



The Gaza Ground War: What to Expect

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The ground phase of Operation Swords of Iron, Israel's response to Hamas' Oct. 7 terror rampage, seems ready to launch at any time. Israel has already begun to conduct raids — “thunder runs” — deep into enemy territory. The fighting will be difficult, not only because of the complexity of the urban terrain in the Gaza Strip and the presence of millions of civilians but also because of the political objective itself. This is no mere retaliatory raid but rather an all-out offensive in pursuit of what amounts to regime change.

Previous ground operations in Gaza sought to punish Hamas or other extremist groups, disrupt terrorist infrastructure, blow up tunnels, eliminate weapons and ammunition dumps, and so forth. The operations were punitive in nature but limited. They were not intended as permanent solutions. Rather, they were intended to tidy things up — “mowing the grass,” in Israeli parlance.

That approach failed, so this time the political objective is to remove and replace the Hamas government such as it is and demilitarize the Gaza Strip. While this objective may be more difficult, it has the virtue of clarity: Israel will not stop until Hamas and other violent extremist groups are gone.

The Early Stages of Israel's Ground Invasion

Israel has important operational advantages in Gaza: a large, well-trained force, superiority in armor, infantry and artillery, air dominance, naval superiority, ample supplies, a contained battlespace, disciplined command and control systems, good intelligence (despite the surprise on Oct. 7), and motivated leadership. But as in any asymmetric struggle, military advantages can be countered by political action, accidents, and the fog of war (such as Israel initially being blamed for the Islamic Jihad rocket that fell on Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City).

We can expect that in the first phase of the ground operation, Israel will move to contain and control Gaza City. This could involve sending a column across Gaza south of the city along the line of the evacuation zone and moving north while pressing into the city from the north and east. Covert and special operations forces will (and may already be) used against key Hamas targets as the attack develops and the terror groups attempt to respond. Battlefield intelligence developing in real-time will be key to tracking and eliminating leadership targets as their safe zones collapse.

A 2017 RAND Corporation analysis, “From Cast Lead to Protective Edge,” provides useful conclusions drawn from past Gaza ground operations. Some of the lessons of earlier incursions still ring true, while others may be affected by developments in tactical warfighting such as we have seen in Ukraine.

For example, the RAND study found that “armored vehicles and active protective systems prove invaluable in urban warfare,” allowing “IDF units to maneuver inside Gaza without incurring significant casualties.” Historically, armored forces have a mixed record in urban areas. Complex terrain mitigates the advantages of armor by making it harder to maneuver and engage targets at a long range. Vehicles can be trapped in urban kill zones such as we saw in Grozny, Chechnya. However, armor had been useful in previous Gaza operations, especially with active defense systems such as reactive armor, to blunt the effectiveness of enemy anti-tank ambushes and IEDs. The RAND study concludes that armored vehicles “remain key to urban combat.”

The wild card since the study was published is the emergence of drones as a lethal force on the battlefield. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated the effective use of drones such as the Switchblade 300 and 600 systems as anti-armor weapons, destroying hundreds of Russian tanks and armored fighting vehicles. Hamas has already successfully attacked Israeli armor and military outposts with drones, perhaps supplied by Iran, and can be expected to go all out once the ground phase begins. Israel is responding by mounting protective “coke cages” on top of their tanks to reduce the threat. But experience in Ukraine has shown there are limits to such measures, especially against kamikaze drones that can target vehicles from a variety of angles.

Entering Gaza Will Be Deadly. Israel Should Do It Quickly.

Another difference in this war may be Israel's willingness to accept casualties. Urban warfighting tends to have high casualties given the nature of the terrain, the ability of the enemy to employ booby-traps and IEDs, and the need to clear the area building to building, block to block. Hamas has the advantage of “Gaza's metro,” the complex network of tunnels and bunkers that allow for quick movement and surprise attacks — as long as those tunnels haven't been **destroyed by Israeli deep penetrating munitions**.

In the past, Israel has been sensitive to combat losses. For example, 73 were killed in the six weeks of Operation Protective Edge in 2014, which was considered a high number in contrast to the 13 killed (four from friendly fire) in the three-week Operation Cast Lead (2008-2009). Given the objective to clear Gaza of militants completely, it is likely that casualties will be on the higher end — something which will also increase political pressure to end the fighting. However, the brutality and scale of Hamas' attacks on Oct. 7 have created a 9/11-style level of determination among Israelis to settle the Gaza situation.

Hamas, too, is motivated. Its campaign — Operation Al Aqsa Flood — was well-planned, well-executed, and showed in its viciousness that the terrorists have adopted an ISIS-style attitude toward warfare. But this new kind of brutality is working against Hamas in the same way it worked against ISIS. The talking point that said Hamas terrorists were merely community organizers committed to building governance capacity in Gaza has been shown to be propaganda. Hamas has lost whatever political legitimacy it had — their killing of over 1000 innocent Israelis and proudly uploading videos of its barbarism has redefined the struggle in a way that compels Israel to seek a lasting resolution.

Israel can expect to make early progress when the ground campaign kicks off, but the political aspect of any such asymmetric conflict will eventually become dominant. Hamas is already seeking to leverage politics to create conditions for a ceasefire even before the offensive begins. It is assisted in this effort by Israel's adversaries, by pro-Hamas international groups, and by political fellow travelers in the United States. Hamas supporters will use lawfare strategies to attempt to limit Israel's military and political options.

Naturally, the people of Gaza are trapped in the middle of this conflict. They are the terrorists' human shields, and dead Palestinians are their greatest propaganda tool. This is why Hamas has attempted to stop civilians from fleeing Gaza City even as Israel has encouraged noncombatants to evacuate the expected battlefield. It is in Israel's interest to complete the ground operation as swiftly as possible to end the fighting and limit the inevitable civilian casualties. Israel also needs to enlist the international community to begin to mitigate the humanitarian emergency that is already unfolding in Gaza. Getting bogged down in a protracted urban slog would only benefit the terrorists by giving them time to shift the terms of debate from their own ghastly crimes to the effects of the war on Gaza itself.

The sooner the ground campaign launches — and the sooner it concludes — the better for everyone.

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