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Opinion | Why Israel Can't Bomb Hamas Into Submission

Netanyahu made a stir in 2016 when, in the Knesset chamber, he read a book that argued that decisive wars are won through overwhelming violence. But factors unique to Hamas and Gaza, as well as the threat of regional escalation, mean Israel can't use the 'surrender or die' ultimatum.
Seven years ago, in December 2016, Benjamin Netanyahu was seen in the Knesset chamber with a book in his hand. Israeli journalists curiously inquired what their prime minister was reading.

The book turned out to be *Nothing less than victory: Decisive wars and the lessons of history* by historian John David Lewis. The main argument of the book is that it is possible to break an enemy’s will to fight through overwhelming violence, that in decisive wars, the enemy is given two possibilities: surrender or die.

For Israel and Hamas, chasing images of victory is a battle with no winners or losers

Israel's military gains in Gaza won't bring strategic change due to Netanyahu's inaction

The unbridgeable gulf between Israeli politicians' rhetoric and the reality in Gaza

At the time *Haaretz* noted that "Time may tell whether Lewis' book influences the prime minister's future military thinking."

Now that time has arrived. Israel is facing the most difficult counterinsurgency operation in modern times, perhaps ever in military history. The challenge Israel is facing is much more complicated than what America faced in places like Falluja and Mosul.
Netanyahu appears to be looking to the examples cited in Lewis' book as a playbook. The problem is the war in Gaza may very well have no precedent and Hamas is proving itself to be an especially formidable foe.

In his book Lewis showed with six case studies from antiquity to World War II that overwhelming victories in wars can lead to peace agreements that are not just stable and lasting, but also moral.

His chapters about Nazi Germany and Japan show that it is indeed possible to force great powers to surrender, crush ideologies and bomb away ideas that were arguably more powerful than Hamas and its militant Islamism are today in Gaza.

Regarding Nazi Germany and Japan, Lewis wrote that it was not enough to defeat them on the battlefield, but total and permanent destruction of both these countries' military capacity and their will to fight. In short: "unconditional surrender."

Their unconditional surrenders meant that millions of Germans and Japanese were saved from certain
death and given their lives back. In both countries peace replaced war as a national policy.

It's not controversial in academic war studies to find the argument that the aim of a war is to defeat the enemy's will to fight, or that decisive victories lead to more stable peace.

Studies have noted a trend over the past 15 years toward military victories in favor over negotiated peace agreements, beginning in 2009 when the Sri Lankan government decisively defeated the Tamil Tigers, which had once been regarded as one of the world's strongest terror organizations. Another example is Russia ending its "anti-terror operation" in Chechnya after brutally crushing an Islamist guerilla there, proving it's possible to bomb even militant Islamists into submission.

But the conditions in Gaza are very different to other recent or past conflicts. It's unique because the territory is one of the most densely populated in the world. Hamas has also governed Gaza for almost two decades, which is unique as well among Islamist terror organizations, which typically only govern for a few years before they are overthrown.

According to Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar, his organization had built over 500 kilometers of tunnels underneath Gaza, the so-called "Gaza
metro".

Unlike the U.S. and Russia in Iraq and Syria, Israel does not have any local Gaza allies to help fight. The IDF is also active in both the West Bank and along the Lebanon border, which means a significant part of the Israeli military is engaged elsewhere.

With possible exceptions for the 1948 war, which led to a mass Palestinian exodus, and the 1982 Lebanon War, which sought to crush the PLO, Israel has never fought to break its enemies' will to fight.

In all its other wars including the two Palestinians intifadas (uprisings) – Israel contended with formal or informal ceasefires when they ended, often under American pressure.

The big question now is whether Israel will act differently in this war. Israel has without a doubt the military capacity to defeat Hamas and its ideology in Gaza.

Alternatively, Israel has the capability to forcibly drive the Palestinians, including Hamas, out of Gaza through bombings, sieges, starvation, and other means of coercion. However, it's doubtful Israel has the will to do any of this, despite Netanyahu's repeated promises that he is committed to crush Hamas, kill its leaders and all of its 30,000 of its combatants.

Despite the brutality of its bombing campaign in Gaza, Israel has so far only managed to kill around 8,000 Hamas members, according to the IDF's spokesperson, which would be 30 percent of its force. Likewise, most of Hamas's top political and military leadership, in Gaza and abroad, are still alive, and much of its infrastructure in the southern
part of Gaza seems intact as well.

The fact that Hamas has managed repeated exchanges of hostages for prisoners during the war proves it's still functioning and in control over large parts of Gaza, and over other militant organizations keeping hostages captured in the strip.

It's increasingly clear that Israel lacks U.S. support for doing what it takes to militarily defeat Hamas and crush its ideology and ideas. If Israel attacks Gaza even harder than it has, it risks not just a wider regional war and the collapse of the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, but also weakening the whole American security architecture in the region.

It's also increasingly clear that this war is a political disaster for U.S. President Joe Biden, who had hoped to start off his election campaign with an Israeli-Saudi peace treaty. Instead, Biden enters this election campaign with dismal polling numbers and betting data clearly against him.

Donald Trump, on the other hand, has received a major boost from it.

It's difficult today to see a clear path to a decisive military victory for Israel. Likewise, the path to a permanent ceasefire also seems distant, especially with most Hamas leaders still alive, the organization somewhat intact and over half of the...
some 250 Israeli hostages still in captivity in Gaza three months after the war began — an agonizing blow to the morale of the country.

At the same time, many things could happen in the war which could alter the political and military calculations on all sides: epidemics could break out, the population could rise up against Hamas, Palestinians could flee or be forced out of Gaza threatening regional stability, Biden could force Israel to accept a ceasefire, the Israeli government could fall.

Most harrowing of all, the situation could still escalate into regional war. Then again powerful Saudi Arabia might be able to help de-escalate tensions, and so on. But no matter which way things go, a decisive, crushing of not just Hamas but its ideology, remains elusive three months into the war.

If a decisive military victory is not possible in Gaza, Israel may again have to contend with a formal or informal ceasefire, as it has done in all previous wars since 1948. This would likely mean that Israeli politicians, led by former Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, were wrong when they promised over and over again after the 2014 war that the next war in Gaza would be the last.

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