



The Long War Phenomenon: Is a New Security Concept Required After October 7?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: David Ben-Gurion's classic security concept made these assumptions: first, that Israel would never be able to force an absolute end to the conflict on its enemies; and second, that Israel cannot maintain a large army for long, so its security requires a reserve army and sufficient warning before war breaks out. This has resulted in a restless reality of short, intense rounds of war. The October 7 disaster prompted a sense that this concept had failed, and that it is time for Israel to adopt a new concept in which the enemy is completely defeated and no longer poses a threat. To a certain extent, the Iron Swords War is an attempt to eliminate the Hamas threat from Gaza once and for all, and possibly after that, the elimination of the Hezbollah threat as well.

But can Israel eliminate Hamas (and Hezbollah)? Would attempting to do so be worth the practical price of the long war it would require? Would Israel's society, economy, and state survive the attempt? Does the failure of Israel's security concept on October 7 mean a new concept is required, or did the concept fail to be implemented properly on that Sabbath (and even more so since then)? In other words: Should the existing security concept be replaced or strengthened?

The October 7 disaster shattered many beliefs and concepts in Israeli society, and the war Israel has been waging since that day differs from the wars of its past.

David Ben-Gurion and Ze'ev Jabotinsky believed that rounds of war in which the enemy is smashed against an "Iron Wall" would eventually cause the countries of the region to come to terms with Israel's existence. This would in turn cause them to change their strategy and choose the path of peace, as did Egypt's Anwar Sadat and Jordan's King Hussein. Ben-Gurion's understanding that an end to the conflict cannot be forced, and that Israel cannot develop and advance in a state of continuous war, led him to the security concept that was in effect until October 7, 2023.

Israel's security concept has to address a fundamental problem: that the country 1) exists within a hostile region that does not accept its existence, and 2) cannot maintain a large army on a daily basis while advancing economically and socially. The solution - until October 2023 - was to maintain a small regular army to address ongoing security challenges; try and postpone wars by deterring enemies from exercising resistance; and maintain a large and agile reserve army that is mobilized on the basis of intelligence alerts. Because the mobilization of the reserves stalls Israel's economy, this security concept required that wars be short.

The first commandment of Israel's security concept was that Israel would never be able to force an end to the conflict on its antagonists because it is simply too small relative to the collective Arab and Muslim world. This approach created the dynamic of cycles of short wars. Israel was destined to mobilize for a significant clash once every few years, to beat the enemy in a short and powerful war, and thereby gain a few years of relative calm. Israel used these periods of calm, together with the assets it gained during the wars (time, territory, deterrence, strategic stability) to transform from a tiny young country into a regional military and economic power.

But the periods between the rounds of war - that is, the "routine" phase of the security concept - were never calm from a security point of view. In fact, since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, not a month has passed without a security incident in one of the conflict areas. Israel's routine security situation is in fact a routine of limited conflict.

Throughout its short history, Israel has never been able to completely eliminate any of its enemies. Ten days after the end of the Six-Day War - Israel's greatest

victory, in which it achieved the total disintegration of the Egyptian army – Egypt renewed fire. Israel's strategic success in expelling the PLO from Lebanon following the Lebanon War did not eliminate Palestinian hostility from Lebanon, and it certainly did not prevent Hezbollah's development and indeed acceleration of strength. Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, and the replacement of Arafat with Abu Mazen, who changed his predecessor's policy of support for terrorism, did not lead to the elimination of Palestinian terrorism. To this day, the IDF is required to carry out operations almost every night to fight Palestinian terrorism in Judea and Samaria.

Israel made good use of the routine periods and turned itself from a small, weak, resource-poor country into a regional power in every respect. Along with strengthening economically, Israel also strengthened militarily. It hit the enemy repeatedly, sometimes so severely that it caused them to weaken and change. But as expected, Israel has failed to force an end to the conflict on its enemies. As Ben-Gurion said, "We cannot have a final battle."

It can be argued that if Israel is fated to go to war at intervals over and over again forever, then all the Sisyphean security activity during the routine periods is unnecessary – in other words, it fails to bring results, as war inevitably breaks out again anyway. But Israel's ongoing defensive and offensive military effort makes it possible to postpone the next war and maintain a tolerable level of violence during the routine periods.

Why does Israel allow the other side to arm itself more than it can be expected to tolerate? Why not act before the other side is dangerously well-armed? The answer is clear. Israel uses the routine periods to build and develop. Overly frequent wars might make it more difficult for Israel's enemies to strengthen, but they would foil the part of Israel's strategy that depends on the periods of routine. The "addiction to peace", as the Israeli desire to extend the routine periods is sometimes called by opponents of the Ben-Gurion security concept, is not a sign of the concept's weakness but a by-product of its implementation.

If Israel cannot force an end to the conflict on its enemies, and its enemies include those who wish to act against it with violence, what prevents those enemies from acting all the time and arming themselves without limit?

If Israel cannot keep its entire army mobilized and active and must be content with a small regular army, what prevents its enemies from attacking it every day that the army is not mobilized? Why hasn't every day of Israel's existence been an October 7?

This is where deterrence and early warning come into play.

Israel's enemies are usually deterred from starting a high-intensity war against it because Israel has proven that it is stronger than they are, and that a high-intensity war would hurt them more than they are willing to suffer. Deterrence keeps wars from starting and helps Israel maintain a tolerable level of violence during the routine periods. But deterrence is not supposed to, and should not be expected to, prevent war from ever breaking out. Nor is it meant to completely prevent any violence from ever occurring during the routine periods.

Israel tries to strengthen its deterrence capacity not to prevent war but to keep war away for as long as possible, on the understanding that war will eventually break out. At the same time, Israel invests a continuous effort in defense to make it difficult for the other side to cause it harm during the routine periods. Defense cannot, and clearly does not, prevent all violence.

Israel invests a great deal of effort in intelligence, the first purpose of which is to warn of the enemy's intention to go to war. Because early warning might fail, Israel built a routine defense system designed to stop an attack in the event of such a failure.

Defense needs to respond to both threats from the borders and terrorism that occurs during the routine periods. This dual role – protection against low-intensity violence and an "insurance policy" in the event of a failure of early warning – can create confusion about the defense mission and even the scenario for which the defense is being prepared.

This seems to be what happened on October 7. The IDF failed to recognize the potential for a major Hamas raid on the Israeli villages and towns near Gaza. The IDF is prepared to prevent infiltration, not invasion. Whether the failure was in the IDF's understanding of the intelligence or in the degree of protection afforded by the new barrier it built around Gaza, the IDF's preparations did not take into

account the possibility of a breach of the barrier or the potentially broad dimensions of such a raid. The IDF did not prepare for this scenario and did not prepare orders or routines for such a case. The Intelligence Division did not build a warning model to protect against such a move, and therefore did not provide warning. Weak preparation, and the failure to prepare a response in case of surprise, allowed Hamas to penetrate the border and carry out the October 7 attack, with all its catastrophic consequences.

But were there elements in the Hamas attack that Israel had no ability to defend against? Had Hamas discovered operative tools against which Israel could not prepare a defensive response? Did Hamas prepare in a way that Israeli intelligence could not discover?

The tragedy is that the answer to all these questions is no!

Has anyone in Israel ever believed that Hamas is interested in peace? Was anyone surprised to learn that Hamas still opposes Israel's very existence and believes it should be violently resisted until it is destroyed? Did anyone in Israel think the IDF could deter Hamas to the point of forcing it to end the conflict – a principle that is contrary to the first commandment of the security concept?

The horrific harm inflicted on Israeli civilians on October 7, the taking of hundreds of captives, and the appearance of the loss of Israeli power caused Israel to go to war. The object of that war is to make clear that Hamas made a grievous mistake and to renew Israel's strategic positioning in the arena. But did the magnitude of the blow inflicted on Israel suddenly make it more capable than it ever believed itself to be before the war? Did the catastrophic failure of Israel's defense and early warning system paradoxically make Israel so strong that it can now force its enemies to end the conflict? Did the atrocities committed by Hamas in its attack somehow make the IDF strong enough to eliminate the threat of Hamas from Gaza, bearing in mind that Israel has never been able to eliminate any of the threats that surround it? Did the terrible damage suffered by the surrounding communities make Israel's economy and society so strong that Israel can suddenly conduct a long and intense war?

The shock and sense of rupture caused by October 7 led many to think that the Hamas attack had irreparably broken Israel's security concept. Israel's deterrence

and early warning both failed, and Hamas was not deterred. Hence: it is no longer true that Israel cannot have a final battle. It is possible to go to war to eliminate Hamas once and for all – to wage a final war and achieve a complete victory.

We will try to formulate this alternative “October 8” concept of security. According to this view, Israel cannot ignore threats against it. It should act decisively and continuously towards the complete elimination of its enemies and their replacement with political elements that accept Israel’s national policies and goals. Thus, the goal of the war in Gaza should be the complete elimination of the military power of Hamas and the dissolution of its civilian rule in the Strip, until it can be ensured that it no longer poses a threat to the surrounding settlements.

Let's ignore for the moment the endless consequences of this concept when applying it to Lebanon and the other arenas. Gaza is a limited geographical space with a topography that supports maneuvering. But even if it were possible to achieve complete victory in Gaza, what would it look like? Full and lasting Israeli control over the territory, à la Judea and Samaria?

After 10 months of war, the IDF has occupied most of the Gaza Strip and destroyed countless buildings and terrorist and tunneling infrastructures. Hamas still exists and functions, though it is unable to launch significant military operations. But it is possible that the manner in which the IDF used its force was wrong. Even if the IDF had acted differently, it is not clear how Hamas fighters can be eliminated when they withdraw and assimilate into the general population. How can every last Hamas fighter be eliminated when they are the ones who choose whether to fight or blend into the crowd? A similar logic applies to buildings and infrastructure. The IDF has shown no mercy to buildings and tunnels in Gaza. It has used an unprecedented quantity of aerial weapons and explosives on the ground, and the number of homes it has destroyed is enormous. Notwithstanding claims that the Americans withheld armaments from the IDF, they provided Israel with tens of thousands of bombs that it did not possess at the beginning of the war. Could yet more infrastructure have been destroyed?

Will anyone be surprised if, after the complete victory in Gaza is achieved and Hamas is defeated, there continues to be a threat of terrorism from Gaza, including

the occasional rocket launch? Can this be prevented? And if not, what is the advantage of continuing the war without end?

The IDF has been at war at varying levels of intensity for 10 months now. The regular soldiers are fighting almost continuously, and the reserve forces are already in their third round of action. Is this not enough? Is there no limit to the hours the engine of the IDF machine can continue to function? And is there a correlation between the prolonging of the war in Gaza and the problematic strategic situation in the north?

Supporters of the alternative view claim that Ben-Gurion's view no longer provides security. According to them, avoiding a complete victory stems first and foremost from weakness. But their new concept ignores the reality of the difficulty that would be involved in achieving either the means or the international support necessary to prosecute such a long war. When asked what Israel should do about the lack of armaments, their answer is often that Israel will simply have to achieve independence in the field. But how can a war be waged right now with armaments that we do not yet have? And can Israel really afford to ignore its need for American military and political assistance? Can Israel stand alone against all the threats that surround us, which are not only military but also political and economic? Can Israel survive without American support at the UN? Can it survive a global boycott?

There are those who exhibit a romantic nostalgia for the hardships suffered by the founders of the state in the War of Independence - back then, we stood alone, the few against many. But after the first ceasefire in the War of Independence, the young IDF was able to strengthen itself and stand in an equal and even better power position than the armies of Egypt and the forces from the north. Note, by the way, that the IDF was largely unable to repel the Jordanian army, which was well equipped and organized. Although Israel won the war of liberation, it did not even approach the defeat of its enemies and the achievement of complete victory. Determination and faith are important in war but do not guarantee military achievements. Embrace the difficulties of the past if you wish, but don't expect those difficulties to somehow ensure success.

Ideology is also involved in the attempt to change the security concept. The Israeli right wing does not believe in reaching an agreement with the Palestinians and is not interested in a binational state. To avoid a resolution is necessarily to choose endless war. According to Minister Bezael Smotritch, Israel needs a security concept that entails a continuous war against the Palestinians until they are defeated. To this ideological way of thinking, endless war is justified if it has the purpose of eliminating the Palestinian threat to Israel.

In the Iron Swords War, the political leadership defined a goal that is impossible according to Ben-Gurion's security concept, and the IDF set out to achieve that goal without a plan, a time frame, or the proper means in place. The IDF embarked on the Iron Swords War without a clear vision of what it was trying to achieve militarily, how long it would take, and what means it had at its disposal. A military plan must be based on resources that you know you have. You must never plan on unspecified quantities of capabilities, equipment, and time that are not already available to you.

Hezbollah's entry into the war, which will occur in the manner chosen by Nasrallah, illustrates the absurdity of the way the Iron Swords War is being conducted. The entire northern region has been evacuated and abandoned indefinitely because the IDF is invested in Gaza and cannot allocate the necessary resources to protect the north.

What will Israel's strategic situation be if the war in Gaza ends with a hostage agreement but without the Hamas regime having been "deported to Tunis"? Hamas (and the rest of Israel's enemies) will be jubilant in their victory at having both achieved the release of Palestinian prisoners and survived to tell the tale. Will the price paid by Gaza, and perhaps the prevention of Gaza's rehabilitation as long as Hamas is in power, be enough to reposition Israel as a regional military power?

Is a new concept of security – one in which every external threat is to be fought by war until its elimination – really required? The elimination of Hamas has not yet been achieved, and Israel has been at war with it for 10 months. How much time, armament, and military equipment will it take to eliminate Hezbollah? And after Hezbollah, what will prevent the forces supported by Iran in Syria, Iraq, and

Yemen from continuing to fight? What will their military elimination look like? And what will move Iran to partner up with Abraham Accords?

According to the new concept, it is not possible to rely on deterrence because it always fails. There is also no point in short wars that do not completely eliminate the enemy. But if the goal of war is complete victory, it is mandatory to build a force that can support such an effort. How many days of war should the warehouses be prepared for? Weeks, months, or years?

If it is to enter a new “long war” era, the IDF will have to prepare and equip forces for wars that last years. Will the Israeli economy be able to withstand this? Will it be able to support "the largest army in the Middle East" (like after the Yom Kippur War)? Will the society that carries the economy on its back and serves in the reserves tolerate this? Will Israel continue to be a center of attraction for investors under such an economic structure? Will Israel's enemies mount another attack like October 7 or just wait for the fruits of the Ben-Gurion concept to collapse? Israel's "miracle" can be destroyed from within. Israel may have a well-equipped army, but what will happen to the country that relies on it?

In order to avoid ending the discussion on a vague statement that the concept of a long war for total victory and complete elimination of the threat is impossible and unrealistic, we will examine what Israel can still do according to the old concept.

If the Iron Swords War had been conducted according to the security concept, the following strategy could, for the sake of illustration, have been devised in October:

1. The IDF will be satisfied with severely hitting Hamas, not the entire territory of the Gaza Strip, while creating a completely demilitarized area in the north of the Gaza Strip. That area will later become the basis for the establishment of an alternative government.
2. Israel will arrive early at an agreement to free the abductees. This will be at the heavy price of releasing murderers and will allow the survival of some Hamas leaders, but will also allow for the design of a new border area and an obstacle that provides security for the returning residents of the surrounding communities.
3. As a result of these measures, Israel will maintain international support and perhaps even become a partner in a regional coalition with Saudi Arabia.

4. The IDF will be left with enough potential to fight Hezbollah – so much so that war might be prevented and an arrangement might be made that allows the residents of the north to return home.

True, this solution does not describe a complete victory, and Hamas would continue to exist. But the conditions would have been created for the establishment of an alternative government, at least in the north of the Gaza Strip, in an area that would begin to recover while the southern part of the Strip remains in ruins. It is possible that the IDF would have had to engage in another round of war in the southern Gaza Strip, but that is Israel's fate. That is the way it was, and that is the way it will continue to be. The Hamas regime would have probably crumbled in half-destroyed Gaza, and the situation in the southern Gaza Strip would have provided Israel with deterrence at least until the next round.

It could have been a short war, just another round, but one that allowed a return to normality that made it possible to restore and recover.

The last 10 months have made clear that great pain does not confer desired abilities that did not previously exist. Israel is an island nation based on a reserve army. A long war is not a solution to a security problem. It is not possible to achieve complete victory, but we may well achieve complete failure if we pursue victory for too long without considering the limitations on our power, economy, and society.

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