

Gaza Conflict 2021 Assessment: Observations and Lessons



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Gaza Conflict Task Force and Staff

Gaza Task Force

LTG Robert Ashley, USA (ret.)
Former Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency

LTG John M. Bednarek, USA (ret.)
Former Senior Defense Official in Iraq; former Chief of Office of Security Cooperation in Baghdad

LTC Geoffrey S. Corn, USA (ret.) *Former Chief International Law for U.S. Army Europe*

Lt Gen Jon Davis, USMC (ret.)
Former Deputy Commandant for Aviation

LTG Karen Gibson, USA (ret.)
Former Deputy Director for National Intelligence for National Security Partnerships

LTG Stephen Lanza, USA (ret.) *Former Commanding General of 1 Corps and Joint Base Lewis McChord*

RADM Brian Losey, USN (ret.)
Former Commander of Naval Special Warfare Command

Lt Gen Richard Natonski, USMC (ret.)
Former Commander of U.S. Marine Corps Forces Command

LTG Raymond Palumbo, USA (ret.) *Former Deputy Commander of U.S. Army Special Operations Command*

GEN David Rodriguez, USA (ret.) *Former Commander of United States Africa Command (AFRICOM)*

Lt Gen Thomas Trask, USAF (ret.) *Former Vice Commander of United States Special Operations Command*

Gen Charles Wald, USAF (ret.)
Former Deputy Commander of United States European Command (EUCOM)

JINSA Staff and Contributors

Blaise Misztal
Vice President for Policy

Jonathan Ruhe
Director of Foreign Policy

Ari Cicurel
Senior Policy Analyst

Erielle Davidson
Senior Policy Analyst

Andrew Ghalili
Senior Policy Analyst

Abraham Katsman
Fellow, Gemunder Center for Defense & Strategy

Samuel Millner
Policy Analyst

Table of Contents

I. Executive Summary	7
A. Observations	
B. Lessons Learned	
II. Introduction	15
III. Observations	17
A. Israel Complied with LOAC and its Requirements to Mitigate Risks to Civilians and Civilian Property	
B. Hamas Pursued an Informational Strategy to Increase its Legitimacy and Delegitimize Israel's Operations	
C. Hamas Violated LOAC and Used Disinformation in Pursuit of Its Strategic Objectives	
D. The International Media and Public Misunderstand LOAC, Enabling Hamas	
E. Israel Pursued Only Military Operational Objectives with No Defined Strategic End-State	
F. Israel Did Not Counter Hamas' Disinformation and Faced Challenges Communications Its LOAC Compliance	
G. The Strategy Mismatch Between Israel and Hamas Makes Recurring Conflict Likely	
H. Israel's Operational Doctrine "Momentum" Shortened the Conflict	
I. Israel's Technological Advances Enhanced Its Protection of Israeli and Gazan Civilians	
J. Organizational Changes Facilitated Israel's Technological Innovations	
K. Hamas Learned From Past Conflicts to Develop New Capabilities and Tactics	

- H. Israel's Operational Doctrine "Momentum" Shortened the Conflict
- I. Israel's Technological Advances Enhanced Its Protection of Israeli and Gazan Civilians
- J. Organizational Changes Facilitated Israel's Technological Innovations
- K. Hamas Learned From Past Conflicts to Develop New Capabilities and Tactics
- L. IDF Capability Gaps Persist
- M. Gaza is a Finite, but Still Complex, Battlespace
- N. Israel Fought Hamas Against the Backdrop of the Iran Threat

IV. Lessons Learned

41

- A. Expect Hybrid Adversaries, Urban Combat, Complex Environments, and Influence Operations
- B. Prepare to Communicate Effectively on Legality of U.S. Military Action
- C. Clarify and More Effectively Explain LOAC Requirements
- D. Do Not Expect Identical Civilian Risk Mitigation Measures in Future Conflicts
- E. Technological Advances Will Require Organizational Changes
- F. Cooperate to Counter and Defeat Emerging Technologies

Appendix A: Events Preceding and Contributing to May 2021 Conflict	44
Appendix B: Timeline of Major Events in May 2021 Conflict	45
Appendix C: Israeli Messaging Missteps	49
A. Al-Jalaa Strike	
B. Gaza Ground Operation Deception	
Endnotes	51

I. Executive Summary

For two decades, the U.S. military has fought enemies who often represent no state, wear no uniform, make no effort to distinguish themselves from civilians in densely populated areas, and respect neither the laws of war nor the truth. The United States might confront such adversaries again, even as it leaves behind its post-9/11 strategic focus on terrorist threats, and not just in the form of non-state actors. Near-peer competitors, too, are adopting strategies that include conflict below the threshold of war, irregular warfare, and information operations.

That is why, as retired U.S. generals, admirals, and military legal experts, we undertook this study of the May 2021 armed conflict between Israel and Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in the Gaza Strip. Our analysis of this conflict—based on primary source research, a fact-finding trip to Israel, and discussions with senior Israeli and United Nations (UN) officials¹—yields legal, strategic, operational, and technological observations about the challenges confronting Israel today and that the United States could face in the future. Based on our analysis of Israeli military operations in this conflict, we also identify lessons that might assist American leaders in preparing for and conducting future conflicts effectively, efficiently, and in accordance with the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC).

Perhaps the most telling feature of the Gaza conflict was the strategy mismatch between Israel's purely military and operational objectives to degrade Hamas' military capabilities—assisted by impressive advances in identifying and precisely striking targets—and Hamas' information-based strategic objectives of delegitimizing the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in global opinion and degrading the IDF's operational advantage. The ability of an unscrupulous adversary to constrain military operations or even achieve strategic advantage against a much more capable opponent through the use of human shields and disinformation about both facts and law is a particularly concerning harbinger of what the United States might soon face.

Our consensus judgment is that IDF military operations complied with LOAC and consistently implemented precautions to mitigate civilian risk, some exceeding those implemented in recent U.S. combat operations that we participated in, despite confronting an adversary that often sought to exacerbate that risk deliberately. Yet, we found a significant gap between this reality of IDF LOAC compliance, and of Hamas' violation of it, and the public's perception. Israel's messaging efforts were unable to close this gap.

Learning from Israel's experience, the United States should prepare to face future adversaries, from loosely organized terrorist groups to conventional armed forces, that willingly put civilians at risk and blame the other side for it. It will have to contest such conflicts emphatically, and preemptively, in the information domain as much as in the physical. The U.S. military should train to operate in environments significantly more complex than Gaza—just as densely populated by civilians, but farther afield, with more limited intelligence, no air dominance, and a contested electromagnetic spectrum—while remaining committed to LOAC compliance. But the U.S. military must also be clear-eyed about setting realistic expectations for what that compliance will look like in such operations—it might not be feasible to take the same extraordinary but costly precautions Israel employed in Gaza. Investments, together with partners like Israel, in new technologies to counter enemies' advancing capabilities and enable mitigating risk to civilians will be critical.

A. Observations

On May 10, 2021, amid a political struggle between Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank, as well as heightened tensions between Palestinian civilians and Israeli police in East Jerusalem, Hamas launched an indiscriminate barrage of 150 rockets at Israel from the Gaza Strip, including six aimed at Jerusalem. The ensuing 11-day conflict was the fourth major round of hostilities since Israel unilaterally withdrew from Gaza in 2005 and Hamas violently assumed power there in 2007.

The conflict saw significantly increased operational tempo, from both sides, compared to the previous conflict in 2014. Hamas and PIJ fired as many rockets, and Israel hit as many targets, in 11 days as in 50 days during the conflict seven years prior. Accusations that the IDF violated LOAC grew louder and more pervasive in the media and seemed to be rapidly embraced by many observers. Nonetheless, due in large part to operational and technological innovations, Israel managed quickly to accomplish its military objectives while substantially reducing the number of civilian casualties. At the same time, Hamas claimed a strategic victory, having bolstered its image vis-à-vis the PA as the defender of Jerusalem and Palestinians, and delegitimized Israeli operations. It also debuted several new and updated capabilities, including drones and electronic warfare. Our observations of key dynamics of this conflict include:

i. Israel complied with LOAC and its requirements to mitigate risks to civilians

In our collective opinion, IDF military operations in Gaza reflected a consistent and good faith commitment to respect and implement the Law of Armed Conflict and its principles of necessity, humanity, distinction, and proportionality. This is nothing more than we would expect from the IDF, our own American forces, or those of coalition partners.

Specifically, we conclude that the IDF has robust processes in place to ensure legal vetting of proposed targets, specific method of attack, and potential incidental injury and collateral damage. Its operations adhered to LOAC's mandate to implement all feasible precautionary measures to mitigate risk to the Gazan civilian population. Numerous leaflets were dropped, telephone calls were placed to residents, and text messages were sent to warn Gazan civilians to leave a defined area of operations in advance of airstrikes. Minutes preceding the actual attack, small munitions delivered a "knock on the roof" to provide further warning of the impending attack—a tactic first used in 2014 and therefore familiar to the civilian population. Moreover, multiple surveillance platforms were dedicated to each target, often for hours, to ensure that civilians evacuated areas of attack. These impressive precautions often came at an operational and tactical cost to the IDF, allowing belligerents to escape, diminishing the tactical advantage of surprise, and reducing the number of other targets that could be monitored or struck. The IDF accepted these costs in the interest of civilian risk mitigation.

ii. Hamas pursued an informational strategy to increase its legitimacy and delegitimize Israel's operations

Hamas initiated hostilities with indiscriminate rocket fire directed at Jerusalem after the PA cancelled elections in the West Bank and amid heightened Palestinian-Israeli tensions in the city. This indicates its strategic goals in the conflict were not related to protecting against any threat to Gaza but tied closely to intra-Palestinian rivalry and the situation in Jerusalem. It even named its operation "Sword of Jerusalem."²

Our assessment is that Hamas pursued broad political and informational objectives to: weaken the PA and seed the ground for Hamas to increase its influence in the West Bank; burnish its self-proclaimed leadership of, and bolster its popularity among, the broader anti-Israel movement; and delegitimize Israel as a violator of Palestinian rights and international law.

iii. Hamas violated LOAC and used disinformation in pursuit of its strategic objectives

Hamas serially violated LOAC by directing attacks against Israeli civilians, launching indiscriminate attacks against Israel, and exposing Gazan civilians to avoidable risk to either intentionally complicate Israeli military operations or exploit civilian casualties in order to make false claims of Israeli war crimes.

Hamas violated the most fundamental LOAC principle—that of distinction or distinguishing between military and civilian targets—by deliberately attacking Israeli civilian population areas and by launching indiscriminate attacks. While most of these attacks failed, it was the effort, not the result, that indicates Hamas' pervasive LOAC violations. Furthermore, Hamas deliberately located its military assets—including rocket launchers, mortar positions, command and control posts, and military tunnels—in close proximity to civilians, indicating an unlawful intent to utilize human shields and render it near impossible for the IDF to attack lawful targets without serious risk of incidental civilian casualties or collateral damage to civilian property. These actions are in keeping with Hamas' stated ideology. Hamas then spread disinformation, claiming that the inevitable civilian casualties were an indication of Israeli war crimes.

iv. The international media and public misunderstand LOAC, enabling Hamas' disinformation strategy

The media and public's misunderstanding of how LOAC applies to military operations—especially the false assumption that the effect of an attack, and especially the presence of civilian casualties, determine its legality—coupled with social media's ability to transmit graphic images rapidly and globally without explanatory context, made audiences more receptive to Hamas' disinformation that Gazan suffering was evidence of Israeli LOAC violations.

v. Israel pursued only military operational objectives with no defined strategic end-state

Israel entered into, and conducted, its May 2021 campaign with specific military operational objectives, namely: deterring Hamas from instigating further conflict for as long as possible and significantly degrading its military capabilities quickly in a manner that minimized risk to civilians and civilian property. Even after Hamas has instigated four significant conflicts since 2008, Israel remains wary of seeking either to dislodge it from Gaza or degrade its military capabilities preemptively, thus remaining generally cautious and reactionary in its approach.

vi. Israel did not counter Hamas' disinformation and faced challenges communicating its LOAC compliance

Israeli communications focused on providing factual information about its military operations—despite several notable missteps—but insufficiently countered Hamas' strategic use of disinformation. There was no consistent effort by the Israeli government, neither before the conflict nor during it, to call attention to Hamas' use of terror to retain control over Gaza, its responsibility for Gazans' suffering and poverty, or its deliberate LOAC violations. Nor was there a systematic campaign to combat Hamas' disinformation.

Instead, during the conflict, Israel principally communicated with the international media and public via the IDF spokesperson, who conveyed factual information about the targets and nature of Israeli operations. On their own, without context and explanation, these facts proved insufficient to align the public perception of the legitimacy of IDF operations with the reality of their LOAC compliance.

The effectiveness of this approach might have been further decreased by delays and several major missteps, including delayed justification for the IDF's strike on the al-Jalaa building housing international media in Gaza as well as the perception that the IDF intentionally lied to the media about launching ground operations in Gaza.

Despite these efforts, we encountered a lingering resignation among military and civilian leaders in Israel that no improvement in their messaging can overcome the rush to condemnation that appears reserved for Israel alone among all nations. We are concerned a similar feeling of futility is an increasing risk among U.S. forces. But our review also indicates that even if messaging efforts have marginal impact, ceding the information domain to the enemy is an unacceptable response.

vii. The strategy mismatch between Israel and Hamas makes recurring conflict likely

The mismatch between Hamas' strategic informational and Israel's military operational objectives enabled both sides to claim victory in the May 2021 conflict, failing to resolve any foundational issues in the conflict and suggesting a high probability of future hostilities. Israel restored a semblance of quiet on the Gaza front, primarily the cessation of projectile firing, and degraded Hamas' military capabilities, but without fundamentally changing the operational conditions on the ground—Hamas' control of Gaza and its ability to rearm. Hamas claimed it had successfully defended Jerusalem and stood up for Palestinians, despite its sizable battlefield losses. This creates a vicious cycle in which Israel's operational focus makes it both more likely to continue conducting military operations in Gaza and losing the battle for legitimacy.

viii. Israel's operational doctrine "Momentum" shortened the conflict

As part of its larger ongoing multiyear "Momentum" (Tnufa) restructuring plan, the IDF's operations in the May conflict prioritized "swift and massive use of force against enemy systems," while also minimizing risk to Gazan civilians.³ Israel set a high tempo of strikes against pre-planned and predominantly fixed Hamas military targets from the beginning of hostilities, and increased the operational tempo over time. This allowed Israel to hit as many targets in the May 2021 conflict (11 days) as it did during the entire seven weeks of fighting in 2014. In particular, due to extensive intelligence and pre-planned target sets, Israel was able to render unusable much of Hamas' tunnel networks and stop almost all its offensive operations, other than rocket and mortar fire.

The intensity and efficacy of IDF operations helped limit the duration of the May 2021 conflict. By rapidly achieving its military objectives, the IDF also sought to curtail both domestic accusations of ineffectiveness and international condemnation.

ix. Israel's technological advances enhanced its protection of Israeli and Gazan civilians

Israel's military has described its operations in May 2021 as the "first artificial intelligence (AI) war."⁴ By employing AI algorithms and machine learning, paired with intelligence analysts in "man-machine teams" to flag and review potential targets, the IDF synthesized extensive amounts of data into pre-conflict target folders that were significantly more detailed, accurate, and timely than in 2014. In what the IDF calls "intel-driven combat," it made intelligence visible to combat units using a battlefield management system that matched targets with Israeli and U.S.-made precision guided munitions (PGM).

Meanwhile, upgrades to Iron Dome air defenses ensured their ability to intercept over 90 percent of projectiles heading toward populated areas—despite new Hamas firing tactics—reducing the threat from, and thus the urgency to neutralize, rocket launch sites in Gaza.

With rapid, accurate intelligence provided to combat units through an effective battlefield management system and integrated with precise weapons, the IDF could conduct highly accurate airstrikes, substantially mitigating risks to civilians. Iron Dome defended Israeli population centers while providing commanders with risk mitigation that allowed Israel the strategic patience to put in place time-consuming and costly precautions for mitigating risks to Gazan civilians.

x. Organizational changes facilitated Israel’s technological innovations

The IDF’s incorporation of AI in the targeting process required both technological and infrastructure investments to combine massive quantities of data into a single, searchable, and accessible databank. *Deploying these advances required organizational and cultural changes to Israel’s intelligence community that focused on breaking down stovepipes in favor of sharing information.*

xi. Hamas learned from past conflicts to develop new capabilities and tactics

Hamas exhibited material and tactical advances—including employing single-target rocket barrages, defensive tunnels, drones, and electronic warfare capabilities—many of which reflected their applying lessons learned from the last major round of fighting in 2014.

The size of Hamas’ and PIJ’s arsenals of unguided rockets remained effectively unchanged from 2014, but their ranges and payloads increased.⁵ Hamas and PIJ also changed their fire plans significantly from 2014, initiating much larger salvos at a single target in deliberate attempts to overwhelm a single Iron Dome battery. Unable to leverage the offensive tunnels crossing into Israel that it used in 2014, Hamas responded to Israel’s border-based tunnel-detection technology by constructing some 220 miles of tunnels under civilian areas of Gaza.⁶ Hamas also launched unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) and unmanned underwater platforms in the 2021 conflict, including training several hundred fighters to conduct seaborne operations on jet skis. Finally, Hamas was developing, in the al-Jalaa building, electronic warfare (EW) capabilities to jam Iron Dome.

xii. IDF capability gaps persist

Despite the IDF’s overall impressive performance in May 2021, particularly against Hamas’ tunnel network, several key operational shortcomings stand out. As many projectiles were fired at Israel in the 11-day May 2021 conflict as in the entire 50-day conflict of 2014—some 4,500 total—including right up to the end of hostilities, suggesting Israel was not able to fully destroy Hamas’ rocket stocks and launchers.⁷ Countering mortar fire remained a challenge due to the low trajectory, short distance, and small warning time of this type of weapon. Finally, while Israel successfully defeated the small number of drones launched from Gaza in 2021, it did so only by diverting Iron Dome batteries and F-16 combat aircraft from other missions. Ultimately, this reflects the folly of assuming that Iron Dome, or any defensive “shield,” can be relied on exclusively to achieve the objectives of territorial self-defense against a determined and adaptive enemy.

xiii. Gaza is a finite, but still complex, battlespace

In many respects, Gaza is a very limited battlespace that does not resemble future environments where U.S., or even Israeli, forces might be called upon to operate. Gaza’s size, its proximity to Israel, and Hamas’ lack of significant multi-domain military capabilities, in particular anti-air defenses, provides Israel with the ability to constantly monitor their enemies from close range and conduct air operations largely unimpeded.

Yet, in operating against Hamas in Gaza, the IDF had to fight an irregular force in, among, and underneath one of the world's most densely populated urban areas. The need to operate precisely, professionally, and in accordance with LOAC in such an environment and against an adversary that ignores LOAC introduces significant complexity that will feature in future conflicts.

xiv. Israel fought Hamas against the backdrop of the Iran threat

Hamas is not Israel's primary threat; Iran and its principal proxy, Lebanese Hezbollah, are. The IDF had to prosecute the May 2021 conflict while trying to minimize its vulnerability by maintaining a balance between ending the fighting quickly and holding back operational capabilities and weapons stocks for the possibility of concurrent or future larger- scale conflicts with Iran and Hezbollah in the north.

B. Lessons Learned

The events of May 2021 underscore the need for U.S. and allied militaries to prepare for operations against adversaries that fight in complex environments, exploit civilians, and deploy deliberate disinformation campaigns. This will require informational strategies to explain U.S. forces' lawful conduct more proactively, preemptively building expectations that higher-intensity conflicts will offer fewer opportunities for the precautions taken to mitigate risks to civilians by Israel in the latest Gaza operation, and investments in technological and organizational advances to defeat adversaries' evolving capabilities.

i. Expect hybrid adversaries, urban combat, complex operations, and influence operations

The U.S. military should be prepared to fight, win, and maintain their commitment to LOAC compliance with limited intelligence, no air superiority, and a contested electromagnetic spectrum when confronting adversaries, state and non-state actors alike, equipped with advanced, conventional weapons that fight unconventionally, often in urban terrain, and conduct influence operations to delegitimize U.S. and allies' military campaigns.

ii. Prepare to communicate effectively on legality of U.S. military action

In preparation for operations in which U.S. forces will face adversaries seeking to complicate LOAC compliance while leveraging disinformation, professional military education and campaign planning should be adjusted to address the increased scale and speed at which influence operations can reach across the globe. To improve communications with international media, organizations, and publics, militaries should seek more effective ways to rapidly provide more detailed information to the public related to both the necessity and the legality of their actions at all phases of combat operations.

iii. Clarify and more effectively explain LOAC requirements

A broad campaign is required to rectify the lack of clarity regarding LOAC requirements, particularly in urban warfare. This cannot be done by cursory statements by public affairs military personnel once hostilities break out. A comprehensive and proactive effort is required to enhance overall appreciation of the U.S. commitment to LOAC and understanding of the true relationship between the law and complex military operations.

iv. Do not expect identical civilian risk mitigation measures in future conflicts

LOAC requires commanders undertake feasible precautions to mitigate risks to civilians. However, many of the precautions employed in Gaza will not necessarily be feasible in conflicts against more capable adversaries and/or in more complex environments. Even while making the case for Israel's lawful conduct in Gaza, Israel and the United States should prepare their publics, the media, and the international community not to expect identical precautions in future conflicts.

v. Technological advances will require organizational changes

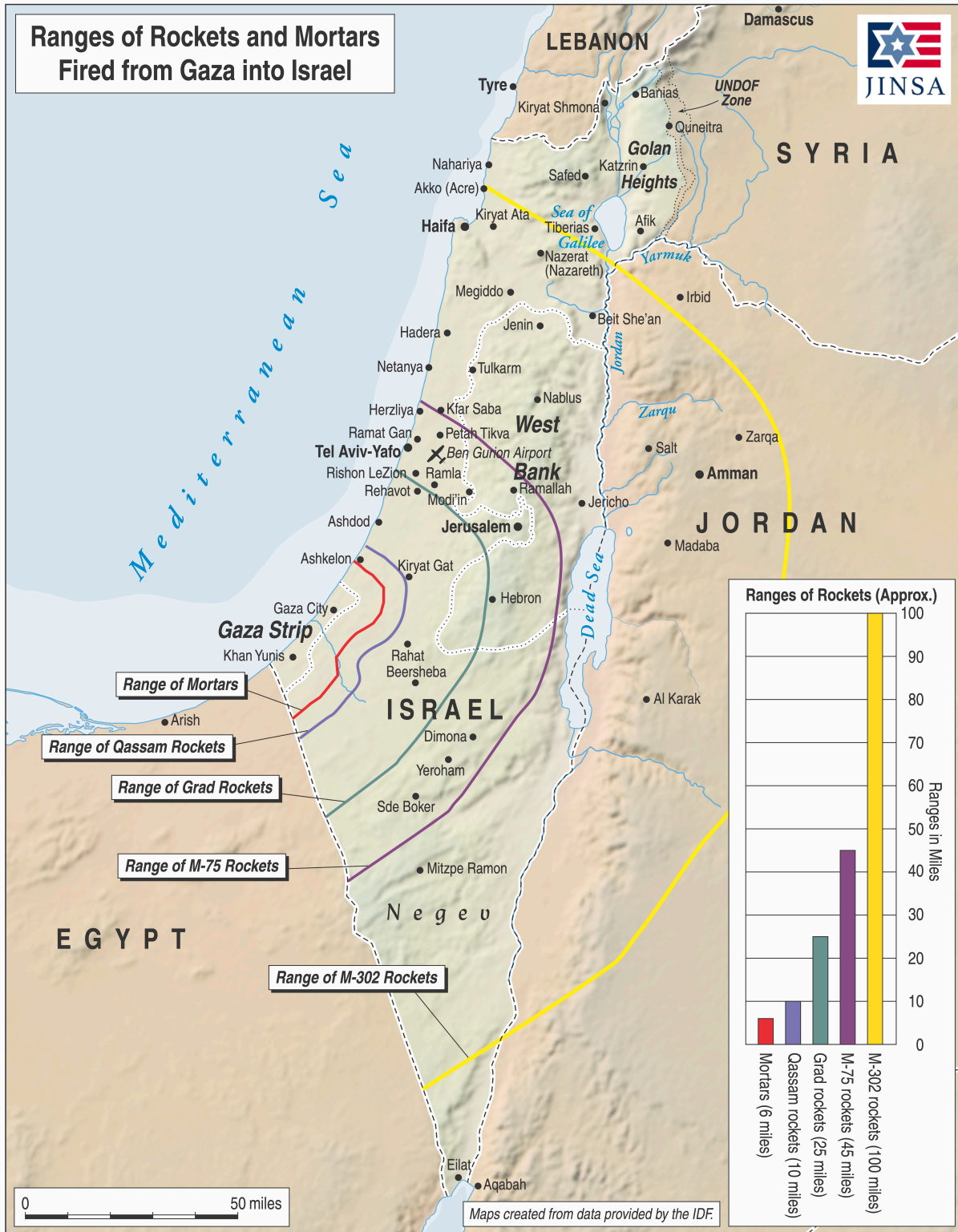
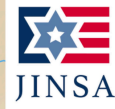
The U.S. military could learn from the experience of its Israeli counterparts how to effectively implement innovative systems such as Joint All-Domain Command and Control. One of the key lessons seems to be that the challenges of collecting and analyzing data are not merely technological—they are just as much cultural and organizational. U.S. and allied militaries will need to ensure a constant commitment to the difficult and potentially disruptive reorganizations necessary to maintain battlefield advantages offered by AI against increasingly capable competitors that are far more technologically advanced than Hamas.

vi. Cooperate to counter and defeat emerging technologies

The growth of advanced capabilities among hybrid adversaries—including EW, UAVs, tunnels, and the capability to employ high-volume rocket salvos and potentially drone swarms—reveals the need for cooperation between the United States, Israel, and like-minded nations to monitor and interdict transfers of weapons and dual-use technology. It also requires joint research and development efforts to develop solutions for threats such as large-scale mortar salvos and remotely piloted vehicle (RPV) swarms, including exploring the need for directed-energy weapons (DEW) and Counter Rocket, Artillery, and Mortar (C-RAM) systems.

We believe the observations contained in this report are of value to the national security of the United States and its allies in future conflicts.

Ranges of Rockets and Mortars Fired from Gaza into Israel



II. Introduction

On May 10, 2021, Hamas fired a salvo of more than 150 rockets at Israel from Gaza, at least six of which it aimed toward Jerusalem. With Prime Minister Netanyahu declaring that this action “crossed a red line,” Israel responded promptly with a high volume of airstrikes against Hamas and PIJ military targets throughout the Strip.⁸

The ensuing 11-day conflict represented the fourth outbreak of large-scale hostilities between Israel and Hamas in less than 13 years. Initially, Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, followed by Hamas’ 2006 victory in Palestinian elections and its defeat of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Gaza in 2007, combined to turn the Strip into a platform for attacking Israel. Persistent rocket fire, kidnapping raids, and other attacks triggered the first major conflict in 2008-09, when the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conducted airstrikes and a costly ground incursion to neutralize Hamas rocket launchers; in 2012, the advent of Iron Dome enabled Israel to forego a ground campaign amid renewed heavy rocket fire from Gaza. In 2014, in addition to airstrikes, the IDF again entered Gaza on the ground during a 50-day operation to take out cross-border assault tunnels and rocket launchers.

Several events in May 2021 precipitated the latest round of conflict, after nearly seven years of relative quiet. Amid the PA cancelling overdue elections it knew it would lose to Hamas, a contentious Israeli-Palestinian court battle over property ownership in East Jerusalem, and clashes around the Temple Mount that were exacerbated by the end of Ramadan and the start of Israel’s Jerusalem Day holiday, Hamas leadership saw a strategic opportunity to gain relevance and power over the PA, and to distract from its own abysmal governance of Gaza, by casting itself as the “Sword of Jerusalem” and escalating tensions with rocket fire toward the city.⁹

The ensuing conflict featured significantly increased operational tempos compared to 2014. Leveraging advances in intelligence capabilities, as well as extensive precision guided munitions (PGM), the intensity of IDF operations was high from the outset and neutralized as many targets—chiefly command and control, military research and development (R&D) and manufacturing, and defensive tunnel sites—in 11 days in May 2021 as in 50 days in 2014.¹⁰ In the process, it reduced physical damage in Gaza by an order of magnitude, negated the need for another ground operation, and minimized civilian casualties. In the meantime, Hamas and PIJ still fired as many rockets and mortars in those 11 days as during the entire preceding conflict. This included much larger and more concentrated mass salvos than ever before, which largely were countered by Israel’s interwar upgrades to Iron Dome. Hamas also developed new UAV, electronic warfare (EW), and naval capabilities, though these too were effectively neutered by the IDF.

Nevertheless, international media and publics were even more vocal accusing Israel of war crimes than previously, and they again proved susceptible to disinformation coming out of Gaza. The IDF did little to help itself in this uphill battle, even as Hamas indiscriminately attacked Israel and intentionally increased risks to Gazan civilians. Israel repeated many of its strategic communications missteps from 2014 by failing to proactively explain either its military justifications for attacking key targets or its extensive precautionary measures; it also did little before or during hostilities to shine light on Hamas’ violations of international law. In the end, each side claimed victory: the IDF restored deterrence by shocking Hamas with the intensity and effectiveness of its air campaign, while Hamas believed it had successfully claimed the mantle of defending Jerusalem and bolstered its political standing in the Palestinian arena. As after past rounds of conflict, this strategy mismatch seems to ensure renewed hostilities in the future.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

LEADING UP TO AND DURING THE MAY 2021 GAZA CONFLICT



Created from data provided by the IDF

III. Observations

Our analysis of this conflict yields legal, strategic, operational, and technological observations about the challenges confronting Israel today and that the United States could face in the future.

A. Israel complied with LOAC and its requirements to mitigate risks to civilians and civilian property

In this 2021 conflict, as in seemingly every conflict involving Israel and Hamas, Israel faced widespread accusations that it routinely violated the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) by causing excessive and legally unjustified incidental death and injury to civilians and destruction of civilian property, what many commentators condemned as war crimes. Regardless of their validity, these accusations gained substantial traction.

Key Principles of the Law of Armed Conflict

Military Necessity: allows the military to employ all measures, not otherwise prohibited by international law, to bring about the prompt submission of the enemy.

Humanity: prohibits the infliction of suffering that cannot be justified by military necessity. This principle implicitly recognizes that both belligerents and civilians will suffer the consequences of war.

Distinction: requires that military forces constantly distinguish between persons, places, and things that are military targets—especially belligerents—and those which are civilian persons and property. The former are usually lawful objects of attack; the latter are protected from deliberate attack unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities.

Proportionality: tolerates harm to civilians or civilian property when it is not the result of deliberate attack but is instead an incidental consequence of an attack on a proximate lawful military objective, so long as the destruction to civilian property and life is not assessed as excessive in relation to the military advantage sought. It does not require a close balance—just the avoidance of an excessive imbalance—between anticipated risk and gain.

Taken together, these principles point to several key components of LOAC compliance. First, indiscriminate attacks are prohibited. This includes attacks employing a weapon that cannot be directed at a specific target and whose effects cannot be reasonably limited to the intended target or that treats a number of clearly distinct military objectives in a civilian population center as one overall target. Second, LOAC requires an attacking commander to take all feasible precautions to mitigate risk to civilians and civilian property inherent in the attack. Finally, and relatedly, while LOAC clearly prohibits deliberately attacking civilians and civilian property that does not qualify as a military objective, it just as clearly does not prohibit all harm to civilians or civilian property.¹¹

i. Israel's LOAC compliance and civilian risk mitigation

Israel categorically had sufficient *jus ad bellum* in responding in self-defense to Hamas' rocket attacks on Israel's civilian population. As for Israel's conduct in this military engagement, we conducted dozens of hours of conversation, questioning, and debriefing with the IDF as part of our comprehensive assessment. *We have determined that IDF military operations complied with LOAC and consistently implemented precautions to mitigate civilian risk, some exceeding those implemented in recent U.S. combat operations that we participated in, despite confronting an adversary that often sought to exacerbate that risk deliberately.*

For a case study on Israel's compliance with LOAC in the attack on the al-Jalaa building (Associated Press Building), please see sidebar on page 21.

The IDF implements a systematic process for adhering to LOAC, beginning with training at all levels of command. The process continues through excellent target assessment and decision-making at appropriate levels of command to ensure maximum care in targeting, especially in the employment of aerial delivered munitions. This involves: verifying that the intended target qualifies as a military objective; determining the desired military effect; selecting the required combination of weapons and fusing needed to achieve that effect; assessing the risk to civilian and civilian property; implementing feasible precautionary measures; assessing the potential for collateral damage; and weighing that risk against anticipated concrete and direct military advantage.

Legal review is built into this process at several points. Lawyers within IDF Southern Command approve the target as legal during pre-planning procedures, and Israeli Air Force (IAF) lawyers may do a second vetting process to approve the method of attack on the target. Higher-value targets, such as civilian towers that Hamas transforms into operational centers, are personally approved by the Chief of General Staff, the highest ranking IDF commander in the operational chain.¹²

Israel's methodology is similar to that of the United States and other modern militaries we are familiar with and reflects a good-faith commitment to LOAC compliance. When there was potential for collateral damage, the attack decision-making authority was sufficiently senior that it was clear that decisions to launch attacks were made only after extensive and experience-based deliberation, and often resulted in modifications to attack weapons and tactics and implementation of other precautionary measures to mitigate civilian risk.

In carrying out strikes, the IDF takes extraordinary and innovative methods in an attempt to further mitigate the risk to the civilian population, often at significant operational and tactical cost. Numerous leaflets were dropped, telephone calls were placed to residents, and text messages were sent to warn Gazan civilians to leave a defined area of operations in advance of airstrikes.¹³ Minutes preceding the actual attack, small munitions delivered a "knock on the roof" to provide further warning of the impending attack—a tactic first used in 2014 and therefore familiar to the civilian population. Moreover, multiple surveillance platforms were dedicated to each target, often for hours, to ensure that civilians evacuated areas of attack. These impressive precautions often came at operational and tactical cost to the IDF, allowing belligerents to escape, diminishing the tactical advantage of surprise, and reducing the number of other targets that could be monitored or struck. The IDF accepted these costs in the interest of civilian risk mitigation.

IDF Cancels Airstrike to Avoid Civilian Casualty



Photos provided by the IDF

As a result of all these precautions, Israel maintained an impressively low civilian-to-belligerent casualty ratio of just under 1:1—all the more impressive considering Hamas embedded its military assets among Gaza’s civilian population, using them as human shields. According to Israeli estimates, there were 264 total deaths in Gaza during the conflict. Of these, 99 were confirmed enemy belligerents (37 percent), 40 were believed to fall into this same category (15 percent), and 120 were civilians (45 percent). Of the confirmed civilian casualties, 20 (17 percent) were killed by misfired Hamas rockets. In total, 1,950 individuals were wounded in Gaza.¹⁴ Just as tellingly, despite striking 20 high-rise towers in Gaza that the IDF assessed as military objectives because of their use or intended future use by Hamas military assets, no civilians were killed and no surrounding buildings were destroyed due to care taken by the IDF to warn inhabitants and design their strikes.¹⁵



Finally, we know the IDF is conducting ongoing and conscientious investigations as part of its process to scrutinize any issues related to civilian casualties, indicating it will not tolerate LOAC violations among its own forces. The independence of the Military Advocate General (MAG) from the operational chain of command ensures the integrity of decisions related to disciplinary and criminal actions resulting from allegations of LOAC violations. Based on its thorough investigations following the 2014 Gaza conflict, we are confident in the capabilities of the IDF to do the same following the most recent conflict.

This is not to claim the IDF conducted a perfect tactical campaign. Regardless of IDF efforts to avoid collateral damage, in many cases they faced only bad choices.

Case Study: al-Jalaa (Associated Press Building) Strike

On May 15, 2021, the Israeli Air Force attacked the 12-story al-Jalaa building in Gaza, which then housed the Associated Press (AP) and Al Jazeera, and numerous residential apartments. Although garnering significant attention as a potential Israeli violation of LOAC, this strike provides an important example of Israel's compliance with LOAC requirements and the precautions it took in mitigating civilian risks.

Distinction

The IDF's targeting of al-Jalaa was not an indiscriminate attack on a civilian building but based on Israeli intelligence that Hamas was operating in the building and developing electronic warfare technology to undermine the efficacy of Iron Dome.¹⁶ If the available information and intelligence was sufficient to lead a reasonable commander to conclude this was indeed how Hamas was using the building, then the building qualified as a lawful military objective. At that point, the presence of civilians would not alter that conclusion, but instead necessitate implementation of precautions and proportionality obligations.

As a result, the IDF took various precautionary measures to reduce the likelihood of civilian casualties. Prior to the attack, the IDF phoned those in the building advising them to evacuate. The attack was not carried out until intelligence resources Israel committed for these purposes determined that everyone had evacuated safely.¹⁷ These precautions also allowed the escape of all high-level Hamas personnel operating in the building.

Military Necessity

The IDF's assessment that the building was being used by Hamas to develop advanced capabilities that could endanger thousands of Israeli civilians would certainly render its targeting to be militarily necessary.

Proportionality

No human life was lost in this attack. In terms of assessing proportionality, human life is and should be considered by a commander as more important than protection of property. Though the damage to property was significant, Israel has already conveyed its willingness to help reconstruct the building. Given Israel's assessment of Hamas' military activities in the building, we believe a commander could reasonably conclude the risk of collateral damage was proportionate to the anticipated concrete and direct military advantage.

B. Hamas pursued an informational strategy to increase its legitimacy and delegitimize Israel's operations

Hamas initiated hostilities with indiscriminate rocket fire directed at Jerusalem after the PA cancelled elections in the West Bank and amid heightened Palestinian-Israeli tensions in the city. It does not appear to have done so with any specific military objectives in mind. It was neither trying to defend itself—there was no Israeli aggression against Gaza—nor was it trying to defeat Israel's military, capture territory, or achieve another conventional outcome of war.

Our assessment is that Hamas sought this conflict to pursue broad political and informational objectives, namely to: weaken the PA and seed the ground for Hamas to increase its influence in the West Bank; burnish its self-proclaimed leadership of, and bolster its popularity among, the broader anti-Israel movement; delegitimize Israel as a violator of Palestinian rights and international law; and divert attention from economic conditions in the Gaza Strip.

i. Hamas sought to prove itself as the legitimate and sole protector of all Palestinians and Jerusalem

In late April and early May 2021, a number of events coincided to present Hamas with what it viewed as a strategic opportunity. Hamas was locked in a political battle with the Fatah-dominated PA for relevance and power in the West Bank.¹⁸ At the same time, it was dealing with its own problems in Gaza, such as severe economic pressures, the COVID-19 pandemic, and delays in receiving critical funding promised by Qatar.

When violent clashes broke out in Jerusalem, Hamas seized the chance to insert itself into the tensions and turn public attention away from its terrible governance of Gaza by firing rockets toward Jerusalem. (See Appendix A for a full account of the events that preceded the May 2021 conflict.) In starting this conflict, Hamas' strategic objectives were not related to protecting against any threat to Gaza but tied closely to this intra-Palestinian rivalry and the situation in Jerusalem. It even named its operation "Sword of Jerusalem."¹⁹

Thus, Hamas had a purely political objective in mind vis-à-vis the PA and Palestinians more broadly. By inciting and capitalizing on the rising tensions and violent clashes in Jerusalem, Hamas effectively transformed them into pro-Hamas rallies and, at the same time, protests against Abbas and the PA. It appears Hamas succeeded in cultivating a widespread perception that it had supported and defended Jerusalem and the Palestinian cause at a crucial time, while Fatah had not. A study in June performed by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research discovered that 53 percent of Palestinians in both the West Bank and Gaza believed Hamas deserves to lead all the Palestinian people; Abbas garnered only 14 percent support. By September support for Hamas dropped to 45 percent and support for Abbas rose to 19 percent, yet 71 percent of Palestinians still believed Hamas won its May 2021 conflict with Israel.²⁰

Finally, by showing its ability to stand up and fight for Palestinians in Jerusalem, compared to the relative impotence of the PA, Hamas hoped to bolster its standing not just among Palestinians but also internationally, casting itself as the leader of both the Palestinian and anti-Israel movements.

ii. Hamas sought to cast Israeli actions prior to hostilities as "war crimes"

Indeed, Hamas' strategic objectives in the conflict appear to have included not only increasing its own legitimacy but, relatedly, decreasing Israel's. Even before the conflict began, Hamas focused on portraying Israel's response to the clashes in East Jerusalem between Palestinians and Israeli policy as "war crimes" and a "massacre."²¹ Such portrayals ultimately proved surprisingly effective, allowing Hamas to establish the narrative of Israel as the aggressor and Palestinians as innocent victims. Moreover, Hamas sought to establish the narrative that Palestinians were demanding intervention to protect them against Israeli violence. (See sidebar on page 22 for examples of Hamas' pre-conflict messaging.) This narrative lay the groundwork for Hamas to justify its eventual rocket attacks as "defensive."

Examples of Hamas' Pre-conflict Messaging

On May 3, Hamas spokesperson Sami abu Zhuri tweeted, "The occupation's attempts to violate #AlAqsaMosque, field executions, mass displacement (#SheikhJarrah neighborhood) are enough to blow up the region. The international community must intervene to stop Israeli #terrorism. The #Palestinian people will face these crimes by all means."²²

On May 10, before firing rockets at Israel, abu Zuhri tweeted, "What is happening in Al-Aqsa Mosque is a real massacre and war crimes, and we call on all our people to take to the streets and clash with the occupation, and these crimes will have their repercussions."²³

C. Hamas violated LOAC and used disinformation in pursuit of its strategic objectives

By firing rockets at Israel not in response to any military action against it, but evidently prompted by internal Palestinian politics as discussed above, Hamas violated *jus ad bellum* by attacking Israel without sufficient legal justification. In its operations throughout the conflict, Hamas also *serially violated the jus in bello component of LOAC by directing attacks against Israeli civilians, launching indiscriminate attacks against Israel, and exposing Gazan civilians to avoidable risk to either intentionally complicate Israeli military operations or exploit civilian casualties in order to make false claims of Israeli war crimes.*

i. Hamas violated LOAC with indiscriminate attacks against Israeli civilians

Hamas violated the most fundamental LOAC principle—that of distinction or distinguishing between military and civilian targets—by deliberately attacking Israeli civilian population areas and by launching indiscriminate attacks.

Though we did not have access to Hamas' or PIJ's targeting methodologies and attack decision data, it seems clear that most of the 4,455 rockets and mortars they fired from Gaza were not directed at lawful Israeli military targets, but instead were fired toward Israeli population centers. Such indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian property are strictly prohibited by LOAC, no matter what the capability of the belligerent. The inaccuracy of Hamas' weapons is not a mitigating factor.

Notably, this is not a prohibition against launching an attack that may have the effect of terrorizing civilians, as virtually all attacks in proximity to civilians risks this effect. Instead, what the law prohibits is launching attacks that are intended to terrorize the civilian population. Firing indiscriminately toward large Israeli civilian population centers and sending hundreds of thousands of Israelis into bomb shelters by attacking areas with no military targets nearby suggests the intent of almost all of these attacks. Even in the unlikely event Hamas was attempting to strike military targets in Israel, the weapons and tactics it employed were indiscriminate and therefore unlawful.

ii. Hamas violated LOAC by using Gazan civilian shields

It is our judgment that Hamas significantly increased the danger to Gazan civilians—and consequently increased the number of civilian fatalities—by locating rocket launchers, other weapons, command and control facilities, and munitions at sensitive sites and in residential areas. This was often done with no apparent military necessity—in clear violation of LOAC.

The placement of military assets in proximity to civilians or the use of civilian property for military purposes is not a LOAC violation per se. However, there is an obligation to take “constant care” to mitigate the risk to civilians even in the conduct of defensive military operations, which brings with it an accordant obligation to refrain whenever feasible from locating military assets in proximity to civilians or using civilian property for military purposes.²⁴

Based on our assessment of Hamas tactics, we cannot believe its emplacement of military infrastructure in and among civilian populations was merely an unavoidable necessity dictated by Gaza’s urban terrain. Instead, it appears to be a deliberate effort to abuse LOAC by exploiting the anticipated—and actual—IDF hesitation to attack legitimate Hamas military targets proximate to sensitive civilian structures. Even worse, Hamas may have sought to generate civilian casualties that could then be used to fuel their disinformation campaign against Israel.

Even Hamas’ attacks directed against Israel were conducted in a manner inconsistent with the constant care obligation it owed to Gazan civilians. Some 900 Hamas and PIJ rockets—one-seventh of all rockets launched—landed inside Gaza, killing 20 Gazan civilians and injuring more.²⁵ Hamas also fired mortars at border crossings to prevent transfer of humanitarian aid into Gaza, presumably to enhance the images broadcast worldwide of suffering and humanitarian crisis, thereby stoking political pressure against Israel.²⁶

This evident exploitation of Gazan civilians by Hamas is not only strategic in nature but also ideological in origin. Hamas’s Charter does not distinguish between belligerents and civilians, justifying involving all Palestinians in its conflicts (“withdrawal from the circle of struggle is high treason and a curse on the doer”) and targeting of all Israelis (“Jihad becomes obligatory against all who show enmity towards” Islam).²⁷

iii. Hamas spread disinformation about Israeli LOAC violations

During the course of hostilities, Hamas continued to accuse Israel of “war crimes,” “terrorism,” and carrying out a “massacre,” as it had prior to initiating hostilities. This disinformation focused primarily on asserting that every civilian casualty or destruction of civilian property in Gaza was caused by Israel and constituted a LOAC violation. In an illustrative statement, Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem, in response to suggestions that Hamas might have committed war crimes, stated that “the real crimes were committed by the occupation by targeting civilians in the recent aggression on the Gaza Strip, killing more than 100 children and women and demolishing residential buildings.”²⁸

D. The international media and public misunderstand LOAC, enabling Hamas’ disinformation strategy

The media and public’s misunderstanding of how LOAC applies to military operations—especially the false assumption that the effect of an attack, and especially the presence of civilian casualties, determine its legality—coupled with social media’s ability to transmit graphic images rapidly and globally without explanatory context, made audiences more receptive to Hamas’ disinformation that Gazan suffering was evidence of Israeli LOAC violations.

i. LOAC: A Misunderstood Protection for Civilians

Unfortunately, the claim at the center of Hamas' disinformation strategy—that international law prohibits all civilian casualties—is a common misperception among the media and general public uninformed about the specifics of LOAC obligations. LOAC does tolerate harm to civilians and destruction of civilian property during armed conflict, subject to certain principles, as defined above. Civilian casualties resulting from a strike on a lawful target, tragic as they are, are not automatic indicators of a LOAC violation. Indeed, an attack may be unlawful because it was intended to harm civilians or civilian property but failed to do so; while a corresponding attack may be lawful because it was intended to harm enemy personnel or a military objective but in fact caused incidental injury to civilians or collateral damage to civilian property.

Similarly, comparing imbalanced raw numbers of civilian casualties between opposing sides has been used to accuse law-abiding regular forces of violating the LOAC principle of proportionality. But such comparisons do not account for the circumstances of those civilian deaths or the use of civilian human shields. Further, while LOAC does require an attacking commander to consider precautionary measures to mitigate civilian risk, there is no absolute obligation to use those precautions.

More pointedly, such use is not required when doing so would not be feasible under the circumstances, a consideration that may include the loss or compromise of tactical advantage or the increased risk to friendly forces. As a result, it is often the case that precautionary measures are not utilized.

ii. International organizations spread misinformation regarding LOAC violations

Numerous organizations, including the United Nations, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch—organizations claiming to be experts in the relationship between law and military operations—quickly seemed to accept Hamas's assertions of unlawful IDF operations. (See sidebar on page 26 for examples.)

Examples of International Organizations' Statements on Israeli LOAC Violations

United Nations

On May 27, 2021, the U.N High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, stated: "Although Israel undertook a number of precautions, such as advance warning of attacks in some cases, airstrikes in such densely populated areas resulted in a high level of civilian fatalities and injuries, as well as the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure. Such strikes raise serious concerns of Israel's compliance with the principles of distinction and proportionality under international humanitarian law."²⁹

Amnesty International

In a press release dated May 17, 2021, Amnesty International stated: "Israeli forces have displayed a shocking disregard for the lives of Palestinian civilians by carrying out a number of airstrikes targeting residential buildings, in some cases killing entire families—including children — and causing wanton destruction to civilian property, in attacks that may amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity."³⁰

Human Rights Watch

On July 27, 2021, Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued its conclusions after investigating three Israeli airstrikes that killed 62 Palestinians, alleging that there was no "apparent military target nearby," meaning the strikes violated LOAC.³¹ The information on which HRW based this report was provided by interviews with only Palestinians and directly contradicted statements from the IDF.

All these allegations were premised on premature, primarily effects-based assessments of military operations. In such statements, the principle of distinction is presented to mean that military objectives cannot be lawful targets whenever they are placed in civilian areas. Meanwhile, the principle of proportionality seems to be interpreted as presenting some quantitative (but unspecified) threshold of civilian casualties or destruction of civilian property above which an attack violates LOAC. Neither of these interpretations is correct. Moreover, such statements either misrepresented Israeli attempts to minimize civilian deaths or disregarded information supplied by the IDF.

iii. The media spread misinformation regarding LOAC violations

Within both traditional media, as well as the social media space, narratives regarding the illegality of Israel's conduct were repeated prematurely and without investigation. The speed with which such claims can be shared has only increased with advances in communications technology, compounding Israel's challenge to responding to Hamas disinformation. The May 2021 conflict featured not only misinformation in traditional media but also, increasingly, on social media. (See sidebar on page 26 for examples.)

Misinformation on social media platforms can be particularly problematic because of the growing frequency with which it is used for news purposes. For example, 57 percent of members of Generation Z and 43 percent of millennials have their first contact with the news in the morning via social media.³² This gives social media influencers, who are not held to the same standards or bound by the same ethical considerations as journalists, the ability to shape public perceptions that then transform into pressure on policymakers.

Examples of Misinformation in Traditional and Social Media about Israeli LOAC Violations

The New York Times, “Children of Gaza”

On May 26, 2021, the *New York Times* published a spread featuring alleged children killed during the recent war, titling the piece “They Were Only Children.”³¹ Nine times, the piece claims that the seventeen children pictured were killed by Israel.³⁴ The piece is sourced only to nameless “Palestinian officials.” One picture featured a combatant who served in the Al-Mujahedeen Brigades, while another was the son of a prominent Hamas commander.³⁵ It also emerged later that close to a dozen of the children pictured may have been killed by Hamas rockets.³⁶

Trevor Noah, The Daily Show

On May 11, 2021, Trevor Noah did a segment on *The Daily Show* in which he argued that, because Israel is more militarily capable, it should refrain from defending itself: “If you were in a fight where the other person cannot beat you, how hard should you retaliate when they try to hurt you?”³⁷

John Oliver, Last Week Tonight

Oliver’s viral May 16, 2021, segment about Israeli actions included the unfounded accusation that it “targeted the al-Aqsa mosque during Ramadan,” and that the IDF’s strike on a multi-story building in Gaza used by Hamas “sure seems like war crime, regardless of whether you send a courtesy heads-up text.” Oliver dismissed Hamas’ firing of rockets at Israeli civilian population centers because “most of the rockets aimed toward Israeli citizens this week were intercepted.”³⁸

E. Israel pursued only military operational objectives with no defined strategic end-state

Israel did not seek primarily strategic or political outcomes in its May 2021 operation in Gaza. It entered into the conflict and pursued throughout it the more limited, military operational objectives of restoring deterrence against Hamas and PIJ for as long as possible and eliminating their military assets rapidly and extensively—all while minimizing risk to civilians and civilian property. By significantly neutralizing and reducing military infrastructure in Gaza, Israel intended to limit for as long as possible the ability of Hamas and PIJ to launch rockets and other offensive capabilities. By doing so quickly and comprehensively, to such an extent that the intensity of its operations surprised Hamas and PIJ, the IDF simultaneously sought to curtail these groups’ willingness to re-escalate hostilities anytime soon. Aided by its intelligence-enabled successes in limiting collateral damage (see below), shortening the conflict also was intended to mitigate the buildup of international pressure on Israel to terminate or substantially limit its operations.

F. Israel did not counter Hamas’ disinformation and faced challenges communicating its LOAC compliance

Despite its own efforts to comply with, and Hamas’ intentional abuse of, LOAC, in May 2021 Israel once again struggled in the conflict’s information domain. It did not effectively counter Hamas’ disinformation operations. And Israel’s focus on providing factual information about its military operations was insufficient to alter public perceptions.

i. Israel did not push back on narratives about the conflict's origins

Israel's legitimate military action in May 2021 came in response to Hamas rocket fire toward Jerusalem. Yet it did not make a public case for how Hamas bore responsibility for instigating the conflict, nor how this initial escalation violated LOAC both by attacking Israel without sufficient *jus ad bellum* and by firing indiscriminately on Israeli civilians.

More importantly, widely broadcast scenes of clashes between Palestinians and Israeli police in East Jerusalem that immediately preceded the conflict made it easy for Hamas to portray Israeli aggression as having sparked the conflict and Hamas' actions as intended to defend Palestinian rights. Israel did little to refute this mistaken narrative. Nor did it make the case that Hamas' actions, and Palestinians' resentment, were as much the result of jockeying for power in the West Bank between the PA and Hamas as of tensions in Jerusalem.

ii. Israel failed more generally to shine a light on Hamas or combat its disinformation

Israel does not need to educate its own public about the daily reality of living next door to terrorist organizations like Hamas and PIJ. But when it comes to international publics, most of whom only pay attention to Gaza when conflict breaks out, Hamas' history, extremist ideology, brutality, and role in impoverishing, disenfranchising, and abusing Gazans is not well known. Israel did not systematically or proactively try to shape these audiences' perceptions of Hamas' legitimacy. Concurrently, Hamas limited media access to only what it wanted seen, not military emplacements in close proximity to civilian structures or its fighters dressed in civilian garb. The lack of an information "campaign between the wars" made it easier for the media and public to accept uncritically Hamas' account of what was happening once hostilities actually erupted, putting Israel at an immediate legitimacy disadvantage from the beginning of the conflict. Yet, even once the conflict began, Israel neither disputed Hamas' disinformation nor called attention to Hamas' LOAC abuses.

iii. Israel focused narrowly, but ineffectively, on factual explanations of its own tactical decisions

Though it lacked a strategic communications campaign against Hamas, the IDF did engage in messaging efforts during the May 2021 conflict. Echoing its focus on military-operational goals in Gaza, the IDF conveyed mainly factual information to the media, seeking to explain why it attacked specific individual targets without providing any context for how this information should help the media and public judge the compliance of Israeli operations with LOAC. Indeed, Israel did not address its audiences' general unfamiliarity with LOAC principles and requirements—an unfamiliarity that often encourages even neutral observers to blame the attacking force for any civilian casualties or damages to civilian property. It also under emphasized the IDF's extensive pre-strike precautionary measures to reduce risks to civilians, many of whom Hamas sought to place in harm's way.

The effectiveness of Israel's approach might have been further decreased by delays and several major missteps. In the conspicuous case of the May 15 attack on the al-Jalaa building, only very belatedly—on June 8, weeks after the conflict—did Israel lay out evidence that Hamas was using the site to develop EW capabilities against Iron Dome.³⁹ The lack of an immediate and thorough response by the IDF to such a sensitive strike, one that literally hit close to home for international media organizations, was a serious mistake. This reflects a deeper, and understandable, tendency among professional militaries generally to prioritize the security of intelligence sources and operational methods over efforts to inform the public. The IDF's deception operation the day before the al-Jalaa strike, in which it unintentionally misled the media and other international audiences about a ground operation in Gaza, compounded Israel's existing challenges in the information domain by accidentally undermining the IDF's credibility.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the IDF's use of the term "metro" to describe Hamas' tunnel network made it sound like Israel was attacking Gaza's public transit system, not military infrastructure, lending support to claims by Israeli critics that it targeted civilians.⁴¹ (See Appendix C for further discussion of these examples.)

Similar to 2014, these shortcomings stem at least partly from how Israel structures and disseminates military information. It relied on the IDF international spokesperson to conduct most of its messaging related to the May 2021 conflict, which translated to a primary, and apparently effective, focus on domestic audiences.

However, Israel did not effectively utilize civilian agencies of government—first and foremost the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)—either to expound a narrative justifying Israel's self-defense and compliance with LOAC or to amplify content provided by the IDF. Such coordination is hampered by the MFA's lack of timely access to information that could help justify and contextualize IDF conduct.⁴²

Despite these shortcomings in messaging and communications, we encountered skepticism among Israeli military and civilian leaders that any strategic communications campaign, regardless of how well executed, could surmount the pre-existing wall of anti-Israeli bias and hostility. We are concerned a similar feeling of futility is an increasing risk among U.S. forces. But our review also indicates that even if messaging efforts have marginal impact, ceding the information domain to the enemy is an unacceptable response.

G. The strategy mismatch between Israel and Hamas makes recurring conflict likely

The mismatch between Hamas' strategic-informational and Israel's military-operational objectives enabled both sides to claim victory in the May 2021 conflict, failing to resolve any foundational issues in the conflict and suggesting a high probability of future hostilities.⁴³ Israel restored a semblance of quiet and eliminated Hamas' and PIJ's military assets to a much greater extent than either group expected. Yet Hamas still could claim it had defended Jerusalem, improved its standing relative to the PA, and further discredited the IDF's effective efforts to minimize risks to civilians. As an anonymous senior Israeli military official told a journalist just days after the conflict ended, "Hamas failed to cause widespread damage or loss of life in Israel; it failed to carry out a commando raid inside Israel and to attack Israel from the sea or air, and extensive parts of its underground tunnels and shelters were destroyed. Still, for [Hamas' leader Yahya] Sinwar, this is all background noise. Whereas we in the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) focus on our military and operational achievements, he only cares about public perception and the symbolic and historic level. He does not understand our language, but it is high time that we understood his."⁴⁴

Israel's focus on operational ends in conflicts started by Hamas stems from the unenviable strategic dilemmas posed by Gaza. Since Hamas' 2007 takeover of the Strip, Israel has chosen limited, but recurrent, operations to buy quiet for as long as possible, instead of a systematic combined-arms operation to remove Hamas altogether. The latter option would entail extensive and incredibly costly ground operations in one of the world's most densely populated and labyrinthine urban enclaves. After retaking the Strip, with no legitimate Palestinian institutions to turn it over to, Jerusalem would have to assume open-ended responsibility for its administration. Conversely, Israeli leadership has rejected preventive military action to degrade Hamas' force buildup before it can be used against Israel because of the likely international backlash.⁴⁵

Unable to eliminate Hamas and unwilling to prevent its attacks, Israel has resigned itself to the notion that all it can do is try to buy as much time as possible between conflicts. Israel's operational focus leaves the information domain uncontested, allowing Hamas to improve its standing while simultaneously discrediting Israel's lawful self-defense. By complicating and potentially constraining future IDF military operations, this creates a vicious cycle in which Israel's operational focus makes it both more likely to have to conduct repeated future military engagements in Gaza and more likely to lose the battle for legitimacy in each conflict.

H. Israel's operational doctrine "Momentum" shortened the conflict

The intensity and efficacy of IDF operations helped limit the May 2021 conflict to a much shorter timeframe than in 2014. As part of its larger ongoing multiyear "Momentum" (Tnufa restructuring plan, the IDF entered the conflict amid changes in how it conducts operations, with specific goals to decrease the duration of conflicts and prioritize "swift and massive use of force against enemy systems," while also minimizing risk to civilians.⁴⁶ Accordingly, during the conflict Israel sought to maintain a high tempo of strikes against Hamas military targets from the beginning of hostilities, and in the process degrade Hamas' capabilities as thoroughly as possible. These plans were reinforced by the need to eliminate Hamas' offensive arsenals before they could be used against Israel, domestic political pressure within Israel to show results, and concerns that international pressure would mount for a ceasefire as the conflict dragged on.

The IDF began its operations with a large number of strikes against pre-planned, fixed targets—including high-rise towers containing Hamas' military infrastructure in Gaza and against Hamas' defensive tunnel network—and increased in intensity over the first five days.⁴⁷ During the second week of fighting, the IDF conducted airstrikes on remaining pre-planned targets, mobile targets that had not been located earlier, and new targets generated as a result of earlier operations such as tunnels, senior military commanders, and rocket launchers.

These sustained operations allowed Israeli airpower to eliminate at least as many targets in 11 days of hostilities in May 2021 as in the 50 days of fighting in 2014. In all, the IDF destroyed or degraded over 1,500 enemy military targets in the Gaza Strip during the latest conflict, including 340 attacks on high-trajectory rocket launch sites, as well as 230 attacks on surface-to-surface rocket launchers and 35 on mortar launchers.⁴⁸

As a result, Israel was able to prevent any major tactical surprises by Hamas, unlike in 2014. Israel had already neutralized Hamas' offensive cross-border tunnels before conflict broke out and successfully anticipated and destroyed Hamas' non-projectile offensive capabilities—including naval commando forces and drones.

I. Israel's technological advances enhanced its protection of Israeli and Gazan civilians

With rapid, accurate intelligence provided to combat units through an effective battlefield management system and integrated with precise weapons, the IDF could conduct highly accurate airstrikes that substantially mitigated risks to civilians. Iron Dome defended Israeli population centers while allowing Israeli commanders the strategic patience to put in place time-consuming and costly precautions for mitigating risks to Gazan civilians.

i. Israel accelerated target production with artificial intelligence and man-machine teams

Israel's military has described its operations in May 2021 as the "first artificial intelligence (AI) war." Thanks primarily to major enhancements in how the IDF collected, stored, and analyzed intelligence, and in the way it used this intelligence to inform operations, it was able to identify and neutralize more targets more quickly and precisely than in prior conflicts.

Utilizing an extensive network of electronic sensors onboard UAVs and F-35 multi-mission aircraft, ground-based and subterranean seismic monitors along the border, as well as other systems, over the course of several years the IDF collected billions of pieces of signals and other intelligence on Hamas' and PIJ's orders of battle, military infrastructure, and daily routines—tasks aided by Israel's near-limitless control of the borders surrounding, and the skies above, Gaza.

By employing machine learning to discern the patterns of likely Hamas targets—such as command and control infrastructure or rocket launchers—and AI paired with intelligence analysts in "man-machine teams" to analyze collected intelligence, and to identify and review potential targets, the IDF then could synthesize this extensive amount of data into pre-conflict target folders that were significantly more detailed, accurate, and timely than in 2014. This process also created a virtuous cycle where, as these algorithms gleaned patterns from existing data, they became increasingly proficient and faster at detecting similar trends or circumstances, and thus more targets, in the continuous influx of evermore sensor information. These technological advances in intelligence collection and analysis, combined with institutional changes to exploit this data, enabled the IDF to reduce the overall damage during its operations by neutralizing targets more precisely and in a much shorter timeframe than in 2014. One limitation that the IDF has encountered in deploying this system thus far is that it lacks data with which to train its algorithms on what is not a target. That is because historical records of rejected targets—that is, intelligence that was examined and then deemed not to constitute a target by human analysts—were not preserved.

The same capabilities that made such a large target set possible also provided a positive feedback loop, which allowed the IDF to generate many dynamic targets during the course of the conflict. Specifically, multi-sensor platforms that were actively engaging in operations—such as F-35s, UAVs, and Merkava main battle tanks—collected real-time information on movements by Hamas and PIJ combat units, rocket launches, and other Hamas and PIJ actions and reactions to Israeli operations. Especially during the second half of the conflict, after exhausting much of the pre-conflict target set, this enabled the IDF to generate several hundred targets of opportunity in a matter of days—a process that previously could have taken a year. Using updated battlefield management systems, the IDF was able to push all this intelligence to combat units in the field and ensure the accuracy of their strikes.

ii. Accurate intelligence and precision guided munitions allowed Israel to minimize risk to civilians

These fairly remarkable leaps in IDF intelligence and operational capabilities would largely have been for naught if Israel had to rely primarily on unguided “dumb” bombs. Instead, the IDF utilized thousands of Israeli and U.S. produced PGMs, including small laser-guided bombs (SLGB), GBU-39/B small diameter bombs (SDB), and Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) tail kits that convert unguided air-to-ground munitions to PGMs. With these weapons, the IDF could apply its precise and timely intelligence regarding target locations, and the activities surrounding these targets, into highly accurate airstrikes against, for instance, the specific floor of a multi-story building where Hamas or PIJ were conducting military activities.

More generally, PGMs provided Israel the ability to neutralize point targets effectively while often leaving surrounding infrastructure undamaged. Accurate intelligence helped the IDF tailor the fusing on its PGMs to further minimize risks of collateral damage. The IDF also employed unarmed SLGBs for non-lethal “knock on the roof” notifications for pre-strike evacuations of a target area.

Because one of these weapons can more reliably neutralize a given target than even a number of gravity bombs or other unguided air-to-ground munitions, PGMs also reduce the overall amount of firepower the IDF needed to employ. By the same token, Israel was able to achieve its operational objectives, and thus conclude its campaign, more promptly and with fewer casualties than if it had to utilize dumb bombs.

iii. Iron Dome defenses enabled Israel to take precautions and avoid ground operations

These advances in intelligence collection and analysis also boosted Israel’s defensive capabilities. The real-time information collected by Israeli F-35s, UAVs, and other platforms on barrages fired from Gaza was passed to Iron Dome commanders, providing the latter not only with early warning but also helping them aim interceptors more effectively by geolocating sources of rocket fire. The incoming data from these sensors even gave Iron Dome units a sense of the optimal timeframes for recharging and restocking individual batteries. In the face of Hamas’ and PIJ’s own improvements to their launch capabilities since 2014, these parallel advances enabled Iron Dome to sustain its 90 percent effectiveness against rockets headed toward built-up areas. Of the more than 4,455 total munitions Hamas and PIJ fired at Israel, consisting of 3,525 rockets and 930 mortars, 3,517 projectiles crossed into Israeli territory, with roughly 1,600 of the 1,750 projectiles deemed “on target” intercepted by Iron Dome and the rest landing in unpopulated areas.⁴⁹ One Israeli estimate suggests Iron Dome would have been only 50 percent effective in the absence of these changes.⁵⁰

By reducing the threat from rockets and other offensive capabilities in Gaza, these defensive advances provided Israeli commanders with risk mitigation that allowed them to exercise strategic patience in their operations. With Iron Dome effectively absorbing the vast majority of projectiles headed toward built-up areas, the IDF faced a far less acute incentive than in previous rounds of conflict to launch a costly and damaging ground incursion to remove rocket launching infrastructure. By the same token, the IDF was afforded more time, and thus could expend more energy, carrying out pre-strike precautionary measures for targets in Gaza.

J. Organizational changes facilitated Israel's technological innovations

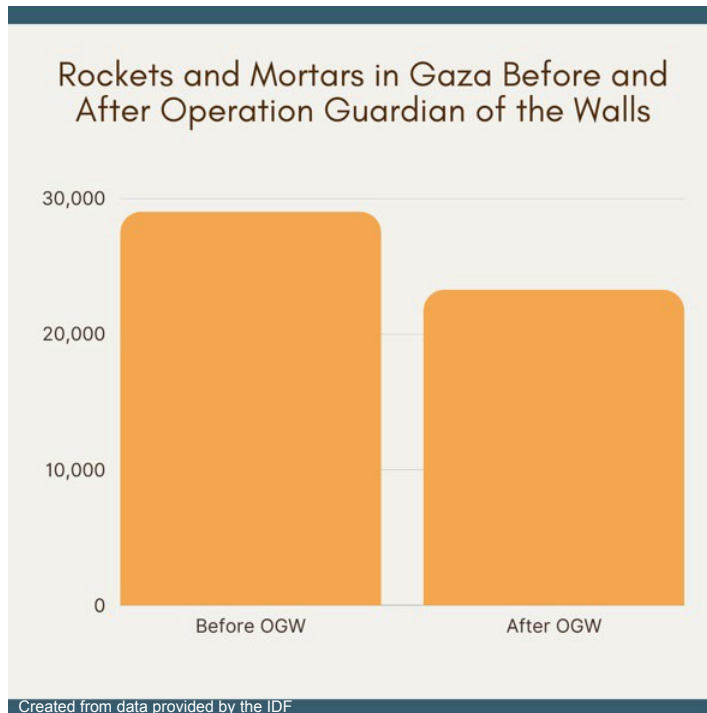
Israel's advances in how it collected and analyzed intelligence are inseparable from organizational and even cultural changes being undertaken by the IDF. Before the latest Gaza conflict, the sheer volume and diversity of intelligence sources required that Israel Defense Intelligence (IDI) set up a clearing house with a single database which AI algorithms could process. This necessitated breaking down barriers to proper information-sharing, including centralizing the flow of relevant intelligence to a single data platform managed by IDI. Accomplishing this in turn required IDI to work closely with the IDF's Cyber Defense Directorate to create a new cloud architecture and migrate data from various legacy systems into this new digital infrastructure. In certain instances, ineffective or recalcitrant intelligence units were disbanded, and sensitive classification protocols and processes were reconfigured to streamline the collection and distribution of growing mountains of incoming information. Analysts also had to fundamentally change certain standard operating procedures, and even basic mindsets, to work effectively in man-machine teams and exploit the potential advantages garnered by the use of AI.⁵¹

K. Hamas learned from past conflicts to develop new capabilities and tactics

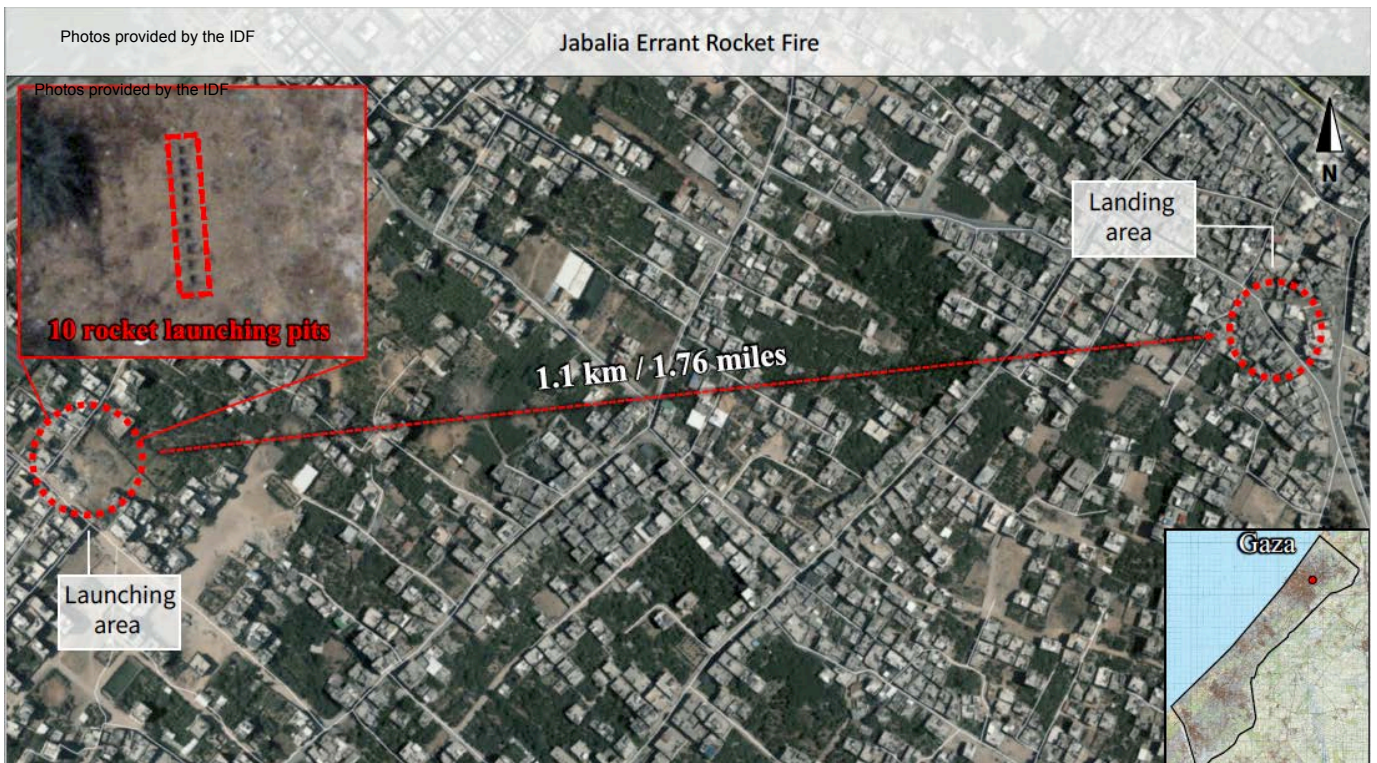
Hamas devoted significant energy to military R&D in the period between the 2014 and 2021 conflicts, drawing on what it believed to be the lessons of 2014. It demonstrated advances in some of their military capabilities, most notably their rocket arsenal and defensive tunnel network, as well as developing both new technologies and adaptive tactics to neuter the effectiveness of IDF intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR).

i. Projectiles

At the outbreak of fighting in May 2021, Hamas possessed some 7,000 rockets and 10,000 mortars, and PIJ roughly 6,000 each of rockets and mortars—figures that were not markedly different from the eve of conflict in 2014.⁵² However, in the intervening seven years, Hamas' and PIJ's arsenals of unguided rockets as well as their approaches to using these weapons changed appreciably. Hamas previously smuggled rockets and parts via tunnels from Egypt before the Gaza-Egypt border was effectively sealed in 2014-15 in the wake of the preceding round of Israel-Hamas fighting.⁵³ In succeeding years Hamas engineers improved their ability to manufacture these weapons domestically, including by diverting dual-use materials and other aid provided by the international community, via Israel, for Gaza reconstruction. Many of these rockets featured longer ranges—up to 70-100 miles, compared to the 60-mile radius of most long-range projectiles in 2014—which made them capable of targeting the entire Tel Aviv metro area more comprehensively than before, plus much of northern Israel for the first time. Many of these rockets also carried heavier payloads than in 2014.⁵⁴



Hamas' and PIJ's increased emphasis on indigenous manufacturing, and their ongoing attempts to surmount the learning curve for producing these weapons, resulted in a larger percentage of launch failures, misfires, and shortfalls compared to 2014. Israeli estimates indicate as many as one out of every seven rockets fired fell short before reaching Israeli territory, often causing Gazan civilian casualties that Hamas subsequently blamed on Israeli airstrikes.⁵⁵ Importantly, Hamas and PIJ also appeared not to have developed any precision missile capability by 2021, which would have improved significantly their prospects for evading or overwhelming Iron Dome air defenses.



Hamas and PIJ also changed their fire plans significantly after absorbing the lessons of 2014 and advancing their R&D effort. In the previous conflict, they aimed to overwhelm command and control for Iron Dome by launching relatively small volleys of rockets toward multiple fronts in Israel simultaneously. With Iranian encouragement, in 2021 rockets were fired from Gaza in much larger salvos—as many as 150 projectiles at a time—at one single target area in Israel, usually a large city, in deliberate attempts to overpower a single Iron Dome battery. Yet this generally was no more successful than the 2014 tactics, thanks to parallel advancements in Israel’s air defenses (including through the use of AI; see above).

ii. Tunnels

The 2021 conflict also revealed changes to Gaza’s subterranean domain. In 2014, Hamas and PIJ used tunnels both offensively and defensively. Offensively, at least 14 sophisticated cross-border assault tunnels—many of them reinforced with concrete, stretching more than a mile long and wide enough to accommodate motorcycles—enabled these groups to conduct surprise attacks, including successful kidnapping raids, on nearby Israeli communities, and to attempt to outflank, encircle, attack, and abduct IDF troops mobilizing along the border. Defensively, a warren of tunnels within Gaza, many of them running through or under civilian sites, allowed lethal subterranean maneuver by Hamas and PIJ fighters against ground incursions by the IDF in 2014. These defensive tunnels also served as bunkers for command and control and weapons storage, among other military activities.



**Locations of Hamas Misfires that Fell in Gaza
May 10-21, 2021**



Even as the advent of Israel's tunnel-detection technology negated the threat from Hamas' offensive assault tunnels by 2021, during the interwar period work proceeded apace to expand and improve the defensive tunnel array within Gaza, in order to shield Hamas and PIJ military assets from Israeli firepower and to contest another potential IDF ground operation. Unlike Israel's northern border with Lebanon, where it took Hezbollah years to carve a small handful of cross-border assault tunnels out of sheer bedrock (before the IDF discovered and neutralized them in 2019), Hamas excavated the relatively soft and sandy soil of Gaza much more easily and rapidly. By May 2021, some 220 miles of these tunnels crisscrossed the Strip. To an even greater degree than 2014, this subterranean network housed command and control, weapons depots, transportation routes for fighters, and even underground rocket launching sites. These tunnels were utilized primarily for military functions and appear to have served no valid civilian purpose.

iii. Drones, EW, and other capabilities

Hamas also debuted new capabilities in 2021 after devoting the interwar period to acquiring and manufacturing dozens of RPVs, including UAV "suicide drones" and unmanned underwater platforms.

The low-flying maneuverable UAVs offered an element of precision unavailable in its unguided rocket arsenals; accordingly, during the conflict Hamas launched them at high-value targets like critical infrastructure in Israel, including an offshore natural gas platform near Gaza. Thanks again to improvements to Iron Dome as well as the use of combat aircraft, these UAV strikes also proved unsuccessful.

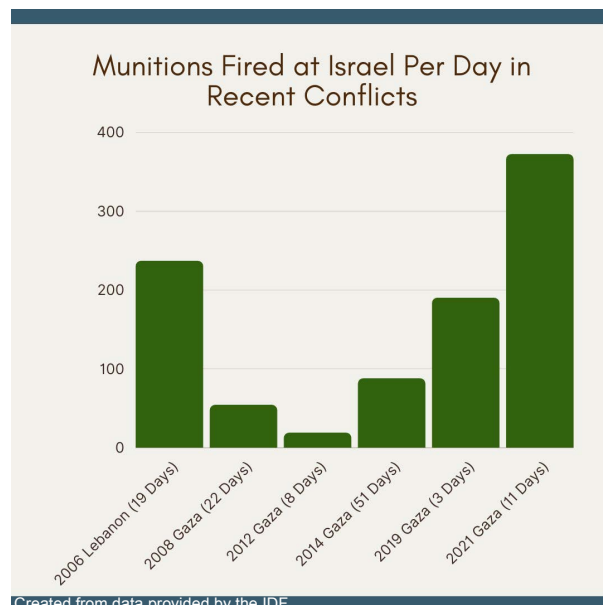
In the littoral domain, Hamas continued and expanded its attempts to develop a maritime capability. By 2021, Hamas and PIJ had trained hundreds of combatants to conduct seaborne operations. However, unlike in 2014, when a Hamas naval commando unit using bubble-free diving equipment was able to reach the Israeli shoreline undetected before being neutralized on the beach, in 2021 Hamas' and PIJ's naval capabilities—concentrated on jet skis for raiding or swarming surface attacks—were eliminated before they could conduct operations. Further showcasing the growing sophistication of its military R&D efforts, and reflecting its inability to overcome Israeli air defenses in 2014, the 2021 conflict debuted Hamas' development of EW capabilities to attempt to jam Iron Dome. Its EW systems were located in the high-rise al-Jalaa building (which housed offices of the Associated Press and Al Jazeera) in Gaza City.

Similar to the previous conflict, Hamas also possessed several dozen Russian-made antitank guided munitions (ATGM) which could pose lethal threats to targets along the border with Israel, including a fatal attack on an IDF soldier during May 2021 operations. To a greater extent than in 2014, in 2021 Hamas' arsenal of perhaps 100 Russian-made antiaircraft weapons, including SA-7 surface to air missiles, forced Israeli aircraft—particularly UAVs lacking active countermeasures—to fly at high altitudes.

As in 2014, Hamas intentionally interspersed these capabilities among civilian infrastructure—not only tunnels with entrances and passages through civilian buildings, but also particularly high-rise apartments, office towers, mosques, schools, and hospitals that housed military R&D and engineering departments, operations centers, intelligence and cyberwarfare units, and weapons storage.

L. IDF capability gaps persist

Despite the IDF's overall impressive performance in May 2021, and its marked improvements over 2014 in many respects, several key operational shortcomings stand out. Its otherwise impressive intelligence collection and analysis, and integration with operations, enabled it to deny many of Hamas' offensive assets and operations, including assault tunnels, UAVs, ATGMs, and naval capabilities. This also proved effective in strengthening Iron Dome's defensive impact. Yet, despite these successes, the IDF struggled in addressing several of Hamas' military capabilities. In some cases, such as drones, this might be due to the relative novelty of these technologies. In other cases, particularly mortars, it is a recurring threat that has yet to be countered effectively.



Despite their inability to surmount Israeli air defenses, the fact remains that Hamas and PIJ fired as many projectiles at Israel in the 11-day May 2021 conflict as in the entire 50-day conflict of 2014—including until near the end of hostilities. Although the number of rockets fired per day decreased somewhat several days into the fighting, they then remained steady throughout the later part of the conflict. Thus, it appears that any decrease in the use of rockets was more likely due to Hamas preserving its arsenal, given that it had not been expecting a conflict in the first place and, once the conflict began, it had to expect that it might last as long as the previous one, rather than as a result of the IDF significantly degrading either Hamas' rocket stockpiles or launchers. It is not clear whether Israel chose not to target Hamas' rocket capabilities. Perhaps Israeli leadership deemed them less important to degrading Hamas' force buildup than, for example, targeting Hamas' tunnel network and military R&D program. Or it might have decided that, given the effectiveness of Iron Dome, the risks to Gazan civilians from attacking rocket launchers placed next to, in, or under civilian infrastructure were unjustified. Alternatively, any further degradation of Hamas' ability to fire rockets might not have been possible from the air, requiring ground operations, which Israel was not prepared to undertake in this conflict. Whatever the reasons for why it did not do so in the latest conflict with Hamas, the IDF's ability to rapidly eliminate projectile stockpiles and launchers will be challenged when facing an adversary, like Hezbollah, with the ability to sustain a higher tempo of longer range and more accurate rocket and missile fire.



Another challenge, albeit not a new one, for the IDF comes from mortar-firing teams whose weapons proved more effective than rockets at eluding active Israeli defenses. Hoping to recreate their successes from 2014, when Israel also lacked defenses against short-range mortars, Hamas and PIJ fired some 930 of these projectiles at Israeli communities and IDF troops near the border.⁵⁶ While Iron Dome is capable of intercepting certain mortars at the apogee of their trajectory, the short flight time and limited range of many of these weapons—combined with the prioritization of Iron Dome batteries for defending more distant, larger Israeli urban areas from longer-range rockets—complicated the IDF’s ability to adequately counter this threat. Finally, while Israel successfully defeated the small number of UAV launches from Gaza in 2021, it did so only by diverting Iron Dome batteries and F-16 combat aircraft from other missions.

M. Gaza is a finite, but still complex, battlespace

In many respects, Gaza is a very limited battlespace that does not resemble future environments where U.S., or even Israeli, forces might be called upon to operate. Yet, it still possesses complexities that Israeli operations there had to overcome and that U.S. forces can learn from.

i. Gaza as finite battlespace

Israel’s ability before and during May 2021 to collect large amounts of intelligence, set a high tempo of operations, and rapidly eliminate large swathes of Hamas and PIJ military capabilities depended partly on the fact Gaza is a very finite battlespace. Only 25 miles long, and 8 miles at its widest, the 141-square-mile Strip is barely one-tenth the size of Rhode Island and sits immediately adjacent to Israel along a 32-mile border barrier, with a parallel underground barrier provided by tunnel detection technology. Multiple IDF airbases are positioned within 20 miles of Gaza, and Israel controls the Strip’s airspace and coastal waters as per the Oslo peace agreements. Gaza’s 8-mile border with Egypt is more or less completely sealed aboveground and below.

These factors contributed to Israel's exceptional ability to deploy ubiquitous sensor platforms above and surrounding Gaza. In conjunction with the IDF's use of AI for intelligence collection and analysis (see above), this enabled Israel to build out and rapidly neutralize highly detailed and accurate target sets, both pre-planned and dynamic. It also helped the IDF proactively deny many potential tactical surprises by Hamas and PIJ, for instance attempted naval offensives and cross-border subterranean assaults. The finite battlespace in Gaza and its proximity to Israel also mitigated some logistical burdens of conducting high numbers of attack and ISR sorties. In turn, all these considerations helped the IDF shorten the conflict and minimize collateral damage.

ii. Gaza as complex battlespace

Gaza's finite battlespace contributed to these IDF successes. Yet, partly in recognition of this fact, Hamas and PIJ exploited the complexity of that same battlespace to try to counter Israel's ability to degrade their capabilities and mitigate risks to civilians. In addition to being geographically small and contained, Gaza is one of the world's most densely populated urban areas, featuring crowded cities with many multi-story buildings, both residential and commercial. Like Hezbollah, Islamic State, and other unconventional adversaries, Hamas and PIJ utilize this intricate urban terrain to illegally shield, disperse, and deploy their military assets within, around, and beneath the Strip's myriad civilian structures. Indeed, they turned Gaza into a three-dimensional challenge for Israel by digging hundreds of miles of tunnels as well as frequently using specific floors of high-rise office towers and apartment blocs to conduct military activities.

N. Israel fought Hamas against the backdrop of the Iran threat

Gaza has been the IDF's busiest front for more than a decade, yet for Israel it is a diversionary theater in the larger conflict against Iran's self-proclaimed "axis of resistance." While Hamas and PIJ receive funding, training, and some materiel from Tehran, their capabilities and strategic threat to Israel pale in comparison to Iran and its primary Shi'a proxy, Hezbollah. Iran's nuclear program currently is at its most advanced state ever, and more conventionally it seeks to encircle Israel with militias, missiles, and drones from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Gaza, and Iran itself. By trying to ensnare it in simultaneous conflicts on multiple borders, Tehran hopes to prevent or at least distract Israel from imposing direct costs on Iran for its nuclear and regional aggression.

This strategic backdrop helps explain the IDF's emphasis on a short, decisive Gaza campaign that would not bog Israel down and pull focus from its primary challenge. In quickly eliminating as many Hamas and PIJ military assets as it could, it sought in part to deter these groups from reigniting hostilities for the longest possible period of time—thereby maximizing Israel's freedom of maneuver to address higher-level threats from Iran. Furthermore, during the May 2021 conflict, when Iran sought to further divert the IDF's attention through proxy rocket and drone attacks from Lebanon and Syria, Israel conspicuously chose to minimize the risks of escalation by retaliating in limited fashion or not at all. Finally, even while trying to end the conflict quickly, the IDF had to hold back operational capabilities and weapons stocks for the possibility of concurrent or future, larger-scale conflicts with Iran and Hezbollah in the north.

Israel's circumspection was quickly vindicated. On May 25, 2021, Hamas' leader in Gaza Yahya Sinwar and Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah each delivered a speech warning Israel against changing the status quo in Jerusalem—Hamas' justification for starting the latest Gaza conflict—with Nasrallah explicitly threatening "regional war" as the consequence.⁵⁷

IV. Lessons Learned

The events of May 2021 underscore how the United States should prepare to face future adversaries, from loosely organized terrorist groups to conventional armed forces, that blame the other side for their own efforts to willingly put civilians at risk. It will have to contest such conflicts emphatically, and preemptively, in the information domain as much as in the physical. The U.S. military should train to operate in environments significantly more complex than Gaza—just as densely populated by civilians, but farther afield, with more limited intelligence, no air dominance, and a contested electromagnetic spectrum—while remaining committed to LOAC compliance. But the U.S. military must also be clear-eyed about setting realistic expectations for what that compliance will look like in such operations—it might not be feasible to take the same extraordinary but costly precautions Israel employed in Gaza. Investments, together with partners like Israel, in new technologies to counter adversaries' advancing capabilities and enable mitigating risk to civilians will be critical.

A. Expect hybrid adversaries, urban combat, complex environments, and influence operations

Much like the capabilities and tactics Hamas demonstrated in the May 2021 conflict, U.S. forces increasingly will confront, and will have to plan against, “hybrid adversaries”: state and non-state actors that fight unconventionally yet are equipped with advanced weapons. This already was evident in the U.S.-led campaign against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, where American and partner forces in many ways confronted a conventionally armed and operationally adept adversary with significant manpower reserves, territorial bases, and intelligence capabilities, yet which employed terrorist tactics and operated intentionally from among civilian populations. The United States also currently confronts similar threats from Iranian-backed militias around the Middle East. The distinction between state and non-state actors is blurring at the level of great power competition as well, whether in the form of Russia's use of proxies for cyberattacks, its private military contractors and its “little green men” in Crimea and Donbas—or most recently China's use of “fishing boat” flotillas as cover to support its disputed maritime claims.

Israel's strategic dilemma about what to do with Gaza also reflects a more general, growing likelihood that in future conflicts U.S. and Israeli adversaries will base themselves and operate in urban areas. According to then-Army Chief of Staff General Mark Milley, by 2050 roughly 90 percent of Earth's population will live in urban areas, and thus “in the future, I can say with very high degrees of confidence, the American Army is probably going to be fighting in urban areas.”⁵⁸ Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Christian G. Wortman, meanwhile, noted that “everything that Marine formations or Army formations have to do is more difficult when you take it into an urban environment.”⁶⁰ Like Hamas, the adversaries the U.S. military will confront increasingly will rely on information operations to achieve their objectives, leveraging disinformation to discredit or constrain U.S. operations. In other respects, U.S. forces might find themselves in environments even more complex than Gaza. They will have to fight further from the homeland, with limited intelligence, no air superiority, and a contested electromagnetic spectrum.

The U.S. military should be prepared to fight, win, and maintain its commitment to LOAC compliance in these complex environments. Learning from, and training with, partner forces experienced in these types of operations could prove beneficial.

B. Prepare to communicate effectively on legality of U.S. military action

The prevailing sense that in May 2021, as in prior conflicts, Israel won operationally on the battlefield while losing strategically in the court of international opinion highlights how the United States must actively make the case for the legality of its military operations, including establishing their legitimacy from the outset. In preparation for operations in which U.S. forces will face adversaries seeking to complicate LOAC compliance while leveraging disinformation, professional military education and campaign planning should be adjusted to address the increased scale and speed at which influence operations can reach across the globe.

Additionally, to improve communications with international media, organizations, and publics, militaries should, to the best of their ability, prepare information well in advance of combat operations that can be shared about pre-planned targets and their measures to implement the full spectrum of LOAC obligations. While we understand concerns of exposing important operational security information, including the sources and methods used to identify targets, law-abiding militaries should seek more effective ways to rapidly provide more detailed information to the public related to both the necessity and legality of their actions at all phases of combat operations.

C. Clarify and more effectively explain LOAC requirements

The types of flawed legal analysis that were so common during the 2014 Gaza conflict only worsened in 2021. If the principles of LOAC are not publicly clarified for the international community, the United States and potential coalition partners may well be confronted by similarly skewed standards that Israel now faces. This would negatively affect the ability of law-abiding militaries to conduct effective combat operations in complex environments that are widely understood as legitimate by the international media and public. Mitigating such misunderstandings and deliberate distortions will require rectifying the lack of clarity regarding LOAC requirements, particularly in urban warfare.

The United States would do well to reaffirm the well-balanced existing standards of LOAC and to promote their equal enforcement against all combatants. It should also engage in a broad campaign to enhance the overall appreciation of U.S. commitment to LOAC and understanding of the true relationship between the law and complex military operations. This requires a comprehensive and proactive approach well beyond cursory statements by public affairs military personnel made only once hostilities have broken out. The U.S. State Department's public diplomacy and public affairs arms should work with the Pentagon to better inform the rest of the U.S. government, the United Nations, the media, and international audiences on these issues to enable them to more actively and consistently oppose efforts to use international law illegitimately to manipulate international opinion.

D. Do not expect identical civilian risk mitigation measures in future conflicts

Israel's measures to ensure strict compliance with LOAC in recent Gaza conflicts are laudable and deserve greater international recognition. But they must also not be held up as offering a template for U.S. or Israeli conduct in future conflicts.

The IDF's intelligence superiority and battlefield dominance over Hamas in May allowed Israel to assume certain tactical and operational risks that will not be possible in larger, more intense operations such as a war with Hezbollah and Iran or in a U.S.-led great power conflict. Both Israel and the United States would benefit from ensuring that the IDF's conduct in May 2021 does not set unrealistically high and legally erroneous expectations or standards that future Israeli or U.S. lawful operations cannot feasibly approach. And LOAC requires that commanders undertake only feasible precautions to mitigate risks to civilians.

The precautionary standard applied by Israel in the 2021 conflict should not be considered the norm. Holding Israel or any western military to this newly raised level of precaution in future conflicts would unnecessarily hamstring military capabilities and possibly impede speedier resolution of military conflicts. Once this higher bar is set, it will be difficult to restore the current, broadly accepted balance. It might also incentivize unconventional adversaries to further use civilians as human shields or deliberately seek to instigate civilian casualties. Instead, Israel and the United States should prepare their publics, the media, and the international community not to expect identical precautions in future conflicts.

E. Technological advances will require organizational changes

Israel's achievements in adopting AI, man-machine teams, and battlefield management to accelerate the targeting cycle demonstrate ways in which technology can enable militaries to operate more quickly and precisely, and therefore more decisively, in complex environments. The U.S. military is already pursuing similar innovations, for example, with its Joint All-Domain Command and Control system. However, it could learn from the experience of its Israeli counterparts how to effectively implement such systems. A key lesson seems to be that the challenges of collecting and analyzing data are not merely technological, but just as much cultural and organizational. U.S. and allied militaries will need to ensure a constant commitment to the difficult and potentially disruptive reorganizations necessary to maintain battlefield advantages offered by AI against increasingly capable competitors that are far more technologically advanced than Hamas.

F. Cooperate to counter and defeat emerging technologies

The growth of capabilities among hybrid adversaries—including EW, UAVs, tunnels, and the capability to employ high-volume rocket salvos and potentially drone swarms—reveals the need for cooperation between the United States, Israel, and like-minded nations to address the threat posed by the proliferation of both advanced and effective low-end capabilities from state sponsors of terrorism like Iran and North Korea to unconventional adversaries like Hamas. Backed in many cases by authorities from U.N. Security Council resolutions that created international arms embargoes, this should entail robust multinational efforts to interdict illicit arms shipments, particularly combined maritime task forces, to intercept seaborne smuggling efforts.

A parallel line of effort should focus on R&D cooperation to develop systems that can effectively and sustainably defeat threats posed by technologies that are proliferating into the hands of unconventional adversaries. Key areas for such joint R&D efforts should include adequate multi-layered air defense networks for these countries, such as directed-energy weapons (DEW) and Counter Rocket, Artillery and Mortar (C-RAM) systems. The importance and success of such initiatives was on full display in May 2021 with the effectiveness of Israel's U.S.-supported Iron Dome system and counter-tunnel technology. Finally, the U.S. military should work with partners to develop joint tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) for effectively countering these technologies on the battlefield.

This report, our observations, and the lessons learned provide the groundwork for future study and development of TTPs that can assist U.S. and allied leaders in preparing for and conducting future conflicts effectively, efficiently, and in accordance with the Law of Armed Conflict.

Appendix A: Events Preceding and Contributing to May 2021 Conflict

In late April and early May 2021, a number of events coincided to present Hamas a strategic opportunity. These included:

- **April-May:** A long-running legal dispute with comes to a head, involving eviction proceedings against several Arab families from properties in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood near Jerusalem's Old City. Israeli court rulings had previously determined that a Jewish family was the rightful property owner, having lost the property due to the expulsion of Jews by Jordan when it occupied Jerusalem in 1948; the Arab families claimed to have assumed rightful ownership soon thereafter from the Jordanian government authority.⁶⁰
- **April 12:** The Islamic holy month of Ramadan begins.
- **April 23-24:** Palestinian youth clash with police who had placed barricades blocking their preferred gathering spots at Damascus Gate (and from which they harassed and attacked several police and Jewish passersby). Hamas fires 40 rockets from Gaza at Israel as an act of "solidarity," and called on supporters to "escalate the uprising in Jerusalem."⁶¹ Hoping to dial down tensions, police remove the barricades; however, hundreds of Arab youth then converge on the area, chanting: "With blood and fire we will liberate you, Palestine."⁶²
- **April 24:** After a district court ruling in the Sheikh Jarrah matter, Hamas spokesperson Sami abu Zuhri tweets, "The confrontations of #Jerusalem constitute a turning point, establish a comprehensive confrontation for liberation, and demonstrate the fragility of the occupation and the solidity of the Palestinian people."⁶³ Hamas also calls for "a comprehensive intifada."⁶⁴ Violent protests continue through the following weeks, punctuated by Hamas attacks against Israel.
- **April 29:** The PA announces it will indefinitely postpone upcoming Palestinian legislative elections, which were scheduled to take place just three weeks later; the cancellation was widely understood as a means to deprive Hamas of a likely electoral victory. Hamas' election slate was named "Jerusalem is our destiny."⁶⁵
- **May 7:** On the last Friday of Ramadan, 70,000 Muslim worshipers pack the Temple Mount and al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. Many wave green Hamas flags and chant, "We are all Hamas."⁶⁶
- **May 9:** Amid several consecutive nights of violent clashes between Palestinian protestors and Israeli police, Hamas launches four more rockets toward Israel to coincide with protests over the Sheikh Jarrah court case. Israel's Supreme Court postpones hearings scheduled for May 10 on the Sheikh Jarrah matter.⁶⁷
- **May 10:** The last day of Ramadan, as well as Israel's annual Jerusalem Day marking the anniversary of Israel liberating and uniting Jerusalem in 1967. Dozens of Palestinians and Israeli police are injured in clashes on the Temple Mount.⁶⁸ Around 5:00PM, as the Jerusalem Day March of Flags is underway in the Old City (though rerouted away from Damascus Gate and the Muslim Quarter), Hamas' military wing issues an "ultimatum" to Israel: by 6:00PM, Israel must pull out its troops, police and "settlers" from the Temple Mount compound and Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, and release all those detained during violent clashes in prior weeks.⁶⁹

Appendix B: Timeline of Major Events in May 2021 Conflict

May 10: Amid renewed clashes between Palestinians and Israeli police around Temple Mount, three rockets are fired from Gaza into southern Israel.⁷⁰ Hamas issues an afternoon ultimatum for Israel to “remove all security forces from the Temple Mount and Sheikh Jarrah by 6PM,” otherwise various armed Gazan groups would attack Israel. After the 6:00PM deadline passes, Hamas and other armed group in Gaza fire more than 150 rockets into Israeli territory, including six toward Jerusalem. Hamas' military wing says it fired toward Jerusalem in response to Israel's “crimes and aggression in the Holy city, and its harassment of our people in Sheikh Jarrah and Al-Aqsa Mosque.”⁷¹ This marked the first time Jerusalem had been targeted since the 2014 conflict, an act which Prime Minister Netanyahu said, “crossed a red line.”⁷²

In response to Hamas rocket fire, including firing at least six rockets toward Jerusalem, Israel responds with a series of airstrikes against military targets in Gaza which neutralize eight Hamas operatives and destroy two rocket launchers, two military posts, and an offensive Hamas tunnel. The Palestinian Health Ministry claims that at least 20 people, including nine children, are killed, although it is not clear whether these deaths can be attributed to Israeli air strikes or to errant rocket fire from Gaza.⁷³

May 11: Hamas fires 711 rockets at Israel, the highest single day total in the history of Israel-Hamas conflict.⁷⁴ The IDF responds with a surge of targeted strikes, including attacking the 13-story Hanandi Tower in Gaza city which houses high-ranking operatives from Hamas military intelligence apparatus. Israeli forces provide “advance warning to civilians in the building and sufficient time for them to evacuate the site.”⁷⁵ According to local sources, unmanned Israeli surveillance planes target the tower with several warning munitions before its destruction, allowing residents two hours to evacuate. The Israeli Air Force also carries out a series of airstrikes targeting Hamas' main police headquarters.⁷⁶

May 12: Israeli airstrikes destroy two multi-story buildings in Gaza City, the al-Shorouq and al-Jawhara towers.⁷⁷ While both contain offices of Hamas and Palestinian Authority news organizations, the IDF states the towers housed military intelligence offices and contain headquarters belonging to Hamas' intelligence unit, the Hamas Judea and Samaria Headquarters, and the Gaza Brigade. Following the al-Shorouq tower strike, Hamas fires more than 130 rockets towards Israel, killing a six year old boy in Sderot, as well as launching an anti-tank guided missile which kills one IDF soldier and injures two others.⁷⁸

In a first, Iron Dome intercepts a Hamas unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) which had crossed into Israeli territory. Several hours later, the IDF strikes a Hamas squad as they prepare to launch a UAV into Israeli territory, in addition to destroying a rocket launcher preparing to fire 10 rockets towards Ashdod and Ashkelon.

Since May 10, approximately 1,500 rockets have been fired from the Gaza Strip toward Israeli territory, and approximately 350 have fallen short in Gaza. Several of the rockets make direct hits on buildings and cars in Israel, killing eight Israelis.⁷⁹

May 13: By this point in the conflict, Israel has attacked over 600 military targets in Gaza. The IDF carries out a series of attacks on Hamas' central bank, internal security headquarters, and the home of a top Hamas commander, Iyad Tayib. According to the IDF, the home was being used as military infrastructure.⁸⁰

Israel's defensive efforts successfully thwart a total of seven ATGM attacks. The Israeli military also releases video of an F-16 fighter jet shooting down a UAV launched from Gaza toward an offshore energy platform. A total of 350 rockets are fired from Gaza towards Israel throughout the day.

May 14: At least three rockets are fired from southern Lebanon toward Israel, while Iron Dome intercepts another two UAVs which crossed into Israeli territory from Gaza. Israeli troops begin massing along the Gaza border, sparking news reports that Israel is conducting a ground offensive. At 12:30AM on Friday morning, the IDF tweeted "IDF air and ground troops are currently attacking in the Gaza Strip." The tweet is worded vaguely enough to suggest the IDF is crossing the border into Gaza, while in reality ground forces are attacking targets in the Strip while still on the Israeli side of the border.⁸¹ Hamas responds by sending some of its combatants into its defensive tunnel system throughout Gaza in preparation for an IDF ground incursion.⁸² According to the IDF, in the ensuing airstrikes against the tunnel network approximately 160 IDF aircraft from 12 squadrons strike over 150 underground targets in the northern Gaza Strip.

Later in the day Israeli forces strike multiple rocket launch sites, Hamas observation posts, and a weapons manufacturing warehouse, while also thwarting an ATGM launch. The IDF also attacks a Hamas tunnel shaft located adjacent to a kindergarten and a mosque in southern Gaza late Friday night.⁸³

May 15: An Israeli airstrike destroys the high-rise al-Jalaa building in Gaza City which houses a number of news organizations, including the Associated Press and Al Jazeera. One week before the attack, Prime Minister Netanyahu publicly states the building was used for Hamas intelligence purposes. The attack sparks widespread international condemnation, despite the IDF giving occupants of the building a one-hour warning and enabling a full evacuation.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken says publicly that Israel provided the United States with further information regarding the attack, though he declines to comment further.⁸⁴ An anonymous Israeli official close to Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi states that Israel provided the United States with the "smoking gun" proving that Hamas used the al-Jalaa building for military purposes.⁸⁵ (Only several weeks later, on June 8, did Israel's Ambassador to the United States Gilad Erdan speak publicly about how Hamas was using the building to develop a system capable of electronically disrupting Israel's Iron Dome.⁸⁶) The IDF states on June 8 that "the target was of high military value to Hamas and was vetted according to rigorous procedures within the IDF, and in accordance with international law."⁸⁷

The IDF also prevents another Hamas UAV attack, in addition to neutralizing rocket and ATGM launch sites. Iron Dome intercepts at least three explosive UAVs launched from Gaza toward Israel. Israeli forces carry out airstrikes on a wide variety of military targets in Gaza, including Hamas cyber-equipment storage, weapons manufacturing warehouses, tunnel shafts, and command and control sites.⁸⁸

May 16: An Israeli airstrike on Hamas' tunnel network in the al-Rimal neighborhood in Gaza City results in 42 civilians killed and multiple buildings demolished after the destruction of the tunnel network collapsed surrounding structures.⁸⁹ After one week of conflict, the death toll in Gaza stands at 192, including 58 children, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. The first seven days of conflict see 10 Israelis killed, including two children.⁹⁰ The IDF has attacked over 820 military targets and neutralized at least 130 combatants, while Hamas and PIJ have fired more than 3,000 rockets, 460 of which landed inside Gaza. Iron Dome maintains a 90 percent interception rate against projectiles headed toward built-up areas.⁹¹

May 17: U.S. Secretary of State Blinken blocks a UN Security Council joint statement that calls for an immediate ceasefire but that does not condemn Hamas rocket fire.⁹² Nonetheless, reports state that Egypt believes it is close to brokering a ceasefire, including cessation of Hamas rocket attacks on Israel.⁹³

At least another 304 rockets are fired from the Gaza Strip, including one that injures several Israelis after striking a home in Ashdod. Hamas encourages attacks from the West Bank, distributing leaflets in the region claiming PA President Mahmoud Abbas approved of violent confrontations with IDF forces—a claim President Abbas reportedly denies.⁹⁴ The IDF also tweets late Monday night that six rockets are fired from Lebanon toward Israel, though all land within Lebanon. These rockets supposedly are fired by a small Palestinian faction, not Hezbollah.⁹⁵

With negotiations ongoing and international pressure for a ceasefire mounting, Prime Minister Netanyahu calls for IDF airstrikes to continue.⁹⁶ The IDF deals further significant damage to Hamas' tunnel system, this time using 54 fighter aircraft to drop roughly 110 precision munitions overnight against roughly 10 miles of tunnels in approximately 20 minutes.⁹⁷

The IDF also targets Hasam Abu Harbid, Commander of PIJ's Northern Division who was involved with ATGM attacks on Israel.⁹⁸ Defensively, the IDF thwarts an attempted Hamas attack as combatants were transporting diving equipment, and it releases video of a strike on an autonomous underwater vehicle in northern Gaza.⁹⁹ In the last major Israeli attack of the day, IDF forces attack the main operations center of Hamas Internal Security Forces, including providing advance warning to the occupants of the building and allowing sufficient time for evacuation.¹⁰⁰

May 18: A total of 326 rockets are fired toward Israel on this day, up from roughly 304 rockets each of the prior two days. Fatah declares a "day of rage," urging Palestinians to clash with Israeli forces in the West Bank.¹⁰¹ Hamas claims to have launched rockets at six Israeli Air Force bases in southern and central Israel, though there are no reports of injuries or damage.¹⁰² IDF fighter jets strike command and control centers in the homes of 12 senior Hamas commanders, as well as a mortar launch site inside a school, in Gaza.¹⁰³

The IDF destroys another nine miles of Hamas tunnels in Gaza overnight, using 62 fighter jets to drop over 110 precision guided munitions on roughly 65 targets in the span of 30 minutes.¹⁰⁴ Cumulatively, Israel claims to have destroyed more than 60 miles of tunnels, which the IDF refers to as the "backbone" of Hamas operations, in four separate series of attacks since the conflict began.¹⁰⁵ Overnight strikes also destroy 10 multi-barreled rocket launchers, bringing the total number of multi-barreled launchers destroyed in the conflict to 65.¹⁰⁶

May 19: The IDF conducts a fifth phase of attacks on Hamas' tunnel system, with 52 aircraft using 122 precision guided munitions on roughly 40 military targets across at least 7 miles of tunnels, all in the span of 25 minutes.¹⁰⁷

Despite Israel attempting to reopen the Kerem Shalom crossing to enable humanitarian aid into Gaza, the crossing has to be blocked off due to mortar fire from Gaza which hospitalizes an IDF soldier with shrapnel wounds.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, four rockets are fired from Lebanon toward Haifa; one rocket is intercepted by Iron Dome, one lands in an open field, and two land in the Mediterranean Sea. Israeli security officials again suggest a Palestinian faction, not Hezbollah, is responsible for the rocket fire.¹⁰⁹

May 20: On the final day of conflict before the ceasefire, 420 rockets are fired at Israel from Gaza – the second most of any day in the conflict. Israeli forces strike several military infrastructure targets overnight, mostly located inside the residences of senior Hamas officials.¹¹⁰ The IDF also neutralizes several rocket-launching operatives and strikes 30 rocket-launching sites in Gaza, several of which are located underground, as well as striking three tunnels in the northern Gaza Strip. Hamas directly hits an IDF bus north of the Gaza Strip with an ATGM just minutes after ten IDF troops leave the vehicle.¹¹¹

May 21: Hamas and Israel agree to a ceasefire brokered by Egypt, Qatar, and the United Nations, to commence at 2:00AM.¹¹² Hamas fires additional rockets in the hours immediately preceding the ceasefire as Palestinians skirmish with Israeli police outside al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

Both Hamas and Israel claim victory. Hamas armed wing spokesman Abu Ubaida says, “with the help of God, we were able to humiliate the enemy, its fragile entity and its savage army.” Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz tweets that Israel “achieved unprecedented military gains.”¹¹³

Appendix C: Israeli Messaging Missteps

A. Al-Jalaa Strike

Initially, the IDF spokesman explained without elaboration that the building was a legitimate target, as it “contained military assets belonging to the intelligence offices of the Hamas terror organization.” Israel was initially, and understandably, reluctant to reveal any of the evidently highly sensitive intelligence on which it had based the strike. Israel did share the “smoking gun” intelligence with the U.S. administration, apparently to the latter’s satisfaction. But only on June 8, more than three weeks after the strike, did Israeli Ambassador to the United States Gilad Erdan reveal to Associated Press executives that Israeli intelligence determined Hamas was occupying a significant part of the building, and “developing an electronic jamming system to be used against the Iron Dome defense system.” The IDF also released a statement defending the decision under international law, declaring, “The strike was designed to collapse the building in order to ensure the destruction of the special means [to disrupt Iron Dome]. The target was of high military value to Hamas and was vetted according to rigorous procedures within the IDF and in accordance with international law.”¹¹⁴

In the interim, however, Israel took a public relations beating. As the IAF had struck two similar buildings from which Hamas operated only days before, and which also housed certain foreign media outlets, the Washington-based National Press Club said, “This trend prompts the question of whether Israeli forces are attacking these facilities to impair independent and accurate coverage of the conflict.” Associated Press CEO Garry Pruitt called the strike “an incredibly disturbing development,” adding, “We are shocked and horrified that the Israeli military would target and destroy the building housing AP’s bureau and other news organizations in Gaza.” Al Jazeera called the strike “barbaric” and said, “The aim of this heinous crime is to silence the media and to hide the untold carnage and suffering of the people of Gaza.”¹¹⁵

That set the tone for much coverage of Israel’s conduct in Gaza. Despite Israel’s initial, verifiable generalized assertion that the building was a lawful military target, international outrage ensued, accusing the IDF of destroying the building in violation of international law, as those in the press themselves characterized the building as strictly civilian in nature. By the time Israel revealed sufficient persuasive information weeks later, the version of events blaming Israel for attacking civilian media headquarters already had crystalized.

B. Gaza ground operation deception

At 12:30AM on May 14, as Israeli troops began massing at the Gaza border, the IDF tweeted, “IDF air and ground troops are currently attacking in the Gaza Strip.” This vaguely worded statement together with the troop movement sparked news reports that Israel was preparing for a ground offensive, although IDF forces were only attacking the Strip from inside Israeli territory. Israeli military leaders hoped this deception would convince Hamas, in the face of an imminent Israeli incursion into Gaza, to send its militants to take cover in its large network of defensive tunnels throughout the Strip. The IAF could then more easily target Hamas fighters congregated underground.

Militarily, the deception failed. The IDF sent far fewer units to the border than would credibly be needed for a ground operation, and Hamas saw through the ruse. As a result, Israel’s large aerial operation—dropping 450 munitions over 22 minutes—struck far fewer militants in the tunnel system than Israel hoped or expected.¹¹⁶

The deception was also a public relations failure. Unaware of the operation's true nature and intent, the IDF's English-language spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Conricus himself misunderstood the IDF's attempts at vague but truthful messaging, turning it into a certain, and false, statement. His unequivocal, and unknowingly false, response when questioned on whether a ground incursion was taking place was "yes ... As it's written in the statement: Indeed, ground forces are attacking in Gaza. That is that they are in the Strip." This mistake eroded IDF credibility and surfaced accusations of intentionally misleading the media.

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1101 14th Street, NW | Suite 1030 | Washington, DC 20005 | www.jinsa.org