

Only a Strong Israel is a US Strategic Asset

written by Prof. Kobi Michael | 08.04.2024

There is an ancient parable about the exodus from Egypt that appears in the midrash (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, Parashat Beshalach 1). It is about someone who blundered and tried to evade the punishment he deserved, but ultimately received his punishment as well as additional punishments. The reference is to the Biblical Egyptians who suffered ten plagues, set the Jews free, and also had their money taken. "They ate the stinking fish, received a lashing, and were expelled from the city."

This parable fits Israel's current strategic situation. After six months of fighting in the Gaza Strip, the IDF has scored impressive achievements, killing many thousands of Hamas and other terrorist organization operatives. Numerous senior Hamas officials have been eliminated, and terrorist infrastructures above and below ground, which the organization built for years, along with its munitions industry and stockpile of arms, were critically damaged. Nonetheless, the war goals have not yet been completed, and military action has yet to be translated into the desired strategic victory.

For two months now, heavy U.S. and international pressure is hindering Israel's plans to operate in the camps in central Gaza and in Rafah, where Hamas's remaining active military and governmental assets are found. The U.S. is publicly expressing its impatience regarding what it portrays as Israel's lack of cooperation with its demands to increase humanitarian aid, as well as Israel's objection to the return of the Palestinian Authority (PA) to the Gaza Strip.

As the U.S. administration sees it, ending the war in Gaza is the cornerstone of any regional strategic vision that is based on building a new regional architecture, in which Saudi Arabia will play a key role. While the U.S., ostensibly, stands by Israel, and while it justifies the goals of the war - underscoring dismantling Hamas's governing and military systems - the U.S. publicly expressed its doubts regarding the IDF's ability to achieve this goal, hampering the IDF even to the point of an implicit threat as to the necessary military operation in Rafah. In effect, the U.S. is making every effort to thwart such an operation.

Regarding the need to find an immediate alternative to Hamas rule in the Gaza Strip, the U.S. is promoting the idea of the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza. This, although it also recognizes that the Palestinian Authority is incapable of filling this function, and that it is unable, at this time and under the current conditions, to step into Hamas's shoes and to take upon itself the responsibility for the efficient management of the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, the Palestinian Authority has yet to begin to implement actual reforms towards a "revitalized" Palestinian Authority, under the conditions as defined by President Biden.

By advancing this idea, the U.S. in practice relinquished its demand for the necessary reform process, indicating that lip service will suffice. Considering the PA's level of functioning, and the loathing most of the Palestinians feel for the Authority, and while Hamas retains its governing and military capacity in Gaza, and completing the operation in Rafah is lacking - it is obvious to all that Hamas will regroup itself and find its way back to govern. Thus, in its actions the U.S. is in effect enabling Hamas to remain a de facto partner in governing Gaza, in essence normalizing Hamas, a murderous terrorist organization. The U.S. also does not understand the opposition of the Israeli public to this move, as it tries to distinguish between the government of Israel and the people of Israel.

In addition, there is the humanitarian aid issue which for Israel has turned into a stumbling block. International pressure on Israel is growing and increasing with the adoption of the Hamas narrative, including by the U.S., and regardless of the facts on the ground. Although the U.S. claims that the pressure exerted on Israel to end the war serves the government in Jerusalem, it first and foremost serves the overarching policy goals and the internal politics of the current U.S. administration. Additional countries and international aid organizations have adopted, without any objective investigation, the current "famine" narrative echoed by the Hamas - a narrative that clearly aligns with a pro-Palestinian position and is biased against Israel. The echoing of this narrative may accelerate the end of the war, including thwarting a military operation in Rafah, which will also impede Israel's ability to achieve its war goals.

Hamas's success in inculcating and echoing the narrative of Israel as a war criminal, and as causing widespread harm to civilians - mainly women and children - in addition to disproportionate and excessive destruction, is reflected in the condemnation of Israel and in obliterating and repressing the atrocities of October 7. Israel's marked weakness in its awareness-raising and perception-

changing efforts further helps instill the Hamas narrative in the minds of the various audiences and actors in the international arena.

In the meantime, a half year after the beginning of the war, the tension in Israel-U.S. relations has escalated. The U.S. took the gloves off, no longer expressing its dissatisfaction behind closed doors. Worse still, the administration publicly airs its explicit threats against Israel and takes action to circumvent Israel, endangering Israel's vital interests. Thus, for example, was the decision to build a pier in northern Gaza, and reports of U.S. plans to hand over its operation to the Qataris through a Gazan company that is operated and controlled by Hamas. This is also the case regarding public statements of Israel's inability to dismantle Hamas's governing and military systems, in addition to publicly doubting and even discrediting Israel's ability to evacuate the Palestinian civilians from Rafah and to conduct a military operation to demolish remaining Hamas infrastructures in the city.

The watershed moment was Biden's call with Netanyahu, after which the White House reported on Biden's outrage at Netanyahu due to the tragic incident in which seven WCK workers were unintentionally killed, as if the U.S. itself has not been responsible for several unfortunate accidents in war zones in which it operated. Biden, according to the report, defiantly insisted that the Prime Minister change Israel's policy regarding humanitarian aid, and stated that U.S. policy towards Israel would be determined subject to Israel's change of policy. The President also demanded that Netanyahu temper his position regarding negotiations with Hamas for release of the hostages and for achieving an immediate ceasefire. The fact that Hamas rejected, for the third time, a deal outline put forth by the mediators - a more compromising position than the two prior outlines, to which Israel also agreed to - did not bring about any change in the administration's policy and demands from Israel to adopt a more flexible position (unless something changed in the negotiations headed by CIA Director William Burns currently underway in Cairo). Meanwhile, Hamas rejected the fourth deal outline proposed by the US with personal and deep involvement of the CIA director.

In its actions the U.S. is creating a comfort zone for Hamas and removing any incentive it may have to change its positions and to show more flexibility in the negotiations for release of the hostages. Even worse, when Hamas analyzes the current situation, America's critical position towards Israel and growing

international pressure on it, it can detect that the victim narrative – which it acts to instill among audiences and actors in the international arena – has taken root and is echoed worldwide. This conclusion leads Hamas to harden its position and to the understanding that Israel can be compelled to end the war, while it can ensure its survival as a sovereign entity in the Gaza Strip, which it will present as the absolute victory. This outcome will only serve to fuel the axis of resistance, across all its components, that is led by Iran.

Criticism of the humanitarian reality and absence of progress for release of the hostages, and of course the number of casualties, is leveled against Israel, while all these statements of condemnation lack any mention of the atrocities perpetrated by Hamas and its murderous actions. In this sense, Israel is forced to ‘eat the stinking fish’, while it is slandered, its image and international standing are harmed, it faces a severe crisis in its relations with the U.S., and its maneuverability is increasingly limited. Moreover, the result in practice is normalization of the Hamas.

At present, after Hamas also officially rejected the third proposed deal outline; when it is clear that its leaders in Gaza do not intend to compromise, and it continues to insist on unreasonable conditions, including in the eyes of the mediators, even though it clearly knows that Israel cannot accept them; when Hamas leaders can draw encouragement from the developing crisis between Israel and the U.S. and from the international pressure exerted on Israel; and when in practice the Hamas has no incentive to compromise – Israel must take action. In the face of this current state of affairs, as Israel anyhow pays a heavy price in the international community and in its relations with the U.S., the government in Jerusalem, that was fed stinking fish, must act so that it will also not be expelled from the city, in the words of the Jewish parable.

Israel must act to completely achieve its war goals: Success in dismantling Hamas’s governing and military systems, release of the hostages, eliminating the serious security threat from Gaza, and resettlement of the communities along the Gaza border. This will be the absolute victory that will convey Israel’s determination and resilience. All this will reestablish Israel’s deterrence against all axis of resistance components, and will ensure Israel’s strategic asset value in the eyes of the regional leaders and the U.S.

The first test will be in the Gaza Strip. Victory will be achieved by completing the

destruction of the remaining Hamas systems and capabilities in the central camps and in Rafah, as well as by blocking the tunnel infrastructure along the Philadelphi Route. The operation in Rafah will indeed be complex, and will therefore require operational creativity, which IDF commanders possess. This creativity will ensure minimal harm to the civilian population, and the IDF is well prepared for this operation. An operation in Rafah is significant both in respect of Hamas's ability to stay standing and the position of its leaders in the negotiations, as well as regarding the civilian population, which continues to support the Hamas because the terrorist organization is perceived as the main alternative for governing the Gaza Strip on the day after the war. Moving ahead with this operation will convey Israel's determination and its willingness to pay a price, and will counter Israel's image as weak and hesitant, as established in the eyes of Hamas leadership and the civilian population.

The Israeli operation will exact a price in Israel-U.S. relations, and will inevitably intensify this crisis. However, history of the relations between the two countries proves that in the past they knew how to overcome crises and even tighten their ties. Only destroying Hamas's governing and military systems and a strong Israel will affirm Israel's strategic asset value in the eyes of the U.S. and as perceived by its partners in the region. This situation will in practice even weaken the axis of resistance, and will enable Israel to advance towards the necessary strategic victory.

The complex strategic reality Israel faces also rouses problems and tensions internally within Israel, with the cries of the families of the hostages intermingled with calls for elections to be held now. Even if most of the Israeli public is opposed to securing the release of the hostages at any price and under any condition, and even though a large swath of the Israeli public is opposed to holding elections now, Israel may again be perceived by Hamas and its supporters in the axis of resistance as a fractured and fragile society, nearing its internal dissolution and collapse. It will be a mistake on the part of the government of Israel to bow its head to what looks like increasing pressure from within.

At this time the government must ensure Israel's image as a country and society willing to pay a price to achieve its vital strategic goals. Only this will reduce the danger of finding ourselves as having "eaten the stinking fish," and also being expelled from the city - precisely when strategic victory is within reach.