

The IDF Ground Operation in Lebanon — Goals, Alternatives and Consequences

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key points: Recently, the IDF began a ground operation in southern Lebanon, following the addition of "safely returning northern residents to their homes" to Israel's war objectives. In this document we analyze potential achievements of a land manoeuvre in Lebanon and alternatives implementation. Consequently, we present a preferred course of action: clearing areas controlling the border line to create a security space for Israeli settlements south of it, preventing direct fire of any kind and thwarting the possibility of a Radwan force raid on them. This is for a limited time, without creating a permanent "security zone" and as a way to restore security while generating pressure for a settlement.

In September 2024, after about a year of war where Israel's main front was the southern front, the Israeli government decided to shift the IDF's main effort to the north, while adding to the war objectives set in October 2023 (collapse of Hamas rule and destruction of its military capability; removal of the terror threat from Gaza; maximum effort to resolve the hostage issue and protect the country's borders and citizens) an additional goal - the return of northern residents to their homes.

The new Israeli approach is intended to change the equation that developed in the north, in which the exchange of fire between Israel and Hezbollah takes place below the threshold of all-out war, and therefore limited in scope. Although the IDF succeeded tactically in the defense plan in the north since October 8, and Hezbollah suffered many casualties alongside few casualties on the Israeli side, at the strategic level, Hezbollah succeeded in creating a security zone in northern Israel and 80,000 Israelis became refugees in their own country.

It should be remembered that the decision to evacuate northern residents was made under the harsh impression of the October 7 events and the fear of a similar raid by Radwan forces into Israeli territory (what Hezbollah called "the plan to conquer the Galilee"). Indeed, within days, the Northern Command created a reinforced defense array on the northern border, but on the other hand, the emptying of Israeli settlements south of the border allowed Hezbollah to fire large numbers of anti-tank missiles at empty houses, causing extensive destruction in settlements near the fence. Ministers who were party to the decision, such as (then)

War Cabinet members Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, even admitted later that it was a mistake, accompanied by a severe and unbearable strategic price. In the situation that has developed, returning northern residents to their homes depends not only on removing the threat of raids on settlements but also on neutralizing the threat of flat-trajectory fire and heavy-weight short-range rockets on the settlements. Moreover, it also requires restoring the confidence and sense of security of the residents, after a year of suffering and frustration, if they are allowed to decide to return their families close to the border line.

The ground operation was preceded by an unprecedented IDF fire strike on Hezbollah infrastructure, including (according to foreign publications) two operations of detonating cell phones and communication devices, which affected about 1,500 of the organization's operatives, according to its own admission. Meanwhile, the Air Force hit Hezbollah seniors in the heart of the Dahieh quarter, its stronghold in Beirut, and carried out numerous attacks against the organization's short and medium-range steep-trajectory fire arrays and other strategic capabilities. The peak of this attack was the bombing of the organization's headquarters in Dahieh on September 27, in which its influential leader, Hassan Nasrallah, was killed. In fact, almost all of Hezbollah's operational leadership was eliminated, and significant percentages of its capabilities were damaged. Israel will have to ensure that in any arrangement, the international presence across the border is thickened, and Israel maintains freedom of action to prevent Hezbollah's rearming with damaged capabilities and the organization's creeping back close to the border, as happened after the Second Lebanon War and contrary to UN Security Council Resolution 1701. All this will be enough, it is hoped, not only to bring the northern residents back to their homes but also to erode the most threatening part of the "ring of fire" that the "axis of resistance" seeks to create around Israel.

The operational success and Hezbollah's relatively restrained responses (as of writing this document) may increase the Israeli appetite to exploit the achievements so far to deepen the damage to the entire "axis of resistance" and even break its backbone. This desire should be examined, and at the same time, it is important to remember: Israeli security history is full of operational successes that created a feeling of "more," and also cases of difficulty in stopping in time and trying to realize the achievement through diplomatic means in order to reach an improved situation over time. This was the case after the Six-Day War, after the expulsion of Yasser Arafat and PLO members from Lebanon in September 1982, and on a much smaller scale - after Operation "Specific Gravity" in the Second Lebanon War.

It should also not be forgotten that the campaign is against the entire "axis of resistance," and its strategic goal is to create a powerful counterweight, with active U.S. support, against the "axis" and Iran at its center. The action in Lebanon is not disconnected from what Israel is doing and will do in the Gaza Zone and the overall effort to exploit operational successes to weaken and restrain the "axis" for as long as possible.

Assuming that a complete military defeat of Hezbollah and the "axis of resistance" is not possible in the immediate term (as will be analyzed in Alternative 1 below), and recognizing that long-term stay in Lebanese territory will harm the IDF and international and internal legitimacy in Israel for this stay (see analysis of Alternatives 2 and 3), we should strive for a diplomatic settlement with the United States and world countries and perhaps even with the state of Lebanon, based on the current Israeli position of strength. This is the preferred option for Israel. This document deals with alternatives for a ground move, including the one being implemented, and recommends one of them (Alternative 5) as the preferred course of action.

Essential Conditions for a Settlement

In order to restore security to the residents of the north, Israel must ensure that, under any circumstances—whether through an agreement or IDF action—the following conditions are met:

1. Hezbollah's infrastructure and weapons in the security zone—within direct range of the Israeli towns and near the border fence—must be destroyed by the IDF or under Israeli supervision within a few weeks.
2. A strengthened international presence, composed of forces committed to the settlement, must be established.
3. Israel must retain freedom of action to prevent Hezbollah from rebuilding its military capabilities near the border, as it did after the Second Lebanon War and in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

Options for a Ground Maneuver

The options are outlined according to their scope, from the most extensive to the relatively limited, in terms of the required achievement:

1. A decisive military defeat of Hezbollah—Capturing significant Lebanese territory and destroying Hezbollah's infrastructure and operatives, comparable to IDF operations vis-à-vis Hamas in Gaza.
2. Capture of territory and establishment of a security zone in southern Lebanon—reminiscent of Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon in the 1980s and 1990s.
3. A series of ground incursions, striking Hezbollah's positions in southern Lebanon, to degrade the organization's capabilities and deter it.

4. Occupation of the territory that commands the border and the creation of a **permanent** security zone to protect Israeli towns south of the border, preventing any direct fire and thwarting the Radwan Force's raid capabilities.
5. Exposure of the line of contact to neutralize the Radwan Force's raid capabilities, similar to option 4 but over a smaller area. Unlike option 4, this approach does not involve the IDF remaining in the area after the mission is completed and until a diplomatic arrangement is achieved. **This seems to be the best approximation of the current IDF ground operation as presently conducted.**

The Three Parameters for Analyzing the Options

Achieving the objectives of the war in the north—Using a ground invasion as leverage for the military defeat of Hezbollah or to achieve a better, more sustainable version of UN Resolution 1701, which pushes Hezbollah north of the Litani River and removes the threat of direct fire and raids into Israel's northern settlements.

Feasibility—This includes available personnel, order of battle, weapons (ammunition, spare parts, platforms), and the domestic and international legitimacy of Israel's actions.

Long term sustainability.

Working Assumptions Regarding the Existing Options for Deploying the IDF's Ground Forces

The IDF has been at war for about a year. Its ground forces have extensive operational experience both in the Gaza Zone and in defending the north. Israel's northern settlements have been evacuated. The IDF is deployed and prepared to defend them with three divisions, and southern Lebanon is nearly free of Hezbollah fighters due to their fear of being attacked. These three factors should facilitate the IDF's transition from defense to offense.

The Northern Command has completed extensive battle procedure for a ground maneuver in Lebanon and has a detailed plan in place. The ground units have undergone extensive training for maneuvering in Lebanon over the past few months.

The ground forces face numerous constraints. Both regular soldiers and reservists are weary after a year of continuous war. The order of battle of the IDF's ground forces is limited in scope, and there are shortages of ammunition and spare parts. These gaps are partly due to the partial embargo on Israel, which could become worse if Israel loses its current legitimacy for its actions in Lebanon.

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Israel's domestic support for a ground maneuver in the north is high after a year of a war of attrition. However, the capacity to absorb heavy casualties is limited, with over 1,500 already killed in combat in the past year. Furthermore, high-intensity combat in Lebanon will add to the ongoing fighting in Gaza and the escalating war against terrorism in Judea and Samaria.

International legitimacy for Israel's occupation of Lebanese territory for an extended period—alongside destruction and civilian deaths, in addition to continued bombing all over Lebanon—is limited compared to the war in Gaza. Unlike the Gaza Zone, many countries whose support is crucial for Israel, namely the United States and France, have a vested interest in preserving Lebanon's regime, minimizing harm to its civilian population, and preventing further destabilization. This is especially important given the upcoming US presidential elections and the already strained relations between the outgoing Biden administration (which will remain in office until January 2025) and the current Israeli government.

The residents of the north will not return home under any arrangement that fails to eliminate the threat of direct fire and invasions of their towns and villages. They must also have confidence in the IDF's long-term ability to protect them from these threats. Any diplomatic settlement will be met with skepticism, especially given past experiences.

Conclusions From the Working Assumptions

Unlike the situation with Hamas in the Gaza Zone, the IDF cannot impose a military defeat on Hezbollah by capturing extensive territory in Lebanon (at least to the outskirts of Beirut) and remaining there for a prolonged period of time. Such an action would likely erode international legitimacy, and ultimately harm domestic legitimacy, as occurred during and after the First Lebanon War.

In every option, except for the decisive military defeat of Hezbollah, there is no solution to the threat of drones and precision-guided missiles targeting Israel's home front. While these threats can be reduced during a ground invasion by continued fire strikes, they cannot be entirely eliminated.

Thus, the key achievement required from the ground invasion—necessary to reassure residents of the north that they can safely return home—is the clear removal of two primary threats: the threat of a ground incursion by Hezbollah and the threat of “close” fire from flat-trajectory weapons, anti-tank missiles, and heavy short-range rockets.

Analysis of the Options

Option 1—Decisive Military Defeat of Hezbollah

In this option, the IDF would need to capture significant portions of Lebanon as outlined in the “Big Pines” plan from the First Lebanon War and clear the area of Hezbollah’s infrastructure and operatives. Since Hezbollah is deployed across much of Lebanese territory, with two main centers located far from the border—in Beirut and in the Beqaa Valley—an extensive area, at least reaching the outskirts of Beirut, would need to be captured and held for an extended period.

In terms of achieving the objectives of war in the north, this plan would be the most effective. Israel would eliminate the strategic and tactical threat posed by the strongest tentacle of the Iranian “octopus,” restore its deterrence damaged on October 7, and enable residents to return to their homes without fear.

However, this option is unfeasible given the available regular and reservist IDF manpower and order of battle. In the First Lebanon War, the IDF entered Lebanon with eight divisions; while the historic parallel is not exact, it provides perspective on the scale of the forces required. This time, the IDF must carry out the operation with additional forces deployed already in the Gaza Zone (at least two divisions) and in Judea and Samaria (as of March 2024, 23 battalions were deployed there). The regular and reservist forces will start the maneuver in Lebanon after a year of fighting, during which over 700 soldiers have been killed and thousands injured and unable to return to service. The reservists being called up will have already served for many months during 2023 and 2024. Although there is no doubt of their motivation and recognition of the operation’s importance, it is questionable whether this can be sustained over the long run, as was the case in 1983.

In addition, the IDF is facing shortages of weaponry (platforms, parts, ammunition) needed to conduct such a war. Its international legitimacy for this action will be zero, especially as the current US administration, already delaying the supply of heavy bombs and precision munitions kits, will likely face increased pressure to withhold further support. Domestically, such a decisive move of this kind might initially enjoy legitimacy, but as time passes, casualties increase, and the operation appears to stall, public support will likely weaken, as it did during the First Lebanon War.

The only possible conclusion is that it will be impossible for Israel and the IDF to implement this option, and it should be taken off the table.

Option 2—Capture of Wide Territory and Establishment of a Security Zone in Southern Lebanon

This option has two stages: The first is the capture of wide territory, the depth of the area to be captured will be determined by tactical and operational considerations. The minimum requirement is control of an area with a direct line of sight to Israel's northern settlements or from areas where anti-tank and heavy missiles can be fired at them. This would include the removal of all Hezbollah operatives and infrastructure within that area.

The second stage is to set up a security zone, similar to the area Israel held in Lebanon in the 1990s. However, it is important to highlight two significant differences between then and now, as the term “security zone” can be misleading. From 1985 to 2000, most forces in the security zone were members of the South Lebanon Army (SLA), with a relatively limited presence of IDF troops. Today there is no SLA, meaning the IDF would have sole responsibility for maintaining the area for the medium and long term. Holding this security zone would require substantial military resources (at least at the divisional level), with reinforcement of the defensive line along the international border, while also accounting for the demands on other fronts.

More importantly, during those years, Hezbollah primarily fought the SLA and the IDF within the security zone, without focusing on it as a launchpad for attacking settlements in the Galilee. This time, however, the organization's main goal would be an incursion, however limited, into the northern towns and villages, to undermine any Israeli sense of achievement. Such incursions would force Israel to invest more forces in the security zone, dragging the IDF into a protracted conflict—“the Lebanese mud”—and once again displacing residents in the north from their homes. It is highly doubtful that the forces stationed within the security zone would be able to completely prevent this scenario.

Therefore, while this option would allow the residents of the north to return home (although it would not fully address the threat of precision-guided missiles and drones launched from deep within Lebanon), it is ultimately not practical.

Moreover, any notion of some kind of Israeli settlement on southern Lebanese territory should be completely dismissed. Such a move would be catastrophic for Israel and would accelerate its decline to the status of a “pariah state.” Therefore, it is neither feasible nor logically sound and should not be considered further.

Option 3—A Series of Ground Incursions

In this option, the IDF would carry out a series of targeted incursions into Hezbollah compounds south of the Litani River to destroy infrastructure and eliminate fighters, and then withdraw to Israel. These incursions could involve relatively large orders of battle—similar to Operation Extended Cauldron 4 in September 1972, which involved two infantry brigades (Golani and Paratroopers), an armored brigade (“Barak”), and the Engineering and Artillery forces. However, the forces would not remain in the area; they would complete their mission and then withdraw.

While this option avoids the long-term damage to legitimacy and erosion of strength associated with the previous options, it also has limitations. As seen in Gaza, incursions often have a limited effect, as the enemy can repair its infrastructure after the withdrawal. It is also uncertain whether these incursions would restore the confidence of the residents of the north to return to their homes. Hezbollah would likely respond with counterattacks, which could, in turn, lead to renewed calls for a broader operation.

Although this option is feasible in terms of manpower, order of battle, weapons, and legitimacy, it would not achieve the desired outcomes.

Option 4— Temporary Occupation of a “Tactical Strip” to Remove the Threat of Direct “Line of Sight” Fire and Radwan Raids

In the past, the IDF referred to the plan to capture territories that overlook the border as “Appropriate Deployment.” According to this plan, the IDF would capture areas north of the international border (an extended version of “Appropriate Deployment”, as Hezbollah’s current capabilities make it imperative to capture a wider area than was planned for the Galilee Division before the Second Lebanon War). This would involve destroying Hezbollah infrastructure and removing its personnel in the area, establishing a security zone to protect the Israeli towns and villages along the border. This plan addresses one of the IDF’s key challenges in defending the northern villages—the lack of defensive depth due to their proximity to the border. The parameters for the width of the zone to be captured were specified in the previous option.

This option would remove the threat of incursion and direct fire on the Israeli settlements. Although it would not remove the threat of precision-guided missiles and drones, it would allow the residents to return home. If it includes a credible threat to destroy the Shiite villages in the area (about 19) and prevent their rehabilitation, it could pressure Hezbollah to reach an arrangement.

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This option is feasible in terms of deploying forces for a limited time, weaponry, and both domestic and international legitimacy. However, this legitimacy could diminish if there is a sense that Israel intends to remain in the area for an extended period. Given these factors, Israel should pursue a diplomatic initiative to achieve an agreement, which could be called an “enhanced 1701”: pushing Hezbollah’s infrastructure and operatives north of the Litani River, deploying a strong international force—such as American and French forces—and ending the war in the north.

If the diplomatic initiative fails, Israel should avoid inadvertently creating a “security zone” with all its drawbacks. Instead, it should prepare for a limited presence in the area, minimizing exposure to Hezbollah’s guerrilla actions and fire, while adopting a policy of shooting and taking action to prevent the reconstruction of threatening infrastructure. Unlike the years before the war, this policy must be firm and consistent to prevent the gradual return of Hezbollah to the border and its unprecedented strengthening that it experienced over the past fifteen years.

Option 5—Exposure of the Line of Contact

In this option, the IDF would operate across the border to destroy the infrastructure of the Radwan Force located in dense areas adjacent to the border. As mentioned before, this seems to be the logic behind the current IDF operation. However, this option would not eliminate the threat of direct fire posed by Hezbollah. **Therefore, even though it is feasible for the IDF and the Israeli government, it is doubtful that it would give the residents of the northern communities enough sense of security to return to their homes. Thus, the objective of the operation would not be achieved.**

Conclusion and Recommendations

The situation in the north, which has developed over the past year of conflict, represents a strategic failure unprecedented in Israel’s history, despite the Northern Command’s successful defensive tactics. Israel has lost a significant portion of its territory, and its residents have become refugees within their own country. To change this grave situation, Israel added a new objective to its original five goals of war—the safe return of the residents of the north to their homes.

To achieve these goals, Israel has sought to change the existing balance with Hezbollah, through a series of escalating shocks. However, even these shocks may not suffice to end Hezbollah’s war of attrition; cessation may ultimately depend on an end to the war in Gaza.

Israel must be prepared for the moment when firing becomes less effective and then move to a ground maneuver while maintaining fire support. There are five options for the ground maneuver. Some are feasible, while others are not; some may achieve the objective, while others may not. In each option, Israel pays the price for years of limiting and neglecting its ground forces, in addition to the strain of a prolonged war in the Gaza Zone, stretching its resources—time, personnel, and weaponry.

To achieve international legitimacy for its operations and prevent the IDF from becoming entrenched in an unplanned, long-term “security zone,” the military effort must be coupled with an effort to attain a diplomatic arrangement that fundamentally alters the situation in southern Lebanon and enables residents of the north to return home. Such an arrangement, with credible terms and preparations for the “day after the war,” could even render a ground maneuver unnecessary, although the window for achieving it without such a move is very limited.

In any such arrangement, Israel must insist on the following conditions: the destruction of Hezbollah’s infrastructure close to the border under Israeli supervision; a reinforced international presence of forces from countries committed to the arrangement; and Israeli freedom of action to prevent Hezbollah from gradually returning to its former positions, with a policy of proactive fire and aggressive measures to prevent this.

Finally, after stabilizing the situation and returning to a defensive posture, Israel must enforce a clear and resolute policy to prevent the gradual return of Hezbollah to southern Lebanon, renewal of the threat, and further erosion of deterrence.