THE CAMPAIGN BETWEEN WARS AT A CROSSROADS

CBW, 2013–2023: WHAT LIES AHEAD?

OFER SHELAH AND CARMIT VALENSI

iNSS
המכון למחקרי ביטחון לאומי
THE INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES
אוניברסיטת תל אביב
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MEMORANDUM 227, NOVEMBER 2023

המב"ם על פרשת דרכים

המערכה בין המלחמות 2013–2023 – מה הלאה?

עפר שלח וכרמית ולנסי

iNSS
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NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

This memorandum was written and published in Hebrew before the attack by Hamas on Israel on October 7, 2023 and the outbreak of the Swords of Iron war in Gaza, which is still ongoing as of the writing of this note. In the first weeks of the war there were daily exchanges of fire between Israel and Hezbollah, and while both sides have seemed reluctant to engage in a full-scale war, the possibility of a far more serious escalation clearly exists. There is also increased awareness in Israel that the pre-war status quo in the north is no longer tenable, and the Hezbollah threat will have to be addressed sooner or later.

Israel is making an effort to amend the pre-war situation in at least one important aspect: the distancing of Hezbollah's Radwan elite units from its border, and the reestablishment of the situation on the ground predicated in UN Resolution 1701, reached with the conclusion of the Second Lebanon War in 2006: no Hezbollah military presence south of the Litani River. It has yet to be seen whether that is achievable without larger scale military operations.

All of this will obviously have a considerable effect on the future objectives and methods of Israel's "campaign between wars" (CBW). Our conclusion in the memorandum, namely, that there is an urgent need to examine in depth the objectives, achievements, and future operational directions of the campaign between wars, as perhaps it had exhausted its usefulness, may seem obvious at this stage.

On the other hand, within the Israeli military establishment there is a growing understanding of some of the conclusions drawn in the memorandum, for example, that CBW helped Israel's enemies develop their "axis of resistance" strategy. The tragic events of October 7 also brought home all too painfully the effects of ignoring the impact of the emphasis on CBW on Israel's readiness for war, and in particular, multi-front war. Some will argue that under the current circumstances Israel is already facing a multi-front war, both in terms

of the readiness of the force and in terms of the enemy's belief that Israel is averse to conflict. This too is discussed in this study.

CBW will be different after the war is over. We believe that a study of its origins, developments, and effects on both sides, like the one presented here, is essential for future decisions about Israel's future security policy, as well as the IDF's force buildup and concept of operation.

Ofer Shelah and Carmit Valensi
November 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The "campaign between wars" (CBW) is the official term in the Israeli security establishment for the series of offensive actions that Israel has launched, primarily in Syrian territory, over the past decade. What began as individual pinpoint actions aimed at preventing the transfer of advanced weapons from a disintegrating Syria to the Hezbollah organization in Lebanon developed into a physically and geographically large-scale campaign that has been anchored in Israel's military operational concept, including in the *IDF Strategy* documents.

Regional changes, however, including the stabilization of the Assad regime, the thawed relations between Iran and longstanding adversaries, and the United States' continued distancing from the region, raise the question whether the overall effect of the campaign between wars still works in Israel's favor, on levels beyond the physical harm to the enemy. For example, the past decade has seen the emergence of the Iran-led "axis of resistance," which now operates against Israel more tightly than in the past. Analysis suggests that the expansion of the campaign between wars actually helped create this axis, to the point of significantly increasing the danger to Israel of a simultaneous multi-arena conflict with various enemies.

The IDF's new capabilities in precision intelligence, air and covert operations, cyber operations, and more have been demonstrated impressively in the campaign between wars. However, experience teaches that focusing on these capabilities can in fact have a negative effect in several areas: CBW requires major monetary resources and a relatively large amount of command attention, which are drawn from other IDF missions, chiefly preparation for a significant military campaign. The means that enable CBW operations – almost unlimited intelligence wealth, central command, and a surplus of capabilities dedicated to precise execution – contrast with the kind of command and operations that are required in a major campaign, and there is concern (also based on

experience) that the command and the forces would have difficulty adapting to the conditions of such a campaign.

This study examines the history of the campaign between wars, its roots as an operational concept, its expansion following its operational success, how it has been viewed over the years by various adversaries, and its relevance a decade after it began. In addition, it examines CBW's impact on IDF readiness for large-scale war and the chances of unintentional deterioration caused by one of the sides. The study suggests that the campaign between wars in its current configuration has passed its peak with regard to most of its objectives, and has increasingly caused negative or unintentional outcomes. Consequently, the study proposes recommendations for the future, led by:

a. Assessing thoroughly the objectives, achievements, and future operational directions of the campaign between wars, while examining the changes underway in the regional and international systems and defining an end state for the campaign.

b. Focusing CBW activity solely on worthy targets of enemy buildup, with an emphasis on Hezbollah, and not exaggerating the importance of symbols, e.g., "Iranian entrenchment in Syria."

c. Examining the situation in Syria carefully, and designing various modes of operation vis-à-vis the different areas within it. In this context, it is necessary to rethink the benefit inherent in striking civilian regime targets.

d. Preparing the IDF for the scenario of a multi-arena war, while assessing its capabilities in depth and giving renewed attention to aspects that have been neglected (in particular, the readiness of ground forces); simultaneously, conveying in military buildup, in rhetoric, and in actions on the ground that Israel is not afraid of a full-scale war and is not willing to adhere to red lines drawn by the enemy.

e. Designing and operating non-violent, covert, and political means of influence in the region, especially in Syria and Lebanon.

f. Forming regional and global coalitions that will constitute a counterweight to the axis of resistance and its connection with Russia and China, and help with the critical political goal of renewing US interest and involvement in the region.

g. Studying the ways of both learning and shaping concepts in the IDF, and examining to what extent they are influenced by individual instances of success in force application and preservation of achievements, rather than by looking toward the future.

INTRODUCTION

Early 2023 marked 10 years since the first strike in Syrian territory attributed to Israel, in the framework of what came to be known as the "campaign between wars" (CBW). What began as a small number of individual strikes, intended to prevent the transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah, developed over the years into an ongoing and intensifying campaign in Syria and elsewhere that has become a central focus of IDF activity and attention.

Over time, the campaign between wars developed far beyond its initial objectives, namely, preventing Hezbollah's acquisition of advanced weapons, and later, impeding the entrenchment of Iran's proxies in Syria. Various statements by the political and military leaderships in Israel have even attributed it strategic significance, portraying it as a new, important form of warfare that reflects Israel's advantages and greatly improves its strategic standing.

However, the enemy also learns the lessons of the campaign between wars and changes accordingly, and recently even developed a kind of "counter-campaign between wars," analyzed below. At the same time, significant changes have occurred in the regional picture, following Russia's force deployment in Syria and the stabilization of the Assad regime in Damascus, the continued US withdrawal from the region, and the increasing standing of Iran and the emergence of the "axis of resistance" to Israel, with tightened relations between Iran and Hezbollah with the terrorist organizations in Gaza and the West Bank. The regional "period of détente," reflected in the warmed relations between longtime and bitter adversaries (Iran and Saudi Arabia, Iran and Egypt) and in Syria's return to the Arab League, also demands a serious examination of Israel's force application policy.

Within the security establishment, opinions are divided regarding the effect of CBW on the IDF's readiness for war, and especially for the scenario of a multi-arena conflict, which stands at the center of the multiyear force buildup plan advanced by IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi. Some see CBW as a

systematic campaign to reduce the enemy's capabilities, which will improve Israel's opening stance in a future war; others point out that the CBW red lines that Israel maintains meticulously erode its deterrence vis-à-vis the enemy (especially Hezbollah) and argue that CBW modi operandi are not necessarily compatible with preparing the IDF for the scenario of a full-scale war.

Ten years since the beginning of the campaign between wars, the time has come to thoroughly examine the evolution of the campaign, its current state, its substantive achievements, and above all, the impact that the emphasis on CBW has had on Israel's regional situation and the IDF's readiness for war.

The research presented here involves studying CBW genealogy, from its roots in the IDF's operational concept and the development of actions since 2013, and the way the enemies – Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran – have viewed them. In addition, it examines developments since early 2023, including significant changes in the enemy's approach to recent events and the operational environment. The last part of the study presents lessons and recommendations that constitute a significant change to the existing policy. Their essence is focusing the kinetic activity on critical aspects of the enemy's military buildup, while forgoing broader targets and developing non-kinetic, political, and other ways to realize Israel's objectives in Syria and Lebanon, which in themselves are not sufficiently defined. In addition, it is necessary to prepare the IDF for the scenario of a multi-arena conflict, and to convey through readiness and action that Israel does not fear such as conflict. In the political sphere, Israel should focus on creating regional and global coalitions that constitute a counterweight to Iran's increasing strength, its formation of the axis of resistance, and its tightening ties with Russia and China.

CBW, with all its operational success and the demonstrated high level of intelligence and air capabilities, has exhausted most of its utility in its current configuration. Thus, it is necessary to formulate a realistic policy and other modes of operation in order to improve Israel's standing and prepare it better for the possibility of conflict – which perhaps will help prevent it.

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

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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

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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.

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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

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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

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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.

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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

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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.

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**
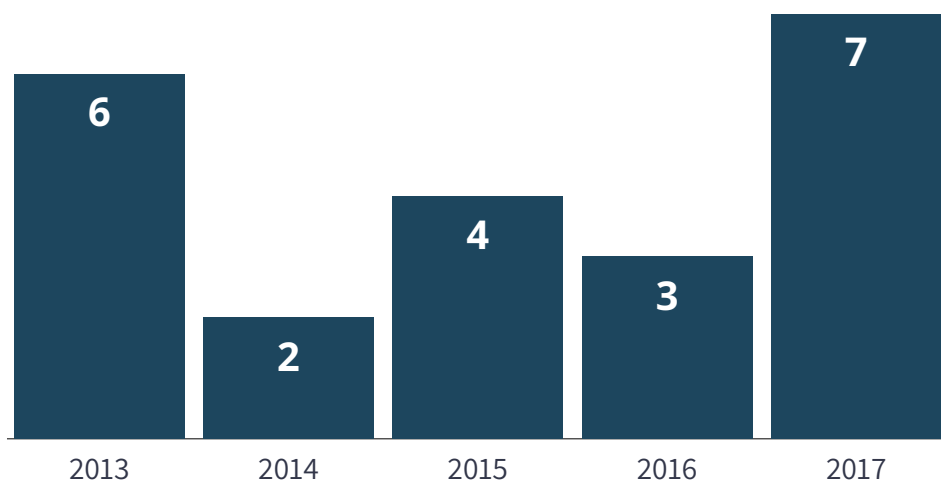
CBW in the IDF: From Individual Operations to Systemic Concept
In those years, discussion arose in the IDF surrounding the need to formulate a comprehensive doctrine for its operations between the major campaigns. In 2012, the Director of the Planning Division in the Planning Directorate, Col. (res.) 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.

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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

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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**
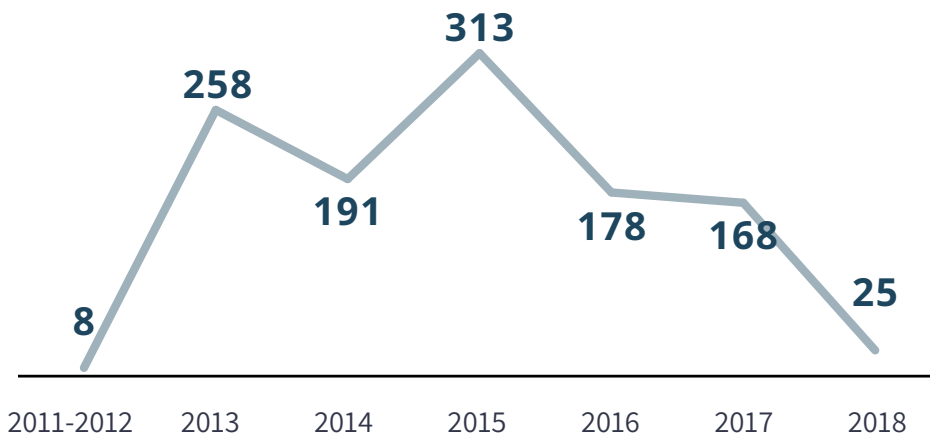
Russian deployment in Syria began in late 2015 – the year when the number of Hezbollah killed peaked, with 313 fatalities (Figure 2).[28] The fact that nearly half of the Hezbollah operatives were killed close to the Syrian-Lebanese border, in fighting intended to prevent a spillover of jihadist terrorism 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].

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

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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

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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

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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.

THE THIRD STAGE:
IRAN AND ITS PROXIES

Toward the end of Chief of Staff Eisenkot's term, some in Israel began to see the campaign between wars as no longer directed primarily at enemy capabilities – game-changing weapons in the hands of Hezbollah or Iranian proxies in Syria – but rather a campaign against Iran itself, and specifically against the Quds Force and the Revolutionary Guards. Eisenkot himself stated in an interview with the *New York Times* at the end of his term in 2019 that Qasem Soleimani (killed by the United States about a year later) erred in "choosing a playground where he is relatively weak," given Israel's complete intelligence and air superiority in the Syrian arena and the international justification for Israel's action against Iranian entrenchment.[54]

These remarks were echoed by statements by Prime Minister Netanyahu, whereby there is little point in striking the "cat's paws," meaning Iran's proxies in Syria and Lebanon, but rather it is necessary to strike the cat itself. Meanwhile, Israeli figures, whether in direct statements or in reports in the foreign media, started to partially remove the veil of ambiguity that Israel had maintained on the campaign between wars, including Israeli activity in Iran itself. These statements were often seen in Israel as aimed inward, as part of the ongoing political crisis and the frequent election campaigns, and were criticized by former senior officials in the political and security establishments.

After rising to the helm in 2021, then-Prime Minister Naftali Bennett held a series of deliberations on Iran. While their contents were not revealed, repeated statements in the media indicated that their conclusion was similar to Nentayahu's: it was necessary to take action against Iran, including on its soil, and not to settle for the increasing number of strikes in Syria. In addition to reports of "kinetic" attacks and cyber actions against targets in Iran, some

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

of which were unrelated to its nuclear project (against which Israel has operated for a long time) and not even necessarily related to Iran's military buildup, leaks and briefings conveyed that the purpose of the campaign was to undermine the regime in Iran and to create pressure by certain elements in Iranian society against the regime and the Revolutionary Guards.[55]

In an article published by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Maj. Gen. Eyal Zamir, former Deputy Chief of Staff and current Director General of the Ministry of Defense, described what he called a "long-term approach" that must be adopted in order to address the comprehensive challenge posed by Iran. According to Zamir, even the negotiations over the nuclear agreement are used by the Iranian regime as a trap: "The Iranian regime is using the nuclear negotiations as a diversion to distract from its ambition to achieve regional hegemony by means of subversion and accelerated development of its aggressive conventional regional capabilities."[56]

Among the principles that Zamir proposed to adopt as part of what he calls "a protracted conflict," which aims to defeat Iran's regional aspirations, he mentions, "Expanding the gray zone campaign, which would involve adopting the Israeli model and experience to expand the gray zone campaign (aka campaign between wars) as an overall concept designed to weaken the Iranian regime, the IRGC, and its regional capabilities by employing low-signature actions short of war while preserving deniability."[57]

The campaign between wars was not restricted to land. Starting in 2019, Israel waged a campaign to thwart an Iranian attempt to fund Hezbollah through a system of oil smuggling efforts from Iran to Syria by sea, and to transfer weapons by sea. Among the actions known in this campaign were

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55 Jonathan Lis, "Israel Marks a New Target in Iran: Harming the Quality of Life of Citizens," *Haaretz*, November 27, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/3hcmp4cx [Hebrew].

56 Eyal Zamir, *Countering Iran's Regional Strategy: A Long-Term Comprehensive Approach* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2022), p. 3, https://tinyurl.com/2y8c5scn

57 Ibid., p. 47.

the attack on the Iranian ship MV *Shahr-E-Kord* and the attack on the Iranian spy ship MV *Saviz*, in 2021, which were attributed to Israel. Iran responded by attacking merchant ships that have ties to Israeli companies, and the scope of the Israeli actions decreased.

The Change in the Attacks in Syria, 2022-2023

As Bashar al-Assad's standing stabilized, the nature of the CBW strikes also changed (Figure 3). About half of the airstrikes in Syria in 2022 were not carried out against weapons transfers or pro-Iranian forces, but were aimed at Syrian regime targets. Fifty-two percent of the regime targets that were attacked were Syrian military targets, and 29 percent of the attacks were aimed against Syrian national infrastructure, airports, and seaports. Unlike attacks in previous years, which were aimed at a warehouse or a specific target connected to the shipment of weapons, the four airstrikes carried out in 2022 on the international airports in Damascus and Aleppo led to their temporary shutdown.

Ostensibly, Israel's strikes in the past two years, which also expanded geographically (in January 2023 several attacks were reported on the Iraq-Syria border),[58] have an additional objective aside from preventing weapons transfers or Iranian entrenchment in Syrian territory: placing pressure on the Assad regime, so that it in turn should pressure Iran to cease its efforts in these areas (Figure 4).[59] This seems to be the objective, even though is doubtful that Assad has the ability, even if he wants to, to actually influence Iran's behavior.

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58 Daniel Salami, "Reports: More Trucks with Iranian Weapons Attacked on Syria-Iraq Border," *Ynet*, January 30, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/2e36uerh [Hebrew].

59 Eden Kaduri, "The Campaign Between the Wars in Syria: What Was, What Is, and What Lies Ahead," *Special Publication*, INSS, March 6, 2023, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/war-between-the-wars-syria/

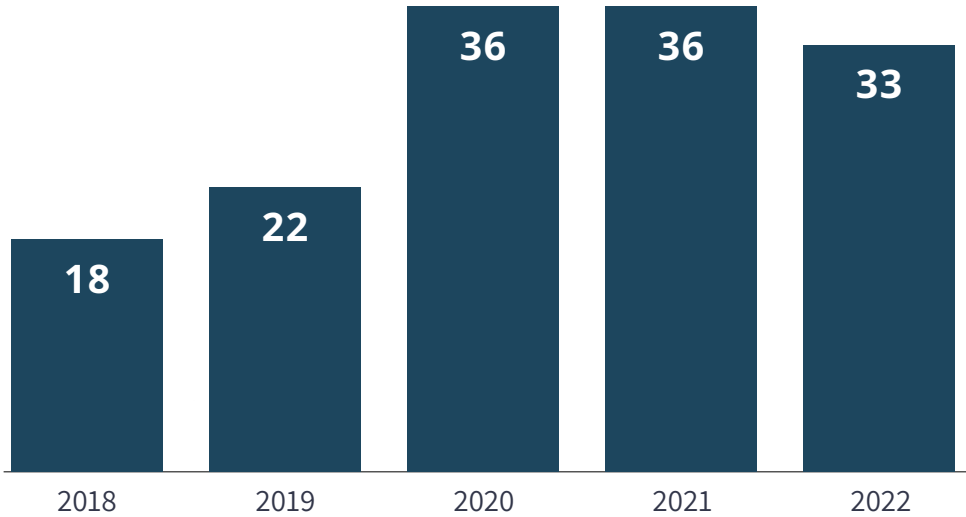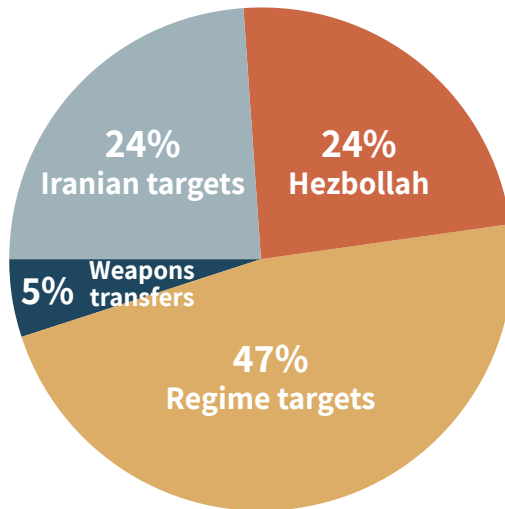## Figure 3. **CBW attacks, 2018-2022**

Figure 4. **Airstrike targets, 2023**

Thus, over the years, the scope of CBW attacks has increased, and with it, the drive not only to reduce the enemy's capabilities, but also change reality with the help of kinetic actions (influencing the Syrian regime, changing Iran's strategic courses of action). Meanwhile, CBW activity has earned greater conceptual significance in the IDF's basic documents, along with increasing attention from the political leadership and the military command.

But with these greater aspirations, the prism for judging CBW success should also change: not only physically counting capabilities (how many precision missiles or anti-aircraft batteries Hezbollah has), but also examining in depth the response of the various adversaries and any essential change in the regional picture. In particular, the changing modes of operation of the enemy – especially transferring the production of weapons to regions that are considered harder for Israel to strike – have created a situation in which it is difficult today to measure CBW success even regarding its initial objectives: chiefly preventing Hezbollah's acquisition of advanced weapons. At the same time, the campaign may have helped bring about changes in the region that are not to Israel's benefit.

The Changed Enemy: "The Counter-CBW"

The change whereby the campaign between wars is not aimed at specific targets, in particular Hezbollah armament or Iranian entrenchment in Syria, but rather is a campaign to achieve broader objectives, has also changed Iran's perception of events, and in turn, its course of action.

The head of the Military Intelligence Directorate, Maj. Gen. Aharon Haliva, said this explicitly: "The State of Israel, because of a whole series of measures that are not only connected to the campaign between wars, has brought itself from the back rows to the front row of the friction with Iran. This must be said in no uncertain terms: from the Iranian perspective at least, Iran is in a direct conflict with the State of Israel. This is a result of the fact that they attribute to us direct attacks on Iranian soil, and since we target Iranians in

various places and in different countries. Israel, and this needs to be said, is today considered by the Iranians as perhaps their number one enemy."[60]

The implication of this statement is dramatic: Israel's actions and declarations are what caused Iran, from whose perspective Israel was in the "back rows" of its enemies, to focus on Israel as an enemy against whom action must be taken. The concept of a "counter-CBW" developed against this backdrop, and was manifested severely in 2023: the axis of resistance, which comprises bodies each with its respective agenda, joining forces to wage a war of attrition against Israel, unifying arenas, and creating the danger of a multi-arena war.

Until 2022, the Iranians complied with the Assad regime's demand to refrain from responding against Israel from Syrian territory. However, since then they have started to respond to attacks against the "big cat" (in Netanyahu's metaphor), and did so against whom they perceive as Israel's "big cat": five attacks that were attributed to Iranian militias in Syria took place in 2022 that were aimed at American bases and international coalition forces, apparently in response to Israel's airstrikes. In 2023 (so far) there have been four attacks using drones and rockets that were attributed to Shiite militias, toward the al-Tanf base and toward the US base at Deir ez-Zor.[61] In March 2023, an American contractor was also killed in an attack on a US base by a pro-Iranian militia, which was launched in response to the Israeli strikes.

Thus, a response equation emerged, endangering the US presence in Syria and possibly eroding the US commitment to maintain its presence there, given the concern for its forces. The resistance axis context is also the likely background to the March 2023 attack at Megiddo, launched by Hezbollah.[62]

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60 Interview with the Head of the Military Intelligence Directorate, Conference on "Iran, Israel and the Shiite Axis in 2023: A Year of Conflict?" Institute for National Security Studies, November 21, 2022, https://www.inss.org.il/he/event/iran-2023 [Hebrew].
61 Kaduri, "The Campaign Between the Wars in Syria."
62 Nir Dvori, "The Security Incident in the North: Terrorist Penetrates from Lebanon and Plants Explosive at Megiddo Junction," *N12*, March 15, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/227yn642 [Hebrew].

The debate on the campaign between wars among the elements of the resistance axis and its media outlets was renewed around the signing of the maritime border agreement between Israel and Lebanon in October 2022. In their view, a turning point in Hezbollah's strategy is what led to the agreement: Hezbollah switched from a strategy of deterring Israel from war to a strategy of threatening war. In addition, the threat in this case was related to a strategic natural resource and not made against a military backdrop, as in the past.[63] This suggested that there was a change in the strategic balance between Israel and Hezbollah, which further undermines the CBW achievements.[64]

In the eyes of the resistance axis, the series of attacks that Israel carried out as part of the campaign between wars since 2022 reflected a deviation from the rules of the game. Syrian journalist Abd Almina'em Ali Issa related to the issue in an article in the state newspaper *al-Watan*, titled "Israel Is on a Rampage…Why Has the Strategy Changed?" According to him, "Israel's rampages at the airports [as part of the CBW attacks] cross red lines and violate the rules of the conflict." In his opinion, a change should also take place in how Syria relates to Israel's actions. He noted that the Syrian discourse has become more confrontational than in the past and that there is an expectation among the public to respond against Israel, all the more so when Syria is reasserting its standing and its sovereignty in the Middle East. He adds that the campaign between wars has created a situation in which Israel has the upper hand, but the broader campaign is expected to change to its detriment: "The defeat in the Six Day War led to the Yom Kippur War, and according to this logic we can say that the regional and international equations can generate new equations, in which the response will come."[65]

63 Ibid.
64 Rafik Khouri, "What Answer are There to the Questions After the Agreement," *Elaph*, October 16, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/2s44ew4k [Arabic].
65 Abd ak-Manaam Ali Issa,"Israel is WildWhy Has the Strategy Changed?" *al-Watan*, December 9, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/yc7dsp8k [Arabic].

The bottom line is that Hezbollah's "precision project" and the creation of the Iranian presence in Syria have been damaged but not halted by CBW activity.[66] According to Dr. Michael Milstein, "Many decades of blows to knowledge centers, thwarted transfers of weapons, and destroyed facilities intended for upgrading military capabilities have thus far not led to incisive critical thinking among members of the resistance camp regarding their strategic objectives or the profile of the actions that they carry out. While it is evident that there is learning that leads to improvement of action, deception, and camouflage capabilities of actors in the resistance camp, there is no willingness for an overall withdrawal from the efforts, as it is reflected in the continuation and even the intensification of the attempts by Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas to improve their capabilities in the lead-up to the next conflicts."[67]

Meanwhile, the campaign between wars has intensified regional processes that challenge Israel and could even bring it closer to – instead of deterring – the next war. Chief among these are the positioning of Israel as Iran's main enemy, according to the head of Military Intelligence, and the shaping of the "counter-CBW," which centers on an ongoing attempt to harm Israel in response to its CBW operations.

The Increasing Strength of the Axis of Resistance

The campaign between wars has not influenced, and could not have influenced, ongoing trends in the Middle East – some of which, especially in 2023, are not auspicious for Israel. The continued distancing of the United States from the region, and the Middle East's entry into an "era of détente," which means rapprochement between longtime enemies, have strengthened Iran's regional standing: in 2023 it renewed its relations with Saudi Arabia (with the mediation of China, which sees the vacuum left by the United States as

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

67 Milstein, "The Campaign Between the Wars," p. 70.

an opportunity to create a power base in the struggle for global hegemony); Assad's Syria has started to return to the heart of the Arab world, and in May 2023 was allowed to return to the Arab League. Meanwhile, it was reported that a meeting between Egyptian President Sisi and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi is expected. Other organizations that belong to the resistance axis have also been embraced by regional actors, led by Saudi Arabia, which Israel still hopes to see at its side on the frontlines of the struggle against Iran; this was demonstrated vividly in a visit by the Hamas leadership to Saudi Arabia in April 2023.

The tightened axis approach and the narrative of unifying the arenas have also helped strengthen the standing of Nasrallah, who is seen by himself and his axis partners as knowing Israel the best and having coped with Israel most successfully. According to Haliva, "For a while now Hezbollah has not been a proxy of Iran; it is an inseparable part of the decision making process in Tehran…It is no longer a discussion of whether Hezbollah is the defender of Lebanon, the defender of the Shiites, or the defender of Iran and just one part of the axis. It is the axis."[68]

The effect of Hezbollah's strengthened standing is twofold. On the one hand, it could impose a restraining limitation on the organization, which is aware that a possible conflagration could lead not to a few battle days, which can be weathered by both sides, but to a large-scale campaign in which it will bear the brunt of the damage. But at the same time, it is possible that its strengthened regional standing could intensify what is seen as Nasrallah's overconfidence, due to which, in the words of the head of Military Intelligence, "Nasrallah is close to making a mistake that would drag us into a major war."[69]

Another actor to consider is Russia. Iran's considerable military support for Russia in the war in Ukraine has certainly created a certain Russian "debt" (Haliva: "There is no such thing as no compensation between countries;

68 Interview with the head of the Military Intelligence Directorate.
69 Head of Military Intelligence, speech at Herzliya Conference, May 23, 2003 [Hebrew].

otherwise there would be no deal…I hope that the Russians will know how to balance a large part of the response or the compensation that they give to the Iranians"[70]). Russia does not belong to the axis that is hostile to Israel, but Iran standing by its side, along with the fact that prior to the deployment of Russian army forces into Syria, Iran and Hezbollah were the ones that had saved the Assad regime, brings the Russian interest closer to that of Iran and the axis. For its aid, Iran could exact a price, possibly in terms of expanding the freedom of operation of its activity in Syria, and perhaps even Russian agreement to defend Iranian assets from Israeli attacks.

In 2022 Russia also intensified the wording of its condemnations of Israeli attacks, and even threatened to formulate a resolution at the UN Security Council that would include a condemnation of the attacks and a warning against undermining stability and violating Syrian sovereignty (in the end the resolution was not brought for discussion). It is possible that Iran will pressure Moscow to respond more firmly to Israeli actions against Iranian targets in Syrian territory and even demand other compensation from Russia, which would harm Israeli efforts to disrupt the Iranian entrenchment in the Syrian realm.

Particularly in the last few years, when an increasing portion of the activity is aimed at Iranian targets, including on Iranian soil, the campaign between wars is also presumably seen by Tehran as part of the "maximum pressure" approach led by Israel. If Iran's nuclearization will be determined first and foremost by the regime's decision to acquire a weapon (a decision that in the words of the head of Military Intelligence in 2022 had not yet been made),[71] then forceful actions against Iranians and on Iran's soil are likely seen by the regime as an attempt to push it against the wall. Along with the Iranian assumption that Israel pushed the United States to withdraw from the nuclear agreement in 2018, the use of force and declarations on a "campaign against

70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.

Iran" could have an effect, important even if not decisive, that would push the regime toward a decision to break out to a nuclear capability.

The Development of the Danger of a Multi-Arena Conflict

The formation of the axis of resistance, in part out of a need for a response to the campaign between wars, increases what appears to be the main threat facing Israel: a multi-arena war waged simultaneously on Israel's borders (Lebanon and Gaza), with extensive terrorist activity in the West Bank as well as riots inside Israel itself, with the addition of missile fire from more distant circles – Iraq, Iran itself, and even Yemen.

Discourse on the multi-arena conflict has increased greatly in the past year, and reportedly was at the center of discussions toward formulating the IDF's upcoming multiyear plan.[72] Contributing factors include the events of Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021, when riots erupted in cities inside Israel during the round of fighting with Hamas, and the events of April 2023, when another round of fighting erupted on the border with Gaza, in part following IDF and ISA activities to thwart Hamas-inspired terrorism in the West Bank – all of this against the backdrop of the tension created by measures by government ministers that the Palestinians interpreted as an intention to change the status quo on the Temple Mount. During the 2023 round of fighting, rockets were fired into Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip along with 34 rockets from Lebanese territory, and there was also weapons fire from Syrian territory. Those firing from Lebanon were Hamas proxies, but it is clear that the shooting could not have taken place without the knowledge of Hezbollah (in addition, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh was in Lebanon at the time and met with Nasrallah). The very restrained Israeli response (which Nasrallah ridiculed, claiming that the IDF bombed a "banana orchard"),

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72 Amir Buhbut, "Preparing for Conflict with Iran and Multi-Arena War: IDF's Plan Revealed," *Walla*, May 7, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/yck7kf3h [Hebrew].

indicated that Israel assumes that a more serious response could cause a large-scale flare-up.

Such a conflict could erupt on Iran's orders, following an Israeli attack on the nuclear facilities, and even in an unplanned manner, as the result of tension on the Temple Mount, or a local action in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip, that could escalate and draw additional organizations into a war.

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.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The operational success of CBW, the satisfaction at the unprecedented level of intelligence behind them, the precise execution in the vast majority of the operations, and the almost total prevention of casualties on the Israeli side have created trends in Israel that are familiar from routine security operations during the days of the major wars. Among them:

a. Amplifying tactical achievements and increasing the appetite to attain more in the same way, despite the changes occurring in the arena, the region, and the international system, which demand rethinking.

b. Drawing far-reaching conclusions regarding the actions' impact on readiness for a major campaign and deterring the enemy from it, with a limited and forceful understanding of the concept of deterrence in general.

c. Attributing strategic significance and even conceptual innovation to what is in essence a collection of tactical operations, and ascribing mistaken strategic importance to a campaign against capabilities that by nature cannot succeed entirely or change the basic interests of the enemy. In addition, taking pride in the fact that Israel is kinetically prevailing in an arena in which the enemy is inferior, and ignoring its achievements in other much more important areas.

d. Ignoring the enemy's interpretation of events, and attributing the other side's statements to propaganda or frustration at Israel's success.

e. Subordinating strategic considerations and broader political interests to CBW – despite its limited achievements and the high cost inherent in operating it.

f. Ignoring the impact of the emphasis on CBW on Israel's readiness for war, both in terms of the readiness of the force and in terms of the enemy's belief that Israel is averse to conflict.

Consequently, action must be taken as soon as possible to implement necessary conclusions:

a. Examine in depth the objectives, achievements, and future operational directions of the campaign between wars, while examining the changes underway in the region and the international sphere – the reconciliation between Gulf countries and Iran, the strengthening of Bashar al-Assad's regional standing, the tightened relations between Russia and Iran, and the increasing brazenness of the regional axis led by Iran. In addition, define an end state of the campaign that will enable measuring and assessing its achievements.

b. Convey in military buildup, statements, and actions on the ground that Israel is not afraid of a full-scale war and is not willing to adhere to the red lines set by the enemy.

c. Prepare the IDF for the scenario of a multi-arena war, while assessing its capabilities in depth and giving renewed attention to aspects that have been neglected (in particular, land maneuvers, logistics, operations in large forces, and stand-in warfare). In this framework, it is necessary to examine seriously ambitious force buildup trends in the IDF, some of which are less than likely to create a critical mass for addressing a multi-arena scenario.

d. Examine the situation in Syria carefully, including the emergence of "four Syrias" with different characteristics as the civil war subsides,[75] and shape various modes of operation vis-à-vis each of these entities, in a way that goes beyond the kinetic-military sphere.

e. Focus CBW kinetic actions solely on worthy targets of enemy buildup, with an emphasis on Hezbollah, while not exaggerating the importance

75 See Carmit Valensi, Orna Mizrahi, Yoram Schweitzer, and Eden Kaduri, "The Northern Arena: A Military Challenge Joined by Potential Political and Economic Cooperation," In Tamir Hayman, Ram Yavne, and Anat Kurz, Eds., *Strategic Analysis for Israel 2023* (Institute for National Strategic Studies, 2023). https://www.inss.org.il/publication/north-2023/

of symbols such as "Iranian entrenchment in Syria," whose significance on the ground is sometimes marginal.

f. Rethink the benefit inherent in striking regime targets and its usefulness, vis-à-vis the cost that could be extracted from Israel given the changing standing of Assad and the regional legitimacy he receives.

g. Design and employ non-violent, covert, and political forms of influence in the region, such as those that Iran successfully employs in Syria. Within this, distinguish clearly between Hezbollah and the Lebanese government and people, in order to increase the pressure to restrain the organization.

h. Form regional and global coalitions, not only for the conceptually limited and forceful objective of a defensive front against Iran (the recent changes in Iran's standing vis-à-vis countries in the region indicates the failure of this approach), but rather in a broader framework that will help renew US interest in the region and constitute a counterweight to Iran's growing power.

i. Study the ways of learning and shaping concepts in the IDF, and examine to what extent they are influenced by successes in employing force and desire to maintain operational achievements, rather than a sober, professional look into the future.

The Campaign Between Wars (CBW) is the term given to the IDF's significant offensive activity over the past decade. What began in 2013 as specific, targeted actions with limited objectives, developed into an extensive campaign in physical and geographical terms and was anchored in the IDF operations approach, with far-reaching strategic ramifications.

CBW did indeed demonstrate advanced capabilities in intelligence and aerial action. But at the end of a decade and in view of significant changes in the region, there is a need to review and update the campaign's benefits and its influence on Israel's regional situation, the danger of a multi-front conflict, and IDF readiness for such a conflict.

This memorandum examines CBW's roots in the IDF operational concept, its development, and its achievements and limitations, and considers how it has been perceived by Israel's various enemies during different phases over the past decade. It also examines recent significant changes in the arena and in the world. The study concludes that the current policy provides only a partial response to the the "axis of resistance" led by Iran, and even reinforces the willingness of the enemies to take risks that could lead to escalation; on the other hand, CBW does not necessarily contribute to the IDF's preparedness to meet these risks.

Consequently, a change in the operational concept is recommended, with the following action items: sharpen the kinetic activity and develop other ways of operating in order to achieve Israel's objectives in Syria and in Lebanon; prepare the IDF for a multi-front conflict and underscore through preparations and actions that Israel is not afraid of such a conflict; work on creating regional and global coalitions that can act as a counterweight to the growing power of Iran, the axis of resistance, and the increasing closeness to Russia and China. In this way Israeli activity can reduce the chances of escalation while improving readiness if it does occur.

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