

APPLIED HISTORY PROJECT

Lessons from Israel's Forever Wars

Graham Allison
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HARVARD Kennedy School
BELFER CENTER

50 YEARS
OF RESEARCH, POLICY,
AND LEADERSHIP

DISCUSSION PAPER
JANUARY 2024



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About the Applied History Project

The mission of Harvard's Applied History Project is to revitalize applied history by promoting the production and use of historical reasoning to clarify public and private challenges and choices. The Project sponsors the Applied History Working Group of faculty members across Harvard University to organize discussions with scholars and practitioners; supports historians and policymakers in producing Applied History; develops courses in Applied History; funds the Ernest May Fellowships in History and Policy for pre- and post-doctoral students; and holds Applied History Seminars open to the Harvard Community and the public. Harvard's project is one of the leaders among a rapidly expanding network of universities and think tanks that are furthering the discipline of Applied History by clarifying predicaments and choices to inform better decisions.

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Foreword

Since its founding in 1948, Israel has been engaged in a series of forever wars. After each war, the IDF, Mossad, Shin Bet, and others in the intelligence and security community analyze what happened and summarize their findings in after-action, or “lessons learned,” reports. Former leaders from these institutions, many of whom retain close relations with their successors, also produce reports on what happened and identify takeaways for the future. Thus, in trying to make sense of what’s happening now, lessons these experts have distilled from their experiences provide a sound starting point.

Over two decades as director of Harvard’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, I was fortunate to build connections with many of the current and former leaders of these institutions, both when they were in office and in further chapters of their careers. Thirty years ago, Ami Ayalon, former head of Shin Bet, was a student at HKS and has remained an alumnus we’re proud of. After more than a decade as a close colleague and senior fellow at the Belfer Center, Shai Feldman returned to Israel to become the director the Jaffee Center—which subsequently was renamed the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). His successor, Amos Yadlin, former head of Israel’s military intelligence, has been a member of the HKS extended family as a graduate of the school and frequent visitor. Many of the analysts who worked at INSS and at other sibling centers have also been valuable colleagues. After retiring from decades of service both in uniform and in the Israeli government, Ehud Barak joined us as a senior fellow and offered us his unique perspective on Israel’s security agenda. When he ended his service as Mossad director in 2016, Tamir Pardo also joined us as a senior fellow.

What American readers of these reports may find most surprising is the candor in calling failures by their real names, and their readiness to accept responsibility rather than simply attempting to pin the blame on a few errant bad apples. Many of the most interesting insights from Israel's earlier wars are to be found in reports that are not readily accessible. Thus, in this paper we have attempted to collect and review these efforts, and to summarize a number of key lessons in ways that will help policymakers and observers as Israel now faces the most serious challenge in its nearly eight decades of existence as a modern state.

The report begins by presenting a brief summary of major takeaways—ours, as well as those of the experts—as context for the broader report. It then offers a timeline of each war, alongside a brief description of each. We conclude with a selection of quotations from Israeli military and security analysts, summarized under nine lessons for the future.

Graham T. Allison

Douglas Dillon Professor of Government, Harvard University



A convoy of Israeli army tanks maneuvers near Israel's border after leaving Gaza, southern Israel, on Friday, Nov. 24, 2023. (AP Photo/Tsafrir Abayov)

Introduction

In trying to extract signals from the cacophony of images and words that has erupted since Hamas's horrific attack of October 7 that killed 1,200 innocent Israelis, we have found the best source of insight comes from former Israeli military and intelligence leaders who have spent their lives attempting to ensure Israel's survival in a series of "forever wars." Fortunately, at Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, we have the opportunity to engage scores of these leaders as colleagues and friends. Four who have recently written and spoken about what is now happening have, in our view, been especially illuminating: Amos Yadlin (a former student at HKS, chief of Israel's military intelligence, and subsequently head of Israel's major think tank, INSS); Ehud Barak (Israel's most decorated warrior and former Prime Minister); as well as Tamir Pardo and Ami Ayalon (former heads of Mossad and Shin Bet, Israel's equivalent of the CIA and FBI, respectively).

While they have offered scores of instructive observations, this discussion paper will underline nine of the lessons learned from Israelis—and others with unique insight into Israel—over the almost eight decades since Israel's founding in 1948. For context on their lessons, we begin with six points of our own about the current situation.

First, amid a host of complexities, it's essential to begin with one simple truth: Hamas's October 7 attack was evil—pure, simple, unadulterated evil. No excuses, justifications, or contextualization should be allowed to cloud the clarity of this simple truth.

Second, nothing in history happens in a vacuum. While we often focus on a snapshot of a moment in time, we know that life is a movie of successive frames leading up to the present. Understanding what has previously been done, and not done, to shape developments in the past is essential in attempting to assess what will happen in the future.

Third, the Biden Administration's immediate response condemning this act of terrorism as "evil," and affirming that the US will stand shoulder-to-shoulder with our ally and provide whatever support Israel requires to exercise its right of self-defense, was precisely the way a responsible great-power ally should respond.

Fourth, in going further to not only stand with Israel, but, as President Biden did, stand in Israel with Israel, the Administration went above and beyond. Careful observers of what the Administration has done would note that in the first weeks after the terrorist attack, holding Prime Minister Netanyahu close by having American or allied leaders in Jerusalem almost continuously since the attack (first Blinken, then Austin, then Biden, and then British Prime Minister Sunak), has helped him and his government get beyond the understandable trauma and outrage that demanded immediate retaliation in ways that would make Israel's security situation worse rather than better. Over three months since the original attack and subsequent war, Biden's attempt to hug Netanyahu tight continues to serve a valuable purpose. As the Book of Proverbs warned, "A fool expresses all his emotions, but a wise person controls them"—preventing emotions from clouding strategic judgment poses a profound challenge.

Fifth, Israel is currently facing its gravest security challenge since the modern Israeli state was founded. Israel's response to the current war in Gaza may well provide a provocation—or pretext—for conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon, with Iran-backed militias in Syria, in the West Bank, inside Israel, with Iran, or even on Israel's southern border with Egypt.

As former Prime Minister Barak was one of the first to point out, Hamas's terror attack constitutes the biggest failure of Israeli intelligence, military preparation, and most importantly political leadership in Israel's history. The officials now in office pursuing the war recognize that when the fighting ends, they will be held to account. But since they remain the key actors currently responding to this failure, there is a real danger that some may be thinking more about justifying their own behavior than about the safety and security of their nation.

Sixth, what about the Palestinians? Every strategist knows that the actions Israeli governments have taken to deal with the Palestinians have been self-defeating. From founder Ben-Gurion to Prime Ministers Rabin, Sharon, Barak, and Peres,

Israeli leaders have agreed that the one solution—and only solution— to Israel’s long-term quest for survival and security requires that the land between the river and the sea be divided into two states: one for Israel and one for Palestine. Ami Ayalon captures the lesson from Israeli intelligence professionals who spent their careers preventing terrorism: “To kill terrorist leaders without addressing the despair of their supporters is a fool’s errand and produces more frustration, more despair, and more terrorism.”¹ Counterterrorism, then, is not just about taking bad actors off the field, but also addressing the factors that create and motivate them. In their unambiguous rejection of this necessity, Netanyahu and his right-wing, extremist coalition have predictably outraged not only Palestinians and Arabs in the region, but serious observers around the world. They have divided the Israeli nation, with former Bibi ally and Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor warning that Netanyahu was willing to “pay any price” to return as prime minister, even if it means aligning with those who seek to inflame the situation in the West Bank. While their crimes cannot excuse the inexcusable or justify the unjustifiable, they created conditions that—as Israel’s intelligence agencies repeatedly warned—made extreme responses predictable.

Among the many wars Israel has fought, its experiences in Lebanon are the most frequently cited by former military, government, and intelligence leaders. In 1982 Israel invaded Lebanon and occupied Beirut to eject the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). In 1985 Israel withdrew to a security zone in southern Lebanon with the hope of stabilizing its northern border. Yet the next 15 years were marked by inconclusive fighting and the continuing loss of Israeli soldiers, ultimately leading Prime Minister Barak to unilaterally withdraw all Israeli forces from the territory. This left fertile ground for the growth of Hezbollah, which today is the world’s strongest paramilitary group, with an arsenal of 150,000 missiles and rockets targeting Israel.

The return of conflict to Gaza has also offered an opportunity for Israeli strategists to restudy their previous rounds with Hamas—most notably in 2008 and 2014—and the lessons of counterterrorism more broadly. Here, they have been analyzing how terrorist groups can be deterred, managed, or, if necessary, defeated—and how this applies to Hamas, a quasi-state entity deeply embedded within the Palestinian population. And while Hamas is not ISIS, the US fight against the Islamic State offers clues to how the operational capability of extremist groups can be successfully and permanently degraded. The Six-Day War of 1967 and Yom

Kippur War of 1973 also offer insights into how regional conflicts can be contained and managed.

Among the major lessons from Israel's experiences in earlier wars, five deserve special attention.

First, as Clausewitz taught students of strategy, war is not an end in itself. War is a means to an end, the application of organized violence to achieve geopolitical objectives. While politicians often focus on fighting first and postpone planning until later, Clausewitz insists that strategists begin with the end and design the means accordingly. The conduct of the war shapes the conditions of the peace that follows. In Lebanon, one of the primary Israeli mistakes was to treat fighting terrorism as separate from post-conflict governance, failing to ask what Lebanon would look like afterwards. Ariel Sharon and others had viewed the objective as a limited military one—ejecting the PLO from Beirut—but had no coherent plan for the day after. Similarly, Netanyahu has concluded that Israel cannot coexist with terrorists in Gaza. Yet this merely describes what he can't live with, not a viable vision of what comes next. This is precisely why former leaders are urging Israel's war cabinet to develop practical plans for governing after the war. Hezbollah's emergence after the removal of the PLO from Beirut and the rise of ISIS after the US destroyed Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime remind us of the dangers posed by security vacuums in the Middle East.

Second, the local population is not the enemy. As US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has put it, protecting Palestinians “is both a moral duty and a strategic imperative.”² Unlike in a traditional war, where post-conflict governance is the adversary's business, Israel's stated aim is to topple the Hamas regime and shape local politics to ensure a safe border with Gaza. Relying on overwhelming airpower instead of door-to-door urban combat may make military and domestic political sense, and it likely minimizes Israeli combatant casualties. But while today's combatants may be taken off the field, alienated youth might become tomorrow's terrorists. As former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asked, “Are we creating more terrorists than we're killing?”³

Third, Israel cannot go it alone. In the literal sense, Israel fights by itself, but its lifeline is the United States. Beyond the US, Israel is engaged in a constant battle for international approval. While Israel may be able to accomplish its military

objectives alone, legitimacy in the eyes of the international community will play an essential role in shaping post-conflict rebuilding and governance in Gaza and thus will be indispensable for any sustainable endgame for Israel.

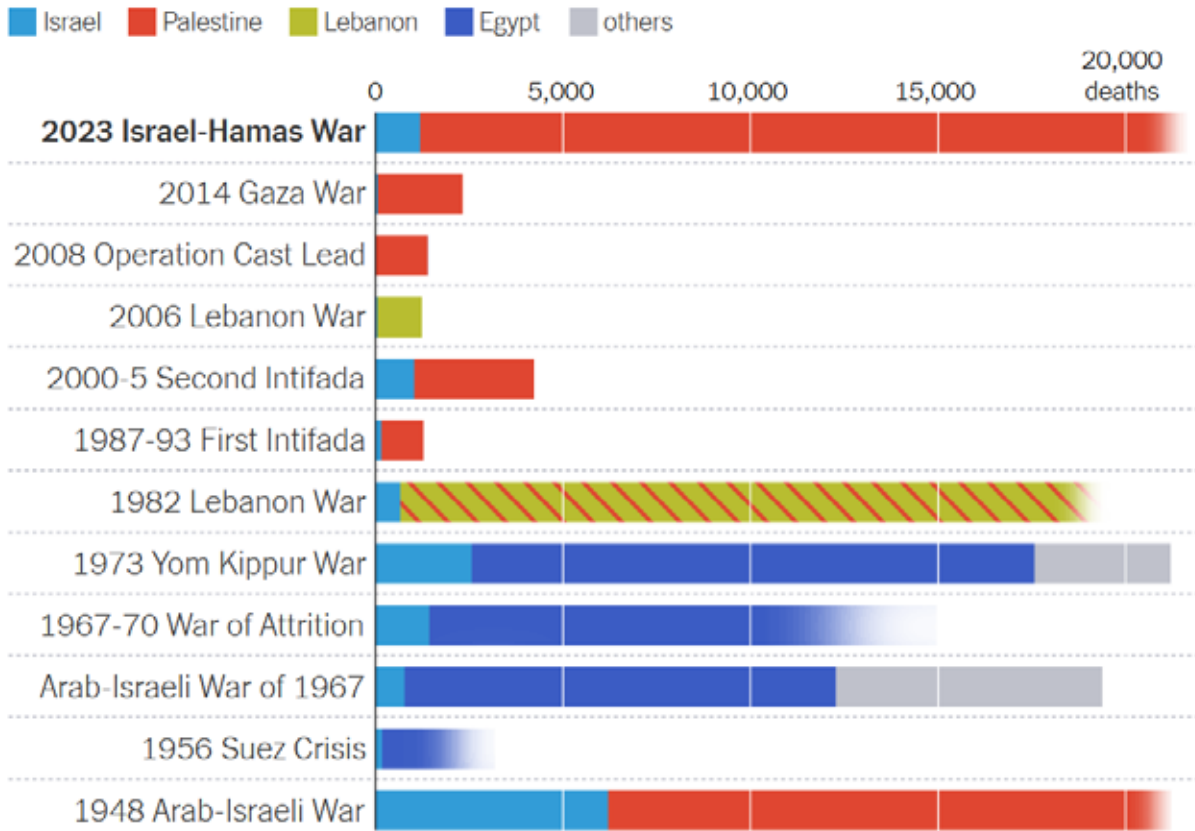
Fourth, while imposing costs on the enemy matters, punishment is just one side of the deterrence equation. As strategists know, deterrence is about costs and benefits. It includes a “thou shalt not” line that, if crossed, threatens unacceptable punishment, but also must ensure that the benefits of not crossing the redline exceed the costs. The current crisis and numerous recent rounds of fighting with Hamas are alarm bells reminding Israel of its failure to maintain this second component—an acceptable status quo.

Fifth, everyone should avoid illusions about a permanent resolution to the conflict. As has often been observed, eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. The US has declared ISIS “defeated.” Nonetheless, it maintains more than 3,000 troops in Iraq and Syria, advising, assisting, and continuing a 24/7 campaign searching for—and taking off the field—ISIS affiliates. While groups can’t be prevented from having leaders, sophisticated counterterrorism can ensure they’re short-lived. And while terrorists will continue recruiting and running training camps, effective counterterrorism can keep them limited in scale.

Thus, the endgame in Gaza will be the management of a chronic condition. Netanyahu’s stated objective of making every Hamas member “a dead man” is unrealistic. But as Barak has argued, an effective Israeli military campaign can deny Hamas “ISIS-like military capabilities.” While defeat is the immediate goal, the longer-term plan will be deterrence and denial: deterring remaining militants from conducting such an attack and denying them any significant capabilities to do so.

Israel's Forever Wars

Arab-Israeli war death toll estimates



Source: Steve Rattner, "More than Words: 10 Charts that Defined 2023," *New York Times*, December 2023.

1948: Arab-Israeli War

After the withdrawal of British troops, Israel declared independence pursuant to the UN Partition Plan. Surrounding Arab nations (Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen) invaded Israel to prevent the plan's implementation. By the end of the war in 1949, Israel had expanded its territory beyond the boundaries of the UN partition. The West Bank was annexed by Jordan while the Gaza Strip fell under Egyptian control.

1956: Suez Crisis

Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal and closed it to Israeli shipping. With British and French support, Israel invaded the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula (controlled by Egypt) to seize control of the Canal. While Israel successfully captured these territories, it faced mounting pressure from the United States and Soviet Union, who saw European intervention as inflaming regional tensions. Israel agreed to withdraw to pre-1956 positions in 1957. Egyptian control of the Suez Canal was ensured by the United Nations.

1967: Six-Day War

After Egypt again closed the Suez Canal to Israeli shipping and deployed its forces on the Israeli border, Israel launched a preemptive strike against Egypt, seizing the entirety of the Sinai Peninsula. In support of Egypt, Jordan and Syria began striking Israeli targets. In response, Israel invaded the Jordanian-controlled West Bank and Syrian-controlled Golan Heights. Large numbers of Palestinians fled to surrounding countries, especially Jordan and Lebanon. The war concluded with Israel occupying the Gaza Strip, West Bank, Golan Heights, and the entirety of the Sinai Peninsula.

1967-1970: War of Attrition

Following Israel's victory in the Six-Day War, Israel and Egypt had continued clashes across the Suez Canal involving artillery barrages and air raids. Israel also engaged in sporadic fighting with Syria and Jordan. The war ended following the death of Egyptian President Nasser, whose successor, Anwar Sadat, adhered to previously negotiated ceasefire agreements.

1973: Yom Kippur War

Egyptian and Syrian forces mounted a surprise attack and crossed the ceasefire line created at the end of the War of Attrition. After initial success by the Arab coalition, Israel repulsed the attacks and advanced into Egyptian and Syrian territory. Before agreeing to a ceasefire, Israel came within 60 miles of Cairo and 20 miles of Damascus.

1982: Lebanon War

Israel had supported Christian factions in the Lebanese Civil War against Arab groups, including the PLO, since the mid-1970s. In 1982, Israel launched an invasion of Lebanon to demilitarize the border and eject the PLO. The PLO was successfully expelled to Tunisia but instability in Lebanon continued, motivating Israel to establish an occupation zone in southern Lebanon. This remained in place until 2000, when Israel withdrew and the Israeli-supported faction in Lebanon collapsed following conflict with Hezbollah.

1987-1993: First Intifada

Protests against Israel's 20-year occupation of Gaza and the West Bank turned into violent riots and widespread Palestinian civil disobedience. Israel responded with force, destroying the homes of protestors and cutting off water and electricity to their communities. Unrest continued until the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, which are widely recognized to have ended the Intifada by providing a pathway towards Palestinian statehood.

2000-2005: Second Intifada

The failure of the Oslo Accords to create progress towards Palestinian statehood and riots by both Palestinians and Jews following Prime Minister Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount escalated into a violent uprising across the Palestinian territories. Suicide bombings and the widespread targeting of civilians by Hamas made this a much larger conflict between the IDF and Palestinian militias than the first Intifada, and the IDF occupied several Palestinian cities as part of it. The 2005 Sharm el-Sheikh Summit led to a ceasefire between Israel and Palestinian factions.

2006: Second Lebanon War

Hezbollah abducted two Israeli soldiers in a cross-border raid. Israel responded with punishing airstrikes and artillery fire on targets in Lebanon and invaded the south of the country. After one month of fighting, the UN brokered a ceasefire between the sides that included the disarmament of Hezbollah, withdrawal of the IDF from Lebanon, and an enlarged UN force in the region.

2008-2009: 2008 Gaza War

Israel attacked Hamas targets in Gaza to stop its indiscriminate rocket fire towards Israel. The IDF conducted a two-week invasion of both Gaza City, in the north of Gaza, and Rafah, on its southern border with Egypt. Hamas intensified its rocket attacks as the invasion went on, leading Israel to decide not to push deeper into the territory. The IDF declared a unilateral ceasefire and withdrew.

2014: 2014 Gaza War

The kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank led to heightened tensions between Israel and the Palestinian territories, causing Hamas to resume large-scale rocket fire into Israel. Israel invaded Gaza in retaliation, this time with the goal of destroying Hamas's tunnel network. The IDF withdrew after two weeks, with Egypt helping to broker a ceasefire.

2023-?: 2023 Gaza War

Hamas militants invaded Israel, destroying the Gaza border wall and killing 1,200 Israelis, most of whom were civilians. They also kidnapped 240 Israelis and others, including at least 12 Americans, and took them back into Gaza. Israel responded with punishing airstrikes and, soon after, a ground invasion, with the stated aim of destroying Hamas. Over 23,000 have been killed and fighting continues.

Nine Dos and Don'ts

#1: Do: Plan for the Day After

#2: Don't: Alienate the Local Population

#3: Do: Recognize Importance of International Support

#4: Don't: Attempt to Deter Just Through Cost-Imposition

#5: Do: Maintain Eternal Vigilance

#6: Don't: Forget "Deterrence Partners"

#7: Do: Prevent Multi-Front War

#8: Don't: Seek Occupation

#9: Do: Recognize War's Domestic Implications

#1: Do: Plan for the Day After

Essence:

After a traumatic attack, the demand for revenge is understandable. Yet an emotional response cannot substitute for a strategy. Designing an ambitious campaign to drive an enemy from power requires asking and answering the difficult question: what comes next? Planners would do well to remember General Petraeus's exhortation, to "tell me how this ends."

Application to Gaza war:

"Destroy Hamas" is a slogan, not a strategy. The Israeli War Cabinet must clarify its operational objectives for the war in Gaza.

Lessons learned:

"The Lebanon war also taught us practical lessons about fighting terrorism—and about our limited ability to envision what things would look like when the fighting is done." (Doron Almog, IDF Major General)⁴

"...the ejection of the PLO from Lebanon was an immense achievement. Equally immense was the strategic mistake of staying in Lebanon. It took 18 years and hundreds of dead for us to understand that there was no prospect for success." (Yair Golan, IDF Major General)⁵

"Destroying Hamas...What does it even mean? That no one can still breathe and believe in Hamas's ideology? That's not a believable war aim. Israel's objective now has to be clearer. It has to be that Hamas will be denied its Daesh-like military capabilities." (Ehud Barak, former Prime Minister)⁶

"Israel's war is not a war of choice against the Palestinians...[and] Israel's military campaign must succeed. But organizing and sustaining it will require establishing political objectives for its aftermath. And a victory over Hamas alone will be insufficient to heal the horrific wounds Israel has suffered in this act of terror. The country that Israel becomes in ten years will depend on the political choices it makes now, not only the military decisions." (Ami Ayalon, former Shin Bet director; Gilead Sher, former Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Ehud Barak)⁷

“In the wake of Hamas’s brutal attack, Israel has come to see that it cannot coexist with a jihadi Islamist state akin to ISIS at its doorstep in Gaza. The era of intermittent cycles of fighting and cease-fires in Gaza is over. What will replace it is a continuous, protracted military campaign, one driven not by a desire for revenge but grounded in Israel’s paramount security interests.” (Amos Yadlin and Udi Evental, IDF Colonel)⁸

“The realistic objectives of the current ground phase of the war are not to eliminate every Hamas operative or completely demilitarize Gaza but to degrade Hamas (and its sometime ally, Palestinian Islamic Jihad) as a fighting force, destroy its infrastructure, and eliminate the direct threat it poses to Israeli communities near Gaza. This will require the destruction of Hamas’s nerve center in Gaza City, its underground facilities, and all its aboveground assets.” (Amos Yadlin and Udi Evental)⁹

“The messaging I inherited [for fighting ISIS] revolved around nine anodyne ‘lines of effort,’ or tasks...It was a list, not a strategy. There was no sequence, no moving picture showing the path we would take and where it was leading, that our troops and the public could see and feel.” (Ash Carter, former US Secretary of Defense)¹⁰

“...[Victory meant] dealing ISIS a lasting defeat in its homeland of Iraq and Syria, eliminating the cancer’s parent tumor; combatting metastases in places like Libya and Afghanistan; and protecting our homeland from ISIS terror.” (Ash Carter)¹¹

“If we don’t set out the picture for the next stage we will not be given the time to complete the military operation to break the military power of Hamas.” (Former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert)¹²

#2: Don't: Alienate the Local Population

Essence:

Military operations beyond one's own territory requires fighting on unfamiliar terrain alongside a hostile population. Advance planning must understand this operating environment, while also identifying careful steps to minimize casualties and avoid alienating the local population.

Application to Gaza war:

When the hot war is over, millions of Palestinians will remain in Gaza. Shaping an outcome in which the next generation will choose to live in peace, rather than organize major terrorist attacks on Israel, will remain Israel's challenge.

Lessons learned:

"We Israelis are measuring hardware. And they measure software. What we measure after every round of violence or military campaign, we measure their losses...they measure the support of the people. ...after every round of violence, after every military campaign, we say ok from now on they are deterred for several years, and they understand it as a huge victory." (Ami Ayalon)¹³

"...our preparations [for Lebanon] did not include study of the population in the combat zone or inter-confessional relations among Lebanese Christians, Shi'ites, Druze and others. We did not dedicate even a single training session to prepare for fighting amidst a civilian population—which in the first day of combat led to unnecessary casualties." (Shaul Arieli, IDF Colonel)¹⁴

"Yes, of course [civilian casualties matter]. Hamas is perceived—and this is a major, major problem—as the only ideology that is fighting for Palestinian freedom and the end of occupation." (Ami Ayalon)¹⁵

"Civilian killing and destruction, and the rage it generates, guarantees militant recruitment and support for resistance among future generations, both in Palestine and beyond. That's a problem for both Israel and the U.S." (Daniel Levy, Israeli negotiator under Ehud Barak)¹⁶

“In this kind of fight, the center of gravity is the civilian population. And if you drive them into the arms of the enemy, you replace a tactical victory with a strategic defeat.” (Lloyd Austin, US Secretary of Defense)¹⁷

“You can’t kill or capture your way out of an industrial strength insurgency... The campaign should be a counterinsurgency campaign. Don’t clear and go on. Clear, hold and build... There needs to be a vision for who’s going to oversee Gaza.” (David Petraeus, former CENTCOM commander)¹⁸

“I do not think we will make any progress until that moment [of treating Palestinians with dignity] arrives, and I fear that it will take a very long time before it happens, if at all. And if it never happens, there will never be peace between us and the Palestinians. And if it never happens, we’re sentenced to a very long term of struggle.” (Efraim Halevy, former Mossad director)¹⁹



A view of the makeshift tent camp where Palestinians displaced by the Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip are staying, in the Muwasi area, southern Gaza, Monday, Jan. 1, 2024. (AP Photo/Fatima Shbair)

#3: Do: Recognize Importance of International Support

Essence:

Beyond its special relationship with the United States, Israel seeks legitimacy in the court of international opinion. As Barak has put it, “The support also comes with an expectation we abide by international law in our operations. Support will erode when there is footage of ruined homes with bodies of children and weeping old women.”²⁰

Application to Gaza war:

As daily pictures of death and destruction have entirely displaced in “the news” Russia’s brutal war against Ukraine, the international demand for ceasefire will continue to rise, hampering Israel’s war efforts.

Lessons learned:

“You can see the window is closing. It’s clear we are heading towards friction with the Americans about the offensive. America cannot dictate to Israel what to do. But we cannot ignore them. We will have to come to terms with the American demands.” (Ehud Barak)²¹

“...Israel cannot neglect other fronts in the meantime... Given the critical support of the United States in this war, Israel also has to draw some lessons from coalition warfare... Recalling British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s words, Israel would do well to remember that the only thing worse than having allies is not having them, and it must make a continual effort to communicate and coordinate with its partners in the world and in the region.” (Assaf Orion, former Head of Strategic Planning on IDF General Staff)²²

“... We know from experience that, in spite of the almost universal support we enjoy now, it will erode very quickly. There are numbers of casualties among civilians in the Gaza Strip. I believe the Americans will stand with us longer, but not for infinity. We have to take this into account as well. The last one is: to whom

do we pass the torch? We do not intend to stay there for the next 20 years, and it's not easy to find someone to whom to pass it.” (Ehud Barak)²³

“To win this war, Israel will require the support of partners who share its strategic interests. A number of Arab states, the United States, and European countries will play pivotal roles.” (Amos Yadlin and Udi Evental)²⁴



Display monitors show the result of voting in the United Nations General Assembly, in favor of a resolution calling on Israel to uphold legal and humanitarian obligations in its war with Hamas, Tuesday, Dec. 12, 2023 at U.N. headquarters. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

#4: Don't: Attempt to Deter Just Through Cost-Imposition

Essence:

Deterrence as a “thou shall not” redline that, if crossed, is met with a punishing reprisal highlights only half of the equation. Equally important is an adversary’s calculation of the benefits as well as the costs of living with the status quo, rather than attacking.

Application to Gaza war:

Nothing can justify Hamas’s heinous terror attacks. But no one can deny that the conditions in Gaza—in Feldman’s metaphor, the sense that they were living in a “gigantic jail”—created fertile ground for extremism. As Pardo, Ayalon and his co-authors summarized the conclusion “shared by 500 colleagues from Israel’s military and intelligence services”: “the IDF alone cannot solve the Gaza problem; such problems do not lend themselves to exclusively military solutions.”²⁵

Lessons learned:

“The military can defend us; it cannot secure us.” (Ami Ayalon)²⁶

“There’s no factor in deterrence that’s more important than motivation. And when you’re in a ‘gigantic jail,’ your motivation to fight back is strong enough that in this case it was stronger than Israel’s deterrent capabilities.” (Shai Feldman, former head of Israel’s Jaffee Center)²⁷

“...when the enemy feels that it does not have much to lose, this reduces the effectiveness of deterrence. If the government of Israel intends to preserve Hamas’ sorry situation, it must take into account that its ability to maintain deterrence against the organization over time will be damaged.” (Avner Golov, INSS Research Fellow)²⁸

“In 1973 Israel underestimated the value of the Sinai to Egypt and how much energy Egypt would expend to take it back. It...made the same mistake in Gaza—pushing desperate people far enough that they are willing to incur huge costs to fight back.” (Shai Feldman)²⁹

“ Hamas is an idea: the idea that Jews must be permanently removed from the Middle East through violence. This idea will appeal to many Palestinians as long as there is no real peace option to which they can attach their hopes. It is an idea that will never be defeated with guns. There must emerge a better idea, a more attractive idea—an idea that does not assume Jews and Arabs are locked in a zero-sum game in the Middle East but offers a win-win scenario to people on both sides. Israel must provide that idea. Israeli leaders must offer the Palestinians, including those who live in Gaza, a real horizon for peace that affords them national dignity.” (Ami Ayalon and Gilead Sher)³⁰

“ We have no other way [than a two-state solution] and not because [the Palestinians] are my top priority, but because I am concerned about Israel’s well-being and I want to do what I can to ensure Israel’s existence.” (Meir Dagan, former Mossad director)³¹

“ The right way is to look to the two-state solution, not because of justice to the Palestinians, which is not the uppermost on my priorities, but because we have a compelling imperative to disengage from the Palestinians to protect our own security, our own future, our own identity.” (Ehud Barak)³²

“ ...[Israel’s] security and prosperity will turn on whether it creates a new political horizon for its region and makes serious advances toward an eventual two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians... Israel must prioritize a larger political vision, not just for the sake of reducing tensions with nearby countries and avoiding engulfing its region in violence but for its own sake: to secure its future as the democratic nation-state of the Jewish people and to preserve its core values of freedom and justice.” (Ami Ayalon and Gilead Sher)³³

“ One thing Oct. 7 made strikingly clear was that Israel cannot provide security for its citizens by controlling millions of Palestinians... [we] must desist from encouraging Israel to hang on to the historically discredited fiction that armed resistance rooted in an oppressed people can be eliminated by the deployment of even more ferocious military methods.” (Daniel Levy)³⁴

#5: Do: Maintain Eternal Vigilance

Essence:

If the fight against terrorism has a mantra, it's that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. While military capabilities can be eradicated, ideas can't—and ideas can spawn new fighters willing to go to war on behalf of their ideologies.

Application to Gaza war:

Israel will never be able to destroy Hamas in its entirety. Terrorism on its borders is not a problem to be solved, but a condition to be managed. At the end of the current hot war, Hamas's members (or its next incarnation) will remain. Thus, as it faces Hezbollah in Lebanon, militias along the Golan Heights, or Iran itself, preventing attacks upon Israel is a challenge to be continually handled.

Lessons learned:

“...a campaign such as Protective Edge should not be examined on the basis of the IDF's traditional security concept or principles of war. It is very difficult to deter a terrorist organization, and it is certainly difficult to defeat it in a short war. A better analogy and reference point might be prolonged counterterrorism campaigns... Even the United States, the greatest military power in the world, was unable to achieve a decisive victory... in the global war on terror.” (Amos Yadlin)³⁵

“Israel's ground operation was only the first step, and the military effort will persist after the withdrawal of IDF forces from Gaza. An effective Israeli strategy demands the integration of several interrelated, parallel endeavors—military, civilian, and political... Israel may find it necessary to shift from a reactive strategy of retaliation to a more proactive approach involving preventive strikes.” (Amos Yadlin and Udi Evental)³⁶

“As Israel begins large-scale ground operations in Gaza, it is crucial to recognize that it will be impossible to defeat Hamas quickly. In contrast to most previous Israeli operations since the First Lebanon War in 1982, a long campaign will be necessary to degrade, isolate, and, over time, eradicate Hamas from Gaza, just as it took years for the US-led coalition to deliver an enduring defeat of the Islamic State (or ISIS) in Syria and Iraq.” (Assaf Orion)³⁷

#6: Don't: Forget "Deterrence Partners"

Essence:

While it's essential to win the war, equally important is winning the peace. As Israel found in Lebanon, permanent occupation is unsustainable. This means that responsibility for governing foreign territory must be handed to some other party.

Application to Gaza war:

Israel must identify a local entity to administer Gaza. The inability to apply this lesson, given the disqualification of Hamas, the incapacity of the Palestinian Authority, and the unwillingness of Arab neighbors to create an alternative, creates a major hurdle to ending the war.

Lessons learned:

"Deterrence needs a partner, and Israel is going to end up in a situation where they don't have one." (Shai Feldman)³⁸

"I had no doubt that our troops could have marched into Raqqa and Mosul and ejected ISIS...but to do so would have been a strategic blunder...A defeat of ISIS ...would be fleeting unless communities taken from ISIS could rebuild and secure themselves." (Ash Carter)³⁹

"Israel cannot be responsible for Gaza's governance, but the Israeli government will have to act responsibly and allow interested parties and partners to provide for the needs of the Palestinian civilian population there and prevent the resurgence of terrorist threats." (Assaf Orion)⁴⁰

"...Gaza must ultimately be governed by capable Gazans and Palestinians...with regional and international support, as well as careful oversight to prevent the resurgence of terrorism. The PA could have a potential leadership role there if it can pull its act together." (Assaf Orion)⁴¹

"Netanyahu's defenders claim that he never had other policy options because he had no good Palestinian negotiating partner. This is simply not true. Although

Hamas has always positioned itself against any compromise, the PA has long supported a two-state solution. Its leader, Mahmoud Abbas, could have been—and could still be, despite his weaknesses—a partner committed to peaceful partition.”
(Ami Ayalon and Gilead Sher)⁴²



Nayef al-Sudairi, Saudi Arabia's first-ever Saudi ambassador to the Palestinian Authority, left, speaks with Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, during their meeting in the West Bank city of Ramallah, Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2023. (AP Photo/Majdi Mohammed, Pool)

#7: Do: Prevent Multi-Front War

Essence:

Israel is surrounded by adversaries along most of its borders. These include Hezbollah in Lebanon with its 100,000 fighters and 150,000 missiles, Iran-backed fighters in Syria, discontented Palestinians, the Houthis in Yemen, and, ultimately, Iran. The risk is particularly acute when these enemies seriously want to wipe Israel off the map. Were Israel to come under attack from all axes, its survival would be uncertain.

Application to Gaza war:

Hamas is not an existential threat to Israel, but a simultaneous attack by multiple enemies would be.

Lessons learned:

“Whatever will be conducted [in response to Hamas], you have to bear in mind and not forget that the security and stability of Egypt and Jordan is a fundamental national interest of Israel...And so I think the steps are going to try to take into account to a maximum, how whatever Israel chooses to do will not undermine either the stability of the two countries or the peace treaties.” (Shai Feldman)⁴³

“The Middle East conflict has the danger of escalating and bringing in other Arab countries under the pressure of their public opinions. Then we are back to where we were in 1973. In 1973, we had the good fortune, Sadat was an Arab leader with a vision of the future, and therefore it was possible to make a peace agreement with them. That sparked a similar agreement with Syria.” (Henry Kissinger)⁴⁴

“But there remains a danger that intense fighting in Gaza may ignite new conflicts in additional arenas such as the West Bank and Israel’s border with Lebanon. A carelessly executed Gaza invasion that kills many civilians or creates a humanitarian crisis could bring many more thousands of Muslims who sympathize with the Palestinian struggle and suffering into the streets, destabilizing Israel’s Arab neighbors.” (Ami Ayalon and Gilead Sher)⁴⁵

“ Hamas may have calculated there was a good chance that a major assault and the likely Israeli response might spark violence on other fronts, including inside Israel...the IDF will need to keep an eye on the Lebanese border. Israel wants to keep Hezbollah out of the conflict.” (Amos Yadlin and Udi Evental)⁴⁶

“ This operation has to be executed under [multiple] different constraints. Number one is the hostage issue. It’s a very delicate problem. The other constraint is that this will spread into the north with Hezbollah. There are probably some dormant cells of Hamas and other terrorist organizations in the West Bank, probably even a Shiite militia backed by Iran deployed in western Iraq or in Syria beyond the Golan Heights. That’s a very severe constraint. We do not have any interest in opening a second front, but it may be beyond our control.” (Ehud Barak)⁴⁷



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken boards a U.S. military airplane prior to departure from Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, Israel, Friday, Dec. 1, 2023. (Saul Loeb/Pool Photo via AP)

#8: Don't: Seek Occupation

Essence:

When is the last time that an occupation has been successful? Combing through the history of Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, or Gaza, it is difficult to find a success story. Temporary control must be transitional, with a plan for what comes next. Any longer-term solution must move beyond occupation to a political solution for autonomous governance.

Application to Gaza war:

Whether Israel calls it “occupation” or “overall security responsibility,” the meaning is the same: administering Gaza. This is not a job that Israel wants or needs, nor is it one that Israel is capable of sustaining.

Lessons learned:

“...the political solution is always to be preferred...The long-term political solution for Gaza is the continued weakening of Hamas—economically, politically, and militarily—and the creation of better political alternatives for both the Palestinians and Israel.” (Amos Yadlin)⁴⁸

“There is no doubt that the annexation of West Bank territory without a political agreement with the Palestinians is a game changer of major magnitude...it is hard to expect positive consequences and strategic advantages for Israel from annexation. Not only will such a move not promote an Israeli-Palestinian arrangement; it will even take the relationship backwards.” (Udi Dekel, former IDF Brigadier General; Anat Kurz, Director of Research at INSS)⁴⁹

“I would like to see a national home that is not maintained by occupying another people...We need an agreement now, before we reach a point of no return from which the two-state solution is not an option any longer.” (Yuval Diskin, former Shin Bet director)⁵⁰

“What the Palestinians need, and we need them to have, is a Palestinian state... We all know the current situation is untenable in the long term. There needs to be change...into a normal situation alongside the paradigm of two states with agreed boundaries and an end to the conflict.” (Dan Meridor, Former Deputy Prime Minister)⁵¹

#9: Do: Recognize War's Domestic Implications

Essence:

Wars are fought on the battlefield but serviced on the home front. In a democracy, the population has the ability to end a war at the ballot box. Military plans that require an open-ended engagement or long-term mobilization of the population should be viewed skeptically, as should heroic assumptions about the willingness of the people to keep fighting.

Application to Gaza war:

Israel has mobilized 350,000 troops for the Gaza war, pulling them from essential sectors of the economy. This has slowed Israel's economic growth and, more importantly, is undermining support among Israel's technological elite who drive the nation's economy.

Lessons learned:

“But remember, in Israel, when you talk about war, people think in the short term. The Six Day War was less than a week. The 1973 War took two and a half weeks. The second Lebanese War took 34 days. The longest conflict with Hamas, five years ago, was 52 days. People are saying, ‘Okay, let’s bite our lips and give them two or three months.’ But when it becomes clearer that it might take many months, or a few years...that changes the whole equation.” (Ehud Barak)⁵²

“The price paid for the Lebanese [war] was high—a major economic crisis, with inflation at 400%, a deeply divided public, and a severe crisis of national motivation.” (Doron Almog)⁵³

“If we lose high tech, if we lose the doctors, if we lose the academics, the country won’t be here...[we could become like a country] stuck in the ’60s of the last century.” (Tamir Pardo, former Mossad director) ⁵⁴

“This is a model of war that involves continuous, full-mobilization and whole-of-society efforts in which...results are delivered not immediately but over a longer time span. These earlier wars also underscore the high costs and potential risks of long campaigns, including the exceptional resources needed for the war effort

and war economy and the deep national resolve necessary to stay the course over months and even years.” (Assaf Orion)⁵⁵

“Alongside the complex military and diplomatic operations, Israeli leaders must launch a number of initiatives at home that will be no less challenging...to restore a sense of normality in a traumatized society...[and] restore trust in the state’s institutions.” (Amos Yadlin and Udi Evental)⁵⁶



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, second right chairs a cabinet meeting at the Kirya, which houses the Israeli Ministry of Defence, in Tel Aviv, Israel, Sunday, Dec. 17, 2023. (Menahem Kahana/Pool Photo via AP)

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