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Mercenaries—Outsourcing—Firepower vs. Ground Maneuver

Shmuel Harlap | February 2, 2023

Every state, governed by any type of regime, faces a paradox: to fulfill its basic obligation to defend the lives of its citizens from external enemies, it puts these same citizens in danger by conscripting them into the army. In order to resolve this conundrum, the state turns to creative solutions, including the recruitment of mercenaries, security outsourcing, and use of firepower instead of maneuver. Do these responses offer a solution to the paradox?

Few people are loathed like mercenaries. Their brutality on the battlefield and the terror accompanying their work set them apart from conventional military forces. Murderousness is their art. Mercenaries resemble contract assassins but differ in terms of legality. Hitmen operate according to a criminal contract with the party commissioning the assassination. Mercenaries, on the other hand, operate through a legal contract with a state. Still, the space between mercenaries and contract assassins is indisputably filled with different shades of black. Mercenaries are often recruited from criminal elements; a timely example is Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of the Wagner Group, the Russian mercenary group, who is recruiting thousands of criminal convicts for the war in Ukraine, in return for promises of a pardon and material benefits.

The use of mercenaries is not unique to autocratic regimes. The oldest mercenary armed force is the French Foreign Legion. Established in 1831, it fought in all of France's wars and eventually became a special operations commando unit.

The United States also uses mercenary services in its wars. Blackwater, led by former Navy SEAL officer Erik Prince, is an American mercenary force that operates in Africa and the Middle East, providing military services to any state entity willing to pay its price. Evidently, the cost of Blackwater contracts to the US administration for the Iraq war exceeded a billion dollars (see Jeremy Scahill's *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army*).

What is it about mercenaries that is so compelling? First, they operate in “grey areas.” Their “dirty work” lends the employing governments benefits without forcing them to assume responsibility for unscrupulous methods. Second, on a deeper level, mercenaries help states resolve the basic contradiction in their relationship with their citizens.

The primary role of any state is to protect the lives and security of its citizens. To do this, it needs a military to defend the population against external enemies. But conscripting citizens to fight for the state puts the lives of these same citizens in danger, which goes against the state’s fundamental obligation to defend and protect them. Mercenaries thus enable states to resolve this contradiction. They voluntarily and contractually assume all risks of fighting for the state, in return for material rewards. The state, for its part, privatizes part of its security at market prices to commercial entities, whose product is warfare. Looked at in this way, the use of mercenaries is the most rational solution for protecting civilians' lives. By assuming the risks of getting wounded, captured, or killed in battle, they absolve the civilian population from the risks of fighting.

In practice, however, disregarding the morality of using mercenaries, the differences in scale and expertise of conventional modern warfare rule out recruiting mercenaries to fight state wars. The mercenary phenomenon is, therefore, the exception that proves the rule.

A more measured and realistic solution is outsourcing some or all of the state’s national security needs. Indeed, outsourcing is used by all types of regimes. Japan enjoys an American umbrella of protection thanks to its January 1960 defense agreement with the United States. The emirate of Qatar has a small, efficient army, but the United States Air Force base on its territory, largely funded by the Qataris, acts as an insurance policy against foreign aggression.

Israel is proud of its position that only the IDF defends the country and its citizens. Still, over the years, the issue of a defense pact with the United States has arisen repeatedly, along discussions of its advantages and drawbacks, in the framework of a political agreement with the Palestinians and withdrawal from the West Bank. Any such defense pact, if and when signed, would amount to outsourcing the defense of Israel.

Furthermore, for many years, Israel has partially privatized and outsourced its security in the northern theater. The liaison with the Southern Lebanese Army, led by Major Saad Haddad, is a classic example of outsourcing security. Haddad’s militia helped defend the security zone in southern Lebanon, from the April 1978

Operation Litani to the withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in 2000. Following this withdrawal, the SLA was disbanded and some of its fighters found refuge in Israel.

In the absence of a realistic possibility of privatizing and outsourcing security, or relying on the dubious services of mercenaries, a state has no choice but to recruit its own citizens to protect its existence. How can the state still take measures to protect its citizens while conscripting them? A common solution is to execute a military campaign based on firepower rather than ground maneuvers.

In Israel, hypersensitivity to loss of life, penetrating the public discourse by references to soldiers as "our boys," has led to the adoption of a defensive rather than an offensive military doctrine. The defensive doctrine hinges on two pillars: a clear preference for firepower over maneuver, and managing military operations on the axis of time rather than on the axis of space.

Military victory is traditionally achieved when enemy forces are destroyed, surrender, or retreat. Securing victory requires massive ground maneuvers, capturing territory, supply arteries, and centers of command and control. However, since the end of the Second Lebanon War in 2006, and throughout the rounds of conflict with Hamas and Islamic jihad, during the military campaigns in the Gaza Strip, Israeli governments and senior IDF generals have persistently striven for a quick ceasefire, rather than a military victory. Military victory has ceased to be an operational objective.

The renunciation of military victory and its replacement by a quest for a ceasefire, similar to the preference for firepower over maneuver and defensive over offensive strategy, seems to send a message of passivity and weakness. In fact, these practices have achieved salutary results, measured against the costs of a military victory on the ground. Israel has prudently avoided repeating a hopeless adventure in the Lebanese quagmire as well as getting suffocated in the Gazan insatiable trap.

Today, in view of the war in Ukraine and advances in military technology, the dilemmas of firepower vs. maneuver, time versus space, are exponentially sharper. As military technology continues to upgrade the lethality of long-distance fire, deploying precision-guided rockets, missiles, UAVs, and drones, Israeli governments and the IDF leadership will face complex dilemmas of rising severity.

Given potentially substantial damage to military assets and infrastructure and numerous civilian casualties, Israel will need, in future wars, to abandon its comfort zone of fire sans maneuver. Pressed to conclude the fighting quickly and resolutely, the Israeli war leadership will have to predetermine the intensity of fire

and level of maneuver, possibly revisiting the operational objective of military victory over ceasefire.

In the best of all military worlds, military victory is secured through intense fire, skillfully weaved into ground maneuvers by mercenaries. In their absence, the case for a definite military victory perpetuates the contradiction between endangering and protecting citizens' lives.