

America wants to help - but it is undermining the war effort

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 08.12.2023

“We’re determined to help Israel ensure that October 7th never happens again,” US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated this week.

This was not the first time he made this promise. Similar statements were made during four (!) solidarity visits he has held in Israel since the massacre. However, concurrently with his statement, under American pressure, the Israeli security cabinet was forced to discuss the increase in fuel deliveries to the Gaza Strip, essentially supplying oxygen to Hamas terrorists fighting our soldiers through terror tunnels.

Soon after this declaration, the spokesperson for the State Department also announced that the United States would oppose the creation of a buffer zone in the Gaza Strip, thus adding more constraints on Israel’s actions, particularly on the options at its disposal when it comes to protecting the towns near the border.

There were also US statements that the duration of the war is not unlimited along with pressure on Israel before the renewal of hostilities in the southern region to reduce the intensity of the fighting and increase humanitarian aid.

There is no room to doubt the commitment of President Joe Biden and his officials in their statements. The administration’s support for Israel is unwavering and deserves much praise. The US has accepted Israel’s right to destroy the military and governance capabilities of Hamas and has provided substantial and vital assistance. However, at the same time, the US has been imposing limitations that prevent Israel from achieving these goals without heavy losses.

Moreover, the limitations imposed by the US will undoubtedly prolong the conflict, which is something Washington doesn’t want. The practical way to ensure a quick and effective military operation with minimal risk to the uninvolved population is to temporarily relocate this population outside the combat zones. However, there are also objections to this.

The increase in pressure on Israel may be related to Biden’s domestic travails

ahead of the 2024 elections. It may stem from differences between how Washington sees Gaza and what the reality is on the ground.

Nevertheless, Israel cannot compromise on achieving its goals while minimizing the burden on its fighters - regardless of how long this takes. This is the message Israel has to drive home when American National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan visits in the coming days.

Those who insist on getting answers from the Israeli government over what happens in the "day after" are doing so despite knowing full well that there are no good options in Gaza. If there were, they would have presumably been implemented during one of the many opportunities over the years.

There is no obligation to debate between bad alternatives in public now, amid the war. Attention should be solely directed towards victory in the war, maintaining internal unity, and minimizing the necessary involvement in issues that could stir controversy, whether internally or with our friends across the sea.

The way Israel sees it, the question of "the day after" in Gaza is secondary to the more critical goal of the war: reestablishing Israeli deterrence that was shattered on October 7. The endgame of the war must be shaped primarily according to this criterion.

The toppling of the Hamas government, the destruction of its arrays, and capabilities, the killing or neutralization of most of its commanders and its military units, along with the devastation resulting from all these - all this will serve as pieces in the desired endgame puzzle.

Of course, Israel must not forget the captives, and certainly, it should not leave for "the day after". Israel's moral obligation towards the captives and their families requires leaving an open channel for negotiations (preferably Egypt, not Qatar, whose chief interest is to ensure Hamas survives). It must ensure that a sword is swiftly placed on the necks of Hamas leaders until they understand that the captives are their responsibility and they must act to release them.

As the fighting continues, the IDF and the Shin Bet security agency continue to crack down on terrorists in Judea and Samaria. The political leaders need to decide whether to allow Palestinian workers from the West Bank to return to work in Israel, a right denied since October 7 (except for a relatively small

number of essential positions defined as critical even at this time).

The main argument for allowing them back to Israel is the fear that economic hardship, frustration, and unemployment will push them to act against Israel. Another consideration is the impact on the Israeli economy, particularly on housing construction. Against these considerations stands the concern over attacks they may perpetrate because they are inspired by Hamas in Gaza or because they want to avenge the deaths there, especially in light of the images and propaganda broadcast continuously on Al-Jazeera.

The successful counterterrorism operations in the West Bank, followed by a not insignificant number of casualties, also add motivation for revenge. The security establishment is fully preoccupied with the fighting in Gaza and the intelligence efforts in the West Bank, and its ability to track terrorist elements and neutralize them in advance is not guaranteed, as we have seen recently in the attacks at the Gush Etzion junction and in Jerusalem.

Today, the public in Israel is vigilant and shows a high degree of awareness regarding any Palestinian in Israel. This contributes to the efforts of detection and neutralization. It will not be the same if tens of thousands of Palestinians are found in Israel. Another consideration, although not mentioned in setting policy, is the perception of the price Israel exacts.

Hamas in the Gaza Strip gains points in the battle over the hearts and minds in the West Bank because it managed to have Israel release terrorists and because it stood up to Israel. These points, at least among some of the population. But it could lose the hearts and minds of the same people if they blame the terrorist organization for hurting their livelihood. It seems that at this stage, the scale leans towards maintaining the current situation and not letting the workers back to Israel. Caution requires us to avoid unnecessary security risks in the short term.

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