



## How Did Israel Win the Iron Swords War?

by Col. (res.) Shay Shabtai

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,330, February 11, 2025

*This perspective is dedicated to the bravery of Israel's fallen military and security combatants.*

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Israel began the Iron Swords War on October 7, 2023, on a “Yom Kippur War” dynamic: the devastating assault on Israel conducted that morning by Hamas was a strategic and operational surprise that collapsed the defense of the Gaza envelope and with it, the foundations of Israel's national security. The war ended on January 17, 2025, on a “Six-Day War” dynamic: a fundamental positive change had occurred on all of Israel's main combat fronts. How did this happen? Israel’s success was the result of intelligent decision-making, military and national strength, and luck. Israel must further improve its decision-making process and enhance its military and national strengths while reducing its reliance on luck and the failures of its opponents, who also learned lessons from this war.

The Iron Swords War began with a strategic and operational surprise that echoed the dynamic of the 1973 Yom Kippur War: a shock invasion and barbaric assault by the terrorist group Hamas that collapsed the defense of the Gaza envelope and with it the foundations of Israel's national security. The war concluded on January 17, 2025, in Israeli success on all its main fighting fronts: Gaza, Lebanon, Iran, and Syria. The scale of Israel’s success calls to mind the dynamic of its victory in the Six-Day War of 1967.

Israel still faces many strategic and operational challenges, and it is possible that fighting will resume in the coming weeks or months. However, the ceasefire on the last active front allows us to reflect on the strategic balance. On the level of a military campaign, this is a victory.

### **How did the victory occur?**

Three parameters dominate this analysis of Israel's achievement: intelligent decision-making, military and national strength, and luck – which, as noted by Clausewitz and others, is always a factor in war. Israel's conduct during the war was not without flaws and failures. For example, the military's moves in Gaza were too prolonged, the first response in April 2024 to the missile attack from Iran sent too weak a signal, it may have been possible to save more of the hostages, and the partial response to the attacks and provocations by the Houthis in Yemen was insufficient. However, in this analysis, we will discuss the factors that led to Israel's cumulative achievement.

**October 7, 2023: Declaration of war.** On that awful day, when nothing worked as it should and even luck was against Israel (see, for instance, the catastrophe of the Nova Party), several things happened that provided the beginnings of a way out of the crisis.

Intelligent decision-making: The almost instinctive decision to declare decisive war on the enemy that perpetrated the atrocities and to ignore the urging, including by former senior figures in the defense establishment, to strive for a surrender deal indicated that Israel was quickly overcoming its shock and taking the necessary response to the challenge.

Military and national strength: The heroic response of IDF combatants, the police, and brave citizens limited the extent of Hamas's attack. Israel's overall military strength prompted Hezbollah to decline opening a second front.

Luck: Hamas leader Yahye Sinwar's decision to act was premature in more than one respect: the internal rift affecting the strength of the IDF had not yet brought it to a level of fatal weakness, and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was not on board with Hamas's gamble. Had Nasrallah chosen to join in Hamas's assault, Israel's military response would have been greatly complicated. Also, the sheer depravity and brutality of the massacres, atrocities and kidnappings

committed by Hamas against Israeli citizens gave Israel both motivation and legitimacy in the critical early months – especially in the eyes of President Joe Biden, who had been sympathetic to Israel for decades.

**October 11, 2023: Decision not to launch a war in Lebanon.** Such a move would have plunged Israel into an all-out war in two or three (including Iran) major theaters simultaneously at a time when it was not adequately prepared for so large an undertaking.

Intelligent decision-making: The understanding that a military move should be clearly focused on defeating Hamas, which started the war against us. For the time being, the other arenas should be contained, at least temporarily.

Military and national strengths: The understanding that despite readiness gaps, the IDF – with the help of arms supplies from the United States – had the stamina to conduct a long war on several fronts.

Luck: The unwise urging of a significant portion of the security establishment to submit to a surrender deal was declined. It would have complicated Israel's position in a complex war and would have opened Israel up to a much greater scope of losses.

**October 27: Ground maneuver in Gaza.** While some of its characteristics were not optimal, the ground maneuver brought about significant operational and strategic achievements and is at the heart of Israel's overall multi-front victory. It restored Israel's confidence in its military capabilities.

Intelligent decision-making: The three-week waiting period prior to the initiation of the ground maneuver allowed the forces to reach a higher level of operational readiness, gain confidence in the IDF's plans, and tighten coordination with the Americans.

Military and national strengths: The combined capabilities built up over years in the ground forces, the air force, and the precision firepower intelligence echelon, together with the supreme determination and motivation of the fighting forces, led to a significant achievement in a very complex combat theater within a matter of just a few weeks.

Luck: Hezbollah's decision to stick with a limited conflict approach below the threshold of war allowed Israel to focus operationally on victory in Gaza. Hamas failed to build a military capability that could crush or exhaust the IDF and suffered tactical defeats in the vast majority of its encounters with IDF forces.

**November 25, 2023: The first hostage deal.** It appears that the scale of the IDF's achievements in combat stunned the Hamas leadership, causing it to request a pause in the fighting to reorganize and release hostages who were a burden on its organizational capacity.

Intelligent decision-making: The decision to pause the fighting with the clear intention of resuming it was not self-evident. It required perseverance and clarity on the part of the decision-makers. In return, they achieved the major achievement of returning a large portion of the hostages alive.

Military and national strengths: The scale of the IDF's achievements in maneuver and fire within the first four weeks of the war put the Hamas leadership in a bind.

Luck: Hamas's decision to abduct large numbers of Israeli women and children rather than focusing on soldiers and men forced the group to thin out a fairly large group. This, along with its continued false self-confidence, led it to think it could still emerge victorious even without those hostages.

**December 2, 2023: IDF entry into Khan Yunis.** The IDF shifted to the control and destruction of the Khan Yunis area, which was the center of gravity of the Hamas leadership.

Intelligent decision-making: Intelligent operational planning by the IDF in which it maintained superiority over the enemy while drawing lessons made it possible to neutralize Hamas's center of gravity with limited consequences.

Military and national strengths: The IDF's advanced forces succeeded in dismantling Hamas's core surface and underground deployments.

Luck: Hamas was subsequently unable to take its operational capabilities to a new level despite a lull in fighting that lasted more than a week.

**May 6: The IDF enters Rafah.** The IDF completed the encirclement of Hamas through a systematic attack on the group and its operational capabilities.

Intelligent decision-making: The entry into Rafah was carried out despite strong reservations from the United States administration.

Military and national strengths: The IDF was able to successfully counter widespread international concerns about the humanitarian situation and possible mass civilian casualties in Rafah. The gradual and cautious operational method it adopted while evacuating the population defused the political landmine.

Luck: The killing of Hamas leader Sinwar in the Rafah area on October 16 was the result of systematic operational activity by the fighting forces in the area, but his “capture in the net” was accidental.

**September 2024: Operation Northern Arrow.** Israel took advantage of operational opportunities and launched a military campaign to eliminate Hezbollah's leadership, severely damage its strategic arrays, and annihilate its positions near the border. The IDF's military achievements, while not leading to a comprehensive decision, led to a clear strategic achievement.

Intelligent decision-making: The decision was made to open another major front and strike Hezbollah despite the risks, and not to settle for a partial arrangement that would have left the organization at full strength close to the northern border.

Military and national strengths: The pagers operation of September 17-18, together with the IDF's precise intelligence and aerial operational capability, led to the elimination of Hezbollah's leadership and a ground takeover accompanied by precise fire that overwhelmed the organization's ground forces. These moves were the result of almost two decades of meticulous preparations since the Second Lebanon War.

Luck: Hassan Nasrallah failed to understand the developing dynamics and respond to them in the form of a broad campaign. In effect, he fell asleep on guard and died in the process.

**October 26, 2024: Powerful attack on Iran.** In April, the Iranians chose to cross the line of directly firing from their territory into Israel, purportedly in response to the killing of Commander Mahadavi of the Lebanese and Syrian corps of the Quds Force. The attack was mostly intercepted by Israel and an international coalition. Israel chose to only send a signal in response, which, judging from Iran's reaction, does not seem to have been understood in Tehran. On July 31, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh was assassinated in Tehran in a special operation. Only after the elimination of both Nasrallah and Mahadavi's replacement in Beirut on September 27 did the Iranians carry out a second extensive attack on Israel on October 1. This attack also failed to cause significant damage to Israel. In response, the Israeli Air Force carried out a precise attack that stripped the Iranians of their strategic air defense capability and damaged their missile production capacity. The Iranians refrained from responding.

Intelligent decision-making: Israel carried out an optimal operation that both severely hurt the Iranians and led them to avoid further reaction, apparently due to their exposed vulnerability and the US's firm stand on Israel's side.

Military and national strengths: After two decades of preparations and long-range strikes in Yemen and other locations, the Air Force implemented a complex capability in Iran and a precise strike without casualties to its forces.

Luck: It appears that the Iranians acted recklessly out of a false sense of strength and did not take into account the potential of Israeli capabilities, the implications of a severe blow to Hezbollah, the American and Western backing of Israel vis-à-vis Iran in contrast to the Palestinian issue, or the approaching election in the US, which could – and did – result in the return of Donald Trump to the Oval Office.

**November 27: Ceasefire in Lebanon.** The agreement reached through American mediation is far from a solution to the overall challenge posed by Hezbollah, but it holds the potential for positive change, as is evident from the subsequent election of President Joseph Aoun and establishment of a new government in Lebanon.

Intelligent decision-making: Israel decided to stop the fighting out of a desire to reorganize its military strength and give the processes in Lebanon under the

control of the United States a chance while continuing to thwart the smuggling of Iranian weapons to Hezbollah.

Military and national strengths: The achievements of the military campaign allowed Israel to reach an agreement that was much better than UNSC Resolution 1701, which concluded the 2006 Lebanon War.

Luck: Israel's weakening of Hezbollah was the trigger for the offensive by the rebels in Syria in which they overthrew the Assad regime. That regime was a central component of Iran's and Hezbollah's ability to maintain their anti-Israel axis. In the Lebanese context, too, the background to the Israeli achievement was Donald Trump's election to the US presidency.

**January 17, 2025: The hostage deal and ceasefire in Gaza.** The difficult situation of Hamas in Gaza, its isolation due to the weakening of Iran and Hezbollah, and its fear of failing to meet President Trump's demand to end the hostage saga and the war led to the signing of a deal between Israel and Hamas.

Intelligent decision-making: Despite extensive internal and external pressures, the Israeli leadership waited until the strategic circumstances had changed in the Hezbollah-Iran-Hamas triangle (the deaths of Haniya and Sinwar and the weakening of the organization) to carry out a hostage deal critical to achieving a major war goal under optimal conditions for Israel.

Military and national strengths: Israel's patience and continued military pressure on Hamas were among the factors that led Hamas to approve a deal on terms to which Israel could agree.

Luck: Trump's election and the ultimatum he presented increased Hamas's willingness to accept the deal.

### **What can be learned from analyzing the reasons for the Israeli victory?**

If Israel is to deal with the challenges it continues to face, it will have to further improve its decision-making process by drawing lessons from the decisions that led to the Iron Swords War's cumulative strategic achievement. Israel should learn from the content and characteristics of both its successful and unsuccessful efforts during the war, but also from processes that were rendered suboptimal by an excessive sequence of leaks and accusations.

Israel should also strengthen and further adapt its military and national strengths to the challenges, including improving the multi-front response, expanding the national security safety margin, and taking practical steps to preserve and even strengthen the motivation of those serving, mainly among the reserve units and the standing army.

Israel must reduce its reliance on luck, which is a random variable. Approaches to future challenges cannot rely on the opponent's failures, because he too has learned lessons from this war. Nor can they depend on political developments in the United States, over which Israel has no control.

*Col. (res.) Shay Shabtai is a senior researcher at the BESA Center and an expert in national security, strategic planning, and strategic communication. He is a cyber security strategist and a consultant to leading companies in Israel.*