

## Chapter 2

# Scenarios for the Northern War

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### Range of possible scenarios

Within the framework of the project, we examined a diverse range of scenarios, in particular the following three:

**A third Lebanon War**, which will be similar in nature to the two previous wars Israel waged against a one-front threat – the Lebanese front (1982, 2006).

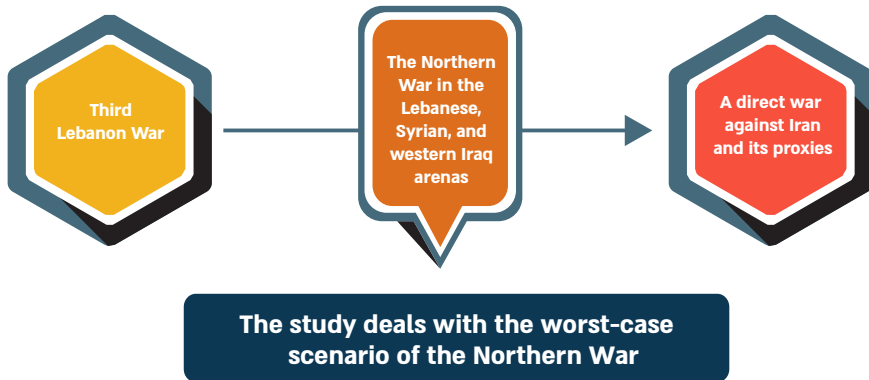
**The Northern War**, which will differ from its forerunners in two main ways: 1. **The enemy** – Hezbollah is the principal enemy, but other members of the Shi'ite axis, which have entrenched themselves in the northern arena, will be full partners in the hostilities (Shi'ite militias in Syria and Iraq; the Syrian army, which is in a process of rehabilitation; and Iranian military capabilities in Syria and western Iraq); and 2. **The war arena** – Lebanon, Syria, and western Iraq. In this scenario, Iran activates its proxies in the region and there is a possibility of missiles being fired from western Iraq, but its forces are still not involved in the fighting from Iranian territory.

**A general war against Iran:** Iran is involved directly and not just through its proxies; it launches ballistic and cruise missiles from its territory toward targets in Israel; and the Iranian army and the Revolutionary Guards take an active part in the fighting against Israel.

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In this project, we decided to focus on analyzing the second scenario, namely, the Northern War, in view of the shared assessment of all team members that this is the more plausible scenario and the one that requires attention at this time.

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### Triggers of war: Deterioration or proactive war

What could trigger the outbreak of the Northern War?

War in the north could erupt following a deterioration in the wake of a limited conflict or a miscalculation by either of the sides. Deterioration scenarios are possible in any of the following arenas:

**The Lebanese arena:** There is a high potential for escalation between Israel and Hezbollah, which could flare up quickly into wide-scale war. Hezbollah is sensitive to the situation, and though it shows a readiness to play by the “rules of the game,” it views the “mutual deterrence” that has existed since 2006 as important to uphold. Indeed, it makes sure to respond to every Israeli action that it perceives as a violation of this mutual deterrence, as seen in its response to IDF movements in the Lebanese and Syrian arenas. This approach could lead to escalation in a number of circumstances, be it friction along the border or a developing incident in the wake of a limited campaign-between-the-wars operation conducted by the IDF or in response to a pinpoint military operation initiated by either of the sides. An example of an event with potential for escalation occurred in August-September 2019: Hezbollah fired a Kornet anti-tank missile at an IDF vehicle, following what the organization described as a drone strike by Israel in a Hezbollah compound in Beirut and a strike on Hezbollah operatives in Syria. Israel chose to contain its response in this instance, in which there were no casualties, and make do with a minor response, but things could have ended differently. Since September 2019, Hezbollah has been trying to extend the “equation of deterrence” to the Syrian arena, as reflected in its attempt to act against the IDF on the Lebanese border (July 27, 2020) that

came following the killing of a Hezbollah operative near Damascus in a strike attributed to Israel a week earlier. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said following that attempt, which failed, that a response would be forthcoming. Even after a massive explosion at Beirut Port (August 4, 2020), where the organization was accused of stockpiling its weapons among the civilian population, Hezbollah is sticking to its strategy, as seen in another (failed) attempt by the organization to hit an IDF force near the border with sniper fire (August 25). This strategy exacerbates the friction between the sides, and the chances of escalation as well.

**The Syrian arena:** Syria has become an arena of conflict between Israel and the Shi'ite axis, especially since the Assad regime has allowed the military entrenchment of Iran and its proxies – Shi'ite militias, including Hezbollah – that came to the regime's assistance in its war against the rebels. This reality has created ongoing and persistent military friction with Israel, which routinely acts to diminish the threats against it through the campaign between the wars strategy. Escalation into a wider war in the Syrian arena could thus stem from an act against Israel, even if limited, by a member of the Shi'ite axis, such as a terrorist attack along the border, missile fire into Israeli territory or the launching of a drone; or following an Israeli action, as part of the campaign between the wars, to strike infrastructure belonging to Iran and its proxies, including Assad's army (precision-missile project, unconventional weapons, air defense); to stop the transfer of advanced weaponry to Hezbollah; or to foil missile fire and terrorist attacks against Israel.

An escalation of the direct military conflict with **Iran:** The catalyst for escalation in this instance would be a military move by Israel or Iran against the other or a decision by Iran to galvanize Hezbollah and other members of the Shi'ite axis against Israel, without being involved in this war directly from Iranian territory. Causes may include, for example, an American strike on infrastructure or sites in Iran (including the extreme option of an attack on its nuclear facilities), a limited military move by Iran against Israel as a result of Tehran's strategic distress created by growing US pressure (with the aim of bringing Iran back to the negotiating table to discuss a new nuclear agreement), domestic social-political unrest, or as a response to repeated or intensified IDF actions against Iranian outposts in Syria.

## ■ DETERIORATION SCENARIOS IN DIFFERENT ARENAS

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|---|--------------------------------|---|
|  | <b>Vis-à-vis<br/>Hezbollah</b> | Escalation could follow: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A strike on precision missile infrastructures</li> <li>- A Hezbollah attack spurred by Iranian or internal Lebanese needs</li> <li>- An operation in the campaign-between-the-wars realm or a border incident</li> </ul>  |
|  | <b>Vis-à-vis<br/>Syria</b>     | A deterioration could follow a broad Israeli operation in Syria as part of the campaign between the wars: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Against precision missile infrastructures</li> <li>- Against weapons transfers to Hezbollah</li> <li>- An action against Iranian forces or a strike on Syrian military infrastructures (non-conventional weapons or air defenses) in response to a strike on Israel (by Iran's proxies)</li> </ul> |
|  | <b>Vis-à-vis<br/>Iran</b>      | A limited Iranian military operation against Israel could be launched: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Due to strategic distress stemming from immense pressure on Iran</li> <li>- In response to an Israeli strike on Iranian forces or proxies in Syria</li> <li>- In response to an Israeli/American attack on Iranian nuclear infrastructures</li> </ul>   |

Alongside the deterioration scenarios, a **proactive war** by either of the involved parties is a possibility in the coming years:

- Initiated by **Israel**, stemming from an understanding of the gravity of the threat developing against it, primarily Hezbollah's amassing of advanced weaponry, such as precision-guided missiles, and/or based on an assessment that the opportunity is ripe for a military move, while Iran and Hezbollah are in strategic distress. Both are currently subject to internal and external pressures, which are expected to continue to grow. This means that in parallel with the growing threat, an opportunity may also have been created – and both could influence the scope of a war initiated by Israel, depending on shifting circumstances. The options include a limited preemptive strike to diminish the threat or a broad war aimed at inflicting wide-scale damage on Hezbollah, with the intention of creating strategic change in the north.
- Initiated by **Hezbollah in coordination with Iran**. This could occur as a result of two seemingly contradictory situations: first, due to the difficulties the organization is experiencing as a result of pressure, as noted above, particularly since the Beirut Port explosion, it may choose to divert attention by spotlighting the struggle against Israel and its role as the “defender of Lebanon”; and second, if Hezbollah feels that it has strengthened militarily to the point that it can inflict significant damage on the IDF and the Israeli home front, weaken Israel, and change the rules of the game.

- **Iran**, for its part, may initiate a wide-scale campaign in the northern arena by sending Hezbollah and its proxies against Israel if it decides that a war, though without its own direct participation, would serve its domestic and regional interests, and distract international attention which is centered on pressuring Iran over the nuclear issue.

## ■ PROACTIVE WAR SCENARIOS



## Worst-case scenario

A worst-case scenario for war in the north is based on the following assumptions:

- The outbreak of a multi-theater war, with the fighting in the first few days concentrated on two fronts: **Lebanon and Syria**.
- The main enemy facing the IDF is the **Shi'ite axis**,<sup>4</sup> which might include the following forces (directly or indirectly):
  - Hezbollah in the Lebanese arena
  - Hezbollah in the territory between the Golan Heights and Damascus
  - Shi'ite militias in Syria
  - Syrian army forces, including in the territory between the Golan Heights and Damascus, and missile launches from deep in Syrian territory
  - Missiles fired by Shi'ite militias in Iraq.

4 It is important to note that in this scenario the Iranian army is not directly involved in hostilities.

- The war could erupt at short notice or without warning, with the IDF not fully prepared for it.<sup>5</sup>
- It is highly possible that in the case of a broad campaign in the north, the IDF will also be required to deal with the Palestinian front: rockets and missiles fired from the Gaza Strip and growing unrest and/or increased terrorist attacks in the West Bank.
- The government and the IDF will have the support of the population in Israel with regard to all its decision and operations, at least in the initial stages of the war.
- During the initial stages of fighting, the IDF's movements will be met with understanding by the international community, which is not expected to intervene.

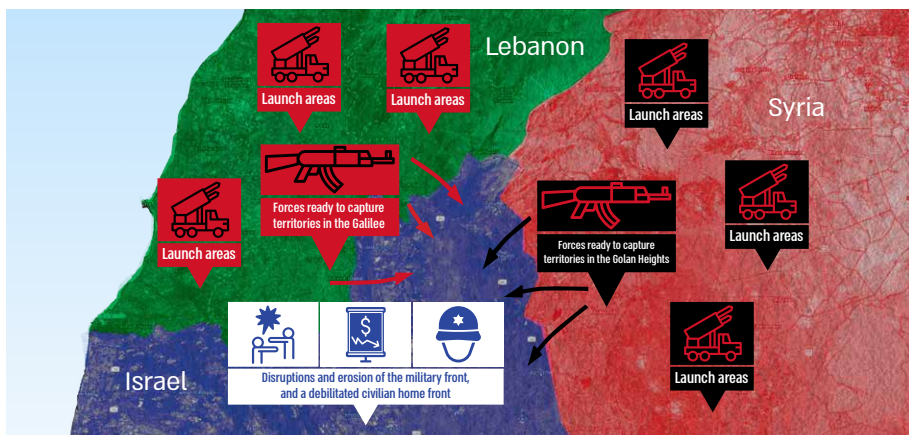
***Threats that can be anticipated in case of war:***

- Barrages of some 1,000 statistical missiles will be fired from Lebanon into Israel every day, along with hundreds of precision-guided missiles. This figure is not based on intelligence, but is a result of an analysis of Hezbollah's launch patterns during the Second Lebanon War. In that war, Hezbollah launched some 14,000 rockets and missiles, which constituted around a third of its arsenal (some 40,000 missiles). Thus in the next war, it is expected that Hezbollah will launch some 50,000 rockets and missiles, representing around a third of its current arsenal, estimated at 150,000 statistical missiles.
- Possible long-range missile fire from Syria and from Iraq must also be considered.
- Precision-guided missiles will be fired at high-value strategic targets: airports; vital infrastructures: energy (power stations, gas facilities, Haifa refineries) and water sources; symbols of government (the Knesset, the government complex); IDF headquarters; air defense batteries, military bases and command centers.

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5 The worst-case scenario is based on the assumption that the IDF will have only a short warning or will be surprised. It was formulated in order to assist thinking on how best to respond to such extremely grave situations.

- Ballistic missiles will be aimed at population centers simultaneous with precision missiles, to disrupt the air defense systems' efficacy and to make it hard for the IDF's air defense forces to pinpoint targets for interception.
- Missile fire toward the Israeli home front will continue during the Israeli ground operation deep into Lebanese territory.
- As well as missiles, swarms of attack drones will be launched against high-value and soft Israeli targets.
- Hezbollah commandoes (Radwan Force) from southern Lebanon and Shi'ite militias from the Syrian Golan will carry out ground operations, with the aim of capturing territory in Israel. Thus, attacks can be expected on military assets and civilian areas.
- Cyber attacks will be launched on critical infrastructures in Israel, specifically command and control centers and vital infrastructures, with the aim of disrupting the economy and security systems.
- Cognitive campaigns will be launched via the media and social networks to unsettle Israeli attitudes and undermine morale.
- The Israeli economy will shift to emergency mode. All related activities are expected to be affected and vital civilian services damaged, the water and electricity supply in particular.
- Significant disruption is expected to air and sea ports, limiting accessibility. The longer this situation persists, the more it will affect military and civilian resilience.



### **The operative implications of a worst-case scenario**

Such a severe operational situation would have the following implications for the IDF:

- The IDF will have to call for a full mobilization of reserves and its entire operations – mobilization of reserves, amassing and deployment of forces, combat on the frontlines – would take place under fire. It will take 48-96 hours for the IDF to complete its defensive deployment on the two fronts (Lebanon and Syria), before moving to the offensive.
- **Defense of the home front:** Initially, the IDF will have to focus on the enemy's advanced missile systems and will not be able to deal with its statistical rockets and missiles. The air force is expected to be relatively limited in its ability to respond to fire on the home front; therefore, the civilian population will benefit from the IDF's missile interceptions only in the second stage, though some level of interceptions will be needed in the face of extensive salvos, as will the need to protect vital assets for the continuation of the war.
- **On the front:** IDF forces will operate under intense fire in the close operations area, and disruptions are expected to the mobilization of reserves and amassing of forces in the combat zones. It is also possible that operations at command and control centers will be disrupted.
- **In the aerial operations theater:** The air force will operate in a number of arenas simultaneously under the threat of the enemy's air defense systems. Its main mission at the beginning of the war will be to achieve aerial superiority in the combat theater, foiling threats from the air against the Israeli home front and neutralizing Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria's strategic launch systems in Lebanon and Syria. It will have to deal with threats to its bases and its command centers. Due to its multiple missions, the air force will likely be limited in its ability to offer air support to ground forces in the defensive phase or to the navy that will be contending with shore-to-sea missiles.
- **In the naval theater:** The navy too will face a challenging environment. Its main effort will be to defending strategic assets at sea; defense of ports; maintaining freedom of movement for maritime routes; preventing use of the naval arena for hostile activities; and to achieve naval superiority by striking the enemy's capabilities.



■ CRITICAL FACTORS IN THE SCENARIO

