

Returning Gaza Envelope Residents Back Home

written by Col. (res.) Prof. Gabi Siboni | 31.01.2024



The evacuation of communities from the Gaza Envelope settlements, including the city of Sderot, following the events of October 7th – and the ruin left in the area in their wake – is a traumatic event for the settlers, a scar in the soul of the Israeli people, evidence to what many perceive as a disgraceful failure of the State's systems, and no less importantly, a substantial psychological achievement for Hamas, the Palestinians, and our other enemies in the area. Every day that the Western Negev stands devoid of its residents amplifies the enemy's achievements, provides further tailwind for its continued struggle against Israel, and further incentivizes it to continue on the path of terrorism, and to support its inciters and sponsors.

Settlement in this area, and along the Israeli border as a whole, is part of the Zionist ethos of inhabiting and defending Israel, reclaiming and making agricultural use of the land – both as a value and as a crucial component of the State's economy and resilience. Any delay in restoring the settlements of the Gaza Envelope to their former glory – and in expanding, developing, and supporting them – further erodes the Zionist ethos.

No less importantly, though – any delay in restoring this region, returning its citizens to their rightful place, and making it thrive again serves to deepen the crisis of faith between these residents and the State and its institutions, as well as the crisis of faith between Israeli society and its leadership – all while making the physical and mental scars of the evacuated residents run even deeper. This, of

course, is compounded by the economic aspects of this ongoing situation – partially due to the direct costs of hosting thousands of families in hotels, but mostly due to indirect costs from loss of income, the impaired production capability and continuous supply of agricultural produce, and the future indirect costs of the mental and physical rehabilitation of those thousands of families and of entire communities.

Thus, as the fighting in the Gaza Strip advances and operational achievements accumulate, it would be prudent to bring the residents back to the Gaza Envelope settlements. As published in early January, some of the residents at the Hof Ashkelon and Shaar HaNegev regional councils have already started returning to their homes. Now, however, is a good time to systematically act to restore the settlements in their entirety – something that harbors much significance for a variety of reasons, including reasons of state sovereignty and regional security, community and personal aspects, the psychological and national resilience element – and finally, for economic reasons.

The State of Israel must reassert its sovereignty over the entire country, including the Gaza Envelope. Reasserting sovereignty and security is fundamental to the State's duties towards its citizens. Thus, we must act quickly to exercise sovereignty and restore our hold over the areas of the nation that were evacuated and abandoned. To this end, two fundamental terms must be met – the first of which is disrupting the capabilities of Hamas and other Gaza-based terrorist organizations to attack the settlements. The IDF's mounting achievements and the building of a security buffer and military defense envelope will make it very difficult for the enemy to launch infiltration or standoff firing attacks in the direction of the settlements – and will eventually, through a prolonged process, negate its capabilities for massive rocket fire towards the settlements as well. The IDF had already begun implementing a broad-scope plan to defend the settlements and respond to their security needs by reinforcing the settlements' rapid response teams, providing proper equipment and regular training, alongside integration of the IDF's area defense into the settlements and installation of various deterrents such as indicative fences, smart cameras, Command and Control rooms, etc.

An important tool for restoring sovereignty and security would be growing the population of the Gaza Envelope area through reviving the Nahal program and establishing Nahal settlements in the Gaza Envelope area – after two decades

during which not a single Nahal settlement was established and converted into a civilian settlement. Beyond increasing the population, further settlement of the area by Nahal core groups would enable reclaiming this geographical area in a productive and principled manner, serving as a lodestone for a reformed ethos of pioneering, inhabiting and working the land, alongside active defense of the area – the sickle and the sword as a foundation for volunteering and harnessing the national spirit to establish new settlements and restore security to the area.

In the personal-community aspect, keeping entire communities out of their natural environment may jeopardize their social cohesion and their ability to recover from the traumatic event. The sooner these communities return to their settlements, rehabilitate them, and establish routines of daily life, the more effective their recovery process will be.

In the national context, the settlements thriving and prospering once again will constitute a victory for the State of Israel – radiating strength both inwards into Israeli society and outwards, demonstrating the resilience of Israeli society and its perseverance in the Zionist endeavor. The residents' return to the Gaza Envelope settlements will also boost the recovery of the area's community and education systems – including that of schools, other educational institutions, medical services, public transport, and a variety of needful community services. This process cannot be serial – it must occur concurrently with the residents' return and brooks no delay. In this manner, community systems could be rehabilitated in a vibrant, healthy way.

One cannot underestimate the importance of the psychological dimension. Restoring and developing settlements will necessarily radiate on the Israeli society's sense of capability, on trust in the State's institutions and its capability to recover from severe trauma and devastation whilst harnessing national resources and capabilities for planning and execution – and no less importantly – on the sense of cohesion, solidarity, and mutual responsibility. All these are expressions and aspects of social and national resilience. National resilience is a fundamental and essential component of national strength – and thus, of national security in its broad sense. We cannot ignore the difficulties and the trauma caused by the events of October 7th, or their impact on our sense of capability, security, trust, and resilience. Since October 7th, Israeli society has gone a long way in the process of rehabilitation and recovery – but the process cannot be

completed without restoring settlement, exercising sovereignty, re-establishing communities, agriculture, and industry in the area – and in particular, continuing its development and expansion as an appropriate Zionist reply to the bloodthirsty destructiveness that Hamas demonstrated during the murderous terrorist attack of October 7th. Through its communities, Israeli settlement shall set exercising sovereignty and reclamation of the land through agricultural work against Hamas' destructive efforts. Renewing the settlement efforts, restoring them to their former glory, developing and expanding them will constitute the true Israeli victory in this war – the triumph of the Zionist ethos of building and development, reclaiming and settling the land, over Hamas' ethos of ruin and devastation.

Finally, the return of the Gaza Envelope's residents to their homes holds economic significance of the highest order, for several reasons. First, the direct costs of hosting evacuated individuals in alternative residences and in hotels and guest houses. An analysis of the proposal for increasing the 2023 budget suggests that the scope of addition to the budget required to support the expenditures of assisting evacuated individuals was more than ILS 6 billion. [1] This budget is expected to grow even further in 2024. Diverting funds from direct aid to the evacuated individuals into developing and rehabilitating the Gaza Envelope settlements will yield great returns and generate income for the national economy, made possible by restoring the Gaza Envelope's economy to a functional state – albeit partially, at first. Second – bringing the residents back would necessitate the provision of economic benefits – both for individual residents and on the community-settlement level. The State is required to invest in developing the area and the settlements, and to provide a variety of economic benefits in the form of tax breaks, grants, and aid in developing settlements, in a manner that would serve all national needs. This investment should be considered a substantial part of the war costs and one of the tools for winning it.

Many residents will wish to return to their homes as soon as possible, given the right conditions. The right time is now, and we must act to return the settlers to the Gaza Envelope. Uprooting these communities from their settlements was a necessary evil at the start of the war, but now we must put our full strength behind making these settlements prosper again. The leadership of the State must take the reins on this national challenge – this national mission – through relevant government ministries and State institutions. It is also the time for local leadership and community leadership – as well as for the communities themselves

and their settlers – to shine. Now is the time for pioneers to take the van – the time for the nation to step forward in its journey to rise again and make its way towards the establishment of Israel 2.0. [2]

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[1] Description and Analysis of the Proposal to Increase the 2023 National Budget and a Macro-Economic Review. Knesset Information and Research Center, December 2023.

[2] <https://www.misgavins.org/siboni-michael-israel-2-0-project-launch>

Pessimism on Steroids

written by Col. (res.) Prof. Gabi Siboni | 31.01.2024

The “Downer Movement” is depressing Israel with defeatism, while Israel’s youth is energized with faith in the future.

Israel mustn't remain silent in face of Turkey's support of Hamas

written by Noa Lazimi | 31.01.2024

Israel can no longer remain silent in the face of Turkey's extensive support of Hamas and its central role in building the organization's financial empire.

Revolution of Consciousness: Sharing Israel's narrative with the Arab, Muslim worlds

written by Ruth Wasserman Lande | 31.01.2024

The Muslim and Arab world is not exposed to almost any information that puts it at odds with the anti-Israeli messaging to which it is accustomed.

The West needs to send a message to the Houthis

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 31.01.2024

If Iran and the Houthis don't pay a heavy price for their attempt to impose a naval blockade, not only will international trade be severely jeopardized, but so will the security of the entire region.

The Making of US and Israeli Policy toward Iran's Nuclear Program

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 31.01.2024

The United States and Israel have been the two states most active in opposing Iran's nuclear ambitions; however, the respective strategies of each of these states have changed repeatedly.

The myth of demilitarization

written by David M. Weinberg | 31.01.2024

Israel's future is guaranteed by gutsy and patriotic teens, soldiers, and students.

Ready the rapid-response squads everywhere

written by David M. Weinberg | 31.01.2024

The establishment of civilian rapid-response security squads everywhere in Israel is more urgent than ever. This requires government investment and volunteer mobilization, including participation of the haredi sector.

Iran Fears Full-Scale Regional War

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 31.01.2024

Israel should attack the Qods Force apparatus in Iran and across the region.

The Gaza war is only a part of Iran's grand plan

written by Joseph Rozen | 31.01.2024

During a UN Security Council meeting on the 24th of October, the secretary general, Antonio Guterres, said that Hamas' October 7th attacks on Israel "did not happen in a vacuum". He was not wrong – Hamas' attacks were planned and executed with the close assistance of Iran, which continues to arm, guide, finance, and activate its proxies in the Middle East.

The Israel-Gaza war has repercussions on the international fight against Iran and its other accomplices. Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shia militias in Syria, Iraq, and recently in Sudan, are all Iranian agents of chaos and terror, who serve Iran's interests – to create a Shia-dominate strip stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean Sea to shift the leadership of the Muslim world from Sunni countries to Iran, end the US presence in the Middle East and destroy Israel. Besides Iranian direct support, the use of these proxies would not have been effective without an envelope-supporting system of private entities, with the ability to enable money transfers, technologies, communications, etc.

The current situation in the Middle East provides an opportunity to increase global efforts to stop Iran's malign behavior, not only by sanctioning Iran and its proxies but also use complementary measures to sanctions and target private companies which assist Iran in executing terror activities.

The Military Sphere

After the fog of October 7th atrocities faded away, the Israeli defense forces were able to recover Iranian-produced weapons used by Hamas during the October 7th attack. The Foundation For Defense of Democracies (FDD) reported that 60mm mortar rounds with Iranian-made AZ111 mortar round fuses and M112 demolition charges were used by Hamas in the attack. Evidence shows that these components were produced in Iran and appear in a catalogue of the Defense Industries organization, an Iranian company that is affiliated with the Ministry of Defense of Iran. The M112 explosives recovered were identical to those intercepted by US-led operations in Yemen and Bahrain to stop smugglers.

In addition to these familiar weapons, the IDF has also recovered new Iranian-made warheads for Rocket-propelled grenade launchers (RPG) that were not seen before. In the new warhead, the first charge is designed to penetrate light armoured vehicles and the second charge is thermobaric, aimed at burning the target.

The latest launching of drones and cruise missiles by the Houthis in Yemen towards Israel demonstrated more Iranian weapons variety. Since November last year, the US Navy seized many weapons and munitions en route to Yemen, in the area of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. These included explosives, ammunition, weapons and missiles, which are in the use of Hamas and other proxies as well.

Iran's creativity goes as far as its cruelty in its efforts to maintain a flow of arms to Iranian proxies in the region. Following the devastating earthquakes that hit Syria in February 2023, the IRGC used humanitarian assistance as camouflage to transfer weapons and crucial components to assist with Hezbollah's efforts to turn their rockets more accurate. Recently, Syria accused Israel of launching simultaneous missile attacks against its airports, probably to stop the already known route of weapons transfer from Iran to Syria and further to Hezbollah. After the destruction of these airports, Russia hurried to allow Iranian flights to use the "Khmeimim" air base in Syria. This is happening while Hezbollah and Shia militias in Syria have been targeting Israel with rockets since October 7th.

The technological efforts

Alongside supplying weapons to terrorist organizations, Iran is also very active in the technological sphere, which is crucial for securing funds for terrorism,

surveillance, and supporting other terror-related activities inside and outside Iran.

ArianTel, an Iranian wireless communications services provider was pivotal to Iran's efforts to create a large-scale surveillance network. According to Citizen Lab, a cybersecurity NGO based in Canada, the surveillance and censorship capabilities resulting from this level of integration with mobile service providers cannot be understated.

Prime example for this is MTN Group. MTN entered the Iranian telecom sector in 2005 and launched its services in Iran a year later using a subsidiary named Irancell, a front company of the IRGC, in which MTN owns a 49% stake, the other 51% owned by the Iranian Electronic Development Company. Since then, MTN has been closely involved with ArianTel, as part of its joint venture with the Iranian government. MTN and Irancell, provided multiple Access Points and Roaming agreements, granting ArianTel explicit access to their cellular networks. This allowed ArianTel and the Iranian government to carry out surveillance operations on dissidents and critics within Iran.

MTN group openly and knowingly conducted business with the IRGC and ArianTel despite international sanctions against them. In April 2023, ArianTel was sanctioned by the European Union, for contributing to the telecommunications surveillance architecture mapped out by the Iranian government to quash dissent and critical voices in Iran. In 2020, a year after IRGC was officially designated as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) MTN released a statement saying that it would continue its business as usual.

MTN made conscious decisions to engage in misconduct while violating sanctions, and effectively supporting and facilitating Iran's terrorism. But the use of telecommunication systems does not stop at surveillance and suppressing dissent at home, rather it is used to advance Tehran's international aspirations as well, supporting Iran's proxies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen.

This activity is at the core of the US district court in New York's high-stakes anti-terrorism act lawsuit against MTN Group. In addition to its direct engagement with the IRGC, the lawsuit revealed the group's violations of the Anti-Terrorism Act by paying protection money of more than \$100M to al-Qaeda and the Taliban so they wouldn't target its cellular towers, and they deactivated the towers at

night, preventing US intelligence operations.

Another dimension of concern is MTN's decades-long association with Hezbollah, a designated terrorist organization and a proxy of Iran. This relationship involved providing equipment that Hezbollah used as detonators and for tracking their adversaries. This history of supporting and enabling terror activity might indicate that other proxies of Iran, such as Hamas were also benefiting from MTN's services.

There is evidence that Hamas' brutal attacks against Israel, were accompanied by cyberattacks conducted by a group linked to Iran. The attacks were aimed at stealing, publishing, and deleting sensitive information such as personal data and intellectual property from educational institutions and tech companies. These attacks began in January 2023 but were intensified following the October 7th attacks.

NYT reported that Iranian hackers were waging an espionage campaign targeting rivals across the Middle East, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. The cyberattacks are linked to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence. According to Israeli cybersecurity officials, 15 groups of hackers, such as "agonizing serpents" and "LionTail", affiliated directly or as a proxy, with the IRGC and Iranian Ministry of Intelligence, are responsible for the attacks. During this campaign, there were also attempts by groups affiliated with Hamas and Hezbollah to hack CCTV cameras in Israel.

It's time to stop Iran

As shown above, Iran's terror network is broad, and it also serves as a distraction from its efforts to cross the nuclear threshold and reach a nuclear military capability. Following Iran's involvement in Hamas' attacks against Israel and the continuous support of other proxies in the Middle East, the international community must step up joint efforts to stop both Iran and its accomplices.

The most common measure against Iran is sanctions, mainly in relation to the nuclear program. While sanctions took a toll on Iran's economy, the shadow financial network provided it a lifeline. This year, the US imposed new and broader sanctions on a "shadow banking" network of 39 entities across multiple jurisdictions, including those registered in China, Türkiye, and UAE. These sanctions are targeting Iranian front companies abroad that have generated tens

of billions of dollars for the Iranian regime.

One of Iran's ways to bypass sanctions is the use of cryptocurrencies, which Tehran legalized in 2019. Around 4.5% of global bitcoin mining is done in Iran. International compliance regulations, including those issued by the FATF (Financial Action Task Force), have made it more difficult to use cryptocurrencies as a way to evade sanctions but did not entirely stop Iran.

In addition, the US decided to freeze \$6 billion that was part of a prisoner swap deal with Iran to free 5 American citizens. Due to Iran's backing of Hamas, the US reached an understanding with Qatar to prevent access of Iran to the funds. The US also imposed new sanctions on Hamas and members of IRGC for arming, training, and providing financial assistance to the terror organization. The US Department of Treasury emphasizes Iran's role in providing financial, logistical, and operational support to Hamas.

The EU announced that it is considering imposing similar sanctions against Iran over its support of Hamas. Moreover, the big three European countries refused to lift sanctions on Iran after the 18th of October 2023, a date set by the original deal in 2015 and relates to missile capabilities of Iran.

Although there is still some pressure on Iran, the effectiveness of sanctions is debatable. The Iranian leadership is very flexible in its ways to evade sanctions, leaving the Iranians to suffer as a result of the sanctions, especially when these are focusing on financing channels. Yes, the economy plunged but that did not change the behavior and ambitions of the Iranian regime.

The current situation in the Middle East generates an opportunity and momentum to act now against Iran. This should include complementary means to sanctions, such as cyber tools, a direct credible military threat to Iran's strategic infrastructure, and dismantle of its proxies. But also, the targeting of target channels of technology transfer and financial support with direct links to IRGC. In this context, the lawsuit against MTN Group is an important step. The Iranian leadership and its accomplices must know that as long as they engage in terrorism and nuclear armament, the international community will react vigorously.

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