

Conditions favor Israel, but don't guarantee Hamas flexibility

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 06.12.2024

Donald Trump's warning on Truth Social that there would be "hellish consequences in the Middle East" if the hostages were not released by his inauguration on January 20 is significant for four reasons.

First, it demonstrates the depth of his commitment to resolving this issue and his willingness to put his full weight and prestige behind it. Saturday's announcement appointing Adam Bohler, a close associate of the president, as special envoy for the hostages issue reinforces this impression.

Second, it establishes a clear and urgent timeline for resolution. Third, the stern message signals that the era of the Biden administration's nuanced diplomacy is coming to an end. Fourth, it comes at one of Hamas's lowest points in the war. From the Palestinian terrorist organization's perspective, the sequence of events and developments in the regional and global arena has worsened the conditions under which Hamas operates.

The "unity of fronts" against Israel is dissipating: Hezbollah broke its promises, contained its fire, and left Hamas alone in the battle. Iran is preoccupied with its own problems, trying to reach an understanding with the US ahead of the Trump administration's entry, and therefore shows relative restraint.

The war in Syria is pushing Gaza from the spotlight while drawing some of the "axis of resistance" forces to its territory. The Houthis from Yemen currently pose more of an annoyance than a real threat to Israel, and while the West Bank situation is simmering, it remains under control.

Egypt, Qatar, and other regional countries are eager to curry favor with Trump and will therefore strive to please him. The IDF can now allocate more resources to the Gaza front and will soon be able to increase its intensity by removing the constraints placed by the Biden administration. All this occurs while Hamas in Gaza fights for survival, its leadership abroad faces threats of expulsion, living conditions in the Strip worsen, and international pressure on Israel diminishes. Under these conditions, the only card remaining in Hamas's hands to change the

situation is the hostages.

Hamas is making adjustments for the Trump era. The organization likely understands that Trump's declaration practically means at least a green light for Israel (when he takes office) to control humanitarian aid distribution, keep it at the legally required minimum, and increase combat intensity in Gaza. This is in addition to unfreezing measures that the Biden administration is delaying, while providing full backing for its activities against actions taken by international institutions. Furthermore, Hamas understands that Trump can also exert heavy pressure on countries hosting Hamas leaders and even take measures against the latter.

Hamas's decision to release hostage videos providing proof of life to Israel without receiving anything in return could indicate that the terrorist organization also reads the situation this way and is interested in a deal that would extract it from its predicament. Will this lead to flexibility in its positions?

Hamas has made four demands since the war's beginning as conditions for releasing the hostages. First, a complete and comprehensive cessation of the war with international guarantees. Second, IDF withdrawal to the October 6 lines. Third, Israeli agreement to a reconstruction process and return of displaced persons to their homes in Gaza. Fourth, the release of imprisoned terrorists in exchange for released hostages, according to an agreed-upon ratio between the parties. The essence of the dilemma that faced and still faces the Israeli government is how to save the hostages without saving Hamas.

Disagreements regarding ending the war and IDF withdrawal led to the idea of a multi-phase deal, where the final stage would mark the war's end, but until then Israel would supposedly have an opportunity to achieve its objectives. Even if Hamas agrees to the principle, complex negotiations on the details and implementation process would still be required, and this is before the internal discussion in Israel regarding the price.

Either way, to improve the chances for a deal and reduce the price, it would be prudent for Israel to show flexibility and perhaps even initiate willingness to provide compensation abroad (for example, agreeing to permanently transfer a certain number of Hamas terrorists to Qatar) to reduce the demanded compensation on the ground. The impact of the latter on Hamas's survival and its

status and capabilities in Gaza and the West Bank would be more difficult for Israel.

No one in Israel doesn't yearn for the release of the hostages from Hamas, just as there is no one who doesn't want the complete defeat of this monstrous terrorist organization. Resolving the tension between these two objectives is a matter of "damned if you do, damned if you don't." Any decision the government makes is legitimate as long as its costs are very clear.

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