



A New Existential War - Part II: Warfare Has Changed, and the Israeli Security Concept Must Change With It

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: On the morning of October 7, 2023, the strategic Israeli security concept collapsed, marking the end of the 30-year era since the Oslo Accords. With the shocking force of an earthquake, a cultural concept that had its roots planted in the dream of peace, and in the illusion that the State of Israel could aspire to become a kind of Denmark, disintegrated completely. For Israel to achieve victory in the war with Hamas, it will have to adapt its security concept to reflect a new and deeper understanding of the enemy's perception of the nature of its struggle with Israel.

In the wake of October 7, the State of Israel, its society, and all its institutions are at a critical crossroads. One path forward demands a thorough investigation and examination of everything that failed on that day so the necessary corrections can be made. The second path directs Israel towards a comprehensive inquiry across all dimensions and urges the formulation of a new and updated national narrative in the face of the existential challenge. The question is, which of the two paths is worth pursuing?

This article is divided into three parts. The first examines the roots of the failure of October 7 and Israel's perception of the struggle on the opposing side. This, the second article, describes the ways in which the Israeli security perception needs to

evolve to provide a proper response to the opposing side's perception of the struggle. The third will present the components of the national vision and the principles of action that will ensure the existence of the State of Israel in the face of emerging threats.

Israel's boldness in its ground attack as an achievement unto itself

There are experts and commentators examining the achievements of the current war with skepticism. They do not deny the IDF's achievements in deep combat in Gaza, which is incorporating an unprecedented coordination of ground, air, and sea forces. However, they caution against excessive enthusiasm over tactical achievements, pointing out that the Hamas organization, its leaders, and its fighters have not yet been broken. They point out that at this stage, it is still unclear how to integrate all the IDF's achievements into a tangible strategic success. In the history of warfare, there are clear examples, such as the US Army in Vietnam, of armies winning the battles but losing the war. War is a complex and unmanageable phenomenon.

And yet, despite uncertainty regarding the continuation of the war, its outcomes, and the implications for the future security of the State of Israel, the moment the IDF launched a ground attack deep into the city of Gaza on Friday, October 27, it crossed a Rubicon of decades-old Israeli apprehension, thereby constituting a significant achievement in and of itself.

At times, our adversaries, understanding our situation, have pointed out our internal complexities. For example, in an interview 14 years ago, Bashar al-Assad described Israel's situation this way:

Israel becomes stronger militarily as time passes... It has more destructive capability but less ability to achieve military objectives, and consequently, less ability to achieve political objectives. Therefore, it goes from failure to failure... Today, there is no Israeli system in the other side's territories. It's a strategic principle. Today, Israel's system is "inside." So the map has changed. Israel doesn't know how to deal with this map. (*Alaspir, March 25, 2009*)

The anxiety of the Israeli leadership in recent decades regarding the deployment of ground forces into enemy territory represents a crisis in the Israeli security perception. It reflects a fear of the uncertainties associated with entering a war, which inherently involves a step into the unknown. At the crossroads where the decision to launch an offensive operation by ground forces is made, the political echelon has been hesitant about making such a potentially complicated move as it could mean a loss of control leading to a failure to achieve the desired end.

This problematic dynamic was evident in Operation Cast Lead at the end of 2008. A dispute arose between Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who was pushing for a decisive move against Hamas, and Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who sought to conclude the operation before matters escalated into the unknown. In this conflict, the Defense Minister and the Chief of Staff prevailed.

The desire to avoid extensive and prolonged ground warfare is rooted deeply in Israeli culture. Despite the many technological innovations in ground warfare equipment, ground warfare continues to embody war's fundamental nature as it was rooted in the industrial era. It is a mass activity involving physical friction with terrain and enemy forces, primarily in a mechanized form. It involves clashes in dust, mud, and trenches. A society immersed in the hi-tech and information age does not find it easy to invest in the physical friction of ground warfare.

This being the case, the audacity of the IDF leadership and the war cabinet to deploy the IDF for an attack deep into Gaza's densely populated, confined, and fortified urban terrain, both above and below ground – with an intensity not seen before, not even in the warfare of the United States and its allies against ISIS in Mosul – must be recognized as an achievement of strategic significance. As in a pilgrimage, where the journey is as important as the destination, the bold and determined path taken by the IDF forces on their way to achieving this war's objectives holds a significance of its own.

Above all, the choice to focus the attack on the core assets of Hamas rule in Gaza demonstrates the significance of the urban environment to Hamas. The dense, built-up environment plays a central role as a kind of cultural-religious womb for the organization. Professor Yuval Portugali, in his new book entitled *The Second*

Urban Revolution, addresses the cultural aspect of war that focuses on the hearts of cities, calling it the "urbanization of warfare."

It is true that in wars of the past century, especially WWII, cities became battlefields. However, urban warfare was just one part of the overall war effort. In the war waged by the IDF in the heart of Gaza, the city itself, with its rich cultural and religious institutions, serves as both the front and the focal point of the conflict. The ability of the IDF to operate successfully in the heart of the city should be regarded as a comprehensive achievement of the highest order.

Why is the war being prolonged, and what should this lengthening teach us about Israel's perception of security?

The political and military leadership clearly understood that they were heading into a prolonged war, and they declared this to be the case from the outset. However, the public, including veterans of previous Israeli wars, is struggling to understand why this war needs to last longer than any other war the country has experienced since the War of Independence.

When Ben-Gurion formulated the Israeli security perception, he acknowledged the fundamental weakness of the State of Israel in terms of its ability to withstand a prolonged war. Accordingly, he expected the IDF to decisively win wars fast, and developed an offensive striking force with the directive to transfer any conflict to the enemy's territory as quickly as possible. This perspective was elaborated by General Israel Tal in his book *National Security - The Few Against the Many*.

The Israeli need to end wars quickly was clearly understood and effectively integrated into the perception of warfare developed by Hezbollah and Hamas, with the backing of Iran. They formulated a concept of warfare that is aimed at swiftly negating Israel's decisive capabilities. Their concept relies on two systemic components. The first is a widespread rocket system covering the entire depth of the area, enabling continued effective firing into Israeli territory for an extended period, even after penetration by the IDF of extensive parts of the enemy's territory. The second is based on dense defensive lines containing obstacles and explosives, both above and below ground, in the heart of built-up areas in cities and villages. Under these conditions, a rapid advance into enemy territory becomes a very complex task.

In conflicts like the Sinai and Six-Day Wars, after breaking through the first defensive line, the IDF's armored forces entered enemy territory, utilizing maneuverability and speed, and achieved swift decisions. The current conflict reflects the ways Hamas and other terrorist organizations have learned from those wars and adjusted their defensive strategies. The defense system they have developed is different from that traditionally used in desert warfare.

The enemy made major changes to its command and control methods. The organization for warfare in Hezbollah and Hamas tends to be decentralized, which allows each local combat core to fight independently even without orders. In past wars, IDF targeting of command and control centers had a direct impact on weakening the enemy, but that is no longer the case.

For years, warfare has focused on urban areas – especially in the case of the organized local networks of Hamas. In Operation Sinai in 1956, a relatively small special forces unit (a reconnaissance battalion from the 37th Division) entered the Gaza Strip, followed by a reserve infantry brigade arriving on buses (Reserve Brigade 11) that conquered the entire Gaza Strip in one quick move. Upon the surrender of the Egyptian commander to IDF Brigadier General Asaf Simhoni, non-local Egyptian soldiers either left the area or surrendered. Similar events occurred in the Six-Day War, where Egyptian forces arrived from Egypt's Delta and Nile regions as an expeditionary force.

In contrast, in the ongoing conflict in the Gaza Strip, the enemy's military force is organized into battalions and brigades made up of local residents. The Shejaiya Battalion, for instance, is made up of fighters and commanders from the Shejaiya region, while the Khan Yunis Brigade consists of residents of Khan Yunis. This pattern is repeated across the entire Gaza Strip. Even within the command hierarchy, local ties are significant. When IDF forces penetrate deep into the territory, Hamas fighters, who are locals, can relinquish their positions and easily blend into the population, ready to reemerge when opportunity strikes. This is why operations to clear the Gaza Strip or to combat Hezbollah in southern Lebanon require extensive force deployment and prolonged durations.

Another significant change is embedded in the jihadist religious consciousness that motivates the forces built up in the last decades to combat the State of Israel.

Reflecting on the Arab armies' defeat in June 1967, Khaled al-Qaradawi said: "Returning to faith and raising the banner of jihad is vital in every battle but particularly crucial against global Zionism because the Zionists fortify their soldiers with religious faith and religious dreams" (Uriya Shavit and Ofir Winter, *Enemies of My Enemies*, 2013, p. 88).

In this spirit, Abdullah Azzam, born in a village near Jenin, led the mujahideen struggle in Afghanistan. Inspired by this, the Hamas movement was established two days after the outbreak of the first intifada in December 1987. When the IDF faces Hamas and Hezbollah, it encounters Islamic fighters who are believers, presenting a challenge not previously recognized.

In order to formulate a new Israeli strategic perception, it will be essential to examine the reasons to prolong the current war and the nature of the current threats to the State of Israel. In this effort, it will be necessary to separate from the concept of retreat. That concept is still maintained by former senior security officials who argue that the IDF, with its technological superiority, can always return to the victory patterns of the Six-Day War, as if the IDF's technological superiority means it can dispense with the need for territorial depth and quickly win even beyond the 1967 borders. The IDF has not weakened since June 1967, but Israel's enemies have changed. They have evolved creatively and are much stronger. This has vital implications for the future of the State of Israel.

Victory will depend on the post-war arrangements and an end to the concept of Israeli withdrawal from territory.

An unprecedented Israeli coalition has formed that insists on continuing the war until its goals are achieved. Leftists like the leaders of the Geneva Initiative for a two-state solution, such as Colonel Shaul Arieli, are voicing this demand. However, despite its urgency, the nationalist commitment to the war against Hamas is short-term. It emerged in response to a severe emergency and appears to be a temporary situation until Israel's inevitable victory. It is doubtful whether it indicates a socio-political direction for the future. Only time will tell.

Those who come to the forefront during a crisis gather great support and unite the ranks of the fighters. But off the battlefield, this spirit does not seem to influence leaders in the socio-political discourse. The commitment to war, with all its

urgency, relies on conflicting Israeli dreams that continue to resist settlement. Advocates for a two-state solution, including Yossi Beilin and others, see the war against Hamas as a historic opportunity to advance their vision. In their view, the disappearance of Hamas rule will mean the removal of an obstacle preventing the implementation of the two-state plan. Their renewed push for the plan, which involves extensive Israeli withdrawals in the West Bank and even the uprooting of settlements, aligns with the expectations of the American administration.

The support of former security establishment officials for the idea of two states has been and continues to be based on the assumption that even in a withdrawal to the 1967 borders, Israel will be able to defend its sovereignty and the security of its residents with its own forces. From a "professional" standpoint, they have argued for decades that the IDF will always be able to ensure Israel's security even after withdrawals. For example, Major General (res.) Dan Halutz, in his article criticizing the Netanyahu government's demand for "defensible borders," said: "The IDF can defend any border defined by the political leadership. It is worth mentioning that the greatest military victory (after the War of Independence) was achieved in 1967, from the border line presented today by the government leadership as indefensible..." (*Yedioth Ahronoth*, January 16, 2015).

Leading up to the disengagement plan in the Gaza Strip in the spring of 2006, in a dialogue with Ari Shavit, Haim Ramon made a surprising statement: "I believe there will be calm (after the withdrawal), but let's assume there will be war. What kind of war will it be? The IDF with all its capabilities against 3,000-4,000 Hamas members armed with nothing? If the Palestinians pose any threat, I'll conquer the West Bank in 24 hours. And how do I know that? Because that's what I did in the 'Defensive Shield' operation...I reconquered the territory and toppled the Palestinian Authority within a day." (*Haaretz*, June 18, 2006)

The approach of the withdrawal supporters has a conceptual framework built on four principles:

1. Territorial separation and the evacuation of settlements, along with the definition of borders, will reduce friction points and generate a trend toward stability. Like Ambassador Martin Indyk, they quote the proverb: "Good fences make good neighbors."

2. If stability is undermined to the point of intolerable security threats, the political leadership can make the necessary decision and deploy the IDF to counter the threat in the depth of the territory from which they withdrew.
3. Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territory, coupled with consent by the international community to recognize the end of the occupation, will provide Israel with international legitimacy for military action should it become necessary.
4. With its enduring superiority, the IDF can meet the challenge and achieve a decisive victory within a few days.

The war that broke out on October 7 proves these assumptions to be flawed to the core. The special security fence in the Gaza Strip did not prevent war and did not even delay Hamas's rapid attack. The decision-making process of the Israeli government to launch an offensive was difficult and complex. The great confusion about the northern front also showed how challenging it is for the leadership to decide to go on the offensive. The promised international legitimacy is far from being realized – quite the opposite, in fact – and above all, the IDF has no way to achieve a quick victory.

Victory will require a long and protracted war that will be full of difficulties and complexities. Senior security officials who support the two-state solution argue that the Palestinian state that will emerge in the West Bank will be fragile. But in view of the changes that have unfolded in the phenomenon of warfare in war zones around the world and especially in the Gaza Strip, as demonstrated by Hamas's resilience, this promise is hollow.

For over a decade, I have been grappling with supporters of disengagement, attempting to present their perspective as detached and dangerous. I based my arguments on comprehensive research published at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies in January 2019 under the title: ["Withdrawal from Area C in Judea and Samaria: An Existential Threat"](#).

That research outlined the foundations of a scenario like the sudden attack by Hamas on the morning of October 7. It referred to the doctrine of war intentionally developed by Hezbollah and Hamas under Iranian influence. My claims are based on an analysis of the characteristics of the new form of warfare that has emerged

in the 21st century, emphasizing the critical need for territorial depth in defense. The changes in the phenomenon of warfare, particularly those adopted from the Russia-Ukraine war, present additional considerations indicating the need for Israeli control over vital territories in Judea and Samaria and the Jordan Valley.

The evolving reality since the beginning of the war on October 7 in Gaza and on the northern border represents a practical demonstration of my claims in this research. Given the changes in modern warfare, proponents of disengagement appear to be suffering from a chronic overestimation of the IDF's capabilities and a similarly dangerous underestimation of the enemies' capabilities.

The perceived strength of the IDF, according to their assessment, leads them to believe that the IDF will always be able to repeat its great achievements, such as that of June 1967. But in essence, the war of 1967 was the last military clash to unfold along the lines of World War II. Since then, the world of warfare has changed completely. To seek a victory along the lines of outdated patterns is like asking for the Red Sea to be split again.

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