THE FIRST STAGE:
FROM THE CIVIL WAR IN SYRIA TO RUSSIA'S ENTRY INTO THE ARENA

Israel's first strike in Syria attributed to the CBW period occurred in January 2013, nearly two years after the civil war erupted. The target, according to foreign sources, was a convoy transporting SA-17 anti-aircraft missiles from Syria to Lebanon – a claim the Syrians denied, although they admitted that an Israeli attack was carried out within their territory.[20] A few days later, then-Minister of Defense Ehud Barak hinted that it was indeed an Israeli attack, and stated: "We said that we believe advanced weapons should not be allowed to be transferred to Hezbollah…When we say something, we mean it."[21]

In the first few years the attacks were relatively rare – according to most sources, there were six attacks in 2013 and two in 2014 (Figure 1). The targets in these years were transfers of anti-aircraft missiles, P-800 Oniks anti-ship missiles, with which it is possible to strike ships and coastal targets in Israel, and Fateh-110 or Scud-D surface-to-surface missiles.[22] During that time the "rules of the game" in the northern arena began to take shape: Israel felt free to attack shipments of advanced or game-changing weapons to Hezbollah, maintaining the freedom to decide which weapons fell into that category. For example, convoys transporting anti-tank missiles or surface-to-surface rockets were not attacked.

The Syrian regime, which was fully preoccupied with the civil war, did not respond to the attacks. For its part, over time, Hezbollah, which has enjoyed

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20 Roi Kais, "Israel Attacks Weapons Convoy in Syrian Territory," *Ynet*, January 30, 2013, https://tinyurl.com/mvs26w7j [Hebrew].

21 Minister of Defense Barak Hints Re: Syria: "When We Say Something, We Mean It," *N12*, February 3, 2013, https://tinyurl.com/yckafwyv [Hebrew].

22 Ron Ben-Yishai, "The Iranians Are Playing with Fire," *Ynet*, December 8, 2014, https://tinyurl.com/y5uedyyw [Hebrew].

mutual deterrence with Israel since the Second Lebanon War (2006) that was only seldom breached, defined its red lines: attacks within Lebanese territory (as it sees itself as defending Lebanon's sovereignty), and the killing of Hezbollah personnel in Syria.

Figure 1. **Attacks in Syria, 2013-2017**
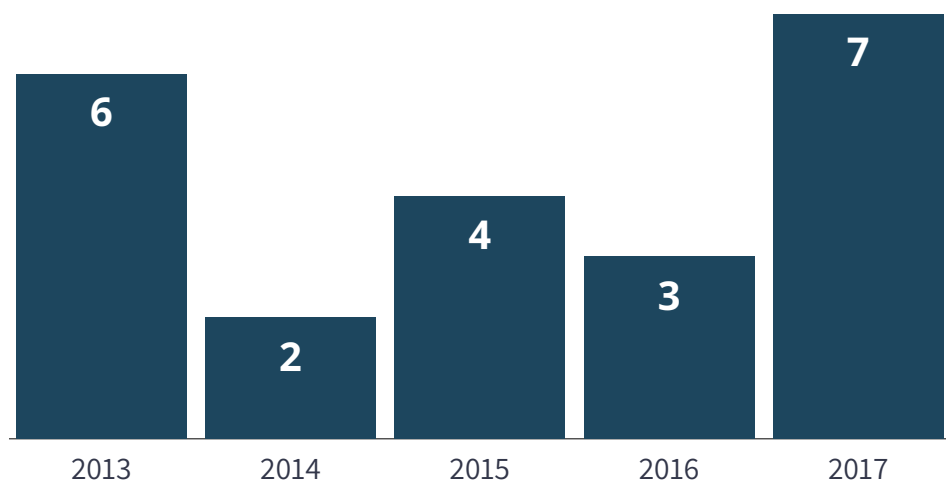
CBW in the IDF: From Individual Operations to Systemic Concept

In those years, discussion arose in the IDF surrounding the need to formulate a comprehensive doctrine for its operations between the major campaigns. In 2012, the Director of the Planning Division in the Planning Directorate, Col. (res.) Shay Shabtai, published an article stating that "between wars the IDF operates based on a collection of principles – some of them out-of-date and irrelevant – that do not converge to form a single coherent doctrine. The time has come for the IDF to see this interval as a campaign for all intents

and purposes and to formulate a combat doctrine, both at the level of the General Staff and at the national level."[23]

This discourse was the background to the first inclusion of the campaign between wars in the IDF's basic documents, led by the *IDF Strategy*, issued by then-Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot in August 2015. According to this document, the campaign between wars is part of the routine state, one of the military's three states of function (routine, emergency, and war):[24]

> The logic of the use of force in the campaign between wars is to maintain and enhance the advantages of the previous campaign with a series of targets or secondary objectives intended to stave off war:
> a. To weaken the negative elements of power
> b. To reduce enemy military buildup
> c. To create optimal conditions for victory in a future war
> d. To create legitimacy for Israel's actions and overturn a legitimate basis for the enemy's actions.[25]

The document states that the principle of using force in the campaign between wars is a combination of: "a. covert and secret action in all arenas and dimensions outside of the borders of the State of Israel; this policy is based on intelligence, and aims to impair the enemy's efforts and initiatives. b. overt action to create deterrence – [which] demonstrates the limits of Israel's restraint."[26] The document emphasizes the element of covertness of action, aimed primarily at preventing escalation into an all-out war, as well as international cooperation and activity in "soft" realms – cognitive, economic, and legal.

23 Col. Shay Shabtai, "The Concept of the Campaign Between Wars," *Maarchot* 445, October 2012 [Hebrew].
24 *IDF Strategy* (2015), p. 14, https://tinyurl.com/5aw8b2s2 [Hebrew].
25 *IDF Strategy* (2015), p. 20.
26 Ibid.

These definitions indicate how the campaign between wars was seen at this stage: as routine security activity whose objectives are relatively limited, and whose essence is staving off war and weakening the enemy somewhat, both in the physical sphere and in cognitive and legitimacy aspects. Chief of Staff Eisenkot underscored the importance of "not getting drawn into war" in the decision making process, and subsequently wrote that "any instance of getting drawn into all-out war, and even a war of attrition, means a failure of the campaign between wars doctrine."[27]

Hezbollah in the First Few Years: Emphasis on the Fighting in Syria

In 2012, at almost the same time that Israel began the strikes in Syria to stop weapons shipments to Lebanon, Hezbollah's involvement in the civil war deepened, and consequently Hezbollah operatives constituted a considerable presence in Syria. The military involvement of Iran and Hezbollah stemmed first and foremost from concern for the survival of the Bashar al-Assad regime: Hezbollah deemed this a necessary preamble for the continuity of the Iran-led axis, which includes Syria and itself, and its ability to survive and gain strength in the future.

Beyond the objective of saving Assad, Hezbollah feared that the civil war in Syria might spill over into Lebanon, and was especially concerned about global jihad forces penetrating into Lebanon – al-Qaeda and later ISIS. In subsequent stages, the organization, at Iran's directive, identified Syria's potential as a transfer station for weapons, goods, and operatives sent from Iran to Lebanon. This land axis constitutes an important artery in Hezbollah's military buildup and in the organization's ability to maintain its military and political power.

In the first year after the outbreak of the civil war, Hezbollah kept a low profile, for reasons that stemmed mainly from internal Lebanese political pressures. However, due to the increasing concern for the survival of the Assad

27 Alex Fishman, "Closing the Red Notebook," *Yediot Ahronot*, January 4, 2019 [Hebrew].

regime, it decided to increase the number of forces significantly: as early as May 2013 it was estimated that about 5,000 fighters participated in the battles in the al-Qusayr area, operating in company and battalion frameworks.

Figure 2. **Number of Hezbollah fatalities during the war in Syria**
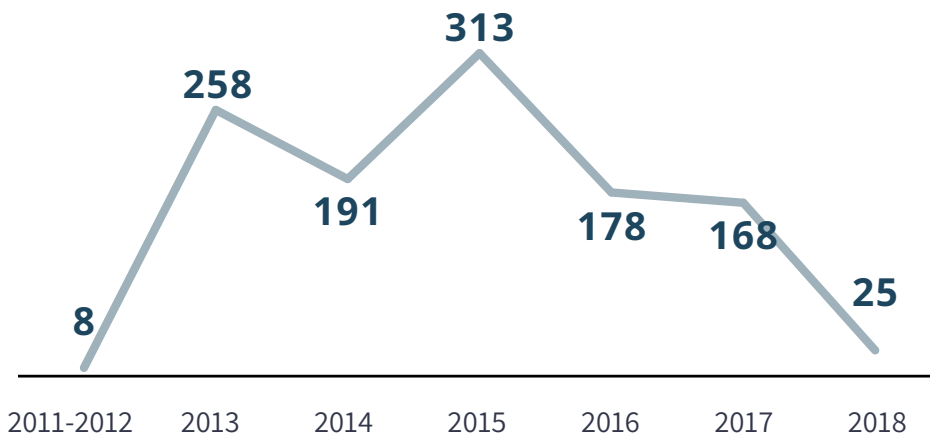
Russian deployment in Syria began in late 2015 – the year when the number of Hezbollah killed peaked, with 313 fatalities (Figure 2).[28] The fact that nearly half of the Hezbollah operatives were killed close to the Syrian-Lebanese border, in fighting intended to prevent a spillover of jihadist terrorism into Lebanon, helped garner internal Lebanese legitimacy for Hezbollah's involvement in the fighting in Syria.[29]

28 Ran Elkayam, "Estimate of Hezbollah's Fatalities during the Syrian Civil War and the Conclusions Arising from the Analysis of their Identity," Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, March 11, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/2nkhupf5
29 Ali Alfoneh, "Hezbollah Fatalities in the Syrian War," *PolicyWatch* 2566, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2, 2016, https://tinyurl.com/3kmh9axy

Defining the Red Lines

In its first two years, the campaign between wars assumed the shape of an ongoing campaign, in which both sides declared red lines: from Israel's side, the transfer of game-changing weapons to Hezbollah, with Israel retaining the right to define what that entailed; and from Hezbollah's side, the killing of Hezbollah personnel or strikes inside Lebanon. However, the red lines dynamic is complex and their definition is flexible, especially when they are not physical, and even more so when they are not seen as a sufficient pretext for war. The grey area that emerges, when each side interprets the red line as it sees fit and at its convenience, creates a "realm of containment" in which forceful action by the other side does not necessarily lead to a large-scale eruption or is even left without retaliation. At the same time, each side is entitled to continue what it is doing – in this case, Hezbollah with its military buildup efforts, drawing on its conclusion that in fact Israel is afraid of war and has settled for the campaign between wars.

Thus, despite the strikes, and perhaps because it was clear that they were the limit of military activity that Israel was willing to launch (given that by definition, every action in the campaign between wars will be measured according to the criterion of "not leading to war"), Hezbollah continued its force buildup, both overall and in its attempts to arm itself with what Israel defined as game-changing weapons.

The Precision Missile Project and "Winter Sun": Testing the Red Lines

In 2014 and 2015, the campaign between wars began to focus on a new threat, which Israel deemed as more serious than before: the "precision project." In a briefing in August 2019 in which it exposed the project in detail, the IDF claimed that the first actions in this context by the Iran-led axis included attempts to transfer to Hezbollah whole precision missiles via Syrian territory,

including some manufactured at Syrian sites. A significant portion of these attempts were thwarted in CBW operations until the end of 2015.[30]

Given the failure of these Iranian actions and Israel's adherence to the red line of not operating in Lebanon, Iran and Hezbollah decided to transfer the production of the missiles to inside Lebanon itself, in two ways: conversion of "dumb missiles" into precision missiles, and full production of long-range precision missiles. In 2018, in a speech at the UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu exposed the existence of three such production sites.[31]

The "precision project" demonstrates both the achievements and limitations of the campaign between wars. On the one hand, it is indisputable that until 2020 at least, Hezbollah possessed a much smaller arsenal of high-trajectory precision missiles than it hoped and planned to have by then. Chief of Staff Eisenkot summarized this at the end of this term in saying, "I can confidently say that as we speak, Hezbollah does not have precision capabilities aside from small and negligible numbers. They hoped that they would have hundreds of medium and long-range missiles."[32]

On the other hand, the transfer of production into Lebanon put Israel in a dilemma: was it willing to strike what became, in the words of some of its spokespeople, a *casus belli*, almost certainly risking an escalation that could lead to war? Israel refrained from striking inside Lebanon itself, and today it is not clear how much Hezbollah's arsenal of precision missiles has grown in the last few years.

At the same time, the attempts at a semi-covert campaign on Lebanese soil also led, at least in one case, to an actual danger of escalation. In August

30 Yaniv Kubovich, "IDF: Iran and Hezbollah Accelerating Precision Missile Project in Lebanon," *Haaretz*, August 29, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/2ucrvw29 [Hebrew].

31 Tal Lev-Ram, "After Netanyahu's Speech – the IDF Exposes Hezbollah's Precision Missile Production Sites," *Maariv*, September 27, 2018, https://w https://tinyurl.com/27tkh7hy [Hebrew].

32 Stephens, "The Man Who Humbled Qassim Suleimani."

2019, sites were attacked by drones in the Dahiyeh quarter in Beirut, where, according to subsequent leaks to the media, equipment for the precision project was stored.[33] (In addition, a Hezbollah operative was killed in a raid in Syria). Nasrallah responded immediately, this time with a direct threat: "If Netanyahu thinks that the story is over because there were no fatalities, he is mistaken. If we sit idly in face of this violation, Lebanon would be on a dangerous path, in which every two days a booby-trapped drone will come and attack targets in our territory… We will not let this happen on Lebanese soil."[34] A few days later, anti-tank missiles were fired at an IDF outpost and at a military ambulance with soldiers. The missiles missed their target, but the clear message was that blatantly crossing a red line would lead the organization to risk escalation.

This incident was preceded by an event that further indicates the tightrope walked by the two sides. On January 18, 2015, six Hezbollah operatives were killed in an air strike near Quneitra, including Jihad Mughniyeh, the son of the organization's former chief of staff, Imad Mughniyeh. An Iranian general was also killed in the strike. Israel did not take responsibility for the raid. However, unlike previous actions, Hezbollah's "realm of containment" was limited, because of the red line of killing its personnel, the identity of those killed, and the overt nature of the strike – in daylight, using aircraft.

Nasrallah promised revenge, and this indeed occurred ten days later, when anti-tank missiles were fired at an IDF convoy near Mt. Dov, killing two Givati Brigade soldiers. A UNIFIL member was killed in the IDF response. Two days after the event, Nasrallah gave a speech in which he sketched his organization's response policy: "They killed us in broad daylight, we killed them in broad daylight. They killed us around 11:30 in the morning, we killed

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33 "Report: The Drones That Struck in Beirut Hit Iranian Equipment for Producing Precision Missiles" *Ynet*, August 27, 2018, https://tinyurl.com/3tks9w4r [Hebrew].

34 Daniel Salami, "Nasrallah: Israel Cannot Attack in Lebanon and Remain Secure," *Ynet*, August 25, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/55ckztpk [Hebrew].

them at 11:30. They focused on two cars, we focused on two cars. They killed and injured; we will also be martyrs… We do not want war, but we are not weak and are not afraid of war."[35]

Ostensibly, the lesson to be drawn from "Winter Sun" – the name that the IDF gave to these events – is that both sides know well how to sketch the boundaries of the use of force so as to refrain from full-scale war. However, a closer look at the incident reveals that the Hezbollah force fired several Kornet anti-tank missiles at the convoy of IDF vehicles (in various reports their number was estimated at between 4 and 7). This could have led to a higher number of casualties, which in turn would have likely prompted a larger and more lethal response from Israel – and to the danger of escalation, particularly obvious to Hezbollah's leadership, which experienced firsthand the events of the 2006 Lebanon War.

The conclusion is that even at this relatively early stage of the campaign between wars in the northern arena, Hezbollah proved that under certain conditions it was willing to relinquish control of the situation in order to uphold its red lines – even at the cost of risking escalation that it did not want. This also applied to the shooting at the ambulance In 2019. The terrorist attack at Megiddo Junction on March 13, 2023 (carried out by a Hezbollah operative who had infiltrated from Lebanon) should be construed in a similar context.

These cases and others illustrate the problematic nature of an ongoing campaign against capabilities carried out under a strict directive to refrain from all-out war: striking the enemy's ways of arming itself also leads it to drawing conclusions, and as a result changing its actions; in order to continue to prevent it from arming itself, Israel must also change its modus operandi, in a way that comes closer to crossing the red lines, which could in turn lead to escalation.

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35 Tom Perry and Laila Bassam, "Hezbollah: We Don't Want War with Israel but Do Not Fear It," *Reuters*, January 30, 2015, https://tinyurl.com/4c6a9w6u

Consequently, Israel is forced to choose between the continuation of an effective campaign against capabilities and an increasing risk of escalation, and usually chooses concessions regarding effective action – for example, refraining from striking the "precision factories" on Lebanese soil. The enemy is both successful in arming itself (albeit perhaps not as much as it wanted) and also concluding that it is protected within the framework of the red lines, because Israel is afraid of war. This understanding in itself increases the chance of miscalculation and unintended escalation.

The enemy, on the other hand, continually displays a willingness to risk escalation, because it assumes that Israel will do everything to refrain from it. Nasrallah expressed this in a speech in May 2023, when he said (in response to remarks by the head of IDF Military Intelligence) that "You are not the ones threatening full-scale war; we are the ones doing so."[36]

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36 Nasrallah Responds to Head of Military Intelligence: "You Are Not the Ones Threatening War," *Walla*, May 25, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/yc2334d5 [Hebrew].