

# HALEVI'S HORIZON: WHAT AWAITS THE NEW ISRAELI DEFENSE CHIEF OF STAFF

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Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi became the 23rd chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in January.<sup>1</sup> During his nearly four decades in the IDF, Halevi served as commander of the *Sayeret Matkal* (Special Forces), the Operational Division of the Military Intelligence Directorate, and the IDF Command and Staff College; as chief of the Military Intelligence Directorate and Southern Command; and as IDF deputy chief of staff. A 55-year-old Jerusalem native, Halevi is widely regarded as a capable officer willing to undertake difficult reforms.



These experiences prepared him well for leading the IDF in a time of complex security challenges, including threats posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran, not to mention the terrorist organizations operating on Israel's borders. However, Halevi was almost certainly unprepared for the domestic challenges now seizing Israel.

Amidst the current political crisis, some reservists have reportedly threatened not to serve. The crisis could impact Israeli decision-making, too. Halevi cannot ignore these challenges. The IDF is, after all, the people's army of Israel. Still, he understands that defense against external threats must be his top priority. He also understands the importance of keeping the IDF out of political debates to the extent possible. This is particularly important as Israel has recently faced heightened threats on multiple fronts from Iran and its proxies.

## HALEVI'S RECENT PREDECESSORS

Israel does not have an official national security strategy. In August 2015, then IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot published an IDF strategy document that defined Israel's strategic and tactical military threats, the IDF's selected courses of action, and the relationship between the military and political leadership.<sup>2</sup> While it was not a formal national security strategy, this document served as an important roadmap for the IDF.

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1. Emanuel Fabian, "Herzi Halevi Formally Takes Over as Chief of Staff, Vows to Keep Politics out of IDF" *The Times of Israel* (Israel), January 16, 2023. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/herzi-halevi-becomes-idfs-23rd-chief-of-staff-in-handover-ceremony/>)

2. Office of the Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff, "להצ תייגטרטסא" [The IDF's Strategy], August 2015. (<https://www.idf.il/media/cdqpfaku/להצ-תייגטרטסא.pdf>)

Upon entering office in 2019, Eisenkot's successor, Lt. Gen. Aviv Kohavi, announced his intention to implement a new multi-year plan for the IDF. He called it *Tnufa* (Momentum).<sup>3</sup> It included some fundamental changes to the Eisenkot strategy.

Kohavi's agenda was ambitious. Among other things, he suggested investing 70 percent of available resources in offensive capabilities and only 30 percent on defensive measures. His proposal aimed to transition the IDF from merely defending against enemy rockets, missiles, and drones to destroying them before they are launched. It expanded the IDF's digital transformation and established a multi-dimensional unit.<sup>4</sup> Kohavi's goal was to shorten the duration of wars and achieve decisive victories that played to the IDF's advantages. The plan was designed to increase by sevenfold the number of targets to be hit at the start of any future fight, with a focus on targeting Hezbollah's assets.

A key element of the strategy was to integrate cyberattacks and electronic warfare with the operations of maneuver forces, while equipping frontline units with thousands of drones, advanced anti-tank missiles, and precision-guided weapons. The plan envisioned high-tech upgrades to the barrier along the border with Gaza. And it included policy changes regarding the advanced Iron Dome missile defense system and enhancements to help deal with shorter-range rockets and mortars.

Kohavi's plan was never fully implemented, in large part due to a lack of resources in the wake of the coronavirus crisis. Many elements of his plan remain in place for Halevi to implement, should he choose to do so.

## THE PRIME MINISTER'S AGENDA

In 2018, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu released a document that came close to a definitive Israeli national security strategy. Though it was never formally approved, the document continues to serve as a compass for the IDF. In the meantime, the prime minister's top three security issues are clear.<sup>5</sup>

His first — and by far the most important — priority is to deal comprehensively with the threats posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran, including its nuclear program, the regime's attempts to establish military assets in Syria, and its assistance to and training of Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad.<sup>6</sup>

Netanyahu is also prioritizing efforts to expand upon the 2020 Abraham Accords.<sup>7</sup> Saudi Arabia is a prime target for another normalization agreement, which could lead to additional agreements with Muslim countries in the Arab world and beyond.

The Netanyahu agenda also includes domestic changes, including the judicial reforms currently at the center of national debate. As noted above, the political uproar in Israel surrounding these changes has had a direct and

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3. Assaf Orion and Udi Dekel, "The Planning Directorate in 'Momentum': 'Tnufa' - The New IDF Multi-Year Plan," *Institute for National Security Studies*, March 5, 2020. (<https://www.inss.org.il/publication/planning-directorate/>)

4. Israel Defense Forces, "הצעה תורקל דלוהש המל הצצה. דרדל תאצוי תוברקה מינשב ל"הצ תא ליבותש תינכותה" [The Plan That Will Lead the IDF in the Coming Years is Underway. A Glimpse of What Will Happen], February 13, 2020. (See archived version at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200313231738/https://www.idf.il/הפונת-ש-רת/הפונת-ש-רת/בירמאמ/>)

5. "Netanyahu Presents New Government's Agenda; Lapid: 'Try Not to Destroy the Country,'" *The Times of Israel* (Israel), December 29, 2022. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-presents-new-governments-agenda-lapid-try-not-to-destroy-the-country/>)

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

unmistakable impact on Halevi. In particular, reservists in certain units have reportedly threatened not to serve. The IDF has established rules for dealing with such scenarios. Still, Halevi knows that it is best for him to steer clear of this debate. However, he gave a speech in which he acknowledged that his mission now includes efforts to “maintain a united and undivided IDF.”<sup>8</sup> How he intends to accomplish this remains to be seen.

## THE THREAT MATRIX

While navigating the minefield of Israel’s domestic upheaval, Halevi must tackle the Iranian nuclear challenge urgently. He must prepare for a comprehensive campaign against the Iranian regime’s nuclear program, with an emphasis on preventing developments in the weaponization of Tehran’s nuclear capabilities. The significant progress Iran has recently made in its enrichment capabilities is a key challenge. The problem began years ago when Tehran enriched uranium to 20 percent. (The regime is now near the 90 percent threshold, the level at which uranium is considered weapons-grade).<sup>9</sup> It might be too late to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. The issue must thus be first on Halevi’s list of priorities.

Halevi must balance this with other Iran-related security challenges and the urgent need for a force build-up in the coming years. The threat of high-tech precision weapons furnished by Tehran to its proxies in Lebanon and Syria, along with other Iranian efforts to establish military assets along Israel’s borders, is second only to the Iranian nuclear issue. In Lebanon, the IDF has come to understand that if Iran and Hezbollah’s precision weapons project continues, Israel may have no choice but to destroy the vast infrastructure related to this project. Such an attack would likely deteriorate into a full war, which may in turn lead to the total collapse of Lebanon.<sup>10</sup> While many in the IDF have consistently voiced fear of escalation, Halevi should provide Israel’s political leadership with clear-eyed operational plans to counter and destroy this threat, as needed.

The threats from Iran-backed Palestinian terrorist groups in the Gaza Strip and West Bank also remain a concern. For more than a year, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has failed to maintain order in the West Bank, requiring the IDF to be more active than it wanted to or should be in PA-controlled areas. This likely will not abate anytime soon. Even as these threats grow, warnings that a third intifada is coming may be premature.<sup>11</sup> In Gaza, the question is not whether there will be another confrontation but when such confrontation will erupt. Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which are largely funded by Iran, continue to build capabilities, including an offensive and defensive underground infrastructure for future confrontation.<sup>12</sup>

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8. Emanuel Fabian, “Halevi: IDF now has dual mission of ensuring security and keeping army united,” *The Times of Israel* (Israel), March 26, 2023. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/halevi-idf-now-has-dual-mission-of-ensuring-security-and-keeping-army-united/>)

9. “UN Inspectors Find Near Weapons-Grade Uranium In Iran,” *Iran International*, February 19, 2023. (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202302198125>)

10. Jonathan Schanzer and Mark Dubowitz, “PGMs: Iran’s Precision-Guided Munitions Project in the Shadow of a Nuclear Deal,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 12, 2022. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2022/09/12/pgms-irans-precision-guided-munitions-project-in-the-shadow-of-a-nuclear-deal>)

11. Amos Harel, “Violence in the West Bank is a Nightmare for Netanyahu,” *The Brookings Institution*, March 6, 2023. (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2023/03/06/violence-in-the-west-bank-is-a-nightmare-for-netanyahu/>)

12. “Five Things to Know About Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Escalation in Gaza,” *American Jewish Committee*, August 6, 2022. (<https://www.ajc.org/news/five-things-to-know-about-palestinian-islamic-jihad-and-escalation-in-gaza>); Daniel Levin, “Iran, Hamas & Palestinian Islamic Jihad,” *The Wilson Center*, May 21, 2021. (<https://gbv.wilsoncenter.org/article/iran-hamas-and-palestinian-islamic-jihad>)

Halevi understands that his primary responsibility on this front is to maintain calm for as long as possible while also preparing the tools that will enable the IDF to deal a decisive blow during the next confrontation.

While calm in Gaza and the West Bank is important to the IDF, diplomacy with the Palestinians falls outside of the military's purview. This is reserved for the political leaders and diplomatic envoys. Halevi should rebut the longstanding (and unhealthy) tradition in Israel in which the IDF Planning Directorate, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, and other security officials wade into the diplomatic arena.

Of course, should diplomacy lead to new security arrangements, Halevi has a responsibility to engage and to influence the outcome. He must also continue to oversee security coordination in the West Bank (when Mahmoud Abbas and the PA are prepared to resume cooperation) and, to a lesser extent, the efforts to return hostages (both living and deceased) from Gaza.

Security cooperation with Egypt and Jordan will also remain under Halevi's direct jurisdiction, in full cooperation with other security agencies. Egypt has grown into its role as unofficial mediator between Hamas and Israel during times of tension.<sup>13</sup> That relationship continues to yield positive results. Coordination with Jordan, however, is sensitive, mainly owing to Amman's role in overseeing aspects of the al-Aqsa Mosque and domestic challenges that could destabilize the kingdom.<sup>14</sup> Halevi's challenge there will be to preserve and even expand the alliance with Jordan while also protecting Israel's security.

## THE CAMPAIGN BETWEEN WARS

The Middle East is no longer a region in which all-out wars occur every decade, with long periods of preparation in between, as Israel's first president, David Ben-Gurion, envisioned in his national security strategy.<sup>15</sup> Rather, the region has descended into a period of continuous warfare at varying levels of intensity. Indeed, Israel's enemies have internalized the fundamental principles of its security strategy: its desire to take the fight to enemy territory, and its effort to shorten the duration of wars. They have thus pivoted to strategies that play to their relative advantages. This includes asymmetric violence on Israel's borders, inside the country, and overseas. It also includes commando and close-encounter warfare, advanced anti-tank missiles, high-trajectory rockets and missiles, and tunnels, which are used for smuggling and defensive purposes but also for cross-border assaults and terrorism.

The Israeli doctrine is rather straightforward: Those who attack Israel will have no immunity, and neither will their dispatchers. As an extension of this, Israel must be prepared to deliver a severe blow to national infrastructure and dual-use assets in countries from which attacks are launched.<sup>16</sup>

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13. Ramy Aziz, "Egypt, Israel, and Hamas: Opportunities for Progress in Gaza," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 19, 2022. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egypt-israel-and-hamas-opportunities-progress-gaza>)

14. Dov Lieber, "Amid Temple Mount tumult, the who, what and why of its Waqf rulers," *The Times of Israel* (Israel), July 20, 2017. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/amid-temple-mount-tumult-the-who-what-and-why-of-its-waqf-rulers>)

15. Jacob Nagel and Jonathan Schanzer "From Ben-Gurion to Netanyahu: The Evolution of Israel's National Security Strategy," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, May 13, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/05/13/from-ben-gurion-to-netanyahu-the-evolution-of-israels-national-security-strategy/>)

16. Maj. Gen. (Res.) Yaakov Amidror, "Israel's National Security Doctrine," *Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security*, July 18, 2021. (<https://jiss.org.il/en/amidror-israels-national-security-doctrine>)

The previous Netanyahu governments waged the “Campaign Between Wars,” which saw the destruction of thousands of Iranian targets, spanning from Iran to Syria to cyberspace and the high seas.<sup>17</sup> The government of Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid continued this approach, using almost the same terminology. Bennett called it the “Octopus Doctrine,” emphasizing that both Iran’s “tentacles” (proxies) and the “head of the octopus” (the regime in Iran) should pay a steep price for attacks.<sup>18</sup>

Among the primary objectives of the campaign are preventing Iran from transferring precision-guided munitions to Hezbollah in Lebanon and preventing Tehran from establishing a formidable threat on the Syrian border.<sup>19</sup> These threats have not abated. They require a robust operational tempo as well as the element of surprise.

Israel has been waging the Campaign Between Wars (commonly known as MABAM in Hebrew) for nearly a decade.<sup>20</sup> Israel has operated just beneath the threshold of war, often enabling the IDF to maintain deniability or ambiguity. Halevi’s previous roles have afforded him an opportunity to take an active role in this campaign. He must now expand the campaign to new dimensions while also developing new capabilities.

## **NEW AREAS OF RESPONSIBILITY**

While the Iranian nuclear threat and the continuation of the Campaign Between Wars will keep Halevi busy, the new chief of staff must now also undertake a much-needed and considerable force build-up, both on land and at sea. The naval build-up must focus on protecting Israel’s gas fields and other strategic Israeli assets.<sup>21</sup>

The IDF has also assumed responsibility for the protection of the home front after the government was unable to establish a ministry for home defense. The IDF must continue to enhance passive defenses (walls, shelters, etc.) and active defenses (missile defense systems, such as Iron Dome, David’s Sling, and Arrow). The technologically advanced barriers that Israel is developing on all its borders are in some ways a hybrid of passive and active defenses.

Halevi’s tenure may also see the creation of a new cyber arm. Unit 8200 is already widely known for conducting cyber operations and, together with the signal corps, maintains a strong defense against cyber incursions.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Israel is seen as a global cyber power in cyber espionage, defense, influence, and offensive capabilities. The new

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17. Jonathan Schanzer “The Quiet War Between Israel and Iran: Iran’s Hegemonic Drive,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, December 1, 2022. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2022/12/02/quiet-war-israel-iran/>)

18. “Israel’s prime minister explains his new approach to Iran,” *The Economist* (UK), June 8, 2022. (<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/06/08/israels-prime-minister-explains-his-new-approach-to-iran>)

19. Jonathan Schanzer and Mark Dubowitz, “PGMs: Iran’s Precision-Guided Munitions Project in the Shadow of a Nuclear Deal,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 12, 2022. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2022/09/12/pgms-irans-precision-guided-munitions-project-in-the-shadow-of-a-nuclear-deal>)

20. Eran Ortal “The Fly on the Elephant’s Back: The Campaign Between Wars in Israel’s Security Doctrine,” *Institute for National Security Studies*, April 2021. (<https://strategicassessment.inss.org.il/en/articles/the-fly-on-the-elephants-back-the-campaign-between-wars-in-israels-security-doctrinee>)

21. Sonia Gorodeisky, Shahar Klaiman, and News Agencies, “New offshore gas rig faces stormy waters amid Israel-Lebanon dispute,” *Israel Hayom* (Israel), June 6, 2022. (<https://www.israelhayom.com/2022/06/06/new-offshore-gas-rig-faces-stormy-waters-amid-israel-lebanon-dispute>)

22. Yuval Mann, “Israeli officer reveals how AI is being utilized in fight against terror,” *Ynet* (Israel), February 14, 2023. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/business/article/hk0drb00po>)

arm would bring together all the forces that operate in cyberspace under one command while leaving day-to-day cyber responsibilities to the relevant agencies.

## MANPOWER

Halevi is taking over amidst an acute manpower crisis in the IDF. There is an urgent need to nurture and retain talent within the ranks of the IDF and the defense agencies. The current model, the net result of decisions driven by economic constraints, has had a negative impact on the IDF and is no longer sustainable. The IDF can no longer entice the most outstanding soldiers to remain for the long run.

For example, the current model retires some of Israel's top technological officers in the prime of their careers, even when they are willing to remain longer. Moreover, poor management of the low-level, mid-level, and senior-level commanding ranks has reduced officers' willingness to enlist in the academic reserve program<sup>23</sup> or even in elite IDF programs, some of which include a commitment to long-term service.

Some in Israel mistakenly believe that a temporary slowdown in the high-tech sector might curtail the flight of senior technologists from the IDF, enabling greater retention in the security agencies and the military.<sup>24</sup> Of particular concern is the top 10 percent of the IDF talent pool. They will be tempted to pursue opportunities abroad, especially with the rise in remote work opportunities.

There are similar challenges related to retention in combat units, where the IDF already faces acute shortages of high-quality officers. This is another challenge that must be addressed.

While the IDF remains by far the most advanced military in the region, the current manpower management model could lead to mediocrity. Halevi's challenge is to improve it without lowering the standards for entrance to the academic reserves. He must do the same with the other elite programs that have served Israel well in the past. Enlarging the number of candidates accepted into those elite programs would likely be counterproductive.

A significant hurdle for Halevi is the bureaucracy. Despite a broad understanding that the existing model is inadequate, officials from the ministries of finance and defense as well as the IDF budget office have demonstrated a rigidity that has inhibited progress.

## THE ROAD AHEAD

Halevi must tackle these and other challenges at a time when domestic tensions are rising in Israel and pressures on the state budget are expected to mount. Indeed, his challenges will be both political and financial. Fortunately for him, the financial decisions will be made at a time when Israel is emerging as an energy exporter.<sup>25</sup> However, the political crisis may grow more acute before a solution is reached.

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23. Gil Baram and Isaac Ben-Israel, "The academic reserve: Israel's fast track to high-tech success," *Israel Studies Review*, 2019, pages 75-91. (<https://www.nli.org.il/en/articles/RAMBI997007735557405171/NLI>)

24. Ricky Ben David, "A correction, not a burst bubble: Israeli tech sector grapples with market realities," *The Times of Israel* (Israel), August 15, 2022. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/a-correction-not-a-burst-bubble-israeli-tech-sector-grapples-with-market-realities>)

25. Ariel Kahana, "Israeli gas exports to Europe could reach 10% of consumption," *Israel Hayom* (Israel), March 14, 2023. (<https://www.israelhayom.com/2023/03/14/877495>)

Halevi will also be buoyed by the support of longtime partners in the Defense Ministry. Maj. Gen. (Res.) Yoav Gallant is the new defense minister. However, his role in the aftermath of the current political crisis is still unclear. Eyal Zamir (who was Halevi's competition for the chief of staff position) is the new director general of the Ministry of Defense. National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi and his team of staff at the National Security Council are also poised to play a supporting role. But Halevi's success hinges on his ability to work well within the broader bureaucracy, steer clear of politics as much as possible, and maintain a commitment to the standards of defense that have ensured Israel's survival for more than seven decades.

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