



UPDATE - IDF Deaths Highlight Perils of Urban Warfare

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Since the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) began ground operations in Gaza on October 27, 175 Israeli troops have been killed. However, terrorists in Gaza have killed IDF soldiers at a roughly 29 percent higher daily rate since December 1, after which the IDF pushed into southern Gaza following the one-week pause in combat operations to allow for hostage releases. This underscores the dangers of urban warfare, highlights the intensity of recent operations, particularly in southern Gaza, suggests that Hamas may have exploited the pause to prepare for more effective combat, and likely reflects increasing IDF reliance on ground forces, relative to air power, risking greater numbers of IDF casualties while protecting civilians. It also demonstrates why, in prior conflicts with Hamas, Israeli leaders have been highly reticent to send in ground forces, preferring to rely predominantly on airpower.

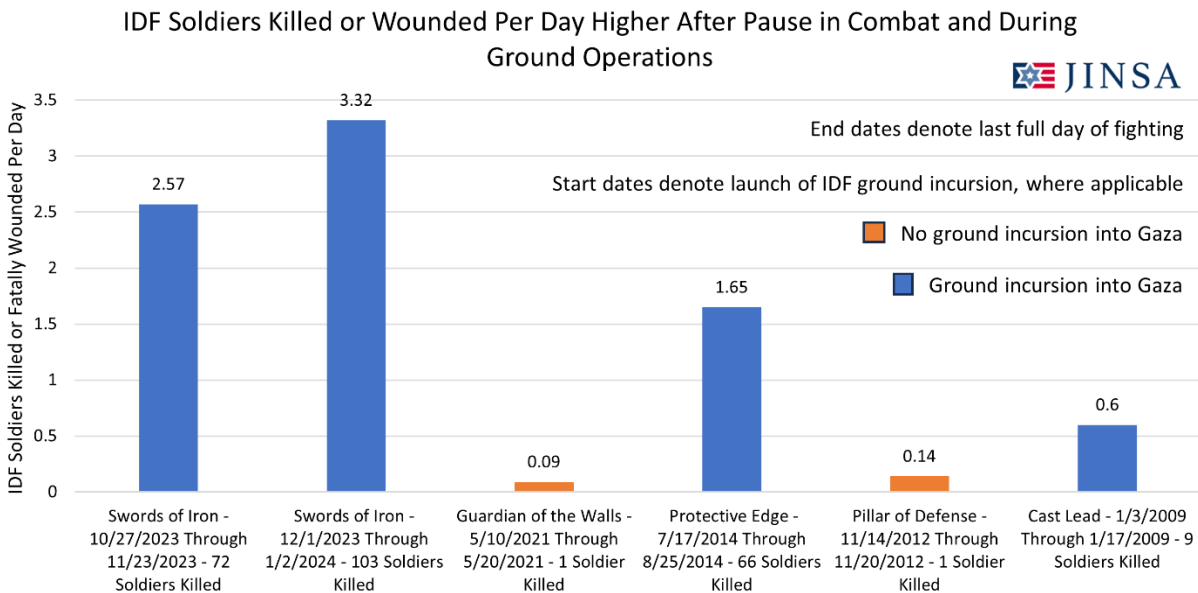
What Happened?

- Between October 27, 2023 and January 3, 2024, 175 IDF soldiers were [killed](#) during the ground operations in Gaza.
- The overall rate of IDF soldiers killed or fatally wounded is roughly 2.65 soldiers per day.
 - » Between the start of the IDF's full-scale ground operation on October 27 and the operational pause on November 24, the rate was roughly 2.57 IDF casualties per day.
 - » Since combat resumed on and the IDF entered southern Gaza after December 1, terrorists have killed 3.32 IDF soldiers per day, a roughly 29 percent increase in the casualty rate.

Why Is It Important?

- The higher rate of IDF soldiers killed per day after the fighting pause suggests that Hamas may have exploited the respite in IDF operations to regroup and prepare more effective attacks, particularly in Khan Younis in southern Gaza after the IDF shifted its operational focus to that region. It also demonstrates the tremendous difficulties of urban warfare and that Israel's increasing reliance on ground forces, whether as a result of its own operational decisions to mitigate risk to civilians in the more crowded areas of southern Gaza or international pressure, leads to more IDF casualties.
- While necessary to root out Hamas's presence in Gaza, Israel's ground operations against Hamas expose its troops to a greater risk of casualties than relying on airpower, as Israel did [during the 2021 war](#).
 - » Compared to the roughly 2.65 IDF soldiers killed per day during the current war, there were roughly 0.09 soldiers killed per day during the 2021 war.

- » During Israel's 11-day-long May 2021 war against terrorist groups in the Gaza Strip, which did not involve ground operations into the territory and relied largely on airpower, only one IDF soldier was [killed](#) when an anti-tank missile struck his jeep on the Israeli side of the Gaza border. The casualty rate was similarly low at roughly 0.14 soldiers per day during Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012, which also did not involve a full-scale ground incursion.

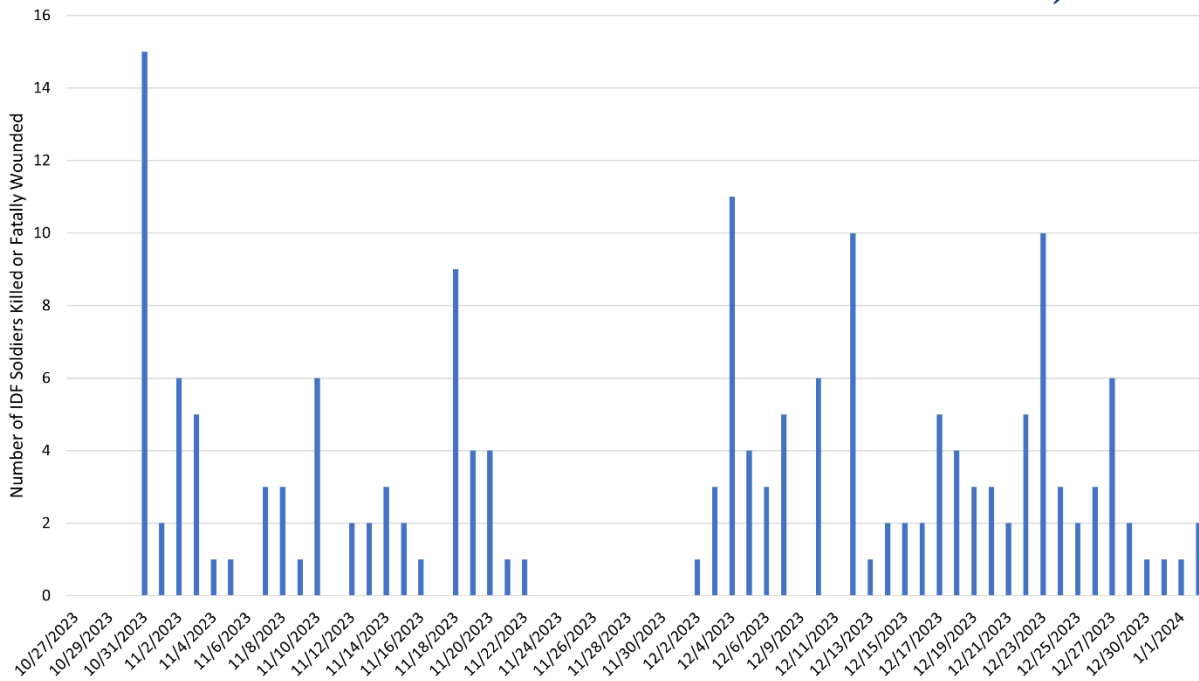


- The dense urban environment in the Gaza Strip enables Hamas to leverage the vast civil infrastructure to [mask](#), or attempt to mask, its movements, granting it the element of surprise. In particular, the vast tunnel network in Gaza allows terrorists to hide, fire, and retreat very quickly.
 - » Hamas constructed [hundreds](#) of kilometers of underground tunnels in Gaza for this very purpose, and the group's efforts to entrench itself and hide the hostages it abducted on October 7 within dense civilian areas render IDF operations immensely difficult.
 - » As detailed in JINSA's [assessment of the 2014 Israel-Gaza war](#), tunnels enabled terrorists to outflank Israeli troops during that war. The tunnel network that Hamas constructed in Gaza in the ensuing years is vastly larger in terms of length and size of the tunnels than the network Israel faced in 2014, likely enabling terrorists to conduct surprise attacks with greater frequency and better capabilities.
- On October 31—the deadliest day for the IDF since the start of the ground operation—11 of the 15 soldiers who died that day were [killed](#) when Hamas struck their armored personnel carrier with an anti-tank guided missile (ATGM). In addition, two others were killed by a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) impact, laying bare the dangers of urban combat against terrorist organizations equipped with advanced weapons.
 - » The other two soldiers who died that day were killed by an explosive device that detonated underneath their tank. Such booby traps are almost certainly myriad in Gaza, whose Hamas rulers have had 16 years to build and fortify their infrastructure absent a full-scale IDF effort to dismantle it entirely.
- Friday, December 22 through Sunday, December 24 was a particularly deadly weekend for the IDF as well, with 18 soldiers killed or fatally wounded during that period. As military correspondent and defense analyst for *Ha'aretz* Amos Harel [noted](#), four IDF soldiers were killed

in the war’s “greatest conflict” in Gaza’s south on that Friday during the 98th Division’s attempts to neutralize senior Hamas operatives sheltering in tunnels under Khan Younis.

- » Of the ten soldiers killed on December 23, five of them were also killed fighting in southern Gaza—the remaining five were killed in northern or central Gaza—further underscoring the intensity of combat operations in the territory’s south amid the IDF’s post-fighting pause operational [focus](#) on the area.
- » Harel also noted that Hamas’s tunnels remain functional despite the IDF’s operations that have incapacitated thousands of tunnel shafts, and the IDF continues to face “very stiff resistance” in areas that it does not fully control. Hamas’s guerilla attacks targeting IDF soldiers utilize small forces that employ sniper fire, RPGs, and explosive devices.
 - In northern Gaza, Hamas’s use of the latter two weapons largely inflicted the IDF’s single deadliest day since the start of the ground operation on October 31. Their continual challenge to the IDF in the south highlights the danger these weapons pose and the extent to which Hamas’s military infrastructure pervades the entire Gaza Strip.

IDF Deaths Highlight Urban Warfare Challenges



- U.S. National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby recently [praised](#) Israel’s decision to rely more on ground forces and less on airstrikes because doing so “allows you to be more precise.” Such focus on precision serves as another example of Israel’s many [efforts](#) to protect innocent Palestinian lives during combat, even at the expense of its own soldiers’ lives.