



The Occupation of Territory in War: A Diplomatic and Strategic Achievement for Israel

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The occupation and holding of territory, which used to be a central component of the IDF's war concept at all levels, became almost irrelevant during Israel's many years of fighting terrorism and guerrillas in Gaza and Lebanon. But there are three reasons why it is a big mistake to discount the value of conquered territory. First, the occupation by Israel of enemy territory (while evacuating the local population for its own protection) is considered by Israel's enemies to be a painful loss, and the possession of territory can serve as a bargaining chip in political negotiations. Second, occupation offers the IDF an asymmetric advantage, as only it can occupy territory, clear it of the enemy, and protect it from counterattack. Third, after a long period of "wars of choice" in which Israel was the strong side, we have returned to the era of "wars of no choice" in which the occupation of territory has both internal and external legitimacy. These insights should be applied to any future war in Lebanon.

Until the 1980s, the occupation of territory and transfer of the war into enemy territory for the purpose of removing the threat of invasion into Israel were central components in the IDF's perception of warfare. But combat against guerrilla warfare in the security zone in Lebanon, and against terror and guerrilla warfare in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, caused a shift in this perception. The holding of conquered territory that contained an enemy

population prepared to conduct guerrilla warfare was perceived as a liability rather than an advantage.

The transition of enemy behavior to a pattern of stand-off bombardment of Israeli territory, and the development of an Israeli response of counter-fire and active defense implemented in limited "rounds" in Gaza, almost completely removed the occupation of territory from Israeli military and public discourse. This diminished the IDF's focus on maintaining the military capability meant to implement occupation: the ground maneuver.

This trend can be seen in IDF strategic documents over the years. In the IDF Operations Concept document of Chief of Staff Dan Halutz (2006), for example, an emphasis was placed on developing the capability of operational-level fire against armored fighting vehicles as an alternative to the strategy of occupying territory when fighting enemy states. Occupation was perceived as an unacceptable burden because of the guerrilla warfare to which occupying IDF forces would be subjected.

The prolonged influence of the IDF's experience in Lebanon is evident here. In the IDF Strategic Concept document of 2015, written almost a decade after the Second Lebanon War, a return to ground maneuver capability was stressed, with two components: the "focused maneuver" against key political and authoritative centers and the "distributed maneuver" against dispersed enemy artillery units and military infrastructures. However, occupying territory to be used as a diplomatic bargaining chip was not defined as an objective.

The Victory Concept authored by Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi had three pillars: long-range fire strikes, ground maneuver, and defense. With the ground maneuver emphasizing "neutralizing capabilities" - in other words, maneuvering for the purposes of destroying specific enemy assets: artillery, combatants, and military infrastructure, but not for the purpose of occupying territory.

Israel's operations in Gaza clearly illustrate the IDF's preference for stand-off fire and defense. The offensive maneuver was activated during Operation Protective Edge only to neutralize the threat of the attack tunnels. Ever since the Second Lebanon War, the IDF has immediately withdrawn from every territory it

conquered, forfeiting any achievement provided by the occupation of territory. In all documents and operations, occupation was meant to neutralize artillery fire or tunnels but was not viewed as an objective unto itself.

This is a narrow view, as occupying territory serves multiple purposes on all levels of warfare. On the tactical level, it can be used to capture advantageous positions from the enemy. On the operational level, it can disrupt enemy formations. On the strategic level, the enemy's capital can be occupied for the purpose of regime change. On the diplomatic level, occupied territory can be a bargaining chip for negotiation.

There are three reasons why it is a serious mistake to devalue the achievement of occupying territory.

The first reason is at the diplomatic and strategic level: It's the land, stupid. Losing territory is a painful loss for Israel's enemies. Hamas in Gaza wants to "return" to Jaffa, Ashdod, Ashkelon (Majdal), and indeed the rest of the State of Israel, either through direct occupation, by exhausting Israel until it collapses, or by exerting enough political pressure to force the "right of return". Hezbollah is fighting for the Galilee foothills, and the Rashidun force wanted to conquer the Galilee. Territory remains as important to Israel's enemies as it ever was. Therefore, Israel's occupation and holding of enemy territory constitutes a serious loss for those enemies.

Holding territory is also a bargaining chip in diplomatic negotiations. This was the case with Egypt and Syria in the agreements on the separation of forces at the end of the Yom Kippur War, and later in the framework of the peace agreement with Egypt, which insisted on the complete return of Sinai.

This will always apply when Israel occupies territory. Hamas's claim that it will return the captives as long as the IDF withdraws from Gaza's population centers proves that occupied territory is once again a diplomatic bargaining chip.

The second reason is at the operational level: The occupation of territory gives the IDF a clear asymmetrical advantage. This exploits enemy vulnerabilities and maximizes the IDF's strengths. Only the IDF can occupy territory, clear it of the enemy, defend it against counterattack, use it to reduce the threat of infiltration,

and hold it as a bargaining chip for diplomatic negotiations. None of Israel's enemies can occupy territory and hold it for more than a few hours.

This asymmetry is especially important when it comes to firepower. Though the IDF is reluctant to admit this, a sort of symmetry has emerged between Israel and Hezbollah. Hezbollah has built a vast arsenal containing statistical rockets, short-range rockets, precision missiles, 120mm mortars, and drone-delivered explosives. The IDF has a highly sophisticated air force with precise intelligence-guided targeting capabilities on a world-class scale. The problem is that a symmetry has emerged. Both sides are capable of inflicting significant damage on the other, and victory in this operational space will be by points.

It has been argued for many years that occupying territory is not worth the price it will cost in terms of heavy casualties and exposure of IDF troops to guerrilla warfare. The "Iron Swords" war demonstrates that both these risks are limited in scope. It appears that with adjustments, territorial occupation can be restored during a future war in Lebanon. This can be done with relatively low attrition ratios (harder to achieve in Lebanon than in densely built Gaza) and with the evacuation of the local population from the battlefield area (easier to achieve in Lebanon than in Gaza).

Territory captured in a future war must be cleared of military infrastructure. Residents should not be allowed to return until Israel's desired diplomatic arrangement is achieved, even if this means the IDF maintains a security zone for months or years in the enemy's territory. I stress that preventing the return of the population is not for the purpose of punishing them. Rather, it is for the same reason that they were evacuated before the war: to minimize the chances of their being harmed. Territory captured during ground combat will remain largely destroyed and will lack any basic electricity or water infrastructure, and it will be filled with ruins and explosive remnants. Fighting is also likely to continue to occur in the area, even if only sporadically.

The third reason is that warfare changes constantly, both globally and regionally. Unlike advanced science, which progresses forward, the phenomenon of warfare sometimes returns to old motivations and patterns. When Israel was perceived as the stronger side against Hamas, the limitations

placed upon it were severe. The Western world expected Israel to defend its citizens solely with active defense systems and counter-fire, without resorting to ground action. In terms of internal legitimacy, the cost of occupying territory was believed to outweigh the benefits when each round of conflict ended with relatively minor damage.

But on October 7, 2023, both Israel's and the world's understanding of the conflict with Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran changed completely. In response to Hamas's brutal, genocidal massacre and mass hostage-taking, the State of Israel declared a comprehensive war. After a long period of "wars of choice" in which Israel was the stronger side, the Jewish State has returned to an era of "no-choice wars". In a comprehensive multi-front war, which will include fighting against Hezbollah and Iran and possibly other elements, Israel will have to utilize all means at its disposal to defend itself. This includes occupying and holding territory.

Occupying territory in Lebanon - for the fifth time

Without attempting to broadly speculate on how the next war in Lebanon will unfold, we will consider a situation in which Israel has decided to enter Lebanon on the ground. In such a scenario, a defensive zone would be established and held as a security belt to protect the northern border settlements from surface-to-surface fire and ground attack until a diplomatic arrangement is reached. The conquered territory would remain "sterile", with neither an enemy presence nor returned local residents, in order to protect those residents from the fighting that is likely to continue in the area as the enemy attempts to reconquer the territory or attack IDF forces.

Israel has a great deal of experience in Lebanon. During Operation Hiram in October 1948, the IDF captured 14 villages in the eastern sector. Israel withdrew half a year later as part of an agreement with the Lebanese government, but in Operation Litani in 1978, the villages were recaptured. In the First Lebanon War in 1982, they were captured a third time; in the Second Lebanon War in 2006, they were captured a fourth time. If we were to capture them a fifth time, as well as other areas along the border for a fourth time, we will need to ensure as much

as possible that that will be the last time they pose a threat to the border settlements.

The way to do this, given the history I have described, is to gain internal and international legitimacy by turning these rural areas into a security zone under Israeli control. They should remain under Israeli security control until an agreement is reached that ensures that if Israel withdraws, the areas will no longer pose a threat.

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