

## The Vanishing Enemy: Force Buildup in Israel Post Hezbollah, Hamas, the Assad Regime, and the Campaign Against Iran

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### Abstract

For approximately two decades, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) force buildup has relied on threat-based planning, grounded in specific threats and scenarios. This approach emerged as the risk of state military invasions into Israel diminished, while the threat posed by the Iran-led axis, including Hezbollah and Hamas, increased. Following the Gaza War (Iron Swords), a new strategic reality has unfolded in the Middle East. On one hand, the primary threats that shaped much of Israel's force buildup have significantly weakened. On the other hand, the emergence of new actors and the potential instability of regimes could disrupt the existing order and give rise to new threats. A comparable strategic situation arose for U.S. force developers after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In response to uncertainty about future scenarios, they opted for capabilities-based planning, emphasizing versatile capabilities over specific threats. This article proposes re-evaluating Israel's force-building approach by integrating capabilities-based planning, focused on generic missions, alongside the use of specific scenarios as benchmarks for assessing the validity of force-building decisions.

**Keywords:** Force Buildup, Capabilities-Based Planning, Threat-Based Planning, Iron Swords

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## Introduction

During the Cold War, the United States built its military power in anticipation of a potential conflict with the Soviet Union. However, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc presented a new challenge for American force-building. As the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, articulated, “I’m running out of villains [...] I’m down to Castro and Kim Il-Sung” (Troxell, 2001, p. 10). In the absence of a clear and distinct adversary posing a severe threat, a different approach was needed to define the necessity of force-building and justify the significant investments allocated to national security. Consequently, the U.S. transitioned from Threat-Based Planning (TBP) to Capabilities-Based Planning (CBP). Israel finds itself in a comparable situation, albeit with notable differences. For the past two decades, the buildup of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has been aimed at countering “the axis” led by Iran. However, this axis has been significantly weakened following the elimination of most of Hamas’s military power, severe blows sustained by Hezbollah, the collapse of Assad’s regime along with the crippling of its primary weapons systems, and the degradation of Iran’s military capabilities. This scenario bears some resemblance to the post-Cold War context faced by the United States. However, key differences remain: the future threat from Iran persists as a significant and severe concern, including the potential for a nuclear threat, while proximate fronts continue to pose unresolved challenges.

The question we aim to examine is whether it is necessary to reassess the approach underpinning the IDF’s force-building considering the evolving situation following the regional war. Our argument is that, over the years, the IDF’s force buildup has been guided by clear adversaries and defined scenarios. At present, however, it is increasingly challenging to outline such scenarios, and there is insufficient foundation for planning future force-building efforts. This challenge parallels Colin Powell’s observation that it was no longer realistic for the United States to base its force-building solely on the remaining adversaries it faced in the 1990s. The article focuses on long-term force-building processes that require a relatively extended period for implementation—primarily weapons systems, infrastructure, and procurement-oriented doctrines. It places less emphasis on components that can be executed over a shorter time frame, such as training and operational plans.

The methodology we have chosen involves analyzing the considerations that led to the revision of the force-building approach in the United States following the Cold War, as well as the factors that drove the evolution of Israel’s force-building approach over the years. Based on this analysis, we will argue that

the strategic context that has emerged in the aftermath of the Gaza War (Iron Swords) should influence an update to Israel's force-building approach.

## **The Challenge of Military Force-Building**

Military force-building is designed to provide the military with the capabilities required for future deployment, whether in times of war or routine operations. It is commonly divided into several components: combat doctrine, organizational structure, weaponry, manpower, training and exercises, and infrastructure (Zigdon, 2004, pp. 42-45). The process of force-building aims to prepare forces for future use, yet its first challenge lies in the inherent uncertainty regarding the circumstances in which the force will need to be deployed. Questions such as when fighting will be necessary, who the enemy will be, what capabilities the adversary will possess, what objectives they will pursue, and what methods they will employ all contribute to this uncertainty. Similarly, considerations include what objectives the state aims to achieve, the initial conditions of a future war, whether advance intelligence warnings will be provided, and whether the political leadership will have the strategic freedom to decide on a preemptive strike. Significant force-building processes, particularly those involving new weapons systems, often require more than two decades from the initiation of research and development to full integration and operational deployment within the military (Ben-Israel, 1997). Consequently, as the level of certainty about the characteristics of future scenarios decreases, it becomes increasingly challenging to define the specific context and the inherent needs that must be addressed.

Military force-building demands substantial resources, and it is not practically feasible to develop all the required capabilities. Resources are always limited, as there are additional national needs competing for funding. The second challenge of force-building is prioritization under conditions of scarcity—deciding which military capabilities to develop, to what extent to invest in their acquisition, and which capabilities to forgo entirely. The decision on how much to invest in force-building and where to allocate resources depends on factors beyond merely defining the capabilities needed for the future. These factors include the following: the assessment of the likelihood of successfully developing the required technology; confidence in the ability to sustain necessary resource allocation throughout the development process; ensuring the project can be completed within a reasonable timeframe; evaluation of the availability of resources for future procurement of weapon systems; and consideration of the interdependencies between various force-building components that must be prepared in unison for the anticipated scenario.

Decisions regarding force-building—what to develop, when, and with what priority—are inherently risky. These decisions are made under conditions of uncertainty and numerous constraints. Force planners are tasked with designing a force structure that will provide the required solutions for the state’s needs with a sufficient level of certainty and within an acceptable level of risk (Troxell, 2001).

## **Threat-Based Planning and Capabilities-Based Planning**

Throughout the Cold War, U.S. force development was predominantly guided by the Threat-Based Planning (TBP) approach. This methodology is founded on the premise that military forces should be structured to achieve victory over an adversary in a future scenario in which they are deployed, or in a small set of anticipated scenarios. The approach provides a benchmark—the future scenario—against which the adequacy of force development can be assessed. It also facilitates justification for the allocation of resources needed to achieve specific output within a defined scenario and coherently links national strategy, military operational concepts, and force development toward that aim. This approach enables clear communication between the military echelon responsible for force development and the political decision-makers allocating resources for these efforts (Troxell, 2001). However, the approach has a critical limitation: it requires a well-defined future scenario from which to identify forthcoming needs and guide planning accordingly. During the Cold War, the prospect of a future war with the Soviet Union was considered a suitable scenario for guiding U.S. force development.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia’s repositioning under Yeltsin’s rule presented a new challenge for U.S. force developers, whose primary scenario had vanished. While it was evident that a global superpower required a military force, it was unclear what scenarios it should prepare for. During the last decade of the 20th century, the focus on building forces for a global war with the Soviet Union was replaced by the requirement to prepare for two simultaneous major theater wars (MTWs). The dilemmas surrounding the formulation of specific requirements led to tailored policies for each scenario, such as the “Base Force” plan under the Bush administration and the “Bottom-Up Review” under the Clinton administration. These efforts aimed to balance scenario-focused force development with a more generic readiness. The U.S. Department of Defense 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) introduced the concept of Capabilities-Based Planning (CBP). It stipulated that the United States would build its forces based on capabilities, enabling their deployment across a broad spectrum of future scenarios. This included the requirement to defeat adversaries in two major theaters simultaneously but not exclusively

limited to that. The document also highlighted the transformation of the military force—technologically, intellectually, and socially—as a central component of the force development doctrine (DoD, 2001).

Capabilities-Based Planning is designed to address situations in which there is no clear future scenario or only a small set of potential scenarios. It provides planning tools that do not measure success based on a specific scenario (Troxell, 2001). Some view CBP as input-focused, in contrast to Threat-Based Planning, which is output-focused. However, focusing solely on inputs does not explain how specific military capabilities are determined within CBP, particularly in terms of their scope and scale. Capabilities are not required simply for their acquisition; their determination involves an operational understanding of how these capabilities will be employed and what they are intended to achieve. A common approach in CBP is planning based on the capabilities needed to achieve output in generic missions. Unlike TBP, these outputs are not derived from a specific context but rather reflect typical outcomes across a broad range of scenarios. Examples include halting ground offensive, disrupting the launch of ballistic missiles, neutralizing fortified enemy positions, achieving air superiority, or rapidly initiating a large-scale counteroffensive (Davis, 2002).

Mission-based planning (Capabilities-Based Planning grounded in the analysis of generic missions) begins with selecting operational concepts suitable for these generic missions. This is followed by identifying the capabilities required to implement those concepts. While this planning approach is detached from any specific context, it still necessitates a fundamental military understanding of the adversary and the characteristics of warfare. Planning capabilities based on outcomes in generic missions enables a productive dialogue between the military and political leadership regarding force-building. Such mission-based planning does so because it allows for the connection between inputs and outputs, even in the absence of a concrete scenario to serve as a benchmark for the required achievements of force-building efforts. Given the need to address diverse future scenarios, the capabilities targeted by CBP are characterized by being generic, robust, flexible, and adaptable. It is important to note that, according to this approach, the need is defined by operational outcomes rather than inputs, such as “increased force size,” or operational outputs, like “broader communication bandwidth” or “enhanced integrated multi-branch planning” (Davis, 2002).

Alongside the advantages of mission-based planning, there are also inherent challenges. First, if the missions are generic, how does one determine the required scope? For instance, even if maneuvering divisions are needed, there is a significant difference between requiring ten divisions versus twenty. Similarly, while a broad airstrike capability might be essential, there is a considerable gap

between needing 1,000 bombs per day and requiring 3,000. In the absence of an external benchmark to estimate the necessary scale of military resources, the standard becomes an internal one—essentially resource-based planning. Consequently, this approach risks being influenced by internal economic and political constraints, which, in turn, may shape strategy in unintended ways. Another significant risk is the inclination toward technology-driven force-building. This tendency emerges when no external benchmark exists to define the requisite force-building parameters.

The American approach to force-building, at least until the outbreak of the Russo-Ukraine War, largely relied on capabilities as its primary framework. The latest U.S. National Security Strategy emphasizes, in broad terms, homeland defense capabilities, strategic deterrence, and the development of military advantages. It also highlights force-building aimed at generic capabilities such as lethality, resilience, survivability, flexibility, and readiness (DoD, 2022). These capabilities address a wide spectrum of generic scenarios, and even the emphasis on two specific adversaries—China and Russia—does not focus on concrete scenarios. At the theoretical level, there remains a tension within the U.S. defense establishment between capabilities-based planning and threat-based planning. However, this tension primarily arises when these approaches are presented in exaggerated terms: threat-based planning centered on a single scenario while ignoring the possibility of alternative scenarios, versus capabilities-based planning devoid of an assessment of specific threats. It is essential to avoid these two extreme positions. Various texts advocate integrating the two approaches, emphasizing capabilities-based planning as the foundational framework for force development while utilizing threat-based planning as a tool for critique and prioritization in force-building efforts (Hicks, 2017).

The American approach has influenced other nations in the Western world, including Western Europe, Scandinavia, and Australia. These countries tend to adopt capabilities-based planning as a leading approach, while also identifying key threats that shape force-building through a threat-based planning framework (Borzillo et al., 2021). However, looking ahead, the potential for change in the coming years cannot be ignored. As the Russian threat in Europe and the Chinese threat in the Pacific region are increasingly perceived as more likely to materialize, future scenarios are being outlined with greater precision. From the perspective of the United States and its allies, this may enhance the relevance of TBP in force-building efforts.

## The Israeli Approach

The Israeli approach to force-building has undergone gradual changes over the years. A few years after its establishment, Israel developed a strategy to address the security threats it faced. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) focused its force-building efforts on countering the existential threat posed, according to Israel's leadership, by a potential "second round" of war with the Arab states. This threat assumed that the Arab states would attempt once again to destroy the young state, as they did in 1948, but with enhanced military and organizational capabilities. In a government briefing famously known as the "18 Points Document," Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion stated that the Arabs were "now transitioning to offensive planning, their self-confidence is growing, and their fear of us is diminishing" (Bar-On, 1997). During this period, the IDF began planning its long-term force development. The Chief of Staff appointed a planning team led by the Assistant Head of Operations (AGAM) to design the structure and organization of the IDF. This team presented its conclusions on August 25, 1953. The report's fundamental assumption was that Israel would face a full-scale attack by Arab states, which would require the mobilization of all the state's military potential, even if the war began with a preemptive strike by Israel (Oren, 2002). This assumption served as the foundation for the IDF's and the government's long-term planning methodology. This methodology relied on the concept of a "reference threat," which at the time was clearly defined as a full-scale war with all Arab states. It involved evaluation of the operational requirements to contend with the threat and determine the IDF's primary force structure and procurement levels needed to ensure Israel's preparedness for such an attack. Simultaneously, the defense budget, which had been reduced by 20% in 1952-1953 to reallocate funds for the absorption of mass immigration, began to rise again (Greenberg, 1997).

The Israeli approach to force-building was capabilities-based. Israel systematically "counted" the main assets in the militaries of Arab states—tanks, aircraft, ships, artillery, and so on—and sought to equip itself accordingly to contend with the combined capabilities of the Arab states. This approach operated within budgetary constraints while factoring in Israel's qualitative advantage. This advantage stemmed from the superior quality of its human capital, which was a product of a more advanced education system compared to that of the Arab states. Notably, the weapon systems acquired by Israel were similar in quality to those purchased by the Arab states. The primary arms race during the 1950s was between Israel and Egypt. This was due to Egypt's efforts under Nasser's leadership to construct a large military force and the relative internal instability in other Arab states (Yaniv, 1994).

The capabilities-based force-building approach continued in the following decades, with an emphasis on expanding the stock of key assets, particularly tanks and aircraft, as the primary tools for achieving decisive victory. In the lead-up to the Six-Day War (1967), the IDF developed a capability for rapid decisive action on three fronts. By the Yom Kippur War (1973), the IDF had significantly increased its tank force, doubled the number of armored divisions, and doubled the number of combat aircraft, while also upgrading their quality (Shelah, 2023). The shock of the Yom Kippur War (1973) led to an accelerated investment in military expansion to prevent the possibility of a similar surprise attack in the future. In the nine years leading up to the First Lebanon War (1982), the number of divisions rose from seven to twelve, the number of tanks increased from 2,100 to 3,600, and the number of armored personnel carriers (APCs) and half-tracks grew from approximately 3,500 to over 8,000. The Air Force acquired modern American aircraft (F-15s, F-16s) and attack helicopters, and there was also a significant growth in the number of artillery pieces. By the mid-1970s, defense spending reached 30 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP). Over time, it gradually decreased to 20 percent of the GDP, until the economic crisis of the mid-1980s (Bar-Yosef, 2023).

Operational failures during the Yom Kippur War highlighted, among other things, that acquiring capabilities must also account for the challenges likely to characterize future battlefields. Relying solely on acquiring “more of the same” is insufficient. The significant investment of resources in expanding the tank inventory and preparing for tank-on-tank warfare overlooked the threat posed by anti-tank missiles encountered by armored forces in the Sinai. Similarly, the investment in combat aircraft underestimated the severity of the threat from surface-to-air missiles.

Alongside the capabilities-based planning approach, the IDF began to systematically integrate elements of threat-based planning, focusing on specific scenarios identified as critical for future warfare. Following the Six-Day War, the IDF’s positioning along the Suez Canal prompted force development tailored to a specific scenario that required crossing the canal. Capabilities such as the “roller bridge” and barges were developed to facilitate crossing. However, due to the prevailing assessment within IDF that war was unlikely in the near future, these capabilities did not reach full operational maturity by the time the war eventually broke out (Nadel, 2006). Threat-based force development was also evident after the Air Force’s inability to effectively counter surface-to-air missiles during the Yom Kippur War. The Air Force embarked on a unique force-building process aimed at achieving air superiority against air defense systems. This approach included the development of real-time command and

control mechanisms, integration of automated systems, new intelligence-gathering tools, advanced weaponry for offensive and electronic warfare, and comprehensive training and systemic exercises. The process came to fruition by the First Lebanon War, where it was implemented with significant success (Finkel, 2020). This is a prominent example of the success of focused, problem-specific force-building initiatives. A third example of threat-based and scenario-specific force development is the “Central Project,” developed in the 1990s to thwart a potential Syrian invasion. This initiative echoed, in principle, the American AirLand Battle concept, which was designed to counter a Soviet invasion of Western Europe (Ben, 2022).

Several processes that took place at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century led to a shift in Israel’s approach to force development. During the 1980s, Israel faced a severe economic crisis that necessitated an economic recovery plan, under which the IDF was required to undergo significant downsizing. The defense budget gradually decreased from 18 percent of GDP in 1983 to less than 10 percent a decade later. The existential threat posed by a coordinated attack from Arab state armies dissipated following the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt, the collapse of the Soviet Union—which had, until the 1990s, supplied weapons to Arab states hostile to Israel—and the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The final remaining state-based threat came from Syria, but this too dissolved with the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. In place of the threats posed by state militaries, new challenges emerged: terrorist organizations and semi-military entities, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. These were not perceived as having the potential to pose an existential threat.

The high costs associated with capabilities-based force development, which leads to the creation of a significantly large military, alongside the delineation of operational challenges into a set of defined problems, resulted in a shift toward force development that relies less on generic capabilities and more on responses to specific scenarios and threats. This process also influenced the planning of the IDF’s multi-year programs, wherein the approach effectively changed after the 2006 Second Lebanon War, as well as government decisions regarding force development policy.

One of the focal points of the IDF’s force development during the second decade of the 21st century was the creation of a capability for “strike output capacity,” enabling the Air Force to conduct massive airstrikes on 3,000 targets per day, alongside the development of “target banks.” Although this strike output was described as a generic capability, it was designed to address a specific operational challenge. According to statements made by IDF officials, the

rationale behind developing this capability was the need to rapidly neutralize the rocket threats posed to Israel by Hezbollah and Hamas (Ben-Yishai, 2014; Ben-Yishai and Zeitoun, 2021). The five -year plan of 2020 further emphasized the IDF's force development programs, which focused on countering the "terror armies" of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, as explicitly defined by the Chief of Staff. This approach differed from the development of generic capabilities aimed at addressing diverse threats under various scenarios. The IDF's force development strategy was tailored to the specific characteristics of Hezbollah and Hamas—their strategies, operational plans, doctrines of warfare, weaponry, organizational structures, and infrastructures (Ortal, 2020).

The emphasis on addressing specific threats and scenarios has been evident in government decisions regarding force buildup over the past two decades. The five -year plan of 2008 outlined which aircraft, tanks, ships, and defense systems the IDF decided to acquire, though priorities shifted subsequently. During this period, the government approved two significant force-building efforts aimed at addressing specific scenarios: the development of a strike capability against Iran and the construction of the border fence with Egypt (Prime Minister's Office, 2010). Following the Second Lebanon War, the government decided to procure the Iron Dome system as a central and urgent response to counter short-range rocket fire from Gaza and Lebanon. The system was developed amid budgetary disputes, without a defined set of operational requirements, and only after securing external funding for its development, despite opposition from the IDF and other parts of the defense establishment (State Comptroller, 2009). The issue of tunnel threats and operations in the subterranean domain emerged as a challenge for the IDF and the defense establishment as early as the 1990s (State Comptroller, 2007). However, it was only after Operation Protective Edge (2014) that it became clear the IDF had not adequately prepared to address this threat (State Comptroller, 2017). Consequently, the Cabinet decided to construct an underground barrier to counter Hamas's offensive tunnels, which was completed at the end of 2021. It is important to emphasize that the government's force-building initiatives were funded, to a significant extent, through budgets external to the IDF's regular allocation.

Formulation of the IDF's five -year plans is one of the primary decisions shaping the military's force buildup in the years following its approval. The process begins with a situation assessment that analyzes the anticipated evolution of threats against Israel. In the first decades after the state's establishment, it was relatively straightforward to define the primary threat as the prospect of a total war with the Arab states. However, since the late 1990s, this threat has ceased to be a concrete consideration in the multi-year planning framework (Eiland,

2011). Furthermore, the assumption that Israel might face a preemptive war initiated by an adversary also ceased to underpin planning—at least until October 7, 2023. With the decline of the conventional army threat, simple metrics such as the number of tanks, ships, armored personnel carriers (APCs), and aircraft could no longer suffice as the required response to Israel’s military challenges. Consequently, the methodology for formulating the IDF’s five-year plan and the government’s decisions on military force buildup underwent significant changes after the Second Lebanon War (2006). Greater emphasis began to be placed on addressing specific threats and scenarios, including engaging in potential strikes on Iran, constructing border barriers, countering tunnel threats, and enhancing intelligence-gathering and strike capabilities in Lebanon and Gaza.

## **The Strategic Context After the Gaza War**

Threat-based planning requires the ability to reasonably predict which threats and scenarios to prepare for. The Gaza War (Iron Swords) has brought about a strategic shift in Israel’s environment and the threats it faces, significantly impacting the uncertainty surrounding the IDF’s long-term force-building planning.

The primary threats to Israel have significantly weakened. In Gaza, the main military threat from Hamas and the Islamic Jihad has collapsed. Their ability to pose a threat through invasion or significant-scale rocket fire does not appear imminent. In the coming years, the potential threat is limited to terrorism and guerrilla activity targeting IDF presence in the Gaza Strip. The military threat from Hezbollah has been severely reduced due to the erosion of its military capabilities following a series of IDF offensives. These operations targeted the organization’s leadership, many senior commanders, weapon stockpiles, production capabilities, and infrastructure. Hezbollah’s logistical backbone crumbled when Syria ceased to function as a cornerstone of the Iranian axis after the Assad regime’s collapse. The new rule of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), hostile to the Iranian axis, compounded this shift. Israel, during this power transition, struck most of the advanced weaponry in Syria that posed a potential threat—particularly surface-to-surface missiles, surface-to-air missiles, aircrafts, and naval assets. Iran has experienced a strategic failure following what appears to be the disintegration of the axis—marked by the loss of Syria, severe damage to Hezbollah and Hamas, the diminished effectiveness of the “ring of fire” proxy militias (in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen), and the degradation of its Air Defense and long range missiles capabilities, the degradation of its weapons industry, and the demonstrated limitations of Iran’s offensive capabilities against Israel. Additionally, the U.S. threat, especially after the air strike on

nuclear facilities, poses an external risk to Iran, while the future strategy under President Trump remains unclear, and Internal pressures within Iran further constrain the regime's actions.

In several regions across the Middle East, there are risks to regime stability. The new regime in Syria has yet to stabilize. The Palestinian Authority has been weakened due to the war, largely because of a significant reduction in Palestinian employment within Israel, additional economic pressures stemming from Israeli policies, and the rise of local forces that do not operate under the Palestinian Authority's control. The PA's weakening, coupled with a power struggle anticipated in the post-Abbas era, increases the likelihood of violence erupting in the West Bank. In Jordan, persistent tensions exist among its populations—mainly between the Palestinian majority, Bedouins, and Syrian and Iraqi refugees. The kingdom is also under pressure from Iran, and it may soon face additional pressures from Syria. Egypt is grappling with economic instability, exacerbated by a decline in revenue from the Suez Canal due to threats to maritime routes, as well as rising wheat prices following the war in Ukraine. The success of Islamist groups in Syria could also embolden the Muslim Brotherhood to take action. In Iraq, inherent instability persists due to tensions between Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds, with the potential spillover of violence from these groups' conflicts into Syria. After a prolonged period during which Iran succeeded in influencing the Iraqi government to permit pro-Iranian militias to operate, tensions have emerged between these militias and the government regarding their actions against Israel. The United States is exerting pressure on the Iraqi government to curb these militias' activities.

New forces have entered the fray in the Middle East. Turkey is seizing the opportunity to strengthen its influence in Syria by supporting the new regime, potentially solidifying its capability to project military power from within Syrian territory. The increasing scope of Turkish military activity may put it on a potential collision course with Israel. For now, the new Syrian regime is focused solely on internal affairs. However, given its Islamist origins, it may opt for a strategy aimed at establishing regional influence. Sunni states, led by Saudi Arabia, are likely to attempt to expand their influence in the region, particularly in Syria and Lebanon, which will require financial support for reconstruction. Saudi Arabia's decision to pursue a defense alliance with the United States may be revisited in light of the setbacks Iran has experienced. The military involvement of the United States, supported by the United Kingdom, has created a presence in the region that cannot be ignored by local actors. The U.S. may seek to leverage this influence to promote regional stabilization, as suggested by proposals from the Trump administration. In contrast, Russia has demonstrated

both unwillingness and incapacity to invest significant military effort, given its focus on the war in Ukraine. However, its growing ties with Iran could signal an increase in involvement, particularly in the form of military assistance. China, on the other hand, is maintaining a low profile in the unfolding developments but may emerge as a key player in the region's economic reconstruction.

The implications of these developments suggest that the coming years are likely to be characterized by significant uncertainty. Over the past two decades, Israel has grown accustomed to threats emerging in its vicinity under Iranian sponsorship. However, the primary threats have diminished considerably, opening the door for new actors to step in and reshape the regional landscape. The difficulty in assessing these developments stems from the fact that all actors will need to evaluate the situation, probe each other's positions, and formulate new strategies. This evolving reality presents new opportunities to influence the shaping of the Middle East and to reassess Israel's relationships with regional states, as well as its Security Doctrine.

Against the backdrop of regional uncertainty, several questions and potential developments arise, whose outcomes are difficult to predict at this stage. Will Iran succeed in maintaining elements of the regional axis it leads? Will the development of a military nuclear capability serve as Iran's cornerstone for defense, or will it exercise caution in advancing toward nuclear armament? Will Israel find itself in near-term friction with Iran, or will an American-brokered arrangement emerge? Could Israel become entangled in prolonged presence in Gaza, or might a new regime under regional sponsorship take shape there? What will the Syrian regime's stance be toward Israel, Iran, and Hezbollah? Will it seek to exert influence over developments in Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq? How will the balance of power in Lebanon evolve in light of the new reality? How might external forces impact the situation, and will Hezbollah manage to maintain its status as an armed militia? Lastly, what will Turkey's strategy be, and will it entail friction with Israel?

## **The Need to Change Israel's Approach to Force-Building**

The strategic shift confronting Israel is dramatic. While Colin Powell's statement about running out of villains is not entirely applicable to describe Israel's situation in light of the threat posed by Iran and its ambitions to develop military nuclear capabilities, there is no doubt that a significant gap exists between the potential long-term threat to Israel—particularly from its immediate surrounding region—and the severity of the threats expected in the coming years. In this sense, the challenge faced by American force-developers after the Cold War mirrors the challenge Israel encounters today. The approach the United States

adopted to address that challenge provides a relevant perspective for devising a suitable solution for Israel.

The uncertainty surrounding the manifestation of future threats to Israel is considerable, and the spectrum of potential threats is exceedingly broad. It ranges from the emergence of threats in various arenas similar to that posed by Hezbollah in Lebanon (long-range fire into Israel's interior, strong ground defenses, underground infrastructure) to the possibility of a wide-scale ground invasion using lightweight vehicles, akin to attacks by Hamas or ISIS, and even to an assault by regular armies possessing strong land, sea, and air forces, potentially following a revolution or radical policy change in one of the neighboring Arab states. This high level of uncertainty renders the threat-based planning approach ineffective. This approach assumes the enemy, the theater of combat, the adversary's capabilities, and their operational methods are known, allowing for the identification of gaps and the formulation of responses. Under current conditions, such assumptions are no longer applicable.

The mission-oriented force-building approach (i.e., capabilities-based planning for generic missions) can provide an effective framework for planning Israel's force buildup. This approach can be implemented alongside the use of distinct scenarios—such as another campaign against Iran or the containment of a mechanized assault on the Golan Heights—as concrete benchmarks for evaluating force-building plans. This method parallels the American model, which combines capabilities-based planning with tailoring force-building efforts to specific scenarios, such as countering a North Korean offensive or, in the past, an Iraqi assault (Troxell, 2001).

Even in the absence of a specific scenario, understanding technological capabilities and typical combat doctrines enables the identification of several generic missions that the IDF will need to address. These include the following: defending against ballistic missile attacks; halting a mechanized or armored assault; striking ballistic and cruise missile launch sites; achieving air superiority against modern integrated air defense systems; protecting maritime and air routes; conducting large-scale attacks on state infrastructure; targeting fortified fixed installations; neutralizing tunnel-based operational systems, and more.

To develop an appropriate response, it is necessary to concretely yet generically characterize the various missions, focusing on both the nature of the challenge and the objectives required to address it. This approach reflects a balanced working framework between two extremes and does not represent a contradiction. Achieving this balance requires an operational and technological understanding of both the “red side” (adversary) to depict its methods of operation and the “blue side” (friendly forces) to clearly define measurable objectives. For example, a

concrete yet generic characterization can be demonstrated for the first mission—defense against missile attacks. A detailed characterization includes the number of missiles launched per volley and over time, differentiated by types (e.g., several operational parameters: maximum launch rates within an hour at both long and short ranges, and total launches over a year at varying distances). It also details the missile mix (proportion between ballistic missiles and cruise missiles), missile characteristics (altitude, speed, precision, warhead type, radar and thermal signatures), general attributes of launch areas (the number of zones, their size, and their distances from targets), target characteristics (distribution between military and civilian targets and their geographic spread), and the required achievement in terms of the percentage of missiles that must be prevented from striking accurately. The generic nature of this characterization lies in its avoidance of specifying individual missiles, exact launch sites, exact trajectories, and specific targets. Similarly, a concrete characterization for the mission of achieving freedom of action in air includes approximate numbers of radars, interceptor aircraft, and long-, medium-, and short-range missile batteries in the adversary state, the size of the areas in which these are deployed, their operational principles (e.g., decentralized versus centralized control, mobility pace), basic technical parameters, and defining the required achievement in terms of the attrition rate of components and the reduction percentage in system performance.

In light of the characterization of the challenge and the required achievement for the mission, the next step is formulating the response concept. This involves describing the method of operation and defining the necessary capability components. Such an approach enables the conceptual linkage between different components in mission execution, identifying their interdependencies and even quantifying the required inputs relative to achievement milestones. While this quantification cannot provide an accurate estimate of future requirements due to scenario uncertainties, it facilitates balanced force development across the various capability components needed for the mission. Moreover, quantification serves another critical purpose—it enables assessment of the residual gaps in mission performance and supports risk management with a clear-eyed perspective. Juxtaposing the various missions in terms of their residual gaps is aimed at promoting a balanced force build-up across all missions. This approach ensures an integrated risk management framework that considers the broader perspective of mission priorities and resource allocation.

A rough characterization of the enemy's attributes does not allow for the creation of a tailored response to the threat, and thus a TBP approach is not as effective. Mission-oriented planning, however, focuses on solutions that are

more robust for the mission, more versatile across various tasks and modes of operation, and more adaptable to new situations. These qualities are precisely the capabilities required to confront an uncertain future—prioritizing adaptability over maximizing outputs for a narrowly defined scenario with a low probability of occurrence (Davis, 2002). The resulting implication is a preference for force-building designed to provide a reasonable response to a broad spectrum of scenarios, rather than an optimal response limited to specific scenarios.

Mission-oriented planning aligns with Itzhak Ben-Israel's longstanding concept, which advocates placing greater emphasis on developing a qualitative technological advantage in force-building, rather than adhering to the conventional approach aimed at merely reducing operational gaps identified in situational assessments (Ben-Israel, 1997). Firstly, mission-oriented analysis focuses on robust solutions rather than exploiting enemy vulnerabilities in a specific scenario, echoing Ben-Israel's proposal. Secondly, the implementation of Threat-Based Planning requires a high degree of certainty regarding the characteristics of a future scenario—certainty that is challenging to establish when addressing the distant future. In contrast, focusing on the development of technological comparative advantages remains relevant in such cases.

## Conclusions

The strategic context emerging in the aftermath of the war generates significant uncertainty regarding Israel's future combat scenarios, particularly in areas along its borders where the ground forces are relevant. Potential future threats are substantially greater than the current threat, yet their realization is characterized by a wide spectrum of possibilities.

Threat-based force building, or its adaptation as capabilities-based planning within the context of a specific theater, is less suitable for Israel today compared to the past. A mission-oriented force-building approach better aligns with Israel's current needs. This approach should be complemented by the use of specific scenarios as benchmarks for force development—such as another campaign against Iran or a ground incursion in the Golan Heights. While these scenarios do not encompass the entire range of future possibilities, they nonetheless demand adequate preparation.

Mission-oriented force building necessitates an adjustment to the planning process. It requires defining the missions, the desired outcomes for each mission, and the operational concepts for their execution. This approach provides the added benefit of preserving operational thinking, even in the absence of specific reference scenarios. When implemented correctly, it enables a balanced force development across missions through an integrative view of resources within

each mission. Assessing residual gaps following the force-building process ensures balance between missions by facilitating a comparative evaluation of these residual gaps.

Capabilities-based planning involves three key risks that must be carefully considered and mitigated. The first is technology-driven planning, wherein technology may become the guiding principle for force development in the absence of a compelling operational benchmark. The second is budget-driven planning, stemming from the difficulty in quantitatively assessing needs. The third is planning influenced by organizational politics, whether through the socialization of resources or preferential treatment of a dominant actor.

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