

To prevent Hamas' resurgence, Israel must stay on Philadelphi

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 13.07.2024

Israel's grip on the Philadelphi Corridor stands out as one of its key strategic gains in the Gaza war. This control serves a dual purpose: it provides leverage in hostage release negotiations and, more critically, acts as a bulwark against Hamas' potential resurgence. The move reflects a hard-learned lesson from Israel's two-decade struggle to contain military buildup in Gaza. Past reliance on international arrangements as a security substitute has proven ineffective, with little reason to believe such measures would fare better in the future. Moreover, acquiescing to these arrangements could embolden Hamas, fostering hope that post-conflict Gaza might revert to its pre-Oct. 7 status quo.

The flurry of updates on hostage deal negotiations and ongoing Gaza operations has overshadowed recent reports suggesting Israel's potential withdrawal from the Philadelphi Corridor. However, the question of who controls this strategic strip could prove decisive in determining the lasting impact of Israel's war efforts. The extent of control over this route will not only influence how quickly adversaries could pose renewed threats to Israel but also shape the nature and intensity of future security challenges. One need look no further than Hezbollah's daily provocations for a glimpse of potential scenarios absent effective control.

Drawing from its Gaza experience, Israel has emphasized that any future political settlement must include Israeli control over the external border areas. This stance, initially articulated regarding arrangements with the Palestinian Authority, holds even truer for Gaza in the absence of a formal agreement. The devastating toll of Oct. 7 has lent legitimacy to this position, while the war has created the operational conditions to make it feasible. However, relinquishing this control now would be irreversible. Israel would be hard-pressed to reclaim the area after making commitments to Egypt and the US, especially within the context of broader international understandings.

Could an Israeli-Egyptian mechanism, with US involvement, effectively replace direct Israeli control? Historical precedent offers little room for optimism. In Jan. 2009, as Operation Cast Lead wound down, then-Foreign Affairs Minister Tzipi

Livni signed an agreement establishing such a mechanism. While this accord halted Israel's military campaign short of decisively defeating Hamas, it failed to prevent even a single instance of smuggling.

This wasn't without precedent. In Oct. 2005, at the urging of US officials, Israel agreed to regulate the opening of Gaza border crossings. Promises of assistance in countering resulting security threats proved hollow. The PA lost its foothold in Gaza, Israeli security assurances evaporated, and Hamas reveled in the perceived folly of the arrangement.

Any reasonable person understands that detection and monitoring systems alone can't stop smuggling. An effective operational force is crucial - capable of swift, timely responses to incidents. Without Israeli control, we would be dependent on the goodwill of the Egyptians. Their priorities and considerations may not align perfectly with Israeli security imperatives. The likelihood of such a mechanism meeting Israel's expectations is far lower than the probability of smuggling along this route becoming a flashpoint in Israeli-Egyptian relations.

Undoubtedly, Israeli control of the Philadelphi Corridor presents complex operational, diplomatic, and logistical challenges. However, these must be weighed against the costs of relinquishing control. The current climate provides unprecedented justification for implementing necessary engineering measures to enhance the security of Israeli forces in the area.

While Israeli control of the Philadelphi Corridor may not be ideal from all perspectives, it represents a vital course correction. It embodies the principle of self-reliance in defense, deprives a significant strategic asset of those responsible for the Oct. 7 atrocities, and marks a substantial step toward reshaping Gaza's future security landscape.

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