

The Swords of Iron War: Transformations in the Global, Regional, and Israeli-Palestinian Arenas - A Preliminary Assessment

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Following two tumultuous years—one of the most significant periods in the history of the State of Israel—this paper offers a preliminary assessment of the far-reaching changes brought about by the Swords of Iron War. While it is too early to fully analyze its consequences, and the war's end remains uncertain, an interim evaluation is required. Even if fighting resumes, it will unfold under different circumstances, shaped by the lessons created by the war.

This paper reviews and analyzes the key developments of the war, highlighting five major shifts it generated:

1. The erosion of Israel's international standing and a marked rise in global antisemitism;
2. The growing centrality of war in international relations;
3. The weakening of the Shiite axis and the concurrent rise of a Sunni–Muslim Brotherhood axis supported by the United States;
4. The internationalization of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict;
5. Deepening polarization within Israeli politics and society.

It explores how the war transformed Israel, the Middle East, and the global system, what opportunities were missed, and what strategic gains were achieved—concluding with recommendations for an Israeli policy adapted to this five-fold transformation.

War Aims & Structure

At the outset, Israel's political leadership defined several primary objectives for the war: replacing Hamas's rule ("destroying its governing capabilities") and dismantling its military apparatus ("destroying its military capabilities"). Shortly thereafter, a third goal was added – to "create the conditions for the return of the hostages."

Raising the bar for success necessitated approving a prolonged, phased campaign:

1. Phase A - **Preparation**: Preparing for the military ground maneuver—defensive fire operations and force build-up (~1 month).
2. Phase B - **Decisive Victory**: Dismantling Hamas's military wing—lasting three months (~3 months).
3. Phase C - **Attrition and Transition**: Continued erosion of remaining Hamas forces (in the form of decentralized guerrilla) while installing a civilian governing body in Gaza (~9 months).

4. Phase D – **Stabilization**: Institutionalizing an alternative civilian authority and restoring security stability (~12 months).

The war was framed within three concentric circles:

- Global – a confrontation between the U.S.-led rules-based order and revisionist actors such as Russia and Hamas.
- Regional (Middle Eastern) - a struggle between moderate forces seeking stability and radical elements led by Iran.
- Local (Palestinian) - between Israel and Hamas within the Israeli-Palestinian arena.

The ceasefire and partial implementation of the U.S. “20-Point Framework” (October 2025) now permit a two-year retrospective examination – crucial for shaping Israel’s strategy amid a turbulent Palestinian arena, a shifting Middle East, and a disrupted global system.

The Global Arena

Among key segments of global public opinion, Israel has come to be perceived as “the aggressor” while the Palestinians have assumed the role of “the oppressed”, mirroring the moral polarity of Russia-Ukraine. The speed of this shift – from victim to villain-was both startling and disheartening.

While governmental policies worldwide toward Israel evolved more gradually, they turned increasingly negative following three pivotal developments:

1. Strategic Coordination and the Rafah Crisis

Delays in the Rafah operation caused a severe rift with the Biden administration-arguably the defining moment of the Gaza campaign. Three lessons emerged:

- i) Tactical tempo directly shapes strategic legitimacy.
- ii) Strategic clarity and synchronization with allies are essential, especially considering the war’s aims and objectives.
- iii) Personal diplomacy matters – never insult the president of the United States.

Israel’s failure to meet the expected timeline (with Phase C scheduled for February 2024) and its reluctance to discuss the “day after” eroded U.S. confidence and raised suspicions regarding Israel’s ultimate intentions.

In greater depth, according to the original timeline (known to the Biden administration), by February 2024 phase B, the most intense period of the war, was scheduled to end, and the long-awaited phase C was scheduled to begin. This included the introduction of a civilian body to govern Gaza – the “Day After” in popular parlance. In practice, the Rafah operation was greatly delayed due to many factors including repeated attempts to eliminate Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar in underground Khan Yunis as well as the redeployment of the 36th Armored Division from Gaza to Lebanon. The division, instead of taking part in the Rafah operation, was transferred to a defensive mission on the northern front in February 2024, apparently due to a desire to relieve reserve forces. All these delays eroded American confidence in Israel’s determination to swiftly defeat Hamas.

Moreover, regarding the war's stated aims and objectives, the original target date for implementing the "Day After" mechanism (phase C) was set for late January 2024. The deadline passed without even a preliminary discussion of the fundamental question: **which entity would assume civilian control of Gaza**. The Prime Minister's refusal to address the "day after" issue until Hamas was completely destroyed contradicted the position of most members of the War Cabinet. When two of them raised the matter publicly and in writing - and their proposal was rejected - suspicions began to grow within the US administration about the war's true purpose. Further doubts were fueled by statements from senior coalition ministers that suggested objectives inconsistent with officially declared goals of the war, such as the expulsion of Gaza's residents, annexation of the territory, and the establishment of Israeli settlements within it.

As for the personal insult to President Biden, the Rafah operation caused great tension between the Israeli government and the American administration. Washington opposed the move, citing concerns over potential large-scale civilian casualties, the obstruction of humanitarian supply routes from Egypt, and what it viewed as Israel's insufficient preparation to provide basic living conditions - such as tents, water, sanitation, and medical care - for evacuees from Rafah. The administration warned that proceeding without coordination would carry "consequences" and explicitly demanded that it not be taken by surprise. Nevertheless, the operation commenced abruptly. **In response, President Biden ordered the suspension of shipments of one-ton bombs and halted the delivery of armored bulldozers to the IDF. This decision not only marked a personal rupture between the two leaders but also signaled to the international community a broader shift toward a more critical stance on Israel.**

2. The Strategic Cost of Breaching Agreements: Operation Gideon's Chariots

At the outset of Donald Trump's second term as President of the United States, a second hostage-release agreement was concluded. To much of the international community, this development was perceived as marking the end of the war. In practice, however, the Israeli government chose not to advance negotiations on the subsequent stages of the deal, leading to its collapse. The decision to resume fighting was widely interpreted-both globally and by substantial segments of Israeli society-as evidence of Israel's unwillingness to bring the war to a close. **Operation "Gideon's Chariots" therefore triggered a renewed wave of international criticism, culminating in the imposition of European arms embargoes on Israel, particularly concerning spare parts for the IDF's ground forces weapon systems).**

3. The Cost of Neglecting Cognitive Warfare: Hamas's "Deliberate Starvation" Campaign

Arrogant and dismissive statements by senior Israeli officials in March 2025 regarding the suspension of humanitarian aid to Gaza severely damaged Israel's international standing. Hamas swiftly exploited these remarks to advance a false "deliberate starvation" narrative that persisted until the ceasefire in October 2025. The campaign gained momentum following Israel's victory in the 12-day war with Iran, driven by mounting frustration over the renewed fighting in Gaza and by genuine shortages within the Strip, as humanitarian warehouses were depleted. These shortages-felt most acutely by vulnerable populations, including women, the sick, and children-lent credibility to Hamas's disinformation efforts. **For the first time, Israel faced a tangible risk international isolation and sanctions. The country found itself teetering**

on the brink of a diplomatic and moral precipice, highlighting the urgent need for a coherent cognitive-warfare strategy and disciplined public diplomacy.

The Middle Eastern Arena

Over the past two years, the Middle East has undergone profound transformation. The Shiite axis has fractured, Iran's regional influence has declined, and states aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood's—mainly Qatar and Turkey—have expanded their reach. Syria and Lebanon have been fundamentally altered, and the potential for renewed expansion of the Abraham Accords has re-emerged on both the regional and global agendas.

1. Strategic Reversal of the Shiite Axis:

At the outset of the war, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that it would change the Middle East. Yet the weakening of the Shiite axis was neither an articulated nor an intended objective. Israel's stated goal was limited to the Gaza theater, seeking "to prevent escalation in other arenas."

However, 11th of October 2023 proved to be a pivotal day. Even before the ground maneuver in Gaza began, Israel came close to launching an offensive against Hezbollah. Had it occurred, this would have been a targeted strike against Hezbollah rather than a full-scale confrontation with Iran. In retrospect, Israel's later campaign against Hezbollah proved exceptionally successful - rendering the question of what might have happened on October 11 largely academic.

The key to Israel's success against the Iran-led Shiite axis lay in its ability to exploit the randomness of events and to employ, with flexibility and boldness, capabilities that had been years in preparation. The principal lesson from the campaign is therefore the importance of combining deep strategic preparation with operational agility and the willingness to seize emerging opportunities. Chance- and a measure of luck- played an undeniable role.

2. Defeating Hezbollah:

Throughout 2024, Israel and Hezbollah engaged in a gradual escalation that unfolded at a slow and deliberate pace. This tempo reinforced the conviction of Hezbollah's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, that Israel sought to avoid – leading him to scale back forces in southern Lebanon and refrain from widening the conflict.

The turning point came with a rocket fired at the Gladiola outpost on Mount Dov that missed its target and struck the sports field of Majdal Shams, killing twelve children. The tragic outcome prompted Israel to order the targeted killing of Hezbollah's chief of staff, Fuad Shukr (Sayyid Mohsen). Soon after, Israel launched the "Pager Operation", which was executed hastily after an intelligence leak risked exposure.

Israeli intelligence then identified a rare opportunity: a meeting above ground bringing together all senior members of the Radwan Force with Hezbollah's Operations Directorate. A precision strike eliminated the entire command structure. Nasrallah's continued complacency and overconfidence, even as Israel escalated, ultimately led to his elimination.

In parallel, Israeli air-strikes- meticulously planned for years based on detailed intelligence – destroyed thousands of long-range missiles and rockets, decisively degrading Hezbollah's strategic arsenal.

3. Weakening Iran:

The campaign against Iran had been meticulously prepared months in advance, made possible by Israel's close coordination with the Trump administration. Tehran provided the pretext through the accelerated weaponization of its nuclear program, creating an intolerable strategic threat that demanded a swift response.

With explicit American backing – and readiness to operate alongside Israel - , the operation created a strategic window unlikely to recur. The campaign met its objectives: delaying the nuclear project by several years, significantly eroding its ballistic missile capabilities, and exposing the regime's military vulnerability relative to Israel's superior precision and reach.

However, the regime in Tehran remained intact. the Iranian public rallied around its leadership, intensifying both nationalist sentiment and hostility toward Israel, which was increasingly viewed as the principal existential threat.

4. Sunni Realignment and the Contest for Regional Leadership

On December 8, 2024, the Assad regime fell – a decisive turning point achieved primarily through the success of rebel offensives, independent of Israeli involvement. It is nonetheless possible that Assad's weakened army, following Hezbollah's defeat and the November 2024 ceasefire in Lebanon, offered only limited resistance.

The rebels' success stemmed largely from Turkey's sustained support for *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS), which Ankara had cultivated in Idlib under its protection. With the fall of Damascus, HTS assumed control of Syria, positioning Turkey as the most influential external actor of influence in the country. The ascendance of the new regime allowed the Turkish-Qatari axis to expand operations inside Syria, prompting a counter-move by Saudi Arabia, which regards the Muslim Brotherhood's radical Sunni bloc the as a threat to its regional leadership.

Saudi Arabia's hosting of President Trump in Riyadh in May 2025 - during which he lifted all remaining sanctions on Syria-was a calculated display of power, reinforcing Riyadh's bid to reassert dominance in the reshaped Middle East.

The most dramatic development elevating Qatar's and Turkey's regional status occurred in September 2025, when an Israeli air strike in Doha violated the unwritten Gulf rule of mutual restraint: states maintaining dialogue do not strike one another. The attack -carried out amid sensitive negotiations with Qatar over a hostage deal-was perceived as a national humiliation.

The U.S., as Qatar's strategic partner, quickly withdrew its support for Israel, sided with Doha, and launched an intensive diplomatic effort to appease and mend relations with the Emir. As part of this process, Qatar secured a series of significant gains: an understanding resembling a U.S. security guarantee, a formal public apology from Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, and an American commitment to enforce an Israeli cessation of hostilities in Gaza—even before Hamas's control of the Gaza Strip had been fully dismantled. This marked a profound diplomatic reversal for Israel and a regional triumph for the Qatari-Turkish alliance.

An Unstable Equilibrium: The Israeli–Palestinian Arena after the War

The war brought back the Palestinian issue to the forefront of the global agenda - but not to center of Israel's domestic one. On the contrary, a majority of Israelis sees no merit in reviving the idea of a two-state solution. For much of the public, any reference to a prospective Palestinian state is perceived as a reward for terrorism. Even among those who support the principle of separation from the Palestinians, there is a deep frustration and a lack of clarity over how such a vision could realistically be advanced.

The war also intensified negative sentiments toward Arabs more broadly. The trauma of October 7, 2023 will continue to shape Israeli attitudes for years to come—particularly among young people and recently discharged soldiers.

From the perspective of Hama's war objectives, it is evident that the organization has been defeated: its strategy of a surprise attack, coupled with an attempt to draw Iran and the Shiite axis into a broader war to destroy Israel, failed. Yet, the vast destruction of Gaza—the extensive physical devastation, human suffering, and staggering civilian toll- has created a parallel Palestinian national trauma, compounding the military defeat with a sense of collective catastrophe.

Israel's achievements, however, remain fragile and have not yet produced a new political or security order in Gaza. No credible Palestinian leadership has emerged. Hamas endures as a radical and violent organization, while the Palestinian Authority (PA), led by Fatah, remains plagued by corruption and devoid of public legitimacy. Despite its security coordination with Israel in Judea and Samaria, the PA is still perceived by many Israelis as a hostile entity, only marginally distinct from Hamas.

Another risk lies in the terms of the war's conclusion. If the ceasefire framework allows Hamas to preserve de facto control of Gaza without disarmament, the group could, over time, consolidate its position. In such a scenario, the current perception of defeat may gradually evolve into one of victory—transforming Israel's military success into a long-term strategic setback.

Conclusion

The Main Transformations:

1. Erosion of Israel's International Standing and the Rise of Global Antisemitism

Israel remains in a challenging diplomatic position. The ceasefire reached under the first phase of the Trump plan has prevented further deterioration but has not restored Israel's legitimacy or improved its international image.

2. The Renewed Centrality of War in International Relations

The notion that political goals can be achieved through war—long familiar in history—had been increasingly dismissed by the liberal West, particularly in Europe. Recent events have reversed this perception. Hamas's attack on Israel ultimately accelerated global recognition of a Palestinian state, while Russia's expected success in consolidating control over eastern Ukraine has reinforced the idea that military force can deliver political outcomes. This

represents a reversal of the post-Cold War trend in which diplomacy seemed to supplant war as the principal instrument of power.

3. Shift from a Shiite Axis to a Sunni–Muslim Brotherhood Alignment

The weakening of the Iran-led Shiite axis and the concurrent rise of a Sunni–Muslim Brotherhood bloc supported by the United States have reshaped the regional balance. Although this is still an emerging trend—distinct from the jihadist surge that accompanied ISIS’s rise—it introduces new dynamics and risks. The growing influence of Qatar and Turkey, particularly in Gaza and the wider Middle East, constitutes a strategic change with implications for Israel’s security environment.

4. Internationalization of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict –

The United States has assumed a dominant role in managing the Israeli–Palestinian arena, effectively shaping and constraining Israel’s tactical choices. The planned deployment of international forces in Gaza represents a strategic turning point in the conflict’s evolution. It remains uncertain whether this trend will prove temporary or enduring, but Israel must be prepared to adjust its policies accordingly—seeking to maximise emerging opportunities while addressing inherent risks.

5. Deepening Political and Social polarization within Israel –

Israel entered the war amid the profound societal divisions of 2023. Disputes over the war’s conduct—whether to prioritise the hostages’ release or Hamas’s defeat—and the debate surrounding “the day after” have exacerbated ideological divides. These rifts continue to fragment Israeli society along political, religious, and cultural lines.

Recommendations for Israel in a Transformed Strategic Environment:

1. Formulating a New National Security Policy:

Even under a fragile ceasefire, Israel must articulate a national-security policy suited to the transformed environment. The regional and international shifts that have unfolded since the war render continuity untenable. A comprehensive strategic review should therefore be undertaken, culminating in a published policy framework from which the IDF can derive updated operational plans.

2. Strengthening Societal Resilience and National Cohesion

Beyond military lessons, the war demands introspection regarding Israeli society and its internal resilience. The State of Israel is approaching an election year that will test whether politics can rise above recrimination. The trauma of 7 October 2023 should serve as a catalyst for renewal—a basis for developing a shared vision for the country’s future. Yet, the more probable scenario is one of continued contestation: campaigns focused on blame, responsibility, and competing narratives. Such discourse risks intensifying polarisation and inciting further internal conflict. Israel’s leadership must therefore seek to transform crisis into opportunity—using this moment of reckoning to build a unifying, forward-looking national agenda.

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