

Hamas should pay a price for its rejection of a hostages deal

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 29.03.2024

Hamas' words of approval following the Security Council resolution in which the US abstained attest to the boost of morale it got from this development. In Hamas, they understand that the Biden administration is striving to end the war through a deal to release the captives even without achieving any of Israel's goals. The administration is also tying Israel's hands so that it would not operate in Rafah, forcing it to increase humanitarian aid and allow the international community to make decisions that undermine its status.

When its work is done by others, all that remains for Hamas is to cling to its exaggerated demands, buy time, and keep its people away from IDF forces operating in the Strip, albeit qualitatively but on a limited scale.

This harms Israel, may spillover to other theaters, and weakens the efforts to release the captives. In the long-term, it even harms the interests of the US because in Saudi Arabia and other countries they see how Washington treats its important ally in times of war. Like Israel, they will not forget Biden's impressive alignment with it immediately after the massacre. But they will also not ignore the American pressure that increased the longer the war dragged on.

The clash between Washington and Jerusalem has also sharpened the understanding among American officials that there is broad public agreement in Israel on the need to defeat Hamas and release the captives together. The government's insistence on this stems from an understanding of the dramatic impact this war could have on Israel's status and power, but it also reflects the authentic position prevalent among the public.

It is precisely now, given Hamas' refusal to accept the offer presented to it for a prisoner exchange deal, that Washington should support Israel's increased pressure and initiate its own moves that will make clear there is a price for Hamas dragging its feet.

The US has significant leverage over Qatar – the biased mediator. It can do many things to exert it, ranging from a decision to re-evaluate relations with the

sheikhdom to the suspension of economic, diplomatic and military agreements, and examining the possibility of moving US bases there to the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia (which could also contribute to normalization processes in the region). The US has so far refrained from using these levers, but placing them on the table could exert indirect pressure on Hamas' decision-makers. Don't forget that just as the Hamas organization is important to Qatar, so too is Qatar important to Hamas.

Another step that would be warranted is the expulsion of the Hamas leadership from Qatari soil. If there was a justification to postpone this step for the sake of negotiations, Hamas' rejection of the deal has voided that dilemma.

In addition, Israel should concentrate efforts to systematically target all Hamas leaders abroad. This is necessary in order to crush the organization, disrupt its command and coordination capabilities, and prevent its recovery in Gaza. Without an effective foreign command, and after inflicting devastating blows to its military and governing capabilities in Gaza and neutralizing its cells in the West Bank, Hamas may lose its status as a movement with regional influence, even if it continues to exist as an entity on the run. This interest is shared by both Israel and its neighbors, and a goal that the Americans should have been pushing to achieve as part of their efforts to shape a new regional order.

No less important than all the above steps is Israeli unity. It seems that our internal discord has made a comeback along with all its ills. We must remember that solidarity is Israel's most significant asset in dealing with the difficult challenges, not only on the battlefield but also on the diplomatic front. Without it, we will struggle to achieve our essential goals.

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