

Israeli Defense Forces: Military Capabilities, Scenarios for the Third Lebanon War

By [South Front](#)

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The Current State of Affairs

At present time, Israel's top political leadership is in the state of outright hysteria regarding [the Lebanese movement Hezbollah](#). Recent statements by senior Foreign Affairs and Defence ministries' officials certainly lead to that conclusion.

"We will not allow Iran and Hezbollah to concentrate their forces in the border areas in the Golan Heights", the Minister of Defence of Israel Avigdor Lieberman wrote on his Facebook page on 26 April 2017.

"... we are determined not to give our enemy opportunities and even a hint of an opportunity to harm the security of Israel and its inhabitants. We will do everything to prevent the creation of a Shi'ite corridor between Tehran and Damascus",

wrote Avigdor Lieberman on his Facebook page on 7 September 2017.



Image: Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman (Photo: Gil Yohanan)

On September 11, 2017, he also wrote “I very much advise our northern neighbours not to test us and not to threaten, because we take threats seriously. I do not recommend that they start a conflict with Israel, because for them this will end badly. Very badly”. This is the answer to Syria’s statement about the strike on the Masyaf plant, in the province of Hama in Syria, where according to unconfirmed reports from the Israeli intelligence, a missile production plant operated. “Aggressive actions against the security and stability in the region will have dangerous consequences”, said the communiqué of the Syrian command.

Israel’s Minister of Defence statement of 19 September 2017 was

“We do not intend to tolerate any threats or attempts to harm the security of Israel. Whoever tries to undermine our sovereignty, our security, must know that he will pay a very high price. We are ready for any eventuality, from any direction. The IDF will cope with any surprises, problems and threats”.

This statement was as a result of the shooting down of the Iranian UAV by the Israeli air defence, launched from southern Lebanon and which has not crossed the Israeli border.

In response Hassan Nasrallah said at the August 13, 2017 rally commemorating the Second Lebanon War that “Israel continuously violates Lebanese airspace, and it complains to the UN about each member of Hezbollah, or any ordinary Lebanese, standing with binoculars on the border”.



Image: Lebanon’s Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah addresses his supporters during a public appearance at a religious procession to mark Ashura in Beirut’s southern suburbs, Lebanon October 12, 2016. REUTERS/Aziz Taher

In addition to the financial and military assistance, United States provides international

support in this matter. During the August 23, 2017 UN Security Council session, Special Envoy of the President of the United States Nikki Haley, responding to a question concerning the extension of the peacekeeping mission in southern Lebanon, insisted that the UNIFIL mandate be changed so that the UN peacekeepers could use force against Hezbollah which the US considers “terrorists”. Haley’s comments mirrored those of Israel’s ambassador to the UN Danin Danon who said that “Hezbollah continues activities directed at increasing and strengthening its presence on the southern borders, which threaten the security of the entire region. The international community cannot ignore the danger”.



Image: Nikki Haley

The US and Israel introduced alternative resolutions introduced before the UN Security Council, which call for :

- provisions to allow UN troops to enter villages occupied by Hezbollah,
- increasing patrols and conducting more active and intensive inspections on the controlled territory,
- monitoring events and reporting violations,
- more thorough examination of Israeli complaints of Hezbollah violations.

The already difficult situation in southern Lebanon and Syria is further complicated by “The Light of Dagan”, a major military exercise named in honour of the former Director of Foreign Intelligence Service of Israel, Mossad, Meir Dagan, which strongly resembles preparations and a rehearsal for armed aggression.



Image: Meir Dagan

The exercise lasted eleven days, from 4 to 14 September 2017, and involved tens of thousands of troops from all branches of service. The exercise legend posited that terrorists attacked the village of Shavey Zion, fifteen kilometres from the Lebanese border and, together with hundreds of Hezbollah fighters from the Radwan units, carried out the invasion in the north, captured civilians, and occupied the local synagogue. Their ultimate goal was to plant Hezbollah flag of the movement on Israeli soil and send a photo to Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. In response, Israel carried out the evacuation of civilians, then units of the IDF conducted a large-scale operation in southern Lebanon, which was carried out in three stages. The first stage was defensive, including a counter-attack and the deployment of additional units to counter the Hezbollah movements. The second stage consisted of launching an assault on southern Lebanon. The third phase pushed Hezbollah forces back into Lebanon. The exercises were held in southern Galilee to the south from Highway 85 Akko-Carmiel. The goal of the exercises was the full capitulation of the Hezbollah movement, “depriving them of their ability and willingness to resist”. According to the IDF command, the IDF excelled at these tasks.



Image: IDF reservists sitting atop tanks as they maneuver during a drill at a military zone near Kibbutz Revivim. Credit: Reuters

The Causes of the Aggressive Rhetoric

The first cause is the parliamentary majority in the Knesset consisting of right-wing and ultra-Orthodox Zionists who badly want revenge for the de-facto Israeli defeat in the Second Lebanon war of 2006. These factions exhibit extreme hostility towards Iran and the Shi'a Muslims because of their political and religious unity. This attitude was expressed in the words of the Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the IDF, Yair Golan, September 7, 2017 at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

According to Golan,

“Iran is far more dangerous to Israel than ISIS because the Iranians are complex, they represent a higher stage of civilization. They have a great academic infrastructure, strong industry, a lot of good scientists, many talented young people. They are very similar to us. Due to the fact that they look like us, they are much more dangerous”.

The second cause is the Israeli flirtation with the Sunni world and with Saudi Arabia in particular, which is taking place with Donald Trump's blessing expressed in the May 21, 2017 statement at the Arab-Islamic-American Summit labeling Iran the “main sponsor of international terrorism”, and calling for its isolation. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly voiced desire to improve relations between Israel and Sunni countries, hinting at Saudi Arabia in particular. According to the Israeli Broadcasting Corporation (ICB) radio, one of the Saudi royal princes made a secret visit to Israel September of 2017 to discuss the “consolidation of peace in the region”.

The third reason is the damage to Syria's military capabilities which will need years or decades to restore and in the meantime will not be able to provide military assistance to

Hezbollah. Many Hezbollah experienced fighters were killed in battle in Syria. Therefore, the leadership of Israel believes that now is the time to inflict a decisive blow to the movement.



Image: A funeral procession in Lebanon of a Hezbollah fighter killed in Syria. Credit: Reuters

The IDF Today

Currently the IDF in the regional scale is a formidable force. Below are the data from the yearbook *Military Balance 2017*.

IDF numbers 176 thousand servicemembers, of which 133 thousand are in the Army, 34 thousand in the Air Force, 9.5 thousand in the Navy. In addition, there are 465 thousand troops in reserve. The border police (MAGAV) may provide 8000 troops to assist the military.



Image: Israeli Border Police arrest a Palestinian youth during clashes in the Shoafat refugee camp in East Jerusalem, September 18, 2015. Credit: AFP

Land forces are organised into three regional commands (North, Central, South), two armoured divisions, five territorial infantry divisions, three battalions of Special Forces, and a team of special operations forces. Overall they command a number of separate reconnaissance battalions, three tank brigades, three mechanised brigades (consisting of three mechanised battalions, a combat support battalion and a signal company), a mechanised brigade (consisting of five mechanised battalions), a separate mechanised brigade, two separate infantry battalions, an airborne brigade (composed of three airborne battalions, a combat support battalion and a signal company), and a training tank brigade. Three artillery brigades, three engineering battalions, two military police battalions, a company of sappers, a chemical protection battalion and a brigade of military intelligence provide battlefield support.

The Navy consists of a surface ship group, a submarine group, as well as a battalion of commandos.



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The Israeli Air Force consist of two fighter squadrons, five attack squadrons, six mixed fighter-attack squadrons (plus two squadrons in reserve), an ASW squadron, a maritime patrol and support squadron (patrol and transport aircraft, tanker aircraft), two EW squadrons, an AWACS squadron, two squadrons of transport and tanker aircraft, two training squadrons, two squadrons of attack helicopters, four squadrons of transport helicopters, an air ambulance division and three squadrons of UAVs.

It is believed that Israel has nuclear weapons. The number of nuclear warheads is debatable, but its delivery vehicles include F-15 and F-16 fighter jets, the Jericho-2 ballistic medium-

range missiles, and Dolphin/Tanin class diesel-electric submarines capable of carrying cruise missiles.

There are nine orbital military and dual-purpose satellites:

- Three Amos-type satellites.
- One reconnaissance satellite with remote sensing of the Earth of the EROS type, located on the sun-synchronous orbit.
- Four optical reconnaissance satellites of the Ofeq type (No. 7, 9, 10 and 11), located in the low earth orbit.
- One radar-reconnaissance satellite of the TecSAR-1 type, located in low earth orbit.



Image: Merkava IV MBT

Land Forces Armaments

Tanks. 500 main battle tanks (Merkava II, III, IV), plus 1060 in storage.

APCs: There are 1200 APCs, including 400 Nagmachon on Centurion MBT chassis, 200 Achzarit heavy APCs on T-55 tank chassis, 100 Namer APCs on Merkava tank chassis, and about 5000 American M113 APCs in storage.

Self-propelled Artillery:

- 250 155mm M109A5
- 300 in storage:
 - 155mm Soltam L-33, 30 M109
 - 175mm M107, 203mm M110.

Towed artillery:

- 276 guns of different types and calibers (all in storage):
 - 5 122mm D-30 howitzers
 - 100 130mm M-46 cannon
 - 40 155mm M-46 cannon
 - 50 155mm M-68 howitzers
 - 81 155mm M-839P/845P howitzers).

Multiple Rocket Launchers:

- 30 227mm M270 MLRS
- 182 other MRLs in storage, including:
 - 58 122mm BM-21 Grad
 - 50 160mm LAR-160
 - 18 227mm M270 MLRS
 - 36 240mm BM-24
 - 20 290mm LAR-290 in storage

Mortars. All in storage

- 1100 81mm
- 650 120mm
- 18 160mm

Medium range ballistic missiles

- Approximately 24 rockets of the Jericho-2 type.

Surface-to-Air Missile Systems

- 20 Machbet.
- A number of Stinger MANPADS.

Navy Combat Forces

Submarines

- 5 ships:
 - 3 submarines of the Dolphin class. Armed with 6 533mm torpedo tubes and 4 650mm torpedo tubes. May carry Harpoon SSMs.
 - 2 Tanin type submarines (Dolphin class equipped with air-independent propulsion engines). Armed with 6 533mm torpedo tubes and 4 650mm torpedo tubes. May carry Harpoon SSMs.

Frigates

- Three Eilat type. Armed with 2 x 4 Harpoon launchers, 2 x Barak SAM launchers, 2 x 3 324mm torpedo tubes, 1 76mm gun, 1 Sea Vulcan.

Missile boats of the Hetz type

- 8 ships. Armed with 6 Gabriel SSMs, 2 x 2 Harpoon SSMs, 1 Barak SAM launcher, 76mm, 25mm and 20mm cannon.

Patrol boats

- 18 ships:
 - 5 Shaldag class. Armed with 1 25mm gun.
 - 3 Stingray class. Unarmed, intended for reconnaissance and sabotage operations.
 - 10 Super Dvora MkIII class. May carry SSM and torpedo tubes.

Torpedo boats

- 13 ships
 - 9 Dvora Mk I class. Armed with 2 324mm torpedo tubes (may carry SSMs)
 - 4 Super Dvora Mk II class. Armed with 2 324mm torpedo tubes.

Torpedo patrol boats

- 11 Dabur class. Armed with 2 x 1 324mm torpedo tubes.

Air Force

Aircrafts

- 151 fighters
 - 15 F-15A
 - 6 F-15B
 - 17 F-15C
 - 19 F-15D
 - 77 F16A
 - 16 F16B
- 248 attack aircraft
 - 25 F-15I
 - 76 F-16C
 - 49 F-16D
 - 98 F-16I
- Unknown number of A-4N/F-4, F-15-A, F-16A/B, C-7 in storage.

Naval Patrol Aircraft

- 3 IAI-1124

Electronic Reconnaissance Airplanes

- 6 RC-12D

EW and AWACS

- 1 EC-707

- 3 Gulfstream G550

Tanker Aircraft

- 4 KC-130H
- 7 KC-707.

Transport aircraft

- 62 aircraft of various types

Training aircraft

- 67 aircraft of various types

Helicopters

Attack helicopters

- 44 Apache AH-64 A/D

Anti-submarine helicopters

- 7 Panther AS565SA

Scout helicopters

- 12 Kiowa OH-58B

Transport helicopters

- 81 helicopters of various types

UAV

Tactical and electronic intelligence UAV

- Over 24 UAVs total

Air Defence

Self-propelled guns

- 165 weapons
 - 105 20mm Vulcan M163
 - 60 23mm ZSU-23-4

Towed air defence guns

- 755 weapons
 - 150 23mm ZU-23-2

- 455 20/37mm M167 Vulcan/M-1939/TCM-20
- 150 40mm L/70 Bofors

IDF Problems

As can be seen from the above list of arms, the IDF at the moment is a unique and astounding combination of nuclear weapons with delivery vehicles, an arsenal of equipment produced in the 1960s and of modern weapons on par with the leading world powers. This combination has its drawbacks and they do not make themselves wait for long.



Image: An Israeli AH-64 Apache helicopter lands at the Ramon air force base in the Negev Desert, southern Israel, on October 21, 2013. Credit: AFP / Jack Guez

In September 2016, during the removal of the machine gun from a tank at the training base in Shizafon in the south of Israel several soldiers were severely injured.

On 5 October 2016 on the approach to the Ramon airbase in southern Israel the pilot was killed as a result of the ejection from the F-16.

In July 2017 during the course of an exercise, due to his own negligence Lieutenant David Golovenchick was shot dead by a soldier.

On 8 August 2017 an AH-64 helicopter crashed at the Ramon airbase, as a result the pilot was killed, and others sustained injuries.

On 9 August 2017 during IDF operations in the suburbs of Bethlehem, an Israeli soldier suffered wounds of moderate severity as a result of friendly fire.

At the end of August 2017 ten soldiers were lightly injured at the Shizafon base in southern Israel after a smoke grenade exploded.

At the beginning of September 2017 an Israeli soldier was severely injured by a grenade that exploded during military training on the base in the south of the country.

These incidents indicate that the Israeli military has serious shortcomings in the realm of personnel proficiency and equipment maintenance.

The Gideon Plan

In order to give the IDF the ability to confront modern threats from various armed groups, while implementing budget cuts and minimizing the number of accidents, Israel adopted the five-year Gideon Plan in 2015.



Image: Israeli soldiers patrol near Ramallah on Friday, June 20, 2014. Credit: Issam Rimawi/Flash 90

Main Provisions of the Plan

- Reduction of 2500 professional soldiers and officers.
- Reduction of military service of male draftees from 36 to 32 months. (Reduction of military service of female soldiers from the draft is not considered so far).
- Reduction of the age of commanders. If the average age of the regiment staff officers, including the commander of the regiment, was 35 to 37 years, now for these positions officers from the age of 32 will be appointed. The staff officers of the brigade, including the brigade commander, 40 to 42 years instead of 45 to 46 years respectively.
- The reduction in the number of reservists to 100 thousand. The reservists who will remain in service will be trained and armed as support troops.
- Reducing the number of artillery and light infantry brigades.
- Structures such as the Education Corps, Military Rabbinate, Chief Reserve Officer, the Chief of Staff's Advisor on Women's Affairs, Army Radio and the Military Censor must undergo reduction and optimization. The command of the Northern District will be merged with the command of the land forces.
- Creation of the cyber-troops. Jerusalem Post, citing a senior officer of the IDF, reported at the beginning of 2017 that it was decided to postpone establishing the cyber-troops center.
- Bolstering of the Navy group through the procurement and construction of

surface ships and a submarine.

- Rearming the Air Force by purchasing the American F-35 and UAVs of American and local production.
- Ending deferment to students in yeshivas (religious high schools) is not mentioned in this plan.

These provisions indicate IDF's leaders had decided to focus on transforming it from conscript army to a professional one, staffed with a large number of trained soldiers as well as young and promising officers, capable to implement and employ in practice new ideas. The fact that the command of the Northern District will be united with the command of the land forces indicates that this area (south of Lebanon and Hezbollah) is given special attention. The new army will be armed with more modern equipment and thus will be able to withstand modern threats.

The Israeli Missile Defence Systems vs. the Hezbollah Missile Arsenal

Knowing that [Hezbollah](#) will not invade Israel itself, its most capable units are involved in the fighting in Syria, and Hezbollah's armored forces of the movement are in the development stages, for the Israeli military the biggest threat is Hezbollah's missile arsenal.

Israel Defence Systems



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There are 17 batteries of MIM-23 I-HAWK available for air defence but presumably due to their obsolescence they are not in active service.

For comparison purposes, the cost of Qassam type rockets of Palestinian production according to Israeli experts is in the neighbourhood of a few hundred dollars. Rockets for the BM-21 Grad cost few thousand. The cost of production of ballistic, anti-ship and medium-range Iranian-made missiles is unknown, but may be assumed that they do not exceed several hundred thousand dollars.

Of course, human life is priceless and the potential loss in this case from Grad rockets, not to mention Scud and Iranian missiles, exceeds the cost of the interceptor missile. While the Iron Dome control system will only launch missiles if incoming missiles are calculated to fall in residential areas, the cost balance is still not in Israel's favor.

Scenarios for the Third Lebanon War

Over time, IDF's military effectiveness had declined. Israel has won the 1967 fully and unconditionally. The Egyptian and Syrian armies were dealt a powerful blow, and the Golan Heights, the Sinai Peninsula and the western shore of the river Jordan were occupied. The war of 1973 was won by Israel with heavy human and material losses; however, neither the Egyptian nor the Syrian army was completely defeated. In the 1982 war, where the IDF had numerical superiority, it had won a tactical victory but the task of reaching Beirut to link up with the right-wing Christian Phalangists was not completed. In the Second Lebanon War of 2006 due to the overwhelming numerical superiority in men and equipment the IDF

managed to occupy key strong points but failed to inflict a decisive defeat on Hezbollah. The frequency of attacks in Israeli territory was not reduced; the units of the IDF became bogged down in the fighting in the settlements and suffered significant losses. There now exists considerable political pressure to reassert IDF's lost military dominance and, despite the complexity and unpredictability of the situation we may assume the future conflict will feature only two sides, IDF and Hezbollah. Based on the bellicose statements of the leadership of the Jewish state, the fighting will be initiated by Israel.

The operation will begin with a massive evacuation of residents from the settlements in the north and centre of Israel. Since Hezbollah has agents within the IDF, it will not be possible to keep secret the concentration of troops on the border and a mass evacuation of civilians. Hezbollah units will be ordered to occupy a prepared defensive position and simultaneously open fire on places where IDF units are concentrated. The civilian population of southern Lebanon will most likely be evacuated. IDF will launch massive bombing causing great damage to the social infrastructure and some damage to Hezbollah's military infrastructure, but without destroying the carefully protected and camouflaged rocket launchers and launch sites.



Image: Israeli soldiers walk together after crossing back into Israel from Lebanon Monday, July 31, 2006. Credit: David Guttenfelder, AP

Hezbollah control and communications systems have elements of redundancy. Consequently, regardless of the use of specialized precision-guided munitions, the command posts and electronic warfare systems will not be paralysed, maintaining communications including through the use of fibre-optic communications means. IDF discovered that the movement has such equipment during the 2006 war. Smaller units will operate independently, working with open communication channels, using the pre-defined call signs and codes.

Israeli troops will then cross the border of Lebanon, despite the presence of the UN peacekeeping mission in southern Lebanon, beginning a ground operation with the involvement of a greater number of units than in the 2006 war. The IDF troops will occupy commanding heights and begin to prepare for assaults on settlements and actions in the tunnels. The Israelis do not score a quick victory as they suffer heavy losses in built-up areas. The need to secure occupied territory with patrols and checkpoints will cause further losses.

The fact that Israel itself started the war and caused damage to the civilian infrastructure, allows the leadership of the movement to use its missile arsenal on Israeli cities. While Israel's missile defence systems can successfully intercept the launched missiles, there are not enough of them to blunt the bombardment. The civilian evacuation paralyzes life in the country. As soon IDF's Iron Dome and other medium-range systems are spent on short-range Hezbollah rockets, the bombardment of Israel with long-range missiles may commence. Hezbollah's Iranian solid-fuel rockets do not require much time to prepare for launch and may target the entire territory of Israel, causing further losses.

It is difficult to assess the duration of actions of this war. One thing that seems certain is that Israel shouldn't count on its rapid conclusion, similar to last September's exercises. Hezbollah units are stronger and more capable than during the 2006 war, despite the fact that they are fighting in Syria and suffered losses there.

Conclusions

The combination of large-scale exercises and bellicose rhetoric is intended to muster Israeli public support for the aggression against Hezbollah by convincing the public the victory would be swift and bloodless. Instead of restraint based on a sober assessment of relative capabilities, Israeli leaders appear to be in a state of blood lust. In contrast, the Hezbollah has thus far demonstrated restraint and diplomacy.



Image Credit: Israeli Air Force

Underestimating the adversary is always the first step towards a defeat. Such mistakes are paid for with soldiers' blood and commanders' careers. The latest IDF exercises suggest

Israeli leaders underestimate the opponent and, more importantly, consider them to be quite dumb. In reality, Hezbollah units will not cross the border. There is no need to provoke the already too nervous neighbor and to suffer losses solely to plant a flag and photograph it for their leader. For Hezbollah, it is easier and safer when the Israeli soldiers come to them. According to the IDF soldiers who served in Gaza and southern Lebanon, it is easier to operate on the plains of Gaza than the mountainous terrain of southern Lebanon. This is a problem for armoured vehicles fighting for control of heights, tunnels, and settlements, where they are exposed to anti-armor weapons.

While the Israeli establishment is in a state of patriotic frenzy, it would be a good time for them to turn to the wisdom of their ancestors. After all, as the old Jewish proverb says: "War is a big swamp, easy to go into but hard to get out".

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