

The Campaign Between Wars: How Israel Rethought Its Strategy to Counter Iran's Malign Regional Influence

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Brief Analysis

The architects of a landmark shift in IDF doctrine explain why the change was necessary, and how it has helped delay full-scale war even while forcefully confronting Tehran's hegemonic ambitions.

The state of Israel has rarely known peace; at best, it has enjoyed short periods of quiet between intermittent conflicts. These periods are cherished by Israelis and serve as incubators for the country's extraordinary growth. Yet Israel's enemies often take advantage of these periods as well, using them to refill their arsenals and evolve their tactics and capabilities.

Most of Israel's current security challenges stem from a single threat: Iran's aspirations of hegemony over the Middle East. These aspirations are manifested not only in the regime's military nuclear activities, but also in its efforts to deploy weapons and build spheres of influence in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and elsewhere. In particular, Iran has sought to improve and expand its arsenal of precision missiles and other standoff fire, in part to export these capabilities to armed Shia factions throughout the region.

To counter such threats while maximizing the state's ability to develop during times of quiet, Israel has endeavored to maintain what it regards as a reasonable security routine. Traditionally, this routine was maintained through territorial defense operations and threat-neutralizing endeavors below the threshold of war, but more recently it has been augmented by what the Israel Defense Forces call the "Campaign Between Wars" (CBW).

WHY DID ISRAEL SHIFT TO THE CBW?

For many years, Israeli military activities were characterized by two interlinked phases. The first was preparation for wars, involving the development of operational concepts against enemies, force buildup processes for procurement and weapons development, and the training and organization of personnel, all culminating in final preparations for ever-imminent conflicts. The second phase concerned the use of force during war and the support of combat efforts. Up until the past decade, Israel felt compelled to focus almost exclusively on these two phases in order to defend its borders and counter outside terrorist threats.

At the same time, the nature of the threats to Israel's security were changing profoundly. The weakening of Arab states and their militaries created a reality in which the conventional threat, the unconventional threat, and the subconventional threat (i.e., terrorist organizations and semi-military organizations) all evolved simultaneously. While Israel's strength was still readily apparent as it entered its seventh decade of existence, the rise of new challenges and the destruction wrought by the 2006 Lebanon war spurred the IDF to develop a concept of integrated, low-intensity, preemptive warfare: the Campaign Between Wars.

The CBW constitutes a fundamental change in the pattern of Israeli security operations over the past thirteen years, and it is one of the main factors in the prolonged period of relative quiet the country has enjoyed along its northern border. Deviating from the binary approach of either preparing for war or openly waging it, the CBW strives for proactive, offensive actions based on extremely high-quality intelligence and clandestine efforts. The strategy's main goals are straightforward:

- Delay war and deter enemies by constantly weakening their force buildup processes and damaging their assets and capabilities.
- Enhance Israel's legitimacy for exertion of force while damaging the enemy's legitimacy, in part by exposing clandestine military activities that violate international law.
- Create optimal conditions for the IDF if war finally does come.

The CBW's development and success led to the authoring of a new IDF military doctrine—one that institutionalized the concept within Israel's operational activities and defined how it would be incorporated into the strategy, goals, and management of various security organizations as they collaborated with each other and their foreign counterparts. The CBW also combined clandestine components and cognitive warfare with international security, economic, and political efforts, all with the aim of exerting power to defend Israel's security interests without escalating to war.

WHAT HAS THE CAMPAIGN ACCOMPLISHED?

Over the past few years, Israel's northern borders have been the center of IDF efforts to deter and thwart Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force, which aims to transform the Syrian and Lebanese frontiers into a base of operations against Israel. In Syria, the IDF has sought to prevent Iran from entrenching itself and its foreign proxies, deploying advanced weapons capabilities, and turning the Golan Heights into another front for striking Israel. In Lebanon, the IDF made noteworthy achievements after launching Operation Northern Shield last December: namely, demolishing the Hezbollah/Qods Force plan to attack the Galilee [through underground tunnels](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/time-to-change-course-on-the-uns-lebanon-policy) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/time-to-change-course-on-the-uns-lebanon-policy>), and preventing the [development of precision missile capabilities](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-precision-missile-project-moves-to-lebanon) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-precision-missile-project-moves-to-lebanon>) that would pose a serious strategic threat to Israel. More recently, the reported [drone strikes against Hezbollah missile assets in Beirut](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-will-hezbollah-respond-to-israels-drone-attack) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-will-hezbollah-respond-to-israels-drone-attack>) may be yet another calculated and precise Israeli measure to thwart its enemies' strategic efforts. The region has also seen substantial IDF contributions to the regional campaign against the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.

Despite the CBW's deterrent intent, however, the moniker "Between Wars" is quite intentional—Israel's military and

political leadership are well aware that this pattern of action involves risks and friction that could spark wider military confrontation or even full-scale war. Accordingly, in planning various CBW operations, Israel has implemented a stringent risk-management process to account for the potentially rapid speed of escalation and minimize the possibility of war. At the same time, the IDF has continued to improve its readiness for such a conflict in all arenas, in part to show the enemy that Israel is ready and willing to exert its full might if required.

Indeed, the CBW has been developed over the years to reflect Israel's military supremacy in the Middle East. The doctrine has greatly strengthened Israeli deterrence against its regional enemies, reduced threats to the state and its citizens, and improved the IDF's capabilities. It has also led to a broad and sustained initiative against the region's most destabilizing actors: Iran's Qods Force, Hezbollah, and the Islamic State.

Going forward, this model can and should be replicated by international forces as they confront Iran's proxies throughout the Middle East, ideally serving as the basis for a strategic regional alliance against Tehran's wide assortment of malign activities. The CBW is a proven operational concept for countering Iran with a lower risk of escalation, making it ideal for use in Washington's campaign to rally support behind pressuring the rogue regime.

As for Israel itself, the CBW has enabled a robust period of security and prosperity, especially since the last major Gaza conflict in 2014. These gains are reflected in the economy, the tourism sector, and the continued development seen in Israel's southern and northern regions. The campaign has enjoyed international support, gained freedom of action (facilitated by an understanding with the United States and Russia), and improved regional cooperation. Meanwhile, the IDF has seen unprecedented strengthening of its readiness for war, including increased armaments and reserves. Israel aims to continue the CBW in the future, refining it according to regional developments.

Finally, it is time for this concept and other key security elements to be formalized beyond IDF military doctrine—that is, they should be incorporated into a comprehensive, official Israeli national security strategy, reflected and implemented by the country's extensive security apparatus. As ever, Israel must continue operating under the ancient adage "Si vis pacem, para bellum"—"If you want peace, prepare for war."

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