Lessons from Assad's fall: The value of pessimism

written by Elie Klutstein | 09.12.2024

Since Oct. 7, Israel has faced numerous internal and external challenges, yet appears to have succeeded in creating a new regional reality. However, security forces and political leadership had to advance these changes amid significant difficulties and at a heavy cost, operating across multiple fronts after failing to foresee and prepare for various developments.

The recent rapid developments in Syria should serve as another reminder of the importance of maintaining a healthy dose of pessimism. Such an approach helps prepare for worse scenarios – and allows for relief when they don't materialize.

According to reports, even Israeli intelligence was caught off guard by Bashar Assad's fall in Syria within days. Their overly optimistic assessment led political leadership to implement what hindsight reveals as flawed policy. Israel believed Damascus' ruler's position was stable, and based on this, diplomatic moves were made with Russia, including regarding the end of the Lebanon war. In practice, the Syrian lion proved to be nothing more than a paper tiger.

Excessive optimism was also evident regarding Iran during the war. Before the April missile attack, experts claimed Iran wouldn't dare launch a direct attack on Israel from its territory, an assessment reportedly shared by US intelligence. The outcome, as we all know, was entirely different: Iran attacked Israel directly not once but twice – launching hundreds of ballistic missiles and UAVs.

This adds to the misconception held by Israeli security forces before Hamas' Oct. 7 attack: many worked under the assumption that Hamas was deterred and uninterested in confrontation with Israel. Senior IDF officials displayed complacency and dismissiveness, leading to the Gaza war that remains ongoing.

Conversely, regarding the war with Hezbollah, Israel heard exaggerated assessments of the Shiite terror organization's capabilities. Doomsday scenarios of thousands of daily missiles and rockets striking Israel, hundreds of casualties, and prolonged power grid failures circulated – but ultimately proved baseless. Israel fought Hezbollah with considerable success, and these nightmare scenarios

proved false and misleading. The prices paid, heavy as they were, weren't close to the numbers cited by many commentators and professionals.

So which approach should national assessors take – those tasked with predicting reality based on available information – optimistic or pessimistic? Seemingly, an optimistic approach or operational concept that relies somewhat on intelligence about enemy intentions becomes necessary when dealing with budget constraints. The numerous missions facing Israel's security forces require prioritization and preparation accordingly.

Yet this was also part of the Oct. 7 error. Had commanders in the field based their military deployment along the Gaza Strip on the enemy's capabilities rather than their analysis of Hamas' intentions, we might be in a different place today. While budget and manpower certainly play a role, it's worth remembering that optimistic scenarios sometimes lead to faulty preparation – and the price we ultimately pay proves exponentially higher.

Is this merely hindsight wisdom? Can we draw future lessons from such thinking? In my view, two conclusions emerge: First, the way to manage budget constraints against mission allocation is simply to increase the budget. Clearly, a jump in defense spending will come at the expense of other matters and affect our quality of life and welfare. However, in recent years, we've grown accustomed to living in great comfort, each under their own vine and fig tree. A clear-eyed look at reality reveals that Israel likely needs a larger defense budget. In the long run, maintaining stability and security here is worth significant investment across other areas of life.

The second lesson concerns future assessments of our regional situation, particularly regarding Jordan and Egypt. While the Syrian government's fall doesn't mean other neighboring regimes will collapse tomorrow, we must seriously consider and prepare for this possibility. If the regime in Egypt, which maintains war readiness against Israel even in peacetime, collapses, we could find ourselves surprised again on the southern front, potentially at an especially heavy cost. Similarly, if Iran succeeds in gaining control over Jordan, it would somewhat compensate for its loss in Syria while gaining easier direct access to act against Israel and promote terrorism in Judea and Samaria.

One derivative of such thinking emerged in discussions about keeping IDF forces

along the Philadelphi Corridor after our troops captured it during the war. Although senior military officials, including the Chief of Staff, indicated that Israel could handle Hamas terrorism without controlling this route – many noted that the military had expressed similar optimistic positions before, yet failed to fulfill the mission.

The economic cost of pessimistic thinking is substantial and burdensome, sometimes proving unnecessary in hindsight. However, the price paid for overly optimistic and incorrect forecasts too often comes in blood, ultimately proving far costlier than any price we would have paid for acting according to pessimistic assessments.

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