



Iron Swords I: A Fundamental Miscalculation on Both Sides That Must Lead to the Defeat of Hamas

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The massive and horrifically destructive military invasion by Hamas into Israel on October 7, 2023 signifies a crisis in Israel's security doctrine principles of the last two decades or more: a failure of early warning, a failure of defense, a failure of deterrence, and a failure of the minimal casualties ethos. These have combined to create an overwhelming security crisis. The events of October 7 created a new strategic clarity regarding another principle: Israel must achieve a comprehensive military decision on Hamas and fully dismantle its governmental control. By committing this invasion, Hamas made a strategic mistake: It should have calculated that there was a possibility that the State of Israel would respond by acting to eliminate its physical existence. The most important thing in the coming weeks is to focus on achieving this goal.

On Saturday, October 7, 2023, at 6:30 a.m., Israel's current security doctrine collapsed after twenty-plus years. Hamas initiated a planned and organized surprise invasion of Israeli territory, breached the border line, and overcame the relatively weak defenses that stood in front of it. The outcome was well over a thousand dead – both civilians and security personnel – and more than one hundred captives who were taken to Gaza.

In this operation, Hamas undermined the basic concepts of Israel's security doctrine as they were established over the past decades and as expressed in the report of the Meridor Committee, which the author participated in writing.

The first concept that collapsed was Early Warning. According to the Meridor report, "While in the past the early warning should have been mainly for a war, today, and looking to the future, early warning is required for a wide variety of threats and scenarios... In this context, special emphasis must be placed on early warning against the various terrorist circles... and on the processes of nuclearization in the regional space." In the past two decades, ever since Operation Protective Edge in 2002, this level of early warning has provided relative security. The security organizations succeeded in significantly reducing harm to Israeli citizens, including successfully thwarting "lone wolf" attacks, which are difficult to detect in advance.

However, as seen in the past, this high level of success in early warning has proved to be a deceptive illusion. It brought disaster to Israel in the Yom Kippur War and failed to predict the Arab Spring, the most significant political change in the region in the last half century. Israel became addicted to the precise early warning, while the lessons of its limited lifespan should have reverberated throughout all security efforts. The surprise attack by the Hamas organization reminded us that we cannot broadly rely on early warning, no matter how strong the intelligence community is.

The second concept that collapsed is defense, which the Meridor Committee defined as "all security efforts, in a broad national perspective, for the defense of the home front, becoming a central battleground, and especially for the protection of the population and strategic infrastructures". At a time when hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed in countries around Israel in the last decade in ongoing bloodshed since the beginning of the "Arab Spring", Israel fortified itself behind ground barriers and active defense. By investing significant but reasonable resources from the country's strong economy, the decision makers gained time and reduced the need to make strategic decisions. The collapse of the barrier at the Gaza border - a complex and advanced security system - during Hamas's attack demonstrated that defense only partially contributes to national security.

The third concept that collapsed is deterrence. The Meridor Committee stated that “in the updated concept the central place of the principle of deterrence against the spectrum of challenges is maintained, but it is necessary to develop concrete models in view of the threats of terrorism and unconventional weapons”. In the past few decades, deterrence has become the “silver bullet” of national security. It was not only intended to prevent conflicts but became their end state. Deterrence gets weaker over time, and the continued dependence on it brought the point of collapse closer.

Another problem is that the Israeli analysis of deterrence was not structured enough. The mechanisms of deterrent action were not fully analyzed, so the assessment of the existence or nonexistence of deterrence was based on problematic working assumptions and variables. This requires a comprehensive reevaluation that is beyond the scope of this paper. This concept of deterrence has collapsed and will require a deep rethink.

The takeover of the “post-heroic war” idea on Israeli security thinking led to the creation of a “close to zero casualties” unwritten principle and the creation of a notion of “absolute security”. Israel’s security organizations became obsessively concerned with preventing any casualties, and public discourse reinforced the norm of a “thorough investigation into every casualty”. All of this narrowed security thinking down to a close focus on local and tactical countermeasures and made it difficult to see the big picture.

The extreme expression of this thinking is the issue of captives and the missing in action. The obsessive preoccupation with returning body parts by using strategic levers and giving up strategic assets in exchange made Israel appear weak and vulnerable in the eyes of its enemies. Hamas’s success in abducting such a large number of soldiers and civilians frees Israel from the sort of bargaining that in the past has caused Israel lasting strategic damage. The scale of the hostage-taking during the Hamas attack means Israel has no choice but to launch a broad operation in areas where Israelis are being held, which will clearly endanger their lives.

The failure of the key elements of Israel’s security doctrine did not occur in a vacuum. It stems, among other things, from the lack of a systematic national security strategy, which is supposed to serve as a framework for updating security doctrine and determining security policy. Among the contributing factors to this

failure are the poor decision-making process within Israeli security and the preoccupation with the “security concept”, a problematic idea that is not connected to any of the required levels and frameworks of national security.

To all intents and purposes, Israel was just attacked by a foreign country - even if not in a conventional sense - and an army was used against it. There is thus a need to create conceptual clarity: An attack on Israel by a country using an army should end in a clear and total Israeli victory. Decisive outcome is the other fundamental principle of Israel’s security doctrine, combined with the transfer of the war to the enemy’s territory, and both should be the focus right now.

Israel has no choice but to launch an offensive military attack, militarily defeat the Hamas organization, and politically defeat its government. Any other course of action would cause enormous damage to Israel and create a threat to its very existence in the long term.

By choosing to launch this comprehensive attack, Hamas made a grave mistake in assessing its strategic situation. It should have anticipated that Israel would respond differently to an attack on this scale. It is not clear what led its leaders to make such a miscalculation:

- A. Did they think Israel is at its most vulnerable point due to a contentious political dispute that was conducted in an irresponsible manner by both sides, and which included, amazingly, a campaign by senior former members of the security establishment to undermine the IDF’s main values of service and capabilities?
- B. Did they look at the war in Ukraine and believe they would be able to deal with a regular and organized army just as the Ukrainians have been dealing with the Russian army for a year and a half?
- C. Did they think the attack would succeed at triggering the involvement of Iran and Hezbollah in a multi-front conflict, a scenario that they could have mistakenly inferred from public Israeli statements? Did they expect those parties to jump at the opportunity to take advantage of Israeli weakness (to what strategic end)?
- D. Did the advancement towards peace with Saudi Arabia prompt them to think they should act before the Palestinians were completely abandoned?

- E. Did they think taking a huge number of hostages would cool Israeli determination to conduct a comprehensive operation in Gaza to avoid harming the captives and result instead in a prisoner exchange?
- F. Did they base their decisions on political and even personal aspirations within the Palestinian arena, without considering the broader context?

None of this matters anymore. The collapse of Israel's security doctrine and the number of casualties and abductees means Israel has transitioned to a decisive decision to end the Hamas organization's physical existence in Gaza. What remains is for Israel to carry out the military strike required to achieve this decision. And that's what we should all focus on in the coming weeks.

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