

# Hamas demanding ‘impossible terms’ as deadlock with Israel continues

Col. (res.) David Hacham, a former Arab-affairs adviser to Israeli defense ministers, says any expectation of a significant change in Hamas’s extreme worldview is fantasy; the latest violence is part of a Hamas bid to “change the rules of the equation” with Israel.



Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar at a rally in Beit Lahiya on May 30, 2021. Photo by Atia Mohammed/Flash90.

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(August 24, 2021 / JNS) Hamas in the Gaza Strip is pursuing terms that are impossible for Israel to accept as part of its extortion attempt to “change the rules of the equation,” a former defense official and expert on Gaza has said.

Col. (res.) David Hacham, an Arab-affairs adviser to seven Israeli defense ministers and a senior research associate at the Miryam Institute, told JNS that a central impasse blocking the path to a broader arrangement between Israel and

Gaza is Hamas's refusal to come up with realistic proposals to facilitate a deal for the release of the remains of two missing-in-action Israel Defense Forces' soldiers who were killed in the 2014 war, in addition to two living Israeli civilians who entered Gaza and are being held by the terrorist organization.

With Israel linking progress on this issue to progress on a broader arrangement for Gaza's reconstruction and economy—and Hamas refusing to budge on its unrealistic demands for facilitating an exchange deal to secure the release of the Israelis—a structural problem is in place, noted Hacham.

"Israel says that if Hamas wants progress on a broader arrangement, progress must be made on an exchange deal. Hamas says these are two separate issues, and it wants separate talks on increasing the entry of commodities and services into Gaza, and the entry of Gazan workers into Israel," he said. "This is the key issue on the agenda. It is the central reason for all of the incidents we are seeing on the border. Hamas demands that Israel 'lifts the siege.' "

In exchange for the release of Israeli civilians Avera Mengistu and Hisham Al-Sayed, and the remains of MIA personnel Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul, Hamas's leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, has demanded that Israel release 1,111 Palestinian security prisoners.

"Hamas is raising impossible standards for Israel," said Hacham.

"In principle, Hamas is seeking to change the terms of the equation that has existed for a long time between Israel and Hamas," he said. "Their slogan of 'lifting the siege' means opening up Gaza's border crossings to Israel and the outside world, the naval arena and the air arena."

Egypt's General Intelligence Directorate has played the central role in mediating talks between Israel and Hamas, with most of the talks taking place in Cairo.

With no progress being made on the swap deal, the other negotiations channel is designed to achieve what Israel calls an "arrangement" and what Hamas calls a *hudna* ("calm").

To that end, talks have revolved on enabling more traffic of goods, merchants and businesspeople through the Gaza-Israel border crossings. Even though no final arrangement has been reached, Israel recently took the step of allowing 1,000

Gazan merchants and 250 businesspeople into Israel.

Throughout the deliberations, Israel has ensured a constant humanitarian flow of basic goods, food and medical supply into Gaza through trucks that pass through Kerem Shalom Crossing.

Hamas is also demanding the entry of funds for rebuilding sections of the Strip and repairing damages following the May conflict it prompted and fought with Israel.

Yet the fact that the talks are stuck on the swap issue means there is “no moving forward,” said Hacham.

This will not change as long as “Hamas does not allow progress on the MIA’s remains and captive issue,” he stated. Hamas’s initiative to jump-start Gaza’s economy and see large-scale infrastructure projects take place is thus being stalled by Hamas’s own refusal to compromise on its demands.

As a result, the fact that an agreement was reached in recent days allowing some \$100 million a month of Qatari assistance cash for needy Gazan families to come has not altered the impasse.

That agreement will see the United Nations allocate the funds through special ATM withdrawal cards, after a list of recipients was authorized by Israel, which is a far cry from the old allocation method, when Qatar’s envoy to Gaza, Muhammad Al-Emadi, would arrive with suitcases brimming with cash.

In the old arrangement, Hacham said, “Israel didn’t fully supervise where this money went. We can assume that not all of it went to needy families; some went to developing Hamas’s terror infrastructure and local rocket-production centers.”

As a result, Israel refused to consider going back to the old arrangement. Yet now that the deal was reached, Hamas is far from being satisfied or willing to scale back its escalation tactics on the border.

### **‘Hamas believes its charger was drawn up by God’**

Hacham said that those who are holding out hopes for a change in Hamas’s radical worldview are clinging to fantasies.

“ Hamas is an enemy. It is guided, conceptually and ideologically, by a call for Israel’s destruction. It does not recognize Israel. Hamas has not changed its ideology, concepts or objectives,” he said. “ And it can’t change them. I remember speaking with Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, who founded Hamas during the First Intifada in 1987, and asking him if the movement’s stances could change, whether mutual recognition could change. He told me, ‘ Our charter was drawn up by God. So humans cannot change our charter.’ ”

Hamas’s 1988 covenant continues to reflect its ideology and policy towards Israel, said Hacham. “ But we have to distinguish between Hamas’s practical actions and ideology. For tactical reasons, it is willing to reach ceasefires (*hudnas*), but not at the cost of recognition of Israel or acceptance of Israel as a legitimate element. Only as part of a tactical need.”

As a result of these dynamics, the chances of a long-term quiet with Hamas are slim, he assessed. However, stepped-up Israeli offensive actions and an Israeli determination to respond to each act of Hamas aggression could boost Israeli deterrence, he argued.

Boosted Israeli deterrence would, in turn, enable Israel to prioritize its strategic task of preventing Iran from breaking out to a nuclear weapon and dealing with Iran’s entrenchment in Syria, and Hezbollah’s threatening force build-up in Lebanon. “ These are the issues at the top of Israel’s priority list. Hence, Gaza is a problem that has to be confined,” he said.

Deterrence can be improved through steps such as “ commando raids or destroying their weapons storehouses, tunnels or even targeted killings—a tool that has proven itself,” said Hacham, while stressing that he is not in favor of a reoccupation of Gaza.

“ But Israel can’t exclude retaking Gaza either. It has to take this option into account, but only in a scenario in which there are no other options,” he said.

Such a maneuver would involve heavy casualties among young IDF soldiers, he said, as well as civilians on both sides, despite Israeli efforts to avoid this; as such, it must be reserved as a last option.

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