



The F-35I stealth fighter jet demonstrated first strike capabilities in the campaign between wars. Photo: Dror Avi (CC BY-SA 4.0)

# The Fly on the Elephant's Back: The Campaign between Wars in Israel's Security Doctrine

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*"If you want peace, prepare for war."*  
Vegetius

Senior officials within the IDF and the Israeli security establishment see the campaign between wars as an alternative to preparation for war. In their view, resources should be channeled to the campaign between wars, at the expense of building a more powerful war fighting machine. This paper challenges this idea and argues that the IDF's ability to achieve decisive victory is the foundation for the deterrence that allows freedom of operation in the campaign between wars. Evidence of this can be seen in the main theaters of conflict, Gaza and Lebanon, where Israel is concerned about the possibility of escalation to war, and its operations are far rarer and far more covert. The firepower aimed at the Israeli home front is the enemy's primary means of deterrence. Building decisive military capabilities focused on neutralizing the enemy's firepower will enable the campaign between wars to be deeper, wider, and less restrained.

*Keywords:* campaign between wars, security doctrine, decision, Syria, Lebanon

## Introduction

A fly rides on the back of an elephant in the African wilderness. The beasts in the savanna make way, trampling the low vegetation with their flight. The fly, in awe of the spectacle, whispers in the elephant's ear, "Look at the all the dust we are kicking up."

The thousands of soldiers and officers, planners and combatants, and intelligence personnel and operations staff that stand behind the most prominent innovation in the IDF in recent years—the "campaign between wars" (*mabam*, as it is known in Hebrew)—are no mere "flies." Members of this special group have overcome difficulties, breached obstacles, displayed talent, creativity, and daring, and reaped significant achievement for Israel's security. But it is crucial that we understand the connection between the success of the campaign between wars, and the "elephant" on which it rides.

This article seeks to place the campaign between wars within the correct theoretical framework and the appropriate strategic context. My central claim is that not only is the campaign between wars not a replacement for the IDF's ability to achieve decisive victory in the battlefield; it is also completely dependent on that ability. Occasionally [the argument is made](#) that resources should be shifted from the buildup of the IDF's decisive capabilities to force design exclusively for the campaign between wars.<sup>1</sup> However, these arguments are wrong, and rely on an approach that the campaign between wars is an independent phenomenon that was added to the other components of the security doctrine. In fact, the ability to expand the campaign between wars and make it effective and more influential depends on the "elephant," far more than it is dependent on the acquisition of resources to strengthen the campaign between wars.

I will support this argument by discussing the various foundations of the traditional Israeli security doctrine. I argue that over the years these respective foundations were mutually

enabling, complementary components, and this is the dialectic that is missing today in Israeli strategy. This lapse, rather than discussion of resources, is the main factor limiting the effectiveness of the campaign between wars.

## The Dual Foundations of the Security Doctrine

We naturally hope to avoid war. This is not only a personal desire; it is the very heart of the traditional security doctrine of the State of Israel. Zionism was intended to create a home for the Jewish nation and enable the ingathering of the exiles. War is not part of these plans, and actually impedes them. Therefore, [a security doctrine was formulated](#) that strives for short and decisive wars, followed by long periods of quiet that will enable nation building and economic growth. On this basis, [Israel's security doctrine](#) posited two complementary foundations: fundamental security and routine security.

Fundamental security deals with questions of war. It addresses how Israel can survive in a hostile environment, in a reality of the few versus the many, and with a lack of strategic depth. Israel's answer was to strive for a short war in which the entire national potential is fully mobilized on the basis of a reserve force, in order to deal a decisive blow to Arab armies and secure victory. The operational mode of this approach was based on three components—a small, strong regular army to stop an enemy offensive; decisive resolution of the war by mobilizing the reservists; and intelligence warnings that would enable mobilization of the strike force as early as possible. The military had to transfer the war to enemy territory, remove the threat, and achieve victory over the primary enemy. If necessary, after decisive victory in the main theaters, the IDF effort would move to secondary and tertiary theaters.

The second foundation, routine security, aims at reducing security disturbances between wars. This foundation was necessary because even when the Arab armies were not threatening

major wars, the young state still faced other challenges—infiltrations, terrorism, clashes between military forces, “border wars,” and more. The approach toward routine security rested on the principle of exacting a heavy price from the enemy for any violation of calm along the borders, in order to deter and force it to restrain its conduct. The goal was to maintain routine security with minimal resources and without interrupting life in the emerging nation. Alongside the requisite regional defense, the offensive operational form of routine security was a series of raids into enemy territory, [known as reprisal operations](#), which developed along varying levels of scope, depth, and force.

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Two important aspects enabled reprisal operations to be a useful operational mode. First, the operations did not affect the home front or the economy. Reprisal operations did not require the mobilization of reserves, did not overburden the readiness of the army for war, and did not spill over into the home front. Second was the threat of escalation. Arab states knew that reprisal operations were merely the tip of the iceberg in terms of Israel’s military power. If they were to choose to escalate, the IDF would mobilize, attack, and achieve victory.

Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and the PLO in Lebanon in the early 1980s all understood that reprisal operations were not just operations aimed at “exacting a price,” but were also a clear message from Israel [regarding its willingness to continue to escalate](#) to all-out war, if necessary. The IDF strike force, which the Arab armies encountered as early as 1948-1949, had to be taken into consideration. During the Sinai Campaign, the IDF proved that it could defeat Egyptian forces in the Sinai Peninsula; in the Six Day War, Israel

proved that it could vanquish three Arab armies and capture large swathes of territory. Even with the disastrous opening conditions of the Yom Kippur War, the IDF succeeded in transitioning from defense to offense and ended the war with the enemy’s military force defeated and the IDF situated firmly in enemy territory. This tacit threat enabled the IDF, during its short history, to conduct hundreds of raids into enemy territory, without escalation to war.

These two foundations, fundamental security and routine security, are clearly not independent, but two complementary sides of one whole.

### **The Connection to the Campaign between Wars**

The campaign between wars is a term given to [efforts by Israel to block](#) the Iranian penetration of the region and the military buildup of Israel’s enemies with advanced weaponry. According to foreign reports, [in this campaign](#) Israel has made use of a diverse range of tools—covert, economic, and the crown jewels of the campaign, kinetic attacks in enemy territory. Attacking the enemy in a foreign country is a show of force by Israel that enables it [to come from a position of strength](#) when coordinating with international actors such as Russia and the United States, and to wield greater cognitive, economic, and other influence in the region. The campaign between wars includes a diverse range of types of power, but it cannot take place, certainly not by the IDF, without a kinetic element.

In his [speech](#) at the annual conference at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in January 2021, IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi referred to the campaign between wars as a “preemptive war” whose goal is to diminish the enemy’s capabilities in preparation for the next war. In other words, despite the use of the term preemptive war, the Chief of Staff invoked the common perception of the campaign between wars as aimed at improving

the opening conditions of the next war, rather than preventing it.

The strategic aims of the campaign between wars resemble the traditional concept of routine security. **The strikes and operations by Israel in Syria over the past few years were aimed** at preventing Hezbollah's force buildup with qualitative and precision weaponry, and preventing the entrenchment of terror infrastructures on the Golan Heights border. The guiding idea of the operations is clear—to halt the buildup of the threat from the Shiite axis from Lebanon and Syria. Indeed, contrary to the reprisal operations of the past, the campaign between wars is not characterized by a pattern of response to terrorist operations in Israeli territory, but operates according to a pattern of proactive operations against the enemy within the context presented above, and is guided by a strategy of prevention and precision interdiction. Reprisal operations, on the other hand, were designed to **be painful**; they constituted **a strategy of coercion**.<sup>2</sup> **Most were directed** against the Arab population in Gaza or the West Bank, from where terrorist operations were launched, or against bases of the Arab Legion or the Egyptian army as the responsible state address. Unlike the reprisal operations of the past, which were directed against the population and the host country, the campaign between wars is characterized by attacks on Hezbollah and Iranian targets.

These differences are significant, but they do not obviate the essential similarity—Israel acted offensively in enemy territory in systematic fashion to ensure its interests, either through prevention or coercion. The reprisal operations of the 1970s, primarily along the Lebanese border, were similar to today's campaign between wars. Raids and air strikes targeted the terrorist bases themselves, not the population or the army of the host nation, Lebanon. The reprisal operations even had a certain element of neutralizing military capabilities, especially strikes by the Israeli Air Force on training bases and weapons depots in Lebanon.

There are therefore both differences and similarities between the current campaign between wars and the IDF's historic reprisal operations. But the most significant similarity relates to the operational mode of the military offensives between wars. Both ground raids ("reprisal operations") and air strikes (which became more common from the 1980s onward) were based on the principle of routine security—a military operation whose strategic logic is limited damage to the enemy, rather than defeat of the enemy, and whose operational form is short and limited; an operation that can be repeated multiple times, without investing considerable resources, without mobilizing the reserves, and without risking a major escalation.

However, one significant strategic difference must be highlighted. The reprisal operations in Gaza in the 1950s were aimed against the primary enemy of the State of Israel—Egypt and its powerful army. The reprisal operations in the West Bank in the 1950s and 1960s were aimed against the Hashemite kingdom and the Arab Legion. This was not only a quality military force, it was also deployed in the heart of the land—in Jerusalem and along the borders in the plains and Sharon region. Reprisal operations against the Syrian army targeted a force that enjoyed complete topographical superiority over the Galilee panhandle and the Sea of Galilee. Despite the significant threat from these armies, the IDF repeatedly launched violent raids on the armies of the surrounding states in order to force them to stop terrorist operations against Israel from their territories.

The campaign between wars is indeed characterized by intense military operations, but it is **focused primarily on the Syrian arena**. Despite the best efforts of Iran and Hezbollah, a military infrastructure based on rockets and missiles, capable of creating a threat of significant scope and duration to the Israeli home front, has yet to be established in Syria. Indeed, **one of Israel's declared strategic goals** is to ensure that this situation persists. The intensive campaign between wars in Syria

stands out against the background of the few raids and air strikes against Israel's principal enemies on their soil—Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.

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Why has the campaign between wars focused almost exclusively on the Syrian arena, and not on other arenas that pose a greater threat to Israel?<sup>3</sup> The answer is obvious. Lebanon and Gaza are flooded with dangerous military capabilities, and Hamas and Hezbollah's ability to paralyze the Israeli home front in response to any Israeli strike is like a train that has already left the station. The campaign between wars strives to prevent this mistake from recurring in Syria and ensure that Iran and Hezbollah's capabilities in Syria, as far as they threaten Israel, remain limited in quality and scope. This was also the message relayed by the chief of staff in his speech at the INSS conference.

In other words, the fact that Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon possess significant quantities of short-range weapons is the most important explanation for Israeli restraint. Both Hezbollah and Hamas have violated Israeli sovereignty by digging tunnels into its territory. Hezbollah has built a large-scale offensive military force on Israel's border, with the declared aim of "capturing the Galilee." Hamas has developed its harassment tactics on the Gaza border into an art form—protesting and upsetting the calm, preventing Israeli residents of the border area from living a normal life, launching incendiary and explosive devices and balloons, and conducting sniper attacks. Israel's response tends to be measured, and certainly does not extend to proactive operations. The difference between preventive logic in the campaign between wars and coercion logic

in reprisal operations is not the crux. Rather, the main explanation for the absence of a more significant and violent campaign between wars in Lebanon and in Gaza is the existence of weapons aimed at Israel's civilian front, a restraining factor not seen during the days of reprisal operations.

The absence in Syria of a significant array of high trajectory weapons that pose a tangible and credible threat to the Israeli civilian front is therefore the primary explanation for Israel's freedom of operation in that country. Over the years of the civil war in Syria, Israel possessed the unique ability to employ significant military force and tip the delicate balance in favor of one of the sides. Under the cover of this "elephant," Israel benefitted from significant freedom of operation, overt and covert, against its enemies. The Shiite axis in Syria still lacks the threat capabilities held by Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. It is this gap in the capabilities of the enemy, and not just Israel's impressive tactical and intelligence creativity, that so far has defined the campaign between wars in Syria.

### **Reprisal Operations that Went Wrong**

If we examine the IDF's major military operations since 1990—Operation Accountability (Lebanon, 1993); Operation Grapes of Wrath (Lebanon, 1996); the Second Lebanon War (2006); Operations Cast Lead (Gaza, 2008-2009); Pillar of Defense (Gaza, 2012); and Protective Edge (Gaza, 2014)—we see a confusing phenomenon. Short raids or fire-based strikes, aimed at exacting a price from the enemy and deterring it, ran into complications and ended up as campaigns that lasted days or even weeks. Even though these were relatively large campaigns (certainly the Second Lebanon War, Cast Lead, and Protective Edge) their aim was not to defeat the enemy and remove the threat to the home front, but in fact was far more circumscribed. **Their goals were usually defined** around the idea of "deterring the enemy" in order to "create a better security reality." The strategic logic of these campaigns was the logic of reprisal

operations. However, the strategic investment required from Israel—mobilization of reserves, material cost, indirect cost to the economy, the duration of campaigns—was similar to that required in war. In fact, some of these campaigns were recognized as wars, albeit in retrospect (the Second Lebanon War and Protective Edge), which in fact suggests that the last IDF wars were basically “reprisal operations gone wrong.”

What is it that makes “reprisal operations” become wars, dragging Israel into long campaigns with limited achievements? Here too there is one answer: high-trajectory weapons. The ability of the enemy to launch rockets into Israeli towns neutralizes the traditional idea of disengaging following the campaign. Operation Black Arrow in February 1955 lasted one night. It had a known beginning, middle, and end. While the raid's planners could not predict with certainty the results in terms of the cost to the enemy and to Israel's forces, it was clear that it was a night raid that would end on the morning of March 1. Sixty years later, the Gaza Strip can “veto” IDF reprisal operations ending on a date decided in advance. In both Cast Lead and Pillar of Defense, the IDF sought to end the campaign on several occasions, and even announced various suspensions of operations. Every such suspension was foiled by the launch of rockets to Israel's home front.

## A Threat Not Removed

Why in that case does Israel refrain from launching a war to remove the missile threat and defeat the enemy? Again, a large part of the answer can be found in high trajectory weapons. The next war, as decision makers know, will take place in Haifa, Tel Aviv, and the entire home front, with grave consequences for both sides. The rest of the answer is the unwillingness of Israel to conquer enemy territories as it did in the past and rule over them. This is what distinguishes between the First Lebanon War and the operations that followed.

Hezbollah and later Hamas were quick to take advantage of this. They were essentially

given strategic immunity to build sophisticated fire arrays in the territories they had seized. This firepower is hidden deep in the urban, labyrinthine environments controlled by the enemy. It is not possible (through current means) to uproot them without a long ground operation that entails [capturing and clearing inhabited towns, and remaining in them for an extended period](#).<sup>4</sup> But the enemy, the Israeli public, and policymakers<sup>5</sup> are all aware of Israel's unwillingness to return to capturing and occupying hostile territory. The exception to this was Operation Defensive Shield in Judea and Samaria in 2002, where there was no presence of deterrent high trajectory weapons and no significant enemy territorial defenses.

Thus we see that not only is the operational mode of a reprisal operation harmed critically by the enemy's veto on disengagement following the raid; the strategic logic of threat escalation to all-out war is in fact rendered toothless. In the absence of military ability to remove the rocket threat at a cost that is acceptable to public opinion and the leadership in Israel and the world, Israel remains devoid of a credible threat. In fact, if our enemies have learned something from the pattern of operations staged by the IDF over the past 30 years and from the limited targets of these operations, it is the lack of a burning strategic desire by Israel to achieve victory.

## The Fly and the Elephant

The campaign between wars is limited to territories where the enemy does not have significant capabilities that can hold the Israeli home front hostage. In Syria, there is a trend of entrenchment by Iran and Hezbollah, but this is still a far cry from enabling the enemy to launch a broad and effective military response. The digging of cross border tunnels into Israel between Operations Pillar of Defense and Protective Edge is testimony to this. Israel in those years [upheld its commitments](#) to the understandings reached after Pillar of Defense to refrain from offensive operations in the Gaza

Strip, despite repeated violations by the enemy and intelligence on the digging of tunnels. Hamas's persistence in a strategy of border disturbances and balloon terrorism over more than a year testifies to the organization's sense of immunity thanks to its rocket arsenal.

Therefore, what defines Israel's ability to execute effective routine security or the campaign between wars, not only in Syria but also in the main theaters, are two conditions. First, the ability to isolate the reprisal operation or coercion so as not to drag Israel to war—in other words, that routine security does not become unintended war. In order to achieve this there is a need to find a way to negate the enemy's "veto" in the form of rockets launched into Israel. The protection provided by systems such as Iron Dome is critical and successful, but it does not provide a response to this need. For the enemy, it is sufficient to cancel school in Israel or to paralyze the entry and exit points by generating multiple alarms at airports and seaports.

The second condition is a new operational idea that will enable the IDF to retain a credible, tangible, and effective threat to eliminate the danger to the Israeli home front and to defeat the enemy as a fighting force without having to pay the heavy price of clearing hundreds of heavily populated towns and villages and occupying territory for an extended period.

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Recent decades have seen a heated debate between the school of thought that claims that it is no longer possible to achieve victory and the school that claims that the IDF must return to a strategy of defeating enemy forces and removing threats. The IDF's force employment approach to achieving victory over enemies on its borders

focused precisely on this debate, and decided in favor of establishing a more modern and adaptable military capability, whose purpose is to return decisive operational victory to Israel's strategic practice. One concrete idea on how victory can be achieved over a terror army based on missiles and rockets appears in my article "[To Turn on the Light and Put Out the Fire.](#)"

Without the threat of a decisive war, the State of Israel does not have an "elephant," and without an elephant, the campaign between wars does no more than mark time.

## Conclusion

"It is possible that in the future there will be significant change with grave strategic implications: the Arabs are liable to have a growing arsenal, both quantitative and qualitative, of surface-to-surface missiles.... Israel's most pressing conventional military challenge in the field of national security ahead of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is therefore this development," wrote pioneering Israeli armored general Israel Tal.

Tal's prophecy has come true. It is high trajectory weaponry that has thrown Israel's security establishment off balance. The ability of missile launch systems to hold the daily routine and mental resilience of hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens hostage, despite air defense systems and home front defense, has negated the logic of reprisal operations and undermined the foundation of "routine security." Israel's reluctance to once again capture large territories and fight in challenging urban arenas where the rockets are hidden, and to clear these areas of the enemy at costs that are expected to be high, is obvious to all. This reluctance has eliminated Israel's threat of launching a decisive war and its ability to remove the threat from the home front. The foundations of Israel's fundamental security have been undermined. Israel finds itself occasionally fighting long and expensive campaigns in order to achieve goals that are becoming more and more limited. We have adopted the worst of all worlds—the limited

achievements of routine security operations with the high costs of fundamental security wars. This phenomenon is so clear that there is no doubt that Syria, at some point, will immunize itself with extensive rocket capabilities.

The campaign between wars is nothing but a new form, albeit original and full of vitality, of the foundation of our security doctrine—routine security. However, without the clear military ability to deny the enemy the option of bombing the Israeli home front and without effective warfare to remove the threat and achieve decisive victory over the enemy as a fighting force, the campaign between wars is no more than a fly without an elephant.

High trajectory weapons and Israel's reluctance to capture difficult territories have upset both fundamentals of Israel's defense doctrine. We need a new form of warfare, one that is offensive and denies the enemy its firepower and destroys it while limiting significantly its impact on the home front. What is required is an attack on the enemy's territory without the accompanying downside—fighting from house to house and clearing every community, street, alleyway, and building, until the last rocket is found. Such ideas about a new form of warfare exist on the discussion table. Only then will the IDF's impressive offensive organized around the campaign between wars be able to operate in the primary arenas, and not just in Syria.

If we desire a campaign between wars that will be less of a fly and more of a hornet, a campaign between wars that will operate effectively and daringly against enemies that have the ability and the willingness to attack Israel, then it will have to sit on another elephant, an elephant that casts a more noticeable shadow on our main enemies, an elephant that knows how to fight and to defeat terror armies built around their high trajectory fire capabilities against the Israeli home front.

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## Notes

- 1 See, for example, Col. Shay Shabtai's "An Approach to the Campaign between Wars" (*Maarachot*, 446, 2012), which includes a series of "annexes" to the security doctrine (reprisals, preemptive wars, special operations, counterterrorism, deterrent operations, preemptive strikes, and more) and calls for a ninth annex—the campaign between wars. He later calls for investment and organization adapted to the campaign between wars ("a new organizational concept"), as if the campaign between wars is an independent component of the security doctrine.
- 2 Prevention and coercion: Prevention is an operation whose purpose is to prevent the enemy from being able to exercise its force against us. Reprisal is an action in response to an enemy operation, and is not directly in the context of an enemy operation. Both prevention and reprisal are key tools in the realization of the idea of "coercion," namely, the desire to change the behavior of an actor who opposed us by threatening to use force or by the use of measured force, without deteriorating into all-out conflict. The logic of coercion, in which prevention is inherent, is aimed at dealing with threats primarily during periods of non-war. For more on this topic, see Thomas Schelling's classic book *Arms and Influence*; and Robert Pape's *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War*.
- 3 According to published unclassified material.
- 4 Yaakov Amidror, for example, recommends in his article "What For" (*Dado Center Journal*, 31-32, in Hebrew) that the purpose of the next war in Lebanon be to prevent future launch capability from that country through a long and exhaustive clearing operation, and thus make a campaign between wars possible following the end of the war.
- 5 The prominent exception to this phenomenon is Operation Defensive Shield in 2002. The proximity to Israeli population concentrations, the fact that there was no need to clear Judea and Samaria of hidden rockets but "only" to locate covert terror infrastructures and the enemy's initial military capabilities enabled Israel to take a different decision in this case. Above all, during Operation Defensive Shield the enemy did not have a rocket capability that threatened to paralyze the Israeli home front as long as the operation continued. Even then, it took two years of suicide bombings against the Israeli home front and some 1,000 Israeli dead in order for that decision to be taken.