

The Response to the Iranian Proxy War: Jerusalem's Power vs. the Quds Force

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Background

In 1979, the regime of the ayatollahs, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, came to power in Tehran, instantly converting Iran from Israel's strategic partner to its bitter enemy. The struggle against Israel and the call to destroy it are an important objective for the current regime, both ideologically and geo-strategically. To this end, Iranian strategy combines two main efforts: first, the drive to acquire nuclear weapons, whereby the regime and its policies would enjoy immunity, prestige, and growing regional influence, as well as the tangible ability to inflict serious damage on its enemies and impose its will on others; and second, an ongoing, patient, and widespread effort to recruit support, build militias, and foster elements of power to operate as proxies against its enemies, among them Israel. These two parallel processes are mutually reinforcing: the conventional military power of Iran and its proxies is intended to deter attacks by its enemies against it and distract them while it develops nuclear capability, while its nuclear status is intended eventually to enable Iran to spread a strategic deterrent umbrella over the activities of its proxies and conventional forces.

For many years, policymakers in Israel and around the world focused on the Iranian nuclear issue and how to contain it, while the challenge posed by the proxies did not receive a proper, systematic response. However, for the last four decades Israel has fought largely against military enemies built by Iran that were financed, equipped, and trained by it from afar, and served as its proxies to harass Israel and wear it down from up close. As such, Israel has fought against Hezbollah in Lebanon and elsewhere, against Hamas and Islamic Jihad on the Palestinian front, and in the last

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few years, against Iranian proxies operating against Israel from Syria. Recent months have seen a significant development in this proxy campaign, against the backdrop of Israel's clash with Iran in Syria. At this phase of the campaign, while Iran has indeed deviated slightly from its familiar indirect approach, the main change was actually in Israel's conduct, reflecting its improved understanding of the strategic problem and the emergence of its response concept to the challenge.

Beyond an analysis of Iran's proxy war challenge and Israel's response policy, this article proposes the main principles for a future strategy, which can be epitomized through a continuous, deep, and parallel campaign (CDP, in Hebrew *ra'am*, meaning "thunder") against the Iranian proxy war, and focusing efforts against its most important long term enabler: the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards, under the command of General Qasem Soleimani.

Iran vs. Israel: An Indirect War of Attrition by Proxies

The strategy of indirect war waged by Iran through its proxies includes the patient, steady construction of a political and military power base among Shiites or radical Sunni communities, while uniting them under the banner of "resistance" (*muqawama*, in Arabic) against Israel, the West, and other regimes in the area. In general, Iran links up with an authentic local movement, and supports it for long periods based on certain common interests. Extensive funding, military training, and advanced equipment and arms, as well as religious, ideological, and military instruction and guidance have gradually created considerable political and military power bases across the Middle East and on Israel's borders. The proxies, promoting their own agendas yet with Iran's encouragement, strike at Israel and attack its citizens and its forces. Consequently, for decades they have commanded Israel's security attention and resources and steered them to the current security challenges on its closest fronts. Iran has used a similar method against the United States and coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, and against Saudi Arabia by means of the Houthis in Yemen.

This campaign of attrition is founded on a sophisticated structure that integrates essential functional components in various theaters, with local adaptations. From an Israeli perspective, from nearest to furthest, the enemy system is built as follows:

- a. *The military proxies* are the direct force employers in the theaters of operations adjacent to Israel. As the system's forward military element,

- they threaten Israel, tie up its resources, and attack it in order to erode its strength, distract it, and deter it from operating directly against Iran. This category includes Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the as-Sabiroom organization, and other Shiite militias. Many of them brandish insignias inspired by a common graphic “brand”: the insignia of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.
- b. *The near logistics rear areas*, such as weapons factories, transitional facilities, depots, and warehouses, enabling the proxies to arm and rearm between wars.
 - c. *Host regimes*, which sometimes (e.g., Syria, Lebanon) enjoy international sovereign status. The proxies build their forces within their territory and sometimes employ force from their front, while in their depth are the near logistics areas.
 - d. *The proxy force buildup mechanisms* operate by funding, arming, training and equipping, consulting, engaging in instruction and guidance, and funneling resources from the strategic hinterland and the near rear areas to the theaters of operation. The most prominent of these mechanisms is the Quds Force, which is responsible for equipping the proxies, building their forces, arming them, supporting their recovery, and rearming between hostilities and in the long run. The Quds Force, one of the five arms of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, is in charge of operations outside Iran, including building proxies and terror organizations, collecting intelligence, engaging in covert diplomacy and logistics, and launching direct attacks. Its operational activity stretches from the strategic hinterland in Iran, through the intermediary spaces and the near logistics areas, to the proxies’ theaters of operations. While the Quds Force command is subordinate to the Revolutionary Guards command, General Qasem Soleimani personally enjoys direct access to the Iranian leadership, wide public prestige, considerable freedom of action, and significant influence on decisions affecting Iranian policy in the region and beyond.
 - e. *The strategic hinterland*: A resource-rich country, Iran’s political, scientific, industrial, and military depth provides the system as a whole with the material and planning resources needed for its campaign: funds, scientific infrastructure, military infrastructure, civilian and tailored transportation infrastructures by sea, land and air, commercial infrastructure and business facades, military training facilities, and a religious-spiritual infrastructure to rally hearts and minds.

The system's underlying logic stems from its ability to harness, channel, and impart the resources of a rich, populous regional power to local organizations whose material ability is limited but that enjoy popular and political local support and geographical proximity to Iran's enemies. Through ongoing activity Iran successfully casts these local elements into effective military organizations on its enemies' borders, supports them in the local political arena, and employs them against its rivals. Iran is focused on building and directing its proxy forces, while the latter bear the brunt and burden, paying the price of operations. In this way, for many years Iran has conducted indirect, one-way warfare against its enemies, at a negligible cost to itself, but at a high cost in lives to its proxies. During actual hostilities, the proxies' force is eroded and their battlespace ravaged, but the mechanism for their arming and recovery is left unscathed, and thus well prepared to regenerate them after the fighting.

The success of the Iranian system is also based on rules of the game dictated by Iran, whereby it avoids direct conflict with its enemies, who are focused on its proxies: Saudi Arabia is fighting the Houthis in Yemen but not Iran; the coalition forces and the United States have suffered heavy losses at the hands of Iranian proxies in Iraq and Afghanistan, but as a rule have avoided reacting against Iran. In the early decades of Iran's attrition campaign against it, Israel conducted campaigns, battles, and wars against Iranian proxies: Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. After suffering heavy losses in their ranks and their environments, and fearing broad escalation, they gradually decreased the continuous military friction with Israel. Over the last decade, Israel has operated in the near logistics areas and the intermediary spaces against weapons shipments from the strategic hinterland in Iran to the operational theaters in Gaza and Lebanon. Israel has also expanded its activity to include the assets of hosts, such as the Hamas regime in Gaza (a host of PIJ and simultaneously a proxy through its own military arm) and the Syrian army. In January 2015, in a highly unusual and singular case until this year, Israel directly attacked an Iranian general on a joint patrol with Hezbollah on the Golan Heights front.

In response to the combined Iranian challenge (nuclear and proxy war), over the years Israeli policy has been expressed in separate efforts: a clandestine and political campaign against Iranian nuclear weapons; strikes on advanced weapons shipments to Hezbollah and Hamas; operations to foil terror attacks and target key personnel in the fields of nuclear weapons, terror, and buildup; and direct fighting against Iranian proxies, including

major operations every few years. The deterrence following hostilities has contributed to fairly lengthy periods of calm, but has not stopped the enemy becoming more powerful and not solved the ongoing, growing threats on Israel's border.

In retrospect, lending top priority to countering Iran's nuclear ambitions was a wise choice, and fighting Iranian proxies who attacked Israel was essential. However, the proxies' rearming and force buildup between conflicts revealed the gaps in this response to the challenge. Israel's current policy in Syria shows that its leaders have recognized these gaps and identified the special surrounding circumstances, allowing it greater freedom of action than in the past.

2017-2018: What Has Changed?

Iran has invested considerable forces and resources in the civil war in Syria, and played a central role in the survival of the Assad regime. From the start of the war, Israel adopted a policy of non-intervention, while enforcing three red lines: attacks on Israel, transfer of chemical weapons to terrorist elements, and transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah.

Since the end of 2017, the regime and its supporters have focused on moves intended to impose "reconciliation" agreements on pockets of resistance. At the same time there are signs of a new trend in Iranian policy, which has accelerated its efforts to establish itself militarily in Syria, by means of Shiite militias, logistical infrastructures, and Iranian operational military assets, as future potential. In light of this development, the threat perception in Israel has changed as well.

Underlying Israel's updated concept are its lessons from the struggles with Hezbollah and Hamas, and especially lapses in counter-buildup response. Such a lapse regarding Hezbollah's years-long buildup was a contributing factor to the creation in Lebanon of the main conventional military threat to Israel today. This threat constrains Israel's freedom of action against further buildup in Lebanese territory, and also plays a role in its calculus of action against the Iranian nuclear threat.

Israel subsequently identified Iran's intention to create another theater of operations on its northern border in Syria, from where it could employ its proxies of Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani militias, and of course, the Lebanese Hezbollah, under the auspices of the Assad regime. Senior Israelis began to stress a new red line in its policy, "prevention of Iran's entrenchment in Syria," and also turned to the United States and Russia

to prevent this and distance Iran and its proxies from its Golan Heights border. When these appeals went unacknowledged, articles sprouted in the international media about Iran's military infrastructures in Syria, and Israel began to strike Iranian facilities in Syria. On February 10, 2018, the Quds Force launched a drone from Syria to Israel, and Israel struck Iranian and Syrian targets. Since that "battle day," Israel has repeatedly attacked Iranian weapon systems and military personnel in Syria, and Iran has repeatedly sought to pay back with its own attacks. On May 10, Iran fired rockets toward Israel, which responded by attacking dozens of Iranian targets in Syria. Israel's Prime Minister expressed a commitment to continue and prevent Iran from establishing itself in Syria and from sending advanced weapons to Hezbollah. In late May there were reports of a possible arrangement sponsored by Russia to remove the forces of Iran and its proxies from the Israeli border, even if not from all of Syria. Although much still lies ahead, it is already possible to discern a change in Israel's policy toward the Iranian proxy war: growing willingness on Israel's part to strike preemptively at Iranian capabilities as they emerge in the theater, before they ripen as a significant threat, and no less than that, its readiness to strike directly at Iranian forces in the theater and expose Iran's involvement and modus operandi. There is no doubt that the support of the American administration and the understandings with Russia are an

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important component in the considerable operational space that Israel has identified at this time.

The unfolding events on the proxy war front in Syria occurred against the background of the United States withdrawal in mid-May from the nuclear agreement with Iran, and the dozen demands made of the Iranian regime in the fields of nuclear activity, missiles, terror, and regional influence. After decades of a bifurcated policy that isolated the nuclear issue from all other issues, there are signs of a potential comprehensive policy. This may be found in a US policy defining the Iranian threat as the sum of all its parts, in the high level of coordination between the administration and the Israeli government, and in the

coincidence of the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and Israel's clashes with Iran in Syria. From this potential to a designed coherent, integrated policy, with other partners and Israel, the distance is still great. The complexity of

the challenge, the multiplicity of actors, the singular nature of the Trump administration, and the many pressing issues it faces are all obstacles in the way of this desired outcome, and it is still too early to judge how the situation will play out.

Israeli Policy in Hindsight

The balance of Israel's achievements and challenges in its long campaign against the Iranian proxy war demands adaptations, rethinking, and a closing of gaps in the response concept. Most of the lapses stem from deconstructive thinking about the problem, playing on a field shaped by Iran, and an unnecessary choice between two options that in fact are not mutually exclusive. First, Israel has focused almost entirely on the nuclear issue, and devoted insufficient efforts to the proxy challenge. Second, between wars the enemy accrues significant achievements in building the threat to Israel for the next round, while Israel has devoted most of its resources to wars, and far less and apparently insufficient effort to the long inter-war campaign. Third, Israel invested most of its resources in the proxies, the spearhead closest to it, but fell short of matching its response to the enemy system's structure and underlying logic whereby this response would undermine the enemy's essential centers of gravity, weaken the spear, and sever the hand wielding it.

Recommended Security Policy for Israel vis-à-vis the Iranian Threat

In response to the two-pronged Iranian threat, Israel must conduct a multi-dimensional, combined, and ongoing campaign based on the principles of continuity, depth, and parallelism. This campaign has one overarching purpose, and it must be conducted consistently, both in times of intense hostilities ("wars" and major operations) and between them, drawing from all the tools of national power at Israel's disposal. What follows is a proposal for a strategic purpose, principles of the campaign concept, and the ensuing lines of operation.

The Strategic Purpose

The supreme test for Israel in its campaign against Iran and its proxies is to safeguard the State of Israel's survival and ensure its citizens' security and economic, cultural, scientific, and social prosperity, despite enemy efforts. To achieve this it must make its enemies realize that they can never defeat it by force, and that their ongoing efforts to fight and to destroy are

hopeless and will exact an unbearable cost; therefore they had better cease these efforts (“the iron wall”).

If Israel’s enemies reach the conclusion that they had better make peace and coexist alongside it, so much the better. Until then, Israel will settle for non-belligerence, postponement of hostilities, and longer intervals between rounds of fighting, brought about by restraint and deterrence; and for minimizing the cost of hostilities by shortening their duration and impeding advance enemy buildup.

On the nuclear issue, Israel must adhere to the objective of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and keeping it as far as possible from such capability.

At the same time, Israel should leave the door open to a second strategic turnaround in its relations with Iran over the long term, surprisingly toward a positive direction, however unthinkable this may seem at present (was it possible to imagine the peace treaty with Egypt?). This notion harkens back to Israel’s strong relations with Iran until the Islamist revolution, and by no means ignores the genuine commitment of the ayatollahs’ regime to Israel’s destruction.

Strategic Principles of the Response: Continuity, Depth, and Parallelism (CDP)

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response so far in mind, there emerges the combined campaign strategy needed for Israel in dealing with the two arms of the Iranian threat. The strategy’s three principles are: continuity, depth, and parallelism.

Continuity

The principle of continuity requires understanding the struggle against Iran and its proxies as a single continuous campaign, in which Israel’s efforts should serve one overarching purpose, both in the ongoing campaign (“routine”) and during wars.

In this ongoing campaign, Israel must distance Iran from nuclear capabilities as far as possible, and in parallel disrupt its proxies’ buildup system and impair its efforts while imposing a heavy cost on them, to deter Iran and its proxies from attacking Israel. It must postpone active hostilities as long as possible, but at the same time prepare best conditions for victory

in war. A successful ongoing campaign requires mutual support between political efforts and clandestine, covert, and military efforts, both offensive and defensive; continuous communication with the enemy in a variety of channels, mainly in order to control escalation and prevent miscalculation; synchronization and cooperation between political, defense, and senior military echelons; and the recruitment of political, economic, intelligence, and operational support from partners in the region and in the international community, above all the United States.

In times of war and military hostilities, Israel must focus mainly on causing heavy damage to the military proxies in order to limit their potential threat and deter them from attacking in the future. During wars it must also devote efforts to promote the objectives of the “inter-war campaign” that resumes as soon as fighting stops, and thus defer as much as possible the enemy’s opportunity for military recovery. Israel can achieve this by attacking the enemy’s buildup assets in the theater of battle and in the near logistics zone, and its force buildup mechanisms in the entire theater of war.

Depth

The principle of in-depth operations requires Israel to conduct its efforts against all elements of the enemy system in three dimensions: geographical, functional, and temporal. In the geographical dimension, the campaign of attrition against Israel stretches from Iran, through the intermediary sea, land, air, and cyber spaces, to the fronts nearest Israel, in Lebanon, Gaza, Judea and Samaria, and Syria. It is easier for Israel to take action in the theaters on its borders and in their near logistics areas; in order to provide a holistic response, Israel must build its capability for continuous action in all the spaces described, even if the challenges regarding intelligence, operations, and logistics increase as they move further from Israel toward the more distant intermediary spaces, and certainly within Iran itself.

In the functional dimension, Israel frequently takes action against the military proxies, and even against host regimes, largely in response to attacks from their territory. However, despite its understanding of the enemy’s system, Israel generally avoids taking action against the strategic hinterland in Iran, to avoid wider escalation, and until recently it also avoided taking direct action against the proxy building mechanism. The first steps largely involved attacking expendable assets, while willingness to attack Iranian personnel emerged increasingly since February 2018. Israel must adjust the guiding logic of its campaign to the structure of the

enemy system and its strategy, and deal with all its components, from the strategic hinterland, through the proxy building mechanisms, to the proxy armies, in their local power bases and the host environment.

In the temporal dimension, Israel must continue working to limit potential threats and work against emerging threats before they are imminent. This leads to the “upstream” operation approach, before threats near Israel’s borders. The logic of this approach involves taking early calculated risks to prevent serious risks from emerging at a later stage, and must be balanced against the risks of escalation, the normal human tendency to postpone difficult decisions, and the conventional political and legal concept in the West, which justifies the use of force only as a last resort and only in the face of clear and present danger. In order to create this kind of space to maneuver, Israel must gain significant political support, making full use of the excellent relations with the Trump administration and Putin on the one hand, and the shared interests in the wider region in view of the Iranian threat, on the other hand.

Parallelism: Both This and That

In view of the serious consequences of the proxy war waged by Iran in parallel to its nuclear project, focusing the response exclusively on the nuclear aspect is a mistake. One explanation derives from an erroneous, binary, and artificial way of framing the struggle against the two threats: “it’s either a struggle against nuclear weapons or against Iran’s malign influence,” sometimes due to a perceived lack of sufficient resources to handle both. The way out of this conceptual dead end is based on an understanding that the long term approach must be “both this and that,” rather than “either this or that.” In view of Iran’s combined efforts (nuclear and proxies) and the synergy between them, it is wrong to combat only the nuclear effort and to neglect the conventional arm that supports it. Iran’s parallel strategy requires Israel to formulate its own parallel strategy, against the nuclear program and against the efforts at its attrition, giving priority to the first, sufficiency to the second, and striving for synergy and mutual contribution between the two.

The CDP Strategy in Practice

At the political-strategic level, when active hostilities (“war”) break out, Israel must strive to end them while in a superior strategic situation, expressed by: significant weakening of its direct enemies and their supporters – in

military, resource, and political terms; deterrence and limitation of their space to operate against it; keeping the cost to Israel in blood and treasure as low as possible during and after the fighting; effecting a swift recovery of the Israeli economy and return to normal life and prosperity; hampering the enemy's recovery and prolonging its military recovery time for as long as possible; recruiting broad regional and political support for joint efforts after the fighting; seeking an advantageous position vis-à-vis the local, regional, and international rivals of the enemies; and preserving Israel's operational space, and if possible, even extending it.

In future conflicts, and in view of the structure of the enemy system fighting against it, Israel must consider widening the campaign boundaries beyond the immediate theaters of operation by attacking not only the fighting proxies, but also the host regimes, the adjacent logistical zones, the mechanisms for proxy buildup, and if necessary, the strategic hinterland in Iran. Thus, when fighting Hezbollah, Israel could also attack the Lebanese government, the Assad regime, Iranian force elements and assets in the near theater, weapons factories and repositories, and even targets in Iran itself. This strategy involves significant challenges and risks, but it also has considerable potential benefits:

- a. *Before the war*, Iran must consider that proxy wars against Israel, which were previously localized and far from its own borders, can also exact of it severe and direct costs. Similar considerations could be in the minds of host regimes in Damascus and Beirut, with a chilling and restraining effect, which would help Israel expand its sphere of deterrence and distance wars from its borders.
- b. *During the war*, expanding the boundaries of the hostilities could encourage regional and international actors to be involved, and thus accelerate the warfighting termination mechanism.
- c. *After the war*, the logic of such action could give Israel a better starting point to impair the enemy's recovery, and help bring about better security regimes.

Naturally, the actual moves in war should be determined in real time, after carefully considering the balance of risks and benefits, and the alternatives available in the particular circumstances.

In the ongoing campaign ("between the wars"), Israel must integrate its political, intelligence, clandestine, covert, and military efforts throughout the enemy system's depth and against all the elements of the Iranian campaign of attrition. The range, continuity, complexity, and cost of the

operations require Israel to work closely with international partners, above all the United States, but also in the region, where there are many who share Israel's concerns over the two arms of the Iranian threat. Pooling resources and cooperation will enable parallel campaigning against its nuclear program and against attrition, terror, and subversion by proxies. A significant challenge for the immediate future is to formulate a coherent, integrated Israeli policy against the two dimensions of the Iranian threat, and coordinate it closely with the US.

Understanding the enemy's logic and the system it operates against Israel highlights the main lapse in what until recently was Israel's response. Israel's acceptance of the Iranian-defined playing field boundaries and rules of the game, whereby the proxies are the disposable cannon fodder while their dispatchers enjoy immunity, was part of the problem. The Iranian system fighting Israel includes a vital center of gravity, namely, building and operating the proxies. Until recently Israel avoided attacking Iran's most precious asset: its people. Long campaigns are a test of resolve for the parties, but they are also a learning competition, and a race of adaptation and updated concept and policy. Iran will not necessarily stop its efforts because of the price it has paid in Syria, and Israel must prepare for the next rounds. A constantly updated and updating policy, outpacing the developing challenge posed by Iran in a changing environment, can shape the contest theater and the rules of the game in Israel's favor.

Finally, the "missing piece" in Israel's defenses against Iran's proxy war is hiding in plain sight, and calls for a crushing response, beyond the borders of Syria alone. Jerusalem's reply to Iran's proxy war must set its sights on the main target: the Quds Force, which borrows the city's name.