

Defensible Borders for Israel:

An Updated Response to Advocates and Skeptics

Amb. Dore Gold

Introduction by
Brig.-Gen. (res.) Yossi Kuperwasser



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Defensible Borders for Israel – What Does It Mean?

Brig.-Gen. (res.) Yossi Kuperwasser

Israel's security concerns justify its demand for defensible borders, which are the military manifestation of the reference in UN Security Council Resolution 242 to the right of Israel, as any other country, to “secure and recognized boundaries.”

As detailed in this comprehensive analysis, from a national security and military point of view, defensible borders are those that allow Israel to effectively defend itself by itself – to deter, thwart, prevent the development, and supply timely early warning against all potential military threats involving all possible dimensions. These include:

- The territorial dimension – threats from distant areas and those adjacent to Israel as well as from inside the territory Israel controls.
- The time dimension – threats that currently exist as well as those foreseen in the medium and long term.
- The military dimension – conventional and unconventional threats, terror threats of various kinds, ground operations, underground threats, aerial activity of different kinds, including planes, UAVs, drones, ballistic and cruise missiles, naval and other threats.
- Additional threats involving the cyber arena, water, and communications security.

Defensible borders do not necessarily mean that all threats can best be treated from the same line, but that all resources necessary to achieve Israel's defense requirements are within its borders. From this point of view, it is clear that the concept does not deal just with a certain outer perimeter but with the characteristics of the territory under Israel's direct

and indirect control. It has to take into account the specific topography, demography, history and political situation.

Israel has a very narrow width and a small population compared with that of its current and potential adversaries. It lacks strategic depth and its armed forces have to rely on reservists to be able to perform its mission, especially in time of war. Its most densely populated areas are very close to territories populated by people who have been exposed to ongoing hate indoctrination against it. The topography along the center of the country includes a mountain ridge that overlooks and dominates the coastal plain in the west and the very deep Jordan Valley in the east. The regimes and countries around Israel suffer from inherent instability and some of them are failed states. Some of Israel's enemies are determined to wipe it off the map. Moreover, some of these enemies, especially Iran, have vast resources and are able to acquire advanced weaponry either through arms purchases from leading arms producers or through local production. All of these components have to be taken into account while drawing Israel's defensible borders.

It is true, of course, that Israel has impressive military capabilities, but if they are not deployed in the right locations, their effectiveness may be significantly compromised. For example, Israel's military deployment has to enable it to thwart attempts to bring in weapons (including rockets and drones) and trained terrorists or foreign military forces to the Palestinian-controlled areas of the West Bank from across the Jordan River.

This mission cannot be accomplished without Israel being able to deploy its forces in areas close to the river and on the eastern slopes of the mountain ridge dominating the Jordan River valley for purposes of observation and intelligence gathering that are necessary for permanent early warning and to thwart such attempts before they cause any damage. This will allow Israel to distance its population centers and critical infrastructure from these possible threats. In addition to "boots on the ground," Israel will require full control over the airspace above the entire territory of the West Bank as well as control of the electromagnetic spectrum to guarantee that it is able to deal effectively with any threat.

This does not mean that this deployment can hermetically prevent any infiltration of the border, but it should guarantee that any attempt to cross into the territory from the east, even if it is part of multi-front hostile activities, is met by sufficient power in time to prevent any considerable damage to the security of Israel and its population, even if the early warning is not perfect. Moreover, Israeli military presence has a strategically important effect on deterrence and stabilization beyond the eastern border.

There have been various suggestions and creative ideas raised to establish a border along the 1967 lines with some local changes and to replace Israel's military presence in some of the critical areas with foreign forces or to rely on electronic detection devices alone. However, this cannot provide Israel with adequate defense. Israeli forces have to be present on the ground to take immediate action against imminent threats. Israel cannot rely on foreign forces, and detection devices can at best give some early warning or signal in real time that the border has been penetrated, but these devices cannot do much about it. The idea that Israeli intelligence collection assets will be deployed in strategically important locations but access to these locations will be through Palestinian-controlled areas, is simply not feasible.

The same is true when it comes to preventing terror and other military threats from within the territory controlled by the Palestinians. If Israel deploys its forces more or less along the '67 lines, it is not going to be able to protect its main cities and infrastructure and collect the information necessary for that purpose. Moreover, it is not going to be able to prevent significant deliveries of arms to the Palestinian-controlled territories or the local production of various weapons inside these territories.

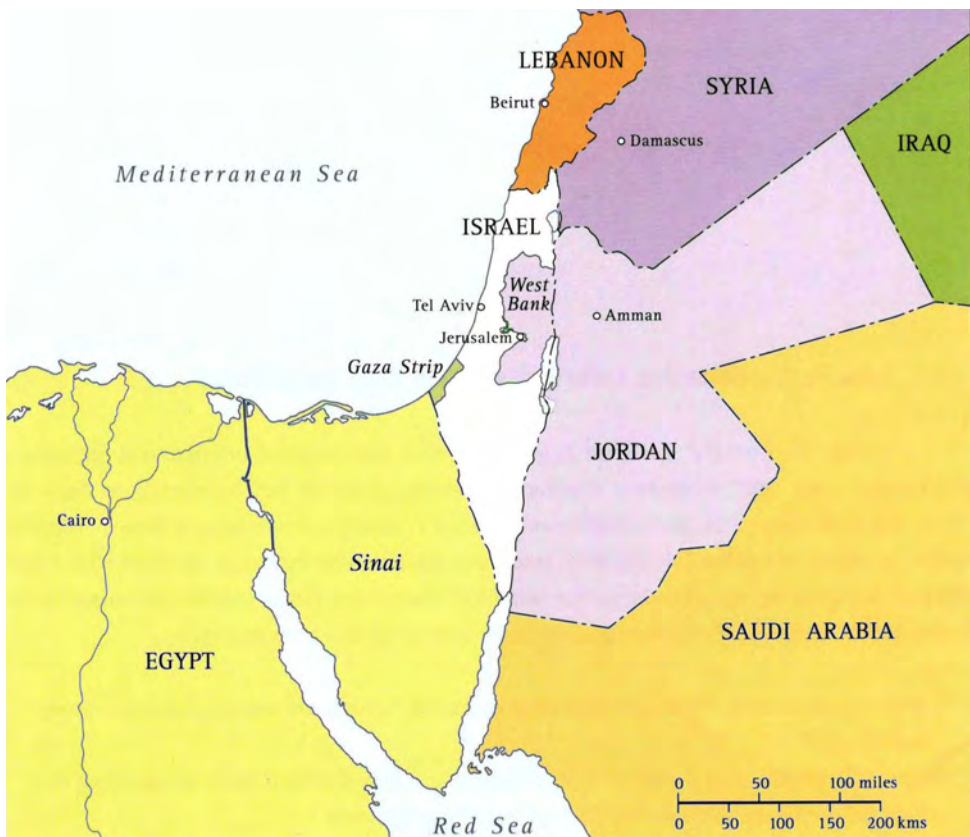
The argument that Israel's armed forces are much stronger than the Palestinians and therefore it can afford to move to less defensible borders in the context of a peace agreement – and if this agreement is violated by the Palestinians Israel can recapture the territory – is baseless too. First of all, under such conditions, the Palestinians will be able to accumulate a considerable number of arms and military capabilities before they trigger hostilities, and once they do, recapturing the territory is going

to be very costly in terms of casualties, not only to Israeli troops but also to the Israeli civilian population and critical infrastructure. Fighting a hybrid force that has both terror and conventional (and perhaps unconventional) capabilities that is fighting behind human shields is a huge challenge for every modern army. As long as many Palestinians continue to support the plan of fighting Israel in phases over time and regard the complete defeat of Zionism as their ultimate goal, any such moves that enable this are extremely irresponsible. The case of Gaza is an illuminating precedent, as are Afghanistan, Vietnam, Lebanon, Sinai, Somalia, and other arenas.

To sum up, the only border that may be regarded as defensible for the central region of the State of Israel is the Jordan Valley, with Israel maintaining military control of the eastern slopes of Judea and Samaria mountain ridge and of the main roads leading from west to east to enable free movement of Israel's armed forces to the border area. This should go along with Israeli control of the airspace and the electromagnetic spectrum. The Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1967, General Earle Wheeler, clarified that to have defensible borders, Israel's boundary must be along the commanding terrain overlooking the Jordan Valley.

Israel within the 1949 Armistice Lines

These were the boundaries at the outbreak of the 1967 Six-Day War.



Defensible Borders for Israel: An Updated Response to Advocates and Skeptics

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Despite the intense efforts undertaken in Western capitals over the last six decades to second-guess Israel's security requirements in any resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the top leadership of the State of Israel has been remarkably consistent about what the state requires to protect its vulnerable borders in a perpetually unstable Middle East. Ever since the 1967 Six-Day War, the architects of Israel's national security have insisted that the territorial dimension of that resolution be predicated upon its retaining "defensible borders" for assuring a stable peace. This principle applied especially to the West Bank, known as Judea and Samaria, but to the Golan Heights as well.



Tanks from the IDF's 188th Brigade train on the Golan Heights in March 2021. Conventional forces play a crucial role in countering terror and other current threats. (Photo: IDF)

The idea was that since Israel faced a gross asymmetry with its neighbors in the number of combat-ready standing forces it could deploy, in the hostile intent the regimes around it regularly voiced, and in the strategic depth it could rely upon if it came under attack, these states might well exploit their advantage in times of tension and strike Israel before it could mobilize its reserves. To make matters worse, Israel's adversaries sought to operate in multi-state coalitions, while Israel did not have that option, making the asymmetry between them even more acute.

Take, for example, the fact that in October 1973, Israel deployed a force of around 177 tanks on the Golan Heights while Syria had a standing force at the time of 1,400 tanks stretching from the border area back to Damascus. That gave Syria an eight-to-one advantage in armor alone. That would have been an intolerable force ratio for NATO in Central Europe, but it was a reality that Israel had to live with. The terrain of the Golan Heights became a hard factor that Israel relied upon in neutralizing Syria's numerical superiority.

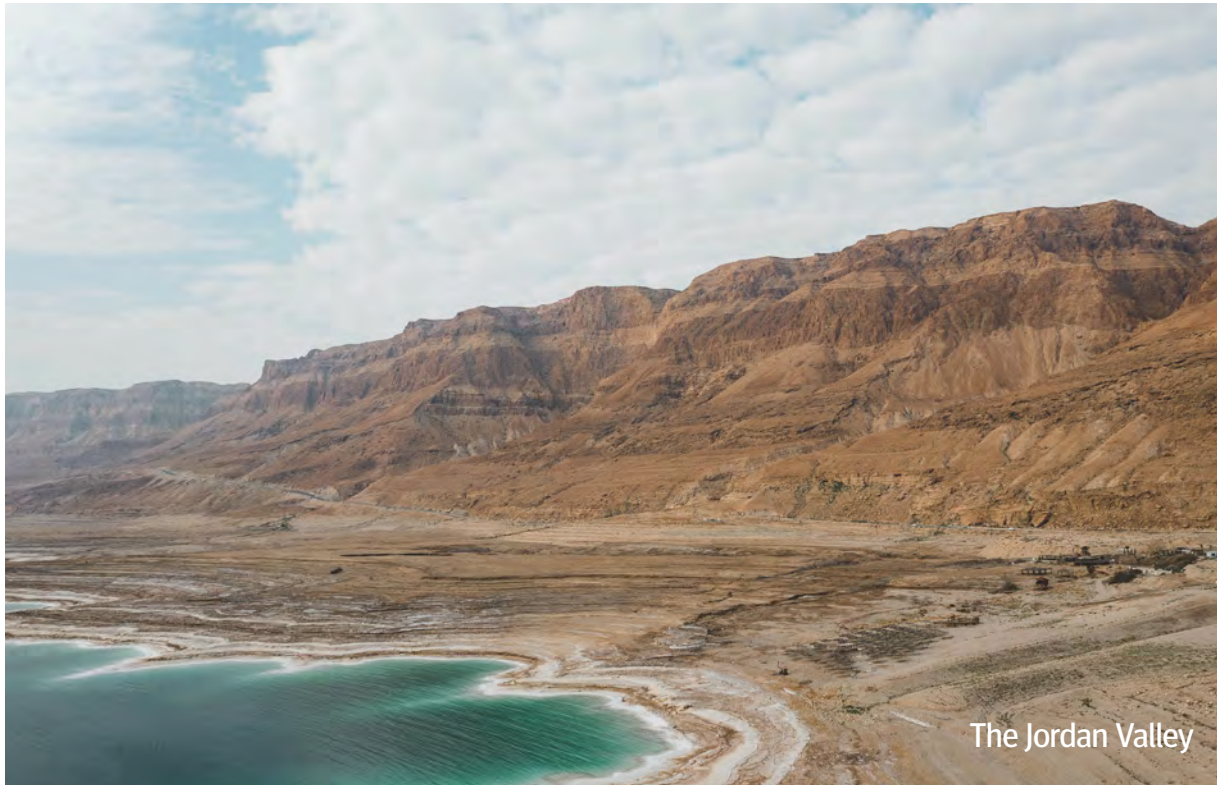


The Jordan Valley

When the International Community Addressed Israel's Security Concerns: Resolution 242

In strategic discussions with their American counterparts, senior Israeli officers added that the neighboring states threatening them could also disperse military assets, like their air bases, across their vast territories, thereby reducing their vulnerability, while Israel did not have that option, giving its adversaries a built-in advantage should they decide to strike first. After the Six-Day War, the international community recognized the need to address Israeli concerns through UN Security Council Resolution 242 from November 1967, which was adopted unanimously and served as the foundation of all Arab-Israeli peace treaties.

That resolution never called on Israel to withdraw from *all* the territory it captured in that conflict, but rather “from territories.” The language that was finally adopted was not the result of a typo but rather intense



The Jordan Valley

diplomatic contacts between the Permanent Members of the Security Council, which were held at the highest levels in Washington, Moscow, and London. At the end of the day, according to the resolution, Israel was to end up with “secure and recognized boundaries” which were not the same as the pre-war lines from which it was attacked in 1967.

Those pre-war lines, in any case, were only armistice lines – not final political boundaries. There was a provision about the “inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war,” but it was part of the resolution’s preamble rather than a part of its binding operative language. A new international border plainly had to be drawn. Former frontiers needed to be adjusted. In fact, the British ambassador to the UN in 1967, Lord Caradon, admitted on *PBS*: “We did not say there should be a withdrawal to the ‘67 line.” In the view of Israel’s foreign minister, Abba Eban, the language of Resolution 242 thus left open the possibility of “territorial revision.” Indeed, such revisions had been a part of postwar diplomacy after many previous conflicts, like the Second World War.

Resolution 242 was incorporated into every subsequent peace treaty between Israel and its neighbors. It was put into the invitation to the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference drafted by Russia and the United States, its co-sponsors. And one of the principles that constantly appeared in past American statements on the Middle East was that Israel was entitled to obtain “defensible borders,” which reflected Resolution 242 and repeated presidential letters to Israeli leaders.

The Principle of Defensible Borders

In the immediate aftermath of the Six-Day War, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara asked the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Gen. Earle Wheeler, what was the “minimum territory” that Israel “might be justified in retaining in order to permit a more effective defense?” Wheeler responded with a memorandum on June 29, 1967, which concluded: “From a strictly military point of view, Israel would require the retention of some captured Arab territory in order to provide militarily defensible borders.” Specifically with regard to the West

Bank, the JCS suggested “a boundary along the commanding terrain overlooking the Jordan River,” and considered taking this defense line “up to the crest of the mountain ridge.”¹

“From a strictly military point of view, Israel would require the retention of some captured Arab territory in order to provide militarily defensible borders.”

– Gen. Earle Wheeler, former Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff

Yet the idea that Israel needed specifically “defensible” borders has always had its skeptics abroad. They frequently focused on different issues. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in April 1976, Col. Merrill A. McPeak noted: “Israel, as Mrs. [Golda] Meir put it, is entitled to defensible borders.” But then he rhetorically asks: “where might such borders be drawn?” – implying that the pre-war lines were adequate. Indeed, his central proposal for resolving the conflict was a formula of “total



U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (right) and Israeli Foreign Minister Yigal Allon (left), March 9, 1975 (Moshe Milner, GPO)

return” of the territories Israel captured in 1967 in exchange for “total demilitarization.” McPeak would become Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force, although it was not clear that his positions on Israeli borders were dictated by his being an airpower enthusiast who belittled the needs of ground units at the time.

At roughly the same time, Foreign Minister Yigal Allon, the legendary former commander of the pre-state Palmach, insisted in a conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance: “Modern weapons make topography and geography indispensable elements in any settlement.” Allon served as foreign minister in Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s first government in the 1970s. He also happened to be Rabin’s mentor as well as his commanding officer during Israel’s War of Independence. Allon also wrote in *Foreign Affairs* six months after McPeak in an article entitled, “Israel: The Case for Defensible Borders.” Allon’s thinking undoubtedly influenced Rabin’s approach to peacemaking, as was evident in his final Knesset address, delivered in October 1995, where he stated: “The borders of the State of Israel, during the permanent solution, will be beyond the lines which existed before the Six-Day War. We will not return to the 4 June 1967 line.”²

Rabin clearly did not believe that peace alone could guarantee the security of Israel. He felt the necessity of reiterating this point about the problematic nature of the 1967 line, two years *after* the 1993 Oslo Accords had been signed by his government and even following the completion of the 1994 Israel-Jordan Treaty of Peace. That legacy also appeared in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s address at Bar-Ilan University in June 2009, when he said that as part of a final peace settlement, “Israel needs defensible borders and Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, must remain undivided with continued religious freedom for all faiths.”³

Netanyahu’s approach was seconded by his minister of defense, Moshe Ya’alon, at roughly the same time. Ya’alon had also served as Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces and as the head of Israeli Military Intelligence. He was a powerful political ally. In 2006, he spoke at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, advocating the Israeli point of

view in a public address entitled, “Defensible Borders for Israel.” While there was a subsequent political rift between Netanyahu and Ya’alon, it did not involve their views on this matter.

In the meantime, the U.S. moved to adopt the language of defensible borders more explicitly than ever. On June 14, 2004, President George W. Bush sent a letter to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon which stated: “The United States reiterates its steadfast commitment to Israel’s security, including secure and defensible borders to preserve and strengthen Israel’s capability to deter and defend itself, by itself, against any threat or possible combination of threats.” Within a little over a week, both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate adopted resolutions supporting the Bush letter and the principles it contained, including Israel’s right to defensible borders. This action was backed by overwhelming bi-partisan support in both houses of Congress. In retrospect, two signatories to this 2004 initiative on the Senate side stand out: Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator Joseph Biden.⁴

Yet a new generation of security experts has arisen in the West with their own critique of Israel’s rights and requirements for defensible borders. This calls for Israelis to articulate their considerations clearly in drawing the lines of any compromise with the Palestinians and along its military fronts with its neighbors. Political figures in the Obama administration often took a position on the issue of Israel’s borders in addition to officials in the Pentagon. Thus, Ben Rhodes, who served as Deputy National Security Advisor to President Obama, would write that the primary threat to Israel had now changed: “Invading Arab armies were replaced by occasional acts of terror.”⁵ This assessment bears directly on Israel’s security needs, and implies that the threats had declined considerably.

Changing American Approaches

One of the considerations raised when a new administration comes into office in Washington is whether the older terms of reference for

diplomacy were somehow outdated and should be replaced with more updated policies.

It is legitimate to raise the question of whether changes in the Middle East have potentially altered what Israel's considerations in its approach to peacemaking ought to be. However, as will be seen, the fundamentals of Israel's strategic situation remain unchanged, especially its need for defensible borders. True, regimes in the Middle East may change, but the mountain ridge in the West Bank remains a constant in Israeli considerations.

Frequently, new ideas are put forward and tested first by think tanks and research institutes, which have become part of the landscape of the U.S. decision-making community. How has the evolution of the U.S. approach to Israeli security expressed itself?

For example, *The Center for a New American Security* (CNAS) issued a report in May 2016 entitled, "A Security System for the Two-State Solution," suggesting elaborate security arrangements that even



Former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and former Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon, January 2014 (Photo: U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv)

included the deployment of American forces. The report acknowledges that “the most notable threat would be an attempt by ISIS or other extremist groups to infiltrate Jordan and attempt to destabilize the kingdom from within.” It does not rule out a future scenario entailing “an Iraqi invasion of Jordan and a march westward [i.e., toward Israel].”

But how are these challenges addressed? The report does not mention assuring Israel’s defensible borders. It relies mostly on high technology and the incorporation of Arab state security organizations. The CNAS report was significant because it contains many of the main points proposed in the security plan authored by General John Allen that became known as the Allen Plan. There was a subsequent CNAS report in December 2020, which also refrained from recognizing Israel’s need for defensible borders.⁶ However, Israelis recall the violence that accompanied the IDF pullouts from Southern Lebanon (2000) and the Gaza Strip (2005). The Allen Plan proposals provided insufficient security to Israel’s population.

What about the arguments in the U.S. that Israel could fall back on advanced Western technology as a substitute for defensible terrain? Maj.-Gen. (ret.) Shlomo Yanai headed the Planning Branch of the IDF as well as the IDF’s Ground Corps Command. He led the security talks for Israeli negotiating teams facing the Palestinians in the late 1990s. Yanai wrote on Israel’s “Core Security Requirements” in a study published in 2005. Presumably he was cognizant of the effort to convince Israelis that there were high tech alternatives to their security positions in the West Bank when he wrote: “despite the technological advances of modern defense systems and warfare, controlling the high ground remains an essential part of basic security doctrine.”⁷

The CNAS report was reminiscent of the Brookings Report in 1977 that shaped the policy of the recently-elected Carter administration at the time. It succeeded in erasing the legacy of the previous administration of Gerald Ford and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger. Brookings also brought new officials into top policy-making positions. It is noteworthy that Hady Amr, who drafted the State Department document for “resetting” U.S. relations with the Palestinians in the Biden

Palestinian Rocket Attacks on Israel



administration, served as a scholar for both the Brookings Institution and at CNAS. In short, CNAS had access to the new administration.

Territorial Withdrawals and Resulting Rocket Attacks

A constant feature of what the CNAS report admits were a series of “failed withdrawals” was the smuggling of vast amounts of weaponry into these territories after Israel left. This produced a radical escalation of the scale of threat Israel faced. Just looking at Palestinian rocket attacks against Israel from the Gaza Strip, in 2005 a total of 179 rockets hit Israeli territory. The following year that number mushroomed to 946, more than a 500 percent increase.

During a week-long period from November 14-21, 2012, the number of rockets launched at Israel reached 1,506. Major cities in the interior of Israel were hit for the first time. That experience made clear that in any new territorial arrangement, it was imperative for Israel to hold on to the outer perimeter of any disputed territory. In the Gaza Strip, that outer perimeter was called the Philadelphi Route. In the West Bank, it was known as the Jordan Rift Valley. This has been ingrained in generations of Israeli ground troops.

Israel's Defense Line: The Jordan Rift Valley with the Steep Eastern Slopes of the West Bank Mountain Ridge



The Jordan Valley and the West Bank Mountain Ridge

The Jordan Valley is not just the water bed where the Jordan River is located. It includes the steep slopes of the West Bank mountain ridge facing the Jordan River. Taking into account the fact that the Jordan River is adjacent to the lowest point on Earth – roughly 1,300 feet below sea level – and the mountain ridge reaches a maximal height of 3,300 feet above sea level, the Jordan Valley really constitutes a strategic barrier reaching more than 4,600 feet in some places.



Uzi Narkiss (left), Moshe Dayan and Yitzhak Rabin (right) enter the Old City of Jerusalem, 1967 (Ilan Broner/GPO)

There are five predictable axes of movement that a force would have to use to cross this mountainous territory. A relatively small Israeli Army could exploit that terrain to defend the state from a conventional attack or in the event it faced an insurgency campaign. The West Bank mountain ridge contains some of Israel's most important early-warning stations, like Baal Hatzor, making it part of Israel's air defense line. For this reason, Rabin spoke about Israel retaining the Jordan Valley "in the *widest* sense of that term," in his memorable address to the Knesset in October 1995.

Looking at this topographical reality, Maj.-Gen. (ret.) Shlomo Yanai succinctly wrote a decade later: "In modern warfare, such a dominating

ridge has the utmost importance as a site for surveillance and air-space control systems....There is no real technological substitute for physical elevation. Technological solutions such as satellites, balloons, and aircraft can provide only a partial substitute to elevation....Thus, despite

“Despite the technological advances of modern defense systems and warfare, controlling the high ground remains an essential part of basic security doctrine.”

– IDF Maj.-Gen. (ret.) Shlomo Yanai

the technological advances of modern defense systems and warfare, controlling the high ground remains an essential part of basic security doctrine.”⁸ Israel’s approach to these mountainous positions was undoubtedly influenced by the fact that a modern jet fighter could cross from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean in three to four minutes.

Evolving Conventional Threats

In the past, Israel had a remarkably consistent threat from the east. Jordan by itself was not the focus of Israeli security concerns, yet it could be exploited as a platform of attack by a neighboring aggressor. In multiple Arab-Israeli wars, for example, Iraq dispatched one third of its ground order of battle, with armor and artillery. In 1948 and in 1967, an Iraqi expeditionary force crossed Jordan, using the West Bank as a point of entry to engage Israeli forces. The amount of time an Iraqi force would need to cross the Hashemite Kingdom was roughly the same as the amount of time Israel needed to complete its reserve mobilization.

In 1973, Iraq was again involved, but its expeditionary force crossed through Syria and fought the IDF. By 1991, Iraq demonstrated a new form of engagement; it fired extended-range Scud missiles into Israel. But that did not eliminate Israel’s concern about the threat of a coalition of hostile ground forces and did not make Israel’s calculations about borders irrelevant. The key factor that Israel had to keep in mind,



Lt.-Gen. Gadi Eisenkot prepared the 2015 IDF Strategy Document.

according to Allon, who saw these arguments growing in the 1970s, was how to win a war that had been inflicted on Israel. He argued that the German air “blitz” did not knock the British out of the Second World War. Equally, the massive bombardment of North Vietnam did not assure a U.S. victory in the Vietnam War. Thus, Allon reminds his readers that only an attack by ground forces can lead to a decisive outcome. And that is precisely what defensible borders deny Israel’s adversaries.

In his 2015 IDF Strategy Document, Israel’s former Chief of Staff, Lt.-Gen. Gadi Eisenkot, raised a new consideration: the need to deny Israel’s enemies from making “territorial gains” in its border regions as a result of ground incursions. He does not detail the scenario he has in mind, but it is known that Hizbullah had an operational plan back in 2008 to employ its “Redwan” special forces to take control of Israeli communities along the Lebanese border. Clearly, a land grab by a terrorist organization like Hizbullah in the north or Hamas in the south would constitute an enormous victory and a boost to the morale of these organizations. Defensible borders would be instrumental in helping Israel avert such a scenario in the future.⁹

With the defeat of Saddam Hussein in both Gulf Wars, the old scenarios of Iraqi intervention became less likely. But should the doctrine of defensible borders now be dropped by Israel? Absolutely not. The sources of hostile forces attacking Israel through Jordan may change. Should Iran take over a fractured Iraq, a whole new scenario may emerge in which Iran becomes directly involved in future Arab-Israeli ground wars. King Abdullah warned in 2004 about a “Shiite Crescent” forming from Iran through Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean. The presence of pro-Iranian forces in southern Syria alone, although constituting a problem mainly for Israel’s north, has been a source of concern for the Jordanian regime.¹⁰

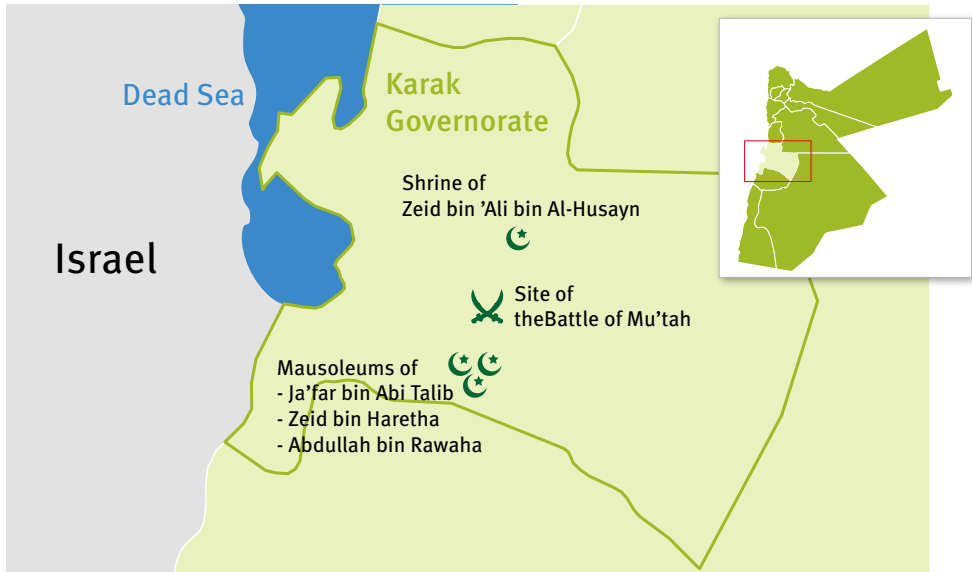
Pro-Iranian Shiite Militias: The Next Threat?

Iran has brought Shiite forces into Syria from neighboring countries; one example is Lebanese Hizbullah. But they have also looked eastward and recruited forces like Liwa Fatemiyoun from Afghanistan, where an estimated 4.6 million Shiites constitute 15 percent of the Afghani population. There is another force known as the Zainabiyoun that comes from Pakistan, where there are 38 million Shiites, 20 percent of the Pakistani population. Shiite insurgents from Iraq and Yemen have also entered Syria in recent years.

The late commander of the Iranian Quds Force, Gen. Qassam Soleimani, often spoke about establishing what one analyst called a “Shiite foreign legion” that would serve as an Iranian expeditionary force and could reach 150,000 men. In 2014, Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, proclaimed that there was an Iranian goal to encircle Israel, including the arming of the Palestinians in the West Bank. It would be thoroughly irresponsible for Israel to dismiss these public statements and not consider how Iran would execute this plan. How would they resupply their forces? Which states would they need to cross? Jordan would figure prominently in Iranian calculations.¹¹

When Iran decided to build up its ground presence in Syria, it invested in building logistics capabilities there, including depots, warehouses,

Muslim Holy Sites in Southern Jordan Revered by Iran



and weapons factories. Shiite religious sites also figured prominently in its calculations. This had been the pattern followed by the Iranians in their quest to dominate Iraq. In Syria, the Iranians focused particularly on the Zeinab shrine in the southern suburbs of Damascus, named after the sister of Hussein and daughter of Ali, whom the Shiites argued should have become the successor to Muhammad (he was selected to be the fourth caliph). The shrine of Zeinab has been protected by a contingent of Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.¹²

In southern Jordan, there are a number of shrines memorializing the Companions of Muhammad, like Ja'far bin Abi Talib, the brother of Ali, Zeid bin Haretha, and Abdullah bin Rawaha. They were all killed in the Battle of Mu'tah (also located in what is today Jordan), where an Arab Muslim army had one of its first military engagements with the Byzantine Empire as it sought to break out of the Arabian Peninsula. Those who died in the Battle of Mu'tah came to be known as martyrs; their burial sites became places of pilgrimage.

In July 2014, according to the *Jordan Times*, 1,919 Arabs and Muslims visited the shrines of the Prophet Muhammed's Companions in the

southern Mazar District in Kerak. There were over 30,000 people visiting the shrines in the course of 2014.

These shrines are held in high regard in both the Sunni and Shiite traditions. For some, they served as a place of pilgrimage when Iranians lost their access to Iraqi shrines during the Iran-Iraq War. In the last number of years, Iran has sought to upgrade Iranian access to these sites by promising Jordan energy supplies in exchange. Tehran offered to provide Jordan's oil needs for 30 years. Iranian officials turned to Jordan five times in 2014 alone. The Jordanians denied all the Iranian requests,¹³ no doubt wary of Iran increasing its foothold. Jordan's border with Israel is the longest border Israel shares with its neighbors, making it very sensitive to what transpires in the Hashemite Kingdom.

The Nature of Current Threats to Israel and Their Implications for Israel's Security Needs

1. Iran and Muslim Terror Armies

Iran has used Lebanon and its Hizbullah forces as a laboratory for developing the new challenge to Israel. The best description of this force is to call it a terror army or hybrid forces, based on using both the tactics of terrorist organizations and much of the equipment of a regular army. Hizbullah is a terrorist organization, but it also operates in conventional military formations. ISIS employed seized American armaments in Iraq, including M1A1 Abrams tanks. *Jihadi* organizations in Syria seized advanced Russian weaponry as well. Indeed, in 2015, reports began appearing that Moscow sent its most advanced tanks, the T-90, to Syria.¹⁴ The Russian tanks were either seized or destroyed by the Syrian *jihadis*.

The fleet of ISIS armor grew especially after the Iraqi Security Forces withdrew from their strongholds, like Ramadi, and ISIS advanced. These tanks have also been known to have fallen into the hands of Iranian-backed militias as well. Skeptics about Israel's need for



Jihadists demonstrate capability to subdue Syrian conventional units. Pictured here is a captured Syrian T-90 tank.



Jihadists demonstrate capability to subdue Syrian conventional units. Pictured here is a captured Syrian T-72V-AT tank (with reactive armor) flying the Jabhat al-Nusra flag.

defensible borders often recall the massive formations that Iraq used to deploy in Arab-Israeli wars but that no longer exist. But terror armies demonstrated their proficiency even during the Arab Spring, at times defeating conventional military formations.

The map of threats to Israel actually “elevates the importance of territory” in the present era.

– Former IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. (res.) Gadi Eisenkot

It is not surprising, therefore, that when former IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. (res.) Gadi Eisenkot wrote *Guidelines for Israel’s National Security Strategy* in September 2019 (along with Gabi Saboni), he included



Syrian rebel fighters fire from the captured Russian T-90 tank from their position in the countryside of Idlib towards government forces positions on February 16, 2020. (Omar Haj Kadour/AFP via Getty Images)

Israel's Strategic Vulnerability from the West Bank



“defensible borders” among the seven principles for the military security of Israel. He explained that the map of threats to Israel actually “elevates the importance of territory” in the present era. As a result, he determines that any peace arrangement must assure that “Israel will exercise by itself absolute control over its present strategic envelope, including the Jordan Valley.”

Implicit in his analysis was the point that in the Gaza Strip, Israel lost control over the “strategic envelope,” leading to a massive arms build-up there and the eventual outbreak of a succession of Israeli-Hamas wars. Eisenkot essentially warned that Israel should not allow the same process to take place in the hills of Judea and Samaria. It is vital to recall that the Israeli territory adjacent to the West Bank contains some 70 percent of Israel’s population and 80 percent of its industrial capacity.¹⁵

Those who come to Israel with new suggestions often err in that their model of security is scenario-specific. It starts with the view that the era of the classic conventional battlefield is finished, not taking into account that states can revive their capabilities over the years.

2. Drone Warfare and New Technology

There are new technologies emerging that are already being supplied to terrorist organizations and they require Israel to continue to be

Houthi Drones Strike at Saudi Oil Infrastructure



Fires burn in the distance after a drone strike by Yemen’s Iran-aligned Houthi group on Saudi company Aramco’s oil processing facilities in Abqaiq, Saudi Arabia, September 14, 2019. (Social media screenshot)

Strategic Reach of Houthi Drone Strikes



cautious. For example, the combat drone has proven its ability to alter the battlefield in recent years, giving renewed power to states that did not have advanced air forces. The Royal Saudi Air Force has been armed with the most advanced Western aircraft. The Houthis, who were a backward, rural organization, demonstrated their ability to master advanced technology. Using Iranian attack drones, they have successfully struck at the Saudi capital, Riyadh, and at some of the most important parts of Saudi Arabia’s oil infrastructure. The Houthis, with Iranian backing, managed to “level the playing field” with Saudi Arabia.

Drones helped Azerbaijan defeat Armenia, which had been the victorious party in previous conflicts between them. Ground-based radar remains vital for detecting low-flying air platforms like drones, which are proliferating throughout the Middle East. Effective air defense requires a combination of air-based and ground-based early-warning systems in order to assure around the clock detection of attacking

air platforms under all weather conditions. As already noted, Israel has used the mountain ridge of Judea and Samaria for that purpose. Defensible borders thus have a new relevance in this conflict as well.

3. Airpower vs. Ground Forces

Another common assumption among Western defense commentators is that airpower is everything. The victories by the West in Kosovo, Iraq, and elsewhere has led some to conclude that any threat can be defeated with airpower. The airpower enthusiasts forget that the critical factor that Israel must neutralize is the enemy's ability to win decisively, meaning decisively defeating the enemy on the ground.¹⁶

That was the message that appeared in the writings of Yigal Allon and it remains true to this day.



Gunmen from Islamic Jihad's armed wing, the al-Quds Brigades, in a tunnel used for ferrying rockets and mortars in preparation for the next conflict with Israel, March 3, 2015. (AFP/Mahmud Hams)

4. Tunnel Warfare

Since the 2014 Gaza conflict, known as Operation Protective Edge, the role of tunnels in modern warfare has become more pronounced. Originally, Hamas used tunnels from Egyptian Sinai to the Gaza Strip in order to maintain lines of supply of smuggled weapons to its forces. Tunnels then came to be used to help Hamas penetrate Israel's southern border for operational purposes, including attacks. Hizbullah followed the same pattern in order to penetrate Northern Israel. Defensible borders remained relevant as this threat grew, for they defined the distances that terror organizations would have to dig and whether their tunnels were feasible.

Pushing Back on Western-Crafted Alternatives to Defensible Borders

In 2014, former IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon took part in a study entitled *Israel's Critical Requirements for Defensible Borders*, published



Smuggling tunnel in Rafah, 2009 (Marius Arnesen/Flickr/CC BY-SA 3.0 NO)

by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Ya'alon authored the introduction to the publication, in which he explained why he was involved in this project: "This study is a corrective to the widely-held view in many international quarters and even in limited circles in Israel about the "need" and even the "inevitability" that peace requires Israel to withdraw to the perilous 1949 armistice lines (erroneously called the "1967 borders").

The previous year, Ya'alon had been part of the Israeli team working with Secretary of State John Kerry, who had been advocating new Israeli concessions in the West Bank and the emplacement of alternative forms of security for Israel, which troubled many in the Israeli defense establishment. An article in the *Washington Post* captured the issues of primary concern in the security discussions at the time:

A generation of Israeli generals had considered the Jordan Valley a crucial eastern flank against a land invasion of the Jewish state from the east. But where they once worried about columns of Iraqi tanks, they are now more concerned about asymmetrical warfare from terror groups seeking to infiltrate the West Bank and use it as a platform of attack.¹⁷

So does Israel need to be as concerned with its eastern front today as it was in the past? The answer is absolutely yes, even if aspects of the military threat have changed. First, the stability of all the neighboring countries was put into question with the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011. Jordan survived, but a new situation emerged in which Iran has exploited the vacuum in the Arab world to project its military power westward. Second, while Israel has demonstrated the prowess of its air force in the skies of Syria as it took out Iranian facilities that were closing in on its borders, Israeli senior officers correctly maintain their belief that when Israel is under attack, wars can only be won by the movement of ground forces.

It would be an error for Israel to join the chorus in the West that subscribes to the thesis that airpower can replace the need for ground forces. As long as ground forces remain the decisive component in

Israel's national security strategy, then terrain, topography, and strategic depth have not lost their relevance. They have always been – and still remain – critical components that Israel needs for defensible borders.

Finally, there has been an unfortunate tendency to try to separate security from sovereignty in proposing what Israel should do with the disputed territories. There is a school of thought among Western experts who write about retaining Israeli security positions on the soil of former adversaries instead of dividing the territory and insisting that Israel retain sovereignty only where it has security needs.

This was the original logic of Israeli proposals for territorial compromise in the Allon Plan. In fact, when Yigal Allon originally proposed his idea to the Israeli Cabinet on July 26, 1967, he stated: "In order to assure a strong defensive deployment and the strategic integrity of Israel," *territories "will be joined to Israel as an integral part of the state"* (emphasis added). In Allon's view, security required the incorporation of strategically vital territories into Israel in any permanent status arrangement for a final stable peace.

Notes

- 1 For a complete text of the memorandum, JCSM-373-67, see Michael Widlanski, "Can Israel Survive a Palestinian State?" Jerusalem Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, 1990.
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- 4 U.S. Senate, *Congressional Record*, S. Res. 393, June 24, 2004.
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- 6 Col. Richard Kemp, "The Allen Plan and Israel's Security," October 2017 (unpublished). See also, "Why the Allen Plan is Detrimental to Israel's Future Security," Friends of Israel Initiative, October 2017.
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- 17 William Booth and Anne Gearan, "Kerry in Middle East to Talk Jordan Valley Security Proposals with Israelis, Palestinians," *Washington Post*, December 12, 2013.



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