



ISRAEL'S SECURITY CHALLENGES TODAY: AN ASSESSMENT

HLMG Fact-Finding Delegation Report

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HLMG
HIGH LEVEL MILITARY GROUP

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FOREWORD

Israel and the Challenge from Unconventional Enemies

Though the nature of warfare remains largely constant, potential combatants and the shape of modern conflicts have evolved and continue to evolve rapidly. Gone are the days of direct and symmetrical army to army confrontations; irregular and unconventional groups, at the service of governments or privately oriented, have emerged as powerful instruments thanks to the dissemination of military technology; politics and religion have shown themselves to be intimately intertwined in huge swathes of the world, particularly in the Middle East; and the ethos and code of the warrior has been replaced in the insurgents' camp by an apparent disregard for any law, accepted practices and protection of human rights. It is to their benefit to blur the distinction between combatants and civilians, and to ignore many other laws and conventions. Civilians are targeted and used as human shields with complete impunity by such groups.

In past reports, the HLMG has assessed operations such as the IDF's Protective Edge, but also dealt with potential threats that threatened to materialize and lead to a major conflict, like a war between Israel and Hizballah. For this report, the latest in a growing series, the HLMG focuses on the emerging strategic military trends that surround Israel. These trends are ominous in nature, to the point that a multi-front attack on Israel in the near future cannot be ruled out.

This report outlines this tremendous risk, made even more acute by the political uncertainty arising from Israel's electoral process and the resulting – and always tense - formation of a new government. The report analyses the preparations on all sides for such a contingency, and ways that Israel, and the West, can seek to avoid an escalation that may end up presenting a devastating scenario. Israel has shown restraint and now is the time for the West to develop cogent responses to the challenges ahead. Responsible deterrence, as Israel has practiced it, should be a concept to be strengthened, and the West can and should make a strong contribution to this important aim.

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Colonel Vincent Alcazar (United States) served as a fighter pilot in Operations Desert Storm and Southern Watch as well as various other post 9/11 theatres. He subsequently served in strategic roles at the Pentagon, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency and at the U.S. embassy, Baghdad, Iraq.

Lieutenant General Michael D. Barbero (United States) has served as Director of the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization (JIEDDO) from March 2011 until May 2013. He previously served in Iraq as the Commander of Multi-National Security Transition Command, and the Commander of the NATO Training Mission. Barbero has been awarded with the Defense Distinguished Service Medal, among others honors.

General Vincenzo Camporini (Italy) is the former Chief of Defense Staff of Italy. He served as Deputy Chief of Defense General Staff and President of the Italian Centre for High Defense Studies before being appointed Chief of Staff of the Italian Air Force and subsequently Chief of Defense General Staff.

General Lord Richard Dannat (United Kingdom) is the former Chief of the General Staff of the British Army. Dannat has previously served as the Military Assistant to the Minister of State for the Armed Forces and Assistant Chief of the General Staff. He has been honored with the Military Cross, the Queen's Commendation for Valuable Service and was appointed as Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Dannat is member of the House of Lords of the British Parliament.

Lieutenant General Kamal Davar (India) served as the first Director General of the Defense Intelligence Agency of India. A former Director-General, Mechanized Forces at Army Headquarters in 2001 he has held a large number of high ranking command posts in the Indian army and served on the Indian Military Training Team in Iraq.

Lieutenant General David A. Deptula (United States) was the principal attack planner for the Desert Storm coalition air campaign in 1991, served as Director of the Combined Air Operations Center in Afghanistan and served as the first Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), Headquarters Air Force.

Colonel Richard Kemp (United Kingdom) was Commander of British Forces in Afghanistan as well as serving in Iraq, the Balkans, South Asia and Northern Ireland. He has led the international terrorism team at the UK's Joint Intelligence Committee and served as chairman of the strategic intelligence group for COBRA, the UK national crisis management committee.

Brigadier General Alain Lamballe (France) served in the General Secretariat for National as head of the Southeast Asia and Europe sections as well as heading the Central Liaison Mission for Assistance to Foreign Forces. He is the former Director of the Department of Security Cooperation of the OSCE Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

General Thomas James Lawson (Canada) is a retired Royal Canadian Air Force general. Lawson was Chief of the Defence Staff of the Canadian Armed Forces from October 2012 to July 2015. He previously served as Deputy Commander of the North American Aerospace Defence Command.

Major General Andrew James Molan (Australia) served as the Chief of Operations for the Headquarters Multinational Force in Iraq. He is a former Commander of the Australian Defense College and has served as Adviser to the Vice Chief of the Australian Defense Force on Joint Warfighting Lessons and Concepts.

General Klaus Dieter Naumann (Germany) is the former Chief of Staff of the Bundeswehr, the German armed forces and served as Chairman of the NATO Military Committee from 1996 to 1999.

Ambassador Pierre-Richard Prosper (United States) is the former the U.S. Ambassador-at-large in charge of the Secretary of State's Office of War Crimes Issues. A former Presidential envoy and adviser to the National Security Council he was previously a war crimes prosecutor for the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.

Colonel Eduardo Ramirez (Colombia) is an elected member of the Congress of Colombia who served with the Colombian National Police from 1987 until 2013. He was formerly the Chief of Security Staff for President Uribe of Colombia as well as Chief of Section at the Judicial and Criminal Directory of the National Police.

Admiral José María Terán (Spain) serves in the Office of Strategic Assessment of the Minister of Defense of Spain. A former Chief of the Joint Staff and Chief of the Strategic Analysis Group, he has also served as Director for Reorganization of the Spanish Intelligence Service.

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1. THE HIGH LEVEL MILITARY GROUP

1.1 High Level Military Group Purpose and Background

The High Level Military Group (HLMG) was formed in early 2015 with a mandate to examine Israel's conduct of military and domestic security operations. This is carried out in the context of a larger project which seeks to address the implications for Western warfare of fighting enemies who fight with a hybrid concept combining terrorism with more traditional military methods. Such adversaries show a disregard for the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC), while exploiting our own nations' adherence to LOAC - and our respect for the preservation of life - for their gain.

HLMG members have a wealth of experience at the very highest operational and policy levels as regards the conduct of warfare and its attendant policies. Our purpose is to add a professional military and legal element to this debate, which at times has been ill-informed and politicized, and which is of vital importance to our own armies and alliance partners.

In the context of Israel, the 2014 Gaza conflict presented a particularly acute problem. In the wake of that conflict, inaccurate interpretations of LOAC have been used to delegitimize Israel's conduct in a manner that, were it to be applied to our own armies, would put our countries at risk. Concern about the appropriate constraints on the conduct of warfare in accordance with laws and norms developed over centuries are necessary and laudable. They are, however, very different from misguided or concerted attempts to misrepresent the requirements of the law in order to harness it as a strategic weapon: a dynamic that has become known as 'Lawfare'. Such efforts are often intended to constrain legitimate military activity, and if successful, will put in jeopardy outcomes deemed necessary for our own nations' respective and collective national security.

Following the experience of the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict, we were concerned by the propagation of misapplied legal concepts in conjunction with narratives that are geared towards political

outcomes in debates about the Middle East and Western military action. The propagation of these misinterpretations and falsehoods through international fora - and governmental and non-governmental actors - poses a serious risk to the Law of Armed Conflict and thus ultimately to the minimization of harm caused through warfare. This is a vital debate not just for Israel, but for all democratic nations seeking to combat enemies that exploit LOAC for their gain, while showing a disregard for it at the same time. Our aim is to make an informed contribution to this debate on the basis of our collective professional experience.

1.2 High Level Military Group Report Parameters

This report forms an assessment of the threat picture Israel faces from adversaries on its southern and northern borders as well as in the West Bank, and additionally explores some of the relevant challenges and opportunities brought on by the new geopolitical realities that govern the wider Middle East today. It is based on a comprehensive fact-finding visit to Israel by a delegation of the High Level Military Group in November 2018, and follow up visits by individual HLMG delegates and staff.

The HLMG had extensive access to Israel's decision makers, from the top-level military leadership to individual unit commanders and soldiers; as well as intelligence and other relevant operatives. Former officials who have significant relevant experience were also made available. The HLMG was thus able to extensively examine all pertinent aspects of the threats covered in the report, which additionally further builds on the HLMG's previous, unprecedentedly extensive examinations of Israel's political, military and legal structures. The HLMG also has at its disposal a secretariat through which it commissions relevant expert research where further understanding is sought.

Based on this comprehensive examination, the report constitutes a professional assessment of the threats Israel faces at the start of 2019 and the prospects for renewed conflict in the region.

2. CONTEXT: THE NEW REGIONAL REALITIES

2.1 Iran

Since the Islamic Regime's revolutionary takeover in 1979, Iran has been a non-status-quo power combining radical Islam with nationalism into a potent, ideologically driven imperialism that seeks to upend the status quo in the Middle East. The Islamic Regime adheres to an inherently expansionist ideology which seeks to assert leadership for Iran's Supreme Leader over the entire Islamic and wider world.

In terms of conventional warfare Iran is not a strong actor, relying on a large army with outdated

equipment. Instead, Iran has pursued its imperialistic ambitions through a unique form of Islamist revolutionary warfare by unconventional means that have proven highly suitable for the current era of unstable Middle East governance. In pursuing this unconventional capability, Iran has prioritized the construction of politico-military proxies and terrorist groups inside the borders of regional neighbors as the primary vehicle for advancing its interests, allowing it to initiate asymmetric, revolutionary and guerrilla warfare against its declared enemies. This is made much more potent by its additional coupling to decades of investment in a sophisticated arsenal of ballistic missile technology.



The HLMG delegation being briefed by the Head of the Strategic Branch of the IDF on the regional situation. (Credit: HLMG)

Among the targets of Tehran's murderous enmity, a religiously motivated hatred of Israel makes that country number one. Categorically, the Shia Islamists who rule Iran see the demise of Jewish statehood as an urgent ideological imperative that they are actively working to achieve. Iran has no border with Israel, no geopolitical dispute, and no area of natural competition, nor are there ancient

antagonisms or rivalries between Jews and Persians. Yet the implacably hostile attitude of the Iranian regime towards Israel takes a multitude of sustained expressions in its politics and export of violence. This explicit quest for the destruction of Israel has been a key ideological tenet of Iran's leadership since the 1979 revolution and Tehran has offered extensive ideological, financial and

tactical assistance to Palestinian terrorist organisations engaged in war against Israel, despite these being adherents of the rival Sunni strand of Islam.

Today, Iran exercises its violent religious imperialism throughout the Middle East. In Lebanon, Iran's terrorist proxy Hizballah is the key political and military force. Militarily stronger than the Lebanese Armed Forces, Hizballah's security services keep a careful watch over the country's most sensitive sites – including the Beirut international airport and the border areas with Israel. Hizballah is the anchor of Iran's strategy of Jihadi revolutionary warfare by proxy and the principal military and terrorist tool in its war on the State of Israel. It has control over Lebanon as regards matters of war and peace.

In Syria, Iranian assistance has played a key role in the survival of the Assad regime, through the mobilization of regional proxies and the establishment of local forces. These forces are set to remain as a decisive actor forming an independent tool of Iranian will, far stronger than the depleted and shattered forces of the official Syrian army. Iran is now embedded in Syria and despite various understandings and assurances with Russia that the U.S., Israel and their allies have sought, is establishing an ever firmer presence there. This is focussed not least in areas that allow Iran to expand the front against Israel created through Hizballah on the Lebanese border into Syrian territories, so as to expand its ability to threaten Israel along the entire range of its northern borders.

In Iraq, Iran exerts extensive political control. Here its strategy is largely implemented through the Shia militias of the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces), raised to face Islamic State in the summer of 2014. Today, these are still maintained by Iran as a political and military proxy. Incorporated as an official paramilitary force, the militias' Fatah list came second in the elections of May 2018. As the next Iraqi government is formed, they are set to continue to form an independent actor under Iranian tutelage in the country. Recent reports suggest that Tehran has begun to directly supply ballistic missiles to elements among these militias.

In Yemen, despite the intervention after 2015 led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the insurgency remains in control of the capital, and is being used as a cover for ballistic missile attacks by Iran's IRGC on Saudi targets.

Compounding the problem of Iran's regional export of violence is the Western approach, where Tehran's nuclear programme has had a near total dominance over the relationship in recent memory, to the exclusion of virtually all of the other detrimental behaviours Iran displays in the international arena. Yet any competent assessment of the nuclear issue must account for the fact that Iran's nuclear ambitions are only one part of its larger aggressive regional strategy. The Obama administration negotiated a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, the unsuitability of which can be witnessed not least in the failure to deliver on any of the promises that administration made about Iran's behaviour modifications the plan would yield in non-nuclear realms. Critics who made plain that the plan would not stop its primary aim either have been vindicated by Israel's repeated intelligence successes, with Prime Minister Netanyahu disclosing yet more sites connected to Iran's ongoing clandestine nuclear efforts in his September 2018 speech at the United Nations General Assembly.

However, despite the Trump administration's recognition of the shortcomings of the JCPOA and President Trump's refusal to give in to domestic and European pressure to stay the course of the flawed agreement, the U.S. strategy remains volatile in ways that could yet enable Iran further. Financial and other instruments of power will undoubtedly exert pressure on Iran's rulers, but they must be coupled to a firm recognition of the pushback required on the ground against its regional modus operandi. A hasty withdrawal from Syria, or the abandonment of Saudi Arabia's efforts to play its role in stabilising the region, despite the unsatisfactory realities in Yemen and other serious concerns over their foreign policy, will harm Western interests and the stability of the region and remain a pertinent concern.

2.2 Israel's Tacit Alliance with the Pragmatic Sunni Camp

Israel has long maintained direct and indirect relationships in the Arab world that were reflective of a reality quite apart from the official Arab narratives. Several foundational factors affect these relations and are relevant to an analysis of dynamics affecting Israel's regional security today. A principal dividing line is the reality of tacit versus treaty relationships. In the latter case, Israel has concluded peace agreements and maintains diplomatic relations with both Jordan and Egypt. These relationships are of immense importance to

regional security as well as to the domestic stability of both countries, entailing close security and strategic cooperation. However, these links remain mostly under the radar since they are subject to strong opposition in the public opinion of both Arab countries. Domestic opposition to peace with Israel is particularly pronounced in Jordan, where the King resists calls for cancelling the peace agreement with Israel, not least by making concessions to reduce cooperation. In Egypt, the potential dangers Israel faced from the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood reign there underscored the importance of a conducive partner in Cairo.

While most of the details of Israeli-Jordanian and Israeli-Egyptian relations are kept confidential, periodic media references suggest a close relationship on security issues. The cooperation with Jordan offers vital territorial strategic depth that Israel's nominal territory cannot provide and is conversely crucial for Western interests in strengthening the moderate government of King Abdullah which faces serious challenges fuelled by neighbouring conflicts. As relates to Egypt, while the countries differ over aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they cooperate closely over Gaza. Israel has been a valuable partner for Egypt in combating Islamic State (ISIS) in the Sinai, whose close contacts with Hamas led Egypt to destroy the informal economy Hamas built and controlled through the tunnels between Gaza and Sinai and crack down on the both Islamist groups.

However, while these relationships are vital both for regional security and Western interests, with the stability of Jordan's government and the eradication of Islamic State from the Sinai being particular priorities, it is the newly emergent tacit alliances in the Gulf that have drawn most attention recently.

The current era of Middle East politics is defined by a split between two visions of existence in the international system. Islamic ultra-radicals seek to fight the West and those co-religionists whom they accuse of supporting Western culture. These ultra-radicals are taking action in an attempt to defeat the West, manifested not least in mass-casualty terrorism. The majority of Islamists however can be deemed to be 'realistic' radicals, who also seek to defeat the West, but, aware of their current limitations, wait to engage in clashes until they deem themselves capable of defeating their opponents. On the other side of this divide are those regional actors that follow a more pragmatic approach, accept the realities of the international arena and thus choose to find elements of the West

that are relevant to them in order to integrate into the world order. Such adaptation does not stretch to key concepts like democracy but suffices to enable a pragmatic approach to diplomacy and alliance building. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been the long-standing leader and lodestar of this camp, which is further identified as the defender of the Sunni tradition of Islam to its adherents in the face of Iran's Shia onslaught. Thus, the confluence of the growing power and hegemonic ambitions of the Iranian regime and the perceived declining engagement of the U.S. have aligned the strategic outlook and interests of Israel and most Sunni Arab countries.

Traditionally, Saudi Arabia has maintained the most cautious attitude towards opening channels with Israel, yet with the rise of new Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, who has repeatedly recognized the entitlement of Jews to their own state in their ancestral homeland and publicly paints a vision of Israel's engagement with the Arab world once it concludes a peace agreement with the Palestinians, there have been growing public displays of Israeli-Saudi and broader Israeli-Gulf engagement over the past two years.

This has led to a dramatic opening for the tacit alliance building between Israel and the Sunni Arab world, taking its cue from these signals, including the visit of a retired Saudi General to openly meet with Israeli members of Knesset, officials and experts in Israel. In addition to other subtler signs of normalisation, such as Saudi Arabia's consent that non-Israeli airlines flying between Israel and Asia are permitted to use Saudi airspace or the King of Bahrain's lifting of a ban on his citizens from visiting Israel, in October 2018 a number of notable advances were on display. Prime Minister Netanyahu visited the Sultan of Oman, whose Foreign Minister declared at a conference the next day that the Jewish religion stems from the Middle East and that it may be time to treat Israel as other countries, noting that the world was 'developing' and that Israel had the capabilities to benefit and be beneficial to others and that the Arab states cannot afford to exclude anyone. Jordanian and Bahraini officials offered cautious assent to these sentiments at the same forum. Such public acknowledgements of Israel's place in the region by Arab leaders, not seen since the height of the Oslo peace process in the 1990s, are important indicators of a new reality shaped by common interests. No less important was the absence of any significant domestic criticism in the Gulf countries to these initial openings to Israel. Even Palestinian responses took a muted form.

Although Israel has since before its founding sought peaceful relations with its Arab neighbours, relations with the Gulf Arab countries are not as critical to its security as its relations with Egypt and Jordan. For the Gulf however, Israel is thus rapidly becoming a vital tacit ally, as they labour under the urgent imperative to shift the regional balance of power vis-à-vis Iran and its proxies. The apparent decreasing strategic ambition of the U.S. in the Middle East has meant that Gulf countries recognise that Israel is their most credible and effective partner in containing Iran. Israel's resolute diplomatic and military campaign against Iran in Syria has further raised Israel's strategic value demonstrably.

Israel's unacknowledged but credibly reported strategic coordination and intelligence sharing with the Gulf countries is of immense value for both sides, as well as to Jordan and Egypt. Media reports of a June 2018 meeting attended by Israel's Mossad Director Yossi Cohen with the head of Saudi intelligence, Khalid bin Ali al-Humeidan, the Egyptian intelligence chief, Abbas Kamal, the Jordanian intelligence chief, Adnan Essam al-Jundi, and Majed Faraj, the head of the Palestinian General Intelligence Service (GIS) is a further confirmation of the progress of these ties behind the scenes, not least since all the intelligence chiefs present were among the closest confidants of their respective leaders.



Prime Minister Netanyahu meeting with Oman's Sultan Qaboos in Muscat in October 2018 (Credit: Omani Royal Palace)

These cautious public openings offer a glimpse of the strategic dimension to this evolving relationship, led by three key parties – Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the U.S. The latter, in addition to seeking to counter Iran with increased coordination among its allies, is also seeking to establish a positive landing for its yet to be detailed plan for a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These dual imperatives, and the complete change in tone President Trump has brought to the U.S.-Israel relationship, as well as his effort to forge a close relationship with Saudi Arabia, have meant that the

tail winds of a fresh U.S. Middle East policy served as an accelerator for the relationships in the tacit alliance between the Gulf states and Israel.

Notwithstanding these advancements in diplomacy, the reliability of Israel's newfound partnerships has its limits and risks, as evidenced by emergent constraints on these relationships. In relation to the United States, recent events have made plain the instability that President Trump's style of policy making has brought to U.S. Middle East policies, with potentially serious consequences for the

region. Even on a more granular policy-making level, as the below-surface strategic coordination grew, it became evident that there were legitimate doubts about the basis of the partnership, not least in Israeli and U.S. concerns that the new Saudi Crown Prince was overambitious and overly aggressive in his foreign policy endeavours. A possible “domino effect”, should the Saudis make serious missteps in any one of their initiatives, was a major concern well before the brutal and reckless Khashoggi murder.

President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu have publicly backed Saudi Arabia, cognisant of the hypocrisy of a narrative driven in part by Iran and its sympathisers, whose murders in the same period pass without comment, and aware of the importance of the alliance with Saudi Arabia. Yet the Khashoggi murder had severe consequences, not just for the Saudi efforts in Yemen, but also in making Western allies in the political and private spheres nervous, as well as more specifically in putting brakes on cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia. While it is expected that such cooperation will continue, and in time regain its upward trajectory, since the underlying imperatives remain unchanged, this comes on the heels of an already growing criticism of Saudi operations. Western defence establishments have not been impressed with Saudi military operations in Yemen, and political leaders question its strategy vis-a-vis Qatar, which appears to be at a stalemate at best. Finally, despite Saudi promises to “deliver” the Palestinians in a renewed U.S. led peace process, the Palestinian push-back led King Salman in July to host President Abbas and reconfirm Saudi support to the Palestinian positions. While Israeli analysts did not expect the Saudis to be able to exert sufficient influence over the Palestinians, it is likely that the current U.S. administration is putting considerable onus on Saudi Arabia’s influence in its planning.

As such, the new U.S. policy in Syria, more difficult Israeli-Russian relations, and doubts regarding Saudi Arabia’s abilities and influence in the region, renders the future strategic role of the U.S.-Saudi-Israeli strategic triangle and thus Israel’s tacit alliance with the Gulf less clear, but it would be premature to dismiss its impact. The deepening of these links in the face of the threat from Iran and changing presence of external powers in the region is significant and lasting in terms of their trajectory in the current era. However, recent events have exposed the fragility of these dynamics, exposing the limits of Israel’s ability to rely on its new partners in the region. Furthermore, the domestic

challenges of most of the Arab Sunni regimes, stoked not least by decades of anti-Israel and antisemitic propaganda, also limit the ability of Israel to strategically rely on its new partners in a more profound long-term sense. These are not people-to-people links, but dependent largely on the political and economic elite in the Arab world.

2.3 Russia’s Entry into the Middle East and its Consequences for Israel

Russia’s reentering of Middle East politics in recent years is a development of significant importance and serious consequence. Despite Russia’s limitations in power and resources, through effective strategy, unconstrained by domestic opinion or moral imperatives, it has become the most dynamic, and in some significant ways the most consequential external actor in the Middle East. This is principally on account of its undeniably effective and paradigm-changing intervention to assist President Assad of Syria in what appears to be a successful mission to keep his grip on power in Syria despite his atrocities and initial Western demands he leaves office. These developments are of serious consequence in shaping the security environment Israel faces, and continue to pose a growing challenge for Israel’s regional policy goals.

Underlying Russia’s motivations in Syria is an attempt at retaliation against the humiliation that President Putin perceives following the breakup of the Soviet Union and Russia’s view of the United States as an enfeebled rival, whose influence it should seek to curb further wherever possible. Added to this is Russia’s grave concern over the international community’s approach to Libya, which Russia did not perceive as a humanitarian intervention, but as a power-play by the West that was mis-sold to the international community and as such, Russia saw the intervention there and in Syria as dangerous precedents that threaten its own security also. Further, Russia is attempting to regain some of the Soviet Union’s strongholds in the Middle East by investing in relations with important actors, such as Iran, and by providing large-scale support to traditional allies in difficulty, such as in Syria. Finally, the question of Radical Islam is real for Russia also, particularly as relates to Sunni Muslims in the Northern Caucasus - Russia has not emphasised this issue in the context of Syria but has made plain it has no particular commitment to Assad, but is committed both to halting Sunni radicalism, and thus the fight against Islamic State,

and to the strong and long-term relations between Russia and Syria, going back to Soviet times.

Russia's intervention in Syria proceeded in three phases. The first was a result of the Syrian Army's overwhelming dependence on Russian weaponry. In order to expand its supply, Russia built up its stronghold at the port of Tartus. At first it mainly supplied large quantities of ammunition, but this grew to encompass advanced weaponry, much of which had no direct application in the Assad regime's war against the rebels and some of which was transferred to Hizballah. Russia denies any knowledge of this transfer of advanced weapons to Hizballah, but there is no doubt that its operatives are well aware of it and have taken no effective steps to prevent it.

This points to another imperative for Russia in this context, namely economic considerations - Russia requires foreign currency and has no hesitations in selling even the most advanced weapons so long as the its price is met. As such, the fact that there is no connection between the war needs of its Syrian ally and the new weapons that Russia has sold them, and that thus a considerable share of these weapons made their way to Hizballah, gave Russia no pause for thought. The extent of Iran's role in funding this arm transfer is unclear, but it must be assumed that Iran covered at least those elements that ended up with Hizballah.

In the next phase, encouraged by its observation of the weak posture of the United States in the negotiations with Iran over the JCPOA, Russia concluded that nobody in Washington would stop them and that it was not possible to blame them for cooperating with Iran when Iran itself was now a legitimate dialogue partner of the Americans. Thus, the Russians subtly expanded their involvement further. Moving from the supply of weapons to inserting military advisors and intelligence personnel was a fairly inconspicuous mode of upping their influence, yet it is likely that Russia's sophisticated intelligence capabilities turned the tide and halted the deterioration in the position of Assad's army, turning Russia into a decisive actor in the Middle East of today.

The third phase saw a marked escalation of Russia's involvement with the deployment of ground troops, mainly to secure Russian strongholds as well as air and sea ports, and advanced warplanes. Russia thus began openly using maximum force in Syria to save the Alawite regime to which it had a long-standing commitment, its top priority, with the fight against Islamic fundamentalists as only a secondary

priority. Since then, it has made the most of the opportunity presented to it and has turned the battlefield in Syria into an arena in which it can demonstrate its strategic capabilities, and a testing ground for new weapons systems to a degree far beyond that demanded by the situation on the ground. It fired cruise missiles from warships in the Caspian Sea, made use of strategic bombers and of firepower from ships in the Mediterranean as well as deploying the S-400 system against aerial threats. These acts have to be seen as demonstrations of Russian power rather than a response to operational needs. Russia sought to demonstrate that it is a state that can rapidly deploy a sizable aerial force, support it with ground defence forces, give it a missile defense umbrella against any possible threat, and conduct an extended logistical operation, far from home and while taking part in constant fighting. This is the most complex operation Russia has carried out since the end of the Cold War. It goes far beyond the relatively low-level fighting in Georgia, or the more complex operation in Ukraine, both of them on Russia's borders.

Russia's success in Syria is an extremely important component in its change of status in the region. It has shown that it can be relied upon as an ally, in contrast with perceptions of the United States, and that it has the capabilities and the willpower to follow through on its decisions to protect its interests and those of its allies. Further, in its success so far, Russia has demonstrated its revived superpower capabilities in Syria, not only to regional states and organisations, but to Europe and the United States. However, it should be understood clearly that this success comes in the context of not only siding with the enemies of the West, but also in discarding rules of warfare and moral considerations to a grave extent in picking its allies and methods. Thus, the absence of democratic checks and balances on Russian state power, and the lack of application of relevant legal and moral concepts has smoothed Russia's path to military success in the region.

Russia's entry into the Middle East arena in such a dominant way is of serious consequence to Israel, which understandably views the de-facto alliance between Russia and Iran in Syria as an alarming development. In addition to denying Iran an opportunity for entrenchment in Syria, Israel is also focused acutely on the issue of Hizballah. Russia has not halted its supply of the most up-to-date weapons to Syria, despite full knowledge that some of them make their way into the hands of the Middle East's strongest terror organization, making

them at the very least passive partners to the build-up of Hizballah capabilities aimed at striking Israel in the future.

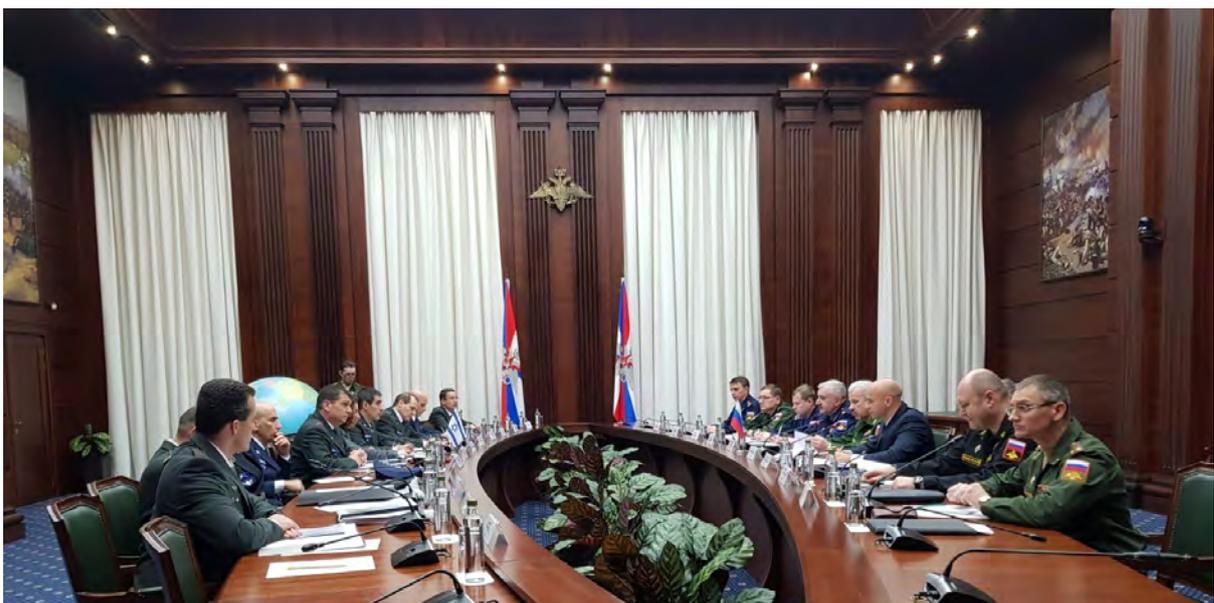
Israel has sought a pragmatic course in the face of this serious new complication in its strategic environment. Prime Minister Netanyahu took steps to reach a practical agreement with Russia, as soon as the massive Russian deployment to Syria was announced, to prevent any military incidents that might have occurred if both sides were active in this arena without reliable communications between them and has since invested intense efforts in personal diplomacy with President Putin.

Israel understood that it cannot prevent cooperation between Russia and its allies Iran, Hizballah, and Syria in fighting rebel forces, but it has been able to assert a set of interests and red lines in the Syrian theatre and pursue these. Recent Israeli statements make plain the intensity of its campaign to prevent Iran's entrenchment and the transfer of sophisticated weapons to Hizballah, with Israeli leaders explicitly acknowledging a significant number of operations inside Syria over a period of years. Prime Minister Netanyahu has however been sensitive to the needs of Russia, and Israel has generally acted within parameters that increase trust between the two leaderships, despite the serious disagreements between them that still remain. Israel has been careful not to harm civilians or Russian troops in Syria when conducting its strikes and Russia's willingness to, at minimum, turn a blind eye to Israeli air activity over Syria reflects a limited form of understanding on its part for Israel

acting independently to ensure its well founded and properly communicated security needs.

Yet these limitations on the part of Russia are very real and have an effect in degrading Israel's security environment. They are visible in the essence of the deconfliction mechanism that the two states have established. Short of an agreement for coordination of forces or something similar, the two nations have a mere technical arrangement designed to prevent accidents, consisting of a direct line between the IDF and Russian commanders in Syria. The implementation of this agreement is of great operational importance, but its diplomatic meaning is of little consequence. It is limited to the narrow sphere of preventing mistakes in airspace in which both sides are active, each for its own purposes, and indicates nothing beyond this.

The limitations of the cooperation are visible most prominently in fabricated Russian claims that Israel was to blame for the loss of a reconnaissance plane over Syria and its subsequent transfer of the S-300 anti-aircraft system from its army to the Syrian army at the end of 2018. Israel has long sought to prevent Russia from transferring these sophisticated systems to Iran and its allies, and while it has taken steps to overcome this challenge, reportedly including training against a live similar system in Greece, as well as acquiring more sophisticated stealth fighter jets from the U.S., Israel has for some time been realistic that it will not achieve a reversal of Russia's decision to supply these weapons. Similarly, Russia had given Israel assurances about Iranian activity inside Syria, which it has failed to adhere to.



An IDF delegation meeting with military counterparts in Moscow. (Credit: IDF)

Each side thus continues to adhere to a more or less carefully calibrated ambiguity seeking to act within parameters that both can accept. These are by nature detrimental to Israel, whose security needs are concrete and challenged by Russian actions in Syria. There is no basis for hope that Russia might restrain Iran and Hizballah from acting against Israel. For Israel, it thus has to suffice that Russia's presence does not prevent it from acting to secure its security needs in relation to the Syrian theatre of operations. Russia may not like some of these actions, but its leadership understands that Israel has certain vital interests that it must assert. President Putin values good relations with Israel, not least because he sees the million Israelis who arrived from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s as a Russian diaspora of sorts, as well as ascribing emotional importance to Israel's recognition of the Soviet contribution to defeating Hitler's Germany. Yet Israel cannot be expected to cope alone with a challenge at the level of international superpowers. Russia's behavior is clearly detrimental to regional stability and creates a real threat to Israel. Israel will thus likely continue to live with the current situation, while making clear its own interests, and where necessary using force in order to protect them, albeit without entering into conflict with Russia. The West's confrontation with Russia is already a highly complex one, and Israel's legitimate security interests should be a firm part of confronting Russia's alliance with Iran and the Assad regime.

2.4 United States Policy in the Region

The United States has in recent history been the most important external actor in the politics of the Middle East, devoting significant financial and military investment in an attempt to contain a multitude of threats to international security. As a result, the U.S. has forged close alliances across multiple dividing lines in the Middle East, with Israel, Egypt, Jordan, the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia and other nations. Since the second Gulf war and the ensuing upheaval in the region however, a clear eyed appraisal of U.S. politics suggests a shift in perception in parts of the American elite and a not insignificant slice of its electorate. U.S. involvement in the Middle East is deemed an elective policy, rather than an existential necessity, a perception which in different guises holds true across the political spectrum. Both Barack Obama and Donald Trump share a basic tenet in that a reduced role for America in the Middle East, at least in terms of direct intervention through the projection of military power, is a desirable and achievable

outcome for U.S. policy. Though such a reality has long been obscured in stated policy prior to the Trump era, the conduct of U.S. foreign policy reflects this new reality and has serious consequences for all players.

President Obama's misapprehension about the nature of politics in the Middle East, and particularly the nature of Iran saw him pursue a policy based on the hope that a diplomatic thaw with Iran could be achieved. The Obama administration distanced itself from traditional allies, not least Israel, and offered unwarranted inducements to Iran. Above all, it concluded a deal which did not achieve the basic premise of offering an ironclad way to prevent Iran from seeking nuclear weapons. Not only did the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) have deep flaws such as not requiring Iran to give a full account of its programme or military sites related to it, but it is now clear that Iran has retained its significant knowledge contained in its illegal nuclear programme and continued its research since the conclusion of the JCPOA. Worse, the attendant promises in selling this deal which the Obama administration made about improvements in Iranian behaviour proved empty. Iran continues its regional violence as described above, using the financial inducements the Obama administration offered as part of its clamour to conclude the JCPOA.

President Obama demonstrated his desire to leave the Middle East in promoting his flawed vision of a region that can be 'shared' by Sunni and Shia Muslims at peace with Jews, without American power present in it, but more specific policies give a better sense of his desire not to exercise American power in the region. Both in the case of Libya, where he famously sought to "lead from behind", as well as in his failure to assert the red line he had set for Syria after the Assad regime engaged in chemical warfare show a reticence in being engaged in efforts that may deepen America's involvement even in the face of great strategic and moral imperatives. The outcome of the Obama Presidency was not a more peaceful Middle East with a less engaged America, but a breakdown of Middle East order as the regional powers that were clear-eyed about the threat from Iran resisted America's policies and Iran was emboldened. Thus, the Obama era inadvertently created the conditions for the tacit alliance between Israel and the Sunni Arab states led by Saudi Arabia described above.

Alas, prior to his accession to office, President Trump expressed a clearer desire than any other politician in the U.S. to leave the Middle East

throughout his campaign. There can be no illusions about where this President's heart lies - he does not wish for America to pay in blood and treasure for the conflicts he sees as inherently not America's own. No matter that a sophisticated analysis of America's interests clearly should include the required exertion of power by America in the international system it has forged, the President's approach is seen as valid by millions of U.S. citizens and this truth is perhaps not yet sufficiently reflected in the policy community. It increasingly looks as though he will prevail in the face of the national security establishment in Washington and America's allies must be realistic about this.

Upon assuming office, the new President immediately made a significant display of the alliance with both Saudi Arabia and Israel, and put Iran on notice about what he called a "terrible" deal. The Trump administration understands the implacable danger that Iran's Islamic Regime presents to the United States and her allies and as such has done the obvious thing, abandoning the pretense of good faith on the part of Tehran and pursuing a clear-eyed policy of aligning with nations that share the American desire to contain Iran in earnest.

President Trump has followed through on his campaign promise to make the historic decision to move the American Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, following the logic that it is conducive to peace to act in a manner befitting reality. Israel will never give up Jerusalem as its capital, whether as a whole or divided by a final status agreement, and as such Trump appeared to consider his action merely the affirmation of a truth already existent. The Trump administration has also appointed officials whose views about the politics of the region, in particular on Iran and the alliance with Israel and Saudi Arabia, closely reflect the President's. In the case of Saudi Arabia, Trump, having chosen it as the first country to visit after taking office, has since displayed America's loyalty robustly in the face of huge pressure over the Khashoggi murder. Grave and risible as that episode is, it is not clear what other nations in the region could be relied upon to serve as a bulwark against Iranian ambitions. Taken together, these policy reversals and the President's stated outlook over the first two years of his administration suggest in principle a new calibration that should rein in Iran and benefit Israel's security.

Difficulties arise however when these policy imperatives meet with in-theatre realities. Most prominently, President Trump has been adamant

about squaring the requirement to bring home American troops with the need to contain Iran, particularly in Syria. When combined with the personality-over-process style of policy-making that he favours, this can make for an unpredictable ally. The recent announcement that the U.S. would pull out of Syria, made in the wake of a phone conversation between President Trump and President Erdogan of Turkey, is the culmination of this trend. America thus fully understands the gravity of the destructive forces of radical Islam in the Sunni form of Islamic State and the Shia version led by Iran. But President Trump's patience for carrying the burden of containing these threats directly is highly limited. The decision to leave Syria, if implemented, will have a vast impact of the security landscape that America's allies face, with an emboldened Iran and an entrenched Russia. But President Trump is nothing if not blunt, noting in recent comments in Iraq that he fully stands behind Israel and will continue to do so, but that Israel will have to defend itself, not least through the application of the financial assistance the U.S. affords Israel for arms purchases from America.

This has to be set against other policy perspectives - for example the Trump administration's approach to the United Nations and its pervasive bias against Israel. Similarly, in the Palestinian arena, the Trump administration has been less indulgent of such unaccountable actors as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (UNWRA). Yet the final piece of the new approach to the Middle East - the administrations long mooted new peace plan, has been kept under tight wraps and it is unclear what new approaches they are considering and whose buy-in such a plan will generate once it is tabled.

Thus, on balance the United States has become a less stable force in the region, in a trend that is not simply to be laid at the door of President Trump's governing style. Israel's security environment is likely to be further affected by the nature of its alliance with the U.S. as a new generation of American politicians gain power. There is nothing to indicate that events could not lead America to establish a firmer grip again, but the trend line of a superpower seeking to leave the region and manage it through alliances is easily discernible across administrations, with the major implications already manifesting in the behaviour of regional and other external powers.

3. ISRAEL'S SECURITY CHALLENGES

3.1 The Northern Border

Israel faces a serious and growing threat on its northern border and previous reports by the High Level Military Group have made plain our concern about the likelihood of a major conflagration. The underlying driver of this threat is Iran's aggression and determination to make war on Israel. Time and again Iran's Islamic Regime has proven its

commitment on the battlefield to what it consistently asserts is its religious duty to bring about the destruction of Israel. Initially, this was manifest through the creation of the jewel in the crown of Iran's regional terror-army proxies Hizballah in Lebanon, as well as the creation of Islamic Jihad in Gaza and financial support to Hamas.



The HLMG delegation being briefed during a field visit to Israel's northern border (Credit: HLMG)

More recently this front has been expanded into Syria with Iran's attempts to expand its substantial foothold in that country to widen its assault on Israel. This is manifested in an effort to entrench Iranian forces in close proximity to Israel as well as secure a stable land corridor for Iran to connect its supply line to its proxies in Iraq through Syria and into Lebanon so as to be able to better arm Hizballah. Given the attendant threat picture, the IDF has been preparing to counter an assault along

Israel's northern frontier for some time. The HLMG delegation was briefed extensively by the Commander of the Golani Brigade in the Northern Command on the situation on the ground and by General Ram Yavne, Head of the Strategic Branch of the IDF, on Israel's contingency planning, as well as the specific aspects, such as the recently uncovered attack tunnels, discussed below.

3.1.1 Hizballah and Iran

Hizballah is a creation of Iran that serves as the anchor to the Islamic regime's strategy of Jihadi revolutionary warfare. Iran's Islamic Regime's ideology is inherently expansionist, and Tehran has pursued its imperialistic ambitions with unconventional means of warfare that have proven exceptionally suitable for the current era of Middle East instability. The primary method of Iranian aggression is the construction of politico-military proxies and terrorist groups within the borders of regional neighbors. This is coupled to the development of ballistic missile technology, where decades of investment have led to a sophisticated arsenal.

While Hizballah is described as a terrorist organization on account of the ethos and tactics it employs, as well as on account of its significant international network of proven capability for terrorist acts abroad, its core operational structure, capabilities and training are more akin to a conventional military force, equipped to, and in many cases exceeding, the level of the armed forces of many states. It is widely considered to be the most powerful non-state armed actor in the world. Hizballah's participation and experience gained in the Syrian civil war has meant a further manifold improvement in the capabilities, size of force and tactical skill it is able to bring to bear on the battlefield.

Hizballah's basic strategic concept consists of a tripartite interplay between terrorism, traditional military capabilities and political activity, governed by its religious ideology and the objectives generated therefrom. Hizballah has developed a distinct Jihadi character of its own, mirroring the Sunni terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda in justifying its engagement in military action that is unrestricted by rules, laws or morality in terms of identifying its enemies as 'infidels' and fighting in the cause of Allah. As such, it fights among civilians and under their cover and targets its adversaries' civilians with impunity, often as an explicitly calculated method of gaining strategic advantage.

In seeking to threaten Israel, Hizballah has transformed almost every Shiite village in southern Lebanon into a military asset. Israeli officials estimate that approximately 10 percent of the population of each village are now Hizballah combatants, while the majority of houses play host to various forms of military equipment. At the same time, Hizballah deliberately targets Israeli civilians as an explicit tactical imperative. As has been

Hizballah's strategy in the past, in any future conflict its aim will be to inflict maximum damage on Israel's civilian population when deploying its vast arsenal of rockets and missiles, in the hope of weakening Israel's resolve, and will target specific civilian and critical national infrastructure to gain tactical advantage.



The HLMG delegation on Israel's northern border
(Credit: HLMG)

Hizballah is a highly robust organization with a clear chain of command overseeing a force of over 25,000 fighters, with at least 5,000 of them having completed advanced training in Iran, as well as more than 20,000 fighters organized in reserve units. Its main fire power is based on a huge arsenal of rockets and missiles, estimated to be close to 150,000 in number. This is a tenfold increase since the 2006 Lebanon War, and presents a threat few countries, much less sub-state organizations, can mount. The majority of these are short-range rockets, but thousands have a much larger range. Iran and Hizballah are currently engaged in a long-term project to greatly enhance the lethality of this threat through larger payloads, longer range and above all higher targeting accuracy. Iran has facilitated the establishment of a minimum of two weapons manufacturing sites in Lebanon for these purposes, with additional activity of a similar nature in Syria and also likely taking place in Yemen. Such advances amount to a gravely serious change in the military capabilities that Hizballah is able to generate, enabling Hizballah to produce more precise long-range missiles without risking their detection in transfer.

Additionally, Hizballah can draw on advanced aerial capabilities using Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), and is able to conduct warfare against naval assets.

Hizballah's well equipped ground forces are also supported on the ground by a new armored support unit consisting of modern tanks and Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) as backed up by a greatly expanded intelligence effort focused on Israel, and targeting key military and national infrastructure.

This also points to a central development in Hizballah's strategic concept today, in that it is seeking to take the battle onto Israeli soil in case of conflict. The goal of such operations would be to occupy a vital area in Israel and hold it for as long as possible, with the aim of demonstrating Hizballah's anti-Israeli credentials to the Arab world, and using kidnapped soldiers and civilians as leverage in diplomatic negotiations. To this end, Hizballah has constructed an extensive array of tunnel systems below the villages and urban areas it controls in south Lebanon, enabling combatants to maneuver within confined spaces, mobilize equipment with speed, store heavy weaponry and engage in ambushes, abductions and retreats into civilian areas.

At the end of 2018, the IDF thus began Operation Northern Shield, exposing a number of these attack

tunnels Hizballah had dug into Israeli territory for the purposes of such operations. Drawing on operational experience gained against Hamas in Gaza, since the 2014 war the IDF has been working to develop the means to detect tunnelling activity and has been able to identify the locations of a number of Hizballah's tunnels, which it neutralised by mid-January 2019.

3.1.2 Lebanon and UNIFIL

Operation Northern Shield aimed at neutralising tunnels Hizballah had dug into Israel for a future attack points to a grave ongoing problem in Lebanon and to serious related failures on the part of the United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL). Western policy towards Lebanon has been based upon the assumption that Hizballah represents a 'foreign element' within the country but the reality is that while Hizballah permits the President and the Prime Minister to enjoy the trappings of office, it sustains informal power structures which neither co-operate with the formal structures of government, nor are beholden to them.



IDF troops working on Israel's northern border to destroy attack tunnels Hizballah has dug from Lebanon into Israel. (Credit: IDF)

Similarly, Hizballah has succeeded in overawing Lebanese state structures that were intended to

restrain its behavior following the Second Lebanon War.

The HLMG has previously warned of the increasingly symbiotic relationship between Hizballah and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Hizballah's de facto control over state security and its immense influence over Lebanese political institutions makes it the arbiter regarding relations with Israel and questions of war and peace for all of Lebanon. Hizballah routinely instructs the LAF on the location of military posts along the border, so as to strengthen its reconnaissance capabilities and intelligence passed to the LAF routinely finds its way to Hizballah while military equipment which the LAF receives from international patrons, including the United States, in some cases finds its way into the hands of Hizballah units. Lebanese authorities tend to turn a blind eye to Hizballah operations; Hizballah continues to use Beirut International airport to smuggle weapons and contraband, and Lebanon's President has confirmed that Hizballah is integrated into the core defensive forces of Lebanon.

Further, the vast pattern of activity by Hizballah in southern Lebanon in violation of these requirements of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1701, which stipulates the establishment of an area free of any armed force or infrastructure other than that of the LAF or UNIFIL

between the Blue Line and the Litani river in southern Lebanon, raises serious questions over the LAF and over UNIFIL's effectiveness. It is abundantly evident that Hizballah is operating extensively in areas south of the Litani where its illicit military activities range from command and control functions to weapons and munitions storage and reconnaissance.

In this context the exposure of the Hizballah attack tunnels leading into Israel marks a grave new low. The IDF conducted Operation Northern Shield with customary caution, its operational plan including a high profile public engagement with UNIFIL and the LAF seeking to keep the border calm while it brought in troops to neutralise the tunnels. During the operation, some of the sealant utilised in blocking the tunnels emerged from civilian locations in south Lebanon. UNIFIL for its part, while recognising that a violation of UNSC 1701 had occurred, was merely able to express concern and call upon the Lebanese government to investigate. This is circular logic, given the already noted control Hizballah exerts over Lebanon's state structures today, and points to the fallacy at the heart of the international community approach to UNIFIL's mission and mandate.



An IDF team arriving for a trilateral meeting with the UNIFIL Force Commander and Lebanese Armed Forces following exposure of Hizballah's cross-border attack tunnel dug from Lebanon into Israel. (Credit: IDF)

3.1.3 Syria

The long-established tense situation with Hizballah in Lebanon is compounded severely by the new reality Israel is facing in Syria. Iran has long related to the area formally comprising the states of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq as a single battlespace, in which they seek dominance and hegemony through the application of the combined political and military methodology of revolutionary warfare utilizing proxies as developed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Further, the alliance between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Ba'athist regime in Syria dates back to the years following the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. In the course of the Syrian civil war over the last seven years, Iran's support in mobilising the IRGC as well as its proxy militias has proven crucial for the Assad regime's survival and its eventual victory over the rebellion against it.

The central military deficiency for the Assad regime from the outset of the war was the absence of sufficient quantities of reliable manpower. Iran's IRGC addressed this problem by mobilising paramilitary proxies from across the region along with its own personnel. Imported fighters included Lebanese Hizballah, Iraqi Shia militias, the Afghan Fatemiyun group, the Pakistani Zeinabiyun and other groups. Subsequently Iran established a number of local 'Syrian Hizballah' type groups, including Quwat al-Ridha from the Homs area, al-Ghalibun from the Sayida Zeinab area in Damascus Governorate, and the 313 Brigade from the Deraa area. The Iranians also established structures within the official ranks of the Syrian state security forces such as the National Defense Forces and the Local Defense Forces, which were organised along the lines of the Iranian paramilitary Basij forces.

Iran intends to entrench its forces in Syria long-term and seeks to maintain control of a corridor from Iraq into Syria, and thence to Lebanon, the Mediterranean Sea and the border with Israel. In pursuit of this goal, the Islamic Regime has deployed a considerable size force, comprised of the various groups described above, and is investing in efforts to build military infrastructure inside Syria as well as develop local production sites for its project to equip its proxies with more accurate missiles to use against Israel. Facilities Iran has built on Syrian soil include air bases, such as T4 located near Palmyra, and logistical facilities and command centers, such as the 'Glasshouse' near the Damascus International Airport as well as a surface to surface missile factory outside Wadi Jahannam in northwest Syria.

This Iranian attempt to take over Syria and menace Israel from there is untenable for Israeli security needs. As such for some time Israeli defense officials, speaking on background, have described Israel as being engaged in a low-level undisclosed conflict against Iran on the soil of Syria to prevent Iran's entrenchment there. Over time this position has evolved: in the wake of President Trump's recent announcement that he intends to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, Israel has become much more explicit regarding this campaign.

Thus, publicly available details and an analysis of the campaign suggests that Israeli aircraft have carried out periodic strikes against Syrian regime and Hizballah targets throughout the period of civil war in Syria in seeking to prevent weapons transfers and associated efforts on the part of the terrorist movement. Israel assessed in late 2016 that Iran was seeking to establish a permanent force of up to 100,000 Shia fighters in Syria and operationalised plans to prevent this. As a result, Israel began to strike directly at Iranian targets in Syria, focusing on infrastructure to avoid Iranian casualties and offer Tehran a face-saving way to prevent escalation.

Beginning in February 2018, in the wake of an armed drone attack by Iran into Israeli airspace marking the first direct military attack on Israeli territory, Israel began to more directly target Iranian facilities and personnel on Syrian soil, which the IDF Chief of Staff described as numbering in the thousands of operations, from the air and also by commando raid. The largest scale clashes so far took place on May 10, when in response to Iranian forces firing 20 Fajr 5 missiles toward Israeli positions on the Golan Heights, Israel launched an extensive air campaign known as Operation 'House of Cards', targeting Iranian infrastructure throughout Syria.

Even before Israel recently switched to a policy of attribution for its strikes, discernible targets of its campaign included the military compound and logistics complex of the Quds Force in Kiswah, an Iranian military camp north of Damascus, weapons storage sites belonging to the Quds Force at Damascus International Airport, and intelligence systems and installations associated with the Quds Force. Israeli strikes appear to not only be targeting infrastructure targets however, with other reports indicating that for Israel, the Iranian land corridor from Iraq to Syria, and the passage of militia units through this, are issues of no lesser importance than the matter of Iranian infrastructure further west.

Israel's operations in Syria are complicated by Russia's entry into the Middle East as previously mentioned. While the relationship has been managed proactively and Israel has seemingly successfully sought to develop a conducive diplomatic relationship with Russia over Syria, Russia's interests are a major factor that degrades Israel's freedom of action to some extent. Most prominently, in September 2018, Russia publicly blamed Israel for an incident that saw Syrian anti-aircraft fire down a Russian spy plane and subsequently delivered S-300 anti-aircraft systems to its Syrian partners. However, these were reportedly not activated once Israel resumed its raids targeting arms shipments and Israeli operational planning has long since taken account of the possibility that both Syria and Iran may operationalise such systems in the near future. So far it appears Russia is willing to be moderate in its approach to Israel's red lines, despite its alliance with Iran.

Israeli actions point to a very clear dominance by Israel in the field of intelligence regarding the southern Syrian theatre. While the IDF has undoubtedly proven effective on the tactical level, it is questionable whether they can, at least in the short term, secure the departure of Iran's forces in their entirety from Syria. Iran has invested a minimum of \$30 billion in its effort in Syria, a sign of its religiously and ideologically committed approach to its regional policies and war on Israel. As such, it is likely that Israeli actions against Iran in Syria are set to continue. The outgoing Chief of Staff of the IDF has asserted that Israel assesses that Iran's major entrenchment has been rolled back, and that its attempts to gain a direct foothold will likely revert to the work through proxies such as Hizballah and Shia militias. However, it is clear that we are far from the end of this campaign and as such Israel will continue to have to hold the line against Iran in Syria, making it one of the major tools of pressure available in a comprehensive Western strategy to contain and roll back Iranian advances in the region.



An IDF medic with a Syrian child during operation 'Good Neighbour', which the IDF instigated to help Syrians in distress near Israel's northern border (Credit: IDF)

Alongside these broader dynamics, the HLMG was also briefed extensively by Lt Col Eyal Dror who was the Commander of Operation 'Good Neighbour', the humanitarian mission Israel ran along its border until recently to help Syrians injured in the fighting.

This operation by the IDF's 210th Division was launched in June 2016 and described as a humanitarian mission aimed at helping Israel's Syrian neighbors by increasing aid to civilians while remaining uninvolved in the armed conflict. The IDF

assisted in the establishment of two medical centers in the region and a field clinic in an IDF enclave in the southern Golan Heights. The IDF supplied large quantities of medicine and medical devices, food, baby formula, diapers, clothing and other basic necessities. It also provided electrical generators, fuel and mobile housing. Syria's Assad regime is as hostile to Israel as the radical Islamist terror groups who controlled some of the territory close to Israel on Syrian soil and as such the operation can be seen as testament to Israel's continued goodwill towards ordinary Syrians coping with immense humanitarian crises as a result of the civil war. At the same time, Israeli officials were clear that they considered it an investment in a future peace, with a population indoctrinated to hate Jews since birth confronted with the reality of Israel being the only local actor willing and able to ease their suffering, while also a strategic investment in relationships with the groups that control the territory. However, as it has become increasingly clear that the Assad regime will likely prevail in the outcome of the fighting, Israel has wound down some of the more established infrastructure to reflect this new reality.



The Commander of Israel's humanitarian mission in Syria briefs the HLMG delegation

Israel has been consistently clear that it does not seek to be involved in the Syrian Civil War, and that its interventions are premised on only two factors. The first is humanitarian assistance at its border, to Syrian civilians or including transit for special purposes where necessary, as was the case in its

assistance in evacuating the White Helmets when their lives were in danger following Assad's retaking of southern parts of Syria. The second is to assert its red lines in fending off Iran's assault by preventing its entrenchment in Syria and countering the threat it seeks to mount on Israel's northern border. Israel is a key ally for Western efforts to roll back Iran's violence and will become of even greater consequence to this effort if America proceeds to leave Syria entirely.

3.2 Gaza

3.2.1 The Internal Palestinian Power Struggle

In the Palestinian arena, Hamas and its government in Gaza are today interlocked in a struggle for survival with Fatah, which controls the West Bank, each governing a territory and population faced with myriad challenges and high popular discontent. Since their 2006 split, numerous attempts at reaching reconciliation have failed as both movements prioritize their own political goals over Palestinian national unity.

In Gaza, Hamas maintains tight control through its military, security and police forces, keeping the local armed and terror factions on a short leash, combining coordination and aggressive suppression to buttress its rule. The main conflict with Fatah concerns Palestinian rule in the West Bank following Palestinian Authority President Abbas' time in office, in the near future. With strong popular support for Hamas throughout the West Bank, it seeks to use that territory for terror activities against Israel, both pursuing its Jihadist doctrine as well as seeking to reap political gains that further undermine President Abbas and the Palestinian Authority (PA).

President Abbas considers Hamas as an existential threat to the PA, to Fatah and to himself personally. His Fatah movement is divided and lacking domestic legitimacy on account of its corruption, high unemployment and its close security coordination with Israel. A large majority of the West Bank public wants to see Abbas go and he and the Fatah leadership understand that Gaza is lost to Hamas, and are well aware that Hamas has its eyes on the levers of Palestinian national leadership. They are determined to block this threat from Hamas to their movement, to their families and to themselves, and they are seeking to uphold stability in the West Bank, as Abbas' term in power is in its closing stage.

That stability is maintained through Abbas' tight control over the Palestinian Security Forces (PASF) and the Tanzim cadres. At the same time, Abbas is resolved to undermine Hamas in Gaza and weaken it, mostly through cutting funding he controls that meets some of the Gazan public wage bill and electricity cost.

President Abbas is likely also seeking to drive Hamas and Israel into a direct military confrontation, which would serve him both by hurting Hamas and by vilifying Israel. Under pressure from Egypt, the Palestinian Authority is considering a gradual return of some of its officials to Gaza and its border crossings, but these steps are often rolled back in the fluctuating power struggles between the territories and factions. Abbas insists on subordinating all armed forces in Gaza to the PA ("one rule, one law, one weapon"), which in reality is aimed at disarming Hamas and depriving it of its most capable tool - violence. While Hamas has considered some transfer of administrative powers in the Gaza strip to the PA, it has steadfastly insisted on maintaining its terror-army independently of PA government control.

3.2.2 Hamas' Structure and Alliances

Today, almost all Hamas' political power is concentrated in Gaza; therefore, its top priority. In February 2017, two young terrorist leaders, Yahya Sinwar and Salah al-Aruri were selected to join

Hamas' Political Bureau. Sinwar spent 22 years in an Israeli prison for his part in multiple terror attacks. After his release in 2011 as part of the Shalit prisoner exchange deal, he took charge of the Hamas' terrorist wing, taking over the work of Muhammad Daif and Marwan Issa, two prominent Hamas military figures, gaining important experience communicating between the terrorist and political operations. Operatives across all of Hamas' activities are united in their commitment to destroying Israel, but differ on the means to do so, on priorities, on pace and on sequence, at times leading to tension. As Hamas leader in Gaza, Sinwar projects the terrorist wing's power towards other armed factions in the Strip, while treading a fine line that heeds to the wing's subordination to Hamas' political leadership. His credentials and authority allow Sinwar stronger sway on military affairs and greater latitude in striking the political-military balance in Hamas policy. As long as Sinwar can show some progress, his position in Gaza's leadership is stable. Aruri and Sinwar work together on Gaza-led policy, but Aruri's focus is on West Bank operations and on contacts with Iran. Alongside Sinwar stands Ismail Haniya, Hamas' former leader and currently chief of its political bureau, responsible for the terror organization's foreign relations. Haniya replaced Khaled Mashal, who now aims to replace Abbas as the head of the PA, and perhaps also to draft a new Palestinian charter, replacing the current one based on the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) text.



Members of the HLMG delegation being briefed at the Gaza border. (Credit: HLMG)

In external policies, Hamas' relationships reflect the regional architecture and power struggles. As a "resistance" movement Hamas historically aligned itself with the "Axis of Resistance" led by Iran and incorporating Hizballah and Syria. However, since the regional upheaval known as the "Arab Spring" brought that Axis' Shiite nature to the fore, the alliance caused a fierce political identity conflict for Hamas, since their "resistance" allies had a substantial part in Assad's massacres of Sunni Arabs in Syria. This led Hamas' leadership in exile outside Gaza to break up with Iran's camp and move to Egypt, which in 2012 was led by a Muslim Brotherhood government, closely allied with Turkey and Qatar, where Hamas leader Khaled Mashal had long been resident. The 2013 rise to power in Egypt of Abd al-Fattah al-Sissi led to a crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and its Hamas offshoot thus became designated as an enemy of the Egyptian state. As a result, a part of Hamas' leadership moved to Turkey and Qatar, since president Erdogan portrays himself as a 'defender' of Gaza and Hamas, while Qatar is the only regional player supporting the Gaza strip with financial assistance of significant scale. Saudi Arabia and Egypt pressured Qatar to expel Hamas military operatives in June 2017.

Subsequently, since Syria's civil war was drawing to a close, Hamas re-established its ties with Iran and Syria, acting on its terror wing's strong affinity towards the IRGC Quds Forces and its Commander Qasem Suleimani, as a main source of military funding and support. Intelligence reports and public Hamas declarations over the last two years of Hamas delegations to Tehran, and Suleimani's portraits in Gaza all point to growing Iranian support for Hamas, mostly on matters related to its terror-army. At the same time, Hamas' political wing sought to mend fences with Iran's nemesis Saudi Arabia and with the other Sunni Arab states, who in general see both Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat.

In this context Egypt has special status, as geography makes it Gaza's only exit to the outside world, other than through Israel. While during Mubarak's term Egypt had turned a blind eye to the burgeoning tunnel industry between the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula, the Muslim Brotherhood government of 2012-2013 showed strong support for its affiliate Hamas. However, al-Sissi's government reversed this policy sharply after Hamas co-operated with Jihadis in Sinai that threatened Egypt's government. His forces razed almost two kilometers of houses and orchards along Egypt's border with Gaza in anti-smuggling

operations. Throughout all these years and different governments and policies in Cairo however, Egypt remained an indispensable interlocutor, mediator and power broker for Gaza, enjoying critical rapport with Israel, the PA and Hamas.

Hamas' current policy stems from interrelated pressures. Since the 2014 conflict with Israel, the Gaza Strip is still crumbling, with not much by way of reconstruction or even serious international donor support on the horizon. Widespread unemployment, electricity and water shortages, have further deepened on account of President Abbas' decision to cut PA funding to Gaza. Public discontent has grown and ultimately threatens to turn against Hamas. Internally, the terrorist wing is increasingly frustrated since the post-2014 Conflict deterrent effect has constrained its active fighting against Israel, while its main military enterprise, the network of attack tunnels into Israel, is regularly detected and destroyed by IDF operations.

3.2.3 Hamas' New Strategy Against Israel

Suffering under these pressures Hamas embarked on a new strategy to break out of its strategic deadlock. Since March 2018, Hamas has thus been orchestrating large-scale violence on the border between Gaza and Israel. The major flare-ups have generally occurred on Fridays, following mosque prayers, when crowds of up to 50,000 people in five separate areas along the border have been massed by Hamas. Violence and acts of terrorism involving explosives and firearms have also occurred at other times during this period.

The Gaza violence has been orchestrated under the pretext of a 'Great March of Return', a demonstration to draw attention to what Palestinian leadership consider to be a right of return of their people to homes in Israel. The stated intention has been explicitly not just to demonstrate, but to actually break through the border fence en masse and physically march in their thousands into Israel.

Hamas' intention as relates to the march for the 'right of return' is not the exercise of such a 'right', which is strongly contested, and the subject of final status negotiations. Rather, it is well understood as a long-standing Arab policy intended to eliminate the State of Israel and has naturally been consistently rejected by the Israeli government. The real goal of Hamas's violence is to continue their long-standing strategy of creating and intensifying international outrage, vilification,

isolation and criminalisation of Israel by creating situations which compel the IDF to respond with lethal force that Hamas exploits through propaganda.

3.2.4 The Tactical Evolution of the Threat from Hamas

Hamas has used a range of tactics which include firing rockets from Gaza into Israeli population centres and constructing sophisticated attack tunnels under the Gaza border into nearby Israeli communities. A critical element of these tactics is the use of Palestinian human shields — civilians, often including women and children, who are either forced or volunteer to be present in locations from where attacks are launched or commanded or where fighters, combat supplies and munitions are located so that Israeli military response will include potential harm to these civilians.

In some cases, including during the current wave of violence, Hamas present their fighters as innocent civilians, stage fake incidents which purport to show civilians being killed and wounded by Israeli forces that are distributed on film or utilise footage of violence from elsewhere, such as in Syria for example, portrayed as violence against Palestinians in propaganda material online.

Tactics deployed utilise smoke screens created by thousands of burning tires to obfuscate the movements towards the fence, as well as more ineffective attempts to use mirrors to blind IDF observers. They have also used burning tires and petrol bombs to attempt to breach the fence, which includes wooden components, in various places. In addition, Hamas and their cohorts have deployed grappling irons, ropes, wire cutters and other tools to break down the fence. They have used drones, slingshots (when used to hurl rocks at soldiers these are potentially lethal), as well as firearms, hand grenades and improvised explosive devices, with the aim of penetrating the fence as well as attacking IDF forces.

In light of the IDF's response, Hamas has not succeeded in significant penetrations of the border. If however they would, thousands of people would likely pour through the gaps, armed terrorists intent on reaching Israeli communities and carrying out mass murder and abductions among them. Among the places Hamas attempted to breach is an area adjacent to the village of Nahal Oz, just a few hundred yards from the border — a sprint that could be achieved in less than five minutes by

gunmen. In such a scenario, with armed terrorists indistinguishable from unarmed civilians who themselves often also pose a violent threat, it is hard to see how the IDF could avoid having to ensure the integrity of Israel's border even at the cost of casualties and condemnation.

Additionally, Hamas has mounted an ongoing campaign of sending burning kites and incendiary balloons into Israel. While this may sound minor, these have caused fires to break out, including a major fire in the Be'eri Forest burning large areas of woodland as well as wheat fields. Israel has estimated an economic loss of several million shekels as a result of fires caused by kites and balloons and while it makes no international headlines, the population in southern Israel has lived with these attacks for nearly a year, with resultant political pressure to take action.

During the period of these events, Hamas also continued its long-standing assaults on Israel, launching hundreds of rockets and mortars into its civilian areas. Israel also uncovered and neutralised a number of cross-border tunnels running under the area where these border events took place.

3.2.5 Israel's Graduated Response

As in previous bouts of violence, the IDF have adopted a graduated response, seeking de-escalation. They airdropped thousands of leaflets and used SMS, social media, phone calls and radio broadcasts to warn the people of Gaza not to gather at the border or approach the fence. They contacted Gaza bus company owners and asked them not to transport people to the border. When these appeals were ignored — or at least negated by Hamas pressure on the civilian population — the IDF used tear gas to disperse the crowds that approached the fence. In an innovative effort to increase precision and effectiveness they sometimes used drones to deliver the teargas. Yet tear gas' effectiveness is limited by time and wind conditions, and by the ability of people to mitigate its most serious effects against them. Where this was the case IDF forces used warning shots, fired overhead. Finally, only where absolutely necessary and permissible by the IDF rules of engagement that meet international standards, ball ammunition was used, aimed to disable rather than kill. Even in situations where shooting to kill would have been lawful, the IDF made plain that they still only fired shots to disable. Nevertheless, several persons died as a result of IDF fire and many more were wounded. Of those killed, Israel assesses that over

80% were Hamas or other terrorist affiliated operatives.

Israel suffered heavy condemnation from various quarters, with some contending that Israeli troops used excessive force because they fired live ammunition against demonstrators who posed no imminent threat to life. Our assessment is that this is incorrect in that not only was Israel diligent in applying applicable rules of engagement and did not target demonstrators deliberately, but also that under international law it is clear that live ammunition can be used when there is a serious threat of death or injury, and where no other means have succeeded in confronting the threat. There is no requirement for a threat to be 'immediate' — rather, such force can be used at the point when it becomes 'imminent'; ie when there is no intermediate stage in which an aggressive action can be prevented before it becomes an immediate threat. Under the conditions deliberately created by Hamas, there was no effective intermediate step that could have been taken in some acute instances at the border, short of live fire at those who posed a threat. Had there been a successful breach of the border, it would have presented not only an imminent but an immediate threat to life which could only have been prevented by inflicting far higher casualties as thousands of people with terrorists among them storm border adjacent communities inside Israel.

3.2.6 Hamas Escalation to the Brink of War

Over the summer of 2018, the weekly riots at the border turned into near daily events as Hamas sought to ratchet up pressure on Israel. Hamas has been in a predicament about its stagnating income from Iran and other patrons busy in other Middle East conflict theatres, a restless population on account of its lack of political outlook, and increasingly tough pressures from internecine warfare with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah movement which runs the Palestinian Authority. On account of Egyptian intelligence officials who visited Gaza and made clear that the violence needed to be reined in, Hamas had tempered the border riots - making quite clear the level of control it exercised over these 'protesters'. Israel had also agreed to transfers of fuel and cash into Gaza sponsored by Qatar, which added to a calmer atmosphere.

Since Hamas continues with great effort to prepare for further attacks on Israel, the Israeli intelligence services have continued their actions to thwart such

plans. Intelligence gathering inside Gaza is essential to Israel's security and a core part of its defensive concept. It is also the reason Israel is able to minimise civilian casualties when Hamas uses Gazans as human shields. By coincidence, a HLMG fact finding delegation researching the subject matters covered in this report arrived in Israel in November 2018 at the same time as a major escalation occurred in the fighting.



General Camporini of Italy inspecting an Israeli home damaged by a Hamas rocket. (Credit: HLMG)

Hamas discovered an Israeli intelligence unit near Khan Younis and killed its commander. The wounded IDF deputy commander managed to extract his unit by helicopter, with seven Palestinians killed in the ensuing gun battle. This led to a massive escalation of the confrontation with Israel by Hamas: It fired nearly 500 rockets and mortars at Israel's civilian areas and launched an anti-tank missile at a bus carrying IDF troops near the Gaza border. The IDF responded by targeting Hamas and Islamic Jihad with airstrikes, destroying several significant command and control facilities and other terror-related sites in Gaza.

During this period the HLMG was able to interview units involved, from junior ranks that were involved in operations to the Commander of Southern Command in charge of the IDF's activity in and around Gaza, as well as extensively tour the area of operations and see the damage from Hamas strikes. It is clear that Israel not only conducted its operations to the same high standard of legal and

moral obligation we expect of our own forces, but further that a detailed consideration of the unfolding violence made plain that Israel had taken a deliberate decision not to escalate, averting a new Gaza war despite having a strong argument to act more forcefully against Hamas' escalation.

3.3 Domestic Political Manifestations of Israel's Challenges

Israel's response to this escalation by Hamas - which had included the greatest number of rockets in a single day ever fired by the terrorist organisation - caused a political crisis that ultimately led to the resignation of the Minister of Defense.

The discussion of the IDF response raised three options: none, a 'significant' blow to Hamas, or launching a major military operation akin in scale to the 2014 conflict. The IDF recommended the middle option, targeting infrastructure but stopping

short of targeting senior Hamas personnel so as to enable a de-escalation once the skirmish had died down. Israel's intelligence apparatus had concluded Hamas did not want a major war and held that Egypt and Qatar's demonstrated commitment to arranging a cease-fire meant an indirect agreement for a cessation of hostilities with Hamas was possible and could prevent a full-scale war and ease Gaza's humanitarian distress. Meanwhile the IDF emphasised the logic shared between the Prime Minister and the IDF Chief of Staff that they were in danger of being dragged into a conflagration with no benefit. Hamas would escalate significantly by firing rockets at Israel's large population centres, public pressure would lead Israel to call up reserves and if Hamas continued these would go into Gaza. This would leave Israel only two choices - occupy Gaza and be forced to maintain forces there again or stop and pick up indirect negotiations with Hamas from the same point as before the escalation.



The HLMG delegation inspecting an Israeli home damaged by a Hamas rocket. (Credit: HLMG)

During There was reportedly some clamour inside Israel's cabinet over the failure to target Hamas personnel directly and some voices suggested that a lengthy campaign from afar was possible without a ground invasion, but the General Staff argued that

such an escalation was not justified under the circumstances. Defense Minister Lieberman was particularly vocal in clashing with these views, insisting that it was untenable to accept a situation in which Hamas was able to dominate the strategic

imperatives of Israel in an ongoing cycle in which it pressures Israel by negotiations about a modus operandi through violence, while preparing multiple ways to attack it. Such a dynamic has led to multiple conflagrations and there was significant public pressure to deal Hamas a major blow so as to change the rules of the game between the two sides. Though the Defense Minister was met with stiff resistance by the IDF, some of the top officers in charge of the operation whom we had an opportunity to discuss these matters with expressed the view that they would have favoured a somewhat expanded operation that hit Hamas harder.

Under the circumstances, however, the Prime Minister sided with a policy of de-escalation, not least given the greater context and other threats as previously mentioned and Defense Minister Lieberman resigned in protest. It is clear that the question of whether Israel should accept the dynamics where a terrorist organisation fires masses of rockets at its population and seeks to breach its borders even in 'peacetime' has become a pertinent one and will likely become more acute as Hamas continues its attempts to target Israel. So far, Prime Minister Netanyahu's approach appears to be politically palatable, but it is unlikely that a further escalation, by design or miscalculation, on the part of Hamas, will leave Israeli politicians as much room for manoeuvre in the face of public opinion.

3.4 The Challenge of Fighting Terrorist Adversaries

Israel is no longer alone in having to face the difficulties that come with wars against terrorist adversaries. Western nations today are engaged in numerous kinetic conflicts with Islamist terrorist groups that straddle the line delineating states from non-state actors. Conflicts with these terror-armies mean decisive victories become increasingly elusive. Such Islamist terrorists' strategy to defeat conventionally superior military forces usually involve an effort to generate maximum collateral damage. Terrorist groups are well aware of the political benefits that can be derived from the negative media attention that attends the loss of civilian life. As such they strike from densely populated areas and frequently use human shields. Groups like Islamic State, and in particular Hamas and Hizballah in this case, are extremely well versed in the desire of democracies to reduce civilian casualties, and are ruthless in their attempt to

exploit the IDF's compliance with the Laws of Armed Conflict for strategic gain. As outlined above, the battlefields the IDF faces in fending off attacks from these terrorist groups are gravely challenging, deeply embedded within Lebanese and Palestinian civilians respectively, and fighting under a strategic concept that targets Israeli civilians directly.



HLMG members at the Ministry of Defence of Israel

Israel, like all democracies' military forces, now operates in a more contested media environment than at any moment in historical memory. This allows both terrorist groups and insurgent forces to advance their strategic goals through social media, new media sources, and willing or unwittingly complicit actors in democratic nations. The result is the dissemination of a flawed narrative, detrimental to mission objectives. Indeed, the information warfare efforts of terrorist groups have often proven more sophisticated than those advanced by the governments of democratic nations although Israel has adjusted fast and mounts a formidable social media and wider information effort now.

In contrast to the terrorist groups it faces, Israel's ethos and military is built on the notion of the preservation of life. As witnessed in the analysis of the summer 2018 flare-up in Gaza, Israel seeks to de-escalate its conflicts, and if forced to fight is a world leader in technical measures that lower the human cost of defending its territory. Israel adheres to the highest standards of both international law and the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC). Often, its measures seeking to prevent loss of life exceed the requirements of LOAC. Israel's civilian government and judiciary are accountable as the arbiters of its policies and laws, in line with

the highest democratic standards. Since Israel has had to contend with terrorism against its civilian population since before its declaration of statehood, its Supreme Court is one of the most respected judicial authorities in the world in seeking to grapple with the difficult problems brought on by democracies engaged in battles with terrorist

organisations and hybrid terror-armies. Its rulings present a sophisticated body of jurisprudence in contending with the debates that all Western states confront today in the effort to balance security and freedom.



The HLMG delegation meeting the IDF spokesperson (Credit: HLMG)

4. PREVENTING ESCALATION

4.1 The Prospect of Renewed Warfare

Israel faces growing threats in Gaza and on its northern border. In both theatres the threat of renewed conflict is serious and it is clear to the HLMG that Israel is prepared to take defensive actions against the terrorist movements seeking to attack it, as well as against their state sponsors, principally Iran.

Israel's strategic analysis of a potential third Lebanon war suggests the result would be thousands of casualties in Lebanon on account of Hizballah's deliberate strategy of hiding its military assets among Lebanon's civilian population. Israel expects Hizballah will target its civilians deliberately, in what is likely to be an unprecedentedly fierce assault. Israeli decision-makers thus understand that they will be presented with a scenario that is going to prove intolerable to their citizens. As a result, the IDF has been intensely focused on developing an appropriate strategic concept to deal with such a conflict, the centerpiece of which calls for overwhelming speed and firepower alongside a rapid simultaneous assault based on aerial, ground and naval forces, artillery, active defense, as well as cyberattacks. Israel's strategy seeks to quickly penetrate Lebanese territory in order to damage Hizballah's military and political infrastructure backed by a systematic air campaign of immense scale targeting ballistic missile and rocket sites and other advanced weaponry as well as Hizballah's leadership. A focus on rapid results also characterizes the approach Israel will adopt for any ground offensive. Given that it is likely the theatre of war would expand to include territory where Iranian and its affiliate forces are based in Syria, there also appears to be a serious risk of a wider conflict.

As outlined, Israeli actions in Gaza will likely depend more specifically on the context of any future conflagration. Sporadic exchanges have continued, and the experience of recent years coupled to the political crisis in Israel brought on by the latest skirmish suggests that it is highly likely that Israel cannot countenance another serious barrage from Gaza. As such, it is possible that a major conflagration would take place in the event of an

escalation there and given the challenges of Israel's northern theatre and the need to avoid a war on two fronts, it's likely that Israel would respond with overwhelming force. Even without renewed hostilities, Hamas's new tactic at the Gaza border has had significant success in turning elements of the international community against Israel and causing damage to its reputation. Inevitably thus, Hamas and other Palestinian groups will try the same tactic again in the future. To mitigate this, Israel is reportedly preparing to strengthen the Gaza border fence to make penetration more difficult without having to resort to lethal force. It is already working on an underground barrier to prevent penetration by tunnelling. Yet it remains unclear how long such incremental measures will suffice in holding off a terrorist group devoted to Israel's destruction that has not wavered from this commitment since gaining power in Gaza.

4.2 Responsible Deterrence

Israel has shown significant restraint in the face of persistent lethal threats from terrorist movements on its borders. It has sought to avoid confrontation by deterring both Hizballah and Hamas. Setting clear red lines, Israel has acted to enforce these, all the while seeking to avoid imperilling the civilian populations of Gaza and Lebanon that these terrorist organisations place at the heart of their strategic concept and thus gravely endanger.

Israel's leaders clearly continue to favour a course of de-escalation. However, their first duty is to Israel's citizens and ensuring their security, and public sentiment is hardening regarding the dangers facing Israel turning into intolerable reality. The stockpiles of weapons amassed in Lebanon by Hizballah since the 2006 war (even under the eye of the international community); similar Hamas stockpiles built in Gaza since the 2014 conflict; Iran's support for terrorism in both locales; and Iran's entrenchment in Syria have all served to create a shifting dynamic. This shift inevitably raises questions regarding the models of strategic deterrence upon which Israel has traditionally relied.

The premises underlying this debate are relatively stable - the ability to mete out overwhelming force with speed and precision across all realms including nuclear, superb intelligence capabilities and a doctrine that calls for short and sharp warfare conducted on enemy territory to protect the small strategic depth the country's geography offers. The questions however arise once the concept of deterrence is applied to the fight against terrorist movements armed with long range and ever more precise rockets, threatening Israeli population centres.

On the one hand, vocal critics, including the Defense Minister whose resignation was partially based on these concerns, make plain the intolerable situation created by a terrorist organisation such as Hamas, on the border of a democratic state it seeks to destroy, being left to conduct periodic attacks, in a cycle of deterioration followed by equilibrium and uneasy truce. Israeli military planners refer to these periods as 'the war between the wars', where low-level activity to suppress Hamas' military build-up and operations continues. There is an increasing view in parts of the security establishment that it is effectively now Hamas that deters Israel, given Israel is unwilling to damage Hamas to the extent that it might lose control of the Gaza Strip, and is unwilling even to conduct large scale operations in the territory if it can be avoided. Yet senior voices in Israel's strategic community insisted during our meetings that deterrence with Hamas continued to be highly effective, and that the confrontation that we witnessed while there was proof it was effective for Israel to de-escalate because it was able to credibly deter Hamas from raising the skirmish to a level of violence that would make full-scale conflict inevitable.

These arguments can also be seen in the wider strategic discussion about the nature of deterrence against terrorist movements. Rather than the concept as traditionally understood, a higher emphasis is placed here on direct threats to organisational leadership and command and control nodes in the terror network to be effective, since by their nature, terrorist organisations, in particular when religiously motivated, are immune to some considerations and consequences other actors would seek to avoid.

Conceptually, this is highly relevant on Israel's northern border. There is no plausible legitimate explanation for Hizballah's efforts to arm itself and threaten Israel other than the explicit religiously motivated Iranian drive to destroy Israel. The established Israeli view formed in the wake of the

2006 war with Lebanon was that it was a missed opportunity in terms of destroying Hizballah but a very effective war in terms of establishing deterrence. Hassan Nasrallah expressed misgivings about inviting the scale of retaliation that Israel brought to bear on Lebanon in that war, reflecting in part Hizballah's more precarious situation during this period, necessitating not least a level of buy-in from Lebanon's population and body politic. Today, Hizballah's control over Lebanon is much stronger, certainly in terms of the use of force and questions of war and peace. Iran's steadfast backing and expansion of Hizballah capabilities, its entrenchment in Syria and the combined experience of Hizballah and Iranian force, as well as the 'precision project' which has upgraded the accuracy, and thus strategic threat, of a portion of the over 100,000 projectiles now stockpiled, present a picture that could lead Iran and its allies to a dire miscalculation due to an erosion of deterrence.

4.3 The Responsibility of the International Community

This risk of dire miscalculation puts a renewed onus on the international community, since it places upon it a particular burden to reinforce Israel's deterrent posture in order to help avoid renewed and serious conflict. The international community must ensure not only that Israel has the diplomatic cover, but rather also the military means and room for maneuver, so as to send a clear message to Iran and Hizballah that it will be confronted by a superior military force with the full support of its allies were they to seek an escalation. Such a display of strength and unity is the best hope of preventing a conflagration that the majority of Lebanese citizens do not wish to be dragged into by Hizballah - and which Israel's leaders and citizens do not want to see happen either. Israel's responsible deterrence will be strengthened and war therefore made less likely.

Similarly, an area in which Israeli's friends and allies could assist in countering Hamas' efforts of escalation is in negating the anti-Israel propaganda that Hamas seeks to generate. This would require countering the misrepresentation of events and false condemnations of Israel by misled politicians, human rights groups, international organizations and the media. By firmly rejecting misled demands for international actions such as one-sided UN investigations and resolutions, the international message should be a condemnation of Hamas's violent and intolerable tactics. Such a condemnation

would help discourage Hamas from similar future detrimental behaviour.

In both Gaza and the northern theatre Israel faces threats that other nations would not tolerate, and many would deal with in significantly less restrained forms than Israel has. If the West strongly supports Israel in its efforts to de-escalate the tensions by making plain to Iran and its terrorist proxies including Hizballah and Hamas what the cost of attacking Israel will be, the chances of war recede. Having chosen a path of responsible deterrence, the least Israel should expect is the full support of its allies in the democratic world.

4.4 The Golan Heights

The challenges set out in this report require urgent and concerted action to constrain Iran and her proxies and ensure a wider conflict is avoided. In this context, current efforts by European nations to circumvent U.S. sanctions on Iran are of concern. The international community has displayed other worrying failures in this regard, UNIFIL being among the most obvious. The credibility of the United Nations, already damaged by bias against Israel, has been further eroded by the failure to empower the armies involved to enforce a resolution that clearly calls for the disarmament of Hizballah. Still, no matter the limitations of the mandate, in allowing Hizballah's extensive terrorist infrastructure to be embedded in south Lebanon under its watch, UNIFIL is an expression of the international community's failure to provide any disincentives to Israel's enemies, which makes war more likely.

Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights is of great importance in this context. That territory was a launch-pad for aggression against Israel from the rebirth of the state in 1948 until captured by Israel in a defensive war in 1967 and continues to be of immense strategic importance to Israel's defense. Recognition of Israel's possession of the Golan Heights as legitimate and necessary by the international community advances peace and regional stability.

In the past Israel offered Syria the Golan Heights in exchange for peace, with all approaches rejected.

Many Western experts and governments naively viewed Bashar al Assad as a potential partner for peace with Israel. The events of the last eight years have proven beyond all doubt that he is a ruthless despot who must not be given any opportunity for further aggression. Syria is now and will remain for the foreseeable future under the domination of Iran and the Syrian government. As the civil war dies down, and when it reconstitutes its forces with Russian assistance, Syria will itself threaten Israel at Iran's behest while Hizballah and other Iranian proxy militias will also continue to do so. If these or related malignant entities gain possession of the Golan Heights the threats to Israeli civilians would be significantly intensified.

Israel's continued possession of the Golan Heights on the other hand is never likely to translate into offensive action against anyone since Israel has only ever fought on the defensive and its government sees neither Syria nor Iran as targets for aggression other than in self-defense. Further, returning the Golan Heights to Syria would not only endanger Israel but also consign the 25,000 Druze living there to the depredations of President Assad against their will. Worst of all, it would also send the message that an aggressor has nothing to lose as there is no territorial price to pay for its violent actions.

President Trump's recent declaration thus recognises a clear imperative in preserving regional stability. Yet many in the international community still do not recognise Israel's possession of the Golan Heights as legitimate. Frequent calls have been made, including by the UN, to restore the territory to Syria. While it is a commonly held view that Israel's possession of the Golan Heights is illegal under international law, this position is not tenable. Israel gained the Golan Heights during its defence against aggression launched from the Golan. Under the UN Charter defensive war is not illegal and throughout history countries have retained territory gained in their own defence. Thus both in law and in a strategy for stability, Israel's de facto control of the Golan should be fully recognised by other members of the international community. Such recognition will aid stability in the region and recognise both Israel's rights as well as the serious challenge from an intensifying Iranian threat Israel faces on multiple borders.





ISRAEL'S SECURITY CHALLENGES TODAY: AN ASSESSMENT

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