



THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Low-Profile War Between Israel and Hezbollah

Yaakov Lappin



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BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY
Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 138

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ISSN 0793-1042

August 2017

Cover image: Hezbollah military parade, image via EuropeIsrael News

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In defiance of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 that ended the 2006 Second Lebanon war, Hezbollah and its Iranian patron, with the assistance of the Bashar Assad regime, are filling Lebanon with surface-to-surface projectiles, and aiming them at population centers and strategic sites in Israel. To forestall this threat, the Israeli defense establishment has, according to media reports, been waging a low-profile military and intelligence campaign, dubbed “The War Between Wars,” which monitors and occasionally disrupts the transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah. This campaign has allowed Israel to reportedly exhibit the extent of its intelligence penetration of Hezbollah and the prowess of its precision-guided weaponry, thus boosting its deterrence, but has not weakened Hezbollah’s determination to expand its vast missile and rocket arsenal. It also carries the calculated risk of setting off escalation that could rapidly spin out of control.

This research project is based on international media reports, as well as an analysis of the events described therein.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, Israel has reportedly carried out low-profile strikes against an extensive regional arms smuggling network that has been moving weapons from factories in Iran and Syria to Hezbollah's home turf in Lebanon.

Precision-guided ballistic missiles and heavy rockets, which can be used against Israeli population centers and strategic targets, likely form some of the targets hit in this campaign. Israel also remains determined to block the arrival of advanced surface-to-air missiles that would disrupt future Israel Air Force (IAF) operations against Hezbollah, and surface-to-sea guided missiles, which could target the Israel Navy, including naval bases, as well as the country's offshore gas drilling rigs in the Mediterranean Sea.

Hezbollah has been able to build one of the largest projectile arsenals in the world,¹ largely because most of its smuggling efforts, involving short-range projectiles, have not been targeted by Israel. Yet Jerusalem remains determined – and capable – of seriously disrupting the flow of long-range, heavy, and precise weapons that could provide Hezbollah with new strategic capabilities in a future war against Israel.

Though Hezbollah is deeply involved in the effort to shore up the Assad regime, and has deployed some 7,000 fighters in Syria to this end, it continues to invest heavily in preparations for war against Israel. With

some 200 southern Lebanese villages acting as Hezbollah projectile depots and launch sites (as well as command and control centers), additional bases located in the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, and a sprawling central nerve center in southern Beirut, Hezbollah has embedded its offensive firepower in the heart of built up Lebanese areas.² Moreover, its considerable sacrifices on behalf of the Assad regime, and spearheading of ground operations in Syria on behalf of the Iranian-led axis, has won Hezbollah greater access to weapons that continue to move into its Lebanese storehouses.

The organization would like to create a sphere of immunity for the continued buildup of its firepower, which Israel would not tolerate. Instead, Israel has invested substantial intelligence and operational resources in reportedly disrupting the smuggling of strategically significant weapons to Lebanon, notably GPS-guided mid- to long-range rockets and missiles, advanced air defense batteries, and surface-to-sea guided missiles.³ Many of these weapons can target Israel's main population centers and strategic sites, such as power plants and vital IDF targets. As Uzi Rubin, an architect of Israel's missile defense programs, put it, some of these weapons "can change the skyline of Tel Aviv."⁴

Additionally, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have targeted Hezbollah's attempts to exploit its Syrian presence to construct operational bases against Israel, with the assistance of the Iranian Quds Force.⁵ So extensive has this anti-Hezbollah campaign become that it has influenced the IDF's own force buildup plan.⁶

Hezbollah's responses have ranged from ignoring these actions altogether to deadly retaliation, accompanied by threats designed to establish deterrence vis-à-vis Israel. All the while, Hezbollah, like Israel, has sought to prevent this low-profile war from spiraling out of control into an open, fully-fledged conflict.

In the first quarter of 2017, the Syrian regime, backed by its coalition partners, has shown greater willingness to respond to such incidents.⁷

Ultimately, the ability to contain the quiet war depends on stabilizing factors that cannot be taken for granted, or seen as permanent in the face of regional shifts and upheavals.

One such factor is Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war and its attachment to the Iran-Assad-Hezbollah axis. Another is Hezbollah's calculation that open conflict with Israel, at a time when it is engaged in fighting Sunni armed organizations in Syria, would be extremely destructive. Yet another factor is the ability of Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah to downplay or deny, whenever he feels it necessary, alleged Israeli attacks.

Yet any of these could change quickly, and so long as the arms flow continues, with the attendant Israeli reaction, the risk of a miscalculation leading to an unexpected escalation remains.

Underlying these considerations is the fact that Israel seeks to ensure its freedom of action and to apply the principle of deterrence, in a controlled manner, in the service of its security interests – despite the massive breakdown of the Arab state system, the rise of coalitions of state and non-state actors in the region, and the general chaos created by the Arab upheavals of the past six years. Israel's ability to adapt both its operational approach and its strategic doctrine to these realities will determine whether the “War Between Wars” proves to be a success or failure.

HEZBOLLAH'S ARMS BUILDUP

In the aftermath of the Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah, together with its Iranian patron, embarked on an ambitious force buildup program, trebling its order of battle from 17,000 to 45,000 fighters into what increasingly resembles an army.⁸

The continuing arms procurement program can be divided to four distinct stages.⁹ In 2006-08 Hezbollah focused on restocking its medium and short-range surface-to-surface missiles and rockets. In 2009-12, it concentrated on smuggling long-range surface-to-surface missile/rockets, surface-to-sea missiles, and drones. During the years 2012-16 Hezbollah shifted to receiving precision guided projectiles, ballistic missiles, and forming

commando units for future cross-border raids into Israel. Finally, from 2016 onward, the organization has focused on building up its precision firepower, by both importing such arms and receiving guidance kits for unguided projectiles. It has also been increasing the levels of warheads explosives and is in the process of building its own rocket and missile factories in Lebanon and in areas of Syria under its control.¹⁰

Hezbollah's weapons often roll off production lines in Iranian or Syrian factories and are smuggled to Lebanon through an array of regional routes. One well-trodden route is the transfer from Iranian factories to Damascus via planes. The final leg of the journey is by ground convoys from Syria to Lebanon. Other routes are possible, such as the hiding weapons in commercial shipping containers that arrive at Beirut Port, or civilian flights landing at Beirut's international airport, but these seem significantly less likely at this time.

Hezbollah's arsenal, estimated at between 120,000 to 140,000 rockets and missiles, is mostly composed of short-range rockets with a range of 45 kilometers, as well as thousands of medium-range rockets, and at least several hundred long-range rockets.¹¹ By comparison, prior to the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah had some 10,000 short-range rockets and under 1,000 medium and long-range rockets. It had no precision guided projectiles in its possession.

Today, Hezbollah likely possesses dozens, if not more, surface-to-surface ballistic missiles, as well as hundreds of drones. It also has hundreds of Fatah 110 guided ballistic missiles (known by their Syrian name, M-600), which have a range of several hundred kilometers.¹²

The IDF is concerned about the ability of Hezbollah to disrupt Israeli air activity over Lebanon in the event of a future conflict, based on the organization's likely possession of advanced air defense batteries, such as the SA-17 surface-to-air missile systems.¹³ In 2015, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu confirmed that Hezbollah received the SA-22 surface-to-air missile system from Iran,¹⁴ and in 2016, the organization began using advanced radars to lock on to IAF aircraft.¹⁵

Hezbollah likely possesses dozens of surface-to-sea missiles. The Israel Navy reportedly assessed in 2014 that these include the supersonic Russian-made Yakhont anti-ship cruise missiles, which can be fired at not only vessels, but also at offshore gas drilling rigs and all of Israel's naval bases and ports.¹⁶ Such missiles, with ranges of 300 kilometers, can be fired from the Lebanese or Syrian coastlines and strike nearly any coastal target in Israel. These join slower surface-to-sea missiles in Hezbollah's possession, such as Iranian-produced C-802 missiles.¹⁷

Pro-Hezbollah media sources in Lebanon have, in the first quarter of 2017, begun boasting about these weapons transfers, in what appears to be an orchestrated media campaign designed to cancel out Israel's disruptive achievements. A remarkable example was provided by Ibrahim Amin, chairman of the pro-Hezbollah Lebanese daily *al-Akhbar*, who wrote:

In practice, Israel reads the map and realizes that Hezbollah's weapons arsenal has steadily grown, and is now several times larger than it was in 2006, and that the kind of weapons that the enemy tried and is still trying to prevent the resistance from acquiring – namely, what Israel calls 'game-changing' weapons – is available to it in great amounts.¹⁸

MONITORING AND DISRUPTING

Over the past several years, the Israeli defense establishment shifted from passivity in the face of the Hezbollah force buildup towards a policy of taking the initiative, albeit in a low-profile manner. The policy, known as "The War Between Wars" in the defense establishment, targets the force buildup programs of all Israel's foes and requires extraordinary levels of intelligence, and when necessary, the ability to conduct pinpoint, surgical operations that do not lead to a general escalation of the security situation.

Israel's defense establishment has presumably made considerable investments in order to conduct surveillance on these international arms production and transportation networks. This reportedly includes an array of visual intelligence provided by satellites and drones, signals intelligence, human intelligence, and other types of data – and the ability to rapidly interpret them. At any given time, the defense establishment might be tracking multiple suspected cases of weapons transfers.

The rapid ability to translate intelligence into operations also necessitated creating a unique doctrine that supports the required 24-hour a day surveillance and reconnaissance. It seems likely that the IDF's Military Intelligence Directorate has the lead role in the northern arenas and Gaza. The Directorate's Activation Division, which focuses intelligence data and coordinates with field units, seems to have a central role as well. In theory, disrupting weapons transfers employs not only kinetic force but also other measures, such as the exposure of shell companies used to fund the weapons network.

Over time, Israeli defense and political leaders have become more outspoken about these operations. In September 2016, an IDF officer acquainted with these activities stated, "The War Between Wars today is more focused and more [intelligence] directed." He added: "We are constantly examining costs and benefits. We have many achievements. There are a growing number of successes."¹⁹

From 2013, international media reports began carrying reports of alleged Israeli strikes targeting weapons convoys and depots in Syria,²⁰ though such strikes may have begun earlier. Reports continued to surface, along with details about alleged strikes on weapons storage facilities in Syria and convoys carrying weapons from Syria into Lebanon.

For example, in May 2013, international media reports spoke of Israeli strikes that "devastated Syrian targets near Damascus," reportedly hitting Iranian missiles heading for Hezbollah warehouses in Lebanon.²¹ Multiple alleged Israeli attacks were reported the following year, such as a December 2014 alleged strike near Damascus International Airport.²² The airport complex reportedly houses the IRGC's headquarters in Syria.²³

There was no letup in reports of Israeli strikes in 2015, despite Moscow's entrance into the Syrian conflict in September of that year. These appear to have included attacks again warehouses storing weapons on Syrian territory that were under Hezbollah control – the target of an alleged Israeli strike in November 2015.²⁴

International media reports indicated strikes continued throughout 2016. In December, the Assad regime accused Israel of firing surface-to-surface missiles against targets near Damascus.²⁵

There were multiple reports in 2017 regarding Israeli strikes against weapons transfers, including one in February on a target near the Israeli-Lebanese border.²⁶ March saw two high-profile incidents; the first a reported Israeli strike on a weapons target deep in northern Syria, which prompted the Assad regime to fire SA-5 surface-to-air missiles at Israeli fighter planes. One of the Syrian missiles was intercepted by Israel's Arrow 2 lower tier anti-ballistic defense system.²⁷ Some 48 hours later, reports came in of a deadly Israeli strike on a local Shiite axis militia leader, likely backed by Iran, on the Syrian Golan Heights.²⁸

These reports demonstrate that since at least 2013 the Israeli defense establishment has pursued a policy of selective disruptions to the systematic transfer of weapons to Hezbollah. Pro-Hezbollah media sources in Lebanon, however, have claimed that Israel's campaign began as far back as 2011 and that the strikes did not exceed five per year, but these sources have a clear interest in playing down the number of attacks to help Hezbollah save face.²⁹

The arms network moving Iranian and Syrian-produced weaponry into Lebanese depots is run by Tehran's Islamic Republican Guards Corps (IRGC) and its extraterritorial elite Quds Force, whose members have reportedly been killed and injured in Israeli strikes over the years, alongside Hezbollah operatives.

These incidents have been acknowledged by the IRGC itself. For example, Quds Force Commander Qassem Solemani attended a Tehran memorial service for a senior IRGC officer killed in 2013 during a reported Israeli strike on an arms convoy, on the Syrian-Lebanese border.³⁰

The core of Israel's campaign appears to rest on the integration of intelligence and pinpoint air power. Some operations are also likely to be the responsibility of the Israel Navy.³¹ The Navy's submarines have the ability to approach enemy coastlines for signals and visual intelligence gathering. Its surface ships could be used to conduct precise sea-to-shore missile strikes on Hezbollah weapons sites.

DETERRENCE AND COUNTER-DETERRENCE

The Israeli defense establishment appears to hold that successful strikes on Hezbollah weapons transfers, as well as on Shiite axis forward positions in southern Syria, have a deterrent effect and delay the start of full-scale conflict.

This view is based on a number of factors. The first is that Hezbollah remains stretched across two fronts. Its southern front with Israel is currently quiet, but Hezbollah continues to build offensive capabilities and deploy forces, preparing them for conflict. Its eastern front by contrast is highly draining, as the organization has deployed thousands of operatives to Syrian battlegrounds to fight a myriad of Sunni armed organizations and militias. Hezbollah also controls some areas of Syria near the Lebanese border that have become part of the unofficial Shiite axis “statelet” that includes the Assad regime’s territory in Damascus, Aleppo, and the Alawite-controlled Syrian coastline.

According to an assessment aired by IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Gadi Eisenkot in March 2017, Hezbollah has lost 1,700 of its personnel in Syria since entering the conflict in 2012.³² This toll far exceeds the estimated 600-700 casualties suffered by Hezbollah during the 2006 Second Lebanon War against Israel.³³ The heavy casualties incurred by Hezbollah are forcing its chief Hassan Nasrallah and other leadership members to justify their decision to intervene in Syria to the organization’s Shiite support base in southern Lebanon, from where recruits originate.

A second active front against Israel, which can be expected to arrive at any new conflict with dramatically improved firepower and intelligence, and a likely rapid and large-scale ground offensive, can well jeopardize Hezbollah’s very existence. At a time when the organization is so deeply immersed in its largest military operation ever in Syria,³⁴ this prospect appears to constitute a powerful deterrent effect on its anti-Israel activities.

The Second Lebanon War and the destruction it wrought on Lebanon and Hezbollah also continues to have a deterrent effect on Nasrallah. It took Hezbollah approximately eight years to rebuild its central command

centers in the southern Beirut neighborhood of Dahiya after massive Israeli aerial bombardments. Several years were needed for southern Lebanese Shiite towns and villages to recover from the war, even with the help of Iranian reconstruction funds. Since these areas today contain Hezbollah military bases and rocket launchers, the local population, as well as homes, mosques, and infrastructure rebuilt across southern Lebanon, would all be in jeopardy in any new clash with Israel.

Israel's low-profile reported strikes seem to underline to Hezbollah and its Iranian and Syrian allies the extent of Israeli intelligence penetration of their activities. This, too, may further Israeli deterrence, since an enemy that considers itself too exposed may be reluctant to risk entering into a larger conflict.

These factors help explain why, on most occasions, Hezbollah chose to absorb Israeli strikes on weapons targets and operatives in Syria, rather than retaliate and escalate.

Yet deterrence is a two-way street. There have been several instances in which Hezbollah responded in a limited fashion to Israeli actions without provoking a full-scale conflict, so as to communicate to Israel that its attacks in the northern arena carry the risk of escalation, and that Israeli decision makers should not feel too free to order strikes.

The first of these retaliations appears to have occurred in October 2014, when Hezbollah detonated explosive devices on the Israeli-Lebanese border near the Har Dov (Shebaa Farms) region, wounding two IDF soldiers.³⁵ The organization described the bombing as retaliation for the death of an operative killed in a blast the previous month that resulted from Israel reportedly destroying a surveillance device in southern Lebanon.

In January 2015, the Israel Air Force reportedly struck a convoy carrying senior Hezbollah and IRGC personnel in southern Syria near the Israeli border. The strikes killed, among others, an Iranian general and Hezbollah operative Jihad Mughniya, son of former Hezbollah operations chief Imad Mughniya, himself assassinated in a reported Israeli attack in Damascus in 2008.

Former Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon cast much light on this incident, and on one of the central goals of the War Between Wars. He described the targeted convoy as a

coproduction of the Iranian Islamic Republican Guards Corps and Hezbollah. They were meant to carry out severe attacks on Israel. They had completed their training. The convoy contained senior commanders, and an Iranian general, who was the “educator.” They went on patrol to choose locations from which to infiltrate Israel, and to choose from where to fire anti-tank missiles at Israeli targets in the Golan Heights. The patrol ended with them being ended. The unit was ended.³⁶

A week later, however, Hezbollah responded by firing a volley of Kornet missiles at two IDF vehicles several kilometers away near the Lebanese border, killing an Israeli officer and a soldier.³⁷ Israel responded with artillery fire on targets in southern Lebanon and a UN peacekeeper was accidentally killed.³⁸ The exchanges of fire then ceased.

This episode reveals that in addition to the transfer of illicit weapons Israel is also enforcing a red line prohibiting the approach of belligerent Shiite axis forces to the Syria-Israel border. It also shows, however, that both sides appear to have been successful in deterring one another.

Similarly, in January 2016, Lebanese terrorist Samir Kuntar was killed by an Israeli precision strike, according to international media reports. Kuntar had set up a command center with Iranian backing in Damascus to recruit Syrian-Druze villagers living near Israel, and to oversee attacks on Israel from southern Syria. Hezbollah set off explosive devices near an armored IDF vehicle in the Har Dov region, injuring two IDF soldiers.³⁹ Israeli artillery then fired on targets in southern Lebanon.

The same pattern is evident. Israel’s intelligence community detected a clear and imminent threat to security and ordered low-profile defensive pinpoint strikes. Hezbollah initiated its own limited response, designed to reinstate counter-deterrence, without being dragged into a war. This episode also ended without significant escalation and suggests that both sides have successfully deterred the other in varying degrees.

Any of these incidents could have ended in war. Had any of Hezbollah's retaliation measures resulted in larger numbers of Israeli casualties, Israel would likely have been compelled to respond more severely and a chain reaction of escalation could have easily begun, leading to full-scale conflict. The cautious balancing act played by both sides, designed to ensure their freedom of maneuver and to deter one another without entering into a war, has so far succeeded. But there is no guarantee that it will continue to succeed in the future.

MESSAGING AND POSTURING

Alongside military operations, the leaderships of Hezbollah, its coalition allies, and Israel have consistently used public statements to posture, set out their positions, project deterrence, and exchange messages.

In recent years Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah, his deputies, and Hezbollah-affiliated media have made a series of statements sketching out their own "red lines," issuing warnings, and striving to accomplish face-saving public relations goals. Thus, for example, in April 2014, after Israel allegedly struck a Hezbollah weapons convoy on the Syrian-Lebanese border, the organization set off border bombs that targeted an IDF convoy traveling in Har Dov, causing damage but no injuries.⁴⁰ Following the incident, Nasrallah granted an interview to the Lebanese newspaper *al-Safir* in which he seemed to indicate that an Israeli attack targeting personnel near or in Lebanon would result in a rapid response against Israel, in contrast to a strike on Hezbollah arms targets in Syria. This represents an attempt by Nasrallah to force Israel to limit its attacks to Syrian territory. As he put it:

We think that in the recent Israeli raid Israel was trying to take advantage of the situation to change the existing rules of the game, or, more precisely, to change the rules of engagement and of the conflict... With time, the Israelis may have gotten confused that the resistance – as the other side in Lebanon is trying to circulate through its media – is feeling embarrassed, weak, confused, scared and worried, and that this confusion may encourage the [Israelis] to change the rules of engagement. The value of the Labbounch explosive device at that time was to send a message that the resistance, although it is fighting in Syria, still has its eyes open and is ready for confrontation.⁴¹

In April 2015, two days after the IAF struck a Syrian-Druze cell recruited by Iran to plant explosives on the border with Israel, Ibrahim Amin wrote in the pro-Hezbollah *al-Akhbar*:

Even if [Israel] wants to accept this reality [of a resistance front in the Golan], it is more interested in trying to lay down the rules of the game in this region. But the new [development] is that it no longer knows what the response of the resistance will be. This failure to formulate a full [intelligence] assessment may lead [Israel] to make foolish mistakes, which will enable the resistance not only to trap and ambush it here and there, but to deprive it of the exclusive initiative on this front – and that is the most important thing.⁴²

He also stated that Hezbollah’s presence “in the regions of southern Syria has to do with the front against the [Israeli] enemy, though Hezbollah is [also] actively and seriously involved in the struggle to defend Syria and its regime.”⁴³

Amin’s message, likely initiated by Hezbollah’s leadership, carried a statement of intent regarding the organization’s ambition to expand its front against Israel from Lebanon into southern Syria. His attempt at boosting deterrence came from his claim that Israel had lost the ability to strategically assess the organization’s responses to attacks, and he warned that Jerusalem should not assume that prior calculations of how Hezbollah would respond would prove accurate in the future.

During a January 2015 interview with the TV channel *al-Mayadeen*, prior to the Israeli strike on the IRGC-Hezbollah convoy in Syria, Nasrallah acknowledged the two-way deterrence in place between his organization and Israel: “There is deterrence on both sides of the border. If the resistance decides to force a confrontation, it should be aware that Israel is a strong enemy and the Israelis also know the resistance is strong and capable.”⁴⁴

He also described Israeli strikes in Syria as attacks on the “resistance bloc,” thus acknowledging the amalgamation of his forces with Iranian and Assad regime forces into an integrated operational coalition. After

the strike, Nasrallah released further statements designed to make it clear that Hezbollah was part of a larger military coalition, describing those killed as reflecting a “fusion of Lebanese-Iranian blood on Syrian soil, and reflects the unity of the cause and the unity of the fate of the countries in the axis of resistance.”⁴⁵

Nasrallah’s post-attack comments were also aimed at boosting his organization’s deterrence. Referring to Hezbollah’s deadly missile response against IDF vehicles he said: “They killed us in broad daylight, we kill them in broad daylight ... they struck two of our vehicles, we targeted two of their vehicles.”⁴⁶ This statement is a clear indication of Hezbollah’s attempt to create deterrence through what it sees as a proportional response to Israel’s actions.

“The Israelis can’t kill our people and then go to sleep ... their farmers can’t stay in their fields and their soldiers can’t stroll up and down the border as if they merely killed mosquitoes,” Nasrallah said. He then issued a vital addition: “We don’t want war but we are not afraid of going to war.”⁴⁷ This explicit admission that Hezbollah is not seeking open conflict with Israel at this time was a direct message to the IDF’s General Staff and Israel’s security cabinet, saying that Hezbollah too had its red lines that it would enforce them, but that did not seek escalation.

Israel’s defense establishment likely pored over this speech, as with many others, to help build a strategic picture. During the same speech, Nasrallah indicated a shift in his posture, threatening that future responses would not be limited to the Har Dov region and that Hezbollah was entitled to confront Israel “wherever it wants and however it wants.”⁴⁸

Nasrallah’s comment about Har Dov was a key warning to Israeli decision makers. In the past Hezbollah felt compelled to respond to strikes inside Lebanon but not necessarily in Syria. That formula was now gone, and all of Lebanon and Syria were viewed a unified arena. The statement was designed to deter Israel from striking targets in Syria, but it could also be interpreted as a warning that future Hezbollah retaliation would not necessarily be launched from southern Lebanon, but rather from Syria.

More recently, Hezbollah held a military parade in the western Syrian town of Qusair, which it controls, displaying armored vehicles, including Russian-made tanks, mobile missile launchers, and artillery guns. The parade, together with speeches by Hezbollah leaders, was designed to send the message to Israel and Sunni regional state actors that the organization had become a full-fledged military force that was firmly entrenched in Syria with no intention of leaving. Shortly after the parade Hezbollah deputy secretary-general Naim Qassem stated: “We are in Syria, and we do not need to give any explanation or justification for this. We stand alongside the Syrian army and the Syrian state ... Hezbollah’s presence in Syria is something basic ... As far as we are concerned, there is no difference between Al-Qusayr and South [Lebanon].”⁴⁹

Hezbollah’s overall deterrence strategy is to set up an “equality” formula. According to this formula, if Israel chooses to “flatten” south Beirut, Hezbollah can do the same to IDF military headquarters in Tel Aviv. If Israel threatens Lebanese ports, Hezbollah can – and has – threatened to do the same to Israeli ports.

This theme continued in 2017 with Nasrallah saying that Israel “must count to one million” before going to war with Hezbollah. “We are not advocates of war. We are in the defense position,” he claimed, possibly to appease sections of Lebanese society who are critical of the grave dangers Hezbollah brings to Lebanon. But Nasrallah then reintroduced the equality formula: “In the face of Israel’s threats to destroy Lebanon’s infrastructure, we will not abide by red lines, especially regarding Haifa’s ammonia and the nuclear reactor in Dimona. Hezbollah possesses the full courage for this.”⁵⁰

Israel’s reported campaign to strike weapons, as well as Shiite axis formations in Syria, has clearly been affected by Nasrallah.

In addition to spelling out Hezbollah’s deterrence formula, these messages suggest that the Iranian-led axis has no intention of giving up its long-term goal of having bases in southern Syria.

Israeli leaders, too, have often used the media and public statements to posture, transmit messages to Hezbollah and its allies, and boost Israeli

deterrence. Israeli counter-threats appeared aimed at getting Hezbollah to refrain from large-scale attacks that could escalate into war. For example, in December 2015, after Hezbollah threatened to retaliate for Kuntar's assassination, Prime Minister Netanyahu stated: "We act against those who act against us, and all our enemies should know that we will react forcefully against every attack on us."⁵¹ The first half of the statement signals to Hezbollah and its allies that Israel intends to continue with the campaign to strike emerging threats as they are detected by Israeli intelligence services. The second indicates Israeli determination to also retaliate against Hezbollah responses to Israeli actions.

Chief of Staff Eisenkot reiterated Netanyahu's warning, saying that "our enemies know that if they try to undermine the security of Israel, they will face severe consequences."⁵² In the following days, Hezbollah detonated a border bomb near an Israeli armored vehicle, injuring two soldiers, and triggering Israeli artillery strikes on Hezbollah positions in southern Lebanon.⁵³

Israeli leaders have, on occasion, issued reminders of Israel's posture following media reports on air strikes in Syria. In April 2015, a day after reports said Israel jets destroyed long-range surface-to-surface missiles in Syria destined for Lebanon, Defense Minister Ya'alon named the IRGC and Hezbollah as the parties trying to smuggle weapons "in every way and through every route, while being aware of the red lines set by the State of Israel, and that Israel has no intention of compromising over them." "We will not allow the transfer of quality weapons to terrorist organizations," he added,

chief among them Hezbollah, and we will know how to reach those who send them at any time and place. We will not allow Iran and Hezbollah to set up terrorist infrastructure on our border with Syria... Iran is continuing to try to arm Hezbollah, including during these current days, and it is aspiring to equip the Lebanese terrorist organization with advanced and precise weapons.⁵⁴

In November 2015, three days after reports of multiple Israeli strikes on targets in Syria's Qalamoun Mountain region, Ya'alon reiterated

Israel's posture, defined Israel's red lines, and warned that these would be enforced repeatedly, as much as necessary, pledging zero tolerance for the transfer of advanced weapons to Lebanon. Ya'alon warned that those who cross Israel's red lines "will be hit."⁵⁵

RESTRUCTURING THE DEFENSE ESTABLISHMENT

Israel's campaign against Hezbollah's force buildup and Shiite axis deployments in Syria has grown in strategic importance over the years. As a result, the defense establishment has begun restructuring itself. These changes are designed to focus additional resources for monitoring and, where necessary, disrupting enemy activities, maximizing intelligence-gathering and operational aspects.

Speed is a vital to successfully waging this campaign, since many targets appear and disappear quickly. Many targets also move freely across 20th century international borders that are irrelevant to the current strategic regional situation, where states have been replaced by transnational coalitions such as the Shiite axis.

To that end, the IDF has significantly boosted its intelligence-gathering capabilities and tightened cooperation between operational units and the Military Intelligence Directorate.⁵⁶ The IAF dedicates a good portion of its flights to intelligence gathering. Air borne platforms are being fitted with a growing number of advanced pods that gather a wealth of visual and electronic intelligence, giving the defense establishment an increasingly detailed regional picture of weapons smuggling and storage activities by Hezbollah and its allies. The data is sent to Air Force and Military Intelligence workstations, where personnel use advanced equipment and algorithms to decipher them quickly. The information can then be stored, or acted upon, depending on whether military planners and the government decide whether an Israeli red line has been crossed or not.

Precision intelligence is being fused with precision targeting, which allows the IAF to strike suspected weapons destined for Hezbollah. On November 30, 2016, for example, Hezbollah's *al-Manar* website, quoting the official Syrian News Agency, released an Arabic-language report stating:

The air force of the Israeli enemy launched two missiles on Reef Damascus early on Wednesday, causing no injuries. A Syrian military source said the two missiles were fired from Lebanese airspace and landed in the area of Saboura in Reef Damascus without causing injuries. The source said that the Israeli attack ‘was an attempt to distract from the successes of the Syrian Arab army and to lift the morale of the crumbling terrorist gangs.’⁵⁷

Advances have also been made in fusing data, such as signals intelligence, satellite data, video feeds, and other forms of sensors, into building up a multi-layered, real time intelligence picture. This has required the defense establishment to work with major Israeli defense companies to build systems that can sift through and organize big data, and to make intelligence available to the relevant command levels, in very little time. These growing intelligence-gathering capabilities mean that the Israeli defense establishment receives millions of pieces of intelligence every hour, 24 hours a day.

To help cope with such immense traffic, the state-owned Rafael company has developed command and control capabilities and search engines. These allow decision makers to quickly access data on forces in Lebanon in Syria. “In the past, it would take months to decipher this. We have shortened the process down to seconds, through an automated process, and through advanced algorithms, which sift through the intelligence automatically,” a Rafael source said in April 2016.⁵⁸

Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) develops and launches spy satellites, including a synthetic aperture radar (SAR) satellite – Ofek 10 – that can see through cloud cover and operate day or night. IAI also makes high quality electro-optical satellites that can gather intelligence on many targets across the Middle East.⁵⁹ These abilities enable the Military Intelligence Directorate to monitor suspicious activity related to the manufacture, transfer, and storage of weapons destined for Hezbollah.

IAI’s subsidiary, Elta, is at the forefront of a series of breakthroughs in Israel’s intelligence-gathering capabilities that enable the defense establishment to use radars, on the ground and in the air, to see its enemies’ activities. Elta has been working to enhance Israel’s ability to ‘acquire’ a designated area by fusing data from radar, intercepted signals, and electro-optical sensors, to build up a multi-layered view of the target area.

The Israel Navy has also undergone changes designed to adapt it to intelligence-gathering and intercepting arms smuggling. Israel's five Dolphin submarines, including new-generation platforms that can remain submerged for longer periods of time, are well designed to approach enemy coastlines and gather visual and communications intelligence.⁶⁰ The navy's missile ships can also be used to intercept Iranian sea-based smuggling efforts, as in 2014 with Klaus C ship, packed with Iranian rockets and other weapons, believed to be headed for Hamas in the Gaza Strip.⁶¹ The same year, former Navy chief V. Adm. (Res.) Eliezer Merom indicated that the navy played a major role in Israel's fight against Iranian arms smuggling, with ships and submarines able to reach target areas while avoiding enemy detection.⁶²

The IDF Ground Forces and regional commands also have a role to play in the War Between Wars. The Northern Command is redesigning itself to be able to cope with big data intelligence gathering and rapid assessments, some of which presumably is regarding the movement and storage of Hezbollah's weapons arsenal. Northern Command would likely have to deal with the weapons that do reach the organization's depots and launch sites, embedded in depots and launchers in civilian buildings across Lebanon, and in underground bunkers. Plans to attack Hezbollah's numerous weapons storage and launcher sites would be activated in the event of a full-scale conflict.

These changes have gone hand in hand with the IDF's ongoing revolution in networked operations. The "Network IDF" program is ultimately designed to allow any unit that has gleaned usable information to instantly share it across the military network with any other unit. The project is overseen by the IDF's C4i Branch, and without it, the scope of activities in the War Between Wars would be impossible.⁶³ The network enables personnel from the Military Intelligence Directorate to speak a "common language" with the IAF, the Israel Navy, the Ground Forces, and the Northern Command.⁶⁴

The demands posed by the War Between Wars have also led the IDF to make significant changes to its forces and budgetary allocations. According to Maj.-Gen. Amikam Norkin, the outgoing head of the

IDF Planning Branch (and incoming IAF commander as of August 10, 2017), the War Between Wars defines the current period, and is part of routine operations. He added that the cumulative effect “actually prevents the next war. It influences our enemies and causes them to not want to fight us. This has become increasingly influential within the [Israeli] military.”⁶⁵

Norkin’s comments indicate that what began several years ago as a series of operations to stem weapons transfers has evolved into a doctrine, which requires its own resource and contingency planning. The defense establishment has come to see the War Between Wars as a major strategic asset, not only to place constraints on Hezbollah’s force buildup, but also to bolster Israel’s deterrent capabilities, and to help stabilize the northern arena.

IMPLICIT STRATEGIC THREATS AND THE RUSSIAN ANGLE

The amalgamation of Hezbollah into a wider regional Iranian-led axis, which was joined by Russia in 2015, has had a profound effect on the strategic factors that affect both Israel and Hezbollah. One major detrimental effect has been the conversion of the Assad regime by Iran into a substantial weapons manufacturing, storage, and transition zone for Hezbollah. The battle techniques, experience, and capabilities Hezbollah has gained during its deployment in Syria has converted it into a regional ground army.

Hezbollah employs state-like military weapons and tactics on the battlefields of Syria, while retaining its ability to apply enhanced guerilla and terrorist tactics against Israel.

Since 2013, Nasrallah has been threatening to use Syria as an additional front from which to attack Israel.⁶⁶ The threat has been made consistently since the organization’s entry into the Syrian conflict, and was explicitly made again by IRGC elements. The IRGC’s deputy commander, Hossein Salami, said in December 2016 that Hezbollah’s urban warfare skills, displayed in the taking of Aleppo, could be used effectively on the streets of Israeli cities as well.⁶⁷

The ascension of a Shiite-Russian-led axis poses difficult questions about the repercussions of Israeli strikes. In theory, a strike on one member of the Iran-Russia-Hezbollah-Assad coalition could be perceived as a strike on others as well. Assad regime and Iranian infrastructure and personnel have reportedly been hit in past Israeli strikes on weapons heading for Hezbollah. It is often impossible to separate the components of this axis when it comes to targeted strikes. Russian involvement in this radical coalition complicates the picture further and might have an enhanced deterrent effect on Israeli decision makers, out of a desire to avoid inadvertent conflict with Moscow.

The Russian presence in Syria is centered on an air base at Hmeimim, on the Syrian coastline, and a naval base at Tartus. It has deployed 40-50 aircraft, which launched waves of air strikes on rebel targets, special forces on the ground, and S-300 and S-400 air defense batteries, whose radars can pick up Israeli air activity for hundreds of kilometers, and whose interceptor missiles place most of Israel in range.⁶⁸ Additionally, Russian surveillance ships patrol the eastern Mediterranean, and are able to monitor all electro-magnetic activity in Israel.⁶⁹ These factors led a senior Israeli navy official to publicly assess that Russia's presence in the region was set to stay for the long-term, and that the Israel Navy has had to change, and sometimes abort, operations as a result.⁷⁰ Yet the involvement can also be viewed in an entirely different manner, which paints Moscow as a broker that restrains Hezbollah and Assad.

Russia's interest in restraining its Middle East allies is apparent. Israel's regional power capabilities, both in terms of firepower and intelligence, make it a force to be reckoned with in Syria, and an unspoken message can be discerned in Israel's campaign against Hezbollah and its partners.

Should Hezbollah or its partner retaliate in an excessive fashion to Israel's strikes and set in motion an escalation dynamic that leads to a greater conflict, Jerusalem could feel compelled to bring the full weight of its military weight into the Lebanese *and* Syrian arenas. This holds the potential to irrevocably shift the course of the Syrian war and gravely endanger the future of the Assad regime, which Russia has worked hard to rescue and strengthen.

While the attempt by Israel and Russia to keep their respective interests from interfering with another has been fairly successful, and maintained by frequent visits by Netanyahu to Moscow to meet with President Putin, Israel's determination to enforce its red lines in Syria and disrupt Hezbollah's force buildup creates continuous tension with the Russian-led axis fighting in Syria.

An example of how quickly the Assad regime, and by extension Russia, can be pulled into the War Between Wars came in in March 2016, soon after Netanyahu returned from a trip to Moscow designed to communicate Israel's red lines in Syria and express concerns over the Shiite axis's activities.⁷¹

An Israeli air strike, likely hitting a Hezbollah weapons target deep in Syria's north occurred later that month, and the Assad regime apparently felt emboldened enough by recent battlefield victories to fire surface-to-air missiles at Israel's jets. The regime even consulted with Russian advisers before firing its missiles, according to a report.⁷²

Yet Israel's firm insistence on maintaining its deterrence and freedom of operation meant that after it dealt with Syria's surface-to-air missiles, Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman issued a follow-up threat. In it, he said the IDF would destroy the Assad regime's air defenses if they were used again to target Israeli jets.⁷³

That threat illustrates the dangers posed to the Assad regime should it be dragged into an escalatory dynamic that begins with strong retaliation by its forces, by Hezbollah, or by Iranian forces, in response to an Israeli strike. Large-scale Israeli intervention in Syria could tip the scales of the lengthy war raging there in favor of the Sunni rebels, an outcome that is deeply worrisome to the Assad regime and all of its backers, including Russia. This fear helps promote a Russian restraining influence, aimed at attempting to prevent Hezbollah and others from reacting strongly to Israeli attacks.

Israel has reiterated its determination to enforce red lines directly in the face of Russian criticisms, as occurred when the Israeli ambassador to Moscow was called in for a meeting by the Russian government a

day after the March incident. Prime Minister Netanyahu also released a statement soon afterwards, in which he vowed to continue the strikes if and when the need arose. This represents a public, diplomatic face-off with Moscow: “We attack if we have information and the operational feasibility. This will continue.”⁷⁴

The deeply disturbing prospect of a military clash between Israel and Russia remains a constant threat that neither side speaks of openly, but one that both sides must clearly and reluctantly plan for. Neither side desires such a dangerous possibility, yet Israel has indicated that it would not back down from its campaign against Hezbollah’s weapons transfers and targeting of Iranian-led deployments in southern Syria, even if this could, theoretically, drag the Russians into a military response to defend their allies.

Moscow’s unwillingness to seek to militarily disrupt Israel’s actions stems from what appears to be respect for Israel’s right to pursue its red lines, so long as they do not end up endangering the Assad regime. This situation seems to also indicate that Jerusalem has the upper hand in its deterrent capability, even against as powerful a global actor as Moscow. The fact that Russia’s regional order of battle in Syria is actually vulnerable to Israel’s local military advantage may be a contributing factor.

It is important to note that the de-confliction mechanism created by Russia and Israel to avoid unintended clashes over Syria’s skies is only designed to prevent accidental run-ins, and would not be relevant in a situation in which one side felt the need to target the other. Ultimately, it is clear that the Israeli defense establishment would do all that it could to avoid a confrontation with local Russian forces, short of halting the military campaign against Hezbollah’s force build up.

Israel has made it clear to all relevant actors that it is prepared to pay any price to continue this campaign. This determination, and the implicit message regarding the influence Israel could have on the balance of the Syrian conflict, appear to have greatly boosted Israeli regional deterrence, a development noticed by the pragmatic regional Sunni powers, which are also threatened by Iran, its agents, weapons industries, and trafficking networks.

Another relevant factor is the Assad regime's ability to facilitate Iranian-Hezbollah arms transfers, and determine responses to Israeli strikes. Russia is keen to preserve and strengthen the Assad regime, yet the regime's involvement in the Hezbollah-Iran weapons network makes it vulnerable to Israeli attacks, creating tension between Jerusalem and Moscow.

Professor Eyal Zisser of Tel Aviv University argued that the Assad regime is no longer in a chain of command in regards to the activities of Hezbollah and Iran, which operate on the regime's territory.⁷⁵

In Syria's chaotic reality, each actor operates as it sees fit, though coordination remains in place when it comes to actions that carry major strategic consequences. "Hezbollah and Iran do what they want," Zisser argued:

Assad cannot tell the Iranians, "give me tens of thousands of soldiers, but they will be under my command." Therefore, I'd say that the reality in Syria is one of forces coordinating with one another strategically, but practically, Iran and Hezbollah do as they please. This pattern would apply to weapons transfers as well.

In Zisser's view, the Assad regime is obligated to supply Hezbollah with any weapons it needs, due to the presence of thousands of Hezbollah operatives fighting for the Alawite regime. He believes the chances of the Syrian leader initiating an escalation with Israel by himself are very low:

The Syrian regime, even when it was its peak, did not seek to get entangled with Israel. So now, even if does not fall, it is still in a very sensitive situation, and what would it gain by getting into a conflict with Israel? The missiles Syria fired on Israel's planes were because Putin said it was okay to fire on planes that enter Syria. Just as Putin told Israel that if they wanted to attack, he would not intervene.

Zisser's analysis, if accurate, would suggest that even though Assad is potentially vulnerable to the fallout from Hezbollah-Iranian arms smuggling, he has no ability to stop it, since he owes the existence

of his entire regime to their support. It also means that Assad has no incentive to react strongly to incidents that involve damage to his regime after Israeli strikes.

Finally, the growing US-Russian tensions, both globally and regionally (the latter following the Assad regime's chemical massacre in Idlib Province in April 2017, and the Trump administration's retaliation through cruise missile attacks on a Syrian airbase) could also impact Israel's War Between Wars. Should Russia deploy more advanced air defense systems with associated long-range radars and interceptor missiles, Israel's ability to maneuver in the already crowded regional air space could face new constraints.

SCENARIOS FOR DESTABILIZATION AND ESCALATION

Over the past four years, the Israeli defense establishment has succeeded in skillfully applying a selective use of force, based on high quality intelligence, and precision-guided weaponry, to disrupt Hezbollah's force buildup. This campaign has boosted Israeli deterrence, and despite Hezbollah's successful counter-deterrence measures against Israel, Jerusalem has assured its own freedom to act whenever it felt necessary and whenever it was operationally possible, without triggering an escalatory dynamic leading to wider conflict.

But regional conditions continue to change rapidly, and there are no guarantees that future developments linked to the War Between Wars will not snowball into conflict. One way this might happen is if Hezbollah or one of its allies retaliates in a deadly manner to an Israeli attack, leading to a number of Israeli casualties that compels Jerusalem to hit back hard. In this scenario, a series of escalatory strikes and counter-strikes drag both Israel and Hezbollah into a full-scale conflict, despite the fact that neither side is interested in entering such a situation at this time.

A number of incidents in recent years came close to triggering this kind of scenario, particularly Hezbollah's January 2015 guided anti-tank missile attack on IDF vehicles, which killed two Israeli personnel. Had the attack resulted in more casualties, Israel would have likely felt compelled to

respond in a major way, and an escalatory pathway to all-out conflict could have occurred.

Inadvertent miscalculation by Hezbollah seems the most likely path to escalation, but it is not the only one. The Israeli defense establishment itself could, in theory, wrongly assess that a planned strike would result in a muted Hezbollah response and then be surprised. This appeared to have occurred in January 2016, when Lebanese terrorist Kuntar was killed.

Western security sources noted that prior to his assassination, Kuntar had become a full-fledged Iranian operative, working independently of Hezbollah, and had possibly even contravened a Hezbollah directive to temporarily scale back anti-Israel operations in Syria to avoid Israeli strikes.⁷⁶ Still, Hezbollah retaliated to Kuntar's death with a border bombing attack, which failed to cause casualties.

Thus, misreading and miscalculations by either side could pave the path for a rapid escalation. An additional pathway to potential escalation is a collision with Russia. This most undesirable of scenarios could occur if the Assad regime comes under Israeli fire, whether through its actions or due to its collusion with Hezbollah and Iran, resulting in Russian response. The Israeli defense establishment, while taking every precaution to try to avoid such a scenario, has likely prepared contingency plans for nonetheless. Washington's role in such a scenario also remains unclear.

A fourth element that could cause the War Between Wars to escalate into war is Iran. As the chief weapons supplier, financier, and commander of Hezbollah, Tehran could at any time decide that Israel's campaign has gone far enough and that the time had arrived to provoke a clash and "punish" Jerusalem for its actions. This could occur if senior IRGC or Quds Force personnel were killed in Israeli strikes, or general Iranian frustration and miscalculation following Israeli successes. An Iranian-ordered escalation could take the form of Shiite militia cross-border attacks from Syria against Israel or the activation of Hezbollah capabilities.

Another potential pathway to escalation would be a decision by Tehran or Hezbollah to avenge an Israeli strike by activating an overseas terrorism cell to strike Israeli interests or civilians abroad. While such efforts appeared

to have diminished, Shiite overseas terrorist networks were quite active until recently.⁷⁷ It seems fair to assume that Hezbollah has maintained this capability and it could reappear in the future. Although Israel's intelligence services have had much success in thwarting past plots, a future successful overseas attack in response to events tied to the War Between Wars could trigger rapid escalation between Israel and Hezbollah.

Ultimately, any of these possibilities hold the potential for bypassing Israel's considerable deterrence.

ADAPTING DETERRENCE AND OPERATIONS TO 21ST CENTURY REGIONAL CHAOS

The Israeli campaign to monitor and disrupt Hezbollah's force buildup has been an evolutionary process. It began as an ad-hoc response to an ambitious weapons trafficking program by the Shiite axis and developed into a full-fledged strategic doctrine with assigned resources and capabilities. This doctrine represents an Israeli response and adaptation of its defense strategy to radical changes in the strategic environment. These changes have rendered the IDF's 20th and early 21st century strategic approaches, which were based on dealing with enemy states and their military forces, largely irrelevant.

The northern arena can no longer be divided into two parts, Syria and Lebanon, as it was in recent decades, due to the erasure of any meaningful border, the collapse of the Syrian state, and Hezbollah's transformation into a regional Shiite ground army, armed with state-like capabilities.

The Israeli defense establishment found that older means of assessing and monitoring regional threats, based on country-by-country intelligence assessments and preparations for individual enemy state capabilities, are irrelevant. In today's reality the Syrian state has been replaced by hundreds of non-state actors, consisting of highly armed Shiite and Sunni militias, and a growing Iranian footprint.

Israel has had to restructure its defense establishment to acquire the ability to rapidly identify and when necessary respond to developing

threats, which often have a transnational dimension. This adaption, which requires far greater flexibility and speed than past capabilities, is a reflection of the partial collapse of the Middle East state system, and its replacement with regional coalitions.

Hezbollah is a core component of the Shiite-led axis, which represents the most severe military threat to Israel's security. The War Between Wars is based on the ability to map out the entire Shiite axis's regional activities. The campaign to challenge Hezbollah's arms buildup has also provided Israel with an opportunity to project an effective, clear deterrence posture, which extends significantly beyond the goal of defending Israeli territorial sovereignty. As such, this low-profile campaign fits in to a long succession of doctrines formulated by other powers that have extended beyond the goal of immediate defense of their borders.⁷⁸

The evolution of the War Between Wars also appears to be the result of a willingness in the defense establishment to respond and be open to the dramatic regional changes. According to Brig.-Gen. (Res.) Meir Finkel, who headed the Army Concepts and Combat Doctrine Department for seven years, the most effective manner a military can respond to surprise developments is by fostering "an atmosphere of openness to new ideas and a mindset conducive to dealing with uncertainty." He called for a military doctrine based on flexibility to "give equal importance to all forms of war (offensive, defensive, advance, and withdrawal)."⁷⁹ And while Finkel referred to military doctrines for open states of war, the War Between Wars also fits this category.

By its very definition, the War Between Wars is flexible. It allows Israel to come to grips with the fact that Hezbollah and its allies are in a state of war with Israel, but not one that takes the form of open, full-scale conflict at this time. Israel has found a way to defend its interests in this grey zone. It gradually developed a campaign to deal with Hezbollah, employing offensive capabilities in a flexible manner to ultimately achieve a defensive strategic goal. The defensive goal here can be defined as delaying the outbreak of the next conflict, by preventing Hezbollah from becoming so heavily armed with game-changing weaponry that it becomes overconfident and reckless. The second defensive goal is to try

to harm Hezbollah's starting position during the opening stages of the next full-scale conflict.

Crucially, the War Between Wars also provides the IDF with breathing space to focus on its own force buildup. This includes the gradual buildup of a multi-layered air defense shield, which will be critical in dealing with Hezbollah's surface-to-surface projectile arsenal. The air defense systems coming online have become an integral component of the IDF's updated strategy.⁸⁰ Other strategic processes underway, and which need time to mature, include the buildup of powerful ground offensive capabilities, and the creation of unprecedented precision air power, able to target several thousand strikes per day.

Delaying the outbreak of the next conflict through the selective disruption of enemy force buildups therefore provides sufficient time and space for the IDF to enlarge and improve its own forces. This gives Israel sufficient time to adapt to the challenges posed by the 21st century Middle Eastern security environment.

CONCLUSION

Israel has, over recent years, been using newly honed offensive capabilities and intelligence gathering to conduct surgical strikes against the Hezbollah-Iranian weapons trafficking network, and attempts by Tehran and Hezbollah to build bases in south Syria.

The goal of this campaign is intrinsically defensive. Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, and Hezbollah lost any territorial dispute justification to continue its conflict with Israel. Driven by Iranian-imported Shiite jihadist ideology, Hezbollah has continued to threaten Israel, and the regional breakdown in the state system over recent years has not compelled it to abandon the Iranian-directed goal of harming the Jewish state.

Tactically, however, Hezbollah responds reasonably well to rational cost-benefit calculations and to deterrence. This fact that has enabled Israel to utilize its low-profile campaign to keep Hezbollah from acquiring game-changing weaponry and bases of attack in Syria, and to decrease its motivation to enter a destructive full-scale war with Israel.

The War Between Wars is far from perfect. Despite Israel's numerous efforts, Hezbollah and its Iranian patron have been able to assemble one of world's largest arsenals of rockets and missiles in Lebanon, and are making considerable progress in improving the accuracy and warhead size of a number of these projectiles. Hezbollah has the ability to fire guided-rockets and missiles at strategic Israeli targets at any time. The sheer size of its arsenal means that in a future war many of its rockets will crash into Israeli territory without being intercepted. Israel's air defenses will have to focus on strategic and military sites, and on population centers, and will not be able to cover the entire country in the face of thousands of rocket attacks per day. Nevertheless, the War Between Wars provides Israel with breathing space for the defense establishment to build Israel's own force. It also helps provide the Israeli home front with critical breaks from rounds of conflict that are destructive to lives and the national economy.

All in all, the War Between Wars gives Israel a window of opportunity to prepare itself for challenges that loom on the horizon. It represents Israel's first major attempt to formulate and develop an operational and a strategic doctrine in the face of the collapse of the state system in the Middle East and the appearance of a transnational axis whose ground force, Hezbollah, has morphed from terror organization to army.

The success of the War Between Wars should not only be measured by what is present and absent in Hezbollah's numerous arms depots, hidden in every one of southern Lebanon's 200 villages and towns, as well as in Beirut and the Bek'aa Valley. Instead, the success of Israel's struggle can be measured by how it utilizes this breathing space between conflicts to prepare for the time when the War Between Wars ends and the next war begins.

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