Without total victory there can be no new regional order

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 09.02.2024

US President Joe Biden and his staff would really like to get through the remaining months to the US presidential election with the Middle East issue in pride of place on the list of achievements of the current administration in terms of foreign policy, rather than sticking out like a sore thumb in the failures column.

"We have succeeded" – is what they would like to announce – "in preventing a regional war, in renewing world maritime trade via the Red Sea, in helping transfer government in the Gaza Strip from Hamas to the Palestinian Authority (PA), resuscitating the discussion on a future Palestinian state and above all promoting the vision of regional integration, with the process of normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia as its centerpiece."

We can assume that they would also have emphasized the significance of this achievement in the competition on the new world order and would rub their hands in glee while presenting their success in returning to the fold of the US-Western camp those countries that have turned towards the Sino-Russian axis and to bolster the US position in the Middle East, without getting entangled in a bloody war.

In the current, extremely complex reality of the Middle East, such a picture appears to be rather unlikely and highly remote, but as absurd as it might sound, it is actually the war in Gaza that might be perceived by the Americans as a golden opportunity to roll out the new order. So, just how is this possible?!

Saudi Arabia plays a key role in the vision of regional integration. The establishment of normalization between Riyadh and Jerusalem is also one of the most important incentives that Washington has in order to exercise leverage on Israeli policy. The recent announcement from the Saudi foreign ministry making the discussions on normalization contingent upon the resurrection of the talks on a Palestinian state and an end to the war in the Gaza Strip is wholly consistent with the existing desire in Washington and may even have been coordinated in advance between the two. According to the Americans, an end to the fighting in Gaza is a sine qua non also for bringing calm to Israel's ongoing low-intensity

conflict with Hezbollah and to end the crisis with the Houthis in the Red Sea, whose knock-on effect on global maritime trade and the Egyptian economy, are already taking their toll. As far as the US administration is concerned, a deal in which Israel receives the hostages back in return for an end to the war and the entry of Palestinian Authority-related entities into management of the civilian government of the Gaza Strip could constitute a sufficiently good solution for both of the key objectives that Israel has defined for the war: toppling the Hamas government and bringing the hostages back home.

In Washington's view, this will pave the way to the return of the PA – after some rebranding – to manage the civil affairs of the Gaza Strip, the idea of "the Palestinian state" will once again occupy a key position on the negotiating table (this too after some serious rebranding to make it more palatable for the Israeli public), the ongoing combat along Israel's northern border will be brought to an end while a "diplomatic component" of unclear nature will be added, the crisis with the Houthis in the Red Sea will end, Saudi Arabia will consent to entering normalization talks while benefiting from the credit it will be given for its contribution to ending the war and restoring the issue of the "Palestinian state" to a place of importance on the agenda, while the Biden administration will be able to clearly applaud this achievement and to showcase it as its own doing.

However, as the saying goes, all that glitters is not gold and what might appear to be a good way forward on paper is far from providing even an adequate solution to these deeply entrenched, fundamental problems. Firstly, Iran – the hand that rocks the cradle and the prime cause of most of the tensions in the region – will be able to continue to operate without being held in check or having to pay any substantial price for its actions. Secondly, Hezbollah – without the physical removal of its men and ensuring they remain stationed back deep in the Lebanese hinterland – it will not be possible to guarantee the safe return of the residents of northern Israel to their homes. Thirdly – Gaza – though Hamas has incurred severe damage to date, it is still far from being completely routed. Ending the war in such a situation will ensure the rapid recovery of the Gaza-based terrorist organization, essentially making it the effective ruler there.

Moreover, the idea of the "New Order" does not tally with the way Hamas currently views the situation – which at this stage of the game is still acting as though it believes it can put the squeeze on Israel and dictate terms that will not only ensure the survival of its men but also its continued rule in the Gaza Strip.

Having said all that, the most important issue is still Israel's deterrence. Israel must not end the war without restoring the deterrence that simply totally collapsed on October 7. Up-to-date opinion polls in the Arab world (conducted on behalf of the Washington Institute) have indicated a worrying decline in the image of Israel's power following the brutal Hamas attack. Total victory (attaining all the objectives in full) is essential to rebuilding that deterrence. Without that, Israel will be exposed to an existential threat from its enemies in the various theaters and will also lose the asset that constitutes the mainstay of its diplomatic stance, including with regards to the peace accords and normalization.

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