Israel's National Security Concept: Functional Incoherence and the October 7 Disaster

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The October 7, 2023, attack recharged discussions surrounding Israel's national security concept. This article claims that the national security concept consists of three interwoven layers—security doctrine, security strategy and military strategy (or operational concept in the Israeli jargon)—and that their misalignment is a prominent reason that led to Israel's failure. Accordingly, the article attempts to present a partial answer to why the October 7 failure occurred, unlike the investigations so far, which address what happened and not why. The author argues that the renewed discussion of this issue does not distinguish clearly enough between the national security concept per se and its implementation through security decision-making. The principles of the existing national security concept were relevant enough to successfully cope with the October 7 attack, and the failure resulted from how they were applied in practice by both the political echelon and the military leadership. The article presents and analyzes the three layers of the national security concept and their misalignment in the years before October 7, 2023, and examines the corrections needed to improve decision-making processes and the functional coherence of the national security concept.

Keywords: Security concept, security doctrine, security strategy, military strategy, grand strategy, strategic assessment, military strategy, operational plans, multi-year force buildup plan

Introduction

Following the October 7 attack and the subsequent Swords of Iron War, there is renewed interest in Israel's national security concept. We can identify several different approaches to this renewed interest:

- An approach that focuses the discussion mainly on the operational level, with an emphasis on the deficiencies that were revealed in military intelligence and in Israel's

force buildup before the war. Proponents of this approach refer to the change needed in Israel's national security concept following the war, mainly in terms of investing significant resources to strengthen the IDF in preparation for the military challenges expected in future wars. The work of the Nagel Commission that presented recommendations on the security budget and force buildup for the upcoming

years represents a notable example of this approach .

- Another approach centers on the need to adapt the basic principles of the national security concept to current reality, with an emphasis on the deficiencies revealed before the war in the Israeli deterrence concept toward non-state actors.
- Others focus the discussion on the need to improve the political leadership's decision-making processes. One example is the bill proposed by Members of Knesset Gadi Eisenkot and Yuli Edelstein, which aims to require an incoming government to draft a written and approved national security strategy.
- Some argue that the problem lies in Israel's lack of an officially approved and up-to-date security concept, which makes it difficult to develop a security response to the challenges it faces.
- One approach that seeks to formulate a new national security concept that is adapted to the circumstances that led to October 7 and the results of the Swords of Iron War, is centered on ideas of prevention, aggressive enforcement, and acting like a regional power.

Behind the various approaches are implicit assumptions about the main failures that led to the October 7 disaster. There may also be other motivations for the approaches being developed on this issue. For example, focusing the discourse on the military-operational level could serve the political leadership's desire to reduce its portion of the blame for the events of October 7.

The premise of this article is that the national security concept consists of three different layers—**security doctrine, security strategy and military strategy**—that need to be aligned with one another. Before October 7, there was a lack of functional coherence between these layers, and this greatly undermined Israel's security response to the threats it faced. This article examines the content of the layers that comprise Israel's national security concept and the gaps that developed between them.

The main conclusion that emerges from the analysis is that **central principles of Israel's existing security doctrine provided an appropriate response to its strategic circumstances on the eve of October 7 but were not applied appropriately across the different layers in the years preceding the attack.** In this context, the political leadership strayed from the basic principles of the security doctrine, particularly the principle of deterrence, did not maintain adequate control over the IDF's military strategy and failed to nurture the alignment and synchronization needed between the three layers of the national security concept. The IDF's military strategy also deviated from the pillars of the security doctrine and in practice, undermined the balance between the layers and operated according to a logic that was not consistent with the security doctrine and was not discussed in depth with the political leadership.

To restore its national security following the Swords of Iron War, Israel must maintain and develop the basic principles of its security doctrine, create alignment between the security strategy and military strategy layers and thus create the necessary coherence in the national security concept as a whole. Furthermore, the acquisition of military nuclear capabilities by Iran will require the adaptation of Israel's national security concept to this reality. Most of the responsibility for this lies with the political leadership, and it needs to significantly improve its decision-making process and oversight of security issues.

Conceptual Framework

The national security concept is not a precise prescription for coping with every security challenge but an overall framework for creating a general security response to the State of Israel's fundamental security condition. This response should enable Israel, through specific

decision-making, to successfully address the range of challenges and crises it faces. The conceptual framework presented here is based on a differentiation between three inherently interconnected layers that together form the main principles of Israel's national security concept. Israel's national security concept is not formalized in an approved written document but exists as implicit guidelines that have developed since the 1950s.

The initial layer contains conceptual components developed to address Israel's fundamental security situation and the basic principles of the response at the strategic level. This is the layer of the **security doctrine**. The third layer is the functional layer—**the military strategy** of Israel's force build-up and the use of Israel's military force. The layer that connects these levels is the **security strategy**, which embodies the strategic preferences of the political leadership, along with decisions on short-term **security policy** based on current strategic-security assessments.

The Security Doctrine Layer

The security doctrine is an umbrella term for principles that underlie how Israel addresses its fundamental security problems. These principles, which are largely ongoing and fixed over time, reflect:

- Israel's national vision, such as building a national home for the Jewish people; the aspiration for peace; the desire for a connection with its regional neighbors; relations with the world; and the connection with Diaspora Jews.
- Defining the country's fundamental security conditions, such as addressing basic regional hostility; geographical and topographical asymmetry regional balance-of-power; and external involvement in the region.
- The basic principles of the national security approach, such as the overall security orientation, the division (according to Ben-Gurion) between "staying power" and "striking power," the architecture of the

security establishment, and the strategic outputs required.

These principles relate to the basic components that guide Israel's overall security approach and the military logic that is supposed to guide the activity of the political echelon and the military leadership in the other layers of the national security concept. Among other things, these basic components led the drafters of Israel's security concept to the conclusion that it was not possible to impose an end to the conflict with the Arabs through force and that Israel needed to stand firm over the long term until it was accepted into the region. Consequently, the country adopted an overall **defensive security strategy** that is executed through an **offensive military doctrine**. Israel's defensive security orientation entails the assumption that the Israeli-Arab conflict will need to be ultimately resolved through political measures based on Israel standing firm (the so-called "iron wall" security orientation) rather than on an overall military victory.

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The security doctrine focuses on issues such as the mix between Israeli society's staying power, which is built up during periods of calm, and its offensive power in times of war; the need for basic deterrence and for a qualitative military, educational, and technological advantage; and high-quality national security decision-making, etc. The security doctrine also includes reference to fundamental principles derived from these basic components. These relate to questions such as the degree of Israel's security-military independence versus dependence on other countries; relevant *casus belli* and goals of war; Israel's security borders; the nature of

the connection with Diaspora Jews; issues of internal security and the treatment of minorities; and other issues on the conceptual-theoretical level.

Within this framework, the security doctrine layer also defines the strategic outputs defined by the political echelon to ensure Israel's security. The most well-known outputs are the three pillars specified by David Ben-Gurion: **deterrence, early warning, and decisive victory,** to which the Meridor Committee (2006) sought to add a fourth pillar—**defense, specifically from ballistic missiles and rocket threats**. The security doctrine defines the need to maintain these pillars to protect the State of Israel's security. In practice, **their implementation is dependent on the actions of the political echelon and military leadership in the layers of security strategy and military strategy.** The security doctrine defines the outputs needed for maintaining security, and the role of the other layers is to execute them in practice.

This underlines the necessity of alignment between the national security principles defined in the security doctrine and the actions taken in the other layers. My argument is that before the October 7 attack, **the three layers were not properly aligned**. While the principles of the security doctrine were valid and relevant to Israel's strategic reality, **they were not applied by the political echelon and the military leadership in the other more functional layers of the national security paradigm.** It should be emphasized that alignment or coherence between these layers in the context of deterrence, early warning, decisive victory, and defense is not a given; rather it requires continuous and consistent maintenance by the political echelon and security leadership.

The Security Strategy Layer

Security strategy is an umbrella term for the national security worldview of the incumbent government, along with its security policy in practice. This layer aims to address security challenges in the short and medium term, to adapt to changing circumstances, and it to define more specific security steps needed to uphold the strategic outputs defined by the security doctrine. This layer serves as a bridge between the principles of the security doctrine and the layer of the military strategy.

As such, the security strategy layer includes several levels of thought and action. The first is the grand strategy of the political leadership, which embodies its worldview regarding how to address the country's security. The grand strategy encompasses the government's preferences for coping with security problems, based, among other things, on its political and policy preferences. Consequently, grand strategy tends to be replaced with changes of government or leaders. The second is its security policy that is determined periodically in the context of the evolving landscape of threats, opportunities, and resources in a given context, in order to advance security activity in accordance with the government's grand strategy and periodic strategic assessments, while attempting to align it with the strategic outputs determined in the security doctrine layer. The third is handling crises or urgent situations that require immediate decision-making.

To-date, Israel's governments have generally refrained from formulating an official grand strategy that would serve as a directive for political-security conduct during their term. The heavy burden of ongoing security problems encourages policymakers to focus on the day-to-day at the expense of formulating long-term strategic planning and systematic working practices. However, this preference is rooted not only in the immediate pressures of the present, but also in a strategic culture that favors a preoccupation with current affairs at the expense of grand strategic thinking.

There is no real limit on time, resources, or expertise for conducting grand strategic thinking, and in the security reality of the State of Israel, this has significant potential advantages. Grand strategic thinking can increase Israel's

room for maneuver by bringing up alternatives and policy directions across the entire range of considerations and options before the circumstances of reality harden and create the need to cope with urgent incidents and crisis-management resulting from them. However, the politicization that characterizes the decision-making process in Israel helps explain the insufficient investment in formulating such a strategy. Ideological considerations, with an emphasis on the Palestinian issue, prevent any real discussion of a range of specific strategic avenues from even getting off the ground.

In response to this missing layer, Members of Knesset Gadi Eisenkot and Yuli Edelstein are proposing a National Security Strategy bill, which addresses what is missing. According to the bill, the National Security Council (NSC), in consultation with government ministries and security agencies, will formulate a national security strategy that will be approved by an incoming government within 150 days of being formed and will subsequently be updated annually. The national security strategy will include an analysis of the foundations of the national security doctrine, including the strategic outputs needed to ensure Israel's security, challenges based on identified threats, capacities for attaining the national security objectives, an examination of weaknesses, and prioritization.

If the bill is approved, it will be able to reduce the ongoing gap in the security strategy layer, and give strategic direction to periodic strategic assessments in order to formulate specific security policy recommendations for the purpose of implementing the national security strategy. Eisenkot and Edelstein's bill intentionally links the government's grand strategy with the annual strategic assessment that the NSC is supposed to submit at least once a year to the Ministerial Committee on National Security (the Security Cabinet), according to the National Security Council Law from 2008. The bill states that this annual strategic assessment

will explicitly relate to the national security strategy (section 2 [6]).

The grand strategy and the government's annual strategic assessment are a substantive basis for guiding Israel's continuing security activity, but necessitates the maintenance of an ongoing decision-making process on national security issues. In light of the gaps of knowledge among Israel's political leadership on national security issues, in May 2016, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appointed a committee headed by Major General (res.) Yaakov Amidror to examine ways to improve the work of the Security Cabinet and formulate recommendations on the issue. In May 2017, the Security Cabinet adopted the Amidror Committee's report, which recommended dedicating resources to improving the learning and depth of understanding necessary for cabinet ministers, the need to make decisions with long-term significance in times of calm, and how to manage the cabinet during times of emergency or war. Despite several NSC proposals to improve the cabinet's work process following the report, there does not seem to have been significant improvement in the professionalism of the cabinet ministers either during times of calm or emergency.

In terms of Israel's overall national security concept, the most important single variable for improving national security is the quality of the country's strategic-security decision-making.[1] The security strategy layer is based on decision-making processes at various levels—grand strategy, annual and periodic strategic assessments, the work of the Security Cabinet, and consultations and discussions on current security issues. These processes together are supposed to provide a connection to and a foundation for the operational level executed by the various security agencies. This requires the political leadership to deepen its understanding of the relationship between strategic components and the operational layer of the IDF and the other security agencies.

The Military Strategy Layer

Military strategy is an umbrella term for the principles of force application, command and control, preparedness for routine and emergency situations, and the force buildup of the IDF and the security establishment. The military strategy of the IDF, as the main security force, should be derived from two parallel axes—the principles of the security doctrine layer and the strategic outputs defined in it, as well as from the security strategy layer—and should comprise the proposed way to implement them. This requires open dialogue between the military leadership and the political leadership, which is critical and must occur in a continuous and focused manner.

In practice, the political leadership has failed to guide the IDF with a long-term strategic perspective or to perform close supervision and control over its military strategy, including its operational plans, multi-year force buildup plans, and organizational changes that are included in them. In this situation, **the political leadership does not shape the IDF's main planning and operational processes through the security strategy layer, and in reality, a gap emerges between the layers of the national security concept, creating an imbalance between them.**

Exposure to operational plans only when they are about to be implemented does not allow the political leadership to influence their content due to time constraints. As a result, it is forced to approve them—whether or not they support the strategic objectives set by the military leadership for the operation or war.

A tangible and recent expression of the incoherence between the layers is the work of the Nagel Commission for Evaluating the Security Budget and Force Buildup. It was appointed to review the IDF's military strategy and force buildup, including the allocation of the budget in light of the ongoing Swords of Iron War. It did not, however, do so based on a coherent strategic concept but rather by bottom-up threat assessments and scenarios presented by security officials. As the commission itself attests, its work was not done in the context of Israel's overall national security concept: "**The overall national security concept** of the State of Israel was not presented to the commission and, by definition, it is the responsibility of the political leadership" (p. 17, emphasis in the original). In other words, even after the October 7 attack, the prime minister and the commission that he appointed still fail to recognize the necessity of coherence between the layers of the national security concept, implying that there is no need to connect them. Deep involvement and guidance from the political leadership regarding operational plans and force buildup is a necessity, especially for a country facing such serious threats as Israel. However, most members of the political leadership, including the ministers on the Security Cabinet, are not familiar with the IDF's operational plans and do not guide their preparation or assess their alignment with Israel's overall national security concept. **As a result, the military leadership is, in most cases, forced to determine strategic objectives on its own in order to guide its military operational planning.**[2] The necessary dialogue is not taking place, in which the construction of the IDF's operational plans are made based on strategic guidance from the political leadership.

Exposure to operational plans only when they are about to be implemented does not allow the political leadership to influence their content due to time constraints. As a result, it is forced to approve them—whether or not they support the strategic objectives set by the military leadership for the operation or war. In order to connect and synchronize between the layers, a different decision-making process is needed regarding the approval process of the IDF's operational plans. Within this context, the IDF must first present the strategic purpose of each plan to the political leadership, which

should then assess whether it aligns with the strategic goals that it wishes to achieve. Only after concluding this discussion should the IDF begin to plan the operational methods to achieve the goals and the designated purpose. Following this, the NSC should assess whether the actual planning aligns with the goals and the purpose and report its findings to the Security Cabinet. This dialogue between the political and military leadership surrounding operational plans must be ongoing and continuous.

With respect to force buildup, too, the political leadership needs to be well acquainted with the IDF's multi-year plans. Without such guidance and familiarity the political leadership will encounter strategic surprises, forcing it to manage war in ways it did not intend. Although the Security Cabinet officially approves the IDF's multi-year force buildup plans, they are generally presented for approval without prior strategic direction from the political leadership, and it is difficult to influence them once they have already been formulated within the IDF.

It should be emphasized that decisions regarding the IDF's force buildup are of great importance, as they have broad implications in a rigid system. Canceling weapon platforms or military units such as armored brigades have long-term impacts, and rebuilding them is a lengthy process—not only in terms of acquiring the platforms themselves but also in training, budgeting, ammunition stock levels, logistical handling, etc.

An example of the Security Cabinet's partial involvement in force buildup plans appears in the State Comptroller's February 2023 report on the force buildup of the armored-tank forces. According to the report, during the six years from 2016 to 2022, the competence-level of the reserve force, including the reserve armored-tank forces, was not presented to the government. This despite Section 3(a) of the Reserve Service Law, which stipulates that the government is responsible for determining the size of the reserve forces and assessing, at least once a year, based on the Minister of Defense's

recommendation, the need to change the size of the reserve forces.

Furthermore, even though the Security Cabinet approved the Gideon Multi-Year Plan for the years 2016-2020, in January 2019, the then new chief of staff, Aviv Kohavi decided to end the multi-year plan that year and to begin a new multi-year plan—Tnufa—in 2020. This occurred without the direction or the approval of the political leadership, even though it included significant changes, such as the closure of tank brigades.

Another expression of the misalignment between the layers of the security concept is the practice of the IDF to formulate what is known as the IDF Strategy, which aims, among other things, to be a platform for dialogue with the political leadership in the absence of ongoing practical guidance from it. As Meir Finkel wrote (2020), the IDF Strategy documents,

> …were written for the army's internal purposes and, therefore, were written in military language, using terminology that is partly unfamiliar to the political leadership and the public […] moreover, the interface between the IDF's senior command and the political leadership regarding the approval of these documents was very limited, not due to the army's unwillingness to present them for discussion and approval, but due to Israel's longstanding tradition of lacking official national security documents. This tradition reflects the political leadership's clear preference not to commit to any specific concept and instead to approve what the army presents, even if only in general terms and retrospectively […] we can say that this represents a deliberate disconnect of the political leadership from the military leadership, apparently in order to maintain the former's leeway, though some in the political

leadership have called for reducing this disconnect in recent years.

In practice, without close guidance and oversight from the political leadership regarding the military strategy of the IDF and the other security agencies, they are forced to develop and implement their own concepts. Meanwhile, in recent decades, the IDF itself has not ensured that its military strategy aligns with the principles of the security doctrine and has weakened its ability to provide elements of deterrence, early warning, and decisive victory as necessary. This situation creates a broad basis for incoherence in defining and achieving the requisite strategic outputs from the security doctrine layer. In the next section, I will attempt to illustrate the impact of the misalignment between the layers of the national security concept on meeting the strategic outputs required by the security doctrine layer.

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Strategic Outputs in Light of October 7

As stated, the security doctrine defines several strategic outputs that are essential for protecting Israel's national security. The first and primary output is **deterrence**. This refers to basic deterrence that aims to create periods of quiet that are as sustainable as possible, in order to focus national activity on developing the country, its economy and society (in Ben-Gurion's terms—building and solidifying Israel as a state).

Basic deterrence relies on a consistent, ongoing effort to dissuade Israel's enemies from taking significant steps to harm it, even though Israel cannot necessarily prevent every hostile act against it. The main purpose of deterrence is to minimize military actions against it to low threat levels and lengthen the intervals between attempts to carry them out. It is called basic deterrence because it aims to address the most significant threats to Israel and to convince its enemies that they cannot bring about Israel's destruction through military means, and therefore, it is pointless to try.

Israel's basic deterrence is ultimately tested in the minds of its enemies and their perception of Israel as a whole, not just by looking at the objective military components of its strength. The development of basic deterrence relies, among other things, on Israel's enemies' perception of the combination of its military and strategic capabilities, the resolve to use them, internal cohesion and resilience, and international support for Israel. From this perspective, **maintaining and strengthening Israel's basic deterrence are not tasks that the political leadership can assign exclusively to the military leadership, which is in charge of key components of Israel's military strength; the political leadership also bears heavy responsibility for the broader political and social context of Israel's basic deterrence.**

In the security strategy layer, in the year prior to the October 7 attack, the political leadership did not prevent the weakening of Israel's basic deterrence in at least two spheres that are critical in the eyes of Hamas and the Axis of Resistance: the state of internal unity, given the advancement of judicial reform, and the escalating disagreements with the United States. This was despite warnings from intelligence officials and others that Israel's basic and situational deterrence had been compromised. **The political leadership did not assess the impact of the non-military components of basic deterrence on the overall balance sheet from the enemy's perspective.**

Based on the partial open-source information we have, it seems that the damage to internal unity in Israel was perceived by Hamas as

weakening Israel's staying power, potentially undermining its ability to mobilize and utilize the IDF's striking power against Gaza. It is possible that, from Hamas' perspective, the worsening of Israel's disagreements with the United States might undermine the American commitment to defend Israel. These two factors, which the political leadership did not take care to prevent due to insufficient attention to their possible impact on Israel's basic deterrence, contributed—along with other processes—to Hamas' perception of the window of opportunity to attack Israel in October 2023. As alluded to above, Israel's "iron wall" is not only physical; it is also has a psychological component.

In the test of cumulative deterrence, the previous operations in Gaza did not lead to longer intervals of calm between Hamas and the Islamic Jihad's provocations or to a reduction of the firepower that they used against Israel. The intensity and range of the attacks increased with each operation, but Israel adhered to the approach that its deterrence of Hamas was effective. In May 2023, at the end of Operation Shield and Arrow, Prime Minister Netanyahu declared:

> We have changed the deterrence equation. I have no doubt about this at all […] I cannot say that we will never return to attacks or when exactly this will happen, but there is no doubt that we have strengthened Israeli deterrence […] this has several precedents […] for example, what we did to Hamas in Operation Guardian of the Walls—we dealt them a blow that they had never suffered in their history, and since then, they have not fired a single rocket into our territory […] therefore they did not participate in the previous operation or in the current operation.

The political leadership's adherence to the view that Israeli deterrence against Hamas was effective stemmed from several motivations on the level of its strategic-political outlook. The government's policy on the Palestinian issue was based on maintaining the differentiation between Gaza and the West Bank, including maintaining Hamas as the ruler in Gaza as a way to weaken the Palestinian Authority and its leader Mahmoud Abbas. This strategic approach filtered into the military strategy with respect to refraining from decisively defeating Hamas and looking for "alternatives to decisive victory." Within this framework, the political leadership's directives on Gaza included postponing confrontations, relying on the physical barrier, conducting periodic strikes, and maintaining Hamas as an effective, restraining, and restrained governmental authority. Despite the limited impact of the deterrence against Hamas, the political leadership relied on it excessively as a central pillar of its strategy in dealing with Gaza.

Senior military officials were also infected with optimism regarding the effectiveness of deterrence against Gaza and did not sound the alarm on the issue, even though in the recurrent outbreaks of violence, Hamas increased the intensity of the violence from round to round. In this context, Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021, in which Hamas' tunnel system was attacked from the air, was seen in Israel as a very important contribution to deterrence, even though the damage was actually limited. The head of the Operations Directorate at the time, Major General Aharon Haliva, claimed that the operation would lead to five years of quiet. Even after another operation—Operation Breaking Dawn in August 2022 against the Islamic Jihad, Haliva claimed that despite the need for another operation, he stood behind his statement. As Amir Lupovici writes, it seems that the military establishment was convinced of Israel's image as an actor that inspires deterrence and interpreted reality based on this image.

In contrast, it seems that from Hamas' perspective, Operation Guardian of the Walls showed Israel's weakness, not its strength. The

fact that Israel avoided a ground operation, along with the limited results of the air strike on the tunnel system, led Hamas to the realization that it was actually Israel that was deterred from fighting on the ground inside Gaza and that given the lack of success in damaging the tunnels from the air, it could survive intense Israeli retaliatory airstrikes (Hecht, 2024, p. 22). From here, it was a short leap to the belief that Hamas would be able to withstand an Israeli response to the planned October 7 attack, which would, in their estimation, be mainly from the air.

It is evident that in the period preceding the October 7 attack, no assessment was conducted by Israel regarding the balance of basic and situational deterrence vis-à-via Gaza. This, despite warnings from working-level officials about the state of deterrence and partial warnings about what was developing in Gaza. It seems that on the level of security strategy, the political leadership was focused on advancing judicial reform without considering how it undermined Israel's image of deterrence in the eyes of its enemies. In addition, it seems that even if there was increased cohesion of the Axis of Resistance in the "ring of fire" being built around Israel, normalization with Saudi Arabia was just around the corner, which was to fundamentally change the regional strategic balance sheet in Israel's favor. On the level of military strategy, the IDF leadership underestimated Hamas' determination to pursue its vision of destroying Israel and the organization's military capabilities to carry out the "Jericho Wall" plan to invade Israel, and refrained from raising a red flag to the political leadership. It seems that both the political echelon and the military leadership relied on their evaluations of the physical results of previous rounds of violence with Gaza and did not examine in depth the more influential broader strategic shifts in Israel's basic deterrence.

The belief that Hamas was deterred led to **a failure to provide advance warning**

of the October 7 attack. There were at least four main reasons for this failure. The first was underestimating the influence of the religious faith component of Hamas' approach in general and that of Sinwar in particular. For the organization, the war against Israel is a permanent state and a continuous obligation, and the final victory is guaranteed by Allah even if it is not achieved quickly. Consequently, there was a great willingness to suffer significant losses for the future fulfillment of the vision.[3]

The second reason was the underestimation of the enemy's capabilities. Even if Israel did not believe in Hamas' ability to carry out a plan such as the "Jericho Wall," the intelligence should have evaluated what the other side believed about its own capabilities. It is now clear that Sinwar believed that the right moment had come to pursue the destruction of Israel, given, in his eyes, sufficient military force buildup; the potential to create a multi-arena campaign by intensively enlisting Hezbollah, members of the Axis of Resistance, and Arabs from the West Bank and from inside Israel for war; and the ability to bypass the barrier and bring the fighting into Israel's territory.

The third reason was a failure originating from a change that occurred over time in the approach to intelligence gathering. An overreliance developed on intelligence based on communications (COMINT) and infiltrating the enemy's computers at the expense of human intelligence (HUMINT) and monitoring public sentiments and discussions. As a result, an intelligence-gathering imbalance emerged that enabled the enemy to hide most of its preparations. The warnings that were received were not tangible enough to break the misconception that Hamas was deterred (Hecht, 2024, pp. 25-29; Hazoot, 2024, pp. 327-342).

The fourth reason is that Israeli intelligence did not properly weigh two strategic factors that influenced Sinwar's sense of urgency to carry out the attack: the serious internal dispute that, in his view, weakened Israeli society; and the discussion of normalization between Israel

and Saudi Arabia, with the associated negative implications for the balance of power in the region and the Palestinian issue (Hecht, 2024, pp. 22-23).

It seems that the emphasis placed in recent years on gathering intelligence for targeting and assessing physical results (battle damage assessment—BDA) weakened the ability to gather and evaluate basic and strategic intelligence, resulting in an unbalanced intelligence-gathering approach. In this context, the intelligence organizations were successful in identifying and locating Hamas military targets in Gaza but failed to raise a flag that might have prompted Israeli actions that would have prevented the October 7 attack or at least enabled a successful military response to it .

In any case, as we learned from the Yom Kippur War, Israel must not allow deterrence to be the final line of defense against the possibility of war. Therefore, the security doctrine requires a strategic output of defensive capability based on the standing army, followed by **decisive victory** on the battlefield. According to the classic victory concept of the security doctrine, this requires that the regular forces be prepared and ready on the borders and in the West Bank, along with sufficient and trained reserve forces. In the last few decades, Israel moved away from this victory concept and downplayed the importance of offensive ground maneuvers as a core component of achieving decisive victory. In this spirit, the report of the Meridor Committee (2006), which examined Israel's security concept, recommended relying on the use of precision standoff fire and limited ground operations in order to reduce the attrition of Israeli forces and take international and regional political sensitivities into account. This change, the report argued, is made possible by technological advancements on the battlefield. It seems the assumption that the era of large wars had ended, and that this development enabled the reduction of the IDF's ground forces and ammunition stockpile, penetrated military strategy.

As a complementary measure, the Meridor report recommended developing and advancing an air-defense component to enable partial offensive measures to be carried out without the Israeli homefront experiencing retaliatory barrages. As a supplement to this, the report recommended developing **alternatives to decisive victory** in order to allow for exit mechanisms that do not rely on decisive victory but rather create a basis for temporary arrangements that end the military friction and enable a reasonable strategic reality. It seems that although the Meridor Committee report was not officially adopted by the Security Cabinet, in practice, the State of Israel implemented a model of alternatives to decisive victory in the rounds of fighting against Gaza since 2008. It did so without a strategic assessment of this model's impact on the other side's perspective regarding Israel's cumulative deterrence strength and its willingness to fight on the ground.

While the terrorist armies surrounding Israel—especially Hezbollah and Hamas—invested in force buildup and devising offensive operational plans, the IDF reduced the size, capability, and readiness of the ground forces of the standing army and the reserves. This reduction in the size of the land army and its capability for high-intensity war was not discussed in depth with the political leadership and apparently stemmed from the preferences of the IDF itself.

Moreover, on the level of the military strategy, while the terrorist armies surrounding Israel—especially Hezbollah and Hamas—invested in force buildup and devising offensive operational plans, the IDF reduced the size, capability, and readiness of the ground forces of the standing army and the reserves. This reduction in the size of the land army and its capability for high-intensity war was not discussed in depth with the political leadership and apparently stemmed from the preferences of the IDF itself. Given the limits of Israeli military force deployed

along the various borders and in the West Bank, there were not enough regular forces along the border with Gaza to cope with the October 7 attack. It seems that there was no awareness of the question of what would happen if there was no pre-warning of an attack, and if the barrier was breached by large-scale enemy forces.

Furthermore, the failure to defend the border with Gaza resulted from the building of a defense system directed against terrorist threats rather than against a large-scale military threat, even after Chief of Staff Kohavi started to relate to Hezbollah and Hamas as "terrorist armies." Although defense is the strongest form of combat, without awareness that the deterrence and early warning could fail, the Southern Command's defense concept was defective—based on deficient allocation of forces, non-investment in fortifying a defensive line that would protect the communities of the Western Negev, and a lack of connection between the forces and the air force and navy— all of which contributed to the disaster (Hazoot, 2024, pp. 332-335; Hecht, 2024, pp. 31-32).

Recommendations

The article's premise is that the most important single variable for improving Israel's national security is the quality of the strategic-military decision-making processes. Consequently, the article focused on examining the implications of the misalignment and incoherence between the various layers of the national security concept and, therefore, recommends making a deliberate and consistent effort to rectify the deficiencies that allowed the emergence of the conditions that culminated in the disaster of October 7. The emphasis is on improving decision-making processes in the security strategy layer and creating professional and continuous dialogue, including direction and control, of the military strategy layer.

For the time being, Israel should continue to base its national security concept on fulfilling the four existing strategic outputs: deterrence, early warning, decisive victory, and defense.

This does not mean that it is not necessary to examine the effectiveness of each of these outputs given the emerging strategic-security reality or to examine other outputs, but this should be done according to the investigations of the war and the conclusions of the various committees that must be established to investigate the reasons for the war and how it was conducted. Iran's possible transformation into a nuclear state will also require a thorough examination of the robustness of the overall national security concept.

In the security strategy layer, it is necessary to develop a format for formulating and approving a grand strategy and periodic strategic assessments. Eisenkot and Edelstein's bill, which aims to establish and institutionalize the formulation and approval of a grand strategy and the creation of a link between it and the content of the periodic strategic assessments, is highly significant in this respect. Both kinds of documents should be presented to the Security Cabinet, discussed seriously and approved by it.

In actuality, annual strategic assessments are not always presented to the cabinet, as required by the NSC Law, and they do not determine whether Israel is realizing the strategic outputs dictated by the security doctrine. **The annual strategic assessments must include a dedicated clear assessment of Israel's ability to provide the strategic outputs (deterrence, early warning, decisive victory, and defense) defined in the security doctrine in various scenarios.**

As a lesson from the October 7 attack, I propose that the NSC's annual strategic assessment institutionalize an examination of whether Israel is fulfilling the principles of the security doctrine, including:
- Evaluating the balance of Israel's basic deterrence not in its own eyes but also by examining the question of how Israel's enemies interpret the balance of deterrence based on dedicated assessments from the Military Intelligence Directorate, the Shin Bet, and the Mossad.

- Examining the intelligence-gathering concept. Such an examination on the eve of October 7 could perhaps have indicated that the reduction of human intelligence and the closing of the open-source intelligence Hatzav Unit, created an unbalanced intelligence-gathering concept that overly relied on one kind of intelligence—COMINT and infiltrating computer databases.
- Assessing Israel's defensive capability in case of failure of early warnings in various scenarios. Before October 7, there was no awareness of what would happen if there was no early warning, so the political leadership did not examine in depth the question of the IDF's defensive capability in the various arenas in case of surprise attacks. The NSC's annual strategic assessment should provide an examination of this issue with recommendations for ongoing discussions that are needed on the issue in the Security Cabinet.
- Further to this, the annual strategic assessment should examine the IDF's estimated ability to deliver decisive victory in various scenarios while examining the relation between achievements, costs, and time.
- The situation assessment should also examine Israel's ability to defend itself in various scenarios and recommend necessary improvements.

The current format of the annual strategic assessment should be changed and expanded, with an emphasis on adding these security and military components, along with continuing to examine the strategic balance sheet and alternatives for Israeli policy. This change would be a vital input into the overall security decision-making process and enable channeling security activity in the required directions while truly synchronizing with the IDF and the other security agencies. Such a change would require increased inter-organizational cooperation between the NSC and the security organizations, with an emphasis on the IDF.

In addition, the functioning of the Security Cabinet needs to be improved, as does its direct involvement in managing the security strategy layer and the monitoring of the military strategy layer. The time has come to enshrine in law the composition and powers of the Security Cabinet, including its obligation to examine and approve the security strategy and periodic strategic assessments and to hold regular discussions and monitoring on the issues of the IDF's force buildup, operational plans, the intelligence gathering concept, etc.

The NSC has a critical role in enhancing decision-making processes in accordance with the security concept, both by virtue of its role as the coordinator of the Security Cabinet's discussions and as the body that is supposed to monitor the implementation of its decisions, formulate a grand strategy and periodic strategic assessments to periodically overview the national security concept, and deepen government ministers' knowledge of national-security issues. Within this framework, the NSC can and should play a central role in strengthening the integration between the security strategy layer and the military strategy layer.

The military leadership must demand that the political leadership provide it with relevant directives and set strategic objectives, rather than continuing the practice, in their absence, of independently determining force buildup plans and operational planning. It must insist on this dialogue taking place. Moreover, the military leadership needs to cooperate with the NSC for the purpose of submitting the expanded and integrated strategic assessment to the political leadership. In addition, it must ensure, irrespective of the political leadership's conduct, effective integration with the required strategic outputs derived from the security doctrine layer and continuously evaluate its adherence to them.

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Notes

1 US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan made an identical claim in an article in *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2023) that analyzed the sources of American power (my emphasis):

"Nothing in world politics is inevitable. The underlying elements of national power, such as demography, geography, and natural resources, matter, but history shows that these are not enough to determine which countries will shape the future. **It is the strategic decisions countries make that matter most—how they organize themselves internally, what they invest in, whom they choose to align with and who wants to align with them, which wars they fight, which they deter, and which they avoid**."

2 In this context, it seems that there has been no change in the reality that the State Comptroller indicated in his report on Operation Protective Edge 2014: "The operational plans for the Gaza Strip were presented to the cabinet ministers before the cabinet determined the strategic objectives regarding the Gaza Strip. As a result, the military leadership was forced to outline the strategic objectives itself and plan accordingly."

3 This view is expressed in the connection that Sinwar made between the attack that he decided on and the 17th Surah of the Quran (the Surah about the night journey), which describes a battle in three stages between the Muslims and the Children of Israel—the Muslims attacking the Children of Israel (the "first promise"); afterward the Children of Israel fighting back; and finally the defeat of the Children of Israel by the Muslims and reaching the holy places (the "second promise"). At the very least, the religious faith component should have influenced the assessment of how much Hamas was deterred—not based on the level of physical damage to it in each previous round, but rather on a supplementary analysis of the non-tangible and cognitive elements of the balance of deterrence against a religious entity.