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Two years to October 7: The Strategic Costs of the IDF's Operational Inadequacy

Why Israel's Wars in Gaza and Lebanon Exposed a Deeper Strategic Problem in the IDF – and What Must Change to Restore Decisive Victory

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Main Points

- Israel neutralized Hezbollah's missile threat but failed to dismantle its ground forces or Hamas's rule in Gaza.
- The IDF lacks a coherent concept of operational maneuver – the coordinated use of ground forces to destroy enemy capabilities and achieve strategic goals.
- Brilliant air and intelligence operations were not matched by decisive ground campaigns, leaving enemy forces largely intact.
- Operations in both Gaza and Lebanon unfolded too slowly, allowing the enemy to recover and denying Israel strategic momentum.
- The IDF repeatedly fought over the same areas instead of seizing and controlling critical ground to deny Hamas sanctuary and supply.
- These operational shortcomings weakened Israel's deterrence and may embolden regional actors, notably Egypt, to reassess Israel's military credibility.
- The IDF must relearn the art of operational maneuver – integrating speed, initiative, and decisive ground action – to transform tactical superiority into strategic victory.

Introduction

Two years after the outbreak of war between Israel and Iran's proxies in Gaza and Lebanon, it appears that Israel's achievements on both fronts are unsatisfactory. While the Israeli air force succeeded in eliminating Hizbullah's missile-borne, strategic threat to Israel's rear, Hizbullah retains most of its ground forces and appears to have stymied the Lebanese government's efforts to disarm the militia group. Despite two years' fighting Hamas remains the dominant military and political force in Gaza.

A major reason for these unsatisfactory outcomes is the failings of the IDF's ground forces. The IDF lacks a genuine doctrine of operational maneuver.

Operational maneuver concerns the use of ground forces, however assisted by other military branches, to overcome and destroy the enemy's forces and his entire strategic position while seizing the territory on which the former is deployed.[1] Operational maneuver is the crucial link between the battlefield and the attainment of the strategic objectives of war – eliminating strategic threats – as well as the attainment of its political objectives as the result of the enemy force's elimination.[2] Without a robust theory and practice of operational maneuver desirable strategic and political objectives are likely to remain permanently out of reach.

Israel's inadequate achievements in Lebanon and Gaza and the reasons for them are likely attract the particular attention of Egypt, the only regional power that currently possesses the capacity to mount a ground offensive against Israel.

Core Operational Principles

There is a core body of operational principles that an army neglects at its peril. We will note five such principles here; they are far from exhaustive but are particularly relevant to the Israeli case.

1. Aim to eliminate the enemy's forces. The primary operational objective is to destroy the enemy wherever he takes up position or tries to go. The relative strength of the enemy and oneself may render his complete destruction impossible, but the basic operational objective is to destroy as much of the enemy's power as one can. Operational maneuver is the art of realizing the maximum possible strategic achievement.

[1] The purpose of this paper is not to provide a primer of operational maneuver method under modern circumstances but to emphasize that the mastery of operational maneuver is the key to achieving significant strategic and political outcomes in war. The study of the campaigns of William T. Sherman, Heinz Guderian, Georgii Zhukov, Terauchi Hisaichi, Douglas MacArthur, William Slim, and defensively Robert E. Lee and Walter Model – to mention only a handful of the outstanding practitioners of the art – will provide a good introduction to operational maneuver method and its connection to strategy.

[2] For more on the theoretical link between operations and the strategic goals of war see Yitzhak Klein (1991), "A Theory of Strategic Culture," *Comparative Strategy* vol. 10, 3-23.

2. If one's objective is to destroy enemy forces and produce a major change in strategic relations with an enemy, ground forces are the primary weapon one must use. For the past two decades, Israel's air force, various technological corps, and special forces, operating behind enemy lines, conducted many brilliant operations in Lebanon, Syria and farther afield. Israel's enemies were hurt, and their plans were delayed, but none were destroyed or failed to build up their strength. Only by coming to grips with the enemy's main forces on the ground can those forces be decisively eliminated.

3. Seize the territory on which the enemy's armed forces depend. Eliminating the enemy's force is generally impossible unless the territory where it has chosen to base itself has been occupied. Operations play a large part in identifying the territory the enemy has to hold and taking it away from him, defeating the forces with which he hopes to hold it.

   Looking beyond the battlefield, territory that is crucial to the enemy – the political entity that is the enemy, not merely his fighting force – is the key to achieving a satisfactory security situation and political resolution during or after the war.

4. Time is precious! Every mission should have a deadline, and deadlines must be as tight as feasible. The side that can conduct appreciations of the state of the battle more quickly, make decisions more quickly and execute them more quickly enjoys a tremendous advantage.[3] Everything an army seeks to do must be done as quickly as possible, because time wasted or an unnecessarily slow tempo gives the enemy time to react, recover or preempt. At a higher level of analysis, war is an immense strain on armies and on the societies that sustain them. The time at one's disposal to accomplish war aims is a wasting asset, socially, militarily, and diplomatically.

[3] This refers to Col. John Boyd's theory of the "OODA cycle." The best presentation to date of OODA and related concepts appears to be Frans Osinga (2007), *Science, Strategy and War: The Strategic Theory of John Boyd*. Oxford-Routledge. See also John T. Hammond (2001), *The Mind of War: John Boyd and American Security*, Smithsonian Books.

5. Initiative, flexibility, and the acceptance of calculated risk. The essence of operational maneuver fighting is to avoid doing what the enemy is prepared to contend with, to seek to undermine his strategy by attacking where he is weak and unprepared rather than trying to overcome him directly and by brute force. The good practice of operational maneuvers requires boldness, initiative, imagination, acceptance of calculated risks, flexibility, and the ability to reach decisions and implement them more quickly than the enemy. These are primarily habits of mind and character. They don't just happen, and it is not enough merely to have a printed primer of them. The spirit of an army needs to be inculcated in these practices. To go into greater detail would take us beyond the scope of this article.

Using ground operations appropriately does not negate the use of other war tools, such as air power, technological measures, intelligence, and special forces, etc. These can be used independently and also play an indispensable role in assisting ground forces to achieve their objectives. However, decisive strategic and political outcomes in war usually cannot be achieved unless one uses ground forces of appropriate strength to attain appropriately selected operational objectives.

Israel's Operational Failures

Nearly two years of war have revealed that the IDF fails to appreciate the operational principles set forth above.

1. The failure to achieve decisive military results against Hizbullah. Israel's offensive against Hezbollah began on 17-18 September 2024 with the celebrated "beeper operation," which killed or crippled thousands of key Hezbollah personnel at a stroke.[4] With Hezbullah's command and control in the field in disarray, Israel followed up with a massive series of airstrikes

[4] Lior Ben-Ari, Itamar Eichner, and Elisha Ben-Kimon, "Ke-Shloshet Alafim Niftzeu, Tesha Nehergu" (About 3000 were injured, 9 killed," *Ynet*, 17.09.2024, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/byznlmdt; Reuters, "A Riddle Wrapped in a Pager: What We Know About the Hezbollah Beeper Blasts," 17 Sept 2025, www.timesofisrael.com/a-riddle-wrapped-in-a-mystery-inside-a-pager-what-we-know-about-the-hezbollah-beeper-blasts.

that wiped out most of Hezbollah's arsenal of missiles[5] and the top command of the organization's elite offensive force, Redwan.[6] Hezbollah never recovered the tactical ability to mount an overwhelming rocket attack; at a stroke Israel reduced it from a strategic threat to a (rather considerable) nuisance.

The brilliant performance of Israel's intelligence services and air force were unmatched by its ground forces. The IDF's high command employed the ground forces in a manner that indicated failure to appreciate the operational potential produced by the intelligence services and the air force.

Everything Israel did in the ground war against Hezbollah was slow. Ground operations did not begin until September 30th, nearly two weeks after the beeper operation and ten days after the air force decapitated the command structure of the Redwan force.[7] While air operations against Hizbullah continued, precious time was allowed Hizbullah to reconstitute part of its command structure.

Far from conducting an integrated campaign against the core of Hizbullah's power, Israel's air force and ground forces conducted two separate and unconnected campaigns. The IDF confined its ground action to the area adjacent to the Israeli-Lebanese border, for the most part penetrating no more than five kilometers into Lebanese territory.[8] Israel failed to come to grips with Hizbullah's main ground forces, deployed south and north of the Litani river.[9] These remained unfought and, though disorganized and to an extent demoralized, remain largely intact. Given time, they will recover

[5] Times of Israel, "Airstrikes on Hezbollah over last day most extensive ever carried out by IAF," 24 Sept. 2024, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/airstrikes-on-hezbollah-over-last-day-most-extensive-ever-carried-out-by-iaf-senior-officer/

[6] Itai Blumental, Ro'i Keis and Chen Biar, "Zahal Measher She-Hisel et Zameret Koah Redwan shel Hezbollah" (IDF confirms it has eliminated the leadership of Hizbullah's 'Redwan force''''), *Kan 11*, 21.09.2025, https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan-news/defense/802661/

[7] Emanuel Fabian, Jacob Magid et al., "Israel sends ground forces into South Lebanon to attack Hezbollah sites near border," *Times of Israel*, 1 Oct. 2024, https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-announces-launch-of-limited-ground-raids-of-hezbollah-sites-across-lebanon-border/

[8] Ibid.

[9] Private communications regarding briefing provided to reserve officers and NCOs on the eve of Israel's invasion of Southern Lebanon, 30 September 2024.

their fighting edge.[10] A more immediate cost of Israel's failure to remove the bulk of Hizbullah's ground forces from the board is that the Lebanese state is currently proving unable to assert its authority over the organization, which retains the ability to resist any such attempt by force.

The operational use of maneuver would have entailed IDF ground forces crossing into Lebanon no more than a day or two after the elimination of the Redwan force's high command and penetrating at least to the line of the Zahrani River or, as Dr. Hanan Shai has suggested,[11] to the Beirut-Damascus highway, in a matter of days. This would have trapped most of Hezbollah's ground forces between the border and Israel's advance forces and facilitated their rapid elimination.

Once Hizbullah missed the opportunity upon the outbreak of war to launch an offensive against Israel's northern border, its strategy was to survive as a force in being, while maintaining its rocket arsenal as a strategic threat against Israel. There is no question that the aerial and intelligence component of Israel's campaign undermined the latter part of Hezbollah's strategy. The lack of an effective ground offensive to surround, cut off and eliminate Hizbullah's main ground forces meant that the most essential part of Hezbollah's strategy remained untouched: the determination to remain a force in being and survive to fight another day.

2. The failure to achieve decisive military results against Hamas. In fighting Hamas, Israel displaced the great majority of the population of Gaza. It inflicted many tens of thousands of casualties upon Hamas' forces. Nevertheless, at the end of two years' fighting and many casualties the IDF at this writing appears no closer to a decisive victory than in October 2023. Up till January 2025 the IDF's failure to achieve a decisive victory against Hamas might have been attributed to the obstacles the Biden administration

[10] Brian Carter, "Hizbullah's Military Forces are Failing in Lebanon," Institute for the Study of War, Oct.28 2024, https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/hezbollah%E2%80%99s-military-forces-are-failing-lebanon

[11] Personal communication to the author

placed in its way, but no such excuse exists for the subsequent months of fighting.

Hamas is incapable of inflicting tactical defeat on the IDF; In parallel with Hizbullah, its main strategic goal is to remain a force in being and keep fighting. The key to victory over Hamas is to separate Hamas from the logistic oxygen that kept it alive as a fighting force, the so-called "civilian relief aid" which it stole and turned to its own purposes.

The IDF did not attempt to separate Hamas from its sources of supply during the war. Doing so would have required the IDF to take several steps it was unwilling to take: First, separate the unarmed civilian population from Hamas, concentrating it in sanctuary areas which the IDF could ensure were weapons-free, taking control of the supply and distribution of humanitarian aid to ensure that none of reached Hamas. Second, the IDF should have acted in accordance with the third operational principle enumerated above: It should have expelled Hamas permanently from every area of Gaza that the IDF succeeded in conquering, maintaining a front of combat behind which no Gazan, armed or not, was allowed to enter. Before long this would have led to the occupation by Israel of all of Gaza's territory, leaving Hamas no sanctuary from which to continue fighting. Instead, the IDF confined itself to distinct concentration areas, emerging from them to conduct "raids" against Hamas concentrations. Of course, Hamas reoccupied any territory the IDF abandoned, so that the IDF had to fight (and absorb casualties) in the same localities again and again and again.

In the Gaza theater, the IDF's failure to comprehend the need to conduct operations with celerity reached grotesque proportions. An operation that could have been completed in a matter of weeks stretched to twenty-two months, during which no decisive outcome was reached, notwithstanding the fact that such an outcome was well within the IDF's capabilities.

The Lessons the IDF Should Learn

Not every war calls for the substantive destruction of the enemy's armed forces or even of its political existence. However, Israel's wars against Hamas and Hezbollah do call for such absolute objectives, and Israel is likely to confront similar objectives in the future. To achieve such goals the IDF needs to relearn the art of strategy as well as of operational maneuver, of which it was a foremost practitioner in the early years of Israel's existence.[12] The main points to be emphasize are these:

1. Start thinking about the war by assessing the entire force the enemy can employ in it. A commander's objective in war is to plan to destroy the enemy's entire force, rendering him, as far as possible, helpless. Technical factors such as military technology, time and distance, and the relative strength of the two sides may render this goal unrealistic, or unrealistic at a certain point in time, but the intellectual exercise of preparing for war should encompass the defeat of everything the enemy can bring to the conflict.

2. Plan to use operational maneuvers to undermine the enemy's entire force structure, or as much of it as possible. The object one initially takes for ground operations should be to undermine and then eliminate the enemy's entire strategic disposition; one should think of one's objectives in terms of the entire theater of operations and not just some part of it. Practical considerations may force one to reduce one's objectives or even decide that one's approach must be defensive rather than offensive; but always think how ground operations supported other arms can achieve the maximal destruction of the enemy and the maximal occupation of territory.

   Contemporary methods of employing air power and cyber operations can disrupt enemy forces, cause them temporarily to lose coherence,

[12] Yigael Yadin and Netanel Lorch contributed appendices to an edition of B. H. Liddell-Hart's Strategy (New York: Praeger, 1955, a version of that author's *Strategy of the Indirect Approach*) based on operations against the Egyptians in Israel's war of Independence. It may be noted that there was nothing especially "indirect" in these operations, which used the art of operational maneuver as employed by competent field commanders throughout the modern history of warfare.

temporarily reduce their combat capability, but they cannot remove them permanently from the board. Only ground operations can do that.

This does not necessarily mean that it is in one's nation's interest to retain this territory after the fighting is over, but that is generally a political not military determination. Possession conveys the greatest set of options in deciding the terms on which to end a war.

3. Always bear in mind the potential political gains that strategic objectives might make possible. In Israel's wars against Iranian proxy Islamist terrorist groups, the primary objective is the military-strategic one: To eliminate or greatly degrade military threats. However, such efforts should be undertaken with potential permanent political changes in Israel's favor kept in mind; some modification of strategic plans to facilitate long-term political achievements ought to be explicitly considered. By tradition, well backed up by bitter historical experience, wars initiated by Israel whose primary objectives were political change have turned out badly.[13] The case is different if political change, actively pursued, is a byproduct of strategic victory that Israel had no choice but to seek in the first place.

Conclusion: Restoring the Art of Maneuver in the IDF

As fighting continues in Gaza and threatens to break out anew in Lebanon, it is clear that the IDF, despite its tactical superiority, failed to achieve satisfactory strategic objectives on either front. Decision depends on the IDF relearning and readopting the methods of operational maneuver regarding the destruction of enemy force which served it well in wars from 1948 to 1982. To the lessons of the latter wars should be added for the future the lessons of the aftermath of 1982 and of "Swords of Iron": An inseparable element of ground operational maneuver against a hostile guerilla force is the removal of hostile civilian populations from territory that operational considerations require one to occupy. Two years after the outbreak of war in October in October 2023, the strategic challenges of the war remain unaltered, and the war cannot end

[13] Sinai campaign, 2nd Lebanon

successfully until Israel adopts the principles of operational maneuver which remain necessary for genuine decision.