

The Mission Ahead for Israel

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Articles & Testimony

Although the immediate goal is to destroy Hamas's terrorist regime in Gaza, there is no viable alternative to a political solution in the longer term.

Hamas's surprise attack against Israel will require inquiries, investigations, lessons-learned exercises, and ultimately a reshaping of Israel's security doctrine. However, the massive assault has already shown the failure of Israel's policy towards the Gaza Strip, which was based on the idea that recognizing Hamas as the de facto sovereign of the area and improving the economic situation of its residents would lead to calm and might even moderate Hamas' approach toward Israel. A new policy is essential.

Israel is still in the midst of a fast-changing event, and it is unclear whether it will have to confront escalation on other fronts, especially the northern border facing Hezbollah. But there can be no doubt that the new reality requires Israel to shift its paradigm vis-à-vis Hamas and focus on the only alternative that remains: toppling Hamas' rule in the Gaza Strip.

Over the years, Israeli policy toward Hamas fluctuated on the military level (between limited operations and all-out wars), the economic level (between tightening and easing closures) and the political level (between threatening Hamas with all-out destruction and offering a modus vivendi based on calm). Each of these policies was born of the assumption that granting Hamas tacit recognition as ruler of Gaza plus providing economic dividends for the people of the area would give Hamas enough incentive to offer relative quiet in return, based on the notion when the

adversary has something to lose, it becomes less dangerous.

Over time, it seemed that Hamas was content to focus on governance and regime maintenance at the expense of resistance against the “Zionist entity.” But appearances were misleading. It turned out that Hamas was indifferent to the welfare of the civilians living in Gaza and exploited its role as effective sovereign there solely to invest in its vision of creating an Islamic state “between the River and the Sea.”

After the horrific October 7 attacks, it is clear that Israel is left with only one of the many tools it had at its disposal over the years—a tool that was periodically considered and then jettisoned as being irrelevant or unrealistic: the tool of decisive military action. This is the most complex, costly tool in the policy shed, as it will require the mobilization of all of Israel’s national resources—political, military, economic and social—and risk the lives of many soldiers, all for the distasteful prospect of returning to the Gaza Strip.

In place of the former strategy, where each side appeared to benefit, there must now be a zero-sum goal—to end Hamas control of Gaza. If this goal is not achieved, Hamas scores a clear victory. The price Israel may pay for achieving this goal will be expensive and painful and it will require using weapons and tactics never before employed. But the alternative is catastrophic—a signal to the Middle East that Israel lacks the ability to confront and defeat its enemies, a perception that will hearten, cheer and embolden all the other extremists in our region.

We must act now because postponing decisive action will only raise the cost to Israel in the future when it will be necessary to deal with a more sophisticated enemy with a foothold in the West Bank—and perhaps even inside Israel proper—with the full backing of Iran’s terrorist network. And once we act, we need to make a long-term change so that decisiveness remains the basis of our security policy toward Gaza, in the sense that the IDF needs to adopt a proactive approach to prevent any attempt to re-build a terrorist infrastructure and thwart any plot of terrorist attacks before they are executed.

In parallel with the military move, Israel already needs to think about the “day after” Hamas, meaning that it needs to consult now with the United States and other key international actors and countries in the region about shaping the post-Hamas reality in Gaza. This will have political, security and economic dimensions. A basic question will be: what is the civilian “address” for administering the area—the corrupt and tottering Palestinian Authority? The representatives of Mohammad Dahlan, the former PA security official evicted by Hamas in 2007 who today enjoys hospitality in the Gulf? An international force of some unknown shape, size and composition?

On the face of it, the optimal option is to return control of Gaza to the PA, although it is unclear to what extent the Ramallah-based government is willing or capable of meeting this goal—and whether PA President Mahmoud Abbas, with his precarious status in the West Bank, can re-enter Gaza after Israeli tanks and airpower have paved the way.

Let’s not forget that the West Bank has already seen a significant increase in the scope and number of terrorist attacks against Israeli targets, as a result of Hamas’s attempts to destabilize the area over the past year, flood the region with weapons and make common cause with other local terrorist groups. Neutralizing such terror activity in the West Bank is essential; anarchy there will give Hamas an outlet to survive what happens in Gaza and will undermine any hope the PA will play a role there following Hamas’ defeat. At the same time, Israel must take steps to prevent vigilante actions by elements of the Israeli population of the West Bank. Opening up another front of conflict between Jewish and Palestinian extremists in the West Bank must be averted.

In addition, we cannot avoid Iran’s critical role. There can be no dispute that Hamas received inspiration, money, weapons, training and know-how from Tehran. Without Iran’s substantial support, Hamas would never have been able to build up its force and demonstrate such advanced military capabilities. Israel needs to internalize the reality that Iran is on its border, acting through Hamas, Hezbollah and other extremist elements.

This means that Iran poses a multidimensional threat, that starts with terrorism and subversion and extends all the

way to the potential to achieve a military nuclear capability. Confronting every aspect of this threat is a difficult and complex challenge that requires the support of Israel’s friends and allies. At the same time, Israel needs to insist that any future international diplomacy with Iran must focus on all aspects of this threat, not just the nuclear end of the threat spectrum. In this position, Israel likely can find support among the Sunni states of the region who view the danger that Iran poses in exactly the same way.

In pursuing these objectives, it is also vital to define what path Israeli leaders have to be careful to avoid. It would be a grave mistake for Israel to re-occupy Gaza, eighteen years after leaving the area. But in resisting the temptation to return to Gaza, Israel must similarly prevent any flow of funds from outside sources that might find their way to Hamas, resuscitating the organization politically and, eventually, militarily. Out of sympathy with ordinary Gazans who too have suffered under Hamas, Israel can play a supportive role in post-war recovery but it needs to be clear that neither Gaza reconstruction nor care for the health, sanitation or displacement of residents is Israel’s responsibility.

Of all the lessons to be learned, perhaps the most important is one that Israel’s founders accepted 75 years ago when they agreed to the United Nations partition resolution that divided British-mandated Palestine into two states, Jewish and Arab. Eventually, after we pay the high but necessary price to destroy the terrorist regime of Hamas, we have to rid ourselves of the fantasy that security measures and economic incentives will suffice as an answer to the Palestinian issue in the West Bank any more than it was an answer in Gaza. Failure of this model should teach us the urgent necessity of a political solution to our overall conflict with Palestinians, helping us find a way to separate our land from theirs, our people from theirs, in an orderly, agreed fashion.

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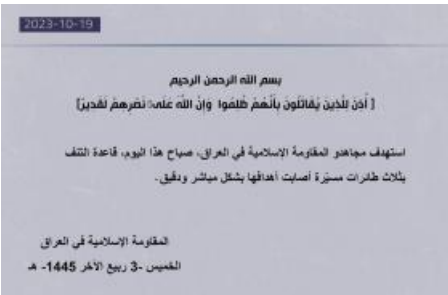
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Oct 20, 2023

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