Generous humanitarian aid will only prolong the war

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 03.12.2023

“Some Western diplomats talk about a post-Hamas Gaza, and I say to them: Let your imagination and dreams run wild, in a couple of years, you will have to deal with the post-Israel region.” This quote was made by former Hamas political bureau chief Khaled Mashal shortly after the ceasefire with the terrorist organization took effect.

In a sarcastic and arrogant speech broadcast at the gathering of one of the global Islamic forums, Mashal sought to double down on Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah’s theory that Israel is about to collapse. He pointed out that the October 7 attack proved that Israel is ‘as weak as a spider’s web,’ and that the organization dealt Israel a crushing defeat in intelligence, battle, and perception. He promised that the defeat “‘will be completed soon.”

Israel after Oct. 7 does not need these words from Meshal to remind it of why it is fighting. Those who need this reminder, at the moment, are our friends in the White House, who have so far gone beyond their usual role to assist us in the war and related challenges (for which they deserve all praise and appreciation). Why? Because these very friends could impede Israel as it embarks on the next phase of the war in the pursuit of the goals vis-a-vis Hamas.

The message conveyed by the United States regarding the continuation of the war in Gaza can be summarized in a short sentence: Reduce the intensity of the fighting and increase humanitarian aid. However, each of these demands will hinder Israel in its efforts to topple Hamas’ rule and destroy its military capabilities. Complying with them will only prolong the war and significantly increase the risks to our soldiers.

We still have a ways to go before Israel’s goals are met. It is difficult to pinpoint precisely where we are in relation to the ultimate goal, but it would suffice to remember that the southern region of the strip has not suffered a significant impact so far. This area is where half of the enemy forces are currently located.

Now that the fighting has renewed in the Gaza Strip, the IDF is expected to

encounter a Hamas that has changed compared to the pre-ceasefire combat. There is an undisputed moral and national obligation to rescue the Hamas captives, but to advance this goal, Israel has agreed to a ceasefire that came with heavy costs and risks.

The time gained in the deal for the release of the captives might have been used by the terror organization to regain strength in the northern part of the strip to reassess the situation, to overcome key shortcomings, to complete its military preparedness, and refresh its forces for the next stage.

The ceasefire also allowed it to reassert its presence as the governing authority. This was evident in the way it staged the return of the captives.

Operationally, this time allows it to regroup, replenish fuel and logistical means to extend its endurance, gather intelligence, formulate updated operational plans, set traps and ambushes, and tighten operational coordination between its components.

The ceasefire and the events that took place when it was in effect have strengthened the morale of Hamas commanders and fighters, as well as their hopes for ending the war through some arrangement. The indirect negotiations with it, even after it had been compared to ISIS and the Nazis have boosted its confidence. The negotiations' channel got a boost, as has Qatar's central role within it. To all this, one has to remember that Hamas also got points from the public in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, thanks to its achievements in freeing prisoners from Israeli jails and its "struggle" against Israel.

When the fighting resumes in the Gaza Strip, the IDF can expect to encounter a Hamas with high operational readiness and strengthened morale. It might be an appropriate time to adopt a more aggressive approach so as to reduce the risks to our forces, even if it runs against the wishes expressed by the White House.

This is also true regarding the scope of humanitarian aid entering the Gaza Strip. The expectation that Israel allow humanitarian aid to Gaza (and even increase it) is based on two mistaken assumptions, in my opinion. The first is that the war is being conducted between Israel and the terrorist organization Hamas in a way that is unrelated to the "State of Gaza." The second is that there is a practical possibility in the Gaza Strip to separate between "aid to Hamas" and "aid to the population."

The simple reality is that the Hamas organization leads the "State of Gaza" and has taken over all the "state institutions" and resources, and has the support of most of its residents. This is also how it has conducted its war against Israel.

Having announced that one of the goals of the war is to topple Hamas', our civilian leaders should also seek to sever the links between Hamas and the various Gaza power centers in a way that the Hamas government would no longer be able to provide for the needs of its residents, will not be able to provide them with any services or enforce its rules on them. Massive humanitarian aid undermines this, as it exempts Hamas from its obligations towards its residents thus sparing it from their anger, and preventing the population from turning against it. The aid serves as a temporary solution until things return to normal. This will prolong the war in every possible aspect.

If that is not enough, it is worth remembering that in the reality that has evolved in the Gaza Strip, it is almost impossible to separate between "aid to citizens" and "aid to Hamas." Hamas is deeply rooted in all aspects of life in the strip. Through its networks, it can receive or take anything that enters the strip for its needs, regardless of the means of transfer or who delivers it.

While Israel usually acts with generosity when it comes to humanitarian issues, in this case, Israel should adopt a strict, suspicious, and minimalist approach: It should allow only the necessary assistance, and only when necessary, and only to the extent required.

The captives will continue to be an issue Israel will have to grapple with. The way Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar sees it, the residents of the border towns his organization managed to capture have a dual role: they are the human shields to ensure the survival of Hamas, and they are also the trump card that will make Israel release all the detained terrorists ("emptying all the prisons" in the language of Hamas) and allow the rehabilitation of the strip.

Since we have entered the hostage deal process and are already paying the price for doing so, we must make sure this plays out to its fullest potential. After that, the effort to release the captives should continue while combat operations are underway in a way that addresses all the captives as one unit while shifting the mediation efforts to the Egyptians. The resumption of combat operations is necessary if we are to bring about the destruction of Hamas capabilities, but, as

we have seen, it also improves the chances and terms for releasing the captives.

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