

Executive Summary

In this memorandum we present a summary of a long process of strategic planning (beginning in early 2019) conducted at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) to examine and analyze the gamut of issues that require consideration in advance of the next war in northern Israel. The aim of the project was to assist the defense establishment and decision makers in Israel to prepare for such a war, and to examine developing threats. It should be emphasized that in this study the reference is to threats against Israel and the overall need to prepare for those threats, without addressing the likelihood of war erupting, or when.

Recent years have seen the northern arena become Israel's primary military challenge. The threat on this front intensified with the emergence of the Shi'ite axis led by Iran and the creation of a "land bridge" from Tehran to Lebanon, and the growing friction between this axis and Israel. Iran was adept at exploiting the regional upheaval and turned Syria and western Iraq into areas where it could base its military capabilities, while also ensuring that Hezbollah continues to strengthen militarily as a key member of the Shi'ite axis against Israel; Iran made explicit efforts to equip Hezbollah with precision-guided missiles, with the intent that they would have a major impact on neutralizing Israel's strategic capabilities.

The current research was based on the assumption that, although it is in Israel's interests to prevent the next war – and it seems that Hezbollah and Iran currently have no desire to enter into a broad conflict with Israel either – a widespread war could erupt as a result of a deterioration triggered by a limited pinpoint event and/or a miscalculation by either of the sides and, therefore, it is necessary to discuss these issues ahead of time.

This memorandum includes an outline of the conventional military challenge to Israel, in the wake of the geopolitical changes and developments on the battlefield in recent years. It presents a description of the worst-case

scenario of the next war (henceforth referred to as the Northern War), which is likely to be a multi-theater war, or at least a two-theater war (Lebanon and Syria), i.e., not limited to Israel vs. Lebanon. It also offers an analysis of the strategic alternatives that Israel has: maintaining the current policy, known as “the campaign between the wars” – a limited operation to reduce the threat of precision missiles and core capabilities – or initiating a general war to remove the threat and bring about fundamental strategic change. In addition, it maps the main dilemmas at the strategic level. It concludes with a list of recommendations regarding how to prepare for the war, how to conduct the campaign, and how to formulate exit strategies for ending it.

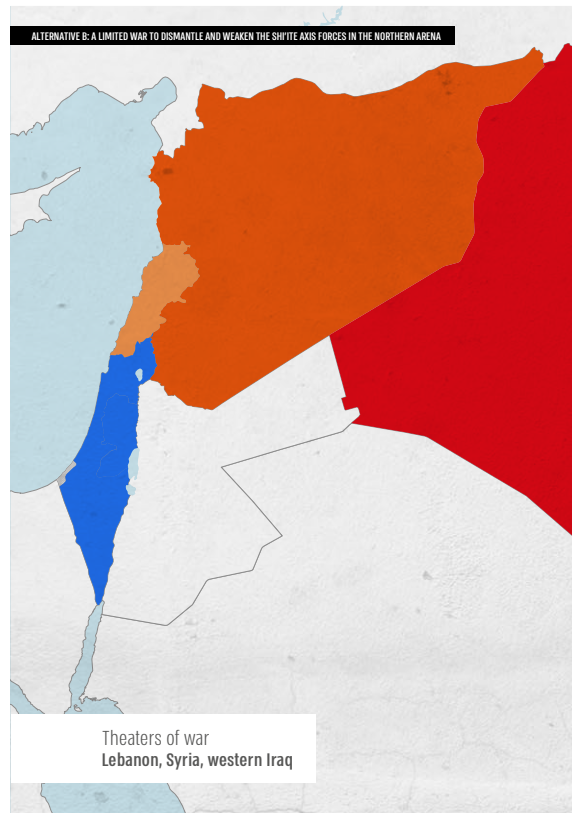
A key conclusion that runs through the entirety of this study is that **the next Northern War will be different and more difficult than its predecessors**. It will be a multi-front war in which we can expect missile and rocket salvos, some of them precision guided, and drone attacks on military and civilian targets on the home front, in a way that may reduce the IDF’s freedom of action and could cause considerable harm to the economy and national resilience. Further challenges will be posed by the enemy’s advanced air defense systems and by anticipated attempts by enemy forces to infiltrate Israeli territory from Lebanon and Syria.

In light of this assessment, Israel must prepare for this war militarily, economically, and politically, while specifying a multi-arena war against the Shi’ite axis, as analyzed in this memorandum, as the “threat reference” for the coming years.

The following is a summary of the recommendations presented in the memorandum:

In the military arena¹: In order to ensure the destruction of most of the enemy’s qualitative power, and thus to achieve victory, the IDF must proceed on the basis of accurate intelligence, offensive precision capabilities, and multi-layer defensive capabilities, and to strengthen and prepare its ground

1 The issue of precision-guided missiles threatening the Israeli home front was also examined, but due the sensitivity of the issue, our conclusions were presented separately to the relevant authorities within the Israeli establishment.



forces for ground maneuvering in the next war. This is for the purpose of conducting both a defensive battle in a limited campaign and an offensive ground maneuver against the enemy (preferably a short, limited and forceful ground maneuver operation). Due to the constraints of Israel's defense budget, we recommend focusing on augmenting lethal capabilities, exploiting to the full the IDF's offensive precision capabilities, improving air defense capabilities and especially increasing the number of interceptors, as well as utilizing new technology-based capabilities (laser, cyber, robotics) against the possibility of surprises and new threats. With regard to operation plans, there is a need to draft a defensive plan along the front lines, as Hezbollah has demonstrated that it is determined to launch a ground offensive to create a precedent of occupying a community or military outpost inside Israeli territory.

On the civilian front: Special consideration should be given to preparing the public for war and developing the home front's resilience and functional continuity. This will require organizational changes. In this context, and drawing on the government's handling of the coronavirus crisis as a lesson, we recommend that a dedicated decision-making body be established at the national level to coordinate the management of all urgent and critical civilian issues and integrate activities between the various civic agencies, local and national, in order to provide a response to the needs of the population during the war (see further details in chapter 5).

At the diplomatic level: The scenario of a possible wide-scale war in the north should be discussed with Israel's major partners, particularly the United States and also Russia, to alert them to the risk of war given the current circumstances and to establish channels of communication and coordination with them for during and after the war. With regard to the US, prior coordination is important so as to ensure military assistance during the course of the war and diplomatic support and intervention whenever Israel needs it. As for Russia, it is advisable, in advance, to formulate understandings and to neutralize its involvement during the war, and to call on it to find a way to end the war and use its influence to help draft a post-war agreement that is suited to Israel.

Regarding the exit strategy: The war scenario suggests that Israel will find it difficult to bring about a quick end to the fighting, or to terminate it at a time or in the circumstances that it would like, without defeating Hezbollah. Therefore, Israel should bring about an end to the war by exacting a heavy price from Lebanon and from Syria (by attacking infrastructures). Offensive actions of this nature are likely to lead to international pressure for an immediate end to hostilities. It is imperative that Israel demand, during negotiations to end the war, the creation of **stability and inspection mechanisms** that will prevent the rebuilding of the offensive capabilities of Hezbollah, Iran, and its proxies in the region – Lebanon, Syria and western Iraq – and that the Lebanese and Syrian state systems take responsibility for their domains, while establishing rules of the game and a border regime that will include international monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, as well as coordination and liaison options with the participation of UN forces. The topmost demand should be for an agreement that can enforce the dismantling of Hezbollah as an independent militia, or at least block all arms transfer

routes from Iran to Syria and Lebanon, and remove the military capabilities of Iran and its proxies from Lebanon and Syria (see chapter 7).

The cognitive angle: A strategy needs to be devised in advance that is suited to various target audiences: the Israeli public, Hezbollah and the other members of the Shi'ite axis, the Lebanese population and establishment, and regional and international entities (see chapter 6).

Finally, although the focus of this memorandum is the necessity to prepare ahead of the next war in the north, it is also extremely important to keep the discussion going on the question, **Is wide-scale war in the north inevitable?** The complexity of the situation and the high price war will exact from all sides requires it. While Israel may not be able to prevent a war that is forced upon it, before it decides on initiating one it should first exhaust all options to prevent a confrontation, and even try open or covert diplomatic tracks. This includes making the most of the recent development in Israeli-Lebanese relations as the two sides met to negotiate the demarcation of their shared maritime border (mid-October 2020); however, the chances of progress on this matter are considered low, as long as Hezbollah retains its status as an independent military force that wields power over decision making in Lebanon.