

Urban Battle of Gaza City

What Happens Next - 10.28.23

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, political science, and war.

Today's topic is the Urban Battle of Gaza City.

Our speaker is Anthony King who is a Professor of War Studies at the University of Exeter in the UK. Tony has written a recent book entitled Urban Warfare in the 21st Century, and he spoke previously on this podcast 18 months about the war in Ukraine.

I want to learn from Tony about what will happen when the Israeli ground war begins, what the street battles will look like and what the implications of the hostages will be to the military strategy.

I want to understand if Hamas can rearm after their weapons run low. What the relevant lessons learned from Ukraine/Russia War as it relates to the urban conflict in Gaza, and what the historical experience from similar city battles in Algiers, Stalingrad, and more recently in Aleppo and Iraq.

I also want to understand what the Gaza end game will be to this awful destruction and terrible loss of life on both sides.

Buckle up.

Tony, please begin with your six-minute remarks.

Anthony King:

7th of October 2023, 3000 Hamas fighters infiltrated Israel to execute the worst terrorist atrocity that Israel has ever experienced. And in population size is something like 10 times the scale of 9/11. 1400 Israeli principally civilians were killed; 200 taken hostage. By population that would be in the U.S. about 40,000 civilians killed. Now, today we are right on another major, signature, urban battle of the early 21st century. Israeli ground forces have quickly surrounded the Gaza Strip, and they've already begun to probe into Gaza along various avenues of advance. That has been preceded by two weeks of very significant air bombardment, and rocket strikes coming out of Gaza back into Israel.

What is that urban battle going to look like? And what are its political and military implications? Well, there are precedents here. If we look at the last 20 years, most of the intense fighting and most of the battles in recent civil and interstate wars have focused on a major urban fight. The upcoming battle of Gaza has immediate precedence in terms of the Battle of Mosul 2016, the Battle of Raqqa 2017, the Battle of Marawi in the Philippines 2017, the Battle of Aleppo 2014, and various other fights.

In all of these cases, state forces would enter an urban area held by a non-state opponent. And in each case, what we saw was successful operations but vast levels of collateral damage and civilian casualties. The urban battle that is approaching in Gaza is likely to take a similar format to those battles that we've seen over the last 10 to 15 years.

Larry Bernstein:

What will happen when the Israeli ground war begins? What will urban warfare look like? How will the Israelis save the hostages?

Anthony King:

What is IDF's strategy? What's the operation? How's it going to be organized? How's it going to be designed? Now at the fundamental level, the IDF have two choices. The mission objective is the military and political elimination of Hamas. Israel have been totally explicit about it. So option one is a complete urban clearance and some urban hold after that. The equivalent there would be like the Battle of Mosul, where the Iraqi coalition forces fought for nine months to take and clear and secure Mosul from ISIS.

It's unpalatable. The scale of the problem is huge. Israel probably don't have enough troops to do that. They've probably got about a hundred thousand combat troops, especially if combat starts on other fronts in the Hezbollah out of Lebanon, and security operations in West Banks seem to be utterly inevitable. They'll struggle to have enough combat power to do a complete clearance. And the politics are really difficult.

The second option is more limited where they identify key centers of Hamas, military and political power headquarters, arms caches, concentrations of fighters, rocket launching sites, rocket manufacturing sites, and more limited thrusts into those areas. I think that's more likely. There's a very intricate tunnel network, which has been built over the last 40 years in Gaza, which the IDF are going to have to clear at some stage. The scale of the problem is difficult. Say they do a series of raids. One of the raids might be to clear hostages. Hamas are bound to resist. They are bound to fortify in place. Lots of IEDs, weaponize the civilian population, use suicide vehicles, suicide bombers to slow down block the IDF's advance. Therefore, the advance will have to use heavy equipment bulldozers of which the IDF have many—tanks, mechanized

vehicles—all supported by air and artillery strikes to breach the fortified buildings and the barricades that Hamas will construct.

And they'll have to do this on the surface of Gaza at street level and simultaneously at subsurface level, because if they go into a street to take out a target and they don't simultaneously clear the network of tunnels below them, Hamas will either retreat from those positions or worse, infiltrate behind the IDF and execute actions in the rear of those attacks. The military prospects are difficult because even if IDF go for targeted raids on a small axis into a defined objective and then withdraw, it's still going to be a very heavy fight. Now, the hostage situation complicates the whole matter again because it would be difficult to rescue hostages. It's a slow operation. Hamas might just murder the hostages they hold, or even worse, put IEDs on them.

Larry Bernstein:

Hamas terrorists may exit Gaza City and blend in with civilians in their exodus. It feels like a whack-a-mole situation, where the Israelis will continually have to hunt down Hamas in the city and then later in the countryside.

Anthony King:

If Israel doesn't go for a complete anti-ISIS clear and occupation, it gives Hamas fighters the possibility of retreating into other urban strongholds, hiding in tunnels, and melting back into the civilian population.

And if you look at Gaza, it's an area of 365 square kilometers. It's got a population of 2 million. It's a very densely populated, urbanized area. The opportunities for sanctuary and concealment and hiding are infinite for Hamas fighters. So, although a series of punctuated raids would without question seriously degrade Hamas capability, precisely for the reasons you said, they can melt back into the civilian population represents a really significant military problem for Israel, and therefore encourages a complete clearance operation.

Larry Bernstein:

This ground invasion will happen in front of TV cameras. We'll watch it in real time from every angle. Both civilians and Israeli soldiers will be killed in dramatic and tragic ways. When the soldiers are killed by suicide bombers and IEDs, Israeli soldiers are going to demand aerial strikes to flatten buildings to rubble to shield their advances. I expect the Israelis to be cautious at first and then quickly become more aggressive with their lethal firepower if Israeli casualty rates are high.

Anthony King:

Let's take a situation where they identify a Hamas command and control center with computer terminals, a load of weapons caches, an Israeli brigade is tasked to go in clear two streets to get

to that objective and then raze it to the ground and essentially kill everybody in it. Even if they achieve that, there will be Israeli casualties, which will, as you say, intensify the situation and likely demand more escalation. Even if they were completely successful, on the political level, it's likely to be a defeat for them. And we've already seen this in the Hamas, Palestinian, Arabic, and wider Muslim states already opposed to the Israeli ground intervention and already making, in some cases, plausible claims about breaches of the laws of armed conflict.

Those calls will become more and more strident as the urban battle intensifies. Essentially, the IDF will get into a situation where the closer their military objectives come, the farther away the political objectives will be. The international landscape looks extremely unappetizing for Israel as this offensive goes on.

But also at a transnational level, once the ground attack starts, we've already seen a lot of demonstrations across cities across the world. In the West, in US and Europe, some very serious protests which have antisemitic elements in them generating political tensions in other western capitals. Those are likely to intensify. So, in addition to regional international tension, there's real risk of very significant political tensions across urban spaces elsewhere where Palestinian, Arabic and Jewish and Israeli diasporic populations are located. The wider informational and political implications of the ground operation are deeply troubling, because it's very difficult to see how Israel, which is still being rocketed by Hamas, can avoid taking some action. It's a very dangerous crisis in my view.

Larry Bernstein:

Explain the end game. What can Israel do to make their local population feel safe?

Anthony King:

I must admit it does look difficult to see what a solution would be without occupying Gaza. This attack, as ISIS attacks before, has set the Israeli government a problem, which is essentially an insurgent force. It's so powerful that it can't be resisted at a lower-level intensity. It demands a complete clearance of an urban stronghold but is pointless unless you subsequently occupy the fortresses from which that insurgent force mounts its attack and in which its political bases is located. And that is a longstanding historical problem and historical truth.

Israel won't want to occupy the Gaza Strip. They've had experience with that in 1967 to 2005. It was totally unsatisfactory and self-defeating process, and I don't think they'll be allowed to occupy the Gaza Strip.

What does the end state look like? It's very unclear. Israel doesn't seem to have any Palestinian partners who could step into the vacuum of Hamas to administer Gaza and the West Bank in place of Hamas. And, indeed, the military actions seem to have completely radicalized the

Palestinian populations, even organizations that aren't allied to Hamas. The only option, unless it's an Israeli invasion occupation, is a proxy partner, Palestinian political organization takes over. That seems unlikely. It seems to me a very conflicted situation. Israel has not helped here by the fact that Palestinian organizations have been difficult to unite the Palestinian opposition to Israel. I personally supported the Oslo two-state solution even before this war started. This is where Israel longer-term political solutions have some culpability. The settlements into the West Bank make a Palestinian independent state impractical. So going back to Oslo and a two-state solution, I am skeptical about, and not least because where's the Palestinian political party that takes that solution forward? It can't be Hamas after this.

Larry Bernstein:

Life depends on a social compact. Citizens pay taxes to educate other people's children and pay for other people's health care and retirement. But that social compact ends when their neighbors kidnap their grandparents and behead their children. If you cannot live with your neighbors, then you drive them out. If your neighbor bulldozes your border fence and uses gliders to machine gun 250 kids at a concert, then you need a bigger buffer.

Anthony King:

Critics of Israel said exactly they intend to drive Gaza's population out of Gaza so that you get a buffer zone. It is an unlikely but possible strategy. It's against international laws, forcibly driving them out an area.

I don't think Gulf States, Middle Eastern states would tolerate Israel driving Palestinian populations into Egypt. Egypt is not going to accept Palestinian refugees. They have been part of the effective blockade of Gaza for the last decade or more. So that is a theoretical solution, one that I wouldn't accept. The political, military, and legal practicalities of it are just not possible. I hope the Israelis aren't thinking on those lines. The inferences I make from Israeli statements is they want to separate Hamas leadership, which doesn't have total support among the Palestinian population by any stretch of the imagination and create some relationship with the Palestinian population in Gaza.

Larry Bernstein:

Separating ethnic people is not something new. There is a long history of it. In 1948, Muslim countries pushed out their Jewish citizens to move to Israel. In 1922, Greece and Turkey were at war, and as part of the political settlement, the Greeks living in Turkey moved to Greece and the Turks living in Greece moved to Turkey. Later in the 1970s, Cyprus was similarly partitioned. Population exchanges were part of the creation of the modern Indian and Pakistani states. When populations cannot live together peacefully, they separate.

Anthony King:

Partitions have happened in the past, and partitions will happen in the future. Belfast remains a partitioned city. There are many examples of political settlements that become necessary because people become exhausted with the fighting. That's certainly the best that we could hope in Israel, an unsatisfactory political settlement between Israel and Palestinians on the lines of Belfast. Indeed, the precedents you've given Cyprus and Turkey, Pakistan and India. The local circumstances will make that difficult. The issue is a regional one in which the other actors, all the major Gulf states and Middle Eastern states, Iran and Saudi Arabia are in a conflict situation.

Larry Bernstein:

What you described in the upcoming Gaza City ground invasion is that the block-by-block fighting will turn the urban environment into rubble. Live footage will show buildings with civilians getting obliterated. We will see Israeli soldiers getting killed by IEDs, snipers, and suicide bombers. Every day further escalation. It will be hell. Hamas and civilians will blend together in these refugee camps that require humanitarian assistance. There will be enormous pressure put on Egypt to open its doors to help if the world and its local population demand it.

Anthony King:

There'll be a lot of fighting. There will be a significant exodus of the civilian population, although Hamas has and will continue to try and block that exodus. There will be refugees that will force their way over the Egyptian border. At the end of a three-to-six-month period, there'll be a hideous end to the operation, totally unsatisfactory, where Israel will claim victory. They'll have killed a lot of Hamas fighters. They'll have destroyed a lot of infrastructure. But they'll leave Gaza with most of the civilian population still there, although there'll be large refugee population to the South and over the Egyptian border.

Now the question then is, will that spark something more serious, more regional? The trouble is that it's very likely to have a reaction quite quickly in terms of Hezbollah in the North. I'd expect some significant fighting, even if it's a series of rocket exchanges and some attacks staged from the West Bank. How involved is Iran going to get? But I think your image of what Gaza will look like after three months is not inaccurate. I don't see a cleanliness of a partition where there's a buffer zone, et cetera.

Larry Bernstein:

George W. Bush during the Iraq War landed on an aircraft carrier to announce victory, but it wasn't. You said after three months of fighting, then Israel will declare victory. But the next day when rockets are fired at Tel Aviv and everyone's back in the bomb shelters, no one's going to believe the Prime Minister declaring victory. How does this end if rockets keep firing across the border?

Anthony King:

I struggle to see where this does end. Because the opponents of Israel, especially Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and their backers don't have to do very much to keep the fighting going. A few rockets, a few terrorist atrocities every so often keep the conflict alive. But on the flip side, Israel doesn't seem to me to be powerful enough to impose a Roman peace on the situation, which is the other way unfortunately wars end, that one of the sides imposes what the Assad regime effectively did in Syria. They, with their Russian backers, imposed a Pax Romana, killing everyone who was opposed to them and suppressing everyone else. But I don't see Israel being powerful enough to do that, nor do I see an international actor, U.S., Russia is of course completely out of the question, or China effectively enforcing a political settlement that's unsatisfactory for each party.

It's going to be very difficult to resolve this situation. Its implications are profound precisely because of that. Because it's not obvious how even with the military defeat, you would reconcile the sides.

Larry Bernstein:

Israel has another limitation. They drafted all their able-bodied men between the ages of 21 and 40. They can't keep these men out of the workforce for many months. The lack of manpower will undermine the domestic economy. They need to end this war quickly, which means that a slow, careful approach has to be abandoned for a fast aggressive military conflict, which isn't good for anybody. How is time a limitation in this urban battle?

Anthony King:

Time is the issue. Israel is unusual in it's got a mass citizen force. Though the Israeli defense force is a lot smaller than it was 50 years ago relative to its population. The Israeli population has basically doubled. The IDF is the same size as it was 40 years ago. Urban warfare, this is difficult because they are labor intensive operations, and absolutely that forces this conundrum. It forces Israel down a rapid series of urban assaults. I can't believe that the Hamas leaders and their Iranian backers are quite as clever as we think are. They've set up a strategic problem to Israel and questioned the security of Israel in a way that is very profound. And did they know what they were doing? Probably not. They probably just wanted to kill some Israelis and hopefully kill some Israeli soldiers as well. But they killed a lot of civilians because they're easier targets. But much like 9/11, I'm not sure that Osama Bin Laden had any idea of the ramifications of a successful attack of that order.

Larry Bernstein:

That does not sound right to me. The senior management of Hamas must have known that if they killed 1500 civilians that Israel would declare war and destroy Gaza City. Osama Bin Laden

knew if the World Trade Center was knocked down that America would attack the Middle East. Japan certainly knew that the US would attack them after Pearl Harbor.

Anthony King:

They're going to retaliate, and this is going to be absolutely great for us because everybody will hate Israel. We'll get massive international support. And because we're in Gaza and we've got all these tunnel systems. We'll probably be able to sustain ourselves militarily and politically. And we'll prepare our informational psychological operations to exploit those attacks.

The danger for us is Saudi Arabia realigning with Israel. This attack and the subsequent reaction will make it completely impossible. So, we'll amplify the informational effects. The benefit of this is the Hamas leadership narrowly defined, and Iran ensures that a potentially threatening Sunni-led reconfiguration of the Middle East doesn't happen. And everyone reorients itself effectively behind Iran, against Israel and its Western backers. If I were Hamas leadership, that's where I'd be. And what's happened is exactly what they predicted.

Larry Bernstein:

What are the lessons learned from the Ukrainian urban battles that apply to Gaza?

Anthony King:

The battle of Kyiv occurred from the 24th of February to about the 1st of April. It was the first phase of that operation, and it's similar to what the Israeli Defense Force face in Gaza. What are we going to learn from that one? The attacking force needs overwhelming military power and air superiority to prevail in the tactical battle. And here the Israeli Defense Force has that capability. It has much more capable military forces. Russia had 15,000 troops against a city of 2 million. The Israeli defense force has probably 100,000 against a much smaller force but an urban area of 2 million.

But they've got total air superiority over that city. So, their combat power is much more significant. Russia lost the battle of Kyiv with disastrous strategic effects. I would argue Russia lost the battle of Kyiv, so it lost the Ukrainian war in the sense the objective of the Ukrainian war was to destroy the Zelensky government.

Israel won't be defeated in the battle of Gaza. But can it affect a strategic victory in this battle to destroy Hamas and secure the security of Israel in perpetuity? I think it can't begin to do it. Had Russia won the battle of Kyiv, do we think Russia would've taken over Ukraine? No, there would've been a massive insurrection, a massive insurgency. It was fighting a battle that ultimately it couldn't win. And the same may be in Gaza as well.

Larry Bernstein:

How will Hamas rearm when its ammunition and rockets are used up?

Anthony King:

They'll somehow get arms smuggled to them by Iran. It's remarkable, isn't it, that a strip that supposedly been blockaded for years, had stockpiled 2000 rockets fired in the first hour of the attack on 7th of October, and yet nobody knew. Hamas had been smuggling in levels of equipment we can't even imagine, presumably with Iranian Hezbollah support for months and years. And I have no doubt that even under Israeli bombardment and massive surveillance, human ingenuity will find a way of smuggling more arms into them. The point here is that they don't need that much weaponry to sustain a strategic objective, which is merely to show that Israel is insecure.

Larry Bernstein:

In Iraq, ISIS was able to recruit fanatics from all over the world. Will pro-Palestinian soldiers from outside of the Gaza Strip join the fight?

Anthony King:

It's very likely. What's more threatening in terms of international security is related Islamicists groups will stage acts of resistance across western cities.

Larry Bernstein:

Hamas has 200 hostages. How do hostages change the urban warfare strategy?

Anthony King:

ISIS has had hostages in various places. It's a longstanding terrorist practice. Will it be decisive in this case? No, I don't think it will. It complicates the political-military calculation for Israel, especially because Hamas has not received the criticism that it might have done for abducting civilian hostages. I see it as the scale of the hostage taking is of a level like Boko Haram. Obviously, this is a scale Israel hasn't faced, and it will be a difficult sell for the Netanyahu government, but I can't see the hostages being a massive calculation in what they choose militarily. I don't see it constraining them in the way that hostages have constrained states in the past.

Larry Bernstein:

We've discussed 21st century urban battles, but they don't really change much over time. So, what can we learn from the most famous urban battles to inform us about what will happen in Gaza?

Anthony King:

There are many continuities back to ancient urban fighting: the siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. by the Romans. The Israeli siege of Gaza 2023, what are the similarities? The problem is with urban fighting, you've got to breach fortifications. You've got to clear fortifications and then destroy your enemy behind those fortifications. If the Israelis are going to mount an operation in Gaza, as the Romans did in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., they're going to have to breach into it. That's going to require huge firepower. And then they're going to have the forces to enter those breaches to clear the fortified positions that Hamas have.

But the urban fight of today is a distinct battlescape. The actual format, the geography, the topography of the battle has a different format. First, air power is implicated inside the battle, which is not true in the past. The city's now so big that they envelop the forces. Effectively, instead of the cities being enveloped by the armies, armies are enveloped by the city, which means that the forces are not surrounding the entire city.

These micro sieges inside the city itself for particular blocks. So, although many of the techniques are old, 20th century, we might even say they're ancient, the actual geometry of the fight becomes different. It now resonates out across a global urban archipelago in a way that was not true even in the 20th century. This is the rise of digital global communications. The other is the increasing ethnicization of cities across the world. There are diasporas located across the world, enclaves of those Arabic, Palestinian diasporas, and Jewish and Israeli diasporas. The urban battle of the 21st century has a very strange anatomy. It's highly localized at the point of the fighting, but also simultaneously trans-nationalized at the same time.

Larry Bernstein:

I would like to do a case study of urban warfare with the civil war in Algiers in 1957. At that time, Algeria was part of France, not a colony but a state like Hawaii in the US. There were a million ethnic French, the so-called Pied Noir, living in Algeria as well as 8 million Muslims. The FLN which was a group that wanted Algerian independence engaged in terrorism. France employed 300,000 soldiers to win the peace. Tell us about urban warfare between France and its local Muslim population in Algiers.

Anthony King:

Historical comparison really instructs us what's different and how to be sensitive to the current environment. And you've put your finger absolutely upon it about Algiers. One of the key things about it in the Battle of Algiers is the French won in a military sense. The French won the Algerian war, they cleared the FLN out of Algiers, and then they cleared them out into the countryside. In a military sense, they defeated the FLN, but they did it in such a manner that it was just totally unsustainable.

And sustaining Algeria beyond the late fifties was completely impossible politically, economically for the French. So, the military won it. But notice how they did it. They had no concerns for the legal requirements.

Larry Bernstein:

For the benefit of the audience, during the Algerian civil war French paratroopers employed the aggressive use of torture to capture the leaders of the FLN terrorist group. The ongoing war led to riots in Paris and divisions in France. The government fell and De Gaulle took over in a non-constitutional way. Later, De Gaulle called a plebiscite in Algeria and the Muslims voted for independence and the French Algerians voted to remain in France. Independence won the plebiscite. Within a year, the million French Algerians who had lived in Algeria for nearly a century moved to France along with hundreds of thousands of Algerian Muslims who had supported the French in the civil war.

Anthony King:

Metropolitan capital France could let it go, even though it generated a revolt among the military itself.

They could let it go. Israel has no choice here. It must defend its security, and it is constrained by international law in a way that French paratroopers, the famous French parachute division, was not in the battle of the Casbah in the Battle of Algiers. So absolutely, it's got a necessity, but also a legal constraint that make the problem much more complicated than the French faced.

Larry Bernstein:

Normally, I end each podcast with a note of optimism. In this case, let's go a different route. In situations like this we often catastrophize war and urban battles. Today Belfast is a peaceful and livable city. Can this battle result in a lasting peace?

Anthony King:

An urban battle we're about to see is going to be very intense and brutal. If we are lucky, it might show to both combatants that there is no resolution through military means. And after many months of fighting, it may be that two populations become so exhausted that collapse into an unhappy and unsatisfactory peace. Frankly, that's the best that we can hope. The battle burns itself out. It doesn't ignite a wider regional conflict and that both parties crawl to a table to work out an unsatisfactory settlement. A settlement in which perhaps civilians aren't being killed in large numbers.

Optimism must be tempered with a level of realism slash pessimism. We have seen that in exhaustion in places in Syria. The war faded with exhaustion eventually, and Assad took most of the country back. But there's large areas of autonomous areas for the Kurds, which have become

de facto part of a quasi-Kurdish principality. Unsatisfactory peace will force the international community to think through the Israeli-Palestinian problem in a different way. That's the most that we might hope for.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Tony for joining us today. If you missed last week's show, check it out. The podcast's subject was Putting Petain on Trial.

Our speaker was Julian Jackson who is an Emeritus Professor of Modern French History at Queen Mary at the University of London. Julian is one of the preeminent scholars of Vichy France. He has written extensively about France and the second world war and has published an important biography of Charles de Gaulle.

We discussed Julian's new book France on Trial: The Case of Marshal Petain. I care about this topic because my grandparents and my mom lived in hiding for years in Vichy France during the second world war because as Jews, they feared being sent to the concentration camps.

Political trials of former heads of state happen frequently. Marshal Petain collaborated with the Nazis and was arrested and tried immediately after the German's surrendered. Julian discussed the crimes of Vichy and its leader's responsibility in the roundup of the French Jews.

I now want to make a plug for next week's podcast with my college roommate Josh Soven who is a partner at Paul Weiss who focusses on Anti-Trust. The Biden Administration is attacking Big Tech and are trying to change the business practices of Amazon and Google.

I want to learn from Josh why the FTC has moved away from maximizing consumer welfare and instead is determined to oppose corporate size and power.

You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website whathappensnextin6minutes.com. Please subscribe to our weekly emails and follow us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Thank you for joining us today, good-bye.