

The Irregular Warfare Implications of the Israel-Hamas Conflict

Description

In the immediate aftermath of Hamas's devastating surprise assault on Israel this past weekend, it is tempting to focus exclusively on the horrific carnage and wanton destruction on both sides of this now only days-old conflict. Beyond the bloodshed and sorrow, however, there are far broader irregular warfare implications that must be considered locally, regionally, and globally. Recently, [the US Department of Defense published an updated description](#) of "irregular warfare" in *Joint Publication 1 Volume 1 (Joint Warfighting)*, defining it as, "A form of warfare where states and non-state actors campaign to assure or coerce states or other groups through indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric activities." Hamas's initial success in raiding Israeli territory and settlements at an unprecedented scale to destroy equipment; kill or capture key military leaders; and [seize over a hundred hostages](#) in an effort to prevent retaliation will provide analytical fodder for years to come. And while the ultimate outcome of the conflict is far from clear at this early stage, there are already emerging considerations for the scholars, practitioners, and policymakers of irregular warfare to study, understand, and apply.

The Israeli intelligence services [have a nearly mythical reputation around the world](#), yet they failed to detect Hamas's massive preparations for their overwhelming attacks that struck across Israel. Hamas's remarkable ability to mobilize its forces covertly and take the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) [completely by surprise](#) is a testament to their growing expertise in irregular warfare tactics at the grassroots level. As much as one might be led to accuse Israeli intelligence of incompetence or arrogance, it is far more likely (and useful) to study the considerable efforts that Hamas must have undertaken to hide the marshalling of their fighters and resources, conceal their multi-echelon planning efforts, and ensure that their communications were secure up to and through the execution of this attack to prevent Israeli detection.

Prior to the attack, Hamas pre-positioned munitions caches and prepared [thousands of rockets and drones of various sizes](#) to launch from hundreds of hidden locations. This initial bombardment [overwhelmed Israel's vaunted "Iron Dome" air defense systems](#). Using tactics like those honed during the ongoing invasion of Ukraine by Russia, Hamas drone operators [destroyed Israeli tanks and armored vehicles](#) to facilitate the breaching of Israel's borders at multiple locations. At the same time, Hamas operatives staged powered paragliders, manned assault boats, and occupied launch points to [conduct stealthy airborne and sea infiltrations](#) of areas deep within Israeli territory,

allowing Hamas operatives to sow widespread confusion and destruction in parts of Israel long considered secure. Finally, during the assault itself, their commanders initiated and coordinated the attack with [communications that Israel was seemingly unable to detect or disrupt](#).

Hamas's capacity to leverage a diverse range of asymmetric capabilities was instrumental in delivering an initial, devastating blow against the IDF and Israel. The losses sustained by Israel dwarf, per capita, [those suffered by the US on 9/11](#), and the monumental effects on Israeli society will take time to fully assess. This episode highlights Hamas's prowess in guerrilla warfare, showing how adeptly they harness local resources and knowledge to achieve their objectives, all while maintaining an extraordinary level of secrecy. It underscores the evolving nature of conflict in today's world, where non-state actors can rival conventional military forces in both strategy and execution, making them formidable adversaries on the modern battlefield.

Despite initial accusations of complicity in planning and approving of Hamas's attack against Israel, Iran has vehemently denied involvement and [both the US and Israel currently claim that there is no intelligence suggesting any connection](#). All the same, the escalating war between Israel and Hamas will certainly cause reverberations across the entire Levant.

Expanding our view to the regional implications, the ongoing involvement of both Iran and the United States in Syria and Iraq hold significant implications for irregular warfare dynamics within the broader context of the Israeli-Hamas conflict. With both the United States and Iran [pursuing divergent objectives in Syria](#), the region has become a hotbed for proxy conflicts, creating a multifaceted environment where irregular warfare thrives. Whereas Iran backs the Syrian regime of its ally, Bashar al-Assad, the US seeks the lasting defeat of the Islamic State terrorist group and [has aligned itself with the Syrian Kurds](#) to achieve that end, requiring that it help secure the southeast corner of the country against Syrian, Turkish, and Iranian proxies intent on destroying the Kurds and ousting the Americans. Recent years have seen a violent tit-for-tat between the US and its Kurdish partners against Iran and its aligned militant groups — punctuated by [exchanges of fire and repeated de-escalations](#) as each side seeks to accomplish their goals in the region.

In addition to [providing considerable support to Hamas](#), Iran's patronage for other militant groups, such as Hezbollah, has allowed them to exert influence and establish a presence in the Golan Heights to amplify the threats to Israeli security. In response, Israel has conducted both covert and overt operations within Syria to counter this encroachment, [such as by destroying caches of Iranian weapons](#) bound for Hamas and Hezbollah. In some instances, Iran has tasked its proxies [to retaliate for Israeli strikes by attacking American targets](#). As the IDF directs its attention toward the siege and potential clearance of Hamas from the Gaza Strip, Iran and Hezbollah might be [unable to resist the opportunity to strike its distracted foe](#). These developments illustrate the intricate interplay of state and

non-state actors, emphasizing the role of irregular warfare in shaping regional dynamics. Furthermore, it underscores the challenge for Israel and the US, as they must navigate not only the immediate threats posed by Hamas to Israel, but also the broader regional complexities that have direct implications for their shared and collective security.

Within the larger southwest Asia region, the [complex and often contentious interactions](#) between Saudi Arabia and Iran represent another competition layer affected by the latest conflict between Hamas and Israel. These two regional powers, representing distinct branches of Islam and competing for influence in the Middle East, have been involved in a broader struggle for regional supremacy for years. As both nations [support different factions and groups across the region](#), this rivalry amplifies the complexities of conflicts such as the Israeli-Hamas struggle. Saudi Arabia's [recent rapprochement toward Israel](#) and its growing ties with Arab states has set the stage for a potential shift in regional dynamics, while Iran's support for groups like Hamas and its ties with Syria and Hezbollah create a web of irregular warfare networks. Separately but related, Iran also provides considerable support to the Houthi rebels in Yemen, which Tehran has [leveraged to attack Saudi Arabia and undermine its interests](#). The ongoing regional competition adds a layer of complexity and uncertainty to the Israeli-Hamas conflict, highlighting the intricate role of benefactor states and their proxies in shaping the broader security landscape in the Middle East.

Finally, the strained relationship between the United States and Russia, exacerbated by intensifying global competition, will absolutely have implications for this conflict between Hamas and Israel. The historical rivalry between these two superpowers has often extended to proxy battlegrounds, with [both nations supporting various actors and factions](#) in the Middle East at different times in history. The Israeli-Hamas conflict has witnessed subtle but influential maneuvering by the US and Russia, each pursuing its strategic interests. America's unwavering support for Israel, backed by extensive military aid, has bolstered Israel's capabilities in past conflicts and will certainly prove critical in the coming battles. By contrast, Russia has sought to strengthen its presence in the region, [propping up Syria and indirectly supporting groups like Hamas](#). The interaction of these two major powers adds layers of complexity to the irregular warfare landscape, as the Israeli-Hamas conflict becomes intertwined with broader geopolitical dynamics already inflamed by the US and its partners' support to Ukraine as it resists Russia's ongoing and savage invasion. Russian propagandists have been working furiously to spread disinformation [accusing Ukraine of selling US provided weapons to Hamas](#), leading some Western politicians to question continued aid amid Kyiv's grinding counteroffensive against the Russian occupiers.

The Israeli government has vowed to crush Hamas and [seems to have the necessary public support to weather any protracted conflict](#). While the most visible portion of Israel's counterattack will be the

large scale clearance of Gaza by the IDF, the Israelis will undoubtedly also pursue the irregular warfare approaches they have previously demonstrated to retaliate and attempt to control escalation. Far afield from the Levant, Israel might potentially engage in its own indirect, non-attributable, and/or asymmetric attacks against Hamas's supporters and [wide-ranging financial infrastructure](#) to either degrade their operational funding or expose illicit activity to further sway international opinion against the group. The Israeli intelligence services could also bring retribution against Hamas or its Iranian supporters [at the times and places of their choosing](#), allowing for more subtle "exchanges" and potential off-ramps to further escalation.

Any additional fuel sprayed on this already raging inferno, by Hezbollah or another Iranian proxy attacking Israel or its interests abroad, will certainly lead to uncontrolled escalation. The web of overlapping and conflicting interests between all the major players in the region – the US, Israel, Iran, Syria, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and others – has created a powder keg primed to detonate. And underlying all is a timeless competition for power and influence undergirded by irregular warfare in its most intricate and complex form. The future is entirely unwritten, but the history that will be made in the Middle East in the coming weeks and months will prove valuable to the study of multi-echelon irregular warfare.

Doug Livermore is the Director of Integrated Deterrence for the Department of the Navy and a U.S. Army Special Forces deputy commander in the North Carolina National Guard. He recently returned from a yearlong mobilization as the deputy commander for Special Operations Advisory Group – Iraq. In addition to his evacuation and advocacy work with [No One Left Behind](#), Doug is the National Director of External Communications for the [Special Forces Association](#), National Secretary for the [Special Operations Association of America](#), and the Director of External Communications for the [Irregular Warfare Initiative](#). He is widely published as a subject matter expert on and advocate for special operations and national security issues. You can connect with Doug on [LinkedIn](#).

All opinions expressed are those of the author alone and do not reflect the official positions of any department or agency of the United States Government.

Image caption: An Israeli Defense Forces soldier fires his M4 carbine during joint training with U.S. Army paratroopers on March 12, 2019, in Israel. The training involved rifle marksmanship, hand-to-hand combat techniques, and other physical competitions designed to hone infantry skills.

Date Created

2023/10/12