

The Zero-Multiplier Paradox

A Critical Look at the War in the Middle East

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How was Israel defeated on October 7 despite absolute superiority (economic, technological, and military), and why is it finding it so difficult to translate its impressive tactical achievements on the multi-front battlefield into the achievement of its strategic objectives?

Defining the Zero-Multiplier Paradox

Regardless of the magnitude of technological or material force multipliers, an ungrounded doctrinal foundation acts as a "zero-multiplier," effectively neutralizing all strategic and tactical advantages.

Israel, despite its economic, technological, and military superiority, was defeated by Hamas on October 7 and suffered the greatest military failure in its history. The Gaza Division was overrun, its bases were captured, hundreds of its soldiers were killed and wounded, and many were taken prisoner. An entire region was seized by an extremist Islamist terror army; its residents were massacred, raped, and abducted, and whole communities were destroyed.

This systemic collapse occurred despite a billion-dollar, technologically advanced physical barrier, mechanized ground forces equipped with state-of-the-art platforms, air force and an intelligence apparatus widely considered globally preeminent.

Israel recovered from this grave failure in impressive fashion. Faced with a multi-front challenge for which it had not prepared, across seven separate arenas financed and directed by Iran, Israel entered one of the most difficult wars in its history. It restored control over the Gaza Envelope on that very day. Three weeks later, it launched a maneuver into the complex battlefield of the Gaza Strip, which had been built as an urban fortress laced with tunnels, with a ground force of low readiness and an operational campaign plan improvised at the last moment. Even so, it succeeded in defeating Hamas's battalions and dealing them a crushing blow. In the northern theater, following a year-long defensive posture, Israel initiated an offensive campaign in Lebanon, severely degrading the most capable proxy within Iran's regional threat network.

After its impressive tactical successes in Gaza and Lebanon, Israel launched three direct campaigns against Iran, in which it achieved striking results - significant damage to Iran's air-defense, nuclear, and missile infrastructure; absolute air superiority; unprecedented success by Israel's air-defense systems; and the interception of most of the Iranian kinetic threats fired at Israel.

Despite its absolute superiority over its enemies and these impressive successes, Israel remained with all fronts open, with the longest war in its history, more than 2,000 dead, severe erosion of its international legitimacy, significant wear on the IDF, and an inability to achieve the war's objectives.

The central reason for the failure of October 7 and for the inability to translate tactical successes in the war into strategic achievements stems from the zero-multiplier paradox: Israel does not know how to realize its technological, economic, and military superiority because that superiority is not anchored in sound tradition, the fundamentals of the military profession, healthy organizational culture, and sound strategic thought. However advanced innovation and technological superiority may be, they have no value if they are not employed in accordance with doctrine. Organizational culture eats strategy for breakfast...

How Hamas Defeated the Gaza Division

Hamas succeeded in combining several decisive elements in the planning and design of the campaign to defeat the Gaza Division and seize the Gaza Envelope:

- A deception plan aimed at Israel's intelligence agencies - surprise was a necessary condition for the success of the attack.
- Strict operational security (OPSEC) and extreme compartmentalization, which limited the "read-on" circle to a minimal command echelon.
- The build-up of an Elite assault force (The Nukhba Force), armed and trained to attack the Gaza Envelope simultaneously across the width and depth of the sector, with a transition from routine to emergency in as little as three to six hours.
- An opening blow integrating drones in order to paralyze and blind Israel's command-and-control (C4I) systems.

Despite all this, the Israeli system should not have collapsed. It collapsed because all of its components - tactical, operational, and strategic - acted in violation of Israeli warfighting doctrine:

- Israel allowed two Elite assault force (including Hezbollah's Radwan Force), armed and trained, to sit on its border at a three-hour state of readiness for attack.
- Despite warning signs uncovered by Israeli intelligence on the night before the attack, intelligence assessments prioritized intent-based probability over capability-based risk analysis. This cognitive bias precluded preemptive disruption operations, despite actionable indicators.
- The Gaza Division defended the border line in violation of the doctrinal principles for conducting a defensive battle - without a security zone, without mobile reserves, without meaningful firepower, without fortified positions, and without overwatching the obstacle with observation and fires.
- The operational culture of the ground forces in the Gaza Division was poor - they did not believe in the threat, half the forces were on leave, they were not at proper operational readiness, and their operational discipline was lax.
- Israel's intelligence agencies invested most of their resources in SIGINT collection based primarily on cyber signals, while neglecting other collection disciplines - OSINT, HUMINT, and IMINT.
- Hamas benefited from a wealth of information about the Israeli military because of a grave failure of information-security culture in the IDF, under which soldiers uploaded to social media, over the course of years, photographs and video clips of high intelligence value.

Like a Phoenix - The Recovery from Failure

At 09:00 on October 7, a region of Israel was in enemy hands. This was not merely the largest terror attack in Israel's history, nor was it simply Israel's 9/11. Never in Israel's history had an inhabited region containing thousands of civilians fallen into enemy hands. At the same time, in Lebanon, Hezbollah's leader was weighing whether to join the war and commit the Radwan Division to the seizure of yet another region in Israel - the Galilee. For the first time since the Yom Kippur War, Israel faced the danger of an existential threat.

Many militaries would have responded to such a chaotic wartime scenario in the following way: a tactical withdrawal to a new defensive line while rescuing military forces and civilians; mobilization of the reserves and stabilization of the defensive line in the south and north; The deliberate planning and preparation for an offensive operation to retake the Gaza Envelope; and the return of the area to Israeli hands only after several days. The IDF, however, restored control over the Gaza Envelope on that same day, within a matter of hours, and needed four more days to clear the area of the last terrorist. What were the keys to the IDF's success in recovering so quickly and returning the Gaza Envelope to Israeli hands?

- The ability to recover from failure, improvise, and function in chaos - this is part of the Israeli society DNA.
- Initiative and determination - many forces and commanders streamed into the Gaza Envelope without orders or a plan, taking initiative and seeking contact with the enemy.
- The correct order of priority in retaking the area - First the lines of communication (LOCs), then civilian population centers, and finally military installations.
- Air Force control over the security space between the barrier and the neighborhoods of Gaza.

The speed with which the IDF recovered from the gravest failure in its history was reflected not only in restoring the situation in the Gaza Envelope but also in the speed with which it managed to formulate a plan and launch a maneuver into the fortified objective of Gaza. Only two weeks passed from the end of the fighting in the Gaza Envelope to the launch of the maneuver in Gaza - despite serious readiness gaps in the Ground Forces, the absence of an orderly pre-prepared plan, and the shaken self-confidence of commanders and soldiers in the wake of the October 7 failure. The achievement lay not only in the recovery and the launch of the maneuver but also in the operational success against Hamas, which was surprised by the depth of the maneuver that reached the heart of Gaza City, by its intensity, and by the IDF's deception. Accordingly, after a month of fighting, Hamas offered a hostage deal under which 110 women and children were released for almost nothing in return (the price was a ceasefire, a halt to the IDF's momentum, and ten invaluable days of learning).

An Urban Fortified Objective - The Battlefield and the Maneuver in Gaza

After the October 7 attack, Hamas prepared for defense according to plans, infrastructure, and training it had built over many years. The Gaza Strip - 365 square kilometers along the coastal plain, populated by two million residents - became a fortified military objective with defensive infrastructure above and below ground. Hamas divided the Strip into five combat zones and five defensive brigades: northern Gaza, Gaza City, the central camps, Khan Younis, and Rafah. Each brigade was composed of battalions and subordinate formations deployed in linear defense, with infrastructure above and below ground, thousands of operatives, high-explosive charges, numerous anti-tank teams, sniper teams, and indirect-fire weapons. Its concept of combat rested on two central pillars:

- The population as a human shield, which would prevent the IDF from employing its full strength.
- "The Metro" - a vast (600 KM) subterranean (SBT) network of interconnected tunnels running the length and breadth of the Strip.

What were the keys to the IDF's decisive maneuver in November 2023?

- Neutralizing the population as a human shield - the evacuation of uninvolved civilians from the combat zones.
- The participation of the Air Force and the Navy in the ground battle and the application of powerful fire support (Despite international allegations of disproportionate force and LOAC violations, statistical analysis of the campaign indicates a historically low non-combatant-to-combatant casualty ratio for dense urban warfare, validating the precision of IDF joint fires).
- The use of the principle of deception - encirclement, envelopment, and maneuver contrary to the enemy's expectations, from west to east.
- The proper execution of combined and joint battle - the maximum exploitation of Israel's military power advantage (Joint multi-domain Operations).
- C4I - computerized, networked, and connected command-and-control systems that injected real-time intelligence and enabled rapid coordination and connectivity across units and service branches in the wake of the digital transformation carried out in the IDF.

- Heavy armored platforms and the advanced technologies integrated into them, enabling maneuver in any terrain, survivability, enemy exposure, and rapid lethality - tanks and APCs.
- Applied innovation in robotics and drones - weapons systems that changed the battlefield, saved lives, and neutralized threats.
- The integration of the IDF's special forces into the maneuver - bringing revolutionary capabilities and technologies into the fight.
- A logistical envelope for a sustained war effort - supply, maintenance, engineering, communications, and medical support.
- Reserve units - more than manpower reinforcement; they also brought thinking and initiatives from outside the box.
- A sustained operational learning effort based on the establishment of a Ground Forces operational learning center.
- Leading from the front - at both the tactical and operational levels.
- New techniques for saving casualties on the battlefield - the numbers speak for themselves: the percentage of wounded who survived their injuries rose to 94%.
- An exceptional Morale and Units cohesion.

Why Hamas Survived – Guerrilla and subterranean Warfare

Why, despite the tactical successes in Gaza, did Israel fail to achieve the war's objectives? How did Hamas manage to recover and disrupt the IDF's war plan, and thereby remain in power and survive militarily?

Hamas emerged from the first ceasefire with the realization that the IDF was conducting a decisive campaign against it and that, in order to survive, it had to turn the campaign into a war of attrition. It did so by abandoning the orderly defensive plan it had built over fifteen years and shifting to Subterranean-based guerrilla warfare. The IDF did not know how to adapt to Hamas's guerrilla warfare, and its response was partial and incomplete. It did not include the principles of counter-guerrilla warfare that regular forces have previously proven to be effective:

Popular support - Israel failed to separate Hamas from the civilian population in Gaza. The reason was the absence of a strategic decision on how humanitarian aid should enter Gaza. The Israeli government saw all the alternatives as bad and chose the worst one of

all: not to decide. The result was that Hamas received all the resources it needed to survive - food, water, fuel, and medicine - and profited from them at the expense of its own civilians. The cash it received from those civilians enabled it to recruit new operatives in place of those the IDF had killed.

Control of territory - The IDF did not deny Hamas urban sanctuaries for guerrilla warfare through a persistent presence on the ground combined with a high tempo and continuity of operations. The pace and continuity of operations were low given the size and readiness of an IDF that had been reduced over the years on the ground forces. An entire area in Gaza was never captured and served as an urban sanctuary - the central camps. The IDF had no robust response to Hamas's tunnels, and its units refrained from entering and fighting the operatives hiding inside them for fear of casualties - the cost mattered more than the mission. In addition, the campaign in Gaza was managed in violation of doctrine: entire areas that had been captured were abandoned before the mission had been completed and before Hamas infrastructure had been destroyed, allowing Hamas to return after the IDF withdrew. Each time the IDF had to recapture such areas, the price it paid was higher, because the enemy had learned and prepared more effectively.

Supply - Israel failed to sever Hamas's supply routes because humanitarian aid flowed directly into its hands.

External support - Israel failed to mobilize an international coalition and legitimacy in its war against Hamas. On the contrary, it lost all the legitimacy it had enjoyed after the October 7 massacre because it fought contrary to its own doctrine of war, without regard for the dimension of time.

Time and attrition - Through guerrilla warfare, Hamas pushed the conflict into a long war of attrition that wore down Israeli society and the IDF. The Ground Forces' flawed operational culture worked against them and led to Hamas successes and many casualties that weakened Israeli society. Israel, facing limited resources due to the shrinking of the Ground Forces, multiple fronts, Force preservation was prioritized over mission accomplishment, and disregard for the time dimension, failed to achieve decision and was dragged into a war of attrition.

Despite the determination of the tactical echelon, technological superiority, continuous and precise intelligence, and the support of the American superpower, the IDF failed to accomplish the mission. Hamas's military power was indeed badly damaged, but it survived, and Hamas remained in power. It did so despite its weakness because it knew how to change in the course of the fighting, adopt a method of war and apply its principles successfully, and exploit the vulnerabilities of the Israeli side - above all its tendency to fight contrary to doctrine and its poor operational discipline.

The Lebanon Front

Throughout the first year of the war, Israel and Hezbollah waged a battle of attrition and tacit rules of engagement below the threshold of full-scale war. Israel refrained from opening another front because of the war in Gaza, while Hezbollah contented itself with symbolic participation in Hamas's war effort, even as it enjoyed an unprecedented strategic achievement: the evacuation of Israel's northern communities. Over time, the IDF's operational learning improved, and the price Hezbollah paid in the exchange of blows below the threshold of war steadily increased. As a result, Hezbollah withdrew its forces from the villages of southern Lebanon. After a Hezbollah rocket killed Israeli children on a soccer field, Israel escalated its actions in several steps - eliminating Hezbollah's military commander, activating a Trojan horse through the explosion of the Pagers, eliminating the organization's leadership including Nasrallah, and conducting air blows that destroyed all of Hezbollah's strategic weaponry. The organization's operatives lost their self-confidence, and the IDF exploited that fact, together with the reality that southern Lebanon had become almost empty of operatives, in order to raid 37 Shiite villages near the border that had served the Radwan Unit as the infrastructure for an invasion of the Galilee. At the end of the operation (Operation Northern Arrows), Hezbollah agreed for the first time to cease its fire, and Israel signed a ceasefire under international mediation, allowing the Israeli residents of the north to return to their homes.

Failure, Success, and a Missed Opportunity

The campaign against Hezbollah, which began with a Catastrophic strategic failure - the evacuation of an inhabited region for a full year - and tactical failures in responding to the missile and drone threat, ended in late 2024 in a major success that pushed Hezbollah out of the war, brought about the collapse of the Shiite axis (with the fall of

the Assad regime in Syria), and later enabled Israel to fight Iran with far greater freedom of action (during Operation Rising Lion, Hezbollah did not intervene, and the Iranians no longer enjoyed the Syrian air-defense systems).

The keys to success were:

- Effective and aggressive defense in accordance with IDF doctrine, which exacted a very heavy price from Hezbollah operatives.
- Impressive operational learning by the IDF.
- The IDF's intelligence superiority, based on advanced technology.
- A rapidly developing technological response to operational problems.
- Operational tools and planning based on intelligence and advanced technology prepared over many years.
- The experience and operational confidence accumulated by the Ground Forces in the Gaza maneuver, and the preparation of those forces to move from Gaza to Lebanon.

At the same time, Israel missed an opportunity to strike Hezbollah so severely that its standing would be undermined and its military structure dismantled. In Operation Epic Fury, a year and a half after Operation Northern Arrows, Hezbollah proved that it was premature to eulogize it. Unlike during Operation Rising Lion, Hezbollah - established as Iran's forward proxy division - this time fulfilled its purpose and joined the fighting after a recovery process that included changes in its warfighting methods. Like Hamas, Hezbollah too returned to its roots and to the way it fought Israel in the 1990s: as a guerrilla organization rather than as a terror army. In addition to firing rockets and missiles at the northern communities, employing explosive charges, and fighting at close range, Hezbollah began to operate fiber-optic FPV drones that were immune to jamming, and these began exacting a price from the IDF. Despite the ceasefire agreed upon by the United States and Iran, a war of attrition continues in the north to this day, while constraints on Israel's use of force are imposed by the Americans.

How Was Hezbollah's Self-Confidence Restored?

Hezbollah managed, within a year and a half, to get back on its feet after the elimination of its entire leadership and a substantial portion of its capabilities, and to challenge Israel again in Asymmetric warfare because of several grave mistakes made by Israel:

Failure to exploit the opportunity; campaign design and execution contrary to doctrine - After the blows Hezbollah absorbed in September 2024, Israel did not exploit the organization's flight from the battlefield. Instead of planning an expanded campaign against Hezbollah, it settled for the limited achievement of destroying Radwan infrastructure. When the enemy flees the battlefield, doctrine calls for exploiting that opportunity and conducting Exploitation and pursuit operations until the enemy is destroyed. Israel instead carried out a limited raid.

Sequential vs. Simultaneous Phasing- Opting for force preservation, the IDF executed a deliberate, sequential clearance rather than a rapid, simultaneous advance. This conservative tempo prolonged the campaign, resulting in increased attrition of maneuver units.

Absence of debriefings, force build-up, and planning for the next campaign in Lebanon by the Ground Forces - With the end of the ground maneuver in Lebanon and Gaza, the Ground Forces did not conduct a learning and lessons-learned process from the maneuver battles. Accordingly, no rapid force build-up was carried out. Nor was operational planning conducted, based on graduated levels of escalation, for another campaign in the north, despite preparations for another campaign against Iran. The result was that when Epic Fury began and the strikes in Iran commenced, Hezbollah joined the fighting and the IDF had no answer beyond a defensive plan. The result: an improvised and hesitant operational plan, the initiative passing to Hezbollah, and no force-design solution to the FPV threat, even though it was known that Hezbollah was studying and copying weapons and warfighting methods & TTPs from Ukraine.

Information Operations and Strategic Messaging- Following Operation Northern Arrows, the Israeli political and military establishments severely mismanaged strategic messaging by overstating the degradation of Hezbollah's capabilities. The adversary's resurgence during Operation Epic Fury consequently fractured domestic morale and exerted undue political pressure on military decision-making.

Fighting contrary to doctrine - The terrain in Lebanon is different from Gaza - mountainous rather than flat - and therefore requires different TTPs. Chief among them is Dismounted overwatch: Securing key terrain with dismounted infantry prior to armored advance. The IDF did not apply this TTPs in a key battle over the crossings of the Litani River, suffered a defeat and many casualties, and thereby convinced Hezbollah that this campaign could unfold differently.

The result of these failures is that the north, like Gaza, has remained an open front, without the achievement of the war's objectives and with a return to a war of attrition.

Summary and Conclusions for Asymmetric warfare

On both fronts Gaza and Lebanon, Israel failed to achieve the war's objectives and did not manage to translate its impressive tactical achievements into strategic ones. There were several reasons for these failures. Hamas and Hezbollah - the two terror armies - carried out a rapid and impressive learning process in response to their failures on the battlefield against the IDF, despite years of force build-up as terror armies. Accordingly, they performed a kind of reverse engineering back to the warfighting methods they had used two decades earlier - asymmetric guerrilla warfare. Despite its military and technological superiority, Israel found, and continues to find, it difficult to contend with asymmetric warfare because of gaps in force build-up for the operational challenges posed by Hezbollah and Hamas - the underground domain, FPV drones, short-range indirect fire, and anti-tank weapons - and because of learning and adaptation cycles slower than those of the enemy.

At the same time, the central gap stems from the Ground Forces' flawed operational culture, together with deficient operational planning and execution and the absence of strategic thought anchored in doctrine, military history, and long-standing canonical knowledge. Regular forces can defeat the organizations that challenge them in asymmetric warfare, provided they shorten the bureaucratic processes of large and cumbersome institutions in learning, short-term force build-up, and operational planning and execution, all grounded in orderly doctrine and the lessons of past wars. Innovation and technology have no value if they are not anchored in tradition, the fundamentals of the military profession, art of war and a strong and healthy organizational culture that sanctifies learning and lessons learned. Technology changes the battlefield only when it is employed according to an operational concept based on

doctrine. Without the blitzkrieg CONOPS, radios and trucks, tanks and aircraft - which transformed the battlefield at the start of the Second World War - would have meant nothing. Military and semi-military organizations throughout history have been in a contest of technological learning: machine guns mowed down infantry in WWI, then came the tanks in WWII. Anti-tank weapons did to tanks what machine guns had done to infantry, and drones today allow even semi-military organizations to generate an aerial threat without an air force. This article does not argue that new technologies are unimportant or that they change nothing, but rather that the changes appear in familiar forms from the past, even if they are carried out by innovative means. As one British scholar wrote during the war in Ukraine: 'We have advanced back to the trenches....'

Israel, despite its technological superiority and impressive successes on the battlefield, remained with all fronts open and with no ability to translate tactical achievements into the realization of the Strategic objectives because it ignored basic principles of its own doctrine of war, combat doctrine, and military history: it conducted war while ignoring the time dimension and the resources available; Force preservation was prioritized over mission accomplishment; and it failed to apply the principles of counter-guerrilla doctrine.