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ARTICLE



Israel's inter-war campaigns doctrine: From opportunism to principle

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ABSTRACT

What started as opportunistic operations has gradually given rise to Israel's prevailing military doctrine of Inter-War Campaigns (IWC). This article provides a comprehensive analysis of a phenomenon that has shaped conflicts in the Middle East, one that has been overlooked in the literature. The IWC utilises advantageous conditions to formulate continuous military campaigns below the threshold of severe conflict. This article argues that the IWC creates and manages limited competitive conflicts intended to mitigate adversaries' force buildup in preparation for war. It provides the first account of the doctrine's development, analyses its enabling factors, and discusses its degree of success.

KEYWORDS Inter-War Campaigns (IWC); Campaign between Wars (CBW); limited competitive conflict; military doctrine; Israel, Hezbollah, Iran, Syria

Introduction

On 11 April 2016 Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly admitted for the first time that for years Israel has been striking arms shipments in Syria en route to Lebanese Hezbollah.¹ Since 2013, reports of Israeli airstrikes in Syria have become routine, as opportunistic military operations have given rise to an established military doctrine.² While many scholars have analysed Israel's military strategy and its posture in the Middle East in the last 20 years, staggeringly, no comprehensive academic study has been published on the most significant change in its military thinking and modus operandi – the adoption of the doctrine of Inter-War Campaigns (IWC).

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¹Reuters Staff, 'Netanyahu: Israel has Carried Out Dozens of Strikes in Syria', *Reuters*, 11 Apr. 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-israel-idUSKCN0X81TO>.

²We adopt the NATO definition of the term *doctrine*: 'fundamental principles by which the military forces guide their actions in support of objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgement in application'. NATO, *Glossary of Terms and Definitions AAP-06* (Brussels: NATO Standardization Office 2020), 44. <https://nso.nato.int/nso/nsdd/main/standards/ap-details/3154/EN>.

Under the principles of the IWC, Israel formed several coordinated campaigns that aim to decrease the likelihood of war by denying its adversaries crucial capabilities, and simultaneously improve operational conditions should war erupt.³ Israel recognised the favourable conditions that enabled persistent surgical use of force. It has been engaging in limited competitive conflicts with adversaries which have thus far been maintained without severe escalation.

The evolution of Israeli military strategy requires a revised look at the existing literature. Scholars have argued, prior to the establishment of the IWC, that in the twenty-first century Israel adopted a strategy of “mowing the grass”.⁴ According to this analysis, Israel’s goal was to achieve substantial periods of quiet by significantly damaging non-state rivals’ capabilities in periodic, short, limited but aggressive, large-scale operations that temporarily enhance deterrence. This observation may still explain the dynamics with Hamas in the Gaza Strip, but it does not provide a sufficient explanation for the absence of a large-scale clash with Hezbollah since the 2006 war. Nor can it describe Israel’s policy against the Iranian presence in Syria, an arena in which Israel has not conducted a large-scale operation since 1973. Although Israel still aims to achieve significant periods of quiet, a cardinal shift occurred in the way in which it pursues this objective. We argue that instead of “letting the grass grow and mowing it” through costly large-scale operations, Israel shifted to a more systematic preventive strategy, preferring frequent small-scale operations.

Some scholars have correctly argued that Israel’s goal is to “keep the Lebanese front quiet”,⁵ but they reached incomplete conclusions regarding Israel’s military principles vis-à-vis Hezbollah after 2006. Sobelman, for example, emphasised Israel’s decision to deter Hezbollah by punishment through communicating “far-reaching threats”.⁶ We argue that this conclusion is partial, as it overlooks significant aspects of the interaction between Israel and Hezbollah since 2013. It misses the direct linkage between the steady Israeli objective of keeping the Lebanese front quiet, and the added goal of denying Hezbollah advanced conventional arms. The IWC aims to achieve both goals through proactive action in Syria.

³G. Eisenkot, *Strategy of the IDF* (Tel Aviv: Office of Chief of Staff 2018) (Hebrew); N. Alon and D. Preisler-Swery, “Running a Marathon and Putting Spokes in the Enemy’s Wheels”: The Campaigns between the Wars in the IDF, *Bein Haktavim* 22–23 (2019), 13–31 (Hebrew); G. Eisenkot and Gabi Siboni, ‘Guidelines for Israel’s National Security Strategy’, Memorandum 196, Sept. (Tel Aviv: INSS 2019) (Hebrew). <https://www.inss.org.il/he/publication/guidelines-for-israels-national-security-strategy/>.

⁴E. Inbar and E. Shamir, “Mowing the Grass”: Israel’s Strategy for Protracted Intractable Conflict’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37/1 (2014), 65–90.

⁵D. Sobelman, ‘Learning to Deter: Deterrence Failure and Success in the Israel-Hezbollah Conflict, 2006–16’, *International Security* 41/3 (2016/17), 151–96.

⁶*Ibid.*, 176.

The three underlying concepts of “deterrence by punishment”, “mowing the grass”, and “preventing crucial capabilities” adopt different principles of action. These principles are, respectively, building a destructive force and threatening to use it, conducting occasional large-scale operations, and carrying out proactive continuous campaigns. These three concepts, and their equivalent principles of action, showcase the three stages of operation identified by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF): war, emergency and routine. Israeli contemporary military thinking favours campaigns in the routine stage.

In short, the Inter-War Campaigns doctrine *utilises advantageous military and geopolitical conditions to formulate well-defined, proactive, preventive, frictional and continuous military campaigns, in order to engage in limited competition with adversaries over strategic objectives, below the threshold of war or severe conflict.*

There have been several partial attempts to describe Israel’s inter-war campaigns in policy circles. The former IDF Chief of Staff Eisenkot, together with Siboni, briefly describe what they call “the campaign between the wars” (CBW)⁷ and emphasise its importance in curtailing Iran’s regional influence. Goldenberg et al. tried to apply lessons from Israel’s operations in Syria to the US efforts against Iran.⁸ However, their analysis misses the evolution of the IWC and focuses on Israel’s campaigns at a very mature stage. Herzog offers a relatively more detailed account of Israel’s campaigns as of 2019, but he too misses its evolution and jumps quickly into contemporary challenges and conclusions.⁹ Within Israeli military circles, the IWC has received more analytic attention. In the local debate, Ortal’s criticism stands out. He argues that the IWC is not a viable doctrine, so long as Israel is incapable of resolving the main threat posed by rockets and missiles from Lebanon and Gaza.¹⁰ From a mostly descriptive standpoint, Alon and Preisler-Swery made an effort to define the IDF’s inter-war campaigns, and to point out the conceptual

⁷G. Eisenkot and G. Siboni, ‘The Campaign Between Wars: How Israel Rethought Its Strategy to Counter Iran’s Malign Regional Influence’, Policy Watch 3174, Sept. (Washington DC: The Washington Institute 2019). <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/campaign-between-wars-how-israel-rethought-its-strategy-counter-irans-malign>. The campaign Eisenkot and Siboni call ‘the campaign between the wars’ (CBW) is in fact composed of several campaigns, as has accurately been pointed out in: Alon and Preisler-Swery, ‘Running a Marathon and Putting Spokes in the Enemy’s Wheels’. In Hebrew it is common to refer to the doctrine in its singular acronym form of CBW (*Mabam*), initially given when it described a single campaign. The acronym of CBW is now inaccurate and confusing. Instead of using CBW, or *Mabam*, to describe plural campaigns, we prefer a new neutral definition, and acronym, that focuses on the evolved doctrine. By using ‘IWC’ we hope to leave behind any historical contexts and references to specific campaigns, and to highlight the general military doctrine.

⁸I. Goldenberg, N. Heras, K. Thomas, and J. Matuschak, ‘Countering Iran in the Gray Zone: What the United States Should Learn from Israel’s Operations in Syria’, Apr. (Washington DC: Center for a New American Security 2020).

⁹M. Herzog, ‘Iran Across the Border: Israel’s Pushback in Syria’, Policy Note 66, July (Washington DC: The Washington Institute 2019).

¹⁰E. Ortal, ‘The Fly on the Elephant’s Back: The Campaign between Wars in Israel’s Security Doctrine’, *Strategic Assessment* 24/2 (2021), 108–15.

doctrine, its characteristics and some of its enabling factors.¹¹ While providing a valuable basis, they neglected to reference the factual development process of the doctrine, and they did not attempt to deduce general conclusions from the Israeli case study.

This article sheds light on a much-overlooked phenomenon which shapes the face of conflicts in the Middle East, and offers a comprehensive and holistic analysis of Israel's military campaigns on empirical and conceptual levels. First, by synthesizing existing literature on conflict and competition, the article offers a conceptual understanding of inter-war campaigns as limited competitive conflicts. Second, it elaborates on the development of Israel's doctrine between the years 2013–20. Third, it analyses the enabling factors of the IWC. Finally, the article tries to cautiously discuss the extent of success the IWC has achieved with regard to its declared goals. By taking these first empirical and analytic steps, we set the foundation for further research on the IWC.

Limited competitive conflicts

Conflicts below the threshold of war have become paramount. The introduction of cyber threats,¹² the spread of violent non-state actors,¹³ the proliferation of advanced arms,¹⁴ and Great Power Competition¹⁵ have pushed militaries to engage in ways that differ from conventional full-scale wars. Many contemporary conflicts manifest in competitive dynamics, where competing actors gradually employ limited capabilities to avoid expensive wars with uncertain results. These competitions tend to involve asymmetrical power. The essence of *limited competitive conflicts* will hereby be explained by deconstructing it into “limited conflict” and “competition”, and by briefly reviewing each of these notions. Outlining the characteristics of *limited competitive conflicts* will provide a conceptual framework for understanding the IWC.

¹¹Alon and Preisler-Swery, 'Running a Marathon and Putting Spokes in the Enemy's Wheels'.

¹²M. P. Fischerkeller and R. J. Harknett, 'Deterrence is Not a Credible Strategy for Cyberspace', *Orbis* 61/3 (2017), 381–93.

¹³E. Shamir, 'Deterring Violent Non-state Actors', in Frans Osinga and Tim Sweijs (eds.), *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020* (The Hague: Asser 2020), 263–86.

¹⁴D. Blair, 'How to Defeat the United States: The Operational Military Effects of the Proliferation of Weapons of Precise Destruction', in Henry D. Sokolski (ed.), *Fighting Proliferation* (Maxwell Air Force Base: Air University 1996), 75–94; BICOM, 'Hezbollah's Precision Missile Project', Oct. (London: BICOM 2019). <https://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis/bicom-briefing-hezbollahs-precision-missile-project-october-2019-update/>.

¹⁵US Department of Defense, *Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy* (Arlington: US Department of Defense 2020).

Limited conflict

Limited conflict and constraints on the use of force are mostly understood vis-à-vis the more severe concepts of full-scale war (or even nuclear war) and escalation.¹⁶ Herman Kahn's influential work "On Escalation" provides deep insight into the ideas of limited conflict, ways of escalation and escalation strategy.¹⁷

Ways of escalation in Kahn's theory are effort-increasing vectors,¹⁸ crossing the threshold of limited conflict or agreed battle. Agreed battle is a state "in which both sides are accepting limitations, whether or not it is explicit or even well understood".¹⁹ Escalation, or stepping out of the borders of limited conflict, can therefore be achieved by increasing intensity, widening the area of conflict, or initiating a new conflict elsewhere (perhaps with an opponent's ally). According to Kahn, two basic strategies are available to the opposing sides of a conflict: to operate within the limits of the agreed battle by using its consensus features or to escalate from the agreed boundaries. The latter may result in new boundaries of agreed battle forming, as "escalation is an irreversible process".²⁰

Building upon Kahn and other strategic thinkers of the Cold War era, Kilgour and Zagare advanced our understanding of escalation and limitations in conflict by addressing actors' diverse strategic preferences and military capabilities.²¹ Their escalation model demonstrates how limited conflict may be the game outcome when complete information is shared by a challenger and a defender, depending on the belligerents' preferences and capabilities.

Although we rely on their thorough model, we reject the premise put by Kilgour and Zagare according to which "all conflicts, whether limited or all-out, must end".²² As implied by Kahn, limited conflicts are not episodic. They exist in a scheme of agreed rules, thus making limited conflict more of a state than a discrete incident. Limited conflicts can continue for a long time without reaching a conclusive result because of their low intensity nature.

Israel's IWC doctrine was designed for this limited type of conflict. Israel recognised an opportunity to change the status quo of uninterrupted force buildup by Hezbollah after the 2006 war. Israel also realised there was a possibility to interact with its adversaries within agreed boundaries. Israel, Hezbollah and Iran occasionally challenged the rules of the agreed battle,

¹⁶e.g., C. M. Gacek, *The Logic of Force: The Dilemma of Limited War in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University 1994).

¹⁷H. Kahn, *On Escalation* (New York: Praeger 1965). Kahn defines *Escalation* as 'an increase in the level of conflict in international crisis situations' (3).

¹⁸All three ways can vary in severity, thus making them vectors.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 231.

²¹D. M. Kilgour and F. C. Zagare, 'Explaining Limited Conflicts', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 24/1 (2007), 65–82.

²²*Ibid.*, 69.

with the intent of reshaping them in their favour. However, this has not led to an escalation spiral. War was, and still is, the least preferred option for all. Intentions and preferences must be clear for an agreed battle to be maintained. Following the 2006 war, the sides made sure they communicated their aims and limits through declarations and actions.²³

Competition

Wide attention has been given by policy documents and international relations literature to competition in recent conflicts. Competition can simply be understood as striving for contradicting goals or for a common goal which cannot be shared. Competition dynamics are seen as an action-reaction cycle.²⁴ The concept of competition is well demonstrated in the struggle over global power between the US and its “near-peer” challengers, China and Russia. The US acknowledges diverse methods are continuously applied to contest its hegemony, without crossing the line of a direct kinetic attack.²⁵

Competition may be a strategy that embraces a state of long-standing contest. Competition strategy embodies several fundamental principles, including: a state of competition is assumed to exist; the competitors should be identified clearly; and action should seek to incite a desirable reaction from the competitor. Competition strategy seeks to efficiently improve one’s standing, for example, by adapting doctrines or organizational concepts without shifting enormous resources.²⁶

Fischerkeller and Harknett describe such an approach in the context of cyber warfare. China and Russia have been competing with the US in cyberspace, proactively exfiltrating sensitive data and launching information campaigns. Having realised it was constantly challenged in cyberspace, the US decided to engage in the ongoing competition.²⁷ Operationally, this manifests as US Cyber Command’s Persistent Engagement.²⁸

Israel initiated competitions with Hezbollah and Iran over the readiness for future war, operating continuously and adaptively against the efforts of the latter two. Israel took a tremendous risk when it first struck Hezbollah arms in

²³Sobelman, ‘Learning to Deter’.

²⁴An arms race is a classic example of a competition, in which both sides act and react over time to secure the upper hand. B. Buzan, *An Introduction to Strategic Studies: Military Technology and International Relations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1987), 76–83.

In regard to escalation, Kahn observed escalation as ‘competition in risk-taking’, while Smoke described escalation as a situation in which opponents are involved in riskful action-reaction cycles. Kahn, *On Escalation*, 3; R. Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation* (Cambridge: Harvard University 1977), 278.

²⁵J. R. Biden, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington DC: The White House 2021).

²⁶D. J. Andre, ‘Competitive Strategies: An Approach Against Proliferation’, in Henry D. Sokolski (ed.), *Prevailing in a Well-Armed World* (Carlisle Barracks: US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute 2000), 3–26.

²⁷M. P. Fischerkeller and R. J. Harknett, ‘Persistent Engagement, Agreed Competition, and Cyberspace Interaction Dynamics and Escalation’, *The Cyber Defense Review* 4/3 (2019), 267–87.

²⁸P. M. Nakasone, ‘A Cyber Force for Persistent Operations’, *Joint Force Quarterly* 92 (2019), 10–14.

Syria, and once again when it initiated the campaign against Iranian entrenchment. It had no prior experience of how they would react to such aggression. Nevertheless, Israel's risks were well calculated, taking into consideration the balance of power, geopolitical conditions, and the alternative consequences of not competing. Indeed, Hezbollah and Iran continued their efforts and retaliated by threatening the Israeli home front and harming Israeli soldiers along the border on several occasions. These interactions consolidated the rules of agreed battle and affected both sides' achievements in the competition.

To conclude this section, the IWC is applied under two conceptual correlated ideas. One is limited conflict, which implies restrained battling within agreed rules. The other is competition, which entails challenging rivals' goals. The IWC institutes and manages limited competitive conflicts intended to mitigate adversaries' force buildup in preparation for a future war. A limited competitive conflict calls for (1) risking escalation when first stepping away from the status quo, and occasionally when agreed rules are challenged; (2) prolonged, continuous, offensive and restrained use of force; (3) composing explicit objectives; (4) tolerance for losses; (5) clear communication of goals and red lines to maintain agreement over boundaries and to avoid an escalation spiral. Later in this article we elaborate on the specific conditions that allowed Israel to initiate and maintain limited competitive conflicts.

The development of the inter-war campaigns doctrine

Traditionally, Israel's military operated in two major phases. The first is preparing for full-scale war, by training and conducting force buildup, while engaging in routine security. The second is fighting a full-scale war against regional rivals. Shifts in regional and military conditions, led Israel to adopt a new three-phase continuum paradigm.²⁹ In between the two traditional phases lies a liminal sustainable phase of continuous proactive friction that does not cross the threshold of war. The IWC capitalises on this phase to shape adversaries' intentions and capabilities, while still preserving the foundational principles of deterrence, offensiveness, and qualitative superiority.³⁰ The Israeli operations in Syria under the IWC may constitute a new domain of Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) operation, building on Maoz's previous observations.³¹

²⁹Eisenkot and Siboni, 'The Campaign Between Wars'.

³⁰D. Meridor and R. Eldadi, 'Israel's National Security Doctrine', *Memorandum* 182, Sept. (TelAviv: INSS 2018) (Hebrew); Y. Amidror, 'Israel's National Security Strategy', *Bein Haktavim* 28 (2020), 19–28 (Hebrew). <https://www.inss.org.il/he/publication/t-security-sisrael-of-formulation-on-report-committee-the-meridor-concept-security-the-later-years-t/>

³¹Z. Maoz, 'Evaluating Israel's Strategy of Low-Intensity Warfare 1949–2006', *Security Studies* 16/3 (2007), 319–49.

Even prior to the adoption of the IWC doctrine, Israel acted against its adversaries' weapons procurement efforts. However, these actions were singular, discrete, and framed as "special operations". They included maritime operations and airstrikes against weapon convoys headed to Gaza. These *reactive* operations were either conducted overtly in international waters, or under great secrecy. While steps were taken to mitigate evolving threats from Gaza, similar action against Hezbollah was not evident prior to 2013.

In the nuclear realm, Israel proactively denied its rival from acquiring capabilities. The "Begin Doctrine" of preventive and pre-emptive action³² was implemented in Iraq and Syria. Moreover, alleged sabotages to Iran nuclear and missile programs were attributed to Israel. This alleged secretive campaign, which was reported to involve Western powers, targeted scientists, military personnel, and infrastructure by kinetic and cyber means between 2005–13.³³ It included a series of covert "special operations", that were meant to delay Iran, and support the main diplomatic steps of economic sanctions and negotiations for a sustainable agreement. These actions were not conducted under a military doctrine that prefers persistent proactive action over preparing for, or engaging in, war. They were not part of the IWC, and by contrast, they highlight the unique characteristics of the new doctrine.

In retrospect, Israel's campaign against Hezbollah's armament began with an attack on a convoy of SA-17 surface-to-air missiles near Damascus in January 2013. The advanced weapon system was headed to Hezbollah in Lebanon, where it could challenge Israel's air superiority. Throughout 2013, Israel carried out more attacks in Syria against advanced weapons intended for Hezbollah. In May that year, a two-day airstrike was launched against Fateh-110 missiles, that were transferred from Iran and waited on the outskirts of Damascus to be moved into Lebanon.³⁴ In July Israel struck again, attempting to destroy Yakhont systems, an advanced shore-to-sea missile destined to Hezbollah.³⁵ Israel did not take responsibility publicly for these strikes, but officials hinted that Israeli forces were behind them. These incidents give a strong impression of opportunism, as Israel unexpectedly seized chances to

³²S. Brom, 'Is the Begin Doctrine Still a Viable Option for Israel?', in Henri D. Sokolski and Patrick Clawson (eds.), *Getting Ready for Nuclear-Ready Iran* (Carlisle Barracks: US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute 2005), 133–58.

³³E. Blanche, 'Iran-Israel Covert War', *The Middle East* 402 (2009), 28–31; J. Kapusnak, 'Covert Operations Attributed to Israel's Intelligence Services Against Iran's Nuclear Program', in Marian Majer and Róbert Ondrejcsák (eds.), *Panorama of Global Security Environment* (Bratislava: Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs 2013), 375–86.

³⁴A. Barnard, M. R. Gordon and J. Rudoren, 'Israel Targeted Iranian Missiles in Syria Attack', *The New York Times*, 14 May 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/05/world/middleeast/israel-syria.html>.

³⁵M. R. Gordon, 'Israel Airstrike Targeted Advanced Missiles That Russia Sold to Syria, U.S. Says', *The New York Times*, 13 July 2013.

destroy high-stakes weapon systems that were seemingly poorly defended and were transferred through tumultuous Syria. Thus, the year 2013 marked the first stage of what shall become a prolonged campaign.

The succeeding stage took place during 2014. While the Israeli attacks continued, the rules of agreed competition evolved.³⁶ In April 2014, the Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, admitted his organization laid explosive devices on the Israeli-Lebanese border. This was in retaliation to an Israeli bombing of a Hezbollah base on the Lebanese-Syrian border in February 2014. Nasrallah announced that “Israel understood the message”, and that he had no other option but to respond to Israel’s attempts to “change the rules of the game” by attacking in Lebanese territory.³⁷ In October, Israeli soldiers were again injured by explosive devices placed by Hezbollah, after an explosion tied to Israel killed a Hezbollah operative in Lebanon a month earlier.³⁸ In January 2015 Hezbollah fired on an Israeli patrol, killing two soldiers, 10 days after Israel attacked vehicles with Hezbollah and Iranian personnel along the Israeli-Syrian border.³⁹

Nasrallah explained his retaliation policy by saying that “from now on, if any member of Hezbollah is assassinated, then we will blame it on Israel and reserve the right to respond to it whenever and however we choose”.⁴⁰ He added, “they killed us in broad daylight, we killed them in broad daylight; they killed us around 11:30 am, we killed them at 11:30 am; they targeted two cars, we targeted two cars; they had killed and wounded, we too had martyrs”.⁴¹ Hezbollah’s actions and statements drew the line of agreed conflict. If Israel would not kill Hezbollah operatives, nor conduct military strikes on Lebanese soil, its surgical strikes in Syria would be tolerated.

The years 2015–16 were the third stage of the campaign, in which the IWC faced potential obstacles, but continued nevertheless to tackle Hezbollah procurement attempts in Syria. The IWC continued despite

³⁶See also Alon and Preisler-Swery, ‘Running a Marathon and Putting Spokes in the Enemy’s Wheels’, 27–28, describing the IWC as a ‘competition in drawing strategic conclusions’.

³⁷U. Dekel, ‘The Incidents in the Northern Theater (Syria and Lebanon): A Change in the Rules of the Game?’, *Insight* 531, Mar. (Tel Aviv: INSS 2014). <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-incidents-in-the-northern-theater-syria-and-lebanon-a-change-in-the-rules-of-the-game/>.

³⁸G. Cohen, J. Huri, and N. Shpigel, ‘In Half Hour: Hezbollah Activated Two Explosive Devices in Har Dov, Two Soldiers Injured’, *Haaretz*, 7 Oct. 2014 (Hebrew). <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.2453526>.

³⁹R. Kais, ‘Nasrallah: Our Achievement – Israel’s Fear’, *Ynet*, 30 Jan. 2015 (Hebrew). <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4621060,00.html>.

⁴⁰Toi Staff and Elhanan Miller, ‘Nasrallah: Hezbollah is Not Afraid of War with Israel’, *The Times of Israel*, 30 Jan. 2015. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/nasrallah-hezbollah-cannot-be-deterred-will-respond-to-every-israeli-action/>.

⁴¹Nour Samaha, ‘Nasrallah: Hezbollah to Respond to Israeli Attacks’, *Al Jazeera*, 30 Jan. 2015. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/1/30/nasrallah-hezbollah-to-respond-to-israeli-attacks>.

the increased Russian presence in Syria, which began in 2015. Israel did not attack in the Latakia region of Syria, where Russian forces were positioned. Furthermore, Israeli officials seemingly created deconfliction mechanisms with Russian forces over aerial activity.⁴² This does not imply that Israel and Russia coordinated the military campaign, but rather emphasises that Israel managed to sustain the IWC despite the significant Russian intervention in Syria. Simultaneously, attempts by the Syrian regime to militarily contest the attacks using air-defence systems were unsuccessful. Overall, Israel faced geopolitical and military challenges but kept acting systematically to prevent the force buildup of advanced weapons in Lebanon. As the campaign reached its third and fourth year, the IWC had consolidated into a steady doctrine; not a series of opportunistic operations, but a principle of action.

The fourth stage marks the evolution of Israel's IWC doctrine, from actions that were focused on a single campaign to multiple simultaneous campaigns. Specifically, in 2017 Israel escalated its actions against Iran's military presence and entrenchment in Syria. The Iranian presence in Syria was, and still is, considered by Israel a strategic threat. It allows Iran to deploy advanced weapons and create a de facto border between Israel and Iranian or Iran-backed forces in the Golan Heights. This unacceptable change in the potential balance of power, from the Israeli perspective, led Israel to implement the IWC against Iranian military presence in Syria.⁴³ The concept of an "inter-war campaign" applies to this case even though Israel has never been in war with Iran, because the IDF assumes it must prepare for war with Iran and that Iran's military presence in Syria could potentially lead to war.

Starting in 2017, many airstrikes were reported to target Iranian entrenchment in Syria. In December 2017 an Iranian military base was attacked, three weeks after the base was publicly revealed by the BBC.⁴⁴ As opposed to prior attacks in Syria, weapons were not the target, but the infrastructure itself. This attack was followed by statements by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defence Minister Liberman, announcing that Israel would not tolerate Iranian military presence in Syria. In 2018 Iran's forces in Syria suffered several blows, while only successfully launching a small number of rockets in response. Strikes on Iranian weapon convoys and militias in East Syria were also publicly attributed

⁴²Amir Bohbot, 'Deputy Chief of Staff to Meet his Russian Counterpart', *Walla News*, 1 Oct. 2015 (Hebrew). <https://news.walla.co.il/item/2893952>.

⁴³Ephraim Kam, 'The Iranian Military Intervention in Syria: A Look to the Future', *Strategic Assessment* 20/4 (2018), 19–30.

⁴⁴R. Kais, 'Reports: Israel Bombarded an Iranian Base near Damascus', *Ynet*, 2 Dec. 2017 (Hebrew). <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5050693,00.html>.

to Israel. If true, this shows the extent of Israeli aggressive initiatives against Iranian entrenchment.⁴⁵ Iran's minimal response to the series of attacks on its bases that year demonstrates Israel's military advantage.⁴⁶

The campaign continued in the following years of 2019–20. Images showed Iranian infrastructure was struck on numerous occasions during 2019 at Damascus International Airport, the western outskirts of Damascus and the Albukamal border crossing between Syria and Iraq.⁴⁷ Other Iranian-affiliated targets were also attacked.⁴⁸ Netanyahu even admitted Israel was behind an attack in January 2019.⁴⁹ Later that month, Israel's air-defence intercepted an Iranian missile over northern Israel. The IDF retaliated against Iranian and Syrian targets.⁵⁰ In November, after previous attacks on Albukamal,⁵¹ several rockets were launched toward Israel. Israel responded aggressively to the alleged Iranian rockets, and announced "tens of Quds Force and Syrian military targets were attacked".⁵²

Like Hezbollah, Iran too has tried to influence the rules of competition with Israel. Despite Iran's efforts, it seems Israel has had the upper hand in shaping the rules of conflict. The year 2020 was not significantly different, though it is important to note one incident, in which Israel was accused of killing a Syrian figure involved in Iranian entrenchment efforts in the Golan.⁵³ Intentionally targeting personnel, as opposed to arms or infrastructure, was irregular. During this period, Iran introduced another retaliation method. According to the IDF, Iran sent two teams of Syrians to place explosive devices, intended to target Israeli border patrols.⁵⁴

⁴⁵AFP, 'Mysterious Attack in Syrian-Iraqi-Jordanian Border', *Ynet*, 3 Sept. 2018 (Hebrew). <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5340155,00.html>; J. Spyer, 'Israel's Secret War Against Iran Is Widening', *Foreign Policy*, 7 Sept. 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/07/israels-secret-war-against-iran-is-widening/>.

⁴⁶Prominent examples include the attacks on T-4 airbase (February, April and July 2018) and operation 'House of Cards' (May 2018). Iranian initiatives in 2018, although having very limited effect on shaping the emerging competition, included a drone crossing to Israel (February 2018) and a retaliation by firing rockets (May 2018).

⁴⁷ImageSat International, 'Quds Force in Syria Strike Aftermath: The Israeli Airforce Wide Attack in Syria – 20 November 2019', *ImageSat International*, 4 Dec. 2019. <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/4a2eaf4d1c9e414a98a9673158706804>

⁴⁸Y. Schneider, 'Damage in Syria after the Attack', *Mako*, 13 Apr. 2019 (Hebrew). https://www.mako.co.il/news-world/arab-q2_2019/Article-8dce9a296c71a61004.htm.

⁴⁹News 2, 'Aftermath of Strike in Syria', *Mako*, 13 Jan. 2019 (Hebrew). https://www.mako.co.il/news-world/arab-q1_2019/Article-49c2b8a60984861004.htm.

⁵⁰R. Sharon, 'IDF: "The Missile to the Hermon was Iranian"', *Kan*, 21 Jan. 2019 (Hebrew). <https://www.kan.org.il/item/?itemid=45958>.

⁵¹T. Yingst, 'Airstrikes Target Iranian Base in Syria, Killing at Least 21', *Fox News*, 9 Sept. 2019. <https://www.foxnews.com/world/airstrikes-iran-base-syria>.

⁵²Israel Hayom, 'Security Source Says "We Change the Rules"', *Israel Hayom*, 20 Nov. 2019 (Hebrew). <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/708663>.

⁵³A. Harel and J. Huri, 'Reports in Syria: Israel Killed a Man Affiliated with Hezbollah near Quneitra', *Haaretz*, 27 Feb. 2020 (Hebrew). <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium.HIGHLIGHT-1.8594640>.

⁵⁴A. Harel, 'Israel Signals Iran that Explosive Devices Crossed a Red Line', *Haaretz*, 18 Nov. 2020 (Hebrew). <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium.HIGHLIGHT-1.9316992>.



Figure 1. Number of Israeli operations conducted in Syria under the IWC by year (2013–20).

Figure 1 shows our compilation of Israeli operations against Hezbollah's force buildup and Iranian entrenchment in Syria based on open sources. We gathered reports from the most popular news website in Hebrew, Ynet, browsing from 2013 to 2020 using relevant tags and keywords. We only listed reports of attacks that were attributed to Israel, and that fall into the characteristics of the IWC operations, i.e., kinetic, aerial, occurring within or close to Syrian borders, and aimed against Hezbollah's attempts to acquire strategic weapons or Iranian forces and infrastructure.⁵⁵ This source was chosen due to its comprehensiveness, good journalistic standards, and the freedom of journalism it enjoys. International news agencies, social media platforms and other Middle Eastern sources did not meet these requirements. We acknowledge our data is far from perfect, probably missing relevant events and falsely including others. Nevertheless, it illustrates the scale of operations conducted under the IWC well and provides a chronological overview.

To summarise, Israel's IWC doctrine was demonstrated in the campaigns against arms shipment to Hezbollah and Iran's presence in Syria. These campaigns exemplify limited competitive conflicts under the threshold of war. A series of initially opportunistic operations had developed into a competitive dynamic between Israel and its rivals. These competitions are defined by (dynamic) agreed rules, resulting in tension and risk of escalation if the rules are broken. Throughout the campaigns, Israel kept a vague media

⁵⁵We included strikes against Syrian arms industry SSRC (Scientific Studies and Research Center), recognizing the close ties between the Syrian regime, Hezbollah and Iran in Syria.

strategy. It tried to manage the need to express power publicly for enhanced deterrence effect,⁵⁶ by regularly hinting about its responsibility; and its aspiration to lower the chances for retaliation or international objection to the campaigns. Israel's IWC exemplifies a change in doctrine in light of geopolitical and military shifts.⁵⁷

Enabling Factors for the Development and Sustainment of the IWC

Israel's Inter-War Campaigns doctrine developed into a systemic approach gradually, as opportunities arose and proved successful. The IWC materialised due to the geopolitical environment in Syria (and the Middle East in general), as well as IDF's intelligence, operational capabilities, and culture. The interaction between Israel and its adversaries poses intriguing questions about the conditions that allowed for this doctrine to evolve and be sustained, without significant escalation.

The geopolitical environment

The Syrian Civil War was fought between many domestic and foreign stakeholders. As territories shifted hands, Bashar Al-Assad's regime lost governance over much of the country and required military assistance to fight both radical Islamists and Western-backed combatants. However, the regime continued to control most of Damascus and the border crossings into Lebanon. This allowed Hezbollah and Iran to coordinate weapons transfers into Lebanon. Due to conflicting interests, Israel decided early on that it would not participate or take sides in the war.⁵⁸ As arms transfers continued, Israel recognised the opportunity to surgically strike with minimal collateral damage. Naturally, the first time an operation was conducted, Israel took a risk that there would be retaliation. Gradually, a one-off strike could develop into a coherent doctrine because the following conditions were upheld.

⁵⁶We adopt Thomas Rid's understanding of deterrence in the context of Israel: 'deterrence connects a series of acts of force to create and maintain general norms of behaviour for many militant actors over an extended period of time'. Thomas Rid, 'Deterrence beyond the State: The Israeli Experience', *Contemporary Security Policy* 33/1 (2012), 124–47. More on deterring Hezbollah as a 'Violent Non-State Actor' see Shamir, 'Deterring Violent Non-state Actors'.

⁵⁷INSS Annual Convention, 'Interview with Former Chief of Staff Lieutenant-General (ret.) Gadi Eisenkot', *INSS*, 27 Jan. 2019 (Hebrew). <https://www.inss.org.il/he/a-conversation-with-the-outgoing-chief-of-staff/>.

⁵⁸N. Boms, 'Israel's Policy on the Syrian Civil War: Risks and Opportunities', *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 11/3 (2017), 323–36.

Lack of governance

The Syrian Civil War, alongside the rise of ISIS, created a “no man’s land” that eroded previous borders. Different factions were fighting for territory and the Syrian state was no longer able to govern significant parts of the country.⁵⁹ While the Syrian regime was in a state of survival, struggling to regain control over lost territories, the occasional surgical use of force by Israel, an external actor to the war, was of secondary importance.

The cost of escalation

The decisions by Hezbollah, Iran, and the Syrian regime not to significantly escalate the situation in retaliation to Israeli strikes was in part due to their strategic disadvantage. A potential war with Israel, or at least, greater Israeli action directly against the Syrian regime was too costly. Hezbollah’s investments in Syria likely impacted its preparedness for war in Lebanon, and Iran had limited tools at its disposal that would not lead to escalation with Israel.⁶⁰ The limited collateral damage further confined the implications of the Israeli actions.

‘Mandate’ from global superpowers

Global powers have had a stake in Syria. The US supported the Syrian Democratic Forces, while Russia fought alongside the Syrian regime. Starting in 2014, these actors also had a mutual interest in defeating ISIS. Despite their involvement in the region, Israel managed to conduct its strikes with limited pushback by foreign superpowers.⁶¹ Israel’s campaigns did not contradict or undermine Russian or US goals in the region, and at times, they may have been aligned with their interests.⁶² Israel also set up deconfliction mechanisms that were instrumental in avoiding altercations and prove that global superpowers accepted the continued Israeli campaigns.

Public discretion

The decision by Israel to maintain public ambiguity at the formative stages allowed the different actors to save face, avoid the need for overt retaliation and accept the competition. In the rare cases in which things did not go according to plan, Israel was obliged to admit it was conducting activity in

⁵⁹Alon and Preisler-Swery, ‘Running a Marathon and Putting Spokes in the Enemy’s Wheels’.

⁶⁰Following several moderate escalations, Israel struck Syrian surface-to-air missiles to signal the potential cost of further action by Syria.

⁶¹Russia has publicly held Israel responsible for the shooting down of a Russian reconnaissance aircraft by Syrian air-defence in September 2018. This temporary crisis did not affect the overall ‘mandate’ Russia has given to Israel’s operations.

⁶²Alon and Preisler-Swery, ‘Running a Marathon and Putting Spokes in the Enemy’s Wheels’; Michael R. Pompeo, ‘Confronting Iran: The Trump Administration’s Strategy’, *Foreign Affairs* 97/6 (2018), 60–71.

Syria.⁶³ Israel's public messaging strategy was somewhat different with regard to the Iranian entrenchment in Syria. In that case, Israel was noticeably more vocal about its campaign, although it still refrained from publicly acknowledging specific strikes. This unmistakable change may be explained by an intent to deter Iran, or as an attempt to gain credit with regional actors with aligned security interests.

The operational ability

Israel's military superiority offered operational ability and deterred adversaries from retaliating. Israel managed to conduct dozens of strikes and only one fighter jet was shot down by Syrian air-defence.⁶⁴ Technological advantage was crucial in the formulation of the IWC, and was a dominant factor in defining the nature of competition between the sides.

Accurate intelligence

The ability to interdict arms transfers is dependent on extremely accurate and actionable intelligence. Israel's intelligence enabled it to monitor transfers, acquire and prioritise targets, as well as understand the operational and strategic context. Therefore, it was fundamental in fuelling the IWC.⁶⁵

Precision strike capabilities

Israel's IWC advocates for continuous precise military strikes. It is contingent on the ability to pinpoint targets with limited collateral damage. Israel has air superiority, advanced aircraft (e.g., F-35) and precision-guided munitions. These allow Israel to successfully strike acquired targets, hundreds of kilometres from Israeli territory, without breaching the rules of competition.

Cultural factors

The development of the IWC was strongly influenced by the culture of the IDF, which is continuously deployed in active mission. The concrete threat perception makes the use of force, both retaliatory and pre-emptive, essential in the eyes of leaders, military officials and the wider public. Other militaries and decision makers may not have made the same decisions that led to the steady state of limited competition.

⁶³See footnote 61; Barbara Opall-Rome, 'Israel's Arrow Scores First Operational Hit – but Against What?', *Defense News*, 17 Mar. 2017. <https://www.defensenews.com/land/2017/03/17/israels-arrow-scores-first-operational-hit-but-against-what/>.

⁶⁴10 February 2018.

⁶⁵Alon and Preisler-Swery, 'Running a Marathon and Putting Spokes in the Enemy's Wheels'.

Attacking and risk-taking ethos

The Israeli military has traditionally promoted the concept of “defending forward”. In wars, Israel took the battle to its enemies’ territory. In other times, Israel proactively operated deep behind enemy lines. These actions entail the risk of retaliation and failure. The risk-taking ethos was also very significant in the development of the IWC. Rather than allowing Hezbollah and Iran to acquire capabilities, Israel took the fight to them despite the possibility of retaliation and miscalculation.

The materialization of a concept

One might rely upon Adamsky’s characterisation of Israel’s strategic culture⁶⁶ to argue that the IWC doctrine merely conceptualised in hindsight a series of opportunistic operations. This is somewhat convincing. However, thought must be given to the fact that as early as 2012 Shabtai, an IDF officer, argued that Israel had been missing a doctrine for its initiatives in the routine stage, and must adopt a paradigm in which several campaigns are carefully planned and continuously pursued. In his vision, these campaigns were not supposed to have clear-cut end goals, but rather should set “favourable continuing trends”.⁶⁷ The IWC evolved at the intersection of this concept with concrete opportunities.

Appetite comes with eating

To a certain extent, the IWC was path-dependent. Had escalation occurred at the preliminary stages of Israel’s campaigns, it is questionable whether the doctrine would have been adopted to the same extent. Tactical successes created greater commitment to the IWC.

The Jury is still out: Does the IWC achieve its declared goals?

It would be unsatisfactory to discuss the IWC without addressing the extent to which it succeeded in achieving its declared goals. However, we are fully aware that any attempt to do so faces great challenges for the time being. Most actions taken under the IWC are clandestine, or at least confidential, making it difficult to get a full picture from openly available information. Furthermore, the evaluation of success is very subjective. The publicly declared goals of the IWC are relatively vague and leave much to interpretation. Success should also be measured in comparison to alternative courses of

⁶⁶D. Adamsky, ‘From Israel with Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Intra-war Coercion and Brute Force’, *Security Studies* 26/1 (2017), 157–84.

⁶⁷S. Shabtai, ‘Concept of the Campaign between the Wars’, *Maarachot* 445 (2012), 24–27 (Hebrew).

action. The counterfactual arguments are fluid and the IWC's success could perhaps only be assessed after war erupts. With this in mind, we can proceed to carefully discuss the goals of the IWC.

Eisenkot, the IDF Chief of Staff for much of the formative years of the IWC, described together with Siboni three fundamental goals for the IWC:

- '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'.⁶⁸

Delaying war

Although the IWC has caused altercations and several confined escalations, Israel continued with military strikes without crossing the threshold of war. There are competing and not mutually exclusive explanations for why war has been avoided. On the Lebanese front, there is a balance of threats between the sides, and external considerations that influence the dynamics. Israel's deterrence was maintained due to the immense damage of the 2006 war, as well as its military dominance and aggressive stance. The latter is in part a consequence of the implementation of the IWC. However, it can also be argued that the increasingly important role of Hezbollah in the Lebanese political system and the Syrian Civil War have contributed to the organization's prolonged restraint. Israel, on its part, also preferred to avoid war, likely fearing the damage of extensive missile and rocket attacks. Like Hezbollah, the IDF was also forced to give attention to challenges elsewhere, namely frequent escalations in Gaza and routine security in the West Bank.

One can contemplate what would have happened if Hezbollah had reached a significant arsenal of strategic weapon systems, such as precise missiles, earlier. Would that have really changed the balance of power? Would Hezbollah have taken bolder risks vis-à-vis Israel, even at the cost of war? Would Israel feel obliged to launch a large-scale operation to "mow down" these capabilities? Without the IWC, it is likely that Hezbollah would have possessed more advanced capabilities at the current time. A change in the balance of power could have hindered the overall stability that characterizes

⁶⁸Eisenkot and Siboni, 'The Campaign Between Wars'. These goals also appear formally in: Eisenkot, *Strategy of the IDF*, 24. The Strategy does not mention *legitimacy*, although it implies it in one paragraph, and in another paragraph brings to attention the goal of *value* in the eyes of international actors, which is interconnected with legitimacy.

the Israel-Hezbollah dynamics since 2006. However, we acknowledge that the IWC is by no means the sole reason for the avoidance of war or severe conflict between the sides.

With regard to the objective of delaying war, the actions taken against Iran are less straightforward. On the surface, a continuous kinetic campaign may seem counterproductive in the attempt to delay war. Why would Israel instigate a new front? This relates to the Israeli threat perception and Israel's fear that Iranian entrenchment efforts in Syria will lead to a major confrontation in time. Even though Iran's military capabilities in Syria appeared so far insufficient for deterring Israel, it is still too early to assess how this competitive interaction will play out in the long run.

Enhancing Israel's legitimacy while damaging its enemies' legitimacy

Israel's activity was clandestine for a significant amount of time. At a later stage, it coincided with international and regional efforts to curtail Iran's growing influence in the Middle East. Framing the campaigns as part of these efforts enhanced its legitimacy with some stakeholders, but others may have perceived Israel's behaviour as reckless. The former Commander of the Israeli Air Force Eshel remarked that the IWC also serves as a foreign policy tool, as it enhances Israel's legitimacy and value in the eyes of regional actors.⁶⁹ Alon and Preisler-Swery claimed Israel's IWC strengthened its standing with Egypt, Gulf states, Jordan and other regional and global actors, especially by contributing to the fight against ISIS and Al-Qaeda.⁷⁰ As Sunni states reshifted to counter Iran following the decline of ISIS, the benefits of the IWC only increased (as most of Israel's activities were directed towards Iran and its proxies). Despite the remarks by Israeli officials, it is doubtful that the IWC significantly enhanced Israel's legitimacy. Military action contributes to Israel's international bargaining power, but it is likely secondary to political and diplomatic factors that impact Israel's international standing.

Creating optimal conditions for potential war

One of the most important parameters is how the campaigns affected the capabilities of Iran and Hezbollah, and how Israel utilised the time bought to develop counter capabilities. Publicly available information does not allow us to sufficiently assess the impact of Israel's interventions on the force buildup plans of Iran and Hezbollah. However, Israel's continuous strikes, its apparent

⁶⁹INSS Annual Convention, 'Commander of the Air Force Amir Eshel Address', *YouTube*, 24 Jan. 2017 (Hebrew). <https://youtu.be/tHrQeyBwTjM>.

⁷⁰Alon and Preisler-Swery, 'Running a Marathon and Putting Spokes in the Enemy's Wheels'.

air superiority and freedom of flight, and its public emphasis on the denial of missile precision technologies in Lebanon, may attest to this doctrine's operational achievements. In addition, Israel continues to develop advanced multi-layered air-defence systems.⁷¹ These systems are a countermeasure for when precision missile systems will ultimately pose a major threat. What Israel has done with the time it bought will perhaps be the most significant aspect to analyse in hindsight.

Prominent criticism

Some critics argue that Israel's kinetic campaigns are blinding senior military officers from the task of preparing for war. They criticise the over-investment (in time and resources) of the IDF in the IWC and the Syrian arena. The former IDF ombudsman Brick is a particularly vocal critic of the IDF's level of preparation for war. In his public campaign on the issue, he has linked lack of preparation for war to investment in the IWC.⁷² Others have said that the IWC is not predominant in Gaza and Lebanon, the main theatres for potential full-scale war, because the risk of escalation is too high. In their eyes, ironically, Israel's predominant military doctrine does not apply to its main arenas of interest, and it can reduce the resources that are invested in preparing for potential war.⁷³

The criticism regarding the connection between the IWC and the preparation for war overlooks some key interrelations. The IWC aims to promote Israel's military interests where the use of force is within the reasonable limits of the agreed battle. As a military doctrine, it is designed to meet the needs of a grand strategy goal – in the Israeli case, delaying war. It is claimed it utilises existing capabilities and does not require significant force buildup resources that go elsewhere.⁷⁴ It allows Israel to deny strategic weapon systems in Lebanon through action in Syria, intending to impact a theatre of interest. It is likely though that the Israeli strikes may have pushed Hezbollah to increase its armament efforts in Lebanon itself. The frequent military engagements in the IWC also may have improved operational capabilities that are relevant for war. Finally, the challenge of preparing for war is inherent to a military that is inevitably engaged in intense routine security.

⁷¹For example, 'David's Sling' anti-missile system entered service in 2017.

⁷²Yitzhak Brick, 'The Missile Bends the Plane's Tale', *Haaretz*, 15 Oct. 2020 (Hebrew). <https://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/premium-1.9237926>.

⁷³Ortal, 'The Fly on the Elephant's Back'.

⁷⁴INSS Annual Convention, 'Panel on the "Eisenkot Doctrine"', *INSS*, 27 Jan. 2019 (Hebrew). <https://www.inss.org.il/he/the-eisenkot-doctrine/>.

The opponents' view

Whereas senior IDF officials are publicly content with their ability to shape their adversaries' force buildup processes, there are intriguing questions about the way in which the Israeli actions are perceived by its opponents. This is especially relevant as Hezbollah and Iran hold different concepts of what constitutes success compared to Israel – do they measure success and failure by the arms transfers that were denied or by the (diminished) capabilities that were nonetheless accumulated over time? Hezbollah and Iran are resolute in their efforts and plan long-term. Nasrallah's admission to possessing the capability to convert precision-guided missiles in Lebanon may in time reveal that the IWC pushed Hezbollah to improve its own production capabilities.⁷⁵ Our study welcomes further research on how the implementation of the IWC has impacted Hezbollah and Iran's strategic posture and force buildup paradigms.

Conclusion

This article introduced a holistic approach to describing and analysing the prevailing doctrine of the Israeli military in recent years. The concept of inter-war campaigns, or IWC, dominates the rivalry between Israel, Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, and shapes the military balance, and perhaps the political balance, in the Middle East. Nevertheless, little attention has been given to this important phenomenon, possibly due to the alleged secrecy surrounding it. We were able to rely on a great amount of empirical evidence from a variety of sources, including news media, officials' remarks, and some local scholarly debate to describe and characterise its essence. Furthermore, this article relies on the literature on conflicts to suggest a conceptual framework of *limited competitive conflicts* to understand inter-war campaigns.

The development of the IWC is classified into four stages, as illustrated by our empirical findings. First came the initial inventive stage, which was characterised by a few precedential airstrikes against strategic weapon systems in Syria that were intended for Hezbollah in Lebanon. The second stage marked the acknowledgement of the existing competition, by all sides, over arms shipments and their prevention. This led Hezbollah and Israel to exchange blows, resulting in the consolidation of agreed rules of battle. The third stage was characterised by the adoption of the IWC as a steady doctrine despite certain geopolitical and military obstacles, while complying with the agreed rules. Finally, in the fourth stage, one inter-war campaign

⁷⁵AP Staff, 'Hezbollah Chief Boasts of Drones, Precision-Guided Missiles', AP, 16 Feb. 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/business-iran-israel-lebanon-hassan-nasrallah-ccc4740ce222cf944dbff6341e247f52>.

became two inter-war campaigns. The modus operandi that was endorsed against Hezbollah proved useful against the Iranian presence in Syria. What started as a series of opportunistic operations has given rise to a complex military doctrine.

The IWC was made possible because of certain geopolitical, operational, and cultural conditions. We showed how the lack of governance in Syria, the high cost of escalation for Israel's adversaries, the "mandate" Israel received from global superpowers, and Israel's public discretion (at least initially), were all necessary enabling factors for the formulation of this doctrine. In addition, we demonstrated how Israel's operational capabilities – accurate intelligence and precision strike capabilities – were crucial for the IWC. The technological superiority provided opportunities and over time enabled a steady state of competition. We explained why the IDF's risk-taking ethos, and its growing commitment to the doctrine over time, pushed Israel to adopt this as a dominant paradigm.

In short, the Inter-War Campaigns doctrine *utilises advantageous military and geopolitical conditions to formulate well-defined, proactive, preventive, frictional and continuous military campaigns, in order to engage in limited competition with adversaries over strategic objectives, under the threshold of war or severe conflict.*

The article cautiously analysed Israel's degree of success to achieve its declared goals. Almost a decade from the start of the Israeli campaigns, it is difficult to measure this objectively. However, Israel has managed to avoid war with its adversaries and has likely deprived them of certain strategic capabilities. Critics have noted that the IWC is insufficient for, and even opposed to, tackling Israel's greatest challenges from Lebanon and Gaza. While not dismissing these claims, we showed the likely positive effects of the IWC on future war from the Israeli point of view.

The IWC can provide important lessons for other limited competitive conflicts. It is of particular importance to military competitions that have an inherent assumption of no clear-cut end, whose outcome is measured cumulatively over time. For example, USCYBERCOM's Persistent Engagement approach to competition in cyberspace.⁷⁶ The proactive exertion of persistent force in cyberspace below the threshold of armed conflict closely resembles the principles of the IWC.

We conclude that continuous use of force, as the IWC illustrates, can allow the technologically superior side to systematically degrade its opponent's capabilities, and shape the rules of competition, while staying under the threshold of war. The Israeli case emphasises the importance of high tolerance for tension in pursuing similar campaigns, as they may come at a price of

⁷⁶Nakasone, 'A Cyber Force for Persistent Operations'; Fischerkeller and Harknett, 'Deterrence is Not a Credible Strategy for Cyberspace'.

moderate aggression by the adversary. Finally, inter-war campaigns, perhaps like “grey zone” conflicts,⁷⁷ can prosper in areas of low governance, such as Syria, Yemen, Libya, international waters or even cyberspace.

This is the first comprehensive analysis of Israel’s IWC doctrine, in the hope to open avenues for further research. Following Eisenkot’s claim that the IWC was applied to four fronts,⁷⁸ further research is needed on how the IWC has been applied against multinational terror groups (ISIS and Al-Qaeda) and in the Gaza Strip. As an evolving doctrine, it would be fruitful to evaluate it in the future.⁷⁹ Theoretically, the IWC poses questions regarding whether the borders of an agreed battle are consolidated in contest and escalation, or rather are pre-determined by geopolitical conditions and the balance of power. Our analytical approach to assessing the enabling factors and degree of success can contribute to the evaluation of other limited competitive conflicts under the threshold of war. Finally, this presentation of the IWC can enrich the discussion on the evolution of contemporary military doctrines.

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⁷⁷L.J. Morris, M. J. Mazarr, J. W. Hornung, S. Pezard, A. Binnendijk and M. Kepe, *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War* (Santa Monica: RAND 2019).

⁷⁸INSS Annual Convention, ‘Interview with Former Chief of Staff Lieutenant-General (ret.) Gadi Eisenkot’.

⁷⁹For example, reports in 2021 have alleged that there were naval conflicts between Israel and Iran, in what seems to be an extension of the IWC to more fronts.

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