THE CAMPAIGN BETWEEN WARS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND THE CHANGING ENEMY

CBW and Routine Security: Continuity or Change?

The campaign between wars has preoccupied the IDF command increasingly over the past decade, and has occupied an arena in which the IDF – which has been hard pressed to achieve unequivocal success in the conflict with Hamas in the Gaza Strip or with Hezbollah in Lebanon – has felt a sense of significant achievement. Lt. Gen. (ret.) Gadi Eisenkot, who as Chief of Staff (2015-2019) oversaw a large number of strikes by the IDF outside of Israel, especially in Syria, noted this in an interview with the *New York Times* at the end of his tenure.[1]

Eisenkot and others also presented the campaign between wars as an innovation in IDF operational theory, one that adapts it to the needs of contemporary times and changes the traditional division of the army's activities between "routine" and "war." In a published article, Eisenkot claimed that "CBW constitutes a fundamental change in the pattern of Israeli security operations over the past thirteen years, and it is one of the main factors in the prolonged period of relative quiet the country has enjoyed along its northern border."[2] The second claim will be discussed below, but the first claim, that this is a significant innovation in Israel's security activity, is also worth examining. Brig. Gen. Eran Ortal, commander of the Dado Center for Interdisciplinary Military Studies – an internal army research center – claimed

1 Bret Stephens, "The Man Who Humbled Qassim Suleimani," *New York Times*, January 11, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/2p9648d7

2 Gadi Eisenkot and Gabi Siboni, "The Campaign Between Wars: How Israel Rethought Its Strategy to Counter Iran's Malign Regional Influence," *Policy Watch* 3174, Washington Institute, September 4, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/mb568uy4

that "the campaign between wars is merely a new form, original and full of vitality as it may be, of basic military doctrine – routine security."[3]

This is not merely a theoretical discussion, but rather an important part of an objective assessment of the campaign between wars, its development, and its degree of success, as a basis for asking the question "what next." In order to decide where to go from here, it is necessary to examine carefully where we have come from, and to ask to what extent strategic thinking has led action, or was it the other way around, as was the case more than once in Israel's history.

The First CBW: The Reprisal Operations

The IDF has always operated with an offensive orientation, seeing offense as the best defense. This approach was reflected in the major campaigns, and no less in routine security. Moshe Dayan, the Chief of Staff during the 1956 Sinai Campaign and later Minister of Defense during the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War, articulated this ethos clearly: "While the Israeli army is called a 'defense force,' it is not a defensive army…to put it simply: the Israel Defense Forces is a decidedly offensive aggressive army in thinking, planning, and execution, and this is in its bones and its spirit."[4]

In the framework of routine security, this ethos was reflected in the reprisal operations in the 1950s: no less than being a response to murderous actions by infiltrators from Jordan and Egypt, they served as a way to build IDF spirit, provide combat experience to its crack infantry units, and train its commanders for the next campaign. The military command also linked the reprisal operations with the principle of deterrence in the security concept, which aimed to

3 Eran Ortal, *The War Before: The Story of the Changing IDF* (Ministry of Defense publishing, 2022), p. 163 [Hebrew].

4 Remarks by the Minister of Defense at a conference of the general command of the IDF with the government ministers to summarize the campaign in the Six Day War, from Ami Gluska, *Eshkol, Give an Order!* (Ministry of Defense Publishing House, 2004), p. 50 [Hebrew].

stave off the next round of fighting, despite its likely inevitability. Deterrence was supposed to be strengthened by the show of the IDF's strength, and by execution of a punitive policy for hostile actions.

In a lecture to IDF officers ("The Reprisal Operations as a Means of Ensuring Peace," a title that reflects just how these operations were perceived), Dayan defined their aim with the words "punishment and deterrence," and added: "Our victories and our failures in small battles along the border and beyond are of great importance in their impact on 'routine security,' on the Arabs' estimation of Israel's strength, and on Israel's belief in its strength…We have the power to set a high price for our blood. A price that will be too expensive for an Arab village, an Arab army, and an Arab government to pay…the Arabs will refrain from war with Israel only if they assume that they would meet severe responses and be drawn into a conflict in which they will have the lower hand."[5]

The nature of the reprisal operations as a central element of Israel's routine security policy, from the beginning of the 1950s until the Six Day War and subsequently as well, is highly reminiscent of the IDF's attitude toward the campaign between wars: an offensive ethos, pushing the fight into enemy territory; use of crack units for the sake of operational success and building capabilities for the entire military in advance of a future war; deterrence of the enemy, which is exposed to the IDF's operational capability, and an effort – at least declared – to operate "below the threshold of war." All of these are meant to stave off the next war and to grant Israel a better starting position if or when it occurs.

5 Moshe Dayan, "The Reprisal Operations as a Means of Ensuring Peace," 1955, https://lib.cet.ac.il/pages/item.asp?item=10856 [Hebrew].

Operating to Deny Enemy Capabilities: Only Against Specific Objectives, and by Covert Means

The name of the reprisal operations attested to their justification, for internal and external purposes: they were presented and perceived as a response to murderous attacks by infiltrators or provocations by the enemy. Israel rarely engaged in forceful attempts to prevent the enemy from obtaining capabilities, mainly because it was clear that such action would indeed lead to war. The exception to the rule were cases in which there was danger that the enemy would acquire game-changing weapons, which would present a different kind of threat to the Israeli rear. In such cases, Israel's preventive operations were covert or specific single operations.

A first prominent example was the affair of the German scientists, who worked in Egypt in the early 1960s to develop long-range surface-to-surface missiles. The Mossad took action against them in various ways, some with force (explosive envelopes) and some with defamatory activity, e.g., publishing items about the scientists' activities in the media in Israel and abroad, and political efforts vis-à-vis the government of Germany, the so-called Operation Damocles.[6] In the nuclear context, air raids destroyed the Osiraq reactor in Iraq in 1981 and the nuclear reactor built in Deir ez-Zor, Syria, in 2007.

The Change in the Balance of Power and the Revolution in Military Affairs

The strategic situation has changed fundamentally over time. Israel's borders with Egypt and Jordan have become peaceful borders, while other fronts have enjoyed a state of almost complete quiet (Syria since 2011) and relatively few incidents (Lebanon). Israel's closest enemies have changed from states and regular armies to terrorist and guerrilla organizations, and the battlefield has evolved gradually from maneuvering grounds to urban spaces inhabited by civilians.

6 Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Center, "Operation Damocles and the German Scientists in Egypt," https/tinyurl.com/2a2e86xy [Hebrew].

The technological trends on both sides have created asymmetry that has greatly changed the parameters of the campaign. Israel enjoys an advantage to the point of complete one-sidedness in air and armored platforms, intelligence, and precision munitions, and has developed combat doctrines influenced by the Revolutionary in Military Affairs (RMA),[7] a general term for the dramatic changes in the nature of war due to the advances in precise and long-range weapons, computing, and network-centric warfare.

The changes in IDF force buildup and force application in recent decades in effect built the capabilities and the operational concept that would later be reflected in the campaign between wars: the emphasis on high quality intelligence, enabling precise and focused strikes; air operations (unlike ground operations in the reprisal operations in Jordan and Egypt, and later in Lebanon, from the 1950s to the 1980s), which enable expanding the range of operations, striking precisely, and avoiding casualties among Israeli forces; and precision munitions enabling, as much as possible, avoiding collateral damage to non-combatants, or even targeting humans at all.

In this sense, CBW operations have intensified trends that became apparent in IDF activity as a whole, including in the campaigns in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip in the 21st century: the emphasis on air, intelligence, and covert operations, and a reluctance to use ground forces; the idea that Israel has little to gain from a high-intensity campaign – which means, inter alia, refraining from defining defeating the enemy as the objective of combat – and therefore it must be avoided at almost any cost; and the preference for technological solutions. All of these have been reflected in CBW operations, in similar fashion to how reprisal operations expressed the IDF's spirit and its future mode of operation in major campaigns until the First Lebanon War (1982).

The IDF "cult of the offensive" (a term first coined to describe the emphasis on offense in military thinking before World War I) has been replaced with

7 Colin S. Gray, *Strategy for Chaos: Revolutions in Military Affairs and the Evidence of History* (London: Frank Cass, 2004).

an emphasis on advanced technology and avoidance of casualties as much as possible. According to Dr. Avi Kober, "a cult of technology has gradually developed, predicated on the belief that thanks to the unprecedented availability of precise, long-range, highly-destructive weapons, information dominance, and new means of command and control, it has now become possible to dramatically reduce the fog of war, to reduce casualties and collateral damage, and to kill without confronting the enemy face-to-face."[8]

It was often claimed that the cult of the offensive reflected a tendency to go to war as a solution to military problems,[9] an approach that indeed prevailed in Israel in the 1950s and 1960s. The cult of technology, in this sense, went hand in hand with increasing aversion to wars of conquest and the use of ground maneuver, while maintaining the IDF's offensive orientation. The IDF remains a military that prefers offense to defense, but engages in it with an emphasis on stand-off operations and not on strikes that strive for close contact with the enemy (stand-in) – both in terms of the use of ground forces and in terms of air operations, which rely increasingly on long-range precision weapons and flying outside of the range of anti-aircraft systems.

At the same time, "grey areas," as defined by researchers from the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), have emerged within Israel's borders, both in the physical sense (areas without real governance, such as Syria since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011), and in the nature of the enemy (military/terrorist/guerrilla organizations such as Hezbollah or Hamas).[10] In many ways, another such grey area is the West Bank, where the majority of the IDF's forces carry out daily operational activity. There the talk was

8 Avi Kober, *Practical Soldiers: Israel's Military Thought and Its Formative Factors* (Brill, 2015), p. xii.

9 For example, Stephen van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Outbreak of the First World War," *International Security,* 9, No. 1 (1984): 58-107.

10 Nicolas Heras, "Gray Zones in the Middle East," Center for a New American Security, September 18, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/ycks86ud

of a strategy termed "mowing the lawn," first conceived in the IDF Central Command in the years following Operation Defensive Shield (2002).

According to Efraim Inbar and Eitan Shamir, "mowing the lawn" is "Israel's strategy for coping with ongoing unsolvable conflicts." In such a situation, they write, "the use of force is not intended to achieve impossible political objectives, but to minimize the enemy's ability to cause damage to Israel. Given the fact that it is very difficult to influence the behavior of extreme non-state actors, all that Israel can hope to achieve from the use of force is temporary deterrence. Consequently, Israel has adopted a patient military strategy of attrition, which aims first and foremost to damage the enemy's capabilities."[11] Maj. Gen. (res.) Nitzan Alon, former head of the IDF Operations Directorate, described this as follows, in an article written with Dana Preisler-Swery: "Within routine security in the West Bank, a campaign is clearly underway to prevent buildup, to prevent the development of future threats, to create deterrence, and so on. The preventive actions and 'mowing the lawn' are in essence a campaign between wars."[12]

Thus, the change in the nature of the enemy and of war have led Israel and the IDF to formulate profound shifts in modi operandi and in force buildup priorities. What hasn't changed is the tendency to see ongoing operations (routine security or CBW) not only as the way to improve Israel's situation in routine times, but also to bring it to war, if and when it happens, after the best preparation and under the most appropriate conditions.

11 Efraim Inbar and Eitan Shamir, *"Mowing the Lawn": Israel's Strategy for Coping with Ongoing Unsolvable Conflicts*, Begin-Sadat Center at Bar-Ilan University, 2013, p. 5, https://tinyurl.com/ycxpn4ff [Hebrew].

12 Nitzan Alon and Dana Preisler-Swery, "Running a Marathon and Putting a Spoke in the Wheels of the Enemy: The Campaign Between Wars in the IDF," *Bein Haktavim* 22-23 (2019) [Hebrew].

The Changing Enemy: From Seeking Decisive Victory to Ongoing Campaign

The changes in Israel's operations were mirrored in its enemies' actions and thought. Along with changes in the enemies themselves (from states with an army to sub-state organizations with hybrid operations) and the new possibilities due to technological advancement, they underwent a corresponding version of a Revolution in Military Affairs, and approaches developed that can be seen as their own campaign between wars.

Toward the end of the 1990s most of the powers that be in the Middle East were already in the midst of an intensive process in which they formulated a combat doctrine based on three principles.[13] First was the improved ability to sustain attacks in order to enable endurance and force preservation, primarily given an understanding of the lethality of precision guided munitions and the change they have created on the battlefield.[14] Improved survival was to be achieved through the use of shielding (bunkers and especially tunnels), camouflage and deception, dispersion of the military force, intentional blurring between "military" and "civilian" facilities and means, and deployment in an urban space, saturated with civilians and the media. Survival was also enhanced by the use of low signature weapons (such as portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles and surface-to-surface rockets); forces that have a low signature (commando, infantry, guerrilla fighters, para-military forces, suicide terrorists), and combat methods that enable maintaining such a signature (especially terrorism and guerrilla warfare).

In this context, much emphasis has been placed on coping with the air superiority of the adversary, through active means (air defense systems and offensive systems) and passive efforts (as part of the overall effort to sustain hits). This understanding has also led to investment in force buildup, centered

13 Itai Brun and Carmit Valensi, "The Revolution in Military Affairs of the Radical Axis," *Maarachot* 432 (August 2010), https://tinyurl.com/y6jbkm6r [Hebrew].

14 On sustaining attacks as a central principle in the strategic conception, see: Brun and Valensi, notes 32, 36.

on acquiring state-of-the-art air defense systems and upgrading the existing air defense systems.

The second principle was the consolidation of a credible deterrent capability, first and foremost in order to prevent large-scale conflict, which the adversary saw as opposed to its interests. The deterrent capability was also intended, in case basic deterrence failed, to draw the war to areas that are more convenient for the weaker side, and to offset, without battle, some of the technological advantages of an aggressor with technological superiority.[15] Emphasis shifted to use of high-trajectory ballistic weapons (rockets and surface-to-surface missiles), whose major advantage is their relative technological simplicity, low cost, and ability to penetrate deep into the adversary's territory; the lack of effective countermeasures against it; and the difficulty locating and attacking the launchers due to their low signature and large number. This has gained importance both as part of the deterrence effort and as part of the attrition effort.[16]

Third is the transition from a strategy of defeat to a strategy of attrition**,** which has been seen as effective due to the Western sensitivity to prolonged war and to casualties.[17] In the view of the adversary, just surviving in conflict is a key to victory, due to the inability of the ostensibly superior side to achieve a clear and unequivocal decision.[18] In this framework, use has been made of various methods of suicide attacks and kinds of explosive charges, including improvised explosive devices.

15 On deterrence as a central principle in the strategic conception, see: Brun and Valensi, note 37.

16 On the logic of using surface-to-surface rockets and missiles as part of tactical patterns, see: Brun and Valensi, note 40.

17 On attrition as a central principle in the strategic concept, see: Brun and Valensi, note 38. On the importance of causing pain and losses as part of tactical patterns, see: Brun and Valensi, note 43.

18 On victory via not losing as a central principle in the strategic concept, see: See Brun and Valensi, note 39.

This "counter-RMA" led Israel's enemies to develop an operational concept whose essence is threatening the Israeli rear with high-trajectory weapons and terrorism. In tandem, they decentralized forces and interspersed them among the civilian population, in order to neutralize the IDF's advantages. The concept has been expressed thus: "It is possible that alongside the technological inferiority, there will be superiority in other areas…There can also be a gap between the sides on the extent to which the interests at the center of the struggle are essential, the objectives of the war, the level of determination, endurance, willingness to take risks, and sensitivity to casualties."[19]

In conclusion, given the changes in the nature of the sides, the enormous gaps in conventional power, and the understanding that defeating the enemy ranges from difficult to impossible, both Israel and its adversaries have developed parallel conceptions that can be called the "campaign between wars" and the "counter-campaign between wars." In the face of Israel's satisfaction in CBW's physical achievements in preventing buildup or in killing enemy combatants, its adversaries developed a mind frame, according to which this physical damage was less relevant than the threat that they themselves created, and especially its cognitive impact on the Israeli public, creating erosion of Israel's willingness to fight, its internal resilience, and its stamina over time.

19 Brun and Valensi, note 46.