Security Risks and Moral Error in the Proposed Hostage Deal

written by Prof. Kobi Michael | 15.07.2024

- **Key Points**
  - The proposed hostage deal for Israel is a strategic risk and a moral and ethical error. The IDF's withdrawal from the Philadelphi corridor would allow Hamas to renew its military buildup.
  - The return of hundreds of thousands of Gazans to the northern part of the Gaza Strip will bring thousands of terrorists with them. They do not need to bring weapons with them, as there are vast stockpiles of weapons in northern Gaza that the IDF has not yet located and destroyed.
  - Statements by senior military officials regarding the IDF's ability to operate again in these areas as needed are presumptuous and disconnected from reality. To resume fighting, Israel would have to sacrifice the lives of its best soldiers and risk crisis with the US and the international community.
  - Only continued military pressure by Israel can increase the chances that Hamas will bend and might release the remaining hostages.

Comprehensive Discussion Needed

The proposed hostage deal requires a thoughtful and thorough discussion, analyzing all the relevant implications. One must not entertain the thought that those who oppose the emerging deal do so out of irrelevant considerations, lack of interest, or insensitivity to the release of the hostages and their fate. The authors of this article addressed this issue in December 2023, discussing the tension between national security and personal safety in the context of the current war's goals. This logic remains valid today.

Prioritizing Collective National Security

Without addressing collective national security through achieving war goals, primarily the destruction of Hamas's military and governmental capabilities, Israeli society is doomed to face many more painful tragedies of this kind. These will not be limited to the Palestinian arena and will exact a high and painful toll on both national and personal security levels. Israel must prioritize its national security while expressing absolute commitment to freeing all hostages. The political echelon must clarify to the public, and especially to the hostages' families, the necessity of adhering to war goals and at the same time work to create the military and political conditions that are crucial for fulfilling the mission and achieving military and political victory, which will ultimately lead to the release of all hostages.

Issues with the Emerging Deal

The proposed deal's problematic points include Hamas's demand that the IDF withdraw from Rafah and the Philadelphi Corridor, an area filled with underground tunneling infrastructure used for smuggling weapons and strengthening terrorist organizations in Gaza. (On August 4, Israel exposed a Hamas tunnel large enough for trucks to drive through.) IDF operations in this area are crucial in cutting off smuggling routes from Egypt and preventing the entry of weapons, thus thwarting the renewed buildup of Hamas and other organizations in Gaza. Attempts to monitor this through technology and cameras have failed, resulting in massive amounts of weapons passing through the Rafah crossing.

International Monitoring Failures

The attempt to incorporate an international entity into the monitoring and supervision system also failed, as the EU-BAM monitoring team abandoned the crossing following Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip. The operational pattern of BAM-EU resembles that of UNDOF on the Golan Heights after the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War and that of the UN peacekeeping force in the Sinai Peninsula in 1967 after the Egyptian army entered the peninsula. Similarly, the UNIFIL force deployed in southern Lebanon following the adoption of Resolution 1701 and tasked with its enforcement failed miserably. Experience demonstrates that

international forces are unable to perform such tasks effectively and persistently, especially in the Israeli context.

Necessity for a Physical IDF Presence

Complete disarmament of Gaza is impossible without thwarting any attempt at weapon smuggling through Philadelphi as well as other crossings into the strip. To ensure no weapons can be smuggled into Gaza, it is imperative that IDF forces are present in the surrounding Gaza area. This is true in general, and it most certainly applies to the entire period of constructing a barrier along the Philadelphi Corridor, until its completion.

Summary

The proposed deal is a strategic threat, as well as a moral and ethical mistake, by all indicators.

The deal includes several phases and demands the withdrawal of IDF forces from the Philadelphi Corridor, the Netzarim Route, and northern Gaza, and eventually also from the security buffer zone. Moreover, the phased hostage release plan is intended, from Hamas's perspective, to prolong the cessation of fighting indefinitely. Agreeing to this demand would mean that Israel forfeits all the remaining leverage it has to ensure the release of hostages and the destruction of Hamas's military and governmental capabilities.

Such withdrawal would enable Hamas to resume smuggling from Egypt, accelerate the process of military buildup, and maintain a real military threat to Israel. The return of hundreds of thousands of Gazan civilians to the northern part of the Gaza Strip would also allow the return of thousands of terrorists. The claim that armed militants will not be allowed back is deceptive, and statements about the IDF's ability to operate again in these areas are disconnected from reality.

Ending the war in the Gaza Strip is a cornerstone of the US regional strategic vision, which, in Washington's view, could also lead to a ceasefire in the north and a reconciliation with Iran and its proxies, thereby advancing the normalization process with Saudi Arabia. Thus, the

US is adamant about this, and will attempt to prevent Israel from resuming combat once IDF forces exit the Gaza Strip. In addition, the presence of regional and international forces, along with Palestinian Authority forces, will complicate the operational reality in Gaza and hinder the IDF's ability to resume fighting against Hamas.

If Israel had accepted such a deal, Muhamad Deif, Aref Saleme, Rauhi Mushtawa and others would not have been eliminated and Hamas would have had more capacity to reconstitute itself rapidly. The fact that central figures have been eliminated increases the pressure on Sinwar and facilitate conditions for a better deal and an improved security reality in the Gaza Strip.

Alternative Proposal

A more logical and moral alternative is an Israeli proposal or ultimatum for the release of *all* hostages in one phase, in exchange for the lives of Hamas leaders and remaining organization members in Gaza, who will be allowed to leave Gaza unharmed. Hamas will likely reject such a deal, in which case the IDF should conquer all of Gaza, establish military governance, and prevent Hamas from regaining control.

From day one, it was sustained Israeli military pressure that forced Hamas to be flexible, and it seems that only continued military pressure can increase the chances of recovering Israeli hostages and forcing a change in Hamas' position.