

Gaza war has regional implications; Israel must act wisely as key moment arrives

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 29.02.2024

Even as the fighting in the Gaza Strip continues, Israel faces challenges and threats from another six fronts: The West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iran, and the diplomatic-legal international system. It is vital that Israel act wisely in juggling security and diplomatic efforts, but that is not enough. Recognizing we are in an existential struggle, being confident of our cause, resolve, and solidarity – are key to success on all fronts.

Just like last week's attack near Ma'ale Adumim and the previous week's attack at the Masmia Junction, the attack in Eli on Thursday should not come as a surprise. The "inspiration" supplied by the war in Gaza, the calls from terror group leaders to West Bank residents to join the struggle and open an active front against Israel, and Al-Jazeera's ongoing fanning of the flames of revenge have created an atmosphere conducive to carrying out such attacks.

The availability of arms and the friction with IDF soldiers and Israeli civilians complete the three conditions required for this: motive, means, and targets. What has curbed the potential so far is mainly the intensive thwarting efforts by security forces: the scale of arrests, demolitions of terrorist residences, and operations – including pinpointed raids and steps against terror networks. It is possible the shock from the October 7 attack and fear among West Bank terror groups that they are the main target of the Israeli rage that followed could also explain the Israeli counterterrorism successes as of late. But if that is the case, we would likely see additional attempts to carry out attacks as this effect wears off.

To rise to this challenge, Israeli security forces should lower the suspicion threshold for preventative steps. This could be in part by adopting some elements of the policy practiced in Jenin and northern Samaria to other areas, fast-tracking the decisions to carry out home demolitions, and increasing efforts to thwart weapons production or smuggling. The high presence of security personnel and

armed civilians increases the likelihood of quick and effective responses. The IDF and police would be wise to invest in public advocacy to explain to the public how to act when they are caught in a terrorist attack, to minimize risks of friendly fire.

In its Gaza war, Israel needs a decisive, unambiguous, and indisputable victory. The October 7 deterrence will not be restored if the narrative emerges that Israel had not achieved its goals despite being subjected to the atrocities of Oct. 7 and after so many troops were deployed for this operation. If that narrative were to emerge, it would face an existential threat, its enemies would feel even more inclined to attack, and its diplomatic stature would suffer a lethal blow. Regional and international players – enemies, friends, and neutral actors – are keeping a watchful eye on developments. Their stance and conduct towards Israel will be affected by Gaza's results. While not the sole reason, this makes it all the more evident Israel has no alternative but to pursue the war's goals until they are fully met.

The IDF's achievements so far are impressive. They have, in themselves, the ability to demonstrate – at least to Hezbollah – Israel's military prowess and its civilian strength should large-scale hostilities emerge in the north.

But much work remains: Hamas' Rafah brigade – with its four battalions – has yet to be dismantled. The combatworthiness of Hamas' top brass and rank and file are intact. The scale of damage to the tunneling infrastructure and weapons is hard to assess, but it is premature to declare them destroyed.

Under such conditions, Hamas recovery could be swift, especially with the capabilities and mechanisms of many undamaged government institutions at its disposal. Therefore, Israel must not fall for offers that would bring an end to the war, even if the wording is tailored so that it is easier to sell to the public.

On this matter, one cannot compromise, not even in the face of political pressures or attempts to exploit the captive issue to halt the IDF. Hamas will likely not agree to a "grand bargain" without guarantees to end fighting and security/civilian arrangements ensuring the continued rule of the strip. Israel of course cannot agree to such a deal. Thus, the practical path forward, as seen by mediators, is a phased deal. If so, we should strive to release as many captives as possible at the lowest possible price, and in any event, without preventing Israel from resuming combat operations.

Negotiations over the captives should continue while increasing pressure on Hamas, including by targeting its overseas leaders and demanding Washington utilize its significant lever on Qatar.

Even before the facts came out, Arab countries and the world quickly pinned the blame on Israel for the incident that saw some 100 Palestinians trampled to death when running toward aid trucks brought into northern Gaza. There is no reason to doubt the IDF spokesperson's version and the initial military probe's findings, but one must assume these will mainly convince those already convinced. Hamas leaders gleefully rubbing their hands at Israeli "entanglement" see the civilians' deaths as reasonable payment for added political pressure on Israel, especially ahead of the planned Rafah operation.

In the conditions created in Gaza, there is no practical, safe way to enable civilian aid to the population without it being seized by Hamas, unless the IDF distributes it. As we learned with UNRWA, one cannot rely on the "neutrality" of international bodies, or expect them to withstand Hamas pressure. The same holds for foreign states, regionally and beyond. The notion that the Palestinian Authority could do this without being at the mercy of Hamas ignores the intra-strip power dynamic.

To meet this challenge, again consider establishing "de-escalation zones" with no Hamas access, where humanitarian aid would be provided solely to the population. This removes Hamas aid control, preventing both equipping its people and strengthening its standing and governance.

One way or another, the incident must not cause retreat or backing off by Israel in its efforts to dismantle Hamas' rule. As The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center said in a new report, many Hamas governmental and public institutions continue to function either fully or in some partial capacity, including the government spokesperson's office and ministries responsible for operating security agencies and the Hamas home front. It makes no sense to let such institutions and apparatuses continue to operate, as they are designed to help Hamas cement its control.

Despite the short-term costs this process may incur, halting their activity is a necessary step in the path toward replacing Hamas.

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