There is no Rafah workaround

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 22.03.2024

Amid escalating disputes between Israel and the US, and following meetings in Cairo with the foreign ministers of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, Antony Blinken made a short visit to Israel. Meanwhile, meetings will be held in Washington with Minister Ron Dermer and the Head of the National Security Council Tzachi Hanegbi with their counterparts in the White House, as well as between Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and his counterpart Lloyd Austin.

The Americans will seek to discuss alternatives to an Israeli military operation in Rafah. They will not disagree on the necessity of dismantling Hamas' Rafah Brigade, with its four battalions, in order to defeat the terrorist organization. They will also support the demand for effective control over the border with Egypt to prevent arms smuggling into the Gaza Strip but will argue that in the cost-benefit analysis, it would be best if Israel took a different course of action.

They will likely president an alternative to a large-scale military operation in the form of a "package" that will include several components: First, American support for Israeli offensive air operations and limited ground raids on targets in the Rafah area; second – resources, commitments and a mechanism for Israeli-Egyptian coordination, with the support of the US and other countries, to prevent smuggling along the border. This package of support, they believe, will make it possible to properly do the job against Hamas.

As for toppling Hamas – the entry of Palestinian Authority elements into the Strip is likely their envisioned solution. The way they see it, having the PA run civilian affairs inherently means that Hamas is no longer in power.

No basis for optimism

In order to advance this or similar proposals, additional concessions will likely be offered that are not necessarily related to Gaza. The option of normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia will resurface too.

Past experience does not provide a basis for optimism regarding the prospects of such a proposal: It is not possible to uproot Hamas and strip it of its military

capabilities solely through air operations or limited raids. These patterns can be used to preserve what will be achieved in the large-scale ground operation, but not to replace it.

As for international mechanisms to prevent the smuggling of weapons – such initiatives have been attempted for years, since the days of "Operation Cast Lead". As early as 2009, Israel signed an agreement with the US, in cooperation with NATO, to prevent arms smuggling into the Gaza Strip, with regional cooperation, training and monitoring measures, and increased sanctions on the Hamas government.

Even then, Washington had hoped that such an agreement "would somewhat ease the pressure on Israel to continue the military operation and instill confidence ahead of the change of administration in Washington," as Tal Schneider wrote in *NRG* at the time. However, despite the good intentions and serious commitments made – the attempts failed miserably. There is no reason to assume that the results will be different this time.

The slim chances of replacing the Hamas government in this way can also be learned from a poll published this week: According to its findings, more than half of the residents of the strip prefer Hamas to remain in power, and an overwhelming majority still supports the Oct. 7 atrocities.

If this is the proposal, then Israel must stick to its guns by fighting until the goals are fully achieved.

Profile of the "day after"

While the diplomatic tensions over the continuation of the war and the preparation for the operation in Rafah are increasingly felt, the military activity on the ground – within the current framework of the fighting – continues to deliver results. Although it is not a substitute for the operation in Rafah, it increases the pressure on the enemy, makes it difficult for Hamas to recover, and shapes the "day after".

The large number of terrorists arrested or hit during the IDF raid on Shifa Hospital in Gaza shows how confident they felt returning and hiding within its walls. They probably assumed that the IDF, in its current deployment in the strip, would not return to operate in this sensitive place, especially as the political

pressure on Israel intensified.

The arrival of IDF and Shin Bet forces at the hospital at this time, in a different format than before and without warning first, created confusion. It will increase the uncertainty in Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad and force them to reassess their governing paradigms, even regarding other places that serve as shelters for them.

On top of the tangible impact on the enemy's order of battle and the demoralizing effect on its fighters, this operation will also assist in gathering up-to-date intelligence for further maneuvers. Above all, it serves to demonstrate, and not just to terrorist elements, that Israel is determined to continue the mission in the Gaza Strip without compromise.

Not just Al-Shifa

And while attention is focused on that, the IDF and the Shin Bet also acted to thwart Hamas' efforts to restore its governance on the ground, through the various organs it runs as a temporary replacement for the security and law enforcement mechanisms.

Thus, it was reported that senior members of the "emergency committees" in Rafah and elements belonging to the Hamas police in various areas of the strip were eliminated. Whether the motivation for this was the desire to save the humanitarian aid from reaching Hamas or not, these are crucial steps in order to topple it. The many manifestations of governance throughout the strip indicate that Hamas feels quite secure. This requires increasing the thwarting operations in this area as well.

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