

INSS Insight No. 1131, January 22, 2019

Israeli Strategy in Response to Changes in the Syrian Arena

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The conditions for the campaign between wars, the strategy that Israel has pursued in the northern arena in recent years, have changed, and bring with them new risks that limit or even remove Israel's freedom to continue operating in Syria. At the same time, the objectives of the strategy have changed, and some of the risks are also an opportunity. If the original campaign between wars objective was to remove threats without resorting to a use of force that might lead to broad hostilities, today it can be argued that the objective is to prevent the buildup of a precision weapons echelon by Iran and Hezbollah in Israel's first circle. This objective did not exist in 2013, but it now demands a primary national and military effort to defend a vital national interest in the Syrian and Lebanese arenas; this might require surgical attacks or larger operations, or even limited warfare. The feasibility of operational action remains, since Israel can continue to achieve the operational objectives it seeks, and all that has changed is the risks and the costs involved. In the case of securing a vital national interest, such as preventing Iran and Hezbollah from building up a precision weapons echelon in Israel's first circle, the current and emerging risks and costs should be incurred.

In "The Culminating Point of Success': Risk Overload in the Campaign between Wars in Syria" (*INSS Insight*, January 6, 2019), Brig. Gen. (ret.) Itai Brun argues that new circumstances in the Syrian arena have led to an "overload" of intensifying risks, and therefore the objectives, need, and ability to implement the campaign between wars strategy that Israel has pursued in Syria should be reexamined. Although he does not call for a halt to the campaign between wars, he prepares the case for reduced and more focused activity.

The purpose of this article is to broaden the factual background surveyed in Brun's article, and then present another thesis regarding the conclusions to be drawn from the analysis.

The Objective

Brun's article indicates a number of possible objectives of the campaign between wars that are cited frequently by the Israeli political echelon, including preventing the transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah; blocking Iranian entrenchment in Syria; frustrating

attempts by Hezbollah, Iran, or Shiite militias to establish a foothold on the Syrian Golan Heights and turn it into a “hot” border; and foiling Hezbollah’s “precision missiles project.” These objectives can be ranked according to their importance to Israel’s national security. However, not every objective represents a vital Israeli interest, and accordingly, as levels of risk and costs change, it is appropriate to reexamine them. Yet it is also possible to argue that foiling the deployment of precision weapons by Iran and Hezbollah in Syria and Lebanon is a vital Israeli national interest that must be secured, even at the cost of assuming a higher level of risk than was assumed in previous years.

In some senses, Israel is an exception in its vulnerability to precision weapons. On the one hand, it is a Western country with advanced critical infrastructures; on the other hand, it is a small country with highly concentrated critical infrastructures and limited redundancy. If we look at electricity production in Israel, for example, out of a national capacity of about 17.6 MW, 28 percent is produced in only two sites (with ten turbines), while the six largest electricity production sites in Israel account for 51 percent of national capacity (with only 26 production units). The picture is similar or even more severe for other critical systems, such as water desalination, gas infrastructure, civil aviation, and certain other civil and military systems.

Israel has an offensive and defensive response to the precision missiles threat, but this response can never be hermetic. Therefore, even the threat posed by a small number of precision missiles that manage to penetrate Israeli defenses could be unprecedented

The establishment of a precision missile echelon by Iran and Hezbollah in Israel’s “first circle” (jargon in Israel for the bordering regions) could give these actors the ability to deliver a paralyzing blow against civil and military systems, causing enormous damage and changing the strategic equation in the theater. To be sure, this threat is not as severe as the one that the Begin Doctrine was designed to prevent, but neither is it akin to the threat posed by a buildup of weapons intended for warfare between armies or statistical weapons aimed at the home front. This is a new category of threat, and because of its severity, the overarching counter idea must be one of prevention and not delay, containment, preemptive strike, or active and passive defense.

Reexamining Israeli Strategy

The Israeli political echelon uses the language of prevention rather than delay. Yet as Brun states, Israel’s operations until now limited and hindered Iranian entrenchment in Syria and the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah, but did not prevent them. Indeed, Israeli strategy in the years 2013-2017 became a victim of its own success: it was so surgical that its strategic footprint was limited, and thus it did not cause the relevant actors to reexamine their policy on this matter.

It is possible to agree that as Syria stabilizes, Israeli attacks within its territory will become less routine and more dangerous. At that point, however, what will be the end states in the campaign against the buildup of a bordering precision weapons echelon by Iran and Hezbollah? Iran will remain in Syria in one way or another; it will have access to the airports, and it seems that once the American forces withdraw, Iran's overland corridor through Iraq will be even more accessible. Thus Iran and Hezbollah will have the technical/physical capability to continue transferring high quality weapons to Syria and Lebanon.

Therefore, in order to achieve prevention (unlike delay), the end states must include two elements. First, the relevant actors must change their policy. Iran and Hezbollah must suspend or abandon their drive to establish a bordering precision weapon echelon, and the Syrian regime and Russia must adopt active opposition measures against the efforts of Iran and Hezbollah. Second, Israel must continue to deter any renewed attempts by Iran and Hezbollah for the long term. Indeed, stopping the campaign because Israel has lost the freedom to operate in Syria, or because of what Israel perceives as an "overload of risks" will create the conditions for the undesirable opposite outcome. In other words, if Israel loses its freedom to act, the pressure on Iran to stop its efforts will be removed or at least reduced. Therefore, in the end state, the "friction equation" (that is, the military-operational and strategic outcome of each attack or round of fighting) must demonstrate Israel's ability to continue achieving its operational objectives in Syria, as well as its operational superiority.

Accordingly, Israeli strategy must be grounded in two ideas. One is a demonstration to the relevant actors of the potential for escalation and regional instability caused by the positioning of high quality Iranian weapons in Syria and by Hezbollah's "precision project." Two is the continuation of attacks in the face of increased risks and resistance, in order to shape a "friction equation" that is more convenient for Israel and enables it to maintain the campaign's achievements and end states for a long time.

In this context, it can be argued that some of the risks described in Brun's article are also an opportunity. If properly handled, the growing friction with the Syrian regime that the regime itself has sparked could actually help to implement the strategy described above. The direct military hostilities with Iran (such as the events of February 10 and May 10, 2018 and January 21, 2019) in Israel's back yard and 1,500 km from Tehran brings the adversaries together in the part of the performance envelope where Israel has a clear advantage. Perhaps, therefore, this is not a risk to be avoided but rather an advantage to be exploited.

There is an argument that the “overload of risks” limits or even removes Israel’s freedom to continue operating in Syria. In contrast, it could be argued that the feasibility of operational action remains, since Israel can continue to achieve the operational objectives it seeks, and all that has changed is the risk and the cost involved. It is possible to further argue that in the case of securing a vital national interest, such as preventing Iran and Hezbollah from building up a precision weapons echelon in Israel’s first circle, the current and emerging risks and costs should be incurred.

Conclusion

Since 2013 the situation in Israel's northern arena has changed in two ways. The conditions for the campaign between wars have changed adversely: the civil war is subsiding and Syria is stabilizing; foreign air forces are largely gone from Syrian skies; the Syrian army is undergoing an extensive reconstruction process; Syria has become more kinetically assertive in its opposition to attacks on its soil; Iran has retaliated to attacks at least twice; and the Russian foothold is gaining strength, both politically and operationally.

But the objectives have also changed. If the original campaign between wars objective was “opportunistic” (removing threats without resorting to a use of force that might lead to broad hostilities, as Brun puts it), today it can be argued that the objective is to prevent the buildup of a precision weapons echelon by Iran and Hezbollah in Israel’s first circle. This objective did not exist in 2013, and indeed, it is doubtful whether the campaign between wars approach is even the appropriate conceptualization. Rather, this is a primary national and military effort to defend a vital national interest in the Syrian and Lebanese arenas, which might require surgical attacks or larger operations, or even limited warfare.

The processes of stabilizing Syria after the civil war and the state of Hezbollah’s force buildup have created a new urgency, and refraining from action is tantamount to consent to the emerging end states. Therefore, it is imperative, now, to reexamine and implement Israeli strategy.