



Israel's Main Military Challenges

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The main challenges currently facing the IDF are preparations to strike Iran's nuclear sites and confrontation of pro-Iranian non-state actors (NSAs), mainly Hezbollah and Hamas. The IDF also has to deal with other important security matters, including ongoing unrest in the West Bank and the military campaign against Iran and Hezbollah in Syria.

Striking Iran's Nuclear Sites

The biggest military threat facing Israel is Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, a goal toward which Tehran continues to make progress. If Iran gets too close to a nuclear arsenal, Israel might bomb Iran's nuclear sites. The Israeli Air Force (IAF) has been preparing for this mission for many years, but carrying it out will nevertheless be a tall order for several reasons.

First, unlike the strikes on nuclear weapons facilities in Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007, there are multiple targets in Iran. There is also the distance to the objectives to be considered, as they are more than 1,000 kilometers away. The IAF will not get new KC-46 aerial refueling tanker aircraft for a few more years, and in the interim would have to rely on very old tankers and drop tanks and possibly ground refueling in an Arab Gulf state.

Even with those elements in place, the IAF could lose planes during a strike on Iran. Aircraft might be shot down by Iranian air defense systems like the S-300. Over the past decade, the IAF has gained combat experience in confronting Syrian air defense, which receives Iranian support. The knowledge the IAF has acquired in Syria could help it prepare to fight Iran's air defense.

The IAF was not tested in Syria in air-to-air combat, but it is well trained in this field. In addition, the Iranian air force is quite weak, as it relies on old fighters like the F-14 (though it is assimilating the SU-35).

Other challenges facing the IDF are the thick fortifications that protect some Iranian nuclear sites. The IAF has bunker buster bombs (GBU-28s), but they are not powerful enough. Israel's new [1,200 lb Rampage and upgraded 2,000 lb Spice bomb](#), as well as special tactics, should help the IAF penetrate Iranian sites.

Overall, the IAF might achieve limited success on an attempted strike against Iran's nuclear facilities but will likely pay a price in aircraft and air crews. Israel might still take that risk for lack of a better alternative.

Hezbollah is loyal to Iran but makes its own calculations. It will do so even if Israel bombs Iran and the latter demands that Hezbollah hit Israel hard. Estimating if and to what extent Hezbollah would be willing to risk full-scale war with Israel will be a significant factor for Jerusalem in planning an attack on Iran's nuclear sites.

This is because [Hezbollah possesses 150,000 rockets and missiles](#) that cover the entire State of Israel and can thus inflict heavy casualties and major damage. Israel might consider simultaneously striking both Iran's nuclear sites and Hezbollah's missiles, at least the most dangerous ones. In this scenario, the IAF would allocate around 100 aircraft to attacking Iran. Until they returned to Israel, the rest of the IAF would strike in Lebanon as necessary.

Fighting a Non-State Actor (NSA)

According to the IDF Strategy document, the Israeli military seeks to combine massive firepower and a large-scale maneuver, and in recent years the IDF has run various exercises aimed at Hezbollah. However, as has been seen in IDF confrontations in the Gaza Strip, Israel might hesitate to conduct a large ground offensive deep inside Lebanese territory as it could result in heavy casualties and a longer entanglement. The IDF would probably continue to rely instead on the IAF while running limited ground attacks, with special forces carrying out airborne assaults deep inside the country. This strategy might work, but if it doesn't, Israel has to be ready to launch a vast ground offensive in Lebanon.

The 2006, 2008-09, and 2014 wars ended more or less in a tie. In the next round in the Gaza Strip and/or Lebanon, the IDF will strive to defeat its foes, the non-state actors (NSAs), quickly and decisively. However, the IDF might end up in another

draw if it makes serious mistakes and also due to its constraints in terms of keeping Arab civilian casualties to a minimum.

In addition, the IDF will have to contend with the physical nature of the battlefield, as the rugged terrain in Lebanon and the dense urban areas of the Gaza Strip are obstacles to be overcome. The IDF will also need to win without seizing any territory because of the severe ramifications of conquering Arab land, which include intense international criticism and the need to fight insurgents in a hostile area. There are, however, military benefits to holding territory for post-war negotiations.

Hamas and Hezbollah will rely on hybrid warfare techniques such as being elusive. They can put up a tough fight, as their fighters are highly motivated and in some cases well-trained and well-armed. Hezbollah is also battle-hardened after years of fighting in Syria, though in that arena, the group enjoyed the advantages of Russian support and Syrian firepower while confronting poorly trained and only lightly armed rebels. Confronting the IDF would be a very different story for Hezbollah, as the Israeli military has overwhelming superiority in the quality and quantity of weapons systems as well as other major advantages if properly used, like the ability to adjust to changing circumstances. With that said, the IDF should not depend too much on its advanced technology.

The IDF has a multi-year plan in place, the "Momentum" plan, for 2020-24. Any new multi-year plan would have to take economic and political constraints into account. Not all problems that could affect IDF build-up can be foreseen, as major events can occur without warning. They might originate within the region or come from elsewhere, like the Covid 19 pandemic.

Other crises are more predictable, such as the dysfunction or total collapse of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Such a development would require the IDF to focus its attention on the West Bank. This would affect its build-up, especially if there is a long and demanding escalation in that area. The need to focus on the West Bank would disrupt IDF training and require budgets that would come at the expense of new systems that might be needed to confront an NSA.

In addition, the IAF has been striking targets inside Syria since 2012 in an ongoing effort to disrupt weapons deliveries to Hezbollah and limit Iran's military deployment in Syria. Israel has launched other strikes against Iran across the Middle East, including sea, and cyber. These are all important actions, but they should not distract the IDF from preparing for the next round against an NSA.

Hamas seeks to undermine the PA and escalate the crisis in the West Bank. Its allies, Iran and Hezbollah, have the same desire, because if the IDF is forced to focus its attention on the West Bank, it would be less prepared to confront them elsewhere. If there is a third intifada in the West Bank, the IDF will have to suppress it as fast as possible so it can return to preparations for a fight in Lebanon and/or the Gaza Strip. This means Israel must form a strategy that includes more than solely military steps to either quickly end or at least dramatically reduce the scale of any outburst in the West Bank that might spread into Israel itself.

Hezbollah and Hamas prepare for war but are not actively seeking to start one, at least not right now. But war could break out anyway because of miscalculations or an incident that goes out of control. The IDF must maintain high readiness while finding the time and funds to invest in preparation for combat.

This dilemma has always been tough to maneuver. However, it was once much more threatening than it is today, as there is a very low probability of a high intensity war breaking out in the near future. The current era differs in this respect from the era of high intensity wars (1948-82). Even if Iran and all its partners attacked Israel, the danger would be much less than it was in 1973.

The IDF should not, of course, underestimate its foes, particularly due to the risk to the Israeli rear. However, unlike in 1948-82, Israel's survival would not be at stake during a war, even in a worst-case scenario.

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