

Objectives versus achievements - the strategy for a path to total victory

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When Hamas launched its deadly attack on October 7, its primary objective was to mobilize all elements of the Iranian-led resistance axis to join the campaign, attack and weaken Israel, and create the conditions for Israel's collapse. By integrating itself into the Iranian strategic framework, Hamas became an important part of the "ring of fire" surrounding Israel - a network of proxies that Iran has meticulously developed over the past decades through an enormous investment of resources and human capital. In particular, Iran identified the Palestinian arena as a crucial component of this "ring of fire" - supporting and nurturing Hamas and Islamic Jihad and enhancing their military capabilities through the provision of weaponry, military knowledge, and financial support.

On October 8, Hezbollah, Iran's flagship proxy, also joined the war. Hezbollah, which operates mostly in Lebanon along Israel's northern frontier, is an enormous Iranian enterprise in which vast resources have been invested. Hezbollah joined the war against Israel in an attempt to stretch Israel's military capabilities and divert its strategic attention away from the war against Hamas in Gaza. The early days of the war were difficult for Israel; it was humiliated, bleeding, and unprepared, all while the Iranian axis, in its various components, experienced a surge in self-confidence.

Iran's proxies were built to serve a dual-purpose. The first was defensive: the proxy network would act as a loaded gun aimed at Israel to deter it from attacking Iran's nuclear program. The animating logic here is that Israel would think twice before attacking Iran's nuclear facilities, because such an attack would immediately expose Israel to an assault from Gaza, Lebanon, and other arenas where Iran's proxies operate, including well-armed terror elements in Judea and Samaria. The second purpose was offensive: to serve as launch sites for a coordinated offensive against Israel, wherein Iran would simultaneously "activate" the entire proxy network once its nuclear weapons reached viability (or approached the threshold of viability). Such an assault, Iran reasoned, would then

lead to the collapse of the State of Israel and, ultimately, its destruction.

The war in Gaza and the northern front cannot be viewed as isolated events; rather, the ongoing war in these two theaters illuminates Iran's strategy--coordinate multiple theaters of combat to trigger a regional war against Israel. Yet, this ostensibly "regional" war entails consequences for the entire world. Russia and China, both opposed to the current American-led world order, have lent their support to the Iranian "resistance axis." In their view, any entity that undermines U.S. interests (such as a strong and secure Israel) and status deserves their backing. By their logic, any blow to American assets, interests, or reputation weakens the U.S. and damages its global standing, thereby advancing efforts to reshape the world order.

On October 16, 2023, Israel's political leadership defined the war's goals: the dismantling of Hamas' military and governing capabilities in the Gaza Strip, the elimination of the terror threat emanating from Gaza, and the creation of the conditions for the return of the hostages. The political leadership also decided that by the conclusion of the war, the IDF would enjoy full freedom of action regarding Gaza, without restrictions on the use of force. This freedom of action would enable the IDF to eliminate terrorist infrastructures, neutralize terror threats, and prevent terrorist infrastructures from being rebuilt. Notably, these war goals outlined at the beginning stage of the war contained no explicit provision regarding the northern front or the return of evacuated residents of the North. Only in September 2024 was this objective formally added as an official war goal.

For many months, Israel responded cautiously to Hezbollah's aggression, effectively subjecting itself to the "equations" set by Nasrallah. Occasionally, Israel's response was particularly forceful, which in turn escalated Hezbollah's attacks. During this period, Israel opted to concentrate its efforts on the southern front, with the IDF dismantling Hamas' military and governing capabilities in Gaza through extensive ground maneuvers and airstrikes. The capture of Rafah and the Philadelphi Corridor was delayed by approximately four months, largely due to a direct confrontation with the U.S. administration which involved the withholding of critical arms shipments by the U.S.

With the formal shift of Israel's military focus to the northern front (from mid-September 2024), Israel has succeeded in "decapitating" Hezbollah by

eliminating most of its senior leadership, as well as damaging its command and control capabilities and causing enormous damage to the group's weapons stockpiles and infrastructure across Lebanon. Israel also began ground operations in southern Lebanon (starting on October 1, 2024) with the goal of "cleaning" southern Lebanon of Hezbollah's threatening military presence and enabling the safe return of the residents of Northern Israel to their homes. Israel's actions managed to sow chaos, confusion, fear, and distrust within the organization, impairing its operational capability and its ability to harm Israel.

From the above, one can discern the main elements of Israel's strategy. The underlying idea of this strategy involves three phases. The first phase includes the destruction of Hamas' and Islamic Jihad's capabilities in the southern front such that they no longer pose a threat to Israel. The second phase entails weakening Hezbollah enough to fundamentally change the situation in Lebanon and enable the safe return of the evacuated northern residents. Finally, the third phase, following the neutralization of the two most significant components of the Iranian axis (Gaza and Lebanon), Iran itself will be exposed to Israel's might, as demonstrated on October 26 attack and potential future attacks, bereft of the protection provided by its important proxies.

In this broader context, one can understand the Israeli Prime Minister's use of the term "total victory." This term was mocked by political rivals who claimed that the statement was empty and that achieving "total victory" was impossible. However, Israel's actions illuminate its strategic logic, which aims to weaken the *entire* resistance axis--including Iran itself. This strategy also serves as the foundation for shaping a new regional order that will see, at the very least, a significantly weakened Iranian threat with its ability to harm Israel and destabilize the region at large hindered.

Israel will no longer tolerate recurring cycles of conflict; it will no longer attempt to "buy calm" or mistakenly apply the logic of "quiet will be met with quiet." Rather, Israel has decided to fundamentally change the rules of the game and adopt a strategy of decisive victory. In this sense, "total victory" refers to the adoption of an offensive and resolute approach aimed at dismantling the existing system. In strategic terms, this is termed a second-order change, which involves changing the system itself, as opposed to a first-order change, which involves changes and adjustments within the existing system. The intended outcome certainly deserves to be interpreted as "total victory."

Therefore, the completion of this effort, with a sequence of Israeli successes, will be nothing short of “total victory,” a game-changer and a decisive shift. This success will open the door for Israel, the region, as well as the U.S. and its allies in the free world, to design a new regional architecture. This architecture would promote stability, security, and prosperity, while weakening Iran and its proxies as actors that destabilize security and spearhead radical Islamic terrorism. Such radicalism, fueled by Iran, Hamas and other radical Islamic entities like Qatar, has also permeated the streets of the free world, infiltrated university campuses, and served as fuel for progressive intellectual and media elites, who consistently identify Israel as the source of evil and the rotten fruit of colonialism, imperialism, and oppressive apartheid.

In less than a year, Israel has succeeded in dismantling Hamas and leaving it with only residual capabilities. These capabilities will continue to fade as the military campaign in Gaza concludes and the last major stronghold of Hamas in northern Gaza is dismantled through control of the civilian infrastructure (humanitarian aid distribution), rather than only through military action.

Israel’s and the IDF’s achievements are impressive by any standard, especially from a historical and comparative perspective, considering the success of other armies and international coalitions in wars against ISIS, Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and others. The most remarkable and significant achievement is in undermining Iran’s confidence and pushing it into a realm of severe strategic confusion and disorientation, and in dealing a major blow to Iran’s strategic assets in which it has invested years of effort and enormous quantities of resources.

Iran has lost the two most important components of the axis it built over the years. In practical terms, Israel has succeeded in significantly weakening the Iranian system, which has in turn influenced the entire regional system. The weakening of the Iranian system and the dismantling of its potential threat to Israel and the region will inevitably lead to a shift in the entire regional system and will also have repercussions for the international system.

If the test of strategy lies in the nature of the change it brings about and its service of vital interests--goals which are reached through the savvy identification and leveraging of opportunities, continuous optimization and learning, and, ultimately, improvement at a fundamental level-- then from a one-year perspective, one can recognize the clear success of Israel’s strategy. The

work is not yet complete, and more time and effort will be required to finish it. However, once completed, the statesman's hour will arrive, and it will be their duty to translate these impressive achievements into diplomatic gains. Only then will we be able to see a grand strategy in all its glory.