

The only way to end the war is to let Israel win

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 12.05.2024

“Not 75 years later, but just seven and a half months later, and people are already forgetting, they’re already forgetting that Hamas unleashed this terror, that it was Hamas that brutalized Israelis, that it was Hamas that took and continues to hold hostages...I have not forgotten, nor have you. And we will not forget,” President Joe Biden declared just two days before issuing his dramatic threat to halt the supply of offensive weapons to Israel should the IDF invade Rafah.

Unlike two months ago when they rushed to welcome America’s abstention in the UN Security Council resolution on Gaza, this time Hamas spokespeople refrained from publicly responding to this move by the Biden administration. However, one can assume they are rubbing their hands in glee and thanking Allah for providing them with salvation.

In this monstrous organization, they understand that Washington is striving to end the war at almost any cost. On the one hand, they are pressuring Israel to reach a prisoner exchange deal that would allow Hamas not only to survive but to militarily rehabilitate and enhance its status beyond the Gaza Strip, including in the West Bank and the broader region. On the other hand, they are preventing the IDF from operating in Rafah, forcing Israel to open the Kerem Shalom crossing just one day after a barrage of rockets hit the area, killing four IDF soldiers. They are compelling Israel to increase humanitarian aid, despite most of it falling under Hamas’ control, pushing for the opening of the Erez crossing, which was the target of a vicious attack on October 7, and promoting ideas like the maritime corridor that Hamas could only dream of. In doing so, the Biden administration is giving the international community the framework within which to maneuver Israel into different channels, hinting that the set of pressure levers at its disposal has not yet been exhausted.

With others doing the work for them, all that remains for Hamas is to continue insisting on their exaggerated demands in the negotiations, buy time, exploit the supplies to equip their fighters and re-establish their governance and prepare their forces for the continuation of the campaign - not just for defense but also for

attack. One cannot rule out the possibility that under the prevailing circumstances in Rafah, they may even manage to smuggle or manufacture means of combat during this period.

This stance is detrimental to Israel, primarily in the effort to secure the release of the hostages and defeat Hamas in Gaza. Israel's enemies, even in other theaters, draw encouragement from this. In fact, from the US perspective, this administration's approach does not even aid its own efforts to persuade Israel to acquiesce to its initiatives. It would want Israel to have faith in its support amid the risks inherent in these ideas, but its conduct could lead to the opposite conclusion. Moreover, this approach toward Israel could undermine America's efforts to strengthen the pro-American axis, as even Saudi Arabia and other countries, they can now see how Washington treats its crucial ally during wartime. The current conduct will likely temper the enthusiasm from the impressive display against the Iranian kamikaze drone attack.

The ongoing dispute over the issue of combat in Rafah provides an opportunity to contemplate the absurdity of the American stance. Hamas' division in that area, with its four brigades, is placed along the border strip between Gaza and the outside world, through which all evil passes: smuggling of weapons and technical equipment, and the movement of operatives and commanders. Rafah may also be a place of shelter for commanders and terrorists from other parts of the Strip who have fled there to escape the fighting. Given these facts, does anyone truly believe it is possible to topple Hamas' rule and dismantle its military capabilities without operating in Rafah? Does anyone think limited and targeted raids can substitute for that? As far as is known, despite its statements, the American administration has yet to provide a realistic alternative plan that could achieve these goals. Indeed, one cannot expect the global superpower to grasp Rafah with the same detail that Israel requires. But precisely for that reason, one must wonder whether it is appropriate for the White House to engage in discussions about operational methods in that area.

The allegations against Israel regarding the extent of harm to the uninvolved population are presumably based on data from the Palestinian Ministry of Health, whose reliability is unclear. Even if we assume these are accurate figures, there is no parallel in the world to the low ratio between the number of terrorists and uninvolved individuals among the casualties. These results were achieved, among other things, thanks to the evacuation of the population and stringent

precautionary measures by the IDF, some would say overly stringent. Israel is doing everything required under international law. If more is desired, the burden of protecting the population should not rest solely on Israel's shoulders. For instance, has Washington considered the possibility of persuading Egypt to allow temporary humanitarian refuge in Egyptian Rafah to minimize the risks of harming the population? In these days when the US, the European Union, and other countries are coming to Egypt's aid with billions of dollars for its economy, one might have expected a serious discussion of this option as well. In any case, the pressure on Israel on this issue only proves to Hamas and other terror organizations that their strategy of using the population as a human shield is proving effective.

As for the border strip with Sinai, it can be assumed that the parties in Washington are trying to establish an Israeli-Egyptian coordination mechanism, with American involvement, to prevent arms smuggling. Well, we've been down that road before. In January 2009, at the end of Operation Cast Lead, Tzipi Livni, then Israel's foreign minister, signed such an agreement that prevented Israel from continuing that war until Hamas was defeated. Yet it did not prevent the smuggling of even a single ounce of gunpowder.

Similar assurances were given by American officials even earlier, in October 2005, when Israel was asked to sign the agreement regulating the opening of border crossings from the Gaza Strip. Presumably, this was also aimed at strengthening Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas ahead of the 2006 Palestinian elections. Nothing came of it. Abbas and his people were expelled from Gaza. The promises to Israel were annulled. Hamas celebrated the folly.

Another contentious issue concerns Washington's desire to hand over the civilian administration in Gaza to an "improved Palestinian Authority" or other entity that they deem a substitute for Hamas. This stance ignores the extent of support for Hamas among the Gazan public. Hamas is deeply rooted in all aspects of life in the Strip, casting doubt on the prospects of effecting a profound change in the Gaza Strip through entities that would take the reins and enjoy Arab or international patronage without Hamas' consent.

The truth must be told, even if it is frustrating and complicates finding solutions: The population in Gaza was not hijacked by Hamas. The majority of the public chose Hamas to govern, and according to the latest polls, they would do so again

if elections were held. This explains the descriptions by our soldiers of finding weapons, tunnel shafts, and the like in almost every home in Gaza. Whoever believes, therefore, that a few nice figures can be installed in power and succeed in changing the mindset and uprooting Hamas fails to understand how deeply rooted Hamas is. As long as a strong, organized, and armed core of the terror organization remains in Gaza, it will be the central force of power in the strip, regardless of who is officially crowned.

Overshadowing all these disputes is the disagreement over the American vision for the Middle East: the desire to establish regional integration that would include peace agreements between Israel and Saudi Arabia and the establishment of a Palestinian state, which would also serve as a response to the Iranian issue. The war is perceived as an opportunity to bring about a new regional order, and that is what Washington is pushing for. The White House would be happy to announce a move that averted a regional war, allowed the resumption of global trade through the Red Sea, assisted in wresting control of Gaza from Hamas and transferring it to the Palestinian Authority, revived discussions about a Palestinian state, and led to a new regional partnership centered on Israel and Saudi Arabia. Such an announcement would undoubtedly emphasize the significance of this achievement in the competition for the new world order: the return to the American fold of countries that had turned toward the Chinese-Russian axis and the strengthening of America's position in the Middle East without getting embroiled in war.

From an external perspective, this might seem like a perfect move that solves the Rubik's Cube all at once. But the closer you get, the more you realize the cube is stuck, and its sides cannot be turned at all because something inside is jammed, disorderly, and unsynchronized. Can one abandon the defeat of Hamas? Is there an entity that could truly govern Gaza? Would it not be a prize for terror to speak of a "Palestinian state" after October 7? Do they not understand that merely discussing it gives Hamas more credit than it has, even in Judea and Samaria? Can one expect Israel to again take on risks similar to those that led it to its current predicament? Is the Palestinian Authority - which received Gaza under its control and failed, and is unable to contend with Hamas alone in Jenin and Tulkarm, encourages terror through payments and glorification of terrorists - suitable to be the partner for the Gaza mission? Or for a Palestinian state? These are just some of the questions and not the most challenging ones. With all the

importance and desire for it, the celebratory carpet of normalization with Saudi Arabia cannot be rolled out before straightening, cleaning, and leveling the floor beneath it.

Washington must understand that for Israel, after October 7, defeating Hamas in Gaza has become an existential matter. It is not akin to America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan - wars waged thousands of miles from its soil, which some tend to draw comparisons to. The players in our region and the international arena, including enemies, friends, and those undecided, are watching what is happening in Gaza. Their stances and conduct toward Israel will be influenced by the outcomes. The deterrence that shattered on October 7 will not be restored unless all of Israel's stated objectives for this war are achieved.

Otherwise, it will face an existential threat, the temptation to attack it will grow stronger, and its political standing will be severely damaged. The room for maneuver that Israel can allow itself under these circumstances is limited. The only way to end the fighting in Gaza is to let Israel win and not stop it. The opposite of what the administration is currently doing.

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