

How Hamas Built an Army

Description

On October 7, 2023, the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas and its allies entered Israeli territory to commit atrocities against civilian communities near the Israel-Gaza border. With about [1,200 dead](#), including children and the elderly [slaughtered in their beds or burned to death](#), and at least 239 abducted to Gaza as hostages, the day will be remembered in infamyâ??â??Israelâ??s 9/11,â?• [or worse](#).

To enable its [genocidal](#) atrocities, Hamas created a conventional army able to overrun Israel Defense Forces (IDF) posts on its way to the border communities. Having [seized multiple positions](#) as far as 25 kilometers into Israel from the 60-km Gaza border, some of the Hamas cadres held their ground and attempted to defend against the coming IDF counter, which defeated them within several days and initiated a ground incursion into Gaza. The [IDF says](#) that at least 278 Israeli soldiers were among the dead of October 7. Indeed, this war has featured a clash of military forces to seize or defend territory and followed [defined frontlines](#) and orders of battle. It is now clear that Hamas possesses and is willing to use conventional military power alongside its traditional terrorist tactics.

Hamas acquired its military capabilities through years of fighting experience, training, Iranian tutelage, and resource accumulation. It learned to adapt irregular and terrorist tactics for conventional warfare. I trace the development of Hamasâ??s conventional warfighting capabilities and place it within a larger pattern of armed nonstate actors seeking to form armies. Because Hamas is now clearly an army, and not only a terrorist group, the ongoing IDF conventional campaign against it must continue until the group can no longer control territory.

This is not to say that Hamas follows international law, nor that it possesses state-of-the-art equipment. None of these is true of Hamas: it does not have tanks, aircraft, or warships. Its members do not all wear distinguishable uniforms, and they certainly do not adhere to the law of armed conflict. Rather, like many nonstate actors seeking control over territory, the group has developed anâ??albeit limitedâ??capability to dispute, seize, and hold territory openly, which is the key method of conventional warfare. The fact that it is a nonstate actor with no regard for international norms should not obscure this important truth.

When Armed Groups Form Armies

In my book on the Islamic State (IS), [Soldiers of End-Times](#), I challenge the notion that armed nonstate actors remain “irregular,” or opt for guerrilla and terrorist tactics by default. Groups like IS that espouse ambitious ideologies and goals necessitating the seizure and governance of large territories must find the means to achieve such lofty aims. An essential part of the solution is conventional fighting power, i.e. the ability to physically destroy opposing forces and hold ground using massed combat power.

An organization does not need all the trappings of a modern Western military to fight conventionally. [Basic infantry tactics](#), small arms and explosives, and other combat essentials are increasingly available to savvy militants in an [era of greater access](#) to information and goods. IS, for example, implemented a series of innovations and improvements to its [suicide bombing tactics](#) to adapt them to the needs of its conventional campaigns in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, even when facing modern state armies. A group can use suicide bombs for enhanced firepower; motorcycles, weapons caches, and tunnels for communications and logistics; and pickup trucks for increased mobility. Popularly recognizable features like tanks and destroyers are not necessary—in fact, venerable military theorists Carl von [Clausewitz](#), Baron de [Jomini](#), and Niccolò [Machiavelli](#) concur on the essential character of infantry versus the supplementary (if sometimes crucial) character of cavalry and artillery.

Indeed, one finds myriad examples of armed groups creating armies throughout history. Communist rebels in China, Cuba, Korea, and Vietnam met the United States and other powerful actors on the battlefield. The U.S. Armed Forces was itself once a rebel group—the Continental Army of George Washington—and the IDF began as the underground Zionist organization known as the Haganah. Today’s jihadist groups, such as IS, the Taliban, al-Qaeda and its affiliates, Hezbollah, and Hamas have demonstrated a special penchant for developing armies. Often, these groups adapt irregular tactics, such as [suicide bombing for IS](#), to enable conventional operations.

Aspects of Hamas Military Power

In its 1988 founding [Covenant](#), Hamas explicitly prescribes violent jihad as the means to reverse the Jewish usurpation of Palestine. It presents as models for its actions the military campaigns of the vaunted medieval Muslim generals Salah al-Din ibn Ayyub and Baybars. As the militant Palestinian branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas’s primary goal is, through armed struggle, to replace the State of Israel with a Palestinian state governed under Hamas’s interpretation of Islamic law. Military strength is an obvious requirement for achieving this aim.

An important component of Hamas’s strength is Iranian support. Despite ideological divergences, Iran and Hamas established connections starting in the early 1990s, as [Iran provided](#) Hamas with training in Lebanon and funding to the tune of millions of dollars. Iran and Hezbollah, Iran’s powerful

Lebanese proxy, taught Hamas how to conduct suicide bombings, fueling Hamas terrorist campaigns in Israel in the 90s and through the 2000-2005 [“Second Intifada,”](#) which killed more than 1,000 Israelis. Moreover, Hezbollah provides strategic advice: the October 7 assault largely resembled [Hezbollah’s “Conquering the Galilee” plan](#) (that Israel discovered in 2012), which included deploying elite units to seize northern border communities and take hostages while simultaneously launching massive rocket salvos and attacks from the sea.

Iran and Hezbollah have [smuggled weapons to Hamas overland](#) through Sinai via Sudan and Libya, as well as by sea. Intensive military training and accumulated weapons have allowed Hamas to gradually organize regional units [as large as brigades](#) containing 2,500-3,500 fighters each. Joint exercises [since 2020](#) (such as [this one](#)) conducted with other Gazan armed factions like Palestinian Islamic Jihad have habituated units to operating in a coordinated fashion, supported Hamas command and control, and facilitated cooperation between Hamas and smaller factions. Such efforts began in earnest once Hamas [seized power in the Gaza Strip](#) in 2007.

Iran has since supplied materiel and know-how for Hamas to build a sizable [rocket arsenal](#), with [more than 10,000 rockets and mortar shells](#) fired in the current conflict. With Iran’s help, Hamas has developed a robust [domestic rocket-making industry](#) that uses pipes, electrical wiring, and other everyday materials for improvised production. Hamas and other Gazan armed factions have terrorized Israeli population centers with rocket attacks, forcing border communities into bomb shelters for significant stretches and drawing the IDF into major conflicts in Gaza in [2008-2009](#), [2012](#), [2014](#), and [2021](#). Although Israel’s [Iron Dome](#) air defense system has complicated rocket attacks due to its 90% interception rate, Hamas’s rockets, together with [incendiary balloons](#), fire-bearing kites, and [kamikaze drones](#), have been a crucial feature of the group’s arsenal.

Militant tunnel-digging in Gaza [dates back to 1967 at least](#), and Hamas has drawn on this tradition and Hezbollah’s tunneling techniques on the Israel-Lebanon border to bolster its capabilities. Extensive tunnel networks conceal and cover Hamas assets from air attack while attack tunnels aid infiltration into Israel. In 2006, Hamas kidnapped Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit via tunnel, whom the [group traded](#) in 2011 for 1,027 prisoners held in Israel. Israel [has since developed strong technology](#) and tactics to find and neutralize attack tunnels.

Furthermore, Hamas has probed the Gaza border fence directly with its 2018 [“Great March of Return”](#) riots, dubbed by Hamas and organizers as demonstrations meant to draw international attention to the plight of the Palestinians. The weekly protests mobilized tens of thousands of Gazans on the border with Israel; terrorist operatives with Molotov cocktails, firearms, and other weapons were embedded in crowds of civilians, whom Hamas sometimes encouraged to deploy burning tires and incendiary kites. Some also tried to infiltrate into Israel. Dozens, including civilians, died as the IDF

responded, giving Hamas a propaganda victory. This is also an example of how [Hamas uses civilians as human shields](#) to cover its terrorist activities while observing how Israel responds to its provocations.

Culmination on October 7

This collection of irregular tactics culminated on October 7 in a conventional assault on Israel. It began with a [massive rocket barrage](#) of more than 3,000 rockets over the first minutes of the war, evidently overwhelming Israeli defenses, which Hamas had been testing with rocket strikes for years. At the same time, Hamas's strike force, led by elite fighters from its [Nukhba](#) unit that [received Iranian training](#), penetrated the border fence in tandem with [attempts](#) to infiltrate from the sea. Operatives on the border [jammed IDF communications and sniped surveillance systems](#). Training and intelligence paid off as [attackers overran](#) unsuspecting military positions. Some attackers [arrived via paraglider](#), following years of Hamas special training with the devices; Hamas likely learned from having previously deployed incendiary balloons and kites—comparably low-tech flying objects that tested Israeli border defenses under similar circumstances.

Lessons likely gleaned from the March of Return appeared as well. [Images emerged](#) after Hamas breached the border fence of Gaza residents coming across it. Despite ample evidence of its atrocities, Hamas [used this to claim](#) that its members did not attack or kidnap civilians, and that it was rather frenzied ordinary Gazans who did so. In addition, the March of Return likely helped Hamas assess the level of force and equipment required to break through the fence.

Although tunnels have not appeared in existing accounts of the assault, they are now a major objective for the IDF. [Experts anticipated](#) that Hamas's tunnel network would pose unique challenges; the difficulty with destroying tunnels with airstrikes and the [risks they present in urban environments](#) created heightened uncertainty that, together with Hamas's possession of Israeli hostages, possibly delayed the start of Israel's ground incursion into Gaza.

The ground incursion has nonetheless made rapid progress, so far occupying much of northern Gaza and [killing some 7,800 Hamas members](#) in exchange for about [502 Israeli troops](#) (including about 280 killed on October 7), according to the IDF. Despite the shock of the initial attack, Hamas's military power appears to have culminated when the IDF repelled the October 7 attackers. Thus, while Hamas has achieved what few armed groups could ever hope to, one should not overstate its battlefield prowess.

Conclusion

Hamas has shown a significant degree of military capability deployed on October 7 to enable it to commit the atrocities of that day. It leveraged its training and experience using irregular tactics. Hamas has so far not performed well as an urban defender and relied more on information warfare and its hostages to keep the IDF from advancing.

However, an underperforming army is still an army, and conventional ground operations must continue to completely dislodge Hamas from the territory it holds. A counterterrorism approach centered on precision strikes on high-value targets and special forces raids, as some [officials](#) and [observers](#) have called for, will not suffice for the task of collapsing Hamas's combat brigades. Once Hamas can no longer hold territory, Israel can shift back to such an approach to hunt down terrorist remnants that attempt to carry on an insurgency. As long as Hamas controls Gaza, it will continue to regenerate combat power and improve its military capabilities, as it has done following previous more limited Israeli campaigns against it. For example, the United States and its allies are able to execute a counterterrorism-centered strategy against IS in Iraq and Syria now because they prevailed in the [predominantly conventional 2013-2019 war](#) to dismantle the group's territorial caliphate.

Hamas is the latest armed nonstate actor to develop conventional military capabilities. As with the rise of IS in 2014 or the fall of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, Hamas's military and terrorist actions on October 7 came as a surprise. This is perhaps indicative of an Israeli [failure of imagination](#) leading to a lack of preparation. And that would fall into a historical pattern of powerful states failing to discern the possibility of their nonstate adversaries conventionalizing.

Ido Levy is an associate fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a PhD student at American University. He is the author of [Soldiers of End-Times: Assessing the Military Effectiveness of the Islamic State](#). Follow him on X @IdoLevy5.

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Main image: At a rally supporting the Palestinian prisoners' movement hunger strike, Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh calls for "a new intifada" to free detainees (Joe Catron via Flickr).

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