

The Weakness of Israel's Approach to War

by George Friedman - December 11, 2024

The Middle East has broken down into a state of extreme combat. The collapse of the system of governance throughout the region has opened up new fronts of warfare. Historically, such situations there were handled by the Israeli military. That basic reality – that Israel is the dominant military force in the region – remains. But there is a new dimension to the conflict. We have to consider whether the Israeli military strategy can be a definitive one – that is, whether Israel has the ability to continue to impose its will on its enemies over greater territories. In a sense, the Israelis have some options, none of which are necessarily appealing.

The problem starts with Hamas. After the Oct. 7 attack, Israel faced a dilemma: It believed it needed to destroy Hamas in an overwhelming way. The Israeli strategy, then, was to impose a system on Hamas designed to destroy its capabilities. In theory, this seemed reasonable. In practice, it was difficult to execute. It resulted in massive attacks all over Gaza. Had Israel been more restrained, the strategy might have worked. Instead, it attacked its enemies in increasingly intensive battles that never overwhelmed Hamas and thus enabled it to survive.

In other words, Israel thought that striking Hamas repeatedly would win the day. It didn't. The weakness of the Israeli approach was that it was carrying out the same operations over and over again with the same outcomes. This was not how Israel waged war in the past. It waged war with clear, limited tactical capability. In the case of Hamas, that clarity did not exist – the idea of attacking on multiple fronts became a principle. Again, this is not an unreasonable approach until we find a situation in which multiple attacks are simply insufficient to destroy the enemy. Israel needed to wage a war focused not on redundancy but on careful planning. The question now is what we make of Israel's strategy. It has failed to destroy Hamas and tried to solve that problem by multiplying its tactics, and apart from the public relations costs, it allowed the enemy both to survive and to create another system.

Crucially, Israel's limited capabilities became a political matter, with various elements arguing for a variety of attacks, none of which have been effective. It's unclear whether Israel can adjust. It is very difficult in the context of war to abandon a strategy. It implies a belief in failure but frequently has no clear intent. This is now the basic problem facing Israel. Israel should be sufficiently victorious at this point to end the war, but it is not in that position, nor is it able to change its understanding of warfare

to achieve a degree of victory, regardless of what its government says.

In fairness, many countries have experienced this problem. But Israel did not have this problem in the past, and therefore it's a real challenge for it to adjust. Looking ahead, the question is where Israel's military goes from here. For Israel, the solution appears to be a frightening one: It will continue this strategy simply because it understands it better than others. I'm unconvinced that Israeli forces are able to carry out attacks with endless repetition in warfare in this age.

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