



IDF exercise in southern Israel. Photo: IDF Spokesperson's Unit

From “Decision” to “Victory”: Resolving the Confusion in Israeli Military Terminology

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This article traces the relatively late evolution of the Hebrew term *hachra'a* (decision) in its military context in Israeli society and examines the ensuing conceptual confusion. It also points out the many original and borrowed meanings that have been attributed to this term over the years in military contexts and elaborates on the dangers inherent in this trend, especially obfuscation of the meaning of “victory.” This conceptual failure is expressed not only in the IDF’s language, but also, and more critically, in IDF doctrine. Hence, resolving the confusion created between the term *hachra'a* and the term victory can help not only by restoring the meaning of victory to its rightful place in the military context, but also by clarifying Israel’s security concept.

Keywords: decision, victory, IDF strategy, security concept, national security

Introduction

Upon assuming his post as Chief of Staff in 2019, Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi sought to reexamine the meaning of the term “victory.” To this end a three-day “victory workshop” was convened, led by the head of the Operations Directorate, Maj. Gen. Aharon Haliva, during which the members of the IDF General Staff and senior brigadier generals discussed various approaches to victory, with the aim of incorporating them into multi-year plans (Shoval, 2019).

This is not the first time the term has been examined in the IDF. As early as 2001, a large-scale symposium was held in which the defense and military leadership examined the term victory in relation to the meaning of the term *hachra’a* (commonly translated as decision)¹ from a large variety of military and defense aspects.

There is no consensus regarding the meaning of the terms *hachra’a* and victory. Furthermore, alongside similar but different approaches to the respective terms, over the years contradictory and even opposing perspectives have developed regarding their meaning.

On the one hand, the fact that the term victory (*nitzahon*) was examined in light of the term *hachra’a* seems to indicate that victory is not *hachra’a* and *hachra’a* is not victory, as why would one definition have two different names? On the other hand, the symposium (and dozens of other discussions and studies on the issue) clearly proved that there is no consensus regarding the meaning of the terms *hachra’a* and victory. Furthermore, alongside similar but different approaches to the respective terms, over the years contradictory and even opposing perspectives have developed regarding their meaning.

This article argues that the source of the contradictory and opposing views that have developed in relation to the terms *hachra’a* and victory lies in terminological confusion. This confusion took root gradually in the military and

security establishment and then penetrated the Israeli media, generating conceptual confusion not only in security settings but in Israeli society as a whole. Accordingly, the article discusses different sources that led to the terminological confusion between the two terms in an attempt to resolve it. The meanings of the terms are based on their definitions in the *Dictionary of IDF Terms* (1998). The article focuses on the term *hachra’a*, examining how it finds expression in various fields in an attempt to clarify the meaning of the term victory. The article contends that the meaning of the term *hachra’a* as a “military outcome” is unclear and that the damage caused by this confusion primarily affects the meaning of the military outcome contained in the term victory.

The Questionable Term

What is the meaning of *hachra’a*? The first meaningful theoretical discussion on the topic of *hachra’a* in the military context was published in Israel in the 1990s, in Avi Kober’s book *Hachra’a* (1995). This book explores the term *hachra’a* through a structured, focused comparative study and through an outline that takes into account both its universal aspect and its particular Israeli aspect. In the *Dictionary of IDF Terms*, Kober’s broad and comprehensive definition of the term *hachra’a* was watered down to the following official definition:

Breaking the enemy’s power of resistance to take effective action against us, by creating a situation in which (*in the assessment of the decider*) the conditions exist for achieving the stated mission. The state of *hachra’a* is usually evident from the fact that the enemy has lost its ability to operate against us effectively. (*Dictionary of IDF Terms*, 1998, p. 136)²

Presumably an explicit dictionary definition of the term *hachra’a* would offer a precise and

exhaustive linguistic description of the term’s meaning, thus preventing different semantic interpretations. The reality was far different. Over the years, the term *hachra’a* has been given a wide variety of interpretations. These interpretations, which were provided first and foremost by the highest military echelons and leading national security researchers, contained meanings that differed completely from one another. Furthermore, stark contradictions were also found between a series of definitions that referred to this term and the official definition formulated in the *Dictionary of IDF Terms*. For example, at a symposium titled “Between Decision and Victory,” Isaac Ben-Israel claimed that *hachra’a* “is entirely, or almost entirely, aimed at breaking the will to fight—and not the ability” (Ben-Israel, 2001, p. 83). In contrast, on the same occasion Shlomo Yanai stated that “*hachra’a* is an abstract concept” (Yanai, 2001, p. 109). Dan Halutz argued that *hachra’a* is a cognitive matter and proposed deleting the notion of “physical *hachra’a*” from the lexicon (Halutz, 2001, p. 100). Shaul Mofaz, in contrast, held that *hachra’a* “is made up of a series of victories in the air, at sea, and on land” (Mofaz, 2001, p. 127). Moshe (Bogie) Ya’alon contended that the correct definition of *hachra’a* is “the achievement or fulfillment of the objectives you set for yourself” (Ya’alon, 2001, p. 75), while Herzl Shafir claimed that *hachra’a* is measured in quantitative, geographical, and psychological parameters (Shafir, 2001, p. 141).

If all these are not sufficient to illustrate the lack of clarity surrounding the term *hachra’a*, Kober himself stated at the symposium:

My name is connected with the concept of military *hachra’a* because I wrote a book about military *hachra’a*, but as you will see, I am not so committed to military *hachra’a*. Military *hachra’a* played a central role in Israel’s military life, but I will attempt to show that we must rethink the concept using more complex thinking than we had become

accustomed to. Along with this concept are two additional concepts that, when combined with the concept of *hachra’a*, help us think about achievements in war: victory and the test of history. (Kober, 2001, p. 13)

In the following years, more interpretations were added to the list of definitions, further deepening the existing terminological confusion surrounding the term *hachra’a* and its relation to the term victory, defined as follows:

Victory: overcoming the enemy and creating a situation in which the victor in a war, campaign, or battle has fully or largely achieved its military objectives, at a cost that can be tolerated. Achieving victory is the constant and overriding aim of every soldier in every situation. (*Dictionary of IDF Terms*, 1998, p. 424)

For example, Yaakov Amidror published an article criticizing the military for beginning to refer to the concept of *hachra’a* as a cognitive concept, thus generating “the belief that there is no military way to cope with terrorism in order to defeat it” (Amidror, 2006, p. 6). Yaakov Zigdon thought that *hachra’a* is an objective concept and victory is a subjective concept, such that “when *hachra’a* is not achieved, each side can claim victory” (Zigdon, 2008, p. 45).

The IDF Strategy document published a few years later distinguishes between tactical *hachra’a* (on the tactical level IDF commanders will strive to achieve *hachra’a* in every mission they are charged with) and strategic *hachra’a* (the IDF strives for *hachra’a* as manifested in the enemy’s lack of ability or lack of desire to operate against us and its inability to defend itself). Nonetheless, the term *hachra’a*, which the document names as one of “the IDF’s four general principles for applying force” (*IDF Strategy*, 2015, p. 14), is at the same time linked to the term “victory” and not differentiated from it.

Israel's security concept was also examined by a committee headed by Dan Meridor, which assumed that in order to achieve victory in all kinds of conflicts and at all levels of intensity, *hachra'a* "alternatives" must be developed (Meridor & Eldadi, 2018, p. 25). A recent book by Amiram Ezov titled *Hachra'a: Who Won the Yom Kippur War?* (2020) likewise grapples with the meaning of the terms *hachra'a* and victory. The fact that Ezov believes that Clausewitz's parameters define victory (p. 341), while according to Amidror (2001, p. 113) these same parameters in fact define *hachra'a*, is one of many examples pointing to the problematic nature of the many original and borrowed meanings attributed to the term *hachra'a* in military contexts.

The Importance of Terminology

A lack of conceptual clarity is a dangerous phenomenon that leads to terminological confusion. Indeed, the importance of concepts and their defined meanings is no less than critical in the eyes of many national security researchers. For example, in his article "The Military Aspects of Limited Operations," Moni Chorev presents a series of lacunae that in his view exist in the concepts of *hachra'a*, deterrence, and victory. He insists on the need for more precise terms to incorporate the concept of security, as "the planning discourse today adheres to concepts, some of which are no longer valid but are used to anchor situation assessments and plan a campaign's operational efforts." Hence, greater precision in the meanings of concepts "is not a semantic change, but rather a substantive issue that dictates the way leaders and chiefs of staff think and manage strategic operations" (Chorev, 2017, pp. 121-122).

Similarly, former Armored Corps brigade commander Yehuda Wegman states that "conceptual confusion among the senior echelons always also leads to practical confusion at the operational levels" (Wegman, 1999, p. 90). This statement is in line with the conclusion of the important terminological

discussion in the study by Yossi Baidatz and Dima Adamsky about the development of the Israeli approach to the concept of deterrence. In this study, they state that "the Israeli concept of 'deterrence' that is accepted today—which is very similar to the simple and traditional dictionary definition—not only is insufficient, but can also cause strategic damage" (Baidatz & Adamsky, 2014, p. 7).

Damage of this type indeed made a mark over the years, both in the context of operational military activity and in relation to national security issues. Ben-Israel offers a prominent example, explaining how a misleading definition or distorted terminology can lead to mistaken conceptual thinking, and in turn, to erroneous conduct:

For years, out of mistaken thinking whose source is beyond me, we divided our wars in two: we said there are "real" wars, like the war against Syria or against Egypt, and there is routine security...It is not so clear why we thought this, but it is clear this is a mistake...I do not know why we thought this way, but I can state the contrary: From the moment we understood this—only three or four years ago—from the moment we understood this, we understood our mistake. (Ben-Israel, 2001, pp. 89-90)

Another example appears in the conclusions of the Agranat Commission, charged with investigating the Yom Kippur War. The commission members pointed out a series of hazy operational expressions and meanings, among them orders to "hold back" and "advance cautiously." In later wars as well, unclear conceptual definitions led to terminological confusion that influenced operational and strategic aspects. One example was the report of the commander of the 91st Division in the Second Lebanon War about control of Bint Jbeil. The report created a mistaken impression from

which it could be concluded that the IDF forces had conquered the town (Kober, 2017, p. 220). These examples illustrate Wegman’s argument that “underlying the process of creating vague terms is a foundation of commanders who evade responsibility for their subordinates as they are unable to inject any practical content into these terms” (Wegman, 1999, p. 91).

Hence, Dov Tamari’s warning—that the frequent and incautious use of the concepts of *hachra’a* and victory “could return to the army and the chief of staff like a boomerang, because civilians, journalists, members of Knesset, commentators, and others are liable to understand and interpret the results of the next campaign in light of the concepts of *hachra’a* and victory as they were traditionally understood from the wars of the past” (Tamari, 2016, p. 148)—not only strengthens the argument that the meanings of the terms are insufficiently clear, but also has actual expressions in reality.

One of the most prominent cases illustrating the confusion of Israeli society regarding the precise definitions and meanings of terms emerged in the public discourse following the Second Lebanon War. Vague interpretations and unclear definitions of the military terms *hachra’a* and victory were a central source of controversy that arose not only in Israeli society and the Israeli media but also in military and political forums. These were also reflected in the Winograd Commission report, which used the concept of victory over 60 times without defining it and without its being clear that everyone involved necessarily interpreted the term in the same way. Ultimately, the terminological confusion was so great that a situation arose in which entire systems had difficulty identifying who was the victor at the end of a round of fighting, whether this “victor” had won or had decided (*hichria*) the battle, and what is the actual difference (if at all) between victory and *hachra’a*.

A similar situation emerged following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, which reawakened theoretical discussions of the

concept of victory that sought to sharpen the interpretation and meaning of the term. Among these were the monograph by theoretician Colin Gray (2002) on the possibility of achieving decisive victory and the book by William Martel (2007) that Bartholomees (2010) used as a basis for developing his theory of victory. A recently published book titled *Moral Victories* discusses, inter alia, the changing attributes inherent in the concept of victory and the challenges and problems contained in the concept of victory in the modern era (Hom et al., 2017). Another relevant book is *Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win* by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin, which was published in 2017 and translated into Hebrew under the title *Responsibility and Victory* (Willink & Babin, 2020). This book associated the concept of leadership with that of victory. In addition, *Victory*, by researcher Cian O’Driscoll (2019), examines in depth the success and failure inherent in the term “just war,” while referring to the definitions of “morality” and “victory” in the modern era.

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The Conceptual Failure in the Term *Hachra’a*

Before delving into the arena of national security and military boundaries in an attempt to prove the article’s claim that the term *hachra’a* in its military context involves a conceptual failure that has taken root over the years, an initial but fundamental distinction must be made between “military *hachra’a*” and other forms of *hachra’a*, such as “halakhic [Jewish law] *hachra’a*,” “legal *hachra’a*,” and “*hachra’a* in

sports.” What these three fields of *hachra’a* have in common is the necessary presence of a judicial authority. For example, the rabbinical judge decides in halakhic *hachra’a*, the court judge decides in court, and the referee decides on the sports field. The society in which these judgments take place accepts the authority of all these judges, and their decisions—which rely on systems of rules—are valid and binding within the society. Hence, the act of *hachra’a* depends on the decision of an actual entity in context. This entity is accepted by the society in which it operates, and for its part, the society is obligated to behave according to its decisions.

In this context, it is interesting to note that Kelsay’s in-depth study “The Bible and Notions of Victory in War” (2017) relates to the topic of *hachra’a* in the Bible in a similar manner. Kelsay puts forth the thesis of a warrior god who fights for the chosen people. This God is also the commander, takes on the role of judge, and attaches conditions to the promise of victory: obeying the laws leads to victory, while disobeying them leads to defeat. God, according to Kelsay, takes on the role of judge. Only God has the power to decide (*lehachria*) the wars of the Israelites against their enemies. Hence, in the arena of the Bible as well, while military victory is attributed to the Israelites, the more basic underlying assumption is that the *hachra’a* (that is, decision) is in God’s hands only.

This understanding raises an important question in relation to military *hachra’a*: What is the actual and authoritative position that ostensibly decides the war on the battlefield? Who is the authority whose decision is accepted by all? Is there a military judge standing in the middle of the military campaign and deciding the war on the battlefield? Has a military (or political) entity been determined as having the authority to declare a military decision?

These questions correspond with the warning by Gabi Ben-Dor regarding the tautological danger inherent in the term *hachra’a* (Ben-Dor, 2001, p. 25). They are also in line with the statement by linguist Ruvik Rosenthal referring

to the Hebrew term *hachra’a* as a verbal noun, exemplifying what Rosenthal calls “the curse of the verbal nouns.” Rosenthal believes that this grammatical form, which illustrates that social and cultural issues also have a direct impact on the adoption of the term *hachra’a* in Israeli society, is too well-liked in Israeli society, for the simple reason that “verbal nouns enable them [Israeli politicians] to free themselves of personal or ministerial responsibility for every action taken in their field of responsibility. They don’t do anything; the deed is done by itself.” “In the field of defense,” Rosenthal states, the use of verbal nouns has proven to be “an especially effective rhetorical tool” that produces headlines such as “*Hachra’a* imminent at Qatar Conference.” This headline, which does not provide the public the information (who decided), seeks to convey the message that “the action has become a completely abstract or indefinite matter, and the person carrying out the action is unknown, [i.e.,] is not important and should be entirely ignored for the purpose of voicing the idea” (Rosenthal, 2001).

Ostensibly, it seems that the *IDF Dictionary* deliberates the very same question, as its definition of the term *hachra’a*—“breaking the enemy’s power of resistance to take effective action against us, by creating a situation in which (*in the assessment of the decider*) the conditions exist for achieving the stated mission” (*Dictionary of IDF Terms*, 1998, p. 136)—in effect proves the need for a tangible entity to carry out this decision, yet such an entity is absent from the military arena.

It is interesting to note that Bartholomees (2010) also dedicates a significant portion of his article “A Theory of Victory” to the question of who actually decides who the winner is in the sports and games arena, where there is a tangible entity that decides, and who decides who has won in the arena of battle and war, where there is no such tangible entity that decides.

The fact that there is a distinct difference between all other kinds of *hachra’a* and military

hachra'a at the very least makes military *hachra'a* an unusual case.

In English the Term *Hachra'a* Does Not Exist

The claim that the concept of *hachra'a* in its military context is at the very least unusual in comparison to all other meanings of the term also corresponds with the position of Yehezkel Dror, who claims he was not able to find a precise definition of the word *hachra'a* in its military sense in the English language or any other corresponding or similar term to the term *hachra'a* in the global strategic literature (Dror, 2016, p. 75).

Israeli security researchers, including the IDF and government bodies, agree that the word *hachra'a* in English is “decision.” Nonetheless, this consensus does not suggest that the word “decision” has a military connotation in the English language. Indeed, a dictionary check shows that the adjectival form of this word (decisive) is defined in three ways: having the power or quality of deciding; determined; unquestionable.³ Hence, the meaning of the word *hachra'a* in English in its various forms (decision, deciding, decisive) is similar to its meaning in Hebrew in its “natural” fields (such as the courtrooms and sports fields described above, where it refers to decision, ruling, determination).

A specific examination of military contexts in English also indicates that the term is absent. Ron Tira’s statement that “American documents on doctrine generally do not define and do not even use the term” (Tira, 2010, p. 17) finds expression, in part, in the notion that losing the center of gravity leads to “defeat” and in definitions of the objective of military force in war that use the term “to prevail.” Hence, the expression “decisive point” is also not understood as a point of decision, but rather as a deciding point (Tira, 2010, pp. 16-17).

In addition, the phrase “military decision” in the American context refers to the United States Army’s Military Decision Making Process

(MDMP),⁴ which includes seven stages and is applied in military camps in tactical contexts. The Hebrew interpretation, which often attributes the Israeli meaning of the term to the phrase “military decision,” corresponds with Moshe Sokolow’s determination in his 2013 article titled “*Rahamim* [generally translated as mercy, compassion, or pity] Is Not Mercy.” In this article, Sokolow clarifies and emphasizes the great importance of etymological rigor in preventing what he calls the “difficulties and dangers” in the context of exchanging information and ideas when they are translated from Hebrew to English and vice versa.

The fact that there is no mention of the term *hachra'a* (decision/decisive) in *The Oxford Essential Dictionary of the U.S. Military* (2001) bolsters attempts by made by Martel in his book *Victory in War* to replace the term “victory” with a series of alternative terms: “conquest, triumph, vanquish, subdue, subjugate, and overcome” that do not include the term decision (Martel, 2011, p. 22).

In conclusion, the word “decisive” in English can only be an adjective and not a verbal noun. Hence the word is only capable of *describing* (i.e., describing the victory as a “decisive victory”). Consequently, the Hebrew meaning when the adjective “decisive” (*machria*) is turned into a verbal noun (*hachra'a*) does not have a linguistic equivalent in English. This means, then, that the English phrase “decisive victory” is often interpreted in Hebrew as “the determination of victory,” a phrase that differs completely from its original meaning.

Hachra'a in Sources Inspiring the IDF

Let us begin with the father of modern warfare theory, the military theoretician Carl von Clausewitz, whose influence on IDF doctrine since its establishment is undisputed (Handel, 2011). The current conclusion of the head of the Center for Military Studies at the Command and Staff College, Sagi Torgan, whereby “it is important to adopt the political and military terminology of Clausewitz” (Torgan, 2016, p.

41), shows that central elements underlying IDF doctrine were based on his teachings. These teachings were originally formulated in German and translated into English, and include a series of specific military terms that are still relevant to the IDF's security concept today. Because the Israeli security concept is based in part on doctrines written in foreign languages, there is no choice but to relate to the translated versions, despite the inherent challenges of translation, whose significance is discussed below.

Consider first the meaning of the term *hachra'a* as expressed in Clausewitz's writings. In his seminal book *Principles of War*, the word *hachra'a* is used beginning with the first principle, which is formulated thus: "First and foremost, the doctrine of war deals with the ways in which you can achieve superiority in forces and physical advantages at the decisive point" (Clausewitz, 1950, p. 21). The word *decisive*, which is an adjective (and not a verbal noun), is not assigned the meaning of a result but merely of a *description* of the result. Clausewitz's perception of the meaning of the word *decisive* is further clarified in the formulation of the second principle: "In war, you always seek to tilt the chance of *victory* in your favor" (Clausewitz, 1950, p. 22). Presumably had Clausewitz attributed a military meaning to the word "decision," he would have formulated the second principle using the words "the chance of *decision* (and not *victory*) in your favor."

This assumption is further substantiated in the next (third) principle, in which Clausewitz attributes the following meaning to the term *decisive*: "It is the nature of war to advise the most decisive, that is, the most daring" (Clausewitz, 1950, p. 23). This principle, in which he compares the term *decisive* with the term *daring*, explicitly demonstrates the *theoretical* meaning he attributes to the term.

In the twelfth principle, Clausewitz returns to and summarizes the two immediately preceding principles (10-11), that together provide us with "a maxim that should take first place among all

causes of victory in the modern art of war." His recommendation to "pursue one great decisive aim with force and determination" (Clausewitz, 1950, p. 31) shows again that the term *decision* is used as an adjective (*decisive*) whose function is to *describe* the "aim" (which is *victory*). This is different from the way the term is used in Hebrew—as a verbal noun (*hachra'a*) that acts as if it were the aim itself.

An examination of the wording of Clausewitz's other principles reinforces the argument that he relates to the term *decision* (*hachra'a*) and its various declensions as adjectives (and not as verbal nouns) and interprets its meaning in contexts that describe "*the extent* of a military result" and not "the military result itself."

Clausewitz goes on to describe advantages as *decisive* advantages and points as *decisive* points, and even explicitly notes: "The plan of battle must be directed toward this end [which is *victory*—not *decision*]. For it is easy to change an *indecisive victory* into a *decisive* one through energetic pursuit of the enemy" (Clausewitz, 1950, p. 36). In other words, here too the word *decisive* serves to *describe* the victory and does not function in the sense of "the victory itself."

Likewise, in examining the principles of war in their strategic sense, Clausewitz remains faithful to his use of the term *decisive* in its original context, as a description of *victory*. For example, in principle 11 he speaks about the term "decisive victory" and states that sometimes a victory is "great" (meaning "decisive") and sometimes a victory is not great (meaning "not decisive"). Later he even explicitly notes: "If you remember, Most Gracious Master, the few defensive battles that history notes as campaigns that ended in *victory* [as opposed to 'those that ended in *decision*' or 'that were decided'], you will find that the conditions in which they were conducted were in the spirit of these principles" (Clausewitz, 1950, p. 32).

In conclusion, examining the term *hachra'a* in Clausewitz's writings explicitly and consistently demonstrates that he makes use of this term in three contexts: in the context of *describing*

a victory or a defeat; in the context of [*making a*] *decision*; and in the context of a *great and significant occurrence*. Emerging from his writings is the understanding that while victory can be decisive, decision (*hachra'a*) in itself is not a military situation.

Unlike Clausewitz, David Ben-Gurion was not a military theoretician. However, there is no dispute that the seminal writings of the individual who founded the IDF are relevant to this day in understanding Israel's security concept—not only on the level of research and knowledge development but also for drafting current security policy.

An in-depth reading of Ben-Gurion's teachings sketches a clear and unequivocal picture of his doctrine, in which the term *hachra'a* means decision and/or something that is important (i.e., decisive). The IDF collected and published hundreds of pages in a book titled *Uniqueness and Purpose* that includes “all of the speeches of the State of Israel's first Defense Minister to the IDF, about the IDF, and about Israel's defense.”⁵ In this book, the word *hachra'a* does not describe an outcome of war. Furthermore, in referring to the results the IDF achieved in battles, struggles, wars, and relations with its enemies, Ben-Gurion is careful to use the word *victory*—which also substantiates the thesis of this article.

For example, in discussions about the wording of the order establishing the Israel Defense Forces, Ben-Gurion stated that everything serves “one objective—*victory*” (Ben-Gurion, 1971, p. 36). Regarding “the language of war,” Ben-Gurion said: “We should all ... focus the essence of our lives, all our senses, and every fiber of our being on the one and only desire—the desire *to be victorious*...the true, only test is—*victory* in war; this is the test of our desire” (Ben-Gurion, 1971, p. 20).

In the context of military parades and lectures to officers, Ben-Gurion stated:

War is not an aim. We will not live on wars—nor on *victories* in war...When

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we fought—we were *victorious*, and when we are forced to continue to fight, I believe we will be *victorious* again. But we do not seek wars or *victories*... we have spared nothing for the sake of *victory*. But *victory* is only a means and not an end. (Ben-Gurion, 1971, p. 49)

Furthermore,

The test will not end even on the day of *victory*, because *victory* in war, by its very nature and essence, is not a final *victory*, even if there is such a thing as final *victory*....We knew from the first moment that the secret to *victory* is not in weapons or in training and organization, although these are important and essential, but rather in the human spirit....We are *victorious* not by the power of the orders but by the power of the mission. (Ben-Gurion, 1971, p. 217)

Finally, in his parting letter to the IDF, Ben-Gurion ties the IDF's victories to the victories in the Bible and notes explicitly:

Upon the declaration of the state—the Israel Defense Forces, established for salvation and glory, was attacked by all the Arab armies and was *victorious* over all its enemies. This *victory* ensured our independence

and made us a sovereign nation. In the War of Independence the IDF also knew failures and retreats, mild and serious, but not many armies in the world have had more glorious *victories* than those our young army has had the honor of winning. This episode of war will hold a place of honor in the series of great *victories* of the armies of our people in the days of Joshua; King David; Jeroboam son of Yoash, King of Israel; and Uzziah (Azariah) son of Amaziah, King of Judah. (Ben-Gurion, 1955, pp. 361-362)

Including all of Ben-Gurion's statements using the term *victory* to define a military result is beyond the scope of this article. The few examples provided here serve to illustrate and substantiate the argument. However, it is important to note that these examples are from three different decades (1940s, 50s and 60s). This indicates that the terminology chosen was not dependent on a specific zeitgeist, but rather matched the principles of the security concept as a whole.

This terminological examination has proven itself again and again in the years in which Ben-Gurion was no longer active in defining Israel's security concept. One of many examples can be found in the lecture by Chief of Staff Haim Bar-Lev in May 1978 titled "Introduction to the Theory of War." In this lecture to students at the Command and Staff College, the Chief of Staff discussed fundamental questions in the art of war through an examination of the wars of the IDF. The lecture included an in-depth discussion of fundamental military concepts, including the essence of war and the achievement of victory in war, and examined these concepts in light of the IDF's wars (with emphasis on the War of Attrition, which occurred during the period Bar-Lev headed the General Staff, and the Yom Kippur War, when he commanded the southern front). Throughout this lecture, which focused specifically on "the results of war," the

word *hachra'a* was entirely absent from the Chief of Staff's lexicon. Clearly Bar-Lev, like Ben-Gurion, made sure to use the term *victory* (and not *hachra'a*) in order to describe military results. For example, he described the political conclusion of the War of Attrition as follows:

The political conclusion was that despite the Israeli *victory* in the Six Day War, the existence of Israel must not be accepted... This conclusion surprised Israel because it was logical to assume that after *the great rout suffered* by Egypt and after *the unequivocal demonstration of Israel's military advantage*, the Egyptians would look for the solution in the political arena. (Bar-Lev, 1978, p. 4)

Bar-Lev later described the military conclusions drawn from each of the wars and mentioned the Egyptian doctrines and conclusions reached in consultation with the Russian advisors. In these contexts as well, Bar-Lev did not use the term *hachra'a* at all in order to describe the aims, intentions, or results of warfare.

As in Ben-Gurion's writings, in Bar-Lev's lectures the word *hachra'a* was almost completely and sweepingly absent from the war terminology and from the goals and results of the various wars, indicating that this omission was not incidental, but rather deliberate.

How the Term *Hachra'a* Became Embedded, Erroneously, in Military Contexts

Many paths led to the erroneous entrenchment of the term *hachra'a*, some known and some unknown. Obviously, this did not occur at any specific point in time but was rather a gradual process. Moreover, there was not one determining factor, but rather a variety of overlapping factors. Several examples can illustrate how this occurred.

We begin with the sources of Ben-Gurion’s security concept, which unquestionably shaped the Israeli military doctrine. This doctrine incorporates Israel’s security doctrine, which determines the overall organization of the IDF, including preparing for and waging wars, campaigns, and battles in accordance with orders from the high command.

This doctrine, which is based mainly on the notion of an “iron wall” formulated by Ze’ev Jabotinsky in the 1920s, developed “as an approach commonly known as ‘deterrence, warning, and decision [*harta’a, hatra’a v’hachra’a*]’” (Henkin, 2018, p. 17). It is no wonder, then, that over the years many researchers and military figures adopted the term *hachra’a* as an inseparable part of the military doctrine. Yet as Henkin indicates in his study, to this day no one knows the identity of the person who formulated the essence of the doctrine (and its three-word summary, including *hachra’a*). Therefore, it is also impossible to know whether this anonymous writer had certain ideological motivations or personal conceptualizations, and if so, what they were. This understanding takes on new meaning when we examine Ben-Gurion’s security concept in depth and realize that Ben-Gurion himself never speaks about *hachra’a* in the sense of a military result. Furthermore, the only time he uses the term *hachra’a* (as a verbal noun) is in the sentence: “A clear and permanent *hachra’a* [in the sense of making a decision] is required” (Ben-Gurion, 1981 [1953], p. 8).

Not only does the document in question not mention the term *hachra’a* even once in the context of the desired result of war; throughout the article the results of wars are referred to again and again using the term *victory*. For example, in discussing army issues Ben-Gurion emphasizes that “the main question of course is: 1) is a war expected; 2) can we stand our ground and be *victorious*” (p. 2). Later he notes that “every military expert knows that the morale—in Hebrew the spirit—of the army is the primary, if not the only, element in *victory*” (p. 9). He

further emphasizes: “If we again face a war with the Arabs—and no one in the world can promise us that this war will not occur, all of our chances of *being victorious* (and I certainly believe in *victory*) depend on the extent of our fighters’ morale” (p. 10).

To this day no one knows the identity of the person who formulated the essence of the doctrine (and its three-word summary, including *hachra’a*). Therefore, it is also impossible to know whether this anonymous writer had certain ideological motivations or personal conceptualizations, and if so, what they were.

Finally, the most unequivocal example illustrates the claim of this article, not only from a terminological perspective but also from a conceptual one:

We must not depend on the *victories* of the past, and we must not rely on the weakness of the enemy. The former *victor* can fail in the future, as happened to the French in World War II. The French relied on their experience in World War I, and the Germans learned from their failure in that same war, and prepared for war under new conditions, and if not for America, England, and Russia, France would have been wiped off the map of the world’s independent nations. (p. 5)

Another reason that may have led to the erroneous entrenchment of the term *hachra’a* lies in mistakes in translation. In this context, it is important to distinguish between difficulties in translation that emerge from cultural and national meanings attached to a certain term in a certain language and are lost in translation to another language, and mistakes that stem from fundamentally incorrect translation. Translation mistakes of both kinds are so common that the American military historian Christopher

Bassford, who for the past few decades has managed a website about Clausewitz,⁶ notes that his keen awareness of the distortion of Clausewitz's original intentions is what led him to refrain completely from relying on Clausewitz's translated writings in his many studies.⁷

Furthermore, the website about Clausewitz distinguishes between translations into English directly from the German source (although Vom Kriege's various editions differ significantly) and foreign editions that rely on other translations (e.g., a Vietnamese version based on a French edition and early translations into Chinese based on Japanese or French versions). The website manager explicitly warns that in all of these cases, it is impossible to escape from the limitations based on the influence of time and place, or from technical mistakes, interpretations motivated by political fear or personal aspirations, controversial conceptual beliefs based on conceptual confusion, ideologically based attempts at counter-persuasion, and in certain cases—completely false beliefs.

For example, in the Israeli context, Clausewitz's book *The Principles of War* was translated from English to Hebrew by Shimon Yiftah. The publisher notes that "the English translation is deficient in many places in terms of accuracy, understanding, and being faithful to the original (necessitating thorough secondary editing of the first Hebrew version, which was translated at the time from the English version)" (Clausewitz, 1950, p. 6). This comment joins the fact that Yiftah's training was in nuclear physics and not in translation. In effect, of the eight books Yiftah wrote (all of them in Hebrew and all on nuclear physics), *Principles of War* was the only book he ever translated. Hence, as talented as he was, it appears only natural to expect various translation difficulties throughout the book and to accept them with a measure of understanding.

For example, Clausewitz's statement that "the most important thing in war will always be

the art of *defeating* our opponents in combat" (Clausewitz, 1943, p. 17) was translated from the German original (Clausewitz, 1834, p. 213), in which the meaning of the German word *befiegen* is none other than "defeat" or *havasa* in Hebrew. Yet in the sentence in question, the word was translated into Hebrew using the term *hachra'a*: "The most important thing in war will always be the art of [deciding] our opponents in combat" (Clausewitz, 1950, p. 27). Hence it is obvious that translating this statement in a way that is faithful to the original would have yielded a completely different meaning (the art of *havasa* [defeat] of our opponents in battle). Indeed, unlike the term *hachra'a*, the terms defeat and victory describe a military result.

Another example appears in the following sentence from Chapter 4, titled "The Existence of These Principles in Times of War": "If we lend our ear to all these difficulties, as Frederick II called them, we shall soon *nichara* [the passive form of *hachra'a*], and we will collapse under the weight" (Clausewitz, 1950, p. 87). Ostensibly the expression "we shall soon *nichara*" attributes a military result to the term *hachra'a*, but in this case as well, the choice of the word *nichara* in the translation into Hebrew is not compatible with the definition in the *Dictionary of IDF Terms*. Here this is a clear translation error, as checking the wording of the original principle in English shows unequivocally that Clausewitz is not speaking about *hachra'a* [decision] at all, but rather about succumbing (and thus uses the word *succumb*): "If we lend our ear to all these difficulties, as Frederick II called them, we shall soon *succumb* completely...we shall be reduced to weakness and inactivity" (Clausewitz, 1943, p. 52). In this case too, the German original proves that the precise word is not *nichara*, we shall be decided, but rather *nikana*, we shall succumb, from a different etymological root.

Hence, in this case too, if we had sought to convey to Hebrew-speaking Israeli society, including the IDF, the literal meaning of the principle, we would have worded it as "we

shall soon *nikana* [succumb],” whose practical, and not only implied, meaning is completely different from that resulting from using the term “we shall soon *nichara* [be decided]” when speaking about a military result.

Because in German there is an intentional and explicit distinction between the terms, the two above examples provide evidence that the source of the meaning of the term *hachra’a* in the context of a military result is an inadequate and insufficiently precise translation. The fact that this term was once translated in the context of “defeating” and another time in the context of “succumbing” not only connects the terms but also directly influences the Israeli interpretation in general, and the military conception in particular.

One example among many is Gadi Eisenkot’s attempt to implement the content of the *IDF Strategy* document as Israel’s current security concept. This attempt also led him to refer to the term *hachra’a* and to state explicitly: “The meaning of this [systemic and tactical] *hachra’a* creates a reality in which the adversary’s capability is eliminated, such that it reaches a situation of helplessness or physical destruction and *succumbs*” (Eisenkot & Siboni, 2019, p. 50).

The linguistic confusion that appears in this explanation corresponds well with the choice of terms in the translation into Hebrew. In the original, a situation was defined in which the enemy *succumbs*. This was translated into Hebrew in a way that was not sufficiently precise, suggesting that the enemy *hachra* (was decided or overcome). This finding may substantiate the assumption that if the translations of Clausewitz’s terms had been precise, they might have clarified the distinction between “succumbed” and “was decided or overcome” according to the definitions in the *Dictionary of IDF Terms*, possibly yielding the following wording: On these levels of operation, it is necessary to *subdue* the enemy. The meaning of *subduing* is creating a reality in which the adversary’s capability is eliminated, it has reached a situation of helplessness or of

physical destruction, and thus *succumbs*. The definition of the term *kni’a*—succumbing or surrendering—in the *Dictionary of IDF Terms* also describes a military result and thus fits well with this meaning.⁸

Another kind of lack of clarity is liable to develop in cases in which there are no translation obstacles but there are other influences, such as worldviews, personal perspectives, and ideological bents, that find expression in biased conceptual formulation.

Examples of this can be found in Kober’s book (1995), in which among the ways he substantiates his arguments regarding the term military *hachra’a* is by using a series of cases of reliance on the term *victory*. For example, Kober bases the argument that will and capability contribute to “generating the *hachra’a*” (p. 27) on a quotation attributed to Clausewitz that actually relates to the influence of *victory* on the course of the war. According to Clausewitz, there are influences that “always appear with every *victory*...and they increase as the size of the *victory* increases” (Leonard, 1977, p. 149).

Kober also begins the section titled “The *Hachra’a* Process and the Threshold of *Hachra’a*” with the words: “Clausewitz described the process an army undergoes until it is *muchra* [decided, overcome]” (p. 53, in Leonard, 1977, p. 148). Yet it is “the influence of *victory*” that is discussed throughout the reference (to Volume A, Book 4, Chapter 10 of Clausewitz) (Leonard, 1977, pp. 147-149).

In the chapter that analyzes the “*hachra’a* process,” Kober relies on Bernard Brodie’s book *War and Politics*, “which emphasizes the psychological necessity of *lehachria* [deciding]... to achieve *hachra’a* in war.” Yet Brodie himself speaks in terms of *victory*, and to his wording “the total commitment to *victory*,” Kober attaches the word *hachra’a* in square brackets (Kober, 1995, p. 45). The subsequent substantiation as well, in which the German army is pushed “to continue fighting even after the battles of 1914-1915 showed the lack of a chance of achieving German *hachra’a* in

the war,” relies on Gordon Craig’s research conclusion “in stubbornly rejecting any opinion that complete *victory* was impossible.” Kober adds his own interpretation to this by adding the words “in the sense of *hachra’a*” in square brackets (Kober, 1995, p. 46).

The fact that the term *hachra’a* is explained, demonstrated, and justified repeatedly using the term victory speaks for itself.

Additional examples can be found in the second part of the book, which discusses the Israeli case. For example, the demand “to understand that in fact we have very little time *lehachria* [to decide, overcome] the enemy” (Kober, 1995, p. 160) is based on Moshe Dayan’s statement, which is phrased using the term victory. Later Kober relates to *hachra’a* of the enemy by means of the air force, “which is capable of creating the conditions for *hachra’a* on land.” He bases this on Ben-Gurion’s statement that “the control [of the air force] in the air ensures us *victory* more than any other factor” (Kober, 1995, p. 178). In addition, the statement that Operation Horev was “aimed at completing the *hachra’a* process” and that “the order of the day of the southern front commander on the day the operation began (December 22) reflects Israel’s desire to achieve final *hachra’a* in the war” is based on a statement by Netanel Lorch, which speaks of “a final and decisive *victory* over the invader” (Kober, 1995, p. 193).

The fact that the term *hachra’a* is explained, demonstrated, and justified repeatedly using the term victory speaks for itself. An examination of various aspects of the term *hachra’a*, including through a series of explanations that rely explicitly on the term victory, shows the similar meaning of the two terms, or at least the conceptual confusion between them.

Along with linguistic and translation issues, reasons tied to cultural and national processes contributed to the penetration of

the term *hachra’a* in the sense of a military result. For example, Eitan Shamir attributes the evolution of the term *hachra’a* in the IDF to an ideological and image-related response to the terms “strategy of annihilation” (in German, *niederwerfungsstrategie*) and “strategy of exhaustion” (in German, *ermattungsstrategie*), which were cultivated in the late 19th century by the German military writer Hans Delbrück and adopted by all of the European and American armies. According to Shamir, public and ideological connotations caused the IDF to gradually move away from the term annihilation. These motivations are what led the IDF to look for ways to defeat the enemy while minimizing IDF losses, and to this end they adopted the unique term *hachra’a* (Shamir, 2017, p. 22). Ido Hecht, in his article “Mechanisms of Defeating—How To Win in War?” describes the “doctrine of *hachra’a* by means of annihilation,” pinpointing the 1990s as a period in which the IDF began gradually moving away from striving for large-scale annihilation as an expression of military *hachra’a* (Hecht, 2004, p. 6).

Over time, ideological assumptions also arose. Moreover, additional motivations, both overt and covert, emerged that were influenced by political, diplomatic, military, and social processes and that may have led to the adoption of the term *hachra’a* as an alternative to the term victory in its traditional sense. For example, in her article “The Fog of Victory,” Gabriella Blum argues that since the clear victory in 1967, it seems that no one has updated Israeli society that the term victory in its modern sense is far from the term victory in its traditional sense, the one that Israelis were raised on (Blum, 2013, p. 418). For Blum, this “absence of updating” is what makes it difficult for Israeli society to define the results of war as victory in the modern era. She claims that in this era victory in war depends in part on political and economic factors and civilian forces—and not only on answering the question of whether or not the military objectives defined at the beginning or during the operation have been fulfilled.

In contrast, Gabi Siboni explicitly relates to this point in this context:

As far as one can see, it is unlikely that the Six Day War and its confluence of conditions will ever recur. [Therefore] a new conceptual framework is required to coordinate expectations among the IDF and the political and the civilian echelons....The strategic discourse in Israel must rid itself of concepts such as quick and absolute victory and decision, or at least redefine them in the context of the present threat. (Siboni, 2009, p.47)

The fact that Siboni links the term *hachra'a* to the term victory, including in relation to the result of the Six Day War, is one more example among many that indicates the terminological confusion between the two terms that has apparently developed over the years. Yet while Siboni proposes looking for alternative definitions, a contrary view contends that the traditional definitions should actually be preserved. For example, in their book *Navy SEALs*, Willink and Babin consciously, explicitly, and intentionally define the Battle of Ramadi, which was the heart of the rebel area and considered the “decisive battle” (as they define it) over the Anbar Governorate, as a *victory* in the full sense of the word. This is despite the clear understanding that this was “not a military victory in the traditional sense of the word,” nor did they have any expectation that the enemy that they fought against *would succumb*, or that as a result of the fighting, peace agreements would be signed. Rather, *victory* here means just that Iraq would become a relatively safer and more stable country (Willink & Babin, 2015).

On the linguistic level, the American terminology provided in this example further strengthens the article’s claim that the term *hachra'a* does not have the meaning of a military result and again demonstrates that the result of the war is defined using the term victory

(and not *hachra'a*) and using the verb “was subdued” (and not *huchra*). On the conceptual level, this example demonstrates well that while the Israeli concept has chosen to relinquish the term victory and replace it with new definitions for a new situation, the American concept has sought to adapt the new situation to the original definitions, including defining victory as a term that describes a military result. In this way it has consciously raised the possibility of continuing to evaluate military achievements using the term victory. This decision also involves preserving the awareness of victory as a military result, and of course this awareness likewise affects national and social resilience.

Conclusion: *Hachra'a* is None Other than Victory

Bogie Ya’alon’s stated expectation that leaders should not assume that longstanding practices are necessarily correct by virtue of their longevity (Ya’alon, 2007) is echoed in this article by the understanding that while the term *hachra'a* has been used for years to define a military result, this fact does not necessarily indicate that the term *hachra'a* actually defines a military result.

Indeed, this understanding has been substantiated in principle. The fact that dozens of military and national security figures have discussed and continue to discuss the collection of definitions and meanings that have accumulated over the past few decades regarding the term *hachra'a* speaks for itself, pointing to an inherent lack of clarity in the term *hachra'a* in the sense of a military result. These are joined by scores of professional discussions focusing on the term *hachra'a* and linking its definitions with the term victory, thus underscoring the confusion between the meanings of these terms.

In the seven weeks in which Ben-Gurion took upon himself to reexamine the army’s situation and security needs, he came to the conclusion “that the means, the forces and *the thought habits* of the members of the Haganah do not meet the needs of the future. *And the*

most difficult thing then was to change the thought habits of our best men in the Haganah" (Ben-Gurion, 1981 [1953], p. 2).

An echo of this conclusion appears in Ya'alon's claim that "the military system is prone to conservatism, rigidity, and adherence to preconceptions" (Ya'alon, 2007, p. 11). To a certain extent this may explain why a prolonged period of time and the awareness of the military and security leadership are not sufficient for ending the terminological confusion that has developed between the two terms. Furthermore, this may indicate why discussions on the issue focus repeatedly on the question of the

IDF's language, but also, and more critically, in the IDF's doctrine. Hence, the main contribution of this article is to restore the meaning of the term victory to its rightful place in its military context.

Resolving the terminological confusion means relinquishing the term *hachra'a* and consciously choosing the term victory instead. The significance of this is complex in itself. First and foremost it requires accepting the statement that "the question of what meaning is should not be answered, unless we are ready to accept as an answer the statement that meaning is what people mean" (Strauss, 1977, p. 127). This also echoes Clausewitz's original message, whereby there is no point splitting hairs about one concept or another, and it would not be right to relate to theory as instructions, as the principles do not exhaust the entire theory and their purpose is not "to provide prescriptions for victory in battle, but rather to provide the fundamental concepts that will enable any military leader to formulate the 'prescriptions' that are suitable for the specific military problem that he is facing" (Y. B. Y., 1988, p. 17). This message fully corresponds with Chief of Staff Kochavi's directive, which was published as these lines were written. According to Kochavi, "*the core of the change that needs to happen*" is to abandon the term proportionality [which contains a cautious or minimal meaning, as he defines it] and replace it with the concept of relativity" (Kochavi, 2021).

This approach strengthens this article's main proposal: to abandon a term that does not faithfully serve the military interests in favor of a different term, whose meaning improves or clarifies the security concept. That is, the term *hachra'a* in the sense of a military result should be relinquished, thus allowing the term victory in all its glory to express the meaning of a military result.

In practice, even if there are those who oppose this approach, they will have difficulty ignoring the reality in the field, which speaks for itself, as *hachra'a* is no longer defined "as

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differences between the two terms rather than on the question of why two different terms with the same meaning have emerged.

This article sought to breach the conventional boundaries in order to prove that the term *hachra'a* in its military context does not express a clear meaning, and that the damage caused by this mainly affects the term victory. In my opinion, the collection of examples presented above are only some of the elements that led to the gradual but consistent adoption of the term *hachra'a* in the sense of a military result, and to the conceptual confusion that has taken root. Yet the reasons that led to the entrenchment of the term *hachra'a* in military terminology are secondary to the implications and consequences of this process, the main one being the *obscuring of the meaning of the term victory*. This obfuscation shows that the conceptual failure is not only expressed in the

the only aim of the military campaign, and instead of it comes victory. In order to achieve victory, the political leadership must define it unequivocally in advance, and in terms that are understandable to both sides” (Michael & Even, 2016, p. 34).

This reality—which is expressed well in the *IDF Strategy* document (2015) and in its updated version (2018), and more clearly outlined in the approach of the current Chief of Staff, Aviv Kochavi—is what has laid a new foundation for civil-military relations, whose essence is none other than clearly defining the meaning of the term *victory* (Michael et al., 2020).

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Notes

- 1 Much of the article that follows is linguistic in nature. The word "*hachra'a*," which is the subject of this article, functions in Hebrew both as a noun and a verbal noun, and in English only as a noun. Hence the translation of this article from its Hebrew original incurs particular challenges as it seeks to bring to the English reader a sense of the difficulties and conundrums of the use of the Hebrew term.

- 2 The emphases in all of the quotations throughout the article are added by the author.
- 3 Merriam-Webster dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/decisive>
- 4 US Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 6-0 (2014). Commander and staff organization and operations. Government Printing Office.
- 5 According to Gershon Rivlin, who “brought it to the publishing house,” on the first page of the book.
- 6 See Clausewitz, <http://www.clausewitz.com>
- 7 Private email correspondence between us from the dates January 25-28, 2021.
- 8 “*Kni’a*—succumbing, surrendering: accepting the authority of the enemy that threatens to use force or dictates with the force of its weapons to the individual, the unit, the force, or the country that is in a state of war, that has accepted its will and given up on demands, control, or ownership. *Kni’a* has several senses: loss of the ability or breaking of the will to fight; reaching the conclusion that continuing the fighting involves such losses that doing the will of the enemy is preferable to them” (*Dictionary of IDF Terms*, 1998, p. 260).