To end Hamas, the IDF must temporarily control Gaza

written by Col. (res.) Prof. Gabi Siboni | 03.06.2024

On May 15, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav said that if no alternative to Hamas rule is presented for Gaza, only two options would remain: Hamas rule or Israeli military rule. “Both alternatives are bad,” he said.

“I will not agree to Israeli military rule in in Gaza, Israel must not establish civilian rule in Gaza…I call on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to make a decision and declare that Israel will not establish civilian control over the Gaza Strip and that Israel will not establish military governance in Gaza,” he said.

He further noted that “the end of the military campaign must come together with political action” and said that “the day after Hamas will only be achieved with Palestinian entities backed by Arab countries taking control of Gaza. This is in Israel’s interests in order to achieve our goals.”

He did not specify which Palestinian entities should control Gaza, or how to get such elements to control Gaza.

It is true that the military campaign must be accompanied by political action to stabilize Gaza and bring about a situation in which it no longer poses a security threat to Israel. For several reasons however, there is still a long way to go until we reach this goal.

First, the fighting is far from over. The IDF is currently operating throughout the Gaza Strip, including in places it has already occupied and partially mopped up. The scope of the terrorist infrastructure built by Hamas above and below ground is unprecedented, and the quantity and dispersal of weapons enormous. Cleansing the Gaza Strip of this infrastructure will require time, and so Gaza will continue to be a combat zone for the near future.

Second, despite the extensive damage inflicted on it, Hamas has managed to partially rehabilitate itself in some places. The Israel Defense Forces has succeeded in dismantling most of Hamas’ military apparatus; its command-and-control systems and organized units (brigades, battalions, companies) are no

longer functioning, or only partially functioning. At this time, several organized battalions remain in Rafah and the central camps.

Hamas, however, is rehabilitating local networks in order to conduct guerilla attacks on IDF forces and from time to time to launch high-trajectory fire at communities near the Gaza Strip and even locations farther away. In addition, since Hamas is deeply embedded amid the Gazan population, in many cases "civilians" not officially belonging to Hamas's military organization also operate against the IDF. As a result, the IDF has had to return to many areas in the Gaza Strip to disrupt terrorist networks.

Third, Hamas has managed to retain civilian and governmental capabilities. It has done so by taking control of the humanitarian aid reaching Gaza, using it to deepen its control over the population; it sells this aid at exorbitant prices to the civilian population.

Hamas thus sends a message to the population that it intends to remain in control and that they would be well advised to cooperate with it. Hamas's continued civilian control even in areas where the IDF has dealt it heavy blows allows it to rehabilitate its military capabilities as well. The preservation of Hamas's civilian and governmental capabilities thus perpetuates the continuation of the fighting. The key to destroying Hamas's military capabilities permanently thus lies in taking away its civil and governmental capabilities in the Gaza Strip.

A governmental alternative to Hamas in the Gaza Strip requires the destruction of Hamas's military, as well as civil and governmental capabilities. Only after this will it be possible to achieve a governmental alternative to Hamas. The group will not disappear voluntarily; it can only be removed by force.

In the interim, there is no non-Hamas-affiliated entity willing to accept civilian control of the Gaza Strip. Only the IDF can do it. Therefore, as part of the military effort, the IDF needs to assume civilian control in areas in which it has military control. This will allow the emergence of elements in Gaza not under Hamas's control. After this interim period, and only after the complete removal of Hamas from the civilian power centers in the Gaza Strip, permanent governmental alternatives can be examined.

Establishment of an alternative to Hamas in the Gaza Strip will have to lean on several principles. The first is that the only armed element operating in Gaza be

the IDF. Civilian entities can operate only with the means to maintain public order and carry out basic policing activity. Israel must strictly enforce this principle to prevent a slow spillover of "police" mechanisms toward military capabilities, such as the commando forces (the Dayton Force established with American funding, training, and equipment) of the Palestinian Authority, established in violation of the Oslo agreements.

The second principle is the maintenance of IDF's operational freedom of action throughout the Gaza Strip.

The third principle is Israeli control of all crossings into the Gaza Strip (including the Rafah crossing and the Philadelphi Corridor).

After implementing these principles, civil alternatives in the Gaza Strip can be examined.

The first alternative is the emergence of local elements that will operate either in the entire Gaza Strip or parts of it. This alternative can exist under the guidance and mentoring of international and/or regional powers. Another alternative which has been raised is the return of the P.A. to Gaza. Without addressing the conditions that P.A. officials have set for such a return, it should be remembered that the P.A. is corrupt and supports terrorism.

In addition, senior P.A. officials have expressed support for Hamas's Oct. 7 massacre. Indeed, P.A. officials regard Hamas as a legitimate member of the Palestinian political body. The legitimacy of the P.A. among the Palestinian population is extremely low, and there is no reason to bring the problems that the P.A. has created in Judea and Samaria into Gaza. In effect, this is the replacement of an element hostile to Israel with another hostile element. Add to this the fact that all the U.S. demands that the P.A. carry out in-depth reforms have been met with lip service only.

A third option is transferring control to local Fatah elements in the Gaza Strip, or alternatively bringing Mohammed Dahlan back to take control of the Strip. This would be extremely dangerous for Israel. These elements would most likely operate under the control of Hamas, which would build a model similar to the Lebanese one, in which Hezbollah is "not involved" in the state system but controls it in practice. This would be dangerous for Israel as in such a scenario, if it attempted to take action against terror networks in Gaza it would be perceived

as interfering with the development of the alternative governmental structure.

Another alternative is the deployment of international forces (Arab, European, American) in Gaza. This alternative, too, is problematic, because it will be extremely difficult for the IDF to maintain operational freedom of action with such a force on the ground. It would further cause constant friction with the governments of the countries that have deployed troops to Gaza. An international actor can only play a role in mentoring and directing the alternative civil framework in Gaza, but cannot replace it.

The only relevant alternative from Israel's perspective, it seems, is the emergence of local elements in Gaza. Defense Minister Gallant noted this option, but without addressing the conditions that would be required for such an alternative to be put in place. It is noteworthy here that there is a public administration in Gaza (municipalities, various ministries) that is not entirely affiliated with Hamas, and from whose ranks it will be possible to find elements that can operate in the Strip.

No matter which alternative is ultimately chosen, the prerequisite for all of them is the elimination of Hamas's military and civil capabilities. Achieving this will require an interim stage of Israeli civilian control of Gaza during which Israel expands civil responsibility in the areas under its military control. The northern Gaza Strip is suitable for this purpose.

The implementation of the proposed framework in the northern Gaza Strip will serve as an operational pilot to deny Hamas governmental capabilities, while at the same time making a concentrated military effort to demilitarize the territory. This will be done through IDF civil control first in the northern Gaza Strip, and later, depending on the circumstances, in other areas.

Some 200,000 Gazans remain in northern Gaza, including hundreds of operatives of Hamas and other organizations who constitute a fighting force and are a threat to Israeli troops. The American pier has begun working in the area and will serve as an anchor for humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip in general and the north in particular. The IDF maintains forces in the northern Gaza Strip to control the area and conduct mop-up operations. Therefore, it is possible to devise methods of action that will further destroy Hamas's military capabilities coupled with establishing civilian control in the area.

The IDF will assume responsibility for providing humanitarian aid to the civilian

population while preventing Hamas from taking control of the aid. The actual distribution will be conducted by international aid organizations, assisted, if necessary, by the IDF. The IDF's duty, as long as the area is a combat zone, is to provide only basic humanitarian assistance, subject to military necessity. Israeli civilian control of the area will also make it clear to the population that the era of Hamas in the Gaza Strip is over. Israel has the operational and organizational capability to exercise such civilian control and assume responsibility for managing the territory and its population.

Removing Hamas from civilian centers of power will help locate elements in the population that can contribute to the distribution of humanitarian aid. The implementation of this process will first require an understanding among decision makers in Israel, especially the defense minister and defense establishment officials, that there is no other way to find governmental alternatives without an intermediate stage in which Israel holds civil responsibility. This will also require coordination and cooperation with the United States and international organizations to channel relief efforts through the IDF's temporary civil control.

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