

# What Would You Have Israel Do to Defend Itself?

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There seems to be a broad consensus atop the Democratic Party about the war in Gaza, structured around two propositions. First, after the attacks of Oct. 7, Israel has the right to defend itself and defeat Hamas. Second, the way Israel is doing this is “over the top,” in President Biden’s words. The vast numbers of dead and starving children are gut wrenching, the devastation is overwhelming, and it’s hard not to see it all as indiscriminate.

Which leads to an obvious question: If the current Israeli military approach is inhumane, what’s the alternative? Is there a better military strategy Israel can use to defeat Hamas without a civilian blood bath? In recent weeks, I’ve been talking with

security and urban warfare experts and others studying Israel's approach to the conflict and scouring foreign policy and security journals in search of such ideas.

The thorniest reality that comes up is that this war is like few others because the crucial theater is underground. Before the war, Israelis estimated Hamas had dug around 100 miles of tunnels. Hamas leaders claimed they had a much more expansive network, and it turns out they were telling the truth. The current Israeli estimates range from 350 to about 500 miles of tunnels. The tunnel network, according to Israel, is where Hamas lives, holds hostages, stores weapons, builds missiles and moves from place to place. By some Israeli estimates, building these tunnels cost the Gazan people about a billion dollars, which could have gone to building schools and starting companies.

Hamas built many of its most important military and strategic facilities under hospitals, schools and so on. Its server farm, for example, was [built](#) under the offices of the U.N. relief agency in Gaza City, according to the Israeli military.

Daphne Richmond-Barak, the author of "Underground Warfare," [writes](#) in Foreign Policy magazine: "Never in the history of tunnel warfare has a defender been able to spend months in such confined spaces. The digging itself, the innovative ways Hamas has made use of the tunnels and the group's survival underground for this long have been unprecedented."

In other words, in this war, Hamas is often underground, the Israelis are often aboveground, and Hamas seeks to position civilians directly between them. As Barry Posen, a professor at the security studies program at M.I.T., has [written](#), Hamas's strategy could be "described as 'human camouflage' and more ruthlessly as 'human ammunition.'" Hamas's goal is to maximize the number of Palestinians who die and in that way build international pressure until Israel is forced to end the war before Hamas is wiped out. Hamas's survival depends on support in the court of international opinion and on making this war as bloody as possible for civilians, until Israel relents.

The Israelis have not found an easy way to clear and destroy the tunnels. Currently, Israel Defense Forces units clear the ground around a tunnel entrance and then, Richmond-Barak writes, they send in robots, drones and dogs to detect explosives and enemy combatants. Then units trained in underground warfare pour in. She writes: "It has become clear that Israel cannot possibly detect or map the entirety of Hamas's tunnel network. For Israel to persuasively declare victory, in my view, it must destroy at least two-thirds of Hamas's known underground infrastructure."

This is slow, dangerous and destructive work. Israel rained destruction down on Gaza, especially early in the war. Because very few buildings can withstand gigantic explosions beneath them, this method involves a lot of wreckage, compounding the

damage brought by tens of thousands of airstrikes. In part because of the tunnels, Israel has caused more destruction in Gaza than Syria did in Aleppo and more than Russia did in Mariupol, according to an Associated Press [analysis](#).

John Spencer is the chair of urban warfare studies at the Modern War Institute at West Point, served two tours in Iraq and has made two visits to Gaza during the current war to observe operations there. He told me that Israel has done far more to protect civilians than the United States did in Afghanistan and Iraq. Spencer reports that Israel has warned civilians when and where it is about to begin operations and published an online map showing which areas to leave. It has sent out millions of pamphlets, texts and recorded calls warning civilians of coming operations. It has conducted four-hour daily pauses to allow civilians to leave combat areas. It has dropped speakers that blast out instructions about when to leave and where to go. These measures, Spencer told me, have telegraphed where the I.D.F. is going to move next and “have prolonged the war, to be honest.”

The measures are real, but in addition, Israel has cut off power in Gaza, making it hard for Palestinians to gain access to their phones and information and, most important, the evacuation orders published by Israel. Israel has also destroyed a vast majority of Gaza’s cellphone towers and on occasion bombed civilians in so-called safe areas and safe routes. For civilians, the urban battlefield is unbelievably nightmarish. They are caught between a nation enraged by Oct. 7 and using overwhelming and often reckless force and a terrorist group that has structured the battlefield to maximize the number of innocent dead.

So to step back: What do we make of the current Israeli strategy? Judged purely on a tactical level, there’s a strong argument that the I.D.F. has been remarkably effective against Hamas forces. I’ve learned to be suspicious of precise numbers tossed about in this war, but the I.D.F. claims to have killed over 13,000 of the roughly 30,000 Hamas troops. It has disrupted three-quarters of Hamas’s battalions so that they are no longer effective fighting units. It has also killed two of five brigade commanders and 19 of 24 battalion commanders. As of January, U.S. officials estimated that Israel had damaged or made inoperable 20 to 40 percent of the tunnels. Many Israelis believe the aggressive onslaught has begun to restore Israel’s deterrent power. (Readers should know that I have a son who served in the I.D.F. from 2014 to 2016; he’s been back home in the States since then.)

But on a larger political and strategic level, you’d have to conclude that the Israeli strategy has real problems. Global public opinion is moving decisively against Israel. The key shift is in Washington. Historically pro-Israeli Democrats like Biden and Senator Chuck Schumer are now pounding the current Israeli government with criticism. Biden wants Israel to call off its invasion of the final Hamas strongholds in the south. Israel is now risking a rupture with its closest ally and its only reliable

friend on the U.N. Security Council. If Israel is going to defend itself from Iran, it needs strong alliances, and Israel is steadily losing those friends. Furthermore, Israeli tactics may be reducing Gaza to an ungovernable hellscape that will require further Israeli occupation and produce more terrorist groups for years.

Hamas's strategy is pure evil, but it is based on an understanding of how the events on the ground will play out in the political world. The key weakness of the Israeli strategy has always been that it is aimed at defeating Hamas militarily without addressing Palestinian grievances and without paying enough attention to the wider consequences. As the leaders of Hamas watch Washington grow more critical of Jerusalem, they must know their strategy is working.

So we're back to the original question: Is there a way to defeat Hamas with far fewer civilian deaths? Is there a way to fight the war that won't leave Israel isolated?

One alternative strategy is that Israel should conduct a much more limited campaign. Fight Hamas, but with less intensity. To some degree, Israel has already made this adjustment. In January, Israel announced it was shifting to a smaller, more surgical strategy; U.S. officials estimated at the time that Israel had reduced the number of Israeli troops in northern Gaza to fewer than half of the 50,000 who were there in December.

The first problem with going further in this direction is that Israel may not be left with enough force to defeat Hamas. Even by Israel's figures, most Hamas fighters are still out there. Will surgical operations be enough to defeat an enemy of this size? A similar strategy followed by America in Afghanistan doesn't exactly inspire confidence.

A second problem is that the light footprint approach leaves power vacuums. This allows Hamas units to reconstitute themselves in areas Israel has already taken. As the United States learned in Iraq, if troop levels get too low, the horrors of war turn into the horrors of anarchy.

Another alternative strategy is targeted assassinations. Instead of continuing with a massive invasion, just focus on the Hamas fighters responsible for the Oct. 7 attack, the way Israel took down the terrorists who perpetrated the attack on Israeli Olympians in Munich in 1972.

The difference is that the attack on Israelis at Munich was a small-scale terrorist assault. Oct. 7 was a comprehensive invasion by an opposing army. Trying to assassinate perpetrators of that number would not look all that different from the current military approach. As Raphael Cohen, the director of the strategy and doctrine program at the RAND Corporation, [notes](#): "In practical terms, killing or capturing those responsible for Oct. 7 means either thousands or potentially tens of thousands

of airstrikes or raids dispersed throughout the Gaza Strip. Raids conducted on that scale are no longer a limited, targeted operation. It's a full-blown war.”

Furthermore, Hamas's fighters are hard to find, even the most notorious leaders. It took a decade for the United States to find Osama bin Laden, and Israel hasn't had great success with eliminating key Hamas figures. In recent years, Israel tried to kill Mohammed Deif, the commander of Hamas's military wing, [seven times](#), without success.

The political costs of this kind of strategy might be even worse than the political costs of the current effort. Turkey, a Hamas supporter, has made it especially clear that Israel would pay a very heavy price if it went after Hamas leaders there.

A third alternative is a counterinsurgency strategy, of the kind that the United States used during the surge in Iraq. This is a less intense approach than the kind of massive invasion we've seen and would focus on going after insurgent cells and rebuilding the destroyed areas to build trust with the local population. The problem is that this works only after you've defeated the old regime and have a new host government you can work with. Israel is still trying to defeat the remaining Hamas battalions in places like Rafah. This kind of counterinsurgency approach would be an amendment to the current Israeli strategy, not a replacement.

Critics of the counterinsurgency approach point out that Gaza is not Iraq. If Israel tried to clear, hold and build new secure communities in classic counterinsurgency fashion, those new communities wouldn't look like safe zones to the Palestinians. They would look like detention camps. Furthermore, if Israel settles on this strategy, it had better be prepared for a long war. One [study](#) of 71 counterinsurgency campaigns found that the median length of those conflicts was 10 years. Finally, the case for a full counterinsurgency approach would be stronger if that strategy had led to American victories in Afghanistan and Iraq, which it did not.

A fourth alternative is that Israel should just stop. It should settle for what it has achieved and not finish the job by invading Rafah and the southern areas of Gaza, or it should send in just small strike teams.

This is now the official Biden position. The national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, has argued that Israel can destroy Hamas in Gaza without a large invasion but “[by other means](#)” (which he did not elaborate on). The United States has asked Israel to send a delegation to Washington to discuss alternative Rafah strategies, which is good. The problem is that, first, there seems to be a budding disagreement over how much of Hamas needs to be destroyed to declare victory and, second, the I.D.F. [estimates](#) that there are 5,000 to 8,000 Hamas fighters in Rafah. Defeating an army that size would take thousands of airstrikes and raids. If you try to shrink the incursion, the math just doesn't add up. As an Israeli war cabinet member, Benny Gantz, [reportedly](#)

[told](#) U.S. officials, “Finishing the war without demilitarizing Rafah is like sending in firefighters to put out 80 percent of a fire.”

If this war ends with a large chunk of Hamas in place, it would be a long-term disaster for the region. Victorious, Hamas would dominate whatever government was formed to govern Gaza. Hamas would rebuild its military to continue its efforts to exterminate the Jewish state, delivering on its promise to launch more and more attacks like that of Oct. 7. Israel would have to impose an even more severe blockade than the one that it imposed before, this time to keep out the steel, concrete and other materials that Hamas uses to build tunnels and munitions, but that Gazans would need to rebuild their homes.

If Hamas survives this war intact, it would be harder for the global community to invest in rebuilding Gaza. It would be impossible to begin a peace process. As the veteran Middle East observers Robert Satloff and Dennis Ross [wrote](#) in *American Purpose*, “Any talk of a postwar political process is meaningless without Israel battlefield success: There can be no serious discussion of a two-state solution or any other political objective with Hamas either still governing Gaza or commanding a coherent military force.”

So where are we? I’m left with the tragic conclusion that there is no magical alternative military strategy. As Cohen [wrote](#) in *Foreign Policy*: “If the international community wants Israel to change strategies in Gaza, then it should offer a viable alternative strategy to Israel’s announced goal of destroying Hamas in the strip. And right now, that alternate strategy simply does not exist.”

The lack of viable alternatives leaves me with the further conclusion that Israel must ultimately confront Hamas leaders and forces in Rafah rather than leave it as a Hamas beachhead. For now, a cease-fire may be in the offing in Gaza, which is crucial for the release of more hostages.

Israel can use that time to put in place the humanitarian relief [plan](#) that Israeli security officials are now, at long last, proposing (but that the country’s prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has not agreed to so far). Israel would also have to undertake a full-scale civilian evacuation of Rafah before any military operation and then try to take out as much of Hamas as possible with as few civilian casualties as possible. Given the horrors of this kind of tunnel-based urban warfare, this will be a painful time and painfully difficult. But absent some new alternative strategy, Biden is wrong to stop Israel from confronting the Hamas threat in southern Gaza.

Finally, like pretty much every expert I consulted, I’m also left with the conclusion that Israel has to completely rethink and change the humanitarian and political side of this operation. Israel needs to supplement its military strategy with an equally powerful Palestinian welfare strategy.

Israel's core problems today are not mostly the fault of the I.D.F. or its self-defense strategy. Israel's core problems flow from the growing callousness with which many of its people have viewed the Palestinians over the past decades, magnified exponentially by the trauma it has just suffered. Today, an emotionally shattered Israeli people see through the prism of Oct. 7. They feel existentially insecure, facing enemies on seven fronts — Gaza, West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Iran. As Ross has [noted](#), many often don't see a distinction between Hamas and the Palestinians. Over 80 percent of West Bank Palestinians told pollsters they supported the Oct. 7 attack.

As the columnist Anshel Pfeffer [wrote](#) in the Israeli paper Haaretz, "The very idea that Israel needed to take any responsibility whatsoever for the place from which those who had murdered, raped and pillaged had emerged was seen as a moral abomination."

Pfeffer continued that because of this attitude, "the government's policy on humanitarian supplies to Gaza is a combination of vengeance, ignorance and incompetence." He quoted unnamed I.D.F. officials who acknowledged that of course Israel is responsible for the welfare of the people in the area it controls but that the civilian leaders refuse to confront this.

On occasions when Israel has responded to world pressure and shifted policy, it has done so in secret, with no discussion in the cabinet.

An officer whose duties specifically include addressing the needs of civilians told Pfeffer that he didn't have much to do except for some odd jobs.

Israel is failing to lay the groundwork for some sort of better Palestinian future — to its own detriment. The security experts I spoke with acknowledge that providing humanitarian aid will be hard. As Cohen told me: "If the Israeli military takes over distributing humanitarian aid to Gaza, they will likely lose soldiers in the process. And so Israelis are asking why should their boys die providing aid to someone who wants to kill them. So the United States needs to convince Israel that this is the morally and strategically right thing to do."

For her book "How Terrorism Ends," the Carnegie Mellon scholar Audrey Kurth Cronin [looked at](#) about 460 terrorist groups to investigate how they were defeated. Trying to beat them with military force alone rarely works. The root causes have to be addressed. As the retired general David Petraeus reminded his audience recently at the New Orleans Book Festival, "Over time, hearts and minds still matter."

Israel also has to offer the world a vision for Gaza's recovery, and it has to do it right now. Ross argues that after the war is over, the core logic of the peace has to be demilitarization in exchange for reconstruction. In an [essay](#) in Foreign Affairs, he sketches out a comprehensive rebuilding effort, bringing in nations and agencies from

all over the world, so Gaza doesn't become a failed state or remain under Hamas control.

Is any of this realistic given the vicious enmity now ripping through the region? Well, many peace breakthroughs of the past decades happened after one side suffered a crushing defeat. Egypt established ties with Israel after it was thoroughly defeated in the Yom Kippur War. When Israel attacked Hezbollah in southern Lebanon in 2006, the world was outraged. But after the fighting stopped, some Lebanese concluded that Hezbollah had dragged them into a bloody, unnecessary conflict. The Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, was forced to acknowledge his error, saying he didn't know Israel would react so violently. The Lebanese border stabilized. Israel's over-the-top responses have sometimes served as effective deterrents and prevented further bloodshed.

Israel and the Palestinians have both just suffered shattering defeats. Maybe in the next few years they will do some difficult rethinking, and a new vision of the future will come into view. But that can happen only after Hamas is fully defeated as a military and governing force.

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