

## Opinions

### **Government Declarations of “Total Victory” Create a Violent Vicious Cycle. We Must Not Believe Them**

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In recent years, under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu, a political and security discourse has taken root in Israel that is based on an imagined reality and is gradually drifting away from the facts. This language has become a central tool in managing government policy, expressed through promises of “total victory,” the “complete elimination” of enemies, and the prevention of any threat “at any cost.” The problem lies in the vast gap between these promises and reality—a gap that is increasingly becoming a defining feature of Israeli policy.

Thus, following the outbreak of the Gaza war after the events of October 7, 2023, Netanyahu declared that the war’s objective was the “elimination of Hamas throughout the Gaza Strip” and stated that Israel was “on the verge of total victory”—a phrase he repeated many times. Regarding the Iranian arena, at the outset of the war on February 28, he declared: “This war will lead to a true peace... We will change the face of the Middle East,” and later added: “We will create the conditions for the brave Iranian people to free themselves from the chains of tyranny.”

These were not slips of the tongue or momentary exaggerations, but a method that prefers absolute formulations over realistic assessments, presenting the public with objectives that are neither attainable nor even measurable. “Total victory” is not an operationally achievable goal but a slogan. When the prime minister repeatedly invokes such slogans, he transforms them into policy and creates public expectations for their realization.

This is where the real problem begins, because the public is not merely a passive audience; it is an active partner in shaping political reality. When the public adopts these slogans without examining their feasibility, it absolves itself of the responsibility to exercise critical thinking. Belief in impossible promises is not only a mistake or a deception by the leadership, it is also an error by a public that chooses to believe.

Various surveys demonstrate how deeply the ideas of absolute and unrealistic objectives have taken root. They show that a majority of the Jewish public supports continuing the fighting on all fronts “until complete victory is achieved.” A Tel Aviv University survey (January 2024) found that more than 60% of respondents believed the war should continue until the “complete destruction of Hamas.” A March survey by the Israel Democracy Institute found that approximately two-thirds of the public supported continuing Operation “Rising Lion.” These figures do not merely reflect a security-oriented position; they testify to the near-complete internalization of misleading governmental rhetoric.

The problem is that reality does not align with slogans. Hamas has not been eliminated. It has been severely damaged but continues to rule Gaza. Its military capabilities have been reduced

but not destroyed. Hezbollah has also not been defeated, and the confrontation in the north continues at varying levels of intensity while displaying the characteristics of an organized army. As for Iran—not only has its regime not been replaced, but its regional influence remains stable; it continues to operate through proxy mechanisms and has even pushed Trump to declare a near-unilateral ceasefire.

The gap between declarations and reality drives a dangerous political process. When a leadership promises an absolute objective and fails to achieve it, it cannot admit failure without paying a heavy political price. Therefore, it tends to escalate its actions, expand its objectives, or alternatively redefine the criteria for success.

Thus, a vicious cycle is created: impossible promises lead to unrealistically high expectations, which generate public pressure to continue operations, resulting in further escalation in a futile attempt to achieve unattainable goals—at an ever-increasing cost. This is not theoretical. This dynamic has been evident in Israeli public and political discourse since the outbreak of the war in 2023.

In Netanyahu's case, this constitutes a deep-seated pattern not limited to the current campaign. As early as 2002, Netanyahu encouraged the United States to invade Iraq, arguing that the move would democratize the Middle East and weaken Iran (testimony before the U.S. Congress, 2002). In practice, the 2003 invasion of Iraq produced the opposite result: the collapse of regional order and a significant strengthening of Iran. Even then, the gap between promises and reality was evident. Even then, no lessons were learned.

The problem does not lie in a mistaken assessment, but in the preference for a fictitious narrative over reality. Instead of adopting a policy that recognizes the complexity of the arena and the limits of power—and therefore selects achievable goals, a policy based on sweeping declarations is adopted, designed to create among the public the impression that the leadership is in control.

Netanyahu's political survival relies on cultivating a constant and absolute existential enemy (such as Hamas and Iran). He needs this to claim his indispensability as Israel's sole protector. If reality is perceived as complex or as requiring compromise, his absolute necessity as a leader is undermined—and such doubt is portrayed as a threat to the survival of the Jewish people.

Yet illusory control cannot replace real control. On the contrary, it weakens it. When the public discovers that promises are not fulfilled, trust erodes. When the leadership continues to make the same promises, the gap between rhetoric and reality only widens.

At this point, the responsibility of the public comes into focus. Belief in these promises is not the result of coercion but of choice—the choice to prefer a simple message over recognition of a complex reality; the choice to believe that conflicts can be “ended” through force alone; the choice to forgo doubt and independent critical thinking. In this sense, the public is not merely a victim of misleading political rhetoric, but a partner in it.

Anyone who believes that a “total victory” can be achieved over a fanatic organization embedded within a civilian population, or that a regional threat such as Iran can be “eliminated”

solely through military means, chooses to ignore the lessons of history. The result is the marginalization of realistic policy. Any proposal for practical solutions—compromise, arrangements, or conflict management—is perceived as failure. Any attempt to define limited objectives is seen as weakness. Thus, the leadership's room for maneuver narrows—not because it lacks options, but because it is bound by its own promises.

This also carries a price in the international arena. States act according to interests, not slogans. When Israel presents unattainable objectives, it struggles to persuade international partners to support its policies over time. The gap between ambitious declarations and actual results undermines its credibility.

The lesson is clear: a responsible leadership does not promise the impossible and does not pledge “total victory.” Instead, it defines achievable policies and objectives, manages risks, and recognizes the limits of power. It strives to achieve a relative advantage within a complex reality.

The fact that the prime minister continues to employ the same rhetoric, even after it has been repeatedly disproven, is no coincidence. It serves short-term political need—preserving support, creating an illusion of control and direction, and deflecting criticism. In the long term, however, it undermines the ability to conduct effective policy, and the boomerang inevitably returns. This does not necessarily occur in a single dramatic event, but through an ongoing process of eroding trust, aimless escalation, and the entrenchment of empty slogans among both the leadership and the public.

The question is not whether the gap between promises and reality will be exposed—it already has been. The question is how long it will take before Israel's political system and public decide to face reality, draw the necessary conclusions, and confront it.