



Where Did We Go Wrong?

Avishay Ben Sasson-Gordis

Institute for National Security Studies—Tel Aviv University
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Israeli public discourse following October 7 has focused on the false “conceptions” that blinded us to the possibility that reality could develop as it did. The surprise caused to Israel by Hamas’ attack deeply undermined Israelis’ confidence in security professionals and, one would hope, those professionals’ confidence in themselves. More broadly, this should lead members of the security community to ask fundamental questions about their understanding of the world around us. Two of these questions are: “Where did I go wrong?” and “In which cases have I changed my mind?”

Recently, but before Operation Rising Lion, we held a discussion on a social media network that addressed the question “What were you mistaken about in the past two years?” The discussion’s participants, many of whom have relevant military or civilian research backgrounds, provided meaningful answers that could help us clarify the changes that have occurred in the way we perceive reality. This article touches on the key points of that discussion

Key Words: Swords of Iron, Hamas, Iran, Hezbollah, Rising Lion, strategic surprise.

Basic Conceptions on the Eve of the War

A central issue that came up was the surprise of October 7. Some of the discussion’s participants pointed out that prior to Hamas’ surprise attack, they had believed that the movement was interested in maintaining quiet for the purpose of building up its force for a future conflict and to provide for welfare needs in Gaza. Others had believed that the change the movement had undergone was even more profound. Their view on the eve of the war was that within Hamas, there had been a shift away from a strong jihadist identity toward the use of political and pragmatic tools in order to advance the movement’s goals.¹

Among those who underestimated the seriousness of Hamas’ intentions to destroy Israel, some mentioned that, accordingly, they had been mistaken in estimating the cost-benefit balance of conquering Gaza versus accepting Hamas’ force buildup. Thus they had opposed a proactive military campaign in the past instead of seeing it as the lesser of two evils. Some noted their surprise that Hamas was able to “bring Israel to its knees” and correspondingly stated that the assumption that the IDF would be able to contain Hamas turned out to have been mistaken.

It is worth noting that a topic that was not raised at all in the discussion was the Israeli policy of the differentiation between the

Palestinian Authority and Hamas, pursued by Israel's governments over the past fifteen years, which included refraining from comprehensive political processes with the Palestinians. The silence on this point might reflect the fact that participants who believed before the war that political processes were important have not changed their minds on this question, or alternatively, that they did not and continue to not see much value in political processes.

The Military Campaign in Gaza

The discussion on the fighting in Gaza in the Swords of Iron War revealed a split among participants. Some referred to the collapse of the IDF's border defense system on October 7 as a surprise, reflecting their mistaken assessment of the IDF's strength and readiness. Also regarding the war that followed, some indicated that they had been mistaken in their assumption that the ground forces were prepared for their missions. Meanwhile, other participants saw the number of IDF casualties, which was lower than what they had expected when they had previously imagined a campaign to conquer Gaza, as a mistake in their assessment of the cost of conquering Gaza. This is connected to the previously discussed error in the cost-benefit analysis of conquering Gaza compared to accepting Hamas' military buildup.

Another topic mentioned by many participants as a mistake was Israel's success in freeing hostages in partial deals. Note that it was not the occasional successes in hostage-release special operations that were seen as reflecting a mistaken assumption—perhaps participants assumed that a few such operations were possible—but the success of Hamas and Israel reaching a point where they were willing and able to carry out prisoner and hostage exchanges in a format that was not “everyone for everyone.” Also notably absent was a topic discussed extensively in the public discourse—the prolonging of the war, which was not brought up by any of the discussion's

participants as a topic on which they were surprised by developments.

The Campaign in the North

Similar to the mistake that some of the participants identified regarding the potential cost to IDF forces of a campaign in Gaza, a similar error was made regarding conflict with Hezbollah. The participants had expected that the IDF would have difficulty in a war against the Hezbollah forces, which were seen as superior to those of Hamas, leading them to price a war in Lebanon even higher than their already high assessment of the cost of a war in Gaza. The participants added that the mistake was especially pronounced with regards to the home-front. Years of discussing Hezbollah's firepower capabilities had prepared the Israeli public for a pounding of the Israeli home-front and massive damage to the cities of northern and central Israel.

To explain this mistake, some pointed out that the campaign developed very differently from previous assumptions about how a conflict with Hezbollah would unfold. If concerning Hamas, the error was the assumption that the movement would not initiate a proactive war, regarding Hezbollah, the mistaken assumption was that the war would begin with almost no prior warning or escalation and that if it developed out of ongoing friction, this would place Israel in an inferior position. This is because the assumption had been that Israeli success in such a war depended on carrying out a surprise opening strike, as it was reported that Israel had considered doing on October 11, 2023, and as it later did against Iran. In practice, the ongoing friction prior to launching the war caused the area in which IDF forces operated in southern Lebanon to have fewer enemy forces than expected. In addition, some of the discussion's participants commented that the nature of Israeli preparations for the war, which naturally receive less day-to-day attention than the enemy's preparations, was of great importance for the success against Hezbollah.

Furthermore, the incremental escalation during the summer of 2024 enabled the IDF to gradually deprive the enemy of a significant portion of its firepower before deciding to escalate to a full-scale war. In this context, the pager explosion operation was of enormous importance. According to many reports, it was not carried out as part of a strategic plan to defeat Hezbollah but out of fear that the capability would be exposed. As one of the participants in the discussion said, this was an important reminder that the use of force sometimes creates opportunities that are difficult to foresee, even if it lacks a clear strategic purpose.

The Iranian Context

As mentioned, the discussion described here took place prior to Operation Rising Lion, so it did not relate to the high-intensity campaign against Iran. The most prominent mistake mentioned in the Iranian context was in assessing the seriousness of Iran's intentions to destroy Israel. The participants felt that they had been mistaken not only regarding the seriousness of Iran's intentions but also regarding how far along the practical implementation of the plan was. One person in the discussion compared this to the oft-recited Jewish prayer, "next year in Jerusalem," which for many years of Jewish exile had been merely a figure of speech that did not lead to practical action. In fact, it turned out that the Iranians, much like early Zionists, had moved toward the practical application of their distant longing.

Internal Israeli and International Aspects of the War

The discussion's participants did not just point out errors in understanding Israel's enemies; they also addressed events inside Israel and its relations with the world. One topic that recurred in various forms in participant statements, was the mistake in assessing the government's survival following the failure on October 7, and the expectation many had that the failures of

that day would lead to the establishment of a state commission of inquiry. Several participants indicated their disappointment in those they had seen as international allies in academic circles and in center-left circles, who stood against Israel and Israelis at the very early stages of the war, even before serious doubts emerged over how the IDF was waging the war.

The moral aspects of the war led to the liveliest discussion among the participants. While some of the participants stated that they had been mistaken in their assessment that the Israeli public would demonstrate greater moral sensitivity to Palestinian civilian suffering, others rejected the criticism and pointed to the reserve forces' continuing to show up for service and society's mobilization in support of those who have been harmed and in favor of continuing the fighting, as a sign of the moral excellence of Israeli society. Clearly, the measure of morality used by the two sides in this discussion is not the same, and it indicates the difficulty of discussing this sensitive question over how to evaluate the moral standing of Israeli society in the war.

Conclusions

Overall, the discussion can be grouped into several themes:

- Taking the enemy's intentions seriously: Following the October 7 attack, like after the Yom Kippur War, some claimed that we must focus on enemies' capabilities and not their intentions. However, as the analysis offered here indicates, listening to the enemy's intentions as they were actually expressed provided a good glimpse into its plans. If we had taken the Palestine Square Countdown Clock in Tehran, which counts down to Israel's destruction, more seriously, we might have been better able to analyze the situation.
- Overestimating enemy capabilities: Regarding enemy capabilities, the error vis-à-vis Hamas was underestimating them. It is equally correct to ask why we were mistaken in

places where we expected worse results than actually occurred. This applies to the fighting against Hezbollah but also to how the campaign against Iran developed. Various statements and reports indicate that on the eve of Operation Rising Lion, military and civilian decision-makers estimated that the damage to the home-front and the operational forces would be much more severe than what actually happened. The plan implemented against Iran provided an extraordinary response to Iranian operational threats, and it is essential to continue to address the question of why our enemies in Lebanon and Iran had difficulty carrying out their plans as we understood them.

- The importance of use of force: In the years preceding the Swords of Iron War, Israel's use of force focused on the "war between the wars"—relatively limited operations that aimed to impair enemy military buildup without leading to a large-scale campaign. In the context of the previous point, one of the reasons for this was concerns about the losses that Israel would incur in a large-scale war. The Swords of Iron War is a serious and difficult war with high costs, but these stem mainly from its length and how it began and not from exceptional enemy success in inflicting losses on Israel. The war showed that the use of force can open unpredictable avenues to change facts on the ground.
- Avoiding a pendulum swing: Following the last point, it is tempting to conclude that Israel should respond to all its challenges with force, but this would be swinging the pendulum too far to the other side. Israel can solve many problems using force, including those that it did not think that it could. However, some remaining problems are better addressed through diplomatic measures. Even more important is the balanced and coordinated use of force and policy tools in order to make the most of the opportunities that each of

these tools provide.

- The importance of expertise in the face of inevitable mistakes: The question of where we went wrong focuses, of course, on our mistakes and, as a result, can create the impression that expertise has no value. But this cannot be further from the truth. First, focusing on mistakes overlooks the numerous instances in which knowledge and in-depth understanding have served us well. Second, even when experts' assessments are mistaken, their knowledge and understanding, along with the analysis and learning that take place over time, create opportunities. A good example of this is the war against Hezbollah, where the ongoing analysis and in-depth understanding of the organization enabled the creation and exploitation of opportunities that Israel did not foresee. Experts and those dependent on them must remember that error is always lurking, but this does not eliminate the need for knowledge; instead, as the clichés rightly say, it demands humility and flexible thinking.

Dr. Avishay Ben Sasson-Gordis is a senior researcher and Ruderman Family Foundation scholar in residence at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). He studies the impact of domestic American politics on Israel and other issues related to relations between the countries as part of the Israel-US Relations Program at the INSS. Avishay is a postdoctoral fellow in the Liberalism Rekindled program at the Hebrew University. His doctoral dissertation (Harvard, 2023) discusses the political theory of military-society relations in democracy. His articles have been published in international journals and the Israeli and international press. avishaybsg@inss.org.il

Notes

- 1 In this context, see Zimmt, R. (2024). Symposium: The Role of Ideology in the Conduct of Islamist Actors. *Strategic Assessment*, 27(4), 94-98. <https://tinyurl.com/y637n4b2> (Hebrew)