

Introduction

May 2020 marked 20 years since the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) withdrew from southern Lebanon after an 18-year presence in the country. The unilateral withdrawal did not lead to the intended calm, but instead to the entrenchment of Hezbollah along the Israeli-Lebanese border, which eventually led to the Second Lebanon War (2006). Following the war, Israel pulled out of Lebanon and on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) deployed along the two countries' shared border and a border regime was established together with the LAF and UN forces, which has managed to maintain a stable security reality. Nevertheless, in the same period, Hezbollah continued to shore up its capabilities and activities in southern Lebanon, including creeping expansion near the border, in contravention of the UN Security Council resolution.

Hezbollah has taken advantage of the passing years since the Second Lebanon War, with the backing of its patron Iran, to reinforce its status in Lebanon and its influence on decision-making processes in the country and, worse yet from Israel's perspective, to increase its military strength and build advanced military offensive capabilities. In this way, Hezbollah has emerged as the primary military threat against Israel, and is capable of operating against it at any time. As a key member of the Iran-led Shi'ite axis, Hezbollah can act in Tehran's interests as a proxy in its pursuit for regional hegemony. There is also concern that Hezbollah could operate against Israel as a Lebanese-Shi'ite terror organization driven by a radical religious ideology, out of its own local interests and due to internal Lebanese power struggles.

Meanwhile, Iran has built and empowered the Shi'ite axis to spread its influence in the region, exploiting the opportunity created by the civil wars in Syria and Iraq, and turned territory in Syria and western Iraq into military bases to serve this axis. There is an Iranian presence at these bases,

alongside Shi'ite militia forces that stand at Tehran's disposal. The land bridge that Iran has constructed, stretching from Tehran to Lebanon, as well as outposts it has set up near Israel's borders, constitute a new and significant threat to Israel's national security, which goes beyond that posed directly by Hezbollah in Lebanon. Thus, despite the fact that the civil war in Syria seemingly diminished the threat posed to Israel by the Syrian army, the evolving situation has yielded a new threat – a triple-theater front, involving the forces of the Shi'ite axis in Lebanon, in Syria (the “first circle”), and in western Iraq, or a multi-theater war that could include the Gaza Strip and perhaps even other arenas in the “second circle” (Iraq) and the “third circle” (Iran and Yemen).

These developments pose a serious challenge to Israel's national security and require the formulation of an appropriate strategy and game plan. Our study centers on the Shi'ite axis, led by Iran, as the threat reference for the next war, with an emphasis on the direct threat posed by the axis' “military outposts” around Israel's borders with Syria and Lebanon. It also considers how to end the conflict with a swift victory, without it becoming a protracted, multi-arena war.

This memorandum is the summation of a project conducted at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) aimed at evaluating what the next war in the north could look like. It does not claim that war is unavoidable, but rather that action must be taken to avoid it. Still, one cannot always control the level of escalation: the code of conduct that exists in our environment is such that each side is obligated to respond to the action of its enemy – and the dominant language is the use of force, not diplomacy. There is thus a possibility that localized incidents or developments connected to the expansion of Iran and Hezbollah's capabilities will lead Israel to war in the north. The purpose of the project is to analyze the circumstances that could cause the realization of this scenario and to examine what the desired results (what is commonly known as victory) would be for Israel if war does break out. The main yardstick that guided the analysis was Israel's ability to enforce upon its enemies its own terms for an end to the war. The ultimate goal of the project is to encourage and inspire the strategic planning process among those dealing with this weighty issue – the decision makers and the defense establishment – as part of the preparations for the next war, which one can assume will be unlike any that came before.

The project entailed an independent process with the participation of INSS researchers, experts, and former high-ranking IDF commanders in an effort to reach insights, conclusions, and recommendations that can creatively support the IDF and the defense establishment's strategic and operational thinking and planning, as well as inform decision making in the political echelon. It does this by highlighting prominent blind spots and dilemmas and delineating the possible alternatives and opportunities that exist for Israel.

The following working assumptions formed the basis of the project:

- The time factor: We related to the possibility of a war erupting within the coming decade. The current circumstances do not necessarily portend war in the near future, but Israel must prepare in advance for the possibility of a wide-scale war against the Shi'ite axis;
- Regionally, we focused on the northern arena since Lebanon and Syria are today considered the frontline branches of the Shi'ite axis led by Iran, which constitutes the main threat to Israel; and
- Conceptually, the analysis is based on a plausible worst-case scenario, taking into account the existing and emerging capabilities of the enemy, and assuming that the enemy will unleash all means available to inflict on Israel the greatest possible damage from its perspective.

This project commenced prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, and its conclusions relate to the level of preparedness Israel needs to attain to meet the possibility of a war erupting in the north, without determining the likelihood of that happening. Our evaluation at this stage is that COVID-19 and the economic and other hardships experienced by the various members of the Shi'ite axis may delay the possibility of a wide-scale war. But circumstances may change, and it is clear that this crisis does not annul the emerging threat faced by Israel and the need to discuss and prepare for it now.

A special section dealt with preempting the buildup of the enemy's precision-guided missile and offensive unmanned aerial vehicle capabilities. Due to the sensitivity of the subject, its findings were submitted to the Israeli security establishment as a classified appendix.

The team of experts that participated in the project, helping to formulate insights and conclusions, included Lieutenant General (ret.) Gadi Eisenkot, Major General (ret.) Amos Yadlin, Major General (ret.) Giora Eiland, Major General (ret.) Ido Nehushtan, Major General (ret.) Nitzan Alon, Major

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