



# Admission and Evasion:

The Use of the Terms “Failure” and “Responsibility” Following the October 7 Attack and their Impact on the Discourse Space between the Political and Military Echelons<sup>1</sup>

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The relationship and discourse between the military and the political echelons serve as the crucible for national strategy. This interaction generates the necessary friction between military imperatives and political logic, fostering the joint learning processes required to develop a knowledge base essential for its formulation. When this vital discourse is disrupted, the state’s ability to define national aims, translate them into clear political directives, and ultimately achieve the objectives of war is severely compromised.

This article utilizes the “discourse space” as a meta-analytical concept to examine the disruption of the diagnostic-strategic learning process within the political and military echelons. The analysis focuses on the decision-making surrounding the war that commenced following the October 7, 2023 massacre. Since a learning process inherently includes a process of conceptualization, we chose to analyze the use of the terms “responsibility” and “failure” by the political and military echelons. These terms hold the potential to influence the framing of “reality” and to reflect the profound chasm and crisis of trust between these echelons. This, in turn, manifests in their impact on the formation of a closed discourse space between the leadership tiers—that is, a discourse space that inhibits strategic learning and disrupts any possibility for a diagnostic-strategic learning process, which is an integral part of decision-making, particularly during wartime. The political echelon’s insistence on focusing specifically on military investigations (conducted as part of an internal organizational review) and confining them solely to the military sphere without treating them as a necessary prelude to investigating the political failure or as a foundation for a joint learning process, eroded trust. This, coupled with the political leadership’s clear reservations about and avoidance of establishing a state commission of inquiry to examine broad governmental responsibility for the attack, destroyed the essence of shared responsibility.

Trust and shared responsibility are two necessary conditions for an open discourse space between the echelons. In its absence, the joint strategic learning process was disrupted and as a result, a gap has emerged between the military's micro-level conceptualization and the political echelon's macro-level conceptualization of events, particularly regarding the military nature of the failure, as well as in the disparity between the echelons regarding the concept of responsibility itself. Both these factors preclude the capacity for macro-level inquiry.

*Keywords:* political-military relations, discourse, responsibility, failure, war, strategy, national security, Gaza Strip, Palestinians, October 7.

## Introduction

The Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, confronted Israel with one of the most complex challenges in its history as a state. The massacre perpetrated under the cover of this attack, considered the most severe since the Holocaust, led Israel to embark on the longest war in its history. The searing "basic surprise" (Lanir, 1983) was perceived as a nadir for both the security establishment (the intelligence community in particular) and the political echelon. The ensuing war, the consciousness of a national catastrophe, and the need to identify those responsible, focused public attention on the responses of the military and political echelons to the attack, the accountability it demanded, and the relationship between them.

Relations between the echelons were already fraught and strained prior to the war, following a year (since January 2023) of intense public controversy that had developed over the government's spearheading of judicial reform. This reform provoked widespread opposition among segments of Israeli society, and the military became embroiled when reserve soldiers and officers, who were among those protesting the measure, threatened to cease their voluntary reserve service.

The political echelon perceived this threat as "insubordination" ("sarvanut") and as a grave danger to the military's operational readiness and national security. Consequently, it regarded the military echelon with criticism and even

suspicion, citing the problematic manner, in its view, in which the military command handled the issue. The political echelon extended this suspicion to the intelligence warnings conveyed to it by the military during that same year (Elran & Michael, 2023).

The Hamas attack of October 7 occurred at a low point in relations between the political and military echelons, and at a time when public trust in Israel in both echelons, particularly in the IDF Chief of Staff (CoS), had been eroded and after some fluctuations had again reached a profound low. These trends persisted with 56 percent support recorded for CoS Herzi Halevi and 49 percent for CoS Eyal Zamir in the first two months (from March 2025) of his tenure.<sup>2</sup> The military echelon (as well as the GSS) succeeded in overcoming the initial chaos, regrouping, and transitioning from a defensive to an offensive posture; several of its senior officials also publicly declared their responsibility for the October 7 attack. Conversely, the political echelon hesitated, equivocated, refrained from assuming responsibility for the attack, and even attempted to shift the blame onto the military and the GSS, which had already acknowledged their failure and accountability.

Warfare manifests the gravity of civil-military relations in its most pronounced and complex form. These relations are, in themselves, a foundational component of national security, as was aptly articulated by Chief of Staff (CoS) Eyal Zamir in his address at the change-of-

command ceremony for the Military Colleges on August 14, 2025: “One of the central issues in national security is the inter-echelon connection and the reciprocal relationship between the military echelon and the political echelon” (Zitun, 2025b). In wartime, the military echelon expresses its professionalism and capabilities; with the goal of synchronizing the military effort with the political effort, and applying military force to achieve political objectives. The relationship between the political and military echelons, and the discourse space they share, function as the crucible for national strategy—the locus where the necessary friction between military logic and political logic is generated. This, in turn, fosters joint learning processes that enable the development of the knowledge base relevant to the formulation of national strategy. When this relationship is disrupted, the political echelon will struggle to define the political purpose, translate it into clear policy directives, and ultimately achieve the objectives of war (Michael, 2008).

National strategy in general, and the political purpose and the definition of war aims specifically, are the product of discourse between the echelons. The essence of this discourse is a joint learning process, and its outcome is the construction of a shared knowledge base and common conceptualizations (Michael, 2016). Such discourse requires two necessary conditions: mutual trust and shared responsibility. In the absence of these conditions, inter-echelon relations are disrupted, and a productive learning discourse is rendered impossible. The military echelon’s ability to present its professional positions candidly and its duty to fully obey the political echelon alongside the political echelon’s obligation to support the military and permit it to operate autonomously (subject to its professional judgment, and so long as the military course of action remains relevant to achieving the political objectives) expresses the essence of shared responsibility (Bland, 1999). This constitutes a normative ideal model for describing civil-

military relations, wherein both echelons share responsibility for the control of the military and the outcomes of military action.

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The focus of the current research puzzle is the deepening crisis of trust between the military and political echelons regarding the nature of shared responsibility (Bland, 1999) for the October 7 failure. In our assessment, the very admission of failure and acceptance of responsibility by the military echelon (and the GSS) led the political echelon to absolve itself of any responsibility for the failure. It proceeded to impose accountability squarely on the professional ranks and to frame the October 7 disaster as a military and intelligence failure.<sup>3</sup> A blatant example was seen in Prime Minister Netanyahu’s press conference on May 21, 2025, where he characterized the Hamas attack as one of “flip-flops, Kalashnikovs, and pickup trucks” and stressed his intention to investigate the military failure exhaustively (Eichner & Zitun, 2025). We do not disregard the argument that Prime Minister Netanyahu has personal reasons for not accepting responsibility and for clinging to his position, namely those related to his ongoing trial and the advantages of managing it as an incumbent. However, in this article, we seek to posit an alternative or additional explanation, albeit partial, for the breakdown in inter-echelon relations. As such, our explanation focuses on analyzing the discourse space between the echelons, based on the military’s conceptualizations of “failure” and “responsibility.” As will be argued, these conceptualizations provide the political echelon

with a means of evading broad governmental responsibility for the events.

The political echelon's choice to frame the October 7 disaster as a military and intelligence failure significantly diminishes the magnitude and essence of the catastrophe's *political* dimension, as well as the political echelon's own share of responsibility for its very occurrence. (This includes, for instance, Netanyahu's attempt at the same press conference to assert that there was no connection whatsoever between the aid from Qatar, which he had encouraged, and the October 7 attack).<sup>4</sup> The political echelon's evasion of accountability, and its framing of the event as a military/intelligence failure without internalizing the political failure, annihilates the essence of shared responsibility and erodes the military's trust in the political leadership. We therefore seek to investigate how the use of the terms "failure" and "responsibility" in relation to the October 7 disaster shaped the discourse space between the echelons, reflected the nature of their relationship, and affected their ability to conduct the joint learning process necessary for national strategy and formulating a response to the attack.

We contend that the way the military conceptualized the terms "failure" and "responsibility" has implications extending beyond inter-echelon relations alone, pertaining directly to the respective accountability of each echelon for the October 7 disaster. Specifically, the military's conceptualization of failure draws no distinction between the magnitude of *this* failure and that of other military and operational failures of entirely different orders of magnitude, thereby effectively reducing and normalizing this exceptionally severe event—that is, rendering it as "just another" military failure, akin to others of a significantly lesser scale. This maneuver allowed the political echelon to absolve itself of responsibility for the disaster, frame it as an *exclusive* military failure, and thus lay accountability solely at the military's door. Given the military's advantage as an epistemic authority (Michael, 2008, 2010),

this framing assisted the political echelon in constructing the war's conduct as military rather than political. Consequently, it increased the military's influence over strategy formulation, policymaking, and decision-making related to the war.

## Methodology

This study employs qualitative research design. The central research question is as follows: How did the military echelon's use of the terms "failure" and "responsibility" influence the discourse space that evolved between it and the political echelon, and in what ways did this reflect the essence of their relationship? To examine these terms in the context of October 7, we analyzed their various manifestations and applications by military officers, government ministers, and officials in both echelons. Data was drawn from publicly available sources—including news articles, reports, opinion pieces, social media posts, tweets, and press conferences, as well as print, broadcast, and online media—which served as channels for the parties to address the public.

The primary methodological tool for this study is Discourse Analysis. This approach allows for a focus on language and its rhetorical organization (whether written, spoken, or signaled) and facilitates an examination of how knowledge and meaning are organized, communicated, and reproduced through institutional practices. The specific sub-category employed is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a key methodological tool for exposing the nexus between discourse, power, and social construction. In this regard, examining the use and comprehension of the terms "failure" and "responsibility" in the context of the October 7 events serves not merely as a descriptive device. It is also a crucial tool for investigating the social construction of socio-political power, aiming to decipher the processes by which power relations and ideologies are shaped and disseminated. CDA thus aids in examining how discourse tools and rhetorical strategies

influence public opinion, reinforce systems of dominance, shape the public's perception of reality (Van Dijk, 2008), and, in sum, delineate the discourse space between the military and political echelons. We emphasize that the selection of these terms is not arbitrary. Both concepts are central to the public discourse surrounding the October 7 attack; they serve as a critical axis in inter-echelon relations generally and during times of crisis specifically; and they directly disrupt the concept of shared responsibility, which constitutes a foundational component of functional civil-military relations.

### **Theoretical Framework: On the Nature of Concepts, Definitions and the Constructions of “Reality”**

Events occurring around us do not have an independent existence; rather, they are contingent upon the meaning we ascribe to them (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). This meaning is a product of social construction; it is contextually embedded and determines our course of action (Weick, 1995, 2001). Leaders, including military commanders, are the ones who imbue events with meaning, thereby interpreting them and creating “reality” (Ancona, 2012; Shamir, 2007). Within this process, definitions are a crucial tool for shaping “reality”; therefore, the choice to use one definition over another is not arbitrary. It allows one to influence and construct meanings and, through them, to shape narratives. As such, definitions are an inherent component of the sensemaking processes of individuals, leaders, and organizations alike. The shaping of “reality” and the construction of meaning have been extensively examined in organizational literature (for examples see Weick, 1995, 2001) concerning leaders who are perceived as responsible for constructing the organization’s “reality” (Ancona, 2012; Shamir, 2007) and, consequently, for the framing of events. To frame means to select certain aspects of a perceived “reality” and make them more salient (Hallahan, 1999), as framing reflects a process of both inclusion and exclusion. The frame defines the situation

(“reality”) by demarcating what lies within it what remains external to it (Goffman, 1974). Definitions of a situation can alter meanings and delineate a range of acceptable behaviors, thus possessing great power (Zerubavel, 1991, p. 11). A frame is, therefore, a mental model: a set of ideas and assumptions that an individual holds to understand and negotiate a particular issue (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Carmit Padan (2017) examined framing processes in a military context and found that commanders’ framing is executed according to how each perceives “reality,” interprets it, and wishes to construct it in a manner that serves their commanding-leadership identity, their operational repertoire, and, in some cases (depending on their command position and role), their career management within the organization (Padan & Ben-Ari, 2019). She thus deduced that “Framing Work” serves as an interpretive framework of action for leaders, one that reflects the organizational mechanisms embedded within the military’s organizational culture (Padan, 2017).

In this vein, the organizational culture of the IDF intertwines the management of operational events with the commander’s leadership. This is reflected in the military perception that the way the commander manages an operational event will determine its definition. This is a perspective that classifies the nature of an operational event only *ex post facto* and emphasizes that the definition of an event in combat units is not fixed but rather subject to social construction by the commander (Padan, 2017). In this regard, it was found that while defining an operational event as a crisis implies it was mismanaged (and thus that the commander’s leadership was found wanting at the critical moment), when a commander defines an operational event as a failure, the implication is that the unit failed. Consequently, there is no absolute identification between the commander and the failure. It was further found that when commanders define an operational event as a failure, they subsequently pinpoint the specific points of failure, thereby

ensuring they do not repeat these errors in the next engagement. Therefore, as the IDF's organizational culture cultivates an adaptive leadership that learns from one operational event to the next, it is not inclined to dismiss commanders who have failed in their duties (Padan, 2017).

**As the IDF's organizational culture cultivates an adaptive leadership that learns from one operational event to the next, it is not inclined to dismiss commanders who have failed.**

The encounter between the military and political echelons discussed in this article is an intellectual one, where knowledge infrastructures, which rely on concepts and their interrelations within an emergent context, are articulated. These are the respective knowledge infrastructures of each echelon within the discourse space that exists between them (Michael, 2008, 2012). The formative dimensions of this discourse space are those of political guidance and content, or conceptualization. Since the military echelon in Israel has acquired the status of an epistemic authority (Michael, 2008, 2010)—a reliable source of knowledge in the domain of military and security affairs—the conceptual framework proposed by the military to construct the “security reality” (including regarding October 7) has had a formative influence on the boundaries of the discourse. This extends to the broader discourse space, encompassing the topics and issues deliberated in political-policy dialogue. In this situation, the political echelon in Israel lacks the capacity and a sufficiently developed civilian institutional infrastructure capable of systematically and profoundly generating knowledge and developing competing alternatives to the military's knowledge infrastructure. Consequently, even in cases where the political echelon is skeptical of the

military's interpretations and recommendations, it has no real capacity to present a more viable alternative. Military knowledge, translated into a sophisticated conceptual system, becomes the shared knowledge base for both echelons and, in effect, the sole and exclusive knowledge base. In this reality, which Kobi Michael (2012) terms an “intellectual vacuum” one of two possibilities occurs: either the analysis of a complex reality is based on military concepts and knowledge infrastructures, or the military echelon expands and encroaches into a deeper engagement with non-military issues.

The interrelations between the political and the military echelons can be described on a continuum. At one end, relations are characterized by conflict and a struggle for political power and influence; at the other, they include components of cooperation and attribute weight to social values and systems of checks and balances (Michael, 2010). Regarding this relationship, Dov Tamari argues: “In Israel, there is no security concept that can serve as a regulating conceptual system for statesmen and soldiers. Relevant knowledge concerning anticipated crises and security matters is not developed within Israeli governments” (Tamari, 2007, p. 31). Michael (2007) contends that in this situation, the military remains the almost exclusive and hegemonic knowledge authority. Thus, a reality of pronounced asymmetry in favor of military knowledge is created. When the political echelon is devoid of knowledge (and even its political thinking is biased towards military logic), the military echelon becomes the epistemic authority. This leads to the informational dependence of the political echelon on the military, the military's domination of the discourse space between the echelons, an almost total erosion of civilian oversight vis-à-vis the military's argumentative capacity, and, in sum, a blurring of the boundaries between the spheres of responsibility and authority of the political and military echelons (Michael, 2010, p. 124).

## Shared Responsibility as a Basis for Understanding the Relationship Between the Political and Military Echelons

The organizing logic of civilian control, as a key concept regulating and shaping the relationship between the political and military echelons, lies in creating a mechanism that ensures the military echelon functions as an advisor, force-builder, and operator of military force in accordance with the political echelon's directives and in a manner that serves the latter's objectives (Michael, 2010). Shared Responsibility (Bland, 1999) is a central concept for understanding this relationship. Douglas Bland proposed it as a normative-ideal model for civil-military relations, according to which both echelons share responsibility for the control of the military and for the outcomes of military action. The principle of civilian control is ensured via the existence of effective, clear, and agreed-upon mechanisms of accountability and shared responsibility and should enable stability in relations between the spheres.

Shared responsibility is manifested in the military echelon's ability to present its professional positions candidly (lit. "without fear") and its duty to fully obey the political echelon. Concurrently, it requires the political echelon to provide backing to the military and allow it to operate autonomously, subject to its professional judgment and expertise, and so long as the military course of action remains relevant to achieving the political objectives. According to Bland (1999), shared responsibility cannot exist without mutual trust between the echelons: the political echelon must trust in the military's full commitment to fulfilling its directives and its complete, unqualified acceptance of the war's objectives as defined by the political leadership. The military echelon, in turn, must trust in the absolute backing it will receive from the political echelon, knowing it will never be made the exclusive scapegoat for failed missions, but rather that the political leadership will stand with it to share the responsibility.

Regarding the normative idea of shared responsibility, it is crucial to emphasize that this norm governing inter-echelon relations in Israel had already been violated several times prior to October 7, 2023. However, the breach on and following October 7 has been exceptionally acute and extreme. In the IDF strategy documents (2015 and 2018), then-Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot addressed the essence of shared responsibility. According to the interpretation by Kobi Michael and Shmuel Even, "The Chief of Staff is asking the political echelon to bear responsibility for the task of aligning military action with political objectives—a task in which it is a central partner. This is intended to improve the chances of success and to prevent the political echelon from subsequently disavowing responsibility with claims that it was unaware of the IDF's capabilities or the magnitude of the threat" (Michael & Even, 2018, p. 29).

Shared responsibility is a necessary condition for shaping an open discourse space and for developing joint, sustained learning. Only thus can the echelons "break down the walls" in their thinking (HaCohen, 2014, cited in Michael, 2016, p. 121). Concurrently, a reciprocal relationship exists between shared responsibility and trust: the very existence of shared responsibility contributes to and strengthens trust, while established trust reinforces the echelons' willingness to maintain shared responsibility.

It is important to stress that even in the case of effective shared responsibility and an open, sophisticated discourse space, within which (while it should be free from hierarchical constraints) there is no equality between the echelons, the relationship must be conducted under the direction and control of the political echelon. In this sense, an open discourse space does not imply equal discourse. On the contrary, the discourse between the echelons must be conducted as an "Unequal Dialogue," according to Eliot Cohen (Cohen, 2003, pp. 189-202). Cohen, who in his seminal book *The Supreme Command* developed the

conceptual framework of civil-military relations as a critique of the field's normative theories, based his findings on four historical case studies (Lincoln, Clemenceau, Churchill, and Ben-Gurion). He concluded that:

What transpired between a president or prime minister and a general was a dialogue between non-equals. A *dialogue* in the sense that both sides expressed their opinions openly, and sometimes even aggressively, not just once, but time and again; and *between non-equals* in the sense that the supreme authority of the civilian leader was unequivocal and unchallengeable [...] The system practiced by these men was one of continuous dialogue throughout the conflict, and was far removed from the simplistic conventions of "normative" theory on civil-military relations (Cohen, 2003, pp. 189-190 (in the Hebrew version), emphasis not in original).

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**Even when the political echelon contests its interpretations and recommendations regarding the operational environment, it lacks the genuine capacity to posit a viable alternative. Consequently, military knowledge, translated into a sophisticated conceptual apparatus, becomes the de facto shared knowledge base for both echelons and, in effect, the more dominant one.**

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## The Necessity of an Open Discourse Space

Rebecca Schiff (2012) further posits that the formalization of the learning and knowledge-production process is actualized via a "Targeted Partnership." This principle, which ensures congruence between military action and the political objective, while securing the supremacy of political logic over military logic, constitutes

the substantive essence of civilian control. It is distinct from the absolute subordination of the military to the elected political echelon, which represents the procedural-normative dimension of civilian control (Michael, 2010).

Such congruence between military action and political aims can only be sustained under conditions of an open discourse space, one that sustains diagnostic-strategic learning processes and thereby enables the production and development of shared knowledge (Michael, 2016). Yet, because the military echelon has established itself as an epistemic authority (Michael, 2012), even when the political echelon contests its interpretations and recommendations regarding the operational environment, it lacks the genuine capacity to posit a viable alternative.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, military knowledge, translated into a sophisticated conceptual apparatus, becomes the de facto shared knowledge base for both echelons and, in effect, the more dominant one. This situation leads to the political echelon's informational dependence on the military, the military's domination of the discourse spaces between them, an almost total erosion of civilian oversight *vis-à-vis* the military's claims (Dauber, 1998), and a blurring of the boundaries between their respective spheres of responsibility and authority (Michael, 2010, p. 124).

Unlike a closed discourse space, characterized by discussions and the presentation of alternatives within a fixed, structured, or essentially ceremonial process, an open discourse space is characterized by challenging extant knowledge by re-examining existing conceptual frameworks and perceptions. It is a necessary condition for developing diagnostic-strategic learning processes, which are nourished by the direct encounter of tensions with knowledge infrastructures, and which enable the clarification and validation of the political directive's relevance (Michael, 2016). Such a discourse space necessitates dismantling the rigid distinction between the military and political echelons during their encounter

and a “flattening” of their hierarchical and dichotomous structure. The conditions for an open discourse space, which facilitates complex diagnostic-strategic learning, require a process of interrogating and interpreting “reality” and understanding its characteristics, in a manner that generates a common conceptual language regarding both facts and their significance. This shared language makes it possible to reduce the subjective dimension inherent in judging “reality” and, from that basis, to formulate a relevant and consensual political-strategic purpose, with the aim of enacting change and reshaping that reality.

### **Analysis of Findings: “Failure” and “Responsibility” as Factors Shaping the Conduct of the Political and Military Echelons in the Context of the October 7 Disaster**

An examination of the definitions applied in public discourse to describe the October 7 disaster reveals that they are diverse rather than uniform or coherent. These include: “Black Sabbath,” “massacre,” “grave omission” (“mehdal”), “crisis,” “disaster,” and “abandonment” (“hafkera”). In contrast, an analysis of the definitions used by the military echelon, including senior IDF commanders, shows that it has consistently adhered to the term “failure” and its various linguistic derivations. For example, in a letter to soldiers circulated on October 17, 2023, the then-Head of Military Intelligence (“Aman”), Major General Aharon Haliva, wrote: “Aman, under my command, failed in providing a warning for the terrorist attack carried out by Hamas” (IDF Editorial, 2023). In the fifth “Combat Brief” published by the Chief of Staff (CoS) on March 7, 2024, to IDF commanders, he wrote: “We failed in protecting civilians” (Halevi, 2024).

The declarations of responsibility by the CoS and the Head of Military Intelligence were joined by other senior officers in public statements: On October 18, 2023, the Head of the Home Front Command, Major General Rafael David (Rafi)

Milo, stated: “We failed in securing the southern front” (Shemesh, 2023). On November 16, the Air Force Commander, Major General Tomer Bar, said: “We failed in the mission” (Harel, E., 2023). The Gaza Division Commander, Brigadier General Avi Rosenfeld, wrote to the municipal heads of the Gaza envelope on June 9, 2024, upon announcing his departure and retirement from the IDF: “On October 7, I failed in my life’s mission to protect the Gaza envelope” (Zitun & Tzuri, 2024). In a special statement following the findings of the “Be’eri investigation” into October 7, the IDF Spokesperson stated: “The IDF failed in its mission to protect the citizens of Israel... The public deserves answers” (IDF Editorial, 2024). Conceptually, failure is a discrete, time-bound event. It is past-oriented and refers to a negative outcome or the non-achievement of a specific goal. It is an instance or situation where something did not function as planned or did not reach its objective. Failure can be singular or recurring and generally focuses on the final result; it is always circumstantial and consequential, and it typically carries a negative connotation (Shvika, 1997; Scott & Marshall, 2009). Responsibility, in contrast, is procedural and continuous, focusing on the response to an event or failure, and it possesses a clear orientation toward the present and future. Its essence is to acknowledge one’s part in a situation, take ownership of the errors or decisions that led to the outcome, and learn from the experience to perform better in the future (Bovens, 2007). Responsibility is an approach, a conscious choice to act in a certain way given the circumstances, and it has a positive connotation. One can fail without bearing responsibility (by blaming others or ignoring failure), and one can bear responsibility even when an absolute failure did not occur—for example, by taking responsibility for improving an existing process (Dweck, 2006). Thus, while failure is an inevitable component of action, responsibility is what transforms failure into important lessons and a lever for growth and future success (Edmondson, 2019).

Bearing responsibility manifests in various ways, and several central types can be distinguished. First is *personal responsibility*, which refers to an individual's moral accountability for their actions and decisions, stemming from concepts of autonomy and free will (Oshana, 2006). Second, in the military context, *command responsibility* is recognized—a legal and moral principle by which a commander bears responsibility not only for their own actions but also for the actions or inactions of their subordinates (Porat, 2022). Concurrently, in the political echelon, the principle of *ministerial responsibility* applies, whereby a government minister is accountable for their ministry's activities and all that occurs within their domain of authority, even if not directly involved in a specific decision (Bogdanor, 2005). Finally, one can speak of *collective responsibility*, which is attributed to an entire group, such as a government or a general staff, that jointly bears the consequences of its decisions and omissions (May, 1987).

**It is crucial to emphasize that by choosing to define the October 7 disaster as a “failure” (akin to other failures in operational routine), the military leadership activated two processes: normalization and magnitude reduction. Through this term, the disaster becomes “just another” internal military-organizational event from which to learn, correct, and recover, as with other operational failures.**

The disparity between the definitions of October 7 events in the public discourse and the military officers' consistent coupling of the term “failure” with their descriptions has not shifted throughout the war, up to the time of this writing. We contend that this choice is not arbitrary; it reflects a significant tool used by the military echelon to shape “reality,” both externally and internally (Weick, 2001). By choosing to define the October 7 disaster using the term “failure,” the senior military echelon initiates two processes: On the civilian

level, a public debate over blame attribution is forestalled by the preemptive admission of responsibility—a debate that would be necessitated by the use of other terms like “grave omission” (“mehdal”), “disaster” or “abandonment.” On the internal organizational-military level, using the term “failure” frames the day’s events in an organizational context, which endows the failure with the meaning of being a product of professional (“operational”) errors made by the military and establishes it as a platform for learning and correction. Therefore, the implication of choosing the term “failure” is that the commander can identify the points of failure—in other words, the errors that led to it—and thus will know not to repeat these errors in the next engagement. Such a definition is a product of how the concept of “failure” is constructed within the IDF’s organizational culture and its mechanisms—from operational training courses to operational conduct. The words of CoS Herzi Halevi at the Military Intelligence Directorate change-of-command ceremony (August 21, 2024) exemplify this perception of failure as a motivating factor for learning, suggesting that the learning of those who failed will be superior: “You who were seared, who smelled the scorch of failure, you will know how to think about how to fix it” (Padan, 2024).

A further examination of public statements by senior military commanders reveals that they create a distinct linkage between “failure” and “responsibility.” This is evident in the following examples: In the letter to soldiers on October 17, ten days after the attack, Head of Military Intelligence Major General Aharon Haliva wrote: “We did not fulfill our most important mission, and as the Head of Aman, I bear full responsibility for the failure” (IDF Editorial, 2023). At an official national event on May 12, 2024, the candle-lighting ceremony at the Western Wall, CoS Halevi added: “As the commander of the Israel Defense Forces during the war, I bear responsibility for the fact that the IDF failed in its mission to protect the citizens of

Israel on October 7" (Cohen & Eichner, 2024). At the change-of-command ceremony for the 98th Division, the outgoing commander, Brigadier General Dan Goldfus, stated: "We all failed. We in the IDF failed to protect the citizens of Israel. We failed to protect the residents of the Gaza envelope" (Buchbut, 2024).

It is crucial to emphasize that by choosing to define the October 7 disaster as a "failure" (akin to other failures in operational routine), the military leadership activated two processes: normalization and magnitude reduction. Through this term, the disaster becomes "just another" internal military-organizational event from which to learn, correct, and recover, as with other operational failures.<sup>6</sup> We must briefly clarify the distinction between the military debriefing mechanism ("tahkir") and a state commission of inquiry ("va'adat hakira mamlakhtit"). The primary declared objective of an operational (military) debriefing is lesson-learning and the improvement of future processes. It focuses on *what* happened and *how* to prevent its recurrence, not on *who* is to blame. According to IDF regulations, the "tahkir" is intended as a tool for internal organizational learning and is therefore based on the cooperation and candor of those involved, with the understanding that its findings will not be used in command or legal proceedings against them. In contrast, the purpose of a state commission of inquiry is far broader. According to Section 1 of the Commissions of Inquiry Law (1968), a commission is meant to investigate "a matter of vital public importance." Although it also produces systemic lessons, a central part of its role is to determine responsibility, both institutional and personal, within the political and military echelons. Its findings can include personal recommendations, such as dismissal from office, which carry immense public and political weight (Blander, 2025). This distinction clarifies that the military's use of "failure" and its focus on the "tahkir" are part of an internal organizational paradigm that is neither suitable nor sufficient for addressing the magnitude of

the October 7 disaster (nor the public's need for total accountability, both military and political).

In stark contrast to the declarations by senior military figures regarding their assumption of responsibility for the failure, the absence of similar declarations from many in the political echelon, the Prime Minister and/or government ministers, was conspicuous.<sup>7</sup> A tweet by the Prime Minister, initially published in the early hours of October 29, 2023, reflected his attempt to cast responsibility for October 7 at the feet of the military echelon: "At no point and at no stage was a warning given to Prime Minister Netanyahu regarding Hamas' intentions of war. On the contrary, all security officials, including the Head of Military Intelligence and the Head of the GSS, assessed that Hamas was deterred and sought an arrangement ("hasdara"). This was the assessment presented time and again to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet by all security officials and the intelligence community, including right up until the outbreak of the war" (Shalev, 2023). The Prime Minister's tweet drew criticism from former senior military officials, including Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, two former CoSs who were serving as ministers without portfolio in the "National Emergency Government" formed after the attack (which served until June 2024). In a tweet responding to the Prime Minister, Gantz wrote: "This morning especially, I want to support and strengthen all security officials and IDF soldiers, including the CoS, the Head of Aman, and the Head of the GSS. When we are at war, leadership must show responsibility... The Prime Minister must retract his statement from last night and cease dealing with this issue" (Gantz, 2023). Eisenkot added in a statement that [the PM] must "immediately cease criticizing the systems for which he is responsible" (Shalev, 2023). Furthermore, Eisenkot's words convey a message (with a personal inflection) that the political echelon is not a passive entity, as it bears responsibility for the military's functioning. He was implying that the political echelon is responsible for the military echelon, and as such, bears

responsibility for its performance—this is the very expression of shared responsibility. Not only can it not construct itself as a passive actor, but it is incumbent upon it to ask questions and demand answers from the military. After facing criticism for the tweet (including from other former military leaders, such as former CoS Gabi Ashkenazi), Prime Minister Netanyahu deleted it. However, in publishing that initial tweet, he had already proposed an alternative, distinct, and contradictory framing regarding responsibility for the October 7 disaster, one that cast accountability onto the military. This framing continued to resonate and was perpetuated despite the retraction (Mordechai & Yadlin, 2024).<sup>8</sup>

An examination of statements by Gantz and Eisenkot reveals their attempt to establish a degree of shared responsibility for the October 7 disaster, encompassing both echelons. Although both belonged to the political echelon at the time, they had only recently left uniform. Thus, in response to a question at a press conference on October 26, 2023, about whether he saw himself as responsible for the “conception” regarding Hamas, Minister Gantz replied: “Anyone who was a partner in the leadership and guidance of the State of Israel, in any role, cannot absolve himself of responsibility, and that includes me” (Rubinstein, 2023). In an interview with the investigative program “Uvda” on January 18, 2024, Minister Eisenkot stated: “There is a sharp and clear responsibility for everyone who was in a military or political position on that day, and there is responsibility for everyone who was there ten years before, including myself as Chief of Staff, and parallel figures: defense ministers, prime ministers.” Later in the interview, Eisenkot emphasized the responsibility of both echelons: “Whether they took responsibility or not... They [political and security echelons] don’t need to take responsibility; it is theirs” (Uvda, 2024a).

Their words weaken and create a stark contrast to the flight of the political echelon, led by Prime Minister Netanyahu, from admitting its part in the failure and from bearing

responsibility. In this sense, their statements do not represent the conduct of the political echelon they were part of, and certainly not after they resigned from the government. The claim by these former senior officers that each echelon holds a degree of shared responsibility is also reflected in an article by military analyst Amos Harel: “The intelligence-defensive blunder (“mehdal”) is the direct responsibility of the security leadership, including the Minister of Defense, the CoS, the Head of the GSS, and other senior officials. But this disaster has another address, one that is currently making every effort to shake off any shred of responsibility—Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu” (Harel, A., 2023).

A further expression of the political echelon’s attempt to evade responsibility involved accusations regarding the intelligence warning for the war. As detailed later, in May 2024, the IDF confirmed that the Prime Minister had received four warning documents from Military Intelligence between March and July 2023. But there were other tactics employed by parts of the political echelon to construct the discourse space in a way that would deflect and distance responsibility from itself. These included, on the one hand, publicizing the Prime Minister’s schedule, and on the other, ministers casting blame on factors and processes unrelated to the political echelon’s functioning before October 7. These tactics also sought to divert public attention from the question of responsibility for the disaster and worked to re-contextualize it, that is, to shape “reality.” Among these rhetorical tactics, the following can be noted:

- a. (a) Reviving the Disengagement issue: About two weeks after October 7, ministers began to point to the 2005 disengagement from the Gaza Strip as the “original sin” that led to the attack. Criticism from right-wing parties focusing on the security aspects of the disengagement drew responses from the left, which focused on its unilateral nature. The return of the disengagement

discourse deflected public attention from the question of responsibility for the October 7 disaster, particularly that of the incumbent political echelon (for example, Binyamini, 2024; Shragai, 2023).

- b. (b) Meetings with Major General (res.) Yitzhak Brik: By May 2024, the Prime Minister had met six times with Brik, who had long warned of the IDF's lack of readiness for war. In meeting with Brik, the Prime Minister signaled that the military was solely responsible for the October 7 disaster (Radio North, 2024).
- c. (c) The reservists' refusal to volunteer (in protest at the judicial reform): After October 7, claims were heard, primarily from right-wing ministers, that the reservists' call to refuse service in protest of the judicial reform had weakened Israel. In their view, this sent a message to the enemy that Israel was less protected and therefore more vulnerable. In this discussion, ministers accused the reservists of harming Israel's security and pointed an accusatory finger at them for their part in the weakness of the Israeli response on October 7.

Prime Minister Netanyahu, as of this writing, has not declared responsibility for the October 7 disaster. When he addressed the question, he employed three primary tactics in an attempt to change the frame of the discourse on the subject: (a) Postponing accountability until "after the war": "October 7 was a black day in our history... This blunder ("mehdal") will be investigated to the end. Everyone will have to provide answers, me included. But all of that will happen after the war" (Eichner, 2023). "I said, and I repeat, after the war, we will all have to provide answers, me included. There was a terrible blunder here, and it will be investigated... I promise that no stone will be left unturned" (Srugim News, 2023). With these words, the Prime Minister deferred any acceptance of responsibility. (b) Expressing sorrow for the events: As he did in an interview with *Time* magazine on August 4, 2024: "I said that after the war there will be an independent

**Prime Minister Netanyahu, as of this writing, has not declared responsibility for the October 7 disaster. When he addressed the question, he employed three primary tactics in an attempt to change the frame of the discourse on the subject: (a) Postponing accountability until "after the war": "October 7 was a black day in our history... This blunder ("mehdal") will be investigated to the end. Everyone will have to provide answers, me included. But all of that will happen after the war"**

commission of inquiry, and everyone will have to provide answers, including me. But you can't do that in the middle of a war. Am I sorry? Of course, of course. I am deeply sorry that something like this happened" (Cortellessa, 2024). (c) Publishing the tweet on October 29, 2023 (despite its deletion), reflected his attempt to do so, adding that the information he had did not indicate Hamas' intention for war ("At no point... was a warning given... regarding Hamas' war intentions") (Hauser Tov, 2023). Moreover, it seems the most faithful representation of the political echelon's position and conduct regarding accountability was evident in Prime Minister Netanyahu's press conference on May 21, 2025. His focus was on his reference to Hamas' "flip-flops attack" ("mitkefet hakafkafim"), a phrase intended to emphasize and magnify the military echelon's failure, while declaring his insistence on "investigating this matter to the end." With these words, he deflected responsibility onto the military echelon while simultaneously ignoring, denying, and even attempting to nullify the responsibility of the political echelon and his own as Prime Minister.

Another expression of the formative influence of the military's use of "failure" on the construction of responsibility is evident in the media coverage of the political-security cabinet meetings, coverage based largely on leaks. This coverage positioned the military and political echelons as adversaries and described a toxic interaction between them. From this

coverage, it emerged that the “blame game” over responsibility was a continuation of cabinet discussions and underpinned other topics of debate including questions of responsibility for the disaster and the management of the war. Below are three examples of such areas of contention:

**1. The Warning of War:** On May 23, 2024, the IDF confirmed, in an official response to a Freedom of Information request submitted by the *Hatzlacha* organization, that the Prime Minister had received four warning documents from the Military Intelligence Directorate (Aman) between March and July 2023. The military refused to disclose the content of these letters to the Israeli public but stated that they concerned a warning “of proximate danger of military escalation.” It added that this warning had crystallized considering the socio-political crisis in Israel surrounding judicial reform, arguing that the crisis over this issue was harming social cohesion. The military emphasized that the last of the four letters was sent before the Knesset approved the cancellation of the “Reasonableness Standard” on July 24, 2023, which was in the eyes of many in Israeli society a controversial move by the executive to limit the oversight power of the judiciary. That letter noted that Israel’s enemies “identify an historic opportunity to change the strategic situation in the region following the immense crisis of the judicial revolution, the likes of which they have never seen before” (Eichner, 2024a). The response from the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) to this publication was that the report—alleging the Prime Minister received warnings from Aman’s research division about a possible attack from Gaza—was “the opposite of the truth.”

Not only is there no warning whatsoever in any of the documents regarding Hamas’ intentions to attack Israel from Gaza, but they provide a completely opposite assessment. The only two references to Hamas in the

four documents state that Hamas does not want to attack Israel from Gaza and is oriented toward an “arrangement” (“hasdara”) (Eichner, 2024a).

The General Security Services (GSS) also partook in this warning of impending war. It was reported in the media that GSS Director Ronen Bar delivered his assessment to the Prime Minister on the eve of the Knesset vote on the Reasonableness Standard on July 24, 2023. In their meeting, he told him: “I am providing you today with a warning for war. I cannot give a precise day and time. But this is the warning” (Eyal, 2024). The PMO issued a press release regarding this assessment as well, on August 29, 2024, stating:

Prime Minister Netanyahu did not receive a warning for war in Gaza. Not on the date mentioned in the article, and not a moment before 06:29 on October 7. On the contrary, all security officials clarified explicitly—as appears in the protocols of the discussions until the eve of the war—that Hamas was deterred and sought an arrangement. Furthermore, just days before October 7, the GSS’ assessment was that stability in the Gaza Strip was expected to be maintained for the long term (Ha’aretz, 2024).

**2. The Aims of the War:** The dispute regarding the aims of the war manifested in a recurring skirmish between the PMO and the IDF Spokesperson. The War Cabinet approved four war aims, but the Prime Minister’s slogan of “Total Victory” captured the most public attention. In March 2024, approximately six months after the war began, a poll by Channel 13 News and Prof. Camil Fuchs was broadcast, showing that 61 percent of respondents answered in the negative to the question, “Will the war in Gaza end in the toppling of Hamas?” Even at this stage, the public appeared highly skeptical of

defining the war's aim as "total victory." IDF Spokesperson Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari stated in a June 2024 interview with Channel 13 News that "while the IDF is close to a *military* defeat of Hamas, it is impossible to destroy the terrorist organization... Hamas is an idea... Whoever thinks it can be eliminated is mistaken... This notion of destroying Hamas... is simply 'throwing sand in the public's eyes'" (Shafran Gittelman, 2025). The PMO responded by stating: "The Political-Security Cabinet defined one of the war's goals as the destruction of Hamas' military and governmental capabilities. The IDF is, of course, obligated to this" (Ynet, 2024).

Furthermore, in a Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee discussion on August 12, 2024, Defense Minister Gallant cast doubt on the "total victory" objective espoused by the Prime Minister: "I hear the tam-tam drums and this nonsense about 'total victory.' It's a shame that same courage wasn't displayed behind closed doors." In response, the Prime Minister stated that the Defense Minister "is adopting the anti-Israel narrative" (Schlesinger, 2024). The IDF Spokesperson, Hagari, stated in his briefing on August 25, 2024: "We are committed to one, central war aim: the return of the hostages" (Eichner & Zitun, 2024). His words angered a "political source," who subsequently released a statement to the media:

The IDF Spokesperson's choice to mention only one war aim in his statement this evening—while ignoring the other war aims—is in complete contradiction to the definitions and directives of the political echelon. The war aims were and remain: the return of our hostages, the destruction of Hamas' military and governmental capabilities, ensuring that Gaza will never again be a threat to Israel, and the safe return of the residents of the north to their homes (Eichner, 2024b).

These statements starkly illustrate the gap between the echelons regarding the definition of war aims and, in effect, the absolute absence of a shared conceptual infrastructure.

**3. The Question of "The Day After":** In mid-May 2024, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant held a press conference. The reason for it, he stated, was the Prime Minister's refusal for six months to discuss the governance structure in the Gaza Strip after the war, an issue known as "The Day After." Gallant claimed the Prime Minister's refusal "is eroding the military's achievements" and is dragging Israel toward a reality where, "in the absence of a governing alternative to Hamas... two bad options will remain: Hamas rule or Israeli military rule. Both alternatives are bad." His words added a further layer to the CoS' prior assessments that "if a political decision is not made, IDF soldiers will have to return and operate in places where they have already operated" (Assaraf et al., 2024).

In a video published in response to Gallant, the Prime Minister stated that he refused to formulate a diplomatic plan of action because he believed "one must first destroy Hamas... The first condition for 'the day after' is to eliminate Hamas, and to do so without excuses" (Elimelech, 2024). The conceptual and substantive incongruence between the two echelons on this issue, as well as the confrontational atmosphere, was highlighted when Minister Itamar Ben Gvir attacked Gallant's remarks and called for his dismissal: "From Gallant's perspective, there is no difference between whether Gaza is ruled by IDF soldiers or by Hamas murderers. This is the essence of the 'conception' of a Defense Minister who failed on October 7." Meanwhile, Minister Gantz, identified with the military echelon's position, backed Gallant, stating: "The Defense Minister is speaking the truth" (Assaraf et al., 2024).

The findings above indicate that the political crisis between the Prime Minister, the government, and the Defense Minister was influenced by the strained and toxic relations between the political and military echelons.

However, it also influenced these relations, exacerbating the tension and toxicity. The compromised infrastructure of the discourse space between the echelons and the absence of a strategic learning process hindered the political echelon's ability to lead the effective realization and development of a strategic purpose, as it understood it. Furthermore, the findings show that the tension and crisis of trust between the echelons spilled over into the relationship between the Prime Minister and the Defense Minister. The latter was perceived by the Prime Minister as being "fully identified with the military," confrontational in his conduct, and in some cases, even "subversive." This was especially true regarding Gallant's contacts with the US Biden administration, which was highly critical of the Prime Minister and was perceived as working to oust him (Ilanai, 2025).

## Discussion and Summary

The discourse space serves as an analytical tool for describing and analyzing the interrelations between the military and political echelons. Friction between different knowledge infrastructures within this space renders it a learning sphere. Under conditions of an *open discourse space*, characterized by the exploration of extant knowledge through the re-evaluation of conceptual frameworks and existing perceptions, the political echelon are empowered to formulate a political-strategic purpose based on its understanding of "reality" as the product of a diagnostic-strategic learning process.

This article utilized the discourse space as an analytical organizing concept to examine the disruption of this diagnostic-strategic learning process within the political and military echelons, focusing on the decision-making surrounding the war that commenced after the October 7, 2023 attack. Since a learning process inherently includes conceptualization, we chose to analyze the use of the terms "responsibility" and "failure." These terms held the potential to influence the framing of "reality," to reflect the

profound gap and crisis of trust between the echelons, and to define the nature of their shared responsibility. This article has demonstrated how the military echelon's conceptualization of the October 7 disaster as a "failure" deepened the crisis of trust, affected the essence of shared responsibility, framed the war's trajectory as military rather than political, and consequently influenced strategy, policymaking, and the decision-making processes of the war.

A healthy discourse between the political and military echelons, whose essence is a joint learning process and whose outcome is the construction of a shared knowledge base and common conceptualizations, necessitates two indispensable conditions: mutual trust and shared responsibility. Chief of Staff (CoS) Eyal Zamir aptly defined this in his address at the Military Colleges' change-of-command ceremony on August 14, 2025 (against the backdrop of tensions with the Defense Minister, who had refused to approve the CoS' latest round of appointments):

Mutual trust and full cooperation are the key to success. Victory on the battlefield depends not only on military strength but also on inter-echelon cohesion [...] At the heart of cohesion is trust. With trust, power is born. Only when they operate in harmony can we... break the enemy, win, and secure the future of the state (Zitun, 2025b).

In the absence of these conditions, the inter-echelon relationship is disrupted, and a productive learning discourse is rendered impossible (Michael, 2016). The crisis of trust led to the formation of a closed discourse space devoid of a diagnostic-strategic learning process. This, in turn, disrupted any ability to create the additional, necessary shared conceptualizations required to frame "reality" and devise an agreed-upon strategy that would permit the political echelon to lead the effort

toward realizing its preferred political-strategic purpose for the war. In this state, the echelons' ability to manage an open discourse space, one that relies on trust and is grounded in a joint learning process, was vitiated, as was their ability to institutionalize the principle of shared responsibility. This principle could have bridged the gaps between them and served as a precondition for a "Targeted Partnership" (Schiff, 2012) that enables the design and implementation of the best civilian policy and military strategy for the state.

Through the uniform use of the term "failure" by senior military officers, and by imbuing it with a unique meaning outside the inter-echelon discourse space, the military echelon confined that space to a defined framework. This truncated the conceptual infrastructure for interpreting "reality" and the range of alternatives for consideration. Thus, the military echelon, identifying "strategic helplessness" (Michael, 2010) within the political echelon, both constricted the discourse space and transgressed its boundaries. In effect, the military's assumption of responsibility for the October 7 disaster was tantamount to a call for the political echelon to bear its responsibility, that of aligning military action with political objectives, but in practice, the political echelon did not heed this appeal.

The causal meaning ascribed to "failure" as a product of professional errors (Padan, 2024) manifested one of the most significant barriers to open discourse. This interpretation framed the disaster as a "technical problem" requiring "simple learning" (single-loop learning), whereas understanding the October 7 disaster demanded a "complex diagnostic learning" (double-loop learning) process. The military leadership's adherence to the "tahkir" (debriefing) mechanism, which focuses principally on tactical and operational issues for knowledge development, vitiated the value of experiential learning. It did not serve the requisite knowledge and cognitive development, undermined the necessary

strategic learning process, and, by definition, failed to address the formulation of the political-strategic purpose required for managing the war. For example, the "Be'eri debriefing," the first military investigation presented to the public, drew significant criticism for its focus on the micro-tactical characteristics of the battle (IDF Editorial, 2024), while lacking a broader context or any reference to the General Staff's role in the disaster. This was further compounded by the case of Brigadier General (res.) Oren Solomon, who was dismissed and arrested on charges of leaking classified documents after his own debriefing, which was highly critical of senior command, and was completely ignored by that same command (Naim, 2025).

Concurrently, the political echelon's insistence on focusing on the military debriefings as the "linchpin" of the joint learning process, while evading the establishment of a state commission of inquiry,<sup>9</sup> (akin to those formed after the Yom Kippur War or the Sabra and Shatila massacre) and avoiding learning within its own sphere of responsibility, eviscerated the discourse space. In effect, the military framed the failure at the tactical level and responsibility at the personal level; meanwhile, the political echelon framed the failure within the military-strategic domain and left responsibility outside the political sphere. This gap between the military's micro-conceptualization and the political echelon's macro-conceptualization regarding the military nature of the failure, coupled with the disparity regarding "responsibility," precludes the ability to investigate the event at the macro-level. This is the clearest manifestation of the absence of a joint strategic learning process.

The military echelon's adherence to the terms "failure" and "responsibility" convincingly contrasted with and highlighted the political echelon's avoidance of these same terms, cementing the latter's public image as one evading accountability. It is plausible that this contrast was perceived by the political echelon as a form of defiance by the military, adding

another layer to the perceived confrontational nature of the military's conduct. This was evident in Brigadier General Dan Goldfus' speech, in which he challenged the political echelon ("We will not flee from responsibility... you, however, must be worthy of us") (Kuriel & Zitun, 2024);<sup>10</sup> the IDF Spokesperson's statements (Zitun, 2025a); CoS Halevi's steadfast opposition to the re-occupation of the Gaza Strip and the imposition of military rule; and the "intimate" relationship with the US administration, which was a thorn in the side of the political echelon (Ilanai, 2025).

The military's use of the term "failure" provided the political echelon with a "discourse escape route" from a discussion of its own failure and accountability, leading to its disavowal of shared responsibility as a necessary foundation for civil-military relations. The result was a platform for the emergence of a toxic interaction between the echelons, derived (in part) from the causal link the military itself had forged between "failure" and "responsibility." In effect, the use of the term "failure" rendered visible the extent to which Israel's governing systems are influenced more by personal and political considerations than by substantive, systemic, or state-level concerns. This situation reflects the "judicialization," as defined by Gal-Nur (2004), of Israeli politics. It may lead the public to develop a cynical perception of its elected officials and appointed professionals, and a growing apathy that manifests in intensified public distrust in the government, protests, and reduced voter turnout in Israel's frequent elections (Koenig, 2023). All this contributes to the erosion of the value-based and institutional foundations of Israeli democracy, placing it on a slippery slope toward the attenuation of the Israeli central government's very capacity to function.<sup>11</sup>

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## Notes

- 1 The authors wish to thank Prof. Yagil Levy for his helpful and important contribution to this paper, and Dr. Ofra Ben-Yishai and Dr. Nir Gazit for their comments.
- 2 The fluctuations in the level of public trust in the army are reflected in INSS surveys conducted in [March 2025](#) and [May 2025](#).
- 3 An example of statements by politicians regarding their share of blame for the failure was given in the television program “Uvda,” which quoted Treasury Minister Bezalel Smotrich on the need for political resignations: “We have a few days of legitimacy until the extent becomes clearer. In another forty-eight

hours they will call on us to resign over this failure and they are right.” (“Uvda,” 2024b).

4 “What led to October 7 was not Qatari money. That’s just a huge bluff [...] What led to it was a chain of failures that must be investigated, and I insist that they be fully investigated.” (Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at a press conference on May 21, 2025).

5 At a study evening of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic & Security Affairs held on February 11, 2025, former Chief of Staff and Knesset Member Gadi Eizenkot claimed that “there has been a decline in the culture of knowledge building at the political level.” In his view, this decline derives from concentrating too much power in security systems (Intelligence, Planning, Operations, GSS, Mossad) relative to civilian systems, which he described as “atrophied.” Eitan Ben David, former senior GSS officer, added that, “The weakness of Israel’s political-strategic thinking reflects the weakness of the NSC [National Security Council].” According to him, this organization is unable to present strategic alternatives and “is therefore failing to challenge the existing mode of political-strategic thinking.” See <https://tinyurl.com/29e9jbub> from the 25<sup>th</sup> minute.

6 Not only that, defining the disaster as a failure limits it to the time of the attack, October 7, and thus avoids reference to an even larger failure, the series of faulty decisions over the years that led to October 7.

7 With the exception of Bezalel Smotrich, who said immediately after the massacre: “I take responsibility, for what was and what will be [...] We have to admit with honesty and pain—we failed to protect the security of our citizens” (Bersky, 2023); and also Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, who said: “I am responsible for the security system, I was responsible for it over the past two weeks, including during very difficult events” (Dvori, 2023).

8 A similar event took place on February 18, 2025 when a senior figure in the Prime Minister’s office, identified as the Prime Minister, declared that the release of four hostages’ bodies on February 19 and the release of six living hostages on February 21 were the result of changes in the negotiating team, led by the head of the GSS Ronen Bar and head of the Mossad Dedi Barnea, alongside General (Res.) Nitzan Alon, whom he accused of engaging in “give and give rather than give and take.” <https://tinyurl.com/4uh83dcy>

9 On May 5, 2025 the Government of Israel decided not to set up a commission of inquiry, saying that this was not the right time. <https://tinyurl.com/2z5spnxv>

10 In response to the officer’s strong criticism of the politicians, he was reprimanded by the Chief of Staff. In fact this reprimand amounted to proof of the flippant way in which the senior ranks treated his criticism so that the Chief of Staff could feel he had “done his duty.”

11 This issue is a grave by-product of the situation but goes beyond the scope of the present paper and will therefore be discussed separately.