[America’s lesson from Gaza: prepare for disinformation war](https://breakingdefense.com/2021/11/americas-lesson-from-gaza-prepare-for-disinformation-war/" \o "Permanent link to America’s lesson from Gaza: prepare for disinformation war)

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***Following the May outbreak of fighting in Gaza, the Jewish Institute for National Security of America gathered 10 former top American military officers to study the conflict and draw conclusions for how it could apply to Pentagon operations in the future. In the op-ed below, Charles Wald, the retired Deputy Commander of United States European Command, and Robert Ashley, the retired Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, write with Blaise Misztal of JINSA that the biggest lesson learned related to information warfare.***

While the US may be turning its focus towards the Pacific, the Middle East still has military lessons to teach. This is particularly true of the May 2021 conflict between Israel and armed Palestinian groups in the Gaza Strip. Israel has termed its operations the “[first artificial intelligence](https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/gaza-news/guardian-of-the-walls-the-first-ai-war-669371)” war, but perhaps the most important takeaway has to do with disinformation.

May’s 11-day conflict, the fourth major round of hostilities since Hamas violently took control of Gaza in 2007, made up for its brevity with intensity. Hamas’ deployment of advanced capabilities, civilian shields, and disinformation are characteristics of tactics US forces will likely encounter. And while Israel’s ability to dominate Gaza’s finite battlespace was an advantage American planners cannot count on, Israel’s operational and technological innovations, and its challenges in the informational domain, should help shape how US forces prepare for their next conflicts.

Hamas entered this conflict with updated offensive capabilities and plans. Its most visible advance was its high sustained rate of rocket fire, including barrages of up to 150 rockets fired at a single target, all meant to overwhelm Israel’s Iron Dome air defense system. Hamas also sought to attack Israeli forces with anti-tank missiles, unmanned aerial and submersible vehicles, naval forces, and an electronic warfare capability designed to jam Iron Dome radars.

Despite these advancing capabilities, Hamas neither expected nor sought a military victory against Israel. Instead, its primary strategic objectives during this round of fighting were political and informational: Hamas sought to boost its own standing among Palestinians while delegitimizing Israel. A critical part of this strategy was Hamas’ use of human shields — placing its military assets and infrastructure among Gaza’s dense civilian neighborhoods — to both complicate Israeli operations and, when civilian casualties occur, wage a disinformation campaign to accuse the IDF of violating the law of armed conflict.

Israel, for its part, sought purely operational-level military objectives, and did not appear to have a strategy for changing the foundational dynamics that have led to repeated hostilities with Hamas. Nor did it effectively contest Hamas in the information domain, even as both disinformation (intentionally false or misleading messages spread by Hamas) and misinformation (false information unknowingly amplified by the media or public) against Israel proliferated, [particularly on social media](https://jcpa.org/article/did-israel-lose-the-social-media-war-over-gaza/). Israeli messaging focused on providing details about its military operations, but did not make the case for the legality of its actions, dispute false information, or call attention to Hamas’ troubling use of civilian shields.

This created a strategy mismatch — because each side was pursuing fundamentally different objectives, both Israel and Hamas consider themselves to have triumphed in the conflict. This seeds the ground not only for repeated future conflicts — you can’t deter future military action if the other side thinks it won —  but also encourages Hamas to continue leveraging the information domain to gain political and strategic advantage over Israel.

Instead, determined to restore deterrence and degrade Hamas’ military capabilities, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) deployed a series of operational and technological innovations, both before and during the conflict, to accelerate their ability to find and fix targets. These included increased transparency in sharing data, deploying artificial intelligence to identify targets, battlefield management systems to push intelligence to combat units, and precision weapons and munitions.

As part of their new “Momentum” doctrine, the IDF began operations with a high tempo of strikes against pre-planned and predominantly fixed Hamas military targets, and only increased the pace of strikes over time. The IDF hit as many targets in 11 days as during seven weeks of fighting in 2014. Due to its swift and massive use of force, Israel rendered unusable much of Hamas’ tunnel networks and stopped nearly all of Hamas’ offensive operations, other than rocket and mortar fire.

Israel’s large, pre-planned target set made possible this high operational tempo. Gaza’s size and proximity to Israel allows the IDF to constantly monitor their enemies. Utilizing an extensive network of electronic sensors, including ground-based, onboard UAVs and F-35 multi-mission aircraft, and subterranean seismic monitors along the border, the IDF has collected billions of pieces of intelligence. To sift quickly through all that data to identify targets, Israel broke down stovepipes in how data is managed, introduced artificial intelligence and man-machine teams, and made organizational changes to enable information sharing. This also helped generate hundreds of new targets, and maintain a high ops tempo, during the conflict.

Using updated battlefield management systems, the IDF pushed strike packages and real-time information about the surrounding areas to combat units. By matching munition payload and fusing to the target and using American-supplied precision guided munitions, including Joint Direct Attack Munition tail kits, the IDF turned its intelligence into highly accurate airstrikes.

Fighting terrorist adversaries on a relatively small, close-in, and finite battlespace may make the Gaza conflict appear to resemble the wars of the last two decades, rather than the great power competition and multi-domain battles that the United States is preparing for now. Yet, [the detailed study](https://jinsa.org/jinsa_report/gaza-conflict-2021-assessment-observations-and-lessons/) we have undertaken of this conflict, with ten other retired senior US military officers under the auspices of the Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA), reveals trends and complexities that are relevant for study today.

Great power competition is underway, and we already know it will not manifest solely as major combat operations. Whether [Iranian-backed militias](https://www.rand.org/blog/2019/10/irans-proxies-are-more-powerful-than-ever.html), Russia’s “[little green men](https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/03/how-why-and-when-russia-will-deploy-little-green-men-and-why-the-us-cannot/)” and private military contractors, or Chinese “[fishing boat](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56474847)” flotillas, state actors are increasingly fighting like unconventional forces. By keeping their operations below the threshold of war and denying state involvement, nation state actors can hope to create facts on the ground without triggering a US response.

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While the current preference in Washington might be to avoid engaging in such contingencies in order to maintain a force posture and readiness better suited to high-end threats, military leaders should also develop plans for responding to and/or deterring adversaries operating at the lower end of the conflict-competition spectrum.

Any such plans must learn from Israel’s shortcomings in the most recent conflict, particularly its ceding of the information domain to the adversary. The ability of Hamas to discredit Israel by spreading disinformation presents other actors for a strategic playbook for constraining a superior military force by exploiting a particular vulnerability of democracies: their susceptibility to public opinion.

US competitors have already begun to leverage disinformation for local and global effect. Russian [information operations](https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/05/gerasimov-doctrine-russia-foreign-policy-215538/) and Chinese “wolf warrior diplomacy,” including [doctored images](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55140848) of Australian forces holding a knife to an Afghan child’s throat posted to social media, already define how these autocratic states compete with the United States and its democratic allies. To confront these challenges, the United States should prepare to contest future conflicts emphatically and preemptively, in the information domain as much as in the physical. This is not just a challenge for the US military but requires a comprehensive approach, updating and strengthening the informational tools — like Radio Free Europe and Voice of America — that the United States deployed effectively in the Cold War.

It is also important to recognize how future US conflicts might differ from the conditions Israel faced in its latest Gaza conflict. US forces will confront adversaries in environments significantly more complex than Gaza — just as densely populated by civilians, but farther afield, with more limited intelligence, little to no air dominance, and in a contested electromagnetic spectrum — while remaining committed to complying with legal protections of civilians.

In preparation for such operations, the United States should make investments, together with partners like Israel, in new technologies to counter adversaries’ advancing capabilities, enable mitigating risk to civilians, and allow it to operate more quickly and precisely, and therefore more decisively, in complex environments. And it should recognize that deploying some of these innovations — such as the new Joint All-Domain Command and Control system — requires overcoming organizational, as much as technological, obstacles.

As near-peer competitors adopt strategies that include conflict below the traditional threshold of war, irregular warfare, and information operations, the US military can learn from the experiences of its Israeli partner in how to fight such adversaries effectively, efficiently, and legally.