

Israel's Moment of Truth in Dealing with Hamas?

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Since Operation Guardian of the Walls, the Israeli pledge that “what was is not what will be” indeed appears validated, although not in the sense that the Israeli leadership intended. The strategic positioning of Hamas after the last round of fighting is better than before, and while Israel succeeded in restoring calm along the Gaza Strip, the price in strategic terms is greater than what Israel can afford. Hamas, as a terror organization, has become a more dangerous enemy in general, and particularly in the event of an operation on another front or with Iran. Therefore, now is the time for Israel to reassess its moves in relation to Hamas. It should take the initiative at a time it deems most convenient, rather than at a time imposed by Hamas, and inflict ongoing and critical damage to the organization’s military organization in all its theaters – even at the cost of harming the chances of reaching an arrangement. Avoiding this type of action could prove to be a very bad option, and more dangerous than the lack of an arrangement.

Since Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021, Israel has continued, with Egyptian mediation, its attempts to achieve a significant arrangement with Hamas. On more than one occasion, the Israeli leadership has pledged that “what was is not what will be,” and has insisted that any arrangement in the Gaza Strip must include the return of the bodies of Oron Shaul and Hadar Goldin and the release of Israeli citizens held by Hamas. Additional, though weaker statements were sounded regarding the need to arrest Hamas’s military buildup. Hamas for its part has maintained there is a clear separation between an arrangement for the purpose of reconstruction and an improved humanitarian situation in the Strip, and the talks on the return of bodies and civilians. Hamas also clarified that it has no intention of discussing aspects relating to its military buildup, and in fact since the end of Guardian of the Walls, it has invested supreme efforts in restocking its arsenals, repairing its military infrastructure, and developing weapons – including heavy and precision rockets, UAVs, drones, and marine capabilities.

In recent days, as the organization marked the 34th anniversary of its establishment with mass rallies in and beyond the Gaza Strip, Hamas leaders have made repeated threats. These include an explicit ultimatum to Israel regarding the intention to instigate security escalation by the end of December, unless there is significant progress toward an arrangement on the organization's terms. At the same time, Hamas is rearing its head in the West Bank and acting defiantly and provocatively toward the Palestinian Authority. Notwithstanding the ban on flying Hamas flags, there were several parades of armed Hamas activists, in Jenin and other cities in the West Bank, along with violent activity by Hamas student cells (al-Kutleh), wearing Hamas uniforms and even carrying weapons, on the campuses of Bir Zeit and al-Najah universities.

The Hamas decision to fire rockets at Jerusalem on May 10, 2021, which led to Operation Guardian of the Walls, marked a shift in the strategy of its leaders, who decided to work toward a change of the rules of the game with Israel; to position Hamas as the defender of Jerusalem, the Palestinians in Jerusalem, and the holy places; and to embarrass the Palestinian Authority and undermine its status and its stability – all in order to establish itself as the alternative to Fatah and the PA.

Guardian of the Walls was conducted on two parallel lines: while Hamas focused on the cognitive element, with the kinetic operation (the rockets) being the means for positioning it as the leader of the Palestinian struggle in the minds of both the Palestinian and the Israeli publics, the IDF meanwhile, highlighting its operational and intelligence capabilities, focused on the kinetic aspect and framed its achievements with reference to the military targets that were destroyed and the number of Hamas casualties.

In fact, the change in Hamas strategy was far wider. The Hamas leadership in Gaza, which until Guardian of the Walls was focused on Gazan affairs and did not show much interest in the West Bank, decided to use the West Bank as leverage to promote its objectives in Gaza and establish the status of its leaders in general. Its involvement in the West Bank increased, and the

Hamas leadership, including Saleh al-Arouri, who is in charge of the West Bank, adopted a “dual resistance strategy” (DRS), which in essence is an effort to maintain security calm in the Gaza Strip alongside a developing and intensive effort to consolidate an infrastructure in the West Bank for terror operations against Israel in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Israel itself. Nor does the military effort end with replenishing stockpiles and developing additional military capabilities in the Strip, while entrenching its terror infrastructure in the West Bank; in addition to these efforts, the organization – with Iranian help and guidance, and in coordination with Hezbollah – is also working to develop its military infrastructure in southern Lebanon. Moreover, it is working to foment unrest in East Jerusalem and deepen channels of communication with Israel’s Arab citizens.

Within the framework of the dual resistance strategy, Hamas’s purpose is to agree on an arrangement in the Gaza Strip that includes easing the closure in order to allow for Gaza’s reconstruction and an improvement in its humanitarian situation. Reconstruction in its turn will enable the organization to strengthen its public and political legitimacy in the Strip and beyond, consolidating its status as a more determined and successful leader of the Palestinian national struggle than the Palestinian Authority or Fatah. An arrangement will also enable Hamas to entrench the infrastructure for the next round of fighting with the IDF. In tandem, the organization develops its military and political base in the West Bank and beyond in order to intensify terrorist actions against Israel in the West Bank and Israel, and to undermine the stability and legitimacy of the PA by aggravating friction between the IDF and the Palestinian population in PA territory.

Evidence of Hamas’s growing military strength in the West Bank lies in the noticeable rise in arrests by Israeli security forces and the growing number of actively organized terror infrastructures and significant attacks that are thwarted. Data show arrests and thwarted attacks on a daily basis, as well as increased incidents of stone throwing, Molotov cocktails, stabbings, and car-ramming attacks. Further evidence of Hamas’s determination is the weakness shown by the Palestinian security mechanisms against Hamas

activity. In some cases, the PA security forces avoid confronting Hamas activists, even when armed and operating openly against the Authority, in Jenin for example or on university campuses. In other cases, the security forces achieve fairly limited success and are exposed to growing public criticism, reflecting the erosion of their support and legitimacy.

Thus since Operation Guardian of the Walls, Israel's pledge that "what was is not what will be" has indeed appeared to be validated, albeit not in the sense that the Israeli leadership intended. Hamas's strategic positioning after the round of fighting in May is better than before. Israel has eased the security closure of the Gaza Strip more than since Hamas took control of Gaza. In addition to 10,000 Israeli work permits granted to laborers from the Strip, imports and exports and bringing dual purpose materials into Gaza is easier. Egypt also significantly eased restrictions at the Rafah border crossing and even launched a number of projects to rebuild the Strip, with unsupervised entry of building materials. Not only did Gaza's humanitarian conditions improve after the last round of hostilities, but Hamas is also stronger politically and with respect to its military infrastructures outside the Strip, including in southern Lebanon. Above all, it has more confidence – in spite of a growing sense of siege in the Strip, after the recent completion of the security obstacle erected by Israel along its border.

The ultimatums issued by Hamas in Gaza should be regarded seriously, because they clearly reflect how the leaders see the situation and how they wish to promote their strategic objectives. Given a zero sum game between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, any gain by Hamas is a loss for the PA, raising the chances of eroding the PA's effectiveness in the West Bank, and leading to increased friction between the IDF and the civilian population, and even to further outbreaks of violence.

True, Israel did succeed in restoring calm to and from the Gaza Strip after Operation Guardian of the Walls, but the tacit price in strategic terms is greater than what Israel can afford. Hamas, as a terror organization that has developed significant military capabilities and is striving to develop military infrastructures in the West Bank and southern Lebanon, together

with political efforts to reach out to Israel's Arab citizens and tighten its cooperation with Iran, has become a more dangerous enemy in general, and particularly in the event of an operation on another front apart from the southern arena, or with Iran.

Now is the time for Israel to reassess its moves with respect to the organization. It should neutralize the dual resistance strategy and make it clear that it sees Hamas as a single entity, and therefore any terror activity in the West Bank or southern Lebanon will be treated in the same way as terror activity in the Gaza Strip, with some of the responsibility assigned to the Hamas leadership in Gaza, which is no longer trying to hide its involvement in other theaters. Israel must take the initiative, at a time it deems more strategically convenient rather than at a time imposed by Hamas, and inflict ongoing critical damage to the organization's military infrastructure in all its theaters – even at the cost of harming the chances of reaching an arrangement. Avoiding this type of action could prove to be a very bad option, and far more dangerous than the lack of an arrangement.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen