

Israel Has Not Won the Gaza War. Its Other Wars Weren't So Successful Either

Nine months into the second-longest war in its history, the question of whether Israel is good at war is a vexing one and raises huge questions



Zen Read



An Israeli soldier operating during a ground operation in the southern Gaza Strip last week. Credit: Ohad Zwigenberg/Reuters



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Jul 10, 2024



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Sunday July 7 marked nine months since Hamas' attack triggered Swords of Iron, which is now the longest war in Israeli history since the 1948-49 War of Independence.

All week, masses of Israelis have been demonstrating against the Netanyahu government for its failure to achieve a hostage release deal and to express their comprehensive distrust in the political leadership. The majority of Israelis do not believe Israel can achieve "total victory" in Gaza, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has promised.

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Last week, Israel's most globally renowned intellectual, Yuval Noah Harari, was the star speaker at a large-scale peace event in Tel Aviv. Observing the prevailing belief in Israel that peace has failed, Harari said: "It's true that we tried to make peace and we weren't very good at it. So what? We're not so successful at war, and that doesn't stop us from trying another and yet another

[war]. Each one led us to an abyss. The time has come to try peace again."

The idea that Israel is "not successful at war" threw me. Over a lifetime of critiquing Israel's political aims, it seemed

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defeating seven Arab armies in 1948; winning in 1956 and 1967; surviving and beating back the surprise attack of 1973.

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Israel was too successful for its own good in the first Lebanon war of 1982: It drove the [Palestine Liberation Organization](#) out, nearly conquered Beirut and occupied southern Lebanon for the next 18 years. The Second Lebanon War in 2006 did so much damage to Hezbollah that the border was mostly quiet for the next 17 years. Its secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, [famously said](#) that if he had known what was coming, he might not have provoked the war.



Yuval Noah Harari speaking at the peace rally in Tel Aviv earlier this month. Credit: Tomer Appelbaum

But looking closely, the question of whether Israel is good at war is vexing and raises huge questions. What counts as success in war – traditional concepts like territorial conquest, defeat of the enemy, improvements in global power, spoils, resources and riches? Is success in war necessarily "good for Israel"? What is a war anyway – do five previous rounds of fighting between Israel and Hamas in Gaza count? Finally, is war good for *anyone* in the world today?

Is war allowed?

First, these questions can only be addressed by realizing how the whole idea of war has changed in the last century. My grandmother, z"l, used to sigh with woe when I gave her the latest bloody updates on Israel, until eventually her 103-year-old eyes would blaze as she declared: "They've got to outlaw war!"

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But "they" tried to do just that. After World War II, the great powers gathered emerging ideas, conventions and nascent institutions from the previous half-century and declared that wars of territorial conquest, along with the traditional spoils of war, were now illegal. The idea was to remove the incentive for war. If you can't snatch territory, conquer a people, expand your empire, gain resources, riches, slave labor, global wealth and power, why bother?

By certain specific measures, the effort was an extraordinary success, a radical break from human history. Azar Gat, a political scientist at Tel Aviv University who literally wrote the whole history of war in a 2008 book, told me that war between economically developed countries has faded (in a firm delineation of economic development, which mostly overlaps with democracies and leaves out Ukraine and Russia, respectively).

Among these wealthier developed countries, he remarked that even the *fear* of inter-state war has vanished: "Interstate wars, civil wars and the 'security dilemma' itself have all disappeared."

Another luminary of war studies, John Mueller, provided data in 2009 showing "the most significant number in the history of warfare: zero (or near-zero). This is the number of wars that have taken place since 1945 between developed states."

There are many theories about why, including nuclear deterrence, the prohibition on territorial conquest and the

controversial "democratic peace" idea that democracies don't fight each other. Gat, meanwhile, argues that industrialization meant peace was simply far more economically beneficial.



Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah giving a televised address in Lebanon two months ago. Credit: Mohamed Azakir/Reuters

Beyond the academy, the dangers of trying to gain land by starting a war should be clear. Arab countries opened a state-to-state war with Israel in 1948, and thereby lost even more than the 55 percent of Mandatory Palestine given to the Jewish state in the partition compromise, which the Palestinian and Arab leaderships had rejected. The 45 percent intended for an Arab state was slashed by war to just 22 percent. Israel was lucky to keep the territory it conquered, through internationally mediated armistice agreements.

But when Israel seized control of Sinai in 1956, it was quickly forced to withdraw. It captured Sinai again in 1967, but gave it up again in 1979. I'll get to the *other* lands later.

If Israel doesn't yet realize that war is just as likely to cost territory as gain it, ask Serbia. Self-determination remains one of the leading remaining causes of wars, Gat explains, and this was clearly true in the post-communist world. The former Yugoslavian wars began when the Serb-dominated leadership refused to compromise on the aspirations of Yugoslavia's constituent peoples to become independent and made war on them instead. It didn't work out well.

Madcap Serbian nationalism drove genocidal slaughter in Bosnia, and Yugoslavia was effectively dismembered, losing Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Macedonia within a few years (and, much later, Montenegro). When Slobodan Milosevic refused a diplomatic compromise regarding Kosovo in 1999, NATO dropped bombs on Belgrade. For Serbia, losing Kosovo was like having its heart ripped out.



A Bosnian woman reacting after judges at the Yugoslav War Crimes Tribunal adjourned the trial of Radovan Karadzic at The Hague in 2009. Credit: Peter Dejong/AP

The Israeli right-wingers [angling to annex Gaza](#), the West Bank and maybe even reoccupy Lebanon should take note: In the tragedy-as-opportunity school of thought, some still hope the current war might be a breakthrough for the [two-state solution](#) – the rightist warmongers' nightmare.

Spoils of war can spoil

History is not linear, or fair. Israel annexed the Golan Heights and, most conspicuously, the Palestinian territories remain occupied – including Israel's long-term effective control and now reoccupation of Gaza. But these territories have become an Israeli albatross, and on October 7 the source of its greatest historic loss.

Gat makes the incisive point that full military success does not always correspond to successful political aims. The first Iraq war liberated Kuwait without toppling Saddam Hussein. But when George W. Bush tried to finish his father's job, the second Iraq war turned into a disaster.

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Gat's point seems to have a local corollary: Israel's aim of the first Lebanon war was to expel the PLO and help install a friendly government in Lebanon. Israel was pretty successful at the military level, and the PLO did flee to Tunis. But from there it continued to be the unrivalled leader of the Palestinian cause and Hezbollah arose in Lebanon, which became arguably the most hostile country to Israel in the Middle East – I'd venture even more than Iran. As for the Second Lebanon War, it's the

Israeli *right* who argue that it didn't work, with Hezbollah now representing a vastly worse threat even than Hamas.

By what logic would a third Lebanon war succeed where two others failed? Five earlier escalations in Gaza, after all, didn't prevent [October 7](#).

None of this yields easy answers, and Israel didn't choose to fight all of its wars. I asked Yagil Levy, a professor of civil-military relations at the Open University, how to distinguish a war of choice from a war of no-choice. The answer wasn't so clear, and Levy noted that even the 1967 war is debatable, with a lingering possibility that the crisis could have been defused with diplomacy.



Israeli army vehicles inside the southern Gaza Strip earlier this month. When did the conflict against Hamas become a war of choice? Credit: Ohad Zwigenberg/Reuters

But even I was surprised when he declared that "the war of no choice in Gaza ended on October 8, more or less, when Israel pushed the Hamas Nukhba forces back ... or let's say a few days later."

After that, he said, Israel had other choices. It could have cut a fast deal to release the hostages, or issued an ultimatum to Hamas to disarm. It's increasingly rare, he noted, for wars to start without such an ultimatum.

If this war was a choice, was it a reasonable one? In Harari's 2018 bestseller "21 Lessons for the 21st Century," the author clearly believed Israel understood the folly of war, or it could have conquered Damascus in a week, theoretically, during the Syrian civil war. In a comment that didn't age well, Harari wrote that "it would be even easier for the Israel Defense Forces to conquer Gaza and topple the Hamas regime ... but Israel knows there is little to be won from war." Harari was dead wrong on both counts, but Israel's military and political leaders should have known far, far better.

Anything to show?

Can Israel measure its achievements in the Gaza war? The IDF has military data: its spokesperson claims that about 15,000 Hamas militants have been killed in Gaza (the IDF uses the term "terrorist," but this is inaccurate when referring to combatants killed in military conflict). In April, 125 of these were commanders of brigades, battalions or companies. In the Knesset on Wednesday, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said that "60 percent of Hamas terrorists" had been killed or wounded, and of 25 Hamas battalions, "the vast majority of them" had been dismantled.

Michael Milshtein, the former head of the Palestinian department in IDF intelligence who now leads the Palestinian Studies Forum at the Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, offered a sobering analysis. Based on Israel's self-defined goals, he says, "we need to admit that actually none of the main pillars

have been realized – primarily the two big ones: the collapse of Hamas and hostage release," nor an alternative order in Gaza for the "day after."

On the tactical level, according to Milshtein, "Israel controls two narrow strips [Netzarim and Philadelphi], while Hamas is the dominant actor in all remaining areas, despite the damage it's sustained." Hamas' military leaders Yahya Sinwar and Muhammed Deif are both alive and, despite its battalions being degraded, Hamas is still fighting.



Yahya Sinwar greeting supporters in Gaza after a cease-fire was reached in the 11-day war between Hamas and Israel in May 2021. Credit: John Minchillo/AP

It's true that "the military wing has been mortally damaged," adds Milshtein, including some of the tunnel infrastructure. But Gat asserts that if Israel withdraws its forces from Gaza, "Hamas will renew its political infrastructure, recruit fighters, build tunnels, take aid money ... [use] the metal workshops where they made missiles, renew the smuggling networks, and within one to two months it will take control of Gaza again."

At the international level, Israel won't have legitimacy to restart the war. "And in about a year we'll be back to them [Hamas] having similar capacity as they did," he notes. As a result, he is concerned about such a withdrawal.

Gat observes that war persists, and can be rather effective at fighting armed groups or guerrillas in the nondemocratic world, where states and armies reject constraints and can unleash sheer brutality. Many, of course, would argue that Israel is already doing so. But it's also possible that Israel could do far worse the less it sees itself beholden to democratic and international norms. That scenario can't be dismissed.

For now, though, it's not clear that Israel's perceived military prowess takes full stock of the consequences – and sometimes failures – of its wars. And if Hamas thinks its initial attack was a "success," Palestinians too need to count the cost of nearly 40,000 dead, total destruction and Israeli reoccupation of Gaza.

Harari's right – it's time to try peace.

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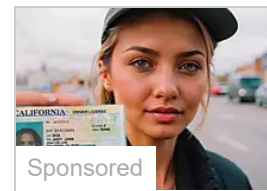


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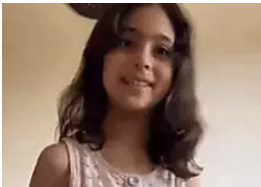
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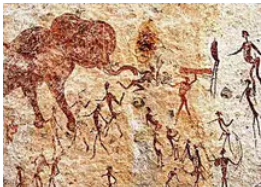
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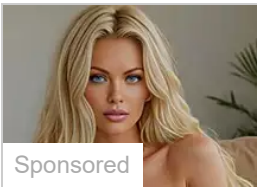
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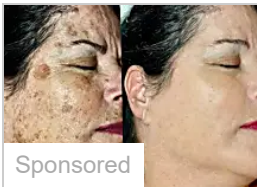


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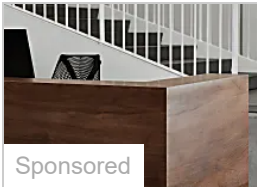


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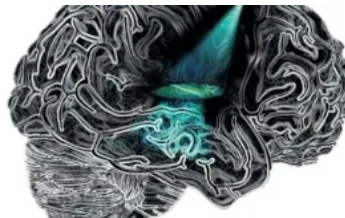
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