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On the Gaza War

Grinding urban combat with high troop densities will reveal different lessons for modern armies than the spare battlefields of Ukraine.

The [AUSA exposition](#), underway this week in Washington DC, is one of the most important arms shows of the year. I was delighted to see a full force of Israeli firms showcasing kit, after the psychotic attack on their country. I salute those who came, and those who fight. Their war will be difficult, but the correlation of forces, the geography, and the essentiality of the struggle strongly favor a decisive Israeli victory.

Earlier this year, I heard a Ukrainian general describe the fighting against the Russians as a hybrid of precision weapons and First World War trenches. The remarkable difference with 1918, I noted in research notes in May and June, is troop density. Precise numbers of Ukrainian and Russian troops on and near the front are unknown, but they are likely but a few hundred thousand each. Bad demographics and incomplete mobilizations in Ukraine and Russia have led to deserted battlefields. Just watch the videos of single drones hunting down single soldiers in dugouts. The fighting in Gaza will differ. The table below compares figures.

ROUGH COMPARISON OF TRENCH WARS, 1918 AND 2023.

Year	Offensive Location	Front (km)	Depth (km)	Attacker Defender	Attackers Defenders	Troop density	Attackers/Defenders
1918	Meuse-Argonne	163	55	US	1,200,000	7,362	2.7
	Western Front			Germany	450,000		
2023	Spring Offensive	1,000	70	Ukraine	300,000	300	1.0
	Eastern Front			Russia	300,000		
2023	"Swords of Iron"	51	12	Israel	300,000	5,882	10.0
	Gaza			Hamas	30,000		

In 1918, General Pershing's soldiers and marines brought 324 tanks, 840 aircraft, and 2,417 guns to the fight. They opposing Germans were well entrenched, with their own artillery and aircraft. Over the 47 days until the armistice, the Americans advanced 55 kilometers, at a cost of 120,000 casualties. If the Ukrainians advance another 55 kilometers in Zaporizhzhia, they will cut off all the Russians in Kherson and Crimea. Note that Gaza is nowhere more than 12 kilometers deep. As the Duke of Exeter might say, the fallback for Hamas is *bloody constraint, for if you hide the crown, even in your hearts, there will he rake for it*.

Perhaps the Israeli Army is not what General Mick Ryan termed "[the best army in the world right now](#)"—that would be the Ukrainian Army. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006 was unimpressive, largely from unwillingness to sustain casualties. This time, as David Wurmer told the *WSJ* and the *Jerusalem Post*, "precedents are irrelevant." Thus has the Israeli siege cut off all electricity, fuel, food, and water. Gaza is about to become what Bernard Fall called *Hell in a Very Small Place*.

The Israelis face an uncertain but smaller number of Hamas gunmen, who have no tanks, no air force, no air defenses, and no artillery beyond mortars and unguided rockets. Their attack rested on bulldozers, motorbikes, and Israeli distraction. Their defenses now rest on tunnels, rubble, and Israeli forbearance. In contrast to 1918, the Israelis will not use phosgene and flamethrowers—though the latter might be helpful. The Israelis will bring a full field army of over a hundred thousand infantry, backed by hundreds of fighter jets and tanks, hundreds of howitzers and rocket launchers, and plenty of drones and robots.

Even so, Hamas is filled with murderous fanatics who will fight hard. I will be closely watching the relative performances as the Israeli Army attacks, and I will aim to learn much about the comparative importance of infantry, artillery, armor, aviation, and other arms in urban combat. Just as the Russo-Ukrainian War has brought many lessons for sparse battlefields, the Gaza War should reveal many for denser ones.

Until my next update, *Slava Ukraini* and *Am Yisrael Chai*.

References and Further Reading

Dion Nissenbaum *et alia*, "[Israel Goes on Offensive Against Hamas...](#)", *WSJ*, 9 October 2023.

Mick Ryan in Stefan Korshak, "[Ukraine's Army is the Best in the World Now...](#)", *Kyiv Post*, March 2023.

Rory Jones & Dion Nissenbaum, "[Israel Was Prepared for a Different War](#)," *WSJ*, 9 October 2023.

Bernard B. Fall, *Hell In A Very Small Place: The Siege Of Dien Bien Phu*, Lippincott, 1967.