

# Formulating an Updated Strategy in the Face of Regional Upheavals: The Northern Arena as a Case Study

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## Introduction

More than four years after the struggles and revolutions began in the Middle East and launched a process that is reshaping the region, Israel is required to adapt to an evolving situation marked by changes and new phenomena. Along most of its borders, Israel has thus far managed to contend with the dynamic threats according to familiar concepts: common interests with Egypt and Jordan have kept the peace agreements stable, Egypt and Jordan are battling radical Islamic entities, and the Palestinian issue has thus far remained relatively independent of developments in the region, which generally enables containment of the prominent actors – Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. The theater that differs is the northern arena, comprising Syria and Lebanon, where there have been the most dramatic changes. The collapse of the Syrian state, along with a tightening of the interdependence between the Assad regime and Hizbollah and Iran; the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) and the strengthening of the global jihad entities; the involvement of the United States and the Western-Arab coalition; and continuous changes in the balance of power and the status of influential actors have all led to a state of chaos that is not bound by familiar rules of the old game.

In order to adjust to the new reality and prepare a response to the various challenges, with an emphasis on the northern arena, Israel must conduct a theoretical review of fundamental elements in its security concept and understand the basis of its preferred strategy in light of the changes that

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have occurred – be they those that constitute a long and continuing process or dramatic twists in the current era. Following clarification of the overall strategy, attention should focus on the northern arena as the locus of a new and unfamiliar reality, where regional and global elements important for Israel are prominent actors. While many of the proposed principles and recommendations that follow have been sounded before, their importance now relates to the implementation of patterns that are ostensibly in effect but in practice are not implemented. The present point in time requires a careful reexamination of the new and the old, in order to define the required framework for implementation, now and in the future.

### Conceptual Changes

Israel's current strategic situation is shaped by the upheaval shaking the Middle East, whose outcome and ultimate long term effects are impossible to predict. A host of changes and complex processes are challenging many of Israel's longstanding assumptions; some of these changes typify the entire region and some are unique to the northern context. The full range of changes can be divided into two major groups: conceptual changes in approach, which are affected by regional and global processes related to national security; and geo-strategic changes, which reflect developments in the northern arena (discussed later in the article).

The conceptual changes represent a familiar challenge, namely, a country's adaptation to doctrinal, technological, social, cultural, and other developments in its immediate and remote vicinity. Future planning of the next campaign in the northern arena involves several such changes that should be taken into account. The first is the nature of the military threat posed to Israel. In the northern context, for instance, prior to the civil war in Syria, the threat reference was a confrontation with the conventional Syrian military, backed by the military capabilities of Hizbollah – primarily missiles and rockets – with Iranian support.<sup>1</sup> Currently, in the wake of ongoing attrition and warfare with Syria, the threat from the Syrian military has ebbed significantly. Some of the weapons of the Syrian military have fallen into the hands of Salafi jihadi elements and some were delivered to Hizbollah. The IDF must engage in force buildup that addresses a wide range of scenarios in an environment dominated by uncertainty, without any accepted and defined rules of the game, and with no ability to determine possible end states. The rationale of terrorism and attacks on the Israeli home front stand as the main threat in the arsenal of the Tehran-Damascus-

Beirut axis and also of the Salafi Sunni extremists. This process reflects an extensive change in the entire Middle East, whereby most of the region's state actors have lost their monopoly on power, and power is now commanded by a myriad of actors with military capabilities – some of them advanced – and an operational concept based on guerilla warfare and terrorism.

The second conceptual change relates to the principle of deterrence, which constitutes one of the pillars of the traditional Israeli security concept. By definition, deterrence cannot be measured or quantified, and it can usually be evaluated only in retrospect.<sup>2</sup> Israel is contending with a system where red lines and rules of the game are no longer as clear as they may have been in the past, and with the difficult question of how to influence the intentions of organizations operating with a jihadist vision. Given the nature of the current conflicts, it is impossible to establish clear facts on the ground and draw a cost-benefit equation that would deter Israel's enemies. Israel is working diligently to formulate the appropriate strategic concept for the new situation, and within this framework the concept of the "war between wars" was formulated.<sup>3</sup> This concept is designed to reinforce the deterrent against the enemies by illustrating what they can expect in a scenario of escalation, while disrupting their buildup processes and creating more favorable conditions for Israel if a high intensity military campaign erupts. Intentions notwithstanding, the policies of "wait and see" and non-intervention in the regional events and processes enable limited application of the war between wars approach.

Another change relates to the strengthening of the defense leg of the security concept. Challenging the offensive ethos of the IDF, which has adhered to offensive and decision-enabling force buildup since the establishment of Israel's military, the confrontations in the last two decades differ from the previous wars, which were based on firepower and maneuver and rapid transfer of the battlefield area to enemy territory. Now the emphasis of the enemies is on high trajectory fire against Israel, terrorism against the civilian population, attempts to disrupt systems essential to the functioning of the state, and guerrilla warfare operations such as underground penetration and attacks on populated areas. These methods aim to offset the technological and offensive supremacy of IDF, and Israel's response to them has prompted substantial investment in active and passive defense capabilities.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the immediate response to the changes in the northern arena was the construction of an enhanced

security barrier in the Golan Heights and an expanded number of Iron Dome batteries for intercepting missiles and rockets launched into Israel territory.

### The Need to Formulate an Updated Strategy

The main difference that must underlie the new strategy is the increasing dominance of non-state and other actors, which shoulder little or no responsibility for territory and population and do not adhere to the rules of the game and standards practiced among the family of nations. The regional environment, and particularly the Fertile Crescent area, continues to splinter into communities while torn apart by religious, ethnic, tribal, and cultural disputes. Lebanon and Jordan have thus far managed to remain intact, despite a heavy influx of millions of refugees; how much longer they can withstand this burden is unclear. For their part, Syria and Iraq will not return to their former states.<sup>5</sup> This new reality requires developing ways and means to approach the new and dominant alternate actors, who are no less important than those before them. Any attempt to apply the old state rules to the new elements is doomed to failure. For example, Israeli use of a deterrent threat – using a combination of verbal and instrumental messages – which had been an effective tool (such as a diplomatic message combined with flying at low altitude over the Syrian President’s palace) is no longer valid and has no effect on the new actors.

It is difficult to identify weaknesses among the new actors that can be leveraged and used as a base for influence and deterrence. In addition, a new approach is required for attaining an adequate intelligence picture. Currently, intelligence deals less with predicting threats and trends and more with providing tools that assist the leader in making decisions. Furthermore, Israel’s ability to draw a map that is not subject to traditional state concepts – borders, governance, sovereignty, and balance of power – is extremely limited and relies on perspectives that incorrectly reflect the interests, intentions, worldviews, and elements and interests that motivate the non-state actors. There is also a lack of a particular kind of intelligence, namely, social intelligence, a critical element given community cohesiveness enabled by the soaring influence of the media and the social networks. On the one hand, these platforms enable mass mobilization and guidance toward extremist ideas, and on the other hand, provide a platform for civil society to voice its opinions. In an age when the cognitive dimension determines much of what happens in the political and state theater, these are important tools to track social moods and trends.<sup>6</sup>

### The Confrontation Dimension

At the confrontation level, Israeli policy should internalize the idea that it is no longer possible to isolate the operational theaters or separate between the front lines and the broad theater and thereby limit the bilateral confrontation. For its part, the bilateral concept is one dimensional, does not currently withstand the test of reality, no longer serves Israeli interests, and will not improve Israel's balance of power vis-à-vis its enemies. Currently, given the links between the arenas and actors, there is a multilateral and multilayered dynamic at work. Consequently, Israel's planning must take into consideration scenarios that contain complex developments that depend on more than one actor or a group of actors that make common decisions. Given the pervasive uncertainty, Israel must build an approach that attempts to provide a valid and strong response under the largest number of scenarios.

In addition, in order to avoid unexpected and unintended consequences that increase the threats and dangers, Israel must prepare for the emergence of unforeseen implications. It is imperative to provide the decision makers with room for deliberation, which allows for understanding and sound judgment in the course of debate, in order to choose the appropriate response, without becoming enslaved to a familiar off the shelf response, and thereby reduce potential entanglements and deterioration to more difficult and complex situations.

### The Conceptual Dimension

Above all it is the conceptual level that will be shaped by the doctrinal novelty, and hence much of the intellectual effort should be channeled there. Until now, military and state lexicons were used to express the traditional approaches derived from wars against state systems. The correct way to launch the new process is first and foremost to create a new conceptual terminology that will reflect the change in thinking and contribute to deeper discourse around the new reality, including: a multilateral operational concept, i.e., against a variety of actors simultaneously; strategic aims from the world of decision and deterrence that can no longer be realized; a changed meaning of state borders to regions defined by context; maximized establishment of partnerships and ad hoc coalitions based on overlapping interests in the face of a singular phenomenon or challenge; the mapping of concepts, ideas, identities, relevant groups, and a coherent strategy in relation to minorities; a multidisciplinary toolbox that aims at a myriad

of efforts – political, diplomatic, economic, military, intelligence warfare, information warfare, legal, media, infrastructure, humanitarian assistance, and handling of the local population – all this in an informed and integrated manner. The interdisciplinary concept embodies the recognition that in the modern campaign, use of the entire toolbox of the state or the coalition countries is necessary to produce the desired effect against other actors. In other words, hard power and soft power measures must be combined in order to further interests.<sup>7</sup> For this purpose, someone responsible for the coordinated and synchronized operation of all the efforts should be specified in order to produce maximum benefit.

On a more internal level, beyond creating a new lexicon, a broad knowledge infrastructure must be established about the relevant actors, particularly their emergence and their influence. One of the essential elements in this context is the individual attention to a variety of non-state entities on the spectrum. Although the Middle East is moving forward, to a great extent it is experiencing a regression to old sentiments and desires that are reflected in the growing social segmentations. Therefore, understanding the ethnic, tribal, religious, and community patterns is a basic part of the adaptation process. Beyond defining the populations in the region, another aspect relates to tracking their movement as a decisively important factor. The phenomenon of refugees and immigration has changed Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq beyond recognition, and the previous demographics are no longer the baseline.<sup>8</sup>

By using new intelligence tools, such as social and psychological intelligence, civil surveillance will become workable and effective, since it is impossible to identify new trends among the region's population with traditional tools – as evidenced more than once during the course of the war in Syria and in Iraq, where activity is affected by social platforms and the new media far more than in previous wars. Understanding these characteristics will assist in identifying the points of influence on the various actors and the ability to exert pressure on the centers of gravity. Currently quality intelligence is required in three dimensions: (1) identifying courses and objectives of the enemies and the adversaries, with emphasis on the radical Shiite axis led by Iran, Islamic State, and additional elements belonging to the Salafi jihad threatening to take action against Israel, with access or establishment along the borders; (2) intelligence required for the sake of protecting an ally – as in the case of the incursion of jihad into the Sinai Peninsula and Jordan – and concurrently protecting the internal balance

of power in the countries with which Israel has peace agreements;<sup>9</sup> (3) intelligence indicating opportunities for finding common denominators and overlapping interests with actors in the region. Although the continuing instability compromises the credibility of many actors and their ability to constitute a foundation for a strategic alliance, the positive aspect of the phenomenon is the emergence of opportunities for ad hoc cooperation based on identical objectives.

### The Israeli Challenge

Israel has not yet developed a coherent concept with respect to its place in a Middle East that is refashioning itself. The dominant strategy characterizing the Israeli policy since the start of the regional turmoil has been non-intervention and “wait and see.”<sup>10</sup> The rationale underlying this policy stems from the desire to exclude Israel from the regional conflicts, in part to reduce the threat of instability crossing over its borders, as experienced by its neighbors. Furthermore, Israel has shed few tears over the extremists killing one another and focused on their internal struggles – a trend that until recently caused a weakening of the “axis” and its anchor, the Assad regime in Syria. Israel does not want to be the target of regional and global attention or considered as part of the regional problem. Moreover, Israel’s bitter history of involvement in regional and local conflicts and attempts to enthrone sovereigns and rulers – headed by the civil war in Lebanon – behooves it to exercise extra caution before taking any step in this direction.<sup>11</sup>

Until last year, the “wait and see” strategy was perceived appropriate for Israel, since it had been relatively immune to the surrounding upheaval. However, this immunity cannot last forever. The ongoing violence along the border in the Golan Heights (as well as in Lebanon, Gaza, and the Sinai Peninsula) is not subsiding. Even today, when Islamic State is not within range of confrontation with Israel and Jabhat al-Nusra chooses out of temporary interests not to confront it, their activities indirectly undermine the peace with Israel. A low signature Israeli operation to establish cooperation with local communities in the Syrian Golan Heights cannot neutralize the efforts of Hizbollah and Iran to entrench themselves in the Golan and in southern Syria – the very efforts that generated a clash with Israel in January 2015.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, and for the sake of preparedness for future scenarios, it is necessary to formulate an updated strategy.



### Israel's Challenges in the Northern Arena

The processes and trends in the northern arena should be analyzed on the basis of the principles at the confrontation and conceptual levels. Israel is watching Hizbollah with concern extricate itself from the hardship that it had encountered early in the upheavals in Syria, as it recaptures its status as “protector of Lebanon” against the danger of proliferation of Salafi Sunni Islam. At the same time, Hizbollah is arming itself in ways dangerous for Israel, and this requires the formulation of an effective military response. In addition, from the world’s perspective Iran and the Assad regime have evolved from the problem to part of the solution in the fight against ISIS.

Accordingly, Israel is required to evaluate its policy in light of two significant phenomena. The first is the spillover of the events into its territory, mainly terrorist activities seeping in through its northern border encouraged by domestic terrorism; the second is the formation of a threat infrastructure in the Golan Heights in the wake of the establishment of Hizbollah and Iranian Revolutionary Guard elements in the region, in parallel with infrastructures of Salafi jihadist elements such as Jabhat al-Nusra, mainly in the southern Golan Heights. The “wait and see” policy implemented thus far does not prevent the formation of new threats and does not improve the ability to cope with the future challenges. The strategic problem is complicated since it is difficult to imagine the feasible end state for Israel, given the growing uncertainty in the wake of the upheavals in the northern theater, an assortment of actors with numerous and conflicting rationales, and the absence of stabilizing factors over time. In the past, depending on the relative stability prevailing in Syria and Lebanon, Israel took action with a state actor – the Assad regime in Syria – as the responsible address, while for its part, Hizbollah was motivated by interests pertaining to the Lebanese population. Therefore, the reference threats were more easily mapped and the required end states more easily defined, and accordingly, an organized strategic rationale was more easily formulated. Currently it is difficult to map the power relations and the developing trends, and thus the establishment finds it difficult to formulate a clear strategic aim.

Using a broader prism, it is clear that geo-strategic changes have begun in the region and directly affect the northern theater. If until 2011 Israel could indicate with a high degree of certainty that its primary threat stems from the strengthening of the Iran-Syria-Hizbollah axis, including the capabilities of the Syrian military and Hizbollah’s array of missiles and rockets, today the picture is much more complex with the disintegration of



the political system and the ascension of new actors, most of them jihadi extremists armed with high quality weapons. The challenge has evolved from a confrontation with a defined and homogeneous body with a clear structure and command and control hierarchy to a mixed set of actors with no systemic logic, which join and converge on ad hoc bases, and are capable of adapting quickly to changes in their operational environment. Thus it is difficult to predict under the patchwork that has been created the hierarchy of threats and the relationship between them. For instance, can it be said today with certainty what the main threat is to the security of the State of Israel, Iran or Islamic State?

The analysis of the geo-strategic trends demands an evaluation of the severity and immediacy of the threats, and a determination of how Israel could best cope with them. This is the context for the gap between Israel and its strategic ally, the United States, regarding definition of the primary regional threat and the requisite course of action. While Israel considers the radical Iran-led Shiite axis of Iraq, Syria, and Hizbollah the primary threat, the US believes that Islamic State is the primary threat requiring military action, taking precedence over all other efforts, and worth the cost of coordination with Tehran.<sup>13</sup> The primary objective of the US is first the eradication of the Islamic State organization.<sup>14</sup> This issue is significant given the developments on the Golan Heights and the question of Israeli strategy in light of the Iranian moves to expand its influence in the Middle East. Israel is tracking the strengthening radical Salafi Islam in the form of Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra and estimates that in the future these elements may act directly against Israel, if they successfully complete a takeover of Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. However, the immediate concern and the more substantial threat from Israel's perspective is the establishment of the axis on the Golan Heights and in southern Syria. Israel declares that it will not allow the Golan Heights to fall under Hizbollah and Iranian control, and it is even willing to cooperate locally with the insurgent groups and local population for this purpose.<sup>15</sup>

### Defining the Main Threat in the Northern Arena

The main question before the Israeli leadership is, which primary regional context should define the main threat to Israel in the northern arena. Is it that Iran is a nuclear threshold state and/or wields much greater influence in the Middle East, or is it the proliferation of the Islamic State and radical Islam, or is it the expanding phenomenon of the disintegration of traditional

countries, spreading to peaceful countries and the Palestinian Authority, or perhaps a combination of the challenges? The answer to this question will underlie Israel's policy toward the northern arena, where it faces a combination of challenges and threats, whose level of severity must be established for the short term and for the long term, and in turn, the respective policy priorities can be established.<sup>16</sup>

We believe that the Iran-led axis is currently the main threat to Israel. Iran, with its strategic capabilities, and Hizbollah, with its arrays of missiles, rockets, and unmanned systems together constitute the fundamental military threat to Israel. Meanwhile, the expansion of the area of friction between Israel and the axis in the wake of its attempt to deploy in the Golan Heights and in southern Syria will provide it with an additional platform to challenge Israel. The two well-known threats for which Israel had prepared up to 2011, i.e., a war against the Syrian military and a war against Hizbollah on the Lebanese front only, are not relevant today. The Syrian military is weakened and does not constitute an immediate threat to Israel, while Hizbollah has expanded its field of operations from Lebanon eastward deep into Syria and southward to the Golan Heights. The struggle taking place in the south of Syria between Hizbollah and Iran and the insurgent forces of the Assad regime is to a large extent the battle for the nature of Israel's next war.<sup>17</sup> Israel must focus its intelligence and operations buildup capabilities in the event it will be required to attack the Iranian and Hizbollah strongholds in Syria and prevent them from creating a military infrastructure for attacking Israel from several fronts simultaneously (Syria, Lebanon, depth).

From a multilateral perspective, Israel must continually assess the repercussions of a confrontation with the axis for other actors, including potential enemies, as well as implications for its partner the Hashemite Kingdom and other actors with similar interests that may be enlisted to fight against the establishment of the Shiite axis in southern Syria. Such decision would direct Israel's efforts in running war between war operations, with the option of enforcing a no fly zone for the Syrian air force and its partners in the Golan Heights sector, along with multidisciplinary efforts (such as humanitarian, economic, infrastructure) to establish partnerships with local actors. All this in order to establish a sphere of influence in southern Syrian and in the Golan Heights and thereby undermine the establishment of the Shiite axis in the region and stabilize the Golan Heights sector. Concurrently, it is necessary to establish preparedness for a confrontation

with the Shiite axis in the northern theater. Within this framework, Israel must highlight two expected repercussions in the event that Hizbollah and Iran initiate escalated terrorist activity against Israel: one, a targeted Israeli strike on Assad regime bastions, which may cause the Syrian President's downfall; second, a devastating strike against Hizbollah's capabilities and assets and against their infrastructure, which in turn will spur it to take action and launch missiles and rockets against Israel.

Israel is required to establish its strategic posture in relation to current and future influential actors in the region: the United States and Russia as involved and shaping superpowers; international coalitions operating in the region; and pragmatic Arab countries that have retained their regimes and want stability. It should also make initial contact with Turkey to explore an option for strategic coordination in the face of the Shiite axis threat and continuation of the Assad regime (bringing down the Assad regime is a major objective of Turkish President Erdogan); reach out to minorities in the Middle East, whose separatist identity has been strengthened by the erosion of the state structure; and identify actors that have potential for a positive and central role in shaping the new Syria the day after Assad and work directly and indirectly to strengthen them.

In parallel to determining the strategic objectives in the northern arena, a competing strategy should be defined that weighs the data differently, which specifies Islamic State as the main threat (similar to the US assessment). In such a scenario, whereby the axis is not the main threat, it is possible to expand the theoretical horizon and identify common interests and potential manners of approach to the axis, in order to evaluate whether understandings can be established, to the extent of coordinating the fighting against Islamic State. Only providing real alternatives will lead to the refinement of a valid and workable strategy for Israel.

## Conclusion

After four years since the beginning of the undermining of the old order in the Middle East, there is no foreseeable end in sight to the dramatic fluctuations that have occurred regularly since then. This situation no longer allows Israel to wait and see and combine non-intervention with strengthening the layers of defense, in the name of striving to be protected and to not be adversely affected by the repercussions of the turmoil. The changes that occurred in Iraq and in Syria have created a regional chain reaction and have shaped a northern arena different from what Israel was

accustomed to prior to 2011, while raising perceptual difficulties and a lack of coherent strategy. Israel has not yet found the shaping principles that it requires in order to contend with the emerging reality, and this has resulted in a growing gap between the stated purpose with regard to the northern theater and the toolbox available to it in order to formulate a response to the threats in the northern arena and the trends and processes there.

In order to bridge this gap, the government of Israel must act promptly and engage in serious thought to formulate an updated strategy in relation to the northern arena. This process will be accompanied by interim actions that will be required in light of the developments in the arena, which will enable a better understanding of the region. Concurrently it is necessary to map a multi-actor and multi-rationale balance of power, while seeking ad hoc partners, and to establish a multidisciplinary toolbox that is appropriate for the new challenges. The strategy itself will have to integrate between long term objectives – derived from an investigation of the Israeli interests and its priorities between the Iran-led axis currently constituting the primary threat and the Islamic State-led bloc, against short term objectives – which focus on preventing the formation of threats and future difficult situations. Within this framework, Israel must assess its position within the patchwork of regional and international actors involved in what is happening in the northern theater, formulating an updated strategy in a thorough planning process, while correctly using new elements, concepts, and mindsets. Updated strategic thinking is essential in order to direct Israel's policy and actions vis-à-vis the northern arena and to prepare effectively for a scenario of escalation against the axis and the radical power elements in the northern theater and in the Middle East as a whole.

## Notes

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