

# Clausewitz Doesn't Live Here Anymore

**Shmuel Harlap** | September 26, 2024

The Israel– Hamas war of 2023–2024, known in Israel as the “Swords of Iron” war, has revived the famous adage of Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz—that “war is a continuation of politics by other means.” This saying has become a basis for criticizing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has so far refrained from adopting a political strategy to end the war in the Gaza Strip and address the “day after.”

Meanwhile, a growing number of voices claim that prolonging the war is Netanyahu’s strategy, particularly given his legal travails. For example, Ofer Shelah (Channel 12, September 19) expressed this sentiment in a conversation with Guy Peleg about Netanyahu’s refusal to discuss a political resolution for concluding the military campaign. According to Shelah, there can be no military campaign without a political component. While we have learned that war is a continuation of policy by other means, the fear is that, from Netanyahu’s perspective, war is the goal, not the means. In this light, it is important to revisit Clausewitz’s adage and discuss it in the present context.

In the 19th century, the Napoleonic conquests served as the model for territorial expansion. War, as an extension of diplomacy, was a legitimate means of acquiring land and establishing imperial hegemony. Morally speaking, war was neutral. In contrast, in modern democracies, war is not merely “another means,” but rather, a “last resort,” when all other options have been exhausted. Its aim is not political achievement but rather national defense or a critical state interest. Simply put, this kind of war is a defensive one. Democracies engage only in defense wars against foreign aggression.

In contrast to defense wars, a war waged as a “continuation” of politics and as “another means” of achieving political, territorial, or other goals, is a war of conquest. Wars of conquest are always fought by authoritarian regimes and are foreign to the democratic spirit. Thus, the West’s support for Ukraine’s defense war reflects its opposition to the Clausewitzian war being waged by Vladimir Putin in Ukraine. From Putin’s perspective, the invasion of Ukraine is a war of conquest, constituting the continuation of the politics of “Greater Russia.”

In the First Lebanon War in 1982, Israel attempted, for the first and so far only time, to fight a Clausewitzian war. The political goal of the “Greater Oranim Plan” was to initiate a new political order in the Middle East by imposing Christian Phalangist rule on Lebanon. The murder of Bashir Gemayel shattered this Israeli fantasy, causing Israel to pay a high price for entangling itself in the Lebanese swamp until its withdrawal in 2000.

The October 7 massacre was a distinctly Clausewitzian war waged by Hamas. The terrorist regime in Gaza launched a war of conquest, driven by its ideological and religious goal of the annihilation of Israel. In response, Israel embarked on a defense war against Hamas—Operation Swords of Iron—which is a war of necessity. Yet, the anti-democratic right-wing forces within Netanyahu’s government seek to transform this defense war into a war of conquest through a campaign of Israeli annexation and Jewish settlement of the Gaza Strip.

The more Israel is perceived globally as waging a war of conquest in Gaza, the more the democratic world will distance itself from Israel and view it as a pariah state. Calls for a military embargo against Israel have emerged in France, Britain, and Germany in response to the resolve of the Clausewitzian right-wing to continue its policy of Jewish settlement by military means.

Today, following Israel’s unprecedented tactical, operational, and intelligence success in targeting the pagers that were detonated in the hands and on the bodies of Hezbollah members, many are searching for the strategic purpose—specifically the political achievement—that should accompany this military operation. Ideally, the achievement should be a diplomatic agreement that pushes Hezbollah north across the Litani River and demarcates the land border between Israel and Lebanon. Moreover, the desired diplomatic outcome the US administration seeks runs counter to the Clausewitzian doctrine. The United States aims to prevent war that could escalate into a regional conflict, rather than seeking some benefit from it.

If the American mediation efforts fail and Israel is forced to launch a military campaign against Hezbollah, it will be a defense war in response to Hezbollah’s firing of rockets and UAVs. Israel’s objectives will be to significantly weaken, if not destroy Hezbollah, pushing it deeper into Lebanon and allowing the inhabitants of northern Israel to return home.

Similar to its war against Hamas in Gaza, fighting Hezbollah shows that Israel engages in defense wars in response to military aggression and refrains from wars of conquest, in accordance with the principles of Carl von Clausewitz.