



The “Strategic Warning” Is Misguided

by Shay Shabtai

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,196, May 16, 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Recent papers by experts and think tanks claim that multiple negative trends occurring simultaneously in Israel’s strategic environment have coalesced into a major threat. There is in fact no clear connection between the trends they identify. The “strategic warning” is unnecessary and could even cause harm, as it distracts from continued critical engagement with the internal issues that are dividing Israeli society, makes it difficult to discuss the main strategic issues facing Israel, and causes an immediate focus on preparedness rather than orderly force build-up.

The problem with the “strategic warning”

Recent publications by Israeli national security think tanks (see, for example, “A Strategic Alert in the Wake of the Judicial Reform” by the INSS and “What Will Change This Passover?” from the Institute for Policy and Strategy) have pointed to a “perfect storm” of external and internal crises that warrant a “strategic warning” that “legislative reform in Israel constitutes a serious danger to its national security”.

Warnings from politically motivated think tanks could be ignored were it not for the fact that they have penetrated the security establishment. This was visible in Defense Minister Yoav Gallant’s statement on March 25 that “A growing rift is penetrating the IDF and the security bodies. This is an immediate and tangible danger to the security of the state”, and in briefings by senior IDF officials and the heads of security organizations that suggest that the likelihood of war in the coming year has increased.

This “strategic warning” is based on erroneous assumptions that falsely integrate processes that do not necessarily correlate into a single picture. The main problems are as follows:

A. The clustering illusion: This is the tendency to see patterns in an aggregate of random events. As Daniel Kahneman writes in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, “Our tendency to think causally exposes us to serious mistakes in assessing the degree of chance in events that are truly random”. Some of the current phenomena, while occurring in parallel, are the results of independent causes. They are only partially connected.

B. The agenda of the parties doing the warning: The “strategic warning” is not an objective assessment. It is a proactive move by actors who have an explicit political agenda. Those issuing the warning are also making efforts to influence foreign parties to exert pressure on the Israeli government and are supporting calls for soldiers to refuse IDF service for political reasons.

C. Dichotomous discussion: As I mentioned in “A Better Way to Implement Constitutional Reform” (BESA Perspective Paper no. 2,183), strategic discussion in Israel tends to revolve around the implementation or non-implementation of a specific strategy. This can be seen in statements like, “The prime minister faces a historic decision and must choose between two contrasting strategic alternatives” (from “What Will Change This Passover?”) or “The Prime Minister... must now focus on forging a broad consensus and finding a framework that will curb the crisis” (from “A Strategic Alert in the Wake of the Judicial Reform”). In practice, the complex reality of tensions within and among the issues in question requires a variety of policy options.

Artificially binding issues together creates an incoherent mess of cause and effect. Above all, it prevents the identification of flexibilities that are essential for designing a strategy adapted to complex environmental conditions.

A more balanced assessment of the strategic situation

In the following analysis I will attempt to separate variables, identify priorities, and offer options. I will do this for the “Red” side (Israel’s opponents), the “White” side (Israel’s partners), and the “Blue” side (Israel).

The Red Side

Iran: Iran is facing multiple crises. Its economic and internal situation is acute. The protests and demonstrations over the past half year were suppressed by force of arms, but they are bad news in the long run for the regime. On the nuclear issue, Iran continues to accumulate enriched uranium at a level of 60%. (Enrichment at the 84% level was at most a local capability experiment.) Iran's continued defiance, combined with its aid to Moscow during the war in Ukraine, have failed to rescue it and have even worsened its international isolation. In the regional arena, its aggressive use of both direct force and proxies has failed to bring it clear achievements such as new countries in its camp or *de facto* control of another area.

On the other hand, Iran's accumulation of enriched material shortens the time it needs to achieve a military nuclear capability. The military aid to Russia brings with it a reward in the form of military and technological intensification. Iranian pressure on the countries of the region, and those countries' perception of American weakness in the face of that pressure, have given rise to a desire in some cases to find consensual ways of containing the threat.

In terms of the Israeli strategic approach, the key questions are: How can Jerusalem mobilize the international community to continue effective political and economic pressure on Iran and give support – without directly interfering – to the forces promoting internal change? Can an independent military option be established for effectively halting Iran's nuclear project? These issues require a vision and a working plan many months ahead, and it does not help to drape them with the aura of a “strategic warning”.

Lebanon and Hezbollah: Hezbollah has become the dominant political and military force in a crumbling Lebanon, but this is not necessarily good for the organization. It is increasingly seen as part of the problem rather than the solution, and Lebanon's economic and social distress affect it and its supporters as well as regular Lebanese citizens. In addition, Hezbollah is deterred by Israel. It has carefully avoided crossing thresholds that it fears could lead to a broad escalation.

With that said, we are witnessing an erosion of this deterrence, as in the case of the Megiddo terror attack. This is an ongoing process resulting from persistent Israeli avoidance of forceful action on Lebanese soil. Israel is deterred by the scope of the missile and rocket threat to the home front; the maritime border agreement that

strengthened Hezbollah's self-confidence; and the group's perception of Israel's current internal situation.

The key questions are: How should Israel adapt its strategic policy to a situation in which the sovereign on the other side of the border does not actually exist? How can Israel act against Hezbollah without sparking an all-out confrontation? How is Israel preparing to impose an overwhelming military achievement that will serve as a deterrent before the conflict and change the strategic reality at its conclusion? These issues are serious, but they are medium and long-term rather than urgent and do not require hasty decisions.

The Palestinian arena: Both internal sides – the Palestinian Authority and Hamas – are in deep distress. Hamas has shown itself to be incapable of improving Gaza's economic plight, and Israel is deterring Hamas sufficiently to ensure that an escalation would result in a severe degrading of its military capabilities. The PA is in decline and awaiting the departure of Abu Mazen. It has been largely abandoned by regional and international parties that have lost interest and is preoccupied with internal struggles.

In between is the Palestinian population of the West Bank. Many among the younger generation have reached the point of despair and extremism and are susceptible to the lure of Hamas. This was reflected in a year of terror attacks by "lone wolves" and small terrorist cells. Both sides use the Temple Mount (Al Aqsa) and incitement against Israel to try to improve their dismal public opinion levels. Hamas is trying to open another front from Lebanon but is subject to the constraints of Hezbollah, which is not interested in a major escalation with Israel.

Israel must cope with continuous terrorism, most of which is thwarted by joint intelligence and operational activities of the Shin Bet and IDI (AMAN) and special units of the IDF and the police. Every victim of a terror attack is a grave loss, but despite the deep pain, it is important to note that the security forces' efforts to contain terrorism match the challenge and are impressive in their level of achievement.

The key strategic questions Israel must answer are: How can the Palestinian arena be stabilized by a combination of economic measures that benefit the population and effective deterrence and countermeasures without paying a significant political price and giving up Israeli assets on the ground? How can this stability be promoted in the post-Abu Mazen era? Is it possible to proceed from such

relative stability to a long-term arrangement that takes Israel's interests into consideration?

These are all long-term trends; none of these issues represents a new change. They require a long-term vision, and solutions should be built around established policy and military alternatives.

Another problem is the term "multi-front", which has replaced the preoccupation with "multidimensionality". Some of Israel's enemies are indeed attempting to coordinate their activities, strengthen each other, and even operate from each other's territory. However, in practice, the "multi-front" challenge relatively remains marginal (with the exception of the scenario of a full-scale war with Hezbollah resulting from a conflict with Iran). As long as there is no substantial change to the strategic situation, it is better to examine the challenges and assess possible responses to them individually.

The White Side

United States: Relations between Israel and the US have been growing increasingly complex for years, and the Democratic American administration contains elements that are openly anti-Israeli. On the Republican side the situation is better, but even there an attitude is developing on the margins that is not necessarily pro-Israeli. There has, meanwhile, been a surge in anti-Semitism in the US on the fringes of both political camps. These challenges tend to intensify when a right-wing Israeli government stands before a Democratic White House (although historically, the most serious crises between the countries - Pollard, economic guarantees, the end of the Second Lebanon War - were between Israeli coalition governments and Republican presidents). The current situation is also a result, as mentioned, of an organized campaign by the Israeli opposition to recruit Democratic elements in the US to put pressure on the Israeli government.

The key questions are: How should Israel prepare for the term of the next Democratic president, who may well not be pro-Israeli? If a Republican is elected in between, how can Israel avoid a crisis with the Democrats during his or her term? Should Israel act proactively in order to reduce its security dependence - especially in terms of military aid - on the US? Should Israel consider seeking more support from other powers to reduce its dependence on the US (Germany, India)?

Regional arena: Locally, we are witnessing a longstanding Middle Eastern dynamic. The agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, mediated by the

Chinese, and the critical attitude of the UAE towards Israel on the Palestinian issue are reminders of Middle Eastern realities that were somewhat blurred for Israelis by the Abraham Accords. In this region, there is great flexibility when dealing with adversaries, friends, and “frenemies”. Changes in situation lead to what appear to be changes in policy, but which are, in fact, behavioral adjustments. Saudi Arabia is using the rapprochement as a trump card to secure demands from the US, while the UAE is acknowledging Arab public opinion in order to soften popular criticism of its agreement with Israel.

The key strategic questions for Israel are: Can current relations between the US and Saudi Arabia include the promotion of a public rapprochement with Israel, and if so, at what price? What limitations, if any, will Arab countries take upon themselves to maintain a semblance of reconciliation with Iran? How do the answers to these questions affect the flexibility of Israeli policy in the region?

As is true on the red side, these are long-term trends. In the case of the white side, there is also an opportunity (which will not be detailed here) of a security rapprochement between Europe and Israel in view of the war in Ukraine.

The Blue Side

The most significant change in recent months has been on the blue side – that is, inside Israel. Like the image of the train in Einstein’s special theory of relativity, the red and white landscapes have changed quickly because the blue train has increased its own speed.

In recent months, many masks have fallen from the Israeli discourse, and gray areas and agreements to disagree have fallen by the wayside.

The political and social phenomena that have surfaced are numerous and significant, including expressions of racism and misogyny; the pushing of personal legislation at the expense of the needs of the state; an effort to establish facts on the ground on the West Bank rather than engage in in-depth discussions about Israel’s policy there; difficulty maintaining law and order in some areas of the country; an entrenchment of the legal establishment’s status that harms the balance between branches; a willingness of interest and pressure groups (the business community, unions) to blatantly and sometimes illegally use their strength to promote their agendas; and the utter failure of journalists and media organizations to maintain even a semblance of ethics and professionalism while

instead making the promotion of their own political and social agendas their main occupation.

All of this will require a renewed discussion of the meaning of “Israeliness” and a rebuilding of formal and informal agreements about life in the State of Israel. This discussion will have significant implications for national security.

The “People's Army” model: The social contract between the public and the IDF, expressed in the ethos of the “people's army”, has been broken and may even have been destroyed. Proposals for the conscription law and the law for the study of Torah legally establish a situation in which both serving in the IDF and avoiding service are of equal value. At the same time, calls by pressure groups to avoid service in the name of the preservation or promotion of values (regardless of the apologetics that accompany them) cast serious doubt on the general willingness to participate in military service - not only among the reserves - on both the day of necessity and even more so in preparation for that day. The IDF loses its legitimacy to recruit for mandatory service when recruiting and avoiding recruitment are seen as equivalent. Nor can the IDF rely on those who have enlisted, because they might, for reasons of serving an external agenda, not be at its disposal when it needs them most.

In this case as well as the others, these trends have been around for years; the current situation has brought them to the fore. This provides an opportunity for real discussion on necessary changes to the structure of IDF service.

The key strategic questions are: How can an army with a proven and available capability be maintained when the very acts of enlistment and continued service are called into question? What other social contract and service models derive from the need to maintain such an army?

Monolithic thinking within the security community: The events of the last few months point to a monolithic way of thinking among both former and current heads and senior members of the security organizations. It is not only their linkage of their political views to their positions as security professionals but also the group-think characteristics they exhibit that have put a question mark on their ability to thoroughly examine creative policy alternatives.

The key strategic questions are: How can mechanisms be created that will promote a plurality of opinions in the security establishment in a way that will support decision makers with a wider range of options for action? How can flexibility and

creativity at the tactical and operational levels - proven once again in dealing with the wave of terrorism in the West Bank and in terms of technological innovation - be supplemented in the strategic discussion in a way that will allow similar flexibility at this level as well?

What do we do with this situational assessment?

On the white and red sides, we are seeing increasing trends of both challenges and opportunities. Only the main ones have been described in this paper. At the same time, a crisis has developed on the blue side that reflects deep divisions. This crisis does not arise from new phenomena but reflects the removal of masks that once concealed longstanding issues.

This is not a “strategic warning” of fundamental change. These trends require an in-depth discussion of strategy and methods of dealing with a complex array of issues as well as a continuous improvement of the ability to act in crisis situations. This does not mean that in some arenas an escalation cannot occur as a result of a shock wave of local events, but this is a risk that should be included in the situational assessment, and in any case, the security establishment is prepared for it.

Hasty decisions made under an imposed sense of urgency should be avoided. Instead, Israel should take three basic steps:

- A. **Focus on the essential inner discussion:** David Ben-Gurion, who has been much cited in recent months (and who, by the way, opposed the tightening of flexibilities by a constitution and judicial review of laws), gave clear priority to the promotion of social and economic issues over security. Giving civilian issues priority over the IDF led to the resignation of the second chief of staff, Yigal Yadin. Even today, it seems right that security issues be subordinated for several months to critical internal processes of change and dialogue until a settlement is reached. This may be by agreement or via a new *modus operandi* (new gray areas) that may not solve all the issues, but that can be a basis for continuing a common life.
- B. **Discussion of strategic issues that are significant for the medium and long term:** During these months it is essential that the security establishment hold discussions on the weighty strategic issues facing Israel so that a set of real alternatives and courses of action can be put to a decision by the political echelon. Separating internal and external issues and prioritizing the former

over the latter also has a distinct advantage in being able to maintain a more balanced situational assessment and above all to overcome thinking biases (confirmation bias, the clustering illusion, anchoring bias, etc.), which are strengthened when creating false links between issues.

- C. **Orderly preparation for the challenges expected in the medium term:** The IDF and the security establishment should not operate under the pressure of an immediate need for readiness and should instead prefer orderly preparation for possible challenges and crises in a way that allows the security, military, and diplomatic levels sufficient time to build capabilities and prepare the ground for major achievements.

Col. (res.) Shay Shabtai is a senior research fellow at the BESA Center and was Head of the Long-Term Strategic Planning Department in the IDF. An expert in Middle East issues, Israeli national security, intelligence, and strategic planning and currently a cybersecurity strategist, he is working on a Ph.D. and lectures at Bar-Ilan University.