Why is the IDF, which defeated Hezbollah, not defeating Hamas?

written by Elie Klutstein | 23.05.2025

The launch of Operation "Chariots of Gideon" in Gaza this week against Hamas marked another phase in the prolonged battle against the terror organization in the strip, which has been ongoing intermittently – except for ceasefires – for nearly a year and eight months. However, one thing Israel lacks is surplus time, as the extended war weighs heavily on the home front and reserve system, erodes its political capital, damages its economy, and also reduces public determination and resilience to fight the Gaza terrorists.

The question of how the Israel Defense Forces reached this situation, when time is running out, becomes even sharper when comparing what's happening in the Gaza Strip with the IDF's battle against Hezbollah in Lebanon – a campaign that once it began intensively, ended within just a few months. How is it possible that the IDF defeated the terror organization considered the strongest in the Middle East so quickly, while it's been mired in the Gaza mud for so long, struggling against a weaker terror organization? What are the differences between the two theaters that caused this?

Indeed, many similarities exist between the two theaters that opened against Israel on October 7 and 8. In both, the IDF fought against an Islamist terror organization supported by Iran, and our soldiers succeeded in eliminating almost all of their political and military leadership. Moreover, in both cases, Israel delivered a decisive military blow against its enemies, emerged from the crisis with them, and severely damaged their rocket capabilities, thus largely neutralizing the long-term threat against it. Many enemy fighters were killed in Lebanon and Gaza, and the enemy was pushed back from its border line with us in both cases.

Alongside this, there are also many differences between the theaters, related to objective conditions, our conduct toward them, the goals we set, and more. We'll present only a partial list of these differences, but they're sufficient to teach about the great challenge facing Israel in Gaza, and also to explain what we still need to deal with to finish the campaign there.

Before diving deep into the analysis, we must warn and say that any measurement of such a campaign cannot produce a binary equation, absolute victory or defeat.

Perhaps the government also erred when it tried to present the goal in the strip in such a way. Eliminating Hamas, its operatives, and weapons is a binary outcome – yes or no. But "victory" is a much more ambiguous concept, and it's difficult to define it clearly.

Therefore, it's possible that even looking at what's happening in Gaza – similar to examining the other theaters Israel fights against – we must honestly admit that the situation in the strip is not similar to what it was on the eve of the war, and not even three weeks after its opening. The IDF worked very hard in Gaza; the situation there is very different from what it was, and from Israel's perspective, it's more positive in many ways. The bottom line is that Hamas' strategic threat to Israel has been removed; it's almost unable to launch rockets at us, doesn't carry out infiltration attacks, and doesn't endanger civilians in the rear. This doesn't mean Hamas has been defeated, but there's certainly a change here.

Victory or threat elimination?

The differences between the basic situation in fighting in Gaza and the campaign against Hezbollah can be divided into several types – geographical reasons, setting different types of goals, differences in the enemy's internal politics, different consciousness here in Israel, a political alternative, and more.

First of all, preparedness – Israel came to the war against Hezbollah after preparing for it for many years. In some ways, after internalizing the lessons of the Second Lebanon War, the IDF and the entire system began preparing the ground for a return confrontation with the Shiite terror organization, and to that end, built complex scenarios, established intelligence systems, wrote operational plans, and more. Hamas, on the other hand, was always perceived as an enemy against whom, at most, a short-term campaign would be conducted, in an attempt to reach understandings that would lead to containment and calm. It's not that the security establishment ignored its existence and didn't prepare against it, as evidenced by the attempt to hit the "Metro" in Gaza in May 2021, but there wasn't the same approach as with Hezbollah. The IDF prepared for the campaign in Lebanon, and in Gaza, it tried to buy quiet through prosperity and welfare.

Moreover, there's a difference in operational coping with Hezbollah and Hamas – the Lebanese organization was built in recent years with many characteristics of an organized army, and therefore it's easier to identify its sites and targets, its weapon caches and strategic assets, and of course this allows building plans to strike them. Hamas, on the other hand, established for itself a fighting framework

of brigades and battalions, but it quickly crumbled, its fighters dug into tunnels and moved to guerrilla warfare. The organization hides its systems under hospitals, inside clinics and schools, and among the civilian population. This makes it much harder to hit it, and many attacks are also canceled due to concern about harming innocents.

Another major gap between the strip and southern Lebanon relates to the geographical characteristics of these areas – Gaza is a narrow, closed strip, sealed on one side by the Egyptian border from the south – where the leadership in Cairo was not eager to open it for mass Palestinian flow – the Mediterranean Sea from the west and Israel from the north and east. Residents there have nowhere to flee, and no one allows them to leave. In Lebanon, on the other hand, residents in the south of the country moved north and went to safe places, and thus could avoid IDF bombardments or ground entry.

Hamas, of course, understands this issue. It hides within the civilian population, and therefore, Israel often also harms residents who are not armed. Due to this, the number of civilians killed in Gaza is immeasurably higher than residents in Lebanon – hundreds of civilians in the northern theater, compared to many thousands in the strip. The IDF was also forced to find creative solutions for the population during the fighting – moving it, evacuation to demarcated areas, and even fighting inside populated buildings.

This is also the background to the question of the siege on Gaza and the "starvation" campaign conducted abroad against the IDF. Hamas deliberately hoards food and doesn't distribute it to residents, who often have no other sources for purchasing food. Although many argue that there's still no real food shortage in Gaza, this campaign pressured Israel due to the basic fact that the strip is closed and there's no exit or entry from it. In Lebanon, such a campaign could not have existed. If we go back even further, this is also the source of the legal claim by the International Court of Justice in The Hague that Israel still "occupies" Gaza, even though it evacuated its soldiers from there in the disengagement. The judges believed that Israel's control over exit and entry from the strip effectively makes it an occupying force.

Another significant difference between the two campaigns against Hamas and Hezbollah relates to the goals Israel set – in Lebanon the IDF didn't try to eliminate Hezbollah, but only to push it back from the border area and thwart its ability to pose a threat to Israel, with the aim of returning northern residents to their homes safely. The derivative of this goal was ultimately not taking control of southern Lebanon or attempting to stay there for a long time, and even after the

ceasefire, it included only staying at five strategic points along the border.

In Gaza, however, the situation is different. The government aspires to emerge with "absolute victory" over Hamas, which includes disarming the organization, eliminating it as an active fighting force, killing its commanders, or getting them to agree to leave Gaza for exile. This is a much more ambitious task, more complex, requiring greater resources than pushing terrorists back from the border and denying their ability to cause damage.

Political and diplomatic struggle

The nature of IDF activity in Gaza and Lebanon is very different, derived among other things from differences in physical and operational characteristics between the two theaters. There are, of course, additional reasons for this, and one can focus, for example, on reasons taken from the world of domestic and international politics.

Thus, for example, in Lebanon, the IDF succeeded in reaching a situation where a political alternative faced Hezbollah. The battles Israel conducted in Lebanon disrupted the political balance that had prevailed in the country until then, and suddenly it became clear that there was another address in Beirut that could be approached to manage affairs. The war actually triggered a powerful social change in Lebanon, at the end of which it's possible that perhaps the new state institutions, those that arose in response to the great destruction the country experienced in the war, will succeed in disarming Hezbollah.

In Gaza, the situation is very different. The Palestinian Authority is not perceived as a relevant option for managing the strip in the eyes of the government in Israel, and as long as no other international body is found that will take upon itself the management of the strip – a task no one is interested in as long as Hamas holds enough power to demonstrate its strength against any such factor – no potential alternative to the terror organization's rule over residents will arise. Hamas doesn't agree to loosen its control over Gaza, whether behind the scenes or openly, and won't consent to accept a body that doesn't answer to its authority as a factor for managing affairs there.

Another matter relates to international pressure applied to Israel. Not only does the government in Jerusalem face claims, threats, and condemnations from countries on specific issues, like bringing in aid or harming civilians, but generally, the international community perceives the conflict with the Palestinians differently from the struggle in the northern theater. Hezbollah is not

found in the consensus of foreign countries, but rather the opposite. Its war with Israel is not viewed favorably, and is perceived as a struggle whose end is to bring destruction upon Lebanon. The northern theater, therefore, didn't stand at the heart of petitions filed with courts in The Hague against the security establishment and government.

The Palestinian struggle receives "legitimacy" in the world, an action that has justification due to the Israeli "occupation." Palestinian supporters in the Western world are very numerous, and they see before their eyes the image that is well-marketed by interested parties regarding Palestinian "victimization," the dangers, and the perception that they are David fighting Goliath. This situation puts Israel under pressure in its actions, specifically in this theater, and even the credit Israel gained as a result of the horrors Hamas committed on October 7 was quickly eroded. This is the background now, for example, to the starvation campaign against the siege on Gaza, which aroused messages even from Trump's White House against Israel. Due to this, Israel's options for action are shrinking, and it always fights with a political hourglass hanging over it.

World countries also often try to preserve the framework plans they've stuck to in the region, especially the two-state solution for two peoples. Thus, when France, for example, speaks with Israel about the war in Gaza, it still operates from the assumption that it wants to advance recognition of Palestinians. Therefore, in the middle of the war, when many hostages were still held in Hamas' dark tunnels, Ireland, Norway, and Spain officially announced recognition of a Palestinian state. Such consciousness can explain, for example, why this week's announcement by France, Britain, and Canada against Israel, while threatening sanctions against it, combined both the continuation of the war in Gaza and "construction in settlements." This is also the reason that, parallel to the British announcement about stopping discussions on a trade agreement with Israel due to the operation in Gaza, personal sanctions were imposed on settlement people in Judea and Samaria due to the alleged harassment of Palestinians.

This trend also connects to the internal political dispute in Israel – many in Israel still adhere to the two-state solution and believe this is the correct way to exit the deadlock with the Palestinians. They give backing in a certain sense to European moves on the matter, and become justification for actions whose purpose is to try to preserve this idea as a practical possibility. On the other hand, there's no movement in Israel calling to reach a political solution with Hezbollah, among other things due to understanding the futility of such an act, especially after Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000 and the fact that it seems the Shiite

organization is only looking for excuses to justify its aggression toward the IDF. The analysis up to this point didn't touch on one of perhaps the most important issues that constitutes the difference between the situation in the northern and southern theaters – the hostage issue. Hamas didn't just take Israeli civilians and soldiers to Gaza's dark tunnels as hostages, but understood very well the implications this would have on Israel's options for action. In the operational dimension, for example, this means the IDF isn't free to operate freely in all of Gaza's terrain cells, since there are places where there's concern that its activity will lead to harming hostages – whether from bombardments or as revenge by their captors. Soldiers also operate throughout the strip with a dual mission – on one hand turning over every stone to free the hostages, and on the other hand destroying Hamas in the process. These are tasks that sometimes clash with each other, and within Israel, there's disagreement between the operational level and decision-makers on which goal comes first.

This dilemma is also reflected in public opinion in the country and in the political pressure it creates among the leadership. There wasn't a large internal movement in Israeli society to stop the fighting against Hezbollah, but this isn't the case in Gaza. Wide segments of Israeli society believe that freeing hostages comes before continuing the war, and think there should be an agreement – even if it's not clear how – with Hamas to stop the campaign, withdraw from Gaza, rehabilitate it, and give the terror organization the possibility to rearm. All in exchange for returning the hostages to their homes or graves.

Cumulative effect

There are many differences between Gaza and Lebanon, and the enemy is not the same enemy. The variance between the basic equation in both theaters stands at the foundation of the fact that the IDF hasn't yet succeeded in achieving final victory in Gaza, but on the other hand it doesn't constitute an excuse for the current situation, where the campaign in the strip has been characterized too many times since the beginning of the war mainly by stagnation.

On the other hand, this doesn't mean Israel won't ultimately achieve victory over Hamas, or at least in a model similar to the defeat we inflicted on Hezbollah. The campaign hasn't ended, and it's difficult to predict where it will develop. This also depends, among other things, on defining goals as finally as possible, on the tension found between the military and political levels, on specific successes that will create an inertia of events, and more. The elimination of Mohammed Sinwar,

for example, if it indeed occurred, might be such an event – the brother of the October 7 attack's architect is considered an extremist symbol in Hamas, alongside being the senior commander and operational brain currently, and his removal from the theater might lead the way to compromises by the terror organization, even if for now it appears that talks between the sides about releasing additional hostages have stalled.

We must understand that the war also creates a cumulative effect on our enemies, and actions are sometimes evident only in the long term. Here, for example, is one interesting point from recent days – in one of the conversations an unidentified "Palestinian senior" conducted with foreign press, the source mentioned conditions Hamas set for Israel to end the war. In these conditions, for the first time to the best of my memory, a demand for safe passage from Gaza for Hamas seniors.

Before celebration, we must remember to take this statement with very limited credibility, and it's not clear who said it, what their organizational and political affiliation is, and what exactly the source saw in their vision. But nonetheless, there's innovation in this demand, an echo of an Israeli goal that didn't previously appear on the Palestinian side. It perhaps teaches that pressure is also working on Hamas and Gaza residents, and that it's possible that in the future we'll be able to realize the goals we set for ourselves.

The meaning is that there's a possibility here to make a change in reality, but it also depends on us in many ways. Will we know how to continue to the end and persevere under pressure? Will our leaders be brave enough to make difficult decisions, despite the difficulties and limitations? Will we have political, military, and human resources for realizing our goals? On these questions, Israel will be tested in the coming months.

Published in Israel Hayom, May 23, 2025