

The folly of siege warfare

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As Israel weighs the costs and benefits of its deadly Gaza assault, the record of siege warfare should give it pause. From Sarajevo to Fallujah, modern sieges have been bloody spectacles with heavy reputational costs and inconclusive military gains.

Siege warfare is typically associated with epic battles such as Carthage or Leningrad, but with most of the world now urban, sieges are in fact integral to modern combat. Unlike the sieges of old, today's besieged cities are linked to the world through satellite technology, humanitarian aid, and transnational smuggling networks. Just as shifts in weapons technology have altered sieges through the ages, so too have CNN and international aid workers.

As a result, sieges often turn into dramatic, highly publicized focal points for global debate, complicating efforts to brutally crush opposition.

Consider the 1982 Battle of Beirut. Then, as now, Israel said an implacable foe was dug in amidst an innocent urban population. The enemy was the secular Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), not the Islamist Hamas, but Israel's tone was similar.

Israel besieged West Beirut for weeks — as it has done in Gaza — from air, land and sea. The PLO — like Hamas today — vowed to fight on. The bombing caused thousands of civilian casualties, and the media covered the destruction in excruciating detail.

Israel's casualties were modest and the PLO was forced into exile, but its image took a pounding, and its war with the Palestinians continued.

Next, consider Grozny. In late 1999, Russian forces encircled the Chechen capital, arguing it had become a terrorist haven. As in Gaza, indigenous guerrillas were mixed in with civilians.

Russia's siege was awful; its guns pulverized buildings without remorse, turning Grozny into what the UN called the world's most destroyed city. Russia won that battle, but the Chechen conflict persisted, and became a rallying call for Islamist groups worldwide. Russia's international reputation was savaged, but it can more easily afford to ignore world opinion than the much smaller Jewish state. Some Israelis may wish to transform Gaza into Grozny — which would create a humanitarian catastrophe — but political realities dictate otherwise.

What about Fallujah? American forces besieged the Iraqi city in April and November 2004, claiming it was a den of terrorists and criminals.

That siege further tarnished America's already dismal world image, and the pictures of civilian dead further mobilized anti-U.S. opinion in Iraq and the broader Middle East. Fallujah finally fell, but only after many insurgents slipped away. During the final siege offensive, the U.S. blocked most independent journalists from accessing the devastated city. Nonetheless, its reputation took a heavy pounding. Meanwhile, the war raged on, and Fallujah never became the hoped-for turning point.

Like both the U.S. in Fallujah and Russia in Grozny, Israel tried to control media coverage by keeping independent journalists from Gaza. But most networks had local correspondents in place, and these sent a steady stream of pictures to the world. As a result, awful, painful images of Gaza's destruction will linger for years in the minds of global publics.

This leaves the 1992-1995 battle of Sarajevo. Like Gaza, Sarajevo was defended by a comparatively weak indigenous force dug in among a relatively supportive population.

Like Israel, the Serbian besiegers enjoyed overwhelming firepower and geographic advantage.

Sarajevo suffered desperately, but still received UN humanitarian aid, much like Gaza today. Like Gaza, moreover, Sarajevo's defenders were covertly supplied by smuggling networks, including via a tunnel underneath the airport.

Like both Beirut and Gaza, the Sarajevo siege was in the global spotlight. The siege outraged the international press corps, forcing the besiegers to pay a devastating public relations price.

Sarajevo never fell. It was resupplied through the UN and smugglers, and an all-out, Grozny-like assault was prevented, in part, by intense media coverage.

What does all this mean for Israel?

The Israeli state is not entirely indifferent to international opinion, and its prolonged Gaza siege has cost it dearly in reputational terms.

Israeli forces will probably continue Gaza's blockade, seeking to squeeze Hamas politically and militarily by curbing the free flow of goods into the Strip. It also hopes that international monitors along the Gaza-Egyptian border will prevent the tunnelling that supplies Hamas with rocketry.

The record suggests, however, that when demand and supply are high, even the most committed monitors will be hard pressed to prevent smuggling over the long term.

If Hamas really wants military hardware — and if desperate Gazans are willing to pay for smuggled consumer goods — there will always be willing suppliers. International monitors may help Egypt destroy any remaining tunnels, but new smuggling routes and methods will likely emerge.

As is evident not only in Gaza but in besieged Sarajevo and even along the U.S.-Mexico border, tighter enforcement often does little more than increase prices and shift smuggling patterns. When demand remains high, the clandestine trade typically continues, albeit in altered form.

Israel, in other words, must ultimately find a way of curbing Gaza's demand for smuggled weapons. But this requires the negotiated solution that has eluded Israelis and Palestinians for decades.

Israel may hope that siege warfare has solved its Gaza problem, but the historical record suggests otherwise.

James Ron is an associate professor of international studies at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs in Ottawa, and the author of *Frontiers and Ghettos: State Violence in Serbia and Israel* (carleton.ca/~jron). Peter Andreas is an associate professor of political science and international studies at Brown University, and the author of *Blue Helmets and Black Markets: The Business of Survival in the Siege of Sarajevo* (research.brown.edu/myresearch/Peter_Andreas).

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