This time, Israel must topple Hamas

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 11.10.2023

Anyone observing the trends over the past year could have seen that Israel's deterrence was weakening on all fronts, both vis-à-vis Hamas and Palestinian terror, as well as Hezbollah and Iran.

Hamas has attacked before, but this time, the strategy that has guided Israel in its response to the terror organization since its takeover of Gaza in 2006 had entirely broken down. In response to previous rounds of Hamas rockets attacks, Israel's goal has been to restore a reasonable level of deterrence against such attacks by exacting a moderate price from Hamas. It did this by destroying parts of its rocket production infrastructure and some of the buildings that housed parts of Hamas's political and military establishment.

The success of this strategy was measured in terms of the amount of time without another period of extended rocket fire, which was on average two to four years. Under this strategy, Hamas should remain in power, as it appeared that the alternatives were worse.

If Israel toppled the Hamas regime, the thinking went, then what would appear in its stead? Likely the Islamic Jihad, or ISIS, and therefore we were better off deterring Hamas and focusing our attention on our bigger threats, like Hezbollah and Iran.

This strategic conception has had its merits over the past 18 years since Israel's withdrawal from Gaza.

Time for a new strategy

However, this weekend's attack has demonstrated that this strategy has broken down and that an alternative strategy must replace it.

Hamas has proven that, in truth, it is no different than ISIS. However, as opposed to the ISIS "Islamic state," which does not currently function as a state, the Hamas Islamic state actually maintains control over a significant portion of land and rules over two million people.

This past weekend has demonstrated that Israel cannot allow a brutal terrorist state to continue to exist alongside it and no state should be expected to accept the existence of such an entity. The continued existence of Hamas has evolved from a tactical threat of sporadic rocket fire into a strategic threat whose continuation cannot be tolerated.

Therefore, the only acceptable result of the current war is the unconditional surrender of Hamas and the toppling of its regime. This must be Israel's goal, and this must be the goal of any moral nation around the world, all of whom should support and encourage Israel to attain it.

If the war ends with the Hamas Islamic State still intact, it will have grave implications that will certainly lead to a broader war in the Middle East in the near future. Hezbollah and Iran are closely watching Israel's next steps and if the results are anything less than decisive victory, then their conclusions will be clear, that now is the time to expand the war

Alternatively, if Israel adopts a new strategic conception and pursues unconditional surrender and the end of the Hamas Islamic State, it will have significant positive implications for the entire region. The most significant of which would be to encourage the negotiations with Saudi Arabia and the establishment of a strong Western-oriented, Israel and Gulf-Arab alliance against Iran.

Saudi Arabia is interested in strengthening relations with Israel for one primary reason, and that is that Israel is a strong country, willing to act forcefully against their common enemies. It is precisely against the backdrop of the progress of the negotiations with Saudi that Iran is looking to undermine them by encouraging this war, in the hopes that Israel will come out looking weak.

It is likely that the specific trigger for Hamas's actions was the progress on these negotiations, which would be a great strategic loss for Iran, its Shia proxies, and Sunni Islamists such as Hamas.

Even more broadly, a decisive Israel victory would be perceived by Russia and China as a sign that the West as a whole remains strong and not to be provoked, and vice versa.

Israel is perceived as the frontline of the West, and it is clear to China that Israel

is supported and strategically aligned with the United States. If Israel falters, it will be perceived as a weakness of the United States in general and its position in the Middle East. If it succeeds, it will project to the region and to the world that the US and its allies around the world remain strong.

Over 800 Israelis have been murdered, another over 2,200 wounded, and there are currently at least 100 Israelis being held hostage in Gaza as a result of the surprise terror attack. Per capita, that is about 10 times more murdered citizens than the US suffered on 9/11. Israel must not be tempted to manage a negotiation for the captives' release but rather must adopt an unwavering policy of non-negotiation with terrorists.

If the goal is to topple the Hamas Islamic State, then there is no legitimate entity with which to negotiate. Hopefully, Israel will be able to extract the hostages alive. But if it sacrifices the goal of decisive victory for their safe release, it will clearly result in incentivizing such incursions and would therefore be immoral and a grave strategic mistake.

Will adopting a policy of unconditional surrender and ending the regime bring Hezbollah into the war? Under the previous strategic conception, Israel sought to avoid a large-scale operation in Gaza in order not to encourage Hezbollah to open a second front. But this calculation is no longer valid.

The threat of Hezbollah unleashing its arsenal of missiles against Israel is not a question of if but when. Hezbollah has built up its terror arsenal for the sole purpose of attacking Israel at a time of its choosing.

A weak Israeli response will certainly encourage Hezbollah to embark on a similar surprise attack on Israel, including both missile attacks and infiltration to Israel communities along the border, but on a much greater scale than Hamas was capable of. Therefore, it may even be preferable for Israel to take the initiative to disarm Hezbollah now, on Israel's schedule, rather than wait to be dragged into another war in the near future at a time of Hezbollah's preference.

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