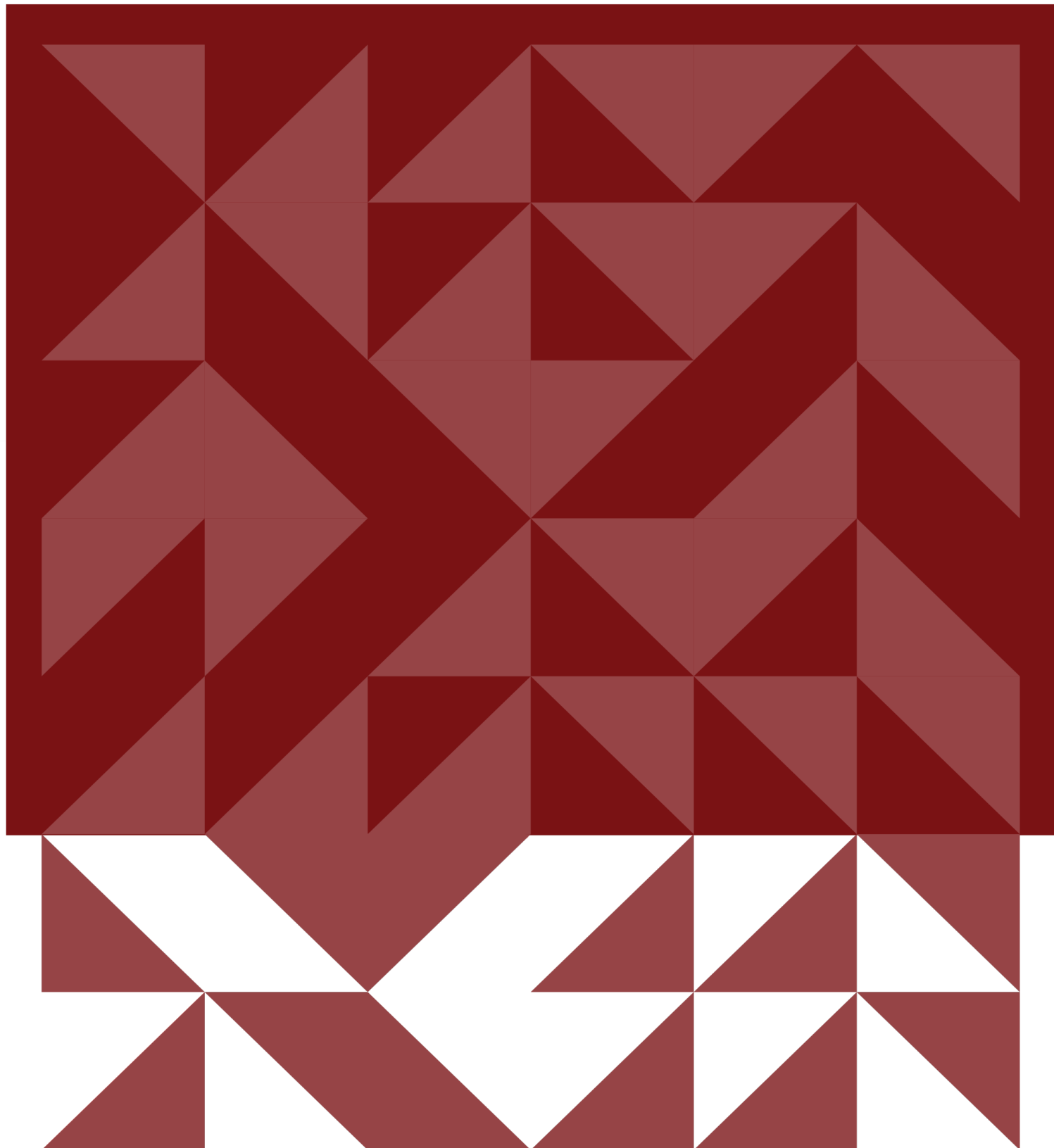




The Mirage of Safe Geography: How Buffer Zones Have Become a Military Liability for Israel

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The Middle East has undergone profound shifts in its security and geopolitical landscape following the major events that began on 7 October 2023 and continued to unfold through 2026. At the heart of these shifts lies a fundamental transformation in Israeli military doctrine. For many years, Israel relied on rapid pre-emptive strikes and advanced technologies to sustain remote defence without requiring permanent control over new territory. However, the unprecedented breaches of its borders have fundamentally altered this strategy. Israel has now moved towards direct physical control over parts of Arab territory and has begun constructing a broad, contiguous belt of buffer zones extending from the Gaza Strip in the south and southern Lebanon in the north to the Syrian Golan Heights.

Historically, buffer zones were understood as demilitarised and relatively calm spaces designed to separate conflicting parties and prevent direct friction. Israel, however, has fundamentally redefined this concept, transforming such zones into instruments of absolute security control. Through this approach, it seeks to create fortified military spaces that provide strategic depth, eliminate cross-border threats and tunnels, and push the battlefield entirely away from its cities and population centres.

Despite the clarity of these objectives, this approach places Israeli military planners in a genuine dilemma. The permanent deployment of large infantry and armoured forces within hostile and volatile areas threatens to turn these belts—intended to serve as secure zones—into arenas of sustained and costly military attrition. Against this backdrop, this analysis raises a central and fundamental question: do these border strips constitute a genuine security buffer capable of ensuring Israel's long-term survival and security, or have they already become a trap that steadily drains its capabilities day after day?





1. The Militarisation of Neutral Geography

To understand how the Israeli military currently uses buffer zones, we must first look back at the origins of this concept and its evolution over time. Since ancient times, states have used geography and territorial space as protective shields to safeguard themselves—a familiar practice in the corridors of international politics. However, the practical application of this idea has changed profoundly across successive periods of warfare, taking on increasingly complex forms.

The concept of buffer zones began to emerge clearly in Europe during the eighteenth century as an ideal mechanism for preserving the balance of power. At the time, these zones were understood simply as geographical spaces or entities situated between two competing great powers, intended to prevent direct physical confrontation and reduce the likelihood of destructive wars.

These spaces were kept entirely free of weapons and military forces under agreements between the rival parties, while adopting a highly neutral posture to preserve their fragile existence. Prominent historical examples include Poland and Czechoslovakia, both of which found themselves in a precarious position between Germany and the Soviet Union after World War I, as well as Lebanon, which was long regarded as a fragile buffer zone contested by Syria and Israel.

Yet military history reveals a reality entirely at odds with these theories. Buffer zones and demilitarised areas have rarely succeeded in preserving peace; indeed, they have often served as catalysts for conflict. Historical experience has shown that such zones are far more vulnerable than others to invasion, occupation, and destruction. The reason is clear: by their very nature, they represent a "power vacuum" and a condition of inviting weakness.

This vacuum creates a persistent strategic imperative for the surrounding major powers to establish pre-emptive control over it, driven by the logic that if one side does not seize it, the other inevitably will. As a result of this mutual fear, these areas—originally designed to serve as havens of peace—are transformed into structural vulnerabilities and bloody arenas for settling scores.



Today, however, amid contemporary warfare—often fought between conventional armies and armed non-state groups—the concept of the buffer zone and its mode of application have been turned on their head. These zones are no longer merely neutral, demilitarised spaces sustained through mutual respect to separate opposing forces; rather, they have become instruments imposed unilaterally by force to secure dominance and maintain control of security.

Instead of being kept weapon-free under international supervision, these border areas are now occupied by militarily superior powers and transformed into heavily armed garrisons as part of a unilateral effort to insulate and protect their territory from sudden or unconventional threats that may cross the border.

2. Strategic Drivers and Dimensions

Israel's accelerated expansion towards the construction of buffer zones does not merely represent a reaction to the shock of 7 October 2023; rather, it constitutes a calculated decision and a structural response to the profound erosion of its traditional security doctrines and models. A closer examination of this contemporary military doctrine reveals that, by engineering these security belts, Israel seeks to achieve specific objectives. This analysis identifies four principal strategic drivers underpinning this approach:

First: At its core, Israel faces a genuine structural challenge stemming from the lack of what is known in military terms as "strategic depth"—the geographical distance separating front lines or borders, on the one hand, from major cities, industrial centres, and critical infrastructure, on the other. For example, the distance between the former borders and the Mediterranean coast narrows to only a few miles at its most constricted points.

To compensate for this acute spatial constraint, Israel built its military doctrine for decades around the principle of offensive action and rapid pre-emptive strikes, immediately shifting the battlefield onto enemy territory to secure swift and decisive victories. However, the unprecedented infiltration operations and border breaches it has recently faced have shattered this doctrine, exposing the catastrophic fragility of absolute reliance on advanced technology, smart barriers, and intelligence capabilities in the absence of genuine physical distance and geographical depth to protect the homeland.



In the face of this devastating failure of technological barriers, the Israeli military has found itself compelled to revert to classical and conventional military methods centred on direct territorial control. The objective now is to create an alternative "strategic depth" by pushing military boundaries several kilometres into neighbouring territory.

The central logic behind this approach is that controlling a security strip within enemy territory would force any future surprise attack to exhaust its initial momentum and element of surprise within the buffer zone itself. In theory, this newly created geographical space is intended to provide the Israeli military with sufficient time to regroup, mobilise reserve forces, and repel the attack before it can breach the border and reach population centres.

Second: Beyond the search for geographical space to protect the homeland, another strategic driver—no less significant—underpins the buffer-zone doctrine: the sustained pursuit of control over elevated terrain and of commanding high ground to expand the range and capabilities of early-warning systems. In the complex landscape of modern warfare, particularly in the domains of electronic warfare, signals intelligence, and target acquisition, physical elevation and a direct line of sight are regarded as essential prerequisites for achieving operational superiority.

Buffer zones, particularly in the terrain of the Golan Heights, Mount Hermon, and the rugged mountains of southern Lebanon, provide the Israeli military with indispensable platforms for intelligence collection. Permanent deployment atop these peaks enables deep and continuous penetration of communications networks within enemy territory, granting Israel a critical capability to anticipate imminent attacks before they occur. It also facilitates the guidance of smart munitions and precision missiles, which require a clear and unobstructed line of sight to strike their targets successfully.

Third: Although modern militaries increasingly rely on unmanned reconnaissance aircraft and airborne early-warning platforms to generate intelligence, these aerial assets face severe constraints that prevent them from substituting for fixed ground-based installations. Such aircraft and drones are inherently incapable of carrying the large antennas and heavy infrastructure that can be installed atop a permanent mountain facility.



Nor can they maintain uninterrupted operations around the clock year-round without pause. Moreover, they remain vulnerable to targeting and interception at any moment by the adversary's surface-to-air missile systems. For this reason, the physical buffer zone extending across elevated ground above enemy lines remains the foundational pillar and operational core of Israel's intelligence and sensor architecture.

Fourth: A tactical driver, and perhaps the most urgent and consequential behind Israel's insistence on establishing these buffer zones, is the desire to neutralise the advanced weapons and capabilities developed by armed groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad over the past two decades. These organisations have succeeded in undermining the Israeli military's conventional superiority by developing hybrid, multidimensional threats that can cross borders, threats that air power alone has proven incapable of eliminating.

Foremost among these challenges are vast and highly sophisticated underground tunnel networks, which have evolved into vital arteries for transporting supplies, fortified command-and-control centres, and concealed rocket-launch platforms. These networks enable fighters to withstand intense aerial bombardment and circumvent conventional border barriers. From Israel's perspective, the buffer zone thus becomes a security necessity, as it provides the secure geographical space required for Israeli military combat engineering units to deploy ground-penetrating radar and seismic sensing technologies, while carrying out the methodical and time-intensive demolition of these underground fortresses.

The challenge extends beyond subterranean threats to include the danger posed by guided missiles and anti-armour weapons, which rely on direct line of sight and can target military patrols and border settlements with lethal precision. To neutralise this threat, the Israeli military uses the buffer zone to implement a large-scale clearing policy involving the removal of orchards and vegetation, as well as the demolition of civilian structures across several kilometres. This effectively re-engineers the terrain of the area in its entirety and deprives fighters of any natural or urban cover from which they can observe and engage targets. In practical terms, this serves to "blind" resistance forces and cripple their ability to deploy short-range missiles effectively.



In parallel, and drawing on the lessons of recent history, these barren and exposed spaces are intended to prevent any mass buildup or coordinated ground incursions by irregular infantry groups trained to breach border defences. The absence of any natural cover, combined with surveillance systems and automated fire-control mechanisms, enables the border strip to be transformed into a lethal kill zone that is virtually impossible to cross. Any human movement can be detected and neutralised immediately before it can approach the border or exploit the element of surprise.

3. Tactics of Geographical Separation

Israel does not apply the concept of the buffer zone uniformly across all its borders. Instead, it differentiates and adapts it according to the nature of the terrain, demographic realities, and the scale of the threat on each front. Close monitoring of the three theatres of conflict in the Gaza Strip, southern Lebanon, and the Syrian Golan Heights reveals a complex implementation of this military strategy.

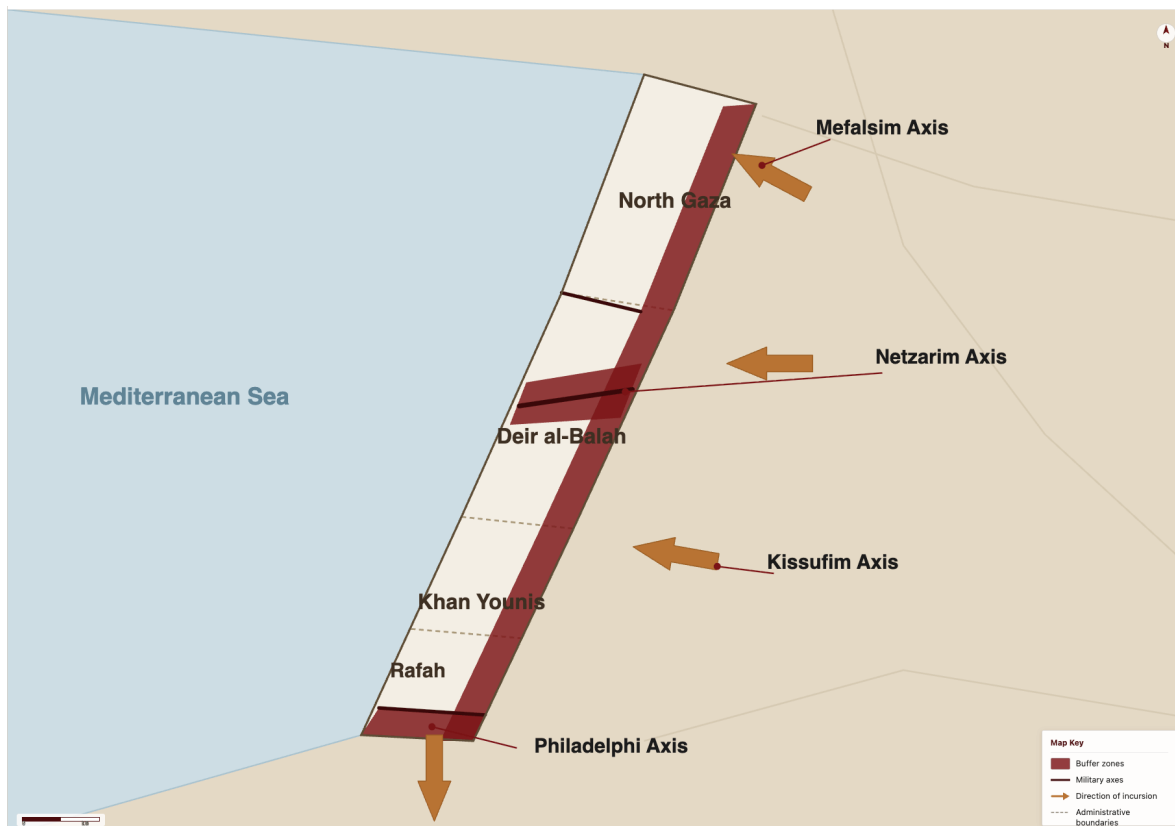
This application has created a broad and interconnected ring of buffer zones that is already reshaping the borders of the Middle East in practical terms. The Gaza Strip is being fragmented through strategic corridors. At the same time, territorial control in southern Lebanon continues to expand beyond internationally recognised boundaries, culminating in open control over the United Nations demilitarised zones in Syria.

- **Redrawing Gaza's Map Through Military Corridors**

Given the extreme population density of the Gaza Strip, Israeli strategy has not been limited to merely securing the border fence. Following the collapse of the truce in late 2023 and the resumption of hostilities, Israel moved decisively to reshape the geography of the enclave in its entirety. Through large-scale evacuation orders and the systematic destruction of infrastructure, the Israeli military has transformed approximately 70% of Gaza's territory into military zones or forced evacuation areas, effectively shrinking the enclave's usable space and fragmenting it from within. This strategy relies primarily on the construction of heavily fortified transverse and longitudinal roads and corridors that permanently divide Gaza, granting the Israeli military suffocating control over areas that are completely isolated from one another.



Illustrative Map of Military Axes and Buffer Zones in the Gaza Strip



Three principal arteries of division stand out within this geographical plan. The first is the Netzarim Corridor, a fortified military strip stretching approximately six kilometres from the eastern border to the Mediterranean coast in the west. It effectively bisects the enclave, separating Gaza City and the densely populated northern areas from the south, thereby enabling the Israeli military to control and isolate the movement of hundreds of thousands of displaced people.

The second is the Philadelphi Corridor, a narrow yet strategically vital sandy strip running along the border with Egypt. Although it was designated a demilitarised zone under previous agreements, Israel imposed military control over it in mid-2024 to tighten the blockade and prevent the transfer of military supplies through tunnel networks. The third artery is the Morag Corridor, established more recently to separate the cities of Rafah and Khan Younis in the south. Israeli forces used bulldozers and explosives to clear buildings and land to sever lines of communication between armed groups operating in these remote areas.



The objective of this complex partition is not limited to securing temporary military gains; it extends into a comprehensive strategy to fragment the territory, deny fighters any supply lines, restrict civilian movement, and paralyse administrative and military capabilities. In parallel with this internal fragmentation, the Israeli military has imposed a prohibited security strip extending one kilometre or more inside Gaza's borders. To ensure an open and unobstructed line of sight free of any barriers that could conceal infiltrators, Israeli forces have also resorted to destructive tactics, including the use of low-flying aircraft to spray powerful chemical herbicides over Palestinian agricultural land. This has destroyed vital crops such as wheat and barley, deprived farmers of their livelihoods, and pushed them into heavy losses.

These ground operations did not stop there. The Israeli military continued to deploy heavy engineering equipment to level homes, agricultural greenhouses, and infrastructure within these border areas, transforming them into barren expanses and prohibited kill zones where any approach is forbidden. The catastrophic outcome of this policy of territorial encroachment and the fragmentation of what remains is the confinement of millions of displaced civilians within shrinking geographical pockets that grow more constricted by the day and lack even the most basic necessities of life, thereby deepening the complexity and tragedy of an unprecedented humanitarian crisis.

- **Exploiting the Syrian Security Vacuum**

The Syrian front presents an entirely different model for applying the buffer-zone concept, far removed from the noise of cities and densely populated environments, as seen in Gaza. Since the signing of the Disengagement Agreement in 1974 following the October War, a demilitarised zone had separated Israeli and Syrian forces in the Golan Heights, under the full supervision of United Nations peacekeeping forces.

This diplomatic arrangement provided long-standing and relatively stable security conditions, allowing Israel to exploit its elevated geographical position, particularly its heavily fortified installations atop Mount Hermon, as a constant watchtower and advanced early-warning system. From these commanding heights, Israel was able to monitor vast stretches of Syrian territory and closely intercept and track the movements of the Syrian military and armed groups, ensuring that the nightmare of a surprise attack it had previously experienced would not be repeated.

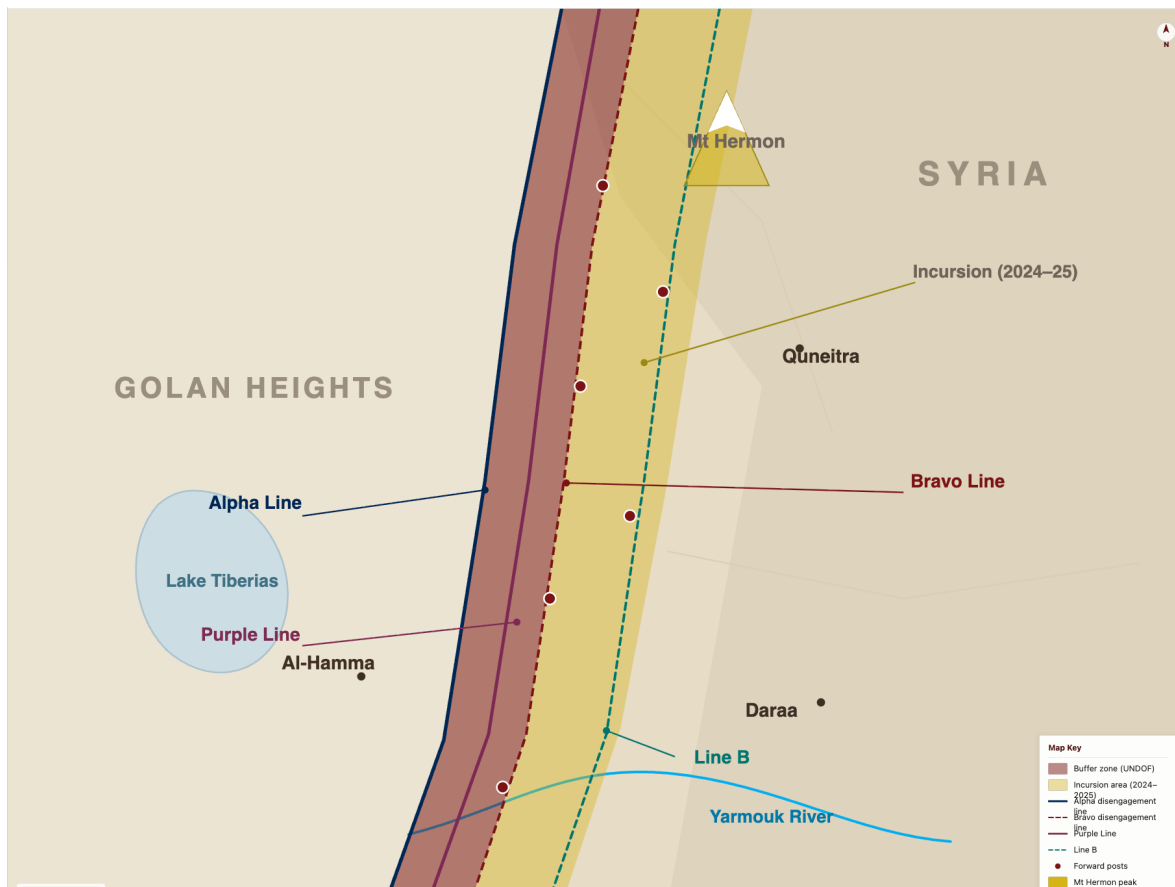


However, this long-standing and stable calm evaporated abruptly with the rapid and unexpected collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in late 2024. Southern Syria descended into widespread chaos and a dangerous security vacuum, as the regular Syrian military disintegrated, leaving the field largely ungoverned. Faced with this volatile landscape, the Israeli military decided to abandon its longstanding reliance on the United Nations buffer zone. Under the pretext of safeguarding its national security and preventing threats from expanding out of this chaotic vacuum, Israel launched a pre-emptive ground operation, pushing its military forces deep into territory that was originally intended to remain under international supervision and free of military presence.





Illustrative Map of Buffer Zones in the Golan Heights



Through this bold move, the Israeli military imposed direct control over vast areas of Syrian territory estimated at hundreds of square kilometres, while entirely disregarding the presence of international peacekeeping forces and restricting their movement through the deployment of roadblocks and checkpoints. Israel has explicitly declared that this new military presence is not bound by any defined timeframe, effectively transforming the Golan frontier from a relatively quiet point of international monitoring into an active theatre of military administration and deep defensive fortification.

This sudden expansion now places the Israeli military under immense logistical and operational strain, as it finds itself compelled to enforce control by force within a hostile and fragmented environment marked by pervasive instability. This, in turn, extends its supply lines and intensifies pressure on its forces, once again demonstrating that the drive to create such buffer zones is gradually drawing Israel into a trap of multi-front regional attrition no less dangerous than the threats it seeks to contain.



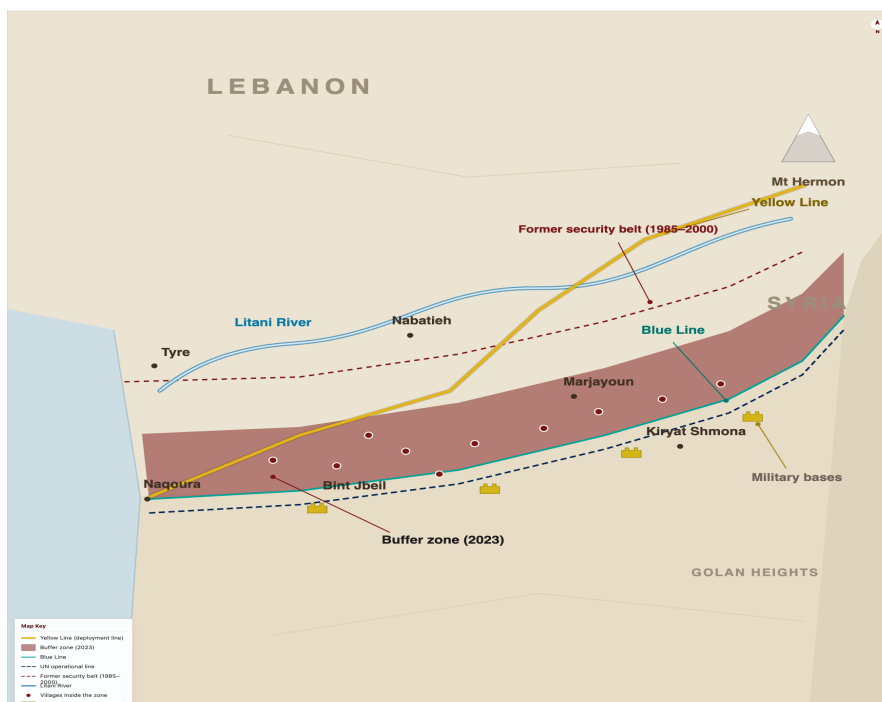
- **Sliding into the Quagmire of Lebanese Attrition**

Buffer zones have not been confined to the Gaza Strip; their application has also extended to southern Lebanon, reviving painful memories and an old military nightmare for Israel. Between 1985 and 2000, Israel imposed control over a border strip it designated the "Security Zone", extending between five and twenty-five kilometres into Lebanese territory.

At the time, the objective of this military presence was to protect northern settlements from rocket attacks and infiltration operations, initially carried out by Palestinian factions and later adopted by Hezbollah. During those fifteen years, Israel relied on a different tactical model, assigning ground patrols and direct confrontation to a local militia known as the "South Lebanon Army", while limiting its own role to supporting it with between 1,000 and 2,000 Israeli elite troops.

Despite this dual defensive barrier, the so-called security zone gradually evolved into a costly theatre of attrition. Israel suffered heavy casualties, losing hundreds of soldiers, while hundreds more from its allied militia were killed in sustained confrontations and an innovative guerrilla campaign led by Hezbollah. Faced with this continuous military drain, which yielded virtually no meaningful strategic gains, and under mounting domestic political and public pressure, the Israeli government was compelled in May 2000 to make the sudden decision to withdraw unilaterally, leaving its local allies to face an uncertain fate.

Illustrative Map of the Military Deployment Line in Southern Lebanon





Yet this return carries risks and consequences more catastrophic than ever before. Today, the Israeli military confronts this dilemma alone, lacking any allied local force capable of absorbing the daily blows of a war of attrition on its behalf, as was the case in the past. More dangerous still is the fact that the adversary itself has undergone a profound transformation. Hezbollah is no longer merely a conventional armed group; it has evolved into a quasi-conventional military force with a vast underground arsenal, including precision-guided missiles, anti-ship weapons, and advanced unmanned aerial systems.

More dangerous still is that the adversary has changed fundamentally. Once Israeli forces deploy their tanks and troops into fixed positions within this new buffer zone, while preventing Lebanese residents from returning to their villages, the Israeli military effectively walks into a tightly constructed attrition trap, exposing its forces as vulnerable and visible targets to an adversary fighting ferociously on its own terrain and across landscapes it knows intimately. This renewed gamble once again underscores the fragility of relying on buffer zones to impose security by force.

4. Challenges of Buffer Zones

Understanding the vulnerabilities of modern buffer zones requires revisiting earlier military experiences that pursued similar objectives. The McNamara Line, established by the United States during the Vietnam War, stands out as a revealing example of these weaknesses. The line emerged as a technology-driven alternative designed to avoid a ground invasion, following the failure of aerial bombing campaigns. US forces designed this barrier to prevent Vietnamese fighters from crossing through the demilitarised zone. Rather than relying on conventional methods, the United States built the system around acoustic and seismic sensors, electrified fences, minefields, and fixed defensive bases.

Despite overwhelming American technological and aerial superiority, this defensive line ultimately failed. Its failure stemmed from the Vietnamese fighters' ability to adapt to and overcome these fixed defences. They succeeded in bypassing the sensor systems, excavating tunnel networks beneath the barriers, and, at times, subjecting those bases to repeated artillery bombardment. By January 1968, US reports indicated that the number of Vietnamese fighters operating within and around the demilitarised zone had risen to more than 40,000. In effect, the Vietnamese forces had completely circumvented the defensive barrier.



These historical precedents demonstrate that fixed spatial barriers cannot stop adversaries from employing unconventional methods of warfare, regardless of the technological sophistication of those barriers. Any defensive barrier inherently requires a permanent human presence to guard the technology, maintain the fortifications, and conduct patrol operations. This continuous deployment turns soldiers into targets whose movements can be readily monitored and attacked. As a result, the security belt intended to provide protection is transformed into a theatre of prolonged attritional warfare. This dynamic, rooted in reliance on fixed technological systems to confront highly adaptive armed groups, closely mirrors the methods currently employed by the Israeli military along its borders.

The Israeli military repeated the same approach between 2024 and 2026. In mid-March 2026, Israel launched a large-scale ground offensive in southern Lebanon. This followed an escalation involving international and regional actors in late February of the same year, as Hezbollah resumed rocket fire. The operation aimed to establish a new buffer zone similar to the one created in the Gaza Strip. Israeli forces crossed the United Nations-delineated "Blue Line", advancing towards new boundaries referred to as the "Yellow Line". This strip extends deep into Lebanese territory, reaching as far as the Litani River in some areas. This expansion places hundreds of square kilometres under direct Israeli military control.

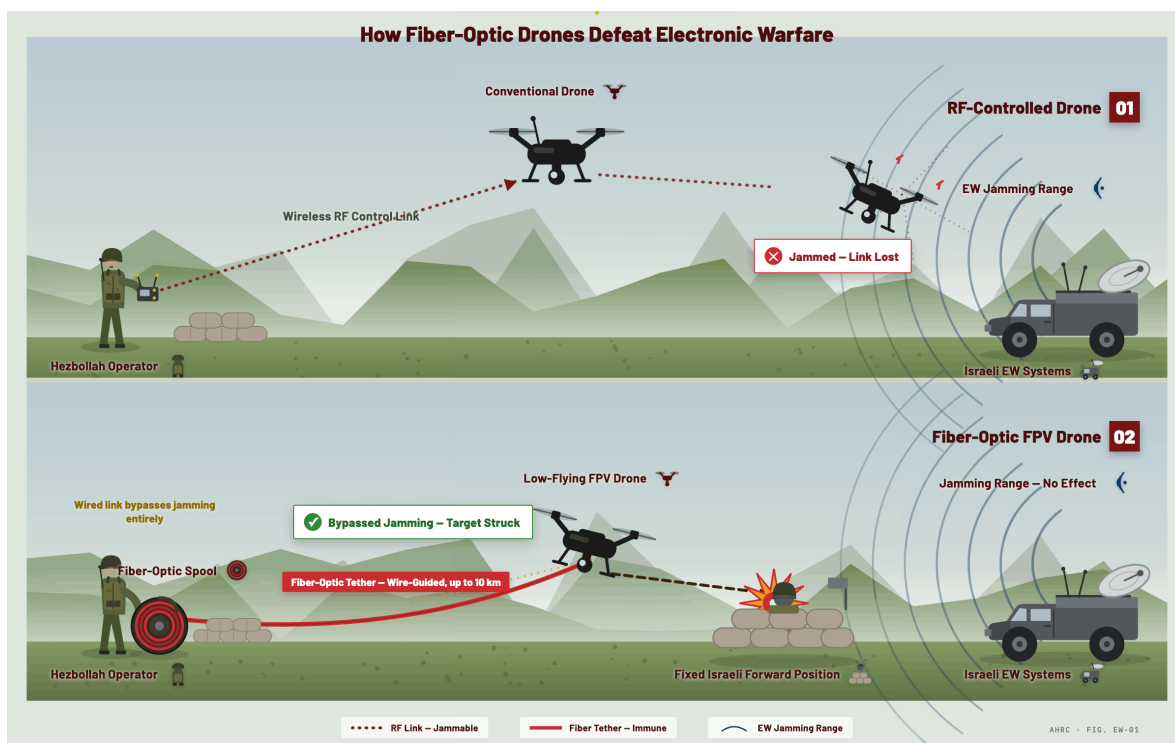
The transformation of these border strips into active battlefields constitutes a major vulnerability in Israel's current military strategy. The permanent deployment of forces within these zones imposes substantial human, material, and logistical costs. This sustained deployment places the Israeli military in a state of attrition that runs counter to both the nature of modern warfare against armed groups and the constraints imposed by international law.

This vulnerability became particularly evident in 2026 as Hezbollah's combat methods south of the Litani River evolved. As the Israeli military advanced into Lebanese territory to establish control, its forces encountered the inability of costly air defence systems, such as the Iron Dome and David's Sling, to effectively counter newly emerging weapons systems.

Hezbollah deployed low-cost, commercially available explosive drones. The group modified and further developed these platforms based on tactics employed in the Russia-Ukraine war. Local workshops converted these drones into precision-guided munitions designed to strike fixed ground forces with high accuracy.



These drones rely on fibre-optic tethering. Each drone remains connected to its operator through a thin cable trailing behind it, extending up to 10 kilometres. This system depends on wired guidance rather than wireless signals or Global Positioning System (GPS) navigation. Such a wired link shields the drones from the jamming systems on which the Israeli military heavily relies. Their small electric motors and low-altitude flight profiles also enable them to evade radar detection. High-definition live video feeds allow operators to manoeuvre the drones through trees and destroyed buildings, striking Israeli fortifications and Humvee vehicles with precision.



This technological adaptation has provided armed groups with a low-cost aerial offensive capability. A single drone costing no more than US\$300 can destroy advanced military vehicles worth millions of dollars. This disparity creates a profound asymmetry in material and human losses. The impact of this weapon became particularly evident in the weeks following the April 2026 ceasefire. During that period, Hezbollah launched more than eighty drones. Fifteen of those drones successfully struck their targets with precision. These attacks resulted in the killing and injury of dozens of soldiers and civilians.

Unable to intercept these drones through advanced defensive systems, the Israeli military resorted to rudimentary defensive measures. Israeli forces in southern Lebanon installed metal cage structures above Humvee vehicles and forward positions to trap incoming drones before detonation.



The Israeli Ministry of Defense requested thousands of boxes of fragmentation munitions and shotgun shells from the United States. These munitions are intended to discharge dense volleys of pellets into the air to bring down fast-moving targets. The military has also sought to introduce electronic optical sights to assist soldiers with targeting. Despite these efforts, a technologically superior conventional army continues to sustain daily losses while positioned in fixed defensive sites. It faces continuous attrition against highly mobile armed groups capable of determining both the timing and location of attack.

In conclusion, the revival of the buffer-zone concept and its elevation to the centre of Israeli military doctrine represents a major strategic gamble whose consequences will extend across generations. Following the severe and systematic failures of doctrines built around mobile defence and reliance on border walls and barbed-wire barriers, whose weaknesses were laid bare by the events of 2023, Israel has embarked on a relentless pursuit of the mirage of "strategic depth". This pursuit has drawn the Israeli military into the establishment of fortified, open-ended military enclaves in the Gaza Strip, southern Lebanon, and the Syrian Golan Heights, driven by the belief that territorial control would provide the level of protection required for the home front.

Yet a precise and realistic reading of this military landscape confirms that these zones are rapidly and inevitably transforming from trusted security belts into lethal attrition traps. The United States' historical failure at the McNamara Line in Vietnam, alongside Israel's bitter experience in southern Lebanon between 1985 and 2000, confirms an enduring military reality: fixed defensive lines established against militant movements possessing strong motivation and a supportive social base are inherently condemned to attrition and cannot be sustained over prolonged periods without incurring severe costs.

In modern warfare, the fusion of flexible combat tactics with cheap, advanced technology, particularly fibre-optic-guided drones, has stripped the Israeli military of the traditional technological superiority it once required to secure these spaces. As a result, positioning infantry soldiers and heavy tanks in exposed, predictable geographic locations has unintentionally provided armed groups with fixed targets and daily opportunities for attack, allowing resistance forces to exercise full control over the tempo of a slow, continuous war of attrition in which the military's capabilities are depleted day after day.



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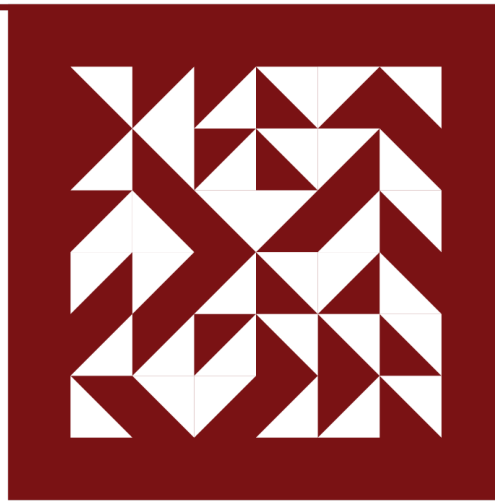
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Strategic Estimates

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