

Rafah operation must take place - even in defiance of the US

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 25.04.2024

As signs of an imminent IDF operation in Rafah intensify, there is growing concern that Israel will unnecessarily exercise self-imposed restraint by acting with insufficient force, so as not to upset the Biden administration, the Egyptians, or the ICC prosecutor at The Hague.

Meanwhile, Hamas is presumably exploiting the prolonged waiting period and preparing well for the ground operation in this sector, which will undoubtedly pose complex operational challenges for the IDF. Despite the political pressures, Israel's decision-makers must make it a top priority to attain the objectives with minimal risk to the security of our forces.

The deadlock in negotiations for the release of Israeli captives held by Hamas, coupled with American accusations against the group, has paved the way for Israel to launch the Rafah offensive. The recent de-escalation with Iran allows Israel to shift its focus, without forfeiting political gains made, while continuing the fight against Hezbollah and dismantling terrorist networks in the West Bank.

In this operation, the security establishment will be required to achieve five objectives: Dismantling Hamas' regional brigade, with its four battalions: eliminating or arresting its commanders and most of its personnel, seizing or destroying its command centers, strategic assets, weapons, and production facilities - both above or below ground. Eliminating or arresting senior members of Hamas or the Palestinian Islamic Jihad who fled from other areas to Rafah and found refuge there.

Ending Hamas' civilian control in this area: striking Hamas' governing mechanisms, including police and internal security forces, prisons, and courts, as well as "civilian" committees for managing emergency affairs.

Taking control of smuggling routes and shaping a new security reality along the border strip, preventing smuggling from Sinai to the Gaza Strip.

Advancing the release of the captives- either by seizing opportunities during the fighting or through negotiations following increased pressure on Hamas.

The IDF and Hamas: Starting Conditions

The IDF's starting position for this operation is better than those at the beginning of the campaign in the northern Gaza Strip or the Khan Younis area. The enemy will now be entering combat with a command echelon that has been depleted, with many fighters dead, injured, or arrested. Second, its stockpile of weapons and ammunition has dwindled. Third, the ability to strike the Israeli home front with rocket fire is rather limited. And fourth, the IDF will have already replenished its forces, updated its intelligence, and improved its fighters' operational combatworthiness through lessons learned from previous stages of the fighting.

However, from the enemy's perspective, the overall picture also has some bright spots. Their force deployment in the combat zone has not only remained intact but has also been reinforced with operatives from other areas. Their logistical preparedness has improved thanks to humanitarian aid entering the Strip, and they are equipped with fuel and food that allow prolonged survival in tunnels.

Additionally, they draw encouragement from the pressures exerted on Israel to minimize casualties and benefit from the involvement of Iran and its proxies, as well as the political support of Turkey and other countries. Above all, they are emboldened by their demonstrated ability to survive the IDF onslaught so far and the fact that even after 200 days of fighting, Hamas continues to be the central power in the Gaza Strip.

Alongside its offensive capabilities, the IDF will also need to strengthen its defense against various forms of attacks on its forces or on the home front that exploit proximity to borders or the use of tunnels. The same applies to the possibility that Hamas may carry out provocations in the border fence area and towards Sinai, aiming to create tensions between Israel and Egypt. Hints of this could be found in a statement issued this week by the "Palestinian factions." The IDF's well-oiled war machine has proved itself, and there is no doubt as to its ability to successfully handle this challenge as well. On the political level, maximum support and freedom of action are required to allow the IDF to employ intense firepower that will reduce the risk to our soldiers and bring about the swiftest possible defeat of the enemy.

Meanwhile, the IDF will need to continuously examine how the combat situation can be leveraged to advance the release of the captured individuals.

The Rafah operation will not complete the task of decisively defeating Hamas.

Even after it is over, much more work, and a deeper impact, will be needed inside the territory before Hamas' remaining capabilities are destroyed and a new reality emerges. This was also the case following Operation Defensive Shield, which began exactly 22 years ago. It will not be quick and easy, but it is necessary and possible.

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