

Nine Critical Lessons from Israel's October 7 War and What They Mean for SOF

Description

Editor's Note: this article is being republished with the permission of [Small Wars Journal](#) as part of a republishing arrangement between IWI and SWJ. The original article was published on 05.23.2025 and is available [here](#).

SWJ Logo Tall

Early on the morning of October 7, 2023, Hamas launched one of the largest and deadliest terrorist attacks in history. The attack and ensuing war between Israel and Iran's Axis of Resistance is reshaping the Middle East. There are many lessons to be learned from this war. This paper looks at nine of the most important lessons from the perspective of Special Operations Forces (SOF).

1. The U.S. and its allies will continue to underestimate terrorists.

Background: Terrorists are highly effective spoilers who routinely derail U.S. foreign policy, but the U.S. Government continues to underestimate them. President Biden and his administration knew the terrorist attack in Benghazi in September 2012 and the rise of ISIS derailed the Obama administration's foreign policy. They also knew the 9/11 terrorist attacks derailed the George W. Bush administration's foreign policy. And yet, they still underestimated terrorists and were shocked when the October 7 terrorist attack derailed their foreign policy. The Israeli government also underestimated the terrorists and was similarly shocked, even though Israel has suffered terrorist attacks throughout its history.

While underestimating terrorists is a consistent theme throughout history, underestimating Palestinian terrorists in October 2023 seems particularly egregious. The Palestinian nationalist cause had been weakening for years, and the Abraham Accords threatened to make [Palestinians irrelevant](#) to the future of Israel and the Middle East. Under such circumstances, violent Palestinian groups, like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, were forced to attempt a spectacular terrorist attack to make their cause relevant again. The exact time, place, and nature of their attack was not foreordained, but a major Palestinian terrorist attack should have been expected and Gaza was the best place for Palestinian terrorists to plan, organize, and train for a major attack. Since the Abraham Accords also

represent an [alliance against Iran](#), the principle of self-preservation virtually forced Iran to support and enable anyone who might stop the progress of the Accords. With such an obvious congruence of interests between Palestinian terrorists and Iran everyone should have anticipated ample Iranian resources to support whatever attack the Palestinian terrorist conducted.

What it means for SOF: The U.S. and its allies have underestimated terrorists in the past and will underestimate them again. Since SOF have a leading role in counterterrorism, SOF must be the nation's counterterrorist conscience always looking ahead to where the next terrorist attack might come from, preventing and preempting when possible, and having the crisis response capabilities and plans in place to respond when prevention fails. The SOF response also needs to be quicker and more effective than the immediate Israeli response on October 7, 2023, or the U.S. response in Benghazi in 2012.

2. Terrorists are very dangerous allies/partners/surrogates/proxies, etc.

Background: Before the October 7 attack, some Israelis felt [supporting Hamas](#) enhanced Israel's security, since Hamas kept the Palestinians fighting among themselves and prevented Palestinians from uniting against Israel. The Israeli government supported Hamas by, among other things, facilitating the transfer of funds from Qatar to Hamas, and by issuing almost 20,000 work visas to residents of Gaza knowing the funds the workers received would enrich and [strengthen Hamas](#). Unfortunately, Israeli support for Hamas backfired spectacularly on October 7 when Hamas pursued its own objectives at the expense of an Israeli government that sought to use a terrorist organization.

Hamas not only hurt its Israeli enemies, but it also hurt its friends, Hezbollah and Iran. Hamas used the October 7 attack to drag Hezbollah into a war with Israel that Hezbollah did not want – a war that [devastated Hezbollah](#). Supporting Hamas is widely recognized as – the greatest [strategic blunder](#) – Hezbollah ever made and Hezbollah finally had to abandon Hamas and [agree](#) to a humiliating separate peace with Israel.

Iran is the main financial backer of Hamas, and Iran is another victim of Hamas. Hamas dragged Iran, [against its will](#), into open conflict with Israel. The war [highlighted](#) and increased Iranian military weakness and enabled Israel to destroy the threat from Hamas and Hezbollah that Iran spent decades building. Hezbollah's defeat also contributed to the fall of Iran's most important ally – the Assad Regime in [Syria](#).

Hamas [forced](#) disastrous wars on its friends, Iran and Hezbollah – wars the friends were desperate to avoid – proving that Hamas was extremely dangerous to everyone, friend or foe, who tried to use Hamas for their own goals.

Implications for SOF: Terrorists are fractious, quarrelsome people who often fight among themselves. Counterterrorism planners will be tempted to try to use one group of terrorists to fight another, such as using al Qaeda to [fight ISIS](#). Such approaches are extremely risky and SOF, as counterterrorism strategists, need to remind strategic decisionmakers that terrorists are very good at harming those who try to exploit them.

3. Geographic global chokepoints matter less than we thought.

Background: It has long been axiomatic that certain geographic [global chokepoints](#)—such as the Straits of Gibraltar, the Suez and Panama Canals, and the Straits of Malacca—are vital for international trade. However, the Houthis disrupted international trade through the Bab al Mandeb for more than a year, [cutting trade](#) through the Suez Canal by about two-thirds, and the international community responded with a shrug and a yawn. The U.S. and a few others sent naval forces to protect international shipping, but the U.S. commander in the region acknowledged his [failure](#) to prevent attacks, and no one seems to care. If the Trump Administration succeeds in forcing the Houthis to halt attacks, it will prove the administration wanted to look decisive and was committed to the [idea](#) of freedom of navigation. It will not prove that any nation needed the global chokepoint the Houthis disrupted.

If protecting international trade through the Suez Canal and Bab al Mandeb does not justify a major effort, then we have probably exaggerated the importance of other chokepoints as well, with major strategic implications. For example, the Strait of Malacca is widely regarded as [critical](#) to international trade, but it is much easier to avoid than the Suez Canal. Likewise, interest in the arctic increased dramatically in recent years and much of the interest is based on the expectation that climate change will [open new trade routes](#) through the region. If major trading nations and the global economy can shrug off the loss of access to the Suez Canal, then the Strait of Malacca and future trade routes through the arctic might also hold only marginal value.

Implications for SOF: SOF engagements must focus on the most important partners. Geographic location, including proximity to chokepoints along global trade routes, is one of the factors in determining which partners to prioritize. If the cost of switching to alternate trade routes is less than we thought, then we might need to reevaluate which nations are critical partners.

4. Nation building is not the only possible war aim.

Background: At an intellectual level we recognize that each nation has its own, unique aims in each war, but we often assume certain aims and project them where they are not appropriate. In particular, many assume every conflict should end up producing more-or-less stable and peaceful nation-states.

For example, President Barack Obama was entirely successful when he used U.S. military force to protect Libyan civilians and help remove Libyan dictator Moamar Qaddafi from power, but Obama was [very disappointed](#) that U.S. intervention did not lead to a stable nation-state replacing Qaddafi.

In Gaza, however, the Israeli government seems to be pursuing a policy of nation prevention, rather than nation building. Israeli operations are focused on preventing a Hamas return to power, and it appears the Israeli government would be satisfied with a failed state in Gaza â?? something like Haiti in the desert â?? if Hamas never recovers.

Naturally, the pursuit of different ends may require different ways and means and will certainly require different metrics to determine success or failure. Those who [criticize](#) Israeli operations because they do not advance the goal of stability and prosperity in Gaza are assigning goals to the Israeli Defense Forces that the Israeli government is not pursuing.

What it means for SOF: SOF routinely operate with inadequate guidance and often wind up defining their own missions. The natural tendency is to assume the current mission should resemble some recent mission. However, the Israeli governmentâ??s goal of destroying Hamas, rather than nation-building in Gaza, reminds us that current missions might be entirely different from earlier missions. When operating under inadequate guidance, SOF must resist the temptation to assume the current mission mirrors some recent mission, and instead explicitly state what SOF believe the mission is and push it to higher headquarters for approval. Failure to do so will lead to disconnects like the final years of U.S. operations in Afghanistan, where many in the U.S. military defined the mission as preventing a Taliban conquest of Afghanistan, even though Presidents Trump and Biden agreed that the mission was to [leave Afghanistan](#), regardless of who would govern after the U.S. left.

5. We need a model for turning hostage rescue raids into a successful campaign.

Background: Hostage taking was a major goal of the October 7 attack. Hamas hoped to exchange the hostages for Hamas fighters in Israeli jails and as the attack progressed. The deputy chief of Hamasâ??s political bureau, Saleh al-Aroui, optimistically [told](#) *Al Jazeera* that Hamas had taken enough hostages to free all its fighters held in Israeli jails. Mr. al-Aroui had reason for optimism since he [exchanged](#) a captured Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, for more than 1,000 Palestinians held by Israel in 2011. (Israel [killed](#) Saleh al-Aroui in Beirut, Lebanon, in January 2024.)

After October 7, Israel needed to rescue more than 250 hostages scattered throughout Gaza. There were models for successful hostage rescues, as single events, but Israel needed a hostage rescue campaign, and it could not produce one. As a result, the hostage rescue efforts in Gaza were disappointing. Israel [rescued](#) only eight hostages. Israel launched some hostage rescue raids, and

some of the raids were successful, but after each raid, Hamas identified Israeli tactics and ordered counter-measures [before](#) Israel could repeat the operation. It took the Israelis a long time to develop each approach, and Hamas disseminated a counter to each approach almost immediately. Eventually, Hamas ordered its guards to [execute](#) hostages the moment there was the slightest chance of rescue, and Israel [abandoned](#) the effort to rescue hostages in favor of negotiating prisoner exchanges.

What it means for SOF: Historically, SOF counterterrorism operations have focused on raids to accomplish two tasks: rescue hostages (for example, the Israeli raid on Entebbe, Uganda, in 1976) and capture/kill terrorists (for example, the raid that killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011). As the examples suggest, these missions were, usually, single operations. However, during the U.S. War in Iraq, [TF 714 developed](#) the Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, Disseminate (F3EAD) targeting cycle that enabled the Task Force to turn individual kill/capture raids into a coherent counterterrorism campaign that helped defeat a terrorist network with thousands of fighters hiding among the population. Unfortunately, Israel was not able to transform hostage rescue raids into a campaign that could rescue hundreds of hostages from dozens of locations. Developing concepts that might work in such situations should be a priority for SOF theorists and concept developers. (Colombia might be the best place to look for lessons on industrial-scale hostage rescue because it faced such a severe challenge with the FRAC rebels [kidnapping](#) more than 20,000 people before the group disbanded in 2017.)

6. Adversaries will weaponize civilian casualties and hostages in future wars.

Background: Hamas has created an environment where every civilian casualty is a victory. Israeli civilian casualties demonstrate the power of Hamas and the weakness of the Israeli military. Palestinian civilian casualties are also a victory for Hamas since they support [Hamas narratives](#) about Israeli brutality and criminality and Palestinian victimhood. The Israeli military, on the other hand, finds itself in the opposite position where every civilian casualty is a disaster. Israelis complain that Hamas hides all its critical facilities under the “Golden Triangle” of hospitals, mosques, and schools, but Hamas would be fools if they did not use facilities protected under the Law of Armed Conflict to shield its forces from attack and maximize propaganda benefits when Israel does attack. In the future we can expect others to follow the Hamas example and weaponize civilian casualties.

No Americans were taken hostage during the 9/11 attacks and decades of post-9/11 combat produced virtually no U.S. prisoners of war, leaving many Americans with a false sense of security on the hostage issue. However, hostage taking was a key element of the October 7 attack, and the October 7 example is available for others to follow. We need to remember the 1979-80 hostage crisis that helped prevent President Carter’s re-election and know that another hostage crisis may come at any time and have strategic impact.

What it means for SOF: SOF direct action raids often produce fewer civilian casualties than striking the same targets with bombs and missiles, so pressure to decrease civilian casualties is likely to encourage more SOF direct action raids and fewer strikes with bombs and missiles. However, when things go wrong, as they did in Mogadishu in October 1993, SOF raids can degenerate into extended urban combat producing more casualties, friendly as well as civilian, than a kinetic strike. Since we already have tools to produce collateral damage estimates (CDE) for a bomb or missile strike, SOF need to develop comparable planning tools to predict the likely civilian casualties from a SOF raid to provide decision makers with the information they need to make informed choices. A separate but related issue is that, if the adversary takes prisoners/hostages to use as bargaining chips, SOF can expect missions to capture adversaries to exchange for the hostages the enemy holds. The Israelis may have [captured](#) some Iranians in Syria for this purpose.

7. Listen to what organizations say because sometimes they mean it.

Background: Actions speak louder than words, but sometimes current actions are a poor predictor of future actions and words are a better predictor. Before October 7, Hamas said a great deal about destroying Israel, but daily Hamas actions focused on governing Gaza, not attacking Israel. By the same token, the Houthis' slogan, reproduced on their flag, famously [reads](#) "God Is the Greatest, Death to America, Death to Israel, A Curse Upon the Jews, Victory to Islam". But before October 7, Houthi actions were almost entirely confined to Yemen and their victims were Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula rather than Americans, Israelis, or Jews. Anyone watching the actions of Hamas and the Houthis would conclude they were all talk and no action. However, the October 7 attack demonstrated that destroying Israel was indeed the number one priority for Hamas. The previous lack of attacks on Israel was a [deliberate deception](#) to conceal their true intentions. The Houthis used the fighting in Gaza as an excuse to do what they always wanted to do: attack Israel and America.

What it means for SOF: SOF are usually further forward for longer periods of time and with better cultural understanding of local partners and adversaries than conventional forces. This puts SOF in a unique position to monitor long-term attitudes as an indicator of intentions and potential future actions. SOF must use their position to identify places where the gap between words and deeds might close abruptly and provide timely warning to partners, allies, the Joint Force, and the Interagency.

8. The exploding pagers demonstrate supply chain vulnerabilities and the enduring value of imagination and boldness.

Background: Israel tracked and targeted Hezbollah members through their cell phones. Hezbollah was unable to compete with Israel using higher technology, so it switched to pagers, lower-technology devices that do not reveal the location of the user. Israel found an opportunity by selling the pagers to

Hezbollah after inserting explosives and triggers that enabled Israel to [explode](#) the pagers at will, wounding thousands of Hezbollah leaders. What Israel did with pagers, i.e., insert itself into the supply chain for a critical item and sabotage that item, can be done with a vast array of items in our globalized economy.

What it means for SOF: The exploding pagers are a powerful example of what can be achieved with imagination and daring. It should inspire SOF planners to think more imaginatively about what can be accomplished and inspire strategic leaders to be bolder in approving daring operations that can achieve spectacular results.

9. Long wars offer valuable opportunities.

Background: Most nations prefer short wars for obvious reasons. Ever since the famous Six-Day War in 1967, Israel has focused on short, intense military operations. However, the war after October 7 has been the longest in Israeli history, and that seems to reflect deliberate policy choices by the Israeli Government. A long war in Gaza allows the Israeli military to dismantle Hamas more systematically than would have been possible in a shorter war. Furthermore, if Israel sticks to its commitment to [retain](#) the Philadelphi Corridor, combat operations along Gaza's southern border may continue indefinitely. Likewise, fourteen months of fighting against Hezbollah allowed Israel to do more damage to Hezbollah, at lower cost to Israel, than was possible during the much shorter 2006 war against Hezbollah.

What it means for SOF: The panic over "forever wars" and the shift to planning large scale conventional warfare against peer competitors led some to plan for short wars, but we need war plans that take advantage of the opportunities a long war creates. In particular, SOF core activities that require months or years to develop need to be included. They shouldn't be ignored in favor of operations that offer quicker but smaller and less certain rewards, at higher cost.

Conclusion

These nine lessons are not an exhaustive list of everything we need to learn from October 7 and the subsequent war, and, for reasons of space, the discussion of each lesson has been very brief. However, these lessons, and their implications for SOF are a good starting point for changing processes, policies, and plans to take advantage of the things we have learned from the October 7 war.

About the Author: Dr. Thomas Searle is a retired Army Special Forces officer with more than 30 yearsâ?? experience in the Special Operations Community. During his military career he deployed to combat with every Active and Reserve Special Forces Group, JSOC, and most AFSOC and NAVSPECWARCOM elements. He earned a Ph.D. in Military History from Duke University and is currently a professor at the Joint Special Operations University. The views expressed are his own and do not represent those of the Department of Defense, U.S. Special Operations Command, or the Joint Special Operations University.

This article was originally published by [Small Wars Journal](#)

Date Created

2025/06/11