**The Day After** / Dr. Shaul Arieli

The Netanyahu government is continuing to live in an alternative reality regarding the future of the Gaza Strip. Some ministers want to expel the Gazans to Sinai and rebuild the Israeli settlements of Gush Katif, because in their reality there is no peace treaty and no shared strategic interests between Egypt and Israel. Others want to impose the same “solution” on the Palestinians in the West Bank and to expel them to Jordan, which they view as the alternative Palestinian homeland, because in their reality there is no peace treaty and no shared interests between Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Prime Minister Netanyahu wins the prize for detachment from reality following his stubborn refusal to accept various American proposals to involve the Palestinian Authority.

Four key insights can be drawn from the dismal reality that has been imposed on us by all the above in their fanatical messianism and extreme opportunism:

Firstly – the lack of any decision defining a diplomatic objective makes it difficult to understand the required closing picture of the military operation in the Gaza Strip;

Secondly – at this point in time, Hamas is leading in terms of its achievements:

• Hamas has strengthened its standing in Palestinian society relative to Fatah;

• Hamas is flaunting its victory picture of October 7;

• Hamas has placed the Palestinian cause at the center of global discourse and is enjoying support from various quarters;

• Hamas is freeing its own prisoners and Fatah prisoners from Israeli prisons;

• Hamas has dented Israeli deterrence;

• Hamas has damaged the Israeli economy, sowed fear among the Israeli public, and turned hundreds of thousands of Israelis into refugees in their own country.

Thirdly – Israel cannot halt the military operation at this point and return to an imaginary status quo, due to Hamas’s achievements as detailed above. Moreover, Israel’s policy of separating Gaza and the West Bank has collapsed completely, as has its strategy of bypassing the Palestinian issue.

Fourthly and lastly – in order to continue its military moves, Israel needs the legitimacy of an international coalition. This is possible only if a clear diplomatic objective is defined that falls within the parameters of the international decisions – above all, a two-state solution.

Israel has three basic options for the Gaza Strip the day after it occupies the area and eliminates Hamas’s military and governmental capabilities. The first is to repeat the mistake it made elsewhere (Lebanon) and remain in Gaza. The second is to repeat the mistake it made 20 years ago – unilateral detachment. The third is to correct the mistake it made 20 years ago by including Gaza in a diplomatic process with the Palestinian Authority and the PLO.

Israel could choose the first option and hold on to the Gaza Strip, arguing that this is necessary for security, along the lines of the Security Zone it maintained in southern Lebanon for almost 20 years. The development and consequences of this option are already clear. The IDF will have to increase by a factor of 10 or more the number of forces it previously maintained in the Gaza Envelope and to place them inside Gaza. The terror organizations will soon resume their routine terror attacks at a high daily cost to Israel. The IDF will need to reestablish the Civil Administration and bear responsibility for the daily needs of 2.5 million Palestinians. The international community will be in no hurry to help reconstruct the devasted Gaza Strip. Lastly, the Ministry of Defense will need to invest billions of shekels in order to rebuild army outposts and pave roads. All this assumes that the demand to reestablish the Gush Katif settlements will be blocked, one way or another.

Israel could also choose the second option – a full withdrawal followed by proactive military action from the Gaza Envelope on an intensive and broad-based scale. This option means that the Gaza Strip would be handed to Hamas once again, just as Sharon did in 2005. Hamas, which is now boasting of its “victory” on October 7, just as it once boasted of “expelling” the Israelis in 2005, will very quickly regain the reins of power in the area. Qatar, Iran, Turkey, and other countries will provide very generous economic support in order to rebuild Hamas as a military and political force capable of threatening Israel in general, and the communities of the Western Negev, in particular. This option will have dramatic consequences for the status of the Palestinian Authority under the leadership of Fatah and for the status of the PLO as the recognized and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

The third option is the only one that can serve Israel’s deepest interests, though not those of the members and head of the current government. The only real option for Israel in terms of the Gaza Strip is the Palestinian Authority. No other body – Arab, international, or the United Nations – will be in a rush to get close to Gaza with all its problems.

But even the Palestinian Authority cannot move into the Gaza Strip immediately and assume responsibility for the area. Accordingly, Israel should adopt a two-stage approach. Firstly it should prepare to manage the Gaza Strip, reviving the dormant Palestinian Authority structure in the area or creating a new Palestinian administration headed solely by technocrats. Israel should not rule out seeking assistance from UNRWA in this stage. In the second stage – following elections in the Palestinian Authority in which Hamas will not compete – Israel should transfer responsibility to the Palestinian Authority, which could seek assistance from an Arab force as it assumes this role.

This option, accompanied by a declaration by Israel of its renewed commitment to the two-state solution in accordance with the international decisions, will create a platform for resuming the diplomatic process on the bilateral and regional levels. Israel must adopt this option immediately. Otherwise it will find things deteriorating from bad to worse as it becomes bogged down in the terrible first option, before being left with no choice but to adopt the second, even worse option. For a change, Israel does not need to follow its usual course of choosing all the bad options before turning to the least bad one.