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Israeli Calculations for Ground Offensive in Gaza and Prospects for Prisoner Exchange

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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On 7 October 2023, the Palestinian Resistance carried out a shock attack on military sites and settlements in the vicinity of Gaza, managing to capture an unprecedented number of soldiers, residents, and foreign nationals. The fate of these captives represents a major challenge for the Israeli government's calculations in its ongoing assault on Gaza. Not only is it seeking to manage the pressure it faces from the families of the prisoners, but it is also trying to appease the other countries of which some prisoners are nationals. Most important of these is the United States, which already fuels existing differences between decision-makers from both the military and political establishment about the timing and objectives of the ground operation.

I: The Question of a Ground Offensive

Planning for a ground invasion was announced by the political and military leadership almost immediately, with the stated intention of overthrowing the Hamas government and eliminating the entire resistance movement. But several factors led Israel to postpone its comprehensive ground offensive on the Gaza Strip. First, the great pressure exerted by the families of the Israeli prisoners on decision-makers in Israel and on Israeli public opinion, seeking the release of their family members held prisoner, in an exchange with Hamas before the entry of infantry into Gaza. Second, necessary military preparations had to be made before the invasion. Third, the US administration asked Israel to postpone the ground attack in order to enable the United States to complete its own military preparations to protect its forces in the Middle East from any possible retaliation to the assault on Gaza. Washington also wanted to make attempts to secure the release of prisoners, especially the US nationals. Fourth, some Israeli leaders in the military and security establishment insisted on postponing the ground invasion as long as possible, and instead to carpet bomb the Gaza Strip from air, land, and sea in order to exhaust the Palestinian people and the resistance before releasing the infantry.

II: The Question of the Prisoners

In recent days, the families of Israeli prisoners have ramped up pressure on decision-makers to prioritize the release of the prisoners before any ground offensive, which would not only reduce the possibility of negotiating with Hamas to conclude a prisoner exchange deal, but also put the prisoners at risk. It has become clear that the issue of prisoners has taken over public opinion. There have been increased statements from former military commanders and analysts calling for a comprehensive prisoner exchange deal between Israel and Hamas. On 26 October, Shaul Mofaz, the former Minister of Defense and Chief of Staff, called for a deal between Hamas and Israel in which all Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons would be released in exchange for the release of all Israeli prisoners. Opposition leader and head of the Yesh Atid party, Yair Lapid, also announced his support for the prisoner exchange. Both of them, and other supporters, stress the continuation of the military operation to “eliminate Hamas” once the deal is completed.



Notably, the prisoners' families escalated their campaign on the eve of the ground attack on the Gaza Strip, derailing Israeli public opinion in support of a comprehensive ground offensive. An Israeli public opinion poll by the Panel4All Institute and cited by the *Maariv* newspaper, on 27 October, revealed that 49 per cent of Israelis support postponing the ground offensive, while only 29 per cent supported an immediate ground offensive. This is in contrast to a week ago, when 65 per cent of Israelis expressed support for the immediate launch a ground offensive.¹

In light of the increasing public pressure demanding that priority be given to working on the release of the Israeli prisoners before the start of the ground invasion,² the war cabinet decided in to make provisions to secure their release.³ However, it seems that this window of opportunity will not last long; Multiple sources in the military establishment confirmed that the negotiations to release prisoners should be limited to a short period during which efforts are exhausted to achieve it.⁴

III: Increased Discord between Israeli Decision-Makers

Disagreements have raged between Israeli War Cabinet members since 7 October, an unmatched degree of discord in the history of Israeli wartime governance. They go much deeper than just personal differences and public opinion of Netanyahu, extending to fundamental differences in the military objectives of the war, the ground offensive in particular, and the bearer of responsibility for the failures of 7 October. These disputes are magnified by a context in which Israeli public confidence in the political and military leadership is shrinking, and the Israeli army itself has lost self-confidence. Furthermore, the society is currently in the grip of unprecedented political and social polarization as Netanyahu's government steams ahead with its judicial coup, despite opposition from the majority of Israeli society and elites, especially the military and security leadership. The attempted judicial coup has led to a significant decline in popularity for Netanyahu and his government, and increased tension between Netanyahu and military and security leaders.

The expansion of the government after Operation Al-Aqsa Flood to embrace members of the opposition, the establishment of the emergency government, and the joining of Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot (former chiefs of staff of the Israeli army) to the government and the War Cabinet did little to improve public confidence of diffuse conflict between the decision makers.

Netanyahu and his Likud party's popularity has subsequently hit rock bottom, and he has moved swiftly to shirk any responsibility for the failure and negligence responsible for the breach in Israel's defences. As calls demanding that he take responsibility and resign before the end of the war began

¹ Moshe Cohen, "49 Percent: Waiting for the Decision on the Large Ground Operation in the Gaza Strip," *Maariv*, 10/27/2023. [Hebrew] For English see: "Almost half of Israelis oppose 'immediate' Gaza ground invasion", *Times of Israel*, 27/10/2023, accessed on 30/10/2023 at: <https://tinyurl.com/mrvpshry>

² Sima Kadmon, "All of them for all of them," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 27/10/2023. [Hebrew]

³ Nahum Barnea, "Deal or Entry," Saturday supplement, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 27/10/2023. [Hebrew]

⁴ Tal Lev-Ram, "Sources in the security establishment: Linger on Negotiations for the Hostages is Forbidden," *Maariv*, 27/10/2023. [Hebrew]

to gain traction, Netanyahu and his close supporters launched a systematic campaign against military and security leaders, blaming them for what happened.⁵ Netanyahu appointed a new spokesman responsible for contacting journalists and military correspondents to defend him and re-direct responsibility for the failure towards the leaders of the military and security establishment. While military and security leaders, including the Chief of Staff of the Israeli Army, the Chief of Military Intelligence (Aman), the Chief of General Intelligence (Shin Bet), the Chief of Mossad, and the Commander of the Air Force, recognized the responsibility they bore for the failure, Netanyahu refused to bear any responsibility, and contented himself with making a statement 18 days later, saying: “there would be time to ask tough questions, including of himself, after the war.”⁶

In this atmosphere of mistrust and tension between Netanyahu and the leaders of the military and security establishment, Netanyahu has ceased his automatic approval of military plans presented by the Chief of Staff. He has increased the frequency of his meetings with senior military leaders and veterans to consult them on military plans, including with General Itzhak Brik and former Army Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi. During preparations for the ground attack on Gaza, Netanyahu met twice with General Brik in as many weeks, indicating his lack of confidence in the current Israeli Army Chief of Staff and the military establishment. Brik warned Netanyahu of the dangers of the Israeli army launching a ground offensive and advised him to be patient, due to his belief that the infantry and ground forces in general were not prepared for war. He advised Netanyahu to bombard the Gaza Strip from the air, land and sea for as long as possible. He added that the ground attack on Gaza may lead to Hezbollah launching a comprehensive war against Israel, from which Israel would incur huge losses. According to Brik, Hezbollah can target Israel with about 5,000 missiles a day, which could cause severe damage, close to the extent inflicted on Lebanon by the Israeli army.⁷

In addition to Netanyahu’s dispute with the military establishment led by Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi, tensions between Netanyahu and his Likud minister Yoav Gallant have escalated since 7 October, and Netanyahu rejected Gallant’s request to attack Hezbollah. They began to butt heads back in March this year, when Netanyahu dismissed Gallant from his position due to the latter’s request to freeze the judicial coup given its negative impact on the army. Netanyahu was forced to rescind his dismissal under pressure from the protest movement and Israeli public opinion. As tension built between the two parties, Netanyahu’s office refused to allow Gallant to enter the office to meet with Netanyahu to discuss military issues, which indicates his lack of confidence in him. Instead, Netanyahu met with Gabi Ashkenazi, whose relationship with Gallant is hostile, consulting him on the war and military operations against Gaza, and attempting to secure his participation in war management.

5 Nahum Barnea and Ronen Bergman, “A crisis of trust between Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli army,” *Ynet*, 23/10/2023, accessed 29/10/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3FzJHEr>; See also: Noa Landau, “The campaign of poison grows: those killed and kidnapped are accused, Netanyahu is innocent,” *Haaretz*, 22/10/2023, accessed 29/10/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3FDvMgo> [in Hebrew]

6 “Netanyahu swipes at intel chiefs over Hamas, then apologizes,” Reuters, 29/10/2023, accessed 29/10/2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2p8xubyh>

7 Tal Shalf, “For the second time since the beginning of the war: Netanyahu meets with retired General Brik,” *Walla*, 22/10/2023, accessed 29/10/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/47dN1Rv> [in Hebrew]



This air of suspicion and distrust plaguing decision-makers at both the political and military levels has affected the deliberations of both the Security Cabinet and the War Cabinet, with all parties anxious about what any committee to investigate their actions in the aftermath of the war may uncover. This increases the complexity of the decision-making process, which should take place freely and transparently, and without fear of an investigation. It also affects their ability to come up with a military strategy with agreed upon objectives. In light of the mistrust and conflicts existing between decision-makers, there has been no agreement on how to achieve the goals set by the Israeli leadership, which are states so far to be eliminating Hamas' rule in the Gaza Strip, eradicating Hamas' military power, and the release of the Israeli prisoners.

Many questions remain unanswered. Does achieving this require the occupation of the Gaza Strip? How long will it take? Do these military objectives require remaining in the Gaza Strip for a period of time? What will the cost of the level of resistance they will face be to the Israeli army? Does the world have a limit on the extent of massacres against Palestinian civilians it can tolerate? What risk to life and property would be posed by a full scale war between Hezbollah and Israel upon or after the start of the ground attack? When will the Israeli army know that it has achieved its goals? Is there a contradiction between launching a comprehensive ground offensive on the Gaza Strip and the goal of recovering Israeli prisoners safely?

Despite open questions and disagreements, there remains a consensus on the goal of “eliminating Hamas” – both its military power and its governance of the Gaza Strip, as well as on the necessity of sending in ground forces to achieve this. And they may do this without answering all these questions.

Conclusion

With the limited incursions by Israeli army ground forces beginning in the past two days, the Netanyahu government faces a number of challenges that may affect the conduct of any full-scale ground offensive. The most important is calculating the degree of resistance that the troops will face, the price they will pay, and the question of the prisoners, who number at least 229. The families of the prisoners are now publicly demanding that the government offer to exchange all Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons to secure the release of all the Israeli captive in Gaza. The Israeli media and the majority of Israeli society now support this deal, but it is a matter of timing. It will not necessarily affect the decision to accept a return to the pre-7 October status quo, nor impact the short window of opportunity for Israel to take advantage of Washington's green light to wage war on Gaza.