

Strategic Blindness

written by Prof. Kobi Michael | 15.02.2024

Tensions between the US and Israeli governments are escalating. This stems from US domestic considerations relating to this year's presidential elections and ever-increasing pressures from the progressive wing of the Democratic Party and Muslim voters.

Despite early staunch support for disassembling Hamas governance and military abilities in Gaza, Washington is now determined to bring a swift end to the war in Gaza at the expense of Israel; at the cost of Israel failing to realize its war goals.

Although the administration continues outwardly to support the elimination of Hamas as a governing and military entity, in practice it is pressuring Israel to end its military campaign, an end to the war which the administration perceives as a prerequisite for advancing its goals in the region.

The US is pressing Israel on provision of more humanitarian aid to Gaza and is repeating unjust criticisms of Israel regarding the number of civilian casualties. In addition, the administration is pressuring Israel to accept a deal to release the hostages held by Hamas in exchange for a series of long ceasefires, i.e., an end of the war.

Moreover, the administration believes that the Palestinian Authority can be "revitalized" via a thorough and rapid transformation, making it into the governing authority in Gaza on the pathway to a full-fledged Palestinian state.

All this is driven by the administration's desire for avoidance of regional war and reshaping of the region leading to normalization of ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia, alongside the Democratic Party's need to offer American voters some kind of political achievement.

Fear that the war could engulf the entire region in a way that forces the US to play a more significant role in the fighting also explains Washington's reluctance to target Iranian assets – even though Iran is waging war against American and Israel through proxies; despite the fact that Iran is "the hand that rocks the cradle."

As far as the US administration is concerned, ceasefire in the Gaza Strip is a prerequisite for realizing its regional goals, and the establishment of the Palestinian state is presented as the keystone of its entire approach.

Alas, this perception of Middle East realities is completely detached from logic. The assumption that the Palestinian Authority is ready for and capable of profound reform, in preparation for what Washington calls a “revitalized Palestinian Authority,” is without basis.

Listen to what senior Palestinian Authority officials themselves say concerning their partnership with Hamas. On Dec. 10, 2023, PA prime minister Mohammad Shtayyeh declared that “Hamas is an integral part of the Palestinian mosaic. The goal of Israel to eliminate Hamas is unacceptable and doomed to fail.” But the administration continues to nonsensically assume it can prevent Hamas from being part of said “revitalized Palestinian Authority.”

Another assumption that does not correspond with reality is that the Palestinian Authority needs, wants, and can return to the Gaza Strip and take effective control of it, to enable its demilitarization and rehabilitation. As a result, the US is interfering in realization of Israel’s war goals, which puts Israel at risk and raises the risks of regional instability.

Unfortunately, US policy towards Qatar smacks of misplaced deference, even appeasement. Washington ought to take a firmer stand with Qatar regarding its support for Hamas and the need for a reasonable deal to free Israeli hostages, including pressure on Qatar to expel Hamas leaders from Doha.

Qatar continues to cynically play all sides of the game. The Palestinian Authority president made an unusual visit to Qatar, accompanied by Majed Faraj and Hussein al-Sheikh, two of his most senior associates. They sought Qatar’s help in forcing Hamas into a Palestinian “National Reconciliation Government” headed by a technocrat (probably Muhammad Mustafa).

Regardless of PA wishes, it is evident that Qatar’s highest interest is assuring the survival of Hamas as the political and military force in Gaza or at least as a significant player in the Palestinian arena. Qatar and its client Hamas might be willing to pay lip service to establishment of a technocratic, “revitalized” PA government in Gaza, but only in a situation where Hamas is really still in control.

The US continues to hesitantly provide Israel with some space to prosecute the war against Hamas while at the same time threatening to unilaterally recognize a Palestinian state. Somehow, all this is supposed to bring about an end to fighting with Hezbollah across Israel's northern border, restrain Iran's proxy attacks (such as Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping), and prevent war from expanding throughout the region. And this would be an impressive political achievement President Biden could boast of in his re-election campaign.

The downside is that this vision for Mideast peace does not correspond to Middle East realities. Without elimination of Hamas as a governing entity, a "revitalized Palestinian Authority" cannot be established, and Iran will have no incentive to change its subversive and provocative behavior. The mere existence of Hamas as a governing entity will fuel Iranian resistance, serve as an incentive to maintain the struggle against Israel and the US, and as the basis for continuing security instability in the region, while the war in Gaza and other places continues.

The endgame in Gaza must be complete Israeli security control, and establishment of a Palestinian civil government that is subject to supervision of regional or international bodies. The IDF will have to continuously interdict any attempt by hostile actors to rebuild a military/terror presence in Gaza. This is a prerequisite for ensuring a de-Hamasification / deradicalization process in Gaza, which will take years.

As for civilian administration of Gaza, we have proposed (in a previous article) a trusteeship regime that will involve pragmatic neighboring Arab countries, to nurture the development of local civic leadership.

As such, an American rush to impose establishment of a Palestinian state in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip is detached from realities in the Middle East. The Palestinian Authority must undergo profound change. Israel cannot accept false processes that pay lip service to this goal, while propping-up the current failed and hostile Palestinian "authority." Step one in this regard is wholesale change in the PA's school curricula. Step two is an immediate end of the PA's "pay-for-slay" stipends for terrorism. Step three is replacement of the existing PA leadership alongside an end to corruption and nepotism in the Palestinian Authority.

These developments will not emerge miraculously from thin air, nor are they

quick fixes that can be brought about on an urgent American timetable in advance of November US elections. It is both foolish and dangerous to think otherwise.