

Hamas' grave miscalculation on how Israel would react

written by Brig. Gen. (res.) Yossi Kuperwasser | 15.11.2023

While IDF forces are engaged in Gaza, in what is becoming a protracted war, aiming to weaken Hamas and secure the release of captives, the main effort by Hamas and its backers has been focused on reaching a prolonged ceasefire as much as possible.

Such a ceasefire has operational and tactical importance for Hamas, as the pressure on Israel increases. However, its main significance lies in the strategic arena. Hamas hopes a ceasefire will compel Israel to change its war objectives and revert to the softer approach that Hamas initially believed Israel would follow right after the Oct. 7 massacre.

I believe that Hamas leaders, despite the severe blow inflicted on Israel, were convinced that the Israeli response would focus on targeted airstrikes that would extract a significant price from the Palestinians and perhaps even a limited ground maneuver – but they never anticipated that Israel would launch an all-out undertaking to eliminate the terrorist organization and deprive it of its military-terrorist capabilities along with retaking the strip.

Hamas likely believed that had Israel subscribed to a small-scale approach, they could build on the success of October 7 and effect a change that would result in a new “equation” between the organization and the Jewish state. Meaning, the release of the imprisoned terrorists, lifting the blockade, and stopping the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Hamas assessed that Israel's weakness and its problematic relations with the United States, coupled with its inherent reluctance to pay the high price involved in a broad military operation to remove Hamas from Gaza, would ultimately prevent it from completely defeating Hamas, just like in previous flare-ups.

In previous rounds, whenever the fighting ended, both sides licked their wounds, but Hamas would then quickly recover and posed a threat to the Gaza area and Israel as a whole.

This time Israel adopted, to the surprise of Hamas, a different approach that could strategically weaken the organization without precedent, thereby also affecting both radical factions associated with the organization: the radical axis led by Iran on the one hand, and the Muslim Brotherhood axis, which includes Qatar and Turkey, on the other.

All actions by Hamas, Iran, and its proxies (Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Shiite militias in Iraq), Qatar, and Turkey should be seen in the context of the attempt to persuade President Joe Biden to pressure Israel to stop the fighting and eventually adopt an alternative approach.

This effort motivates them to create the impression that there is a severe humanitarian crisis in Gaza. It is what made Hamas play a cynical game with the captives, and this is also what has prompted the Shiite militias in Iraq to step up their actions. Likewise, this explains the gradual escalation by Hezbollah in the north and the missile launches from the Houthis, and the potential expansion of the conflict by Iran and its allies

This is also the context through which we must treat the numerous protests in Western capitals calling for a ceasefire. Even Jordan and Egypt are joining the chorus for various reasons, primarily due to the concern about a flow of Palestinian refugees into their territories. The Palestinian Authority seemingly calls for a ceasefire, but it is unclear if it is genuinely interested in one.

So far, Hamas and its allies' efforts have been unsuccessful. Biden is under pressure, along with most Western leaders. They understand the importance of Israel's success in undermining Hamas and the moral justification for it. Israel's recent moves, such as advancing on the ground, exposing the illicit Hamas activity at the Rantisi Hospital, and continued close coordination with the US. regarding the management of the conflict against Hezbollah, contribute to President Biden's ability to withstand pressure.

As the fighting continues, Israel will need to remind Western leaders, led by Biden, that letting Hamas stay in power would be beyond the pale and that Israel can bring about its demise within a reasonable time without causing a humanitarian disaster in Gaza or leading to actions that would escalate the conflict into a regional war. This is how Israel would be able to get room for action and the time needed to achieve its strategic goals, even if it agrees to short

ceasefires/pauses to release the captives.

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