



A New Existential War - Part I: Israel's Perception of the Enemy's Goals

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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. The second 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 presents 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.

Physical and cultural collapse

The situation of the State of Israel these days, however grim, is still far stronger than it was at the time of its birth in 1948. But as far as complex strategic challenges are concerned, there is a noticeable lack of coherence in both the military and political leadership regarding clarification and decision-making.

The Chief of Staff and the military and security apparatus, which managed to recover within a few days and organize a full, battle-ready mobilization on all fronts, are leading the war. But the national leadership has further obligations. It must direct and confirm the goals of the war. In the process, it must mediate for both itself and the people the reality that changed in the blink of an eye. It must provide a simple and clear explanation of what Israel is fighting for and who the enemy is.

This kind of story has both a physical-military dimension and a cultural-spiritual dimension. The military dimension, as outlined in the enemy's war concept, was described by the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Hossein Salami, on August 19, 2022: "The Palestinians are ready for ground combat. This is Israel's vulnerability. Missiles are excellent for deterrence... but they don't liberate land. Ground forces must be deployed, step by step, to liberate it... Hezbollah and Palestinian forces will move on the ground in a unified military structure." (MEMRI, 30.8.2022).

In this statement lies the foundational idea of the regional warfare concept as articulated and shaped by the Iranian regime, led by Qassem Soleimani: to construct a ring of fire and station commando forces around the State of Israel. Israel, which has continued to confront the threat of war according to the pattern of conflicts from the last century, from the War of Independence to the Yom Kippur War, has struggled to grasp the implications of the new existential threat emerging from Iran's conception of warfare. This conception has thrust Israel into a state of continuous warfare, like a chronic disease without a cure.

Just two years ago, former Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert argued that it was possible to reduce the size of the IDF forces: "It was Ehud Barak who said that we need a small and smart IDF. Unfortunately, the IDF is not small; it is too big and too expensive." (*Maariv*, 9.4.2021) Many believed that in the era of peace with Egypt and Jordan, and with the collapse of Syria's army in the civil war, the era of threats from state armies had ended. Well-known experts explained that while there were remaining threats from terrorist organizations, they did not pose an existential threat to the State of Israel.

On a joyous Simchat Torah morning, Israel received a painful wake-up call that this was a dangerously wrong assessment. The country had become accustomed to focusing on the nuclear threat as an existential danger, and directed its diplomatic and operational attention in that direction as well as numerous resources. The threat from the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank was relegated to a secondary status. However, combined with the threat from Hezbollah in the north, Palestinian terrorist organizations now represent an overarching regional threat. Victory over this threat will require a fundamental, multi-dimensional paradigm shift for the State of Israel and its security apparatus.

In the spiritual-cultural dimension as well, a new narrative is required. For years, it has been argued that economic development and prosperity for the Palestinians and the countries in the region are the key to achieving stability and order. But Hamas's leadership has taught us that its conduct is guided not by the Palestinians' economic situation but by a deep religious rationale. Western cultural observers, who for centuries have separated religious motives from the political, diplomatic, and military considerations of state leaders, have no tools with which to understand the leadership of Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, which are driven by religious conviction and carry out their daily work guided by faith.

The leadership of Hamas in Gaza, as an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood, embodies the new Islamic integration of religious, political, civic, and military interests. The fractures and divisions within Israeli society over the past year were seen as a divine omen that this was the time when the gates of heaven would open to herald their redemption. Muslim religious leaders and military strategists predicted years ago that this period would mark the beginning of the end for Israel.

Two years ago, a conference called "The End of Days" was held in Gaza where an approach was designed to advance the "end of the occupation." At the end of 2022, Palestinian writer Bassam Jarrar declared it the "year of reversal." Religious dreams and prophecies among Muslims led to a belief that the time had come for the revelation, and that what was required of them was military action. Mohammad Deif, head of Hamas's military wing, named the current war "Tufan al-Aqsa" (in Hebrew: "Mabul al-Aqsa") in the belief that through this battle, a great cosmic salvation would unfold.

As it defines the goals of the war, it is crucial that the Israeli leadership understand the religious logic guiding Israel's enemies. On the physical level, Israel must strive to dismantle the regional system that has been constructed with the support and intent of Iran. On the spiritual-faith level, Israeli victory must be decisive in a way that neutralizes the belief among the leadership of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran that the day of Israel's destruction is at hand.

The central goal of the war for Israel should be that upon its conclusion, a profound disappointment will be instilled in the Islamic believers who started and sustained it. They must be forced to accept that once again, their time has not come, and the gates of heaven have not opened before them.

The Al-Muqawama idea

Over the last 40 years, radical Islamic organizations have formulated the idea of an ideological-religious war guided by the concept of "Al-Muqawama". In cultural terms, this concept has been translated as "resistance." This translation omits certain important dimensions of the ideological content that underly the concept.

This idea represents a cultural perspective on the phenomenon of war that differs strikingly from that of Western observers. According to the Western cultural perspective, war is a deviation from the stable and peaceful order and is therefore conducted with the intention of restoring that order. The Al-Muqawama concept, by contrast, views warfare as a means of maintaining a constant momentum of conflict and struggle designed to ultimately bring about global Islamic religious conquest.

In the context of the struggle against the State of Israel, this vision is simple and clear: the goal is to completely eliminate Jewish sovereignty over the Land of Israel, banish any Jewish presence, and "liberate" Jerusalem. Thus, for example, when Israel withdrew from Lebanon, Hassan Nasrallah named Sheba Farms as the new cause for which to fight, declaring that fighting in that area represented war for the gates of Jerusalem. He thereby drew a line connecting limited and constant fighting in the Sheba Farms area to Jerusalem, which, according to his vision, will one day be entirely in Muslim hands.

To simplify the concept of Al-Muqawama somewhat, it can be viewed as the inverse of Clausewitz's well-known description of war as "the continuation of politics by other means." The Al-Muqawama idea sees politics as the continuation of war by other means. Thus, negotiation is viewed not as a means to bring about the end of a war but simply as a pause that serves its continuation at a more opportune time under more favorable conditions.

Al-Muqawama as a concept of war has two ideological dimensions. The first arises from the duty of the believer to take the initiative, an idea also seen in Jewish Kabbalistic teachings that emphasize the responsibility of humans to awaken and act in the world below so as to generate a divine awakening in the world above. This duty involves practical effort and activity. For example, if a person is facing a tsunami, while it may be clear that he has no chance of defending himself armed with only a bucket, he has a duty to strive and to act with whatever he has to hand in the expectation and belief that those actions will contribute to his salvation.

This was the thinking of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat when he decided to go to war with Israel in October 1973. His ultimate goal was to reclaim the entire Sinai Peninsula for Egypt. He knew he could not achieve this goal militarily. Aware of this gap, he employed a concept of war based on the expectation that through his efforts to minimize the war's toll, something great would emerge beyond his control that would lead him to his goal.

It is from this perspective that we can understand the logic employed by Yahya Sinwar in his decision to go to war on October 7. From his point of view, after Hamas fulfilled its duty to take the initiative and act, trends would develop later that would advance the divine intention. If, for example, the war results in a

situation in which Israel is forced to submit to American demands for the establishment of a Palestinian state and withdrawal from the West Bank, Sinwar will be perceived as victorious. Despite the massive destruction he has brought down upon Gaza, he will achieve a historical status no less than that of Saladin.

The second dimension in the concept of Al-Muqawama signifies an obligation on the part of the believer to recognize the reality that victory is neither swift nor guaranteed. The believer is therefore committed to patience, known in Islam as "Sabr." This commitment entails an ability to retain the dream of victory without compromise even at the cost of great losses. Consider, for example, the "Cup of Poison" speech delivered to the Iranian parliament in the summer of 1988 by Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini. In the speech, Khomeini said Iran had accepted the terms of the ceasefire that ended the Iran-Iraq War, explaining that even that which appears to be poison must be accepted as the will of God. In that way he accepted reality but retained his status as a believer who had not given up on his aspiration to eventually fulfill the religious vision of the Islamic Revolution.

Israeli victory will depend on the leadership's understanding of both dimensions of the concept of Al-Muqawama. Victory is not only contingent on the magnitude of the achievement on the battlefield but on the trends in the struggle that develop in the days after the war. The Hamas vision will likely persist – but Israel's ability to force jihadist believers to recognize their weakness, a condition referred to in Islam as "Marhalaat Al-Isda'ta'af," increases the chances of a temporary cessation of their struggle under the obligation to heed the "Sabr" directive of patience.

This insight must be integrated into the foundations of the Israeli security perception. Israel must remain constantly aware of the eternal Islamic struggle against it. In terms of comprehensive existential considerations, this perception extends beyond the concept of deterrence, which has repeatedly revealed itself to be fragile.

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