

# The Securitisation of Hybrid Warfare through Practices within the Iran-Israel conflict – Israel's practices for securitising Hezbollah's Proxy War

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**Christian Kaunert<sup>1</sup>, Ori Wertman<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>[christian.kaunert@southwales.ac.uk](mailto:christian.kaunert@southwales.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup> <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4493-2235>

<sup>2</sup> <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1978-7478>

<sup>1,2</sup>International Centre for Policing and Security, University of South Wales, CF37 1DL, Pontypridd, United Kingdom

## Abstract

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*Iran has been waging a hybrid war against Israel since the Islamic revolution of 1979. In an era when conventional wars have given way to a different method, hybrid warfare, the main challenge facing states is how to deal with this new type of security threat. Thus, while states have previously faced security threats from regular enemy states' armies, nowadays hybrid warfare in which non-state actors play a key role has become a widespread security threat that requires democratic states to use very different strategies and tactics to overcome it. Using securitisation theory, which explores how normal issues transform into security threats, this article analyses how the State of Israel has securitised Iranian hybrid warfare which has been mainly executed through its proxy terror organisations of Hezbollah. It does so by applying a revised version of the Copenhagen School's securitisation framework, which focuses on security practices and is underpinned by an understanding of security as belonging to a continuum. The proxy terror organisations have moved towards the end point of the continuum, which is characterised by survival, existential threats, and militarisation, albeit without completely reaching the end point.*

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## Keywords:

Iran, Israel, hybrid warfare, Securitization Theory, Hezbollah

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## Introduction

The Iran–Israel proxy war is an ongoing conflict between Iran and Israel, emanating from threats and hostility of Iran's leaders against the state of Israel. It is often also bound up in Iran's stated objective to dissolve the Jewish State, most famously voiced by former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who served as the sixth President of Iran from 2005 to 2013. Ayatollah Khomeini had already previously been critical of Israel before he became Iran's first Supreme Leader after the Islamic Revolution, criticising the Pahlavi dynasty's ties with Israel. Subsequent to the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, his new government quickly became very hostile towards Israel. Iran therefore withdrew recognition of Israel as a state, which meant that they severed all diplomatic and commercial ties with Israel. Since then, Iran subsequently only referred to Israel as the 'Zionist regime' and 'occupied Palestine'. On the other side of the equation, Israel's strongest security concern regarding Iran has been its nuclear weapons programme, especially in the light of Iran's allies and proxies, such as Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu therefore aimed to securitise the Iranian nuclear programme on several occasions. Clandestine actions were taken by Israel against the Iranian nuclear programme from the early 2000s, including the assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists and sabotage operations in the nuclear facilities, which eventually led to its delay (Bergman, 2018; Katz and Hendel, 2011; Kfir, 2019). In essence, Netanyahu, who returned to the post of prime minister in 2009, believed that nuclear facilities in Iran posed an existential threat to Israel and should therefore be destroyed (Kfir, 2019; Lupovici, 2016).

Following the deterioration in the relationship between Iran and Israel after 1979, the new Iranian regime significantly altered its relationship with Israel and, subsequently, started to wage a hybrid war against the Jewish State. In an era when conventional wars have given way to a different method, hybrid warfare, the main challenge facing states is how to deal with this new type of security threat. Thus, while states have previously faced security threats from regular enemy states' armies, nowadays hybrid warfare in which non-state actors play a key role has become a widespread security threat that requires democratic states to use very different strategies and tactics to overcome it.

Using securitisation theory, which explores how normal issues transform into security threats, this article analyses how the State of Israel has securitised Iranian hybrid warfare which has been mainly executed through its proxy terror organisation of Hezbollah. In order to do so, this article draws upon a revised version of the Copenhagen School's securitisation framework. The following section presents this amended version of the securitisation framework, which highlights the importance of securitising practices and is underpinned by a conceptualisation of security as being located on a continuum. Thus, the section will outline the theoretical framework of the article, synthesising from the literatures on hybrid warfare and securitisation theory. It is followed by an analysis of the evolution of the securitisation practices of Israel against hybrid warfare, outlining the role performed by Hezbollah as an Iranian proxy in the hybrid war against Israel and the latter's securitisation of the hybrid warfare by Hezbollah against Israel. The final section will then conclude on the empirical material of the article. In essence, this article will shed light on the topic of the securitisation of hybrid warfare, notably through practices, one of the greatest security challenges of the 21st century, especially for the western democratic world.

## Securitisation and Hybrid Warfare

The core idea of the securitisation framework, which was originally developed by Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, in cooperation with other colleagues of the so-called 'Copenhagen School', is that there are no objective security issues that exist 'out there' (Buzan

*et al.*, 1998). There are actually only issues that are socially constructed as security threats through processes of ‘securitisation’, which can be defined as ‘processes of constructing a shared understanding of what is to be considered and collectively responded to as a threat’ (Buzan *et al.*, 1998, p. 26). In contrast to the realist conceptualisation that perceives threats objectively, securitisation theory perceives threats as a social construction on the basis of speech act and focuses on the process of how issues intersubjectively transform into security threats. Thus, according to securitisation theory, an issue becomes a security threat not because it constitutes an objective threat to the referent object, but rather when an audience, or several audiences (Leonard and Kaunert, 2011), accepts the securitising actor’s position that the issue poses an existential threat to the referent object. Their conceptualisation of securitisation has a strong linguistic dimension, as they argue that security issues are socially constructed as such through ‘speech acts’ (Buzan *et al.*, 1998, p. 26; Waever 1995, pp. 54–55). During the securitisation process, the securitising actor claims that the referent object is existentially threatened, and therefore extraordinary measures are justified in order to eliminate the threat (Waever, 2004). Unless the audience both agrees with the securitising actor’s claim that the issue is an existential threat to the referent object and supports the securitising actor’s suggestion to use extraordinary measures to deal against it, the issue will not be successfully securitised (Buzan *et al.*, 1998, p. 25). While it seems that the move from normal to emergency mode is immediate, in most cases, securitisation is in fact a very gradual process and it is very rarely that an issue moves directly from normalcy to emergency (Abrahamsen, 2005). In that context, Leonard and Kaunert (2019, p. 23) suggest “not to follow too closely the traditional and narrow definition of security as advocated by the Copenhagen School as it may hamper the understanding of ‘real life’ security dynamics”. Alternatively, Leonard and Kaunert (2019, pp. 24–29) accurately assert that securitisation occurs even when the security issue is located at the lower level of the normalcy/existential threat spectrum. Securitisation does not, therefore, necessarily incorporate aspects of emergency, exceptionalism, or illegality. Moreover, the securitisation framework is underpinned by a ‘traditional military-political understanding’ of security (Buzan *et al.*, 1998, p. 21), which equates security with survival (Leonard and Kaunert, 2019).

Over the years, the securitisation framework has attracted much praise, but has also been criticised from various perspectives (Balzacq *et al.*, 2016). In essence, two issues are of particular importance for the purpose of this article. The first is the idea that issues cannot only be constructed as security issues discursively, but also through practices. The second concerns the understanding of security underpinning the securitisation framework. With regard to the issues of discourses and practices, the securitisation framework as it was originally developed by the Copenhagen School put significant emphasis on the social construction of threats through securitising ‘speech acts’. In other words, it highlighted the importance of discourse for the social construction of security threats. However, Bigo (2000, p. 194) argued that ‘[i]t is possible to securitise certain problems without speech or discourse and the military and the police have known that for a long time. The practical work, discipline and expertise are as important as all forms of discourse’. Likewise, Balzacq (2008, p. 75) has claimed that ‘rather than investigating the construction of threats at the level of discourse, we should focus on the function and implications of policy instruments used to meet a public problem’. Concerning the understanding of security underpinning the securitisation framework, this article moves away from the Copenhagen School’s narrow understanding of security – which is equated with survival and involves existential threat – to adopt a broader understanding of security. From that perspective, the ideas of survival and existential threats are not abandoned, but are placed at the end of a continuum. As advocated by Abrahamsen (2005, p. 59), security issues can be conceptualised as ‘[moving] on a continuum from normalcy to worrisome/troublesome to risk and existential threat – and conversely, from threat to risk and back to

normalcy'. Thus, existential threats, survival and arguably military practices can be seen as characterising the end point of this continuum, whereas the realm of security encompasses a broader part of the continuum than merely this end point.

The phenomenon of hybrid warfare has been debated since it entered into the security and military lexicon. On the one hand, as states and non-state actors have employed both conventional and irregular methods to achieve their goals throughout history, some view hybrid warfare as the latest definition for irregular or asymmetric methods used to counter a conventionally superior enemy. On the other hand, others assert that the concept of hybrid warfare represents a new type of phenomenon implemented by contemporary threat actors (Jasper and Moreland, 2014). According to Hoffman (2007), hybrid warfare comprises different types of warfare, which can all be executed by both state and non-state actors. These types of warfare include conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts, and criminal disorder. By conducting this variety of acts of warfare, Hoffman (2007, p. 8) asserts that the main goal of hybrid warfare is to obtain "synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict". In addition, Hoffman (2007) notes that in hybrid war, all the forces, whether they are regular or irregular, become blurred into the same force in the same battlespace. Pindjak (2014) contends that Hybrid warfare involves multi-layered endeavours that aim to destabilise a functioning state and polarise its society. Thus, by combining kinetic operations with subversive efforts, the adversary goal is to have an impact on decision-makers. Usually, according to Pindjak (2014), in order to avoid attribution or retribution, the aggressor using hybrid warfare conducts clandestine actions that leave no credible smoking gun. In that sense, Deep (2015) argues that hybrid warfare has the "potential to transform the strategic calculations of potential belligerents due to the rise of non-state actors, information technology, and the proliferation of advanced weapons systems" (Deep, 2015). With regard to hybrid terrorist organisations, Ganor (2019, pp. 73–83) asserts that these groups operate in two spheres, the pseudo-legitimate sphere of welfare and political activities, and the sphere of violence and terrorism. A notable example of hybrid warfare is the case of the Lebanese terror organisation Hezbollah, which during the Second Lebanon War in summer 2006 fought a multifaceted campaign against Israel, blending conventional and unconventional methods. Other examples of hybrid warfare campaigns are Russia's involvement in Ukraine and ISIS operations in Syria and Iraq (Bachmann, 2018).

Given the phenomenon of hybrid warfare poses a substantial challenge to democratic states in the current era, not all kinds of hybrid warfare pose an existential threat. However, the conundrum is what happens when a situation occurs where hybrid warfare poses an existential threat to a sovereign state. How does the threatened state respond to that hybrid threat when it poses an existential threat to it? How can the decision-making process in the threatened country whose purpose is to confront that hybrid threat be analysed? Thus, in order to combine these two elements, hybrid warfare and security threats, this article will use securitisation theory, which explores the process in which social entities transform normal issues into security threats (Buzan *et al.*, 1998, p. 29). While securitisation can assist scholars in analysing the process of how an issue transforms into a security threat, notably through practices, as outlined above, this article uses securitisation theory in order to explore how the State of Israel confronted Iran and Hezbollah's precision missile project, which has posed a security threat for the Jewish State. While other scholars used securitisation theory for analysing how security issues evolve in Israel (Abulof, 2014; Olesker, 2014a, 2014b, 2018; Lupovici, 2014, 2016), the Israeli securitisation of Iran and Hezbollah's precision missile project can shed light on the topic of the securitisation of hybrid warfare, which is one of the greatest security challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially for the western

democratic world. In the next sections, this article will look at the history of the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, from the establishment of the Shiite organisation in the 1980s to the Iranian decision after the Second Lebanon War in 2006 to significantly upgrade its rocket fire capability in order to threaten strategic targets and population centres in Israel.

## Hezbollah as an Iranian proxy: military practices for Iran

This section examines the evolving security practices of hybrid warfare of Iran against the State of Israel, and the subsequent securitisation of hybrid warfare itself in the eyes of the Israeli security echelon. As part of its ongoing struggle against Israel, the Iranian strategy uses proxy organisations for two main reasons. First, because of the considerable distance between Israel and Iran, over a thousand kilometres, it is an operational difficulty for Iran to attack Israel. Second, Iran is very concerned about the Israeli response if it attacks Israel directly. Therefore, the use of proxy organisations significantly shortens the distance from Iran to Israel, effectively creating two fronts of struggle against Israel, one in the north against Hezbollah in Lebanon and the other in the south against Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip. In addition, it allows Iran not to be directly involved in confrontation with Israel (Eilam, 2019, p. 37). In order to achieve this goal, Iran has supported its proxy organisations in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip and provided them with various weapons, including rockets and missiles (Bergman, 2018, pp. 568–571). In practice, this proxy warfare has become one of the main military practices by which Iran threatens the security of the State of Israel, which is of crucial importance in terms of Israel's response, as will be outlined in the next section.

Iran's most central proxy organisation is Hezbollah, which is based in Lebanon. Hezbollah, Lebanon's Party of God, is a pan-Shi'a movement and an Iranian proxy group, which constitutes the largest militia in Lebanon (Levitt, 2013, p. 8). Since its establishment in 1982 by Iran, Hezbollah has become the major political factor and the most militarily powerful body in Lebanon. In fact, Hezbollah has succeeded in advancing the status of the Shiite community in Lebanon, from a persecuted and deprived community to the most powerful and dominant community in the country, while repressing the Christian community in Lebanon. The Iranians, who sought to instil their religious ideology of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and improve the status of the Shiite population in Lebanon, poured hundreds of millions of dollars in favour of Hezbollah. Thus, Iran established many social institutions for the Shiites in Lebanon, such as hospitals, clinics, universities, cultural institutions and radio and television stations (Harel and Issacharoff, 2008, pp. 52–57). In parallel, Iran has trained and armed Hezbollah operatives and turned them into a military militia in the service of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) (Katz and Hendel, 2011, p. 41). The organisation numbers about 20,000 armed men, of whom 5,000 are elite fighters, and between 20,000 and 50,000 are reserve fighters (Eilam, 2016, pp. 51–52). Hezbollah bases its defence on the civilian population in which it is located. The organisation establishes its headquarters on the lower floors of ten-story residential buildings and hides weapons such as missiles and rockets in residential buildings. Hezbollah therefore succeeds in deterring Israel from attacking these targets for fear of harming many civilians, which may provoke sharp international criticism of Israel if it decides to attack (Katz and Hendel, 2011, pp. 58–59). Hezbollah's main weapon is its missile arsenal of over 150,000 rockets, reaching a range of up to 300 kilometres, which cover the entire population concentration in Israel (Eilam, 2019, p. 36). Yet, despite Hezbollah's huge stockpile of missiles, which are stored and scattered in 200 cities and villages all over Lebanon, it is mainly based on non-guided missiles that cannot hit a target accurately (Eilam, 2016, pp. 37–42).

Hezbollah began its military operations following the expulsion of Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) forces from Lebanon in 1982 during the First Lebanon War. Inspired by the religious justification of leading Shiite ideologues such as Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, Hezbollah carried out suicide bombings against Israeli, American, and French targets located in Lebanon including the Israeli military government building in Tyre killing 91 people in November 1982, at the American embassy in Beirut in April 1983 killing 63 people, at the US Marine Corps barracks in Beirut in October 1983 killing 241 people, at the French army barracks in Beirut killing 58 people, and at the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) headquarters in Tyre in November 1983 killing 60 people (Marcus, 2018, pp. 40–41; Harel and Issacharoff, 2008, p. 56).

After Israel's withdrawal to the security zone in June 1985, and until the early 1990s, despite violent clashes between Hezbollah and the IDF, the latter had the upper hand killing many Hezbollah militants. However, after Hezbollah fighters were trained by the IRGC and acquired guerrilla skills in the early 1990s, the Shiite organisation began to pose a significant challenge to Israel in southern Lebanon. The reform of Hezbollah's military capability began during the time of Secretary-General Abbas Mussawi, who was assassinated by Israel in February 1992, and was accelerated even more after the appointment of his successor, Hassan Nasrallah. Thus, during the 1990s, the IDF, together with the South Lebanon Army (SLA), waged an ongoing war in southern Lebanon against Hezbollah, which in turn waged a guerrilla war against the IDF and SLA, fighting that was mainly characterised by the laying of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) on the sides of the roads where IDF convoys passed and the firing of anti-tank missiles at IDF's outposts (Marcus, 2018, pp. 42–50). Hezbollah's campaign against Israel was also related to the domestic political situation within Lebanon. According to the Taif Agreement signed in October 1989 that aimed to end the 14-year-long civil war in Lebanon, it was agreed that all militias, including Hezbollah, would be disarmed. Hezbollah, which refused to disarm, realised that only continued fighting against Israel would leave the organisation legitimised to remain armed. Therefore, the organisation pledged to the Lebanese government, which in turn preferred not to confront Hezbollah, that it would use its weapons only against Israel (Harel and Issacharoff, 2008, pp. 57–58).

Hezbollah was not content with just firing and fighting against Israeli military targets. The organisation also fired rockets at towns and villages in northern Israel near the border with Lebanon, mainly on the city of Kiryat Shmona, which is only 3 km from the Israel-Lebanon border. In order to put a stop to the rockets firing on northern Israel, the IDF launched two rounds of fighting against the Shiite organisation: Operation Accountability in July 1993 and Operation Grapes of Wrath in April 1996, in which Israeli Air Force (IAF) and artillery corps attacked Hezbollah's targets in Lebanon. In launching both operations, Israel opted that its airstrikes in southern Lebanon would lead the Lebanese and Syrian governments to pressure Hezbollah to stop firing rockets at Israel. Eventually, both military rounds ended without the defeat of Hezbollah, and the parties reached an understanding to remove the citizens of the two countries from the fighting circle. In fact, while as part of the understanding, the organisation was banned from firing rockets at Israel, Hezbollah was given legitimacy to continue operating against IDF soldiers in Lebanon. Hezbollah has therefore gained growing sympathy among the Shiite population in Lebanon, which sees the Shiite organisation as the only factor that dares to challenge Israel's military superiority in the region (Marcus, 2018, pp. 54–66).

The clashes between the IDF and Hezbollah continued into the second half of the 1990s. The number of casualties on the Israeli side, which averaged 25 soldiers killed per year (in Hezbollah, the average death toll was double and stood at 50. In total, 256 Israeli soldiers and 1248 Hezbollah militants were killed in Lebanon in the years 1982–1999), and

especially the intense sensitivity of Israeli public opinion to the deaths of soldiers, meant that many voices began calling for an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon (Marcus, 2018, pp. 66–72; Harel and Issacharoff, 2008, pp. 15–23; Rapaport, 2007, pp. 64–67). In May 1999, Ehud Barak, who during his election campaign in March 1999 promised that if elected he would withdraw the IDF from Lebanon within a year of his election, was elected as Israel's new Prime Minister. Barak, who hoped to reach a peace agreement with Syria in which the IDF would withdraw from Lebanon, stated that in any case, the IDF would leave Lebanon even as part of a unilateral withdrawal. In that sense, the new Israeli prime minister believed that an Israeli presence in southern Lebanon did not serve Israel's security interests, as it provided Hezbollah with a legitimacy to act militarily against Israel. Eventually, after the failure of peace talks with Syria in March 2000, Barak decided that Israel would withdraw unilaterally from southern Lebanon, despite opposition from top IDF officials who warned that Hezbollah would be stationed along the border with Israel. Therefore, after 18 years of presence, Israel unilaterally withdrew from Lebanon in May 2000 (Harel and Issacharoff, 2008, pp. 26–45; Marcus, 2018, pp. 90–91; Rapaport, 2007, pp. 90–91).

Although the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon was perceived as a tremendous achievement for Hezbollah, which was portrayed as the group that expelled Israel from Lebanon through the force of the armed resistance, it removed the organisation's main grounds for continuing its fighting against Israel. In this situation, the Hezbollah leadership feared that the organisation would lose its legitimacy to stay armed. Therefore, Hezbollah made a new argument to suggest that Israel did not fully complete its withdrawal from Lebanon as long as it continued to own the Shebaa Farms, an area located at the foot of Mount Hermon and which actually belongs to Syria according to UN maps and not to Lebanon. Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah stated that as long as Israel did not withdraw from the Shebaa farms, his organisation would continue its struggle against Israel (Harel and Issacharoff, 2008, pp. 66–67). In October 2000, after less than half a year of silence, Hezbollah militants abducted the bodies of three soldiers whose vehicle was hit by an explosive device placed by Hezbollah in the Israeli territory of Mount Dov near the border with Lebanon. This timing of Hezbollah's move was inconvenient for Israel, due to the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada a week earlier, and therefore Jerusalem preferred not to open a second fighting front in Lebanon. Hence, instead of reacting harshly to the Hezbollah abduction incident, Israel chose to contain the event and responded by only bombing individual Hezbollah targets in Lebanon. Israel actually continued in this way until the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006. Whenever Hezbollah created provocations along the border, such as placing explosive devices and firing anti-tank missiles at IDF outposts, Israel chose to restrain and contain the events, which signalled to Hezbollah and Iran that Israel was refraining from responding. Ariel Sharon's tenure as Prime Minister from 2001–2006, who was politically remembered as the one who led Israel into the Lebanon War in 1982, a war that left Israel in Lebanon until 2000, also added to Israel's policy of restraint toward Hezbollah. Sharon, like his predecessor Barak, preferred not to open a second front in the north that would surely lead to Hezbollah rocket fire on northern Israel and to an extensive IDF action in Lebanon, while Israel was engaged in fighting Palestinian terrorist organisations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Even when Sharon chose to respond to Hezbollah provocations, for example when Hezbollah fired massive mortars at Israel in March–April 2002, Sharon responded by firing on Syrian radar stations and positions of the Syrian army in Lebanon, an operation that was contained by Syria and Hezbollah and did not degenerate into widespread conflict (Harel and Issacharoff, 2008, pp. 69–75).

In addition to Israel's containment policy, the latter has refrained from treating the armament of Hezbollah's rocket arsenal, which has been steadily growing since the IDF left Lebanon in May 2000. Since then, Hezbollah received a steady supply of rockets from

Iran and Syria, which increased the organisation's rocket arsenal from 7,000 rockets in 2000 to 14,000-20,000 rockets, most of them short-range up to 20 km. Thus, while Hezbollah continued to arm itself, Jerusalem preferred to ignore it, assuming that it would be enough to use the air force against Hezbollah in Lebanon. Moreover, in the years 2000-2005, the IDF was mainly occupied in the Palestinian arena and later in the implementation of the disengagement plan from the Gaza Strip, and therefore the Lebanese arena was not on Israel's top priority list (Harel and Issacharoff, 2008, pp. 77-91).

Hezbollah's continued activity also provoked criticism in the Lebanese domestic arena, with the Lebanese government led by Rafic Hariri expressing displeasure with the organisation's continued attacks on Israel at the Shebaa Farms, claiming that they endanger Lebanon. Yet, despite harsh criticism of Hezbollah and especially its refusal to disarm under the 1989 Taif Agreement and also in accordance with the Security Council Resolution 1559 of September 2004 calling for the disarmament of all Lebanese militias, the Lebanese government refrained from confronting Hezbollah. In response to the criticism, Hezbollah claimed that in light of the weakness of the Lebanese army, the organisation constituted a buffer between Israel and Lebanon and in fact protected Lebanon from any Israeli aggression (Harel and Issacharoff, 2008, pp. 97-105). Another issue on the agenda in Lebanon was the release of Lebanese prisoners held by Israel. The 2004 prisoner exchange deal with Israel, in which Israel released 430 Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the three bodies of soldiers abducted in 2000 and an Israeli citizen abducted by Hezbollah abroad, was a great achievement for Hezbollah. Therefore, Nasrallah continued to declare that his organisation would continue to kidnap Israeli soldiers in order to secure the release of additional prisoners. In carrying out further abductions that would lead to a prisoner exchange deal with Israel, Nasrallah opted to remove the issue of dismantling Hezbollah from its weapons from the public agenda in Lebanon. Given Israel's containment policy in response to Hezbollah's provocations, an agenda that has prevailed in Jerusalem since the IDF withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, Nasrallah estimated that Israel would not respond harshly to further abductions and, therefore, the price Hezbollah would pay would be minimal. After a failed attempted abduction of an IDF soldier in the village of Ghajar in November 2005, Hezbollah succeeded in kidnapping two soldiers (who were apparently dead at the time of the abduction) in July 2006, an event that led to the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War (Harel and Issacharoff, 2008, pp. 108-110; Rapaport, 2007, pp. 86-89).

After refraining from responding to Hezbollah operations and maintaining its containment policy since withdrawing unilaterally from Lebanon in 2000, Israel decided to respond harshly to the abduction of two IDF soldiers. In response to the abduction, the Israeli Air Force destroyed Hezbollah's medium-range rocket arsenal and bombed civilian infrastructure targets in Lebanon, such as bridges and the Beirut airport runways. Furthermore, the Israeli Air Force bombed the Dahiya suburb in south Beirut, which was Hezbollah's nerve centre in the Lebanese capital. In fact, the IDF offered a tougher response in the form of bombing vital infrastructure facilities in Lebanon, such as power plants, but the Israeli government led by Ehud Olmert refused, claiming that this would harm the pro-Western Lebanese government headed by Fouad Siniora and increase Hezbollah's popularity among the Lebanese public. In response to the Israeli bombings, Hezbollah fired short-range rockets at northern Israel. Hezbollah, which was confident that the incident would end within 48 hours and did not assume for a moment that Israel would respond severely to the abduction, was astonished by the intensity of the Israeli response. Nasrallah, for his part, admitted that if he had known that Israel would react as he did, he would not have ordered the abduction that led to the outbreak of the war. Despite the massive Israeli response, Hezbollah's rocket fire did not cease, which led to Hezbollah's conscious victory over Israel in that the organisation continues to stand on its

own two feet and does not capitulate. Hezbollah has realised that as long as they continue to kill Israeli soldiers in Lebanon and continue firing rockets at Israel, which damages morale among the Israeli population, they are winning the battle for consciousness. In practice, Israel did not have an appropriate response to the continued short-range rocket fire by Hezbollah that hit cities in northern Israel, including Haifa, Acre, Nahariyya and Safed, causing casualties and extensive damage to buildings. Given that a massive ground operation could have brought an end to the rocket fire on Israel, Israel opted to avoid it for fear of casualties. Alternatively, the IDF chose to rely mainly on air force bombings, which in turn did not lead to the cessation of Hezbollah rocket fire at Israel. Eventually, the casualties among IDF soldiers and the continued firing of rockets at Israel led to great disappointment among the political echelon and the Israeli public with the IDF performance in Lebanon and to an anxiety regarding further losses in battle. After more than a month of fighting, in which about 4,000 rockets were fired at Israel and 161 Israelis (119 soldiers and 42 civilians) and a thousand Lebanese (half of them civilians) were killed, a ceasefire was reached ([Harel and Issacharoff, 2008, pp. 145–265](#); [Olmert, 2018, pp. 693–729](#)). While the Second Lebanon War was the last time a round of fighting took place between Israel and Hezbollah, the Lebanese organisation has worked since then with Iran's assistance to increase its rocket arsenal and especially to improve its accuracy.

This section outlined the security practices of hybrid warfare of Iran against of Israel, notably through its proxy organisation Hezbollah. This proxy warfare has become one, if not, the, main military practice by which Iran fights with Israel, and, thus, has determined the course of Israel's response to it. Given the long distance between Israel and Iran, a direct military attack on Israel does not seem feasible, and retribution very likely. Using proxy organisations, Iran effectively creates two fronts against Israel. Thus, Iran has supported its proxy organisations in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. The next section will discuss how Israel securitized Iran and Hezbollah's precision missile project, which has posed a security threat for the Jewish State. It arrived on Israel's security agenda through the IDF's Military Intelligence practices, and was subsequently accepted by the Israeli Cabinet and the military echelon. The next section will outline this in more detail.

## **Israel's securitisation of Iran and Hezbollah's precision missile project**

This article suggests that issues cannot only be constructed as security issues discursively, but also through practices, as outlined in the theoretical section. Furthermore, to comprehend the security underpinning the securitisation framework, this article moves away from the Copenhagen School's narrow understanding of security – which is equated with survival and involves existential threat – to adopt a broader understanding of security. This is vital for an application of hybrid warfare, which does not predominantly involve existential security threats. Ideas of survival and existential threats are not abandoned, but are placed at the end of a continuum, whereby hybrid warfare represents a large range before the reaching of the end point of this continuum.

The Lebanon War revealed to Israel the depth of Iranian involvement, both in financing and training of Hezbollah forces ([Katz and Hendel, 2011, p. 55](#)). In fact, the Second Lebanon War and Hezbollah's alleged victory encouraged Iran to further arm its proxy organisation in Lebanon ([Eilam, 2016, pp. 37–38](#)). According to the head of the Israel Defence Intelligence Analysis Division, Brigadier General Dror Shalom, the main Iranian goal has been to arm Hezbollah with precision missiles and rockets that could hit strategic targets in the State of Israel ([KAN, 2020b](#)). Thus, while there are many types of hybrid warfare waged by Iran against Israel, such as terrorist acts and cyber-attacks, the Hezbollah missile accuracy project being built by Iran is Israel's main hybrid warfare security threat.

While as of 2019, Hezbollah holds 150,000 rockets, the option under which these missiles will be converted into precision-capable missiles will be a change in the balance of power between Israel and the Iranian proxy Hezbollah. During the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006, 4,000 rockets were fired at Israel by Hezbollah from Lebanon, hitting mainly populated areas in the north of the country. However, the firing of Hezbollah rockets at Israel during the war was not effective in terms of accuracy and damage. Therefore, as Brigadier General Dror Shalom explains, in order to strengthen Hezbollah's military capability, the Iranians decided to develop missiles and rockets with a precision level of ten metres and hand them over to Hezbollah. Because of these capabilities, Iran, through Hezbollah, will be able to accurately hit vital targets in Israel such as power plants, government facilities and IDF bases ([KAN, 2020b](#)).

According to Amnon Sofrin, former head of the Israeli Mossad's intelligence department, the man behind the precision missile project was the commander of the Quds Force of IRGC, General Qasem Soleimani, who was assassinated in January 2020 in Iraq by the United States. In fact, until his assassination, Soleimani was the mastermind and operative of Iran's policy of aggression in the Middle East, which supported its proxy organisations based outside Iran ([KAN, 2020a](#)). Al Quds Force was established in the early 1990s to allow the Iranian regime to operate covertly outside Iran's borders. The goal was to build an operational mechanism that would bring the Islamic Revolution out of Iran ([Katz and Hendel, 2011, p. 243](#)). According to Col. G, the head of the Lebanese arena in the Israeli Military Intelligence, Soleimani had two main goals in developing the precision missile project. The first was to reduce the firing range for Israel. While the distance between Iran and Israel is thousands of kilometres, southern Lebanon is located about a few hundred kilometres from the nerve centre of the State of Israel in Tel Aviv and Gush Dan. Therefore, while Iran needs to launch longer-range missiles to hit Israel, Hezbollah can achieve the same goal from Lebanon with shorter-range rockets. Soleimani's second goal was to remove the battlefield from Iran. Given firing at Israel from Syria and Lebanon will lead to an Israeli response against these countries, rather than against Iran, which in turn will remain unharmed, it is better for Tehran to fund its proxy organisations and arm them so that they will be at the forefront of the struggle against Israel ([KAN, 2020b](#)). According to the head of the IDF's Operations Division, Major General Aharon Haliva, a situation in which Hezbollah will have accurate missile and rocket capability is a security threat to the State of Israel, a threat that is second in severity after the Iranian nuclear threat. If Iran's proxy organisations achieve these capabilities, the balance of power in the region will change significantly to the detriment of Israel, whose population will be exposed to accurate rocket and missile fire. Therefore, to prevent this kind of scenario, it was decided in Israel to securitise Iran and Hezbollah's precision missile project ([KAN, 2020b](#)).

The fight against the Iranian precision project is part of Israel's overall strategy known as the "Campaign between the Wars (CBW)". According to Brigadier General Dror Shalom, the main idea behind the CBW is to offset the enemy's capabilities without reaching war, and to use this period to build Israel's power and weaken its foes, so that if a war does erupt, Israel will face it with greater force than its adversaries ([KAN, 2020b](#)). In addition to Israel, there has also been great concern in the United States regarding the development of Iran's missile capabilities. According to former U.S. Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta, arms shipments from Iran to Hezbollah and the aid Tehran provided to terrorist groups across the region were directed by Soleimani. The purpose of the latter, according to former head of the CIA David Petraeus was to establish the Shiite crescent (Iran, Iraq, Syria, and southern Lebanon) and especially to establish a land communication line from Iran through Iraq, Syria and south to southern Lebanon ([KAN, 2020b](#)).

The topic of the precision missile threat to Israel began to evolve on Israel's security agenda in early 2013, when officers from the technology arena in the IDF's Military Intelligence introduced the danger of the Iranian precision project to the then head of Israel Defence Intelligence Analysis Division, Brigadier General Itai Brun. According to Brun, this was the first time a serious discussion had taken place on the significance of the Iranian precision project and what the consequences would be for Israel in the event that Iran transferred to Hezbollah an accurate missile attack capability. After the Israeli Cabinet and the military echelon realised that the Iranian missile accuracy project posed a security threat to Israel, the question was how to confront it. One of the main considerations in the course of action against the precision project was how not to embarrass the other side and allow it to contain the Israeli preventive attack, and therefore preventing the outbreak of a comprehensive war in the Middle East (KAN, 2020b). In terms of securitisation theory, the conundrum was what extraordinary measures should be taken in order to overcome the threat.

Eventually, in 2013, following the decision of the political echelon headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Chief of Staff Benny Gantz placed the responsibility for handling the precision project on the IAF, which in turn began to act against the Iranian arms shipments arriving in Syria and from there to Lebanon to Hezbollah. According to Amir Eshel, the commander of the IAF at that time, the IAF bombed convoys of trucks loaded with missiles at the beginning of the process (KAN, 2020b). Then, in addition to six attacks executed during 2013 against arms shipments destined for Hezbollah from Syria, one of the attacks attributed to Israel took place in February 2014, in which the IAF bombed a convoy of trucks carrying Syrian surface-to-surface missiles (Haaretz, 2014). However, according to Eshel, after the missile shipments were discovered and destroyed from the air, the Iranians began to disguise the shipments and move missile components inside suitcases. Damascus Airport was therefore the gateway for weapons to Syria and from there to Hezbollah, and Israel successfully targeted this path of weapon smuggling too (KAN, 2020b). In essence, Israel attacked arms shipments from Syria to Lebanon at least 100 times until 2017 (Eilam, 2019, pp. 56–57). After the Iranians realised that whenever a shipment arrived in Damascus it was intercepted by Israel, they decided to transfer the shipments to an airport in northern Syria, but even there the long arms of the IDF managed to reach and destroy the components transferred by the Iranians. Therefore, Iran and Hezbollah have decided to set up their own facilities in Syria where they can continue to develop the missile precision project. The site chosen for this activity was the CERS Centre in the Hama district in central Syria where the Assad regime produces missiles and other weapons. Eventually, the facility was bombed by Israel in September 2017 (KAN, 2020b; Eilam, 2019, pp. 58–59; Ynet, 2017).

In response to the destruction of the facility in Syria, Iran and Hezbollah decided to move the missile production project from Syria to Lebanon, assuming that Israel would refrain from attacking Lebanon. According to Col. G, with the help of the Iranians who provided the knowledge, Hezbollah began converting the inaccurate projectiles in its possession into GPS-guided missiles with a precision capability of ten metres. To disguise the operation and make it difficult for Israel to destroy the facilities where the rockets were converted, Hezbollah chose to carry out the missile precision project in the heart of a civilian neighbourhoods such as in Beirut, in the basements under the Beirut football stadium, and at Beirut International Airport. Due to the desire to avoid harming the civilian population, Israel chose to publicly expose those rocket conversion sites, which led to their closure by Hezbollah (KAN, 2020b; Times of Israel, 2018; Haaretz, 2018; Ynet, 2019b). Yet, in other cases, Israel chose to attack targets in the Lebanese capital. Thus, in August 2019, as part of thwarting the missile precision project of Hezbollah and

Iran, Israel also used assault drones to bomb Hezbollah buildings in the Dahieh suburb of Beirut where rocket conversion components for precision missiles were stored, including a planetary mixer manufactured in Iran (KAN, 2020b; Ynet, 2019a).

This section has examined the Israeli response to the evolving security practices of hybrid warfare of Iran against Israel. Securitisation and its emphasis on practices has helped to analyse the process of how hybrid warfare transformed into a security threat, and was accepted as such by the Israeli security echelon. This section contributed to our understanding of the Israeli securitisation of Iran and Hezbollah's precision missile project, and, more broadly, the securitisation of hybrid warfare by Iran. The section identified the precision missile threat to Israel, which was securitised through the IDF's Military Intelligence practices, and, subsequently, accepted by the Israeli Cabinet and the military echelon. Israel responded to this with extraordinary measures, such as the bombing of convoys of trucks loaded with missiles and arms shipments from Syria to Lebanon. The section, thus, underlined the hybrid nature of the warfare between Iran and Israel and the social processes that explain the events in this conflictual relationship.

## Conclusion

This article set out to investigate the evolving security practices of hybrid warfare of Iran against the State of Israel, and, the subsequent securitisation of hybrid warfare itself in the eyes of the Israeli security echelon. Securitisation helps to analyse the process of how hybrid warfare transforms into a security threat, notably through aforementioned military security practices, as outlined above. This article utilised securitisation theory in order to analyse how the State of Israel confronted Iran and Hezbollah's precision missile project, which posed a significant security threat for the Jewish State. In addition, the article further contributed to previous work whereby other scholars used securitisation theory for analysing how security issues evolve in Israel (Abulof, 2014; Olesker, 2014a, 2014b, 2018; Lupovici, 2014, 2016). Yet, the Israeli securitisation of Iran and Hezbollah's precision missile project has shed light on the topic of the securitisation of hybrid warfare, arguably one of the greatest security challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially for the western democratic world. It did so by applying a revised version of the Copenhagen School's securitisation framework, which focuses on security practices and is underpinned by an understanding of security as belonging to a continuum, rather than being equated with survival and existential threats.

The article analyses the precision missile threat to Israel, which began to evolve on Israel's security agenda in early 2013 through the IDF's Military Intelligence practices. The acceptance of this security threat by the Israeli Cabinet and the military echelon led to several extraordinary measures being taken in order to overcome the threat. Firstly, Israel bombed convoys of trucks loaded with missiles and attacked arms shipments from Syria to Lebanon. However, after Iran and Hezbollah set up their own facilities in Syria for the development of the missile precision project, the CERS Centre in the Hama district in central Syria, the facility was subsequently bombed by Israel. Moving the missile production project from Syria to Lebanon, Hezbollah converted inaccurate projectiles into GPS-guided missiles with precision capability. In some cases, Israel, in response, publicly exposed those rocket conversion sites, while in other cases, it attacked relevant targets. Thus, in August 2019, Israel used assault drones to bomb Hezbollah buildings. The analysis of the more recent security practices illustrates that this crisis led to an intensification of the Israeli security practices against Iran and Hezbollah. It therefore moved towards the end point of the continuum, which is characterised by survival, existential threats, and militarisation. Yet, the article also showed the full range of securitisation practices in

the hybrid warfare against Iran. This article has therefore shed light on the topic of the securitisation of hybrid warfare, notably through practices, which is one of the greatest security challenges of the 21st century, especially for the western democratic world.

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