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"Iron Swords"

A Military Analysis of Israel's War in Gaza



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Résumé

Le 7 octobre 2023, l'attaque du Hamas baptisée « Déluge d'al-Aqsa » a provoqué un choc majeur et a conduit Israël à déclencher la guerre la plus longue de son histoire. L'opération « Glaives de fer » se distingue par son intensité inédite, tant par l'engagement de forces terrestres massives que par la puissance de feu déployée.

Cette étude adopte une démarche de retour d'expérience (RETEX) qui consiste à analyser sous le prisme militaire les choix stratégiques et tactiques faits par les Forces de défense israéliennes (FDI) et leurs résultats, sans juger de leur légitimité morale ou politique. Cette approche permet de comprendre la rationalité militaire de cette opération tout en éclairant les impasses stratégiques.

Avant l'opération « Déluge d'al-Aqsa », Israël avait développé une stratégie de « bunkerisation » fondée sur le blocus terrestre, aérien et maritime de Gaza. Depuis le retrait de l'enclave en 2005, les opérations israéliennes alternaient frappes aériennes et incursions ponctuelles, sans parvenir à éradiquer le Hamas. La construction débutée en 2014 puis la modernisation en 2021 de la barrière de sécurité entourant la bande de Gaza ont renforcé ce sentiment de sécurité pour les FDI, nourri par leur confiance dans leur supériorité technologique.

La culture stratégique israélienne, marquée par l'idée d'une menace existentielle, privilégiait historiquement une approche offensive prenant la forme d'attaques préventives. Toutefois, elle a glissé vers une posture défensive, misant sur l'utilisation de l'arme aérienne dans des campagnes de bombardement ciblé et non sur l'offensive terrestre.

Les FDI, organisées autour d'un noyau professionnel restreint et d'une réserve massive, constituent une armée puissante et innovante mais limitée en endurance. Face à elles, le Hamas a consolidé sa branche armée et s'est imposé comme un acteur hybride, combinant actions militaires et objectifs politiques. L'attaque du 7 octobre a profité d'un contexte politique israélien profondément divisé par la crise de la réforme judiciaire, détournant l'attention de Gaza.

L'opération « Déluge d'al-Aqsa » est un succès tactique du fait de sa vitesse d'exécution. Au matin du 7 octobre 2023, près de 3 800 commandos du Hamas ont percé quasi simultanément la frontière en plus de soixante points, utilisant des moyens aussi divers que rudimentaires tels que des pick-ups, des motos, des parapentes et des embarcations. Ils ont neutralisé capteurs et communications avec des drones et des bulldozers, attaqué des

bases et des localités israéliennes, et capturé 251 Israéliens, détenus comme otages dans la bande de Gaza.

La riposte israélienne sous la forme de l'opération « Glaives de fer » s'est ensuite déployée en plusieurs phases : mobilisation générale, conquête de Gaza-Nord, offensive sur Khan Younès puis prise de Rafah. Cette progression méthodique du nord vers le sud s'est appuyée sur des frappes aériennes massives et des bombardements intenses, causant une létalité et des destructions d'une ampleur sans précédent.

Analysé au prisme des « facteurs de supériorité opérationnelle » de la doctrine française, Israël a montré une grande agilité tactique et une capacité à mobiliser rapidement sa population.

Cependant, ses faiblesses sont apparues dans son absence de compréhension du Hamas, dans son endurance limitée et dans la dégradation de son image à l'international du fait de ses violations répétées du droit international. L'isolement diplomatique et les accusations croissantes de crimes de guerre et de génocide, portées notamment par le Conseil des droits de l'homme des Nations unies à l'été 2025, soulignent le coût stratégique de la campagne.

Executive summary

On October 7, 2023, the Hamas attack known as Operation Al-Aqsa Flood caused a major shock and led Israel to launch the longest war in its history. Operation Swords of Iron stood out for its unprecedented intensity, both in the massive deployment of ground forces and in the firepower employed.

This study adopts a lessons-learned (RETEX) approach, which consists in analyzing, through a strictly military lens, the strategic and tactical choices made by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and their outcomes, without judging their moral or political legitimacy. This approach makes it possible to understand the military rationale behind the operation, while shedding light on its strategic dead ends.

Prior to Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, Israel had developed a “bunkerization” strategy based on the land, air, and naval blockade of Gaza. Since the withdrawal from the enclave in 2005, Israeli operations had alternated between airstrikes and limited incursions, without succeeding in eradicating Hamas. The construction, begun in 2014 and upgraded in 2021, of the security barrier surrounding the Gaza Strip reinforced this sense of safety for the IDF, nourished by its confidence in its technological superiority.

Israeli strategic culture, shaped by the perception of an existential threat, had historically favored an offensive approach in the form of preventive strikes. However, it gradually shifted toward a defensive posture, relying on the air force in targeted bombing campaigns rather than on large-scale ground offensives.

The IDF, organized around a small professional core and a large pool of reservists, constitutes a powerful and innovative army but one that remains limited in endurance. Opposite it, Hamas consolidated its armed wing and established itself as a hybrid actor, combining military actions with political objectives. The October 7 attack exploited a deeply divided Israeli political landscape, shaken by the judicial reform crisis, which diverted attention away from Gaza.

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood achieved tactical success due to its swift execution. On the morning of October 7, 2023, nearly 3,800 Hamas commandos breached the border almost simultaneously in more than sixty locations, using means as diverse as they were rudimentary, such as pickup trucks, motorcycles, paragliders, and boats. They neutralized sensors and communications with drones and bulldozers, attacked Israeli bases and towns, and captured 251 Israelis, held as hostages in the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli response, in the form of Operation Swords of Iron, unfolded in several phases: general mobilization, the conquest of northern Gaza, the offensive on Khan Younis, and finally the capture of Rafah. This methodical progression from north to south relied on massive airstrikes and intense bombardments, causing unprecedented levels of lethality and destruction.

When analyzed through the lens of the French doctrine of “factors of operational superiority”, Israel demonstrated significant tactical agility and a remarkable capacity to mobilize its population quickly. However, its weaknesses became evident in its failure to understand Hamas, in its limited endurance, and in the deterioration of its international image due to repeated violations of international law. Diplomatic isolation and growing accusations of war crimes and genocide, particularly highlighted by the United Nations in the summer of 2025, underscore the strategic cost of the campaign.

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Introduction

From Operation Cast Lead in 2008–2009 to Operation Swords of Iron in 2023, numerous Israeli military interventions that have redefined modern urban combat have taken place in the Gaza Strip. The surprise attacks of unprecedented scale carried out by Hamas on October 7, 2023, triggered a massive Israeli military response, which marked the beginning of Operation Swords of Iron. This became a military ground engagement of an intensity not seen since the Second Lebanon War (2006), involving large-scale deployment of ground troops and powerful technological resources engaged in intense and prolonged urban maneuvers. This operation is a key milestone in understanding how warfare has evolved in contemporary times, and particularly in areas that are densely populated, heavily covered by the media, and subject to legal processes.

In this context, it is essential to adopt a lessons-learned approach (RETEX), understood as an analytical process aiming to draw objective operational lessons from a given conflict. Far from applying a normative or ideological interpretation, RETEX focuses on the rationales underpinning actions, the strategic choices, and the operational successes and failures, with the aim of refining expertise and enriching strategic thinking. The aim is to produce a framework for interpretation based on the facts, doctrines, innovations, and breakthroughs that can be identified in the military action.

There are three key aspects of Operation Swords of Iron that make it stand out as a case study for strategic analysis. First, in this operation, urban warfare reaches its highest possible level of complexity. Building density, the systematic use of underground tunnels, the non-evacuation of civilian populations, the dispersal of the enemy, and the hybridization of modes of action combine to make integrated maneuvering essential. Second, Operation Swords of Iron demonstrates the centrality of airpower and targeting in the Israeli approach, which relies on artificial intelligence with algorithms such as Habsora, Lavender, and Where's Daddy?¹ Third, the information war, amplified by social media, turns every strike, tactical move, and image into a potential weapon in the battle for international public opinion. Instrumentalization of the law, both by military actors and by armed groups, is emerging as an aspect of the battlefield, with lawfare becoming a line of operation in its own right.

1. Y. Abraham, “A Mass Assassination Factory’: Inside Israel’s Calculated Bombing of Gaza.”, *+972 Magazine*, November 30, 2023, available at: www.972mag.com.

What is the tactical and strategic assessment of the first year of Operation Swords of Iron? Did the IDF achieve its military objectives regarding Hamas, between the launch of the operation on October 7, 2023, with the initial objectives of eradicating Hamas and bringing home the Israeli hostages, and September 17, 2024, when the Israeli government added the further objective of the return to northern Israel of residents threatened by Hezbollah?

As the operation is still ongoing, limiting our analysis to the first year of Operation Swords of Iron allows us to achieve a small degree of perspective and helps us identify the initial objectives pursued by the IDF, which were deemed to have been achieved at the time of the decision to turn its attention to Lebanon. Setting this timeframe also allows us to focus on the early stages of the conflict, before it became bogged down—a period particularly rich in tactical lessons.

However, at the time of writing, in 2025, two years on from the October 7 attack, the level of destruction inflicted on the Gaza Strip cannot be ignored. Last summer, several UN agencies took the step of declaring a famine.² In September 2025, a UN Human Rights Council commission of inquiry concluded³ that genocide had taken place, echoing the analysis of the Special Rapporteur⁴ on the human rights situation in the occupied Palestinian territories in March 2024, along with assessments by several human rights organizations (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Médecins sans frontières),⁵ some of which were Israeli (B'Tselem and Physicians for Human Rights Israel).⁶ Several opinion pieces by legal experts and academics were also published in 2025, describing the military operation in Gaza as genocide.⁷ Undertaking a military analysis of the first year against

2. "Famine Confirmed for First Time in Gaza", Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), UNICEF, World Health Organization (WHO), World Food Programme (WFP), August 22, 2025.

3. "Legal Analysis of the Conduct of Israel in Gaza Pursuant to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide", Human Rights Council, September 16, 2025.

4. F. Albanese, "Anatomy of a Genocide – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied since 1967 (advance unedited version, A/HRC/55/73)", Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (mandate of the Special Rapporteur), March 25, 2024, available at: www.un.org.

5. "Gaza Death Trap: MSF Report Exposes Israel's Campaign of Total Destruction", Médecins Sans Frontières, 2024, available at: www.doctorswithoutborders.org; "You Feel Like You Are Subhuman": Israel's Genocide against Palestinians in Gaza", Amnesty International, December 2024, available at: www.amnesty.org; "Extermination and Acts of Genocide: Israel Deliberately Depriving Palestinians in Gaza of Water", Human Rights Watch, December 19, 2024, available at: www.hrw.org.

6. "Our Genocide", B'Tselem, July 2025, available at: www.btselem.org; "Genocide in Gaza", Physicians for Human Rights, July 28, 2025, available at: www.phr.org.il.

7. Collective of French-speaking professors of international law, "Violations du droit international: Plus de 150 juristes d'accord pour nommer ce qu'il se passe à Gaza", *Libération*, August 7, 2025; Collective of 300 authors, "Nous ne pouvons plus nous contenter du mot 'horreur', il faut aujourd'hui nommer le 'genocide' à Gaza", *Libération*, May 26, 2025. The International Association of Genocide Scholars also adopted a resolution to this effect in September 2025. See also O. Bartov, "I'm a Genocide Scholar. I Know It When I See It", *The New York Times*, July 15, 2025; D. Lerner, "Leading Israeli Author David Grossman Calls Gaza War a 'Genocide'", *Haaretz*, August 1, 2025. Other voices have expressed their disagreement: S. Cohen, "Pour l'armée israélienne, épargner des civils ne fait plus partie des options", *Le Monde*, September 29, 2025, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

this backdrop may seem surprising, even shocking. However, this approach is necessary to gain a broader understanding of the connection between military rationality and genocidal logic. It was in the name of military rationality that Israel defended itself against criticism, explaining that its intentions were purely tactical, even though intentionality, a crucial concept in the assessment of genocide, is difficult to establish. However, when Israel shifted its efforts toward Hezbollah, at the end of the first year of Operation Swords of Iron, Hamas was a military actor with seriously damaged capabilities, but one that remained politically relevant because it still held a significant number of hostages.

Our aim here is not to pass judgment on the legitimacy or the humanitarian consequences of this operation,⁸ but rather to understand from a military perspective how the IDF conducted this campaign and what doctrinal decisions were made. Our analysis focuses on the challenges of modern-day urban combat, the limitations of a purely technological approach, the impact of internal political and strategic dynamics, and new forms of asymmetric conflict.

When compared to the numerous other Israeli military operations conducted in the Gaza Strip since Israel's withdrawal from the enclave in 2005 and Hamas's seizure of power in 2006, Operation Swords of Iron stands out because of its scale. It began at a time of political crisis, not only for the Israeli government but also for Hamas, which saw the Palestinian cause becoming increasingly marginalized in the Arab world. (I)

The October 7 attack was striking because of its speed, which stunned the IDF and explains its tactical success. By contrast, Operation Swords of Iron was characterized by a build-up of force followed by a methodical takeover of the Gaza Strip in a north-to-south movement. (II)

Finally, when examined through the lens of the "factors of operational superiority" identified by French military doctrine, Operation Swords of Iron demonstrates the IDF's great tactical mastery, but the IDF's strategic performance is undermined by the humanitarian consequences of its actions and the moral condemnation these have attracted. (III)

8. On this point, see the abundant literature: K. Khan, "Statement of ICC Prosecutor Karim A. A. Khan on the Issuance of Arrest Warrants in the Situation in the State of Palestine", International Criminal Court, May 20, 2024, available at: www.icc-cpi.int; "Order of 24 May 2024", International Court of Justice, 2024, available at: www.icj-cij.org.

Putting Operation Swords of Iron into perspective

Analyzing the first year of Israel's Operation Swords of Iron through a military lens requires a two-pronged approach: The operation must be located within the trajectory of Israel's posture—capabilities, doctrines, and political and legal constraints—and understood in the light of Palestinian dynamics, particularly the structure of Hamas and the logic behind Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. Combining these two perspectives allows us to understand not only the tactical choices made, but also the strategic and political rationales that provide the framework for the operational review that follows.

Gaza before October 7: Israel's posture

Prior to October 7, 2023, Israel's posture toward Gaza was based on the three operational pillars of access control and isolation (smart fence, sea and land blockade); technological superiority (advanced ISR capabilities and air defense system to deal with rockets); and the preferential use of remote airstrikes. This configuration—which could be described as “bunkerization”—favored remote threat management, but at the same time widened the gap between surveillance/neutralization and willingness to engage on the ground. This imbalance influenced tactical choices, deterrence calculations, and operational flexibility on the eve of the October 7 attack.

Israel's military interventions since 2006

To understand the military challenges of Operation Swords of Iron, we need to place it within the context of the IDF's history. Ever since the state of Israel was created, the IDF has been permanently on operations. The IDF is deployed across the territory of Israel and maintains a posture of continuous territorial defense against various “fronts”, but is regularly called upon to conduct targeted interventions or larger-scale operations in response to a spike in threats. Between 2006 and 2023, the IDF carried out around ten major operations in the occupied territories and Lebanon, along with almost permanent targeted bombing campaigns in Syria aimed at containing the Iranian militias operating there and preparing the conditions for future engagements (the MABAM concept, or “the campaign between the wars”).⁹

9. C. Freilich, *Israeli National Security: A New Strategy for an Era of Change*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 225.

Table 1: IDF operations between 2006 and 2023

Date	Operation (Israeli name)	Theater
2006	Second Lebanon War	South Lebanon
2006	Summer Rains	Gaza
2008	Hot Winter	Gaza
2009	Cast Lead	Gaza
2012	Pillar of Defense	Gaza
2014	Protective Edge	Gaza
2018	Northern Shield	Northern Front
2019	Black Belt	Gaza
2021	Guardian of the Walls	Gaza
2022	Breaking Dawn	Gaza
2023	Shield and Arrow	Gaza

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The most significant of these, prior to Operation Swords of Iron, was the “33-day war”—named the “Second Lebanon War” by the Israelis—whose failure had a lasting impact on Israel and its armed forces. While the IDF expected to comprehensively dismantle Hezbollah’s strike capability with an intense air campaign (involving nearly 20,000 bombs, 2,000 missiles, and more than 120,000 artillery rounds),¹⁰ a lack of decisive results forced it to launch a ground offensive with four divisions. These quickly found themselves engaged in a high-intensity battle against a heavily armed militia carrying out a deep defense of complex, fortified terrain. After 33 days of operations, including three days of particularly violent fighting, the Israelis had suffered 120 fatalities and around 1,000 wounded, without achieving any of their ground objectives. By resisting and merely existing, Hezbollah inflicted a stinging strategic defeat on Israel.

10. P. Razoux, “Après l’échec: Les réorientations de *Tsahal* depuis la deuxième guerre du Liban”, *Focus stratégique*, Ifri, October 2007.

The many lessons learned from that war now shed light on the current engagement with Hamas in Gaza:

- The IDF made significant errors because of its ignorance of its adversary, seriously underestimating Hezbollah's tactical capabilities and its transformation into a "techno-guerrilla" force with a sophisticated arsenal and proven tactical skills. The defeat of the ground forces engaged thus amounted to a strategic surprise with enduring effects.
- Overconfidence in the effects of airpower led to the decisive effects of standoff strikes being overestimated, while the IDF underinvested in modernizing its ground component.¹¹
- The ground offensive was conducted under time constraints, with insufficient preparation and a lack of clarity regarding the objectives to be achieved. The main issues with the ground component of the operation were that it lacked preparation and proper coordination with the air component. Above all, the ground forces were only engaged because of the air campaign's lack of results, and even then, only with great reluctance.¹²

Despite the northern front returning to calm after the ceasefire agreement, Israel's failure to achieve its objectives and the continued presence of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon raised questions about the effectiveness of its deterrence strategy against asymmetric adversaries.

In Gaza itself, the IDF, facing Palestinian armed groups led by Hamas, conducted nine interventions between its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005 and the beginning of Operation Swords of Iron in October 2023, including three large-scale operations involving ground troops and sustained engagement: "Cast Lead" in 2008–2009, "Pillar of Defense" in 2012, and "Protective Edge" in 2014. These operations were systematically coordinated with a campaign consisting mainly of airstrikes and were most often decided on in response to a security incident or a significant increase in rocket fire from this territory. They targeted limited tactical objectives, such as the elimination of a leader of an armed group, the neutralization of indirect strike capabilities, or the destruction of combat infrastructure in the Gaza Strip.

The aim of these operations was to contain the threat posed by Palestinian armed groups at an acceptable level, while recognizing that it could not be eradicated, and their regularity led to this strategy being

11. D. Johnson, "Hard Fighting: Israel in Lebanon and Gaza", RAND Corporation, 2011.

12. L. Berman, "Un ancien général de l'armée israélienne préconise une réforme urgente de *Tsahal*", *The Times of Israel*, February 17, 2023.

ironically nicknamed “mowing the grass”¹³ (“לכַּח אֶת הַשָּׂבָע”).¹⁴ They all follow more or less the same pattern: rising tensions; a triggering event; massive airstrikes on pre-programmed targets; rocket fire into Israel; if necessary, mobilization and concentration of troops around Gaza; ground intervention as a last resort; and negotiations and cessation of hostilities, after which each side declares victory, in a situation of “asymmetric strategy”.¹⁵

From this set of operations, varying in scale and duration but similar in nature, several constants emerge. The first is Israel’s systematic implementation of a massive and violent response that is disproportionate to the scale of the triggering event and harmful to the civilian population. This tendency is embodied in the Dahiya doctrine, developed by General Gadi Eisenkot in 2008 with regard to the southern suburb of Beirut of that name, a Hezbollah stronghold. Eisenkot told the newspaper *Yedioth Ahonot*, “What happened in Dahiya (...) will happen in every village from which Israel is fired on. We will apply disproportionate force on it (...). This is not a recommendation. This is a plan. And it has been approved”.¹⁶ Eisenkot, who served as Chief of the General Staff of the IDF from 2015 to 2019 and has served as minister without portfolio in the war cabinet since October 12, 2023, advocates a principle of using disproportionate force to break the will of the enemy, without sparing the civilian population.¹⁷

Second, the IDF faces a constant operational dilemma of wanting to neutralize threats from a distance to limit casualties but needing to deploy ground troops to control the terrain in order to achieve effective and lasting results. The memory of the losses suffered during the 2006 ground operations in southern Lebanon can be detected in its reluctance to deploy soldiers in Gaza.

With the IDF’s withdrawal from successive engagements, the tactical effects of operations remain limited, despite figures favoring the IDF (in terms of human toll, destruction of infrastructure, seizure of weapons caches, etc.), and the strategic effects seem to be virtually nil (depending on the length of the relative peace that follows the intervention), which highlights in each round the impossibility of eradicating the threat by military means.

Above all, it is striking to observe the gradual strengthening of Hamas’s combat capabilities and the improvement of its strike arsenal (in terms of both quantity and quality of munitions), as well as its tactical expertise and

13. J. Henrotin, “Opération ‘Gardien des murailles’: Quelles leçons?”, *Areion24News*, October 10, 2023.

14. The expression has been used since 2014 by right-wing Israeli think tanks. See: E. Inbar and E. Shamir, “Mowing the Grass in Gaza”, BESA, July 20, 2014, available at: <https://besacenter.org>. It reappeared in 2023 and was so popular that it appeared as a slogan on chocolate éclairs: J. Glausiusz, “Let the IDF Mow Them Down! In Israel, Violence Saturates Everyday Life”, *Haaretz*, May 6, 2025, available at: www.haaretz.com.

15. C. Freilich, *Israeli National Security*, op. cit., p. 168.

16. “Israel Warns Hizbullah War Would Invite Destruction”, *Ynetnews*, March 10, 2008, available at: www.ynetnews.com.

17. A. Harel, “Analysis: IDF Plans to Use Disproportionate Force in Next War”, *Haaretz*, October 5, 2008, available at: www.haaretz.com.

combat infrastructure, particularly underground. This has occurred despite the IDF's repeated targeting and destruction of kilometers of tunnels, weapons caches, and armed-wing cadres.

Table 2: IDF operations in Gaza between 2006 and 2023

Operation <i>*Israeli names</i>	Exact dates	Duration	Operation format	Volume of forces engaged	IDF losses <i>*soldiers only</i>	Estimated enemy losses <i>* Combatants and civilians</i>	Firepower
Summer Rains	June 28, 2006– November 26, 2006	152 days	Airstrike and artillery campaign, ground incursions	Approx. 3,000 soldiers	6 fatalities and 30 injured	Around 400 fatalities and 1,000 injured of which 2/3 were combatants	Approx. 5,400 bombs dropped
Hot Winter	February 27, 2008– June 19, 2008	112 days	Airstrike and artillery campaign, ground incursions	Approx. 1 brigade (2,000 men)	2 fatalities	More than 70 Palestinians killed	
Cast Lead	December 27, 2008–January 21, 2009	25 days	Air campaign Large-scale ground offensive	2,850 air sorties 8 brigades Mobilization of 30,000 reservists	10 fatalities	Approx. 1,400 Palestinians killed, of whom 500–700 were combatants	820 rockets and mortars
Pillar of Defense	November 14, 2012– November 21, 2012	7 days	Air campaign Mobilization without ground engagement	1,500 air sorties Mobilization of 57,000 reservists	2 fatalities and 20 injured	60 to 120 combatants killed 68 to 105 civilians killed and 900 wounded	1,600 rockets
Protective Edge	July 8, 2014– August 26, 2014	49 days	Air campaign Large-scale ground offensive	Mobilization of 86,000 reservists 3 divisions (7 brigades, 2 artillery brigades, 2 territorial brigades)	66 fatalities and 725 injured	Approx. 800 combatants and 1,500 civilians killed	3,400 rockets and 1,600 mortar shells

Black Belt	November 12, 2019–November 14, 2019	2 days	Airstrike campaign	-	-	Estimated 25 fatalities		Approx. 100 strikes
Guardian of the Walls	May 10, 2021–May 21, 2021	11 days	Airstrike and artillery campaign	Mobilization of 7,000 reservists	1 fatality and 3 injured	225 combatants killed At least 125 civilians killed	Approx. 4,400 rockets of various types and mortar shells	1,500 IDF strikes
Breaking Dawn	August 5, 2022–August 7, 2022	3 days	Airstrike campaign	-	-	12 combatants killed Several dozen civilians killed	Approx. 1,100 rockets	Between 140 and 170 strikes
Shield and Arrow	May 9, 2023–May 13, 2023	4 days	Airstrike campaign	-	-	Approximately 35 fatalities, including 3 Islamic Jihad leaders	1,468 rockets fired	700 targets neutralized

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Israel's strategic grammar, a legacy of the Arab-Israeli wars

Security is deeply rooted in the historical, cultural, and religious heritage of the State of Israel. Israel has been faced with the existential question of its survival ever since its creation and has developed a strategic culture based on two assumptions: first, that its enemies—from Arab countries to contemporary Iran and its proxies—are engaged in an existential struggle to eradicate it; and second, that peace is impossible to achieve by force of arms; at best, Israel can preserve or restore the status quo to guarantee its security.¹⁸

Israel's security culture is therefore defensive in its objectives. However, it is offensive in its methods of action.¹⁹ A lack of strategic depth and the multidirectional nature of the threat have led the Israeli military to take the offensive in order to carry the war into the enemy's territory and achieve

18. C. Freilich, *Israeli National Security*, op. cit., p. 21.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

victory as decisively and rapidly as possible.²⁰ Since the 1950s, Israeli strategy has therefore been based on a preventive attack approach, in which initiative and surprise play a key role.²¹

The former prime minister and founding father David Ben-Gurion established the three pillars of Israel's strategic posture: deterrence, early warning, and decisive military engagement on the battlefield.²² Each of these pillars reinforces the others: Detection allows for timely offensive action, or even the launch of a preemptive war, and the cumulative effect of achieving victories in every round reinforces deterrence. As for the period of calm that deterrence creates, Israel takes advantage of it to prepare and optimize the next engagement. Military victory must be achieved as quickly and decisively as possible, with the fewest possible casualties. Above all, Israel realized early on that victory on the ground must not be overshadowed by political defeat on the international stage. It must therefore avoid becoming isolated internationally and ensure the support of as many powers as possible.

The penultimate version of the "Momentum" ("הנץ") plan, the IDF's multi-year strategic program initiated in 2019, showcased a modernized vision of these strategic principles. It aimed to provide the IDF with the means for decisive and rapid engagement by increasing its firepower, precision, and mass of effects. It promised to exploit Israel's technological superiority in order to significantly increase the IDF's intelligence-fire loops at the tactical level through unprecedented networking of its forces, accelerated by AI.²³

Despite the preeminence of offense in Israeli strategic thinking, as the regional strategic context has evolved, a fourth "defensive" pillar has gradually emerged. The IDF strategy, first made public by Eisenkot in 2015, thus mentions defense as one of the four principles of the National Security Concept, alongside detection, deterrence, and defeating the enemy.²⁴ Although it is counterintuitive for the majority of Israeli military personnel,²⁵ the relative marginalization of the sole offensive principle has gradually become an established fact for several reasons: the increasing complexity of military engagement, a marked reluctance to deploy ground forces on a large scale, the renunciation of territorial conquest, Israel's lack of international legitimacy and its diplomatic isolation, and, finally, the fragility of the domestic political situation. The IDF's strong pro-technology stance and its conviction of its superiority in this area have also convinced it of the new technological opportunities for defensive operations.

20. A. Levite, *Offense and Defense in Israel Military Doctrine*, New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 42.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

22. C. Freilich, *Israeli National Security*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

23. Y. Lappin, "The IDF's Momentum Plan Aims to Create a New Type of War Machine", Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, March 22, 2020.

24. "IDF Strategy", Israel Defense Forces, 2015.

25. C. Freilich, *Israeli National Security*, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

Territorial defense, intelligence, obstacles, and fortifications have thus made it possible to recreate "artificial strategic depth".²⁶ While not sufficient on its own, this is intended to provide enough time to mobilize the resources for military engagement. The defense pillar thus aims to ensure territorial inviolability, but it is based on a strategy of walling-in that could lead to "geographical and mental isolation".²⁷

The construction of the "security fence" in the West Bank in 2003 and the physical isolation of the Gaza Strip since 2007 (by means of a naval blockade and a fence along the 65 km perimeter of the Gaza Strip, modernized in 2021²⁸) are visible expressions of this bunkerization of Israeli territory. The missile/rocket defense system, a multi-layered protection that has proven its effectiveness since the deployment of Iron Dome in 2011, is an aerial extension of the land wall and naval blockade. Finally, Israel has invested heavily in surveillance and warning systems along its various fronts, again with a heavy emphasis on technology. Before October 7, the Gaza Wall was thus considered the most impenetrable and most closely monitored border in the world.

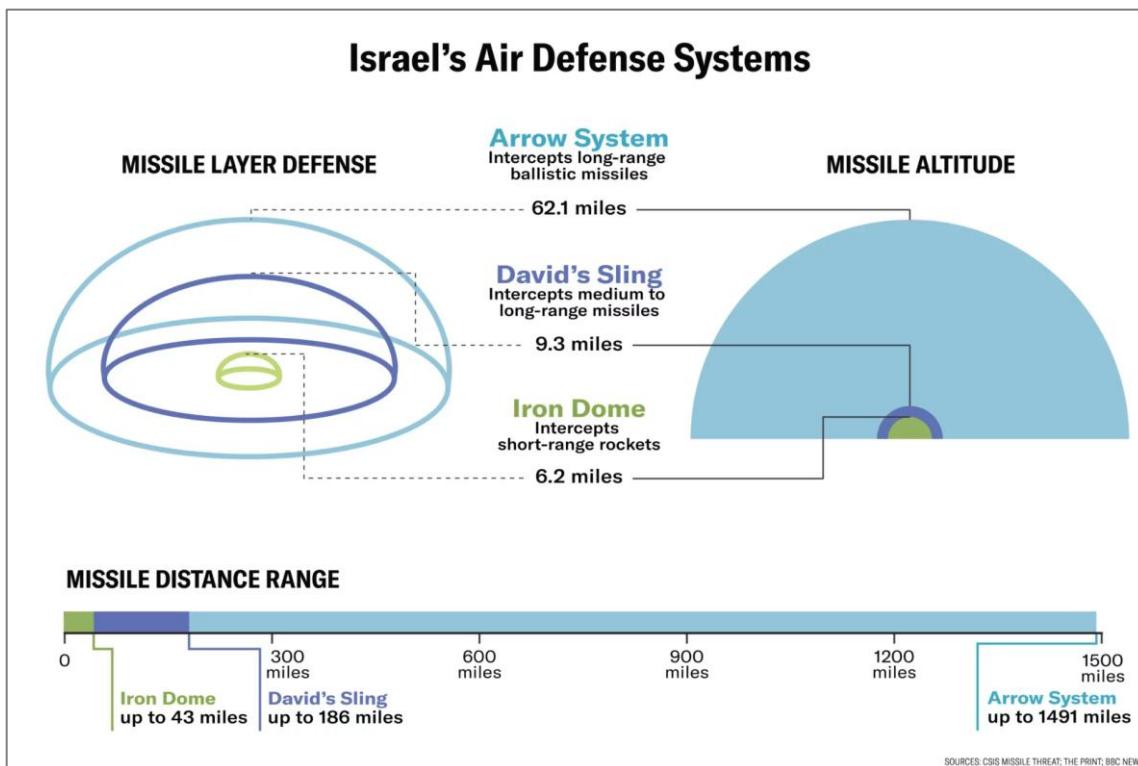
Over the past decade, several IDF officers have lamented this shift in Israel's strategic posture. Giving up the use of ground forces, the systematic use of limited strikes in response to occasional flare-ups of tension, and the strictly defensive posture encouraged by the effectiveness of Iron Dome and the Gaza Wall have all been severely criticized. Those who disparage this strategic shift toward the defensive have criticized the dangerous illusion created by this new "Maginot Line", while highlighting the diminishing effectiveness of strategic strike campaigns.²⁹

26. Levite, *Offense and Defense in Israel Military Doctrine*, p. 44.

27. S. Boussois, *Israël entre quatre murs: La politique sécuritaire dans l'impasse*, Gien: GRIP Éditions, 2014. **Translator's note:** Our translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign-language material in this text are our own.

28. O. Passot, "Une barrière trop intelligente? Comment le Hamas s'est joué d'un système de protection très élaboré", *Brève Stratégique*, No. 67, IRSEM, November 8, 2023.

29. L. Berman, "L'utilisation ciblée des forces terrestres de *Tsahal* pourrait enfin offrir une issue", *The Times of Israel*, May 23, 2023.

Diagram 1: Israel's air defense systems

Source: M. Brest, "Arrow 2 and 3, Iron Dome, and David's Sling: Israel's Air Defense Systems Explained", Washington Examiner, October 2, 2024, available at: www.washingtonexaminer.com.

Diagram 2: Naval and land blockade of the Gaza Strip



Source: "Gaza Strip: Access and Movement – September 2023", United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, available at: www.unocha.org.

The IDF's operational culture

While this list is by no means exhaustive, the IDF is characterized by three major features that shape its operational culture: its unique relationship with the society it defends, its approach to maneuvering, and its sense of adaptation and innovation.

The centrality of security and war issues in Israeli politics places the armed forces at the heart of Israeli society. As a genuine “nation-in-arms”,³⁰ Israel has a deep connection with its armed forces. Not only are they responsible for protecting the population and ensuring a degree of normality in community life, but they are also perceived as the crucible of national identity. The Israeli army model is organized around a permanent corps of professionals and conscripts (the ground forces have 26,000 professional soldiers and 100,000 conscripts),³¹ which constitutes an elite strike force that is versatile and responsive but limited in terms of personnel and therefore endurance. It is through conscription and the mobilization of the population, via a proven general reserve system, that the IDF ensures the effectiveness of its model:³² “Israel's (...) use of universal conscription and compulsory reserve service has permitted a relatively small country of limited resources to generate vastly disproportionate military capability at a remarkably low annual budgetary cost”.³³

The permanent core of the IDF maintains the capacity to integrate and train reserve forces mobilized from the civilian population, enabling a very rapid ramping-up of combat capability. This connection with a highly militarized civilian society gives the IDF a culture marked by alertness and high responsiveness, with a consequent high sensitivity to losses. First, the IDF attaches great importance to the lives of its soldiers.³⁴ Furthermore, the close connection with civil society maintained through conscription and the reserve forces imposes on the armed forces a kind of social contract regarding the protection of the children entrusted to them. The mobilization system also has a considerable impact on the functioning of Israeli society and is ill-suited to a long-term war of attrition. The risk of attrition in the event of a prolonged armed engagement is therefore a major political, economic, and social weak point,³⁵ which encourages a focus on speed and decision-making.

30. A. Dieckhoff, “Quelle nation en armes”, in “Israël et son armée, société et stratégie à l'heure des ruptures”, *Études de l'IRSEM*, No. 3, IRSEM, May 2010.

31. “The Military Balance 2025”, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025.

32. Levite, *Offense and Defense in Israel Military Doctrine*, 2018, p. 34.

33. K. Brower, “The Israel Defence Forces 1948–2017”, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, May 28, 2018, p. 5, available at: <https://besacenter.org>.

34. F. Encel, “L'armée israélienne et ses spécificités géopolitiques”, *Hérodote*, Vol. 116, No. 1, 2005, pp. 138–149.

35. G. Allison and R. Piliero, “Lessons from Israel's Forever Wars”, Reports and Papers, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, January 2024.

This factor, combined with Israel's view of preventive war as being the best means of ensuring its defense, contributes to making offensive maneuvers one of the IDF's salient features.³⁶ Nevertheless, firepower is a defining feature of the IDF, whether in the form of airpower or ground artillery. Indeed, maneuvers combine movement, shock, and fire, and must be powerful to be decisive. The principle that links the different components of maneuvers appears to be that of taking the initiative: seizing air superiority as early as possible, preemptive strikes on critical enemy nodes, seeking information superiority, systematic and permanent targeting of all enemy capabilities—everything must contribute to disrupting the enemy and preventing it from expressing its own military power. However, doctrinal developments over the last two decades have shifted the center of gravity of maneuvers toward precision strikes and targeted action, to the detriment of conventional ground forces and the conquest of ground objectives.³⁷

Finally, the IDF is characterized by its "remarkable capacity for rapid innovation",³⁸ mirroring Israel itself, which presents itself as the "start-up nation". The Israeli army acts as a crucible of innovation for society as a whole. On the one hand, it expresses numerous military needs, for which it develops technical solutions in conjunction with its defense technological and industrial base (such as Iron Dome, the Trophy active protection system, drones, integration of algorithms into targeting loops, etc.). On the other hand, its unique conscription and reserve model guarantees a mix of civilian skills that maintains this culture of innovation and, in turn, feeds back into civil society. However, this ability to "constantly adapt" that characterizes the IDF is as much a weakness as it is a strength, because it has led to a lack of doctrinal structure.³⁹

This significant characteristic is linked to the Israeli army's relationship with technology. In the numerically unfavorable balance of power that has historically pitted it against its adversaries, the IDF has relied, among other things, on technological superiority to compensate for its limited numbers.⁴⁰ Although the balance of power is no longer calculated in the same way when facing today's asymmetric adversaries, gaining ascendancy through technological superiority remains at the heart of Israeli military culture, and it is on this pillar that the "Momentum" plan relies to significantly increase the operational performance of the armed forces. To achieve this, Israel has one of the world's most advanced C5ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Cyber, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) architectures in the world, based on a system of 11

36. F. Encel, "L'armée israélienne et ses spécificités géopolitiques", *op. cit.*

37. M. Finkel, "The Miracle of the October-November 2023 Maneuver" (trans.), Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, August 19, 2024, available at: <https://jiss.org.il>.

38. E. Luttwak and E. Shamir, *The Art of Military Innovation: Lessons from the Israel Defense Forces*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023, p. 40.

39. B. Binnendijk and C. du Plessix, "Un regard sur l'armée israélienne", in: "Israël et son armée, société et stratégie à l'heure des ruptures", *Études de l'IRSEM*, No. 3, IRSEM, May 2010.

40. C. Freilich, *Israeli National Security*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

intelligence and communications satellites,⁴¹ advanced aerial detection capabilities, medium- and long-endurance drone systems, a multi-domain communications architecture (Elbit's Torch-X system), and increasing integration of AI into intelligence and targeting processes.

The organization of the IDF

The IDF has 169,500 active military personnel and is organized into three branches of different sizes. The ground forces represent the largest branch, with 126,000 active men and women, including 100,000 conscripts between the ages of 18 and 21. Of the 460,000 reservists who can be mobilized, up to 400,000 serve in the ground forces. The IDF as a whole is organized into three regular divisions, five territorial divisions, and three reserve divisions, spread across the country under the control of three regional commands: Northern, Central, and Southern. The divisions are organically attached to these commands but may be required to rotate to other fronts or detach some of their units according to operational needs.

Table 3: Distribution of the IDF's ground force units

	Regular	Territorial	Reserve	Total
Divisions	3	5	3	11
Brigades	14	15	27	56

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The active ground forces comprise a total of 29 combat brigades (14 regular brigades and 15 territorial brigades), including 5 mechanized infantry brigades, 4 armored brigades, 4 artillery brigades, and 1 commando brigade, the Oz Brigade, which brings together the ground forces' three elite special forces units (Maglan, Duvdevan, and Egoz). The territorial brigades, all predominantly infantry, are exclusively assigned to securing Israeli territory.⁴² In addition, the Ground Forces Headquarters (Mazi) also has specialized units under its command, such as the Yahalom Special Forces Unit of the Combat Engineering Corps, which has expertise in underground combat, among other things, as well as weapons schools that arm some of the brigades in the regular forces.

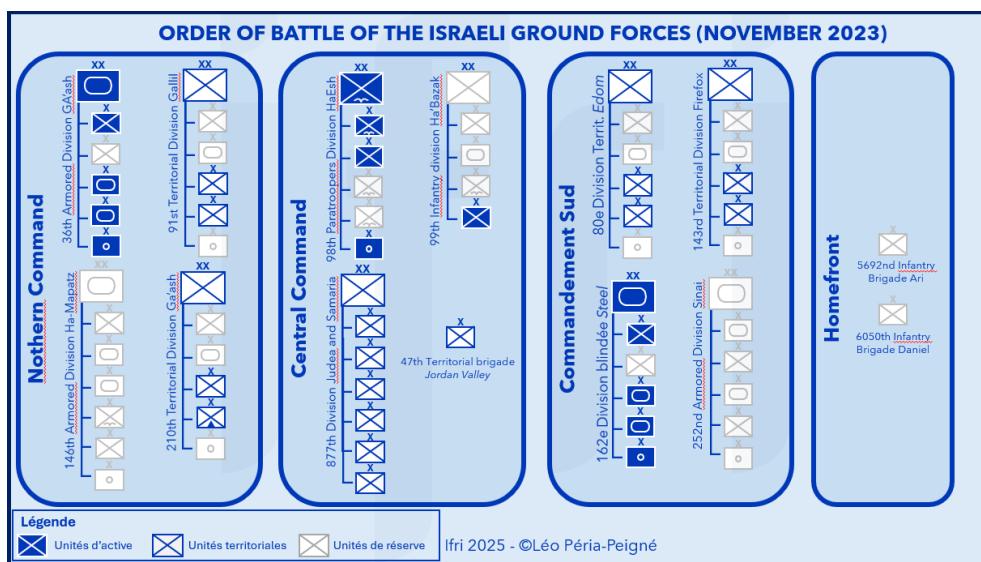
The Southern Command is primarily responsible for controlling the Gaza Strip (as well as defending the Sinai border). To this end, it has:

41. *Strategic Atlas of the Mediterranean and the Middle East 2022 Edition*, Fondation méditerranéenne d'études stratégiques, 2022.

42. A. Jager, "The Transformation of the Israel Defense Forces", *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 74, No. 2, 2021.

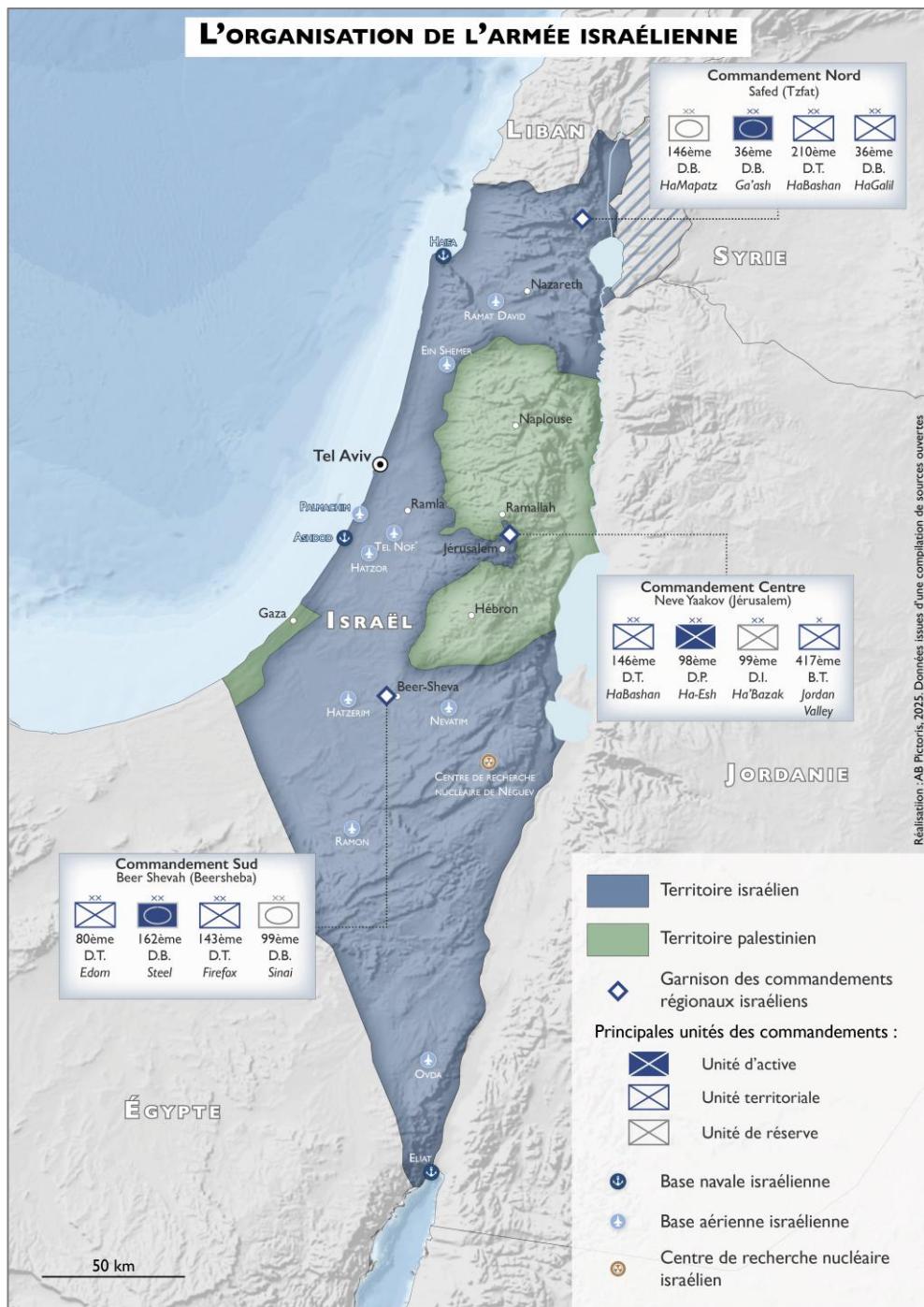
- two territorial divisions, the 80th Territorial Division "Edom" and the 143rd Territorial Division "Firefox" in charge of the Gaza Strip with two brigades (the 6643rd Territorial Brigade "Katif" covering Southern Gaza, and the 7643rd Territorial Brigade "Gefen" covering Northern Gaza);
- one regular division, the 162nd Armored Division "Ha-Plada", with four brigades;
- one reserve division with five brigades.

Diagram 3: Order of battle of the IDF's ground forces



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Map 1: The organization of the Israeli army



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The IDF's air arm, the Israeli Air and Space Force (IASF), is considered to be the region's leading air force and has a considerable strike force of approximately 310 combat aircraft divided into 14 fighter squadrons.⁴³ Just over half of the fleet is equipped with frontline fighters (163 in total, including 25 F15Is, 97 F16Is, and 39 F35Is). In 2017, it was estimated that the IASF was

43. "The Military Balance 2025".

capable of conducting an average of 2,000 sorties per day in peacetime and could deliver up to 5,000 precision-guided munitions weighing between 500 kg and 1,000 kg per day when operating at full capacity.⁴⁴ Israel thus has a very significant conventional strike capability, including deep strike. The IASF also has 46 AH-64 Apache combat helicopters. A growing fleet of drones complements the IDF's air capabilities (including Hermes 450 and 900, IAI Heron and IAI Eitan, and Orbiter4 drones, and Harop and Harpy loitering munitions). These systems provide the IDF with capabilities in the realms of multi-spectrum intelligence (electromagnetic and image intelligence), target acquisition for airstrikes and artillery fire, electronic warfare, and communication relays, as well as direct strike to complement other air capabilities. Missile defense is also the responsibility of the IASF, which operates the Arrow, David's Sling, and Iron Dome multi-layer defense systems with 15 dedicated batteries.

The Israeli Navy is the poor relation of the IDF, with only 9,500 personnel. It is notably absent from Israeli strategic thinking and is seen more as a support force for the air and ground components. Its main assets are 5 Dolphin-class submarines and 7 Sa'ar missile-launching corvettes, including 4 new-generation Sa'ar 6s. Its main operational contribution is denial of access. The Navy has been enforcing the maritime blockade of Gaza since its establishment in 2007 and contributes to missile defense with the C-Dome short-range defense program (the naval version of the Iron Dome system).⁴⁵ The new capabilities of the Sa'ar 6 corvettes also enable them to protect Israel's exclusive economic zone and offshore gas fields. However, the Navy regularly contributes to fire support for IDF engagements, with a significant proportion of fire coming from the sea (3,500 rounds fired during Operation Protective Edge in 2014, for example).⁴⁶

Gaza before October 7: Hamas's posture

Hamas is an organization created by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin in 1987, in the context of the First Intifada (1987–1993). Its goal, as stated in its founding charter of 1988 and then in its general principles of 2017, is the liberation of Palestine through armed struggle based on Islamist principles, following in the footsteps of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

The movement remained marginal on the Palestinian political scene for a long time, but the failure of the 1993 Oslo Accords and the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2002 positioned it as an alternative to a Fatah that was running out of steam. While the failure of this process was also a failure for those Palestinian leaders who favored reconciliation with Israel, Hamas

44. K. Brower, "The Israel Defence Forces 1948–2017", p. 42.

45. J.-L. Samaan, "La marine israélienne: L'émergence d'une puissance navale en Méditerranée?", Fondation méditerranéenne d'études stratégiques, February 21, 2022.

46. A. Sheldon-Duplaix, "Les métamorphoses de la marine israélienne", *Areion24 News*, December 8, 2023.

refused to abandon armed struggle and denounced the agreements. In the 2006 legislative elections, held after the then-Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's 2005 decision to withdraw from the Gaza Strip, ending 38 years of military occupation of the enclave, Hamas enjoyed a success that propelled it to the forefront of the political scene. In 2007, the movement staged a coup and seized power, purging Fatah members from the Strip. In retaliation, Israel began a military air, naval, and land blockade of the Gaza Strip.

To understand the surprise caused by the October 7 attack and Israel's failure to prevent it, we must look back at Hamas's governance and the gradual reversal of the relationship between the political wing in exile and the movement's leadership in Gaza. The movement has four centers of gravity: Gaza, where Hamas controls the territory; the political leadership in exile (first based in Amman, then in Damascus until 2012, and later in Qatar), whose role is essentially diplomatic; the West Bank, where it has a semi-clandestine presence due to its opposition to Fatah; and, finally, Israeli prisons, where many of its members are detained. Its political wing was run from Qatar first by Ismail Haniyeh, who was killed by an Israeli strike in Tehran in January 2024, and then by Khaled Mashal, who has himself survived an attempted poisoning orchestrated by Israel.⁴⁷ This political wing was targeted unsuccessfully by Israeli airstrikes on Doha on September 9, 2025.⁴⁸

Until 2006, Hamas was criticized for its choice to resort to suicide bombings, a tactic it had used since 1994 in protest against the Oslo Accords.⁴⁹ It subsequently gave up suicide bombings to focus first on launching rockets and missiles to overwhelm Israel's air defense system, and second on taking hostages. Emblematic of this strategy is the 2011 exchange of the French-Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, who had been held in the Gaza Strip for five years, for 1,027 Palestinian prisoners, including Yahya Sinwar. It was Abu Obaida, the spokesman for Hamas's armed wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, who announced Sinwar's capture, thus revealed him to be a key figure in the movement in Gaza.

These brigades, created in secret in 1991, are named after one of the leading figures in the opposition to British colonization and the Zionist project in Palestine during the first half of the twentieth century.⁵⁰ They began to operate more like a conventional army when Hamas seized power in 2007. Estimates of their membership vary between 20,000 and 40,000 individuals. They comprise five brigades consisting of around thirty battalions and are divided by geographical area: the North Brigade, the Gaza

47. A. Bar Shalom, "Comment Israël a résolu la crise après l'assassinat raté de Khaled Meshal en 1997", *The Times of Israel*, September 8, 2022, available at: <https://fr.timesofisrael.com>.

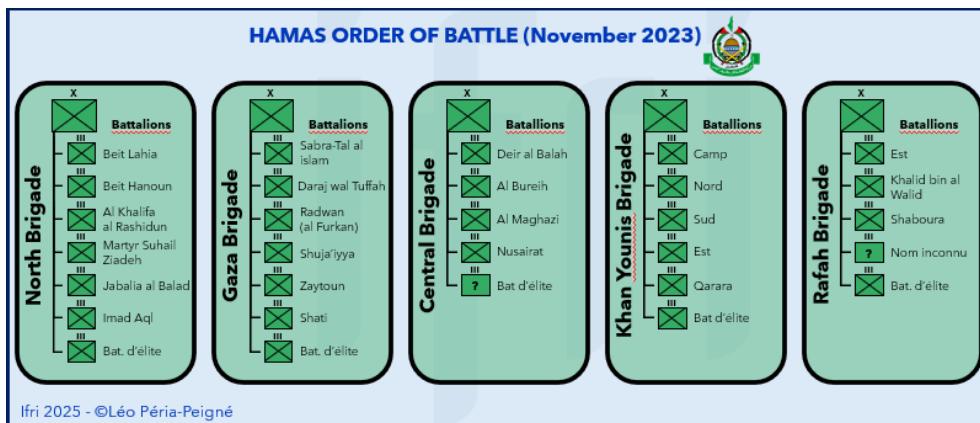
48. "Israel Reportedly Struck Doha With Ballistic Missiles Launched From Jets Over Red Sea", *Haaretz*, September 13, 2025, available at: www.haaretz.com.

49. L. Bucaille, "L'impossible stratégie palestinienne du martyre Victimation et attentat suicide", *Critique internationale*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2003, pp. 117–134.

50. K. Hroub, *Le Hamas*, Paris: Demopolis, 2008.

Brigade, the Central Brigade, and the Khan Younis Brigade. Each brigade includes a battalion from the elite Nukhba Force.

Diagram 4: The order of battle of Hamas's ground forces



The architects of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood

The generation that planned the October 7 attack emerged during the First Intifada (1987–1993). Yahya Sinwar, nicknamed “the butcher of Khan Younis” by Israeli forces, made a career in Hamas’s intelligence branch, specializing in the fight against “collaborators” with Israel, before being arrested in 1989. After 22 years in Israeli prisons, he was released as part of the agreement to free the French-Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, mentioned earlier, and he took over as leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip in 2017.

Since then, he has constantly endeavored to achieve autonomy from the political leadership in exile, which he considers too conciliatory toward Israel. He has concentrated on refocusing the movement on Gaza and improving the military wing.⁵¹ He played an active role in the “Great March of Return” in 2018, a series of demonstrations of varying degrees of spontaneity within the Gaza Strip commemorating the Nakba and other military actions. Nearly 195 Gazans were killed during these demonstrations. The territory obtained concessions from Israel, such as the opening of border crossings and larger transfers of Qatari funds. It was also Sinwar who, in 2021, decided to launch thousands of rockets at several Israeli cities during the Sheikh Jarrah crisis, with the aim of positioning Hamas as the protector of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and asserting its centrality in the Palestinian political scene.

In this context, Operation Al-Aqsa Flood was designed with three objectives: to take hostages to exchange for Palestinian prisoners, whose release is one of the very foundations of Hamas’s legitimacy; to claim

51. L. Seurat, “Le Hamas revendique désormais le leadership du mouvement palestinien”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, January 2024, available at: www.monde-diplomatique.fr.

leadership of the Palestinian cause over Fatah; and to force Israel to agree to a ceasefire and an end to the blockade. In the document released by Hamas in English and Arabic at the end of January 2024, entitled "Our Narrative", the objectives of the operation are described as follows: "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on October 7 targeted the Israeli military sites, and sought to arrest the enemy's soldiers to pressure [sic] on the Israeli authorities to release the thousands of Palestinians held in Israeli jails through a prisoners [sic] exchange deal".⁵²

The name of the operation refers to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third-holiest site in Islam, located on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.⁵³ This mosque is at the heart of a political struggle between the Palestinians, who consider it central to their identity—Yasser Arafat's tomb in Ramallah faces Al-Aqsa—and a fringe group of Israeli settlers who want it to be destroyed so that the temple that historically stood on the same site can be rebuilt. The Western Wall is located below the mosque.

The political and security context of the October 7 attack

An unprecedented political crisis in Israel

Because of its diversity, Israeli society has historically been marked by a culture of intense political debate. On the eve of October 7, 2023, however, the polarization of Israeli society reached new extremes. The Israeli government was mired in an unprecedented political crisis, which weakened the country's security.

This extreme situation was due to a series of structural tensions. First, the failure of the peace process initiated by the Oslo Accords in 1993 and the lack of a political solution to the Palestinians' desire for independence were fueling a permanent state of crisis. The huge growth in settlement activities was pushing the prospect of a resolution to the conflict further away. At the same time, the proportion of settlers in the Israeli population doubled between 2005 and 2020, giving greater importance to parties adopting a pro-settlement political agenda. While in 1972, settlers had represented 0.05% of the Israeli population, in 2023 they exceeded 5%, or more than 700,000 individuals, in the West Bank.⁵⁴

Second, Israel's institutional structure itself, with its proportional representation system, encouraged electoral volatility and gave prominent

52. "Our Narrative... Operation Al-Aqsa Flood", Hamas Media Office, January 21, 2024, available at: www.palestinechronicle.com.

53. In Muslim theology, it was on this rock that the Buraq, the winged steed ridden by the angel Gabriel that carried the Prophet Muhammad to Heaven, landed during its night flight.

54. P. Breteau, "Cinquante ans d'occupation illégale en Cisjordanie: Comment la colonisation n'a cessé de s'étendre", *Le Monde*, July 31, 2023.

roles to extreme political groups, even though the threshold for representation was raised to 3.25% in 2014.

Finally, there were also demographic factors. Palestinian citizens of Israel, who make up 20% of the country's population, constitute a significant proportion of the electorate (16%). In 2020, the United Arab List political party was the third-largest electoral force, and it effectively blocked the Israeli parliamentary system because no Zionist party was willing to form a coalition with it, due to significant disagreements over a possible Palestinian state.⁵⁵

These structural weaknesses were exacerbated by a temporary crisis sparked by the Israeli prime minister's plans for judicial reform.

To understand it, we must go back to 2018, when revelations about four corruption cases involving Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu came to light. Regular demonstrations were held, rallying Netanyahu's opponents under the slogan, "Prime minister=Crime minister". In 2019, Avigdor Lieberman, the leader of the right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu party, refused to support Benjamin Netanyahu, whom he considered subservient to the ultra-Orthodox, and thereby prevented Netanyahu from having a large enough coalition to achieve a majority. After two years of political turmoil during which no coalition emerged despite four elections, a coalition government was formed by the centrist Yair Lapid and the right-wing entrepreneur Naftali Bennett. They put an end to twelve years of Likud rule. However, this change of power turned out to be short-lived, as this government fell after only a year.

In order to return to the top position in government, on December 21, 2022, Netanyahu formed an alliance with parties with openly anti-democratic and supremacist agendas: Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power), led by Itamar Ben-Gvir, and HaTzionut HaDatit (National Religious Party), led by Bezalel Smotrich.⁵⁶ This coalition, the most right-wing in the country's history, had stated its intention to bring the Supreme Court to heel, as the latter stood in the way of the Greater Israel project and also posed a personal threat to Netanyahu.⁵⁷

The judicial reform advocated by this government sparked widespread civil unrest across the country, which even reached the ranks of the army. Since January 2023, hundreds of thousands of Israelis had been demonstrating every week, denouncing the government's veer toward illiberalism and swelling the ranks of the protests against Netanyahu that had been going on since 2018. The most prestigious bastions of the Israeli security apparatus, from Unit 8200 to fighter pilots and Mossad, dared to express their opposition to this reform publicly through open letters or by

55. A. Férey, "Les Arabes israéliens, véritables gagnants des élections en Israël", *The Conversation*, March 5, 2020, available at: <https://theconversation.com>.

56. J. Sesquin and N. Perelman, "Israël: Les ministres du chaos", *Yuzu-Arte*, 2024, available at: www.arte.tv.

57. "Israël: Les quatre affaires qui menacent Benyamin Netanyahu", *Le Figaro*, February 14, 2018.

simply refusing to report for duty to their units.⁵⁸ This erosion of national cohesion on an unprecedented scale weakened political authority and the bond of trust between citizens, the army, and the government. These divisions were exacerbated by a feeling that the government was turning its back on the public interest, the government's refusal to engage in inclusive dialogue involving the various components of Israeli society (including Ashkenazim, Mizrahim, secular and religious Jews, Druze, and Palestinian citizens of Israel), and the radicalization of power.

This political crisis diverted Israeli leaders' attention away from traditional security threats, starting with Gaza. Defense Minister Yoav Gallant recognized this weakness and, as early as March 2023, warned of the security risks posed by such a polarization of society. However, Gallant was dismissed by the prime minister on March 26, 2023, because he was deemed too critical of the judicial reform and the government. On the night his departure from the government was announced, spontaneous demonstrations broke out in several major Israeli cities, forcing Netanyahu to reverse his decision and keep him in office.⁵⁹

On the eve of October 7, the ruling coalition was thus mobilized by the implementation of a radical political program: the acceleration of settlement in the West Bank and the subordination of judicial institutions to the executive branch. The Israeli security establishment was ignoring the faint signals suggesting the possibility of an imminent attack and failing to reexamine its perception of Hamas as being weakened, or even deterred.

The security situation and ongoing operational commitments on the eve of October 7, 2023

On the eve of October 7, the Israeli army was facing a series of internal questions stemming from Israel's political crisis.

The armed forces, viewed through the prism of institutional tensions

General Herzi Halevi was appointed the IDF's Chief of the General Staff (CGS) by Benny Gantz, a former CGS and former minister of defense in the Bennett/Lapid coalition in 2022, and his appointment took effect in January 2023. He succeeded Aviv Kohavi, who had reached the end of his term.

58. "Israël: Des pilotes réservistes de *Tsahal* refusent de s'entraîner pour protester contre la réforme judiciaire", *i24NEWS*, March 5, 2023; "IDF Admits Protesting Reservists Have Caused Some Harm to Its Readiness", *The Times of Israel*, August 9, 2023, available at: www.timesofisrael.com.

59. "Israël: Des milliers de personnes manifestent après le limogeage du ministre de la Défense", *Ouest France*, March 27, 2023, available at: www.ouest-france.fr.

The return to power of Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu weakened the Israeli CGS for several reasons. First, his appointment was contested by the prime minister on the grounds that the previous government could not make such decisions involving the country's security. Gali Baharav-Miara, the Attorney General, who publicly opposed the new government, decided to confirm Halevi's appointment regardless. Even before taking office, the CGS was thus immediately caught up in a political conflict between supporters and opponents of the prime minister.

Second, Halevi faced a major challenge: The institutional reorganization on which the government was based encroached on the IDF's prerogatives. The implementation of the new ruling coalition's pro-settler agenda was leading to major changes. An independent ministry headed by Bezalel Smotrich, the leader of the National Religious Party (who did not carry out military service), had been created within the Ministry of Defense. This independent ministry aimed to strip the armed forces, which it perceived as too conciliatory toward the Palestinians, of particular powers over the administration of the West Bank, to the benefit of the settlers. For example, Smotrich intended to reinforce the ban on Palestinians building in Area C of the West Bank,⁶⁰ while working to regularize hundreds of settlements built without official authorization. He also aimed to abolish the legal distinction, which had already been gradually weakened, between Israeli territory and the occupied territories in order to restrict Palestinians to densely populated enclaves and deprive them of their agricultural land. At the same time, he openly called for the dismantlement of the Palestinian Authority, which he described as a "terrorist entity". This new ministry had the power to appoint commanders responsible for coordinating government activities in the region, thus disrupting the military chain of command. For example, some demolitions ordered by Smotrich were not carried out because they were not authorized by Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, which put the CGS in a tricky position between the two ministers. Furthermore, Itamar Ben-Gvir, who was given responsibility for the Ministry of National Security and who also did not serve in the military, was given control of the border police, which normally operates under the authority of the IDF's Central Command in Area C, thus further eroding the IDF's operational coherence.

Debates over the structure of the army

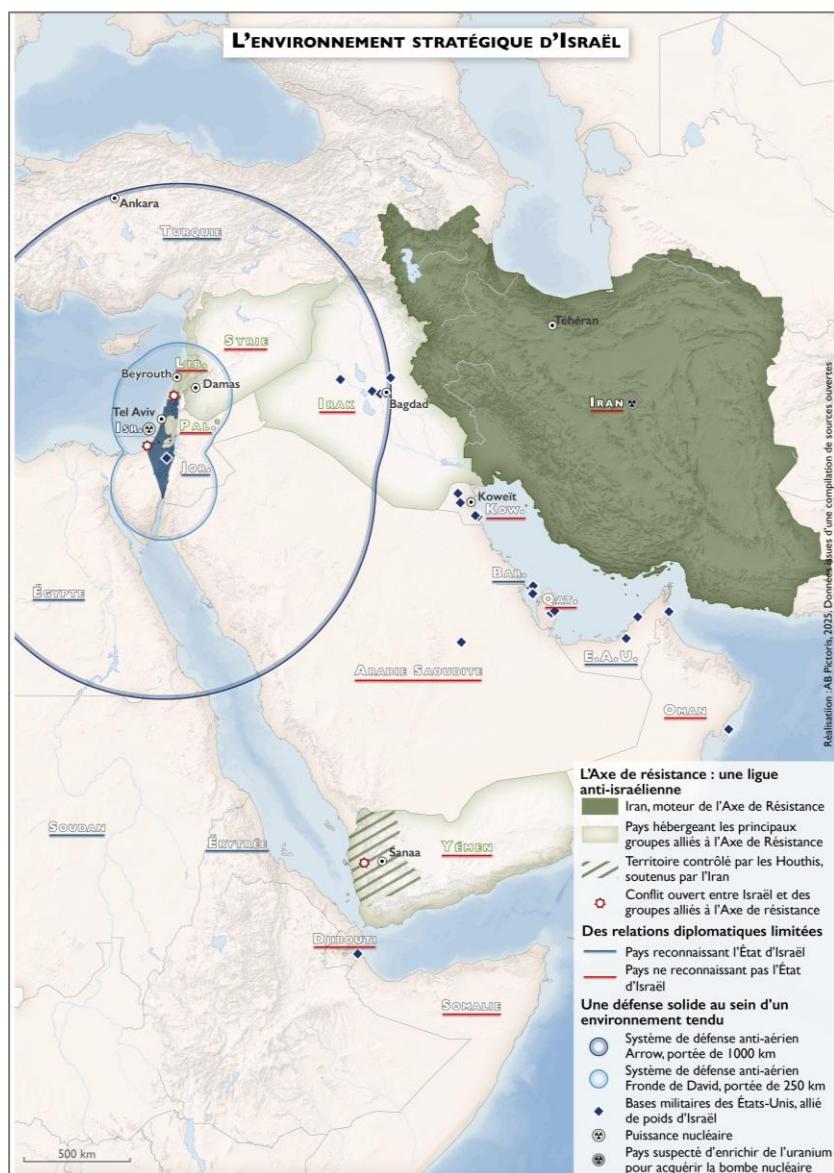
In addition to all these institutional tensions, there were also several fundamental debates taking place within the army regarding the appropriate structure for it at a time of budgetary restrictions. Former CSG Aviv Kohavi's legacy was centered on the "Momentum" plan mentioned earlier, which aimed

60. According to the Oslo Accords, Area C refers to the part of the West Bank under exclusive Israeli civil and military control; it represents approximately 60% of West Bank territory and covers almost all the Israeli settlements as well as vast areas of Palestinian agricultural land.

to transform the IDF into a high-tech army relying on mastery of digital networks and tools to accelerate the detection and destruction of threats.⁶¹

Halevi was faced with the complexity of a potential war against Iran on multiple fronts, with an army weakened by decades of underinvestment. The majority of operational units were mobilized in the West Bank for missions far removed from conventional warfare scenarios. The dominant operational doctrine, based on remote preemptive actions and avoiding ground engagement, tended to prolong conflicts and was proving unsuitable for a multi-front war scenario. This multi-front war was also envisaged as being accompanied by clashes with armed groups in the West Bank and inter-ethnic riots on Israeli territory itself, along the lines of 2021.

Map 2: Israel's strategic environment



At the same time, the “campaign between the wars” (MABAM) in Syria, referred to earlier, was taking up significant resources in terms of intelligence and airpower. Between 2018 and 2022, 145 airstrikes were attributed to Israel, with a sharp uptick since 2020 (an average of 3 per month compared to 1.5 previously), reflecting the growing strategic importance of this campaign.⁶² It had been highly successful, both politically (in terms of cooperation with Russian forces on the ground) and operationally, which complicated the task of defending reinvestment in ground forces. Any desire to improve ground forces was therefore met with internal debate, as MABAM’s successes strengthened the political and military bias in favor of an exclusively air-based approach to operations—a model that some wished to maintain, including in the context of a potential confrontation with Iran.

Containing Iran, in Iran, Syria, and Lebanon

In October 2023, the main threat identified by the Israeli military command was that posed by Iran and its proxies in the region, foremost among which was Hezbollah, whose arsenal, estimated at more than 150,000 rockets, could reach the entire territory of Israel.⁶³ Hezbollah also had air defense systems⁶⁴ and had trained its Radwan Force commandos for a possible underground incursion into Israeli territory. This scenario, feared and anticipated by the IDF, was precisely the one that materialized on October 7, but on the southern front, around Gaza. Possible strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities were being considered, taking into account that the threat posed by Tehran concerned not only its nuclear facilities and ballistic missile program, but also its production of drones and munitions such as the Shahed, which were being used with some success by Russia in Ukraine.⁶⁵

These two objectives consumed a considerable amount of intelligence resources and occupied a significant proportion of the Israeli generals’ attention. This focus on Iran was increased with the intensification of Israeli strikes in Syria against Iranian positions in the months leading up to October 7, 2023. In October 2022 and again in January 2023, Israel struck Damascus International Airport, demonstrating its capabilities on Syrian territory.⁶⁶

62. E. Kaduri, “The Campaign between the Wars in Syria: What Was, What Is, and What Lies Ahead”, *Special publication, INSS*, 2 mars 2023, available at: www.inss.org.il.

63. P. Beaumont and Q. Kierszenbaum, “Hezbollah Leader Threatens Escalation in Fighting with Israel”, *The Guardian*, November 3, 2023.

64. W. Taleb, “Hezbollah’s First-Ever Targeting of Israeli Jets and What It Means for the War”, *L’Orient Today*, June 10, 2024.

65. U. Rubin, “Russia’s Iranian-Made UAVs: A Technical Profile”, Royal United Services Institute, January 13, 2023.

66. “Syrie: Quatre morts dans un raid israélien près de Damas”, *Le Figaro*, October 27, 2022; “Syrie: L’aéroport de Damas hors service après des frappes israéliennes, quatre morts”, *Le Figaro*, January 2, 2023.

Securing the West Bank

Operationally, the West Bank also consumed significant resources. Since the inter-community riots of May 2021 during Operation Guardian of the Walls, which was launched in Gaza after tensions in the East Jerusalem Palestinian neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, the security situation had deteriorated significantly, especially as settlement activity accelerated. New, more flexible armed groups were emerging, and they were communicating and encouraging each other via social media. They claimed to be independent from the traditional factions. In 2022, the IDF launched a large-scale operation called "Break the Wave", with the aim of "thwart[ing] future attacks and apprehend[ing] those involved in terrorist activities against Israeli civilians".⁶⁷ In August 2022, a Palestinian armed group emerged called the Lions' Den, referring to the assassination by Israeli forces of a militant nicknamed the "Lion of Nablus".⁶⁸ It was quickly neutralized by the IDF but made a lasting impression with its novel methods of action, its circumvention of historic Palestinian armed groups, and its determination to directly target Israeli soldiers, despite their firepower.

Clashes were occurring across the whole of the West Bank. In Jenin, on July 3 and 4, 2023, the Israeli army conducted a two-day operation called "Home and Garden" to curb the deterioration in security linked to the Palestinian Authority's loss of control in the city.⁶⁹ In Tulkarem, on October 5, 2023, there was an attack injuring five border police officers. Two Palestinians were killed.⁷⁰ Additional troops were mobilized to secure West Bank settlers,⁷¹ including two companies that were dispatched from the Gaza border just a few days before October 7. This deterioration in security fueled criticism of Israeli policy in the West Bank that pointed out the weaknesses in its modus operandi. Faced with a proliferation of armed groups and the audacity of the latter in attacking the IDF directly, undeterred by its firepower, the Israeli military leadership was divided between those who favored surgical operations involving commandos and those who advocated a larger-scale ground operation.⁷²

67. "One Year Since Operation Break the Wave", Israel Defense Forces, March 31, 2023, available at: www.idf.il.

68. "New Palestinian Militia, Lions' Den, Behind Attacks on Soldiers, Settlers", *Jerusalem Post*, September 27, 2022.

69. E. Fabian, "IDF Set Clear Goals for Jenin Op, Though Any Substantial Impact Remains to Be Seen", *The Times of Israel*, July 6, 2023.

70. "Les troupes israéliennes tuent deux Palestiniens lors d'un affrontement en Cisjordanie", *Le Figaro*, October 5, 2023.

71. E. Fabian, "2 Commando Companies Said Diverted from Gaza Border to West Bank Days Before Oct. 7", *The Times of Israel*, December 5, 2023, available at: www.timesofisrael.com.

72. K. Michael, "The Events in Jenin: Lebanonization Is Already Here", Institute for National Security Studies, June 21, 2023.

Hamas's stratagems in Gaza

In 2023, Hamas was perceived by the Israeli military leadership as relatively contained, thanks to the costly "smart fence" (estimated to cost nearly \$1 billion) surrounding the Palestinian enclave. Operation Shield and Arrow, conducted between May 9 and 13, 2023,⁷³ mainly targeted Islamic Jihad, following on from Operations Breaking Dawn (2022)⁷⁴ and Black Belt (2019).⁷⁵ Hamas was keeping a relatively low profile, leaving Islamic Jihad alone to face the IDF. Some members of the IDF's leadership were therefore considering a truce (*hudna*) with Hamas, which seemed focused on administering the Gaza Strip; a plan to this effect was even discussed⁷⁶ between Egypt, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad in Cairo in 2023.

This atmosphere of détente also explains Israel's about-face on the elimination of two key figures in the movement, Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif, the leader of Hamas in Gaza and the commander of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, respectively. In May 2022, Naftali Bennett's government gave the green light for their elimination to the director of Shin Bet, Ronen Bar. However, following the change of government on January 19, 2023, this plan was shelved due to a lack of approval from the new prime minister, who was deterred by fears of regional escalation while he was attempting to normalize Israel's relations with Saudi Arabia.⁷⁷

The international front

2023 was also marked by an Israeli diplomatic campaign focused on its desire to increase its international alliances and end its isolation.

From 2022 onward, Israeli diplomacy had to contend with renewed competition between major powers, which relegated the Middle East to second place behind Ukraine, not to mention the issues around a potential confrontation in Taiwan, which was primarily a concern for the United States. Israel's American ally was considering a realignment of its military apparatus to adapt to a potential rise in tensions. Some 300,000 munitions from the US War Reserve Stock for Allies, stored in Israel, were thus shipped to Ukraine in January 2023,⁷⁸ before Netanyahu's return to power. These stocks had already been at the center of tensions between the White House

73. "Summary of Operation Shield and Arrow", Israel Defense Forces, May 14, 2023, available at: www.idf.il.

74. "Opération Aube", Israel Defense Forces, August 5, 2022, available at: www.idf.il.

75. "One Year Since Operation 'Black Belt'", Israel Defence Forces, November 11, 2020, available at: www.idf.il.

76. U. Dekel and O. Perlov, "The Egyptian Hudna Initiative: Bypassing Israel", *INSS Insight*, No. 1740, Institute for National Security Studies, June 21, 2023, available at: www.inss.org.il.

77. M. Hauser Tov, "Shin Bet Sought to Assassinate Hamas Leader Sinwar Before Oct. 7, but Netanyahu Declined", *Haaretz*, March 28, 2025.

78. E. Schmitt, A. Entous, R. Bergman, J. Ismay, and T. Gibbons-Neff, "U.S. Sends Israel-Stored Weapons to Ukraine", *The New York Times*, January 17, 2023, available at: www.nytimes.com.

and Israel when some of them were used in the 2014 Gaza War without President Obama's approval.⁷⁹

Netanyahu needed the United States but maintained relations with Russia as part of his MABAM campaign in Syria, while welcoming Chinese investment in the ports of Ashdod and Haifa. For him, it was thus a question of maintaining a balance between these different countries. He needed to continue to rely on the United States but also to deepen his relations with other powers. Thus, he hoped to prolong the atmosphere of détente across the region by broadening the Abraham Accords and thereby effectively marginalizing the Palestinian cause. These accords, signed in 2020 under the auspices of the United States during Donald Trump's first presidency, are a series of normalization treaties between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and subsequently Morocco and Sudan. They marked a diplomatic turning point by confirming open political, economic, and security relations between Israel and several Arab states, without the Palestinian issue having been resolved. Progress toward normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia may have prompted Hamas to act in order to shift the spotlight back onto the Palestinian cause.⁸⁰

79. "Quand Washington puise dans ses stocks d'armement en Israël pour aider l'Ukraine", *France 24*, January 18, 2023.

80. A. Kurtz and Y. Guzansky, "Normalization Between Israel and Saudi Arabia: Interests, Challenges, and Prospects for Realization", Institute for National Security Studies, July 2025, available at: www.inss.org.il; "Hamas Document Shows Oct. 7 Attack Aimed at Derailing Saudi Normalization – Report", *The Times of Israel*, May 18, 2025, available at: www.timesofisrael.com.

From Hamas's attack to the conquest of the Gaza Strip: The unfolding of Operation Swords of Iron

The tactical success of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and the collapse of Israel's defense system initially provoked operational paralysis. This shock phase was swiftly transformed into a sustained build-up of forces: Operation Swords of Iron committed most of Israel's reserves and took the form of a methodical, north-to-south advance with the aim of conquering and controlling the Gaza Strip.

The October 7 attack and its immediate aftermath

First phase

The attack on October 7, 2023, consisted of three successive waves.⁸¹ The first took place in the early hours of October 7 and was carried out by almost 3,800 commandos in the Nukhba Force,⁸² Hamas's elite force, who were tasked with neutralizing Israel's defenses. Supported by the largest barrage of rockets in the history of the conflict (more than 5,000 were fired), which was intended to confine Israel's forces in shelters, the Nukhba commandos entered Israeli territory by land, sea, and air, using boats, divers, paragliders, and vehicles (pickup trucks and motorbikes). The border was penetrated at more than 60 points,⁸³ sometimes with the aid of bulldozers. Some armed units crawled right up to the barrier, taking care to remain part of the permanent "background noise" that triggers sensors and that operators have learned to ignore (movements of small animals, wind-blown dust, vegetation brushing against sensors).

81. This section is based on a detailed analysis of the work of the newspaper *Haaretz*, which provided an hour-by-hour account of the attack. It can be consulted at: www.haaretz.com.

82. According to estimations published by Israel; Hamas has not provided any information on this point. See: www.mako.co.il.

83. "Israel's Army Admits Failures on Oct. 7. Its Probe of the Attack Could Put Pressure on Netanyahu", *AP News*, February 28, 2025.

The Hamas commandos also used drones carrying explosive charges to neutralize the barrier's threat-identification systems. Remotely controlled weapons mounted on small concrete towers, which the Israeli soldiers were supposed to be able to activate at a distance from their surveillance posts, were mostly destroyed by grenades dropped from drones. The Israeli soldiers were left blind and disoriented by the loss of their sensors. The destruction of communications systems also stopped them from communicating with each other and sounding the alarm. Thirty-seven of the 40 relay masts comprising the command network for the Gaza perimeter security system were destroyed by commercial drones that had been converted into remotely controlled munitions. It took more than a month for the IDF to restore connectivity.⁸⁴

Anticipating weak defense from Israel (three infantry battalions and one armored battalion to cover the entire border) due to numerous soldiers being on leave for the Jewish holidays, the Hamas commandos chose to attack IDF combat positions, rather than avoiding them, so as to neutralize Israel's combat capacities at the outset. The speed of their operation caused stupefaction on the Israeli side: The attack started at 6:30 a.m., and by 7 a.m. the Nahal Oz base (6:46), the Paga outpost (6:47), the Erez base in the north (6:51), the kibbutzim of Kissufim and Zikim, and the general headquarters of the Gaza Division (143rd Division "Firefox") in Re'im had all been attacked. In less than an hour, the Hamas commandos had reached six posts located several kilometers from the border, including the division's general staff. This gave them freedom of action for the following phase, allowing them to commit their crimes and return to the Gaza Strip with their hostages. At 7:04 a.m., less than 40 minutes after the first attacks, the massacre at the Nova festival began. Inquiries conducted by the police and the Israeli services and published in the press concluded that Hamas had not originally planned to attack the Nova festival, but that its units (particularly paragliders) noticed the gathering during the raid and exploited the opportunity. Several Israeli and international press outlets reported that captured maps and plans, as well as statements by Hamas members arrested by the Israeli forces on October 7, 2023, show that the festival was not part of the initial plans and that the event itself had only been extended to October 7 the day before, making prior targeting unlikely.⁸⁵

84. Interview with an IDF general, Tel Aviv, April 2025.

85. J. Breiner, "Israeli Security Establishment: Hamas Likely Didn't Have Prior Knowledge of Nova Festival", *Haaretz*, November 18, 2023, available at: www.haaretz.com; "Hamas Had Not Planned to Attack Music Festival, Israeli Report Says", *Al Jazeera*, November 18, 2023, available at: www.aljazeera.com; "How the Hamas Attack on the Supernova Festival in Israel Unfolded", *The Guardian*, October 9, 2023, available at: www.theguardian.com.

Second phase

The second wave of the attack took place from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. Hamas fired rockets at police and military posts located several kilometers away. Those on duty carried out the usual procedure when under fire and took shelter in concrete bunkers. This enabled Hamas to immobilize the second tier, consisting of teams capable of responding rapidly in the event of an alert, while also complicating the arrival of reinforcements.

After achieving their first objective of neutralizing the Israeli military structure, Hamas's Nukhba commandos moved on to hostage-taking and killing in local civilian communities, particularly in nearby kibbutzim, which were targeted simultaneously. Mass abductions took place, such as that of the Bibas family in Nir Oz, which was broadcast live on social media. The cities of Sderot and Ofakim were also attacked with the tactical goal of neutralizing local defenses; Hamas captured the Sderot police station. At 8:04 a.m., the IDF declared a state of war.

Third phase

During the third wave of the attack, which lasted from 09:00 a.m. to the end of the afternoon, secondary armed groups (Islamic Jihad's Al-Quds Brigades, which also contributed to the rocket barrage fired from Gaza)⁸⁶ and Palestinian civilians engaged in looting and acts of violence as well as hostage-taking. The third phase also saw the first IDF responses, aimed to stop the hostage-taking, to help the population, to regain control of military bases and cities, and to secure the zone. The understaffed Israeli military had to retake base by base, house by house, with very intense urban combat. The general confusion led to tragic mistakes, such as when a tank in Be'eri fired at and killed 12 Israeli hostages hiding in a house.⁸⁷

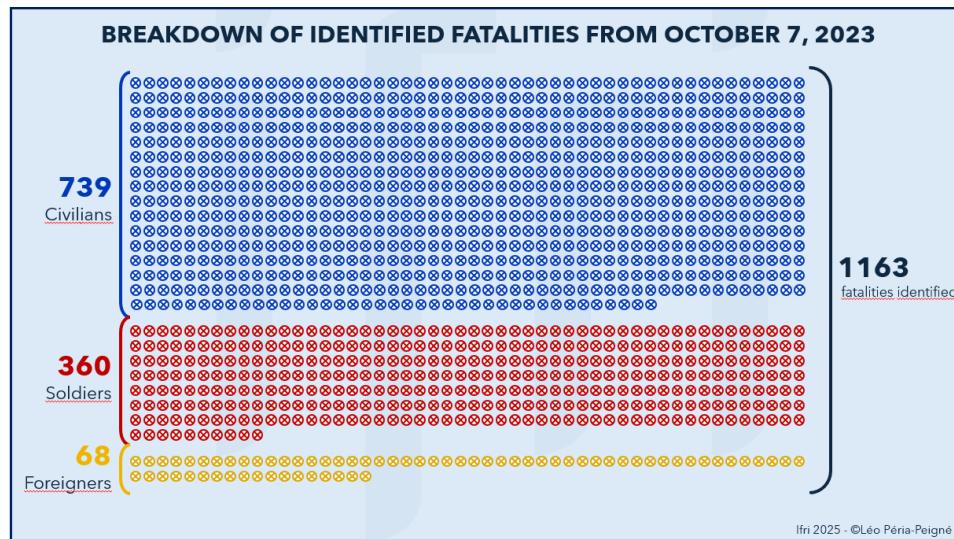
At 10:30 a.m., the first large units were deployed in the south. At 11:35 a.m., Benjamin Netanyahu made an official statement confirming the state of war and mobilizing the reserves. The Erez base was not recaptured until 5:04 p.m. Fighting continued in some of the last kibbutzim, including Kissufim, which was only retaken the following morning.

Overall, the operation cost the lives of more than 1,100 Israelis and foreigners, more than 90% of whom were civilians, while 253 hostages were taken to Gaza, including children and the elderly.

86. "What Is Islamic Jihad? The Hamas Ally at War with Israel", *Reuters*, October 18, 2023, available at: www.reuters.com.

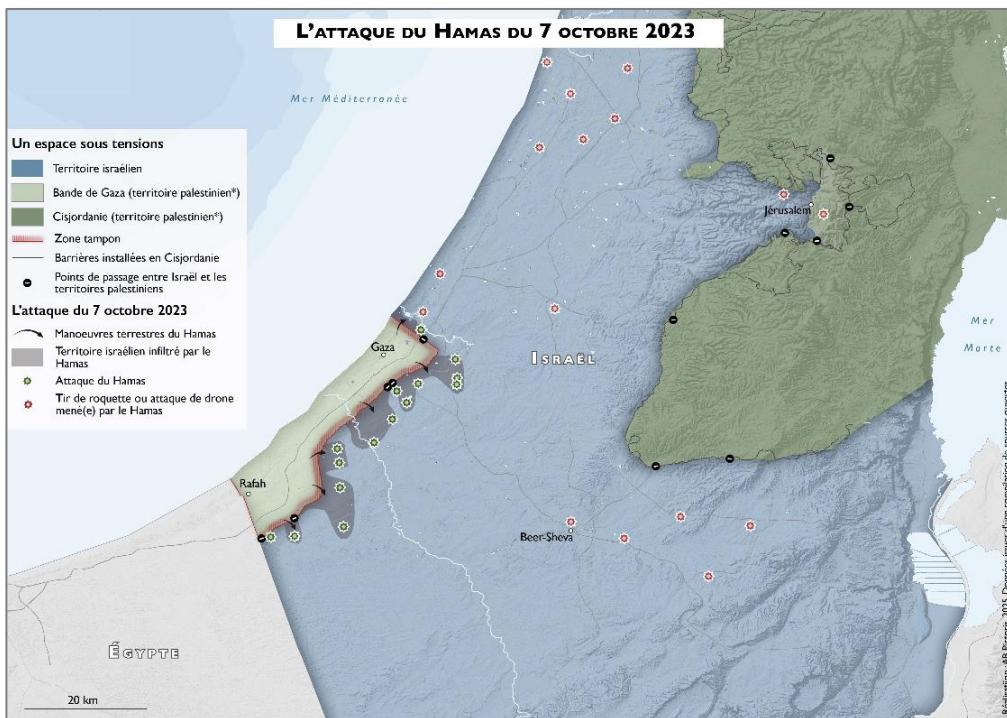
87. Y. Kubavich, "Israeli Army Probing Death of 12 Hostages in Kibbutz Be'eri House Shelled on Orders of Senior Officer", *Haaretz*, February 6, 2024, available at: www.haaretz.com.

Diagram 5: Infographic showing the breakdown of Israeli victims on October 7, 2023



Source: [INSS](#).

Map 3: The Hamas attack on October 7, 2023

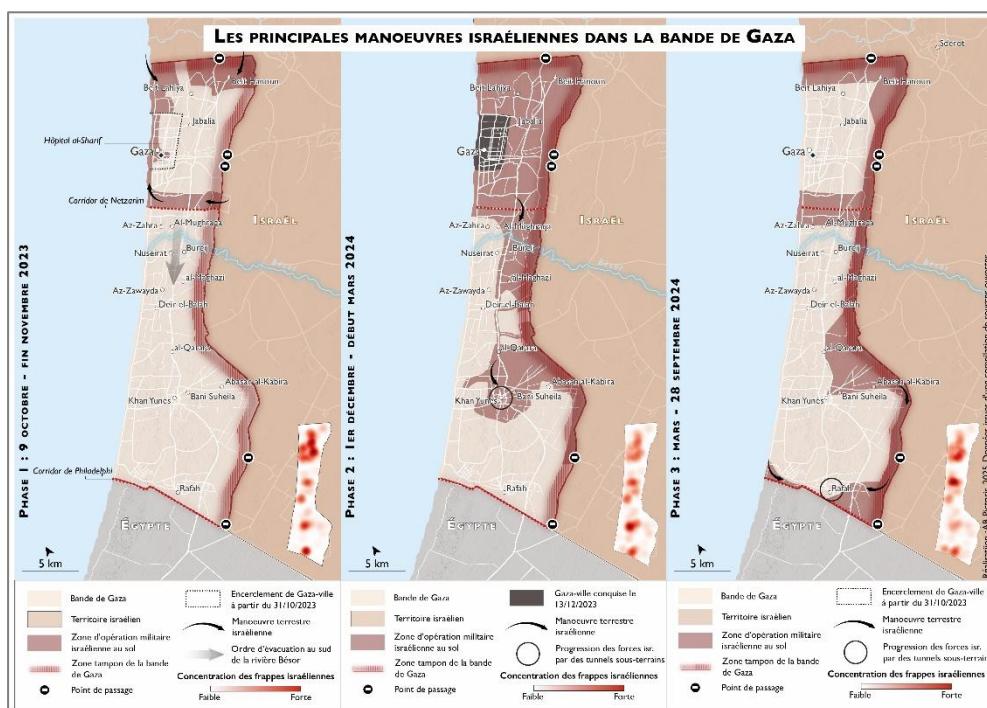


© Map AB Pictoris.

The tactical phases of Operation Swords of Iron from October 9, 2023, to October 16, 2024

Just a few hours after the Hamas attack began, the Israeli government officially announced the beginning of Operation Swords of Iron. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave the IDF three main objectives: to destroy Hamas militarily so that it no longer posed a threat to Israel; to remove any possibility of Hamas regaining strength in the future; and to free the hostages held in the Gaza Strip.⁸⁸

Map 4: The principal Israeli maneuvers within the Gaza Strip



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Phase "0": Build-up of forces

By October 9, 2023, 100,000 reservists had already been mobilized. The target of 300,000 mobilized reservists was met on October 11, at which point the government announced an additional 60,000 to be mobilized. The build-up phase for the operation's land component was complete by October 25: Troops were equipped, trained, and assembled in the initial deployment zone. They were also rapidly instructed in their mission: the conquest, control, and "cleansing" of the Gaza Strip.⁸⁹ The perimeter of the Gaza Strip

88. J. Watling and N. Reynolds, "Tactical Lessons from Israel Defense Forces Operations in Gaza, 2023", *Occasional Papers*, Royal United Services Institute, July 2024.

89. Y. Amidror, "Swords of Iron – An Interim Assessment of the Gaza War", The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, August 11, 2024.

is defended by the 143rd Territorial Division. The operation in Gaza was carried out by three main divisions (the 36th Armored Division "Ga'ash", the 162nd Armored Division "Ha-Plada", and the 252nd Reserve Division). They had significant combat support: As well as their organic artillery brigades, they were reinforced or supported by a large pool of engineering and specialized combat support units, including the Yahalom engineering battalion and the Oketz canine unit, but also special forces units integrated into combat brigades for the first time in the IDF's history.⁹⁰

Phase "1": The conquest of North Gaza

From October 25 to 27, a series of limited raids took place in the northeastern corner of the Gaza Strip, near Beit Hanoun, with the goal of reconnoitering key points for subsequent operations but also misleading the enemy about the real focus of the offensive. This deception was strengthened by the deployment of a first division, the 252nd Infantry Division (reserve), to the same place during the night of October 27–28. Two other divisions then joined the attack in succession: The 36th Armored Division in the south of Gaza City had the objective of cutting the Gaza Strip in two by seizing control of the Netzarim Corridor all the way to the sea and so isolating the northern third, seen as the center of gravity of Hamas's defenses, from the rest of the enclave. The 162nd Armored Division spearheaded the operation and was deployed in the narrow coastal band running from northwest to south, with the goal of coming up behind Hamas's defenses, largely oriented toward the east and Beit Hanoun. As they traveled along the coast, the tanks literally had "their right treads in the water".⁹¹

On October 31, the division reached the suburbs of Gaza City. At this point, the IDF was encountering almost no enemy fire, with Hamas having been surprised by the angle of the attack and unable to reconfigure its defenses.⁹² On November 2, the 36th and 162nd Divisions met on the seafront near al-Shifa hospital: Gaza City was surrounded. After a few raids into the city to test Hamas's defenses while tightening the security cordon around the area, the IDF gradually entered the city, methodically combing through its neighborhoods from west to east. The fighting was fierce, with Israeli units attacked from behind by Hamas raids pouring out of tunnels in recently conquered areas. At the same time, the IDF continued to evacuate the population of North Gaza toward the south of the Gaza Strip via a single checkpoint on the Netzarim Corridor. Fighting continued in the northern zone until November 23. The IDF focused its efforts on gaining control of the western part of the northern region. It carried out regular, targeted raids into the center and east of Gaza City, but without securing the territory. On

90. Research interview with an IDF officer, Tel Aviv, 2024.

91. *Ibid.*

92. J. Watling and N. Reynolds, "Tactical Lessons from Israel Defense Forces Operations in Gaza, 2023", *op. cit.*, p. 16.

November 15, a special operation was conducted to capture al-Shifa hospital, which was apparently sitting on top of a vast Hamas command and storage network.

On November 24, a provisional ceasefire was signed between the two sides and a truce was imposed. Gaza City had been taken, but the eastern, most heavily defended part was still far from under control. The IDF was mourning the loss of 63 soldiers. It estimated it had killed 4,000 Hamas combatants⁹³ from the two brigades thought to be defending North Gaza. Entrances to 400 tunnels had been discovered and neutralized with explosives. During this period, Hamas fired almost 7,000 rockets, not including the 5,000 fired on October 7 alone.

Phase "2": The conquest of Khan Younis and the "cleansing" of North Gaza

On November 28, Hamas launched a series of raids against the IDF in Gaza City, but the ceasefire did not officially end until December 1, 2023. The IDF immediately started its conquest of Gaza City's eastern suburbs. In parallel, it deployed a fifth division, the 98th, in two lines of attack against Khan Younis in the southern part of the Gaza Strip. After crushing Hamas's defenses with an armored offensive, the mechanized infantry rapidly moved to surround the city, which they did on 6 December. From December 13, the focus of the IDF's efforts shifted from north to south: The conquest of eastern Gaza City was complete, while that of Khan Younis was beginning via the northeast. Here, again, the angle of attack seems to have surprised Hamas, although it put up fierce resistance. The fighting in Gaza City gradually subsided, with Hamas's operations now resembling harassment more than an organized defense. Meanwhile, the fighting in Khan Younis was intensifying.

Starting on December 25, 2023, five brigades disengaged from North Gaza, and the 36th Regular Division was relieved by the 99th Infantry Division (reserve). Operations to bring Khan Younis under control continued, with the IDF advancing both above and below ground, which had not been the case in Gaza City.⁹⁴ The IDF gradually extended its control of the city westward. During January and February, the IDF carried out further strikes and raids in Gaza City, which had been reoccupied by groups of Hamas combatants. Despite the isolation of Gaza City by the IDF's control of the Netzarim Corridor, Hamas used tunnels connecting the north and south to regain a foothold in the city.

93. M. Goya, *L'embrasement: Comprendre les enjeux de la guerre Israël-Hamas*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 2024.

94. E. Hecht, "Gaza Terror Offensive – 18 January – 3 February", Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, February 3, 2024.

During this phase, which ran from December 2023 to March 2024, the IDF lost 186 soldiers, bringing the total to 249, attesting to the violence of the fighting. It claimed it had killed 13,000 Hamas combatants and wounded as many more, although Hamas only acknowledged 6,000 losses.⁹⁵ The number of rockets fired by Hamas decreased sharply during this period, falling to fewer than 10 rockets per day.

Nevertheless, these figures must be taken with caution. First, official Israeli estimates of the number of Hamas combatants killed have fluctuated; second, the Israeli intelligence services themselves differ in their assessments, with Shin Bet having reproached the Southern Command for a lack of rigor. There are also questions around the counting methodology used: The number of Hamas combatants killed is declared directly by brigade commanders, with no systematic verification procedure, in a context where the military leadership had given orders to use firepower on a massive scale. For example, Yossi Sariel, commander of Unit 8200, was given the objective of killing "at least 50 Hamas combatants for each victim of October 7". These figures thus reflect a quantitative, declarative approach rather than a precise knowledge of the number of militants killed, with the IDF working from estimates that were often difficult to verify due to the chaos on the battlefield.⁹⁶

Phase "3": The conquest of Rafah and control of the Gaza Strip

During March 2024, the IDF disengaged all its troops from conquered areas, only retaining control of the Netzarim Corridor and the perimeter of the Gaza Strip. It then proceeded to carry out a series of targeted raids on sites of Hamas resurgence while continuing to neutralize Hamas's combat infrastructure. This approach was exemplified by the IDF's large-scale operation against al-Shifa hospital on March 18, 2024, which was based on intelligence reports indicating that around 600 Palestinian combatants had gathered in the area around Gaza's principal hospital, at that time sheltering 3,500 civilians. After 15 days of fighting, the IDF announced on April 1, 2024, that it had killed more than 200 combatants and taken more than 500 prisoners.⁹⁷ Between then and the middle of May 2024, the IDF launched four other similar raids into North Gaza from the buffer zone and the northern perimeter of the Gaza Strip.

On May 6, 2024, the IDF started its conquest of the stronghold of Rafah, deploying the 162nd Division against the Rafah Brigade, which comprised

95. E. Hecht, "Gaza Terror Offensive – 4 February – 8 March", Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, March 8, 2024.

96. Y. Abraham, "L'offensive à Gaza à fait au moins 83 % de morts civils, selon les chiffres de l'armée israélienne", *Mediapart*, August 22, 2025, available at: www.mediapart.fr.

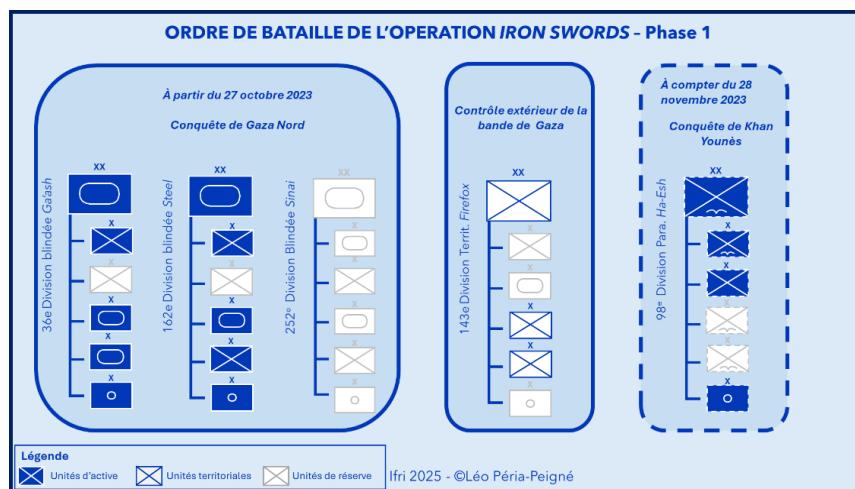
97. "Press Briefing by IDF Spokesperson, Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari, April 1, 2024", Israel Defense Forces, April 1, 2024, available at: www.idf.il.

around 5,000 combatants. Until May 30, the operation was focused on taking control of the "Philadelphi Corridor", a narrow strip of land 14 km long that runs along the border with Egypt and serves as a key Hamas supply zone. More than 150 tunnels were discovered and destroyed,⁹⁸ including some connecting the Gaza Strip with Egypt that were large enough for vehicles to travel through. From June, the 162nd Division gradually expanded its area of control and started sweeping Rafah, again advancing both above ground and through tunnels. At the end of August, the IDF believed it had destroyed Hamas's core defenses in Rafah.⁹⁹ In parallel, the IDF continued its cleansing operations, with a major raid on Khan Younis in July 2024, before the gradual return of the city's population. In September, new raids were carried out in northern Gaza, while the IDF consolidated its control of the two corridors (Netzirim and Philadelphi).

By the end of this third phase of the operation, the IDF had neutralized around 22 of the 24 battalions thought to constitute Hamas's armed wing. The last two battalions were apparently located in refugee camps in the center of the Gaza Strip (Bureij and Nuseirat) and had been targeted by raids since January 2024. After more than a year of fighting in Gaza, the IDF had lost 312 soldiers, with 53 of those killed between March 1 and October 16, 2024.

On September 28, 2024, the focus of the IDF's efforts shifted from Gaza to the northern front against Hezbollah, with the beginning of its ground offensive in southern Lebanon. But the symbolic end of the first stage of Operation Swords of Iron in Gaza can also be dated to October 16, 2024, when the IDF managed to find and kill Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in Gaza and the mastermind of the October 7 attack, who had taken over as chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau following the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran.

Diagram 6: Order of battle of Operation Swords of Iron – Phase 1



98. E. Fabian, "Gallant affirme que 150 tunnels ont été détruits le long de la frontière entre l'Égypte et Gaza", *The Times of Israel*, August 21, 2024, available at: <https://fr.timesofisrael.com>.

99. *Ibid.*

Table 4: Phases of Operation Swords of Iron in Gaza

Dates	Phase	Principle actions
October 7 to October 25, 2023	Phase "0"	Shock, response, reconquest, build-up of forces, and air campaign
October 25 to November 24, 2023	Phase "1"	Conquest, isolation, and control of North Gaza Temporary ceasefire
November 24, 2023, to March 9, 2024	Phase "2"	<u>Phase 2.1</u> Gradual conquest of the eastern part of North Gaza Conquest, encirclement, and cleansing of Khan Younis
		<u>Phase 2.2</u> Temporary conquest of Central Gaza (Bureij) Isolation and control of North Gaza with periodic raids
March 9 to October 16, 2024	Phase "3"	Reorganization and disengagement from Gaza City and Khan Younis Control of the Netzarim Corridor Intermittent targeted raids Conquest of the Philadelphi Corridor and conquest and cleansing of Rafah

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Swords of Iron through the lens of factors of operational superiority

In 2016, the French Army introduced the concept of factors of operational superiority (FOS), defined as “operational capacities or qualities, the ownership of which is likely to give our forces the edge over the opponent”.¹⁰⁰ The eight FOS are: understanding, cooperation, agility, mass, endurance, moral strength, influence, and efficiency of command. Although not an exhaustive summary of the tactical equation, they offer an effective interpretive framework for analyzing the IDF’s operational and strategic performance during the first year of Operations Swords of Iron.

The IDF’s operational performance in Gaza

Mass

“The ability to generate and maintain the sufficient volume of forces to produce long-lasting strategic decision effects (...”).¹⁰¹

Although the IDF had been in the process of reducing its land forces and massively expanding its intelligence-strike complex, with a strong technological focus, Operation Swords of Iron demonstrated the need for a more balanced force model and reaffirmed the necessity of land forces, which even the most sophisticated technologies cannot replace indefinitely.¹⁰²

The conquest of Gaza in terms of the principles of war

After October 7, the IDF knew it would have to conquer a densely populated urban zone that was heavily defended by a determined enemy, an operation of a scale it had not attempted since 2006.¹⁰³ Even in 2014, during Operation Protective Edge, the objective of the troops on the ground was not to take and occupy the territory, but simply to destroy Hamas’s infrastructure and

100. “Future Land Action”, French Army, 2016.

101. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

102. E. Hecht and E. Shamir, “Does Israel Need a Large Army If It Has Advanced Technology?”, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, May 29, 2024, available at: <https://besacenter.org>.

103. Interview with an Israeli general officer, May 5, 2025.

offensive capabilities through targeted raids.¹⁰⁴ The campaign had to involve a balanced application of the three principles of war as conceptualized by Foch: concentration of efforts, economy of force, and freedom of action.

The choice to concentrate initially on the northern part of the Gaza Strip, without first cutting Hamas off from its Egyptian supply flows by immediately taking control of the Philadelphia Corridor, was criticized during the first year of the war.¹⁰⁵ But the decision to focus the land action in the northern part of the Gaza Strip was probably influenced by the desire to avoid a dispersion of effort. Likewise, it is worth noting that while Israeli operational culture generally encourages speed in deployment and the conquest of ground objectives, in this case, the IDF chose to adopt a methodical and very gradual approach, giving priority to fire support.¹⁰⁶ This measured pace can be explained by the desire to protect IDF forces, but also consideration of the civilian population that had yet to evacuate the area, and of course, the hostages held by Hamas. The existence of tunnels and the control of underground networks is another reason for this slow-seeming operational pace.

The land force was structured around a powerful armored mass that deployed tanks in urban areas to capture and secure target zones. It was the first time in many years that the IDF had been engaged in a city in this way. Counterbalancing this focus on mass, efforts were also made to maintain agility. The rapid isolation of Hamas's key defense center in the northern region, thanks to the 36th Division's maneuver along the Netzirim Corridor, allowed the IDF to preserve its freedom of action. The maneuver to take Hamas's defenses from the rear by conquering the coastal strip, aided by the deception in the Beit Hanoun region in the northeast, is a good illustration of the balance achieved between concentration of efforts (the merging of two armored masses in the Shifah sector) and freedom of action. During the three phases of the operation, the IDF constantly took the initiative in its engagements and reorganizations, always retaining the freedom to increase, relieve, and reduce its forces in the Gaza Strip. This was in part made possible by the permanent pressure exerted on Hamas to stop it from regaining the initiative and to preserve the upper hand gained by the land troops when they entered Gaza.

Mobilization and build-up

The mobilization of the IDF's reserves in the wake of October 7 was extremely efficient. On October 9, 2023, while isolated pockets of resistance were still holding out, 100,000 reservists had already been mobilized. The target of 300,000 reservists mobilized was reached on October 11, at which point the government announced an extension of a further 60,000 soldiers.

¹⁰⁴. *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵. Y. Amidror, "Swords of Iron – An Interim Assessment of the Gaza War", *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁶. *Ibid.*

Nevertheless, the challenge was not so much the activation of a reserve system that was already known to be highly effective, but rather the job of bringing all the units up to the standard required for the task ahead. The deployment of reservists with little training and no experience of the type of mission that awaited them in Gaza was a massive challenge: Planners predicted heavy losses, and the complexity of the environment and the parameters of engagement made it essential to prepare units in advance. In just three weeks, the IDF managed to achieve a "miracle"¹⁰⁷: forming a cohesive, well-trained force with a high level of confidence. The high quality of the technical, procedural, and operational preparations prior to troop deployment, as well as of the operational planning and the firepower applied, all contributed to much lower losses than were foreseen, and to a gradual improvement in units' level of tactical execution, although the disparate levels of the reservists could have created tactical implementation difficulties.¹⁰⁸

As well as the mobilization of the reserves, comprising the stand-up of a full reserve division (the 252nd Infantry Division) and the reorganization of regular divisions on the ground (movement of the 36th Division from the northern front to Gaza), the build-up phase also included significant logistical activity (preparation of supplies, routing and modernization of vehicles, preparation of assembly and holding areas). In parallel, the training conducted at the Tze'elim training base, from individual to battalion level, was focused on mastering offensive missions, especially in the form of combat.¹⁰⁹ The IDF also took advantage of a series of limited raids in the days before the attack to accustom units to using their equipment on simple targets, at night, in order to increase their self-confidence and give them the experience they were lacking. This fairly unconventional procedure, which also contributed to the deceptive effect of the overall operation, proved highly successful in toughening up the units and giving the senior military leadership confidence in the tool they had just established.¹¹⁰

Although the time window for a ground engagement was limited on the one hand by the continuation of Hamas's indirect fires, and on the other by the likely erosion of international support for the Israeli cause,¹¹¹ the IDF did not make the same mistake as in 2006, when it hastily deployed its land forces without planning or joint training. On the contrary, the time allowed for the build-up of forces, optimized to match the threat level, the environment, and the mission, helped to transform the gross mass of mobilization into effective combat strength.

107. M. Finkel, "The Miracle of the October-November 2023 Maneuver", *op. cit.*

108. J. Watling and N. Reynolds, "Tactical Lessons from Israel Defense Forces Operations in Gaza, 2023", *op. cit.*, p. 14.

109. M. Finkel, "The Miracle of the October-November 2023 Maneuver", *op. cit.*

110. Interview with an Israeli general officer, May 5, 2025.

111. J. Watling and N. Reynolds, "Tactical Lessons from Israel Defense Forces Operations in Gaza, 2023", *op. cit.*

The mass of indirect fires: the use of airpower in Gaza

Operation Swords of Iron was centered on the unrestrained use of airpower, with three unique characteristics that must be taken into account in order to understand how the IASF was able to unleash such power over Gaza and maintain it in the long term.

First, the IDF had total air supremacy, with no tactical limitations on the use of airpower over Gaza. The air force could thus operate in unique operational comfort, carrying out plane, helicopter, or drone strikes unhindered. It also provided permanent, multi-layer ISR coverage of the Gaza Strip, further facilitating the deployment of airpower.

Next, the unusually small size of the operational zone and the resulting short flight distances enabled extremely rapid response times and a very high tempo of air sorties. With an air sortie over Gaza lasting just minutes, it was possible to increase the number of strikes without being restricted by flight time or pilot recovery, or even in-flight refueling. This proximity also ensured very short delays in providing fire support for ground troops (CAS, or close air support), averaging around 12 minutes during Operation Swords of Iron.¹¹²

Finally, these two factors enabled the third characteristic of the Swords of Iron air component: the immediacy of airpower effects. The availability and responsiveness of the air force made it possible to launch a powerful, targeted response against Hamas just 4 hours after it first entered Israeli territory. After 2 hours of strikes, 16 tons of bombs had been dropped on targets in Gaza; after 24 hours of air operations, the IASF announced it had struck 1,200 targets and killed 400 Hamas combatants.¹¹³ With a long-standing list of targets constantly updated by intelligence, the IDF was able to take full advantage of its available airpower. This effective airpower allowed Israel to launch a military response against Hamas while leaving enough time for the build-up of the operation's land component. It produced visible, quantifiable results and made tactical conditions easier for the ground offensive, at the cost of considerable destruction of urban infrastructure in the Gaza Strip and heavy civilian casualties.

As Operation Swords of Iron unfolded, airstrikes made it possible:

- to destroy the majority of Hamas's human and material combat capabilities;
- to prepare future zones of engagement for the ground forces, as in Khan Younis and Rafah during Phase 1 of the operation;
- to support the advance of the ground forces during the conquest phases;

¹¹² Y. Amidror, "Swords of Iron – An Interim Assessment of the Gaza War", *op. cit.*

¹¹³ "Emploi de la puissance aérienne au cours des 72 heures après l'assaut du Hamas", *Les Notes du CESA*, Centre d'études stratégiques aérospatiales, November 2023, available at: www.calameo.com.

- to target Hamas resurgence in controlled areas, such as North Gaza, after the IDF's disengagement from Gaza City at the beginning of 2024;
- to help destroy the located tunnels with specific strikes.

They thus acted as a force multiplier for the armed campaign, with decisive consequences for Hamas's military organization, while minimizing the exposure of the ground forces in a particularly hostile environment.¹¹⁴

Agility

"The permanent ability of the forces to confront the evolution of a diverse, unstable and uncertain environment".¹¹⁵

Underground combat: A major challenge for agility

Hamas's tunnels posed the greatest tactical challenge to the IDF's operation in Gaza. Despite being familiar with the tunnels since at least Operation Protective Edge in 2014, the IDF had underestimated the complexity and sophistication of Hamas's underground network.¹¹⁶ The whole "Gaza metro" comprised up to 600 km of tunnels,¹¹⁷ split into around 1,500 sections with more than 5,000 access shafts,¹¹⁸ all organized on three levels, the deepest of which could go down to 70 meters. Rather than a single, homogeneous network, it was a combination of interconnected networks of different sizes and very varied uses. The longest reached around 10 km. The tunnel entrances and exits, camouflaged or hidden in basements, were difficult to detect and systematically booby-trapped.¹¹⁹ As the IDF learned to its cost, it was not enough to control tunnel access points and the surface level: It was also essential to acquire total control of the undercity space, without which the enemy could simply pass underneath the IDF's defenses and emerge from supposedly conquered areas to strike its forces from the rear.¹²⁰

This control of the undercity space posed four major challenges, each of which demanded significant adaptation from the IDF:

- **An intelligence challenge:** finding, describing, and mapping tunnels, locating the underground network's command posts, and

¹¹⁴. S. Bruchmann *et al.*, "The Israel-Hamas War One Year On", International Institute for Strategic Studies, October 7, 2024.

¹¹⁵. "Future Land Action", French Army, 2016, p. 33.

¹¹⁶. Interview with an Israeli general officer, May 5, 2025.

¹¹⁷. Interview with a French officer and expert in the Israel Defense Forces, April 28, 2025.

¹¹⁸. J. Spencer, "Israel's New Approach to Tunnels: A Paradigm Shift in Underground Warfare", Modern War Institute, December 2, 2024, available at: <https://mwi.westpoint.edu>.

¹¹⁹. B. Dunoyer, "Gaza et ses tunnels, quand la technologie appuie la manœuvre", *Revue Militaire Générale*, No. 59, "Le combat en zone urbaine", Commandement du combat future, June 2024.

¹²⁰. E. Hecht, "Gaza Terror Offensive, 29 October – 2 November", Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, November 2, 2023.

understanding their organizational logic and operational nature, with the goal being to “understand what we were fighting”.¹²¹ To do so, numerous technological mapping solutions were used: ground penetrating radar, drones equipped with LiDAR systems or thermal cameras, inertial navigation devices, camera-equipped dogs, “throwable” robots, investigation units specialized in confined spaces...¹²² Wherever they were engaged, tactical units prioritized “combat for intelligence”, seeking above all to locate Hamas’s command posts in order to gather as much usable data as possible about the defense arrangements in their zone of action, including the tunnel network.¹²³ As the operation went on, units learned to recognize signs and markings indicating the presence of access shafts.¹²⁴

Table 5: Typology of Hamas tunnels in the Gaza Strip

Type	Use	Configuration
Offensive tunnel	Infiltration of light troops into Israeli territory to carry out raids, ambushes, or kidnappings	Deep, long tunnels coming out near targeted objectives, multiple exits
Defensive tunnel	System for defending the Gaza Strip against an Israeli invasion and carrying out operations behind enemy lines	Interconnected systems with multiple exits
Tunnel for the use of indirect-fire weapons	Enabling rocket launchers, mortars, and missiles to be fired in secrecy	Dugout position with a connection to the main tunnel system for supplying ammunition and facilitating communication
Logistical tunnel (within Gaza)	Transporting and storing logistical resources for combatants	System connected to the defensive network, with numerous access points in dwellings
External supply tunnel	Smuggling weapons, munitions, vehicles, and provisions of all kinds from other countries	Tunnels between Rafah and Egypt are large enough for vehicles to pass through
Command infrastructure	Protecting command centers and wanted individuals, concealing hostages	The deepest tunnel systems, with large rooms containing computing and communications equipment and living spaces
Mobility tunnel	Moving between combat zones unseen and safe from attack	Small tunnels, either independent or connected to larger systems

Source: M. Abuamer, "Gaza's Subterranean Warfare: Palestinian Resistance Tunnels vs. Israel's Military Strategy", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Routledge, 2024, p. 10.

121. Interview with an Israeli general officer, May 5, 2025.

122. M. Abuamer, "Gaza's Subterranean Warfare: Palestinian Resistance Tunnels vs. Israel's Military Strategy", in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, New York: Routledge, 2024, pp. 12–14.

123. Interview with an Israeli general officer, May 5, 2025.

124. J. Spencer, "Israel's New Approach to Tunnels", *op. cit.*

A security challenge that routinely required engineering support to disarm traps and neutralize improvised explosive devices (IEDs) scattered around tunnel entrances, but also long-term surveillance to prevent any subsequent infiltration.¹²⁵

An underground combat challenge: Although it seems that Hamas rarely used the tunnels for combat purposes, investigating them required forces trained and drilled to reconnoiter this dangerous and confined environment, and to fight there if necessary. Combat in confined spaces was reserved for the special forces, supported by units from the Yahalom engineering brigade, dogs from the Oketz canine unit, and numerous technological solutions: drones, ground robots... During the first phase of the conquest of Gaza City, divisions did not go down into the tunnels. It was the 98th Brigade that first suggested an underground advance in its Khan Younis conquest operation,¹²⁶ and the same tactic was used in Rafah. A key challenge was to coordinate above-ground and below-ground maneuvers: The latter were very slow and not always aligned with the direction of the above-ground advance, which was restricted by buildings and streets. For every day it took to control an area on the surface, it took four to five days to control the corresponding underground area.¹²⁷ Frequent losses of connection were a further tactical constraint, which the IDF tried to mitigate using various technological solutions: radio links, relay drones...

A tunnel neutralization and destruction challenge. Numerous solutions were tested and used: seawater flooding, poured concrete, expanding foam, liquid explosives, high-penetration bombs ("bunker busters")... None was perfect on its own, and the IDF continually tested and used whichever seemed the most appropriate for a given area or soil type.

125. Interview with a French officer and expert in the Israel Defense Forces, February 4, 2025.

126. J. Spencer, "Israel's New Approach to Tunnels", *op. cit.*

127. D. Rodriguez *et al.*, "The October 7 War: Observations, October 2023 – May 2024", The Jewish Institute for National Security of America, May 30, 2024, p. 19.

Table 6: Various techniques used to neutralize tunnels in Gaza

Destruction techniques	Limitations
"Bunker buster" bombs	Ineffective beyond 30 m depth Destroy specific tunnel but leave rest of infrastructure operational
Thermobaric bombs	Ethical restrictions on use in urban areas Unsuitable in coastal areas (water) Limited effectiveness in some conditions
Conventional bombs	Limited effectiveness at great depth, complex to use Create substantial debris that makes it harder to discover additional tunnels
Emulsion explosives	Require significant volumes of explosives Take a long time, restrictions on ground operations
Flooding	Ineffective against the most sophisticated concrete tunnels Requires significant volumes of water Takes a very long time
Expanding foam "sponge bombs"	Does not destroy the tunnel itself Not very effective on complex tunnels with multiple exits Very dangerous to use

Source: M. Abuamer, "Gaza's Subterranean Warfare: Palestinian Resistance Tunnels vs. Israel's Military Strategy", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Routledge, 2024, p. 16.

While the IDF is recognized as the military best prepared for the challenge of underground combat, it acknowledges that it was overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of this "city under the city" in Gaza. A permanent threat to the rear, coordination and communication difficulties, the dangers of confined spaces, systematic booby-trapping: The tunnels were a highly complex and oppressive combat environment that demanded adaptation. The IDF rose to the challenge, evolving its solutions pragmatically as its forces gained more operational experience.

Mastery of joint forces combat, an asset for a force's agility

The level of interforce integration was highlighted by numerous Israeli experts as a major improvement compared to the IDF's previous engagements.¹²⁸ The systematic integration of combat engineering units into

128. Y. Amidror, "Swords of Iron – An Interim Assessment of the Gaza War", *op. cit.*

brigades up to the section level was a key factor in the success of the operation's land component. The engineering corps experienced high demand for all its capabilities: opening routes, discovering and neutralizing IEDs and traps, destroying obstacles, opening up access to buildings so the infantry could advance under cover, supporting operations involving tunnels, but also repairing water pipes and providing infrastructure expertise to assist in controlling the occupied urban area. The systematic deployment of D9 bulldozers, the "kings of the Gaza battlefield",¹²⁹ at the head of armored units (20 D9s were sent to reinforce the forward brigades during Phase 1)¹³⁰ illustrates the central role of the engineering corps.

The force's agility was also boosted by a marked decentralization of command, particularly of joint forces coordination (close air support, intelligence) down to the subunit level, which significantly increased responsiveness at the cost of a higher risk of errors.¹³¹ For example, the 166 Squadron, a drone squadron using Hermes 900 "Star" and Hermes 450 "Zik" aircraft, coordinated intensively with the brigades of the 98th Division during the conquest of Khan Younis¹³² so as to ensure the intelligence and close air support provided to ground units was as accurate and responsive as possible.

Flexibility, an indispensable antidote to surprise

According to General (res.) Meir Finkel, author of a 2011 book on "flexibility" as a way to improve a force's resilience to tactical surprise,¹³³ Operation Swords of Iron demonstrated the Israeli military's resilience and adaptability in recovering from the massive shock of October 7. Whether planning an emergency intervention that required a complete reevaluation of the enemy, refitting its armored vehicles to protect against drones, or creating an ad hoc organizational structure to manage the tunnel environment, the IDF was able to adapt to its adversary and gain the upper hand in Gaza.

As the deployment went on, the repetition of certain procedures led to the establishment of routines that made this flexibility less effective. For example, systematic reliance on specialized engineers when underground entrances were discovered meant that time could be lost if engineering support was unavailable. Some units learned to distinguish between tunnel entrances and underground access points to civilian infrastructure of no tactical interest and to perform some of the engineers' basic tasks themselves, reserving support requests for confirmed tunnels. Another

129. Interview with an Israeli general officer, April 29, 2025.

130. J. Watling and N. Reynolds, "Tactical Lessons from Israel Defense Forces Operations in Gaza, 2023", *op. cit.*

131. Y. Amidror, "Swords of Iron – An Interim Assessment of the Gaza War", *op. cit.*

132. A. Dombe, "IDF's 'Star' Drone Squadron: Eliminating Any Threat That Disrupts the Gaza Maneuver", *Israel Defense*, February 21, 2024, available at: www.israeldefense.co.il.

133. M. Finkel, *On Flexibility: Recovery from Technological and Doctrinal Surprise on the Battlefield*, Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2011.

challenge was to notice the enemy's adaptations and tactical or technological developments in time to adapt in return and not be taken by surprise due to a lack of observation or imagination. This "competitive learning" turned out to be essential when confronting a shifting enemy like Hamas.¹³⁴ It was reflected in the IDF's ability to effectively integrate lessons learned via a short feedback loop, for example, by adapting vehicle protection to the reality of the threat seen on the ground (fitting armored vehicles with anti-drone protection and anti-magnetic devices).¹³⁵

Endurance

"The ability to last in operations, to bear the continuous operational needs, coping with the blows and standing firm over time in a hostile environment".¹³⁶

Although the success of the IDF's large-scale mobilization in the wake of Hamas's attack demonstrated the reliability and efficacy of the Israeli defense model, it was not designed to sustain a prolonged war effort, and even dangerously weakened the equilibrium of Israeli society, as discussed above. October 7 shattered the strategic paradigm that had dominated operations against Palestinian armed movements in the Gaza Strip for twenty years, rendering lightning-quick, decisive warfare and limited, preventive raids obsolete. The IDF's objective, as set by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was to attack and thoroughly destroy Hamas. The strain on personnel and equipment, attrition, and the length of operations severely tested the IDF's endurance in the first year of fighting.

The urban environment: The challenge of attrition

The urban environment is a particularly abrasive one that prematurely wears out personnel and equipment. For more than ten years, mastery of urban combat has been at the heart of the IDF's training for land forces, given the adversary's evolution and the increased likelihood of action in densely urbanized areas.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, the reservists' inexperience and the inherent complexity of urban environments posed a major challenge for preserving combat force potential.

The urban environment is a four-dimensional environment with a unique geography, every corner of which can be exploited or held by the enemy, particularly in the case of an asymmetric adversary like Hamas. This "360 degree" threat¹³⁸ can emerge from a basement, swoop down from the upper floors of a building, or approach from a parallel street. Every building

134. Interview with an Israeli general officer, May 5, 2025.

135. Interview with a French officer and expert in the Israel Defense Forces, February 4, 2025.

136. "Future Land Action", French Army, 2016, p. 43.

137. A. Jager, "The Transformation of the Israel Defense Forces", *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 74, No. 2, 2021, p. 6.

138. D. Rodriguez *et al.*, "The October 7 War", *op. cit.*, p. 31.

is a potential defensive outpost. This was particularly true during the initial defense of Gaza, when Israeli soldiers reported that all buildings were occupied by Hamas combatants.¹³⁹ Having previously distributed weapons caches and tunnel access points throughout numerous dwellings, Hamas was able to transform any given building into a hardened position within a very agile defensive system. Above all, Hamas systematically booby-trapped buildings, streets, and even some city blocks. Every house entrance, every street crossing, every object was thus potentially a deadly trap. This omnidirectional and permanent threat complicated all combat and prematurely wore down specialized units like the engineers, whose skills were everywhere in demand.

Urban combat also creates an “inverse geometry”, in which the traditional meaning of urban spaces is turned on its head: Movement through streets, front doors, or windows is impossible, while walls and confined spaces become the safest passageways.¹⁴⁰ Further exacerbated by the asymmetrical use of urban space, this phenomenon took a heavy psychological toll on combatants. Hamas increasingly exploited it by basing ambushes and traps on realistic lures, such as Hebrew recordings that simulated hostages calling for help.¹⁴¹

Next, the configuration of urban space funnels activity into certain axes imposed and dominated by buildings, a fact that also contributed to attrition by facilitating enemy harassment and complicating logistical support. Visibility, mobility, and communications were restricted, slowing down operations; units could rapidly find themselves split up, with combatants isolated. Moreover, because distances are compressed in urban environments, most engagements were very short range, with friendly and enemy forces highly intermingled. All these limitations created coordination difficulties and increased the risk of friendly fire, as the IDF found out during the fighting to take control of the Gaza Strip’s cities. Up to 25% of Israeli losses could have been caused by friendly fire.¹⁴² This high rate can be explained by the reservists’ limited training and their poor command of weaponry.¹⁴³ Classic urban combat procedures, such as the creation of a “buffer zone” between units’ corridors (a deliberately unoccupied built-up area between two corridors that is seen as a dangerous area held by the enemy), were rediscovered and integrated into the IDF’s feedback loops.¹⁴⁴

^{139.} *Ibid.*, p. 32.

^{140.} E. Weizman, *À travers les murs: L’architecture de la nouvelle guerre urbaine*, Paris: La Fabrique Éditions, 2008, pp. 40–48.

^{141.} W. Booth, I. Stern, and H. Balousha, “Ambushes and Booby Traps: Hamas Tactics Stir Confusion, Fear, Danger”, *The Washington Post*, December 22, 2023, available at: www.washingtonpost.com.

^{142.} Interview with a French officer and expert in the Israel Defense Forces, April 28, 2025.

^{143.} J. Watling and N. Reynolds, “Tactical Lessons from Israel Defense Forces Operations in Gaza, 2023”, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

^{144.} *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Finally, Operation Swords of Iron featured a reality of urban warfare that training can only imperfectly reproduce: the ruins and debris created by the destruction of buildings. Primarily due to Israeli strikes, the large-scale destruction of the built environment (63% of urban infrastructure in the Gaza Strip had been partially or totally destroyed by September 2024)¹⁴⁵ created numerous obstacles that hampered personnel and vehicles. To give an idea of the scale of the issue, Operation Swords of Iron generated more than 47 million tons of debris across the Gaza Strip, compared with 2 million tons recorded in 2014, the year of Operation Protective Edge.¹⁴⁶ By August 2024, 1,200 km of roads, comprising 63% of the Gaza Strip's road network, had been destroyed.¹⁴⁷ The complexity created by the ruins led the IDF to create a new subcategory of urban operations: "devastated terrain warfare".¹⁴⁸ The integration of D9 bulldozers into combat brigades turned out to be particularly useful for recreating movement corridors and opening gaps or filling craters. Similarly, although tanks had been deemed unsuitable for urban warfare after 2006, their excellent mobility and protective capabilities have led to a full restoration of the Merkava tank's use in urban areas.¹⁴⁹

145. "Gaza Strip – Preliminary Debris Quantification: Damage Assessment Analysis: 6th September 2024", United Nations Environment Programme, October 2024, available at: <https://wedocs.unep.org>.

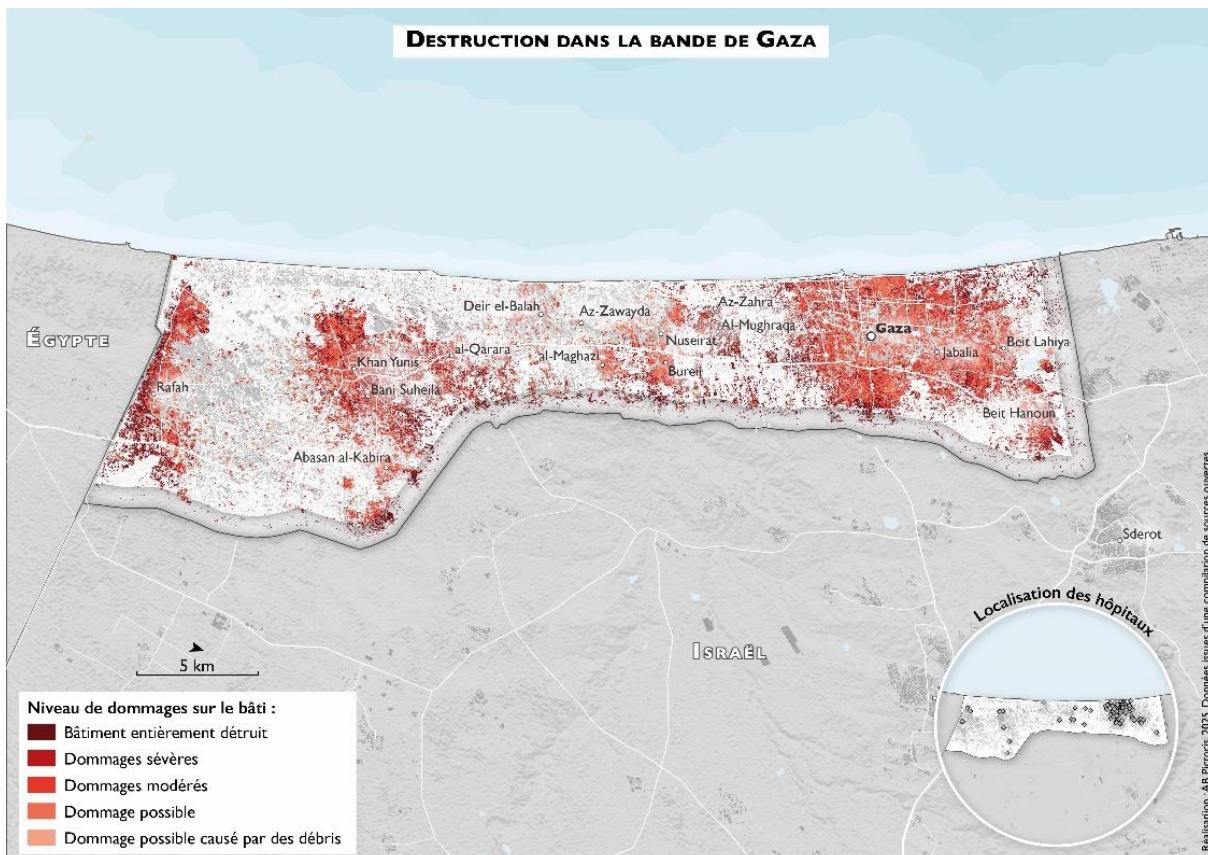
146. *Ibid.*

147. "UNOSAT Gaza Strip Road Network Comprehensive Damage Assessment", UNOSAT, September 9, 2024, available at: <https://unosat.org>.

148. J. Watling and N. Reynolds, "Tactical Lessons from Israel Defense Forces Operations in Gaza, 2023", *op. cit.*, p. 15.

149. Interview with a French officer and expert in the Israel Defense Forces, February 4, 2025.

Map 5: Destruction in the Gaza Strip in September 2024



Loss management and combatant protection

From October 2023 (not including October 7) to September 2024, the IDF lost 393 soldiers, with more than 2,000 wounded in combat,¹⁵⁰ a ratio of around 1 death and 6 injuries per day. By comparison, during Operation Protective Edge the IDF suffered 66 fatalities and 725 injuries in 50 days (1.3 deaths and 14.5 injuries per day). Despite the overall total, the operation's rate of losses was surprisingly low given the intensity of the fighting and the number of reservists deployed.

Table 6: IDF soldiers killed in combat (Gaza) from October 7, 2023, to September 27, 2024

Date	IDF soldiers killed in combat (Gaza)
October 7	439
Oct 2023	53
Nov 2023	56

¹⁵⁰ 2,364 injuries by December 3, 2024. Figures compiled using official IDF data, available at: www.idf.il and www.idf.il.

Dec 2023	102
Jan 2024	53
Feb 2024	18
Mar 2024	16
Apr 2024	7
May 2024	33
Jun 2024	25
Jul 2024	11
Aug 2024	13
Sep 2024	6
Total (excl. October 7)	393
Total	832

© Pierre Néron-Bancel, source: <https://idff.il>.

This low rate was due to several factors. First, the deliberately measured pace of the ground advance, as discussed above.

Second, the preference for using special forces for close combat operations, such as capturing tunnels or urban infrastructure like al-Shifa hospital. The losses suffered by the Yahalom engineering unit are revealing in this respect: In 14 months of the operation, the unit lost 14 soldiers, including its deputy commander, and suffered several hundred injuries.¹⁵¹

The excellence of the medical support for combatants should also be highlighted, in clear contrast with the failings revealed in 2006 during the war in southern Lebanon. Extremely high medical capacity at the front line (almost 800 medics deployed in Gaza, at the cost of high losses among medical teams) made it possible to treat those injured in combat in a record time of under 4 minutes. In the event of hemorrhages, the IDF also routinely performed blood transfusions in the combat zone before evacuation, as well as applying tourniquets. Finally, the tactical situation made it possible to prioritize helicopter evacuations for most injured personnel, who were treated in national hospitals. The choice was made to prioritize initial care followed by immediate evacuation, omitting the intermediate step of

¹⁵¹. Interview with a French officer and expert in the Israel Defense Forces, February 4, 2025.

evacuation to the aid post of the relevant large unit. The improvement of initial care and the reduction of evacuation waiting times significantly decreased the number of Died of Wounds (DOW) casualties. The percentage of injured soldiers who died (casualty fatality rate, CFR) fell to 6.5%, compared to 15% during the 2006 Lebanon War.¹⁵²

Finally, the importance placed on combatant protection when designing the land forces' equipment also contributed to the low number of losses in combat. The superiority of heavily armored vehicles such as the Merkava IV tank or the Namer armored personnel carrier made it possible to save crews when vehicles were hit, sometimes repeatedly. In the whole first year, fewer than 5 Merkava tanks seem to have been completely destroyed.¹⁵³ As well as offering passive protection, these machines were also equipped with the Trophy active protection system, which can neutralize anti-tank munitions by launching an active countermeasure. It turned out to be highly effective in most cases, even at short distances (under 50 m). The challenge remains infantry/armored cooperation, which this type of protection system makes particularly dangerous. Individual protective equipment was also highly effective, with low rates of thorax injuries.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵². A. Pfeffer, "How the IDF Is Using Lessons from Gaza to Teach the US How to Minimise Casualties", *The Jewish Chronicle*, July 10, 2024; interview with an Israeli general officer, Tel Aviv, April 2025.

¹⁵³. Interview with a French officer and expert in the Israel Defense Forces, February 4, 2025.

¹⁵⁴. *Ibid.*

Cooperation

"The ability to act or even to fight together with all the stakeholders participating in crisis resolution at home or abroad",¹⁵⁵

Air support for ground maneuvers

The coordination of air-ground fires to support ground maneuvers appears to be one of the most successful aspects of Operation Swords of Iron. In the opinion of numerous IDF experts, Swords of Iron represents the most advanced and effective integration of close air support (CAS) in the entire history of Israeli military engagements.¹⁵⁶ For the first time, air support was seen as a component of ground maneuver rather than independent of it, as was the case in Lebanon in 2006. This marked a veritable "cultural shift within the Air Force, where success is now measured by the achievements of maneuvering ground forces".¹⁵⁷

This extensive coordination was primarily the result of a series of structural evolutions that have taken place since the 2010s within the IDF, including the establishment of strike cells within brigades (2012), air operations training centers (Operational Air Training Center in 2020 and "Strike School" in 2021), joint forces exercises... In the build-up phase, liaison officers were exchanged between the air and land components up to brigade level.¹⁵⁸

The acquisition of the Elbit Systems Torch-X information and communication system¹⁵⁹ also facilitated joint forces coordination. Finally, brigades had direct access to the air force via a tried and tested emergency procedure, known as "Flash", which could be used to send a short-notice support request.

All these factors helped to reduce the safe distance for CAS from 1,000 to 250 m, or even 80 m in some cases.¹⁶⁰ They also meant the timing of dynamic airstrikes could be better coordinated with ground maneuvers so that targeted objectives were not retaken by Hamas before ground troops had secured them.¹⁶¹

Unprecedented integration of the special forces

As discussed above, for the first time in the IDF's history, special forces were integrated into the joint forces operations of conventional units, directly

^{155.} "Future Land Action", French Army, 2016, p. 29.

^{156.} M. Finkel, "Not a 'War of Its Own': Offensive Air Support for the Maneuvering Forces in the Iron Swords War in Gaza. Factors of Success and Looking Ahead", *Aerospace and Defense*, No. 1, November 2024: pp. 25–44.

^{157.} *Ibid.*

^{158.} Research interview with an Israeli officer, Tel Aviv, April 2025.

^{159.} Torch-X HQ, available at: www.elbitsystems.com [accessed on May 7, 2025].

^{160.} M. Finkel, "Not a 'War of Its Own'", *op. cit.*

^{161.} Interview with an Israeli general officer, April 29, 2025.

subordinate to brigades. The contributions of highly qualified and trained specialist units were invaluable in the most specific or sensitive combat operations. The raid on al-Shifa hospital in March and April 2024 is a good illustration of how this integration was implemented. The brigade-level operation began with armored units taking control of the maneuvering area and cordoning off the zone. Conventional infantry units were then deployed in the area to secure access points and internal areas, opening the way for the special forces, who occupied the hospital, neutralized resistance, and captured objectives. The special forces also carried out all operations in confined spaces (reconnaissance and operations in tunnel networks). Despite the marked cultural difference between special and conventional units, the subordination of special units seems to have had a positive effect, protecting units that lacked training in specific environments and close combat operations.¹⁶² For their part, the special forces incorporated their new role as the spearhead of joint forces operations into their doctrine of use.¹⁶³

The challenge of accommodating humanitarian operations

Acting in a very densely populated area, the IDF had to design its operations with humanitarian aid in mind from the moment it entered the Gaza Strip. Despite the IDF's genuine consideration of the "maneuver" of humanitarian aid, the latter was underestimated and implemented very inadequately. Moreover, coordination with humanitarian organizations was poor, as sadly shown by the strike on a convoy belonging to the non-governmental organization (NGO) World Central Kitchen, which killed seven aid workers on April 1, 2024.¹⁶⁴ The large-scale destruction of urban infrastructure, including the drinking water, electricity, and wastewater disposal networks, but also hospitals and humanitarian NGO headquarters, soon impacted the daily, essential needs of the civilian population. For example, 19 of the 36 hospitals in the Gaza Strip were out of service in December 2024,¹⁶⁵ with a peak during 2024 of 24 facilities out of service and the rest only partly operational.¹⁶⁶ Population displacement due to the fighting (90% of Gaza's 2.1 million inhabitants fled their homes¹⁶⁷) only exacerbated the urgency of making provision for humanitarian aid as the IDF advanced.

Initially the IDF was reluctant to allow humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. Letting convoys through would have gone against the desired objective of isolating and besieging Gaza via the encirclement maneuver. Moreover, it

162. Interview with an Israeli general officer, May 5, 2025.

163. Interview with a French officer and expert in the Israel Defense Forces, April 28, 2025.

164. "Humanitaires tués à Gaza: Sept morts après des frappes israéliennes", *France Info*, April 2, 2024, available at: www.franceinfo.fr.

165. "Gaza: Survivre dans un piège mortel", Médecins sans frontières, December 2024, p. 8.

166. "Peu d'hôpitaux fonctionnels à Gaza, et parfois les conditions sont 'inimaginables'", *ONU Info*, <https://news.un.org/fr> [accessed on May 20, 2025].

167. "Occupied Palestinian Territory", Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, www.unocha.org [accessed on May 20, 2025].

was generally accepted in Israeli society that sending food or fuel to the Gazan population would amount to directly replenishing Hamas's supplies.¹⁶⁸ Under international pressure, however, the Israelis were soon forced to allow convoys to enter the Gaza Strip, although the extremely strict controls put in place to prevent weapons being brought in kept the number of trucks well below the necessary minimum for a long time.

Next, the IDF was soon confronted with the problem of how to distribute humanitarian aid. It was not enough to manage supply flows; it was also essential to prevent Hamas from getting its hands on the convoys' resources, and above all from assuming control of distribution operations, which would have restored its power over the population. The IDF chose to defend distribution points itself, which made it an easy target for the enemy and often put it in a difficult position vis-à-vis a civilian population that had no qualms about resorting to violence. Some distribution operations provoked large-scale panic, as in Gaza on February 29, 2024, when 112 people were killed during a stampede, an event subsequently exploited by Hamas's public relations arm.¹⁶⁹

To better coordinate the management of civilians with the successful conduct of operations, Israel relied on the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), a body created in 1967 that is responsible for civil affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and reports to the Ministry of Defense. Its Gaza department authorizes and supervises the transportation of all supplies to the Gaza Strip by land, air, or sea. This requires significant cooperation with donor countries and NGOs, and particularly Egypt, the country through which most overland supply flows pass. Five entry points on the perimeter of Gaza were opened for convoys, with the principal one at Kerem Shalom on the Egyptian border. Although COGAT claims that just 15% of transport requests were refused for operational reasons,¹⁷⁰ the volume of aid delivered to the population was very variable and well below what was needed on a daily basis, with Israel accused of blocking incoming supplies arbitrarily.¹⁷¹ For the month of March 2024, for example, the United Nations estimates that just 26% of food aid convoys were facilitated by Israel (40% denied and 34% delayed or impeded).¹⁷²

168. Interview with members of the Knesset at Ifri, January 30, 2025.

169. V. Le Guen, "Ce que l'on sait sur la distribution d'aide humanitaire meurtrière à Gaza", France Bleu, March 2, 2024, available at: www.francebleu.fr.

170. "Humanitarian Efforts Israel", available at: <https://gaza-aid-data.gov.il> [accessed on May 20, 2025].

171. "Gaza: Survivre dans un piège mortel", *op. cit.*

172. "Humanitarian Access Snapshot – Gaza Strip | 1-31 March 2024", Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, April 6, 2024, available at: www.unocha.org.

Map 6: Humanitarian access to the Gaza Strip – September 2024



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Thus, despite the resources expended by the IDF to integrate humanitarian aspects into its Gaza Strip control operations, coordination with humanitarian actors was insufficient to cope with the scale of the challenge. The destruction of infrastructure, repeated population displacements into overcrowded gathering areas, and frictions around the transportation and distribution of aid all aggravated an already critical humanitarian situation, significantly undermining the legitimacy of Israel's actions. This dynamic intensified in 2025, when the continuing deterioration of living conditions led the United Nations to officially declare a state of famine in the Gaza Strip in August.¹⁷³

Strategic performance

At the end of the first year of Operation Swords of Iron, did Israel manage to convert its tactical successes into lasting strategic results? We analyze four criteria—understanding, influence, moral strength, and efficiency of command—to assess the consistency between stated objectives, resources committed, and results achieved.

173. "Famine Confirmed for First Time in Gaza", Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Unicef, World Health Organization (WHO), and World Food Programme (WFP), August 22, 2025, available at: www.who.int.

Understanding

"The ability to perceive, to interpret and to assess a complex and ever-evolving operational environment in order to provide the required context, insight and foresight to make a decision".¹⁷⁴

Strategic surprise

One of the major questions raised by Operation Al-Aqsa Flood is as follows: How could the IDF, a highly distinguished military backed by internationally recognized intelligence services, have been so completely caught off guard by Hamas, a non-state actor that has been under constant Israeli surveillance for years? This shock adds to the long list of strategic surprises, that is, events that initially appear inconceivable but which prove predictable in hindsight.¹⁷⁵ The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and, in Israeli national history, the Yom Kippur War that broke out on October 6, 1973, thirty years and one day before Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, all fall into this category.

The Israeli government has not yet appointed an official commission of inquiry to assess the causes of its security apparatus's failure, despite a High Court of Justice decision from May 2025 requiring that one be established.¹⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the country has a long history of such commissions, the best known being the Agranat Commission, following the Yom Kippur War,¹⁷⁷ and the one chaired in 2006 by Judge Winograd, after the 2006 Lebanon War.¹⁷⁸ A detailed understanding of security failures and how to correct them is crucial for Israel. The government justifies the delay by citing ongoing operations, but another explanation is the political sensitivity of establishing responsibility, which could trigger a series of high-level resignations. Brigadier General Yossi Sariel, commander of Unit 8200, stepped down on September 12, 2024,¹⁷⁹ following the resignation in April 2024 of General Aharon Haliva, head of military intelligence. In 2025, Chief of the General

174. "Future Land Action", French Army, 2016, p. 25.

175. See C. Brustlein, "La surprise stratégique: De la notion aux implications", *Focus stratégique*, No. 10, Ifri, 2008. The study notes: "Strategic surprise, though rarely defined precisely, generally refers to a poorly anticipated or unanticipated threat that strikes a state unexpectedly and undermines its security assumptions and posture."

176. S. Ben-Nun and Y. Halfon, "Israeli Gov't Decides Against Launching State Probe into October 7 Massacre", *Jerusalem Post*, May 5, 2025.

177. B. Sentenac, "La 'Commission Agranat' et la guerre du Kippour: Qu'attendre d'une commission d'enquête sur les défaillances des services de renseignement et de l'armée?", *Revue de défense nationale*, No. 874, November 2024, pp. 71–82.

178. P. Razoux, "Après l'échec: Les réorientations de Tsahal depuis la deuxième guerre du Liban", *Focus stratégique*, No. 2, Ifri, October 2007.

179. Despite the sensitivity of his position, this general's identity was revealed by *The Guardian*. He published a book online (without a publishing house) titled *The Human-Machine Team*, under the name Brigadier General Y.S., during a one-year research fellowship at the U.S. National Defense University in Washington, D.C. The publication page was linked to his Gmail account, which made it possible to identify him. The book, published in 2021, describes how AI is used in a military context, particularly to build "target machines". See H. Davies and B. McKernan, "Top Israeli Spy Chief Exposes His True Identity in Online Security Lapse", *The Guardian*, April 5, 2024, available at: www.theguardian.com.

Staff Herzi Halevi and General Yaron Finkelman, commander of the Southern Command, also left their posts. All cited their failure to prevent the October 7 attack.

Another point of tension involves the eventual composition of such a commission. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court may appoint its members, and traditionally one of its judges chairs it, but the institution is currently the target of attacks by the government. On the other hand, if the prime minister were to directly appoint the commission, its ability to render an impartial judgment would be undermined.¹⁸⁰

An initial analysis of this tragic misjudgment can therefore draw on information revealed by the so-called civil commission, a citizen initiative established to shed light on the October 7 attack in a context of widespread mistrust of the government. More than 120 witnesses testified before the commission, including leading military and political figures.¹⁸¹ We supplement this information with a report from the IDF that summarizes multiple internal investigations conducted at various key levels, the conclusions of which were released to the press in February 2025. The report confirms that the Hamas attack came as a complete surprise in spite of the warning signs, which went unrecognized.

The attack was surprising in four respects: the timing, the scale of the assault, the speed of the attackers, and the violence of their methods. Three types of errors stand out: overconfidence resulting from an overemphasis on technology, underestimation of the enemy, and dysfunction in the chain of command.

Israel was overconfident in its technology. As a result, it fell into the transparency trap, in which “the visual clarity gained through technology does not necessarily guarantee the cognitive clarity that would allow us to understand the opponent’s intentions or even predict their actions”.¹⁸² In this case, the paradox of transparency played out fully: Israel’s mass surveillance of the Gazan population did not provide it with clear-sightedness and an accurate understanding of Hamas’s intentions.

Three factors explain this overconfidence. As noted in the first section, the IDF model itself led to significant investment in technology, which fosters a sometimes illusory sense of control. The so-called “smart” fence, which was modernized in 2021 to collect data through a series of sensors, radars, and thermal cameras, reinforced the illusion that Israel controlled the Gaza threat. More broadly, IDF doctrine itself gradually evolved toward an approach where technical intelligence assumed a predominant role. General

180. S. Forey, “En Israël, l’enquête impossible sur le fiasco sécuritaire”, *Le Monde*, October 6, 2024, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

181. S. Sokol, “Échecs du 7 octobre: L’enquête civile blâme Netanyahu, mais que...”, *The Times of Israel*, November 26, 2024, available at: <https://fr.timesofisrael.com>.

182. G. Garnier and P. Néron-Bancel, “De l’autre côté de la colline’: Atouts et fausses promesses de la transparence du champ de bataille”, *Focus stratégique*, No. 118, Ifri, May 2024.

Yossi Sariel, commander of Unit 8200, argued as early as 2021 that artificial intelligence had enabled a “revolution” in processing diverse data and required overhauling traditional approaches: “The machine needs enough data regarding the battlefield, the population, visual information, cellular data, social media connections, pictures, cellphone contacts. The more data and the more varied it is, the better”.¹⁸³

In this case, emphasizing this type of intelligence led Israel to undervalue other signals from the field. Compounding the Shin Bet and IDF’s gradual devaluing of human intelligence (HUMINT) in their threat assessment was the fact that it was becoming increasingly difficult to recruit human sources, Hamas having locked down its military wing. Beginning with Israel’s disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005 and Hamas’s takeover in 2007, this disinvestment in HUMINT accelerated after Yahya Sinwar took control of the movement in 2017. Sinwar’s political trajectory is telling in this regard: Born in the Khan Younis refugee camp (his parents, originally from Ashkelon, had fled in 1948), he made a name for himself by creating Hamas’s first intelligence service, “al-Majd”, which was dedicated to hunting down Palestinians who had collaborated with Israel.¹⁸⁴

Second, the IDF’s perceptual biases led it to underestimate Hamas, both in terms of its capabilities and its willingness to attack Israel despite the unfavorable balance of power. With respect to Hamas’s intentions, the prevailing view was that Hamas had been “contained”, particularly through Qatari financial transfers, and that its primary ambition was to govern Gaza. The Netanyahu government sought to strengthen Hamas in order to weaken the Palestinian Authority and divide Palestinians between the West Bank and Gaza, all in order to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state.¹⁸⁵ This vision had in fact been briefly endorsed by the first Trump administration, which, in its “deal of the century” proposed by Jared Kushner, floated the idea of recognizing both an independent Gaza Strip and the legality of West Bank settlements.¹⁸⁶ Concerning Hamas’s capabilities, Israel’s fixation on the tunnels diverted its attention from the possibility of a ground attack involving bulldozers and an air attack involving paragliders. (The tactical success of Hamas’s maritime maneuver was negligible.) The use of drones and the level of intelligence possessed by the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades—which proved to be quite precise in targeting Israeli sensors—caught Israel off guard. Israel had viewed Hamas as incapable of conducting a large-scale conventional attack: It was, after all, a non-state actor with no armored vehicles, airpower, naval forces, strategic depth, or mobility.

183. Y. S, *The Human-Machine Team*, self-published, 2021.

184. S. Forey, “Yahya Sinouar, chef militaire et politique radical du Hamas, architecte de l’attaque du 7-Octobre, est mort”, *Le Monde*, October 17, 2024, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

185. T. Schneider, “Pendant des années, Netanyahu a soutenu le Hamas. Aujourd’hui, on en paie le prix”, *The Times of Israel*, October 8, 2023, available at: <https://fr.timesofisrael.com>.

186. U. Dekel, A. Kurz, and N. Shusterman, “The Deal of the Century: Where Does It Lead?”, Institute for National Security Studies, February 24, 2020.

As a result of these preconceptions, Israel failed to properly assess the significance of warning signs that were clear in retrospect. For example, the Shin Bet and IDF possessed plans for an attack, titled "Jericho Wall", that bears a striking similarity to Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. According to *The New York Times*, which broke the story and reviewed the document, the operational method described in the attack plans matches that of October 7: a barrage of rockets that would force soldiers to take cover; drones that would neutralize security cameras and automated defense systems; Hamas fighters crossing on foot, by car, or by paraglider; and the taking of large numbers of hostages.¹⁸⁷

Observation units stationed at the border—the so-called lookouts (*tatzpitaniyot*) of the Border Defense Corps—had frequently sent alerts to their superiors about an increase in Hamas training and numerous movements of armed men in pickup trucks. These alerts, issued by all-female units that communicate real-time information (hence their nickname, "the eyes of the army"), were ignored. The fact that these signals were labeled "weak" calls into question the very distinction between weak and strong signals in intelligence analysis. Furthermore, despite their proximity to Gaza, these border units had not received training for an invasion and lacked weapons, leaving them unable to resist the attack when it came. In their testimonies, these soldiers also described broken cameras that had not been repaired and surveillance balloons (meant to cover the cameras' blind spots) that were faulty. The testimony of one soldier's father, whose daughter had told him about the defective cameras, is revealing in this regard. Before the civil commission of inquiry, he testified: "I listened, but I didn't act. I told her that we had the best and strongest army in the world".¹⁸⁸

Hamas exploited the IDF's careless use of social media. In September 2023, as one of the female observers at the Nahal Oz base was celebrating her birthday, Hamas members erected a large banner behind the barrier reading "Happy Birthday" in Hebrew followed by the soldier's name. She was killed on October 7. By studying photos posted on social media, Hamas members learned details about the base, including key elements such as the location of the armory, the commander's quarters, and the location of the shelters.¹⁸⁹ When it entered Gaza, the IDF found a replica of the base that had been used to train Hamas fighters.

These perceptual biases were compounded by organizational biases, the result of a dysfunctional chain of command. One of the main problems was that superiors dismissed opinions out of hand because they came from lower-ranking or female soldiers. In July 2023, a non-commissioned officer in Unit

187. R. Bergman and A. Goldman, "Israel Knew Hamas's Attack Plan More Than a Year Ago", *The New York Times*, November 30, 2023, available at: www.nytimes.com.

188. S. Sokol, "Des Tatzpitaniot témoignent de problèmes et de manque d'entraînement avant le 7 octobre", *The Times of Israel*, September 18, 2025, available at: <https://fr.timesofisrael.com>.

189. R. Rérolle, "Après le 7-Octobre, le père d'une guetteuse israélienne devenu figure de proue des familles endeuillées", *Le Monde*, April 15, 2025, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

8200 alerted her superiors that a Hamas exercise was replicating the "Jericho Wall" plan mentioned above. She repeatedly issued warnings at various levels. The 143rd Territorial Division "Firefox", responsible for the Gaza Strip, drafted an internal memo referring to a major attack involving the capture of 250 hostages.¹⁹⁰ One of the commanders at the Nahal Oz base who was convinced that a raid was being prepared issued multiple alerts about it. She was even nicknamed "raid" by her fellow soldiers.¹⁹¹ All of these soldiers' superiors considered these alerts "imaginary" or "unrealistic". Furthermore, the algorithms that control the central information management system, established by General Yossi Sariel, blocked the non-commissioned officer's report.¹⁹²

Israel does, however, have mechanisms to challenge prevailing analyses, such as the Ipcha Mistabra (Red Team) unit of Aman (Israeli military intelligence). The head of Ipcha Mistabra claimed to have issued, in the three weeks leading up to October 7, four alerts emphasizing that Hamas believed that Israel's internal political unrest put the country in a weak position that Hamas could exploit. Reportedly, two of his reports were widely circulated among political and military leadership.¹⁹³ In this case, this unit's analyses suffered from well-known limitations: The more the role of devil's advocate becomes ritualized, the less seriously that view is taken, precisely because it is often proved wrong. The civil commission of inquiry also pointed out how politicized the unit had become: In his power struggle with the intelligence agencies, the prime minister had used Ipcha Mistabra not as a source of genuine dissent, but as a tool to delegitimize the agencies.

As a result of these various biases and dysfunctions, the IDF's response to Operation Al-Aqsa Flood was delayed. On the night of October 6–7, a massive activation of Israeli SIM cards in Gaza was detected. This scenario had occurred before, however, and could therefore have been a false alarm. Shin Bet Director Ronen Bar and Southern Command officials were alerted. At 4:00 a.m., Chief of the General Staff Herzi Halevi attended an assessment meeting. The IDF chose to discreetly raise the alert level in the air and at sea but, fearing Hamas would detect the change and consider it a provocation, not on the ground. Prime Minister Netanyahu's military secretary, General Avi Gil, was not informed of the situation until 6:15 a.m., 15 minutes before the attack began.

The October 7 attack is thus an archetypal example of a risk paradox as Michael Handel defines it: The more unlikely an attack seems, the less

190. "3 Weeks Before Oct. 7, IDF Gaza Division Warned of Hamas Plan to Attack, Take 250 Hostages", *The Times of Israel*, June 17, 2024.

191. R. Rérolle, "Après le 7-Octobre, le père d'une guetteuse israélienne devenu figure de proue des familles endeuillées", *op. cit.*

192. "Un haut responsable des services secrets israéliens sur la sellette", France Inter, April 8, 2024, available at: www.radiofrance.fr.

193. "Head of IDF Devil's Advocate Unit Tried Repeatedly in September to Warn of Possible Hamas Attack", *The Times of Israel*, January 6, 2024.

seriously it is taken, which paradoxically increases its chances of success.¹⁹⁴ Faced with an asymmetric enemy, Israel fell prey to technological hubris, cognitive biases, ineffective internal mechanisms, and weakened security governance.

Targeting: Large-scale targeted assassinations

The principle of restraint in the use of force, encapsulated in the Israeli concept *Tohar HaNeshek* ("purity of arms"), is the moral pillar of the Israeli army and a central element of its identity narrative. It is thus for both moral and strategic reasons that the IDF has, over the years, developed such a high level of expertise in targeting.¹⁹⁵

This expertise involves, on the one hand, the preeminent role of intelligence in operations that enables the IDF to identify individual members of an enemy force (in this case Hamas) and, on the other hand, economy of means: Because Israel's army model relies on technological superiority, not mass, precision weaponry is essential.

Israel has long engaged in a policy of SIKUM, an acronym for *sikul memukad* ("targeted prevention"). The goal of this policy is to eliminate, usually through airpower, any individual considered a threat. This approach has been adopted by other Western armies, especially in the wake of technological advances in the field of drones. The founder of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, was killed in a targeted assassination by the IDF in 2004. At first, SIKUM was used only against so-called high-value, strategic targets, such as the commanders of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, all of whom were killed this way. SIKUM was mostly limited to military targets and used to minimize "collateral damage", using precision weapons to comply with international law. That said, the practice is controversial.¹⁹⁶

By the IDF's own admission, the response to October 7 did away with the requirement for precision. As IDF spokesperson Daniel Hagari stated on October 9, 2023, "the emphasis is on damage and not on accuracy". Operation Swords of Iron applied SIKUM on an unprecedented scale. In accordance with the prime minister's stated objective—that the Israeli army "totally eliminate" Hamas, "down to their very foundation"¹⁹⁷—the IDF carried out operations intended to systematically eliminate all Palestinians associated with Hamas or

194. This analysis is developed in Michel Wyss's excellent piece, "The October 7 Attack: An Assessment of the Intelligence Failings", *CTC Sentinel*, October 2024.

195. The expression "purity of arms", a true moral compass for the IDF, appeared before the creation of the state, in a speech delivered by Berl Katznelson in 1939: "Restraint means that our arms remain pure. We learn the use of arms, we carry them, we face our enemies. But we do not want our arms to be stained with the blood of innocents". See S. Cohen, *Tuer ou laisser vivre: Israël et la morale de la guerre*, Paris: Flammarion, 2025, p. 21.

196. A. Férey, *Assassinats ciblés: Critique du libéralisme armé*, Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 2020; R. Bergman, *Lève-toi et tue le premier. L'histoire secrète des assassinats ciblés commandités par Israël*, Paris: Grasset, 2020.

197. "Gaza: Benyamin Netanyahu jure d'éliminer le Hamas 'jusqu'à la racine'", *Le Figaro*, July 3, 2025, available at: www.lefigaro.fr.

Islamic Jihad. As Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated on October 11, 2023, "every Hamas member is a dead man".¹⁹⁸

That goal was still a pipe dream only a few years ago. It has since been made possible both by the considerable amount of data collected by the IDF and Israel's intelligence agencies and by the computing power of the AI used for targeting. Operation Swords of Iron employed at least six software programs developed for the Target Division and which came out of Unit 8200: Alchemist, to calculate the trajectory for intercepting rockets; Gospel (*Habsora* in Hebrew), to destroy infrastructure; Depth of Wisdom, to locate tunnels; Fire Factory, to develop strike plans in real time; Lavender, to identify human targets; and Where's Daddy?, to locate them.¹⁹⁹

Operation Swords of Iron thus stands out for its intensive use of targeting, both in terms of the unprecedented number of targets generated and the broad nature of those targets, not all of which were military. According to Israeli authorities, more than 15,000 targets were struck during the first 35 days of the conflict in Gaza, three times more than during all 51 days of Operation Protective Edge in 2014. Nearly half of these were "power targets" (that is, strategic targets), including universities, religious sites, and government offices.²⁰⁰

Table 7: Change in the number of targets addressed by the Israeli army per operation

Name of operation	Duration of the conflict (days)	Number of targets	Average number of targets per day
Swords of Iron (2023)	35	15,000	429
Guardian of the Walls (2021)	11	1,500	136
Protective Edge (2014)	51	5,748 (average estimate)	112
Pillar of Defense (2012)	8	1,500	187
Cast Lead (2008)	22	3,400	155

Source: Y. Abraham, +972 Magazine, available at: www.972mag.com.

We identify four categories of targets. First, the IDF struck tactical targets, such as Hamas training sites, weapons caches, and rocket launch sites.

Second, it targeted underground targets (namely tunnels), using airstrikes to collapse houses above or near their entrances and exits.

198. "Joint Statement by PM Netanyahu and MK Benny Gantz", Israeli Emergency Government, October 11, 2023.

199. L. de Roucy-Rochegonde and A. Férey, "De Gaza à l'Ukraine: L'intelligence artificielle en guerre", *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 89, No. 3, Ifri, Autumn 2024.

200. According to statements by IDF spokesperson Daniel Hagari. See Y. Abraham, "Inside Israel's Mass Assassination Factory", +972 Magazine, November 30, 2023, available at: www.972mag.com.

Third, the IDF identified so-called “power” targets (*matarot otzem*), including high-rise buildings and residential towers that Hamas could have been using as observation posts. These practices had already been tested in Operation Guardian of the Walls in 2021. In that operation, however, the IDF had taken care to evacuate buildings before striking and used drones to verify the strike’s effectiveness.²⁰¹ The IDF did not systematically evacuate buildings during Operation Swords of Iron, which significantly increased collateral damage and left many people buried under the rubble. Power targets also include public buildings, such as universities and government offices. The purpose of targeting such buildings, as per Giulio Douhet’s theories,²⁰² is to inflict enough suffering on the population to incite them to revolt and pressure their government—in this case Hamas—to stop the war.

The final category is that of human targets. In the past, under SIKUM, these included only senior Hamas commanders. The IDF considered killing them and their families to be “particularly brutal” and was thus sparing and cautious in designating targets and carrying out operations. During Operation Swords of Iron, however, the IDF expanded this category to include all Hamas members, whether senior or junior. Generating such a large number of human targets—the algorithm proposed nearly 37,000—was made possible by Israel’s Lavender software. Lavender merges and aggregates a range of data, including biodata (i.e., surname, first name, age), communication data, social media presence, images captured by drones, and surveillance videos. By cross-referencing this data, Lavender classifies Gazans according to the likelihood that they belong to Hamas. What makes Lavender unique, thanks to the AI’s pattern recognition capability, is the speed at which it determines whether a target is valid. The AI is therefore key to both establishing such a large database and processing the data at such high speeds. This type of software automates the production of target files by cross-referencing data from multiple sources, using a model similar to US “signature” strikes. Targets can thus be selected based solely on algorithmically identified patterns of behavior: Their identity does not need to be formally confirmed. For example, the following are indications that someone may be a Hamas member: frequently changing phones or homes, turning on one’s phone at certain times of the day, being in a WhatsApp group that includes a Hamas member, or owning a phone that belonged to a Hamas member.

This list of names is then imported into another software program, Where’s Daddy?, which locates the targets when they are at home with their families, to maximize the chances of killing them. To save on guidance kits, purchases of which are regularly negotiated with the United States, the IDF typically used unguided munitions for “garbage targets” (individuals of low tactical value, also

201. Y. Abraham, “Inside Israel’s Mass Assassination Factory”, *op. cit.* The building housing the offices of Associated Press and Al Jazeera had already been destroyed by the Israeli army in 2021. According to the article, it was among the “power targets”.

202. G. Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, 1921; R. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996.

known as “junior operatives”), according to testimonies from officers collected by the journalist Yuval Abraham.²⁰³

Untargeted targeting?

There are two main problems with this massive expansion of targeted killings in Operation Swords of Iron.

First, Lavender’s error rate resulted in numerous mistakes in targeting. Before Lavender was deployed in Operation Swords of Iron, a sample was manually collected and checked: The error rate was 10%. A back-of-the-envelope calculation shows that out of 37,000 targets—the number of people Lavender identified as being Hamas members at the start of the conflict—3,700 people were perhaps targeted by mistake. If we assume, based on intelligence from the Where’s Daddy? software, that these people were targeted in their homes with an average of five people around them, then some 18,500 civilians may have been killed, which is roughly the estimated number of deaths after 35 days of conflict.

The second problem is the dramatic reduction in precautionary measures taken to avoid “collateral damage”, that is, civilians near military targets. Killing these civilians is not a violation of international humanitarian law if 1) they are not intentionally targeted, 2) all feasible precautions are taken to minimize harm to them (the precautionary principle), and 3) the military objective justifies it (the principle of proportionality).²⁰⁴ The IDF went to great lengths to warn Gazans about strikes and indicate the location of “safe zones”, by posting information on social media, sending messages directly to Gazans’ phones, and dropping leaflets (the IDF claims to have dropped 16 million in April 2024).²⁰⁵ Drones were also used to broadcast messages in Arabic. Other, more rigorous procedures that had been implemented in prior IDF operations, however, were not used. (One such procedure is “roof knocking”:²⁰⁶ The IDF fires a warning shot on the roof that is light enough not to destroy the building. This signals to the residents that their building will be bombed in 5 minutes.)²⁰⁷ The head of the Israeli Air Force, General Omer Tishler, has stated that these procedures are no longer the norm for Operation Swords of Iron: “We act precisely and professionally but not surgically. I’m not talking about single, tens, or hundreds [of strikes]. We are talking about thousands of munitions”.²⁰⁸ Israel appears to be

203. Y. Abraham, “Inside Israel’s Mass Assassination Factory”, *op. cit.*

204. See G. S. Corn and A. Férey, “Droit humanitaire et combats urbains: Entretien avec Geoffrey S. Corn; entretien avec Amélie Férey”, CESA, Vortex, No. 7, “Varia”, 2025, available at: www.calameo.com.

205. S. Hegarty and A. Nour, “Gaza Evacuation Warnings from IDF Contain Many Errors”, BBC, April 5, 2024.

206. “Le ‘roof knocking’ ou comment Israël évite les victimes civiles à Gaza”, *The Times of Israel*, May 20, 2021, available at: <https://fr.timesofisrael.com>.

207. “Senior Israeli Source: Gaza Will Not Be Hamastan; ‘Roof Knocking’ Policy No Longer Norm”, *The Times of Israel*, October 9, 2024, available at: www.timesofisrael.com.

208. E. Fabian, “Air Force Says It’s Hitting Gaza on an Unprecedented Scale”, *The Times of Israel*, October 11, 2023, available at: www.timesofisrael.com.

reserving most of its precision munitions for a possible confrontation with targets of strategic importance, namely Hezbollah and Iran.

The IDF therefore broadened its targeting to include all members of Hamas, while simultaneously reducing its focus on limiting collateral damage. As the international community has not failed to note, this combination has caused a particularly large number of civilian deaths. In a conflict marked by intense information warfare, Israel, though anxious to preserve its legitimacy, has chosen to depart from its traditional posture of restraint and precision. The brutality of Hamas's initial attack helped shift the conflict into a more emotional gear, one in which Israel's strategic judgment in conducting operations is at greater risk of being impaired.

Influence

"The ability to act on the perceptions to a similar degree to kinetic and conventional ones."²⁰⁹

Operation Swords of Iron has shown that tactical victories in the field cannot compensate for defeat in the war of opinion. To prosecute this war, Israel is dependent on the international community and on the United States in particular. Israel needs Washington's support to finance its war, replenish its matériel, and secure its strategic position. The density of US military positioning in the region makes Washington a powerful and indispensable ally. The 40,000 US soldiers stationed in the Middle East and the several US aircraft carriers that were mobilized after October 7 to back Israel against Hezbollah and Iran are integral to Israel's strategic posture. The threat of a partial halt to deliveries, which the Biden administration made repeatedly,²¹⁰ shows that the classic military confrontation is also being played out in the domain of international opinion.

Israel was cognizant of the need to consider kinetic and non-kinetic operations in tandem long before Operation Swords of Iron. The state has a history of engaging in public relations efforts to legitimize its military operations that dates back to its founding. These efforts are based on the principle that a good international image, being necessary to secure military and political alliances with foreign powers, is integral to the war effort. In Israel, the issue of influence is approached from at least two perspectives: *hasbara* ("explanation"), led by the political echelon, and cognitive warfare, led by the military echelon. For analytical purposes, these Israeli categories are only partially adopted here, as they roughly correspond to the Western doctrinal categories of strategic communication, psychological operations,

209. "Future Land Action", French Army, 2016, p. 51.

210. "Biden décide de l'arrêt de livraisons d'armes offensives vers Israël", *Le Monde*, May 9, 2024, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

and operational-level communications.²¹¹ Israel has also engaged in lawfare to respond to criticism and to limit the various criminal proceedings brought against it.

Strategic communication: Hasbara

Efforts at the political level to justify Israel's military operations and its position on Palestine generally fall under the Israeli umbrella term *hasbara*. Derived from the Hebrew *laasbir* ("to explain"), *hasbara* sits at the midway point between public diplomacy and propaganda. Its purpose is to explain and rationalize the state's actions.

We will not review the history of how *hasbara* has been implemented at the institutional level. Note for our purposes that in the context of Operation Swords of Iron, Benjamin Netanyahu seized control of *hasbara* as soon as the conflict began. On October 12, 2023, Public Diplomacy Minister Galit Distel-Atbaryan resigned from her post because the prime minister was so involved in decision-making that her ministry had been rendered effectively "redundant".²¹² Netanyahu created a National Public Diplomacy Directorate²¹³ that reports directly to the Prime Minister's Office. The Directorate has been at the center of several key campaigns that have revolutionized the administration's approach to *hasbara*.

First, to better communicate the scale of Hamas's October 7 attack to the international community, the IDF assembled a 48-minute video using footage collected from surveillance cameras, victims, Hamas commando units, and Gazans who had entered the country in the wake of these units to plunder Israeli towns. The film follows the timeline of the attack and its various phases: Hamas's takeover of military bases, kibbutzim, and the Nova festival, followed by the IDF's eventual retaking of the territory. A reservist who works in the film industry offered to edit the footage. So as not to compound the horror of the attacks, Israel chose to show it only to a select audience of "opinion leaders", mostly from Western countries.²¹⁴ The National Public Diplomacy Directorate, under the control of the IDF, managed this distribution, sometimes with the help of prominent figures. The film was shown to members of the national parliaments of several allied countries, which helped unite this community around Israel and garner support for its ground offensive while diverting attention from the controversy surrounding the number of civilians killed in Gaza by the IDF. Several journalists were shown the film, which helped focus the debate on October 7 and not the ongoing operation.

211. R. Mielcarek, "La défense française, en retard dans le domaine de la communication stratégique", *Les Champs de Mars*, No. 30, 2018, pp. 37–45.

212. A. Spiro, "La ministre de la Diplomatie publique démissionne, invoque un 'gaspillage de fonds publics'", *The Times of Israel*, October 13, 2023, available at: <https://fr.timesofisrael.com>.

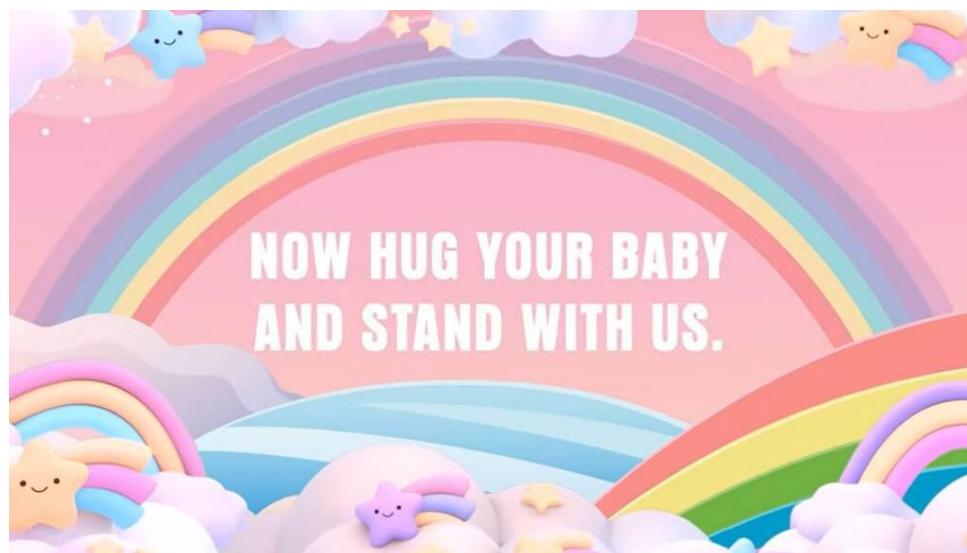
213. "Israel's Legal and Factual Justification for Its Actions against Hamas in Gaza", Government of Israel, April 10, 2024, available at: www.gov.il.

214. One of the authors of this study viewed the film at the Israeli embassy in Paris.

The second major success of the National Public Diplomacy Directorate in its early days was its campaign around the slogan “HAMAS=ISIS”. The campaign was designed to encourage Europeans, who had themselves been victims of terrorism, to identify with Israel. This choice of narrative indicates that the traditional approach to *hasbara* as rational persuasion has been supplanted by a more cognitive approach designed to appeal to emotions and elicit empathy.

The “HAMAS=ISIS” campaign was also conducted in an innovative way, through advertisements on social media and online games such as the highly popular Candy Crush. The contrast between the childlike imagery and the harsh tone of the message is jarring.

Image circulated by the National Public Diplomacy Directorate on the Candy Crush application



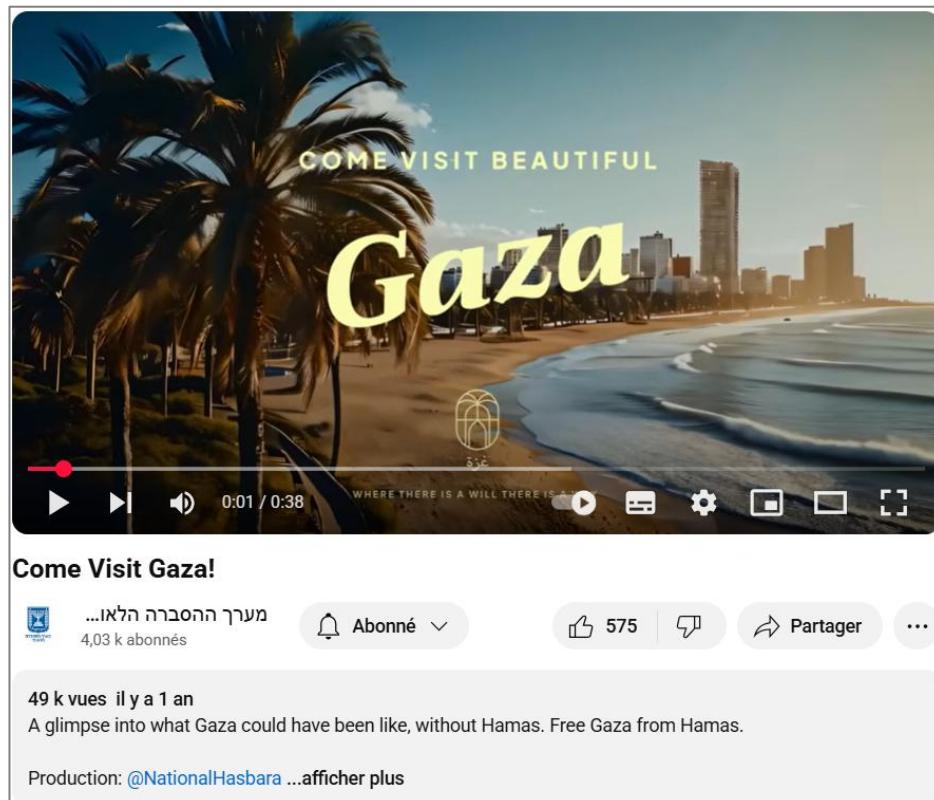
Source: National Public Diplomacy Directorate, YouTube.

The National Public Diplomacy Directorate also supported field operations to counter accusations of genocide. The video “Come Visit Beautiful Gaza”, released in January 2024, includes a series of AI-generated images depicting what the Gaza Strip could supposedly look like if Hamas were not in control. In the style of a tourism video, the voiceover, in English, celebrates “stunning beaches and charming boardwalks”, “five-star hotels”, “the best in Middle Eastern food”, and “vibrant nightlife”. The video closes with the following on-screen text: “This is what Gaza could have been like if Hamas hadn’t built a nation of terror, instead of a nation of peace”.²¹⁵ “Come Visit Beautiful Gaza” thus blames Hamas, and not the IDF, for the current destruction of the Gaza Strip. A year later, this video would influence Trump’s vision of the Gaza Strip as expressed in an outrageous video

²¹⁵ “Come Visit Gaza!”, ייחד ננצח - מערך ההסברה הלאומי, YouTube, January 21, 2024, available at: www.youtube.com/.

produced by the EyeMix virtual agency that came to be known as the “Gaza Riviera” video. It features computer-generated images of Donald Trump, Elon Musk, and Benjamin Netanyahu dancing in a Dubai-on-steroids vision of Gaza.²¹⁶

“Come Visit Gaza!” video, produced by the National Public Diplomacy Directorate, YouTube



Source: National Public Diplomacy Directorate, [YouTube](#).

What makes Israeli *hasbara* innovative is its network of civil organizations. These organizations can serve as intermediaries, offering content that is perceived as more authentic or more viral because it departs from conventional institutional communication, which, paradoxically, is perceived as less than reliable. Because state actors are not directly involved with these organizations, they can claim plausible deniability: The Israeli government is not held accountable for what these organizations do.

Since the launch of Operation Swords of Iron, the National Public Diplomacy Directorate has relied on a mix of NGOs, more or less spontaneous grassroots initiatives, and influencers, some in domains far removed from the military, such as culinary influencers. According to the Israeli Ministry of

²¹⁶ Y. Roblin, “C’était une blague: Les créateurs de la vidéo Trump Gaza générée par IA se défendent”, TF1/LCI, March 7, 2025.

Foreign Affairs, Israel has approached nearly a thousand influencers of various nationalities.²¹⁷

In December 2023, two months after the October 7 attack, the Institute for National Security Studies mapped civil *hasbara* initiatives. Its researchers counted 120 “operations rooms”, with 40 organizations developing specific technological tools, including 100 databases used to identify Israeli government messaging that could support pro-Israel narratives. Of these discussion forums that enable concerted action, 72 are volunteer-based. Thirteen of them are outgrowths of organizations that existed before the war, such as Stand With Us²¹⁸ and DiploAct.

COMOPS: The IDF Spokesperson's Unit

The Israeli army produces a substantial amount of resources and information about its war against Hamas. The IDF's X account, for example, is available in seven languages: Hebrew, English, French, Spanish, Russian, Farsi, and Arabic. Through this channel, the IDF provides live commentary on military operations in the Gaza Strip, continually publishes information, and shares testimonies from Israeli soldiers to humanize the war. On social media, it vehemently criticizes Hamas leaders and counters Hamas disinformation. More than a thousand people staff the IDF Spokesperson's Unit, whose newsroom operates around the clock, handling operational communications and responding to requests from journalists.

The IDF's operational communications are twofold. On the one hand are communications directed at the population of Gaza, to inform them of bombings or maneuvers; on the other are communications directed abroad, to justify the army's operations.

The first aspect has already been mentioned in relation to targeting. The IDF has made it a point to communicate with civilians so they could move away from combat zones. This communication includes both leaflets and Arabic-language social media posts via IDF press releases. These posts were replicated in Lebanon and even Iran.

The second aspect warrants closer examination because it illustrates the originality of the IDF's communication strategy. Historically, the IDF has stood out from other Western armies for its transparency and boldness in communication. It was among the first to provide live updates about its operations, particularly drone strikes. The comparison with the Ukrainian army is instructive in this regard, since both armies have fully embraced the

217. T. Lefèvre, “Des influenceurs franco-israéliens au service de la propagande de l’État hébreu”, France Inter, March 14, 2024, available at: www.radiofrance.fr.

218. StandWithUS was founded in 2001 in Los Angeles. It defines itself as nonpartisan and states its mission is to educate the public about Israel, combat antisemitism, and correct what it considers misinformation or biased discourse about Israel. In 2021, it had a budget of around \$15 million. See “Supporting Israel and Fighting Antisemitism Around the World”, StandWithUS, July 2025, available at: www.standwithus.com.

conventions of social media communication, including memes, humor, provocation, dialogue, and engagement with the OSINT community.

The ability of the IDF Spokesperson's Unit to leverage technological innovations in telecommunications and break with the conventions of institutional communication gives it exceptional visibility. It has supported field operations to prepare for tactical phases that are expected to generate strong reactions abroad.

On October 27, for example, the IDF posted a 3D model on its official X account showing a complex network of tunnels and bunkers beneath al-Shifa Hospital to demonstrate that Hamas was using it as a command center.²¹⁹ According to this video, the hospital represented the "beating heart" of Hamas's command structure, and several of its buildings sat directly above tunnels accessible from the hospital facilities. (This version was disputed after the hospital was seized.)²²⁰ The purpose of the video (which, again, featured an artificial creation, not actual footage) was to "prove" the military purpose of the operation, since hospitals enjoy special protection under international law. The use of images is key here: Images induce a cognitive bias based on the old principle that seeing is believing.

Diagram of Hamas command center posted by the IDF



Home to Hamas' Headquarters, This is an IDF 3D Diagram of the Shifa Hospital:



Source: Israel Defense Forces, available at: [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com).

219. Available at: www.youtube.com.

220. "L'hôpital Al-Shifa, centre de commandement du Hamas? Ce que montrent les images", *Le Monde*, December 3, 2023.

Lawfare

Finally, Israel exerts influence through the law. Operation Swords of Iron has been widely discussed from a legal perspective, and the aim here is not to give a detailed account of the controversy but to analyze how the law becomes an essential component of a conflict.

The two most important legal issues were the proceedings for breach of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the proceedings for war crimes and crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court (ICC).

- ***The International Court of Justice***

On December 29, 2023, South Africa brought a case before the ICJ. Invoking the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, it accused Israel of committing or preparing to commit genocide against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. South Africa requested urgent provisional measures.

The ICJ is the judicial body of the United Nations. Unlike the ICC, it assesses the legality of state behavior, not of individual conduct. As a result, it does not have the power to enforce penalties.

The strategic importance of the ICJ proceedings is mainly discursive: Public hearings held in The Hague on January 11 and 12, 2024, broadcast live, fueled a debate on the operation from a legal perspective and in light of the concept of genocide.

In previous proceedings brought before the ICJ against Israel, including the 2002 case on the illegality of the security fence, Israel had never sent a legal team, because it considered the Court itself illegitimate. In 2023, however, and for the first time in Israel's history, Benjamin Netanyahu chose to send a team, choosing to break with tradition rather than let such a trenchant criticism of Israel go unchallenged.²²¹ To supplement the panel of permanent judges sitting at the ICJ, each party (in this case Israel and South Africa) has the right to appoint a judge. Benjamin Netanyahu sent Aharon Barak, former president of the Israeli Supreme Court, who enjoys considerable international prestige.

In its preliminary decision on January 26, 2024, the ICJ ordered provisional measures requiring Israel to allow humanitarian aid to reach the population of Gaza, to prevent and punish any incitement to genocide, and to report back to the ICJ on these measures within one month. Although it did not call for a ceasefire, the decision considers South Africa's allegations plausible. It states that while the Court has jurisdiction to hear the case, it will issue a final judgment only after further consideration. The elements the Court

²²¹ L. Imbert, "Guerre Israël-Hamas: L'ancien juge Aharon Barak sorti de sa retraite pour défendre l'État hébreu devant la Cour internationale de justice", *Le Monde*, January 11, 2024.

considered in reaching this decision are the destruction of Gaza's cultural heritage, the humanitarian situation (forced displacement, famine, and destruction of medical infrastructure), and political rhetoric and incitement to the destruction of the Palestinian people as a whole.²²² In addition to these symbolic repercussions, this decision complicates arms exports to Israel for countries whose export controls include compliance with international humanitarian law standards.

- ***The International Criminal Court***

The second ongoing proceeding is at the ICC. States can voluntarily join the ICC by acceding to the Rome Statute, which examines the responsibility of individual political and military personnel under international humanitarian law. Israel and the United States have not joined. Palestine, having been recognized as a state by the United Nations General Assembly, signed the Rome Statute in 2015, which grants the Court jurisdiction over crimes committed on Palestinian territory.²²³

The ICC's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict did not begin with Operation Swords of Iron. In 2011, in an op-ed in *The New York Times*, Mahmoud Abbas declared his intention to make the conflict a legal rather than simply political one.²²⁴ In 2019, the Court's prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, a Gambian national, declared the ICC competent to hear the case. (As a result, she was sanctioned by the Trump administration and threatened by the Mossad.)²²⁵

In 2021, British national Karim Khan succeeded her as the Court's prosecutor. He rose to prominence when he issued, in alignment with the ICC's interventionist vision, an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin for his personal responsibility in the deportation of Ukrainian children. (This was the first time the ICC had issued a warrant while the conflict in question was ongoing.) In November 2024, Khan issued arrest warrants for three Hamas leaders (Yahya Sinwar, Mohammed Deif, and Ismail Haniyeh) and two Israeli leaders (Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu) for crimes against humanity and war crimes.²²⁶

In addition to its symbolic implications, this decision has concrete effects. In principle, it bars these individuals from visiting the territory of States Parties to the Rome Statute. It complicates arms exports from countries that

²²² L. Bronner, "En Israël, les discours de déshumanisation des Palestiniens et d'éradication de la bande de Gaza se sont banalisés depuis le 7 octobre 2023", *Le Monde*, May 21, 2025, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

²²³ A. Férey, "La Cour pénale internationale, nouvelle arène du conflit israélo-palestinien?", *Brève stratégique de l'Irsem*, Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire, 2021.

²²⁴ M. Abbas, "The Long Overdue Palestinian State", *The New York Times*, May 16, 2011, available at: www.nytimes.com.

²²⁵ H. Davies, "Revealed: Israeli Spy Chief 'Threatened' ICC Prosecutor Over War Crimes Inquiry", *The Guardian*, May 28, 2024, available at: www.theguardian.com.

²²⁶ "Statement of ICC Prosecutor Karim A.A. Khan KC: Applications for arrest warrants in the situation in the State of Palestine", International Criminal Court, May 20, 2024, available at: www.icc-cpi.int.

include compliance with international law in their export controls. Furthermore, it provides grounds for legal proceedings in national courts, particularly against Israeli soldiers with dual nationality. For example, in France, the public prosecutor's office is investigating a number of cases brought against Franco-Israeli soldiers deployed in Gaza.²²⁷ In Brazil, an Israeli soldier on vacation was forced to make a hasty exit from the country after he was spotted by an NGO that specializes in prosecuting IDF soldiers. The fact that the soldier's own social media posts helped the NGO identify and locate him highlights the risks that social media poses for military personnel.²²⁸

Moral strength

"The individual and collective ability to give a new impulse to the moral and physical abilities to face dire conditions and to overcome them."²²⁹

Israel has been at war ever since 1948, the year of its creation. As a result, Israeli society has developed great resilience to war. The patriotism and resilience of Israelis are sustained by the conscription of young men and women. Within the IDF, the Home Front Command (created in 1992, during the Gulf War) is responsible for preparing and assisting the population during conflict or disaster. It alerts the civilian population when the country is under attack and decides, depending on the security situation, whether to restrict or prohibit activities such as school. During Operation Swords of Iron, the Home Front Command created an app to alert Israelis and inform them when they needed to go to a safe place. In 2025, the app was upgraded to issue early alerts to users' cell phones regarding long-range missile attacks, 3 to 5 minutes before impact. (Previously, alerts were issued only 90 seconds ahead of time.)²³⁰

Mobilizing reserves over the long term

Despite the unity and resilience Israel has demonstrated since October 7, 2023, this harmony is being fractured by two issues that are the subject of intense debate in the country.

First, the lack of conscription for Haredim (ultra-Orthodox Jews) is a recurring source of tension. Traditionally exempt from military service, Haredim (who make up 14% of Israel's Jewish population, or nearly 1.3 million people) include nearly 66,000 men of military age. A Supreme Court decision was handed down that requires their conscription, but the government is

227. Research interview, June 2025.

228. J. Brabant, "Un soldat israélien visé par un mandat d'arrêt lors de vacances au Brésil", Mediapart, January 5, 2025, available at: www.mediapart.fr.

229. "Future Land Action", French Army, 2016, p. 47.

230. E. Fabian, "Commandement du Front interieur: Nouveau système d'alerte mobile avertisseur des missiles à longue portée", *The Times of Israel*, April 17, 2025, available at: <https://fr.timesofisrael.com>.

hesitating to pass a law to this effect because the current coalition relies on the support of two Haredi parties: Shas and United Torah Judaism. The IDF has, however, made efforts to accommodate practicing Jews who do join up, such as by creating units that respect the rules of Judaism (using prescribed types of fabric for clothing, observing Shabbat, etc.).

Second, mobilizing the reserve forces to continue the war effort is weighing on both the morale and the economy of the country. The reserve forces (which were established by Ben-Gurion 75 years ago) have always been a central pillar of the Israeli defense model. After October 7, there was a real surge in momentum, with Israelis living abroad returning to the country to serve in the military. This popular support for the war effort, however, is gradually eroding, the result of a process fueled by physical and mental fatigue, by family, professional, and financial pressures, and by mistrust of the government. The reserve model, which is not necessarily suited to a long-term war, itself contributes to this erosion of support: A significant proportion of reservists are sent home after extended service and then re-mobilized, forcing them to deal with family anxiety, career disruptions, combat stress management, and uncertainty about whether they will return to their jobs.²³¹

Furthermore, senior officers, all of whom are career military personnel, view reservists as a ready-made workforce. Even before the October 7 attack, the reserve corps suffered from a chronic lack of funding, uneven skills, and poor equipment, particularly in the army.

In October 2023, more than 300,000 reservists were called up. They were unprepared and had little time to organize their departure. Civilian donations helped fill the gaps in equipment (bulletproof vests, helmets, and drones) and logistics (food, basic supplies). Despite the strength of the mobilization and the patriotic sentiment, many soldiers expressed anger and disappointment with the government and the army, accusing them of failing in the face of Hamas. Along with the numerous alert periods and widespread school closures, this mobilization significantly reduced the working population.

Furthermore, the transition from large-scale ground maneuvers to standoff operations, which require fewer troops, is set to continue. The IDF will also have to build new lines of defense in the Negev, raising questions about the sustainability of this intense use of reserves over the long term.

Financing the war effort

The Israeli economy, already weakened at the beginning of 2023 by political instability and tensions over judicial reform, deteriorated further after the October 7 attack. The prolonged war has caused a series of simultaneous shocks: a fall in gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, a drop in exports,

²³¹ D. Scheindlin, "The Military Is in Crisis, Despite a Cease-Fire", *Haaretz*, January 16, 2025.

consumption, and investment, and an increase in the public deficit. The traditional drivers of Israeli growth—high-tech, exports, and foreign investment flows—have slowed. The only somewhat positive indicator in 2024—private consumption, up 2.6% per capita—is largely the result of the fact that the uncertainty has spurred purchases of durable goods.²³²

The real economy was also hit hard by the departure of 250,000 foreign workers, including 150,000 Palestinians, which paralyzed agriculture, construction, services, and other key sectors. This labor, which the Israeli economy is struggling to replace (despite the arrival of Indian workers), was indispensable to low-wage sectors. The increase in military spending (up 43% in 2024), meanwhile, was financed at the expense of social spending, with sharp cuts in education and health care, exacerbating social inequalities.²³³

As for fiscal policy, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu refused to raise income tax, preferring instead to increase the value-added tax (VAT) from 17% to 18%. This regressive policy has hit the middle and working classes hardest. The public deficit reached 6.9% of GDP in 2024, and public debt rose to 69% of GDP, compared to around 60% before the war.

Another worrying sign is that Jewish immigration (*aliyah*), traditionally a strategic pillar of Israeli demographic policy, has declined. In 2024, 82,700 Israelis left the country, but only 23,800 new immigrants made *aliyah* (the term, which literally means “ascent” to the land of Israel, refers to Jewish immigration to the country), resulting in a net loss of 59,000 people. Many skilled, educated, and wealthy citizens are among those who have left, which weakens the country’s prospects for growth. This climate of uncertainty led the rating agency Moody’s, and later Fitch, to downgrade Israel’s rating.²³⁴

As a result, Israel’s war effort now rests on three pillars: the national defense budget, public debt, and US military aid.

The defense budget has increased, reaching 5.5% of GDP in 2025. (It was less than 5% in 2022.) This represents approximately \$30 billion, a significant portion of which is allocated to the modernization and maintenance of the IDF. This is still a far cry from the rates attained after the Yom Kippur War, when military spending accounted for up to 30% of GDP. That level of spending triggered an inflationary spiral and the economic crisis of the 1980s, a period Israeli economists still refer to as the “lost decade”.

232. J. Bendelac, “Israël, une économie en guerre à bout de souffle”, *Aerion24.news*, June 14, 2025.

233. *Ibid.*

234. S. Wrobel, “Les échecs ‘sans fin’ du gouvernement à l’origine de la dégradation de la note par Fitch – économistes”, *The Times of Israel*, August 13, 2024, available at: <https://fr.timesofisrael.com>.

A growing share of the exceptional costs associated with the conflict, including the prolonged mobilization of reserves, compensation, infrastructure reconstruction, and aid to businesses, is being financed through government borrowing. This dynamic raises questions about the medium-term sustainability of the Israeli model, particularly if the conflict were to continue.

Finally, US military aid has been essential to the war effort. Since October 2023, Washington has provided Israel with over \$22 billion in matériel and military and logistical support. Whether this massive flow of aid will be maintained, however, depends on precarious geopolitical balances and international perceptions of the conflict.²³⁵

The psychological weapon of hostages

Among the many challenges Israel has faced in the context of Operation Swords of Iron, the issue of the hostages has proved to be one of the most sensitive from a moral, political, and strategic standpoint.²³⁶ Hamas's strategy included kidnapping Israeli civilians and military personnel to be used not only as a bargaining chip but also, and primarily, as a tool of psychological warfare. Its goal was clearly to exploit internal divisions within Israeli society, delegitimize Israel's political leaders, and increase public pressure on the government to force it to make concessions.

Hamas used this leverage with considerable sophistication. It quickly proposed a so-called "all for all" exchange, demanding the release of all hostages held in Gaza in exchange for thousands of Palestinian prisoners in Israel. This demand echoed classic strategic bombing strategies: striking at the enemy's morale, not with brute force but with internal pressure, by attacking the bond between the population and its government.

Hamas initially waged its psychological warfare with images. It selectively and carefully released videos of hostages, in Hebrew, calling for a ceasefire, criticizing the prime minister's policies, or "thanking" Hamas for their "good treatment". The case of Liri Albag, a 19-year-old soldier captured at the Nahal Oz base, is emblematic. Forced to speak in front of the camera, she calls on her government to stop the bombing. The videos were designed to go viral, arouse emotion, and deepen internal political divisions.

Hamas also played on symbols. Several of the freed hostages were filmed wearing pendants bearing the image of Palestine across its historic territory or bracelets in the colors of the Palestinian flag. (When the

²³⁵ J. P. Filiu, "Jamais les États-Unis n'ont soutenu aussi massivement une guerre d'Israël", *Le Monde*, November 2024, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

²³⁶ For further analysis of how hostages can be used in psychological warfare, see E. Dignat, *La Rancœur de la terreur. Gouverner le marché des otages*, Paris: PUF, 2023. The work offers a comparative analysis of how governments position themselves regarding hostages.

hostages were returned, Israeli media digitally changed these colors to the Israeli blue and white.)

The Israeli government, caught in this emotional and political trap, held firm and alternated between diplomatic and military leverage to secure the hostages' release. Two release agreements have been reached since October 7. The first, on November 22, 2023, secured the release of 50 hostages in exchange for 150 Palestinian prisoners and a temporary ceasefire. In the days that followed, more hostages were released: 24 hostages (including 13 Israelis, 10 Thais, and 1 Filipino) on November 24; 81 Israelis and 14 foreign nationals on November 30. However, no conclusive exchange agreement has been reached.

In 2024, several rescue operations were carried out by the IDF, with mixed results. On February 11, two hostages were freed in Rafah, at a cost of nearly 100 Palestinian deaths. On June 8, an operation in Nuseirat recovered four hostages but resulted in the deaths of 274 Palestinians. These operations burnished the IDF's image, showing it to be capable of protecting its citizens, but the Palestinian casualty numbers fueled criticism.

With the hostage strategy, Hamas has demonstrated its ability to use psychology as a powerful strategic lever. Managing internal pressures under the watchful eye of the media and of world opinion has been an unrelenting challenge for Israel. How to destroy Hamas's military capabilities without putting the lives of the hostages at risk? How to maintain national cohesion while prosecuting a war that has been as divisive as it has been galvanizing? In this context, the optics of the war became a battlefield in itself, and military communication had to contend with moral, political, and strategic imperatives that were sometimes difficult to reconcile.

Efficiency of command

"Optimised management of operations, by taking into account four interdependent imperatives (...): situation intelligence, acceleration of decision-making, flexibility of organisations, and reduction of the vulnerabilities."²³⁷

In French military doctrine, "efficiency of command" is based on a combination of four imperatives: situation intelligence, acceleration of decision-making, flexibility of organisations, and reduction of vulnerabilities. Together, these determine operational superiority. Examining Operation Swords of Iron through the lens of these categories reveals the constant tension between military effectiveness and political-strategic coherence. The liberation of hostages, the weakening of Hamas's

²³⁷ "Future Land Action", Land Army, 2016, p. 57.

military capabilities, the protection of civilian populations, and the management of the “day after” for the Gaza Strip reveal both tactical successes and structural limitations. The latter relate less to the power of the resources deployed than to the difficulty of translating military action into lasting political advantage.

Release of hostages

One year after October 7, 117 of the 253 hostages captured by Hamas had been released. Most of these releases were the result of diplomatic negotiations. The November 2023 ceasefire agreement, which led to the release of 50 hostages, was the greatest single success. High-risk military operations such as Operation Golden Hand (February 2024) and the Nuseirat operation (June 2024) also succeeded in freeing hostages, but not as many. At this point, 37 bodies had been returned, while 66 people remained captive and 33 bodies remained in Hamas's hands.

This partially successful outcome reflects a structural limitation: As of early October 2024, Israel had been unable to force Hamas to release the hostages en masse, and Hamas's political survival still depended largely on its ability to use the hostages as a bargaining chip.

Table 9: Release of hostages since October 2023

Date	Number of hostages	Conditions of release
October 20	2	Negotiation
October 23	2	Negotiation
October 30	1 (Ori Megidish)	Military operation
November 24–30	50	Negotiation
October 17, 2024	4	Military operation in Nuseirat
Outcome	59 out of 253	

Sources: *Haaretz*, INSS.

Destroying Hamas

The second objective, eradicating Hamas, has drawn widespread criticism because of its ambiguity: Does it mean simply destroying Hamas's military capabilities, or also bringing down the movement as a political force? Political statements from the war cabinet have not cleared this up. Defense Minister Yoav Gallant stated at a press conference on October 11: “We will

wipe this thing called Hamas, ISIS–Gaza, off the face of the earth. It will cease to exist".²³⁸

From a strictly military standpoint, Hamas's capabilities have been severely degraded one year after the intervention. According to IDF estimates, 22 of Hamas's 24 battalions have been dismantled, their members killed and their infrastructure and arsenals destroyed. An estimated 90% of its rocket arsenal has been destroyed, which has resulted in a significant decrease in rocket fire from Gaza. Approximately 17,000 fighters—nearly half of the organization—are believed to have been killed.²³⁹ In addition, several prominent Hamas figures have been killed, including Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades Commander Mohammed Deif, the political leader Ismail Haniyeh, and the leader of Hamas in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar.²⁴⁰

These results have nonetheless failed to clarify the strategic ambiguity of the operation. Hamas continues to exist as a key political player precisely because the fact that it holds the hostages makes it an unavoidable interlocutor. In other words, the logic of the operation continues to be undermined by the fundamental contradiction between the objective of destroying Hamas and the need to negotiate with it to save the lives of the hostages.

Table 10: Elimination of Hamas leaders by the IDF since October 2023

Date	Identity of target	Position	Location
January 2, 2024	Saleh al-Arouri	Deputy political leader	Beirut, Lebanon
March 10, 2024	Marwan Issa	Deputy Commander of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades	Nuseirat, Gaza
July 13, 2024	Mohammed Deif	Commander of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades	Khan Younis, Gaza
July 31, 2024	Ismail Haniyeh	Political leader of Hamas	Tehran, Iran
October 17, 2024	Yahya Sinwar	Political and military leader in Gaza	Southern Gaza Strip

238. "Israel's New War Cabinet Vows to Wipe Hamas Off the Earth", Reuters, October 12, 2023, available at: www.reuters.com.

239. "Swords of Iron, Real Time Tracker", INSS Data Lab, Institute for National Security Studies, available at: www.inss.org.il [accessed on June 2025].

240. S. Forey, "La mort de Yahya Sinwar porte un coup sévère au Hamas", *Le Monde*, October 18, 2024.

The security threat: A real but incomplete reduction

As for the security situation, the results are more mixed. More than 13,000 rockets were fired from Gaza between October 2023 and September 2024, but since then, the pace of attacks has slowed considerably. Only 26 projectiles were recorded in September 2024, compared to several hundred a month during the first half of the year.²⁴¹ Although Hamas's offensive capabilities have clearly been weakened, the security of Israeli civilians has not been fully restored. In the south, some 7,000 people remain displaced, staying with relatives or in hotels, unable to return to their homes near Gaza. In northern Israel, on the border with Lebanon, nearly 70,000 Israelis have been evacuated²⁴² because of Hezbollah rocket fire and fears of another October 7-style attack. (Hezbollah has built tunnels into Israeli territory to carry out raids.) The fact that a normal level of security for Israelis remains out of reach reveals the limits to what a strictly military victory can achieve.

The political and institutional management of the war

During the first year of the war, the sharp political differences that existed before the October 7, 2023, attack were temporarily set aside.

Benjamin Netanyahu established a bipartite cabinet designed to legitimize his political decisions by bringing together Israel's various political factions.

In addition to the traditional security cabinet, which included the most influential ministers in the government (such as Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich), Netanyahu created a cross-party war cabinet on October 12, 2023, bringing in opposition figures such as former chiefs of staff Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot. This arrangement, which effectively established two parallel cabinets, generated confusion about who was truly making decisions. Ultimately, it allowed Netanyahu to secure broad decision-making powers.

241. See: www.inss.org.il.

242. "The Israel-Hezbollah War by the Numbers", Associated Press, November 27, 2024.

Table 11: War cabinet and security cabinet during Operation Swords of Iron

Characteristic	War cabinet	Security cabinet
Nature	Ad hoc body created on October 12, 2023	Institutional body provided for by law
Role	Closely manage military operations Can act quickly without parliamentary approval	Define broad security guidelines and oversee national defense
Composition	<u>Three full members</u> Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister, Likud) Yoav Gallant (Minister of Defense, Likud) Benny Gantz (Minister without Portfolio, National Unity) <u>Two observers</u> Gadi Eisenkot (former Chief of the General Staff, Minister without Portfolio, National Unity) Ron Dermer (Minister of Strategic Affairs, Likud)	Broad, includes key ministers from the governing coalition Benjamin Netanyahu Yoav Gallant Ron Dermer Benny Gantz Bezalel Smotrich Itamar Ben-Gvir
Political objective	Demonstrate national unity in wartime, prevent military decisions from being influenced by the most radical ministers However, lacks legitimacy	Represent the entire government in security decisions, reflect internal political power relations
Development	Created consensus but was dissolved in June 2024, after Gantz and Eisenkot resigned	Regained influence after the war cabinet was dissolved, allowing radical ministers to exert greater influence on strategy

In addition, recurrent leaks about the content of these meetings revealed deep divisions among the members of these bodies, which reinforced the sense of chaos surrounding the administration.

These divisions—particularly the lack of a clear vision for the postwar period—were brought to the fore in June 2024 by the resignations of Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot. As this crisis shows, the Netanyahu government has struggled to maintain political cohesion while pursuing a long-term military operation.

The impasse of "the day after"

The central issue remains: What is the ultimate purpose of Operation Swords of Iron? What is the political plan for the Gaza Strip once the operation ends? Israel's vision for "the day after" was not made clear until the summer of 2025, when Netanyahu announced his intention to occupy the Gaza Strip. The grandstanding in 2023 and 2024 about destroying Hamas, then, belied the fact that the Israeli chain of command had no clear understanding of its strategy. Did "destroying Hamas" mean destroying only the military organization, or its political wing as well? Is the Gaza Strip destined to be governed by the Palestinian Authority, or will it be brought under Israeli occupation (something the Israeli political class had been calling for even before October 7)? The occupation project was not officially adopted by the Israeli government until the summer of 2025.²⁴³ The lack of a clear political plan has been criticized both inside Israel and abroad, particularly with respect to humanitarian aid and the management of the territories. The government's indecisiveness is more evidence for the idea that military victories do not guarantee lasting political stabilization. In this sense, Operation Swords of Iron appears less like a war of destruction than a war to shift the balance of power, the long-term consequences of which remain highly uncertain.

Table 12: Assessment of the tactical objectives of Operation Swords of Iron in October 2024

Nature	Description	Achievement (in October 2024)
War aims (political)	Destroy Hamas as a military and political entity	Partially
	Eliminate the terrorist threat to Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip	No
	Free the hostages held by Hamas	Partially
	Protect the country's borders and citizens	Partially
Military end state	Hamas's military capabilities are dismantled, and the organization no longer has the capacity to exercise political leadership in the Gaza Strip or threaten Israeli territory	Partially
Military objectives	Conquest of the Gaza Strip and major urban strongholds	Yes

²⁴³ L. Bronner, "Israël se prépare à occuper toute la bande de Gaza", *Le Monde*, August 8, 2025, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

Decisive conditions (partial)	Clearing and securing defensive strongpoints	Mostly (except for camps in the center)
	Destruction of combatants, combat capabilities, and infrastructure, with a focus on underground infrastructure and weaponry	Mostly
	Liberation of hostages, dead or alive	Partially
	Hamas is militarily neutralized (quantitative objective)	Mostly
	Hamas is no longer capable of firing a significant number of rockets into Israeli territory	Yes
	Hamas is no longer capable of conducting large-scale, organized tactical operations (battalion level) (qualitative objective)	Yes
	The Hamas government in Gaza collapses	No
	Hostages are located and freed	Partially
	The underground infrastructure of the Gaza Strip is mapped and neutralized	Partially
	The territory of the Gaza Strip is under control and the borders with Israel are secure	Yes
	The Israeli population can return to the evacuated area around the Gaza Strip	No
	Gazans no longer view Hamas as legitimate	No
	Hamas is cut off from its international support and sources of supply	No
	A credible political alternative to Hamas to administer the Gaza Strip has been identified	No

Conclusion

Operation Swords of Iron, launched by Israel in response to Hamas's attack of October 7, 2023, represents a significant departure from Israel's numerous previous military operations in the Gaza Strip. From a tactical standpoint, the IDF demonstrated its ability to rapidly mobilize substantial ground forces, particularly through its reserves, to conduct methodical urban operations and to closely integrate intelligence, fire support, and specialized units. The coordination of armored units, special forces, and military engineering (particularly for neutralizing tunnels) and their unprecedented integration with airpower enabled the gradual seizure of key urban areas despite intense fighting, military losses, and unrelenting media pressure.

From a strategic perspective, several key lessons emerge. First, technological deterrence, however advanced (smart fences, Iron Dome, SIGINT), cannot eliminate the risk of strategic surprise when political will, preparedness, and doctrine are out of step with the reality of the threat. Second, the emphasis on offense in Israeli military culture, tempered in recent years by a posture of containment toward Hamas, was abruptly reactivated, revealing both its strengths (response capability) and limitations (prolonged attrition, human cost, political uncertainty).

From a strictly military standpoint, Operation Swords of Iron confirms trends observed in other conflicts. Contemporary urban combat must fully integrate the underground, informational, and legal dimensions of the battlefield. Joint coordination, decentralized but synchronized command, and the resilience of logistics chains in complex urban environments have become structural priorities. Given intense media coverage, control of the operational narrative has become a capability in its own right. Finally, the link between political objectives and military conduct must be constantly reevaluated: A tactically successful but strategically ambiguous campaign can rapidly fail to achieve lasting results in a prolonged asymmetric war.

Operation Swords of Iron, therefore, represents an urban combat operation of unprecedented scale. Its clear tactical successes were achieved at the cost of massive and deliberate destruction. The first year saw the dismantling of Hamas's military capabilities, which forced the organization to shift from acting as an organized paramilitary force to engaging in hit-and-run guerrilla attacks while seeking to maximize the leverage afforded by its Israeli hostages. The tactical success of Operation Swords of Iron paved the way for the conflict to turn regional, as the IDF shifted its focus to Lebanon in October 2024. Iran was also drawn into the conflict in October 2024, when Israel launched Operation Days of Repentance with the intent to destroy

Iranian anti-aircraft batteries. This was followed by Operation Rising Lion, on June 13, 2025, against Iran's nuclear facilities.

The launch, in the spring of 2025, of Operation Gideon's Chariots (an air-land offensive intended to seize control of the Gaza Strip) marked Israel's shift away from the military response to October 7, 2023. The country has entered a new phase, characterized by its formal intention to occupy the Gaza Strip long-term despite international opposition and the fact that Hamas continues to detain hostages.



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