Biden has failed to understand what this war means to Israel

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 15.03.2024

The growing tension between Washington and Jerusalem, which this week escalated into blunt messages towards Benjamin Netanyahu from President Joe Biden, makes it that much worse for the IDF to ensure it would have the freedom of operation in Gaza. It also presents Israel's civilian leadership with a challenge: Is there a way to achieve the war objectives in Gaza without escalating the confrontation with the Biden administration and losing the support of the White House?

Biden's standing by Israel at the start of the war will be remembered as one of the high points in the special relationship between the countries. But this has been blunted by the passage of time, the images from Gaza, the disputes over the "day after", and domestic US politics ahead of the presidential elections, all of which have made relations tense and delicate.

While Biden says that he continues to support the goals Israel has defined for the war, the limits he has placed on Israel make achieving them an almost impossible task.

The points of friction can be summed up as follows:

Israeli action in Rafah

Hamas' brigade in Rafah, with its four battalions, constitutes one-fifth of the organization's military force. In addition to its missions, it is also responsible for the stretch of border connecting Gaza to the outside world via Egypt. Through it, weapons, technical equipment, operatives, and commanders are smuggled in. Terrorists from other areas of the strip have found refuge in Rafah during the fighting. Does anyone really think that Hamas' rule and military capabilities can be defeated without action in Rafah?

Reducing Palestinian casualties

Biden expects the fighting to continue while reducing Palestinian civilian casualties. He relies on data from Hamas' Ministry of Health, whose reliability is unclear, and is not satisfied with the IDF's evidence of an extremely low fatality ratio of "uninvolved" vs. combatants, partly thanks to population evacuation and stringent precautions taken by Israeli troops, which some say are overly stringent.

Should the entire burden be on Israel's shoulders? Have they thought in Washington about persuading Egypt to allow temporary humanitarian refuge in Egyptian Rafah to enable the fighting? At a time when the US, the EU, and other countries are providing billions of dollars in aid to the Egyptian economy, this option could have been seriously considered as well.

Increasing humanitarian aid

Biden's demand to increase humanitarian aid and related initiatives (airdrops, maritime pier) show that his administration has not internalized that the problem is not delivering aid to the strip, but its distribution within it. Hamas will take control of everything that enters. It will use it to supply its fighters (and prolong their ability to fight) and strengthen its rule. The way to prevent this is to deliver the aid to areas that Hamas would not be able to access it, which could also be achieved by establishing a humanitarian refuge in the Egyptian side of Rafah.

An "improved Palestinian Authority" in Gaza

Another issue straining relations with the Americans is the Israeli position regarding the establishment of an "improved Palestinian Authority" in Gaza. The Biden administration has not internalized the suspicion Israelis harbor towards the PA and its current or former leaders, and to the possibility of establishing a Palestinian government in the terror city that will not cooperate with Hamas.

The US' posture of discounting the extent of public support for Hamas in Gaza, and the fact that it is entrenched in all spheres of life in the strip has had the administration hold on to an optimistic assessment regarding the ability to bring about deep change through governmental models under Arab or international auspices, detached from Hamas. As long as there remains a strong, organized, and armed core of the terror organization in Gaza, it will have effective control over the strip.

“Regional integration” and a “Palestinian state”

Looming over all these issues is the disagreement over America’s vision, which seeks to create regional integration that includes peace agreements between Israel and Saudi Arabia and the establishment of a Palestinian state. The war provided the Biden administration with an opportunity to bring about a new regional order. The president also needs this ahead of his elections, but from Israel’s perspective, normalization with Saudi Arabia will not compensate for Hamas’ non-defeat.

Talk of a “Palestinian state” after the Oct. 7 massacre constitutes a prize for Hamas and also expresses a lack of understanding of the sentiment in the Israeli public. Anyone who thinks that after the October events Israel will take risks like those taken in the past lives in La La Land.

The root problem

The root of the dispute between Washington and Jerusalem concerns the meaning of the war, which brought Israel back to the realization that it is still fighting for its existence. The Biden administration has not internalized that for Israel, the defeat of Hamas is an existential issue. It is not like America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which were conducted thousands of miles away.

The players in our region are keeping a watchful eye on what is unfolding. Their posture and conduct toward Israel will be influenced by the results. The deterrence that collapsed on October 7 will not be restored if Israel stops short of meeting the goals it has defined for the war. An Israeli failure will have it face an existential threat, the temptation to attack it will grow, and its diplomatic standing will be severely crippled. Therefore, the room for maneuver that Israel can afford is highly constricted.

Biden expects the fighting to continue while reducing the scope of civilian casualties.

The administration’s approach plays into Hamas’ hands and has granted Hamas freebies: A delay in action in Rafah and increased humanitarian aid – conditions that help it reassert its control. The pressure from Washington moves Israel closer to a war of attrition, whose costs are high and its duration is difficult to control. They even push away America’s hopes of advancing a deal for the release

of the captives.

So what should we do?

First, continue public diplomacy and persuasion efforts with administration officials and the American people despite the slim chances of moving the needle.

Second, increase efforts in areas where there is no dispute: targeted assassinations of Hamas leaders abroad, raids on targets in the strip where signs of Hamas has been rearing its head.

Third, promote the establishment of temporary humanitarian shelters, in Egyptian Rafah (with Egyptian consent) or the strip (such as in the Dahaniya area near Rafah), and accelerate preparations for action in Rafah.

In the spirit of President Biden's words, in the speech he gave after the massacre: "Hamas' stated purpose is the annihilation of the State of Israel and the murder of Jewish people. Israel has the right to respond — indeed has a duty to respond – to these vicious attacks."

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