

The October 7 War: Observations, October 2023 - May 2024





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Policy Project Members and Staff

Task Force Members

GEN David Rodriguez, USA (ret.)
Former Commander, U.S. Africa Command

ADM Michael Rogers, USN (ret.)
*Former Commander, U.S. Cyber Command and
Director, National Security Agency/Chief, Central
Security Service*

Gen Charles Wald, USAF (ret.)
*Distinguished Fellow, JINSA; Former Deputy
Commander, U.S. European Command*

LtGen David Beydler, USMC (ret.)
*Former Commander, U.S. Marine Forces Central
Command*

Lt Gen Tom Trask, USAF (ret.)
*Former Vice Commander, U.S. Special
Operations Command*

COL Marc Warren, USA (ret.)
*Distinguished Fellow, JINSA; Former Senior Legal
Advisor, Joint Special Operations Command*

LTC Geoffrey Corn, USA (ret.)
*Distinguished Fellow, JINSA; Former Special
Assistant for Law of War Matters, U.S. Army;
George R. Killam Jr. Chair of Criminal Law and
Director of the Center for Military Law and Policy
at Texas Tech University School of Law*

Staff

Michael Makovsky, PhD
President & CEO

Sander Gerber
Distinguished Fellow

John Hannah
Randi & Charles Wax Senior Fellow

Blaise Misztal
Vice President for Policy

Jacob Olidort
Director of Research

Jonathan Ruhe
Director of Foreign Policy

Ari Cicurel
Assistant Director of Foreign Policy

Zac Schildcrout
Policy Analyst

Yoni Tobin
Policy Analyst

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I. Executive Summary

On October 7, Hamas terrorists invaded Israel and violated and killed 1,200 people and kidnapped 252 others in the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. The conflict that has ensued—between Israel and not just Hamas but the full panoply of Iranian-backed terrorist organizations, and even Iran itself—has been intensely scrutinized. In particular, questions about the Israel Defense Forces’ (IDF) strategy, operations, legality of conduct, concern for mitigating harm to civilians, and provision of humanitarian assistance are being raised and actively debated everywhere from the public square to international organizations.

That is why, as retired U.S. generals, admirals, and military legal experts, we undertook this preliminary assessment of the 2023–2024 armed conflict initiated by Hamas. Our analysis—based on primary source research, a factfinding trip to Israel, and discussions with senior Israeli, international aid agency, and United Nations (UN) officials—is necessarily interim, focused on the first six months of fighting and issued while fighting was still ongoing. This report, moreover, is focused solely on military operations by the IDF and Hamas that have taken place inside Gaza or were initiated from within Gaza, about which we offer operational, legal, strategic, informational, and contextual observations to assist American policymakers and military leaders seeking to understand this conflict and its implications.

Our expertise does not extend to addressing the future political disposition of Gaza, although we do discuss the importance of there being an agreed upon vision of a “day after” in order to shape IDF operations. For a detailed analysis of what a post-Hamas Gaza might, but also should not, look like, we commend to readers the 2024 report of a separate JINSA group, *The Day After: A Plan for Gaza*.¹

Overall, after Israel was attacked on October 7 by a Hamas force that was organized, trained, equipped, and motivated to viciously kill as many civilians as possible, we find that Israel’s determination to “destroy”—defined in U.S. and Israeli military doctrine as rendering the enemy unable to continue fighting effectively, rather than, as the term may be more commonly interpreted, completely eliminating the enemy altogether—Hamas as a conventional military force in the Gaza Strip is wholly justified self-defense and represents a justifiable objective. The IDF’s operations in Gaza must be considered in the context of Hamas’s stated intent to destroy Israel and kill Jews, borne out in numerous attacks on Israel and particularly the barbarism of October 7, repeated previous IDF operations that left Hamas’s capabilities intact only for the group to launch more attacks, and the multifront threat Israel faces from Iran and its terror network.

Israel has the legal right and responsibility to its citizens to restore its security. We believe that eliminating Hamas's ability to threaten Israel is a legitimate goal. The IDF's campaign to achieve this objective may also have the collateral benefit of demonstrating to its regional adversaries Israel's commitment to self-defense against any adversary that poses an actual or imminent threat of unlawful armed attack against it.

The IDF has carried out its mission to eliminate the Hamas threat with operational and tactical excellence and in overall compliance with the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC). This occurred despite encountering a complex urban and subterranean battlefield in which almost the entirety of Gaza, including civilian infrastructure including schools, hospitals, and places of worship, had been prepared and repurposed by Hamas as fortified fighting positions. The U.S. military would benefit from studying how the IDF fought effectively in this highly complex, multi-domain environment.

Hamas, on the other hand, has intentionally and systemically violated those same laws by dragging civilians into the fight, using them to shield their personnel and assets in an attempt to compel the IDF to inflict civilian casualties so as to trigger opposition to Israel by the United States, European countries, the United Nations, and international courts as well as in public opinion. Yet, the IDF's operational effectiveness has been jeopardized by the lack of a clear, announced strategy for a post-Hamas future for Gaza. Our military experience has taught us that tactical success is often undermined when military operations are not consistently directed toward a well-defined and understood strategic end-state.

We believe the IDF has fulfilled its legal obligations to provide humanitarian access and assistance to Gazan civilians. At the same time, we acknowledge the strategic legitimacy of Israel's campaign has been compromised by the *perception* of indifference to the humanitarian suffering in Gaza. It may be understandable why many Israelis, including some families of hostages, have opposed Israel providing assistance to Gazan civilians, many of whom supported the October 7 attack, or even participated in it. However, this cannot be permitted to dictate decisions related to humanitarian obligations and policies. Fortunately, the recent increase in aid deliveries indicates a positive trend and Israel's growing understanding that achieving strategic objectives can require exceeding minimum legal obligations.

A. Observations: Operations

- The IDF’s performance on Gaza’s complicated battlefield—its ability to combine effectively air power, indirect fire, and ground forces in a significant above- and under-ground maneuver while implementing precautions to mitigate civilian harm and managing threats on multiple fronts—demonstrates operational and tactical excellence.
- Hamas is better understood as a “terror army.” It has the structure, training, infrastructure, and advanced weapons of a conventional force. But by frequently wearing no uniform, openly killing, abducting, and assaulting Israeli civilians, terrorizing and exploiting Gazan civilians and civilian infrastructure, and relying on information operations to achieve its extremist objectives, Hamas fights in a consistently illicit and illegal manner.
- This was particularly evident in the way that Hamas had transformed the entirety of the Gaza Strip, including the underground domain and civilian buildings, into a fortress intentionally designed to support its terror war effort, protect Hamas, expose Gazan civilians to harm, and impede the IDF’s advance.

In confronting Hamas belligerent operatives—with capabilities, organization, and operational concepts analogous to a conventional military—Israel was compelled to conduct a large-scale combined arms operation that at one point involved approximately five maneuver divisions and 100,000 IDF personnel and that continues at the time of this report. The IDF encountered a Hamas force estimated to number more than 35,000 operatives that combined conventional-type capabilities and force structure with asymmetric tactics, including transforming all of Gaza, including its civilian infrastructure, into prepared, fortified, and multidimensional battle positions. These tactics, planned for years, are not only intended to oppose Israeli advances but employed for the purpose of creating Gazan civilian casualties that will be blamed on the IDF and Israel.

The IDF has conducted a complex combined arms maneuver operation in one of the most densely populated places on earth effectively, efficiently, and rapidly. We believe that the United States would benefit from studying the IDF’s maneuver campaign in Gaza’s dense complex urban terrain and particularly the tactics, techniques, and procedures it developed in the course of battle for identifying, clearing, and neutralizing tunnels.

B. Observations: Legal

- The IDF's campaign to dismantle Hamas's military capabilities, including its ground maneuver into the Gaza Strip, is a legally justified and reasonable response in self-defense following the barbaric October 7 attack.
- During the conduct of hostilities, the IDF demonstrated commitment to implementing and complying with LOAC, including implementing many precautions to mitigate risks to civilians.
- It is misleading to rely on aggregate casualty numbers to judge the legality of IDF operations, and such reliance distorts any credible assessment of IDF compliance.
- Hamas's legal status as an organized armed group means that its belligerent operatives are both a lawful object of IDF self-defense actions and legally obligated to follow LOAC.
- Hamas intentionally and systemically violates LOAC by deliberately attacking Israeli civilians, exploiting the presence of Gazan civilians and protected sites like hospitals, places of worship, and schools to obtain a shielding effect from lawful attacks, and seeking to compel the IDF to conduct attacks that inevitably place civilians at mortal risk.

Israel's military campaign against Hamas in Gaza is legally justified pursuant to the inherent right of national self-defense in response to the horrific attack it suffered on October 7 and the ongoing threats posed by Hamas, Iran, and Iran's other proxies. The scope of this campaign is, in our view, both necessary and proportionate in order to restore the safety and security of Israel and its population. In short, Israel is justified in employing military force to ensure Hamas cannot again pose a threat to Israel.

We observed that IDF commanders demonstrated overall commitment to ensuring operations were planned and executed according to the key tenets of LOAC, knowing full well they would face an enemy who at best has no respect for the law and at worst would exploit IDF commitment to the law to gain tactical and strategic advantage. We further observed that the IDF took steps to mitigate the risk of civilian casualties in the conduct of hostilities and, on many occasions, we believe, prioritized mitigating civilian risk over anticipated tactical advantage or striking legitimate military targets. Indeed, after the initial phase of airstrikes and as the IDF began to better understand

the nature of the battlefield in Gaza and how to operate securely and effectively on it, the IDF changed its procedures to reduce the number of munitions being dropped in Gaza in order to reduce risk to civilians.

The total number of reported civilian casualties in Gaza is often pointed to in public discourse as evidence of Israeli illegality. It is not. Arguments that casualty figures indicate indiscriminate Israeli attacks are flawed both as a matter of military analysis and law, in particular because LOAC applies principally to how the decision for each specific attack was made, rather than being judged based on the outcome of that attack, let alone all attacks in a campaign taken together. However, issues related to detainee treatment and humanitarian assistance do raise concerns about Israel's interpretations of its legal obligations and, more importantly, whether otherwise legally compliant policies are responsive to broader strategic considerations (discussed below).

On the other hand, Hamas forces consistently and intentionally ignore and violate the most basic LOAC principles and obligations applicable to all organized armed groups engaged in hostilities. This includes frequently fighting without uniforms and feigning civilian status as well as embedding assets and defensive positions in and amongst densely populated civilian areas in order to shield those assets or, even worse, deliberately expose civilians and protected sites to IDF attack.

C. Observations: Strategic

- Hamas pursued a fundamentally information-driven strategy, intentionally exposing Gazan civilians to risk of harm in order to spread disinformation that would generate international public and political pressure to end the conflict prematurely, on terms favorable to Hamas.
- The IDF operated with multiple conflicting and, at least for external audiences, unclear objectives. While the goal of “destroying” Hamas has a very specific military meaning, the IDF has not sufficiently defined it, sowing uncertainty about the IDF's mission.
- Faced with extremely difficult choices, the government of Israel has not yet matched the IDF's operational success on the battlefield with a clear political strategy for the “day after” in Gaza that would enable it to make further progress toward its stated strategic objective of destroying Hamas. Until it defines a strategic end-state for Gaza, Israel will have to continue prolonged counter-terrorist operations to degrade remnants of, or re-emerging, Hamas forces and other resurgent terrorist groups.

- Israel's early reticence to provide more than the legally required humanitarian assistance or to administer areas of Gaza that have generally been cleared of Hamas threaten to undermine the tactical victories it has won on the battlefield.

In analyzing the 2021 Israel-Hamas conflict, an earlier JINSA report, in which some of us participated, observed that there was a “strategy mismatch” between the two sides, namely Hamas had a clear “informational strategy to ... delegitimize Israel’s operations,” while Israel “pursued only military operational objectives with no defined strategic end-state.”² In this war, Israel seemed determined to rectify its previous lack of strategic objectives in Gaza. However, we observed that while Hamas once again pursued the same (dis)information-based strategy, the IDF still struggled to connect its operations with clear strategic objectives.

We came away from our visit convinced that Israel is unlikely to terminate combat operations until it has rendered Hamas incapable of projecting force into Israel and against Israeli citizens. We believe this is a legitimate goal, alongside which Israel will necessarily need to continue to mitigate civilian suffering. We also concluded that Israeli officials failed to sufficiently define the end-state and objectives of the campaign beyond the immediate goal of dismantling Hamas military capabilities. This adds to the risk that Hamas will remain as an insurgent force, requiring continued Israeli counter-terrorist operations in Gaza. Hamas’s ability to reconstitute itself in areas that the IDF had previously cleared only highlights this risk.³

Relatedly, Israel has complied with its legal obligations to allow access to and, in some instances, provide humanitarian assistance to Gaza. However, Israeli policies and actions contributed to the (often exaggerated) perception of indifference toward civilian suffering by emphasizing compliance with legal obligation when that compliance was overwhelmed by the perceived insufficiency of Israeli efforts. It was only in April 2024 that Israel began notably increasing the amount of humanitarian aid entering Gaza.⁴ Israel could advance its strategic objectives more and help counteract negative public perceptions that Israel’s enemies only seek to amplify by going beyond what is legally mandated and taking responsibility for delivering aid and administering Gaza in the interregnum between Hamas and whatever comes next.

D. Observations: Information

- Hamas waged effective information warfare against Israel through the promulgation of disinformation about events in Gaza; IDF operations; the extent of, and IDF responsibility for, civilian casualties; and IDF responsibility for harm to protected objects, seeking to delegitimize Israel; create the perception that the IDF routinely commits war crimes; and to generate sympathy for its own activities.
- Although the IDF has made some improvements compared to past conflicts, it continued to face challenges effectively communicating with international audiences to mitigate the adverse impact of Hamas disinformation. Ironically, some IDF efforts to share more information about its operations might have backfired by setting unrealistic media expectations.
- From the inception of the maneuver operation, the IDF failed to effectively convey the gravity of the enemy threat and the accordant scale of the operation needed to address this threat.

Given Hamas's strategic goal of delegitimizing Israel, the information domain has been a major arena of the current conflict. Particularly given this, we believe that Israeli and IDF strategic communications were inadequate to mitigate the negative perception of how the IDF prosecuted the campaign. Although the IDF has made significant strides in its strategic communications compared to previous conflicts, in spite of clear biases in some global media, Israel's ability to reach international publics to explain the justness of its cause, the legality of its operations, and the responsibility of its enemy for the suffering of the Gazan population continues to prove insufficient to balance against the outrage and condemnation that Hamas purposefully stokes.

E. Observations: Context

- Beyond the carnage it caused, Hamas’s October 7 savage attack shook the foundations of Israeli security, well beyond the immediate vicinity bordering the Gaza Strip.
- Previous, repeated rounds of fighting between Israel and Hamas might have temporarily degraded the terrorist group’s capabilities but did little to deter it—calling into question Israel’s previous approach to dealing with the Hamas threat.
- Hamas has not been the only threat facing Israel since October 7. Iran has encircled, and attacked, Israel with proxies, Lebanese Hezbollah foremost among them, armed with missiles, rockets, and remotely piloted vehicles (RPVs).

The sophistication of Hamas’s operation on October 7, its surprising use of advanced weapons with increased lethality against an armored force, and the attackers’ barbaric violence against civilians, indicating not a spontaneous expression of violence but conditioned hatred of Jews, shifted Israel’s understanding of the threat the group poses and could pose in the future if allowed to continue its evolution into an ever more capable adversary. That the attack happened at all—after seven IDF operations against Gaza-based terrorists in the last seventeen years, in which it always chose to degrade enemy capabilities rather than launch a full-scale incursion—disproved Israel’s overarching assumption that terror threats from the Gaza Strip were contained and raised questions about the IDF’s longstanding reputation as the Middle East’s most capable military, exposing Israel to the real possibility that other adversaries would grow emboldened and seek to replicate Hamas’s success.

And other adversaries Israel does not lack. The Iranian regime has established a dispersed network of proxies around Israel, U.S. forces in the Middle East, and U.S. Arab partners by training, funding, equipping, and directing “axis of resistance” proxies in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, Iraq, and Yemen. That investment has paid dividends since October 7, as virtually all of Iran’s proxy forces have joined the fight against Israel, including Iran itself, turning it into a multifront conflict with serious risk of escalation and spillover.

These factors have, understandably and appropriately, shaped the IDF’s operations and strategy. The current conflict in Gaza cannot be understood without heeding this context.

II. Observations: Operations

The 2023-2024 fighting in Gaza was not merely another Israeli counter-terrorist operation against a guerrilla or insurgent force. Several characteristics of Hamas and IDF operations alike set this conflict apart from both previous rounds of hostilities between the two forces as well as from U.S. Middle Eastern conflicts. Our operational observations are that:

- The IDF's performance on Gaza's complicated battlefield—its ability to combine effectively air power, indirect fire, and ground forces in a significant above- and under-ground maneuver while implementing precautions to mitigate civilian harm and managing threats on multiple fronts—demonstrates operational and tactical excellence.
- Hamas is better understood as a “terror army.” It has the structure, training, infrastructure, and advanced weapons of a conventional force. But by frequently wearing no uniform, openly killing, abducting, and assaulting Israeli civilians, terrorizing and exploiting Gazan civilians and civilian infrastructure, and relying on information operations to achieve its extremist objectives, Hamas fights in a consistently illicit and illegal manner.
- This was particularly evident in the way that Hamas had transformed the entirety of the Gaza Strip, including the underground domain and civilian buildings, into a fortress intentionally designed to support its terror war effort, protect Hamas, expose Gazan civilians to harm, and impede the IDF's advance.

A. The IDF's Operational Excellence

The IDF has conducted successful operations inside Gaza on the ground, in the air, and below the surface. Five IDF divisions, including two active and three reserve divisions, with troops, tanks, and other vehicles, along with several support brigades, fought on Gaza's streets and in its buildings. Meanwhile, Israeli forces have been searching and neutralizing Hamas's vast underground tunnel network. The IDF also effectively managed extremely confined airspace for operations by helicopters, transport planes, remotely piloted vehicles (RPVs), fighter aircraft, Airborne Early Warning and Control (AWAC), and air defense interceptors in the sky above Israel and Gaza. The IDF conduct-

ed a professionally executed combined arms military operation that precisely targeted the enemy; effectively maneuvered in a complex battlespace, including underground; and mitigated civilian harm while balancing the threats from multiple fronts.

i. Fires

As Israel conducted its most extensive war in Gaza, with Israeli troops operating on the ground in significant force for the first time since 2014, Israel's air superiority, precise direct and indirect fires, and constant deployment of RPVs above the battlefield significantly enabled its ability to target Hamas cells rapidly and accurately, while taking precautions to mitigate civilian harm.

Information available to us indicates that approximately ninety percent of Israeli strikes were pre-planned, even those by Remotely Piloted Vehicles (RPVs), although planning may have occurred only ten minutes before the operation, while ten percent were dynamic, real-time strikes. Most of the real-time strikes were launched from RPVs carrying small, precision-guided munitions. With blue force tracking, a GPS capability that provides commanders with real-time locations of their troops, the IDF was able to assign the most appropriate available capability to deal with a threat and direct fire accurately.

a. Precision

Over two-thirds of the munitions that Israel fired during the war were precision-guided munitions (PGMs), which have guidance systems that provide the weapons accuracy within several yards. While Israel still used fire support from unguided ground-based weapons, like artillery and mortars, as well as unguided air-dropped munitions, these still have an accuracy of up to tens of yards and were only deployed in clearing operations where risk to civilians was assessed as unlikely.

The IDF's combination of intelligence and PGMs enabled it to use air support to reduce the number of both IDF and civilian casualties—preplanned, accurate strikes eliminated Hamas threats to IDF troops on the ground while reducing risk to civilians. The use of air support, however, was directly correlated to the extent of the Hamas threat. As Israel degraded Hamas's capabilities in Gaza, reducing the number of enemy personnel and units and their capacity and capability to launch attacks, the numbers of bombs that the IDF dropped also decreased. While the IDF was dropping up to 1,000 munitions per day at points of the war, it reduced the number of strikes on average to approximately a couple dozen per day by the end of October 2023 once it began intensive ground operations.⁵

Israel employed a multistep process from target selection, assessment, and attack that included civilian harm mitigation integration. There were more than 150 areas in Gaza marked on pilots' maps that require high-level authorization for any fire.⁶ The IDF employed tactical patience with targets, even the dynamic ones, to make sure that it fully understood the target and potential civilian impacts of a strike.

b. Remotely Piloted Vehicle (RPV) Deployment

RPVs, also called drones, have long been a core component of IDF operations in Gaza, conducting strikes as well as providing Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR). The IDF used a range of RPVs, from larger, high-flying platforms to handheld RPVs to conduct a range of missions, including gathering intelligence about targets, striking Hamas, and supporting ground operations.

The IDF has used high-flying RPVs to conduct pervasive constant surveillance of Gaza and launch strikes against terrorist targets. RPVs, like Israel's Heron RPV, have provided situational awareness of the battlespace and better enabled Israeli forces to respond against threats.⁷ Others, like the Hermes 450 and 900 RPVs, enabled the IDF to rapidly respond against emergent threats by launching missile strikes with large payloads at Hamas sites.⁸

Although RPVs are piloted remotely, the relative size of Israel and Gaza means that the front lines of the war can be just thirty minutes away from a RPV launch site. This proximity allows RPV operators to meet with soldiers in the field to discuss and coordinate combat operations.⁹ Crewmembers are also given updates on changes in operational conditions, and frequently discuss how many civilians are present in the area and the requisite precautions that need to be taken. As a result, IDF RPV units were able to make informed decisions about information collected and react quickly to battlefield changes.

IDF ground forces also used a range of portable RPVs during their maneuver in Gaza that helped minimize operational risk. IDF soldiers utilized RPVs to identify enemies and check for civilians before directing an airstrike. Handheld models are designed to work in close-quarters environments that would be hazardous for ground forces, such as placing a charge on a doorframe or checking if a building is occupied.¹⁰ Other RPVs provide aerial overwatch and reconnaissance.

IDF forces have also used smaller, inexpensive RPVs to rescue hostages and map out Hamas's vast underground tunnel system all while minimizing loss of life.¹¹ For example, the IDF used RPVs in tunnels to generate a map of its flight path while sending back high-resolution video and thermal footage in real time.

ii. Maneuver

While the IDF had not engaged in a large-scale ground maneuver since the 2006 Lebanon War, it quickly demonstrated the ability to rapidly seize control of territory in Gaza. The IDF ground forces—supported by air assets in Israel’s first significant combined arms maneuver—attacked from multiple fronts to achieve full control over decisive battlefield terrain, envelop and isolate Hamas battalions, and then clear Hamas’s tunnel network.

a. Surprise

We observed that the IDF employed a highly successful maneuver in a very confined battlespace, particularly at the outset of its campaign. The IDF’s advantage was using an indirect approach to maneuver to Hamas weak points to defeat the adversary’s fortified defensive positions. This approach also enabled Israel to take greater precautions to minimize civilian casualties compared to launching a more direct approach using greater force.

For example, Hamas prepared its defensive posture to counter an IDF advance into Gaza from east to west, arraying its battle positions eastward to meet the expected offensive. However, in order to enter Gaza City in the opening stages of the ground maneuver, Israel’s 36th Division made a tactical maneuver to surprise Hamas by first bypassing Gaza City and reaching the Gazan shore and then attacking Hamas from the west, approaching Hamas battalions from behind and evading much of their defensive capabilities.¹²

In other maneuvers, the IDF used speed to surprise and overpower Hamas. During the IDF’s operations at al-Shifa Hospital, Israeli forces quickly blocked access to the compound above and below ground and then proceeded to target fighters inside the compound.¹³ The scale and scope of the IDF maneuver surprised Hamas, which did not anticipate that Israel would reach critical infrastructure in and beneath schools, hospitals, and mosques.

b. Combined Arms

The effective use of combined arms maneuver marked one of the most significant changes compared to previous Israeli operations in Gaza. The success of Israel’s combined arms was significantly enabled by the decision four years ago to bring Air Force officers into ground units, who now support these forces by communicating between air forces and ground units.¹⁴

The IDF's ability to integrate its ground and air assets during the war was such that one Israeli military commander told the authors of this report that "every ground force had their own air force," which provided enhanced targeting capabilities.¹⁵ RPVs with munitions moved above ground forces. IDF forces did not move without having this escort from the sky that could safely strike combatants less than thirty feet from Israeli troops.¹⁶

For example, Skylark teams and other RPV operators were paired with artillery and infantry regiments, and information they received was crucial in directing artillery strikes or tactical maneuvers.¹⁷ In one such instance, the Golani 13th regiment coordinated airstrikes with the Sky Rider RPV unit against Hamas operatives that were ambushing the regiment's vehicles.¹⁸ Similarly, the IDF's Multidimensional Unit, or Unit 888, used small RPVs in tandem with Iron Sting precision mortars.¹⁹

Historically, ground forces would have relied on artillery to provide that sort of shielding fire support but would not have been able to direct as precisely, quickly, and near to their own positions.

Air-to-ground integration directly contributed to the reduction in high-risk situations for Israeli operators and allowed the IDF to take precautions to mitigate civilian risk while precisely targeting Hamas militants and infrastructure. The average time from request for air support to delivery was ten minutes.²⁰ This meant that IDF forces could advance methodically and rely upon air assets to clear areas ahead of ground force maneuvers, decreasing the risks to troops on the ground. By moving slowly, IDF forces gave the civilian population time to leave the area of operation along IDF-designated and -publicized humanitarian corridors, thereby reducing casualties.

iii. Subterranean Threat

Despite knowing before entering into Gaza that Hamas had significant subterranean infrastructure, the IDF did not expect to fight underground. It planned to destroy the tunnels from outside or above, as it had done in previous conflicts. However, it quickly developed new tactics, techniques, and procedures for fighting underground, exploiting tunnels for intelligence and using explosives to destroy completely strategic tunnels and partially collapse tactical tunnels, rendering them impassable.

Israel's acquisition of a large amount of intelligence about the tunnels significantly enhanced its ability to efficiently neutralize them. Alternatively, Israeli forces found some tunnels with sensors through the electromagnetic signal given off by wiring for power and communications in the tunnels.

The IDF sought to avoid underground confrontations due to the lack of intelligence about Hamas's tunnel network and high risk to troops entering it. However, it quickly found that it would have to conduct operations below the surface. Instead of focusing solely on striking the tunnels from the air, Israeli forces have instead been destroying them from the inside. Reasons that the IDF chose to send ground forces into the tunnels included fear that bombing the tunnels would have posed risks to potential hostages being held in the tunnels, the collateral damage associated with such attacks, the IDF gaining confidence that they could fight effectively and safely beneath the ground, and concerns that destroying tunnels from the air would have consumed unnecessary Israeli munitions.

Perhaps most important in this decision, however, was the IDF's experience from the 2021 conflict in which it targeted tunnels inside of Gaza with airstrikes. Those strikes proved to have limited effect because without physically mapping the tunnel network, the IDF lacked the intelligence to neutralize all of Hamas's subterranean infrastructure. Meanwhile, airstrikes on the tunnels inflicted greater than expected damage to civilian infrastructure due to Gaza's sandy soil. In at least one instance in 2021, an airstrike on Hamas tunnel led the tunnel to collapse, along with all the buildings above it.²¹ Consequently, in the 2023–2024 conflict, the IDF only resorted to bombing the tunnels when it had no other options to reach them.

Instead of airstrikes as the primary anti-tunnel tactic, the IDF adopted a method of clearing tunnels that involved ground troops, but only after its forces had taken control of and secured the surrounding area. To isolate the area around the tunnel, the IDF established secure perimeters and searched for additional openings. Initial exploration of tunnels involved acquiring a survey of the passageways using footage from RPVs or canine-mounted cameras. The IDF scanned tunnel openings and surroundings for threats, such as Hamas fighters, gas, explosives, or the risk of the tunnel collapse. Unlike the more stable tunnels that Hezbollah built to infiltrate northern Israel, tunnel collapse was a major threat, particularly in Hamas's tactical tunnels, because the tunnels were often poorly built and Gaza's soil was so unstable. As a result, the IDF had to develop and implement methodical tunnel clearing operations.

At first, for every day of maneuver above-ground, it took the IDF 4–5 days to clear the same area below ground.²² The IDF has become much more efficient, and this ratio has gone down, but Israeli forces remain very cautious because of the potential for hostages to be in the tunnels, underscoring the preference for maneuvering ground troops to search the tunnels over conducting airstrikes that could inadvertently harm civilians.

However, sometimes there was fighting in a tunnel at the same time as forces were maneuvering above ground. Soldiers entered tunnels to combat urgent threats, respond to the possible presence of hostages, and map the tunnels. When the IDF found strategic tunnels with headquarters or server rooms, soldiers had to enter them with

mines and a large number of explosives to destroy the caverns. An Israeli official who spoke with our group indicated that Israeli officials do not believe that Hamas expected the IDF to reach those strategic tunnels.

To destroy a tunnel completely, the IDF developed a technique using a liquid emulsion explosive that it mixed in the tunnels, a practice that avoided the risk of the explosive detonating in the field. Specialized trucks mixed and pumped the emulsion and required significant quantities of explosives—about three tons or two trucks-worth to destroy 150 meters of tunnel.²³ Facing a massive underground network of sophisticated tunnels throughout Gaza, the IDF recognized that it did not have to neutralize all the tunnels. Indeed, the tunnel network in Gaza is so extensive and deep that the IDF does not have enough explosives to neutralize its entirety. Instead, the IDF frequently partially destroys tunnels, partially sealing them by targeting the junctions and intersections to make tunnel networks impassable.

iv. Training and Reserves Mobilization

While active-duty ground forces with whom we spoke had a high level of readiness and training before the October 7 attack, the IDF did not have a ready-made plan for large-scale combat operations in Gaza or previous experience launching a ground operation into such a large urban area for a prolonged operation. Following the October 7 attack, the IDF successfully and rapidly mobilized, prepared, and trained to fight high-intensity combined arms operations in Gaza.

After October 7, the IDF rapidly conducted its largest mobilization of reserve forces since the lead-up to the 2006 Lebanon War, calling up 300,000 reservists, or approximately four percent of Israel's population.²⁴ By the start of the ground operation, the IDF had called up 360,000 reservists.²⁵

IDF forces spent the three weeks after October 7 mobilizing, developing an operational plan, and training to conduct combined arms maneuvers. Immediately before the ground operation, the IDF conducted numerous training exercises, many of which combined different ground and aerial units. The training focused specifically on urban warfare and fighting with hundreds of hostages present in the Gaza Strip. The IDF constructed an urban warfare training ground at the Tse'elim army base. Known as "The Strip," it was built in only a few days to resemble conditions in Gaza.²⁶

Active units conducted the majority of the IDF's ground offensive maneuvers, and reserve units primarily conducted clearing operations and border patrol. However, in early November the 252nd Division entered Gaza, marking the first time an entire reserve division conducted combat operations since the Lebanon War in 1982. Reserve forces

also worked alongside active units to better enable their maneuver, as the 551st Paratroopers Reserve Brigade of the 98th Division did in mid-November when it conducted an offensive in northern Jabaliya to open a route for the 162nd Division to maneuver.

v. Operations on Multiple Fronts

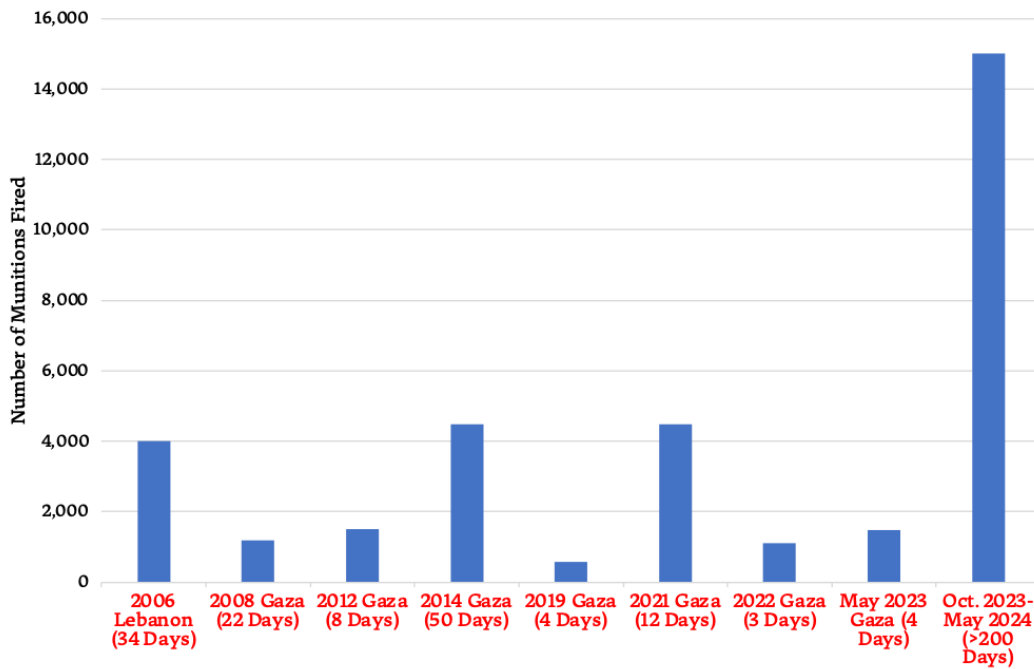
Even as the IDF conducted operations in Gaza, it simultaneously fought and managed threats on other fronts. The IDF devoted air defense and offensive strike capabilities to the Lebanese border to address threats from Hezbollah and other Iran-backed terrorist groups to its north, while also protecting southern Israel against strikes by the Houthis in Yemen.

Shortly after the war began, the IDF conducted operations in Lebanon every day, two to three times per week in Syria, and occasionally even beyond these fronts. Although, so far, the IDF has succeeded in keeping the conflict on these other fronts from escalating to full-scale war, the continued potential for such escalation, coupled with complexity and demands of a war with Hezbollah in Lebanon, have shaped IDF operations in Gaza. The IDF had to carefully consider where and how to position its air defense to defend against multiple threats, making degrading Hamas's launch capabilities quickly an urgent priority in order to be able to re-task assets from the southern arena to other fronts. Deploying forces to reinforce the northern border impacted the manpower available for operations in Gaza. Additionally, the IDF has had to hold munitions in reserve for potential use in other theaters, affecting the number of PGMs it chose to use in Gaza, according to a senior Israeli officer with whom we spoke.

a. Air Defense

Israeli air defenses successfully intercepted eighty-seven percent of the over 15,000 rocket, missile, and RPV attacks launched against it from all fronts, the most that Israel has faced since at least the 1973 Yom Kippur War. As Israeli operations neutralized much of Hamas's capacity to launch rockets, Israel was able to redeploy its air defense assets to address threats to its north and east.²⁷ For the first time, all tiers of Israel's air defense—the short-range Iron Dome, medium-range David's Sling, and long-range Arrow—intercepted incoming threats during a single conflict. Israel's Arrow 3 long-range anti-ballistic missile defense system intercepted at least three missiles, some of which had trajectories toward Israel's neighbors, who appreciated Israel's willingness to protect beyond its borders, according to an Israeli official we spoke with. Israel also intercepted missiles over Eilat with the cooperation of Jordan.²⁸

Projectiles Fired Against Israel During Major Conflicts



b. Deployments

In addition to deploying forces into Gaza, the IDF bolstered its force posture in northern Israel. When the IDF mobilized its reserve forces, it added a division to the north as well as the south. Then, as the IDF withdrew its reserve forces from Gaza, it redeployed many of them to the north to strengthen Israel's force posture against threats from Hezbollah.²⁹ With these additional forces in northern Israel, the IDF also increased its training for a potential full-scale war with Hezbollah.³⁰

c. Managing Escalation

The IDF also successfully managed to protect northern Israel from Hezbollah strikes and push back against its deployment of Radwan forces along the border without triggering an escalation to a full-scale war. Israel launched attacks against the launch locations, weapons storage facilities, and headquarters of Hezbollah cells near the border to degrade their capacity and capability to conduct attacks. Out of 2,700 Radwan operatives, Israeli strikes drove all but roughly 400 from the border area, with primarily Anti-tank Guided Missiles (ATGM) squads remaining.³¹ Israel also targeted terrorist leaders and key sites away from the border, which signaled the ability of the Israeli Air Force (IAF)

to reach terrorist locations deep into Lebanon as well as Syria. The ability of Israel's air defenses to neutralize the resulting retaliatory strikes from Hezbollah and Hamas's wing in Lebanon helped it keep the exchange of fire from escalating.

B. Hamas: A Terror Army

As one former Israeli official told us, “Hamas is not a terrorist organization. They are a terror army. They have all the structure of an army.”³² Hamas's conventional force posture, which included special forces, intelligence units, cyber units, and a hierarchical battalion/brigade order of battle, contradicted the received wisdom that Hamas is merely a conventionally weak and disorganized fighting force.³³ And, like many highly capable state armed forces, Hamas was adept at engaging in a broad range of operational methods. Specifically, the Iranian regime organized, trained, and equipped Hamas to fuse this conventional structure with its unconventional warfare tactics to prevent IDF advances, inflict maximal Israeli and Palestinian civilian casualties, and protect its leadership.



Source: IDF³⁴

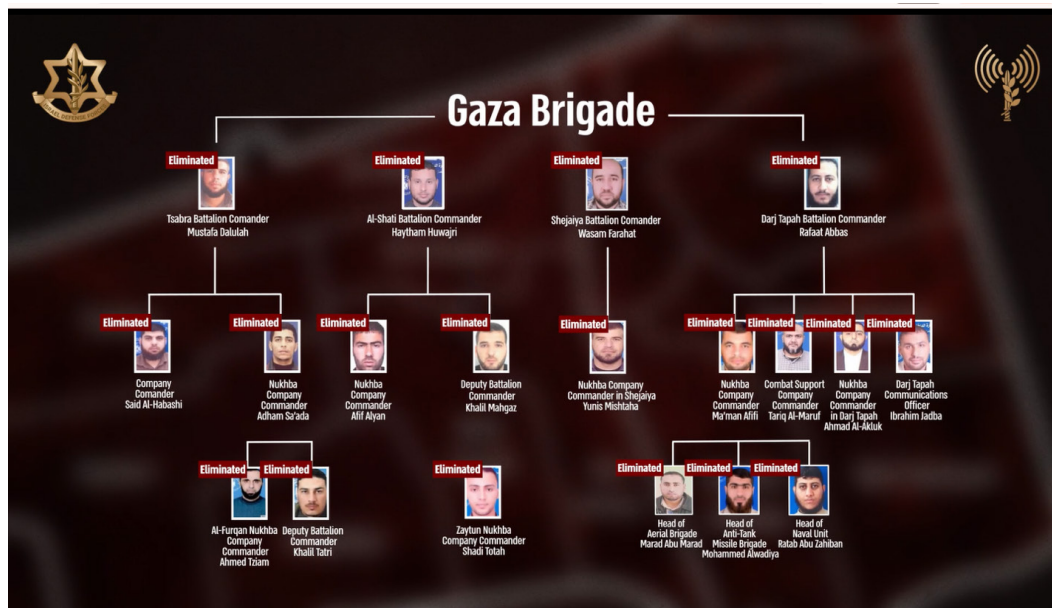
i. Conventional

Hamas has developed many of the attributes of a modern, standing military—including a conventional force structure, centralized command and control and hierarchical order of battle, heavy weaponry, and even a rudimentary industrial base for producing munitions.

Hamas utilized camouflage and ambush tactics, including hiding in the ruins of buildings that had already been struck, to launch rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) and improvised explosive devices (IED) attacks on advancing IDF troops.³⁵ Fighters managed to place IED ambushes on roads that had previously been cleared, including those that the IDF traveled along in unprotected vehicles.³⁶ Hamas frequently employed snipers and camouflaged positions, including fighters firing machine guns and ATGMs from the top floors of buildings.³⁷

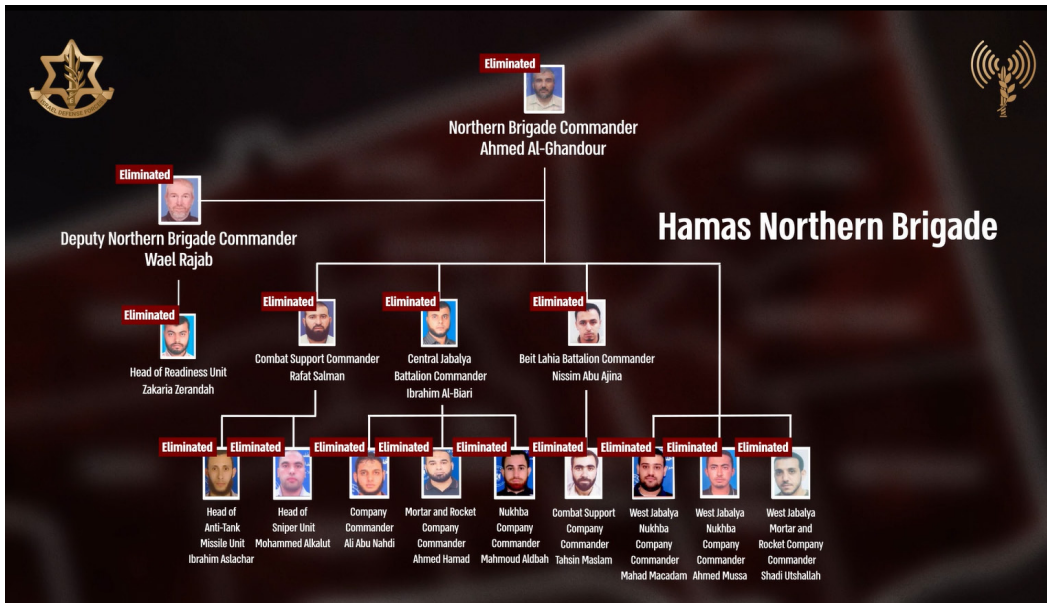
a. Force Structure

Hamas started the war fighting in formations and units like those of a conventional army, with clearly organized brigades, battalions, and special operations forces (SOF). Its estimated 40,000-50,000 fighters were structured in five brigades and twenty-four battalions.³⁸ Each battalion, responsible for its own geographic sector of the Gaza Strip, had an estimated 1,000-1,500 fighters.³⁹ A number of these brigades included rocket array divisions and anti-tank units.⁴⁰ Hamas also incorporated into its force posture an aerial unit, a munitions production unit, and a naval commando unit.⁴¹ To train and support its fighters, prior to the war, Hamas operated an advanced military academy, including cyber training, and maintained an intelligence division.⁴²



Source: IDF⁴³

Hamas also fielded a special operations unit, the al-Nukhba force, made up of some 5,000 members. It was sequestered from the rest of Hamas's combat units and received advanced sniper instruction as well as tunnel warfare training involving tunnel maneuvering that included a prolonged period spent in the tunnels without food and water.⁴⁴



Source: IDF⁴⁵

b. Arms Inventory

Hamas not only exhibited well-developed force structure but also proved to be a well-armed force.

Rockets have been Hamas’s weapon of choice in past conflicts and so, too, in 2023. More importantly, the group demonstrated that it has been able to build its arsenal of projectiles despite Israeli efforts to degrade it. In 2014, Hamas was thought to have possessed roughly 6,000 rockets.⁴⁶ Seven years later, its arsenal had not grown significantly, with estimates putting it at roughly 7,000 rockets.⁴⁷ By contrast, in 2023, Israel’s military intelligence assessed that Hamas possessed around 12,000 rockets prior to the start of the war, and other reports indicate that Hamas possessed up to 30,000 projectiles total, with as many as 18,000 rockets, at the start of the war.⁴⁸

In addition to its projectile arsenal, however, Hamas began the war with a sizable amount of conventional weaponry. Hamas fighters were armed with not just small arms but also Iranian, Russian, and North Korean-made RPG-7 launchers and machine guns, presumably used by pro-Assad forces in the Syrian Civil War and then smuggled over the years via Egypt into Gaza through cross-border tunnels.⁴⁹ The RPG-7s, with a range of up to 2,000 feet, became a prevalent feature of the conflict, particularly targeting IDF tanks to immobilize them.⁵⁰ Hamas also launched mortars to complement RPGs and small arms in its rampant ambush attacks throughout the course of the war.⁵¹

Hamas utilized a number of munition types for the first known time in conflict, including thermobaric missiles, thermobaric grenades, and explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) capable of penetrating armor and launching steel shrapnel over dozens of feet.⁵² Thermobaric weapons raise temperatures to some 3,000 degrees Celsius and are capable of being outfitted on RPGs.⁵³ The thermobaric weapons and EFPs are believed to have been indigenously produced in the Gaza Strip.⁵⁴ Hamas also developed magnetic explosive charges capable of attaching to IDF armored vehicles and cantonments.⁵⁵

c. RPVs

Much like in the Ukraine conflict, RPVs have become a reality of modern warfare even in Gaza. Hamas had hundreds of RPVs, some of which were capable of dropping explosives onto tanks.⁵⁶ Hamas effectively combined these RPVs with conventional weapons in operations against the IDF. Multiple Hamas squads would ambush troops at once with mortars and similar weapons, with combat RPVs—some equipped with RPG warheads—serving as air support. The RPVs were also used to coordinate ambushes. Hamas used these ambush tactics against IDF troops as they entered Khan Younis and other major strongholds.⁵⁷

d. Command and Control

Hamas's command-and-control was highly centralized, conducted from brigade command bunkers frequently embedded in sensitive sites such as hospitals, schools, and mosques, and informed by an extensive intelligence gathering network.⁵⁸



Source: CBS News⁵⁹

Hamas's internal military command operated its own command-and-control system in Gaza, with Hamas's brigade commanders each maintaining their own command-and-control center inside a personal bunker.⁶⁰ However, Hamas's intelligence headquarters in central Gaza also underscored the centralized, conventional nature of this system. The facility contained detailed maps, Hamas command-and-control charts, order of battle tables, means of communication, and details about Hamas commanders and field operatives.⁶¹ Communication among and between units and their commanders was mostly conducted through a hard-wired voice network built into the subterranean infrastructure, making it difficult for the IDF to intercept communications while providing resiliency against Israeli efforts at disrupting Hamas operations.

Using this centralized command-and-control system, Hamas was able to form a cohesive intelligence picture of IDF forces across the entire Gaza Strip due to widely distributed array of field intelligence units and facilities.⁶² These facilities collected information about IDF troop movements, which were then collated in an operations room, distributed to operational units, and used to help facilitate terrorist attacks against IDF troops.⁶³ These rooms were hidden in sensitive targets in Gaza's urban centers. In al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City, IDF troops found a room used to coordinate rocket and anti-tank fire; in a mosque in Jabaliya, IDF troops located a Hamas command-and-control center containing an operations room with cameras used to monitor the activities of Israeli forces.⁶⁴

e. Industrial Base

In 2019, Hamas's leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, reportedly boasted that there were "enough [plumbing pipes] to manufacture rockets for the coming 10 years."⁶⁵ It appears he was right. Hamas's defense industrial base was able to indigenously manufacture and distribute large quantities of weapons in its underground weapons plants.⁶⁶ The IDF uncovered some eighty weapons manufacturing sites throughout Gaza by February, some containing 3D printers, chemical and explosives labs, and coded manuals. Israel's military intelligence sources estimate that some eighty percent of Hamas's explosive weapons were produced in the Gaza Strip, including around 500 rockets a month in the lead-up to October 7.⁶⁷

Hamas Weapons Manufacturing Facility



Source: *The Times of Israel*⁶⁸

At the reported behest of Hamas's military wing leader, Muhammad Deif, Hamas's indigenous manufacturing program was guided by three principles: prioritize indigenous production over weapons smuggling where possible; prioritize producing a high quantity of weapons; and distribute weapons across the Gaza Strip.⁶⁹

In addition to cannibalizing Gaza's infrastructure for rocket parts, chemicals used in explosives, including ammonium chloride, were reportedly smuggled in through salt shipments.⁷⁰ Operating at scale and using widely available commercial components reportedly proved cost-effective: short-range rockets were estimated to cost just \$150 per unit to produce, and \$700 per unit for long-range rockets.⁷¹ Hamas also manufactured anti-tank missiles, explosive charges, and one-way attack RPVs.⁷²

Hamas's primary weapons manufacturing plant was strategically located in a complex used by Hamas's South Khan Yunis Battalion in central Gaza to facilitate both above- and below-ground transportation of weapons across Gaza. The plant was near the primary north-south Salah al-Din Road as well as connected to a roughly 100-mile-long tunnel network snaking across the Gaza Strip.⁷³ According to reports, at least some of these tunnels contained a rail system for fighters to move shipments of rockets.⁷⁴

Hamas Rocket Manufacturing Facility



Source: *The Times of Israel*⁷⁵

There were also other weapons-building plants scattered throughout Gaza. Some of the facilities were located inside residential homes heavily insulated with egg cartons, sponge material, and wooden boards to prevent the sound of manufacturing from emitting.⁷⁶ One such facility was embedded in a tunnel accessed via concealed passages and an elevator shaft hidden in the upper level of a residential house.⁷⁷ In another, elevator shafts led to an underground launching post; in the words of an IDF spokesperson, “in one place you make the rockets, another place you launch.”⁷⁸

Hamas capability and expertise in weapons production reportedly came from abroad, even as manufacturing was conducted locally.⁷⁹ The IDF found evidence that Hamas fighters “learned under Iranian guidance how to operate and build precision components and strategic weapons and gained technological knowledge in the field.”⁸⁰ These weapons reportedly include precision munitions.⁸¹ In addition, Hamas’s “brain trust” of military engineers reportedly received training abroad, including in Iran and Malaysia.⁸²

ii. Unconventional

Although it may have had the structure, and infrastructure, of a conventional military, Hamas heavily leverages unconventional tactics in the way it fights. However advanced its capabilities might have been, Hamas knew it could not defeat Israel in a force-on-force campaign. Instead, Hamas’s tactics supported its information-driven strategy of delegitimizing Israel by intentionally seeking to maximize, almost certainly exaggerate, and publicize civilian casualties, including by fighting without uniforms and hiding within and below the civilian population. Gaza’s complex urban environment also

enabled Hamas's adoption of guerilla tactics, including subterranean battlespaces, booby-traps, and frequent ambushes, particularly as the conflict dragged on and its force structure began to disintegrate.

a. Guerrilla Tactics

Hamas increasingly shifted to guerilla tactics as the war progressed. By December 30, according to a senior Israeli intelligence official, much of Hamas's command structure was "gone" and Hamas fighters resorted to guerilla tactics rather than cohesive operations.⁸³ After each battalion was dismantled, they disintegrated into small cells of guerilla fighters who both operated among civilians above ground and in Hamas's tunnel network.⁸⁴

b. Using Civilian Infrastructure

Hamas fighters consistently engaged in the illegal tactic of using civilians and civilian facilities, including protected sites such as schools, hospitals, and places of worship, as well as disguising themselves as civilians to shield Hamas's assets, complicate IDF attack decisions, generate civilian casualties, and advance its objectives.

As part of its exploitation of Gaza's population, Hamas made extensive use of civilian facilities to store its weapons, stage attacks, and conduct command-and-control operations. Terror cells used apartments to store Kalashnikov rifles and RPGs, retrieve the weapons, and perpetrate sniper or RPG attacks.⁸⁵ By early January, the IDF had confiscated over 4,000 Hamas weapons from inside mosques, elementary schools, and residential buildings in Gaza in the less than three months from when the war began.⁸⁶ Hospitals were also a frequent location of, or used to shield, Hamas's weapons stockpiles, command-and-control centers, and access tunnels.⁸⁷ While under the law of armed conflict such use transformed these ostensible civilian objects into military objectives, as noted below, the pervasive practice of such use frequently violated the obligation to avoid, whenever possible, locating military assets amongst the civilian population.

c. Feigning Civilian Status

In addition to transforming civilian infrastructure into military assets, Hamas belligerents also sought to make themselves indistinguishable from civilians. Not only did Hamas forces eschew uniforms, they also largely avoided carrying weapons in the open, breaching their "passive distinction" obligation. This tactic was facilitated by Hamas pre-battle preparations, discussed below, to fortify, connect, and pre-position weapons in civilian buildings.

For example, a former Israeli official described the typical behavior of Hamas fighters responsible for launching rockets as heading to a hidden launch site carrying a battery hidden in a basket of vegetables, quickly connecting the battery to the launcher, and setting a timer. He would be back at home when the rockets launched. If spotted on the street at any point other than the several seconds needed to prepare the launcher, he would appear to be as any other unremarkable and unthreatening civilian.⁸⁸

Similarly, Hamas fighters engaging with the IDF would rarely carry weapons with them when moving between positions. Instead, Hamas pre-equipped tunnels, homes, and other likely battle positions with weapons caches. Thus, when out in the open again, Hamas fighters would appear to be civilians.

C. Gaza’s Multidimensional, Prepared Battlespace

Following Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 and Hamas’s subsequent takeover of the territory in 2007, the Iran-backed group and other Palestinian terrorist organizations have had nearly two decades to prepare the ground for this conflict by turning the Gaza Strip into a multidimensional battlespace with multiple connected strong points and defensive belts. By utilizing Gaza’s small size and dense urban environment to create interconnected, fortified fighting positions on top of, inside, and alongside civilian structures, combined with a massive network of tunnels that extend underneath the territory – usually underneath densely populated civilian areas, Hamas created what Israeli military commanders described as a “360 degree” threat environment.

i. Size and Density

Gaza’s small size makes it a finite battlespace that has an immensely high population density. Sitting along the Mediterranean coast, Gaza shares a thirty-seven-mile border with Israel and 7.5-mile border with Egypt. At only twenty-five miles long and 7.5 miles at its widest point, the 141-square-mile Gaza Strip is approximately the same size as Detroit, a city with a population of 620,000. Yet, with roughly 2.3 million people, the Gaza Strip’s population density of roughly 14,000 people per square mile more closely resembles that of London.⁸⁹ Whereas the latter has numerous public spaces in addition to its high-rise buildings, the Gaza Strip has few open areas, and the population density is even higher in the major urban centers, like Gaza City and Khan Younis.

ii. Roofs

Roofs and elevated buildings provided Hamas and other Palestinian groups with a platform to strike from above and behind Israeli ground units. Videos published by soldiers from the Nahal Brigade of the 162nd Division show Hamas unprivileged belligerents using the third floor of a Gaza residential building to target Israeli soldiers with grenades.⁹⁰ Israeli soldiers were forced to utilize precise small arms fire and a tank to neutralize the threat, underlining the time-consuming process of operations against such obstacles.

iii. Buildings

Hamas shaped the infrastructure in Gaza to become a combined defensive fortification. By connecting buildings with holes through their walls, Hamas turned structures or large areas into linked military strongholds. With this high level of connectivity, Hamas was able to maintain a presence in every building throughout Gaza, an advantage it did not have during previous wars. As one former senior Israeli official told the authors of this report, “unlike previous battle[s], Hamas is in every building. We didn’t enter into any building in which we didn’t find some remains of Hamas. It is not Hamas hiding in the population. Hamas is integrated with the population ... They are everywhere.”⁹¹

In addition to enhancing the connectivity between buildings, Hamas also had prepared caches of weapons in civilian buildings throughout the Gaza Strip. This allowed Hamas units to maneuver above ground without weapons or uniforms, masquerading as civilians as discussed below, but take up ready-made fighting positions at almost any point at which they encountered the IDF.

Hamas also made adaptations to buildings in Gaza to make them deadlier. Hamas placed booby-traps on houses to attack IDF forces and prevent them from quickly moving between buildings. Hamas used these door traps in tandem with other devices, like live Hebrew-language recordings to lure IDF troops into ambushes.⁹² Infrastructure projects in Gaza were built for the purpose of providing Hamas and other fighters with locations from which to launch attacks into Israel and strongholds from which they could hide and defend against IDF operations.

iv. Ground

As was the case in 2009 and 2014, Gaza’s urban landscape makes it difficult for the IDF to advance its forces and search for terrorist targets. In an urban environment, large, heavy armored vehicles can be outflanked or channeled into ambush kill zones. Entering a contested urban environment like Gaza requires the IDF to lead with heavily

protected engineering vehicles and tanks that can survive anti-armor munitions. The urban environment minimizes many of the IDF's advantages in terms of speed, maneuverability, communication, surveillance, and long-range firepower.

v. Tunnels

Khaled Meshaal, Hamas's former leader, told *Vanity Fair* in 2014 that "in light of the balance of power, which is shifted toward Israel, we had to be creative in finding innovative ways. The tunnels were one of our innovations ... putting more obstacles in the way of any Israeli attacks and enabling the resistance in Gaza to defend itself."⁹³

Hamas appears to have devoted significant planning and resources to this subterranean innovation, constructing a massive network of interconnected tunnels that extend for hundreds of miles beneath Gaza's dense landscape. As much as 6,000 tons of concrete and 1,800 tons of metals are estimated to have gone into constructing over 300 miles of tunnels, diverted from materials allowed into Gaza by Israel for civilian purposes.⁹⁴

The existence of this subterranean domain is not new. Cross-border tunnels that exited in Israel were a prominent feature of the 2014 conflict. Afterwards, although subsequent Israeli-built and U.S.-funded tunnel barriers and detection technology prevented Hamas from tunneling under the border, it continued building tunnels under Gaza itself.

By May 2021, Israel believed that over 200 miles of tunnels crisscrossed the Gaza Strip. The IDF sought to render much of the known network unusable with precision airstrikes during the 2021 conflict. However, after that war, Yahya Sinwar, Hamas's leader in Gaza, claimed that the group had built a far more extensive subterranean network than was previously known—over 310 miles of tunnels—and that the IDF had only destroyed a portion of them.⁹⁵ IDF leaders admitted to us that they were surprised by the extent, depth, and sophistication of the tunnels they have found.

Beyond building a massive subterranean network, Hamas added measures that would make it more difficult for the IDF to destroy the tunnels, slow IDF operations in them, and better enable Hamas fighters to evade and fight IDF troops. These included blast doors, workshops, ventilation, sleeping quarters, kitchens, toilets, and other living necessities that enable Palestinian fighters to remain underground for longer and better protects them from IDF strikes, as well as hard-wired communications. Hamas also placed booby traps and blast-proof locked doors between tunnels to prevent the IDF from safely moving through the tunnels.

Hamas appears to have deliberately chosen the location of its tunnels based not only on logistics but also the anticipated information operation benefits. Hamas constructed its vast subterranean network so that many of the tunnels traverse below civilian infrastructure, including residential buildings, hospitals, and schools. Placing tunnels

below civilian populations and deliberately constructing the entrances at sensitive civilian sites makes it virtually impossible to neutralize the tunnel network without adversely affecting Gaza’s densely populated urban areas. For example, destroying a tunnel with explosives inevitably destabilizes the foundations of structures above the tunnel, often resulting in collapse. In doing so, Hamas sought to deter IDF destructive action against tunnels or, when such action did occur, use the collateral damage to civilian structures to contribute to perceptions that Israel is engaged in indiscriminate combat operations or, even worse, deliberately targeting civilians and civilian objects.

This subterranean network was largely comprised of two distinct types of tunnels: tactical tunnels, smaller and closer to the surface, used by fighters to stage attacks, move between fighting positions, and travel undetected within their area of operations; and

more deeply buried and fortified strategic tunnels housing command-and-control centers, weapons production and storage facilities, and hostages.

The Tunnel Network in Gaza



◀ Left Image Source: *The Wall Street Journal*⁹⁶

a. Tactical Tunnels

What the IDF refers to as “tactical” tunnels were built closer to the surface, sometimes as deep as 60-100 feet, but often just below the surface, allowing fighters to get to the surface rapidly to attack from underground cover as required and flee the surface to evade IDF forces. The tunnel network was used for a variety of purposes, including transporting weapons, underground maneuver, staging ambushes, retreating, communication with battalion commanders, and connecting to other battalions’ area of operations.

Hidden entrances enabled Palestinian fighters to evade or surprise Israeli troops and forced Israeli troops to conduct slow, methodical operations to ensure they are not outflanked. Similarly, alternative entrances to tunnels allowed Hamas belligerents to flee Israeli forces or enter a tunnel even if the IDF has neutralized other entrances.

Crucially, the tactical network appears to have remained accessible to Hamas even if the above-ground infrastructure housing the tunnel entrances was destroyed. This allowed Hamas to stage ambush and rapid attacks on IDF units advancing through terrain that they might have believed to already have been effectively cleared. For example, we saw battlefield video of a Hamas unit emerging from what appeared to be a pile of rubble to place an EFP on an IDF tank and quickly return to the tunnel.

b. Strategic Tunnels

In contrast to the shallower tactical tunnels, Hamas also excavated much deeper strategic tunnels that contained headquarters, server rooms, weapons manufacturing facilities, and other strategic assets that it wanted to hide from IDF forces and better protect from IDF attacks. As of our group's briefings with IDF officers in February, the IDF had located seven sites in Gaza with strategic tunnels. While tactical tunnels pose a direct operational threat to IDF forces, Hamas's strategic tunnels enable the group to direct its forces and undermine the IDF's objectives of neutralizing Hamas cells and recovering hostages.

A Data Center in a Strategic Tunnel (left) and The Longest Tunnel in Gaza (right)



Source: *The Times of Israel*^{97 98}

In mid-December 2023, the IDF claimed to have found the largest tunnel to date, which, at three yards in diameter, was wide enough to drive a car through. The entrance to the roughly 2.5-mile-long tunnel extended from northern Gaza City to a sand dune in northern Gaza, roughly 110 yards south of Israel's Erez military checkpoint. The tunnel extended down to a depth of roughly fifty-five yards below ground, and cables and piping provided power and ventilation to it.⁹⁹

III. Observations: Legal

Perhaps no other aspect of this conflict has received as much scrutiny as the question of whether the IDF has operated in accordance with international law; and perhaps no aspect has received as little attention as the legality of Hamas's conduct, from its attack on October 7 to its activities in Gaza. As military commanders and legal experts with experience addressing complex legal issues associated with fighting similar adversaries, we are well-versed not only with the obligations imposed by LOAC on a fighting force, but also the reality of how those obligations are implemented on the battlefield and the importance of fulfilling them. In this Israel-Hamas conflict, we observe that:

- The IDF's campaign to dismantle Hamas's military capabilities, including its ground maneuver into the Gaza Strip, is a legally justified and reasonable response in self-defense following the barbaric October 7 attack.
- During the conduct of hostilities, the IDF demonstrated commitment to implementing and complying with LOAC, including implementing many precautions to mitigate risks to civilians.
- It is misleading to rely on aggregate casualty numbers to judge the legality of IDF operations, and such reliance distorts any credible assessment of IDF compliance.
- Hamas's legal status as an organized armed group means that its belligerent operatives are both a lawful object of IDF self-defense actions and legally obligated to follow LOAC.
- Hamas intentionally and systemically violates LOAC by deliberately attacking Israeli civilians, exploiting the presence of Gazan civilians and protected sites like hospitals, places of worship, and schools to obtain a shielding effect from lawful attacks, and seeking to compel the IDF to conduct attacks that inevitably place civilians at mortal risk.

A. IDF Operations in Gaza are Justified Self-Defense

The right of states to act in individual and/or collective self-defense is reflected in Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations and characterized as an “inherent” right, indicating it logically and necessarily follows from the fact of sovereignty. This right is triggered by an actual or imminent unlawful armed attack. Whether one considers the October 7 attack as a stand-alone act of aggression that triggered this right or a continuation of an ongoing armed conflict between Hamas and Israel, Israel was justified in its response. Israel’s campaign against Hamas is, in international law terms, an exercise of this inherent right.

Israel is justified in exercising this right of self-defense against Hamas; it is also justified by the right of self-defense to seek the objective of dismantling Hamas’s military capabilities. The most common criticism of the IDF campaign is not that Israel does not have the right to defend itself, but that it has gone too far in exercising that right, that it has somehow exceeded the scope of the right to self-defense. However, self-defense for a nation is analogous to self-defense for an individual: it legally justifies measures, when acting in response to an actual or imminent unlawful attack, that would otherwise be unlawful so long as they are reasonably necessary to reduce the threat and restore the *status quo ante* of safety and security. This is why a tit-for-tat conception of self-defense is so highly misleading: it is the *threat* that dictates the permissible scope of self-defense, not the suffering inflicted by the unlawful aggression that triggers the right to self-defense.

Key Principles of the Law of Armed Conflict¹⁰⁰

The international law that determines when a nation may resort to the use of military force is known as *jus ad bellum*. The law regarding how that force may lawfully be used once hostilities are underway is known as *jus in bello*, more commonly referred to as the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) or International Humanitarian Law (IHL). The LOAC regulatory norms are meant to balance the necessity of military force to efficiently bring an enemy into prompt submission (in its collective capacity) with the humanitarian imperative of mitigating, to the maximum extent feasible, the inevitable suffering produced by armed hostilities—especially that inflicted upon civilians and civilian property. While there is no complete consensus on the “list” of LOAC principles, it is generally recognized that equality of application, military necessity, humanity, distinction, precautions, and proportionality count among them.

It is important to understand that the law that regulates the conduct of hostilities is inherently *decision*-oriented, not *outcome*-oriented. Therefore, while attack outcomes are relevant when assessing legal compliance, they are rarely conclusive and often produce a distorted understanding of this question.

Equality of Application: Indicates that all parties to an armed conflict are equally bound by the LOAC no matter how disparate their military capabilities may be.

Military Necessity: Allows the military to employ all measures, not otherwise prohibited by international law, to bring about the prompt submission of the enemy.

Humanity: Prohibits the infliction of suffering that cannot be justified by military necessity and requires the humane treatment of any individual who is not or no longer actively participating in hostilities (most notably civilians and the wounded and sick). This principle implicitly recognizes that both belligerents and civilians will suffer the consequences of war.

Distinction: Permits attacks to be directed only at persons, places, or things that are reasonably assessed as qualifying as military objectives and categorically prohibits directing an attack against civilians, civilian property, or any other protected person, place, or thing. This means that in relation to attack *decisions*, military forces must constantly distinguish between persons, places, and things that are military and civilian targets. The former are presumptively lawful objects of attack; the latter are presumptively protected from deliberate attack unless they directly participate in hostilities.

Proportionality and the Prohibition Against Launching an Indiscriminate Attack: Any attack that is anticipated to have an indiscriminate result is prohibited, to include launching an attack without directing it towards an assessed military objective or using a weapon with uncontrollable effects (like fire or poison gas). The proportionality rule tolerates harm to civilians or civilian property when it is not the result of deliberate attack but is instead an incidental consequence of an attack on a proximate lawful military objective, so long as the destruction to civilian property and life is not assessed—at the time of the attack *decision*—as *excessive* in relation to the anticipated concrete and direct military advantage. It demands that attack decision-makers always consider the “collateral” consequences of attacking a legitimate military objective and refrain from launching such attacks when they assess that those consequences will be excessive to the military advantage they anticipate. While difficult to apply in practice, this is an important reminder that even in hostilities the ends do not always justify the means.

Precautions and Constant Care: This principle demands that military leaders take “constant care” to mitigate the risk to civilians during the conduct of all military operations and, accordingly, implement all *feasible* measures to mitigate the collateral damage and incidental injury anticipated from attacking legitimate military targets. A feasible measure is one that the force is capable of implementing without degrading or compromising anticipated military advantage from the attack.

In the immediate aftermath of the October 7 attack, there was near universal acknowledgment that the unlawful attack conducted by Hamas triggered Israel's international legal right to take necessary and proportionate measures in self-defense.

It is logical for a state to assess the scope of an imminent or ongoing threat by considering not only the opponent's capability to inflict harm, but its motivation and intent. Translated into military terms, this leads to a simple question: what scope of military action is necessary to secure the safety of the Israeli population from the clear, stated, and acted upon Hamas (and Palestinian Islamic Jihad) threat emanating from Gaza (while mitigating the risk of harm to civilians)?

In this regard, it is highly significant that in prior conflict flare-ups, Israel attempted more limited military self-defense actions. October 7 proved that these limited responses failed to secure Israel from the Hamas threat and renders reasonable the conclusion that nothing short of a full-scale campaign to destroy this enemy's military capability was necessary.

From all we observed, the military objective of dismantling Hamas is legally and strategically justified and, in its pursuit, IDF operations have not been excessive or disproportionate. However, as we discuss below, translating the operational military objective of neutralizing the threat of Hamas into a lasting strategic victory, in which Hamas does not reconstitute itself nor do other groups take its place, will require identifying a political end-state for Gaza, something that we have not yet seen Israel do.

B. IDF Operations Comply with LOAC

We assess that the IDF is committed to implementing and complying with the law of armed conflict. We believe the operational decisions that we were made privy to all fell within the margin of reasonableness established by the law. As with any military force, this commitment cannot guarantee complete compliance with the law; even the best armed forces experience incidents of LOAC violation. But our observation is that the IDF is a military organization that systemically respects LOAC. We also believe the IDF conducts credible investigations into allegations of violation and, where supported by evidence, pursues appropriate disciplinary action against IDF personnel (something completely alien to the enemy it confronts). Indeed, at times, the IDF made conscious decisions to put its soldiers at greater risk in order to completely comply with the spirit and intent of LOAC.

We emphasize that our inquiries related to the conflict to date were principally focused on the conduct of hostilities between the IDF and Hamas and other organized armed groups in Gaza. As an interim report, we consciously limited our focus on other issues related to LOAC implementation, such as detainee operations and post-hostilities secu-

rity operations. However, that limited inquiry does not alter our overall assessment of IDF commitment to LOAC obligations, although we were made aware of certain policy decisions that did cause concern that they may have been informed by operational policies that may ultimately compromise strategic legitimacy.

i. Civilian Risk Mitigation Integrated at all Levels of Combat Action

Legal review is built into IDF targeting processes at several points. We observed that deliberate targeting decisions were made by senior levels of command authority to ensure proper assessment. Time-sensitive attack decisions are often also subjected to senior commander and legal scrutiny even in very short execution periods. This decision-making process often resulted in modifications to attack weapons and tactics and implementation of other precautionary measures to mitigate civilian risk. Indeed, after the initial phase of airstrikes and as the IDF began to better understand the nature of the battlefield in Gaza and how to operate securely and effectively on it, the IDF changed its procedures to reduce the number of munitions being dropped in Gaza in order to reduce risk to civilians.

Legal advisors within IDF Southern Command approve the target as legal during pre-planning procedures. The legal review process conducted by commanders and IDF lawyers involves: verifying that the intended target qualifies as a military objective; determining the desired military effect; selecting the required combination of weapons and fusing needed to achieve that effect; assessing the risk to civilian and civilian property; implementing feasible precautionary measures; assessing the potential for collateral damage; and weighing that risk against anticipated concrete and direct military advantage. IAF lawyers may do a second vetting process to approve the method of attack on the target. Higher-value targets that pose substantial civilian risk, such as targets located in areas of dense civilian presence, are vetted at higher levels of command.

The IDF LOAC implementation methodology reflects a good-faith commitment to LOAC compliance. To enhance the quality of attack decisions involving the risk of collateral damage and incidental civilian injury, the IDF integrates casualty authorization thresholds as a precautionary measure. Increasing levels of command are required to authorize attacks when the anticipated civilian risk exceeds a designated threshold. While these thresholds and levels of authorizing command are classified, we were assured this process is integrated into operations. It is important to note that this precautionary measure does not mean that any civilian harm within an authorizing commander's threshold is automatically permissible. Instead, it simply means that commanders at different levels of command are restricted in making certain proportionality judgments.

Israel-Designated Humanitarian Zone in Gaza



Source: *The Guardian*¹⁰¹

ii. Implementing Precautions

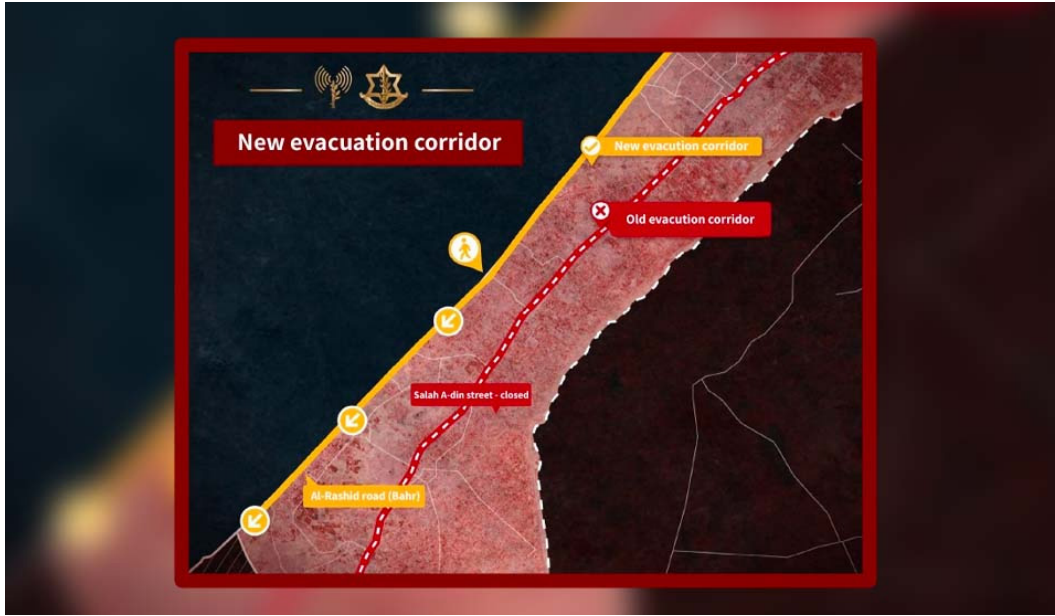
The precautionary measures implemented during IDF operations were impressive. Extensive use of warnings in many forms was common. Furthermore, IDF forces executed many operations to enable the evacuation of civilians from areas most significantly impacted by hostilities.

In the first months of the war alone, Israel dropped over 1.5 million pamphlets into Gaza, made nearly six million pre-recorded calls, sent over four million text messages, and made nearly twenty thousand direct phone calls warning residents to evacuate dangerous areas where combat was imminent.¹⁰² In just one week in November, the IDF helped facilitate the evacuation of over 200,000 Gazans along a humanitarian corridor to southern Gaza.¹⁰³ In the early months of the war, Israel moved some 800,000 Gazans to a designated safe zone, the Mawasi camp, which the IDF did not conduct any operations in during the war despite Hamas exploiting the zone to fire over 100 rockets.¹⁰⁴

While the geography of Gaza and Hamas tactics of comingling with the civilian population meant that no area in Gaza was completely immune to IDF combat action, this process of evacuation substantially reduced civilian presence in areas with the most intense hostilities. Moreover, multiple surveillance platforms were dedicated to support target identification and assessment, often for hours, to ensure that civilians evacuated

areas of attack. These precautions were often implemented with full knowledge that they would produce operational and tactical cost to the IDF, allowing belligerents to escape, diminishing the tactical advantage of surprise, and reducing the number of other targets that could be monitored or struck. The IDF accepted these costs in the interest of civilian risk mitigation.

IDF Published Evacuation Corridor



Source: COGAT¹⁰⁵

IDF Published Map with Evacuation Areas



Source: IDF Spokesperson for Arab Media¹⁰⁶

iii. Casualty Figures Are a Flawed Metric of Illegality

The total number of reported civilian casualties in Gaza is often pointed to in public discourse as evidence of Israeli illegality. It is not.

To be clear, every civilian killed in this conflict—Palestinian and Israeli—has been one too many. Indeed, none of them would have died but for Hamas’s barbaric attack. But arguments that casualty figures indicate indiscriminate Israeli attacks are flawed as a matter of law, military analysis, and fact.

Total casualty numbers are not a sound basis for legal condemnation. LOAC applies principally to how the decision for each specific attack was made, rather than being judged based on the outcome of that attack, let alone all attacks in a conflict taken together. “Indiscriminate,” in international legal terms, means an attack *decision* that anticipates incidental civilian death and injury that is excessive in comparison to the anticipated concrete and direct military advantage. The law, therefore, tolerates the *knowing* infliction of death and injury on innocent people in war; it is the line between knowledge and intent that is most definitive of illegality. While attack *effects* are relevant to judging whether an attack crossed the legal line, they are rarely conclusive. This is especially true in complex urban operational environments when confronting an enemy that pervasively hides behind innocent people either to shield itself or, even worse, compel attacks that will cause civilian casualties.

Hovering over all this is a reality that almost all experienced combat commanders understand: it is near impossible to accurately identify the number, nature, or cause of casualties during ongoing combat operations. That is particularly true in this conflict, in which the only available figures are those provided by Hamas and do not hold up under scrutiny.¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, the publicly reported figures are an inherently flawed foundation for anything close to reliable conclusions as to actual casualty numbers, enemy-to-civilian casualty ratios, or the overall legality of combat operations. It is more likely the case that civilian deaths have been, according to West Point’s Chair of Urban Warfare Studies, “historically low for modern urban warfare.”¹⁰⁸

It is for this reason that we believe the more logical focus is on the measures implemented by the parties to this conflict to comply with the law that serve as the most valuable indication of legitimacy.

C. Hamas Is Bound by LOAC ...

Hamas is routinely characterized as a terrorist organization. This has led some to suggest that Israel cannot invoke the right of self-defense because it had not been attacked by another state, an interpretation of international law based on two International Court of Justice opinions but inconsistent with widespread practice and the weight of international legal opinion. Alternatively, this might lead others to suggest that Hamas is not bound by the same international laws as Israel when it comes to engaging in armed conflict. However, we believe it clear that Hamas is subject to and bound by LOAC as much as Israel.

For purposes of assessing its LOAC obligations, Hamas is best understood as a non-state Organized Armed Group (OAG) engaged in an armed conflict against Israel. As such, Hamas units and personnel are fully bound by the same LOAC obligations applicable to the IDF.

This in no way legitimizes Hamas as an organization or an armed group. Equality of application of the law does not require equality of status. Hamas units and operatives are not, in accordance with LOAC, vested with international legal privilege to engage in hostilities, and do not qualify as “combatants” within the technical meaning of the law. This is because that status is reserved for armed forces fighting on behalf of a state engaged in hostilities, whether as members of the armed forces of the state or as members of other organized armed groups forming part of the state armed forces.

Instead, Hamas operatives are better understood as “unprivileged belligerents,” meaning they are belligerent members of an OAG engaged in hostilities against Israel but do not qualify for the “privilege” of being a combatant. Both unprivileged belligerents and combatants are subject to attack based solely on their status (unless they are rendered *hors de combat* as the result of wounds, sickness, or capture). However, unlike combatants, unprivileged belligerents are not protected by combatant immunity upon capture, meaning they are liable for prosecution by the detaining power (in this case Israel) for violation of domestic criminal law. Furthermore, like any combatant they are also liable for prosecution by the detaining power for pre-capture violation of international law (war crimes).

D. ... But Hamas Intentionally and Pervasively Violates LOAC

Hamas forces routinely and systemically violate LOAC obligations. This is most notable—and troubling—in relation to their targeting practices and *their* obligation to do all that is feasible to mitigate civilian risk. In terms of targeting, Hamas made no apparent attempts to direct its rocket attacks against Israel at military objectives. Instead, it appears they employed rocket and missile assets in a deliberate effort to target civilians and spread terror among the civilian population, both of which are categorical LOAC violations (and war crimes). In relation to Gazan civilians, Hamas not only made no effort to remove civilians from conflict areas but also used the presence of civilians and civilian property to gain a shielding effect for its vital military personnel and assets. This is also a LOAC violation, and the use of civilians as human shields is a war crime.

Although LOAC does not prohibit launching an attack that may have the *effect* of terrorizing civilians, we emphasize that it does prohibit launching attacks that are *intended* to terrorize the civilian population. Firing indiscriminately toward large Israeli civilian population centers and sending hundreds of thousands of Israelis into bomb shelters by attacking areas with no military targets nearby suggests the intent of almost all of these attacks was to attack civilians and terrorize the civilian population. Even in the unlikely event Hamas was attempting to strike military targets in Israel, the weapons and tactics it employed were indiscriminate and therefore unlawful.

It is our judgment that Hamas significantly increased the danger to Gazan civilians—and consequently increased the number of civilian fatalities—by locating rocket launchers, other weapons, command and control facilities, and munitions at sensitive sites and in residential areas. This was often done with no apparent military necessity—in clear violation of LOAC.

Hamas places its military assets, such as weapons and its extensive tunnel labyrinth, adjacent to and below civilians in a deliberate and illegal attempt to render the IDF's legitimate military operations almost impossible without inflicting civilian casualties. The placement of military assets in proximity to civilians or the use of civilian property for military purposes is not a LOAC violation per se. However, there is an obligation to take “constant care” to mitigate the risk to civilians even in the conduct of defensive military operations, which brings with it an accordant obligation to refrain whenever feasible from locating military assets in proximity to civilians or using civilian property for military purposes.

Based on our analysis of Hamas tactics, we cannot believe its emplacement of military infrastructure in and among civilian populations was merely an unavoidable necessity dictated by Gaza’s urban terrain. Instead, it appears to be a deliberate effort to abuse LOAC by exploiting the anticipated—and actual—IDF hesitation to attack legitimate Hamas military targets that are located in, near, or under sensitive civilian structures.

Even more troubling is our observation that Hamas not only sought a shielding effect from the presence of civilians, but likely sought to compel IDF forces to engage in attacks that would cause civilian casualties, in essence sacrificing Gazan civilians in an effort to gain fodder for their strategic delegitimization campaign against Israel. When head of the Intelligence Division of the Israel Prison Service Yuval Bitton asked Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar while he was in prison, “is it worth it for 10,000 innocent people to die, in order to free 100 prisoners?” Sinwar replied, “even 100,000 is worth it.”¹⁰⁹ With this mindset, Hamas fighters fired over 115 rockets from Mawasi, a designated safe zone for civilians to flee combat, in the first two months after the zone’s creation.¹¹⁰ Hamas fighters, when wearing Hamas uniforms—a rarity—surrounded themselves with young children as they walked through Gaza.¹¹¹

This abuse of the civilian population proved successful by playing to international audiences’ apparent inability to accurately and legitimately allocate *responsibility* for civilian casualties but instead resort to the easier yet invalid practice of “effects-based condemnation.”

IV. Observations: Strategy

In analyzing the 2021 Israel-Hamas conflict, an earlier JINSA report in which some of us participated observed that there was a “strategy mismatch” between the two sides, namely Hamas had a clear “informational strategy to...delegitimize Israel’s operations,” while Israel “pursued only military operational objectives with no defined strategic end-state.”¹¹² In this war, Israel seemed determined to rectify its previous lack of strategic objectives in Gaza. However, we observed that while Hamas once again pursued the same (dis)information-based strategy, the IDF still struggled to connect its operations with clear strategic objectives. More specifically:

- Hamas pursued a fundamentally information-driven strategy, intentionally exposing Gazan civilians to risk of harm in order to spread disinformation that would generate international public and political pressure to end the conflict prematurely, on terms favorable to Hamas.
- The IDF operated with multiple conflicting and, at least for external audiences, unclear objectives. While the goal of “destroying” Hamas has a very specific military meaning, the IDF has not sufficiently defined it, sowing uncertainty about the IDF’s mission.
- Faced with extremely difficult choices, the government of Israel has not yet matched the IDF’s operational success on the battlefield with a clear political strategy for the “day after” in Gaza that would enable it to make further progress toward its stated strategic objective of destroying Hamas. Until it defines a strategic end-state for Gaza, Israel will have to continue prolonged counter-terrorist operations to degrade remnants of, or re-emerging, Hamas forces and other resurgent terrorist groups.
- Israel’s early reticence to provide more than the legally required humanitarian assistance or to administer areas of Gaza that have generally been cleared of Hamas threaten to undermine the tactical victories it has won on the battlefield.

A. Hamas’s Strategy of Intentionally Endangering Civilians

In initiating this conflict with its October 7 attack, Hamas was neither trying to defend itself—there was no Israeli aggression against Gaza—nor was it trying to achieve another conventional outcome of war, such as defeating Israel’s military or capturing territory. While its founding documents make clear that Hamas’s overarching objective is the eradication of Israel, it does not seek to accomplish this militarily. Instead, Hamas pursues the informational objective of delegitimizing Israel—and, in the most recent conflict, delegitimizing Arab states’ attempt to normalize relations with Israel. And Hamas understands that the most effective ammunition in its delegitimization campaign arsenal is death or injury to Palestinian civilians and destruction of Gazan cities. As IDF Spokesperson Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari noted early in the war, Hamas “built its entire operational strategy in a way that puts civilian lives at risk.”¹¹³

Hamas’s entire strategy for this campaign and the tactics implemented throughout the campaign were designed to achieve these objectives by maximizing the potential for civilian casualties that could be blamed on Israel. Hamas anticipated that the scale and barbarity of its attack would necessitate a major Israeli military response, resulting in inevitable civilian suffering in Gaza. Then, to exacerbate that suffering, Hamas pervasively utilized tactics intended to increase risk to civilians, almost certainly hoping to compel the IDF to inflict incidental injury to civilians and collateral damage to civilian property in order to leverage the casualties and destruction to support their information.

Indeed, we observe that Hamas systematically violated LOAC by directing attacks against Israeli civilians, launching indiscriminate attacks against Israel, killing and injuring IDF personnel while feigning civilian status, using civilians as human shields, and exposing Gazan civilians to avoidable risk. These illegal acts, particularly the use of civilians as human shields, are not incidental to Hamas’s war effort but a crucial and intentional part of their strategy both to complicate Israeli military operations or exploit civilian casualties in order to make false claims of Israeli war crimes.

This informational strategy has proven effective, more so than in any previous Gaza conflict. Hamas has successfully generated unfounded global outrage against Israel, which it seeks to channel both to force Israel to cease its operations before accomplishing the mission of ousting Hamas from Gaza and to stop military assistance to and political support for Israel from its international partners. Hamas’s leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, reportedly felt vindicated that this strategy was working, according to reports that he sent a message via courier to Hamas leaders in Qatar urging them not to accept any hostage deal because high civilian casualties would add to the world-

wide pressure on Israel, forcing it to prematurely stop the war.¹¹⁴ Geopolitically, Hamas also may have sought to inflame the Arab street, derailing positive trends of regional rebalancing between Israel and Sunni Arab states prior to the war.

B. Israel’s Unclear and Conflicting Objectives

From the moment Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, Israel made “destroying” Hamas a, if not the, key strategic goal, without clearly defining what this meant.¹¹⁵ Shortly thereafter, the government unveiled a list of six war objectives, creating even greater confusion about its priorities or how to achieve different goals at the same time.

During our visit, Israeli officials and military commanders described their goals using inconsistent and unclear terminology, including “defeating,” “destroying,” “degrading,” “neutralizing,” and “dismantling” Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). In addition, Israel’s political leadership speaks of achieving “total victory.”¹¹⁶ This creates the impression, at least in the general public, that Israel is seeking not only to eliminate each and every Hamas belligerent in Gaza but also to cause the group to cease to exist—a far-reaching and ambitious goal. Meanwhile, in U.S. military doctrine, each of these terms (other than “dismantle”) describes a different objective along the continuum of competition with an adversary, and each requires different levels of resources, forces, and time. For a military audience, the use of these different terms with distinct meanings creates the impression that the IDF does not have a clear objective of what military effect it is tasked with accomplishing in Gaza.

U.S. Doctrinal Definitions for Competition ¹¹⁷	
Term	Definition
Defeat	“A tactical mission task that occurs when an enemy force has temporarily or permanently lost the physical means or the will to fight. The defeated force’s commander is unwilling or unable to pursue his adopted course of action, thereby yielding to the friendly commander’s will, and can no longer interfere to a significant degree with the actions of friendly forces. Defeat can result from the use of force or the threat of its use.”
Degrade	“Reduce the adversary’s ability and will to the greatest extent possible within resource constraints and acceptable risk.”
Destroy	“A tactical mission task that physically renders an enemy force combat-ineffective until it is reconstituted. Alternatively, to destroy a combat system is to damage it so badly that it cannot perform any function or be restored to a usable condition without being entirely rebuilt.”
Neutralize	“1. As pertains to military operations, to render ineffective or unusable. 2. To render enemy personnel or materiel incapable of interfering with a particular operation. 3. To render safe mines, bombs, missiles, and booby traps. 4. To make harmless anything contaminated with a chemical agent.”

Ultimately, we believe some of this confusion is a result partly of the difference between general and military meanings of specific terms, partly of translation difficulties, and partly of challenges in matching Israeli military doctrine to its U.S. counterpart. Our understanding, through further discussion and request for clarification, is that, although different English language terms might be used, the IDF has a clear understanding of its mission as “destroying Hamas’s military capabilities.” This is doctrinally defined by the IDF as an enemy unit losing its cohesiveness and ability to act as a unit. Specifically, the IDF considers a Hamas battalion “destroyed” when it has lost seventy percent of its combat power. Thus, by February, the IDF claimed to have destroyed eighteen of Hamas’s twenty-four battalions by having killed, captured, or rendered combat ineffective, more than seventy percent of their forces—even though this still left a significant number of Hamas belligerents who were able to reconstitute and continue fighting. This IDF understanding of “destroy” tracks with U.S. military doctrine which states that to destroy “is a tactical mission task that physically renders an enemy force combat-ineffective until it is reconstituted.”¹¹⁸

Less clear to us is whether this specific, military understanding of the mission of “destroying” Hamas is shared by Israel’s political leadership. Nor is destroying Hamas Israel’s only war goal. The other four objectives that the IDF has been tasked with are:

- restoring safety and security to Israeli citizens who reside in the Gaza envelope;
- strengthening the personal security and national resilience of Israeli citizens;
- creating conditions to enable the return of hostages held in Gaza;
- and deterring Israel’s enemies in all arenas through steadfast power projection with an immediate readiness for escalation with Iran-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon.

This multi-pronged list of war objectives suggests a lack of strategic clarity and specificity. A more focused mission statement would also help improve message discipline in Israel’s public diplomacy.

C. Israel Has Not Defined an End-state for Gaza

Although the purview of this report is military operations in Gaza, not considering what the final political disposition of the territory should be after hostilities end—a task undertaken by a separate JINSA group, whose report on *The Day After: A Plan for Gaza* we commend to readers—we nevertheless believe that the lack of a clear Israeli, or international, vision for the “day after” in Gaza has had an impact on IDF military operations and limits their long-term effectiveness.¹¹⁹

Israel professes a desire to break with its prior campaigns to reset deterrence in favor of destroying Hamas’s military capabilities. Accordingly, at the strategic level, this campaign was a stark contrast to Israel’s previous campaigns in Gaza. Whereas before it had focused on degrading Hamas’s capabilities and (re)establishing deterrence against the group, while leaving both the group and its grasp on power in Gaza intact, after October 7 Israel explicitly sought to break this cycle of conflicts and temporary ceasefire. Israeli leaders have recognized that fundamentally changing the strategic equation in Gaza required achieving two objectives. First, eliminating Hamas’s ability to attack and threaten Israel from Gaza. But also, second, creating a new political reality in Gaza—one in which both the current population was deradicalized after nearly two decades of control by Hamas and governance was undertaken by a new entity that could be a partner for peace with Israel. As we discuss below, these are legitimate objectives, justified by Israel’s right to self-defense after the October 7 attack.

IDF commanders have, as discussed below, effectively planned and executed military operations to make significant and impressive progress toward the first of these strategic goals—eliminating Hamas’s military capabilities. As a result, the intensity of Israel’s current military campaign dwarfs that of its previous campaigns with more limited operational objectives.

However, we did not observe that Israel’s political leadership has developed a “day after” plan that would secure the IDF’s operational gains and achieve Israel’s second strategic objective of a deradicalized, peacefully governed Gaza. More worryingly, the IDF commanders we spoke with appeared to be operating under an assumption that any such political transition in Gaza was, at best, a distant possibility. As one commander told us, he expected that his fourteen-year-old son, when he is conscripted into the IDF, will still have to fight in Gaza. Others echoed this belief that Israel would be engaged in counter-terrorism operations in Gaza for years to come. Indeed, the IDF seems to be explicitly preparing itself for such a protracted mission.

Such assertions that indefinite military force in Gaza will be necessary undercut the professed goal of a victory achieved through replacing Hamas with a better governing entity. Until Israeli decision-makers envision a viable political end goal for a post-Hamas Gaza that suppresses Hamas's re-emergence as an insurgent force—an “in-order-to” framework for the war—Israel's mismatch between its strategic objectives and operational framework will persist.

Failure to contend with these questions has already enabled worrying developments that portend a Hamas resurgence. An early February report in *The Times of Israel* noted that, according to four residents of Gaza and a high-ranking Hamas official, “Hamas has begun to resurface in areas where Israel withdrew the bulk of its forces a month ago” in Gaza City.¹²⁰ More recently, on March 18, the IDF announced that it began a new operation in al-Shifa Hospital, killing at least 140 combatants and capturing approximately 600 as of March 21.¹²¹ Absent a sustainable arrangement that fills any vacuums Hamas might exploit, Israel will be forced into such counter-terror measures in Gaza indefinitely, including within regions previously cleared of terror activity.

D. Israel is Fulfilling Humanitarian Legal Obligations, But Should Do More

Separate from, but related to, the question of a long-term political end-state for Gaza is the immediate issue of providing assistance to and administering the territory now. This raises complex questions related to Israel's legal obligations *vis-a-vis* Gaza and the mitigation of humanitarian suffering in Gaza.

Many of us have been responsible for stability operations and/or administering humanitarian assistance. Our lesson from these situations is that, rather than relying on overly formalistic legal interpretations of the minimum assistance that *must* be provided, it is often strategically wise to be guided by questions of how much aid *should* and maximally can be delivered. Mitigating civilian suffering can itself have strategic impact, particularly in a conflict waged as much in the court of public opinion as on the battlefield. Israel has recently significantly increased the amount of humanitarian assistance entering Gaza, demonstrating they could—and likely should—have done so all along to offset the perception of indifference to civilian suffering.

i. Legal Obligations to Mitigate Humanitarian Suffering

There is, undoubtedly, some level of humanitarian suffering in Gaza resulting from civilian displacement and disruption of access to essential resources such as food, water, shelter, and medical care. Based on our discussions with Israeli officials, international aid organizations, and UN agencies, there does appear to be exaggeration inherent in these characterizations as well as overreliance on Hamas-controlled or -influenced sources. Similarly, we observe that there has been disproportionate scrutiny of the amount of aid entering Gaza from Israel and not enough attention paid to how Hamas complicates or disrupts the distribution of that aid to civilians. Nonetheless, we recognize that perception in the context of such situations can be more influential than reality.

This is not to suggest that we consider Israel primarily responsible for the humanitarian suffering in Gaza. To the contrary, just as Hamas is primarily responsible for the civilian suffering resulting from the conduct of hostilities in Gaza, it is equally responsible for the ongoing humanitarian suffering. For decades, Hamas diverted resources that could have been vital in mitigating this suffering to its nefarious military ends and continues doing so during this conflict. By the admission of its own leadership, Hamas considers civilian suffering an acceptable price the Palestinian population must pay to advance its ultimate goal of destroying Israel.¹²² Hamas has made no effort to facilitate access to humanitarian assistance. Instead, it has threatened humanitarian actors, disrupted the efforts to provide assistance, and pilfered humanitarian resources. In short, like its approach to civilians caught up in hostilities, Hamas has shown a complete indifference to the humanitarian suffering.

Nevertheless, during our meetings in Israel, it appeared to us that Israel viewed its *legal* obligation in relation to humanitarian assistance to be limited to allowing third-party access to Gaza to provide assistance. This is consistent with the general obligation during armed conflict to avoid arbitrarily impeding such access, a principle that allows parties to the conflict like Israel to implement reasonable measures to ensure humanitarian resources will not be diverted to use by an enemy. In our view, by providing access points from within Israel into Gaza and implementing monitoring programs, Israel has complied with this obligation.

In recent months, Israel has expanded access for trucks to provide aid deliveries into Gaza. While Israel opened the Kerem Shalom border crossing into Gaza in December 2023 for the first time since the October 7 attack, the IDF also began allowing aid deliveries in March 2024 through the Gate 96 crossing, the military's entrance to central Gaza's Netzarim Corridor.¹²³ In the beginning of April, Israel began expanding the number of trucks that entered Gaza. On April 18, State Department Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel stated, "there has been some measurable progress that we've seen when it comes to humanitarian aid getting into Gaza."¹²⁴ By mid-May, Israel had opened a third crossing, the Eastern Erez Crossing, which is adjacent to the existing Erez Crossing, to provide access from Israel into northern Gaza.¹²⁵

ii. Administering Post-Conflict Areas

What is a far more complex question is whether the operational situation has evolved in a way that imposes more extensive obligations on Israel, most notably those derived from the law of belligerent occupation? Whether the law of occupation continued to apply to Gaza after the Israeli withdrawal in 2005 is a complex and controversial issue of international law beyond the scope of this report. Equally complex is the question of whether, as the result of the ongoing operations in Gaza, Israel is *now* an occupying power in Gaza.

Whether Gaza is now formally occupied may dictate the scope of formal legal obligations to restore stability in Gaza and provide humanitarian aid to the civilian population. It seemed clear to us that Israel does not perceive its role in such a manner, perhaps on the basis that it cannot be an occupying power because it did not displace the authority of another sovereign State. However, regardless of Israel's legal *obligations*, the *principles* of occupation seem especially significant at this point in the operation, at least until some viable alternative to Hamas is capable of exercising civil authority in Gaza. We believe this raises an issue that is as important for Israel's strategic success in this conflict as it may be for future U.S. operations: in situations of legal uncertainty, should commanders and their forces be prepared to conduct operations aligned with occupation principles to prevent civil chaos and humanitarian suffering after displacing the enemy's authority and control over an operational area?

The law of belligerent occupation includes extensive rules and obligation related to governing occupied territory. But at the core of this law is the principle that a military force assumes obligations *vis-a-vis* the civilian population once it has displaced the existing governing authority. The most important of these obligations is to establish security and facilitate and, where necessary, provide essential humanitarian assistance to the civilian population. To this end, it is notable for us that it is the perceived failure by Israel to address these two issues in Gaza that has become the focal point of international condemnation for its operations, highlighting the consequence of ignoring the pragmatic—if not technically legal—necessity of implementing these principles.

We know from experience that Israel's security cannot be restored simply by achieving the operational objectives of destroying Hamas's conventional military capabilities. Leaving a stability vacuum behind these successful operations will invite the resurgence of Hamas and other extremist groups, a process that has apparently already begun in northern Gaza. Only by conducting operations to establish some semblance of security and stability in Gaza will the perception of "massive" humanitarian suffering be negated, as the provision of assistance is contingent on security. How Israel achieves this goal in the long-term will be an immense political, diplomatic, and military challenge. However, until some alternative to direct IDF operations becomes viable, we believe there is substantial strategic peril for Israel if it ignores these imperatives. While Israeli efforts to mitigate civilian risk in Gaza and ease humanitarian suffering have been frustratingly ignored or dismissed by its many critics, the acute question is whether there is more that should be done.

V. Observations: Information

Given Hamas's strategic goal of delegitimizing Israel, the information domain has been a major arena of the current conflict. We observed that:

- Hamas waged effective information warfare against Israel through the promulgation of disinformation about events in Gaza; IDF operations; the extent of, and IDF responsibility for, civilian casualties; and IDF responsibility for harm to protected objects, seeking to delegitimize Israel; create the perception that the IDF routinely commits war crimes; and to generate sympathy for its own activities.
- Although the IDF has made some improvements compared to past conflicts, it continued to face challenges effectively communicating with international audiences to mitigate the adverse impact of Hamas disinformation. Ironically, some IDF efforts to share more information about its operations might have backfired by setting unrealistic media expectations.
- From inception of the maneuver operation, the IDF failed to effectively convey the gravity of the enemy threat and the accordant scale of the operation needed to address this threat.

A. Hamas Deploys Disinformation

Hamas pairs this tactic of placing its military infrastructure among civilians with the promulgation of disinformation, claiming that resultant Palestinian civilian deaths from Israeli strikes necessarily constitute war crimes. Such disinformation exploits the widespread yet false assumption that determining the legality of a military strike pursuant to the LOAC rests on the effects of a strike as opposed to the intent behind it.¹²⁶

As part of its information warfare, Hamas also frequently attempts to deflect blame for its own operational failures by misattributing deaths caused by misfired rockets launched from Gaza to Israeli strikes. Perhaps the most egregious example of this since October 7 was the tragic October 17 explosion near Gaza's Al-Ahli hospital caused by a misfired PIJ rocket but that Hamas initially falsely blamed on Israel.¹²⁷ The false claims of Israeli culpability prompted violent demonstrations throughout the Middle East and North Africa, including against U.S. and Israeli consulates and embassies, underscor-

ing the perils of failing to apply appropriate skepticism to Hamas's claims.¹²⁸ Despite these tragedies, the Hamas-run Ministry of Health in Gaza, in addition to its failure to distinguish between combatant and civilian casualties in the territory, does not specify how many deaths misfired rockets inflict lest it undermine its own information warfare.

Furthermore, Hamas has attacked innocent Palestinian civilians when it has perceived that they were acting contrary to its interests. An IDF commander told our group that when the IDF facilitated the evacuation of Palestinian civilians from northern to southern Gaza to escape heavy fighting, Hamas fired upon fleeing civilians using the main Salah-al-Din Road corridor. Reporting from as early as October 14 indicated that Hamas urged Palestinian civilians to disregard the IDF's evacuation instructions.¹²⁹

B. Israel's Strategic Communications Shortfalls

Facing an adversary engaged in an information war against it, Israel needed not just tactical excellence and legal compliance to succeed but also strategic communications. Unfortunately, Israel faces an uphill battle in communicating to an international audience that seems pervasively predisposed to be skeptical of, if not hostile, to its messaging. Additionally, the responsibility and scope for strategic communications of the IDF, or any military—which is what this report is concerned with—is rightfully limited to messaging related to military operations, which represent only a small portion of the broader informational challenge confronting Israel. Nevertheless, even in this arena we believe Israel could, and should, have done better in communicating the impact of the October 7 attack, the strategic need for a full-scale ground operation into Gaza, and the legality of its conduct to a broad, global audience.

i. Explaining October 7

While a skeptical world looked to Israel to explain its operations in Gaza, IDF messaging often focused instead on justifying them by pointing back to the horrors of the October 7 attack. At the same time, it was striking to us that, even many months after the attack, there are shocking facts about what happened on that day that are still widely unknown. Even our group learned new details during our visit to Israel.

The IDF has focused a significant portion of its communications to trying to convey the shocking magnitude of the October 7 massacre. However, for audiences who were trying to understand why Israel was mounting a full-scale invasion of Gaza or committing itself to the exacting task of destroying the terrorist group, repeatedly referring back

to the atrocities of that day was not sufficient. For audiences unfamiliar with Israel's history or the geopolitics of the Middle East, the strategic implications of the attack, and of leaving Hamas intact, were simply not understood or appreciated.

The IDF could have provided tremendously important context by laying out its repeated attempts to deter Hamas and improve conditions in Gaza or by pointing to the history of its adversaries joining forces to exploit moments of perceived weakness. Furthermore, a more comprehensive explanation of the enemy order of battle—in lieu of constant reference to operations against terrorists—may have placed the scale of the IDF campaign into better context. Instead, the continued references to what happened on October 7, without the explanation of why and how it endangered Israeli security, contributed to a false perception that Israel's operations in Gaza were driven by a desire for revenge, not a matter of absolute strategic necessity, or that the threats Israel faced had already been neutralized once the attack was stopped.

At the same time, we were surprised by how much about the October 7 attack is still not widely known. For example, even though Israel made a major effort to ensure the world is aware of the sexual violence that was committed on that day—and the United Nations has corroborated those accounts—in speaking with the IDF, we were shocked to hear, for the first time, that Hamas fighters carried manuals and Arabic-Hebrew phrasebooks for raping women. These sorts of details that demonstrate not just what Hamas did on October 7 but the deliberate and intentional nature of the massacre are an important aspect of justifying Israel's decision to seek the group's elimination. Anyone who has suffered through the “Bear Witness” video documenting the October 7 terrorist attack can attest to these points. Yet, for understandable reasons due to its graphic nature and the sensitivities of victims' families, that video evidence is not widely available for the global public to see Hamas's brutality on that day. Better making the case for why it must destroy Hamas might have increased and/or prolonged international support for Israel's operations.

ii. Managing Expectations

Israeli officials also seemed to have overlearned lessons from previous conflicts about the importance of providing information to press outlets by, in some cases, offering too much information about targets prior to operations, setting the conditions for being accused of underdelivering on the outcome.¹³⁰

In one high-profile operation, at al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City in mid-November, the IDF created high expectations on what the operation would yield. As Israeli officials acknowledged to our group, Israel succumbed to Western media pressure to prove that Hamas had a major presence underneath al-Shifa. Prior to conducting a raid on the hospital, Israel had released a detailed animated graphic showing five subterranean complexes and tunnel shafts entering into hospital wards.¹³¹ Though Hamas did

in fact emplace a command and control node under the hospital and operate within the hospital, and Israeli forces subsequently located the underground complex, the parts of the tunnel that the IDF was able to show journalists appeared much smaller, lacking the weapons and sophisticated equipment, and without the direct connection to hospital wards that the IDF graphic had depicted. This was in part due to limited access that the IDF was able to grant journalists in the complex because of booby-traps and perhaps also due to Hamas removing evidence in anticipation of the IDF operation that it knew was looming precisely because of IDF strategic communications efforts to justify it ahead of time.¹³²

As a result of this discrepancy between what the IDF publicly asserted and what it was able to publicly validate, media outlets portrayed Israel as overpromising and underdelivering on claims that the hospital was used to shield a major operational center.¹³³ *The New York Times* reported it could not “directly assess” Israel’s claims, and *The Washington Post* claimed that the evidence “falls short” of proving Israel’s initial claims, questioning whether “Israel’s military operations against the hospital ... were proportionate.”¹³⁴ This despite the abundant evidence troops uncovered showing that Hamas in fact did use the hospital for its operations—including at least a dozen rifles, grenades, and at least one tunnel entrance.¹³⁵

iii. Communicating Compliance, Countering Disinformation

Although the IDF went to great lengths at every level of operations, from leadership down to the brigade level, to mitigate civilian risk whenever feasible, Israel did not communicate the scope and efficacy of these efforts in a manner that resonated with and convinced foreign audiences. Though the IDF released the number of phone calls and texts it sent to Palestinians warning them to evacuate from combat zones, which numbered in the tens of millions in the first weeks of the war, it released few, if any, estimates of how many Palestinian lives were saved by these measures.¹³⁶ We learned that the IDF evacuated an estimated 850,000 Palestinians out of Gaza City to safe zones in southern Gaza, a figure that the IDF itself did not widely publicize.¹³⁷ Other proactive efforts to protect civilians were not adequately spotlighted, such as the IDF establishing a civilian harm mitigation unit as part of its Southern Command, and the fact that the IDF has an eight-step targeting process aimed at mitigating civilian risk.¹³⁸

Meanwhile, the Hamas-run Ministry of Health in Gaza was publishing a daily update on claimed casualties in the war. The simplicity and directness of this numerical message made its implications significantly easier to grasp than eventual IDF explanations of the precautions it was taking. In our meetings, the IDF explained to us the difficulty of coming up with its own accurate assessment of either terrorist or civilian casualties and, thus, its reluctance to push back on Hamas’s claims with its own numbers. While we know first-hand the difficulty of precisely counting casualties in complex war zones—there are still no complete casualty counts for major U.S. battles in the war on

terror—this was just too important a messaging battle to cede to Hamas. As a fairly simple matter, the IDF should have been offering an estimate of fighters it had killed so that Hamas’s casualty numbers were not, improperly, assumed by the world to represent only civilians. In short, the IDF should have done more to communicate its commitment to protecting civilians, how it was doing so, and the figures to back that up.

iv. Choosing the Right Audience

Israel’s strategic messaging appears to have been overly tailored to specific audiences—including analogies that proved ineffective—instead of crafting messaging to reach a broad base globally. Senior Israeli military officials told our group that largely neutral, or moderately critical, audiences were the focus of Israel’s strategic communications, particularly young, center-left, and coastal Americans, and American and British media outlets and policymakers.¹³⁹ This focus missed a broader, global audience, even though international actors, such as South Africa, are able to at least attempt to influence Israeli operations. In addition, by tailoring messaging towards policymakers and media outlets, Israel implicitly presumed a level of situational awareness on the part of its audience that may have been absent.

Israel’s efforts to persuade a Western, largely American, audience may have contributed to its problematic analogizing of the October 7 attack that understated the threat posed by Hamas and Iran’s proxy ring of fire. By comparing October 7 to September 11, Israeli officials drew an analogy to an attack in which the enemy primarily operated from another continent, rather than—as with Hamas—on the homeland’s borders. In comparing Hamas to ISIS, Israel implied a similar dynamic. In a sign of adaptiveness, officials told us that the IDF is incorporating polling results into its messaging and dropped a messaging tactic that sought to associate Hamas with ISIS after polling showed Hamas-ISIS analogies were not resonating with audiences.¹⁴⁰

VI. Observations: Context

The current war in Gaza is not happening in a vacuum. It was, of course, most immediately sparked by Hamas's horrific and surprising attack against Israel on October 7. But Israel's response, strategy, and operations are also shaped by a much broader historical and geopolitical context. Our observations of the context that is necessary to understanding the conflict in Gaza include:

- Beyond the carnage it caused, Hamas's October 7 savage attack shook the foundations of Israeli security, well beyond the immediate vicinity bordering the Gaza Strip.
- Previous, repeated rounds of fighting between Israel and Hamas might have temporarily degraded the terrorist group's capabilities but did little to deter it—calling into question Israel's previous approach to dealing with the Hamas threat.
- Hamas has not been the only threat facing Israel since October 7. Iran has encircled, and attacked, Israel with proxies, Lebanese Hezbollah foremost among them, armed with missiles, rockets, and RPVs.

A. Understanding 10/7

The October 7 terrorist attack transformed Israel's approach to the threats from Hamas and other Iran-backed neighbors. Hamas's rapid incursion into Israel and the brutality that it inflicted—and continues to inflict—on Israelis has shaken a foundation of Israeli security and the ability of Israelis to live safely in their homeland. On October 7, Hamas disproved the widespread assumption within Israel that repeated, albeit limited, Israeli operations, alongside attempts to improve economic conditions for Gazans, had deterred the terrorist group from launching such a large, barbaric assault.

The attack surprised Israel, shook Israelis' confidence that their superior military could protect them, disrupted the nation's economy, and convinced Israel that the continued presence of Iran-backed threats on its borders, not only in Gaza but also in Lebanon, could no longer be tolerated.

i. Surprising Capabilities

Despite Israel's extensive deployment and reliance on a network of sensors for early warning along the border with Gaza, Hamas organized and executed a brigade-sized combined-arms assault into Israel by air, land, and sea that penetrated Israeli defenses, killed Israeli soldiers, murdered civilians, and kidnapped Israelis back into Gaza to hold hostage. The attack was enabled by much greater—and better coordinated—military and intelligence and *counter-intelligence* capabilities than Hamas had previously demonstrated, combined with IDF failures on October 7 to rapidly respond to and repel the attack. Hamas's October 7 operation leveraged significantly improved combined arms operations involving indirect fire, RPVs, airborne assault, light and motorized infantry, and amphibious assault. The attack plan appears to have been based on a high-level of intelligence of both Israeli military border defenses, sensor networks, and base locations, in addition to clear knowledge of the layout and inhabitants of targeted Israeli communities—including which ones kept arms at home. While Hamas may be routinely characterized as a terrorist group, this operation was far more robust and complex than a “terrorist” attack; it was an attack by a quasi-conventional military force operating under the authority of a quasi-government.

The Hamas military units that invaded Israeli territory were heavily armed and specifically equipped for the limited objective of killing as many Israelis as quickly as possible. From large numbers of small arms and ammunition, to breaching devices of various sizes for explosively creating openings in the border fence, a large number of various EFPs for neutralizing armored vehicles, and even shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, we saw evidence in Israel that Hamas brought with them a heavy arsenal designed to break through Israeli border defenses, neutralize armored IDF units they expected to encounter, and then carry out their deadly objective against civilian targets. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) developed EFPs, which are a shaped charge a little smaller than a coffee can with a concave end and are packed with plastic explosives that turns a copper plate into high-velocity slugs that can penetrate armor plating. The IRGC proliferated EFPs to its proxies, in particular in Iraq, where Shia militias used the devices to kill at least 165 U.S. service members and wound over 900 between 2005 and 2011.¹⁴¹

Beyond the inherent dangers that these capabilities posed, Hamas used these weapons in a combined arms approach that synchronized the fighters' actions at a greater scale and complexity than it had previously demonstrated, clearly belying the impression, as we discuss below, that the group is merely a terrorist or guerilla organization.

Nor was it only in their ground incursion into Israel that Hamas demonstrated capabilities superior to any it had been previously believed to possess. While Palestinian fighters had managed to fire only an average of 400 rockets per day in previous conflicts, the 3,000 rockets that Hamas launched at Israel on the first day of the war outstripped the group's known abilities. On October 7, Israel faced a larger barrage of projectiles than on any other single day since at least the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

The sophistication of Hamas’s operation on October 7, its surprising use of advanced weapons with increased lethality against an armored force, and the attackers’ determination to unleash violence specifically at civilian targets shifted Israel’s understanding of the threat the group poses and could pose in the future if allowed to continue its evolution into an ever more capable adversary.

ii. Barbaric Tactics

The October 7 attacks were shocking not only for having occurred, or for the capabilities that Hamas deployed against Israel, but even more so for the intentional brutality that defined the operation. It is not merely that they engaged—as the United Nations has now corroborated—in a clear pattern of rape, sexual violence, mutilation, and other forms of viciousness against Israeli civilians and captured IDF personnel.¹⁴² It is that this violence against civilians was a deliberately calculated and executed tactic.

Israel compiled raw footage of the October 7 attack, known as “Bear Witness,” much of it having been shot by the perpetrators of the violence, into a forty-seven-minute video capturing the murder of 139 people—approximately ten percent of those murdered that day. The barbarism documented in the video did not indicate a spontaneous expression of violence but conditioned hatred of Israelis that Hamas and other groups had cultivated for years.

The attackers carried manuals—including Hebrew phrasebooks—for how to rape Israeli women. They included in their ranks Gazans who had worked in the very Israeli communities they had returned to attack and who abused their relationships with Israelis to encourage them to leave their safe rooms, only to be killed, violated, or kidnapped. Such brutality—especially against Israeli civilians who, in many cases, by living so close to Gaza had dedicated themselves to an optimistic vision of peace between the two peoples—undercut the assumption, which had informed previous Israeli strategies, that Hamas might be moderated over time by the responsibility of providing for the well-being of Gazans.

Pamphlet Found in the Possession October 7 Infiltrator

23.	لا تقتل مشاكس	أل نعيمه بعوت
24.	إهدى	تبرقاع
25.	انت أسير	أناه شغوى
26.	تجمعوا هنا	كولام بو
27.	ابن مسزول الكيبوتس	أيفو روش هكيبوتس
28.	ما اسم الكيبوتس	ما شيم هكيبوتس
29.	لدينا رهائن	بشلائو بنيه عروفاه
30.	سنقتل الرهائن	نهروق هشويم
31.	كيف اسوق الدياتية	أبج ايطعلل هناك
32.	بننا دكتور / مين دكتور	أنى روتسيه روفاه
33.	عاجه	التايل بو
34.	نحتاج الى طعام وشراب	أناخلو روتسيم لوجل قا مام
35.	نحتاج الى وسيلة اتصال	أناخلو روتسيم ليهكشير
36.	أين مفتاح السيارة	أيفو مفتاخوت هاريفخ
37.	الرجال هنا	إفغاريم بو
38.	النساء هنا	أنشم بو
39.	الأطفال هنا	هينديم بو
40.	انا مش قاهم	أنى بو مغم
41.	أبلى هنا	تشارير بو
42.	من يتكلم عربى	سى ميدائير عرافيت
43.	الخلع ملايمك	هوريد هيتديم
44.	بحاجة لنواء	أنى روتسيه ثروفاه
45.	أين القائد	إفوه هسفاكير

كتيبة القدس

2

From the phrasebook: Line 25: "You are a prisoner." Line 2: "Where is the head of the kibbutz?"
Line 29: "We have hostages." Line 30: "We will kill the captives." Line 36: "Where are the car keys?" Line 37: "Men here." Line 38: "Women here." Line 39: "Children here." Line 43: "Take off your clothes." Line 45: "Where is the commander?"

Source: The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center¹⁴³

iii. The Existential Threat of Deteriorated Deterrence

Beyond the death and destruction that Hamas was able to inflict on October 7, beyond what the attack suggested that Hamas might be capable and willing to do in the future, it was that day's implications for Israel's overall national security that were the most sobering. October 7 undermined the IDF's longstanding reputation as the Middle East's most capable military, a reputation it had steadily built over decades of tactical and operational excellence.

This perception of Israel’s strength—and the futility of attacking it—has been the foundation of Israel’s security. It had contributed substantially to the decision by Arab neighbors to cease their intermittent wars against Israel and had influenced Egypt and Jordan to make peace with Israel. With that strength called into doubt on October 7, Israel faced the real possibility that other adversaries would grow emboldened and seek to replicate Hamas’s success.

Indeed, on November 18, 2023, Hossein Salami, the head of the IRGC, argued that after Hamas’s October 7 attack, “the Zionist army, which had built itself into a legendary army, can no longer prevent the implementation of heavy subversive operations against the Zionist regime, nor that terrible and complex intelligence system that the Zionists relied on to sleep peacefully at night.”¹⁴⁴ The existential threat to Israel that the spread of this perception of weakness could pose was perhaps the most dangerous and globally underappreciated consequence of October 7.

iv. Fear and Uncertainty

All of the above—the sophistication of the October 7 attack itself, its brutality, and its impact on Israel’s security—had a significant and detrimental impact on Israel’s psyche, one that was still palpable when we visited four months later. Many Israelis still live with fear and uncertainty about the future of their nation and their safety; and those displaced by the attacks question whether they will be able and willing to return home or be kept safe. As one senior Israeli official who spoke with the group argued, “Israel was not created so that Israelis would have to hide in safe rooms in their homes to avoid attacks.”¹⁴⁵

a. Evacuations

The abandoned communities, not only in Israel’s south but also in the north, have become an enduring reminder of the disruption to Israeli life that illegal aggression of October 7 caused. Nearly 200,000 Israelis have been internally displaced since the Hamas attack. The devastation from the attacks, and projectile fire by Iranian proxies in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria, have rendered large areas of southern and northern Israel unsafe to live.¹⁴⁶

Of the 200,000 Israelis who left their homes, roughly half—some 30,000 from the vicinity of Gaza and 60,000 from the north—were mandatorily evacuated, while the other half left voluntarily due to security concerns. In the north, roughly 83,000 Israelis fled their homes within roughly nine miles of the border. Of these, only those living within roughly three miles of Lebanon faced mandatory evacuation, the remainder choose to leave—a manifestation of the pervasive loss of confidence in the safety and security

theretofore provided by the State. Providing housing, schooling, and medical services for the massive number of evacuated Israelis became a significant challenge for Israel, with displaced Israelis indefinitely stuck at hundreds of hotels throughout the country.¹⁴⁷

The evacuees' fear that they might not be able to return to their homes, either because of the devastation caused by Hamas's attack or because they might never be safe there again, imposes not just an economic cost on Israel, but a strategic one. The promise that Jews could live in Israel safely has been the foundation of the social contract between the Jewish state and its people. With hundreds of thousands of Israelis questioning whether the government and military could keep them safe, the aftermath of the October 7 attack has undermined Israel's very purpose for existing. Similarly, the ability of Hamas and Hezbollah to force Israelis to abandon their homes gives encouragement to all of the adversaries who harbor ambitions of driving Jews out of Israeli territory.

b. Mindset

Nor are those Israelis who had to evacuate their homes the only ones deeply impacted by the October 7 attack. It was clear to us that the whole country has been traumatized. The attack disrupted Israel's sense of identity unlike any other moment in its history and evoked memories of the worst events in Jewish history.

The Jewish state was founded in the aftermath of the Holocaust as a Jewish homeland to ensure that the systematic murder of Jews could never happen again. After Egypt and Syria mounted their surprise offensive on Yom Kippur in 1973, Israel vowed to never be surprised again. The October 7 attack, in which Hamas surprised Israel exactly fifty years and one day after the 1973 invasion and killed more Jews in a single day than at any time since the Holocaust, shocked the Israeli psyche precisely because it undermined their confidence that lessons of the past had been learned. Regular Israelis we spoke with on the street were quickly moved to tears not just by recounting what they or their families suffered on October 7 but by their doubt if they could ever be safe again.

With Israelis' sense of security so severely shaken, normal life cannot return to Israel not just until the threat from Hamas is confronted but also the government can reassure its citizens that another October 7 is not on the horizon. As a result, Israel's understanding of what it needs to do to restore its security extends beyond Hamas and the Gaza Strip.

B. Operational Context

Since Hamas took over the Gaza Strip in 2007, and prior to current conflict, the IDF has undertaken seven military operations against Gaza-based terrorist organizations, including Hamas but also several smaller groups such as PIJ. Israel had previously considered, but always rejected, the option of a full-scale incursion into Gaza to eliminate the terrorist presence. Instead, in each of the past rounds of fighting, it sought to degrade enemy capabilities and deter future attacks, primarily from the air and occasionally through limited ground operations. Those efforts ultimately resulted in Hamas's continued control of Gaza and eventual ability to launch the devastating terrorist attack on October 7.

i. Repeated Hamas-Israel Conflicts

In addition to its current campaign to destroy Hamas's military capability and to remove Hamas as the governing authority in Gaza, Israel has undertaken four military operations of varying length against Hamas since the terrorist group seized control of the Gaza Strip in 2007—in 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2021. While Israel achieved tactical successes eliminating terrorist leaders and operatives, as well as degrading Hamas's military capabilities, the group's ability and, crucially, its will to attack Israel remained after each round of fighting—an outcome of each campaign's limited objectives.

On December 27, 2008, the IDF began Operation Cast Lead after an escalation of rocket fire from Gaza. Then-IDF Chief of General Staff Gabi Ashkenazi declared following the twenty-two-day campaign, including strikes on Hamas's rocket launching infrastructure and a limited ground operation, that “[the operation] significantly [changed] the security situation in the southern region of Israel.”¹⁴⁸ Palestinian terrorist groups fired more than 1,000 rockets toward Israel during this round of fighting.

Operation Pillar of Defense began on November 14, 2012, with the objective of reducing the frequency of rocket attacks against Israeli civilians after the IDF killed Ahmed Jabari, the head of Hamas's military operations.¹⁴⁹ Afterwards, the IDF admitted that “despite the IDF's achievements, more than 3.5 million Israelis were still in Hamas' range of rocket fire.”¹⁵⁰ Palestinians in Gaza fired over 1,500 rockets toward Israeli communities during the just eight-day war.¹⁵¹

After Hamas operatives kidnapped three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank on June 12, 2014, triggering an escalating cycle of attacks, Israel launched Operation Protective Edge on July 8, 2014. The conflict, which lasted fifty days—the longest round of fighting before 2023—included a ground campaign with the goal of “destroying the tunnel network leading from Gaza to Israel.”¹⁵² Palestinian terrorist groups fired more than 4,500 rockets from Gaza toward Israel during this round of fighting.¹⁵³

On May 10, 2021, Hamas’s barrage of 150 rockets from Gaza toward Israel, with at least six projectiles targeting Jerusalem, pushed Israel to initiate Operation Guardian of the Walls “to restore the security and ensure the safety of Israel and its civilians.”¹⁵⁴ The operation, which, like the 2012 campaign, did not involve a ground operation, lasted eleven days. Palestinians fired nearly 4,400 rockets toward Israel during this conflict—almost as many in eleven days as during the fifty-day campaign in 2014.¹⁵⁵

ii. Not Just Hamas

Although Hamas has ruled the Gaza Strip since 2007, it is not the only terrorist group in the territory. The relationships between these various groups can be complicated, both cooperating with and competing against Hamas. Most prominent among the other, smaller terrorist organization is PIJ. Like Hamas, PIJ is backed by Iran, although it is much more directly controlled by Tehran than its larger counterpart.¹⁵⁶ In addition to joining the October 7 attack, PIJ has its own history of attacks on and conflicts with Israel.¹⁵⁷

The IDF’s 2019, 2022, and May 2023 operations in the Gaza Strip were much shorter—lasting four, three, and four days, respectively—and solely geared toward degrading PIJ’s capabilities using air power. Operations Black Belt in November 2019 and Breaking Dawn in August 2022 began after the IDF preemptively and precisely eliminated PIJ’s senior commander in Gaza, Baha Abu al-Ata, and its commander of northern Gaza, Taysir al-Jabari, among several other operatives, respectively.¹⁵⁸ The IDF launched Operation Shield and Arrow in May 2023, during which it eliminated six senior PIJ figures, a week after the terror group fired 100 rockets toward Israel.¹⁵⁹ PIJ fired hundreds of rockets during the 2019 operation and more than 1,000 during the 2022 and 2023 operations.¹⁶⁰

These three operations were significant because they sought to degrade PIJ’s capabilities in isolation from the Hamas threat, even though Israel’s military doctrine in Gaza had emphasized chiefly targeting Hamas in response to attacks emanating from the Strip, including attacks orchestrated by PIJ, to incentivize Hamas to stifle PIJ operatives.¹⁶¹ That Hamas largely abstained from entering the IDF-PIJ hostilities, particularly in 2022 and 2023, was interpreted by Israeli security leadership as an indication that the IDF had been successful in establishing deterrence against Hamas during, and in the period after, the 2021 conflict.

Several other smaller terrorist organizations also operate in the Gaza Strip, threatening Israeli civilians and soldiers. In addition to Hamas and PIJ, Gaza-based terrorist organizations that Iran supports militarily and financially include the Abd Al-Qadir Al-Husseini Brigades; Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades; Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP); Palestinian Mujahideen Movement; Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP); PFLP General Command; and Popular Resistance Committees. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has documented several other terrorist organizations in Gaza, including the Army of Islam; Abdallah Azzam Brigades; Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Qods Force; ISIS–Sinai Province; Mujahidin Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem; and Palestine Liberation Front.¹⁶²

iii. Degrade and Deter (but Not Eliminate)

The IDF's cyclical yet limited military operations against Hamas and PIJ were the outcome of a long-running Israeli strategy to weaken and deter, but not eliminate, threats from the Gaza Strip. The limited scope and duration of these operations may have also been influenced by an Israeli interest in demonstrating its respect for the international law of self-defense, most notably the obligation to use only “necessary and proportional” force in the exercise of self-defense.

Periodic operations, referred to by some as “mowing the lawn,” relied on three assumptions: that diminishing and eliminating Hamas's assets and high-value personnel would buy time before the group was capable of attacking Israel again; that such operations inflicting losses on Hamas would deter it by exacting higher costs than the benefit the group received from attacking Israel; and that as governing entities, terrorist groups such as Hamas might eschew destructive wars in favor of economic advancement to keep their populations placated and to legitimize their own political authority.¹⁶³ At the same time, Israel assumed that through its regulation of materials and goods flowing into Gaza—including cooperation with Egypt to eliminate smuggling tunnels under Gaza's southern border—it was preventing Hamas from receiving and developing advanced weapons, even if it remained capable of producing crude rockets indigenously and diverting civilian building materials for tunnel construction.

In addition to belief in the effectiveness of deterrence, Israel had other reasons to reject numerous previous suggestions that it act to remove Hamas from Gaza—all of which have been borne out during the current conflict. This includes concerns about the challenge of protracted ground operation in Gaza; concerns that getting decisively drawn into Gaza would provide an opportunity for Israel's other adversaries, particularly Hezbollah, to exploit; uncertainty about who would fill the vacuum left by removing Hamas; and, finally, doubt that Israel's partners would support such an operation.¹⁶⁴

However, the barbaric attack that began on October 7 and continued with unprecedented intensity thereafter disproved Israel’s overarching assumption that terror threats from the Gaza Strip could be contained at a tolerable cost and negated most of the concerns about an operation to destroy the terrorist group’s military capability and remove it as the governing entity in Gaza. The failure of the previous strategy to prevent Hamas from developing both the means and the will to conduct an attack on the scale of October 7 means that neither similar, limited operations against Hamas nor a reliance on deterrence were strategic options for Israel.

C. Geopolitical Context: Iran’s Proxy Network

The Iranian regime has established a dispersed network of proxies around Israel, U.S. forces in the Middle East, and U.S. Arab partners by training, funding, equipping, and directing “axis of resistance” proxies in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, Iraq, and Yemen. That investment has paid dividends since October 7, as virtually all of Iran’s proxy forces have joined the fight against Israel, turning it into a multifront conflict with serious risk of escalation and spillover. Iran’s proxies have also targeted the United States, its other partners, like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and critical interests in the Middle East, including oil infrastructure and freedom of navigation through the Red Sea, Arabian Gulf, and other waterways vital to international trade. This encirclement, and the risks it poses, has been a crucial factor in shaping Israeli strategy and operations.

i. Iran

Iran has an extensive military arsenal. The Iranian regime’s rockets, cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and RPVs enable it to strike any point in the Middle East, endangering all U.S. forces and partners in the region. These weapons further enhance Iran’s asymmetric advantages over U.S. and partner forces in the Middle East. Iran’s projectiles are relatively cheap compared to most air defense interceptors. Its RPVs, increasingly used by Iranian proxies, fly low and unpredictable routes, making it difficult for air defenses to detect, track, and neutralize incoming threats.

During congressional testimony in March 2023, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Michael “Erik” Kurilla, USA warned that the threat Iran poses has grown “exponentially” in the past five years, largely because of its advancing missile and RPV arsenal.¹⁶⁵ Kurilla’s predecessor, General Kenneth “Frank” McKenzie, Jr., USMC (ret.) cautioned that Iran has effectively achieved “overmatch” in the Middle East, meaning it has the strategic capacity to fire weapons that can overwhelm the air defenses of the United States and its partners.¹⁶⁶

On April 13-14, Iran launched an unprecedented strike against Israel—Tehran’s first attack against the Jewish state—including 120 medium-range ballistic missiles, 170 RPVs, and thirty land-attack cruise missiles. Close cooperation from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Jordan, and others intercepted ninety-nine percent of the projectiles. The United States and Israel reportedly utilized multiple Arab countries’ intelligence-sharing and sensor data that was transmitted to the U.S. Combined Air Operations Center in Qatar to neutralize projectile threats.¹⁶⁷

ii. Hezbollah

Tehran’s most capable proxy, Hezbollah, has long posed the most perilous conventional military threat to Israel. Ever since October 7, the risk of a much more serious attack by Hezbollah—whether a ground incursion by its Radwan forces or a massive projectile barrage—had been as grave, if not graver, a concern for Israeli leaders than the threat from Hamas. Deterring escalation by Hezbollah and holding in reserve the capabilities to respond to an attack, if need be, has been a dominant strategic and operational consideration for the IDF, even as it mounted its ground maneuver into Gaza.

Despite Israel’s decade-long “campaign between the wars” to interdict Iranian proliferation of advanced weapons into Lebanon, Hezbollah’s arsenal has grown to roughly 150,000 projectiles, including long-range and precise missiles far more advanced than those of any groups in Gaza.¹⁶⁸ With this stockpile of weapons, Hezbollah could launch 6,000 or more munitions per day at a sustained rate of fire, at least double the single-day peak that Hamas reached during the first day of the war.¹⁶⁹ This arsenal threatens to overwhelm Israel’s multi-layered air defense architecture and inflict catastrophic damage on Israeli military installations, critical infrastructure, and civilian population centers. Even if effective against this threat, the IDF would be compelled to prioritize defense of vital installations, thereby leaving the civilian population vulnerable to rocket and missile attacks of unprecedented intensity. Hezbollah’s near daily attacks against Israel since the war began have not appreciably reduced this massive stockpile.

In the wake of Hamas’s al-Nukba ground forces mounting an incursion into Israel on October 7, the presence of Hezbollah’s Radwan special forces has become a particularly acute problem. Indeed, Hamas’s al-Nukba forces executed a playbook for invasion that Hezbollah had developed. As early as 2012, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah had promised to “order our soldiers to conquer the Galilee,” during its next war with Israel. Radwan units have since developed their combined arms capabilities to accomplish such a mission and further honed them during their fighting in the Syrian civil war.¹⁷⁰ The Radwan force’s capabilities and experience makes it an even more dangerous threat than Hamas’s surprisingly sophisticated combined arms assault on October 7.¹⁷¹

Hezbollah's proximity to Israel and the geography of the Israel-Lebanon border is also a crucial element to the tensions. From 2018-2019, the IDF neutralized several Hezbollah tunnels that, like those Hamas had previously constructed and operated under the Israel-Gaza border, could enable fighters to infiltrate Israel and conduct massacres and kidnappings.¹⁷² Yet, the hilly and densely forested terrain along the Blue Line, which demarcates the Israel-Lebanon border, functionally acts as above-ground tunnels that hide potential Radwan cross-border infiltrations, unlike the relatively flat and open terrain along the Gaza border. Further complicating matters, several Israeli towns are closer to the border with Lebanon than those that the Palestinian terrorists devastated on October 7 were to Gaza.¹⁷³

This strategic aerial and ground threat from Hezbollah caused Israeli military leaders to immediately focus on the north in the aftermath of the October 7 attack, concerned that a much more serious attack might still materialize. The Israeli War Cabinet's near decision to authorize a full-scale preemptive strike against Hezbollah in the days after October 7 may have bolstered, if not convinced, Hezbollah not to get involved.¹⁷⁴ So, too, the U.S. deployment of a carrier strike group to the eastern Mediterranean and President Biden's message of "don't" to Iranian and Hezbollah leadership might have bolstered deterrence.

But even if a major Hezbollah attack did not take place, the group nevertheless entered the conflict. It has launched persistent cross-border attacks into Israel since October 8, including firing thousands of rockets, missiles, and RPVs.¹⁷⁵ While Israel and Hezbollah have kept the fighting below the threshold of full-scale war, the threat that Hezbollah poses to Israel's north has underscored the risk that the Iran-backed force poses to Israel and regional stability. It has also driven some 83,000 Israelis from their homes in the north and created additional security challenges that Israel must resolve to restore security in the aftermath of October 7.

iii. Iranian-backed Militias in Iraq and Syria

In addition to Hezbollah, Iran-linked militia in Iraq and Syria have also joined the fight against Israel to a limited extent. They also escalated their aggression against U.S. forces, launching more than 170 attacks.¹⁷⁶

Iran-linked groups in Iraq have claimed to target Israel on several occasions since the war began, with few munitions reaching Israeli airspace and many of the claims unsubstantiated.¹⁷⁷ Instead, these Iran-linked forces have focused on pressuring the United States in Iraq and Syria. Despite occasional, limited U.S. strikes on Iran-linked targets, attacks against U.S. forces continued, including a deadly attack that killed three U.S. service members at an outpost on January 28. These attacks have at least temporarily subsided following the large U.S. military responses on February 2 and 7, the latter of which killed the commander of the IRGC-aligned Iraqi group responsible for the January 28 attack.¹⁷⁸

iv. Houthis in Yemen

The Houthi militants in Yemen have launched long-range missiles and one-way attack RPVs at Israel and ships in nearby waters, despite repeated U.S. and partner nation strikes on Houthi weapons depots, radars, and other infrastructure in Yemen. A combination of pre-existing Israeli, U.S., and Arab partner air defenses combined with maritime assets that the United States and European nations have deployed to the region since the war began have intercepted most of the Houthi strikes.¹⁷⁹ However, the Iran-backed group's persistent aggression risks provoking a wider regional war by endangering southern Israel and disrupting maritime traffic through some of the world's most critical waterways.

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