THE SECOND STAGE:
FROM RUSSIA'S DEPLOYMENT INTO THE ARENA TO 2018

On September 30, 2015, Russians forces entered Syria and deployed at the Khmeimim Air Base and the Port of Tartous. At the peak of its military presence, Russia's order of battle included about 70 fighter aircraft (Sukhoi 24, 25, 30, 34, and 35), transport aircraft, and attack helicopters, hundreds of drones, advanced air defense systems (SA-22, S-400, and electronic warfare), T-90 tanks, ships, submarines, and about 4,000 soldiers, including commando units.

The initial goal of Russia's military involvement in Syria was to help Assad's forces retake the country's critical territories, while suppressing the offensive efforts of the rebels. The Russian forces operated as part of a coalition that included the Syrian army; Iran, which dispatched about 2,000 combat soldiers from its Quds Force; and Hezbollah, which deployed the majority of its fighting force in Syria. These forces constituted the coalition's land forces, while the Russians mainly provided air support and supplied armament.

The involvement of these forces in the fighting generated a significant change in the civil war: the existential threat to the Assad regime was removed, and instead, the regime began a process of retaking the territories that were previously under the control of ISIS or rebel forces. This change enabled Hezbollah to gradually reduce the involvement of its fighters in combat, reflected in a decline in the number of fatalities among the organization's personnel – from 313 in 2015 to 25 in 2018 (Figure 2).[37]

Hezbollah's fighting alongside the Russian military was a watershed moment. For the first time, its operatives fought side by side with a strong, advanced army. Fighting alongside the Russians also introduced Hezbollah to advanced weapon systems and methods of organization of a veteran army skilled at deploying large units with inter-branch cooperation, as well as small units

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37 Alfoneh, "Hezbollah Fatalities."

in special operations. For the first time in its history, Hezbollah conducted relatively large-scale, integrated attacks, together with the Russian military, and fighting alongside Russian tanks, the Russian air force, artillery, drones, and reconnaissance. The operational experience that Hezbollah's fighters and commanders accumulated following the successful attacks in Syria led the organization to rethink how it would handle the next clash with Israel – a transition from defense to offense.[38]

Russia's Involvement in Syria and the Beginning of the Campaign against Iranian Entrenchment

The Russian presence created another red line for Israel – refraining from endangering the lives of Russian forces. This was mainly a tactical limitation, as the IDF raids were not necessarily in conflict with Russian interests, as long as they did not endanger the declared Russian objective – preserving the Assad regime, and later, also strengthening Assad's standing and image as ruler and sovereign.

For Israel, the Russian presence initially prompted caution in the campaign between wars: figures on the attacks attributed to the IDF following the Russian deployment in Syria showed that for over a year there were fewer attacks, most of them focused on the Syrian side of its border with Lebanon (the Qalamoun Mountains). As time passed and the IDF adapted to coordination with the Russians, the number of attacks rose (from February 2017 onward), with an emphasis on the "precision project." There was also a new focus for Israel, resulting from the increasing strength of the axis connecting Iran to Lebanon, via Iraq and Syria: the entrenchment of Shiite militias established by Iran in Syrian territory.

Former Chief of Staff Eisenkot described this in an interview: "In 2017 we came to the cabinet, gave a presentation on the arena and the situation,

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38 Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, "Hezbollah's Involvement in the Civil War in Syria," https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/20521

and explained to the ministers that Qasem Soleimani had decided to deploy 100,000 Shiite fighters along our fences, and that the Iranians were on the way to taking control of Syria. At the end of the presentation, I said to the cabinet that I recommend embarking on a campaign against the Quds forces and to call it a campaign between wars."[39]

From late 2017, the entrenchment of pro-Iranian militias commanded an increasingly larger portion of the expanded CBW activities. On December 2, 2017, a militia base in the al-Kiswah region was attacked; the attack was preceded by statements by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman that Israel would not allow Iranian entrenchment in Syria.[40] Meanwhile, the response of the Syrian military (with encouragement from the Russian commanders on the ground) against Israel's violations of the renewed Syrian sovereignty intensified, including anti-aircraft fire that downed an Israeli Air Force F-16 (February 2018). In May 2018, the Quds Force also responded, firing about 20 rockets toward Israel in response to Operation House of Cards – a large-scale bombardment of Quds Force targets and Syrian anti-aircraft batteries.

The risk of conflict in Israel and Russia's operational zones in Syria required a mechanism of coordination between Israel and the Russian forces to prevent escalation or unintended clashes, and this was indeed established and operated successfully in most cases. The deconfliction mechanism developed over time from the military-tactical level to a strategic coordination mechanism, including a three-way consultation forum, comprising Russia, Israel, and the United States. Furthermore, the Israeli government began to see a possibility of Russia restricting Iran and Hezbollah's operations in Syria – a concept that

39 Ben Caspit, "Will Eisenkot Go into Politics? 'When the Country Goes to Elections We'll Be Able to Talk About it Again," *Maariv*, January 29, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/4camj9fh [Hebrew].

40 Yoav Zeitun, "Lieberman in Message to Russia: We Will Not Allow Iranian Entrenchment in Syria, Freedom of Operation for the IDF," *Ynet*, November 15, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/5fp3ssjk [Hebrew].

served Moscow. Israel also saw Russia as a channel of communication for conveying messages to the Assad regime, when necessary.

At the Helsinki Summit in the summer of 2018, with the participation of then-US President Donald Trump, his Russian counterpart President Vladimir Putin, and Prime Minister Netanyahu, it was decided that the sides would work together to protect Israel in the Syrian arena, mainly limiting Iranian activity in Syria. However, despite the statements by Israeli and Russian officials that the countries share the interest of containing Iran, in fact only limited and inconsistent measures were taken. Russia lacked genuine intent and capabilities to push the Iranians out of Syria, and preferred to keep the issue as a bargaining chip vis-à-vis Israel.

Things reached a point of decision with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Israel's position in the first few months of the conflict was evasive and equivocal (state officials defined it in briefings as "walking between the raindrops" and "biting its tongue").[41] This position, to the dismay of the US administration, was justified internally and externally by the need to maintain the Air Force's freedom of operation in the campaign between wars – a narrow tactical consideration in an event of global implications. Even though this position was supported by IDF leadership and perceived within Israel as justified, it attested to limited thinking, engaged mainly in aspects of the use of force and shaped by the perspective and stature of military leaders.

IDF Strategy 2018

In April 2018, Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot updated the *IDF Strategy*. The new document reflected his view on the changes that occurred during his term, which ended eight months later. The most prominent change was the emphasis on the campaign between wars, defined in the preface as of

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41 Jonathan Lis, "Foreign Ministry: Israel Supports the Territorial Integrity of Ukraine, Calls for a Diplomatic Solution," *Haaretz*, February 23, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/b7cvnrds [Hebrew].

"increasing importance."[42] Unlike in the original document from 2015, in which the campaign between wars was considered a routine situation, now CBW was discussed in a separate chapter and portrayed as the main tool within what was called "the prevention and influence approach."[43]

In this document, the list of goals regarding the use of force in the campaign between wars is longer and more ambitious than in the past:

a. To reduce existing and emerging threats
b. To stave off the next war, and to create better conditions for victory
c. To maintain and strengthen deterrence
d. To increase the State of Israel in general and the IDF in particular as an asset
e. To maintain the IDF's freedom of operation and to reduce that of the enemy.

The document specifies that "the activity of the campaign between wars is ongoing, occurring throughout the combat arena…in all dimensions of combat and in a variety of offensive tools – kinetic, legal, diplomatic, cognitive, technological, electronic, network environments, cooperation, and military diplomacy. The mode of operation in the campaign between wars is offensive and proactive, under the threshold of war."[44]

This change reflected in the development of military thinking upon recognition of the opportunities offered by the campaign between wars allows, or perhaps – as has occurred more than once in the annals of the IDF – ascribes strategic significance to a series of tactical actions stemming from tactical opportunities rather than strategic thought. One way or another, an objective examination raises doubts about whether the campaign between

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42 *IDF Strategy* (2018), p. 3 [Hebrew].
43 Ibid., p. 23.
44 Ibid., p. 24

wars in the northern arena has achieved more than the first objective out of the five presented – and even that only in part.

From an organizational standpoint, leadership of the campaign in those years was transferred from the Air Force to Military Intelligence, "in a way that required [from the IAF] a 'systemic payment,' from setting the objectives of the campaign to fulfilling them."[45] This process, led by Chief of Staff Eisenkot, should also be seen as an attempt to institutionalize CBW and to ascribe it significance beyond bombing targets, linking it to general insights about the enemy and the arena in general. This turning point prompted change within the Military Intelligence branch itself: "The balance of power between the different bodies changed: whereas the operations division made CBW the focus of its activity in practice…the research division was required to concentrate its efforts on operational intelligence and position CBW at the center of its activity."[46]

This is a familiar process in the history of the IDF, in which the various organizations engaged in "today's war" garner power and resources and command attention, and the entire system has to cater to the urgent needs of practical operations. This is a natural tendency and earns doctrinal interpretation, and ostensibly reflects an innovation in the nature of war and the military; but in practice, this focus on current operational activity is not necessarily consistent with preparations for war – a problem that has had dire consequences on more than one occasion.

The analytical article on CBW cited above, which is based on a classified book written in the Military Intelligence branch and published within the IDF, states that in the IDF itself there were those who "raise doubts regarding the strategic impact of the campaign between wars" and claim that "the intensive engagement in CBW prioritizes what is urgent over what is important, diverts

45 David Siman-Tov and David Sternberg, "The Campaign Between Wars and the IDF's Changing Form of War," *Bein Hadrachim* 179, https://tinyurl.com/485w7ewf [Hebrew].
46 Ibid.

manpower (toward the operations), leads to a lack of management attention of the organization's leadership, and impairs the ability to have a broad and holistic view of the problems, observing them through tunnel vision."[47]

CBW in the Eyes of the Axis of Resistance

Since the adoption of the campaign between wars as Israel's main strategy in the northern region, the other side – which includes Iran, Hezbollah, and the Syrian regime – has assigned several interpretations to the logic and purpose of the campaign. Most remarks on CBW occur in reference to Israeli speakers or writers, citing quotes and analyses of senior IDF figures, research institutes, the Israeli government and media, which have all described the new operational concept.[48]

In general, it seems that the resistance axis did not see the campaign between wars as a fundamental change in Israeli strategy demanding new conceptualizations on its part. The prevailing assumption was that Israel was not waging this campaign by itself, but was helped by the United States, countries in the region, and armed terrorist groups, such as Syrian rebel organizations and ISIS.[49]

An article published in 2016 in a *l-Akhbar* with the headline "The Campaign Between Wars: A New Failed Israeli Strategy" discussed the evolution of CBW and noted that the idea developed in the IDF long before the outbreak of the war in Syria in 2011. The author claimed that the Israeli surprise at Hezbollah's weapons and combat capabilities in the Second Lebanon War and Israel's recognition that it is unable to thwart Hezbollah's military capability in a political or deterrent fashion are what led to the CBW approach. According to

47 Ibid.
48 Michael Milstein, "The Campaign Between the Wars": The Enemy's Conception of the War Between the Wars, *Bein Haktavim* 22-23, Campaign Between Wars and Routine Security – Part 3. https://tinyurl.com/5x3rfjva [Hebrew].
49 Khalil Nasrallah, "The Campaign Between Wars: The Failure of Israel's Strategy in Syria," *Ufeed*, December 22, 2021 [Arabic].

this interpretation, Israel's original plan was to integrate means from different areas in addition to military force – international law, media, diplomacy, and economy – in order to disrupt the enemy's buildup, maintain deterrence, and strengthen Israel's legitimacy and the legitimacy of its actions in advance of a potential future war. This plan required the involvement of various Israeli mechanisms and institutions, but failed in its attempt to become a multidimensional strategy and remained the military's domain.[50]

Far-reaching interpretations of CBW objectives can also be found in the Arab media. A comprehensive study conducted at the al-Ittihad Center for Research and Development titled "The Campaign Between Wars: The Failure of Israel's Strategy in Syria,"[51] argues that aside from CBW's declared objectives of preventing the transfer of game-changing weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon and the entrenchment of Iran and its proxies in Syria, Israel seeks to establish a security zone 40 to 80 km into southern Syria and beyond, and even to strive to overthrow the Syrian state.

The discourse of the resistance elements reflects a mutual learning process and learning through friction (in a crisis mode). It is not only Israel that improves its capabilities in the campaign between wars; the other side also internalizes the changes and acts accordingly. For example, if Israel focuses its attacks on attempts to smuggle elements needed for the precision project by air, the attempted smuggling moves more to sea or land routes; if military airports are attacked, then increasing use will be made of civilian airports while using means of camouflage. And similar to Israel, which seeks to exploit the enemy's vulnerabilities, the axis's elements identify the vulnerabilities of the campaign between wars – the complicated relations between Israel and Russia in the Syrian theater, or the sensitivity of the United States to attacks on its forces by Shiite militias – and seeks to exploit them.

50 Mahmed Badir, "The Campaign Between Wars: A New Failed Israeli Strategy," *al-Akhbar*, May 24, 2016, https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/214192 [Arabic].
51 Nasrallah, "Campaign Between Wars."

The media discourse on CBW does not lack for criticism: the axis's elements often refer to CBW as a "default option" and as an Israeli compromise that stems from weakness and failure to cope with its adversaries and the complexity of their activity on the battlefield. In their eyes, the CBW strategy indicates an erosion of Israel's deterrence, and especially Israel's ability to win wars. Accordingly, Israel settles for selectively striking capabilities and the military buildup of the axis and refrains from challenging it in a way that would lead to escalation. Israel's restraint against Hezbollah's game-changing strategic weapons and reluctance to directly strike the organization's operatives are mentioned often.

The criticism relates mainly to Israel's failure to achieve the objectives of the campaign. According to the critics, the Israeli attempt to separate Syria from Iran has failed – Iran has in fact strengthened its ties with Syria. In this context, Israeli officials were quoted as claiming that not only was Iran not pushed away from Israel's borders, but rather, its presence there was strengthened, and this is an "overwhelming failure."[52] Furthermore, researchers claimed that the campaign between wars has not neutralized the axis of resistance's ability to obtain high-quality know-how, or the ability of the Syrian army to rebuild and renew its capabilities. In this view, not only are the airstrikes little more than a default option; instead, they divert attention and resources and especially harm Israel's preparedness for the next war: "The constant focus on actions that are part of the campaign between wars will harm the army's capabilities, or the army will forget how to wage a real war, because these actions are at the expense of training for a large-scale conflict."[53]

Thus, public reference to the campaign between wars in Arab and other media associated with the axis contradicts each of the Israeli claims regarding CBW's objectives and achievements. In their eyes, CBW does not cause

52 Ibid.
53 Adnan Abu Amar, "Israel and the Results of the Campaign Between Wars Strategy in Syria," March 18, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/47zmexmr [Arabic].

real damage to their buildup and does not reduce "existing and emerging threats"; it does not strengthen Israeli deterrence and stave off the next war, as it encourages a sense that in fact it is Israel that is deterred from war; and it does not raise Israel's value or expand the IDF operational freedom.