

Israel's Response and Readiness in Face of the Expected Security Challenges

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An analysis of Israel's strategic environment and security challenges in 2016 prompts the question whether Israel's political-security response suits the anticipated strategic framework of the coming years. The IDF strategy document, published in August 2015 (in a shortened and unclassified version), makes it possible to consider whether the IDF is preparing for the right challenges.¹ The strategy document emphasizes, inter alia, the main extreme scenarios facing the IDF: a war in Lebanon, a war in the Gaza Strip, and military operations in a country having no border with Israel (i.e., Iran). In addition, until those extremes come to pass, the IDF is preparing for operations in the framework of the "campaign between wars," and is running a "current security routine," including border security, counter-terrorism, curtailment of enemy force buildup, and the impeding of terrorist infrastructure and capability development, while accumulating legitimacy.

The IDF document indicates that current strategy allows for the use of force at various levels, depending on the political goals – be it to preserve the political-security situation or to fundamentally change it, whether by operations seeking to deter the rival players, or alternatively, to decisively defeat enemies, mainly semi-states, such as Hezbollah and Hamas (organizations with military and governance capabilities and responsibility for territory and populations). The IDF is tasked with decisively winning battles at the tactical level and enabling victory in the war, the latter meaning achievement of the

political goals set by the political leadership. This is done by leveraging military achievement in order to force the enemy to accept either Israel's conditions for a ceasefire or a stable security arrangement. This operational concept is based on strong defense to fortify the security and resilience of the home front, combined with offense that combines massive precision fire strike with rapid land maneuvers to reach and damage the enemy's centers of gravity.

Over the years, the strategic assessment of the IDF and the defense establishment has shaped a reference framework for military force buildup and readiness for war. In the early years of the state, this was an all-out Arab attack – an “everything scenario,” in which a coalition of Arab countries attacks Israel simultaneously on all fronts. Since peace treaties were signed with Egypt and Jordan, and following the civil war in Syria, the conventional military threat to Israel posed by the regular armed forces of Arab countries has lessened considerably, while at the same time, irregular or semi-regular threats have developed and become stronger, accompanied by a revised and diverse world of concepts and terms: asymmetric warfare, hybrid players, extensive terrorism campaigns, guerilla warfare and guerilla terrorism, and others.

Prioritizing the Response to the Spectrum of Threats

Devising the security response to this range of threats requires striking the right balance between the response to severe scenarios and urgent challenges, and between short-term readiness on the one hand, and capability building for more distant future challenges on the other. Over the years, this balance has focused on the principal challenges combining a severe risk and/or probable potential for escalation into a military conflict. The main priority in recent years has been the Iranian nuclear project, i.e., the capacity to damage it in a way that will put Iran several years from attaining a nuclear bomb. Following the signing of the JCPOA between Iran and the major powers, the Iranian nuclear project will presumably progress during two main time periods: (a) in the coming decade – clandestinely and cautiously, in order to prevent exposure of violations, and (b) once the restrictions established in the agreement are rescinded, when Iran is likely to move forward more openly with the project. During the coming decade, therefore, penetrative intelligence capabilities

should be developed to detect both Iranian violations of the agreement as well as activity toward acquisition of nuclear capabilities anywhere in the region; these capabilities must be complemented by preservation of relevant operational capabilities and the ability to intervene militarily, if necessary.² It is important to achieve strategic coordination with the United States concerning deeper and wider intelligence coverage, allowing access for Israel to the findings from inspections for the purpose of detecting Iranian violations of the agreement, and agreeing on responses to Iranian violations of the agreement. At the same time, it is necessary to build an infrastructure for intelligence and operational capabilities in preparation for the removal of restrictions on Iran or the cancellation or collapse of the agreement.

The IDF ranks a scenario of a military conflict with Hezbollah as the second highest threat. The operational response focuses on an attack against all dimensions of the organization's power: (a) reducing Hezbollah's rocket and missile threat through a combination of precision strike, land operations, and improved defensive capability against rockets and missiles (Iron Dome, David's Sling); (b) attacking Hezbollah's strategic rear with the aim of neutralizing its control centers and supply and support channels, including channels for external aid; and (c) treating Hezbollah as a key element in the Lebanese state system, and consequently attacking infrastructure in Lebanon that serves belligerency against Israel by Hezbollah and its supporters. At the same time, owing to Hezbollah's military buildup among the civilian population and assets, it will necessarily involve attacking those military forces and assets, especially launching systems, concealed within residential buildings and embedded in cities and villages, most of which are Shiite.

Against the operational gains and essential reduction of the potential damage to Israel, it will be necessary to take into account possible consequences of attacking dual-purpose infrastructures and military targets embedded in densely populated areas: a large number of casualties and damage to civilians among whom Hezbollah deliberately placed its military facilities; destruction and ruin that will weaken the already fragile governing system in Lebanon; the development of a widespread civilian crisis in Lebanon that will facilitate the rise and spread of radical groups, such as Salafi jihadist groups; and consequently, a negative impact on Israel's international legitimacy and future freedom of action. In addition, despite the prolonged calm on the

Israeli-Lebanese border, due to effective enforcement by Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces and political support from the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNFIL), it is necessary to prepare for destabilization in southern Lebanon and increased terrorist activity. Penetration by terrorist squads seeking to attack Israel must be prevented. Building capabilities for a response to Hezbollah also gives the IDF basic operational capabilities for a response against Hamas.

The Palestinian system is not defined as a major military theater, despite its key political weight and its ramifications for the security situation in Israel and in Judea and Samaria. A security response is required for the range of threats that includes organized terrorism of varying scope and in various formats, terrorism by individuals encouraged by ideological inspiration and incitement, by virally distributed contents, and regional radical phenomena like the Islamic State. In view of the political deadlock, the military response alone cannot by itself eliminate popular uprisings or the threat of terrorism, and certainly not terrorism perpetrated by isolated individuals; substantial political, economic, social, and infrastructure inputs are necessary. Israel should avoid weakening the Palestinian Authority security agencies, continue to cooperate with them, and even take action to strengthen them as long as they enhance the security of both sides.

In the southern arena, Israel is threatened not only by direct and indirect fire and tunnel attacks from the Gaza Strip (mainly by Hamas, but also by Islamic Jihad and other radical groups), but also by the possibility of “popular” assaults, such as mass storming of the border fence, and even infiltration of an Israeli community in the area near the Gaza Strip. A response to the threat from Gaza must therefore have two aspects. The first is readiness for major military campaigns against the military infrastructure of Hamas and the other terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip for the purpose of substantially reducing the threat from these organizations and deterring them from additional attacks. The IDF has the capability to take control militarily of the Gaza Strip or critical areas within it, and must prepare suitable operational plans and demonstrate determination in the use of force, if necessary. The second aspect is reduction of the risk of escalation, in part through an urgent and major effort toward reconstruction and stabilization of the Gaza Strip in both infrastructure (energy, water, sewage, housing)

and employment aspects, realizing that the population's distress contributes to potential security instability, and that it is therefore worthwhile to reduce this distress in controlled fashion, even at the price of somewhat easing pressure on the Hamas government.

For the sake of the security of its borders, Israel must continue to improve the border detection and obstacle systems and fortify weak points, joining independent efforts and low profile cooperation with neighbors on the other side of the border that provide Israel with forward strategic depth and keep threats away from its territory. Emphasis should be placed on Jordan and Egypt, relevant peacekeeping forces, and pragmatic local forces in southern Syria sharing a common interest with Israel in uprooting terrorism, keeping the population at peace, and maintaining daily life.

The Concept of Response, in Light of the Lessons of Previous Clashes

From an analysis of the strategic environment, the IDF has concluded that it must prepare for a variety of scenarios, including surprises. Building readiness requires balancing preparation for severe scenarios of possible damage to Israel against the likelihood that these scenarios will materialize. Formulating the response concept calls for a continuous process of learning from the IDF's recent rounds of conflict in Lebanon and the Palestinian theater,³ while adapting to the new situation. An analysis of the experience accumulated from these conflicts shows a number of weak points and problems that should be addressed in preparation for the coming conflicts:

- a. In most cases, the IDF has had to launch a military campaign guided by a vague policy directive, lacking clear definition of the required political-security end states for after the fighting – which is an important prerequisite in clearly defining the desired military achievement. The critical role of discourse and prior coordination of expectations between the senior political and military leaderships is even more necessary when there is no clear and agreed strategic purpose, which is sometimes formulated only in the course of the campaign.⁴ Recent years show increased difficulty in clearly defining the required political-strategic achievements by the political leadership. This difficulty is rooted in the desire to retain political flexibility and room for political and strategic maneuver and to reduce

the risk of critical judgment of the attained achievements at the end of the fighting. In addition, the Israeli governments' political-security strategy seeking "preservation of the status quo" means that their expectations from military operations are the restoration of calm at minimal cost. In order to improve the balance of cost and achievements in future campaigns conducted by Israel, an ongoing discourse between the political and military leaderships is vital. This will allow the design of a comprehensive policy aimed at preventing wars through the use of the whole toolkit available to the state, while tirelessly building the necessary military capabilities in the event of a war situation, should it erupt.⁵

- b. Although the IDF is oriented toward achieving decisive victory on the battlefield, it realizes very well the difficulty in translating this achievement into a political victory, or even into a strategic decisive victory that deprives the enemy of the will and ability to continue fighting. The military effort in conflicts is therefore oriented toward a more limited achievement of obtaining deterrence that will postpone the next round of fighting for as long as possible, in accordance with Israel's traditional concept that it has embraced since its establishment. In practice, while the Second Lebanon War led to a lull on the northern border longer than Israel has ever known (this coming summer will mark a decade of calm on that front), the intervals between campaigns in the Palestinian theater are quite short. Deterrence by itself is only one element in postponing conflicts; since it is a result whose success can be assessed in retrospect only, it is a questionable criterion for defining military achievement before or during conflicts.
- c. In recent years, a high priority in force employment has been assigned to massive precision strike, utilizing the IDF's intelligence and operational capabilities seeking to reduce IDF casualties and collateral damage in enemy territory. Land-based maneuvering capability is essential for demonstrating direct offensive capability, striking directly at a land-based enemy, and conquering enemy territory and clearing it. Employing this capability involves complex military-political considerations, such as the effect on the conflict's duration, the difficulty of halting the fighting, protection of forces in enemy territory, return of the forces to Israeli territory without this being perceived as a retreat, and the high level of

friction with the civilian environment with its significant potential for causing more casualties to the warring parties and the population among which the fighting takes place. The IDF should develop maneuvering capability suitable for operations in urban areas and fighting among civilians, while formulating a special response for challenges both on the battlefield and in the political theater. Joint political-military discourse improves the political leadership's knowledge of the military's capabilities and increases the supreme military leadership's awareness of the political leadership's considerations.

- d. Operational planning assigns a high priority to surprise in the opening overture, based on intelligence superiority and operational opportunities. Examples of this include the destruction of the enemy's surface-to-surface missile units, decapitating strikes on senior enemy commanders, and wide attack against terror rank and file. The purpose is to throw the enemy off balance and disrupt its plans. At the same time, a strong and unexpected Israeli opening strike sometimes forces the enemy into an escalating response because of the need to offset its losses by exacting a price from Israel. As history teaches, the conditions for an opening Israel military strike may not exist for reasons of operational feasibility and legitimacy considerations.
- e. It is difficult to bring conflicts to an end when the political goals are not clearly defined and the operational concept is not aimed at achieving decisive military victory over the enemy. This leads to the prolongation of conflicts, gradual erosion in operational outputs, and great difficulty in translating military achievements into political returns. This dynamic aids the enemy in emerging from its state of shock and adapting to the new situation, while portraying its endurance in the face of Israeli power as the proof of victory. In this way, conflicts last longer than planned, with mutual attrition between the sides, feelings of missed opportunities from the failure to maximize the utility of force, and what appears to be a strategic draw at the end of the conflict. The conclusion is that preliminary formulation of a political-military concept concerning the war goals and planning a set of diplomatic and operational measures for terminating the conflict on terms set by Israel are necessary. This level of strategic

- planning is an important element in the ability to shorten the duration of the fighting and improve the balance of cost-achievements to Israel.
- f. The defensive aspect has been assigned more weight in management of the conflict, and as a result, in the security concept as well. A growing proportion of the military-security investment is channeled into defense capabilities, which facilitates functional continuity on the home front and the battlefield, improves national resilience and social cohesion, and provides leaders with flexibility and maneuvering room in decisions about the timing and method of using force.
 - g. The battles over both perceptions and cyber warfare have gained increased weight in the long, ongoing campaign and in the conflicts themselves. The establishment of a cyber command in the IDF is a significant measure in devising a response – both defensive and offensive – for the cyber realm. This command will be tested by the IDF's ability to deal with the various challenges, and constitutes a key element in the array of efforts to promote the goals set by the political and military leadership. In the struggle over perceptions, Israel needs to recruit support from sympathetic audiences, undermine the enemy's advantages, and strengthen its own victorious image. It is necessary to institutionalize a national system for guiding and coordinating all the measures concerning perceptions, and integrating them with the other efforts.

Principles for Formulating an Updated Military-Strategic Concept

Israel's geo-strategic environment features basic instability, rapid change, and a wavering state order among its neighbors. When added to the lessons of the recent military campaigns, this environment requires the formulation of a flexible and ever-evolving strategic concept that adapts existing and future tools and capabilities to the specific challenges of each conflict, and relies less on past anchors of the reference threat and a purely military response, and combining more non-military efforts generally referred to as soft power.

It is necessary to formulate a concept of waging an ongoing campaign as a principal activity. This requires the "campaign between wars" as a prolonged principal campaign, rather than a secondary interim activity between wars (which still constitute the supreme military test). The campaign between

war is aimed at strengthening deterrence, preventing escalation into war, bolstering the IDF's operational advantages, weakening enemies, countering enemy threats and disrupting its force buildup, imposing excessive costs on its force buildup, designing improved conditions for dealing with the expected threats (including in war, should one erupt), preparing infrastructure for partnership with other actors, attaining influence among the population beyond Israeli territory, and strengthening actors that have shared interests with Israel.

In addition, a multidisciplinary operational concept should be applied to integrate a plethora of efforts – military, diplomatic, economic, civilian, humanitarian, legal, media, and infrastructure – based on smart power and a process of joint learning on the part of all the parties participating in the efforts: both among themselves and between them and the political leadership. All this will facilitate shortening combined multidisciplinary procedures in response to special events, trends, and aggregate threats.

As a supplementary dimension to this multidisciplinary effort, analytical and network capabilities must be developed. Israel is struggling against networks of enemies (state and non-state actors, patrons and proxies, sponsors and clients), all of whom share hostility to Israel. These enemies seek to challenge Israel simultaneously in a number of theaters; disrupt its routine; drain it economically, socially, and politically; and disrupt the IDF's ability to focus a critical mass of force and weapons against the various threats. On its part, using smart power, Israel must also take advantage of the network approach and form an array of partners (even in the framework of an undeclared coalition) and use a variety of tools and disciplines against the enemy networks as part of a long campaign.

Israel should enhance its influence in the strategic environment by utilizing its powers and advantages to attain strategic advantages that will result in new options for shaping a more favorable environment for a prolonged period. This must be subordinated to considerations relating to the need to bolster stability and governance, moderate the populations' distress, reduce the sources for terrorist recruitment and extremist influences, and strengthen forces having shared interests with Israel.

On the basis of the multidisciplinary concept and the network approach, it is necessary to shape a policy aimed at improving Israel's regional and

international status, which will be led and coordinated by government ministries, security agencies, and agencies dealing with foreign relations and the media. One fundamental element is creating a relevant intelligence and situation picture that will make it possible to identify and define the strategic problem at any given time and context. For this purpose, the intelligence community will have to expand and deepen its understanding of and access to the social, cultural, and political dimensions of an increasing variety of actors in the region. This conclusion is also valid for the other agencies involved in carrying out policy: military, security, diplomatic, economic, and others. These agencies should synchronize their actions with joint understanding and unity of purpose. Such multidisciplinary synchronization and coordination in the campaign requires leadership from a multidisciplinary administrator directly subordinate to the Prime Minister.

Notes

- 1 “IDF Strategy,” from the IDF website, http://www.idf.il/SIP_STORAGE/FILES/9/16919.pdf.
- 2 Major General (ret.) Isaac Ben-Israel: “The agreement... prevents a nuclear bomb for the next 15 years.” See Dov Gil-Har, “Ben Israel in a Surprising Position: The Nuclear Agreement is Good for Israel,” *Walla*, July 15, 2015, <http://news.walla.co.il/item/2872982>.
- 3 Operation Defense Shield, the Second Lebanon War, Operation Cast Lead, Operation Pillar of Defense, and Operation Protective Edge.
- 4 MK Ofer Shelah: “What we have is a method of fighting in which the relation between effort and effectiveness is impossible. You enter a war without knowing what its goals are, and you fight in a way that will bring you to red lines in a limited conflict.” See Amos Harel, “Ofer Shelah: This War was Known in Advance; the Lapse of Protective Edge Will Recur,” *Haaretz*, April 2, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/.premium-1.2605852>.
- 5 Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: “I’m asked if we will forever live by the sword – yes,” See Barak Ravid, “Netanyahu: I Don’t Want a Binational State, but We Need to Control All of the Territory for the Foreseeable Future,” *Haaretz*, October 26, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.682374>.