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**“The Culminating Point of Success”: Risk Overload in the Campaign  
between Wars in Syria**  
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The Israel Air Force attack in Syria on December 25, 2018 showed that Israel is trying to keep to its strategy of offensive action – the “campaign between wars” – that has been implemented successfully in the northern arena since early 2013. The attack did indeed show that Israel maintains its operational attack capability and that it can execute a focused attack of this sort even at present, while dealing with immediate risks of escalation. However, after six years, a combination of factors suggests that this mode of action in the northern arena may have realized its potential, confronts an “overload” of risks, and is close to exhausting its ability to record achievements without significant cost.

**The December 25 Attack**

The attack in Syria on December 25, 2018 was Israel’s first overt attack since the Russian IL-20 was downed on September 17, 2018, and occurred just after President Trump’s announcement of the withdrawal of United States forces from Syria. During the attack, Syria fired a number of surface-to-air missiles, and Israel’s air defense system was activated against one of the missiles, which might have landed in Israeli territory. The Russian Defense Ministry called the attack “a provocation” and charged that it endangered two civilian aircraft landing in Damascus and Beirut. The Russians also claimed that the Syrian air defense managed to intercept a significant amount of the munitions fired during the attack.

The events of the attack itself were not unusual. The Syrian air defense has operated against Israel’s aerial attacks for over two years, and during that time there were cases when Israeli interception systems were used against Syrian surface-to-air missiles. The Russian condemnation was also not unusual, and it is likely that the details about the risk to passenger aircraft and the interception of munitions are not correct. Apparently, therefore, Israel indeed demonstrated that at an operational level it maintains its ability to attack in Syria, and that it can carry out such attacks even now, while dealing with the immediate risks of escalation (the risk to aircraft and direct responses during the actual attack).

The day after the attack, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that Israel was determined to continue taking action against Iranian entrenchment in Syria – even in face of the changes in this theater. The attack was apparently intended to signal this determination, and perhaps also to test the ability to implement it under current conditions. However, it appears that the timing is also suitable for a broader examination of the Israeli strategy. In his book *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (2002), Edward Luttwak writes, "In the entire realm of strategy, therefore, a course of action cannot persist indefinitely." Indeed, a combination of factors requires an examination of the possibility that the Israeli strategy has reached its culminating point.

### **The Strategy of the Campaign between Wars**

The idea of the campaign between wars in the northern arena was initially linked to the chaotic situation during the civil war in Syria. In early 2013, Israel realized that the characteristics of the northern arena increased the IDF's operational freedom of action, and it was assessed that correct management of the escalation risks would enable Israel to use its power to reduce existing and emerging threats; such use of force would not lead to broad hostilities, which Israel sought to avoid. This assessment, which was proved correct, led over the years to daring and imaginative operations, including hundreds of attacks against a range of targets in Syrian territory. The ongoing activity was directed primarily against the transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah, and last year against Iranian entrenchment in Syria as well.

During these attacks, the IDF and the intelligence community demonstrated impressive intelligence and operational capability in all aspects of locating and attacking targets. A broader examination of the campaign between wars strategy shows that there were considerable achievements. Although it did not lead to the withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria (and it is likely that in any case it did not seek such an ambitious objective), there is evidence that the rate of Iranian entrenchment slowed down, and the deployment of forces was perhaps affected by Israeli activity. The effort to prevent weapons transfers to Hezbollah did not eliminate them entirely, but the pace was probably slowed and Hezbollah was prevented from acquiring massive quantities of some components that were perceived as game-changers.

Israel also demonstrated impressive control of escalation risks, and in fact none of the activity led to a significant response from those targeted: the Syrians never responded directly to Israeli activity in their territory; Iranian efforts to attack Israel from Syrian territory failed; Hezbollah apparently initiated a series of attacks from the Golan Heights border (in 2013-2015, without causing fatalities), and responded from Lebanese territory following an attack on a weapons store on the Lebanese side of the Lebanon-Syria border (on March 14, 2014, likewise without fatalities) and after an attack in the Golan Heights

in which senior Hezbollah operatives and an Iranian general were killed (on January 28, 2015 on Mt. Dov, with two IDF soldiers killed).

### **The Campaign between Wars in 2018**

The risks incurred by the campaign between wars have accumulated over recent years: the Russian presence in Syria since late 2015 demanded the development of effective coordination mechanisms and greater attention to the use of force; a change in the Syrian air defense firing policy required special preparations for attacks and readiness for a trickle of missiles into Israeli territory; and Iranian entrenchment required sensitive handling of the escalation risks.

Moreover, in 2018 there were a number of incidents that illustrated various risks the Israeli strategy must deal with at present:

- a. The first group of risks is linked to the threat to the attacking aircraft and the possibility of fighting with Syria, as illustrated by the downing of the Israeli F-16I on February 10, 2018. The plane was brought down in Israeli territory (the two crew members ejected safely) in an incident that began with the interception of an Iranian drone that tried to penetrate Israeli air space, continued with an Israeli attack on the drone's command and control trailer deep in Syria, and ended, after the plane was brought down, with an attack on the surface-to-air missile batteries that launched the missiles at the Israeli planes.
- b. The second group of risks is linked to the possibility of an escalation in direct hostilities between Israel and Iran, as illustrated by a series of events in Syria in April and May 2018. Israeli attacks on Iranian targets in April were followed by a failed Iranian attempt to send a few dozen rockets into Israeli territory (most came down in Syrian territory and some were intercepted by Israeli air defense), and peaked in a powerful Israeli response on the night of May 10 (Operation House of Cards), which included attacks on dozens of Syrian and Iranian targets.
- c. The third group of risks is linked to possible hostilities with Russia, as illustrated by the downing of the Russian spy plane in September. The incident began with an Israeli attack in the Syrian coastal area. In response, Syria's air defense system launched a few dozen surface-to-air missiles, one of which by mistake hit the Russian aircraft. The plane fell into the Mediterranean Sea, a few dozen kilometers west of the Syrian coast, killing all 15 Russian crew members aboard. Israel's explanations were rejected by the Russians, who continue to blame it for the incident. After the plane was downed, the Russians sent batteries of fairly advanced S-300 surface-to-air missiles to Syria, but it appears they have not become operational by the Syrians themselves (although the Syrians have started training on the systems). Once the Syrians are given operational

responsibility, the threat to IAF planes could increase (and to the munitions launched during attacks), and the joint operation of the batteries by Syrians and Russians could increase the threat of fighting with Russia.

### **The Campaign between Wars: A Look Ahead**

Although these are not new risks, the changing conditions in the arena demand a review of the effectiveness and relevance of the campaign between wars strategy in the Syrian-Lebanese context. These include the general situation in Syria, as it returns to the status of a sovereign state with the ability to change its policy of no response (and making it harder to justify an attack on its soil); the continued Russian presence in Syria; the lessons learned by the Russians by the downing of the IL-20; Russian policy that sees Syrian sovereignty and stability as very important (and Israeli attacks as a danger to this stability); the developments in Syrian air defense and its fire policy, which supports the launch of a large and uncontrolled number of missiles (that are also a risk to civil aviation); and the lessons learned by all elements from ongoing Israeli activity.

The shift of the center of gravity of activity from Syria to Lebanon regarding the precision missiles project brings into sharp relief the challenge facing Israel, and could lead to fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, which for its part has consistently underscored that its response policy will be different for attacks in Lebanon. This possibility requires Israel to analyze the overall benefit of the effort to prevent the enemy from increasing its conventional strength (as distinct from efforts to acquire nuclear power, where the broad consensus is that, as per the so-called Begin Doctrine, force should be used to foil them). In the context of the precision missiles project, the discussion should pit the possible damage from the use of accurate weapons and the options for action (defensive and offensive) against them versus the cost of moves to prevent increased buildup.

The Israeli attack on December 25 showed that it is still possible to launch attacks in Syria with meticulous and accurate planning in certain spaces. However, it appears that a combination of factors creates a need to maneuver between an overload of risks whose likelihood of materializing will increase as Israeli activity continues. This means that it may not be possible to continue taking action against transfers of weapons to Hezbollah and against the Iranian presence in Syria without risking escalation, and even the development of a situation of all-out fighting. It appears therefore that the Israeli use of force in the framework of the campaign between wars requires strategic and operational analysis, focusing on its goals, necessity, effectiveness, and success potential in the current conditions in this arena. The upcoming change in Chiefs of Staff could be the right time for this discussion.