

A Ray of Light: A Strategic Opportunity that Must Not be Missed

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The October 7 calamity – the worst Israel has experienced in the 75 years of its existence – brings with it a strategic opportunity of historic proportions: a willingness among regional and international actors to form a coalition against Hamas and Iran and its proxies, which operate across the Middle East and beyond. However, in order to take advantage of this golden opportunity, Israel must take meaningful political and public measures, particularly regarding a political process with the Palestinians. Yet the current Israeli government is hard pressed to take any decision that will allow it to take advantage of the promising opportunity before it. Unless this opportunity is leveraged immediately, it will likely disappear and leave a weakened Israel that is deemed far less of an asset to Western countries in general and the United States in particular, as well as to the pragmatic Arab states.

The war against Hamas provides Israel with a historic strategic opportunity, thanks to the unprecedented international support that it has been given for the stated goals of the campaign: securing the release of the hostages held in the Gaza Strip and bringing down the Hamas regime. This support reduces (for the time being) the potential costs of the war, since it manifests itself in a willingness to give Israel freedom of operation, force buildup assistance, and diplomatic-political protection. The significance of this widespread support from the United States and other Western nations, as well as willingness of pragmatic Arab states to support complementary political processes, is a singular strategic opportunity for Israel.

Moreover, it seems that there is a willingness to form a coalition to fight Hamas, which would include a military presence in order obstruct the Iranian axis and even to use force against it – regional defense against missiles and drones, and attacks by proxies that are part of the war and seek to escalate confrontations on additional fronts to prevent Israel from focusing on Hamas.

The positioning by Western leaders alongside Israel is not limited to the duration of the war. It is expected to continue thereafter, into the prolonged campaign that Israel is likely to wage to bring down the Hamas regime, prevent its rejuvenation, and ensure its replacement with a new and stable regime in the Gaza Strip. In addition, this Western coalition, with Arab partners, will play a vital role in establishing an improved security regime in southern Lebanon, which will distance Hezbollah from Israeli communities in the north (an updated version of UN Security Council Resolution 1701) and counter the international legal campaign underway against Israel at The Hague. This coalition would also have the potential to help Israel recover its social, military,

and economic robustness and strength on “the day after.” It is likewise imperative that there be a strong and coordinated international and regional front against Iran to obstruct its nuclear program and neutralize the actions of Tehran and its proxies in the region. A strong coalition can highlight the negative and destabilizing actions by Iran, and the potential scope of the regional and global damage if the Islamic Republic acquires a nuclear capability.

In order for this opportunity to materialize and become more than a pipe dream, the burden of proof is on Israel in two respects. First is the military aspect, i.e., Israel’s ability to bring down the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip and defeat its armed wing, while adhering to the rules of international law (limiting the harm to noncombatants and allowing humanitarian aid into the Strip). The second aspect is political: Israel must show genuine willingness to advance toward a political arrangement regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which once again has surfaced as an open and painful wound.

At a meeting of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on October 20, 2023, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant presented the goals of the Israeli campaign – first and foremost the destruction of Hamas and its military and governmental capabilities. Additional goals include the absolute removal of Israeli responsibility from and for the Gaza Strip and the establishment of a new security regime in the region. The Defense Minister stated: “This is a three-stage campaign, and we are in the first phase, in which a military campaign is underway with firepower and subsequently with a ground maneuver with the purpose of destroying operatives and damaging infrastructure in order to defeat and destroy Hamas. The second phase will be an intermediate phase, with continued fighting but at a lower intensity to eliminate pockets of resistance. The third step will be the creation of a new security reality for Israeli citizens, including the population in the Gaza envelope.” This suggests that international and regional support for Israel is vital to realization of the goals of the campaign, both because it is expected to last several months and because its success will be measured according to the outcome of the third stage – the establishment of a new security regime in the Gaza Strip and the removal of Israel’s responsibility for the Strip. This will require not only international and regional support, but also the involvement and even the active integration of the international community in setting up and supporting this new regime and in reconstruction of the Gaza Strip.

The October 7 calamity is also a strategic challenge in terms of its accompanying and subsequent ramifications, all of which are difficult for Israel to confront alone: (1) an increased chance of multi-arena conflict, while Israel is enervated from a prolonged campaign in Gaza and struggles to function normally; (2) force buildup needs, security for border communities, and replenishment of military stockpiles; (3) recovery of Israel’s standing as a regional power; (4) re-leveraging of the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia as part of the effort to establish a regional architecture that will include the Palestinian system; (5) military and operational freedom to maintain any achievements against Hamas; (6) practical and conceptual victory over the axis of resistance, from Iran to Hezbollah and Hamas; (7) economic robustness, given the difficult recovery that will be faced by the Israeli economy and ensuring a return to the

growth figures of before the war and perhaps even higher; (8) societal resilience: the solidarity that is currently evident in Israeli society is not fundamental, rather situational (the tension has intensified and the rifts in Israeli society have not disappeared) and the state will need to rebuild society, as well as the public's faith in the IDF, the leadership of the country, and Israel's future.

In order to meet these challenges, each complex on its own, and even more so when taken together, Israel must have a Western and regional coalition by its side, under the leadership of the United States. The countries that are members of this potential coalition have presented Israel with a number of demands and conditions, led by Israel's evincing a willingness to advance a dialogue and political arrangement with the Palestinians after the war. In addition, Israel is urged to adhere to international law and the laws of armed conflict, prevent a humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip, and thwart any danger of regional escalation. These stipulations reflect the political pressures these countries experience from respective internal actors and their expectations of Israel, as part of the global democratic camp that is currently confronting Russia and China. US President Joe Biden and other Western leaders have publicly highlighted the issue of a political envelope. For them, political moves are more important than military moves – or, at least, must be combined with them in order to resolve regional crises. In advance of an election year in the United States, it is vital for President Biden to maintain the momentum needed to create a new regional and moderate architecture in the Middle East, particularly when the war poses a domestic challenge for pragmatic Arab regimes.

Although Israel is amenable to many of the demands made of it, when it comes to a commitment to promote a political agreement in the Palestinian arena, the current Israeli government is hard pressed to demonstrate any forthcoming measures. The demand to reinstate the Palestinian Authority as the sovereign in the Gaza Strip has already met with stiff Israeli opposition. However, the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian political process is an Archimedean point for the establishment of this potential coalition. Thus not only will failing to take a positive view on the resumption of political dialogue with the Palestinians make it harder for Israel to achieve its stated goals in the war against Hamas, but it could also mean that it misses this historic strategic opportunity to restore itself and its standing, and to reshape the Middle East with Israel itself a key and influential link in the chain.

In order to extricate Israel from this distress, the current government would be advised to show historic responsibility and view the strategic environment through sober eyes. It should make two proposals:

- a. The convention of a regional conference – in Cairo or Riyadh – sponsored by the United States and with the support of Western states, which, along with a process that restarts talks aimed at securing a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (even though there is no way of knowing how this process will end), will deal with the immediate demilitarization of Gaza and the establishment of new regime to govern the Strip, in addition to expansion of the normalization process and measures taken to halt the Iranian axis.

- b. The gradual integration of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza. At first, the PA's civilian apparatus should be integrated (the Civil Committee) to take on the practical management of the needs of the civilian population there and fill the vacuum that will be created once the Hamas regime is toppled. In the second stage, the Palestinian Authority will be asked to implement whatever reforms it is capable of, as part of its effort to show the US-led coalition that it intends to and is capable of bringing stability to the Gaza Strip; at the same time, the US security coordinator, along with Egypt, will work to establish police and domestic security forces to bring law and order to the Gaza Strip.

One of the important roles of the Western-regional coalition will be to prevent Hamas's rejuvenation and to support the establishment of a stable regime in Gaza, while weakening the Iranian axis. Failure to be integrated as a key player in this potential coalition – especially at a time of war – will make it hard for Israel to achieve the goals it has defined for this campaign and to recover and strengthen its standing in the future. On the other hand, taking advantage of this opportunity to forge an alliance will improve Israel's international and regional standing, allow it to expand and deepen the normalization process, strengthen its special relationship with the United States, and improve national resilience and the public's faith in the state institutions.

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