

Before the Culminating Point Passes: Translating Military Successes Into Diplomatic Gains

Tamir Hayman | October 31, 2024

A series of operational successes provides Israel with the ideal opportunity to closely consider its exit strategy. Now, with these achievements accumulating, it is the right time to examine the question of ending the military campaign and securing its diplomatic benefits to improve Israel's national security in every respect.

In recent weeks, Israel has achieved a series of successes, particularly on the northern front and in the Gaza Strip. Some of these achievements can be attributed to chance, such as the elimination of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar. In the war with Hezbollah, a combination of operational preparations, excellent intelligence, and a severe strategic miscalculation by Hassan Nasrallah, coupled with some good fortune, has left the Iranian-backed organization facing the worst crisis in its history. This achievement arguably creates the opportunity for Israel to continue fighting Hezbollah, as the threat of war with the organization has long been a significant factor deterring Israel from attacking Iran. Some now call for the expansion of the war to include Iran once the threat posed by Hezbollah has been eliminated. This raises the question: Why not continue fighting against both Hezbollah and Iran?

Furthermore, given the IDF's recent successes on the northern front and the recognition that Hamas is at a military low point (with the IDF chief of staff even asserting that the organization has been militarily defeated), some argue that time is on Israel's side, suggesting there is no rush to conclude the campaign. There are also those who contend that had Israel acquiesced to Hamas's demands to end the campaign in Gaza several months ago, the achievements on the northern border would not have occurred, and Hezbollah could have posed an even greater threat to Israeli security. From this perspective, one might conclude that it might be preferable for Israel to continue the war with full force and without a fixed end date. But is this truly the case?

Summary of Recommendations

Efforts should be made to end the war through a UN Security Council resolution or an agreement among the major powers calling for a cessation of hostilities (timed for after the upcoming US presidential election and before the inauguration of the new president).

With each campaign approaching its culminating point, Israel's political leadership must unify these efforts into a cohesive exit strategy:

The operational component involves synchronizing all tactical achievements to align at a decisive moment:

1. Against Hezbollah: Israel should complete the ground operation in Lebanon to enable negotiations for a significantly enhanced ceasefire agreement (1701++).
2. Against Hamas: In the Gaza Strip, Israeli forces should withdraw from the city centers and redeploy to staging areas that allow for continued operational pressure while simultaneously working toward a comprehensive hostage deal. This would entail halting hostilities and withdrawing from Gaza in exchange for the hostages' release. Following the completion of the deal, Israel must establish legitimacy to continue its actions against Hamas, as part of its right to protect its citizens.
3. Against Iran: Israel should complete a series of strikes against Iran up to the culminating point, which could result in one of two outcomes: containment of Iran, which would mean shifting the deterrence balance in Israel's favor, or direct attacks on Iran's energy facilities and its nuclear program, fundamentally altering the threat landscape against Israel over time.

The diplomatic component includes establishing an internationally agreed-upon framework for a multifront resolution and a ceasefire. This would mean a significantly strengthened security arrangement on Israel's northern border and in relation to Iran. To achieve this, Israel will require coordination with the United States, which could influence a Security Council resolution or facilitate a joint US–Russian call for a ceasefire on all fronts. In either case, Israel must ensure that any Security Council resolution or international call includes a ceasefire on all fronts, an agreement on the release of the hostages, constraints on Iran's destabilizing influence in the Middle East, and detailed plans for improved security arrangements on Israel's northern border (an upgraded version of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, including an expanded mandate and an operational enforcement mechanism).

Israel Must Not Miss the “Strategic Culminating Point”

Israel's unique characteristics require it to operate within a strict timeframe—a core principle that is enshrined in the IDF's 2018 operational doctrine. This principle stems from Israel's specific attributes: its small geographical size, its deep ties to the democratic Western world, and its free-market economy, which is based on the country's high-tech industries. These characteristics compel recognition of two fundamental truths:

1. An endless war of attrition is the worst-case scenario. Even if such a war ends in military victory, the economic, social, and international costs would likely outweigh any tactical or military achievements.

2. Military achievements must be translated into diplomatic successes to ensure enhanced national security for the long term. Tactical military victories, however significant, can rapidly lose their impact if not backed by a complementary diplomatic achievement.

The conclusion is obvious: Israel must strive for a diplomatic achievement at the peak of its operational and tactical successes, with timing being an important factor. Determining the strategic culminating point involves skillfully coordinating military and diplomatic actions. Reaching an agreement prematurely could mean missing an opportunity to exert additional pressure on the enemy and secure a more favorable resolution for Israel. Conversely, waiting too long could erode military gains, allow the enemy to adapt, and reduce the potential for diplomatic achievements.

The concept of the “strategic culminating point” has been the subject of much discussion throughout history. It is acknowledged that every military strategy has its culminating point, beyond which the strategy is no longer effective and can even become counterproductive. Military history is replete with examples of nations that have been defeated because they operated after the culminating point. Three examples will suffice here: the arrogance that led to the fall of Napoleon against the British and Russia; the Nazi offensive against the Soviet Union; and even the brutal campaign launched by ISIS, which led to the formation of the largest military coalition since World War II. The most recent example is Hezbollah’s strategy of equations and its willingness to walk a fine line toward chaos, which ultimately led it to the very chaos it sought to avoid. If Nasrallah had accepted several months ago the proposal by US Special Envoy Amos Hochstein, Hezbollah might be in a much stronger position than it is today.

Therefore, precisely at this time, when there is a relatively positive attitude among the Israeli public—apart from the unbearably painful subject of the hostages who remain in captivity in the Gaza Strip—it is crucial to discuss the culminating point. Israel must reach this culminating point with a clear diplomatic framework that is acceptable to the international community. It is like driving along a freeway at 100 miles per hour, when it is clear that you will have to exit soon. It is far better to be prepared in advance for the exit than to leave it to chance or to look angrily in the rearview mirror when you miss the optimal opportunity to exit. To continue the metaphor, continuing along the freeway at full speed could plunge Israel into endless wars of attrition—the worst-case scenario for its national security.

The Nature of Israel’s Current Campaigns

Before addressing the timing for ending the conflict, it is essential to assess Israel’s operational situation across its four fronts:

1. The campaign against Hezbollah and Iran's other proxies: Hezbollah has suffered massive losses, yet without a coordinated operation deep into Lebanese territory, the organization will not be decisively defeated. While Hezbollah is still in a stage of shock, it is expected to recover over time. Iran's other proxies, such as the militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen, continue to launch their attacks against Israel in accordance with a clear policy of attrition. Although the extent of the rocket fire is small, it still persists.
2. The campaign against Iran: The confrontation between Israel and Iran has intensified into a direct conflict. Following Israel's significant response to Iran's ballistic missile attack on October 1, a wide range of new operational possibilities has emerged if the escalation continues and Iran insists on another round of tit-for-tat responses. Since Israel does not have the capability to militarily defeat Iran or to overthrow the regime there (a challenge even for the United States), Israel must conduct its campaign in a calculated manner while making every effort to avoid a war of attrition.
3. The campaign against Hamas: The military wing of Hamas is no longer functioning as a coordinated military force. However, despite the assessment of the IDF chief of staff, it seems that the organization has yet to be defeated. Nonetheless, it is clear that its military capabilities have been dismantled (we could refer to this as organizational defeat in that it can no longer function as a cohesive combat organization; although individual arms are still operative, they are no longer coordinated and do not have shared goals).

By dismantling Hamas's terrorist infrastructure, the IDF has the freedom of action to continue targeting Hamas even after the war has ended, but this will prolong the fighting. However, Israel is still a long way from achieving its two primary objectives of the war: securing the release of the dozens of hostages held in Gaza tunnels, with negotiations for their freedom stalled, and establishing a civilian administration to replace Hamas, ensuring that it does not rebuild its strength to its previous lethal capacities.

More concerning, the Gaza Strip is descending into chaos—a situation that could ultimately aid Hamas's survival. At the same time, Israel is on the verge of retaking the northern Gaza Strip and may even impose military rule there to manage the distribution of humanitarian aid. This approach would be tantamount to reoccupying Gaza, with all that would entail, including the need for economic and human resources, withstanding harsh international criticism, a deepening of Israel's international isolation (including restrictions on arms sales). Such a move could also endanger peace accords and normalization agreements with our Arab neighbors, intensify the legal campaign against Israeli leaders, and exacerbate tensions with the United States.

4. The international campaign: Israel's standing in the international community, particularly in Europe, North America, and the Arab world, is deteriorating. Although Jerusalem enjoys full support from the United States, this backing may come with an expiration date. Economically, the largest credit rating agencies continue to downgrade Israel's rating and have even added negative forecasts. Even if the war were to end tomorrow, it will take months or even years before Israel's credit rating is restored. Therefore, the sooner the war ends, the easier it will be for Israel to embark on the lengthy process of regaining its economic stability.

The Obvious Conclusion: Israel Needs a Comprehensive Exit Strategy

Each of Israel's four campaigns is approaching a culminating point:

1. Against Hezbollah: Once the IDF has cleared Hezbollah from the villages adjacent to the Israel–Lebanon border and has destroyed the underground infrastructure of the Radwan Force, Hezbollah will find itself at an all-time low: its strategic capabilities will have been undermined, it will no longer have the means to conduct significant cross-border attacks, and its command-and-control systems will have been dismantled. This reality could allow Israel to secure enhanced security arrangements along its northern border, including an agreement in principle to disarm Hezbollah and the other armed militias in Lebanon in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1559. Even if the implementation of that resolution is uncertain, Israel must ensure that Hezbollah is kept out of the area south of the Litani River in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1701. In any case, Israel should be adamant in demanding any future oversight agreement that allows the IDF to enforce the terms of any agreement that is reached, if necessary.
2. Against Iran: Israel responded forcefully to Iran's attack on October 1, in which around 200 missiles were launched directly from Iranian territory toward Israel. Even before that attack, thanks to close coordination with Washington, the United States had deployed THAAD air defense systems across the country, significantly boosting Israel's operational capacity and sending an important strategic message to Iran. Iranian leaders assumed that Israel had a limited number of Arrow interceptor missiles, but the addition of the American interceptors has significantly increased Israel's capacity to prepare for multiple waves of attacks. Iran's leaders must now consider whether to respond to Israel's latest attack and risk falling into the strategic trap set by Israel and the United States. This would mean responding at a time when Iran's air defense capabilities are weakened, its stockpile of missiles dwindling, and its production capacity for new missiles severely damaged. This situation clearly affords Israel broad freedom of action to attack targets that would harm the Iranian economy or, more importantly, to destroy the infrastructure and

capabilities of Iran's nuclear program. It is obvious to all that this would be a successful culmination point.

3. Against Hamas: Israel's campaign in the Gaza Strip reached its successful culminating point with the defeat of Hamas's Rafah Brigade and the elimination of Sinwar. Although Israel can continue to conduct raids to suppress any resurgence attempts by Hamas, the absence of an alternative governing authority to combat Hamas's recovery efforts and to allow Israel freedom of action has moved Israel away from the culminating point. The reoccupation of the northern Gaza Strip and the transfer of responsibility for civilian affairs there to Israel (either directly or indirectly, through Israeli-funded private security firms) could force Israel to take control of Gaza for years. This would mean reoccupying and annexing the Gaza Strip to Israel.
4. On the international front: After the election on November 5, the "lame duck" period will begin in the United States, during which President Biden will enter a two-month period where he can act with fewer restraints. Currently, just days before the US presidential election, any hesitation in efforts to find a diplomatic exit from the multi-front war, which has far-reaching consequences beyond the region, will clearly translate into political capital for the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, and would harm the chances of the Democratic candidate, Vice President Kamala Harris.

The situation is likely to change after the election. Whether it is won by the Republicans or the Democrats, outgoing President Joe Biden, a supporter of Israel, will have more freedom to solidify his presidential legacy by bringing an end to the war in Gaza and increasing American support for Ukraine. This will be a dangerous period for Israel, which could face repercussions for any perceived defiance or public criticism of the US president. Therefore, Israel would be well advised to initiate a conclusive diplomatic move during this period. Such an initiative would be infinitely preferable to a framework imposed upon us, such as a UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. The Israeli government should view this as an opportunity and ensure that any proposal presented to the Security Council aligns with Israel's interests. Ignoring this could lead to an imposed framework that may not ensure Israel's long-term security stability on all fronts and might not necessarily include the release of the hostages—something that the United States might not oppose.

A Framework to Conclude the War by Means of a UN Security Council Resolution or a Major Power Agreement (Post-US Election and Pre-Inauguration of a New President)

With each campaign approaching its culminating point, Israel's political leadership must unify these efforts into a cohesive exit strategy:

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If Hamas's leadership, following the elimination of Sinwar, refuses to release the hostages as part of a comprehensive international arrangement, as described, then Israel should separate the fronts. In that case, the IDF should fully focus its power on intensifying strikes against Hamas until it agrees to a deal that includes the release of all hostages in exchange for a broad release of Palestinian prisoners. Continued fighting against Hamas would then become a separate campaign, distinct from the multifront war, which would be possible if Israel utilizes the successful culminating point to advance the proposed diplomatic resolution.

Conclusion

Israel's political leadership is sorely tempted to continue the war. The longer the war continues, the more tactical achievements Israel accumulates and the devastating failure of October 7 recedes into the past. However, political leadership is not judged by tactical gains but rather by the improvement of the long-term security realities.

Such improvement requires optimal timing to transition from military action to diplomatic means.

It is possible to ask, of course, whether Israel is still far from the culminating point and should wait for a potential point in the future. However, this is not the question that the political leadership should be asking. The right question is: When can Israel secure a ceasefire that aligns with its conditions, meeting both immediate and long-term interests? If that point has been reached, there is no purpose in continuing operational efforts, particularly when doing so could entail significant costs that may erode any operational benefits. It is worth mentioning a truth that seems to have been overlooked in the last year: War is not an end in itself but a means of achieving a better security reality. This should be the focus, with full force and clear intent.