How much influence does the US really have over Israel?

written by Lahav Harkov | 10.04.2024

The pullout of the vast majority of the IDF's troops from Gaza in recent days has raised questions about whether Israel's military campaign is ending with a whimper.

Amid pressure from its most important ally and weapon supplier, the US, the operation in Rafah — where Hamas's remaining battalions are located — has not yet begun. But based on the remarks made by Israel's top generals and politicians, it appears as though it will go ahead. After IDF troops left Khan Younis on Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared: "We are but a step away from victory."

Yet members of his governing coalition remain sceptical, with far-Right minister Itamar Ben-Gvir responding that "if the Prime Minister decides to end the war without a broad attack on Rafah to defeat Hamas, he won't have a mandate to continue serving." Hours later, Netanyahu released a video in which he said "there is a date" for the operation.

The continued delay of the Rafah invasion also shows that Washington has greater sway than Israel's leadership is willing to acknowledge — at least publicly. Out in the open and in meetings with Israeli officials, the White House's criticisms have grown sharper and more threatening to the alliance with Israel. Indeed, the withdrawal of troops from Khan Younis came only three days after Netanyahu and Joe Biden spoke on the phone, with the American President saying that "US policy with respect to Gaza will be determined by [its] assessment of Israel's immediate action" to improve the humanitarian situation. He also called for an "immediate ceasefire". Netanyahu's office announced the opening of more crossings for humanitarian aid hours later.

A source familiar with Netanyahu's thinking confirmed that there are several motivations behind the troop withdrawal: giving a chance for a hostage release and ceasefire deal; calming the Americans down; the beginning of Eid al-Fitr; and preparing for invading Rafah, which he said Netanyahu plans to do.

The Biden administration's influence over the war effort in Gaza is apparent: the President and his Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, have taken part in Israeli war cabinet meetings and this week's increased aid is not the first time Israel has changed its plans after meetings and conversations with White House officials.

The danger is that if this withdrawal is part of a mini-ceasefire or a brief pause, the US will try to make it permanent, as Biden administration officials have said they hoped to do in the past. Then, Israel will be faced with the choice of either going it alone, without American support, or giving in, thus allowing for Hamas's remaining brigades in Rafah to continue posing a threat.

But it should also be noted that the US continues to supply weapons to Israel, and the Biden administration has yet to set additional conditions on its military aid, despite unprecedented backing for such a policy from within the Democratic Party. The President has not backed down from his support for the war aims of eliminating the Hamas threat and bringing home the more than 130 hostages remaining in Gaza.

What's more, influence does not mean omnipotence. Biden also demanded that Netanyahu "empower his negotiators to conclude a deal without delay to bring the hostages home" — yet the deal still fell through.

The question, then, is whether this influence is such that Israel will make any major changes due to US influence, such as backing down from eliminating the final Hamas battalions in Rafah.

Recent remarks from Israeli Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer, someone so close to Netanyahu that he has been nicknamed "Bibi's brain", indicate that Jerusalem is determined to push forward regardless of the pressure from Washington.

"If Israel does not take care of Hamas in Gaza after what it did on October 7th," Dermer said, "I truly believe that this country has no future because all the buzzards circling around this country are going to think that you can pick apart this carcass […] That's why the determination to take them out is so strong, even if it leads to a potential breach with the United States."

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