



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Rethinking Israel's Syria Campaign

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,074, January 27, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Moscow's public demand that Israel stop its attacks in Syria places Israel's longstanding air campaign at a critical juncture despite PM Benjamin Netanyahu's avowed determination to sustain it for as long as necessary.

Three primary goals underlie Israel's longstanding air campaign in Syria, dubbed the "Campaign Between Wars": 1) preventing the buildup of a terrorist front on the Golan Heights; 2) preventing Tehran's military entrenchment in Syria; and 3) preventing the acquisition of long-range precision missiles/rockets by Hezbollah and other Iranian-propped militias. In a 2015 doctrinal pamphlet entitled "The IDF's Strategy," then-Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot defined the Campaign Between Wars as designed to "weaken negative factors and achieve deterrence in order to keep the next war away."

At present, there is broad consensus in Israel regarding the essential vitality of the above three goals. Yet the changing strategic circumstances in Syria have given rise to concerns that not only does the continuation of the campaign in its present form not forestall the danger of war, but it actually increases its likelihood due to the possibility of an uncontrolled escalation.

The clashes along the Syrian-Israeli border in the three years preceding the June 1967 war may help place the current confrontation in a broader historical context. Since 1964, the IDF had been conducting a "Campaign Between Wars" similarly aimed at achieving three main goals: 1) foiling the diversion of the Jordan River estuaries; 2) asserting Israel's sovereignty in the demilitarized zone along the border; and 3) fighting Syria-originated attacks by the nascent Fatah terror group. The IDF General Staff, headed at the time by Lt. Gen. Yitzhak Rabin, sought to maximize the operational and strategic potential of these clashes while being keenly aware of the possibility of their possible

escalation to the point of war. Rabin in particular believed that Syria's defeat in a general war would also solve the problem of Fatah terrorism.

On April 7, 1967, Syrian fire on Israeli farmers tilling lands in the demilitarized zone expanded into a wider confrontation, with Israeli PM and Minister of Defense Levi Eshkol approving the use of air strikes to neutralize the Syrian artillery. In the ensuing air battle the IAF shot down six Syrian fighter aircraft.

This incident was without doubt a critical milestone on the road to the 1967 war. Had the "Campaign Between Wars" been designed expressly to foreclose the danger of war, then the April 7 clashes – for all their tactical achievements – constituted a systemic failure (though the deterioration to war was by no means a foregone conclusion). From a different vantage point, however, the "Campaign Between Wars" might have served the opposite goal: of improving conditions in case of an outbreak of war.

The same logic may be applied to the current Israeli campaign in Syria. While it is necessary to have it defined in precise and clearly articulated terms, manifested in the public domain by the above-stated three strategic goals, it is equally crucial for the Israeli leadership to realize that in the changing circumstances, even if the continuation of the campaign might lead to war, that war must be prepared for with a view to fundamentally changing the security situation on Israel's northern border in its favor.

An earlier version of this article was published in Hebrew in Israel Hayom on January 25, 2019.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh is a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for forty-two years. He commanded troops in battles with Egypt and Syria. He was formerly a corps commander and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.