

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 Netanyahu'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

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

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 it is doubtful that Assad has the ability, even if he wants to, to actually influence Iran's behavior.

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**

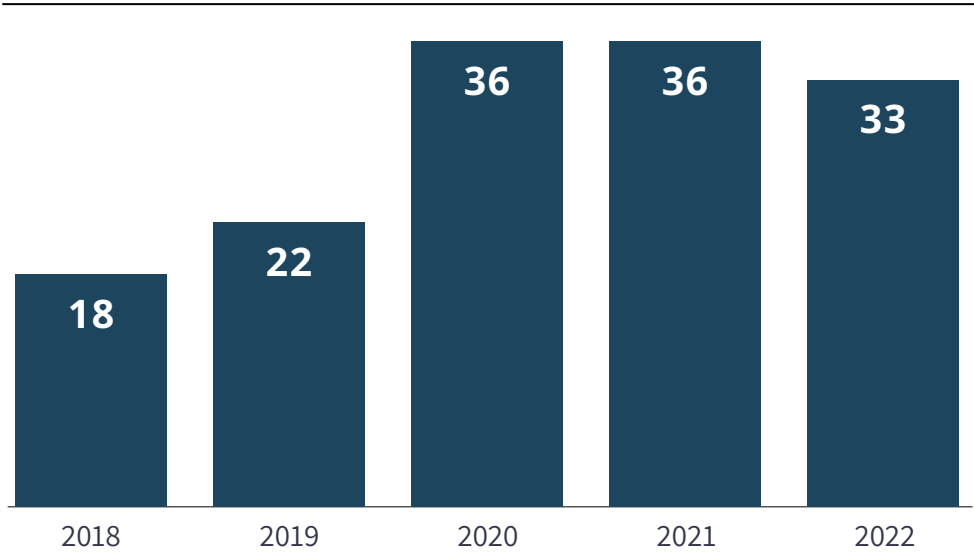
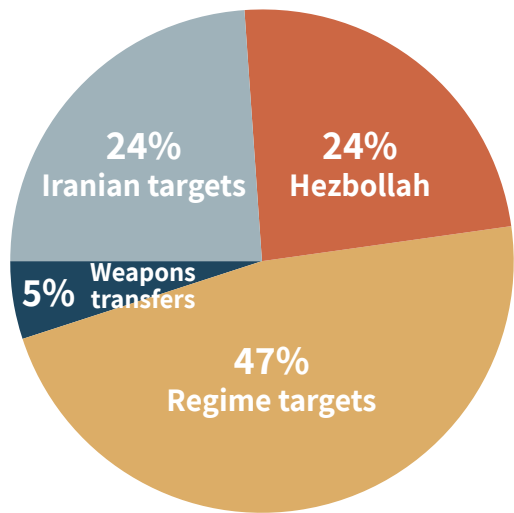


Figure 4. **Airstrike targets, 2023**



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

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 Wild Why 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

66 Yaniv Kubovich, "IDF: Iran and Hezbollah Accelerating Precision Missile Project in Lebanon," *Haaretz*, August 29, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/2ucrww29> [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”),

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.