Why the US approach endangers Israeli troops and will only prolong the war

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 04.12.2023

"The center of gravity is the civilian population and if you drive them into the arms of the enemy, you replace a tactical victory with a strategic defeat," US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said after the truce with Hamas expired renewed fighting followed. His comments showcased just how perceptually divorced the US is from the actual reality on the ground in the Gaza Strip.

The Biden administration's support for Israel is not in doubt and is commendable. Still, in light of various high-ranking US officials' recent comments, it appears that they are oblivious to the widespread support Hamas enjoys in Gaza and the solidarity the people have with that movement. As a result, Biden's officials have adopted a position that may complicate matters for Israel as the fighting continues.

Secretary of Defense Austin, like his colleagues in Biden's cabinet, assumes that Hamas forcefully took control of Gaza imposed itself on its population, and uses it as human shields in the war against Israel. They believe that all that is needed in order to change the reality is to weaken the organization's grip on the population and remove its grip on the people – which would magically have them turn their back on it. This presupposition, which runs against alternative viewpoints, provides a basis for optimism, hence the temptation to adopt it.

The unfortunate truth is that Hamas enjoys broad political support from the population of the Strip, which elected it in the past and may do so again. In the parliamentary elections in 2006 – the last held in the Strip – Hamas won 76 out of 132 seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council. Out of the 24 seats in the five districts in Gaza, Hamas won 15.

Public opinion polls conducted in recent years indicate continued public support in Gaza for Hamas and its armed struggle against Israel. In its 17-year rule, Hamas has permeated the education system and other governing bodies to spread its ideas and imbue public consciousness with its values. Thus, Hamas is deeply

rooted in all aspects of life in the Strip. In some respects, it has implemented the idea of a “people’s army” and serves as the masses’ representative in the struggle against Israel.

Israeli action won’t lead the civilian population into the arms of the enemy; much of it, if not the majority, is already there by choice. Humanitarian generosity, beyond moral and obligatory considerations, will also not change the public’s preferences. It can be assumed that the main beneficiaries of any aid will be members of Hamas.

The American expectations that Israel reduce the intensity of the fighting and increase humanitarian aid will only prolong the conflict and endanger the lives of our soldiers. It would be wiser to avoid imposing additional restrictions and allow the IDF to operate with high intensity until Hamas is toppled and its capabilities are eliminated. Dealing with the complex challenge of de-radicalization in the Gaza Strip will already pre-occupy the region for many years after the war.

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