

Operation "Gideon's Chariots" – Crossing Red Lines?

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In May, the IDF launched Operation "Gideon's Chariots," aimed at achieving the war's objectives in the Gaza Strip: securing the return of the hostages and dismantling Hamas both militarily and politically. The full scope of the "Gideon's Chariots" operational plan remains unclear, and contradictions have emerged between statements made by military officials and political leaders. It is also uncertain whether there is genuine intent to carry out all phases of the operation; some of the announcements may be intended to pressure Hamas without plans for actual implementation. Nevertheless, the details that have been released--particularly statements by political figures--raise two major concerns: first, whether the operation is also intended to advance an unlawful objective beyond its stated goals; and second, whether the humanitarian plan complies with international law. This article aims to highlight problematic aspects of the plan, as reflected in political discourse, which run the risk of constituting violations of international law which could amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity.

In May, the IDF launched Operation "Gideon's Chariots," aimed at achieving the declared objectives of the war in Gaza: returning the hostages home and dismantling Hamas--militarily and politically.

According to reports, the operation, as approved by the Cabinet, consists of a military maneuver that comprises clearing the Strip of terrorist infrastructure and cells, fragmentation of the territory into controllable sectors, and expanding IDF operational control in areas of activity including "evacuation and movement" of the population from combat zones. The operation is accompanied by a humanitarian plan aimed at renewing aid to Gaza's residents through the establishment of aid centers, where assistance will be received and distributed to the population.

However, it is not entirely clear what the operational plan includes, and contradictions have emerged between statements made by military officials and political leaders. Moreover, it remains unclear to what extent there is genuine intention to implement all phases of the operation. It is possible that some announcements are designed to exert pressure on Hamas without actual intent to follow through on them. Still, the details made public--especially political leadership declarations--raise serious concerns around two central questions. First, is the operation also intended to advance an unlawful objective through internal displacement? Second, does the accompanying humanitarian plan meet the requirements of international law?

This article seeks to warn against problematic elements in the plan, stemming from statements by political officials, which may constitute violations of international law and even amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

"Evacuation and Movement" of Civilian Population

Evacuating civilians from combat zones is lawful, provided it is meant to protect them during necessary military operations, and as long as the evacuation is temporary, and conducted, as the extent possible, through accessible routes leading to safer areas. It is prohibited to forcibly evacuate civilians against their will. Throughout the war, the IDF has issued evacuation notices from specific combat zones in Gaza to minimize civilian harm.

According to reports, Operation "Gideon's Chariots" involves an especially wide-scale evacuation of large portions of Gaza's population, which totals approximately two million people, from around 70% of the territory into designated zones. However, no clear indication has been given that the evacuation is temporary or that civilians will be allowed to return to their homes once the operation ends. On the contrary, political leaders have linked the operation to advancing a policy of "voluntary emigration." For example, the Prime Minister has referred to the massive demolition of homes, which would prevent return and compel residents to emigrate.

The vast scale of evacuation, crowding the population into limited areas with unclear humanitarian provision, the lack of assurances regarding the temporary nature of the move, and political rhetoric about "voluntary emigration"-- enhance suspicion that the evacuation and concentration of the population might not merely serve operational purposes, but rather is an end unto itself. Mass evacuation designed to forcibly push civilians out of the Strip is unlawful--even if it aims to protect them from combat zones.

Widespread and planned forced displacement may fall under the definition of ethnic cleansing, which is a crime against humanity, and may potentially be interpreted by critics as the deliberate infliction of conditions calculated to bring about physical destruction, which falls under the definition of genocide--even though Israel is not committing genocide.

Addressing Humanitarian Needs

The humanitarian plan accompanying the military maneuver includes a new mechanism for receiving and distributing aid, designed to prevent it from reaching Hamas or other terror organizations. The aid will be managed via the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) and private American companies, with backing from countries and philanthropic organizations.

According to the published plan, four Secure Distribution Sites--mostly in southern Gaza--will be established. These centers, run by American companies, will receive and distribute aid to the population. The IDF will secure the surrounding area without being physically present or involved in the aid distribution. Each site is meant to serve up to 300,000 people, with a total initial reach of 1.2 million. The plan is to expand aid to service up to two million people. Families will receive one weekly aid package containing basic food items. Distribution will be continuous to prevent overcrowding at the aid sites.

This limited and focused model, which differs from the broader system used thus far--both in scope and in diversity of aid, raises concerns that the plan might not adequately meet the population's humanitarian needs.

First, the aid is described as a limited weekly food package per household. It is unclear how other essential needs, such as medical supplies, treatment for vulnerable populations unable to reach aid centers, or support for those who remain in combat zones, will be addressed. It also fails to clarify how critical services like hospital and clinic operations will be sustained.

Second, concentrating vast populations in small areas necessitates appropriate sanitation and medical infrastructure. Without such infrastructure, especially after nearly two years of war, the result may be severe shortages, overcrowding, looting, violence, disease, and a rise in mortality.

If the plan fails to meet the required humanitarian threshold to ensure the population's survival, it could amount to a war crime or even crimes against humanity. The plan appears to be evolving during implementation. One can only hope that these concerns are being addressed. If appropriate solutions are being put in place, they should be publicly clarified.

IDF Control Over Parts of the Gaza Strip

Another aspect of the operation involves implications of the IDF's planned "operational control" over territory.

Until now, IDF's activity has been based on targeted incursions, followed by withdrawals, leaving Hamas with some residual military and governing power. The current operation envisions deeper military engagement across Gaza, accompanied by full evacuation of civilians, combat against terrorists, and continued IDF presence to prevent Hamas from returning or regrouping.

While the military refers to this as "operational control," political figures have spoken of longer-term domination of the entire Strip.

Occupation of territory during war is not illegal per se and is recognized under the laws of armed conflict. However, it entails significant obligations toward the civilian population. Effective control is the test for determining whether a territory is under military occupation. A significant and stable IDF presence in parts of Gaza that denies Hamas authority would constitute such control, even if it does not cover the entire Strip.

Accordingly, Israel would assume the full responsibility of an occupying power over the areas it controls, including security, public order, healthcare, education, welfare, employment, and the active provision of food, water, medicine, and even electricity. The broader the control, the broader the obligations. These obligations apply even if Israel does not declare intention to govern or to exercise actual authority.

Conclusion and Implications

The IDF is waging a difficult war with major operational challenges. Fighting an enemy embedded in the civilian population, operating from hospitals and refugee camps, and using innocent civilians as human shields, inevitably leads to civilian harm. The laws of war recognize this complexity and allow for achieving military objectives while respecting legal constraints.

Israel has a legitimate goal of defeating Hamas and preventing it from monopolizing aid distribution. Nonetheless, this does not exempt Israel from its humanitarian obligations

toward Gaza's civilians. Even in war against a brutal enemy--and without forgetting the horrors of October 7 and the continued captivity of hostages--**there are red lines.**

Forced displacement of civilians with the intent of driving them out of Gaza is one such red line. Depriving civilians of life-sustaining necessities and crowding them into areas that lack basic living conditions is another.

If the political echelon instructs the military to carry out severe crimes, these are **illegal orders** that IDF commanders are duty-bound to disobey.

If the actual operational plans being implemented differ significantly from political rhetoric and address the concerns raised here, military leaders should make **clear public statements** to that effect - including references to moral dimensions.

Beyond the legal and moral considerations, actual or perceived implementation of illegal actions has **grave consequences for Israel's international standing.**

Israel is facing ongoing investigation at the International Criminal Court (ICC), with additional threats of criminal proceedings against its officials worldwide. If manifestly illegal orders are carried out, even if they originate from the political echelon, commanders and soldiers could be held personally accountable. Even the appearance of compliance with illegal orders could expose them to prosecution.

Furthermore, steps are already being taken to **isolate Israel diplomatically.** Even countries that supported Israel during the war are distancing themselves. This trend could worsen. An isolated Israel is a weaker Israel, less capable of facing Hamas and other enemies. Thus, illegal actions promoted by the government, at least rhetorically, might ultimately **strengthen Hamas** at Israel's expense. If such rhetoric is merely performative, its **diplomatic damage outweighs any tactical benefit.** If such statements are driven by domestic political considerations, they should be set aside in favor of Israel's national interest.

In a deeply complex war, the IDF is striving to uphold the **values on which the State of Israel was founded.** The political leadership must not impose illegal tasks that endanger soldiers and commanders and undermine Israel's identity as a **Jewish and democratic state.** Concern for democracy often focuses on internal threats, but **immoral and illegal conduct toward Palestinians in Gaza is no less corrosive** to Israel's democratic and Jewish essence.

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