Israel’s Conduct of the War After October 7: Is This Carelessness or Wrongdoing?

Col. (res.) Ron Tira

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel's main objective in the Iron Swords War is to topple the Hamas regime – an ambitious goal that seeks to change the political-strategic reality in Gaza. To achieve it, international cooperation is required to ensure legitimacy for the new regime as well as funding for the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, establishment of its civilian administration, transfer of Gazan public servants to a new employer, de-radicalization, and internal security. The war must therefore be conducted by a coalition. Indeed, the war began with an unprecedented alignment of the United States, the West, and moderate Arab countries on Israel's side. But Israel’s refusal to conduct a dialogue with the international partners on the nature of the regime that will replace Hamas, foot-dragging on the humanitarian issue, extremist messaging, and poor management of the legal dimension have resulted in severe damage to Israel's legitimacy and ability to harness the international community’s help in achieving the war's objectives. The damage was done with no associated gains, as the Israeli government's conduct has steered it away from, rather than toward, achieving the goals of the war. Unless there is a profound change in the way the government conducts itself (and if it is not already too late), Israel's situation in the coming years will be worse than it was before the war.

War is an enterprise for the conversion of tactical inputs into strategic outputs. The military effort is just one of a series of national efforts that are meant to work together synergistically to realize the war’s policy objectives. The unique
context and specific circumstances of the war should characterize the military and other efforts.

The war effort should be directed not toward the period while the war is taking place but toward the impact the war will have on the years, perhaps the decades, to come. Paraphrasing Ronald Reagan's words during the 1980 election campaign, the obligatory question is "Are you better off?" after the war than you were before it in terms of all the national parameters.

It is too early to assess the results of the Iron Swords War, but at the time of writing it is hard to say that the war is being conducted according to these principles. There are no real policy goals toward which the war is being directed; it is difficult to discern a multidisciplinary national synchronization of efforts, and there is a lack of characterization of all efforts in a manner adapted to the distinct context of this war. It appears that the conduct of the war has been reduced to choosing the next military input, with that input leading to... more input. To paraphrase Alice in Wonderland, if you don't define where you're going, you probably won't get there. In the meantime, the long-term costs of the war are rising for Israel. Unless there is a profound change in the Israeli government's conduct (and if it is not already too late), it is doubtful that Israel's situation in the coming years will be better than it was before the war.

Hamas's goals and strategy

Analyzing Hamas's strategy requires "reverse engineering" its behavior, as there are few comprehensive sources on the subject. Its goals may have been to stop Saudi Arabia from joining the Abraham Accords, to improve its position in the struggle for Palestinian leadership after Mahmoud Abbas leaves the scene, or to take advantage of an opportunity that emerged due to Israel's structural weakening as a result of the so-called "judicial reform" and the serious internal rift to which it led.

Hamas completed its offensive feat on the morning of October 7 and moved from there to defense, attrition, and survivability efforts. The hostages were taken to force Israel to release prisoners and safeguard the survivability of Hamas's leadership. Hamas prepared for defense in urban areas, probably with the intention of inflicting many casualties on the IDF and causing extensive IDF damage to the civilian population of Gaza. The harm to Gazan civilians was
supposed to escalate the war into a multifront conflict that included Iran and its proxies, the West Bank, and Israeli Arabs. The harm to Gazan civilians was also intended to undermine the Abraham Accords, disrupt the political process with Saudi Arabia, and undercut Israel's legitimacy. To all of this was added influence and disinformation campaigns and legal warfare (lawfare).

All these ways and means were likely intended to deny Israel the ability to complete its military plans and to end the war after the release of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails (which gives the Hamas organization prestige), with Hamas still in control of Gaza and Israel weakened.

**Israel's war objectives**

The events of October 7 left Israel vulnerable - and that vulnerability was clear to see. If it took root, that vulnerability would fundamentally undermine Israeli society, its ability to deter its enemies, and its value to its allies. Israel had to prove that it was still a regional power. Failing to do so would have the serious consequence of losing that status.

One of the criteria by which a regional power is defined is its ability to bring about strategic change. The required strategic change for Israel, and perhaps the most attainable one, is to overthrow the Hamas regime.

In the years since Operation Cast Lead, Israel attributed to Hamas (and it seemed to attribute to itself) a state-like rationale: that of the state of Gaza. This is evident, among other things, in the fact that the various rounds of hostilities in Gaza ended in negotiations on economic arrangements (such as fishing and farming rights) and in state-like negotiations for long-term ceasefire. But the methods used by Hamas on October 7 took it outside the scope of a state-like rationale. It is not possible to continue any policy with a government that commits acts like the catalogue of atrocities committed on October 7. For the same reason, Hamas cannot be left in charge of a quasi-sovereign territory, with its own government and an army of sorts.

Therefore, the main war objective adopted by the Israeli government – the toppling of Hamas (meaning the collapse of its military, organizational and governmental capabilities) – was correct. However, when determining war objectives, a "circular" process of examining alternative objectives must be
carried out against an analysis of power limitations, objective conditions, and constraints. The selection of goals should be synchronized with the creation of conditions for their realization. Choosing war objectives beyond the limitations of power, or where there is no ability or willingness to create the conditions for achieving them, is wrong and dangerous.

The goal of overthrowing Hamas requires a complementary definition of who will rule Gaza. The aspiration to topple the Hamas regime without stating who will replace it lacks an essential element in the definition of the war's objectives. Without such a definition, the military effort lacks both direction and a finish line.

**The distinct strategic context**

Israel has tried to bring about such a change in the strategic-political reality only a few times (such as in 1956 and 1982), and in those cases success was modest at best. Most of Israel’s wars have been fought solely to remove an immediate military threat and did not directly aim at bringing about a strategic-political change (though such a change did sometimes occur as an unintended consequence). The military conflicts of the last 30 years were concerned with shaping the rules for the routine periods that followed them.

Conflicts such as the Second Lebanon War and Operation Protective Edge resulted from disagreement on the rules of the game for those routine periods (essentially the level of violence to be tolerated during ceasefires). Their strategy was to exert general pressure to convince the opponent to accept Israel's demands for the rules of the game after the war. This kind of pressure does not require the completion of specific plans. It seems that the outcomes would not have changed much if the Second Lebanon War had ended after the "Change of Direction 8" phase instead of "Change of Direction 11", or if Operation Protective Edge had ended after 30 days and not after 50.

Unlike war goals like agreement on the rules of the game for the ensuing ceasefire, where it is possible to have a "gray" military achievement, the overthrow of the Hamas regime is a binary goal. It is either achieved or it isn’t. The toppling of the Hamas regime therefore requires the full realization of a coherent effort capable of achieving this goal, as well as sensitivity to the effect of a cessation of the effort while it is still incomplete.
The goals of the war and the circumstances that prevailed after October 7 required a coalitionary effort with international partners; a joint effort to create the necessary conditions to complete the military operation in Gaza; and a joint effort to establish a new administration in Gaza.

Hamas wanted to drag other actors into the war, including Iran and its proxies. The Iranian axis, while in no hurry to commit to joining an all-out war, sought to pose multifront dilemmas to Israel in order to restrict its freedom of action in Gaza. Whether by necessity or otherwise, Israel and its allies believed that to allow Israel to concentrate its efforts in Gaza, the allies must help Israel isolate the Gaza theater and make sure the war remained on a single front. The change in the military posture of Israel’s allies in the Middle East, and their operational activities and political-strategic statements, were designed to create the conditions for the concentration of Israel’s efforts on overthrowing the Hamas regime. The allies helped Israel defend itself against the missile attacks of Iran and its proxies and replaced it in the mission of protecting freedom of navigation. They assisted in supplying essential weapons, financing the war, and creating the necessary conditions in the international system and in the UN Security Council. The claim that Israel could have achieved the war’s objectives on its own is inconsistent with Israel's revealed behavior. Whoever makes such a claim will have to bear a difficult burden of proof.

The process of replacing the Hamas government with another requires the cooperation of the United States, Europe and friendly Arab countries. This is to ensure legitimacy for the new government, funding for the reconstruction of the Strip, the setting up of a civilian administration, the orderly transfer of Gazan public servants to a new employer, de-radicalization, and internal security.

As they proved by their actions, Israel's international partners wanted it to succeed in toppling the Hamas regime. However, they have their own interests, and accepting their assistance requires taking their positions into consideration. Of course, it is not necessary to accept all their opening positions, but there is a necessity for a dialogue in which the objectives of the war (including who will control the Strip after Hamas) and the assistance of the allies to achieve these objectives are agreed upon side by side. This is the same "circular" objective process mentioned earlier, in which alternative war goals are examined against
the mapping of the limitations of power as well as the ability and willingness to create the conditions to achieve those goals.

It is doubtful that such a process took place. The lack of a give-and-take discussion between Israel and the international partners left those partners with their opening policy positions. Furthermore, the high level of involvement of the partners in the war required a characterization of Israel's strategy, operations and messaging that took their essential interests and constraints into account. This characterization did not occur either.

Hence, the distinct strategic context of the Iron Swords War emerged as:

a) an ambitious goal of fundamentally changing the strategic-political reality;
b) the need for a full realization of a strategy capable of achieving this goal (partial realization is not enough);
c) the need to create conditions that allow for the full realization of this strategy, including via international partnerships; and

d) the need to agree in advance with the international partners on what the ends are and how to achieve them in a manner that takes the partners' essential interests and constraints into account.

The decisions that shaped the war

As soon as the war broke out, the Israeli government had to make a series of decisions that would shape it.

The first formative decision was to establish who the primary enemy is in this war, and as a result, to determine in which theaters to order an offensive strategy and in which a defensive one. Israel decided, rightly, that the main enemy is Hamas, and that it would follow an offensive strategy in Gaza (and against Hamas in the West Bank) and a defensive one in the other theaters.

This decision is not trivial in view of the fog of war that descended on October 7 and in its immediate aftermath, and in view of the readiness measures taken by Hezbollah and other actors. The situation could have been interpreted through an axial prism, but Israel interpreted Hezbollah's attacks as restrained and chose to restrain itself in the face of them.
This decision was correct, but it is doubtful whether Israel made sure that its actions and messaging during the war were consistent with the decision. Thus, for example, it is unlikely that the killing of Hassan Mahdavi, which led to a direct and precedent-setting exchange of blows between Iran and Israel, was consistent with a strategy of isolating the Gaza theater and concentrating efforts there. Israel took unnecessary risks by conducting operations that could have led to diversions to other theaters. This also applies to Israel’s unhelpful economic pressure on the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank.

The second formative decision is to define the relationship between the overthrow of Hamas rule and the release of the hostages. The two goals are apparently considered equivalent and complementary, but statements by Israeli leaders have on occasion prioritized them inconsistently. Israel’s overt behavior has not demonstrated a clear prioritization between the objectives. Sometimes it conducts offensives while ignoring the hostages, and sometimes it suspends operations for weeks in a manner that seems to prioritize their release.

As a matter of fact, these two goals cannot be seen as complementary. A war whose goal is the release of the hostages should be shaped differently from one whose main goal is to overthrow the Hamas regime. Israel’s political leadership has not published a directive that dispels this fog.

The third formative decision is the "clocks" of the war. These include the ticking clock that can be obtained from the international community, the clock until deterioration in international public opinion causes intolerably great damage to Israel, the clock in which unrest in the Arab street can be tolerated before it threatens the stability of friendly Arab regimes, the clock in which a large reservist force can remain mobilized, the clock in which a large Israeli population can remain internally displaced and the economy disrupted, and others.

It is possible that hidden under this common Israeli defense term, "clock", are the budgeting of resources for the war and the mapping of the limitations of power. But such a mapping was not done. The IDF did not receive directives from the political level defining a resource budget for the war. Even worse, the messaging from the political echelon may have created the (wrong) impression that the war has an unlimited budget of time, resources, international political
capital, etc., and encouraged the military to adopt a (wrong) operational plan in which time, resources, and methods do not constitute a critical constraint.

Indeed, it is doubtful whether the linear operational plan of gradual progress from neighborhood to neighborhood, sequentially "defeating" Hamas battalions (which still left behind a great many Hamas combatants), then moving to the next neighborhood or returning to a previous one, corresponds with the necessity to achieve defined strategic outputs within a given basket of resources and limited time. With that said, it was sometimes precisely the military that initiated the saving of national resources – for example, in decisions regarding the release of reservists and the easing of policies of the Home Front Command.

These issues are of course connected to the question of characterizing the strategy so that it takes into account the essential interests and constraints of the international partners. Therefore, the fourth formative decision was supposed to be the adoption of a multidisciplinary strategy, orchestrating all constraints and resources: diplomacy, humanitarian aid, legal considerations, messaging, and, of course, the war economy.

Because Hamas deliberately chose to place itself among its civilians and use them as human shields, a military operation to overthrow its regime was going to inescapably involve considerable harm to uninvolved civilians. Even when the harm to noncombatants is done in accordance with the laws of war (for military purposes and proportionately), and even when Israel warns the civilian population in advance and creates evacuation corridors and safe havens for them, the considerable – and unavoidable – harm to noncombatants challenges the international partners.

Israel should have taken this foreseeable problem into account and from the beginning compensated for it with extensive humanitarian aid and moderate messaging that emphasized compliance with the laws of war, as well as other tools that mitigate the challenge. Diplomacy, extensive humanitarian aid, and moderate messaging are supposed to be the "bridge" on which the military offensive progresses. Humanitarian aid is also a tool for routing the population of Gaza to areas where they will not interfere with the operational plan and a way to constitute the government that will replace Hamas (through...
the act of aid distribution). As such, it should have been an integral part of the war plan.

Messaging that creates the conditions for the realization of the war's objectives would have been, for example, that Israel is fighting Hamas but not the Palestinian people, that Hamas has proven itself an obstacle to peace, and that Israel remains committed to the international agreements it has signed and to a political solution that will be reached through negotiations without preconditions. Israel would, furthermore, immediately enter into negotiations with its partners in the region and around the world on the nature of the new Gazan regime, which would not include either Hamas or an Israeli occupation. Such messages, which do not constitute any new concrete commitments, would have effectively framed the situation with the partners and in international public opinion.

In practice, Israel unnecessarily dragged its feet for about six months on the issue of humanitarian aid. This caused an unnecessary rift with the allies, extensive damage to its legitimacy, and an uncontrolled and unwanted movement of refugees, specifically to Rafah (which is important for stopping arms smuggling). The attempt to use humanitarian aid as a lever did not succeed, so no profit was recorded to compensate for the prices Israel paid.

The Israeli government's approach to humanitarian aid not only did not advance it toward achieving the war’s objectives but in fact distanced it from achieving them. The messaging of the government and the coalition were also unhelpful regarding relations with the allies and for legitimacy (for example the "Victory Conference" in which 40% of the members of the coalition took part, including 11 ministers) and references to "Amalek" that found their way to the ICJ.

Despite its foreseeable importance, it is unlikely that consideration of the legal dimension was part of the overall war plan. Questions of legality apply not only to aspects of legitimacy and international damage sustained by Israel during the war, but also to the matter of legal responsibility for the Gaza Strip or parts of it. Its hold on the Netzarim Corridor, and eventually perhaps the border crossing in Rafah, brings Israel closer to the definition of occupation, with all the accompanying legal responsibilities – and economic and international costs – without a decision having been made that Israel wishes to be defined as an
occupying power in Gaza. Nor has Israel made preparations to live up to the legal obligations of an occupying force. The foot-dragging regarding the return of the Gazan population to the northern Gaza Strip also raises legal questions. These risks can be managed – for example, by agreeing with the international partners on a plan for the gradual return of the population and a gradual withdrawal of the IDF from the Strip, alongside the entry of the new regime. Such a plan has not been proposed.

The international legal system intervenes where the local legal system does not function as required. In this war, the failure to exhaust the Israeli law enforcement process in the face of alleged settler violence has resulted in international legal measures being brought against those settlers. This serious event might in and of itself create a dangerous precedent regarding the state of the rule of law in Israel, with systemic implications that open the door to international legal intervention in all matters under the jurisdiction of the Israeli legal system.

On the economic front, not only did the government fail to define the basket of resources dedicated to the war, but it also failed to transfer the state to a war economy. It was necessary to allocate resources to the war effort and the generation of economic growth after its conclusion, and sharply cut the rest of the budgets. But the budgets at the end of 2023 and 2024 (and the bureaucracy accompanying them) a) did not support the reservists or the businesses affected by the war to the required extent or in time; b) cut the allocation for future growth (such as higher education and agricultural research budgets); and c) increased sectoral and growth-inhibiting spendings (such as incentivizing Ultra-Orthodox students not to acquire "core" education or work). Indeed, the government's expenses – excluding war expenses – increased by an unusual rate of 12.2%. At the same time, the government halted the work of Palestinians in Israel but did not offer alternatives in time to the sectors affected by this measure (mainly construction, infrastructure and agriculture). This affected both economic activity and the state's income from taxation of these sectors.

The immediate result is an increase in the government deficit to 8% of GDP, which caused a downgrade of Israel's credit rating and credit rating forecast. In practice, the Israeli government borrows in international markets at a yield that governments rated BBB (on the eve of the war, Israel's credit rating was -AA;
that is, the actual drop in the markets was five notches). The reasoning for the downgrade also mentioned the weakness of Israel's government institutions and concerns about their fiscal responsibility.

It is doubtful that the Israel government held a comprehensive discussion on the interrelationships between the war's objectives and what is necessary to realize them, the constraints, the military plan, international cooperation, humanitarian aid, messaging, legal considerations, and the economy of war. It certainly never issued any such directives.

The "Are you better off?" test after the war

The Iron Swords War began with the unprecedented alignment of the United States, the West and moderate Arab countries to Israel's side, but the combination of refusing to hold a dialogue with the international partners on the government that would replace Hamas, the unhelpful dragging of Israel's feet on the humanitarian issue, extremist messaging, and poor management of the legal dimension caused deep damage to Israel’s legitimacy and ability to harness the international community to achieve the war's objectives. This damage was done with no compensating profit, and the conduct of the government has brought it no closer to realizing the goals of the war. The avoidance of political dialogue with international partners did not neutralize them, but limited Israel's ability to influence the political processes.

Even worse, these failures threaten to create long-term weaknesses, from deep cracks in Israeli national cohesion, to damage to the Israeli “brand” in the business world, to weakening the economy, to undermining the prestige of the Israeli legal system in the world and the protection it provides to the IDF and the government, to damage to academic and research collaborations.

Israel's competitive advantages are based on international integration – a high-tech economy, a Western military, strategic intimacy with the United States, research and development, and quality manpower – and the cracks that are now opening threaten all of these in the long term.

It is therefore to be feared that if the current behavior of the Israeli government does not change soon, and if it is not in fact already too late, Israel will be structurally weakened.
Even from a narrower perspective – strategic and military – it is doubtful that Israel’s current conduct will lead to a better reality after the war. Israel’s military degrees of freedom are reduced in many ways. It is possible that a war will expedite the withdrawal of the United States from Iraq and southern Syria, which will increase Iran's freedom of action. It is unlikely that the status of the Jordanian king’s relations with Israel are strengthening. The use of the Middle Eastern Air Defense arrangement (MEAD) in the context of a war in Gaza may reduce future degrees of freedom for its use. The conduct that led to infrastructural fractures in a war against the weakest of its enemies could undermine Israel's ability to act against the strongest (Iran) and in the most important context (the nuclear program).

The Israeli government’s conduct is leading to a situation in which many of the developments and outcomes of the war are incidental – that is, not the result of a defining of goals, planning and initiative-taking, but of reluctance or inability to make decisions. Sometimes, reality emerges by itself, from a lack of management. Sometimes, persistence on a certain path exacts prices and poses risks that are too high, so that path is abandoned too late in favor of another one that is also not calculated but selected through an inability or unwillingness to make serious decisions.

A future investigating committee may define the processes that preceded October 7, 2023, and occurred during it, as carelessness. But it can be argued that the conduct of the war after October 7 is much more severe, and that the term "wrongdoing" better describes it than the term "carelessness".

Col. (res.) Ron Tira is a former fighter pilot who serves as a reservist at the Campaign Planning Department of the Israel Air Force. He is the author of many books and articles in the fields of air power and strategy.