

Gaza's Urban Warfare Challenge: Lessons from Mosul and Raqqa

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Brief Analysis

The differences and parallels between urban battlefield circumstances in Gaza, Iraq, and Syria give U.S. policymakers a sobering but clear view of what exactly they will be committing to in supporting Israel's ground campaign.

On October 12, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) warned all residents of Gaza City to evacuate within twenty-four hours, signaling that a ground operation into the urban area is likely imminent. As Israel begins the ground phase of its campaign to destroy “the military and governing capabilities” of Hamas (as the [Prime Minister's Office put it \(https://www.mprnews.org/story/2023/10/09/israel-vows-complete-siege-of-gaza-as-it-strikes-palestinian-territory-hamas\)](https://www.mprnews.org/story/2023/10/09/israel-vows-complete-siege-of-gaza-as-it-strikes-palestinian-territory-hamas)), officials and observers would be wise to review the lessons of other recent urban battlefields.

Comparing the Gaza Battlefield and Opponent

Every urban battle is unique and shaped by the cityscape, human terrain, and forces, so comparing Gaza and its relevant forces with other urban battlefields and combatants is a useful first step. Although the Gaza Strip comprises 140 square miles overall, its numerous semi-urban and lower-density areas mean that the urban battlefield can more accurately be thought of as a network of four to six smaller zones, the largest being Gaza City, which covers about 20 square miles, plus a number of 5 square mile zones (e.g., Khan Yunis, Rafah). This makes it somewhat smaller than the past Iraqi urban battlefields of East Mosul and West Mosul (about 30 square miles each) and nearly the same surface area as Raqqa, Syria, the former “capital” of the Islamic State (IS). Yet Gaza's population of approximately two million people is on par with all of Mosul's circa 2014, when the city fell to IS. In other words, Gaza City is far more densely populated than other recent urban battle environments—though how much of the population will remain there following Israel's evacuation order and the beginning of the battle itself is unclear.

Gaza is also an unusually complex urban battlefield, including in the third dimension. Gaza City has around sixty buildings that are six floors or taller, compared to almost none in the 2016-17 Battle of Mosul and 2017 Battle of Raqqa. Hamas has also invested huge effort in developing military tunnels under the Strip, expanding the potential battlespace to an unknown extent. Taken together, seizing all of Gaza's conurbations would entail an operation equivalent to one West Mosul-size fight plus one or two Raqqa-size fights (whether these battles unfold sequentially or in parallel is uncertain).

Moreover, Hamas differs from the opponents in Mosul, Raqqa, and other smaller urban battles such as Kobane, Manbij, Ramadi, and Fallujah. It is certainly on par with IS in its ability to conduct suicide bombings, and probably superior in anti-armor warfare, drone operations, and air defense. And while IS had around two years to prepare Mosul and Raqqa's defense, Hamas has had fifteen years to prepare a dense "defense in depth" that integrates subterranean, ground-level, and aboveground fortifications, communication tunnels, emplacements, and fighting positions, as well as potential minefields, improvised explosive devices, explosively formed penetrator anti-armor mines, and buildings rigged as explosive booby traps.

As important, Hamas is holding more than a hundred Israeli and foreign hostages by most accounts, including some Americans—an unprecedented complication. Earlier today, Hamas claimed that thirteen prisoners, "including foreigners," had been killed by IDF airstrikes in the preceding twenty-four hours, a clear attempt to deter Israel's use of airpower.

Moreover, the attitude of Gaza residents is uncertain. In Iraq and Syria, most urban residents actively sought to get away from IS defensive pockets but were prevented from doing so and exploited as human shields. Although Hamas may use the foreign hostages in much the same way, at least some of Gaza's citizens may be inclined to remain in urban areas willingly and even support the group actively or passively—a potentially huge complication. Indeed, Hamas authorities urged residents to ignore the Israeli evacuation warning.

Another major difference may be the quality of the attacking forces and their appreciation of the environment. In the Iraqi and Syrian urban battles mentioned above, the ground attackers were almost always poorly equipped, semi-trained light infantry troops (with the exception of fights involving Iraq's Special Operations Forces or certain units of the Syrian Democratic Forces). As such, they were inadequately prepared for the complexity and novelty of those urban environments. Even in the best case, when these forces were provided with U.S. intelligence gleaned from eight years of occupation and three years of intense surveillance, they were still probably not as well-informed as the IDF is about Gaza—a territory where Israel has conducted two previous wars and decades of nonstop surveillance. The IDF is also qualitatively different from America's "by, with, and through" partners in Iraq and Syria. Exactly how different will be tested by the imminent fighting, but the IDF appears to be the most cohesive, well-equipped, and well-prepared force to fight major urban battles since the U.S. military itself fought the highly destructive second Battle of Fallujah in November 2004.

Lessons of Recent Urban Battles

Although the above differences underline the hazards of overreliance on historical comparisons, one can still glean many important lessons from recent urban battles in the Middle East:

- **Destruction of urban areas is almost unavoidable.** The opening days of IDF strikes on Gaza suggest that Israel is willing to cause immense material damage in pursuit of its military objectives. Even if this changes at the outset of the ground phase, every urban battle eventually becomes a choice between saving the physical environment and saving the lives of friendly troops. Faced with such a decision, attackers generally choose the latter, especially once they become weary. In West Mosul—which humanitarian agencies consider an extraordinarily destructive battle—the UN certified that over 13,000 structures were demolished or made uninhabitable in about 180 days of battle. In the more

concentrated Raqqa area, the figure was 11,000 (or **80 percent** (<https://www.rand.org/blog/rand-review/2022/07/civilian-casualties-lessons-from-the-battle-for-raqqa.html>) of the city's structures) in 90 days. In Gaza, local authorities report that 535 structures are destroyed or uninhabitable after five days of war—which is probably not far off the mark judging by imagery from the estimated 2,000 airstrikes conducted thus far (rough tracking points to around 400 Israeli strikes each day in the conflict's opening period, increasing to 750 on October 12). Destruction tends to accelerate when ground operations commence and troops require fire support, so the Gaza damage will likely wind up equaling or exceeding that of Mosul and Raqqa.

- **Tactics, timing, and troop quality matter.** Urban battles are especially unforgiving of mistakes, lethargy, and low-quality or exhausted troops. In the Battle of Mosul, the mistiming of concentric attacks on the city allowed IS to muster its full strength against each piecemeal Iraqi thrust—a mistake that was not remedied until late in the battle. Gains and momentary opportunities to achieve breakthroughs were therefore not exploited; weaker formations contributed little, while higher-quality troops ended up taking the brunt of the fighting and being worn down and destroyed.
- **The enemy was often given a way out.** In Manbij, Raqqa, Fallujah, and numerous other small battles, IS forces were typically left with an escape corridor. Although this sat uneasily with the U.S.-led coalition, which wanted to decisively eliminate the IS threat, it served as a useful splintering technique that saved lives, reduced damage, and shortened battles. In contrast, IS did not use opportunities to escape in battles such as Mosul, Hajin, and Baghuz; some fighters were consequently cornered, while others merged into the civilian populace.
- **The United States has supported long, destructive urban fights.** In the war against IS, the United States supported 277 days of urban fighting in Mosul, 90 days in Raqqa, and 23 days in Manbij. In comparison, Washington and other international actors pressured Israel to shut down its December 2008 Gaza operation after 22 days and its 2014 operation after 49 days, even though they were less destructive than any of the three urban operations against IS.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Even if Israeli ground operations are initially successful, as tends to be the case with the first phase of urban warfare, U.S. officials should presume that the campaign will soon become slower, costlier, and deeply unpopular—not just in the Arab world, but also in Europe and eventually the United States. If America supports a ground operation and truly intends to “stand with Israel,” then it must fully own that decision for the duration of the campaign—unlike the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, which Washington initially backed but then progressively disavowed as the outcry over civilian casualties increased. To expel the bulk of Hamas from Gaza—a worthwhile benefit for the entire international community, not just Israel—the IDF must be given the space and time to complete the mission. Otherwise, both sides will have paid the grave costs of a ground operation with little or nothing to show for it, and with future rounds of Hamas terrorism and warfare sure to follow.

Accordingly, if Washington supports the Gaza ground operation, then it will need to summon the same resolve it showed during the battles for Kobane, Ramadi, Manbij, Raqqa, and Mosul. The recent mass-casualty terrorist attacks in Israel have bared Hamas's true nature for all to see, including its growing threats to regional stability and U.S. interests, its implacable opposition to Israeli-Palestinian coexistence, and its active role in advancing Iran's interests. If Washington supports Israel's elimination of the group's military and governing capabilities in Gaza—much as the U.S.-led global coalition supported the elimination of IS territorial control in Iraq and Syria—then it needs to accept that this goal will not be achievable without significant harm to Gaza's civilian population, even with the best of efforts. The sad truth is that the civilian death toll in Gaza—not to mention the risk to hostages and Israeli troops—could reach the levels seen during the Battle of Mosul (estimated at more than **9,000**

([https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-only-on-ap-islamic-state-group-](https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-only-on-ap-islamic-state-group-bbea7094fb954838a2fdc11278d65460)

[bbea7094fb954838a2fdc11278d65460](https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-only-on-ap-islamic-state-group-bbea7094fb954838a2fdc11278d65460)) killed), rivaling the high price that many innocent Iraqis paid to defeat IS.

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