

Maneuver: “In Order To”

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In his article “Whoever Flees from Maneuver Will Not Win” (December 23, 2021), Ofer Shelah argues that maneuver (a ground offensive, in military terminology) is essential to defeat the enemy forces, maximize destruction on the enemy’s side, and ensure that the question of “who won?” does not arise. Shelah contends that the use of firepower without maneuver extends the duration of hostilities and thereby increases the damage to Israel, and that defensive achievements are insufficient for any campaign. The purpose of this article is to examine Shelah’s arguments, and in some cases to present counter-arguments.

Not a Generic Concept, Rather, Planning in a Specific Context

A military contingency plan can be the basis for analyzing a challenge and a reference for force development, but it will not be executed exactly, since at the time of its drafting it lacked a specific context. Prior to the actual use of military force, the first – and most essential – stage is to analyze the distinct strategic context in which the use of force is intended. In this particular context, it is imperative to define how the “routine period” after the hostilities should be more favorable than the “routine period” beforehand, and draw a Gantt chart that demonstrates, from the end to the beginning, how the use of force will bring about the more favorable post-hostilities “routine.” The desired objectives must be formulated in terms of strategic outputs; in other words: the benefits to the decision makers, and in their terms and perspectives, and not in terms of military inputs (such as missions, or damage to the enemy). Moreover, there must be a reasonable correlation between the anticipated strategic achievements and the anticipated cost resulting from the use of force (a constraint that does not apply to contingency plans, at least in practice).

We do not know the next particular context in which the IDF will have to fight Hezbollah, and it is therefore difficult to discuss the necessity of ground maneuver. In some cases it will be necessary, and not in others, or the anticipated cost may exceed the forecasted benefit. But it is still possible to assess two sets of parameters that are relevant to a foreseeable conflict:

- a. Changes in the theater, that in some contexts could reduce the benefits of ground maneuver;
- b. An array of possible contexts in which maneuvers are less essential and the need arises for other strategies and plans.

Note that the discussion centers on the necessity of a ground offensive that is carried out in order to achieve the objectives of the conflict, and does not deal with the question of the defense that the Northern Command must provide against the threat of Hezbollah raids, even if such (strategic) defense involves (tactical) cross-border offensive operations.

The Change: From a “Victory Photo Op” to Competition on Entry into Hostilities

The strategy Israel chose to implement in the Campaign between Wars disrupted and delayed Hezbollah’s force development plans, but did not eliminate them. Hezbollah ultimately developed high quality fire power capabilities, exceeding those of most NATO members, and with every passing day these capabilities are developed further, from high-trajectory precision weapons, to “non-parabolic” precision weapons (cruise missiles, attack UAVs, shore-to-sea missiles), to surface-to-air missiles. The struggle against Hezbollah’s acquisition of precision weaponry is not yet over, but for the purposes of this analysis, it is assumed that at this late stage Israel will not change its strategy and will not present the organization with a dilemma that forces it to reexamine its acquisition of precision weapons.

This assumption entails several implications. First, Hezbollah’s new capabilities could enable it to carry out deep precision strikes on vital Israeli assets, both civilian and military. Second, these capabilities can be operated from deep inside Lebanon and perhaps from other theaters (for example, deep inside Syria and western Iraq), i.e., from deep inside enemy territory to deep inside Israeli territory. And third, these capabilities can be used fairly quickly, with only minor preparations and redeployments.

This new reality has strategic and operational significance. Strategically, the cost of conflict has risen significantly, and for the first time effective damage can be inflicted on critical Israeli systems, requiring lengthy and expensive reconstruction. Thus the task of devising a war plan that from the perspective of the political echelon offers a reasonable correlation between the anticipated achievement and the forecasted cost is far more complex. Operationally, most of the threat to Israel comes from the high quality units located deep inside enemy territory, and not from the frontline.

The Second Lebanon War was focused on its final stage: the IDF sought "a victory photo op" with a series of moves, climaxing in Operation Change of Direction 11 (and an echo of this kind of thinking can be found in Ofer Shelah's analysis, which wants there to be no doubt over the question of "who won?"), while until the end Hezbollah sought to "win by not losing." Both sides were focused on the desire to demonstrate an advantage in the final days of the war.

But the processes of force development on both sides, and in particular the enhancement of the effectiveness of their respective firepower, could actually shift the focus of the next round of fighting to the opening phase. Both sides could inflict significant damage on the other in the first few hours, and each side might try and disrupt the other side's process of mobilization and entry into fighting. The competition over how to enter hostilities could create one of the main dilemmas of any future conflict: on one hand, the increasing cost of war will make it harder to take a decision to go to war, certainly an all-out war. On the other hand, the potential for competition over the way and conditions for starting the war, and the concern that Hezbollah might develop an approach of "use it or lose it," could create a dynamic of escalation. The strategic dynamic will seek to restrain entering into an all-out war, while the operational dynamic will seek to accelerate it.

In the changing reality described here, ground forces suffer increasingly from a crisis of relevance. In order to carry out a full-scale ground offensive, they need time to mobilize and stage regular and reserves units, and they need a minimal amount of time to carry out and complete the ground maneuvers. This minimal time is not measured in hours or a few days, but in many days and even weeks. Contrary to Shelah's claim, it is possible that the ground maneuver itself creates the minimal time framework for war, making it difficult to shorten it.

Ground forces are positioned along the border, and from there they have to maneuver linearly through the front, while the enemy's high quality echelons may be operated from a depth of tens or hundreds of kilometers. Indeed, in scenarios where Hezbollah operates from additional theaters, such depth could also include the depth of Syria, for example. In order to be relevant, ground forces must develop the capability to exert significant influence over the time (the stage of entering the war) and the space (enemy depth) that are critical to the war, and with an added marginal cost that is proportionate to the added marginal achievement they offer.

Who Is It that Wants Something from the Enemy?

When we begin to examine a distinct strategic context, perhaps the first question to ask is, which side wants to create for itself a new, more favorable strategic reality after the conflict. Often, the side that wants to get something from the enemy adopts a fundamental strategic state of offense, while the other party can afford to assume a fundamental strategic state of defense (although within it offensive operations can certainly be carried out). As a general rule, which certainly does not cover the whole range of possibilities, the cost of a fundamental strategic state of defense is lower, since its objective is more limited: preserving the existing strategic situation, rather than changing it. This distinction has been forgotten by the IDF, which went as far as forgoing the fundamental strategic state of defense in its entirety.

In a distinct context in which Israel will strive to create a new strategic reality in Lebanon, there may be justification for a ground offensive that can contribute to achievement of a specific strategic goal – if those planning the operation can establish that the anticipated benefit of the ground maneuver will exceed its anticipated cost.

And yet, in many of its conflicts over the last three decades, Israel did not seek to gain anything from its enemy, but simply to bring a swift end to hostilities Israel fell into that do not benefit it. At least some of these conflicts erupted due to a process of escalation that went out of control or to a miscalculation. In such situations it is certainly possible that it is more rational for Israel to choose a fundamental strategic state of defense and use its forces in a way that brings about a quick, low-cost end to the fighting. One who contends that in the case of hostilities that erupted due to a miscalculation or out-of-control escalation it is appropriate to define far-reaching objectives – such as reaching a decisive victory over enemy's forces – and embark on a ground offensive that requires a minimal

commitment to several weeks of fighting, during which the home front will be exposed to missile attacks, must back this argument with solid reasoning.

Other contexts, for example, could involve a complex scenario of multiple theaters, in which Lebanon is not the only or even the primary theater, where Iran might be the primary theater and Lebanon represents an attempt by Iran to distract or draw Israel to a secondary theater. In such contexts it is important to assess how wise it would be to lose degrees of freedom and commit to ground maneuvers in Lebanon, particularly when such a commitment requires not only the allocation of ground forces but also considerable aerial intelligence gathering and air support resources.

But even in contexts where Israel wants to extract something from Hezbollah and create a new strategic reality, changing circumstances may allow it do so below the threshold of war. The cost of an all-out war has become enormous for all sides; the decision to go to war is harder; and the degrees of freedom below the threshold of war may therefore be expanding. Perhaps a conflict over the issue of Hezbollah's acquisition of precision weapons, for example, could include the exchange of kinetic blows – but without escalating into all-out war. In a limited conflict, the time, cost, and resources needed for a ground offensive may also be unsuited to the limited required achievement.

In situations where Israel is trying to change the reality in Lebanon or in a campaign against the Iran-led axis, the conflict should persist until conditions become ripe for the sought-after change – even if that involves a longer time-frame during which it is possible to complete a ground offensive. In conflicts where Israel wants nothing from Hezbollah, it must strive for an immediate end to hostilities, if only to limit the damage to Israel. The time required to achieve this could be too short for ground maneuvers. Nevertheless, ground maneuvers could be a lever for forcing an end to a conflict when the conditions are ripe from Israel's perspective, so perhaps they should be prepared as soon as fighting erupts.

Conclusion: The Centrality of “In Order To”

There are specific contexts in which a broad ground offensive is in order, but it is important to guard against the desire for maneuvers come what may, and the decision must be examined in the light of the context. It is important to avoid seeing ground maneuver as part of an ethos, or to demonstrate that lessons have been learned from the mistakes of the Second Lebanon War.

Circumstances have changed substantially since 2006, and the correct solution for the Second Lebanon War is not necessarily the correct solution for the next round of fighting, whose context is yet unknown.

The most important part of any military order is the sentence following the words “in order to,” which provides a rationale for the order. The decision to carry out ground maneuvers must be taken “in order to” contribute directly to attainment of the war's objectives, in the specific strategic context in which it has erupted. The “in order to” element must clarify why reality will be more favorable following the maneuvers, from the perspective of the decision makers – and not from tactical or operational perspectives. Increasing the damage to the enemy, for example, in and of itself, is a physical-tactical gauge, but does not necessarily improve the post-conflict “routine” from the perspective of the decision makers. A plan for limited conflict or for a defensive strategy is not a plan for all-out offensive that is scaled down in real time. It is a different plan, and the IDF toolbox also needs such plans.

IDF terminality that resembles Liddell Hart's “better state of peace,” only it presumes an acceptable level of low intensity conflict, rather than peace, following the high intensity conflict.