Gaza’s lesson for Judea and Samaria

written by Noa Lazimi | 15.12.2023

Hamas’s Oct. 7 rampage of murder, rape and kidnapping has forced a painful but necessary paradigm shift among Israeli policymakers regarding Gaza. A similar change of mindset must occur in regard to the future of Judea and Samaria. If Israel wishes to prevent similar attacks aimed at Israel’s major metropolitan centers, it must maintain both IDF security control and flourishing civilian communities in Judea and Samaria.

For years, the Israeli political and military establishments regarded Hamas as manageable. Israel tried to minimize the rocket threat emanating from the Gaza Strip by periodically responding to Hamas attacks without aiming to eliminate the terrorist organization. All the while, Israel allowed significant amounts of funds for humanitarian purposes to enter Gaza, much of which ended up in Hamas’s hands. Regrettably, this approach blew up in Israel’s face. Not only did Hamas remain undeterred, but it grew stronger and better prepared for each round of fighting. It has become clear that Hamas must be destroyed rather than merely contained, and a complex, methodical ground invasion is now underway.

As the IDF makes substantial progress in Gaza, talks about the day after Hamas are intensifying. U.S. President Joe Biden has called for the revival of the two-state solution and suggested that the Palestinian Authority could replace Hamas. This idea seems to be gaining momentum in some diplomatic circles. Such a vision for a “revitalized” P.A. stems from a false perception that the P.A. is a moderate, pragmatic actor with whom Israel can reach a peaceful resolution. In truth, however, a realistic analysis of the P.A.’s conduct in Judea and Samaria proves that giving it more power will undoubtedly yield grievous consequences.

It is important to remember how the P.A. came about, and especially its ties to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Founded in 1964 and headed by Ahmad Shukeiri and later Yasser Arafat, the PLO stated in its charter that its goal was to eliminate “Zionism in Palestine” through an “armed struggle.”

These words were not mere rhetoric. The PLO launched numerous terror attacks both on Israeli soil and against Jewish targets globally. Even so, as part of the

Oslo Accords gambit, Israel agreed to treat the PLO as a legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. The P.A. was established and Fatah, a central member of the PLO coalition, effectively became the ruling body of the Arab population in Judea, Samaria and Gaza.

Since its inception in 1994, this Fatah-controlled entity has continuously glorified terrorism in its educational system, media outlets and throughout the public sphere. It has collaborated with the BDS movement to boycott Israel and delegitimize its very existence worldwide. It has worked to incite extremists among Israeli Arabs, thousands of whom are enrolled in P.A. higher education institutions. The P.A. also rewards acts of terror by providing security prisoners or relatives of "martyrs" with monthly salaries.

The P.A.'s hatred of Jews supersedes even its deep-seated loathing for its bitter rival Hamas. About two weeks after the Oct. 7 massacre, the P.A.'s Religious Affairs Ministry released a document with guidelines for sermons to be given in mosques that referenced Islamic verses calling for the murder of Jews.

As a matter of fact, in the arena of inciting murder within the territories it controls, the P.A. had done quite "well" on its own long before Oct. 7. The Ramallah lynching (2000) and the horrendous slaughter of the Fogel family (2011)—neither carried out by Hamas in Gaza, but by Palestinian terrorists in Judea and Samaria—are proof of it.

Under these circumstances, Israel has been trying to maintain a degree of security cooperation with the P.A., knowing full well that this is far from being a sustainable arrangement. In fact, in northern Samaria, which to date presents one of the greatest challenges to Israel's security, the P.A. has no real influence. The city of Jenin and its refugee camp in particular have become a lethal terror haven, responsible for about 50 shooting attacks in just one year.

In addition, most polling indicates that Hamas enjoys overwhelming support among the Palestinian population of Judea and Samaria. Shortly after the murderous rampage of Oct. 7, Hamas successfully incited Palestinians in Hebron, Hawara and other places to participate in violent riots with the potential to ignite the entire area.

It appears, then, that there is no essential difference between the P.A. and Hamas. Although Hamas justifies its war crimes along religious lines and Fatah

tends to speak in more nationalistic terms, both seek the annihilation of the Jewish state. Therefore, the danger of both should be equally alarming. In fact, the only reason an attack similar in scale and brutality to Oct. 7 has not taken place in Judea and Samaria is due to Israel's military presence.

In this context, it is crucial to understand that an effective security presence goes hand in hand with the establishment and nurturing of civilian communities in the territory. Since the military must protect the civilian communities and the roads leading to them, the existence of approximately 250 Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria translates into 250 points around which the military is active, making it very difficult for terror to thrive.

The opposite is also true. The uprooting of four Jewish communities near Jenin as part of the 2005 disengagement is a perfect example. The entire area in and surrounding Jenin has become a breeding ground for terror, forcing the IDF to make repeated incursions to restore law and order.

Therefore, the IDF's control of Judea and Samaria, coupled with the presence of flourishing civilian communities, is key to thwarting terror plots to carry out mass-casualty incidents. This is why, despite routine Palestinian threats, we have not seen rockets being shot into the heart of Israel from Judea and Samaria. Nor have we seen terrorist-owned Toyota pickups like those that charged into Ofakim on Oct. 7 on the streets of Tel Aviv, despite Tel Aviv being only 20 kilometers from Samaria.

It is time for the State of Israel to view Judea and Samaria as an asset rather than a liability and to treat it as such. Israeli decision-makers should make clear, both domestically and internationally, that the option of loosening either military or civilian control over Judea and Samaria, let alone an Israeli retreat from these strategically critical territories, is not on the table.

On Oct. 7, Israel failed to prevent Hamas's lethal attack from the relatively small Gaza Strip. While Israel cannot undo this unfathomable tragedy, it must work to prevent the strengthening of a second hostile entity in Judea and Samaria. This is the only way to ensure that the moral imperative of "Never Again" is given concrete meaning on the ground.

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