

Israel's Campaign Against Hamas in Gaza: War Aims and Operational Challenges

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.



Brief Analysis

The goal of destroying Hamas will require a prolonged military effort, but the longer the fighting drags on, the less likely Israel will be to retain the freedom of action needed to achieve its war aims.

In response to the massive Hamas terrorist attack of October 7, Israel initiated Operation Swords of Iron, a sustained air, sea, and land campaign to destroy the group's military capacity, end its rule in Gaza, and obtain the safe return of the 229 or more Israeli and foreign hostages taken during the attack. The air and sea campaign, now in its twenty-fifth day, has targeted, inter alia, Hamas's Gaza-based political leadership, its military commanders, and fighters from its land, sea, and air forces, along with command centers, training facilities, rocket launch sites, the tunnel network under Gaza, and military workshops. And following a number of limited incursions, Israeli ground forces entered the northern part of the Gaza Strip in force last Friday, October 27, and are reported to be gradually expanding operations there.

Meanwhile, Israel has been fending off attacks from Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hezbollah and other pro-Iran militias in Syria, which are seeking to tie down forces on the country's northern border. They are also likely testing Israel's risk and response thresholds there, perhaps with an eye toward further escalating operations on this second front. In expanding the ground war in pursuit of their war aims, Israeli policymakers and military planners will have to balance a number of considerations.

Achieving a Decisive Outcome?

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) will undoubtedly inflict heavy losses on its enemy's military formations, though Hamas may try to disperse and hide at least some of these assets in the hope of facilitating their postwar reconstitution. Hamas's military force, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, consists largely of lightly armed fighters

equipped with small arms, rocket-propelled grenades, and antitank missiles—and a massive rocket array. (Much the same can be said of Palestinian Islamic Jihad's al-Quds Brigades.) Though there are no large armored formations to be eliminated, these fighters and rocket forces are protected by extensive prepared defenses that are woven into Gaza's dense urban landscape and will be difficult to root out.

Moreover, Hamas's military workshops, which now produce nearly all its arms, will need to be destroyed. This could take many months—though their reliance on low-tech, dual-use equipment, components, and **systems** (<https://warontherocks.com/2014/08/israel-and-the-demise-of-mowing-the-grass/>) could facilitate their reconstitution after the war. Furthermore, many arms workshops and weapons caches buried under the rubble will likely remain unknown or inaccessible without a major, prolonged Israeli effort. If not recovered by Israel, these military assets may be recovered by the remnants of Hamas or an eventual possible successor.

The relatively low-tech nature of the Hamas force, its reliance on arms workshops that employ dual-use equipment, and the retention by Hamas members of the know-how gained while building this infrastructure will greatly complicate Israel's efforts to eliminate these capabilities on a lasting basis.

Challenges of Urban Warfare

Urban combat is the most difficult form of warfare. An Israeli ground campaign, therefore, could be prolonged and bloody, involving fighting in the streets and alleyways of Gaza as well as the subterranean tunnel complexes beneath them. Much of Hamas's street-level defenses in parts of Gaza City have probably been damaged by airstrikes, though the rubble created may yet provide cover and concealment for its fighters. Moreover, Israeli operations may be complicated by a desire not to harm hostages when intelligence indicates they may be present. Beyond this, longstanding questions regarding the **readiness** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/defense-ministry-ombudsman-says-idf-ground-forces-unprepared-for-war/>) of Israel's ground forces for such a complex and challenging mission were reinforced by the IDF's poor response on October 7 and problems **outfitting** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/reserve-soldiers-complain-that-equipment-is-lacking-or-substandard/>) mobilized reservists thereafter. However, the long wait before the start of major ground operations has provided time to refine plans, close intelligence gaps, resolve issues identified during mobilization, and conduct refresher training for troops.

Beyond Gaza City

While Hamas's military center of gravity may be located in Gaza City, Israel will have to eventually expand ground operations to other built-up areas in the Strip—Nuseirat, Bureij, Maghazi, Deir al-Balah, Khan Yunis, and Rafah—if it wants to destroy the group. Many Hamas fighters and leaders live in these areas, and others may have fled there since the start of the conflict to shelter among the masses of the displaced and near facilities operated by the United Nations and international organizations. Such an expansion could require the further movement of internally displaced persons who previously went south at the urging of the Israeli military, creating additional humanitarian challenges. As a result, Israel is likely to come under pressure to avoid follow-on operations in these other parts of the Strip.

Humanitarian Challenges and Obligations

It is not possible to wage war against an enemy ensconced in a city without causing grievous harm to the civilians who remain. Yet Israel has an **interest and obligation** (<https://jstribune.com/jeffrey-gazan-civilian-casualties/>) to do what it can to avoid harm to civilians by ensuring that its use of force is in accordance with military necessity, discriminate (focused on legitimate targets), and proportionate to the anticipated military gains. Israel needs to do so as a matter of principle, and to preserve its military and diplomatic freedom of action, even if it gets little credit for its efforts. Yet in a fight against a murderous enemy that seeks its annihilation, Israel will likely claim significant

leeway in implementing these principles. Moreover, given that allies of Hamas have **bragged** (<https://www.memri.org/tv/pro-iran-lebanon-anis-naqqash-qasem-soleimani-imad-mughniyeh-orchestrated-weapons-transfer-humanitarian-aid-gaza>) about how Iran previously used humanitarian shipments as a cover for arms shipments to Gaza, Israel will likely continue to demand strict safeguards at the Rafah border crossing to ensure this can never happen again, even if it hinders the import of humanitarian goods to the Gaza Strip.

Israel faces a major dilemma in fighting an enemy that hides among civilians, as mass civilian casualties feed into Hamas's strategy of **inculcating** (<https://www.memri.org/reports/ideology-hamas-%E2%80%93-its-own-words>) in its supporters a **hatred of Jews** (<https://www.memri.org/reports/hamas-official-fathi-hamads-speech-was-no-exception-repeated-antisemitic-statements-hamas>)—whom its leaders, committed to **violent jihad** (https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp), regularly **refer to** (<https://www.memri.org/reports/hamas-official-fathi-hamads-speech-was-no-exception-repeated-antisemitic-statements-hamas>) as “sons of apes and pigs,” “murderers of prophets,” filth, and human garbage. For those Palestinians who **do not** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-poll-shows-gazans-pragmatic-now-not-long-term>) support (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/polls-show-majority-gazans-were-against-breaking-ceasefire-hamas-and-hezbollah>) Hamas (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/what-palestinians-really-think-hamas>) or buy into its ideology, Hamas seeks to ensure, by using them as human shields, that they suffer heavy losses in order to foster hatred of the enemy while garnering sympathy abroad. For Israel, there is no easy solution to this dilemma.

Dueling Narratives

E motive images can have a significant impact on publics and policymakers. Thus, Israeli operations in Lebanon in 1996 and 2006 were curtailed as a result of the international outcry raised by media reports of Israeli artillery strikes that targeted Hezbollah fighters and inadvertently killed civilians in the town of Qana. Conversely, images from bodycams worn by Hamas fighters during the October 7 massacre of Israeli civilians have gained Israel sympathy and legitimacy for its actions.

But Israel generally faces significant structural disadvantages in the informational domain. First, the images coming from the battlefield were terrible because combat against an enemy embedded among civilians *is* terrible and inevitably exacts a heavy toll from noncombatants there. Second, Israel labors under several other disadvantages, in that journalists tend to: (1) give equal weight to the claims of the two sides and accept uncritically even the most tendentious explanations for the events of October 7 in order to demonstrate their impartiality—e.g., that Hamas's violence is born of desperation, rather than indoctrination and an ideological commitment to jihad; and (2) avoid addressing Hamas's central role in creating the tragedy of the Gaza Strip—dictated perhaps by the politics of these journalists or the NGOs they rely on for information, and the need to preserve their access in Gaza. As a result, Hamas, the de facto governing authority in Gaza, is almost completely invisible in reporting from there. It is too early to say, however, how these factors will ultimately affect the course of the current war.

Preserving Freedom of Action

F inally, it is unclear how long Israel will be free to act in Gaza; the longer the war drags on, the greater the potential for the expansion of Jewish-Arab violence in the **West Bank and Israel** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/second-palestinian-front-relative-quiet-restlessness-and-waiting>), escalation with **Hezbollah** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/will-hezbollah-hold-back-or-escalate>)—even if a war with Hezbollah seems unlikely, at least for now—political instability in the Arab world, and perhaps growing U.S. pressure to end the operation due to rising civilian casualties or a horrific Qana-like event. At any rate, if past is prelude, the longer the war, the more likely that political and perhaps military constraints may hinder Israel's ability to achieve its war aims. Managing these tensions will likely prove increasingly

difficult, but will be necessary if Israel is to achieve its goal of eradicating Hamas as a military actor and political entity.

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of the Military and Security Studies Program at The Washington Institute. ♦

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