Neutralizing Iran comes before normalization with Riyadh

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 13.09.2023

In a rather unusual speech, whose content was also disseminated by the Public Diplomacy Directorate in the Prime Minister's Office, the Head of the Mossad threatened that Israel would exact a price from the Iranians "deep in Iran, in the very heart of Tehran", for any damage to an Israeli citizen or Jewish individual or for the infiltration into Israel of Iranian weapon systems. Barnea explained that this price would be exacted from all the relevant echelons involved in such activity, whether carried out by Iran's own units or the various proxies operating on its behalf.

When referring to the threat posed by Iran's military nuclear capability, Barnea reiterated his former declaration: "We simply cannot allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon ever," and he added: "We are not just sitting idly by."

Despite the fact that the value of silence has been somewhat undermined in Israel recently, we need not suspect that the Head of the Mossad was speaking off the top of his head. His words were read from a written text and his speech was then widely disseminated.

Fewer words and more actions

Although in his speech he did evoke emotions of national honor and pride, which are in need of an urgent boost at this juncture, we should not necessarily assume that Barnea's words were aimed specifically at the ears of the Israeli public. Israeli sentiment tends to prefer actions, as they speak louder than words, and has reservations about the use of bombastic threats that is more characteristic of the style of rhetoric used by our enemies in Tehran, Beirut, or Gaza.

Even if this speech entails an implicit response to the criticism of the policy of containment in relation to Hezbollah's actions and those of additional adversaries – the public would still prefer that we speak the language of actions rather than words.

Neither are Barnea's threats necessary for Iran itself. Tehran is well and truly

aware of its ‘misdeeds’, and their inherent risks and will clearly be able to make the connection between them and any Israeli response when such action is taken. Should there be any doubt about that, there are numerous ways of issuing hints after such action is taken, that will clearly underscore the connection between the subsequent Israeli operation and Iran’s nefarious activity. As far as Israel is concerned, Washington should be the prime audience for the Mossad chief’s words.

The US administration under President Biden, which has sought to lower the profile of the Iranian problem and to remove the danger of a military confrontation with it as far as possible, is now seeing the tangible results of its policy: a growing sense of confidence in Iran, leading to defiant activity on its nuclear program, providing aid to Russia in the form of supplying Moscow with drones for its combat effort in Ukraine, compounded by a significant increase in its efforts to promote acts of terrorism around the globe, owing to a feeling that it will not be required to pay any real price for all of this.

An accusatory finger

The American concern over becoming bogged down in a military quagmire in the Middle East, which constitutes a significant mainstay of the Biden administration’s policy of restraint towards Iran, might actually eventually lead to the opposite outcome: a regional conflagration as the outcome of the dynamics of action and reaction, in which the US will not be able to remain on the sidelines.

The Mossad chief’s speech, only a few days prior to the arrival of the prime minister in the US for a meeting with Biden and attendance at the UN General Assembly, constitutes a good preparation for these two key events. For understandable reasons, Barnea did not point an accusatory finger at our good friends in Washington, but as the popular idiom has it – he “shouted at the tree so that the camel might hear.”

Although tough Israeli talk on the Iranian issue might not go down too well with those US administration officials, who are currently working hard to establish normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, they do accurately reflect the situation that has developed under the auspices of their policy and will serve to clarify Israel’s current priority: neutralizing the existential threat posed by Iran takes precedence even over normalization with Saudi Arabia.

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