



The Israeli Catch 22

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More than six decades after Joseph Heller's great anti-war drama *Catch 22* saw light, the timeless masterpiece is relevant to current day discussion on national security dilemmas, diplomacy, the use of military power and what's in between. *Catch 22* is a comic-drama on the insanity of war that feeds on the lethal combination of bureaucracy, nationalism, and ego and whoever challenges it is being ostracized, even if this person is the sanest person in the room. In many aspects, *Catch 22* is the story of the long-standing Israeli policy on its missing personnel held by Hamas in Gaza, since the Shalit deal in 2011. The adoption of parts of the Shamgar committee that limited the leeway of the negotiators with respect of the acceptable price tag for a prisoner exchange caused a significant change in Israel, much like the change the Israeli public and leadership underwent after the Jibril deal in 1984, which inter alia led to the loss of the trail of Air Force Navigator Lt. Ron Arad who is still missing.

Israel wants to return the MIAs from Gaza (two KIA IDF soldiers and two mentally impaired citizens) as part of its long-standing commitment to return its MIAs wherever they may be. The conflict is and has always been the price. Whereas Hamas is interested in repeating its phenomenal success in the Shalit deal where it managed to free over 1,000 terrorists, including Yahya Sinwar, Hamas' current leader, Israel strives to cut down the price tag to a reasonable size (humanitarian gestures, freeing "light" terrorists etc.). The above fixation on both sides, coupled with its ideologic and historic components, does not allow any meaningful progress of the negotiations. The negotiations have been de facto stalled for years and slowly but surely are on the way to become the longest futile negotiations between Israel and a terrorist organization ever (seven and a half year and no end in sight). Moreover, the above fixation applies not only to the negotiations but also to the lack of Israeli adaptation to the changing reality as of the end of operation Protective Edge in 2014. In an era where Israel is focused on the Iranian threat and its derivatives, Israel's policy in Gaza is aimed at managing the conflict and minimizing the potential for a military confrontation vs. Hamas. That said, Israel has been having a hard time stabilizing the Gaza front and have not been able to arrive at a long-term arrangement with Hamas, all that while Hamas has been rebuilding its military capabilities and constantly testing Israel just below the threshold for escalation. For example, Hamas launched missiles into the Mediterranean and simulated IDF soldiers kidnapping. Similarly, PIJ enjoys Iranian backing be it economic, political, or military so if Iran wished it could pull the trigger and have PIJ escalate the Gaza front instantly, all as part of its strategy vs. Israel in Lebanon, Syria,

Gaza, and the Third Circle territories as well as deepening the protection or rather immunity of its nuclear program and eroding Israel's military advantage in the region.

The failure of the Israeli policy on Iran and its nuclear program in the last decade that culminated with the Trump administration's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran and thus enabling the latter to get closer to the bomb require a rethinking of Israel's national security concepts and stepping out of the Catch 22 situation, much like it is required for the KIA/MIA policy. Moreover, the changing geopolitical situation in the Middle East (from the Abraham Accords to the Iranian nuclear program) most definitely require Israel to rethink and recalculate its course in terms of managing its security risks. Case in point, the advantages of a slightly pricier (than the Shamgar committee benchmarks) KIA/MIA deal outweigh its disadvantages as it will rid Israel of a burden it has been carrying for years and enable a significant policy change of policy on Gaza within which Israel may be able to freely operate to help with the reconstruction of Gaza without the onerous equation of "reconstruction in return for KIA/MIA" or "humanitarian in return for the same". It may also be able to forego the "managing the conflict" approach in favor of a long-term arrangement with Hamas which will free Israel to focus on foiling the Iranian plots. Above all bringing the KIA/MIA back home will deepen the Israeli social solidarity and bring the Israeli society closer together, which in and of itself is a major component of resilience and will fortify Israel's national security.