

Checking Israel's claim to have killed 10,000 Hamas fighters

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INVESTIGATION

Israel faces growing concern about the number of civilian deaths after at least 30,000 Palestinians were reported killed in Gaza — as well as pressure to show it is eliminating Hamas as it vowed after October 7. BBC Verify examines Israel's claims about how many of those killed were combatants. The Israeli military says it has killed more than 10,000 fighters in its air strikes and ground operations in response to the Hamas attack which killed about 1,200 people. But there are concerns about whether it is able to separate fighters from ordinary civilians. President Joe Biden said in December that Israel had the support of the world as well as the US, but "they're starting to lose that support by the indiscriminate bombing that takes place".

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have consistently defended their tactics, stressing that they are trying to be precise in their targeting of Hamas fighters and infrastructure, while seeking to minimise civilian deaths.

Hamas does not provide any figures for its military fatalities. The Reuters news agency reported that an official had admitted 6,000 fighters had been killed, but Hamas denied this figure to the BBC. The toll of at least 30,035 killed, from Gaza's Hamas-run health ministry, has previously been described as trustworthy by the World Health Organization's (WHO) regional emergency director Richard Brennan. The WHO says the ministry has "good capacity in data collection" and its previous reporting has been credible and "well developed".

But its overall tally of those killed does not distinguish between civilians and combatants.

The Gaza authorities' last demographic breakdown from February 29 indicated more than 70% of those killed had been women and children.

So, with the figures suggesting less than 30% of those killed were men — some of whom are likely to be over fighting age — experts have raised questions about how Israel arrived at its claim of killing 10,000

fighters.

BBC Verify has repeatedly asked the IDF for the details of its methodology for counting Hamas fighter deaths, but they have not responded.

The BBC tried to piece together a fuller picture through claims and videos published by Israel.

The IDF has issued press statements and social media posts since October, making claims about the outcome of its operations in Gaza. References to the numbers of fighters killed in these announcements are more sporadic and approximate than the Hamas-run health ministry's regular updates on fatalities.

One IDF estimate before the war suggested Hamas had about 30,000 fighters in Gaza.

In December, it described an assessment that it was killing two civilians for every Hamas fighter as "tremendously positive", given the challenges it faced on the battlefield.

On December 29, IDF spokesman Major Doron Spielman told Sky News Australia that 8,000 Hamas fighters had been killed, saying the figure was based on intelligence, interrogations, and examination of satellite photographs.

In mid-January, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed Israel had "destroyed" two-thirds of Hamas fighting

regiments in Gaza.

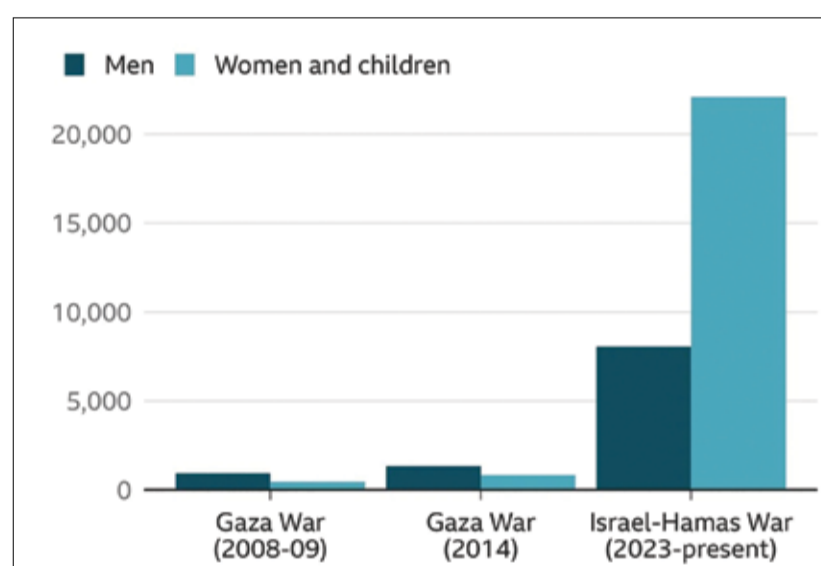
On February 19, the Times of Israel reported the IDF as saying 12,000 fighters had been killed. We put that figure to the IDF who, in two separate responses to us, said the figure is "approximately 10,000" and "more than 10,000".

The Israeli embassy in the UK told us they think the total number of Hamas fighters killed is "between 10,000 and 12,000". But they said it was hard to distinguish between civilians and combatants as many of them are not wearing military uniform and Hamas also has fighters who are aged 16 and 17.

Other factors cited by experts as obstacles to counting combatant casualties include Hamas operating in tunnels. BBC Verify reviewed all 280 videos posted to the IDF YouTube channel from October 7 up to February 27 and found that very few contained visual evidence of fighters being killed.

Of these, just one — posted on December 14 — purports to show dead bodies of fighters. A handful of other videos appear to show fighters being shot at.

We also attempted to count the number of individual claims of Hamas fighters killed on the IDF's official Telegram channel. We found 160 posts claiming to have killed a specific number of fighters, for a



The chart compares the fatality figures of men with those of women and children in Gaza in its three wars as of February 29, 2024. BBC

total of 714 fatalities. But there were also 247 references that used terms such as "several", "dozens", or "hundreds" killed, making a meaningful overall tally impossible. Since the beginning of the IDF incursion into Gaza, the military has accused

Hamas of using the civilian population as human shields, but some experts are concerned that the IDF might be counting some non-combatants as fighters merely because they are part of the Hamas-run territory's administration. Andreas Krieg, a senior lecturer in securi-

Where is Hamas getting its weapons?

Increasingly, from Israel



Israeli soldiers standing in what they say is a rocket factory in January 2024 during an escorted tour by the military for international journalists in the central Gaza Strip. AVISHAG SHAAR-YASHUV/THE NEW YORK TIMES

By Maria Abi-Habib &
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smuggling routes to explain how Hamas stayed so heavily armed despite an Israeli military blockade of the Gaza Strip.

But recent intelligence has shown the extent to which Hamas has been able to build many of its rockets and anti-tank weaponry out of the thousands of munitions that failed to detonate when Israel lobbed them into Gaza, according to weapons experts and Israeli and Western intelligence officials. Hamas is also arming its fighters with weapons stolen from Israeli military bases.

Intelligence gathered during months of fighting revealed that, just as Israeli authorities misjudged Hamas' intentions before October 7, they also underestimated its ability to obtain arms.

What is clear now is that the very weapons that Israeli forces have used to enforce a blockade of Gaza over the past 17 years are now being used against them. Israeli and American military explosives have enabled Hamas to shower Israel with rockets and, for the first time, penetrate Israeli towns from Gaza. "Unexploded ordnance is a main source of explosives for Hamas,"

said Michael Cardash, the former deputy head of the Israeli National Police Bomb Disposal Division and an Israeli police consultant. "They are cutting open bombs from Israel, artillery bombs from Israel, and a lot of them are being used, of course, and repurposed for their explosives and rockets." Weapons experts say that roughly 10% of munitions typically fail to

detonate, but in Israel's case, the figure could be higher. Israel's arsenal includes Vietnam-era missiles, long discontinued by the United States and other military powers. The failure rate on some of those missiles could be as high as 15%, said one Israeli intelligence officer who, like others interviewed for this article, spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence matters.

By either count, years of sporadic bombing and the recent bombardment of Gaza have littered the area with thousands of tons of unexploded ordnance just waiting to be reused. One 750-pound bomb that fails to detonate can become hundreds of missiles or rockets.

Hamas did not respond to messages seeking comment. The Israeli military said in a statement that it was committed to dismantling Hamas but did not answer specific questions about the group's weapons.

Israeli officials knew before the October attacks that Hamas could salvage some Israeli-made weapons, but the scope has startled weapons experts