

Analysis | Between Hamas, Hezbollah and Public Opinion, Israel Finds Itself in a Strategic Bind

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Israel's unsolved conflicts with the Palestinians and Hezbollah have returned to the regional stage ■ The country could face a war of attrition alongside Netanyahu's attempts to undermine democracy

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The truth must be told: Israel finds itself in a serious strategic trap as a result of the massacre Hamas perpetrated in communities adjacent to the Gaza Strip on October 7.

Security threats that were repressed for years, in a manner that allowed most Israeli citizens to go about their daily routine with a limited sense of risk, escalated greatly, fundamentally altering Israeli everyday life.

At this stage, it's not yet clear whether and how it is possible to get out of the trap. A near-permanent situation could emerge in which a prolonged [war of attrition](#) will be waged along two borders at least. The risk still exists that the more threatening Lebanese front will heat up to the level of a war that is liable to mix with a broader confrontation with Iran and the militias it runs, notably Hezbollah.

Two unresolved problems, which bubbled on a low burner – the Palestinian conflict and the confrontation with Hezbollah – have returned to the center of the regional stage. Hamas' move also provided inspiration for other extremist organizations in the region, which are hoping to band together and gradually vanquish Israel.

And even though Iran and Hezbollah did not plunge head-first into the war, as Hamas' leaders in the Gaza Strip hoped they would in the wake of the surprise attack on Israel, they are taking part in the effort and pinning down large numbers of Israeli soldiers in the north of the country.

The Israeli army launching an artillery strike into Lebanon this week. Credit: Gil Eliyahu

The vision articulated by the slain Iranian Quds Force commander Gen. [Qassem Soleimani](#), which spoke of a "ring of fire" that will encircle Israel, is starting to be realized via the pro-Iranian militias, even if the latent danger they pose is still limited.

For more than a decade, we told ourselves stories: Iran is permeable to Israeli intelligence (fact: the Mossad stole the nuclear project archive from Tehran); the [campaign between the wars](#) that the IDF is waging is undercutting Hezbollah's ammunition and rendering Iran and its allies helpless; every round of fighting in the Gaza Strip ends with a crushing Israeli advantage and leaves Hamas and the Palestinian organizations weakened, frightened and deterred; and in the West Bank, if a Palestinian only dreams at night of carrying out a terrorist attack, the Shin Bet security service shows up at his house in the morning and arrests him.

Those illusions were shattered with a deafening crescendo on the morning of Simchat Torah in the area bordering Gaza.

One should not belittle what the IDF has achieved in the Gaza Strip during 12 weeks of fighting. Israel has a [clear-cut advantage](#) in firepower, technology, intelligence and ability to connect all those elements. The spirit of combat and the professionalism of the commanders and the troops, together with a broad American back, are providing the IDF with an advantage in every arena in which it clashes directly with Hamas. In almost every such encounter, Hamas' rate of losses is immeasurably higher than that sustained by the IDF.

But in the same breath, we should take with proper caution the body count of terrorists Israel insists it had accumulated in order to illustrate its military successes.

Every day, in briefings and declarations by commanders in the field, the estimated number of Hamas losses rises. The number of terrorists killed is already said to be 8,000, but, in an aside, the intelligence reports state that these figures are based on an "intermediate level of reliability." In other words, it's likely that the IDF, too, is falling into the exaggerated-count trap that was detrimental to American forces in the Vietnam War.

The shrouded bodies of Palestinians killed in northern Gaza being buried in Rafah in the south on Tuesday. Credit: Mahmud Hams/AFP

The present challenge in Gaza doesn't resemble the collision with the Egyptian divisions in the Strip and in Sinai in the Six-Day War, or the battles on both sides of the Suez Canal in the Yom Kippur War. It's not only a case of the tremendous population density of the Gaza Strip, or that Hamas deliberately deployed its combat systems in the midst of a civilian population (the soldiers say they are finding combat materiel in about every second house). The game-changer for Hamas is the subterranean space. The [network of tunnels](#) and shafts turned out to be incalculably more sophisticated and complex than anything Israeli intelligence knew before the war.

Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar didn't spend the last dozen years, since his release from an Israeli prison in the Gilad Shalit deal, creating youth orchestras in Jabalya and tennis centers in Khan Yunis. Every available shekel was devoted to military buildup and deployment for war against Israel. The billions that Qatar pumped into Gaza were also mostly used for this purpose, or at least [made resources available to Hamas](#) to establish its military force. Thus the assault against Israel was prepared, and Israeli intelligence missed the critical danger it posed. Thus also the defensive plan against the IDF was formed.

It's likely that Hamas was surprised by Israel's readiness to execute an extensive ground maneuver and by the speed with which its own defensive systems collapsed under the pressure of the IDF divisions. But the large-scale damage inflicted on Hamas battalions in the northern Strip did not prevent the organization from fighting with what remained. In place of platoons and companies, it used small squads, with personnel emerging from tunnel shafts to attack Israeli forces before disappearing quickly.

The high-density deployment of four IDF divisions across about two-thirds of the Gaza Strip creates a broad inner area for friction and strikes at vulnerable points. Hamas is succeeding in exacting from Israel a steady daily price in blood, in the form of the troops killed and wounded. Palestinian sensitivity to losses appears to be lower, including against the background of the total number of losses - [more than 20,000 killed](#), according to the Hamas-controlled Ministry of Health in Gaza, which does not distinguish between civilians and armed militants in its announcements.

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Phase 3 and its malcontents

The IDF is counting on a cumulative, gradual, slow achievement: that ever more shafts and tunnels detonated, terrorists killed and combat material destroyed, will ultimately bring about the eradication of Hamas' military capabilities.

But within this equation, Israeli public opinion is a weighty factor. Part of the public is being negatively affected by the growing number of losses and is gradually getting less of a boost from the achievements being scored, even if the IDF Spokesperson's Unit continues to report enthusiastically about another local operation by one brigade combat team or another.

Posters of Israelis taken hostage by Hamas on October 7, Wednesday. Credit: Clodagh Kilcoyne/Reuters

This state of affairs is compounded by other difficulties: the need to preserve much ammunition for the possible development of an intensive war with Hezbollah in the north; the continuing, unusually heavy load on the reservists; the [burden on the economy](#); mental fatigue [among the troops](#) fighting in Gaza and the increasing doubts among the public.

The accumulation of these circumstances is giving rise to support - in the General Staff as well - for a change in the mode of the fighting. For more than a month, the security establishment and the U.S. administration have been discussing lethargically a transition to what's termed phase 3.

This would involve the formation of a narrow security perimeter inside the Gaza Strip, maintaining a buffer zone between the north and south of the Strip (an issue that is still controversial), a thinning out of forces, discharging reservists and shifting to a format of brigade-scale raids against the remaining Hamas bastions.

The direction was discernible in the short statement issued on Tuesday of this week by the IDF chief of staff, Herzl Halevi. There are no magic solutions or shortcuts, Halevi stated. "We will reach the Hamas leadership as well, whether it takes a week or takes months." In other words, the IDF intends a long haul, at varying degrees of intensity.

Those who advocate this transition often mention the precedent of Operation Defensive Shield. That 2002 operation, in the midst of the second intifada, led to the waning of Palestinian terrorism from the West Bank. But that goal was not achieved in the operation itself, in which five divisions took part, but two years later, through hundreds of smaller-scale operations which gradually eroded the adversary's strength.

The circumstances in Gaza are more complex, and the tendency to reduce the offensive forces stems also from the feeling of many that the present format has exhausted itself, and because of questions

about the long-term resilience of Israeli society and its ability to meet the challenge.

The decision will ultimately be made by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. And here, Netanyahu is invoking the strength of the weak. The grim situation in which Israel found itself, at his responsibility, when the war broke out prompted him to summon leaders of the National Unity Party, Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, to join the war cabinet he established. Netanyahu was aided by them urgently.

Since then, Netanyahu has been systematically [undermining his alliance with Gantz](#). The mouthpieces and the toxic machine that is operated on his behalf are already attacking Gantz furiously, even as Netanyahu [violates his commitment](#) not to touch senior appointments in the security branches and while his coalition partners are methodically looting the coalition funds.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu chairing a cabinet meeting at IDF headquarters in Tel Aviv on Sunday. Credit: Ohad Zwigenberg/Pool/Reuters

The prime minister himself is floating speeches about his intention to go all the way against Hamas and is drawing on the aid of various forums of a Hardali (Haredi nationalist) character, who see the campaign in Gaza as a [holy war for Greater Israel](#). During a visit this week to a Jerusalem hospital to meet wounded soldiers, some of them refused to see him.

Gantz and Eisenkot are to some extent painted into a corner, for fear that if they leave because of one of these disputes, two serving ministers – Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich – will enter the war cabinet in their place.

The National Unity Party ministers are still trying to push Netanyahu to decide on a transition to phase 3, but are finding this difficult. This is closely connected to Netanyahu's sweeping refusal to discuss [the "day after"](#) in Gaza. There is no military operation without a distinct political-diplomatic act at its end, but the prime minister is still avoiding this with all his might, because of concern that the coalition will collapse and for fear of the rage of right-wing voters.

Alongside the criticism on the left and center over the [total impasse](#) in the talks to arrange a second release of captives, a huge wave of disappointed expectations is likely to come over the public when it turns out that the fighting tactics have been abridged without the war's aims being achieved.

Even more dangerous, from Netanyahu's viewpoint: The transition to a new phase will send home tens of thousands of reservists, some of whom will channel their anger into the renewal of the public struggle to bring about his ouster.

Brig. Gen. (res.) Assaf Orion, from the Institute for National Security Studies, describes the year ahead, which we can dub "Catch-'24." "The political decision-makers set very ambitious goals, not entirely unjustified, for the war," Orion tells Haaretz. "Those goals mandate a lengthy, not to say endless, war. That's legitimate if you say, like the chief of staff, that the war will be prosecuted in varying intensities. But that also creates a catch. The IDF says it will investigate the hitches and mistakes only after the war. The prime minister promises that he will provide answers when the war ends. And the political process is stuck because one supposedly does not engage in politics during wartime, even though in practice Netanyahu is doing so all the time. In the meantime, the whole group on whose watch the attack occurred is remaining in office."

"From the military angle," Orion says, "we have degraded a large part of Hamas' abilities. But over time, the test will be its ability to regroup. If there are three things that are not in short supply in Gaza, it's young men, Kalashnikov rifles and shovels. A Hamas that is not totally defeated can recruit new militants, arm them and dig tunnels anew. For them not to be able to do that, a new regime

needs to be established there.”

“But the government is unwilling to let the Palestinian Authority take part in that, and international support for the move requires drawing a political horizon, which Netanyahu is refusing to do. If we don’t fill the vacuum, someone else will do so in our place,” he says.

The furor over the leaking of the High Court of Justice’s [draft decision](#) in the case of the reasonableness standard (Channel 12 News reported on Wednesday that the court will strike down the amendment by a majority of 8-7), shows that Netanyahu and his cohorts have not abandoned the effort to advance the judicial coup. In extreme circumstances, Israel might experience a particularly toxic potion: a long war, in which a very unpopular leader both clings to power and continues his efforts to enact antidemocratic legislation.

It’s clear by now that Netanyahu has no intention of going home at his initiative. He will enjoy a Hardali tailwind, from a segment of the population that seeks to leverage the great self-sacrifice of its sons on the field of battle in Gaza into unilateral political dictates, under the false cover of a thrust for unity. When the center-left camp tries to protest, it will be accused of plunging a knife into the back of the fighting troops.

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A hot winter?

This week saw a further escalation in the north with Iran attributing to Israel the [assassination of a Revolutionary Guards general](#), Razi Mousavi. He was killed in an airstrike on his home in Damascus.

Israeli defense officials take seriously Iran’s threats to powerfully respond to the assassination but don’t believe that a war will erupt against Iran and Hezbollah. On Thursday sirens went off - unusually - in Haifa’s suburbs when a drone entered from Lebanon and was downed by the IDF.

The funeral of Iranian general Razi Mousavi in Tehran on Thursday. Credit: Majid Asgaripour/WANA News Agency/Reuters

According to the intelligence analysis, which of course is no sure thing after October 7, Iran and Hezbollah’s opening position hasn’t changed. Iranian Spiritual Leader Ali Khamenei set the policy in the very first days after the terrorist attack. Khamenei was worried about the threats by U.S. President Joe Biden, who told Iran to stay out of the war.

Accordingly, the Tehran regime wants to avoid a broad war and doesn’t want to be directly involved. During the Gaza war, Hezbollah will continue to attack Israel from the Lebanese border, with [Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah](#) acting according to Khamenei’s rules.

At the start, Hezbollah was a bit surprised by Israel’s prowess: intelligence that led to precise hits against squads launching rockets and anti-tank missiles. Later, the organization retreated and regrouped. Even though Israel too is being cautious to prevent a total escalation, the impression is that it’s the one stepping up attacks on the border.

In these forays, Israel has destroyed observation positions and outposts that Hezbollah built next to the fence in the past two years. The situation in the north remains perilous. The Americans’ effort to launch a diplomatic process to cool things down and let the people on both sides return home (tens

of thousands have also fled the Shi'ite villages in southern Lebanon), isn't bearing fruit.

Israeli defense officials aren't optimistic. A war in the north isn't inevitable, but anyone who thinks Hezbollah will give up its presence south of the Litani River only because of diplomatic pressure is probably delusional.

Reservists resisting

As of midweek, the cost of the war in Gaza stood at 66 billion shekels (\$18.2 billion), or more than 800 million shekels a day. In the first weeks, amid the mass mobilization of reservists, the movement of forces and the massive use of ammunition, this number was at 1.3 billion shekels, though now it's down to about 400 million.

The change is explained mainly by the lower spending for ammunition and reservist days, the two major items in the war budget. At the height of the fighting, more than 300,000 reservists were called up, a figure now down by about 40 percent to 170,000.

A David's Sling missile. About \$4 billion will go toward interceptor missiles for the Iron Dome and David's Sling antimissile systems. Credit: Ministry of Defense via AP

Other heavy spending has been on new equipment from both home and abroad for things like augmenting logistics, treating the wounded, helping the bereaved families, and assisting the home front. The procurement costs are extremely high: more than 20 billion shekels (\$5.5 billion) at home and \$5 billion abroad.

Israel is still waiting for the American aid package that the Biden administration is having trouble passing in Congress because of disputes with the Republicans over investments on the U.S.-Mexico border.

The aid package contains support for Ukraine, Taiwan and Israel. Israel's special budget from the Americans stands at around \$14 billion, of which \$5 billion will be for procurements from U.S. defense contractors. About \$4 billion will go toward interceptor missiles for the Iron Dome and David's Sling antimissile systems.

Some of the manufacture of the interceptor missiles is being done jointly by Israel's Rafael Advanced Defense Systems and U.S. company Raytheon, now actually known as RTX Corporation. Another \$1.2 billion of the aid will go toward developing Rafael's laser-based interceptor; the first battery is expected to be deployed in a little under two years.

Israeli defense officials are now more aware of the heavy burden on [the economy](#) of reservists' long service. The IDF has found that about 14 percent of reservists work in [high-tech](#) in their civilian lives, the economy's growth engine and main source of income tax revenue.

Brig. Gen. (res.) Ariel Heimann is a former first chief reserve officer; he was appointed to the post two decades ago. In an article this week on the INSS website in Hebrew, he warns that the reservists' long, devoted service is in danger. "Long service creates emotional and practical difficulties," he writes. "The assumption that the reservists will be at the IDF's disposal for an unlimited length of time, and in full force, is unreasonable."

As Heimann puts it, part of the difficulty is that, the reservists will soon be discharged knowing that they'll be called up for another long stint in a few months. He believes that families and employers will begin to pile on the pressure - as the reservists process their experiences in intense, long battles.

Heimann thus predicts "attempts to avoid additional service and even quiet evasion on a large scale." That's likely. Unfortunately, conversations with top people in the IDF, all in the career army, show that they haven't yet figured out this trend. The IDF hasn't begun to deal with the problem.

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P.S.

- Haaretz. Dec 29, 2023 6:00 am IST:
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