



## How Will the Swords of Iron War Change Israel's National Security Strategy and Doctrine?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Israel's national security doctrine collapsed on October 7, and the way in which the Swords of Iron War is being conducted is fundamentally changing its components. After the war is over, an in-depth review of the doctrine will be required. Fundamental questions will need to be discussed, such as: Is Israel giving too much weight to the Iranian threat? What is the basis of the national approach to the Palestinian issue? What is the right balance between independence and dependence on the United States? And is Israel a country that manages risk or actively shapes its environment? The main issue may be a return to the concept of preventive war and creation of a clear ranking between the core components of the doctrine – deterrence and decisive outcome – and the other components. It might be helpful to make these discussions part of binding legislation in which, for example, any new government would have to approve its National Security Strategy in the Knesset.

The events of October 7 marked a total collapse of the basic principles of Israel's national security doctrine. Three of the four basic components – deterrence, early warning, and defense – failed completely.

In view of this collapse, the State of Israel obviously cannot continue to base its security planning on the existing doctrine. So what is to be done with it? This will be a long conversation that will be held in depth after the war ends. This article

presents several initial lines of thought on both the content of Israel's security doctrine and the process of updating it.

Above all, the time has come to distinguish national security *strategy* from national security *doctrine*, and to stop once and for all the problematic preoccupation with the "security *concept*".

A national security *strategy* is the worldview of an administration that defines its basic assumptions underpinning national security. It connects the permanent, emerging, and changing elements of national existence. A national security *doctrine* is a document containing the fundamental principles and concepts that are to be applied to address military and security threats and challenges.

The foundations of Israel's national security strategy were defined by David Ben-Gurion. There are five components: conventional qualitative advantage; perception of nuclear deterrence; special relationship with a superpower; technological and economic superiority; and national focus (statehood, majority democracy, the spirit of the Jewish people, and the connection between Israel and the diaspora).

However, discussions about the ways national security strategy can and should change do not take place in Israel in an orderly manner, and new governments do not clearly define their strategies. The events of October 7 show that the absence of such discussions can lead to a period as long as 18 years (the time since the disengagement from Gaza in 2005) in which no profound changes occurred in the Israeli approach to national security, even though four prime ministers served during that time.

The fundamental questions regarding Israel's national security strategy are:

**The Iranian threat: Is Israel giving it too much weight?**

There is no doubt that a scenario in which the Islamic regime in Iran is equipped with nuclear weapons would constitute an existential threat to Israel, and this must be prevented. But the path from this statement to a clear national strategy on the Iranian issue remains unclear.

Iran is advancing towards the nuclear threshold mainly through the accumulation of matériel, but there is still some distance between Iran and a bomb, and there are no signs that it has decided to produce one. What does this mean for Israeli strategy?

Also, Israel has not done everything in its power to prevent an Iranian bomb. It has not militarily attacked the Islamic Republic's nuclear project. What does this say about its considerations in handling the Iranian nuclear issue?

In the Swords of Iron War, the "Iranian axis," with the possible exception of Hezbollah, has proven to be a paper tiger with regard to its ability to conduct operations that will seriously harm Israel. What does this say about Israel's attitude towards Iran regarding issues other than nuclear weapons?

And how should Israel weigh the Iranian regime's perception of its own domestic threat or its reluctance to engage in an all-out conflict with Israel for its own strategic reasons?

### **The Palestinians**

The Swords of Iron War opens the door for change on the Palestinian issue, if only because a new civil order will take shape in Gaza whose connection to the Palestinian Authority will be loose (at least in the early stages). Along with the reshaping of the Palestinian Authority after the eventual death of Abu Mazen, the conclusion of the war will mark a great opportunity to restart and clarify Israeli strategy towards the Palestinians.

After two decades of postponing a conclusion and instead "managing" the conflict, the time has come for Israel to decide its vision for the Territories. Does it want to hold and annex part of them (the settlement blocs? Area C?) in order to realize the vision of the connection between the people of Israel and the Land of Israel? Does it want to control the territories with a Palestinian population (in Gaza? in the major cities and towns of Judea and

Samaria?) or create the reality of another political entity while maintaining freedom of security action?

### **Independence from, versus dependence on, the United States**

The Swords of Iron War has demonstrated Israel's political and military dependence on the United States. Israel was revealed to be too dependent on Washington, which points to a series of planning and execution failures regarding decisions about the desirable extent of Israel's independence. Economic and resource decisions led to the emergence of a strategic gap. Israel's dependence is particularly problematic at a time when trends in the United States on matters concerning Israel are not necessarily in its favor.

To what extent is Israel willing to invest in security and economic independence? What is the depth of her basic commitment to the American axis in the world, and what price is she willing to pay for it? To what extent would it be wise for Israel to spread the risk and establish economic and perhaps also security relationships with other key powers? To what extent should Israel preserve the direct relationship with Russia in an effort to moderate its attitude (as is now occurring after a "bad start" by Moscow towards the Swords of Iron War)?

### **The changing attitude towards regional alliances**

A follow-up to the issue of Israel's dependence on the United States is the extent to which Israel is willing to risk being tied, economically and to a certain degree in terms of security, to a regional coalition led by Saudi Arabia. Is Israel ready to integrate into the region in a way that will create a dependency on it among its neighbors, for example in energy or investment in hi-tech and critical infrastructure?

### **Risk management or active design**

Until October 7, Israel's approach was based primarily on risk management and the maintenance of stability. It chose to preserve the rule of Hamas in

Gaza, not to advance the overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria, and not to defeat the Hezbollah organization and fundamentally change the order in Lebanon. The Swords of Iron War represents a change in Israel's approach in one of those arenas: It is now actively working to change the governing order in the Gaza Strip.

Does the move in the Gaza Strip signify a shift in overall Israeli strategy away from risk management and towards an initiative or design approach?

### **The use of force**

After years of avoiding full activation of its most significant military tool, its maneuvering and offensive ground army, Israel is now using that tool to great effect in Gaza. This proves that offensive military power remains an essential component of Israel's strategic toolbox. In light of the scale of the events of October 7, considerations of human life – the fate of the kidnapped civilians and risking of its soldiers – was given a lower precedence on the understanding that national strategic needs had to prevail over individual lives (though not always, and not in every way).

Will Israel's national security strategy now be more flexible with regard to the use of military force, especially ground maneuvers?

These are only some of questions that should be asked at the level of the National Security Strategy. The answers to these questions will require deep thought, and the conclusion of the Swords of Iron War will represent an unrepeatable opportunity to consider them at the highest levels.

Israel's National Security Doctrine needs an even more urgent rethink in light of the blows it received on October 7. The National Security Doctrine is the basic document of the security echelon, and in principle it should not be immediately affected by the worldview of an elected political echelon. It defines the basic conventions – i.e., the principles and concepts – involved with security and military challenges. The discussion that needs to take place after the war holds the potential for a profound change in the existing doctrine or perhaps a return to the basics after decades of *de facto* change.

The issues that need to be addressed as part of the discussion of these principles are:

- a. *The transfer of war to the opponent's territory, which stems from the basic principle of a defensive strategy and an offensive approach.* In the reality created by the Swords of Iron War, and in light of the strategic decisions that need to be made about Israel's willingness to use force to shape the regional environment according to its needs, should Israel reinstate the concepts of preemptive war and the preemptive strike that were once at the heart of its security doctrine?
- b. *The principle of the "People's Army".* Considering the extent of the military commitment manifested in the Swords of Iron War, the vast use of reserve units, and the (likely) need to increase the size of the regular army, might it be wise to reverse the decisions that led to the erosion of the components of the "People's Army"? Don't Israel's updated security needs necessitate a renewed discussion of which populations serve and which do not? To what extent can that discussion be disconnected from its divisive political context and be held in the context of Israel's security needs?

Another serious discussion will have to be about the basic elements of security doctrine: deterrence, early warning, defense and decision. The events of October 7 and the ensuing war brought decisive decision back as the core achievement required by the security doctrine. Decades of shifts away from it, and the creation of alternatives like "deterrence campaigns" and defensive countermeasures, turned out to be less relevant to or effective against the types of enemies Israel faces.

The discussion of the basic elements of the security doctrine can go in several directions:

- a. *Reducing the basic elements to deterrence and decision only.* In practice, these are the two components Israel must be able to bring to bear against its enemies.
- b. *Creating a ranking among the components:* deterrence and decision as the core components, with the other components – early warning, defense, and possibly thwarting or prevention and participation in coalitions – serving as enablers of the core components.

- c. *Flexibility in the application of the components:* that is, determining that while all the components are valid, they will vary according to enemy and context. Unlike the doctrine of recent decades, which showed a drift away from decision and towards other components, all the components would be applied according to need. In other words, against certain opponents, decision and deterrence would be at the core and the other components would enable them, while against other adversaries, the response would be based on prevention or thwarting and coalitions, with the others less relevant.

The national security policy document contains the principles of operation of the political-security echelons and expresses their assessment of the current national situation and required political directives. Updates should be derived from the revised National Security Strategy and the updated National Security Doctrine.

One way to promote an orderly process at the national security level is through binding legislation. This would entail legal definitions of structured processes for the development of national security documents, approval by the cabinet/government, and their presentation and approval in the Knesset. These processes would give form to a substantial, structured, and continuous engagement in national security. Within this framework:

- a. *The National Security Strategy would be the basic document of the elected political echelon.* On the establishment of a new government, the NSC would lead a process to structure a new strategy document. The cabinet would approve both the classified and public versions of the National Security Strategy document. The prime minister would bring the public document to the Knesset for approval as part of a political announcement up to six months from the date of the government's establishment. The Knesset's approval of the document would constitute a vote of confidence in the government.
- b. *The National Security Doctrine would be the basic document of the national security echelon.* Once every five to seven years, the defense minister would guide the security apparatuses to update the document. At the end of the process, it would be confirmed by the cabinet and both the classified and public versions would be published.

- c. *The National Security Policy would be the document containing the operating principles of the political-security echelons for the upcoming year. It would be updated once a year in a process led by the NSC and would be approved by the government and the Knesset as a condition for approving the state budget.*

As seen in the United States and other countries, the systematic and mandatory review of national security documents requires a public reexamination of the principles of national security. Even if it is carried out solely to fulfill a formal obligation and there is a gap between it and its implementation, it would be difficult for Israel's decision-makers and security establishment to avoid addressing the key issues and still remain trapped in outdated concepts that can end up in a grave crisis, as occurred on October 7.

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