Chief of staff: North 'could explode any moment'

The cease-fire between Israel and Hezbollah is holding steady seven years after the Second Lebanon War, but should hostilities resume it would be better to be an Israeli citizen than a Lebanese citizen, IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Benny Gantz told the Herzliya Conference on March 11.

During a speech that opened the annual gathering, Gantz said Israeli deterrence against Hezbollah remained “authentic.” He noted that Hezbollah was involved “up to its neck” in the Syrian civil war, sending thousands of fighters to support the Assad regime, and warned that the North “could explode at any moment.”

“I hope this quiet is maintained... but if not we are prepared and we will know to act with the required force... directly against Hezbollah and its state surroundings,” Gantz said. “Lebanon [as] the neighboring state can’t be sovereign but not responsible. If this goes off, I’d rather be an Israeli civilian, and not a Lebanese civilian.”

Turning to Syria, Gantz said the arena had become “very unstable and dangerous.” Although the IDF no longer faces six army divisions threatening to invade the Golan Heights, terror organizations are growing in Syria.

“They’re fighting Assad. But guess what. It’s us afterward. We could be the next challenge for the same organizations,” he warned.

The chief of staff said that should radical rebel elements get hold of strategic weapons in Syria, there was a reasonable chance that they would use them.

“The Golan is not the same Golan it used to be,” he added.

Addressing the issue of Iran, Gantz said we can “assume that this preoccupies me on a daily and weekly basis.” He did not elaborate.

The IDF is having to adapt to a reality of multi-arena threats, he continued, adding that the chances of a deterioration were “very high.”

“An incident can turn into a bigger event, which can cross arenas,” he said. “Threats haven’t disappeared. They’ve changed form.”

To deal with the changing nature of the region, the IDF has developed a strategy that places offense and ground maneuvers at its heart, Gantz told the audience. The military’s aim, he said, is to ensure that “tomorrow, we can win the war. Not to start it, but win it. If we are not ready, we won’t forgive ourselves.”

The strategy is based on flexibility among ground forces, enabling them to quickly deploy from a northern to a southern front, or vice versa.

“The air force is outstanding at this type of flexibility,” he said. “We can attack targets in one day that previously took whole wars to strike.”

However, he stressed that creating long-term solutions can only be achieved by ground offensives.

“We’ll have to go to the tunnels of Gaza and the thickets of Lebanon, because that’s where the enemy is,” he said.

— Yaakov Lappin