

# 7 The Operational Environment: New Capabilities of the Radical Shiite Axis

Itai Brun and Itai Shapira



## Snapshot

Increased enemy capability to damage Israel's national infrastructure and IDF operational components – using precision-guided weapons, advanced air and naval systems, and new cyber capabilities



## Recommendations

Finalize a new multi-year plan for the IDF

- Prepare for a multi-theater war
- Close gaps in the public's expectations regarding the characteristics of a future war
- Debate "decision" and "victory" in the current era

## Introduction

Today's complex and challenging operational environment, in which Israel exercises its military and other capabilities, is the product of a host of intertwined technological, military, social, and political developments. These developments, which have unfolded over the past few decades, include deep global changes in the characteristics of war; geostrategic changes in the Middle East – most of which are outcomes of the regional upheaval and related events (including the dispatch of military forces to the region by world powers); essential changes in the operational concept and the weapons of Israel's enemies, especially the radical Shiite axis; changes in the way Israel's military force is exercised, reflected mainly in the preference for firepower (based on precise intelligence) over ground forces maneuver; and implications of the information revolution that has hit the world and the military establishments.

## The Events of 2019

On the operational level, several events in 2019 reflected deep processes connected to the military buildup of Israel's enemies and their approach to the use of military force. Among them:

- Iran's September 2019 attack on oil facilities in Saudi Arabia with precision-guided cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles illustrated Iran's audacity and the advances in the precision strike capabilities of the radical Shiite axis.
- Two escalation events with the Gaza Strip that involved large numbers of rockets fired at Israeli territory demonstrated the ability of terrorist organizations in Gaza to overturn the routine of Israel's civilian population. In May 2019, when some 700 rockets were fired, four Israelis were killed by rockets and an anti-tank missile fired by Hamas. In response to a Hamas cyberattack, Israel attacked a cyber complex from the air. In November, some 450 rockets were fired following the targeted killing of an Islamic Jihad leader, and Islamic Jihad succeeded in shutting down daily life in the Tel Aviv area for a full day. These events also included the use of heavy rockets, whose damage is liable to be significantly greater than that caused by regular rockets.
- In September 2019 Hezbollah launched anti-tank missiles at an IDF vehicle and outpost on the northern border (with no injuries) following an Israeli attack on Iranian drones and another attack that was attributed to Israel on Hezbollah's precision missile project. The event illustrated the risks of escalation on the northern border, Hezbollah's ability to organize an offensive operation relatively quickly using "simple" means, and the current role of drones as offensive weapons.
- The Israeli operation that began in December 2018 to neutralize the attack tunnels dug by Hezbollah along the Lebanese border revealed the importance that Hezbollah, like Hamas, places on inserting a large number of fighters into Israeli territory in war.

## The Operational Concept of the Radical Shiite Axis

In recent years, Hezbollah and Hamas, supported by Iran, have assumed a prominent role as enemies with significant military capabilities. The combat patterns of these organizations (and additional groups) have a common denominator, and stem from similar strategic and operational ideas that in recent decades developed among various groups "on the other side of the fence." They are grounded in the deep recognition of Israel's military-technological superiority, and

an assessment that this superiority can be offset by attacking Israel's weak spots: its sensitivity to casualties; its difficulty in coping with a prolonged war; and the limitations that result from its preference for airpower and reluctance to engage in ground maneuvers.

This doctrine, which has become more sophisticated over the years, emphasizes the need to improve survivability and the ability to sustain hits, in order to allow greater endurance and the ability to maintain military force in the face of Israel's capabilities. Also emphasized are the need to establish credible deterrence capability – first and foremost in order to prevent large-scale clashes that they prefer to avoid – and the idea of attrition as the key to victory, due to Israeli sensitivity to prolonged war and to casualties. This doctrine is what led these organizations (and additional entities, including states such as Iran



US Government / DigitalGlobe

Saudi oil facility hit in an exact strike following the Iranian attack in September 2019. A new phase in Iranian capability and audacity.

and Syria) to arm themselves heavily with ballistic weapons (missiles and rockets) and with advanced anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles; to acquire and develop advanced air defense systems; to adopt combat methods that emphasize concealment, defense, the dispersion of fighting forces, reduced signature, and hiding in a civilian environment and civilian facilities; and even to embrace the efforts of states such as Iran and Syria to arm themselves with chemical and nuclear weapons.

The confrontations since the Second Lebanon War (2006) have illustrated to Israel's enemies that this doctrine has, in many senses, reached a dead end. While it has succeeded in establishing deterrence against Israel and has led to Israel's inability to defeat them decisively and unequivocally, clashes where Israel exercised intensive military strength have entailed severe costs for its enemies, and have reflected the limitations of the doctrine and their means to implement it. These results were among the factors that led to the strengthening of Israeli deterrence and to the long periods of quiet on the Lebanese border since the Second Lebanon War, and on the border with Gaza (in the three and a half years following Operation Protective Edge, and to a large extent afterwards as well).

**Changes in military thought among the radical axis have led them from a victory doctrine based on attrition to a doctrine that seeks to damage Israeli national infrastructure and essential military capabilities, in order to throw the Israeli system off balance.**

The last few years reflect an attempt by Israel's enemies to formulate and implement an improved and updated military doctrine using additional elements: increased numbers of rockets and missiles, both in order to improve organizational survivability and to saturate Israel's air defense systems; high precision-guided rockets and missiles that can hit vulnerable civilian sites (electric, gas, and other national infrastructure) and vulnerable military sites (air force bases and military HQ locations); drones and other unmanned aerial vehicles, also for the purpose of precision strikes; improved air defense measures in order to neutralize the impact of Israel's air force, given its central role in Israel's military doctrine; improvements in coastal defense systems and naval warfare; development of cyber capabilities; and plans for operating ground forces in Israeli territory, including via attack tunnels (some of which were exposed and neutralized this year), in order to disrupt the IDF's offensive and defensive capabilities and to increase the damage to the stamina of the Israeli home front.

These military buildup efforts are apparently connected to a more fundamental change underway in the military thought of those identified with the radical Shiite axis. This change leads them from a victory doctrine based on attrition of the Israeli population ("victory by non-defeat") to a different doctrine that also seeks to damage Israeli national infrastructure and essential military capabilities from different arenas, in order to throw the Israeli system off balance.

## The Characteristics of the Next War

The theater in which this concept is most evident is the northern arena, where the IDF is preparing for two main scenarios: a "Third Lebanon War" against only Hezbollah in Lebanon, which will be much more intense and destructive than the Second Lebanon War; and a "First Northern War" with Hezbollah in Lebanon and forces in Syria and Iraq, and perhaps also Iran and other arenas. The multi-front scenario of a "First Northern War" could also include clashes with forces in the Gaza Strip.

In both scenarios, Israel will likely face massive surface-to-surface missile fire at the home front, some precise and some that will succeed in penetrating the air defense systems; attacks on the home front from unmanned aerial vehicles and drones; the penetration of ground forces into Israeli territory on a scale of thousands of fighters; and a large scale cognitive warfare campaign to undermine the public's stamina and its confidence in the political and military leadership. The IDF's offensive component – on the ground, in the air, and at sea – will face more sophisticated air and naval defense systems and complex ground defense systems that also include the use of subterranean warfare and advanced anti-tank missiles.

Such a war, therefore, involves the possibility of serious damage to the IDF's basic capabilities such as the air force, air defense, intelligence, logistics, and reserve recruitment system. Essential national infrastructure might also be damaged, and there could be destruction and death in Israel's cities.

## Changes in the IDF and the Debate over “Decision” and “Victory”

In recent decades, changes have also occurred in the IDF’s operational concept and in Israeli thinking on war. Since the 1990s, Israel has preferred to use its firepower over use of ground forces. This became clear in the Second Lebanon War, when Israel was very reluctant to use maneuvering ground forces. While ground forces were used in the operations in Gaza (Operation Cast Lead in late 2008-early 2009 and Operation Protective Edge in 2014), the way they were used also reflected this trend.

There are a number of reasons for this process, which is also connected to new possibilities afforded by technology. However, the main factors are apparently social and political constraints that developed over the past few decades, and particularly the change in Israeli society’s attitude toward war and its costs.

For several decades, there has been a debate in the IDF on questions connected to the current meaning of “military decision” and “victory,” and the way they can be realized in the contemporary era with an up-to-date operational doctrine. At the base of these discussions is the question of whether a clear, unequivocal decisive victory, which seemingly characterized the wars of the past, is possible in current wars. *The IDF Strategy* (2018) and Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi’s declared modes of operation (“a lethal, effective, and innovative military”) give a positive answer to this, and rightly so. They describe the current operational doctrine for war as based on a lethal multidimensional strike that simultaneously includes precise fire (against thousands of planned and opportune targets) and quick and flexible ground maneuvering that is meant to penetrate enemy territory toward targets that it sees as having value, and bring about the enemy’s defeat.

While similar texts were composed in the past, in practice, in all of the most recent clashes, Israel has preferred to exercise its firepower using the air force and artillery. This emphasis on firepower (based on precise intelligence) is correct, but it is absolutely clear that the IDF must also have significant maneuvering capabilities to serve as a central component of defeating the enemy in the case of war. In the IDF’s new multi-year plan, it should therefore be ensured that the military has this capability to counter enemies such as Hezbollah and Hamas, and the ability to cope with the years-long process of social and political pressures that constrain the army’s exercise of force.

## Confidence in the IDF

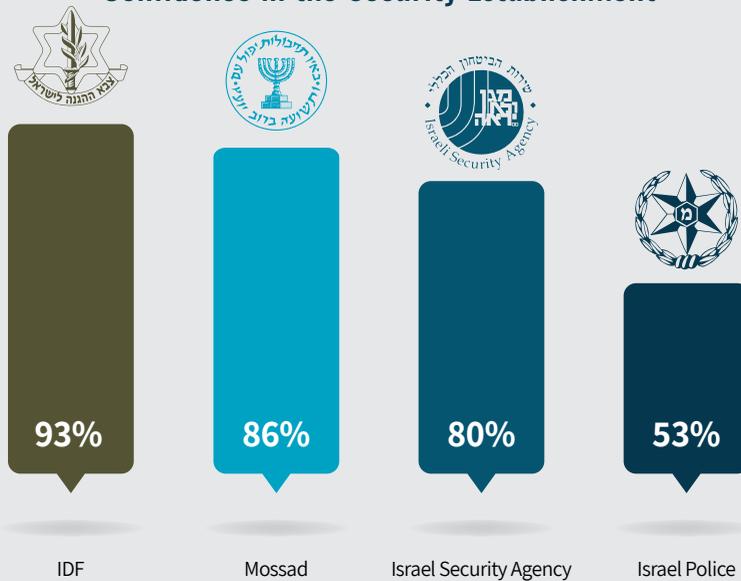
The Israeli public has much confidence in the military and in the security establishment, especially on issues that are considered professional and operational (such as combat preparedness). In contrast, there is disagreement on attitudes toward the IDF, particularly regarding issues related to values and ideologies, such as the integration of women, religion and the army, and even the rules of engagement. In light of the characteristics of the current period and the intensification of ideological and political arguments in Israeli society, it is at times difficult to distinguish between professional-operational issues and issues related to values, ideologies, and even politics. This difficulty could undermine the public’s overall confidence in the IDF.

Another challenge for the public’s confidence could relate to the results of a large-scale military conflict. The image of a clear and unequivocal victory in a short, fast war has succeeded in surviving over time, and still heavily shapes the way the Israeli public judges the war and its results. In this state of affairs, the complexity and challenges of the current conflicts are joined by ongoing frustration with the clear gap between image and reality. The characteristics of future conflicts could intensify this gap.

Israeli society understands that in war there are casualties among soldiers and on the home front, but it is doubtful whether the public is currently psychologically prepared for a reality of large-scale destruction in the cities. In this context, it seems that a relatively large number of rockets and missiles with heavy warheads striking population centers could cause severe, long term damage to the Israeli public’s sense of security.

## Confidence in the Security Establishment

Jewish respondents only



Findings from the INSS National Security Index, November 2019

## Conclusion

From an analysis of the changes in the operational environment and the IDF's response to them emerges the urgent need to finalize a new multi-year plan for the IDF to replace (likely somewhat late, given the political crisis) the Gideon plan, starting in 2020. Such a plan, including a multi-year budget, must be approved by the government.

Furthermore, there is a need to be prepared for a multi-theater war as a main reference scenario, both regarding the exercise of force and military buildup. Such a scenario heightens the need to close gaps in the public's expectations of war in the current era and its possible results. It also requires deepening the discussion on the current meaning of the terms "defeating the enemy" and "victory" and the way to achieve them in such a war. "Defeating the enemy" by means of overwhelming military action to beat the enemy has not disappeared from the world, and the IDF may need to do so. Therefore, along with the continued correct emphasis on the large-scale exercise of firepower based on precise intelligence, the IDF must also have maneuvering capabilities that can cope with changes in the characteristics of war, with the current mode of action of Israel's enemies, and with the changes in Israeli society and its attitude toward war and the costs it incurs.



IDF Spokesperson's Unit

Neutralization of Hezbollah's attack tunnels on the Lebanese border, December 2018. Demonstrated drive for forces to infiltrate into Israel emphasizes the importance of initiative to uncover enemy capabilities.