

The IDF Must Build Itself for the Next War—Not the Previous One

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The deep trauma left by the October 7 war, along with the large budgets allocated to the defense establishment as a result, may lead the IDF to pursue a whole series of force buildup and procurement programs without clear priorities. Priorities must be set from the top-down by the General Staff, based on expected threat scenarios for the next war, should it occur. The main stresses and gaps in the IDF's capabilities should be identified, and force-buildup investments directed accordingly. To a large extent, this is already happening. Still, there is concern that a significant part of the efforts and funding is spread horizontally as additive measures—some of them devoted to military formations and weapon systems that were more relevant to the previous war than to the next. Such investment could be suboptimal in terms of security output, inflate the defense budget beyond what is necessary, and come at the expense of vital civilian spending and Israel's economic resilience. Above all, we must not prepare for the previous war.

Threat Arenas

Hezbollah no longer exists as a formidable terrorist army on Israel's northern border, one capable of a rapid incursion into Israeli territory and of threatening to seize the Galilee. This does not mean that the threat from Hezbollah has disappeared. The chances that the organization will be disarmed are slim. In practice, Hezbollah is making major efforts to rebuild itself, and renewed flare-ups of fighting are certainly expected. Even so, Hezbollah is far weaker today than it once was; it has lost its rear base in Syria, and Israel will not allow it—primarily through the Air Force and special forces—to reestablish a strong presence in southern Lebanon.

As for the Gaza Strip, it is still too early to determine how the situation there will develop following the current pause in the intense war against Hamas. The organization's main fighting formations, its missile-production infrastructure, and its command echelon were crushed during the war. Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that Hamas will agree to disarm or be disarmed by international forces, according to the Trump plan. On the contrary, Hamas is strengthening its control on the ground and recruiting new fighters. Fighting may reignite, potentially leading to an IDF offensive to capture areas beyond the "yellow line" that remain under Hamas's control in the Strip, now that the hostages are no longer in its hands. The military challenges involved in such an offensive are discussed below.

The principal security threat to Israel remains Iran and, above all, its nuclear program, alongside its efforts to rebuild its ballistic-missile arsenal, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Since the destruction of Iran's "ring of fire" around Israel, direct confrontation between the two countries has become more real and expected than in the past. It can be

assumed that Israel is investing—as required—the greatest efforts in intelligence, technology, and force buildup, for both attack and defense, against these threats.

A secondary yet still significant arena—and one that has exposed major gaps in Israel's capabilities—is the Houthi threat from Yemen, both in direct fire against Israel and, especially, in the disruption of shipping through the Bab al-Mandab Strait, which has effectively shut down the Port of Eilat. The Israeli Air Force and Navy play a leading role in confronting this challenge. At the same time, Israel should examine operational options inside Yemen and in its vicinity, in possible cooperation with the Yemeni government that controls the south of the country and with Saudi Arabia, the Gulf principalities, and other neighboring states.

In Judea and Samaria, there remains a latent potential for escalation at varying levels of violence. It is intensifying because of the pogroms carried out by extremist settlers against Palestinians, which are met with a feeble response from the government and the army. Given the Palestinian Authority's security cooperation, limited as it may be, and the intensive IDF activity against terrorist cells, it is difficult at present to envision a full-scale October 7-style assault by Hamas or by PA forces from the West Bank. Still, the possibility of an organized attack on communities in the West Bank or within Israel must be taken into account.

Some view Egypt under President al-Sisi as a potential enemy that might initiate a war with Israel or be dragged into one. I do not share this assessment. However, those who hold it should remember that Egypt is militarily dependent on the United States—even more than Israel is—and that US supplies of arms and ammunition to Egypt would likely cease in the event of war. In addition, crossing the expanses of the Sinai Peninsula poses an enormous logistical and operational challenge: It is largely empty of population and cover, and Egyptian military formations and logistics, with their high signature, would be extremely exposed to air attack. Moreover, Israel's Air Force could quickly destroy the bridges and block the tunnels across the Suez Canal. These are basic military facts in this arena, and Egypt is well aware of them.

Of course, the IDF must maintain basic readiness for any threat along Israel's borders, including from Egypt. Such readiness also constitutes part of Israeli deterrence against such threats materializing. According to open sources, the IDF has six maneuver divisions and a similar number of border defense divisions. If necessary, this should suffice for concentrating the main force in southern Israel against the principal land threat, Egypt, should the threat materialize—in line with the classic principles of Israel's security doctrine. In a combined air-land battle under such conditions, Israel has a clear advantage.

Since the regime change in Syria, some in Israel view Turkey as a potential military threat. Again, this is a matter of assessment regarding the likelihood of such a confrontation and its contours. There is no doubt about the hostility of Erdoğan's Turkey toward Israel, which has sharpened considerably during the war, or about Ankara's vision of regional hegemony; however, that is a long way from any willingness by Turkey to risk a direct military confrontation with Israel. Here as well, a military clash, if it occurs, is expected to take place hundreds of kilometers away from Turkey, amid major logistical and operational challenges, under conditions of the Israeli Air Force's superiority and near the main mass of the IDF's ground forces. Moreover, just as Iraq's government and its Shiite majority do not want Iranian

control over their country, the new Syrian administration—despite its heavy reliance on Turkey—is not expected to view itself as a vassal state in a neo-Ottoman-style order.

The Order of Priorities in Force Buildup

We must beware the possibility that a significant part of the IDF's force-buildup efforts will be driven by the trauma of October 7 and the last war. "He who has been scalded by boiling water is cautious even with lukewarm water"—but the October 7 threat has not survived in its previous form, and the responses to it lie largely elsewhere.

Clearly, there is a pressing need to repair weapon systems that were heavily worn down in the war, to replenish stocks, to return to three years of regular service, and to make other necessary adjustments. However, one should not assume—explicitly or implicitly—that the next high-intensity war will also last two years and, therefore, that extremely costly investments should be allocated for it in advance. The protraction of the last war should be seen as an exception, whose causes will be discussed below. Even though it was necessary under the circumstances, a long war runs contrary to the principles of Israel's security doctrine. Of course, we cannot rule out the possibility that an unforeseen future high-intensity war could drag on. But Israel has withstood such a war profile even in its current security posture—albeit at the price of severe attrition of regular and reserve personnel and of combat equipment. Israel will withstand such a war in the future as well, should it materialize, without preemptively subordinating the defense budget—and the state budget—to an extreme scenario.

Contrary to the view that prevailed following the outbreak of the last war, the IDF is not too small for its missions. It is one of the largest armies in the world, comprising dozens of combat brigades in regular service and in the reserves. Not only has the threat of cross-border invasions by terrorist armies been largely crushed, but the standby response to such raids is the local territorial-defense units in communities along the border that need to be rebuilt. These units rely on the residents of these communities and are therefore immediately available; they are based largely on released reservists; and their armament is light, simple, and far cheaper than that of heavy field formations. Against this background, the neglect of the standby squads in the Gaza border communities before October 7 is glaring. The IDF's establishment of the 96th Division, in such a territorial-defense format, along Israel's eastern border, following the war, is the correct, effective, and resource-efficient step—one that should be taken along all borders.

The protraction of the previous war stems mainly from the campaign in the Gaza Strip. By contrast, Israel achieved crushing results in a very short time both against Hezbollah—once the IDF finally launched its offensive in Lebanon—and in the 12-day campaign against Iran. It is important to understand that the prolonged fighting in the Strip stemmed almost entirely—aside from the hostage problem in Hamas's hands—from the subterranean factor: Hamas forces disappear into the underground tunnel network and sally out from it. Even after two years, the IDF has not found an effective response either for entering the tunnels to clear them or for destroying them. The tactical problem posed by this subterranean system, stretching hundreds of kilometers and dug into the soft sandstone that distinguishes the Strip from the rest of Israel's fronts, is well known. But it is doubtful whether its *strategic* significance has been fully internalized.

In the absence of an effective solution, the IDF was forced to flood the area with forces—up to five or six divisions at the peak of the campaign in the Gaza Strip—on a scale comparable to that deployed against the Egyptian and Syrian armies together in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. And despite this, the campaign lasted two years and did not reach a decisive victory. Something here clearly makes no sense and cries for an explanation. (See my article, [“What Have We Not Yet Grasped About the Strategic Implications of Gaza’s Underground Challenge,”](#) August 3, 2025.)

This is the principal strategic distress revealed by the war, and it is doubtful whether there is sufficient awareness of how it should shape the lessons drawn. The main predicament of the land forces is not the shortage of additional heavy formations but rather the lack of an adequate response for neutralizing the subterranean tunnels—above all for clearing them, and also for destroying them—across technology, doctrine, force buildup, and training. One wonders whether the IDF has truly internalized the root of the problem and is focused appropriately on solving it.

Conclusion

Weapons systems that were damaged and worn down in the war require repairing, of course. At the same time, however, given the diminished ground threat from terrorist armies and the fundamental subterranean problem in the Gaza Strip, the IDF’s force buildup must be adapted to the relevant challenges.

On the nearby fronts, the focus should be on the territorial-defense units to secure the borders and on a comprehensive offensive solution to neutralize the underground tunnel network in the Strip.

The Iranian arena is the top priority. The vital needs there—in fighting in the distant circle—remain tightly linked to the Air Force, anti-missile defense, and intelligence. At a much lower level of importance within the distant circle is the Houthi threat from Yemen.

Other significant capability gaps concern defense against cruise missiles, UAVs, and anti-tank missiles. Development and procurement in all these areas are less connected to heavy ground platforms and more to active systems of disruption and interception, including laser systems and active protection systems such as Trophy and Iron Fist, which should be installed on all fighting vehicles.

One must not be drawn into additive investments across the board—of the “good to have” and “just in case” type—when the defense establishment operates as a kind of federation of services and corps, each allocated its slice of the pie.

Contrary to criticisms heard in Israel at the beginning of the war, investing in technology and in the Air Force plays a leading role in force buildup for the challenges of the next war. Within this framework, the Air Force must also define its requirements more closely. For example, given that the attack-helicopter squadrons were slated for closure before the war, is it really necessary to renew them at enormous cost? They are presented as a response to surprise attacks by light terrorist armies, and, during the war, they also filled a gap in intercepting cruise missiles, which are small, slow, and fly low. Yet attack helicopters are an expensive and sophisticated system designed to fight armored formations. A squadron of light, far cheaper aircraft designed for counterinsurgency missions—such as the Sky Warden, an armored, well-

equipped, and well-armed military version of the Air Tractor 802 crop duster that is also used by US forces—could be a better response to surprise incursions by terrorist armies. Against cruise missiles as well, attack helicopters seem mainly a temporary stopgap solution.

Aligning and optimizing IDF investments for the challenges of the next war are vital—operationally and budgetarily alike.

Previous articles by the author on this topic:

[“Expanding Israel’s Ground Forces or Prioritizing Technology?”](#) INSS Special Publication, March 24, 2024

[“The ‘Cavalry Army’ Becomes the ‘Hi-Tech Army,’”](#) INSS Insight, May 5, 2025

[“What Have We Not Yet Grasped About the Strategic Implications of Gaza’s Underground Challenge,”](#) INSS Insight, August 3, 2025.

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