

THE CAMPAIGN BETWEEN WARS AND THE IDF

Israel's Readiness for War

The campaign between wars is the most evident expression of Israel's advanced capabilities – those of the IDF and the intelligence organizations – in acquiring precise intelligence and turning it into surgical action. In the past decade, according to reports, targets varying from weapons convoys to suitcases at the Damascus International Airport were attacked, all while impressively limiting the damage to the target itself and refraining, if so decided, from human casualties – in part in order to observe the red lines set by the sides over time.

These attacks have helped achieve the defined main objective: impairing the enemy's capabilities and thwarting its intentions without deteriorating into full-scale war. It is also clear that the units involved in the operational campaign – intelligence units, the Air Force, precision munitions operators, and even those engaged in deconfliction vis-à-vis actors such as Russia – have evolved to a great deal, to the point of an ability to carry out a large number of strikes and inspire confidence among decision makers in the IDF's ability to fulfill the mission.

But at the same time, the gap between “the IDF of the campaign between wars” and “the IDF of war” has increased. This refers not only to the enormous investment of financial and manpower resources, but also to the command attention that is naturally drawn into “today's campaign.” Moreover, it is evident that Israel has become accustomed to standards of complete intelligence control, the ability to operate surgically, reliance on stand-off weaponry, and an emphasis on zero casualties to IDF forces. These will not exist in the scenario of a large-scale war, and the question of whether and how the IDF and its commanders will succeed in making the necessary adaptations has become increasingly significant.

CBW does not involve most of the IDF. Unlike the examples provided above, which show that high standards of fighting spirit and the unwillingness to accept inactivity that emerged in small unit reprisal operations had permeated the entire IDF, contemporary CBW offers a kind of technological, intelligence, and operational “luxury” that expands the gap between those engaged in it and those who are not, mainly the ground forces.

In this context, it is important to remember the remarks by former head of the Operations Directorate Maj. Gen. Nitzan Alon and Dana Preisler-Swery: “The advantage of the campaign between wars is that it sharpens certain operational capabilities, and under certain conditions it creates experience and friction. But most of the IDF’s order of battle is not involved in the campaign between wars. First, certain groups in the Air Force, the Military Intelligence branch, and the General Staff are engaged in the campaign between wars, along with very specific niches in the Navy and the ground forces. The illusion can emerge that the IDF is acting, succeeding, improving, and learning, but these only apply to very specific parts of the IDF. Second, among those engaged in the campaign between wars, there is no similarity between the Air Force and Military Intelligence’s focused involvement in a certain strike operation – in which preparation is prolonged, all of the attention and capabilities are concentrated, and an excellent result is achieved – and the conditions in war.”⁷³

Several examples illustrate this concern. At the time of the second intifada (2000-2005), during the IDF’s years of fighting terrorism, its commanders tended to shrug off questions about the lack of training combat soldiers and commanders received to operate within large formations, or even when was the last time soldiers in the Armored Corps had been in their tanks as part of a platoon or company exercise. The commanders claimed in response that the conflict in the West Bank placed many soldiers under fire, and this produced readiness for war that exceeded what could be achieved in exercises. When

73 Alon and Preisler-Swery, “Running a Marathon and Putting a Spoke in the Wheels of the Enemy.”

the IDF needed to go into “war mode,” even in a relatively limited campaign such as the Second Lebanon War, the difficulties in performance were evident, both on the individual and team level and in large formations.

In a different but related context, the fact that the Air Force has not faced enemy air forces for decades and has grown accustomed to operating with no glitches or casualties, has helped to create a situation, whereby a manned aircraft brought down is an incident capable of influencing decision making and providing the enemy with a “victory image.” In the Second Lebanon War, the Air Force operated under serious limitations that significantly undermined the effectiveness of its support to the ground forces; when a CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter was brought down, while airlifting troops during the final phase of the war, the entire operation was stopped. Even in the context of the Russia-Ukraine War, the possible downing of an Air Force aircraft by the Russians has been mentioned (including by senior officials) as a danger that should influence Israel’s policy, in a global event with far-reaching political implications.

CBW has also encouraged thinking whereby technological superiority can solve everything, and therefore it should be applied even in conditions where it is doubtful that it will operate perfectly, first and foremost in ground maneuvers. In recent years the IDF seems to rely on technological “miracle solutions” for issues such as ground maneuvering, whose performance is doubtful under the chaotic conditions of war.

In the physical sphere, a “munitions attrition race” has developed as part of CBW. The IAF uses increasing amounts of expensive long-range munitions – all the more so the more the enemy invests efforts in intercepting them. This has been mentioned by senior officials as a significant factor in what has been termed the IDF’s “anorexia,” which undermines the stockpiling of armaments needed in case of war. Without getting into exact numbers, it is enough to multiply the number of raids Maj. Gen. (res.) Amir Eshel alluded to (“three digits”) by the amount of munitions needed to ensure that targets

are hit, in order to understand that these are considerable numbers when trying to assess what the IDF would need in a multi-arena scenario.

And finally, and perhaps most important of all, the (undeclared but in practice clear) overarching directive of CBW, “anything but war,” could undermine the rule coined by Alon and Preisler-Swery, whereby “he who wants a campaign between wars should prepare for war.” They add, “it is essential to create deterrence in which the other side understands that if large-scale escalation to the point of war develops, Israel will win. The idea of the campaign between wars is to stop before the deterioration but from a position of strength. To this end, the two sides need to be convinced that in the case of escalation, Israel will ultimately prevail (whether in a war or in contained escalation). The central condition for waging a campaign between wars needs to be readiness for escalation and for full-scale war.”⁷⁴ However, the analysis above shows that it is doubtful that the behavior of the sides today reflects such confidence in the results of a possible conflict.

IDF commanders grow used to the fact that preventing war is the highest dictum behind every action; the enemy, for its part, assumes that Israel will do everything to avoid it. This allows it to find ways to thwart some CBW objectives and also prepare for war – precisely under the auspices of the red lines that Israel accepts.

Examples are the transfer of the production of precision missiles inside Lebanon, acquisition of air defense systems that make stand-in air operations difficult in the case of a major campaign, and Hezbollah’s increasing daring in using force – such as the launching of a drone toward the Karish gas field prior to the signing of the agreement on the maritime border between Israel and Lebanon. In all of these aspects, material and psychological, CBW has had a negative impact on the IDF’s readiness for war.

74 Ibid.