

Tablet



Soldiers exit a tunnel that Hamas reportedly used on Oct. 7 to attack Israel through the Erez border crossing in northern Gaza, on Jan. 07, 2024. NOAM GALAI/BETTY IMAGES

Why Israel Is Winning in Gaza

The tactical victory that Hamas achieved on October 7, with all its scenes of unimaginable horror, has become a leading driver of its strategic defeat

BY [EDWARD N. LUTTWAK](#) FEBRUARY 08, 2024

Anyone who has ever been in combat knows that the enemy is almost always invisible, because to remain alive one must remain behind good cover: The one and only time I saw live enemies walking toward me, I was so astonished that I hesitated

before opening fire (ill-trained, they were walking into a blinding sun).

It is the same in urban combat, but much worse because the invisible enemy can be a sniper behind a window—and any one of the countless apartment houses in Gaza has dozens of windows—or he can wait with an RPG at ground level to pop out and launch his rocket, whose short range makes it of little use in open country but is amply sufficient across the width of a street. Mortars, which launch their bombs parabolically in an inverted U, are exceptionally valuable in urban combat because they can attack forces moving up one street from three streets away, beyond the reach of immediate counterfire.

Finally, there are mega-mines: not the standard land mines with five to 10 kilos of explosives placed on the ground or just under, but wired demolition charges with 10 times as much explosive covered over with asphalt, to be exploded when a tank, troop carrier, or truckload of soldiers is above them.

That is why, from the start of Israel's counteroffensive into Gaza, almost all the media military experts, including colonels and generals

festooned with campaign ribbons (though few if any had ever seen actual combat) immediately warned that Israel's invasion of Gaza could not possibly defeat Hamas, but would certainly result in a horrifying number of Israeli casualties, before resulting in a bloody and strategically pointless stalemate.

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And that was before it was realized that there were hundreds of miles of tunnels beneath Gaza, from which fighters could emerge from invisibility to attack advancing soldiers from the rear, or to set up instant ambushes in apparently cleared terrain, and through which encircled fighters under attack could safely escape. In the special case of Gaza, moreover, the crowded urban battlefield offers endless opportunities for the easiest of tactics, because contrary to accusations that only expensively educated U.S. college students could possibly

believe, Israeli soldiers do not deliberately kill innocent civilians going about their business. Therefore Hamas fighters can be perfect civilians walking alongside women and children right up until the moment they duck into the right doorway to take up prepared weapons and come out shooting.

Yet as of now, after 124 days of fighting in both Gaza and in the north against Hezbollah, a total of 562 Israeli soldiers have died—a total that includes 373 soldiers and local security officers, who died on Oct. 7 itself, when any and all immediately available soldiers—only some of them as organized units—rushed in to fight Hamas infiltrators wherever they could find them. Even a single death is immensely tragic for an entire family, and quite a few are entrepreneurs with employees who depend on them, so that every single death gravely affects many in many ways.

That must be said and emphasized before adding that the actual number of Israeli soldiers killed in the counteroffensive until now is not in the thousands suggested by the beribboned skeptics who were gleefully echoed by the malevolent, *but under 300* as of this writing. In other words, only a

very, very small number, given the magnitude of the forces involved on both sides, and the exceptional complexity of the battlefield. By way of comparison, 95 U.S. Marines and four British soldiers were killed in the six-week-long, 2004 battle of Fallujah, the famous Pumbedita of the Talmudists but a small town, fighting some 4,000 Sunni fighters. In Gaza, estimates are that Israel faced approximately 30,000 trained Hamas fighters at the start of the war.

Regardless of what happens from now on, the Gaza fighting to date has been an exceptional feat of arms. A conservative estimate—the lowest I have seen—is that approximately 10,000 Hamas fighters have been killed or terminally disabled, along with an equal number of wounded who may or may not fight again in the future.

The sensational 1 to 50, or near enough, kill ratio achieved by the IDF in fighting Hamas in Gaza is all the more exceptional for reasons that neither official Americans nor official Israelis care to mention, albeit for different reasons.

The first is tactical and technical. Without saying more, it is fair to conclude from news accounts that

Israel's very innovative methods to surveil, penetrate, and destroy Hamas tunnels have been markedly and unexpectedly successful.

But the constraints placed on Israel's combat operations have been very severe, and a major impediment to its fight.

Israel has a fair amount of field artillery in the form of the common 155 mm caliber gun-howitzers, just like the U.S. and other Western armies. But it also has much smaller, much cheaper Israeli-made 160 mm heavy mortars that deliver 30 kilos of high explosives at shorter ranges. The Israelis should have used them abundantly in the Gaza fighting, because parabolic fire is just the thing in urban warfare, but did not because of their own avoidance of collateral casualties ... and because of continued alarms and warnings from the U.S.

That was most certainly the case with the exceedingly restrained, indeed inadequate use of Israel's air power in Gaza. In the 1991 "Desert Storm" attack on Iraq, for which I received a letter of commendation from U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff Merrill A. McPeak for target selection before and during the bombing, I never deliberately selected a

civilian target. But I do not recall anyone ever telling me that a valuable military target must not be attacked because there may be civilian casualties. But in Gaza, the Israeli air force was hardly allowed to contribute more than a fraction of its strength to the fighting, in deference to the insistent requests coming from the White House.



Israeli soldiers patrolling an area in Gaza's main southern city of Khan Yunis during a media tour organized by the Israeli military on Jan. 27, 2024, amid continuing battles between Israel and Hamas. NICOLAS GARCIS/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

All this makes the Israeli success in the fighting to date all the more remarkable.

One reason is known to all: The Israeli army remains wedded to the British method of intensive and prolonged individual instruction for its soldiers *before* their in-unit training, so that nobody enters Gaza without at least a full year's worth of combat instruction, much more than their American counterparts had in Vietnam when the U.S. last used conscripts.

Another reason is that the IDF did not fall into the illusion that normal infantry soldiers, howsoever well-trained, could venture into invariably booby-trapped and deviously interlinked Hamas tunnels and fight successfully. More than 25 years ago, the IDF established its Yahalom (an acronym that means "diamond" in Hebrew) combat engineer unit that specializes in tunnel warfare to learn all its many tricks and perils, so that when a new tunnel entrance is discovered in Gaza by advancing troops there is no rushing in Israeli-style, until Yahalom soldiers arrive to lead the way, very carefully. By substituting low-frequency sensors, heavy earth-moving equipment, minidrones, and bullets for jet fighters, heavy artillery, and smart bombs, Israel has effected massive cost savings while reducing its reliance on U.S. resupply—and taking the steam out

of propaganda claims about bombing and artillery massacres.

Finally, there is the equipment much of it unique to the IDF, and already in high demand by foreign armies. Israeli Merkava tanks, unlike the seemingly formidable German Leopard tanks that failed to spearhead Ukraine's big offensive, were not penetrated and cooked by the remarkable Russian Kornet missiles that Hamas also has. That's because, in addition to its thick armor, each 60-ton Merkava went into Gaza with its own Trophy counterweapon that intercepts incoming missiles and rockets at close range.

Also unique to Israel is the turretless Namer infantry carrier, a battle taxi in effect, that allows Israeli troops to move about in the perilous urban space protected by more armor than any combat vehicle in history. When armored vehicles enter defended urban areas they must do so almost blindly, because their commanders cannot stand in their turrets to look all around, as they do in open ground, without fatally exposing themselves to close-in artillery and mortars, and also snipers. Yes, there have always been observation slits, periscopes and protected sights but they only offer

narrow views, of little use when a hundred windows and balconies overlook the fight.

In the Namer by contrast, nobody has to stand in an open hatch to view all 360 degrees of the outside world, because the locked-down crew can see everything on large screens whose images come from microcameras safely embedded in the armor.

Even when Israel's infantrymen in Gaza must dismount, or advance on foot from the start, they are guided by the warnings and directions of their commanders, who monitor their movement and those of any enemies close by with the cameras of their minidrones that can see them from above, while other flying cameras look for snipers and for mortar crews in the next street over. While these days even Iran manufactures drones, Israel was the first country to produce remotely piloted vehicles as they were originally known some 60 years ago, and still today leads the way, producing both the smallest—mechanical flying insects—and some of the largest. They are especially useful in Gaza because it takes many eyes to surveil the very complicated urban landscape.

None of the above would matter if the troops fighting in Gaza were not determined to ensure that they will not have to come back, by fighting as hard and as long as necessary to grind down Hamas until nothing is left of its fighting strength. Of that the best evidence is provided by a misunderstanding: The soldiers of a reserve battalion of several hundred, rotated out after much hard fighting to bring in a fresh battalion, mistakenly thought that Israel was starting to retreat altogether, and staged a protest until they were reassured—and also reprimanded—for protesting while still in uniform.

It is now evident that the tactical victory that Hamas achieved on Oct. 7 with all its scenes of unimaginable horror has become a leading driver of its strategic defeat, by compelling the Israeli government to persist in spite of the atrocious plight of the hostages, by motivating IDF troops to fight until its destruction, and by forfeiting much potential support even from within the Arab world, allowing all Arab governments that had them to maintain diplomatic relations with Israel. That feckless American college students sing its praises will not avert the well-deserved fate that awaits

Hamas, and without the heavy casualties that some feared while others gleefully anticipated.