

# DEFENSIBLE BORDERS FOR ISRAEL

AFTER THE **OCTOBER 7<sup>TH</sup>** INVASION

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## INTRODUCTION

# **Defensible Borders after October 7: Topographical Security along the Judea and Samaria Mountain Ridge, Buffer Zones and Demilitarization over Israel's Northern and Southern Borders**

*Dr. Dan Diker and Brig.-Gen. (res.) Yossi Kuperwasser*

Since Israel's victory in the Six-Day War of 1967 opposite four Arab armies, Israel's doctrine of defensible borders has evolved. Driven by the vision and influence of former Foreign Minister Yigal Allon, Israel's defensible borders doctrine addressed its pre-war vulnerabilities to the East and its narrow coastal plain to the West, along the Mediterranean Sea. Israel's lightning victory in the Six-Day War resulted in both topographical advantage and strategic depth opposite Jordan to the East and Syria to the North, through the newly conquered Golan Heights. This newfound strategic advantage would protect Israel's main transportation arteries and its large coastal cities, from Ashdod in the South to Haifa in the North, where roughly 70% of Israel's population lives and about 80% of its industry is located.

Over the course of the last half-century, and particularly since Hamas's October 7, 2023, invasion, massacre, and abduction of hundreds of innocent civilians, Israel's security concept has undergone a fundamental shift. The horrors that Israel experienced on that fateful day were part of a larger Iranian regime strategy that sought to dissect the country in half, by the Iranian proxy Hamas in the South and by its Hizbullah proxy in the North. The lessons of October 7 underscored the essential importance of protecting all of Israel's borders by demilitarizing the territory beyond the border, creating broad buffer zones, enabling Israel's control, monitoring mechanisms, with strategic depth and maneuverability. This reflects the importance of expanding the defensible borders doctrine to effectively defend Israel from the East, the South, and the North.

In the South, establishing a buffer zone and demilitarized belt inside the Gaza Strip under Israeli control, including along the border between Gaza and Egypt, is essential to establish minimal strategic depth to prevent a repetition of Hamas's October 7 invasion. Before the attack, the lack of strategic depth between Israel's Gaza-envelope communities and the Gaza Strip rendered them virtually defenseless against a mass terror assault. Moreover, the porousness of the Gaza-Egyptian border, where tons of weapons, ammunition, and contraband were smuggled to Hamas, reflects similar strategic and existential vulnerabilities.

In the North, Israel has faced ongoing threats of Hizbullah terrorist infiltration through the Lebanon-Israel border, where the group has burrowed tunnels. On the Syrian-Israeli border, the collapse of Syria's Assad regime and the ascendance of competing jihadi groups pose an additional threat to Israel. Radical Islamist militias have threatened to invade Israel and Israeli military positions near the Golan Heights. These threats require Israel to establish buffer and demilitarized zones of approximately 15–20 kilometers beyond the border with Syria. IDF presence on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, including Mount Hermon towards Damascus, has created that buffer zone.

In Lebanon, too, Israel has established a buffer and demilitarized zone of a few kilometers. These areas must extend at least to the Litani River and, in certain places, beyond it to prevent hostile direct fire at Israeli communities and the threat of invasion. Israel learned painful lessons from its unilateral withdrawal in 2000, given the fragility of the country's truncated borders. Israel will always need to defend itself from ongoing threats from jihadi groups, whether Iran-backed Shiite Hizbullah or radical Sunni terrorists. Buffer zones will anchor, stabilize, and secure the fledgling anti-Hizbullah government, bolstering their efforts in demanding that Hizbullah and other terrorist actors disarm. Demilitarization and buffer zones provide a security advantage to Israel and other regional ethnic minorities, such as the Druze and Kurds in Syria.

Opposite Egypt, Israel should seek a full demilitarization of the Sinai approaches to Gaza, as set in the 1979 Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty's military annex.

From an international perspective, defensible borders for Israel also constitute a vital condition for the U.S. administration's "America First" policy in the Middle East. Safeguarding these borders is a shared interest for Israel and the United States, which seeks to ensure regional stability, enabling economic prosperity in cooperation with leading states such as Saudi Arabia.

Additionally, defensible borders in Judea and Samaria, particularly securing and holding the Jordan Rift Valley and the Judea-Samaria hill ridge, constitute unconditional security requirements for any prospective Palestinian entity there. Israel must also make sure that the Palestinian Authority areas are not used to amass terror groups, especially in the refugee camps.

For any possible IDF redeployment to new security lines, Israel requires the reliable verification and well-monitored disarmament and the dismantlement of Iran's proxy Hizbullah and other Islamist terrorist groups in Lebanon and Syria, and of Hamas in Gaza. These unconditional security prerequisites would run in parallel with new border security arrangements in cooperation with neighboring state military forces that could ultimately replace Israeli security presence. Particularly after the atrocities of October 7, and ongoing Iranian regime pressure on the United States to drive Israel defense forces from its vital security positions in Southern Lebanon, establishing Israel's defensible borders in the South, North, and East constitutes an existential security requirement and a critical cornerstone of a potentially stabilized secure and prosperous Middle East region.



# Defensible Borders for Israel: From Historical Imperative to Post-October 7 Existential Necessity

*Dr. Dan Diker*

For nearly six decades, Israel's quest for defensible borders has been driven by its basic right as a sovereign state-member of the international community to defend itself, by strategic necessity, military and diplomatic achievements, all enshrined in internationally acknowledged and recognized instruments of law. However, Hamas's October 7, 2023, border invasion, massacre, and kidnapping operation, followed by the ensuing war and its international repercussions, shattered the defense assumptions that had governed Israel's national security concept. They brought about the need to fundamentally expand Israel's defensible borders doctrine. Israel's military achievements in the 1967 and 1973 wars with the concomitant international acknowledgment in United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), had provided territorial advantage, enabling Israel to control its borders and coastal plain from the east.

However, following Hamas's October 7 invasion and subsequent Hizbullah attacks that threatened Israel's very existence as a sovereign state, Israel requires a strategic framework that mandates demilitarized buffer zones across Israel's southern and northern peripheries.

## The Diplomatic Foundation: UNSC Resolution 242

UN Security Council Resolution 242, unanimously adopted in November 1967, deliberately refrained from calling upon Israel to withdraw from all the territories it captured in the Six-Day War against four Arab armies. The resolution's carefully crafted language—withdrawal “from territories” rather than “from *the* territories”—reflected intensive diplomatic consultations among the Security Council's

Permanent Members. As British Ambassador Lord Caradon later acknowledged in a PBS television interview, “We did not say there should be a withdrawal to the ‘67 line.”<sup>1</sup> That was a position shared by U.S. Ambassador Arthur Goldberg, who asserted that the cease-fire lines of 1949 were temporary armistice lines, not meant to be permanent borders, and would leave Israel with insecure boundaries if established.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, UNSC Resolution 242’s operative clause calling for “secure and recognized boundaries” reflected the Security Council’s recognition that Israel’s pre-1967 armistice lines, including the mere nine-mile width at the country’s narrow waist, were indefensible. Moreover, they were temporary military demarcation lines, not international borders. Former U.S. Undersecretary of State Eugene Rostow, a central figure in the passage of UNSC 242, argued that the resolution did not require Israeli withdrawal in advance of negotiated peace terms establishing “secure and recognized boundaries.”<sup>3</sup> Security Council resolution 338, following the 1973 Yom Kippur war, affirmed the implementation of Resolution 242 and its call for secure and recognized boundaries in the context of a just and durable peace.

Successive U.S. administrations recognized the defensible borders framework. In June 1967, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) General Earle Wheeler concluded that “from a strictly military point of view, Israel would require the retention of some captured Arab territory in order to provide militarily defensible borders.” Regarding Judea and Samaria, the JCS recommended “a boundary along the commanding terrain overlooking the Jordan River.”<sup>4</sup>

This American commitment reached its most explicit formulation in President George W. Bush’s April 14, 2004, letter to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon: “The United States reiterates its steadfast commitment to Israel’s security, including secure and defensible borders.”<sup>5</sup> Both the U.S. House and Senate adopted resolutions supporting the Bush letter with overwhelming bipartisan majorities, including then-Senators Hillary Clinton and Joseph Biden. These were formal commitments incorporated into every subsequent Israeli-Arab peace treaty and diplomatic framework.

## **The Rabin Legacy and Strategic Continuity**

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s final Knesset address in October 1995 articulated the Israeli consensus on defensible borders. Speaking during Knesset deliberations over the Oslo Interim Accords and concluding the Israel-Jordan peace treaty, Rabin declared: “The borders of the State of Israel will be beyond the lines which existed before the Six-Day War. We will not return to the 4 June 1967 lines.”<sup>6</sup>

Rabin specified that “the security border of Israel will be located in the Jordan Valley, in the broadest meaning of that term,” emphasizing retention of “a united Jerusalem” and the major settlement blocs.<sup>7</sup> His position reflected Israel’s fundamental vulnerabilities: gross asymmetries in standing forces compared to hostile neighbors, lack of strategic depth, and the concentration of 70 percent of

Israel's population and 80 percent of its industrial capacity in the coastal plain adjacent to the West Bank highlands.

As former UN Ambassador Dore Gold demonstrated in his comprehensive studies on defensible borders, this consensus extended across Israel's political spectrum and military leadership.<sup>8</sup> From Foreign Minister Yigal Allon's 1976 *Foreign Affairs* article, "Israel: The Case for Defensible Borders,"<sup>9</sup> through Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon's 2014 study "Israel's Critical Requirements for Defensible Borders,"<sup>10</sup> senior Israeli officials consistently maintained that topography, geography, and territorial control remained indispensable despite technological advances.

## **Defensible Borders After October 7: Shattering the Security Concept**

The October 7, 2023, Hamas invasion and assault in Southern Israel exposed the failure of Israel's prevailing security concept that deterrence and early warning alone, backed by technological superiority and limited military presence, could substitute for territorial depth and topographical advantage. The mass invasion by some 6,000 Hamas terrorists and their Gaza supporters resulted in the brutal murder and butchering of approximately 1,200 civilians and soldiers and the taking of 251 hostages, demonstrating that the 2005 Gaza disengagement model had neither deterred nor contained the enemy.

The conceptual failure was threefold. First, it assumed that a vision imbued with economic development and welfare would moderate Hamas's ideology. Second, it presumed that a limited Israeli military presence, combined with technological surveillance, could provide an adequate warning. Third, it underestimated adversaries' capabilities to prepare coordinated multi-front attacks. October 7 proved that territorial withdrawal without strategic depth and verifiable demilitarization is merely an invitation for further devastating cross-border attacks.

## **The Post October 7 Defensible Borders Doctrine: Buffer Zones and Demilitarization**

Israeli strategic thinking has now crystallized around two complementary requirements: comprehensive demilitarization and territorial buffer zones. These principles now apply not only to Israel's control of the high ground in the hills of Judea and Samaria—where Rabin's vision of Israeli control over the entire Jordan Valley, 3,200 feet below, remains essential—but today no less important opposite hostile forces in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria.

Israel's 2005 Gaza disengagement, a unilateral withdrawal from the Strip that expelled some 9,000 Israelis from their homes, resulted in a massive Hamas military buildup. Hamas systematically accumulated an arsenal exceeding 30,000 rockets,

mortars, and drones, built an underground tunnel network of some 500 kilometers, and trained forces capable of complex combined-arms operations. October 7 demonstrated that demilitarization must be absolute, verified, and maintained only through a permanent Israeli security presence.

Territorial buffer zones physically distance hostile forces from Israeli population centers and provide essential warning time, strategic depth, and freedom of maneuver. Following October 7, Israel established or expanded buffer zones across multiple fronts. In Gaza, the IDF established these zones extending up to three kilometers along the entire perimeter.

In southern Lebanon, despite UN Security Council Resolution 1701, following the 2006 Lebanon war, aimed ostensibly at establishing a Hizbullah-free zone south of the Litani River and supervised by UN forces, and in light of the abject failure of the UN to prevent the Hizbullah armed presence in southern Lebanon, Israeli forces now maintain positions several kilometers deep along critical high ground. Similarly, following the Assad regime's collapse in Syria, and after that regime had enabled increased terror activity from its territory against Israel, Israel secured the UN-mandated buffer zone on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights and established a wider, 15 to 20-kilometer demilitarized zone. This gives Israel a topographical advantage, overlooking Damascus and preventing hostile forces, including Iranian proxies, Hizbullah elements, or jihadi organizations, from positioning themselves in southern Syria.

## **Threats That Necessitate Expanded Defensible Borders**

The expanded defensible borders doctrine responds to an intensifying threat matrix. In the North, Hizbullah still boasts a considerable arsenal of rockets and missiles, far exceeding Hamas's capabilities, and has demonstrated plans to infiltrate northern Israel. Iran still seeks to establish a continuous land corridor through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon, while Turkish influence and backing for Syrian militias threaten Israel's border.

The proliferation of precision-guided munitions, combat drones, and tunnel warfare has made control of key topographic positions even more critical. Ground-based early warning systems on the Judea and Samaria mountain ridge and the Golan Heights remain essential for detecting low-flying threats. Control of the Jordan Valley is now more vital in preventing weapons smuggling and hostile force infiltration as Iran attempts to infiltrate westward.

As former IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Gadi Eisenkot and Col. (res.) Gabi Siboni wrote in their 2019 strategic guidelines, the contemporary threat map "reinforces the importance of territory," and any peace arrangement must ensure "Israel will exercise by itself absolute control over its present strategic envelope, including the

Jordan Valley.”<sup>11</sup> October 7 vindicated this assessment and demonstrated that the strategic envelope must explicitly include buffer zones across confrontation lines.

## A Call for International Recognition

The post-October 7 security environment demands renewed U.S. and international legal recognition of Israel’s requirement for expanded defense borders. The principle established in UNSC Resolution 242 and reaffirmed in President George W. Bush’s 2004 letter to former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon—that Israel is entitled to secure and recognized boundaries different from the 1967 lines—must now extend to encompass buffer zones and demilitarization arrangements across Israel’s southern and northern borders. Ambassador Alan Baker, a longtime legal advisor to Israel’s foreign ministry, noted that Israel maintains the full legal right and requirement to guarantee its security by all means as long as the threat to its sovereignty remains active. This international legal principle remains all the more applicable, essential, and justified today regarding buffer and demilitarization security in Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza as long as threats persist.

The historical record speaks for itself. Every territorial withdrawal Israel has undertaken—Southern Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005—resulted in hostile forces filling the territorial vacuum, and embedding themselves along Israel’s borders, leading to additional cross-border attacks. As October 7 tragically confirmed, Israel’s insistence on defensible borders, supervised and monitored demilitarization, buffer zones, and the presence of Israeli forces to monitor and guarantee security cannot be seen to be an obstacle to peace. To the contrary, it is a prerequisite for any hope of regional stabilization and an essential requirement to ensure Israel’s justified and proven right to ensure its security in accordance with its internationally acknowledged rights to defend itself and its people.

## Conclusion

October 7 shattered a complacent security paradigm. The *assumption* that deterrence and early warning—two iron-clad principles of Israel’s long-standing national security concept—could substitute for defensible borders rooted in strategic depth and the new principle of proactive military prevention collapsed in blood and fire. Yet, from this tragedy emerges a clarified strategic vision: defensible borders must now explicitly incorporate supervised demilitarized zones and monitored territorial buffers across all confrontation lines.

Israel’s expanded defensible borders are a military, national security, and foreign affairs necessity. Israel must prevail upon the international community to recognize that its needs for secure borders are minimal requirements for a nation that has learned, at terrible human cost, that geography, topography, and territorial depth remain the foundations of security in the Middle East’s volatile environment.

The October 7 invasion has transformed Israel's national and strategic consciousness, redefining its collective identity and security perception. That is why defensible borders securing all of Israel's fronts are existential requirements regardless of foreign political and economic pressure, global public opinion, or international NGO activism. As Israel faces Iran's continuing pursuit of nuclear weapons and regional supremacy while sponsoring jihadi terror proxies on a global scale, these vital security principles articulated by former Foreign Minister Yigal Allon and Prime Ministers Rabin, Levi Eshkol, and Benjamin Netanyahu remain essential to guarantee the continued existence of the nation-state of the Jewish people.

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### Notes

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# A Defensible Border with the Gaza Strip After October 7

*Brig.-Gen. (res.) Yossi Kuperwasser*

## Executive Summary

Israel's defense concept for Gaza failed on October 7 due to flawed intelligence, misplaced reliance on deterrence, underestimation of geographic and human factors, and failure to prevent Hamas's buildup. To establish a defensible border, Israel must shift from relying on deterrence and intelligence warnings to maintaining permanent readiness, operational control, and depth. Full control over access routes, a demilitarized buffer zone, and a constant IDF presence are essential. Settling Israelis in Gaza should be avoided. Only continuous vigilance can secure the southern border.

If one lesson is clear from Hamas's terrorist assault on October 7, 2023, it is that Israel's security concept regarding the Gaza Strip failed completely. Although the investigation into that day's events is still underway, several key failures have already emerged.

## 1. The Intelligence Failure

The first failure was conceptual.

- Intelligence assessments wrongly assumed that Hamas was deterred, incapable of a large-scale attack, and primarily focused on improving Gaza's living conditions.
- Analysts believed they could accurately gauge Hamas's intentions and capabilities.

This led to complacency and overconfidence, eroded professionalism, and resulted in an inadequate intelligence-collection plan. The defense establishment also assumed that the border fence system was sufficient to block infiltration attempts. That assumption was based on a small-scale threat scenario, not a broad, coordinated invasion targeting both civilians and military sites.

## **2. Overreliance on Deterrence**

Too much confidence was placed in deterrence. The belief was that Hamas, due to Israel's overwhelming superiority in force, technology, and intelligence, would avoid offensive actions. It was also assumed that Hamas understood its tunnels were neutralized and its rockets were ineffective against Israeli defenses.

In reality, Hamas was willing to pay a heavy price to achieve its goals. The group's cost-benefit logic was misunderstood. Fanatical organizations are not deterred by conventional measures.

## **3. Underestimating the Geostrategic and Human Terrain**

The defense posture underestimated the dangers posed by geography, population, ideology, and military conditions.

- The border's proximity to hostile population centers created vulnerability.
- Intelligence penetration was difficult.
- Defensive depth was almost nonexistent.
- Standing forces were limited.
- Civilians and bases were positioned too close to the border without proper protection.

These weaknesses existed opposite a population indoctrinated from childhood to hate Israel and glorify violence.

## **4. Failure to Prevent Hamas's Military Build-Up**

Since the 2005 disengagement, Israel failed to prevent Hamas from building military strength. Beyond enforcing a blockade, little was done to stop the manufacture of weapons, smuggling, or training. The withdrawal caused a major loss of human intelligence, weakening Israel's counterterrorism capabilities. During quiet periods, Israel rarely targeted Hamas leaders.

## 5. Building a Defensible Border

To make the Gaza border defensible, Israel must fundamentally revise its security concept. Defense should be based on potential threats, not enemy intentions. Deterrence alone cannot guarantee security.

High-quality intelligence is vital, but defense cannot rely on advanced warning. Israel must maintain constant readiness, ensuring security through uninterrupted preparedness, much as Iron Dome does.

## 6. Operational and Strategic Requirements

Israel must prevent Gaza's rearmament by controlling all access routes, including the border with Egypt, tunnels, sea, and air approaches. An IDF presence along the Philadelphi Corridor is necessary until Egypt and technology can ensure complete arms interdiction.

Israel must also retain operational freedom across Gaza to prevent regrouping and rearmament. Firepower alone is insufficient; ground maneuvering must remain an option.

A forward demilitarized buffer zone inside Gaza could help detect infiltration. Agricultural land along the border should be fenced, and movement strictly controlled. In areas near the border, residents may need to relocate or face additional barriers.

Defense in depth requires strong border fortifications, rapid-response teams in nearby communities, and improved aerial and naval defense.

## 7. The Question of Renewed Settlement

Reestablishing Israeli settlements inside Gaza would currently do more harm than good. While settlements contribute to security in other regions, under the present circumstances, they would complicate defense and should be avoided.

## Conclusion

Achieving a defensible Gaza border will require significant investment in manpower, technology, and intelligence. In a multi-front conflict, this burden is heavy but necessary.

Regardless of Hamas's status or Gaza's governance, only continuous readiness, operational control, and strategic depth can ensure a truly defensible border. This

is especially true as long as the Palestinians don't change their narrative of hatred towards Zionism and struggle against Israel until its demise.

# The Changes Required in Israel's Security Concept Following the Failures of October 7

*Brig.-Gen. (res.) Yossi Kuperwasser*

## Executive Summary

The October 7, 2023, Hamas attack and ensuing multi-front war exposed critical failures in Israel's security doctrine, particularly in early warning, deterrence, and defense. Israel's traditional four pillars—early warning, deterrence, decisive victory, and defense—proved inadequate against hybrid terror armies operating from urban and underground environments. To address these shortcomings, Israel must revise its security concept by adding a fifth pillar: prevention and suppression of enemy force build-up. This requires stronger intelligence coordination, expanded forces, and sustained cooperation with the United States to maintain freedom of action. Deterrence must account for ideologically driven adversaries, while defense strategies must ensure truly defensible borders. A decisive victory remains essential but must align with strategic and moral considerations. The updated doctrine should prepare Israel to operate across multiple arenas, strengthen resilience, and secure its long-term regional stability and survival.

Hamas's murderous terrorist attack on October 7, 2023, and the prolonged war Israel has since waged across eight arenas, shook Israel's security concept and require a review of its existing principles and the formulation of a new concept. Above all, they demonstrated how Israel's security and very existence are challenged by many of its neighbors, and how essential it is that the security concept take this fact into account, along with efforts to build a regional architecture that strengthens actors

willing to maintain peaceful relations with Israel and to reduce, as far as possible, the intensity of hatred and hostility (de-radicalization).

Until October 7, the security concept rested on an analysis of Israel's relative military, human, technological, demographic, geographic, diplomatic, and economic advantages and disadvantages in relation to its environment. It was built on four pillars: early warning, deterrence, decisive victory, and defense. A series of principles was designed to ensure those pillars were realized. These included a people's army based on compulsory service and a large reserve force; air and intelligence dominance and superiority; preservation and expansion of the qualitative edge; a commitment to defend ourselves by ourselves while maintaining strategic and operational cooperation with the United States grounded in shared values and interests; shifting the fighting to enemy territory; developing indigenous technological solutions such as missile defense; continuous learning; preventing enemy nuclearization; responding to any harm to Israeli interests; preventing force build-up through the campaign between wars (MABAM); home-front resilience; adherence to the laws of armed conflict and IDF values; and preserving international legitimacy.

On October 7, Israel failed in warning, deterrence, and defense. Despite impressive battlefield achievements, it did not succeed in defeating Hamas in Gaza, due to both the strategic complexity and the enemy's changing characteristics. In practice, rather than fighting regular armies in open battlefields, Israel was compelled to fight terror armies operating from densely populated areas and from the subterranean domain. All this was seemingly known in advance and should have required appropriate preparations and a prior reassessment of the security concept. To some extent, such a reassessment did occur and had implications for force building and employment, but these were not fully internalized across the board, particularly within the intelligence, planning, and operations bodies dealing with the Gaza Strip.

The conceptions that led up to the war, partly derived from the security concept, assumed that the defense establishment could provide timely warning on Gaza, that Israel deterred Hamas there, and that Israel could defend against any Hamas offensive and, if necessary, defeat it. They also included the assumption that because Hamas is a chronic threat with which one can live—"mowing the grass" whenever its jihadist nature sparked escalation—there was no need to act decisively to prevent its military build-up. In practice, all these assumptions proved baseless. Worse still, the clash with Hamas ignited many additional arenas at varying intensities, forcing Israel to cooperate with the United States to defend itself and take care of the Iranian threats with relative success.

Accordingly, Israel must update its security concept, including both the four pillars and the accompanying principles. First and foremost, Israel appears to need to add a new pillar: prevention and suppression of force build-up. Israel cannot allow the development of threats to its security near its borders or in the second and third rings (a nuclear program and missiles in Iran; missiles and UAVs in Yemen and

Iraq). Implementing this pillar requires cooperation and strategic understanding with the United States to guarantee freedom of action and the practical use of air and intelligence superiority.

The campaign between wars (MABAM), through which Israel sought to limit Hizbullah's build-up and, to a lesser extent, Hamas's, proved insufficient. Far more resolute measures are needed to realize this new pillar. The conditions for ending the current conflict must create an operational space that allows this pillar to be applied in all arenas. In practice, it means maintaining buffer zones controlled by the IDF in Gaza (including along the border with Egypt, to prevent arms smuggling), in Lebanon, in Syria, and in certain areas of Judea and Samaria (especially in the refugee camps).

It is no longer possible to base emergency and wartime readiness on the assumption of timely warning. The place of warning and of intelligence in general must be redefined within the security concept. Intelligence plays a crucial role in each component of the concept, but the expectation that it will provide timely warning has proven unrealistic. This means the new pillar, preventing and suppressing force build-up, is essential to reduce the likelihood of surprise attacks. It also means that Israel needs a significantly larger army than the IDF on October 7 to deploy adequate forces across all plausible theaters, according to updated reference scenarios.

Deterrence must also be updated. Until October 7, the working assumption was that an enemy familiar with the IDF's power would be deterred and prefer to avoid confrontation. The Hamas attack and ensuing war demonstrated that the willingness to sacrifice among radical Islamist actors, along with their assessment of Israel's internal weaknesses, can motivate them to attack despite the IDF's strength. Their calculations also included the costs of not acting, for example, in light of Israel-Saudi normalization.

Moreover, deterrence has proven to be a multidimensional and relative concept. An enemy may be deterred from a full-scale war with Israel, yet be less deterred by a controlled escalation focused mainly on exchanges of fire, especially if refraining would damage its standing and prestige among its target audiences. This describes Hizbullah's conduct at least until July 2024 during the period of controlled escalation. Assessing an enemy's level of deterrence is another elusive task for intelligence, one in which it also failed, and the security concept should not rely too heavily on success in this task. For this reason as well, the IDF's order of battle must be expanded.

Defense also failed on October 7. It relied excessively on the barrier system, which collapsed in an instant, while the division had no preparation for such a case. Area defense and the defense of communities and permanent bases functioned only partially. As for air defense, performance against missiles was relatively good, but gaps were revealed in countering attacking UAVs.

The conclusion is that Israel must ensure defensible borders in all sectors, with the

territorial implications that entail, and it must improve the overall defense concept and all its components. Some defensive lessons are already being implemented, including greater use of relatively older reservists for area defense. The need for defensible borders is also a clear American interest, not only because of the U.S. commitment to Israel's security but also because, in their absence, extremists are more incentivized to attack Israel. Without defensible borders, Israel becomes more sensitive to potential threats, and as a result, the likelihood of regional instability that endangers Washington's allies increases.

A decisive victory remains the most significant pillar. Israel's defense establishment demonstrated its strength in this regard during the recent war, both against immediate enemies and distant ones. At the same time, the limits of power were exposed. The IDF did not bring down Hamas, not necessarily because of military incapacity, but apparently because of a considered decision that the strategic, military, moral, and economic costs would outweigh the benefits. Yet this assessment also stemmed from a lack of resolve to create a complete change in Gaza's reality after October 7, particularly the removal of Hamas from its position of control. The required change, therefore, concerns both the scale and composition of forces, especially strengthening the ground army, as well as the command ethos.

Updating the security concept requires renewed understanding that Israel faces a significant and ongoing threat from its regional enemies and cannot afford complacency at any time. The concept must also reflect the need to operate across multiple arenas, including international legitimacy.

This brief volume presents reflections by several veterans of Israel's security-concept design on the implications of the "Iron Swords" war for that concept. Some of the military implications have already been examined by the Nagel Committee, which called for a substantial increase in the defense budget and identified key directions needed in force building. However, the scope and direction of change remain open to debate, partly professional, partly political, and, in the end, it will be the democratic decisions of the public that are implemented.

# “Defensible Borders”—What It Means: Reflections After the War

*Maj.-Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror*

## Executive Summary

Enduring security relies on strength, vigilance, and unity. Geography alone cannot ensure safety; defense must combine military readiness, intelligence dominance, and social cohesion. A credible deterrent requires constant preparedness, rapid response, and the visible ability to act decisively. Diplomatic agreements can aid stability but cannot replace self-reliant defense. In an unpredictable region shaped by shifting alliances and new technologies, national resilience and proactive prevention are essential. True security comes from anticipating threats before they emerge and sustaining the moral and material strength needed to deter aggression and protect the nation’s survival.

The phrase “defensible borders” has been used in Israel for many years to explain why Israel could not accept the 1967 lines as defensible, mainly with regard to the border with Jordan before the Six-Day War (that is, the Green Line between the West Bank and the State of Israel) and the pre-1967 border with Syria at the foot of the Syrian Golan Heights.

Before delving into detailed border options and what makes them defensible, it is worth recalling Israel’s basic strategic reality, a reality that is unlikely to change despite the many shifts that have occurred and will occur in the Middle East:

- Israel remains a small country (Iran is roughly 70 times larger in area) with a population bearing a demographic weight of about eight million Jews compared

with roughly 400 million people in the Arab League countries. Israel will remain the sole Jewish state at the United Nations facing 21 Arab states and 57 Muslim-majority states.

- The broad asymmetry facing Israel means it cannot “bring Berlin” to the Middle East; it cannot remake the region into liberal democracies or significantly reduce hatred of Israel, no matter how many wars Israel wins (and probably not even through diplomatic agreements alone). Conversely, if Israel ever loses a war, even once, that could spell the end of the Jewish national state. Therefore, after every war, however successful, Israel must begin preparing for the next one.

The Middle East will not change dramatically in the foreseeable future. It is unlikely that many new open, democratic societies will emerge there. Islam in its various forms will remain a dominant force. Regional competition for leadership, mainly from Iran and Turkey, will continue to hinge on military strength and the willingness to project force across the region. The Gulf states will use their economic power to expand influence, but they will be cautious about direct confrontations with aggressive neighbors and may seek accommodation with them, even at the cost of closer ties with states hostile to Israel, including Iran.

Therefore, Israel must understand that it is compelled to prepare for “the next war” and to rely on its own strength, even during extended periods of quiet. The sword must remain sharp and ready at all times, even when sheathed. Building Israel’s economic, social, and diplomatic strength is vital for its future and must proceed in tandem with building military strength, carefully balancing these efforts. It is essential to stabilize and strengthen Israeli society so it can withstand serious threats posed by states that reject the very existence of the Jewish national state.

Only on the basis of these two foundational understandings about Israel’s condition can one discuss various reference scenarios, knowing that Israel’s survival is not guaranteed by diplomatic agreements (which it should pursue but without accepting constraints that weaken it), but rather by objective strength and how that strength is perceived by enemies and rivals. No one truly knows how to build “conventional deterrence,” so Israel must rely on real, demonstrable power projected outward rather than on the psychological assumption called “deterrence.” Because one cannot precisely know the enemy’s deterrence status, national-security decisions must not rest on assuming deterrence exists or can be reliably altered. Deterrence can be an incidental result of correct actions and strong blows against the enemy, but whether it has been achieved, and how the enemy subjectively perceives its situation relative to Israel, is unknowable.

The concept of defense grounded in Israel’s borders is thus a vital component of its future ability to pursue those aims: to enable the society to strengthen, the economy to grow, and to demonstrate Israel’s capacity to protect itself. After the recent war, one must add and stress that border defense must make certain that no real existential danger threatens the state or its residents, both those close to

the border and those far from it. Therefore, border defense must take on renewed importance in the post-war security concept, which means clarifying the essential elements that constitute “defensible borders.”

Historically, the definition of defensible borders was largely geographic, that is, whether borders lie in terrain favorable or unfavorable for defense. For example, there were calls to move the Golan border eastward because the old Sykes-Picot-era line along the western slopes of the Golan, close to the Jordan Rift Valley and the Sea of Galilee’s shore, was topographically indefensible. The memory of the IDF’s topographic disadvantage before the Six-Day War, the difficulty of defending a low, dominated border along the Golan, embedded itself in Israeli consciousness and led to the enduring desire for a higher, easterly defensive line.

In the West Bank (Judea and Samaria), in addition to topographic disadvantage along much of the Green Line, Israel had virtually no operational depth between the West Bank and the Mediterranean. For example, the Tulkarm-Netanya sector of the country was extremely narrow, roughly 12 kilometers from the coast to the border fence, meaning a division-level offensive could reach the seacoast in under 24 hours. To create depth where none existed, Israel in practice (if not legally) moved the border away from its urban core. Yitzhak Rabin said in his last Knesset speech (October 1995) that the IDF would be deployed in any future agreement framework with the Palestinians “in the Jordan Valley in the broadest sense of the term” (my reading is that he meant up to the Allon Road, though he did not say so explicitly). He spoke not of sovereignty but of a practical reality that pushes the effective security border away from Israel’s heartland.

This logic appears in the Israel-Egypt peace treaty as well. The Sinai Peninsula separates Israel from the Suez and Egypt, and the treaty used limitations on Egyptian deployment and logistics to create an early-warning space and forward depth for Israel’s border, a buffer created by treaty limitations on Egypt’s forces across Sinai.

After the October 7 war, it is appropriate to reexamine the question of “defensible borders” to draw lessons from the conflict. Two general conclusions emerge that go beyond the Gaza envelope and should be adopted whenever Israel considers how to defend its borders.

**First conclusion:** How one prepares for defense and what forces are assigned matters, whether the border runs through terrain that is physically favorable or unfavorable. Defense is a military event with rules and principles like any other form of combat. Ignoring those principles greatly increases the chances of failure in a test, as happened in the communities around Gaza on the morning of October 7.

**Second conclusion:** Beyond correct force posture and adequate force along the borders, Israel should add substantial physical obstacles along the border to increase the cost of any attacking attempt. Those obstacles must be protected so they cannot be easily neutralized by a surprise attack. It is highly desirable that areas of buffer

or barriers be established before the obstacles to hinder access to them and to the border both in routine times and in emergencies.

On October 7, the IDF failed to meet the accepted requirements for defensive preparedness and lacked adequate obstacles or buffers, not only opposite the Gaza Strip but also regarding Hizbullah in Lebanon. Therefore, the failure was, in effect, predetermined by poor defensive preparations, regardless of the underground barrier (which was tested in a different way since Hamas did not attempt to cross the border in tunnels that morning).

**Third conclusion:** Along Israel's borders, most areas include civilian communities on or very near the border (or near IDF positions). The October 7 experience requires integrating those communities into the defense concept and defense management, as was common in the years after the state's founding. This concept was neglected over the years, as the October 7 morning made painfully clear, yet the communities still exist close to the border without adequate protection or proper integration into defense plans. Some communities were intentionally established near the border as part of the previous defensive doctrine; when that doctrine changed, necessary adjustments for the communities and their defense were not made.

**Fourth conclusion:** Israel must change its approach regarding the required combat power holding the defense lines. Because the October 7 attack occurred on a holiday, IDF forces were significantly reduced and "the IDF was in silence." That has no place in a force prepared to defend against an enemy openly intent on destroying the State of Israel. The IDF must set minimum manning levels in every sector and maintain them 365 days a year, without leniency. It must ensure that the components in the area match defense needs, for example, increasing firepower for combat support by enlarging artillery, adding armed drones, immediately deployable UAVs, and integrating reconnaissance directly with ground forces (not centralized in Tel Aviv). Firepower is central to defense capability; thus, units that generate firepower should be organic to or under the command of the regional division commander.

In general, one should not limit the definition of "defensible" to boundary placement alone. Defense is a professional challenge affected by factors beyond geography. Israel should change its approach in contact zones and treat them as combined spaces that include communities, outposts, fire assets, mobile military forces, and non-permanently inhabited agricultural lands. In light of the development of low-altitude warfare—drones, quadcopters, and personal aerial mobility seen on October 7—it will be appropriate to integrate local air-defense elements in these spaces that can operate independently without relying solely on the central air-defense elements run by the Air Force. Planning must include movement capabilities from these border areas into Israel and from Israel to these border areas to ensure tight coordination with the police, which remains responsible for the home front unless reallocated during wartime.

Regional divisions and corps should be built with a unified view of the military and

civilian space because integrating these capabilities under a single command will ensure better execution of the defense mission. Border location in geographic terms matters and Israel should strive for borders that are easier to defend, but location is not the whole story; one must address defense elements wherever the border lies.

Given these principles, what should Israel prepare for in the future and how will the war affect future threats?

Although it is too early to conclude the long-term impacts of Operation “Iron Swords,” there are important observations we can already make.

## **Future Options and Scenarios**

The key question is how the Middle East will look after the war across various theaters.

Assuming the IDF completes its missions over the coming year and Israel succeeds in reaching agreements or practical arrangements on the ground, Israel will face a different Middle East in which the principal active, central, and direct adversary is Iran, and friction on Israel’s immediate borders will be reduced.

Because of developments in Lebanon and Gaza, Iran cannot rely on proxies on Israel’s borders to wage a large, multi-front war while remaining apparently uninvolved. Iran will have to depend more on Houthi capabilities and perhaps Shiite militias in Iraq. Iran itself was badly hit by Israeli strikes during the “12-day war” and operation “Roaring Lion”/ “Epic Fury” and its nuclear program has been set back, as has some of its missile production capacity. Nevertheless, Iran remains a country with enormous destructive potential, a learning state that will challenge Israel again in military and other domains such as cyber, terrorism, espionage, and internal subversion.

The reduced immediate threat from Gaza will permit the IDF to maintain a less intense combat posture vis-à-vis large areas in Gaza. At the same time, a wide deterrence or engagement zone may extend across a vast arena from western Iraq to the Mediterranean, encompassing Syria and Lebanon together. This represents a major and positive shift compared with the threat that faced Israel before October 7.

Future threats will center on two aspects:

- The residual capabilities remaining with Hamas, even if dismantled as an organization, and the residual strike capabilities that Hizbullah retains despite the severe blow it suffered, along with both organizations’ efforts to rearm and overcome IDF countermeasures.
- Concerns regarding various Sunni countries stemming from their internal

threats, meaning the possibility of drastic change in the regimes of states with which Israel currently has agreements or may have agreements in the future. Israel must learn to act to remove threats to those countries and within them, and to prepare both ideationally and operationally for regime changes that could affect Israel, a threat likely to grow over time.

Four countries merit focused intelligence and planning attention (in no particular order): Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Turkey. Israel must study them more deeply and prepare plans for scenarios in which regimes or their attitudes toward Israel change.

## **Jordan**

Forces should focus mainly on preventing smuggling across the Jordanian border. As long as the current regime remains, a broader IDF deployment there would be a waste of resources, since Jordan is Israel's longest land border. Jordan would become an enemy or permissive to terrorism only if its regime changes.

## **Egypt**

Egypt has the largest Arab army, and its capabilities should not be underestimated. Once fighting in Gaza eases, diplomatic efforts should focus on reducing the deployment of Egyptian forces and large logistical systems in Sinai. Israel must strictly enforce the military annex to the peace treaty. The Sinai Peninsula, the land separating Israel from the Suez and Egypt, must not permit Egypt to prepare the means for an attack on Israel. This is not necessarily about Cairo's intentions since there is likely no serious faction in Egypt today desiring war with Israel, partly because such a conflict could cause total economic collapse. Rather, this is about the military potential being built in Sinai. Israel should expand intelligence collection and research on Egypt and ensure that experienced professionals think operationally about potential Egyptian scenarios. At this stage, there is no need for major changes to the Israeli border posture vis-à-vis Egypt, but contingency plans must exist.

## **Syria**

It is not yet clear what the new regime in Damascus will look like, whether jihadist elements within it will abandon an ideology hostile to Israel and attempt to reconstruct Syria as a state serving its population, or whether they will retain a hateful core and turn Syria into an active enemy. The danger increases if Syria becomes effectively a Turkish proxy as Turkey pursues neo-Ottoman aspirations. Turkish proxies or Turkish forces in Syria could deepen the risk of a direct and violent Israeli-Turkish confrontation.

A policy of caution and gravity is appropriate. Israel should maintain a broader IDF presence on the Golan while conducting real dialogue with the new regime in Damascus, which may still be fragmented and not fully in control of its territory. Israel should also consider its commitments to the Druze population, which remains an important separate matter. It is necessary to monitor Syrian developments closely; the situation there is highly fluid, and Israel may have to maintain a dual relationship with Syria—on one hand, pursuing talks about a better future, and on the other, preparing for friction including Israeli deployment and activity in parts of the Golan and preventing actions against Druze militants.

## Lebanon

Lebanon is something of a success story following the war, but continued activity beyond the border is essential to consolidate and deepen the achievements. The replacement in Syria of an Alawite regime with one hostile to Iran and Hizbullah will make rearmament of Hizbullah more difficult. Hizbullah may have to devote resources to defending its own interests against a hostile Sunni neighbor. Together with the Lebanese government, there may be pressure to disarm the organization. In the new situation, Hizbullah's threat to Israel may decline or take a new form (drones) and its weakness may increase. This could provide Israel with an opportunity to further degrade Hizbullah's strength, either directly if circumstances allow or indirectly by exerting appropriate pressure on the Lebanese government.

## Final Observations

One of the main lessons of the war concerns the root of Israel's ability to defend its borders in future defensive battles: it is crucial to prevent the formation of a large threat close to the borders even in periods of quiet. Israel must adopt an active worldview that regards preemptive operations aimed at preventing the construction of a significant threat as an essential tool of defense. The importance lies not only in the border's location and readiness along it but also in preventing the adversary's ability to create a border threat in the first place.

To realize these goals, it is vital to build intelligence systems tailored to these requirements. The enemy across the border must be understood as a military threat even when the actor is a terrorist organization. Intelligence collection and analysis must be structured accordingly. In these matters, the responsibility must lie fully with the military, which should hold exclusive authority for border defense, for managing defensive combat, and for overall preparedness.



# Defensible Borders Are an American Interest: Strategic Depth, Hybrid Warfare, and the Logic of Forward Defense After October 7

*Brig.-Gen. Ernest C. "Ernie" Audino, U.S. Army (ret.)*

Strategic depth is not a slogan. It is a function of time and distance that enhances a nation's geographic defensibility, and it does so in two concrete ways. It provides adequate reaction time between sensing a threat and acting on it. And it provides sufficient land area to deploy and array friendly forces before committing them to combat. Every serious military planner understands this. Few American politicians do.

October 7, 2023, forced the question back into the open. Without the high ground of Judea, Samaria, and the Golan Heights, Israel is incredibly narrow—too narrow to permit the swift internal deployment of overwhelming combat power against any compelling external threat. This is not a recent insight or an Israeli talking point. The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff reached exactly this conclusion in their own analysis in the late 1960s, when modern Israel was barely two decades old. Their judgment has only been reinforced by the technological developments of the intervening half-century. The terrestrial range of the weapons commonly employed today is far greater than it was 20 years ago, let alone 60. Once-adequate strategic depth is no longer adequate.

## The Litani Lesson

Consider the area south of the Litani River since the IDF's unilateral withdrawal in 2000. The river's furthest point from the Israeli border is less than 30 kilometers. That is not a vast theater. It is a thin strip of land. Yet in the 23 years between withdrawal and the October 7 war, that strip became saturated with Hizbullah

missiles, artillery, mortars, anti-tank guided missiles, rockets, and drones. The terrain, combined with modern technology, enabled deeper, more accurate strikes into Israel proper than had been possible previously. Every weapon was emplaced for one purpose: to kill Israeli civilians.

Three conclusions follow, and they are not difficult. First, it is unacceptable that non-combatants should be targeted by these weapons. Second, it is unacceptable that the Lebanese government has been unable to disarm Hizbullah. Third, it is a fantasy to think Hizbullah will disarm itself. Given these realities, re-securing this area as a buffer is therefore imperative—not optional, not negotiable, and not subject to revision by a foreign chancellery whose own borders are not exposed to a single Hizbullah rocket. Similarly, the same logic applies on the Syrian side of the Golan, where the lessons of 2000 in Lebanon and 2005 in Gaza were paid for in Israeli lives and should not have to be paid again.

## **Why Washington Misses This**

American opposition to Israel's IDF presence in Lebanon and Syria is, at root, ideological, not experiential. Most U.S. politicians lack military experience and do not understand battlefield realities. They are politicians, not colonels. They first weigh every issue in terms of political coin, whether it will gain or cost a vote, and they are uniquely vulnerable to their preferred sources of information on warfighting, because they lack the relevant experience to critically assess what they are told. Lacking relevant experience, they're vulnerable to their preferred sources, shaped by decades of orchestrated false narratives about the Israeli-Palestinian arena, Iran, and the broader Middle East. The result is that passions masquerade as reason—and they do not or cannot acknowledge it. Advocates of defensible borders face less an analytical challenge than an engagement challenge: figuring out how to reach politicians on the terrain of American interests, where their passions already lie.

## **Appeal to Self-Interest, Not Mercy**

With this in mind, the most effective way to convey to U.S. lawmakers the necessity of military buffer zones and demilitarization on Israel's exterior borders is not to appeal to American mercy. Instead, it appeals to American self-interest. President Trump's "America First" framing may be labeled arrogant by his political rivals, but it is eminently rational. The essence of rational behavior is acting in one's own interest. As unseemly as that may sound in polite company, it is how the world goes round, and it is how alliances are sustained when the rhetoric of shared values runs thin.

A related factor complicates the conversation: isolationist sentiment now occupies much of the Republican coalition and, in the Beltway, inhibits discussion of allies' security needs. Even isolationists rarely admit they'd want as many strong friends

as possible in a fight—not senior citizens, but buddies with the power and will to knock someone out. That is Israel. As General George Marshall said: You don't want to fight unless you must, but if you do, you don't want to fight alone or for long.

From an American viewpoint, Israel is on the front lines against global Islamist terror, providing a buffer. Israel's need to counter threats daily has fostered valuable experience, technology, and intelligence networks. Their lessons benefit U.S. security as well.

## **The Same Enemy in Our Own Backyard**

A similar dynamic plays out in the United States' own backyard, making the case for defensible borders relevant beyond Israel. The United States faces the same enemy, albeit from a greater distance, conducting distributed operations on non-contiguous terrain in our own hemisphere. Venezuela is the clearest illustration. Until the recent capture of Nicolas Maduro, Iran's presence there was pervasive and deliberate. Since at least 2010, Tehran has maintained a growing complement of Quds Force and Hizbullah assets on Venezuelan soil. In 2022, Tehran and Caracas began coordinating with Moscow and Beijing to establish an Iranian naval base on the Venezuelan coast. In 2023, the commander of the Iranian Navy publicly announced the regime's intention to deploy and maintain assets at the Panama Canal. For several years, Iran supplied Venezuela with drone components and assembly lines, eventually opening a dedicated factory producing three variants of the Shahed loitering attack drone—the same family of drones supplied to Venezuelan forces and to other Latin American militant groups. Shortly before Maduro fell, the two regimes had agreed to deepen nuclear cooperation.

The threat in the Western Hemisphere is not isolated. The tri-border area where Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina meet has become a narco-terror hub, and it should surprise no one that Quds Force and Hizbullah operatives are on the ground there to exploit those networks in service of Iranian interests. The same Quds personnel missioned to train, equip, and cadre terror forces in the Middle East are the same personnel missioned to do the same in Latin America, and, almost certainly, inside the United States itself. The enemy employs hybrid capabilities by design, operating in the gray zone between war and peace, between combat and crime. That ambiguity confuses lawmakers and warfighters alike and inhibits effective response. Because Tehran calculates each hybrid action to remain just below the threshold that might trigger a decisive American reply, the temptation in Washington is to deny that this is a new character of war at all.

President Trump is finally doing something about this. Re-invigorating the Monroe Doctrine and toppling Maduro were the first steps. Cuba is likely next. The second- and third-order effects for global adversaries, Iran above all, who have been quietly setting up shop near our southern border while American eyes were closed, will be considerable. Stay tuned.

## Tehran Is the Center of Gravity

What happens in Tehran does not stay in Tehran. Modern, global Islamist terrorism was born there in 1979. Islamist terrorism existed before the Islamic Revolution, but the example set by Khomeini's seizure of power, combined with the regime's explicit doctrine of exporting jihad, inspired and underwrote campaigns of terror worldwide. Tehran is now the global patron and center of gravity for these movements. Their dependency on that patron is also their vulnerability.

Eliminating the center of gravity makes its operations—including those in Latin America—untenable. Israel's proximity, will, and capability make it indispensable for any effort to destroy that center. Whenever Americans choose to target Iran's regime, Israeli participation will be essential. The reverse is also true: a secure Israel within defensible borders is the platform from which this work continues.

## The Floor of a Serious Strategy

Defensible borders, buffer zones, and demilitarization on Israel's northern and southern frontiers are not maximalist demands. They are the minimum required for a small state to survive in a hostile neighborhood, and the precondition for any lasting peace. The military center of gravity in any democracy is almost always the support of its domestic population. If Americans want a willing and capable ally in Israel—and it is increasingly clear that many of our European allies are no longer willing or capable—if we want a partner who can go shoulder-to-shoulder with us and deliver a punch, we need to understand that sufficient strategic depth is necessary to secure the Israeli population. That is not charity. It is American interest, plainly stated.

# Defensible Borders Are the Floor, Not the Ceiling: An American Commander's Case for Israeli Strategic Depth After October 7

*Gen. Charles F. "Chuck" Wald, USAF (ret.)*

Hamas's massacre in Israel's southern communities on October 7, 2023, settled an old strategic argument. Israel, about the size of Maryland, is bordered almost entirely by adversaries intent on its destruction. Defending Israel requires strategic depth. The country lacked buffers in Gaza, southern Lebanon, and on the Syrian Golan front. The result was the worst single day for Jews since the Holocaust. Hizbullah also attacked from the north, and with better coordination from Tehran and Hamas, the disaster could have been far worse. The case for defensible borders is no longer theoretical. It is the operational lesson of an ongoing war.

Most Americans have little sense of these distances. Israel covers about 8,800 square miles, smaller than New Jersey. Its population and industry cluster on a coastal strip that, before 1967, was just nine miles wide at its narrowest. Hizbullah's estimated 150,000 to 200,000 rockets and missiles are in Lebanon, north of Israel, comparable to Northern Virginia relative to the U.S. The Iranian regime built this arsenal, armed Hamas, and has spent 40 years declaring its intent to eliminate Israel. Iran operates about 1,000 miles away—the equivalent, for Americans, of a hostile power in Havana able to strike Chicago.

Strategic depth, in this environment, is not a luxury. It is achieved simultaneously on three lines, and Israel must pursue all three. The first is physical control of key terrain that prevents an adversary from massing on the border. The second is the elimination of the near-end threat, the enemy capability that can reach out and strike. The third is layered defense: Iron Dome, David's Sling, Iron Beam, and Arrow, integrated with U.S. and allied systems. None of the three is sufficient on its own.

The first, the territorial line, is the most controversial and resource-intensive. It is also the most decisive, and it is the one that was missing on October 7.

The IDF holds vital territory about 30 kilometers north of the Israeli border in southern Lebanon, up to the Litani River. The recent discovery of more Hizbullah tunnels three to four kilometers from the border shows the scale of invasion infrastructure being built as the international community urged restraint. Israel must not withdraw from the area until the threat is clearly and consistently neutralized. The same logic applies on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, where Israeli forces now provide depth and buffer zones absent on October 7. The new Damascus leadership may be an improvement, but no responsible military assessment would advise Israeli withdrawal for that reason. The lessons of withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005 were paid for in Israeli lives. They do not need to be paid again.

A familiar argument says precision rockets, cruise missiles, and one-way attack drones make terrain obsolete. But this claim does not survive operational reality. Rockets and drones are lethal, but not war-winning. Hizbullah, Hamas, and the Iranian regime do not aim to harass Israel—they seek its elimination. That requires a ground invasion like Hamas executed in the south on October 7. Buffer zones, demilitarized areas, and topographical control prevent such invasions. Layered air defense can blunt missile barrages, but cannot stop infantry from entering through tunnels.

The recent record of American military operations reinforces the same conclusion. The Taliban were defeated in roughly five weeks after October 2001. Saddam's regular forces collapsed in three. The American error in both theaters was not in the conduct of the initial campaign. It was on the assumption that follow-on political reconstruction could remake those societies in a Western democratic image. It could not. The applicable lesson for Israel is operational, not political: defeat the adversary's capability to threaten and to invade, do not attempt to remake his worldview, and return to dismantle the capability whenever it begins to reconstitute. This is the logic the IDF has applied to Lebanon, to Gaza, and most consequentially to the Iranian regime itself.

Israel's Operation Rising Lion in June 2025 showed what that logic achieves at scale. In under two weeks, Israel crippled Iran's nuclear and ballistic-missile programs, dismantled its air defenses, decapitated command and control, and eliminated key scientific and military leaders. Israeli pilots first cleared a path for U.S. B-2 bombers at the Pentagon's request. The operation should have lasted another two or three weeks: every remaining missile, air-defense radar, IRGC headquarters, and command-and-control node should have been struck. The campaign should resume as soon as signs of reconstitution appear. The IRGC is now degraded, isolated, and bleeding cash. Its proxies are starved, its population exhausted, and the regime's grip weakened. Patience and continued pressure will finish what Rising Lion began.

Within this picture, the regional architecture matters as much as the territorial one. The Abraham Accords were the political and economic opening. The next required step is what Prime Minister Netanyahu, in his August 2024 address to a joint session of Congress, termed an Abraham Security Alliance. The word “security” distinguishes the next phase from the last. It commits the resources of partner states and the credibility of partner governments to a shared regional defense—a formal, integrated air and missile defense capability that binds Israel, the United States, and willing Gulf partners into a single architecture, with a serious ground component. The strategic conditions for such an arrangement have not been better at any point in the past quarter-century. When the air chiefs of the GCC states first met one another, during this author’s service as commander of U.S. Air Forces in the Middle East, the foundation for that architecture did not yet exist. It does now.

One element of the strategic picture remains underdeveloped: Israel’s case is not being presented effectively to the American and Western publics. Polls and direct experience show that most Americans cannot locate the Litani River on a map, envision a 30-kilometer buffer zone in a country the size of Maryland, or grasp the significance of 150,000 rockets aimed at it.

Meanwhile, adversaries with less military capability still conduct more disciplined, sustained information operations than the West’s strongest democracies. Although the IDF is the region’s most operationally proficient military by a wide margin—and arguably the world’s most precise urban warfare force—military excellence does not speak for itself. This underscores the need for a sustained, joint U.S.-Israeli strategic communications effort focused on clear, factual presentations of geography, threat, and capability. Without legitimacy abroad, even the most advanced military tools cannot be used to full effect.

This is the work the Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs undertakes in its Defensible Borders Initiative. The project does what governments rarely do well. It makes clear to Western audiences why Israel cannot be defended from within the pre-1967 lines. It shows why buffer zones in southern Lebanon and the Syrian Golan are self-protection, not aggression. It explains why a security architecture anchored by Israel and the United States serves direct U.S. strategic interests.

Israel has a right to exist. Its citizens have a right to live in safety within defensible borders. October 7 showed what happens when geography is left undefended and threats are allowed to grow. Defensible borders are not a maximalist demand or a negotiating position. They are the minimum required for a small state’s survival in a hostile neighborhood, and the precondition for any lasting peace.



# Israel's Right to Maintain and Supervise Security Zones and Demilitarized Areas as Part of its Right to Defensible Borders

*Amb. Alan Baker*

Every territorial withdrawal Israel has undertaken, whether in the Sinai following the 1956 Suez crisis, and pursuant to the 1979 Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty, in Syria in the 1974 Israel-Syria Disengagement Agreement, in Southern Lebanon in the late 1980s, and in the Gaza Strip in 2005—all have been accompanied by security and demilitarization arrangements, monitored and supervised in order to prevent hostile forces from filling the vacuum and embedding themselves along Israel's borders, resulting in territorial vulnerability and cross-border attacks.

Hence the creation of UNEF in the Sinai after the Suez Crisis in 1956 to supervise the cessation of hostilities and withdrawal of foreign forces, and UNEF II in 1973 to supervise the Israeli-Egyptian ceasefire after the Yom Kippur war, UNDOF in 1974 to maintain the ceasefire between Israel and Syria and supervise the disengagement of forces, and UNIFIL, established in 1978 and remodeled in 2006, to restore peace and security along the border between Israel and Lebanon.

These various security and demilitarization arrangements proved to be totally inadequate inasmuch as dependence on foreign forces and UN approval failed to prevent violations of the demilitarization requirements.

As October 7 tragically confirmed, both with regard to the Gaza Strip as well as Southern Lebanon, Israel's insistence on defensible borders, supervised and monitored demilitarization, and buffer zones, including the presence of Israeli forces to monitor and to guarantee security, is an indispensable component for ensuring the defensibility of Israel's borders.

As long as a real and immediate danger continues to exist along Israel's borders, and as long as Israel's security continues to face ongoing threats from neighboring territory, Israel is fully justified in insisting on security zones and demilitarized areas under its monitoring and supervision.

Insistence by Israel on such ongoing presence and supervision cannot be seen in any manner whatsoever to be an obstacle to peace.

To the contrary, it is a prerequisite for any hope of regional stabilization and an essential requirement to ensure Israel's justified and proven right to ensure its security in accordance with its internationally acknowledged rights to defend itself and its people.

# An Updated Security Doctrine

*Maj.-Gen. (res.) Giora Eiland*

## Executive Summary

The brutal terrorist attack carried out by Hamas on October 7 requires not only concrete lessons and adjustments in Israel's military force-building and border defense postures, but also an update to Israel's overall strategic concept, and to its ability to explain that concept to the international community. The purpose of this article is to outline the key principles Israel must adopt for itself, and learn to communicate effectively abroad.

## Updating Israel's Existing Security Doctrine

Israel's existing security doctrine, as formulated by the Meridor Committee and approved by Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz in 2006, consists of four pillars: early warning, deterrence, defense, and decisive victory. It is fair to say that on October 7 Israel failed in the first three pillars; as for the fourth, decisive victory, the verdict is still unknown. Clearly, Israel must ensure that such a failure never recurs, but that alone is insufficient. There is now a clear need for an additional, first-in-sequence pillar: "prevention of enemy build-up."

For decades, Israel was willing to act militarily to prevent the build-up of an enemy only when the threat involved nuclear weapons. This was the rationale behind Israel's strikes on Iraq's nuclear program (1981) and Syria's reactor (2007). Israel refrained, however, from military action to stop conventional rearmament by its adversaries, a reasonable policy as long as those adversaries were states such as Syria or Egypt. The traditional four pillars of Israel's security doctrine were sufficient

both to maintain long periods of calm and to guarantee eventual victory when wars occurred. In the cases of Egypt and Jordan, this doctrine even proved robust enough to help produce peace treaties with Israel.

But adopting the same “containment approach” toward sub-state enemies such as Hamas in Gaza and Hizbullah in Lebanon proved to be a grave mistake. In both arenas, monstrous adversaries arose. Moreover, the stronger they became militarily, the greater their willingness to go to war against Israel. Traditional deterrence factors that work against states, such as the need for international legitimacy, are far less effective against these new types of enemies.

The years 2005–2006 mark Israel’s abandonment of the principle of preventing enemy military build-up. Until the 2005 disengagement, Hamas in Gaza possessed mostly light weapons, mortars, and short-range rockets. After the Second Lebanon War, Hizbullah was severely weakened. Had Israel then applied the principle of force-build-up prevention, it would be in a far stronger position today.

The only arena in which Israel de facto implemented this principle was in Syria, not against the Syrian army itself, but against Iranian arms transfers to Hizbullah and the establishment of Iranian-backed Shiite militias modeled after Hizbullah. This campaign, the “Campaign Between the Wars” (MABAM), proved partially effective.

The implementation of the “prevention of build-up” principle could and should be applied, after the conclusion of Operation Iron Swords, to both Gaza and Hizbullah.

## **The Importance of Territorial Depth**

Throughout history, terrain has remained the most crucial factor in any military assessment. Hizbullah poses a significant threat to Israel not only because of its strength but primarily because of its proximity, enabling it to fire anti-tank missiles directly into Israeli towns. Hypothetically, if Hizbullah possessed the same capabilities but were located 1,000 kilometers away, it would constitute a far lesser threat, even though distant adversaries such as Iran or the Houthis in Yemen still pose serious challenges.

Classical defensive doctrine dictates organizing territory into three zones:

- Security zone (forward area)
- Holding zone (main defensive belt)
- Civilian rear

When attacked, the enemy may penetrate certain parts of the security zone, an area designed to “absorb” incursions. The main defensive battle takes place in the

holding zone, which, if it holds, prevents any invasion of the civilian rear, the most sensitive area.

When the IDF withdrew from Lebanon (2000) and from Gaza (2005), it effectively gave up its ability to deploy according to this accepted model. All three layers—the security zone, the holding zone, and the civilian rear—collapsed geographically into a narrow strip, in places less than a kilometer deep. The assumption that Israel could adequately defend itself without territorial depth, relying instead on intelligence, barriers, and technology, collapsed on October 7.

Israel therefore needs, along both the Gaza and Lebanon borders, and equally in the seam zone adjacent to the West Bank, to create minimum defensive depth, which must include at least some kind of security zone.

Two possible configurations exist:

- The more limited version is the establishment of a security perimeter—a strip beyond the border where no enemy military presence, overt or disguised, is allowed. This is a constrained solution, but it has the advantage of avoiding permanent Israeli presence inside enemy territory.
- The broader version involves establishing a security zone inside enemy territory. Such a zone both pushes the enemy back and provides early warning in case of invasion. In Lebanon’s case, it offers a further, critical advantage, control of commanding terrain, preventing the enemy from using those high points to fire small arms or anti-tank missiles into Israel.

## **State Responsibility and Strategic Clarity**

An equally vital strategic recalibration concerns how Israel defines its enemy. This definition shapes both Israel’s declared policy and its military responses to attacks from neighboring states and entities.

In recent conflicts, the Second Lebanon War and the current Gaza war, Israel adopted the narrative that the enemy is the sub-state terrorist organization that attacked it (Hizbullah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza). Accordingly, Israel fought those organizations and their military infrastructures while trying to avoid, as much as possible, damage to the civilian areas in which they operate, including infrastructure, logistics, and the “noncombatant” population.

This narrative aligns with international preferences, particularly those of the United States, which will likely continue pressuring Israel to maintain it. Yet, this narrative is fundamentally flawed and disconnected from reality. History shows that the gravest strategic errors often stem from adopting a false narrative.

Hizbullah, while a terrorist organization, is also a major political party with substantial representation in the Lebanese parliament. It is the principal, legitimate representative of Lebanon's Shiite population. Moreover, Lebanon's so-called "moderate" factions rely on Hizbullah's superior military power, granting it broad authority over national security. Hizbullah effectively decides whether the border with Israel remains calm or ignites. Consequently, it makes no sense to separate Hizbullah from the State of Lebanon in the context of its conflict with Israel. Israel is therefore justified in holding Lebanon as a whole responsible for security along its northern frontier.

Similarly, the link between Gaza and Hamas is absolute. Since the 2005 disengagement and Hamas's electoral victory, Gaza has become a fully-fledged state-like entity with its own foreign policy, well-armed military, and centralized governance. Hamas arose as an authentic, legitimate movement elected from within the Gazan population. After winning power, it seized all state institutions—military, civil, educational, medical, and administrative—creating complete unity between the State of Gaza, its population, and the Hamas ideology, enjoying the population's broad support. Thus, it is more accurate to view the current war as a conflict between the State of Israel and the quasi-State of Gaza, with all that this implies.

Beyond narrative correction, it is vital to recognize that a democratic state acting under international law cannot win an asymmetric war against a sub-state organization operating from within another state's territory, supported by that state's population but bearing no national or international responsibility. A state cannot prevail in a war where the enemy attacks its civilian rear while the state is expected to avoid harming the quality of life of the enemy's population.

In wars between states, the range of legitimate and effective tools is far broader, including economic, diplomatic, and civilian pressure, than in conflicts against terror organizations. For example, Hizbullah does not fear another military clash with the IDF aimed at eliminating its missile launchers, but it, and the world, does fear the destruction of Lebanese infrastructure including in Beirut.

The conclusion, therefore, is that Israel must make it clear now, to the international community, that any hostile action against Israel originating from a territory not under Israeli control, including Gaza or any other state, will be treated as an act of aggression by that state itself, which will bear full responsibility.

## **Security Implications for Judea and Samaria**

For 31 years, the "two-state solution" has been at the center of debate over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Naturally, Israel has raised security concerns and demands, which its counterparts, the Palestinians and the United States, typically answer by promising that any Palestinian state would be largely demilitarized and far weaker than Israel, implying there would be nothing to fear.

Unfortunately, there is much to fear, and three points are especially critical:

1. **Regional Environment:** Israel and any future Palestinian state would not exist in a peaceful, pastoral setting. Theoretically, if the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean could be relocated to Western Europe or Canada, the security challenges would be manageable. In reality, Israel is surrounded, within a few thousand kilometers in every direction, by actual or potential enemies. If Israel were to withdraw to the 1967 lines (with minor adjustments), the distance from Tulkarm to Netanya would be 15 kilometers, but from Tulkarm eastward for 5,000 kilometers lies a continuum of hostile or potentially hostile states and forces.
2. **Lack of Strategic Depth:** As emphasized, there can be no adequate compensation for a severe shortage of territory, particularly territorial depth. If Israel were ever to agree to a Palestinian state roughly within the 1967 framework, the enemy could fire Kornet anti-tank missiles, with an effective range of 10 kilometers, at every major road, critical site, and urban center in Israel's heartland. Unlike past demilitarization agreements, when the main threats were tanks and artillery, difficult to smuggle and conceal, it would be virtually impossible to prevent smuggling of anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles into a Palestinian state. Given the short distances and topography, such weapons could easily paralyze Israel, and no agreement or international guarantee could prevent it. Moreover, if the IDF withdrew from most or all of Judea and Samaria, thousands of armed Palestinians in Tulkarm or Qalqilya could, on a Saturday morning, breach the fence, cross Route 6, and massacre civilians in Kfar Saba and other nearby towns.
3. **The Jordan Valley Factor:** One might assume the Palestinian state could be isolated if the IDF retained control of the Jordan Valley along the Jordan River. Effective control, however, would require at least 10 kilometers of depth on average, since without minimal depth and control of the first ridgeline west of the Valley, Israeli presence would be a liability rather than an asset. This means roughly 800 square kilometers—about 12% of the West Bank—would need to remain under Israeli sovereignty, not counting a western security belt adjacent to Israel proper. It is doubtful any Arab or Palestinian party would accept this, since such a configuration would render their state a landlocked enclave surrounded by Israel on all sides. Moreover, maintaining control of the Jordan Valley would require Israel to keep at least one corridor from west to east, such as the Jerusalem-Ma'ale Adumim-northern Dead Sea axis, connecting Israel to the Valley. Thus, the Palestinian state would not only shrink in size and become an enclave, but it would also be geographically split into at least two separate parts.

## Conclusion

The events of October 7 prove that agreements, or even deterrence alone, are insufficient when dealing with non-state enemies. A Palestinian entity created

under a “two-state solution” might formally be a state, but it is naïve, and dangerous, to assume that Hamas or other jihadist groups would not seize control, just as they did in Gaza. When that happens, no agreement would be respected.