

Turning the Table: Ramadan as an Opportunity

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The month of Ramadan—holy to Muslims across the world, including the Palestinians —is due to start on March 10 or 11. Ramadan has its own character and unique dynamics that could create an energy that is today missing and could cause the Palestinians to escalate the violence. Due to the sensitivity of Ramadan and the potential violence it could bring, it is important for Israel to consider an extraordinary move, which would turn the table and shift the responsibility onto Hamas—by making an offer that includes an end to the fighting in Gaza, the end of Hamas’s governing power in Gaza, the release of the hostages being held by Hamas, and the release by Israel of Palestinian prisoners. In all likelihood, Hamas would reject the proposal, but then responsibility for the continued fighting would fall on its shoulders. Just making this proposal could serve as leverage to pressure Hamas from the public, the Palestinian Authority, Arab countries, and the international community.

The war in the Gaza Strip is in its fifth month. The three goals of the campaign, as defined by Israel’s political leadership, remain both justified and necessary: 1. Toppling Hamas’s governmental and military infrastructure and ensuring that the organization is never in a position of power in Gaza again; 2. Securing the release of all the Israeli hostages; and 3. Changing the security situation in the Gaza Strip to ensure that attacks against Israel cannot be launched from there again in the future and by guaranteeing that the IDF has complete freedom of operation there.

At this stage of the war, Israel has made some achievements in terms of dismantling Hamas’s military and governmental infrastructure. Having completed the operation in northern Gaza, the main military focus on the Khan Yunis region and the refugee camps in the central Strip are coming to an end. The next goal is Rafah, including the Philadelphi Corridor. Even if Hamas still maintains the illusion of civilian control over the areas that the IDF has pulled out of in northern Gaza, it is clear that this is the organization’s swansong. Any attempt by Hamas to restore its military capabilities is met by a swift and effective response from the IDF, in precise operations that end with Israeli forces leaving the areas (in a manner reminiscent of the IDF operations in refugee camps in the West Bank). What remains of Hamas’s leadership has fled; Yahya Sinwar has lost effective control of the remnants of his organization and it is reported that he has been incommunicado for the past few weeks.

The situation in the Rafah region is complex, both because of the large number of Palestinian civilians who have gathered in the southern Gaza Strip—the vast majority of them displaced from northern Gaza and the Khan Yunis regions—and because of the intensifying tensions with Egypt, which is afraid that refugees will stream into the Sinai Peninsula as a result of a broad military operation Rafah. Cairo also objects to the model of operation that Israel has proposed

with regard to a barrier along the entire Philadelphi Corridor, the goal of which is to prevent smuggling into Gaza above and below ground.

Only now, after months of negotiations has there been any real significant progress over the release of the hostages, since Hamas presented unacceptable and inflexible opening positions. American, regional, and international pressure on Israel to end the fighting is increasing, especially in light of a possible military operation in Rafah. When it comes to the Biden administration, the main fear is the escalation of the conflict into a regional war, which would thwart Washington's attempts to introduce a new regional architecture. Saudi Arabian officials have repeatedly stated that they intend to renew the normalization process with Israel, but Riyadh has also stressed that the process will only begin once there is a political horizon for the Palestinians—which the Saudis believe, more forcefully than in the past, depends on the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the paradigm of the two-state solution. In addition, Hezbollah, encouraged by Iran, is committed to continuing the fight against Israel as long as the war in Gaza rages on and to ensuring the survival of Hamas's leadership. Day by day, the level of intensity of mutual attacks is increasing, as Israel and Hezbollah draw closer to a wider war.

Against this backdrop, the month of Ramadan—holy to Muslims across the world, including the Palestinians—is due to start on March 10 or 11. Historically speaking, Ramadan has seen an increase in the extent of unrest and violence in the Palestinian sphere, especially on the Temple Mount. Even though there are no clear signs to indicate any sharp increase in tension during this year's Ramadan, and the Palestinian public, especially in East Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria, seems completely depleted of energy for engaging in activity against Israel and escalating tensions, it should be remembered that Ramadan has a character and dynamics of its own. This could generate an energy that did not previously exist and could motivate the Palestinians to engage in violence—especially if the limitations that Israel places on Muslim prayer on the Temple Mount are particularly draconian.

Ramadan is such a sensitive and important month that Israel should consider a unique and extraordinary move, with the goal of reversing the trends and shifting responsibility onto the shoulders of Hamas, the Palestinians, and other countries in the region. For example, the Israeli government could, citing the importance and sanctity of Ramadan, put a generous, two-stage offer on the table:

- A. The first stage would be a cessation of fighting in the Gaza Strip, a massive humanitarian effort to assist the civilian population of Gaza, and the start of the process of reconstruction. In exchange, Israel would demand the release of all Israeli hostages that Hamas is holding, and a guarantee from the Palestinian Authority and Arab countries, especially Egypt, that Hamas would no longer be the governing power in Gaza. Likewise, Israel would demand that Hamas's leadership leave Gaza and that a moderate player, with pan-Arab backing, is either appointed or nurtured. Israel, for its part, would release Palestinian prisoners according to a ratio to be worked out in negotiations, without specifying numbers or the identities of the prisoners.

- B. If the hostages are released and Hamas's leaders do indeed leave Gaza, the second stage would be for Israel to withdraw its forces to the international border—after Hamas's Rafah Brigade and the rest of its military force is disarmed and their weapons handed over to Egypt. Israel would make it clear that it retains the right to operate freely in Gaza to thwart terrorist attacks and to implement its right to self-defense.

Additional elements of the deal could be considered, but Israel would have to place them on the table as soon as possible, at its own initiative and in the clear context of Ramadan. An initiative of this kind would indicate Israel's willingness to bring the war in the Gaza Strip to an end and even to show the "generosity of the victor" by helping to ease the suffering of the Palestinians who have been displaced from their homes.

It is reasonable to assume that Hamas would reject any such offer. However, in that case, responsibility for the continued fighting and for the danger of the escalation of the Israeli–Palestinian front would fall on Hamas. Hamas, after all, would be seen as having rejected an offer that would have ended the fighting, while Israel would be seen as having proposed a solution that would curtail the war and lower regional tensions, as well as being attentive to its most important ally, the United States, and as being sensitive to the expectations of its Arab allies in the region. That is, just making this proposal could serve as leverage to pressure Hamas from the public, the Palestinian Authority, Arab countries, and the international community. Israel would declare that the offer is valid throughout the month of Ramadan and the subsequent Id al-Fitr celebration. If no positive response is received, Israel would continue its military campaign in the Gaza Strip at full intensity—including capturing Rafah and the Philadelphi Corridor.

An Israeli initiative, as opposed to an Israeli response to proposals from mediators or Hamas itself, is something that has yet to be tried. It would mean turning the table and shifting responsibility onto the shoulders of Hamas and all those clamoring for a ceasefire. In addition to the possibility of preventing an escalation on the Israeli–Palestinian front, an initiative of this kind would represent a positive Israeli response to the expectations of the United States and the pragmatic Arab states in the region. It could recharge Israel's battery of international legitimacy and, at the same time, could undermine Hamas in the eyes of the Palestinian people, who are desperate for the war to end and to begin the process of rebuilding. At the same time, the initiative could help calm Israel's northern front and start the process of formulating understandings, with the aid of the United States and France, to bring stability to the Israel–Lebanon border, based on UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

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