

“Urban Fortress”: On Ground Maneuvering Against a Terrorist Army in a Densely Populated Area

A Response to the Article “Gaza and the Management of Warfare in Built-Up Areas: Harm to Civilians, Risk, and Responsibility,” by Andy Milburn

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The article “[Gaza and the Conduct of Urban Warfare: Civilian Harm, Risk, and Responsibility](#),” by Andy Milburn is infuriating—both morally and professionally. This is not necessarily due to its criticism of the conduct of the war in the Gaza Strip, nor because of the series of inaccuracies it contains. Rather, it stems from the approach adopted by Milburn and others like him—an approach that jeopardizes the West’s ability to fight effectively against armies and terrorist organizations that exploit Western values to defeat it. Moreover, Milburn’s approach adds another layer to the false accusation that Israel has committed war crimes in Gaza. The danger inherent in his article lies in its reliance on arguments presented as professional and authoritative. Therefore, avoiding debate with Milburn’s claims or ignoring them would be unwise and misguided. This article presents a summary of Milburn’s claims, alongside a critical professional and moral analysis. This discussion is of great importance for the Israel Defense Forces and for foreign militaries, whose wars are fought not only to defend the lives of their citizens but also to preserve the values of Western democracies.

In his article, Milburn, a retired U.S. Marine officer and the founder of the Mozart Group, a private security company that operated in Ukraine after the Russian invasion, ostensibly outlines a moral framework for limiting the use of force by democratic states by analyzing the campaign in the Gaza Strip. His principal claim is that Israel, through its military, effectively weighed the lives of Palestinian civilians against military objectives, while prioritizing the safety of its soldiers over the risk to civilians in Gaza. Milburn disputes the common argument that widespread civilian harm is an unavoidable result of fighting in dense urban terrain. His central contention is that the level of destruction and the number of casualties in Gaza resulted from deliberate decisions and a specific doctrine of warfare adopted by Israel, rather than from “the necessities of reality.” He further argues that under conditions of uncertainty, the Israeli military adopted a stringent interpretation of intelligence assessments, attributing to them a degree of reliability and timeliness that was not necessarily justified. In addition, Milburn claims that the Israeli military relied excessively on technology and artificial intelligence—without sufficient human oversight—thereby generating targets on an industrial scale.

Milburn further accuses Israel of justifying the extensive damage inflicted upon Gaza by claiming that the Israeli military had acted in accordance with the laws of armed conflict, while in practice, it conducted a campaign in which the collateral damage was manifestly unreasonable and exceptionally high by modern Western standards. He also argues that the damage was disproportionate due to Israel’s broad interpretation of the term “military objective.”

While Israeli spokespeople often compare the fighting in Gaza to coalition operations against ISIL in Iraq, Milburn argues that the comparison is misplaced. He claims that civilians in Gaza had no genuine escape route from the war zone due to the siege. He maintains that the

intensity of fire employed in Gaza over a short period was significantly greater than in other 21st-century campaigns. Milburn also addresses the argument made by military experts that the civilian-to-combatant death ratio in Gaza was approximately 1:3, compared to 1:9 in other Western campaigns. Although he does not deny the numerical figure itself—one of the main pillars of Israel’s public diplomacy—he deconstructs its meaning, asserting that it creates a false impression of “morality” or “precision.” Milburn further claims that a modern military with advanced intelligence and precision-strike capabilities—a “high-tech” army—should be expected to achieve a far better ratio than 1:3. What matters, he emphasizes, is not only the final statistics but also the actions taken to prevent civilian deaths. In his view, had the Israeli military chosen different tactics, such as less reliance on airpower and more targeted ground raids, the ratio of civilian-to-combatant deaths could have been significantly better, but Israel chose not to take that risk.

Milburn warns that Israeli tactics could lead to strategic failure: Widespread destruction will generate new generations of “resistance,” while the erosion of Israel’s international legitimacy will make it harder to achieve long-term war objectives. He calls on Western militaries to learn from Gaza and adopt stricter standards for civilian protection in the future.

Milburn does not limit himself to criticism; he sketches a model of “responsibility” that, in his view, modern militaries should adopt. He proposes measures that he believes could have altered the outcome in Gaza and should serve as lessons for future wars: shifting the risk back to combat soldiers; establishing safe zones for civilians; ensuring human oversight of AI systems (human-in-the-loop); and defining “victory” in political rather than statistical terms. The measure of victory, he argues, should not be “how many terrorists we killed” (the body count), but “what the situation looks like the day after.”

Milburn Is Mistaken, Misleading, and His Views Endanger the West

Milburn’s article sparked intense debate among military professionals and experts in international law. Many challenged his analysis, particularly his underlying assumptions regarding “risk transfer” to combatants and what they view as historically inaccurate comparisons.

The “Moral Paradox” of Endangering Soldiers

The expectation that an army should sacrifice its own soldiers to spare enemy civilians is not only unrealistic but also morally problematic for its own citizens. Every government has an unwritten social contract with its citizens and its soldiers to protect their lives. Requiring that a military adopt tactics that significantly increase its own fatalities is a demand that no democracy can sustain over time.

The Illusion of the “Surgical Maneuver”

Milburn idealizes maneuver and ground combat. Close-quarters fighting in dense urban terrain saturated with improvised explosive devices, snipers, anti-tank units, and tunnels (like in Gaza) often results in heavier and less discriminate fire by forces facing immediate mortal danger. This can lead to greater civilian harm than a planned, intelligence-based aerial strike. An urban battle that goes wrong because it was not preceded by preparatory and precise fires frequently leads, under the acute pressure faced by troops on the ground, to the use of heavy and imprecise fire. This is indeed what happened during “Operation Protective Edge,” the

Israeli military campaign in Gaza in the summer of 2014. Following Hamas's breach of a ceasefire in Rafah, a close-quarters battle ensued in which three Givati Brigade soldiers were killed and Lt. Hadar Goldin was abducted. During the heavy fighting, as the troops came under severe pressure and attempted to prevent the abduction, extensive fire was employed, resulting in the deaths of dozens of Palestinians, including civilians.

Hamas's Strategy as a Main Variable

Even though Hamas initiated the war with a brutal massacre of Israeli citizens, Milburn assigns "responsibility" to Israel, perceived as the attacking side, while overlooking the conduct of Hamas, seen as the defending side. Hamas turned the use of human shields and its deliberate blurring of the distinction between civilian and combatant into a strategic method in its favor. Civilians became its insurance policy. If Milburn's approach were adopted internationally, it would effectively grant "immunity" to any terrorist organization that entrenches itself within a civilian population, and encouraging other groups to adopt this tactic and producing the "human shields paradox." Milburn's approach, therefore, creates a moral distortion: If an army endangers its soldiers and restricts its firepower solely because the enemy operates from within a civilian population, using it as a human shield, it effectively "rewards" terrorism.

Quantitative vs. Qualitative Comparison

Numbers do matter. If the Israeli military managed to maintain a 1:3 civilian-to-combatant death ratio under Gaza's conditions (a dense urban environment with extensive subterranean infrastructure), then that is evidence of an extraordinary effort to reduce harm rather than a show of contempt for human life. Milburn sets a bar that amounts to an "impossible standard," one that no Western military, including the U.S. military, has ever met in a comparable campaign. Contrary to Milburn's claims, the Israeli military has effectively set standards for the West that are unattainable given the battlefield challenges.

"Transferring Risk"

The field commander is obligated to the mission and his soldiers. Choosing to rely on airpower is not "operational laziness" but rather a necessity in a booby-trapped environment, saturated with explosives and tunnels, where the entry of ground forces without preparatory fires is effectively suicidal.

The Legal Response

The principle of proportionality is assessed not by outcomes (i.e., how many civilians were actually killed) but by the commander's decision-making process in real time. Moreover, proportionality in international law is not determined by comparing the number of casualties on each side. Rather, it is evaluated in relation to the military necessity of accomplishing the mission—specifically, whether more were killed than necessary. This also raises the question of examining the necessity of the military objective itself: Is the objective important enough to justify an operation that will harm civilians? Therefore, even if "only" 2,000 Israelis were killed compared to tens of thousands of Gazans, this disparity does not constitute disproportionality from a legal perspective.

The Use of AI Technology

In the Israeli military, AI systems serve only as intelligence support tools. The final decision to carry out a strike is always made by an officer (human-in-the-loop), who weighs the military value of the target against the expected incidental harm based on the information available at that time.

The Israeli Military's Evacuation and Humanitarian Aid Efforts During the War

The Israeli military invested exceptional efforts to evacuate the residents of Gaza by issuing warning calls, dropping leaflets, and establishing the Salah al-Din route as a humanitarian corridor. No other Western military (including the U.S. military) has ever devoted comparable resources to direct communication with an enemy population to evacuate it from combat zones. In addition, the volume of humanitarian aid the Israeli military allowed into Gaza was far beyond what would normally be expected of a country at war. However, Hamas's seizure of aid trucks and profiteering from their contents severely harmed Palestinian civilians.

A civilian population in wartime is not required to move "to the ends of the earth" to avoid the fighting. For a prolonged period, the central refugee camps of the Gaza Strip and Gaza City itself were areas in which the Israeli military did not operate or maneuver. Aerial strikes in these areas were highly targeted, with efforts made to avoid harming civilians. The percentage of fatalities within the designated humanitarian areas in the central camps was significantly lower (about 2%–3.5% of total fatalities), indicating a clear Israeli effort to avoid strikes in these locations despite Hamas's attempts to use them as refuge. Therefore, the claim that the population could not move away from the fighting is incorrect. Had that been the case, civilian losses among Gazans would likely have been much higher, in the hundreds of thousands.

Before the entry of American forces into Fallujah in late 2004, a U.S. military spokesperson announced that the population was required to leave and warned that those who did not would remain at their own risk. Compared to Gaza, Fallujah was a much smaller built-up area, with a smaller population and a significantly smaller enemy force than the one the Israeli military faced in Gaza. The operational assumption was that once the uninvolved civilians left the combat zone, those who remained were overwhelmingly combatants, or what the U.S. military referred to as "military-aged males." This American term became entrenched during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq but is not an Israeli concept. Hamas's reports throughout the war reflected this pattern: Most of those killed in combat zones from which the Israeli military had evacuated the population were military-aged men.

The Subterranean Challenge—The "Elephant in the Room"

The subterranean challenge is the "elephant in the room" that Milburn ignores (in a 3,000-word article on the war in Gaza without mentioning the word "tunnel" even once!). When fighting in Mosul, for example, the U.S. military did not have to contend with 600 kilometers of interconnected tunnels under civilian homes. In contrast, in Gaza, the tunnels turned every civilian structure into a potential military objective (as they could serve as exit shafts or underground command posts), fundamentally altering collateral-damage calculations. "Gaza's metro," as the tunnels have been called, effectively transformed the Gaza Strip from an ordinary civilian area into a subterranean military fortress and forced difficult operational decisions and unavoidable damage to infrastructure. Along with the tunnels, Hamas booby-trapped tens of thousands of civilian buildings, including schools and kindergartens. The

widespread presence of explosives compelled the Israeli military to employ significant firepower to protect soldiers' lives (force protection), resulting in increased physical destruction. Tunnels, together with booby-trapped structures, turned civilian spaces in Gaza into weapons in every sense. In addition, the systematic destruction of the houses of Hamas operatives was a response to the fact that these homes were used not only to store weapons but also for combat purposes. What alternative did the Israeli military have other than destroying the infrastructure and operational space from which those who carried out the October 7 massacre emerged?

Comparing Gaza to Iraq (Mosul)

The operational challenge in Gaza is not comparable to the challenges the Americans faced in either Iraq or Afghanistan. The enemy's strength in Gaza was many times greater than in Mosul: a few thousand fighters in Mosul versus many tens of thousands in Gaza.

Milburn is inaccurate in claiming that civilians were able to evacuate Mosul while asserting that evacuation was not possible in Gaza. The U.S. Air Force bombed entire areas in Mosul without prior warning or calls for civilians to evacuate, unlike the Israeli military's practice in Gaza. Civilians in Mosul were largely unable to leave because ISIL, which controlled the area, did not allow it. Those who attempted to flee were forced to pass through the lines of contact between multiple opposing forces, whereas the Israeli military opened secured ground corridors to facilitate civilian evacuation. The result in Mosul was tens of thousands of civilian deaths. While Hamas inflated the civilian casualty numbers during the war, which the West accepted, the Iraqis to this day have refrained from publishing the true figures.

The Israeli Military Is not an Expeditionary Force—The Fighting in Gaza Is a Form of Direct Defense of Israeli Civilians

The Israeli military began combat in Gaza after the horrific October 7 massacre carried out by Hamas and other Gaza-based militants, while Israeli civilians were also under sustained, widespread rocket and missile fire from Gaza. Unlike U.S. operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Israeli military is not an expeditionary force fighting thousands of kilometers from home without any direct threat to its citizens. The ongoing threat from Hamas and other armed groups in Gaza directly affected how the Israeli military fought. The central issue was not only the risk to soldiers' lives versus Palestinian civilians but, more fundamentally, the lives of Israeli civilians versus those of civilians in any enemy authority.

The Gap in the Concept of "Responsibility"

The dispute between Milburn and the Israeli military ultimately comes down to one question: Who is responsible for civilian deaths when they are in the line of fire? Milburn argues that responsibility rests with the attacker (Israel), which must find a way to fight without killing civilians, even at the cost of endangering its soldiers. The Israeli military, for its part, argues that responsibility rests with the defending side (Hamas), which uses its own population as a weapon and at times even "profits" from civilian deaths in global public opinion. Assigning responsibility to the attacker would only encourage greater use of human shields in the future.

Tactical Victory and Strategic Failure

Milburn argues that by the end of the war in Gaza, Israel failed to translate its tactical achievements into strategic gains and did not succeed in militarily defeating Hamas, which still controls Gaza. Milburn distinguishes between the tactical and strategic levels in part because, in his view, Israel's excessive use of force led to widespread destruction and the killing of many civilians, caused significant international damage, and prevented Israel from achieving its war objective in Gaza.

Having examined this issue in depth during the war in my capacity as head of the Israeli Ground Forces' Operational Learning Directorate, I argue that the reasons for the Israeli military's strategic failure in Gaza were different. A combination of factors at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels led to the failure to achieve the war's objective: conducting combat operations while disregarding the dimension of time; prioritizing cost at the expense of the mission; failing to implement principles for countering tunnel-based guerrilla warfare; and being unable to prevent Hamas's takeover of humanitarian aid due to the absence of a governmental decision on the matter.

In other words, the strategic failure did not stem from disproportionality or a lack of restraint in the Israeli military's use of force in Gaza, which led to a loss of international legitimacy—although Israel has always suffered from double standards regarding its use of force against Palestinian terrorism—but rather from Israeli operational and strategic decisions that contradicted its own combat doctrine and warfighting doctrine.

Learning From the War Doctrine in Gaza and Substantive Critique

Visits by senior officers from Western militaries (primarily from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany) during the war generated a series of professional assessments published in military journals and internal reports. Unlike Milburn, many of them reflected a more pragmatic approach, seeking to understand how a modern military is required to function in a situation like the one the Israeli military confronted in Gaza. Analyses by foreign militaries (particularly NATO and the British Army) present a more complex and balanced picture than Milburn's, combining professional appreciation with recognition of the ethical dilemmas that this type of warfare entails. While they seek to learn from the Israeli military's "how" to fight (tactics), they are deeply concerned about the "cost" (legitimacy).

General James Glynn (U.S. Marine Corps): The Lesson of "Multi-Dimensional Warfare"

Glynn, who was sent to Israel as an adviser and had previously commanded forces in the campaign against ISIL in Mosul, focused on the inherent difficulty of the Gaza theater compared to Mosul. The fundamental difference, he noted, was that in Mosul, ISIL fought primarily above ground and used tunnels mainly for escape. In contrast, in Gaza, the subterranean system constitutes a distinct dimension of warfare in its own right. Glynn was impressed by the Israeli military's ability to conduct "multi-dimensional maneuver" with forces fighting simultaneously inside buildings, in the streets, and underground. In his view, this is a challenge the U.S. military has not previously encountered at such intensity.

German Army (Bundeswehr) Officers: Tunnel Warfare and Technology

German military delegations focused on unmanned technologies and praised Israel's use of drones and robotics. In their assessment, deploying indoor drones to scan rooms prior to soldiers' entry was the only way to reduce casualties among assaulting forces without

demolishing the entire structure. The lesson for Germany is that the Bundeswehr has begun updating its urban warfare doctrine, recognizing that defending European cities in the future will require subterranean warfare capabilities and extensive tactical use of drones.

NATO Experts: “Legitimacy as a Component of Power”

Alongside their operational praise, many NATO officers expressed concern in internal reports about the erosion of “freedom of action.” Their conclusion was that the Israeli military had demonstrated that tactical victory is achievable, but that such victory may be “too costly” in strategic terms. In their view, if a Western military were to replicate Israel’s fire doctrine, it would lose domestic public support within weeks. They identified a “Western paradox”: a widening gap between operational capabilities and the moral and legal constraints imposed by Western societies.

The British Army: The Doctrine of “The Fortress City”

In professional seminars within the British Army, Gaza is analyzed not as a city but as a “modern fortress.” British analysts have argued that traditional encirclement concepts are inadequate against an adversary with an extensive underground network. They note that the Israeli military demonstrated that such territory cannot be seized without massive physical destruction. The question they raise is whether Western militaries possess the political will to accept such levels of destruction in future wars.

NATO Experts: Learning “Multi-Domain Operations”

For NATO, the Gaza campaign demonstrates a modern military’s ability to integrate intelligence, fires, and digital warfare in real time. Observers were impressed by the capacity to inject precise intelligence down to the platoon commander level within seconds, alongside concerns about the erosion of norms. The fear is that militaries such as those of Russia or China may invoke the “Gaza precedent” to justify the total destruction of cities under the claim that “this is how one fights terrorism in dense urban terrain.”

The U.S. Military: The Logistical and Munitions Lesson

At the Pentagon and within U.S. Army learning centers, Gaza is viewed through the prism of consumption rates. The ammunition-to-target ratio astonished American observers: the quantity of precision-guided munitions required for the Israeli military to advance even a few meters in built-up terrain was striking. The conclusion is that Western militaries are not stocked for a months-long, high-intensity urban war. The fighting in Gaza demonstrated that precision does not necessarily conserve munitions; in some cases, it merely increases the number of targets engaged.

A Shared Conclusion: The End of the Era of Surgical Precision?

The most unsettling insight among international experts (echoing the spirit of Milburn’s article, albeit from a more professional perspective) is that precision is no longer a panacea. In the past, it was widely assumed that a precision-guided bomb would solve the problem of collateral damage. However, the war in Gaza demonstrated that when there are 30,000 precise targets in the heart of a city, the cumulative result resembles the carpet bombing of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, the Israeli military prepared for war against the terror armies of Hamas and Hezbollah, which built their capabilities on a doctrine of offsetting Israel's battlefield superiority—in airpower, intelligence, and ground maneuver—by exploiting civilian populations in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip as human shields and constructing a military fortress within dense urban areas. Assuming that Israel seeks to remain part of the democratic Western family of nations, these terror armies developed a concept of warfare intended to defeat Israel and compel its submission, beginning with the seizure of territory adjacent to its borders. The threat posed by the terror armies in Lebanon and Gaza was direct, comprehensive, and dangerous to the lives of thousands of Israeli civilians; under certain scenarios, it could even have threatened the existence of the State of Israel.

Accusations against Israel regarding its conduct in Gaza have often relied on false reporting, Hamas manipulation, and a degree of antisemitism. Milburn's article is not of that nature, which makes his claims more dangerous. Warfare conducted according to Milburn's standards would not reduce civilian casualties; it would merely impose unreasonable risks on soldiers. Indeed, his approach would lead to harsher and more brutal wars, ultimately resulting in the defeat of the West and its values—without saving innocent civilian lives.

For many years, Israel refrained from waging decisive war against the terror armies of Hamas and Hezbollah. Israel contained the threats from north and south and avoided a decisive war for two decades, despite the steadily growing danger to its security. The war in Gaza—despite the threat that had become intolerable and dangerous to Israel's national security—was not initiated by Israel. Rather, a flawed Israeli conception was exploited by Hamas and led to the October 7 massacre.

Despite that horrific massacre, Israel activated a war machine in Gaza that imposed self-restraint to prevent a humanitarian crisis for the enemy's civilian population and, to the extent possible, avoid harming innocents. Yet this does not satisfy Milburn. In his view, 2,000 Israeli dead is a relatively low number in light of the destruction in Gaza and the scale of Palestinian civilian casualties. However, Milburn does not live in the Middle East and is not versed in its complex rules. The October 7 massacre had to carry a price of defeat for Palestinian society—not in the killing of innocents but in the destruction of the military fortress built by the planners and perpetrators of the massacre: the military infrastructure above and below ground in the Gaza Strip and the terror infrastructure constructed along Israel's borders, not thousands of kilometers away. No society would survive were it to act differently from Israeli society. Therefore, the Israeli military's methods of warfare were justified not only professionally, as proven on the battlefield, but also morally.

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