What Does Trump Mean by promising “Hell” for Hamas

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 13.01.2025

President-elect Donald Trump said this week: “If the hostages are not back by the time I get into office, all hell will break out in the Middle East.” Since December 2, he has repeated this stark message, without embellishment or ambiguity. “The consequences will be unprecedented. Those responsible will be hit harder than anyone has been in the long history of the United States,” he has threatened. When asked a few days ago about the practical implications of his words, he clarified: “It won’t be a ‘don’t’; it will be hell.”

Trump’s declaration is not merely another important expression of identification and solidarity with Israel. It goes far beyond the supportive statements about hostage release of other world leaders, as significant as they may be. When the President-elect puts his prestige on the line and subjects himself to a test with clear metrics for success and with a defined end date (by his inauguration) – he is signing a commitment to deliver results.

Trump understands that his success or failure in this matter will influence his standing and American ability to tackle other challenges, from China to Russia and Iran, and from the Houthis in Yemen to global jihad organizations.

The Israeli public is accustomed to a gap between declarations and actions, and thus may welcome Trump’s approach but cannot rely on it. This skepticism stems from the fact that it is difficult to influence extreme non-state actors with the tools used against states, as well as from the sense that Israel has reached its limits in exerting force on Hamas on its own. As Osama Hamdan, a member of Hamas’ political leadership, said, “Hell is not a threat to Palestinians who are already living in hell.”

One hopes that this sentiment is not shared by Israel’s senior diplomatic and defense leadership, and that it is working to formulate concrete recommendations for the incoming administration on how exactly Trump can deliver the promised “hell” to Hamas.

A plan to dish-out “hell to Hamas” will require, first and foremost, removal of

American restraints and handcuffs on the IDF. It should include the following components:

1. Complete support for Israel's position in negotiations versus Hamas.
2. Tightening the siege on Gaza: Reducing fuel and food supplies to Gaza to the bare minimum and preventing Hamas control over them. This includes support for establishing an Israeli military administration in Gaza and blocking the transfer of non-critical supplies from foreign states and international entities.
3. Backing intensive, high-intensity Israeli military operations: Removing limitations on armament, territorial occupation, and the movement of large populations from combat zones. These operations aim to eliminate the Hamas terrorist threat and to destroy its capabilities. Although Hamas has been hit hard by the IDF, it has not yet been dealt fatal and irreversible blows. Hamas remains the dominant force in Gaza with thousands of fighters and operatives, who await the "day after" an IDF withdrawal and meanwhile inflict losses on Israel through local guerrilla actions.
4. Elimination of the Hamas external command structure: Hamas' leadership in Qatar, Turkey and elsewhere remains intact, turning this from a local problem into a regional issue. Neutralizing Hamas power centers, including assassination of Hamas leaders, would severely harm the organization and its recovery capabilities.
5. Drying up funding sources: It is critical to target Hamas fronts such as the "Coalition of Charity Organizations" and its various components.
6. Utilizing American influence on mediators in negotiations: Egypt and Qatar's influence on Hamas is neither unlimited nor negligible. Given Trump's statements on the hostages, it is appropriate to demand that they exert all possible leverage on Hamas to produce results.

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