

Tactics differ when goals differ, Secretary Austin



U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant meet, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, in Tel Aviv, Israel December 18, 2023. REUTERS/Phil Stewart

by Lev Tsitrin

America is unhappy with the way Israel is fighting Hamas, so “[US Secretary of Defense Lloyd] [*Austin Returns to Israel With a Tougher Message and Lessons Learned*](#),” according to the *New York Times*. Needless to say, Mr. Austin’s credentials in that regard are impeccable: “You know, I learned a thing or two about urban warfare from my time fighting in Iraq and leading the campaign to defeat ISIS,” he said in a speech at the Reagan National Defense Forum earlier this month. “The lesson is not that you can win in urban warfare by protecting

civilians. The lesson is that you can only win in urban warfare by protecting civilians." Accordingly, "Mr. Austin recently predicted [that Israel] could face "strategic defeat" that would leave the country less secure if it does not do more to protect civilians."

He is right that "more" can always be done. But isn't the change in tactics he suggests – switching to "a targeted precision air campaign, with limited numbers of special operations troops on the ground to act quickly on intelligence leads about the location of senior Hamas leaders" based on wrong assumptions? How does Secretary Austin factor in the key terrain of this war – Hamas' tunnels?

Tunnels do a bunch of things. Firstly, being hidden from view, they render the intelligence useless – how does one know where the tunnels are, and where inside of them Hamasers are – so where do the "intelligence leads" come from? Secondly, being dug deep underground, tunnels shield their inhabitants from bombs (tunnels are excellent bomb shelters – London's Tube was used as bomb shelter by the British during the blitz, as was the Kiev Metro during Russian bombings). So the bombing of tunnels isn't particularly useful either: it causes damage to the above-ground structures (and hurts their inhabitants – defeating Mr. Austin's very purpose of not harming civilians). Nor can "special operations troops" fight inside tunnels – the terrain is home to Hamas; and getting inside tunnels for a hand-to-hand combat is a fool's errand. Besides, having "special operations troops on the ground" assumes that the above-ground area has been secured – and how to do *that* without the above-ground combat – the very combat that Israel is engaged in now?

And then, there are the sheer numbers of the enemy that needs to be eliminated to consider – estimated to be 25,000 armed men, and 40,000 Hamas apparatchics. How many "intelligence leads" and how many pinpoint attacks would it take to eliminate them – not to mention that no intelligence would be

coming, and no attack inside tunnels would be successful? Hamas has to be flushed out of the tunnels to come above ground – which can happen only once tunnels get exposed and destroyed; hence, the way Israel wages the war.

(Besides, the headcount of Hamas operative gives a proper perspective on the much-touted “death toll [of] 20,000” that makes “critics of Israel’s bombing campaign” froth at their mouths. Yet, this number is far below the membership of Hamas – and hence, nothing to wring hands about. Given the overall size of Gaza population – 2.2 million – and Hamas’ reliance on non-combatants as human shields, the level of civilian casualties is in fact relatively low. Those crying “genocide!” should ask themselves, why aren’t 2.2 million Palestinians killed by now? Why are they being warned by Israel to move out of the zone of fighting? And – why won’t Egypt show some concern for Gazans’ suffering, and let them in?)

As to the argument like that of one “Daniel Levy, a former Israeli peace negotiator who is now the president of the U.S./Middle East Project” – “This level of civilian killing and destruction, and the rage it generates, guarantees militant recruitment and support for resistance among future generations, both in Palestine and beyond” – it does not hold water, because Palestinians do not necessarily blame Israel on what befell them – but have every reason to blame Hamas. If they don’t, then they are irrational, hating Israel simply because to them, it is a right thing to do – and therefore, they do not deserve our commiseration. Besides, this is not what happened in Lebanon. After Hezbollah’s 2006 war with Israel that rained devastation on Beirut, the Lebanese are overwhelmingly opposed to another round with Israel.

“During his earlier trip to Israel, six days after the Hamas attack, Mr. Austin warned his Israeli counterpart, Yoav Gallant, and the country’s military chief, Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi, that the large number of troops they had assembled at the border of Gaza, combined with the air campaign, was

excessive.” And yet, those troops, and this air campaign destroyed many above-ground structures that his tunnel entrances, that allowed for the large number of tunnels to be exposed and destroyed, and may allow for future gradual tapering of the operation. Secretary Austin is not the only one to know “a thing or two about urban warfare.” The Israelis know about it, too, and – excepting the very sad, nay, tragic, exceptions – are generally doing fairly well.

The other thing to consider is the goals of the war. Secretary Austin and the Israeli leadership may differ on military tactics for the simple reason that they have different political goals. Israel clearly aims to rectify the mistake of Sharon’s “disengagement” from Gaza in 2005, which resulted in Hamas’ deadly engagement with Israel – and to again get the handle on the security situation there. In contrast, America did not plan to stay in Iraq when then-General Austin commanded US troops there (Iraq is very far indeed from the US, and US does not mind too much the resulting Iran’s domination of Iraq, or that the Taliban controls Afghanistan) – but Gaza is very close to Israel, and Iran’s proxies there must not only be destroyed, but not allowed to reappear. This means Israel’s full security control of Gaza’s territory – something that Biden administration vociferously objects to. Hence, the debate over proper tactics – they being “proper” for what?

Biden wants the right thing, the destruction of Hamas, for a completely wrong reason: to him, it will open the door to the “two-state solution” – while Israelis rightly see Palestinians, of all political stripes, as implacably opposed to Israel’s very existence. That’s pretty fundamental. The disagreement about tactics merely reflect the differing worldviews, and approaches based on those worldviews – reliance on the Palestinians for the future peace by Biden versus the clear-eyed understanding by the Israelis – purchased by so many thousands of dead Israelis in the wake of

Oslo – that a Palestinian state is a recipe for an endless war for Israel's very existence,

And so, Israelis will listen to Secretary Austin, and will give them all the info they have, and will update him on their plans – but don't expect them to change those plans, because they reflect a much more sound understandings of Middle East realities than those of the Biden administration.