

The dilemma: Saving hostages without saving Hamas

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 31.07.2024

Israel is riding a wave of momentum in the Gaza conflict. On the battlefield, the defense establishment has chalked up a string of victories, starting with the push into Rafah and securing the vital Philadelphi Corridor - Hamas' lifeline. Other successes include the daring rescue of four hostages in Nuseirat, the reported elimination of Hamas military chief Mohammed Deif and Khan Yunis commander Rafah Salameh, establishing control over the strategic Netzarim Corridor, conducting raids in Gaza City and Khan Yunis, and recovering the bodies of five fallen soldiers abducted into Gaza. Hamas' inability to mount significant counteroperations during this period underscores the cumulative impact of Israel's actions.

Moreover, Israel's swift and bold response against the Houthis in Yemen, coupled with the ongoing precision strikes on Hezbollah field commanders and relentless operations against terrorist cells in the West Bank, demonstrate not only Israel's operational prowess but also its resolve and the resilience of its defense apparatus. This steadfast stance in the face of prolonged multi-front challenges, despite intense pressure and heavy costs, is beginning to shake some of our adversaries' core assumptions and raise doubts about the viability of their war of attrition strategy.

Even on the diplomatic front, typically a source of hope for Israel's enemies, there are signs of a shifting landscape. Global attention has diversified beyond Gaza, criticism of Israel persists but with limited impact on military operations, international courts have not halted Israel's actions, normalization agreement partners have maintained ties despite street-level anger, and discussions of future peace deals continue to simmer.

From Hamas' perspective, political developments in the US are casting a long shadow. It's unclear whether pressure on Israel from the current administration will maintain its intensity, and they've heard Donald Trump's hawkish stance loud and clear, should he return to office. The call for Israel to swiftly conclude the war and "finish the job against Hamas" is interpreted as an expectation of ramped-up

military action. Against this backdrop, Hamas likely realizes that time is no longer on its side.

A double-edged sword

For Israel, the passage of time cuts both ways. On one hand, it allows for consolidating gains, further degrading Hamas, and potentially securing more favorable terms for hostage release. On the other, it heightens the risk to captives' well-being and escalates costs and dangers on the northern front, which is inextricably linked to the situation in Gaza. The political leadership faces a stark dilemma: balancing the imperative of dismantling Hamas against the urgent need to bring the hostages home.

Hamas' demands in the emerging deal aim to end the war while preserving its status as Gaza's power broker and securing conditions that would enable it to rebuild its capabilities and leverage political gains, including in the West Bank. Israel's insistence on resuming combat operations after the deal's initial phase is meant to address these concerns, but it overlooks the complex dynamics of such processes. Once the war machine winds down, it can't simply be restarted at will. The international community would likely oppose such a move, and domestic support would be difficult to muster given the mounting costs and new challenges on the horizon. The practical upshot is that the war could effectively end without achieving its stated objectives.

Another sticking point is Hamas' demand for IDF withdrawal from Gaza, including the critical Philadelphi Corridor and Netzarim Corridor. Control over the Philadelphia Corridor represents one of Israel's key strategic gains in this conflict. This control is crucial for preventing Hamas' resurgence. Without it, Israel would struggle to curb weapons smuggling into Gaza and its transformation back into a terrorist stronghold. Past experience cautions against relying on foreign entities for this task, regardless of their identity. An Israeli pullback from this corridor would be nearly irreversible and invite pressure in future Palestinian negotiations.

Caught between a rock and a hard place

Relinquishing the Netzarim Corridor, or entrusting it to other parties, would pave the way for Hamas' return to northern Gaza. In the current climate, it's hard to envision any enforcement body (besides the IDF) capable of restricting Hamas'

movements - not Arab states, not international forces, not even Mohammed Dahlan. Even if a solution were found, declaring that “armed individuals will not be allowed to return to northern Gaza” rings hollow when miles of unmapped tunnels honeycomb the area.

Paradoxically, the extensive tunnel network beneath Gaza City neighborhoods provides Israel with justification to delay the return of displaced residents and continue treating these areas as active combat zones. This could serve as leverage, with the displaced population pressuring Hamas. Conceding on this issue would amount to tacit Israeli acceptance of this reality, undermining the goal of demilitarization.

We haven't even touched on the risks posed by the potential release of terrorists as part of any deal: It could incentivize future kidnappings, see those released return to terrorist activities, and bolster Hamas' political standing in both Gaza and the West Bank.

There isn't a soul in Israel who doesn't yearn for the hostages' safe return, just as there's no one who doesn't want to see Hamas decisively defeated. Navigating between these two imperatives is a true “damned if you do, damned if you don't” scenario. Whatever course the government chooses will be legitimate, provided we don't blind ourselves to the costs.

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