

How Hamas Is Fighting in Gaza: Tunnels, Traps and Ambushes

Hamas overwhelmed Israel's border in October with a coordinated, large-scale maneuver before committing atrocities. Now, it acts as a guerrilla force, its fighters often disguised as civilians.



Israeli soldiers, photographed during a tour organized by the Israeli military, standing near the entrance to what the military said was a Hamas tunnel, near the Erez border crossing in Gaza, in December. Tamir Kalifa for The New York Times

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The reporters interviewed Hamas fighters, Israeli soldiers and military analysts and assessed dozens of videos published by Hamas's military wing.

July 13, 2024

They hide under residential neighborhoods, storing their weapons in miles of tunnels and in houses, mosques, sofas — even a child's bedroom — blurring the boundary between civilians and combatants.

They emerge from hiding in plainclothes, sometimes wearing sandals or tracksuits before firing on Israeli troops, attaching mines to their vehicles, or firing rockets from launchers in civilian areas.

They rig abandoned homes with explosives and tripwires, sometimes luring Israeli soldiers to enter the booby-trapped buildings by scattering signs of a Hamas presence.

Through eight months of fighting in Gaza, Hamas's military wing — the Qassam Brigades — has fought as a decentralized and largely hidden force, in contrast to its Oct. 7 attack on Israel, which began with a coordinated large-scale maneuver in which thousands of uniformed commandos surged through border towns and killed roughly 1,200 people.

Instead of confronting the Israeli invasion that followed in frontal battles, most Hamas fighters have retreated from their bases and outposts, seeking to blunt Israel's technological and numerical advantage by launching surprise attacks on small groups of soldiers.

From below ground, Hamas's ghost army has appeared only fleetingly, emerging suddenly from a warren of tunnels — often armed with rocket-propelled grenades — to pick off soldiers and then returning swiftly to their subterranean fortress. Sometimes, they have hid among the few civilians who decided to remain in their neighborhoods despite Israeli orders to evacuate, or accompanied civilians as they returned to areas that the Israelis had captured and then abandoned.

Hamas's decision to keep fighting has proved disastrous for the Palestinians of Gaza. With Hamas refusing to surrender, Israel has forged ahead with a military campaign that has killed nearly 2 percent of Gaza's prewar population, according to Gazan authorities; displaced roughly 80 percent of its residents, according to the United Nations; and damaged a majority of Gaza's buildings, according to the U.N.

By contrast, fewer than 350 Israeli soldiers have died in Gaza since the start of the invasion, according to military statistics — far fewer than Israeli officials had predicted in October.

Yet despite the carnage in Gaza, Hamas's strategy has helped the group fulfill some of its own goals.

The war has tarnished Israel's reputation in much of the world, prompting charges of genocide at the International Court of Justice, in The Hague. It has exacerbated long-running rifts in Israeli society, prompting disagreements among Israelis about whether and how Israel should defeat Hamas. And it has

restored the question of Palestinian statehood to global discourse, leading several countries to recognize Palestine as a state.

Just as important for Hamas, its war doctrine has allowed it to survive.

[Hamas's leader in the territory, Yahya Sinwar](#), and most of his top military commanders are still alive. Israel says it has killed more than 14,000 of Hamas's 25,000 fighters — an unverifiable and disputed number that, if true, suggests thousands remain active.



Members of the Qassam Brigades in central Gaza in July 2023 during a military parade marking the anniversary of the 2014 war with Israel.

Credit...Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

An analysis of battlefield videos released by Hamas and interviews with three Hamas members and scores of Israeli soldiers, most of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly, suggests that Hamas's strategy relies on:

- Using hundreds of miles of tunnels, the scale of which surprised Israeli commanders, to move around Gaza without being seen by Israeli soldiers;
- Using civilian homes and infrastructure — including medical facilities, U.N. offices and mosques — to conceal fighters, tunnel entrances, booby-traps and ammunition stores;

- Ambushing Israeli soldiers with small groups of fighters dressed as civilians, as well as using civilians, including children, to act as lookouts;
- Leaving secret signs outside homes, like a red sheet hanging from a window or graffiti, to signal to fellow fighters the nearby presence of mines, tunnel entrances or weapons caches inside;
- Dragging out the war for as long as possible, even at the expense of more civilian death and destruction, in order to bog Israel down in an attritional battle that has amplified international criticism of Israel.

“The aim is to vanish, avoid direct confrontation, while launching tactical attacks against the occupation army. The emphasis is on patience,” said Salah al-Din al-Awawdeh, a Hamas member and former fighter in its military wing who is now an analyst based in Istanbul. Before Oct. 7, the Qassam Brigades operated as “an army with training bases and stockpiles,” Mr. al-Awawdeh said. “But during this war, they are behaving as guerrillas.”

At the start of the war, Hamas and its allies fired a barrage of rockets toward civilian areas of Israel, including roughly 3,000 on Oct. 7 itself, often using launchers hidden in densely populated civilian neighborhoods in Gaza. The Israeli Army captured and destroyed scores of launchers, including some it said it found near a mosque and a kindergarten, bringing the rocket fire to a near halt.

After Israeli ground troops invaded in late October, Hamas went further in transforming civilian areas of Gaza into military zones, setting traps in scores of neighborhoods and creating confusion about what a combatant looks like by dressing its fighters as civilians.

Israeli officials say that Hamas’s tactics explain why Israel has been forced to strike so much civilian infrastructure, kill so many Palestinians and detain so many civilians.

Mousa Abu Marzouk, a senior Hamas official based in Qatar, dismissed criticism of Hamas’s use of civilian attire and storage of weapons inside civilian homes, saying that it deflected attention away from Israeli wrongdoing.

“If there’s someone who takes a weapon from under a bed, is that a justification for killing 100,000 people?” Mr. Abu Marzouk said. “If someone takes a weapon from under a bed, is that a justification to kill an entire school and destroy a hospital?”



Emergency workers carrying a person from the rubble of the Sousi Mosque in Shati, west of Gaza City, on Oct. 9. Credit...Samar Abu Elouf for The New York Times

Other Hamas members acknowledge and defend the movement's use of civilian clothes and civilian homes, saying the group had no alternative.

"Every insurgency in every war, from Vietnam to Afghanistan, saw people fighting from their homes," said Mr. al-Awawdeh. "If I live in Zeitoun, for example, and the army comes — I will fight them there, from my home, or my neighbor's, or from the mosque. I will fight them anywhere I am."

Hamas militants wear civilian clothes in a legitimate attempt to avoid detection, Mr. al-Awawdeh said. "That's natural for a resistance movement," he added, "and there's nothing unusual about it."

How Hamas Reacted to the Invasion

Hamas's response to [Israel's ground invasion on Oct. 27](#) became a model for its strategy since.

When Israeli tanks and infantry battalions surged into Gaza that Friday, they were met with little to no resistance for the first couple of miles, according to four soldiers who were among the first to cross the border.

Lior Soharin, an Israeli reserve sergeant major, helped overrun a Hamas outpost a few dozen yards from the border. There was no one inside, he recalled.

“We learned in retrospect that they were there — just underneath the ground,” Mr. Soharin said.

Having retreated into their labyrinth of tunnels, Hamas fighters had ceded thousands of acres of farmland to Israeli forces.

That was partly because the Israeli forces advanced along routes that Hamas had not lined with explosives and traps, according to a Hamas junior officer from northern Gaza who left the territory before Oct. 7 and remains in close touch with his subordinates. But it was also because the Qassam Brigades’ strategy was to ambush Israeli soldiers once they had advanced deep into the territory, instead of counterattacking immediately, according to the fighter.



An Israeli tank near the border with Gaza in January. Credit...Jack Guez/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Dozens of Hamas propaganda videos, posted by the group on its social media channels, show small groups of Gazan fighters — often clad in [jeans](#), [sweatpants](#), [sandals](#) and [sneakers](#) — [emerging](#) from tunnels to take potshots at nearby Israeli tanks and personnel carriers; [rushing](#) on foot toward tanks and attaching mines near the turrets; [firing](#) rocket-propelled grenades from residential buildings; and [shooting](#) at soldiers with sniper rifles.

Hamas had been preparing for this moment since at least 2021, when the group began scaling up production of explosives and anti-tank missiles, in preparation for a ground war, and stopped making so many long-range rockets, the Hamas officer said.

It also expanded a vast network of tunnels, creating entry points in houses across Gaza that would allow fighters to enter and exit without being seen from the air but made targets of civilian neighborhoods. The network was fitted with a landline telephone network that is difficult for Israel to monitor and that allows fighters to communicate even during outages to Gaza's mobile phone networks, which are controlled by Israel, according to the Hamas officer, Mr. al-Awawdeh and Israeli officials.

By the start of the war, Hamas had enough explosives in its underground arsenals for an extended campaign — as well as enough canned vegetables, dates and drinking water to last for at least 10 months, the officer said.



A tunnel believed to have been used by Hamas militants at Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City in November. Credit...Daniel Berehulak/The New York Times

The tunnel network grew so extensive that it ran underneath a major U.N. compound and the largest hospital in Gaza, as well as major roads, countless homes and government buildings. Nine months later, senior Israeli officials say that they have destroyed only a small fraction of the network, and that its existence has stymied Israel's ability to destroy Hamas.

Hamas's commandos had also been trained to remain alert and focused during shortages of food and water, the officer said. Before the war, fighters were sometimes ordered to spend days eating only a handful of dates and to sit for several hours without moving, even as instructors splashed water on their faces to distract them, the officer said.

As vast swaths of Gaza began to empty out in October, Hamas fighters began booby-trapping hundreds of houses that they expected the Israeli troops would seek to enter, the officer said. The mines were linked to tripwires, movement sensors and sound detectors that detonate the explosives once triggered, the officer said.

The terrain prepared, the fighters then descended into the tunnels — and waited for the Israelis to arrive.

How Hamas Sets a Trap

In the best-planned ambushes, Hamas squads have lulled Israeli forces into a false sense of security by allowing them to move freely for hours or even days in areas marked for attack.

Hamas fighters and Israeli soldiers say that Hamas tracks the Israelis' locations using hidden cameras, drones and intelligence provided by civilian lookouts. Five Israeli soldiers said those lookouts include children, who stand on roofs and relay information to commanders below.

Hamas's ambush squads typically stay hidden until an Israeli convoy has moved through an area for several minutes, or Israeli forces have grouped in a particular place for hours, creating the impression that Hamas has left the area, six Israeli soldiers and the Hamas officer said. After a period of calm, a squad emerges from a tunnel, often as a group of four.

Two fighters are tasked with fixing explosives to the sides of a vehicle or firing anti-tank missiles at it, according to the Hamas officer. A third carries a camera to film propaganda footage. A fourth typically stays at the tunnel entrance, preparing a booby-trap that can be activated as soon as the others return, to kill any Israelis who try to follow them underground.

A well-planned ambush aims to take out not only the initial Israeli force, but also the backup fighters and medics who come to rescue the injured, according to soldiers who experienced such ambushes and the Hamas officer.

One Israeli special forces member recalled how a group of Hamas fighters appeared to have positioned itself specifically so that Israeli backup forces would have to fire across stricken comrades in order to hit the ambushers.



A drone that members of the Israeli military claimed to have found on the grounds of Al-Shifa Hospital in November in Gaza. Credit...Daniel Berehulak/The New York Times

Another described Hamas fighters waiting after members of an Israeli unit had been wounded by an exploding mine and then emerging to fire on the rescuing force. In a June 11 [attack](#) in Rafah, both Hamas and the Israeli military said that Qassam fighters fired mortars at an Israeli relief force that came to rescue soldiers who had been attacked earlier in the day.

Hamas showed off most of these approaches in an extensive eight-minute [video](#) released on its social media channels in early April.

The video appears to show fighters carrying out a multistage ambush that is said to take place in Khan Younis, in southern Gaza.

The video seems to show Hamas fighters, their faces blurred, sitting on patterned mats as they plan the attack. They use pen, paper and a digital tablet to draw simplistic maps detailing where they want to plant a set of roadside mines.

“We ask, O Lord, for the ambush to achieve its goals — let us kill your enemies, the Jews,” the narrator says.

Next, Hamas men — wearing civilian clothes — are seen laying those explosives in the rubble of a ruined neighborhood. Then, the video cuts to what appears to be the planned ambush: Filmed by hidden cameras, a group of Israeli soldiers pick their way through the rubble before being hit by gunfire. That attack seems to lure an Israeli relief squad to the scene, and the arrival of those rescuers appears to trigger the mines.

“This is a miniature sample of what their defeated army is suffering in the mire of Gaza,” the narrator concludes.

How Hamas Uses Homes

In addition to setting traps in houses, Hamas has also used residential buildings to conceal scores of small arms caches across the territory, according to more than a dozen Israeli soldiers who have found such stockpiles.

The soldiers said it became normal to find munitions hidden inside civilian homes and mosques, which is one of the reasons, they said, the army had destroyed so many such buildings.

Some soldiers said their units needlessly destroyed civilian property, or [filmed themselves vandalizing it](#), creating the impression that the Israeli military often had little reason to be searching civilian homes. But others said there was usually a clear military purpose to picking through civilian belongings: One recalled finding guns behind a false wall in a child’s bedroom, while another said his unit found grenades in a woman’s clothes closet. International law [requires](#) combatants to avoid using “civilian objects,” which include homes, schools, hospitals and mosques, for military objectives.

Sometimes, Hamas fighters emerged from tunnels without weapons, passing as civilians until they reached a house where other fighters had hidden weapons and ammunition inside the lining of furniture, Israeli soldiers said.



Israeli soldiers in central Gaza in January in a building reportedly used by Hamas to manufacture rockets. Credit...Avishag Shaar-Yashuv for The New York Times

To help its gunmen find these weapons caches, several Israeli soldiers said, Hamas has developed an elaborate system for marking houses that double as military storerooms, or contain tunnels or booby traps. Some buildings were marked with a particular symbol, some had red fabric hanging from windows, and others had plastic barrels or plastic bags outside — all of which told Hamas fighters something about what was concealed inside.

Some Israeli units were eventually supplied with printed guides to help them identify the meaning of each symbol or object, one soldier said.

When in doubt, soldiers entered houses by blowing a hole in their walls, in case the front doors were rigged with mines, according to a senior military officer, Maj. Gen. Itai Veruv, who escorted a reporter from The New York Times in central Gaza in January.

To draw Israelis toward a trap, Hamas gunmen sometimes scattered a building with visible signs of their presence, such as a Hamas flag. At other times, two Israeli soldiers said, Israeli troops were lured inside by a piece of Israeli clothing or identification card, which hinted that hostages might be held within.

One soldier said Hamas used chained dogs to entice soldiers toward a booby-trapped building, hoping that the soldiers would try to free the dogs.

Another soldier recalled spotting a dead Hamas fighter inside an apartment block and making his way toward the body. As he drew closer, he realized the corpse had been rigged with an explosive, he said. When his squad fired at the body, it blew up and set the building ablaze, he said.

Some soldiers said they found weapons in houses that they had searched earlier in the war. It suggested that at least some of the arms had been placed in houses after the start of Israel's invasion.

Even in areas where Israel claims to have defeated Hamas, Israeli forces have often had to return, weeks or even months later, to continue the battle against fighters who had survived earlier phases of the war.

For Hamas, "it was always about avoiding losses for as long as possible so they can fight another day," said Andreas Krieg, an expert on military strategy at King's College London. "They're nowhere near being defeated."

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/13/world/middleeast/how-hamas-is-fighting-in-gaza.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare&sgrp=c-cb>

Such a war leaves lasting resentment and anger that produces the next one. No one can get his or her mind around this mess that is Israel and Palestine, yet all get evidence with which to assert their “real world wisdom” assigning blame and “justice.”

I wonder, though, if Palestinian youth had ever had a real chance at real jobs by means of which to buy homes, raise families, and build neighborhoods, if the Middle East would be locked in this intractable tragedy killing innocent people and ruining the people who kill them.

Makes me remember the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). The Afrikaners lost quickly to the British Empire War Machine, but settled into a successful guerilla war campaign. This led to Lord Kitchener's blockhouse and scorched earth brutality, burning farms and rounding up Afrikaner women and children in concentration camps where many died, causing Afrikaner hatred of the English that lingers to this day. To stop the Boers from blowing up trains, rail cars full of Afrikaner prisoners were put in front of the engines. The Boers captured a young Winston Churchill and threatened to shoot him at dawn the next day. Winston said knowing such “focuses the mind wonderfully.” Finally the Boer commandos gave in.

Two of the commando leaders went on to especial prominence: Louis Botha became a revered first Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa. (Later in the century delighted researchers discovered Black genes in his genetic profile, which irked the latest *Bittereinders* to no end.)

Jan Christian Smuts' United Party dominated South African politics for decades; Smuts was in the Allied War Cabinet in Britain during the Second World War, quite the turnaround for a former Boer guerrilla, especially considering the Nazi sympathies of many Afrikaners. Some have touted J.C. Smuts as the only South African leader who could have prevented *apartheid* from being implemented. But this assumes Smuts himself was not inclined along racist lines, if only in a “civilized British” way. He also had become too much of an Anglophile to have retained his status in the Afrikaner community; he had become estranged from the stolid Boer farmer in the Orange Free State. The spent-force United Party succumbed to the *Broederbond* National Party in 1947, and Smuts himself was dead by 1950. (In some Afrikaner museum I saw a recreation of the bedroom in which he passed away.)

But I'm pretty sure no such reconciliation as happened between Boer and Brit will ever be possible between Israeli and Palestinian, Haganah Jew and Jihadi Muslim. TJB