



## How Can Israel Complete Its Victory in the Swords of Iron War?

by Col. (res.) Shay Shabtai

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,259, January 25, 2024

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The IDF is winning the Swords of Iron War, and the position of the State of Israel is being strengthened. Wherever the IDF reaches, Hamas ceases to function as an organization and military force. Israel has had significant achievements in terms of the hostage deal and the IDF's substantial operational successes against Hezbollah. Israel has also been assisted by the American coalition's activity against the jihadist threat, and there has been a positive change in the Russian approach to the war in light of Israel's successes. India and Japan have also offered support, helping to balance international public opinion. The challenge will be to maintain and increase this positive momentum. To achieve this, it will be necessary to continue the war and seize the opportunity, both locally and internationally, to start a rebuilding process oriented towards creating a new local government in Gaza that is focused on the population's needs. The goal should be the establishment of a Gazan government that is capable of serving as an effective counterweight to any attempts by Hamas to reassert control.

The security-military failure of October 7, 2023 revealed fundamental flaws in Israel's national security doctrine. Those flaws led to the collapse of defense lines and the subsequent terrible outcome of a massacre and mass abduction of civilians. On October 7, Hamas succeeded and Israel failed.

October 7 also saw the expression of the Israeli spirit of audacity, resilience, and closeness, with remarkable acts of heroism that saved many lives on that day. However, it is regrettable that as a nation, Israel had to resort to them out of necessity.

From the deep abyss into which Israel was plunged, the IDF, security apparatus, and other critical systems - particularly healthcare - managed to lead Israel to a clear victory. That victory is not yet complete, but what has been achieved so far is significant in every respect.

First and foremost, Hamas has ceased to function wherever the IDF has engaged it in combat. The integrated warfare of the IDF undermines Hamas's military and authoritative capabilities even beyond the areas where the IDF has physically reached. There are numerous indicators confirming this: a decrease in Hamas resistance to the IDF beyond mere survival or retreat, Gazan civilians' attitudes toward Hamas, and the severe impact the war has had on the Hamas leadership's military and civilian control capabilities.

So far, the ratio of casualties between the IDF and Hamas and other Palestinian factions is over 1:40. This is an extremely high ratio by any standard, one of the highest in history. It is based on the almost absolute operational efficiency and superiority of the IDF, stemming from the synergy between ground forces and effective close air support, the integration of precise intelligence with operational implementation on the ground, and the IDF's proactive learning and knowledge dissemination processes, which exceed those of the enemy.

Another significant achievement is the notably low ratio between enemy combatants killed and civilian casualties. Even if, for example, all 24,000 reported Palestinian casualties (as of the time of writing) were civilians, the killing of around 9,000 militants, as reported by the IDF, represents a ratio of less than 1:3. Given some flexibility in casualty counting, it even approaches 1:2. This is an exceptional and highly unusual ratio. The IDF is eradicating the enemy while inflicting a very low proportional toll on civilians, making this one of the "cleanest" wars in history.

The combination of these two ratios - combatants affected on both sides and combatants relative to civilians on the enemy side - indicates the IDF's highly

effective operational capabilities, despite challenges like crossfire incidents and the population's displacement efficiency. The strength and success of the Israeli military operation is also helping to contain potential terrorism in the region, at least for the time being.

The hostage exchange deal at the end of November was a significant achievement for the military operation. Israel did not succumb to an "all for all" deal, which was not only practically impossible but would also have posed a tangible threat to the security of Israeli citizens both domestically and abroad and would thus have constituted a strategic defeat. Instead, through military pressure, Israel succeeded in reaching an arrangement that released numerous captives in exchange for a limited and conditional release of Palestinian prisoners.

In the north, Hezbollah is being deterred from opening a comprehensive war, and based on the combination of temporary population displacement (the "security belt in our territory") and precise strikes against Hezbollah fighters in Lebanon's south, the IDF is successfully shifting the balance of power between the sides. The casualty ratio between the IDF and Hezbollah stands at 1:20. A clear indication of the positive trend was Hezbollah's relative restraint in response to the strike against senior Hamas figure Saleh al-Arouri in his Beirut residence and the liquidation of the commander of the Redwan force, both attributed to Israel.

The issue of the violent disruptions by the Houthis in Yemen to maritime traffic in the Red Sea is being addressed as a global problem by a coalition led by the United States. The Houthis are paying a price for their disruptive behavior. China has indicated, through its foreign minister, a desire to remove the Houthi threat to freedom of navigation on a crucial trade route.

Iran is keeping its actions confined and is avoiding direct confrontation with the United States and Israel. The Iranian regime has refrained from conducting wide-ranging attacks on Israel, even when a senior official in the Quds Force was eliminated, relying on proxies in other areas (Syria, Iraq) to target the forces of the United States and Israel. Its success in this regard has been severely limited, partly due to the operational response by the United States and Israel's advanced active defense measures.

Another achievement of Israel's military victory is the change in Russia's approach towards Israel, which was initially very negative. Russia, sensing Israeli weakness and seeing an opportunity to challenge the United States and divert attention from the war in Ukraine, showed support for Hamas at the beginning of the war. The Israeli military success led the Russians, operating from a cool and realistically grounded perspective based on strategic interests, to readjust their policy and realign with their previous stance towards Israel of recent years. This stance, while still negative in the public domain, is now much more balanced behind the scenes.

The crimes committed on October 7 and the understanding of governments and experts worldwide that they cannot be attributed to the Israeli military operation are influencing a change in public sentiment towards Israel. Setting aside the vocal minority of extreme progressives and the surge in antisemitic sentiments being expressed around the world, public opinion towards Israel is as balanced as one could expect. A clear expression of this is the struggle over the soul of universities in the United States, where the progressive response to October 7—effectively supporting the massacre of Jews that occurred on that day—has fueled a backlash against “woke” ideology and its incessant negative discourse on Israel.

Another significant achievement of the campaign is the strengthening of the alliance between Israel and its rising partners worldwide. The clear pro-Israel positions of Germany, India, Japan, to some extent South Korea, and Argentina with the ascent of its new president (compensating to some extent for the temporary distancing from Brazil) reflect a new international coalition of friends of Israel. At least with regard to India and Japan, it can be said that the security-political coalition built by the United States alongside Israeli military achievements constitutes a significant reinforcement of Israel's security.

All this being the case, at the conclusion of the first hundred days of the war we can begin to discuss a clear Israeli military victory and its profound implications for Israel's strategic position.

The greatest challenge will be to maintain and increase the positive momentum. Israel must not reach a point of strategic exhaustion, so it needs to push ongoing efforts to secure a clear strategic advantage with full force.

The main way to do this is to keep fighting. The difference - which will become clear to the leadership of Hamas in Gaza - is that this time, there will not be a complete ceasefire (allowing for possible temporary pauses) during which Yahya Sinwar can relax. The continuation of the campaign against Hamas infrastructure and the non-stop search for Hamas leadership both above and below ground will eventually bear fruit. As long as those leaders are in Gaza - and we must strive to ensure that that does not change - they are effectively neutralized and will pay with their lives for every small mistake they make, something that is increasingly likely as the days pass with them hiding underground. The IDF must continue to pursue and eliminate the military capabilities of Hamas and dismantle the organization (what is known in the US military as “degrade and destroy”) in order to return peace to the civilian home front and create a situation in which Hamas no longer has any substantial influence on the future of Gaza.

As part of its military operations, Israel needs to seize control of Rafah and the border area with Egypt. Israel must choke off the capabilities of terrorist entities, which include not only Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad but also global jihadist elements and al-Qaeda. The main way to achieve this is by blocking the escape route along the border with Egypt. As for any future local governance in Gaza, Israel must insist on controlling movement between the Strip and Egypt.

Taking control of Rafah requires dealing with the civilian component. There are currently hundreds of thousands of refugees in the Rafah area, and measures need to be taken to ensure their relocation to facilitate the takeover of the region. The relocation of civilians from the Rafah area is an excellent opportunity to return the population to northern Gaza and begin civilian reconstruction.

Part of Israel’s victory scenario is a situation in which Gaza residents rebuild infrastructure and damaged buildings in an organized manner, managed by a local civilian-government nucleus with the support of a limited external envelope composed of international and regional entities. Israel needs to ensure that Hamas cannot be the leading civilian force in the Gaza Strip, and this can only happen if a local force develops with sufficient capabilities and powers to address the population's needs. A civilian reconstruction plan for Gaza operated by locals and guided and funded by external entities would constitute a clear Israeli victory.

Regarding the painful issue of the captives, the goal should be to rescue as many of them as possible through three avenues: military operations, negotiations, and deals (exchanges) with local entities that are holding them. One incentive could be the offer of a high monetary reward for anyone who delivers captives alive to the IDF. There is no reason to continue promoting a comprehensive deal with Hamas.

On the northern front, it is advisable to seek international agreements based on an international monitoring mechanism to ensure that Hezbollah forces stay away from the border. Such arrangements could hold for an extended period if the IDF's strikes on Hezbollah continue until an agreement is reached and compliance is achieved, minimizing casualties on our side. After securing such agreements, the IDF should stand strong in defending the border and respond forcefully to any provocations by Hezbollah. However, it is clear that a much broader approach will be required (as was the case in Gaza with Hamas) to comprehensively address the Hezbollah challenge.

Increasing Israel's strategic advantage also requires the exploitation of political opportunities. The most important is capitalizing on the decrease in the visibility of the conflict to broaden the Abraham Accords through an agreement with Saudi Arabia and the renewed promotion of relations with the UAE and other countries. A clear military victory and the advancement of the reconstruction process with the assistance of a regional coalition will facilitate this progress.

As for the United States, the upcoming presidential election represents a fundamental challenge to Israel. Israel must navigate between maintaining a close relationship with the American administration, currently led by President Joe Biden, which is taking significant – in some cases unprecedented – steps in support of Israel during wartime, and the fact that each of the Republican candidates is a clear supporter of Israel. Israel will need to handle political matters with extreme caution, but there is a major opportunity to harness the mechanisms and processes successfully executed during the war – with an emphasis on building the international coalition and convincing the Americans to deter Iran – to advance the discussion on long-term confrontation with Iran and its proxies. This should include a return to a joint discussion on the nuclear issue, which has been pushed aside due to the war.

The final effort to highlight the military victory involves deepening the discourse with international actors. It is crucial to solidify the support and partnerships that have been established with Germany, India, Japan, and other countries to accelerate diplomatic and military cooperation. There should also be an aspiration to restore positive dialogue with Russia, which has been strained since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and Russia's growing need for an Iranian foothold in the Middle East. Israel's demonstrated strength in Gaza and the northern front allows a return to an open and critical dialogue with Moscow, which previously led to meaningful understandings on Syrian and Iranian issues.

Perhaps most importantly, the victory should be exploited to effect a change in the Israeli domestic discourse. The current generation of Israeli leadership on both sides of the political spectrum failed on October 7, in terms of the unnecessary and extreme polarization around the judiciary issue, management of the internal crisis in the years that led up to the massacre, and the formulation of policy towards Gaza over the years. It is likely that, as happened after the Yom Kippur War, the current leadership will make way for a younger generation.

Alongside the political-military issue, the biggest challenge will be to leverage the expected recovery of Israel, which tends to be rapid after a crisis or war, to accelerate the Israeli economy while creating new balances. For example, in the hi-tech sector and other industries, a balance will need to be achieved between growth and self-production and imports that ensure, among other things, food security in times of crisis. Similarly, there will need to be a balance between traditional and renewable energy to diversify risk.

Israel is a country of many narratives and not one of extremes. This stems from the history of the Jewish people but is reinforced by the political discourse, characteristics of Israeli media coverage, and the dynamics of open studios in which excess opinions, arrogance, and criticism are expressed. A significant gain from the ordeal of October 7 will be a process of correction in all these aspects.

*Lt. Col. (Res.) Shai Shabtai is a senior researcher at the BESA Center and an expert in national security, strategic planning, and strategic communication. He is a strategist in the field of cyber defense and a consultant to leading companies in Israel. He is about to complete his doctorate at Bar-Ilan University.*