

Securing US approval for a Rafah operation - a harmful precedent

written by Prof. Kobi Michael | 21.03.2024

Following a call with U.S. President Joe Biden, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu initially agreed to send an Israeli delegation to Washington to present to senior U.S. officials the IDF's plans of action in Rafah. Sending such a delegation would have devastating implications.

The Biden Administration's critical view of Israel's planned Rafah operation was made clear in a series of statements issued by senior officials. White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on February 12 that "Israelis have an obligation to make sure they can provide for the safety of innocent Palestinians throughout any operation in and around Rafah," and that the United States does not want "to see any forced relocation of people outside Gaza." President Biden said in an interview to MSNBC on March 10 that an Israeli military operation in Rafah would be his red line.

After speaking to Netanyahu on March 18, Biden said he asked the Israeli Prime Minister to send a team to Washington to discuss ways to target Hamas without a major ground operation in Rafah. If such an Israeli delegation is indeed sent to Washington, as was reportedly agreed to, it would be an unprecedented development in Israel-U.S. relations with far-reaching implications that go beyond the concrete discussion with the U.S. Administration regarding the IDF's actions in Rafah.

There are several reasons why sending an Israeli team to Washington to discuss the IDF's operational plans in Rafah is problematic. First, it means that Israel is, effectively and officially, subjugating its operational freedom and achievement of war goals to the U.S. Administration. The Administration, despite its support for Israel, is driven by American interests, including some that derive from the upcoming presidential elections. Obviously, not all U.S. interests align with Israel's, and some are even in stark contrast to them.

Second, it creates a precedent between the two countries concerning future actions or operations – whether in the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, or other arenas.

Finally, by being public, this step makes Israel seem weak – as may well have been Washington’s intent. This appearance of weakness conveys an encouraging message to Hamas, and particularly its Gazan leadership, increasing the likelihood of Hamas maintaining rigid positions in the hostage negotiations. A similar message is conveyed to the Gazan population whereby Hamas remains the alternative for the “day after” in the Gaza Strip. Israel should have and could have held such discussions with the U.S. covertly and discreetly via the two countries’ professional channels of coordination and collaboration.

This turn of events results from American and international pressure exerted on Israel, which is so strong that it implies that the U.S. Administration might veto Israel’s future actions in the Gaza Strip, effectively denying Israel’s operational freedom. The very idea that an elected Israeli government would not be able to act upon one of its policies or achieve one of its strategic goals, particularly against the backdrop of a severe threat, places Israel’s ability to contend with the range of threats it now faces at extreme risk.

Furthermore, this American step is being taken as part of the special relations between the two countries, and not as part of a formal defense treaty. One must wonder how far things would go if Israel were to partake in such an alliance with the United States, as discussed just weeks before the events of October 7. Indeed, in a paper issued three days earlier, which addressed the possibility of a defense treaty with the United States, we warned of a “bear hug” that could subordinate Israel’s interests to those of the U.S., with the latter always being preferred to the former. Several other reasons why Israel should object to such a defense alliance were also cited in this paper.

The events of October 7 are seminal, and will forever be etched in the Jewish People’s collective memory. Paradoxically and cynically, it is under these harsh and severe circumstances that Israel is turning from a victim to an aggressor in the eyes of many in Washington, as its right to self-defense loses all meaning while Hamas’ deceitful narrative spreads among senior U.S. Administration officials, thereby eroding their support for Israel and enhancing the limitations imposed on it. Netanyahu’s approval of a delegation to Washington perpetuates this problem, draining Israel’s right to self-defense of all content and significance.

Undoubtedly, the State of Israel must make every effort to preserve its special relationship with the United States, as a fundamental pillar of its national

security. The United States' support on both political and military levels – and, in times of great need, on the economic level too – is essential. It is also important to show respect for the United States, as well as its president, ensuring that disagreements are dealt with behind the scenes, instead of in full public view. However, it seems that, with each passing day, a new line is crossed in the U.S. Administration's attitude toward Israel.

President Biden is fostering Hamas' narrative with regard to the number of civilian casualties, repeating reports made by "the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza," which is yet another unit of Hamas, even though the United States likely has its own objective assessment of the number of civilian casualties in Gaza. Indeed, an analysis published by the authors of the present paper shows that the ratio of terrorists killed during the war versus civilians, i.e., collateral damage, is significantly lower compared to that of wars in urban spaces waged by the United States and its allies in recent decades. Similar findings were presented in other analysts' reports. Nevertheless, President Biden uses false Hamas numbers while declaring that he will not allow Israel to keep killing innocent civilians, as if that was the aim of this war, or typical Israeli conduct.

Furthermore, while talking to a reporter, President Biden was caught on a hot mic saying "I told him, Bibi, and don't repeat this, but you and I are going to have a 'come to Jesus' meeting." Similar sentiments were expressed by Vice President Kamala Harris, who drew a distinction between the Israeli people and their elected government, and Democratic Majority Leader Senator Chuck Schumer, who said during a speech in the Senate that Netanyahu has lost his way, and called for Israeli elections.

These statements and others are examples of blatant and uncalled-for intervention by U.S. officials in Israeli politics. The United States has meddled in Israeli politics before, and more than once, but these days its interference is particularly public and blunt. America's conduct depicts Israel as a "banana republic," as Netanyahu has stated, weakening it in its campaign against Hamas. This conduct gives the terrorist group and its Palestinian supporters a tailwind, encouraging Hamas to insist that its demands be met while it rebuilds its governing and military capabilities, and holds on tightly to what remaining powers it has in and around Rafah.

Instead of sending a team to Washington – especially so overtly – Israel should

find a way to present its case to the United States discreetly right here in Israel. The Head of CENTCOM visited Israel several times since the war broke out and has staff permanently based here. That would have at least spared Israel the problematic side effects of this delegation. Sending a delegation to Washington would be blindly running to the American bear's open arms. Therefore, it should come as no surprise if this bear hug ends in the resounding crunching of bones.