



The IDF's Priority: War Readiness

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Truces with Hezbollah and Hamas are enabling the IDF to focus on combat training and force build-up programs as part of Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Gadi Eizenkot's push towards a high state of war readiness. The need to achieve consistent war readiness is based on the assessment that the Middle East of the future will be significantly more dangerous, less stable, and more complex than it is today, due in part to the proliferation of powerful weapons throughout the region. The IDF must be in a position to deal simultaneously with multiple fronts, near and far, and be able to defeat both non-state and state actors.

Israel is enjoying a period of relative calm, but in five to ten years, its strategic environment will likely be significantly more complex and challenging than it is today. For that reason, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has, under the Gideon multi-year working plan, placed combat training and war readiness at the top of its agenda.

The IDF General Staff has identified the objective of attaining a good state of war readiness, and keeping this readiness high, as a crucial objective for Israel in the medium to long term. It is an objective that has been neglected in past years due to budget instability and the lack of a clear strategic directive to place war readiness front and center.

This dangerous blind spot appears to have been corrected. IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Gadi Eisenkot is intensively promoting the objective of war readiness throughout the whole of the military. A multi-year working plan provides a stable funding environment in which this can be achieved.

The stable truces in place with Hamas and Hezbollah, and the freeze in Iran's nuclear program, allow the IDF time and space to focus on combat training and force build-up, thereby giving Israel the ability to prepare for a more dangerous future. The truces are fueled by Israeli deterrence and an Israeli ability to skillfully leverage influences on enemy decision-making.

Both of the hybrid terrorist-guerrilla armies, Hezbollah and Hamas, are bogged down by challenges of their own. Despite their ideologies, they are reluctant to initiate a full-scale clash with Israel at this stage, as that would expose them to devastating Israeli firepower.

Such deterrence, could, however, prove time-limited. The prospect of combat with these foes, even if unintended, seems likely to grow with time. The risk of clashes with Hezbollah and Hamas will also be joined over time by new threats, the seeds of which can already be discerned.

As Maj.-Gen. Herzl Halevi, head of the IDF's Military Intelligence Directorate, said in June, "Israel's power deters all enemies in all arenas, state and non-state ... but there is a basic instability, and an increase in non-state actors. Their force build-up is intensifying, increasing the chances of scenarios of [a security] deterioration, even if no one wants these scenarios."

Several factors point to a likely increase of threats. An assessment of these confirms the wisdom of Eizenkot's directive to focus on achieving and maintaining good war readiness now, while conditions allow.

The Iranian regime has not given up its strategic objective of obtaining nuclear weapons. The sunset clauses on the nuclear deal will lift key restrictions over the next eight to thirteen years. Assuming the hard-line Shiite ideological-religious camp and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) continue to control Iran's foreign and military policies, the Islamic Republic will be able to restart its nuclear program at the end of the sunset clauses (if it does not cheat and breach the agreement beforehand).

Iran could begin enriching uranium again (using improved techniques it is currently researching) to bring it to nuclear breakout, and could try to reach that point at a time of its choosing. Its missile program is already developing. This means Israel could find itself in a state-to-state conflict in the not too distant future.

Additionally, Arab Sunni states threatened by Iran have launched civil nuclear programs of their own. These could turn out to be the initial stages of military nuclear programs, designed to counter Iran's nuclear shadow.

The prospect of a nuclear arms race in the region is therefore very real. It might develop as an added layer on top of the fast-paced conventional arms race that already exists throughout the Middle East.

An arms race in a region marked by instability and multiple failed states calls for an IDF that is capable of dealing with both non-state actors and state militaries that might, in the future, fall under the command of revolutionary Islamists. The latter are seeking to topple the pragmatic, rational Arab Sunni governments who currently share many interests with Israel.

Meanwhile, powerful hybrid non-state actors, which are part army and part terrorist-guerrilla, are building up their forces near Israel's borders. Hezbollah in particular, though also Hamas, continues to build up its offensive capabilities. The Iranian missile factories set up in Lebanon are the latest indication of Hezbollah's ambitious force build-up program, which threatens the Israeli home front as well as strategic targets inside Israel.

Where Syria once existed as a centralized state, an assortment of well-armed Iranian-backed forces is gaining strength. The Shiite axis in Syria combats Sunni rebel organizations (some of them fundamentalist and jihadist) and receives Russian air support.

A number of these non-state entities are arming themselves with destructive firepower, including precision-guided heavy rockets and missiles. These capabilities were once reserved for the great powers. Halevi described this situation as one in which "great military power is falling into irresponsible hands."

The IDF is busy building up its own capabilities, and it remains the most potent military force in the Middle East. But as time progresses, Israel's strategic depth is shrinking due to the mass production of precision weaponry by Iran's military industries and the trafficking of such weapons to Iranian proxies.

Israeli war readiness programs have doubled combat training for conscripts and reserves. The IDF is also working to ensure it has sufficient ammunition, fuel, and other equipment necessary to sustain prolonged combat operations in multiple arenas, including ones that do not border Israel.

IDF sources indicate that the military's force build-up program is being modeled on the assessment of enemy capabilities, not on potential scenarios. This more flexible approach is significantly better suited to the unpredictable, volatile Middle East that is taking shape.

Israel is mass-producing armored personnel carriers and tanks with Rafael's Trophy active protection system on board, meaning IDF formations moving

into enemy territory in the future will not be hindered by shoulder-fired missiles and RPGs.

The air force is building up its ability to strike unprecedented numbers of targets in very little time and is developing firepower the Middle East has yet to witness.

Military Intelligence is combining big data with hi-tech sensors to gather more information on more targets than ever before. An IDF C4i network is taking shape that will be capable of delivering that intelligence to the units that need it in real time.

The IDF is also creating more border security battalions whose sole task is defense, thereby freeing up the infantry to conduct more war training.

There is much trouble on the horizon in the region. Despite the fact that the Middle East constitutes only 5% of the world's population, 58% of world refugees are Middle Easterners fleeing lands ravaged by conflict and radicalism.

According to Military Intelligence figures, 21 million youths in the Middle East have no access to an education system, meaning they will be prime recruitment targets for Islamist terrorist forces in the future.

Societies in places like Syria, Iraq, and Yemen have broken apart, and a lost generation is growing up without any viable solutions.

"I doubt any new Marshall plan can be applied," Halevi said in June, in reference to this situation. "The world must be explicitly disturbed."

Yaakov Lappin is a military correspondent and analyst. His areas of coverage are focused on Israel's defense establishment, and the country's strategic environment. Yaakov is also the Israel correspondent for Jane's Defense Weekly and author of Virtual Caliphate: Exposing the Islamist State on the Internet.

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