

Theories of Victory: Israel, Hamas, and the Meaning of Success in Irregular Warfare

Description

Two months in, what does the war between Israel and Hamas tell us about victory and defeat in irregular warfare? There is no difficulty in identifying those who have lost the most through this conflict: the civilian victims, caught up in a hellish devastation not of their making. In contrast, assessing which of the two combatants is winning is a far more bewildering task. In this war as in so many others, success and failure are polymorphous, unfolding tactically and strategically, locally and internationally, directly and indirectly, and across different timescales. As warfare, with its destruction and loss, is ostensibly justified by the political purpose it is meant to attain, this lack of clarity should be concerning.

Using Israel's war on Hamas along with past precedents as case studies, this piece seeks to shed light on the question of victory in irregular warfare. It is certainly too early to make definitive statements on the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, but much can be learned by studying what has unfolded to date. With this caveat, the question remains: is anyone winning this war and, if so, how and why? The discussion relates not only to the fighting in Gaza, or to its broader regional politics, but to the [future of irregular-warfare strategy](#) and to our continued theorization of what it may achieve. War colleges rightly teach [theories of victory](#) as a crucial component of strategy, but do we even know what we're looking for?

The Case for Hamas

Since its brazen attack on Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas has faced a furious Israeli counterattack. Israel has pummeled Hamas positions across Gaza, devastating its base of operations and seeking thereby to fulfill its war objective of eliminating the group. After just weeks of fighting, [casualties in Gaza](#) are some 20,000, the vast majority of whom are civilians. The scale of the offensive indicates that Israel will not be deterred by Hamas's use of human shields or civilian infrastructure. Hamas, in other words, would appear lost.

To be sure, this is not the mainstream narrative. On the contrary, there is no real confidence today that sheer military strength will win the war. As it might be put, if we learned anything from Iraq, and from the two decades of battling various asymmetric threats, it is that victory means not only military success but also achieving a lasting peace. Through this lens, despite its military setbacks Hamas is

succeeding politically and benefiting, paradoxically, from Israel's military onslaught. In invading Gaza, goes the argument, Israel has fallen victim to the strategic fallacy typical of Western armed forces: that military superiority can be used to defeat insurgencies.

This case of a Hamas victory rests on three pillars.

First, through its brazen attack, Hamas was able to demonstrate Israeli vulnerability and outflank its Palestinian rivals, principally the Palestinian Authority (PA). In Israel, the attacks are widely viewed as representing an [existential threat](#), hence the celerity and severity of its response. As Hezbollah increases its rocket attacks, violence escalates on the West Bank, and the Houthis continue their missile strikes on Israeli and US targets, Israel finds itself in a potential multi-front war, underscoring its precarious position. Meanwhile, the image of Israel's much-vaunted military and intelligence machinery has been diminished. Through the attack, therefore, Hamas has evinced a new balance of power.

Second, destroying Hamas, as Israel seeks to do, is a tall order. Even if the organization is irrevocably weakened, ideologies are harder to kill. Much will therefore depend on whether, in pummeling Hamas, Israel can also undercut the appeal of its message and cause. Beyond what it can (and cannot) achieve militarily, this would require addressing the aggravation of Palestinian anger toward Israel as well as the desperate conditions in Gaza, even prior to the offensive. It is difficult to see how Israel might achieve progress on either front. The "two-state solution" has become an obsolete mantra with minimal purchase. Meanwhile, none of the proposed alternatives to Hamas for governing Gaza appear viable, with the PA being particularly unpromising due to its perceived inactivity and diminished legitimacy in the wake of Hamas' attacks.

With continued political uncertainty in Gaza, and old grievances inflamed by fresh wounds, Hamas may just survive, if not organizationally then ideologically. If so, this self-proclaimed resistance movement will be able to claim tremendous legitimacy for having hurt Israel as never before, for gaining concessions through the release of hostages, and for withstanding the ensuing onslaught. These achievements will reverberate not just across the Palestinian world, where [polling](#) suggests increased support of Hamas since the Israeli offensive, but also regionally and internationally.

Third, whatever happens to Hamas, it can rightly claim to have put the Palestinian cause back on the map. Clausewitz tells us that warfare is a continuation of politics by other means. On that front, the current cycle of conflict has convinced many that the Israeli policy toward Palestine is unsustainable and that a different political solution is needed. Compare this attitude with the relative neglect of the Palestinian cause prior to Oct. 7, when Israel was managing the conflict against a backdrop of global oblivion. Hamas will, with some credibility, claim credit for having tarnished Israel's reputation both

regionally and beyond, returned Gaza to international headlines, and caused dilemmas also for Israel's chief sponsor, the United States.

Indeed, Israel is now more isolated than it has been for a long time, and this following a period of successful international engagement. Several countries have [recalled their ambassadors](#), and [deals made](#) have been [annulled](#). Even the United States displays signs of hesitation. Though difficult to detect, given America's consistent military assistance and tendency to back Israel to the hilt, President Biden has been putting pressure on Israel in ways uncharacteristic of a US president. The [delay in sending Israel new rifles](#) (for fear of their usage against Palestinian civilians on the West Bank) and the [creative methods needed to send artillery shells](#) (to bypass potential congressional opposition) indicate just how US opinion on Israel is shifting. [Polling](#) reveals a growing tendency among Americans to blame Israel for the war and to sympathize with the Palestinian population. For the Biden administration, supporting Israel has become a riskier proposition, costing it possible votes domestically and legitimacy internationally.

Given this logic, it is plausible to argue that Hamas's attacks have yielded some level of success beyond the apparent military imbalance in the ongoing conflict. The severe violence carried out on Oct. 7 disrupted entrenched political dynamics and reshaped psychological and strategic perceptions in unexpected ways. Such flux can prove helpful.

Parallels can be found in history. North Vietnamese forces were badly mauled in their Tet offensive of 1968, but the show of force changed the strategic calculus surrounding the war, leading eventually to an American withdrawal and the collapse of South Vietnam. In 1995, the Zapatistas in Mexico launched a daring attack that was soon rebuffed, yet the group was then able to present itself internationally as the beleaguered victim of an abusive state. The resulting ["net-war"](#) in the terms of Arquilla and Ronfeldt, leveraged globally distributed networks in such manner as to paralyze the state, so that, to this day, the Zapatistas still govern autonomous rebel zones separately from and in opposition to the state.

In these instances and others, the military balance was undone by intangibles. While it is uncertain if Hamas anticipated this type of outcome, it is evident that the organization has derived perverse benefits from its Oct. 7 attacks, especially in terms of influencing public perceptions. Recognizing this fact is not a defense of mass violence but rather an attempt to explain its occurrence. Such terroristic action can create a cognitive shock, capturing global attention and potentially altering the narrative. Accordingly, any reaction to such events must itself be crucially concerned with the framing, narrative, and perceptions that follow. Military might will always matter, but as [Joseph Nye](#) warned almost two decades ago, "victory also depends upon whose story wins." That Hamas, an internationally reviled terrorist organization, can succeed in this contest should be as shocking as it is instructive.

The Case for Israel

So, is Israel doomed, yet another state victim of “net-war”? It would seem a puzzling conclusion, given the country’s military power, the asymmetry in casualties through fighting, and its growing control over a devastated Gaza. Israel remains a nation-state recognized by most of the international community and certainly by its main players; it benefits from legal standing, backing, and resources in a way that Hamas could never match.

The Israeli aim in this war is to destroy Hamas. As discussed, this will be difficult, but certainly Hamas stands to lose more tangibly than Israel in the current battle. Each day, Israel is striking more targets, weakening Hamas and making a return to its former position of power increasingly unlikely. Hamas seeks to win this war in the realm of optics and perception, but, in the words of [Lt. Gen. George Miller](#) (of *In the Loop*), “At the end of a war you need some soldiers left, really, or else it looks like you’ve lost.”

But what of the intangibles? Hamas’s sponsors may rejoice at the group having soured Israel’s relations with some Arab states, principally Saudi Arabia, but none of these sponsors are coming to the rescue against the Israeli onslaught. For several weeks, Hezbollah remained [largely passive](#) in the face of the Israeli attack; only recently has it [escalated](#), but without yet opening up second front in aid of Hamas. Iran, long-time sponsor of Hamas, [quickly proclaimed](#) it had no hand in or foreknowledge of the Oct. 7 attack, reflecting its reluctance to be drawn into a regional war (all while it uses its influence over the Houthi insurgency in Yemen to strategic advantage). Hamas may have gained some sympathy for compelling Israel to release Palestinian prisoners, and perversely from Israel’s heavy bombardment of Gaza, but most observers nonetheless spurn the group as a terrorist organization, particularly as gruesome details of its massacre emerge.

Facing Israel alone in Gaza, Hamas is now the victim of an age-old [insurgent’s dilemma](#): “between taking actions which have a high probability of bringing on a violent response (but which have some chance of reaching the group’s goals) and taking no action at all (thereby assuring the defeat of the group’s goals).” Hamas chose to act, and to do so with unprecedented savagery and malice. In so doing, Hamas also gave Israel the impetus and justification to pursue it militarily and at an unprecedented intensity. As Hamas is after all fixed in Gaza, a territory smaller in size than Rhode Island and on Israel’s doorstep, the military task of suppressing the group would seem within Israel’s reach.

If this is Hamas’s future, it would not be the first insurgency that is undone by military might. Consider the mighty Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), author of a protracted and sophisticated insurgency, but eliminated by sheer force from 2006 to 2009 at the hands of the Sri Lankan military.

The destruction was significant and civilian casualties high, but such losses did not reverse the strategic outcome. In a similar vein, the Islamic State claimed extensive territory across both Syria and Iraq in 2014 and became one of the most notorious insurgent groups ever seen. Yet despite (or precisely because of) such successes, ISIS exposed itself to a military counterattack that demolished its overall plan in less than three years. ISIS still plots its resurgence and launches occasional attacks, but it is unclear how its vaunted “caliphate” can be created without the group facing the same fate as it did in Mosul or Raqqa.

Despite the generally low faith in conventional military power in irregular warfare, such outcomes are hardly aberrational. In most recent insurgent struggles, it has been the state that wins, either decisively as in Sri Lanka or by pushing its opponent below an acceptable threshold, as in Iraq and Syria. Indeed, since 2000, [only six insurgencies](#) can be said to have been “victorious,” though most of these produced only further conflict, and all required *significant* external support (most notably in Libya and in Afghanistan, both in 2001 and 2021). Absent such backing, insurgent efforts have largely failed.

The states that emerge on top in these contests do not do so by adhering closely to counterinsurgency best practices: winning hearts and minds, separating insurgents from the people, and following a political plan. Instead, states reapply military force as necessary to suppress rather than ever quite resolve the matter. “Mowing the grass,” as the approach is termed, is deemed a suboptimal response to political violence, as it does not address the root causes of the conflict. Even so, for the insurgent, the grass is mowed, and the armed struggle must start over—often with great effort. Neither side shines, but the insurgent suffers more, and the state gets to survive.

This history establishes a clear asymmetry: a contrast between the state’s military strength and the insurgent’s ability to rally support. For Israel, the challenge lies in whether it can apply enough of the former to counteract Hamas’s application of the latter. In the past, Israel has succeeded in mowing the grass, setting its adversaries back and deflecting the international opprobrium resulting from its military actions. The irony today is that, more than anything, it has been the speed, scale, and intensity of Israel’s own response that is making the difference, fueling support for Hamas, opposition to Israel, and sympathy for the Palestinian cause. If Israel had adopted a more measured, precise, and diplomatically savvy approach in its efforts to neutralize Hamas, the group’s assertions of victory, whether actual or perceived, would likely appear less credible. In that sense, Israel’s own strategy has been its greatest enemy. This unforced error need not derail Israel’s objectives, but they may come at a far higher cost, if they come at all.

Conclusion: Power, Legitimacy, and Politics

“Winning or losing is all one organic globule, from which one extracts what one needs.” These insightful words, not from Sun Tzu but spoken by Rosie Perez’s character in the movie, [White Men Can’t Jump](#), resonate curiously well with the nuances of irregular warfare. In these conflicts, the act of winning and losing occurs both tangibly and intangibly, making the balance of advantage in any given situation difficult to see.

In such contexts, what is a suitable theory of victory? One method of approaching the question is to assess the respective asymmetries and vulnerabilities of each side and to query to what degree they are being effectively exploited. These vulnerabilities, it should be stated, are not just military in nature, but also political, social, and informational. Thus, for insurgents, working from the ground up, victory has always required applying their strengths against the government’s weaknesses and avoiding the application of government strength against their own vulnerabilities. A corollary, for states, is to prevent insurgents from dictating this correlation of forces.

How do Israel and Hamas fare? Both appear to have committed cardinal errors. States are typically militarily superior, yet they suffer when they lose legitimacy and can no longer resist the mobilizing powers of their insurgent foe. Israel has applied its strength (military force) but in such a way as to reveal a weakness (a lack of international and regional legitimacy) that Hamas is now exploiting. It may be that the world anyway moves on, and that continued American support allows Israel to prevail. However, at worst for Israel, its military gains will be pyrrhic, as international, regional, and local opinion turns on the country and generates fresh attacks and resistance.

For Hamas, the brutality of the Oct. 7 attacks provided Israel with a reason to unleash its strength (military force) against Hamas’s comparative weakness (its inability to stand up and fight), and the group therefore risks severe degradation or even complete destruction. Hamas’s strengths lie in asymmetry and ambiguity. Using human shields and the population of Gaza as hostages, it has long been able to threaten moral outrage should Israel truly pursue it where it lives. These advantages are however difficult to maintain when it is committed to territorial defense of a controlled area and engaged in head-on clashes against the military forces of the state.

The ongoing conflict in Gaza epitomizes the complex nature of irregular warfare. The Department of Defense once defined irregular warfare as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence,” which captures well the conundrum at the heart of modern conflict. The key takeaway emerging from the current situation in the Middle East is that for violence to be strategically effective, it must be both underpinned and bolstered by persuasive narratives and sufficient support. Military strength can yet be decisive, but its power and sustainability are enhanced when it is aligned with, rather than corrosive to, public opinion. As illustrated by the Middle East today, in winning this battle for legitimacy, there can be no room for complacency.

David H. Ucko ([@daviducko](#)) is professor at the College of International Security Affairs, National Defense University. He is a 2023 Irregular Warfare Fellow and an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University. This article is loosely based on [his latest book](#), *The Insurgent's Dilemma: A Struggle to Prevail* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the United States Military Academy, National Defense University, Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or United States government.

Main Image: Israeli Defense Forces Soldiers prepare for ground activity in Gaza (IDF via Wikimedia Commons)

Date Created

2023/12/30