Israel’s two-pronged challenge

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 01.10.2023

“We have no desire for an escalation nor do we seek to engage in fighting, but if we are required to do so we will have no qualms about using the full extent of our military might” – this is the essence of the message that Defense Minister Yoav Galant sought to convey to the Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip, during an address he delivered this week commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War.

This warning was issued following the recent escalation in the acts of violence and rioting along the border separating Israel from the Gaza Strip, under the direction of Hamas. While Galant was delivering his address, Israel’s Shin Bet Security Agency, better known as Shin Bet, was disseminating one of its many alerts that have become part of our daily routine. This time it involved the exposure of a terrorist cell operating both inside Israel and in Judea and Samaria in order to perpetrate terrorist attacks. In this case, the support and guidance were provided by Iranians.

This alert landed on the editors’ desks of the various media outlets before the ink had time to dry from the long series of alerts from last month. It was preceded by: a notification on the seizure of detonators and standard high explosives at the Kerem Shalom crossing point on the Gaza border, during an attempt to smuggle them into Judea and Samaria, apparently by Hamas in the Gaza Strip; a report on the exposure of a terrorist cell involved in smuggling weapons from Jordan for use by terrorists in Judea and Samaria; as well as the exposure of a smuggling ring in Israel, operating on behalf of Hezbollah, and which among others, was supposed to obtain weapon systems manufactured abroad and then pass them on for use by various hostile elements in Israel.

Playing it safe

This cluster of alerts, which does not include numerous other incidents that form part of the routine security effort, clearly illustrates the enormity of the immediate challenge with which the defense establishment here in Israel constantly must contend. Israel’s adversaries are investing considerable efforts to build terrorist cells, equip them with a variety of weapons, and prepare them to carry out terrorist attacks and additional missions.

This ongoing effort takes place via diverse channels and by numerous parties: Iranians, Hezbollah, Hamas, and PIJ (Palestinian Islamic Jihad) operatives. It is managed from a number of different locations: Lebanon, Jordan, Gaza, Judea, and Samaria, working with Palestinians from Judea Samaria and Gaza, as well as elements within the Israeli Arab population. All this takes place in addition to local initiatives and other terrorist attacks, often perpetrated by "lone wolves", which although they might not take place as a result of the direct support and guidance of the established terrorist organizations, are patently inspired by the ongoing, vicious incitement and the general vitriolic atmosphere that these organizations seek to create.

Galant's statement is a clear reflection of Israel's interest in avoiding escalation. Indeed, as long as this is not an absolute necessity, Israel has no interest in getting involved in a military escapade in the Gaza Strip or in Lebanon. At this juncture, any anticipated long-term value from such limited military conflicts in these specific theaters does not necessarily justify their security, economic, and diplomatic costs. It goes without saying, of course, that any such development would involve diverting attention, resources, and energies to these theaters, which would be at the expense of the requisite efforts pertaining to Iran, and at the very least would not provide any positive contribution to the ongoing efforts to build regional ties.

This is something that is well understood in Iran, in the Gaza Strip, and in Lebanon, and so the policymakers in Israel are faced with a particularly thorny challenge: how to prevent our adversaries from interpreting Israel's overall systematic "cost-benefit" analysis as a golden opportunity for them to act against it. Or in plain English: how to cause them to restrain their actions without being sucked into a military conflict. Israel's security policy is based on the underlying deterrent between us and our enemies. To this, we may add a layer of efforts designed to provide defense, prevention, and countering of hostile activity, as well as non-violent means of leverage such as economic or diplomatic pressure.

Although these efforts are quite effective they are not sufficient to impair our adversaries' motivation and to strengthen deterrence. But more importantly perhaps, these efforts are generally aimed at quashing 'clear and present dangers' rather than the military capabilities and infrastructure in Gaza or Lebanon.

Moreover, the benefit of diplomatic or economic sanctions is generally rather limited when it comes to Gaza or Lebanon. Although the parallel "cost-benefit analysis" of our adversaries might not ignore the interests in these specific spheres, it tends to assume that Israel's use of these "sticks" will be limited in time or in scope, and so the effectiveness of Israel's use of such capabilities is consequently most limited, irrespective of the current situation.

Rethink

It might be prudent for the security establishment to take a fresh look at its approach to the cost-benefit analysis of allowing thousands of Gazans to enter Israel every day, especially in view of the desire of Hamas senior figures in the Gaza Strip to ignite terrorism in Judea and Samaria and from it. In any event, the answer to Israel's dilemma will not come from here.

What more can be done to strengthen our deterrence and to cause the "heads of the snake" to cool their passion when it comes to attacking Israel? Without going into details, I believe that the correct approach would be to increase those offensive efforts that Israel knows so well how to conduct using "stealth" and "discretion". First and foremost, against those who generate the terrorism. The dangers of opting to go down this path are quite clear and so it is also necessary to make the requisite preparations for any potential escalation, but the deterrent-related benefits from such action are indisputable.

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