

## Israel's Irregular Warfare Paradox: Reconciling Precision Abroad and a Killing Field • Next Door

### Description

On June 24, two equally striking news stories underscored the notably different approaches Israel has taken to its wars with Iran and Hamas. The first, a *Washington Post* [front page story](#), detailed recorded conversations between Israeli intelligence operatives and senior military figures in Iran, wherein the Israelis warned the Iranians that their personal identifiers were known and that they were next on Israel's target list. One operative [warned](#) his interlocutor that "we're closer to you than your own neck vein." Meanwhile, in a separate story, the Associated Press reported from Deir al-Balah in the Gaza Strip that [44 Palestinians were killed](#) in separate incidents while waiting for aid handouts.

Since its establishment in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, the Israeli state has relied on strong U.S. and Western support to pursue its foreign and national security policy. Recent indications, however, suggest that the sands of U.S. and Western support may be shifting. A *New York Times*/Siena [poll](#) taken in late September found that 40 percent of voters said Israel was intentionally killing civilians in Gaza, a remarkable percentage in a country that has typically resolutely supported the Israeli cause.

Accordingly, as Israel mourns the [second anniversary](#) of the October 7 attacks amid the backdrop of accelerating peace talks between Israel and Gaza, it is worth taking stock of Israel's prosecution of its [multi-front wars](#) over the past two years, which perhaps offers some insights on changing public opinion. This article assesses Israel's widely divergent approaches to its conflicts next door and further afield, and finds that Israel's irregular warfare doctrine is suffering from a dangerous paradox—a scorched-earth approach in Gaza, and a more surgical war against Iran—that is sure to lead to further violence and terrorism against Israeli civilians, not to mention a failure to meet its broader, strategic objectives.

### Gaza: Precision Abandoned

In the wake of repeated killings at food distribution sites in Gaza, *Haaretz* in late June [released a major exposé](#) in which Israeli soldiers reported widespread abuses and indiscriminate violence, directed and organized by IDF commanders.

“It’s a killing field,” one soldier explained, adding “Our form of communication is gunfire.”

“This thing called killing innocent people it’s been normalized,” another senior IDF reservist lamented. “We were constantly told there are no noncombatants in Gaza, and apparently that message sank in among the troops.”

Killings during food relief distribution have led to condemnation from the Red Cross and United Nations (UN), with one UN spokesman calling the locations “[death traps](#).” The United Nations’ Human Rights Office recently [reported](#) that over 400 Palestinians had been killed in the vicinity of aid sites. Prominent American political scientist Robert Pape goes as far as to [call the war in Gaza](#) “the worst campaign of civilian punishment ever performed by a Western democracy,” while Daniel Byman notes in [Foreign Affairs](#) that “[b]y trying to stave off its adversaries and protect itself from terrorist attacks, Israel will in fact be entering a state of permanent war.”

The latest mass killings in Gaza barely registered a blip in the Western media, in part because Israel has already killed over 65,000 people in Gaza, according to local, Hamas-linked [authorities](#). Israel’s military has repeatedly [shifted blame](#) to Hamas, claiming its habitual use of human shields has driven disproportionate suffering among civilians. Last December, however, the *New York Times* [reported](#) that Israel had loosened its rules of engagement in the immediate aftermath of October 7, including allowing some strikes to kill up to 100 civilians. [The Times’s investigation](#) found that Israel weakened its system of safeguards meant to protect civilians; adopted flawed methods to assess risk of civilian casualties; routinely failed to conduct post-strike reviews or punish officers for wrongdoing; and ignored warnings about these failings.

Furthermore, in contrast to Israeli assertions of precision targeting, *Reuters* in September released [a report](#) finding that Israel had killed several journalists and health workers in a “double tap” strike on a video camera in Khan Younis initially claimed to feed footage to Hamas (the video camera in fact belonged to a journalist and sat on the outer stairwell of a hospital). Even if the camera was a legitimate military target, Wes J. Bryant, a former advisor to the Pentagon’s Civilian Protection Center of Excellence, insists the tank rounds employed were a “disproportionate munition, for sure.” The *Times* and *Reuters* reports followed *CNN* findings in 2023 that [nearly half](#) of the ordnance dropped on the Gaza Strip in the first two months of the war had been unguided “dumb bombs.”

Eventually, Israel’s widespread killing of Gazans in the name of counterterrorism has led many Western observers to deride the campaign as “[genocide](#)” and even “[ethnic cleansing](#).”

Indeed, regardless of whether such accusations are accurate, it is difficult to justify the death toll in Gaza as anything other than disregard for human life, that at times has been accentuated by [overt racism](#) (as well as what Daniel Byman terms an [“expansionist ideological agenda”](#)) permeating the highest ranks of the Israeli government. A more charitable assessment might point to incompetence: U.S. Joint Special Operations Command has [repeatedly warned](#) its Israeli counterparts that their targeting calculations were leading to [“catastrophically imprecise assessments.”](#)

## The Twelve-Day War: Precision Restored

Yet the Gaza campaign stands in stark contrast to Israel’s efforts to neutralize the Iranian nuclear and ballistic missile threat. Deploying what my Council on Foreign Relations colleague Steven Cook [called](#) [“a combination of derring-do, spectacular intelligence, and technological wizardry”](#) complemented with a display of the extraordinary skills of their pilots, Israel launched a stunning and broadly successful effort in June to decapitate Iran’s military leadership and nuclear expertise. As part of what is now deemed the Twelve-Day War, Mossad, Israel’s primary intelligence agency, [embedded commandos and drone squads](#) deep behind enemy lines, activating them as part of Operation Rising Lion. [Operation Narnia](#), a coordinated attack against nine nuclear scientists, involved near-simultaneous killings of the targets to avoid them scattering into the darkness.

The success of this latest salvo follows a longer history of spectacular and highly precise operations orchestrated by Israeli intelligence within enemy borders. In July 2024, Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh was [killed](#) in a Tehran guesthouse by an explosive hidden there two months earlier. Israel’s [notorious pager attack](#) on Hezbollah that September relied upon Israeli shell companies established with the specific reason of creating pagers rigged with PETN (pentaerythritol tetranitrate) explosives that are powerful, compact, and difficult to detect. But arguably the most high-tech killing occurred in 2020, when a leading Iranian nuclear scientist was [assassinated](#) by a remotely-controlled, self-destructing gun, after the operatives who placed it had already left the country.

## Israel’s Irregular Warfare Paradox

Israel’s irregular warfare paradox appears to have at least four causes. First, the differences between Israeli intelligence agencies’ success in infiltrating Iranian security services and Hamas appear to be staggering. In the wake of Israel’s strikes in Iran, the latter has [executed several suspects](#) accused of spying for the enemy, arresting 700 others. One Israeli official [bragged](#) that [“our intelligence penetration is 100 percent.”](#) In contrast, the Israeli security services were forced to face a national—and global—reckoning after October 7. A Shin Bet investigation into the failures of October 7 for instance [indicated](#) that Israel had [“a poor network of spies in Gaza.”](#) One must

also recognize the insurgent tactics displayed by Hamas, particularly at the [subterranean level](#), which has drawn Israel into a [counterinsurgency trap](#) from which it cannot easily extricate itself.

Secondly, Israel's failures in Gaza testify to a complete mismatch between strategy and tactics. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu has [repeatedly shifted the goalposts of his campaign](#), variously claiming "There is [no solution](#) besides total victory" while prioritizing the lesser goal of ensuring the release of all remaining hostages at other times. After almost two years of war, the strategy has failed on both counts. Equally important, Israel has failed to convincingly defend its actions amid an "inability to articulate the endgame of this war," leading one analyst to [claim](#) that "This absence of Israel from the information space has been Hamas's most important advantage in this war." On the other hand, Israeli goals in Iran are more clear-cut—an end to the Iranian nuclear program and proxy network—and therefore more measurable and palatable.

Thirdly, Israel's reluctance to employ its Gaza tactics in Iran is likely due to its concerns about escalation and alliances. Iran has developed closer relationships with Russia, for instance, and an overly punishing strategy against Tehran might risk an intervention from the Kremlin. Palestine, on the other hand, is diplomatically isolated, with many Arab states just as reluctant to guarantee security and prosperity among Gazans as Israel. Here, though, lies the Netanyahu administration's ultimate miscalculation: that a high death toll in Gaza would be acceptable to the world's publics if they were periodically reminded of the horrors of October 7. Instead, Israel's relationships with its own allies, including the United States, are facing [unprecedented strain](#), with even some far-right American politicians calling the war in Gaza a [genocide](#). The aforementioned *New York Times*/Siena [poll](#) found slightly more respondents now siding with Palestinians over Israelis for the first time since *The Times* began asking voters about their sympathies in 1998.

The final possibility is a more damning one. Israel's stunning tactical success in Iran points to a country that has tremendous intelligence penetration and sabotage capabilities that it chooses to use in some contexts and neglects to use in others—with thousands of Gazans now paying the ultimate price. Whether racism is indeed the driving factor, Israel's refusal to adopt a more surgical approach in Gaza will inevitably lead to further waves of violence that threaten the safety of Israeli civilians, empower clamors of "genocide" and undermine peace and stability in the region. Indeed, as former deputy national security advisor Chuck Freilich [noted](#) in *Haaretz*, "The country that defeated Iran in just days, through unerring strategic and operational planning, could have certainly put together an effective humanitarian mechanism right on our border."

It remains to be seen whether the latest war with Iran will prove strategically successful for Israel. For instance, [some estimates](#) suggest the recent strike set Iran's nuclear program back by only months. What is certain, however, is that Israel's approach to Hamas and the Gaza Strip will lead to new

waves of extremist radicalization and violence, both within the Strip and beyond. The United States-led “War on Terror” taught us that an approach to countering violent and deeply ideological actors centered on kinetic action does not work. To be sure, it has certainly never worked during the Arab-Israeli conflict. On the second anniversary of the October 7 attacks, Israel ignores those lessons at its own peril.

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