War must continue until all Hamas tunnels are destroyed

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 29.12.2023

It would be a daunting challenge to map a realistic vision for the Gaza Strip for the coming decade or even, in most likelihood, farther down the road. One will have to choose between a hopeless vision and baseless hope. In formulating its positions regarding the day after, Israel's civilian leaders will need to adopt a realistic approach, adhering to the hard facts and data about the monstrous entity that has grown in our midst, taking deep root in all systems of life and segments of the population in the area it controls.

It will have to operate on the assumption that it is impossible to effect real change on a profound and cultural level there, at least for our generation. It will be required to set demilitarization as a threshold condition for any future modus vivendi in Gaza, to oppose any initiative or move that would jeopardize this, and not to trust foreign peacekeeping mechanisms.

The upcoming visit to Israel by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken provides an opportunity to set expectations with the US administration on this matter too. While the discourse on the "day after" issue has focused on the question of "who will be" in charge the day after a Hamas regime collapse, no less important is the question of what will be the reality on the ground. In public, Israel's answer to these questions has been in a negation – emphasizing what will NOT be in the strip: no to a Hamas regime, no to a Palestinian Authority in power there, no to military capabilities threatening Israel, no to restrictions on that would hamper its freedom of action. Israel's leaders have put forth a general framework but did not flesh it up with details.

Despite criticism of this, the government has been acting properly in postponing any real deliberations on the details. This was designed primarily to keep attention focused on the fighting, but also so as not to create an impression of Israel being in a hurry and already preparing for the conclusion of the campaign (thereby weakening our forces and bolstering the enemy's hopes). A third reason is to avoid having this issue dividing the public, and a fourth reason is to delay and reduce political friction on this issue with the Biden administration. Finally,

another reason for this dithering was the realization that creating the “day after” depends on the achievements of the ongoing combat, and it is best to have that discussion from a position of strength, when one holds assets and leverage, not before.

Although the IDF operation is still in full swing, it is worthwhile to deviate from this line and delve now into one of the characteristics of the “day after,” precisely because deliberating this issue provides an answer to one of the tough dilemmas at this stage of the fighting: coping with the tunnel challenge.

On the one hand, after the price it paid on October 7, Israel cannot allow the monstrous tunnel network and its additional elements to exist in the Gaza Strip. On the other hand, the price Israel is already paying to expose and destroy this network is high. Continuing the systematic effort to uncover tunnels will prolong fighting, exact further costs on our forces, and also increase political pressure on Israel. What should be done, then?

Any area with tunnels will be declared a battle zone for an indefinite period. First, it must be made clear that as long as tunnels exist – the state of war will continue! Israel should seek consensus (especially by having the US on board) on the idea that the existence of tunnels in the strip violates the principle of demilitarization and that the Palestinian residents will not be able to live their lives in areas with tunnels. This means that these areas will be defined as “combat zones,” and anyone found in them will be considered an enemy combatant and treated as such until the area is tunnel-free.

Opponents of this idea will likely point out that solutions must be found for the population. In a different reality, given Gaza’s conduct as a “Hamas state” and in light of the high levels of support for that organization and its brutal attack on Israel among Gazans, there would be no room for this question at all.

However, given prevailing attitudes today in the world, it can be assumed that ignoring the plea of the population would only increase opposition to Israel’s plans. Thus, Israel must enlist the US to help provide humanitarian solutions that would be defined as lengthy but not permanent. These will be outside the area of combat.

Another argument to support such an approach is the state of destruction in most Gaza neighborhoods. Most of the population has nowhere to return to anyway.

Anyone who sees Hamas' tunnel enterprise – which relied on construction materials intended for civilian purposes – should also lower expectations for rebuilding and rehabilitation in the foreseeable future. Israel cannot afford to let such diversion of construction material happen again.

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