

Israel's dangerous trap: Why Biden's day-after proposals will only bolster Hamas

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 17.05.2024

"The Israelis go on the trajectory, potentially, to inherit an insurgency with many armed Hamas left or, if it leaves, a vacuum filled by chaos, filled by anarchy, and probably refilled by Hamas. We've been talking to them about a much better way of getting an enduring result, enduring security," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said just recently, criticizing Israel's conduct in Gaza. "We haven't seen an Israeli plan to prevent this situation," he added. Similar remarks are expected from Jake Sullivan, the US National Security Advisor as he begins his visit in Israel this week.

The same could be said about the reality in northern Samaria. We have long stopped counting the number of operations in Jenin and the Tulkarm area. Our forces go in, arrest or eliminate targets, and withdraw - only to see terror elements rear their heads again, forcing the IDF and Shin Bet to go back and operate there in a continuous cycle. Nevertheless, no one in the political or security establishment has doubted the necessity of such action.

Quite the opposite - it has been refined into an almost official policy called "mowing the grass," underscoring the belief that the fight against terror is an ongoing process, not a one-time thing. This applies to the West Bank theater of operations as well, where the IDF has thoroughly combed, and even more so to the Gaza Strip, where our activity so far has focused on achieving operational control and dismantling Hamas' military frameworks, but not on a thorough clearing of the area.

The blow Hamas sustained from the IDF is indeed painful but far from fatal. Its order of battle still includes thousands of fighters, ammunition and weaponry, and many kilometers of tunnels. The dead commanders and battalion leaders have deputies, and in any case, Hamas knows how to easily transition from a semi-military system to a flexible and mobile mode enabling terror and guerrilla warfare.

It fires rockets almost daily, demonstrating control and governance, and displaying a high level of coordination among its senior command components; this can also be gleaned from how the negotiations over the captives are being conducted. In such a situation, the debate over the “day after” is akin to arguing over the skin of a bear that has yet to be hunted.

As early as February, in a document issued by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office outlining the principles for the day after the war, it was stated that “a necessary condition for reaching the day after is for the IDF to continue the war until its objectives are achieved: the destruction of Hamas’ and Palestinian Islamic Jihad’s military capabilities and governing networks.” The same document also provided guidance on managing civilian affairs in the strip after Hamas’ rule collapses: “As much as possible, civilian administration and responsibility for public order will be based on local elements with managerial experience, who will not be identified with states or bodies supporting terror and will not receive salaries from them.” At present, there is no entity that could rule without submitting to Hamas’ dictates.

From the Americans’ perspective, the discussion about the “day after” is meant to lead Israel to recognize the futility of the war and push it toward a solution that will be presented as the lesser evil but will serve President Joe Biden’s vision of establishing a new regional order, including a Palestinian state.

The truth must be told: There are no good options in Gaza. If there were, they would have been implemented during one of the many opportunities over the years of conflict. Nevertheless, Israel did not enter this war to find a replacement for Hamas but to destroy it. That is the goal, not the means. Moreover, it is not at all clear that imposing the “Palestinian Authority,” which aside from its many flaws would also allow Hamas’ survival and recovery, is preferable to the alternatives.

One need not be an intelligence expert to understand that given the current balance of power in Gaza, no entity can replace Hamas in the civilian administration of the Strip without its consent. This applies to the “Palestinian Authority,” the “Dahlan camp,” “technocratic ministers,” or local “clan” leaders. Hamas, for its part, will have to accept such an arrangement only if it has no choice or if it shapes it as a “puppet government” that provides cover for its behind-the-scenes rule and protection for its military buildup.

This is the context in which to view a senior Hamas official's statement that "we will be ready to support a national (Palestinian) consensus government in Gaza and the West Bank, and we do not necessarily have to be part of it." In such a case, Israel would pay twice: Not only would Hamas strengthen under the new administration's cover, but Israel would also find it difficult to act against this administration, lest it be accused by the international community of undermining efforts to establish a "governing alternative to Hamas."

Israel must also draw lessons from its three decades of relations with the Palestinian Authority. Israel has already transferred control of Gaza to the Palestinian Authority in the past. The notion that it will now succeed where it previously failed rests more on the wishful thinking of its proponents than on a factual basis. The authority would owe its return to Gaza to Hamas, not Israel. That is how the Palestinian public would perceive it, and their attitude toward the Authority would stem from that. It is the same Authority that cannot control Jenin and northern Samaria and would likely be unable to address security challenges even against itself were it not for the IDF and Shin Bet.

And from Israel's perspective, it is the same Authority that did not condemn the October 7 massacre, that leads efforts to accuse Israel of war crimes, that perpetuates the struggle against Israel among its people, that provides incentives for terror, and that continues to instill hatred of Jews through its schools. Given this reality, talk of expanding its sphere of control to Gaza is disconnected from reality.

Some circles are toying with the idea of entrusting the strip to Mohammed Dahlan, with the support of the United Arab Emirates and other countries. Even without delving into Dahlan's political doctrine and the challenges it poses for Israel, it is clear that he too would be dependent on Hamas, and the considerations regarding having him in charge are similar to those concerning the Palestinian Authority. The "clans" idea, intended to circumvent Hamas through local elements, has failed and demonstrated the terror group's absolute control over the area.

Given this situation, it must be stated that even after seven months, the conditions for establishing an alternative to Hamas' rule have not yet matured. From Israel's perspective, the question of the "day after" in Gaza is secondary to the more important goal: destroying Hamas' military and governing capabilities

and restoring Israeli deterrence. Israel must not be tempted by proposals that provide the appearance of a solution while leaving the problem intact.

To reach the “day after,” the pace of fighting must be accelerated and the intensity increased: in Rafah, the central camps, and areas where Hamas’ activity has resumed. It is crucial to act against its governing mechanisms, which have suffered only minor damage so far, and no less important, to crush its overseas headquarters.

Above all, it is essential to mitigate internal disputes at all levels and ranks. The war is in full swing, and no one knows how it might evolve on each front. To succeed, preserving cohesion is crucial.

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