The Operational Objectives in Lebanon and the Strategic Context

written by Prof. Kobi Michael | 15.10.2024

The State of Israel cannot afford to revert to an approach of containment, nor to miss the strategic opportunity to inflict significant damage on Iran and all elements of the axis it leads. Israel has no choice but to maintain and even intensify its momentum. This is not merely a historical opportunity which may not present itself again, but also a unique strategic opportunity that must be fully seized. The reality that has emerged allows a return to the concept of decisive action and a departure from the now significantly eroded concept of deterrence. Political leaders must harness and subordinate military actions to political strategy, which should first set the conditions for building the new regional architecture and then accelerate its construction, understanding that not only will this process involve the reshaping of the region, but also inevitably result in global implications.

When Hamas launched its offensive on October 7, the IDF mobilized many reserve forces. Part of this force was sent to the northern front, recognizing that Hezbollah has the capability and motivation to join the battle, with its Radwan force having been equipped, trained, and prepared to invade the Galilee for years. The deployment of forces to the north was aimed at taking up defensive positions before Hezbollah could attempt to execute its plans. Hezbollah's entry into the conflict on October 8 began with relatively low-scale fire, mainly targeting military objectives. Later, as the organization gained confidence and identified a policy of containment on the part of Israel, it ramped up fire across the entire front.

At the beginning of the campaign, Israel chose to separate the fronts and focus its primary efforts on the southern front. This situation persisted for nearly ten months. The Israeli intelligence-driven offensive on September 17, 2024 signaled a change in approach, and since then, Israel has been engaged in an expanding and evolving offensive against Hezbollah across all of Lebanon. After eliminating Hezbollah's Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah, and decapitating a significant portion of the organization's senior command levels, as well as damaging its

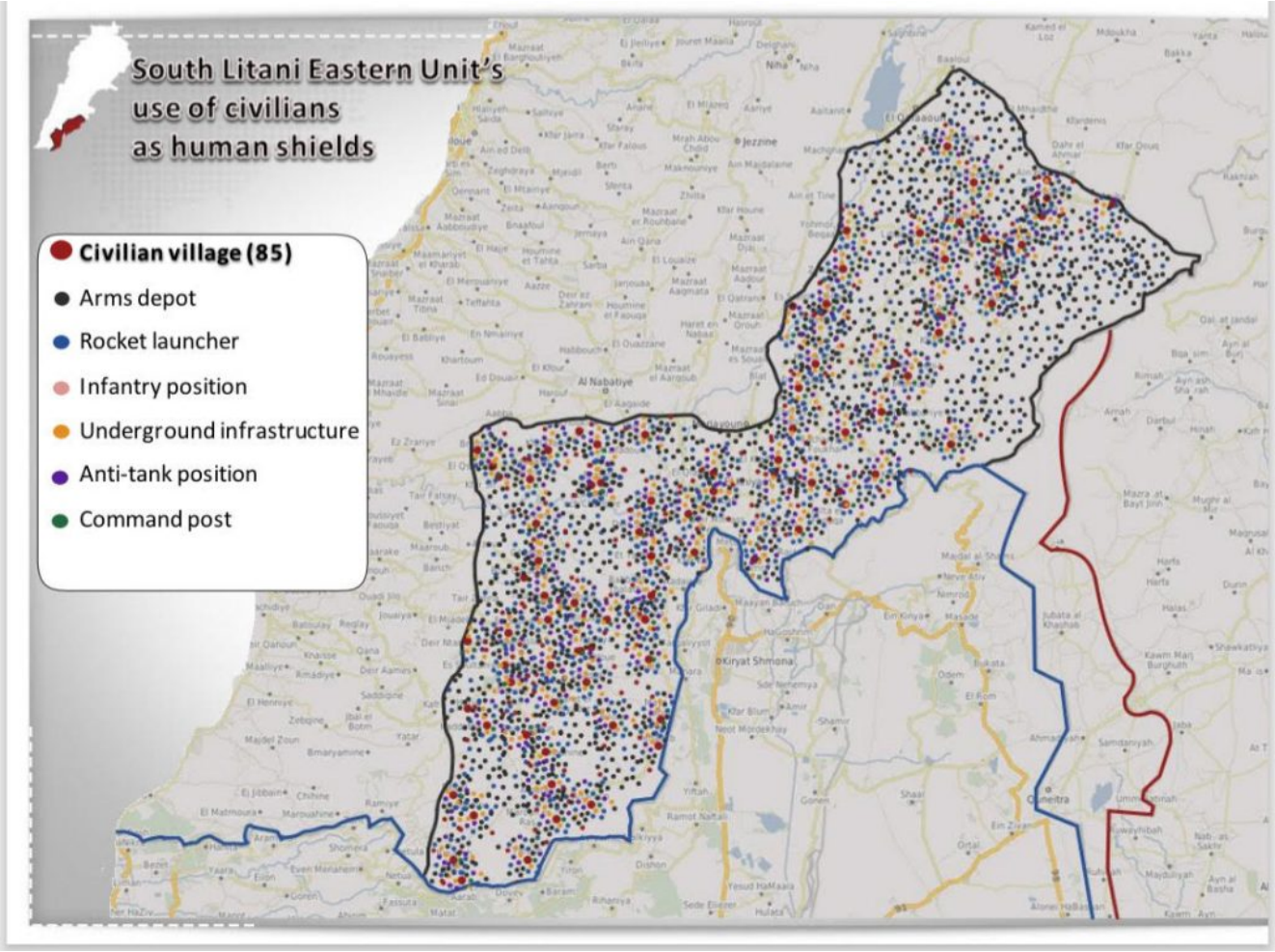
infrastructure, Israel launched a limited ground operation in southern Lebanon in early October 2024.

To this end, the Israeli government added an additional war goal, stating that the State of Israel would work to safely return the displaced residents of the North, who had evacuated their homes as Hezbollah ramped up its attacks. Based on what is publicly known, the IDF's ground operation is advancing cautiously, with forces currently operating only in the area adjacent to the line of engagement with an aim to destroy terrorist infrastructure close to the border (approximately 4 km deep). After four weeks of ground operations, a reality more severe than the Israeli intelligence likely knew has emerged—and far more than what was made clear to the public before the ground operation.

Hezbollah has built an extensive terrorist infrastructure. This was done under the laxity of the Lebanese army, which failed to fulfill its obligations; under the eyes of the UNIFIL forces; and most gravely, due to Israel's decision not to instruct the IDF to thwart the transfer of massive quantities of weapons into the area. Weapons and equipment stockpiles were stored in extensive tunneling that reached very close to the Israeli border, and in at least one case, even crossed it. Extensive use was made of residential homes and civilian infrastructures such as mosques and schools. In fact, nearly every house and building in the Shiite villages along the front have been turned into a Hezbollah military outpost or prepared for offensive military effort. While it is clear that the overwhelming majority of buildings in these Shiite villages are considered legitimate military targets, and although it is evident that clearing the area cannot be limited to narrow surgical operations in a strip of a few kilometers, the IDF has so far refrained from systematically and thoroughly destroying all of these buildings.

However, even if a security buffer zone of a few kilometers' width is created, this space will not provide adequate protection to northern communities and will not allow evacuated residents to return to their homes safely. Defending the northern communities requires a broader approach that does not limit itself to addressing only the line of engagement. This defense requires the removal of Hezbollah forces from the entire area, at least up to the Litani River, and in certain areas where the river's course is closer to the Israeli border, even beyond. Since Hezbollah operatives are integrated into the Shiite villages––some even living there––and given that many of the Shiite villages conceal terrorist infrastructure, it will not be possible to allow residents of these villages to return to southern

Lebanon. The map below illustrates a small portion of Hezbollah's terrorist infrastructure up to the Litani in the eastern sector (as of 2015).



In the initial phase, the IDF must take control of the entire area up to the Litani River (and in certain places beyond it) while fully evacuating the population of the Shiite villages in the area for their protection and to allow for the clearing of the area without endangering the Lebanese population. The IDF has already begun the process of evacuating the population, but there is still work to do as it is necessary to address the presence of terrorist infrastructure in the city of Tyre, which lies south of the Litani.

The operation in southern Lebanon is closely linked to the overall strategy of the State of Israel. The extent of the damage inflicted on Hezbollah creates an opportunity to fundamentally change the situation in Lebanon and weaken Hezbollah to the point where it is no longer a relevant threat to Israel by continuously and persistently thwarting its efforts to recuperate and reconstitute itself.

In southern Lebanon, up to the Litani River and beyond where necessary, full Israeli control is required, preventing residents from returning to the villages to avoid Hezbollah operatives returning under the guise of the civilian population. The Shiite region must be completely cleared of any military and civilian presence under Hezbollah's cover. Regarding other villages, a specific assessment will be needed to determine the level of threat posed by their population to Israel's security, and a policy will need to be established regarding monitoring their exit from and return to the area. As for how the IDF should take southern Lebanon, this article does not provide an operational outline, but it is expected that IDF commanders will carry out this mission in a cunning and creative manner.

A second area of operations would be between the Litani River and the Awali River and the Qaroun Lake line in the east. This area will serve as an immediate depth zone of operation for the IDF to prevent capabilities from drifting towards the Litani. The IDF can operate through aerial actions and special operations. Lastly, operations, mainly aerial, should be carried out throughout Lebanon to prevent Hezbollah's attempts to rebuild its military capabilities.

Until an agreement that meets Israel's security needs is achieved (although under current conditions and for the foreseeable future, it is unclear if such an agreement can be established), there should be a buffer zone (security perimeter) established north of the security zone in southern Lebanon. This area must be cleared of infrastructure and buildings, enabling observation and fire control to prevent any entry into the security zone established in southern Lebanon and to destroy any Hezbollah force attempting to return to this area. This should resemble the buffer zone along the Gaza Strip border. In the case of Lebanon, this zone should be 2–4 km wide depending on the terrain conditions. Therefore, a quick and efficient clearing of the area is required. For this purpose, maneuvering must be expanded and civilian structures destroyed to render the entire area uninhabitable.

Such a move would impose a painful cost on Hezbollah and the Shiite population in southern Lebanon that supports it, serving as a catalyst for Lebanon and the international community to dismantle Hezbollah and reach a security arrangement acceptable to Israel. Above all, it would allow effective military control and presence in the area until such an agreement is achieved. Given that this is likely to require a long-term commitment––perhaps even years until an achievable and enforceable agreement is reached––the IDF must prepare optimal

conditions for military control in the area, which must also be better protected.

This improved defense will be achieved by emptying the area of its residents and blocking access to it while considering any entity trying to enter the area as a hostile element to be neutralized. This reality is fundamentally different from what we knew during the 18 years when the IDF was in the security zone. In those years, the zone remained populated, and despite the actions of the IDF and the South Lebanon Army (SLA), Hezbollah found it relatively easy to penetrate the area with the support of the large Shiite population and launch attacks on IDF and SLA forces.

Simultaneously with the necessary military organization in southern Lebanon, the IDF must continue its offensive actions against Hezbollah throughout Lebanon. In this regard, there cannot be and should not be a ceasefire until the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which calls for the disarmament of all militias in Lebanon, including Hezbollah. Resolution 1701, meanwhile, should be discarded in the annals of history, as it is demonstrably unenforceable, nor can one rely on international actors for its implementation. Israel, after October 7, cannot afford to revert to a doctrine of containment regarding Hezbollah's growing strength. What is more, the ongoing pursuit of Hezbollah operatives, leaders, and military assets in turn weakens Iran and its entire axis. Hezbollah is the crown jewel of Iran, the spearhead, and the center of gravity in Iran's "Ring of Fire" strategy against Israel. Harming this key Iranian asset necessarily harms Iran, the central factor undermining regional security.

The effort in the northern arena must continue alongside the effort in the Gaza Strip until Hamas is dismantled and the conditions are set for a civilian governance alternative with Israeli security responsibility and full military freedom of action in order to prevent any attempt by Hamas to recuperate and rebuild its military and governmental capabilities.

All these efforts are intended to pave the way for the third effort. This effort should focus on weakening Iran itself through strikes on military and governmental assets, and subsequently on its nuclear infrastructure. Following Iran's 181-ballistic missile barrage launched at Israel which targeted military and civilian infrastructure alike (1 October 2024) and Israel's precise and targeted retaliatory strike against Iranian military infrastructure (26 October 2024), Iran seems poised to respond. Should it choose to, Israel's ambition should be to

utilize such an Iranian response to persuade the United States to prepare to destroy Iran's nuclear infrastructure. Should Israel fail in this crucial effort, it must prepare to carry out this operation independently.

The fourth effort should focus on painful responses in Yemen, western Iraq, and southern Syria in response to missile and drone launches from these areas. As part of this effort, Israel should make it clear to Syria's president that it would be in his best interest to restrict the steps of Iran and the Shiite militias operating within Syria's sovereign territory or else his regime would be in danger.

It may seem that the multitude of required efforts stretches Israel's capabilities to the limit. Indeed, this series of efforts demands significant resource investment and is not without risks. However, in the reality that has emerged, Israel wields strategic momentum that it cannot afford to lose. Israel has no choice but to maintain and enhance its momentum as it can lead to the weakening of the entire Iranian axis and the laying of the foundations for establishing a new regional architecture, which–– beyond its contribution to regional security, stability, and prosperity–– would further weaken and restrain the Iranian axis and open new opportunities for addressing the Palestinian issue.

The State of Israel cannot afford to revert to an approach of containment, nor to miss the strategic opportunity to inflict significant damage on Iran and all elements of the axis it leads. Israel has no choice but to maintain and even intensify its momentum. This is not merely a historical opportunity which may not present itself again, but also a unique strategic opportunity that must be fully seized. The reality that has emerged allows a return to the concept of decisive action and a departure from the now significantly eroded concept of deterrence. Political leaders must harness and subordinate military actions to the political strategy, which should first set the conditions for building the new regional architecture and then accelerate its construction, understanding that not only will this process involve the reshaping of the region, but also inevitably result in global implications.

1. This map, which includes only the eastern sector, was released by the IDF in 2015. Since then, Hezbollah's terrorist infrastructure has expanded significantly and is likely much broader today.