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**THE EVOLVING THEATRE OF URBAN
WARFARE: A POST-MODERN
BATTLEFIELD IN UKRAINE AND GAZA**

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Introduction

"There's no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons" (Deleuze, 1992, p.3).

Urban warfare always posed unique challenges for military planners, but in the 21st century, combat dynamics within densely populated areas have undergone a seismic shift. The battles of Gaza and Bakhmut offer sobering case studies of how technological advancements, asymmetrical strategies, and shifting ethical boundaries are reshaping the nature of war. In these conflicts, traditional military doctrines meet the intricacies of post-modern warfare, a landscape where technology, psychology, and propaganda intertwine to redefine the rules of engagement.

At the heart of this transformation lies the relation between precision and chaos. In Bakhmut, drones proved to be a nightmare for soldiers caught in the open field. In Gaza, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) have pioneered a technologically advanced approach to urban combat, deploying countless airstrikes, autonomous Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems, and real-time surveillance to strike at adversaries embedded in civilian environments. This operational sophistication, however, raises profound ethical questions. The deliberate use of civilian infrastructure by groups like Hamas as shields complicates the application of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), forcing militaries to walk a tightrope between tactical effectiveness and ethical responsibility.

Simultaneously, the psychological dimension of warfare has emerged as a powerful tool. Both Ukraine and Russia utilise drone footage and even alleged war crimes on social media channels. In Gaza, propaganda and information campaigns are not mere afterthoughts but integral components of conflict strategy. Hamas leverages civilian suffering to amplify its narrative of victimhood, rallying international support while eroding Israel's moral standing. Conversely, the IDF employs psychological operations to delegitimise its adversaries and render their war a means of survival. This perception battle unfolds in tandem with physical combat, creating a dual-front war where information can be as decisive as ammunition.

The post-modern urban battlefield is a realm of blurred lines between civilian and combatant, ethical warfare and tactical necessity, reality and perception. As the European land forces observe and learn from these conflicts, it is increasingly challenging to grapple with the question of how to adapt their military doctrines and ethical frameworks to an age of warfare that transcends conventional definitions. This paper examines the cases of the Battle of Bakhmut and the Israel-Hamas War in Gaza through the dual lenses of operational innovation and ethical complexity by looking at the tactic deployed, technological advancements and ethical concerns, ultimately drawing lessons that may shape Europe's

approach to urban warfare in the years to come.

1. Historical Context of Urban Warfare

Urban warfare is usually conducted to gain strategic advantage or logistic control over control of a significant part of an urban settlement (Desch, 2001). Beginning as early as the Hittites era where the ancient city of Kadesh was the centre of intense battles, urban warfare gained prominence in modern military history with World War I and its trench-based engagements near urban centres (Caro, 2023). World War II marked a turning point, with large-scale operations in cities like Stalingrad and Berlin showcasing the brutal and chaotic nature of urban combat (Laakkonen, 2020). These conflicts foreshadowed the operational and ethical dilemmas that would characterise urban warfare in the following century.

While the Cold War era saw smaller-scale rural battles, counterinsurgency, and guerrilla warfare as decolonisation and proxy wars replaced traditional grand battles, the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s demonstrated the complexities of urban engagements in ethnically diverse and politically fragmented regions (Antouly, 2019). The siege of Sarajevo and the destruction of Vukovar reflected the interplay of modern weaponry, irregular forces, and civilian populations (Konaev, 2019; Notholt, 2008). These conflicts foreshadowed the operational and ethical dilemmas that would characterise urban warfare in the following century.

2. Urban Warfare Theory in the 21st Century

In the 21st century, urban warfare has reemerged as a focal point of military strategy, driven by increasing urbanisation rates and the strategic significance of cities. Modern conflicts, such as those in Mosul, Aleppo, and Marawi, mark the prevalence of urban combat in contemporary warfare (King, 2021; Knight and Theodorakis, 2019). The urban environment today presents unique challenges, including complex terrain, dense civilian populations, and the integration of infrastructure into defence strategies. These factors necessitate adaptations in military tactics and technologies (Williams and Cheng, 2023).

One significant aspect of modern urban warfare is the use of civilian infrastructure by combatants. In Gaza, Hamas insurgents often embed themselves within urban settings, utilising buildings and underground tunnels (known also as 'Gaza Metro') to their advantage (Spencer, 2024b). This tactic complicates targeting decisions for the IDF's conventional forces, as Hamas's ability to blend into Gaza's urban setting makes it harder for the IDF to identify enemy combatants, leading to the exposure of IDF forces during attacks. Additionally, air raids often result in significant civilian casualties (Coble et al., 2024). The

urban landscape thus becomes a complex battleground where distinguishing between combatants and non-combatants is increasingly challenging.

If infrastructure is one crucial aspect of modern urban warfare, technological advancements are undoubtedly another. The proliferation of kamikaze drones, precision-guided munitions, and surveillance systems has enhanced situational awareness and targeting capabilities indefinitely. In both the cases of Bakhmut and Gaza, the 'individualisation' of high-tech made urban warfare much deadlier and more unpredictable (Chávez and Swed, 2024; Milevski, 2023). On top of that, the integration of cyber warfare and information operations further complicates the urban battlefield, where control of information can be as critical as control of physical space (Pedersen and Jacobsen, 2024). To understand how these dynamics play out in practice, examining the battles of Bakhmut and Gaza provides valuable insights. These cases highlight not only the technological and strategic shifts in urban warfare but also the operational and ethical challenges faced by modern militaries in densely populated environments.

Case Study: The Battle of Bakhmut

The Battle of Bakhmut, a protracted and intense confrontation in the Russo-Ukrainian War, stands as a significant case study in modern urban warfare. Bakhmut, an industrial city situated on the Bakhmuta River in eastern Ukraine, became a focal point due to its strategic location along the Kramatorsk line. The city's infrastructure and position made it a valuable asset for controlling supply lines and regional influence (Czub, 2023).

The prolonged engagement in Bakhmut exemplifies the brutal attrition characteristic of urban warfare and the failure to identify a strategic retreat, where both sides took substantial losses over an extended period (Storring, 2024). The battle showcased distinct tactical approaches from the involved forces. Russian troops, including mercenaries of the Wagner Group, employed a combination of spearheads by untrained recruits and experienced fighters along the communication lines (Kyrylenko, 2022). Initial assaults often involved sending less trained personnel in small, expendable groups (also called 'meat-grinder') to engage Ukrainian defences, effectively revealing their positions and exhausting supplies (Beaumont, 2022). Subsequently, more skilled Wagner operatives conducted deliberate attacks, adapting their tactics during the battle, especially within the urban confines of Bakhmut (Ber, 2023). By mid-2023, they organised combined arms storm units, integrating infantry, Iran-made Shahed drones, and artillery shelling to enhance combat effectiveness (Atwood, 2022; Battersby and Boyer, 2023).

Ukrainian forces, in response, fortified urban positions and utilised the city's dense

infrastructure to their advantage. Called the "not one inch back" strategy by Kofman, Ukrainians established defensive strongholds within buildings, creating a network of interconnected positions to facilitate movement and communication instead of retreating to the open fields (Kofman, as cited in Brands, 2024, p. 114). This defensive strategy aimed to exploit the complexities of urban terrain, making it challenging for Russian forces to achieve rapid gains, albeit costing the Ukrainian forces a significant number of resources. Although it was a pyrrhic victory for the Russian side, Bakhmut proved some important insights about the state of urban warfare (Shoib, 2024). For the Ukrainian side, the main objective was to keep Russians trapped in Bakhmut while better-trained soldiers could advance in a counter-offensive (Bigg and Gibbons-Neff, 2023). However, military experts argue that the intensification of urban defence led to the depletion of equipment and units that could be transferred to other parts (Ryan 2023).

The battle highlighted the integration of various technologies and methodologies in urban warfare. Both sides deployed different kinds of drones for reconnaissance and targeting, providing real-time intelligence on enemy movements and positions (Franke and Söderström, 2023). For instance, the use of kamikaze drones affected the morale of the troops and, more importantly, made concealment difficult for both sides (Molloy, 2024). Both Ukraine and Russia leveraged platforms like Telegram and Twitter to influence morale and international opinion; Ukraine highlighted resilience and resistance, while Russian forces used disinformation and exaggerated gains (Pettyjohn, 2023). Drones were not only tactical assets but also tools for psychological intimidation, capturing combat footage for propaganda (Pettyjohn, 2023). The close-quarters nature of urban combat in Bakhmut heightened stress for soldiers, while the inability to hide from kamikaze drones prolonged the battle, redefining urban warfare strategies (Haltiwanger, 2023). Additionally, as this paper will examine in the Gaza case, electronic warfare systems were deployed to disrupt communications and GPS signals, aiming to degrade the adversary's command and control capabilities.

Case Study: Gaza and Operation Swords of Lion

What truly defines the essence of urban warfare in Bakhmut is the return of trench warfare and prolonged defence lines (Baker, 2023). Nevertheless, although both sides relied on an "adapt or die" method, casualties were almost entirely between units and mercenaries on larger fields (Molloy, 2024, p.64). In Gaza however, the IDF found itself in a maze of tunnels and debris (Abuamer, 2024; Krauss and El Deeb, 2024). With around two million people concentrated in an entrapped city, Gaza highlighted the most brutal question of urban warfare: the line between civilians and designated enemies.

The land operation in Gaza following the October 7th, 2023, attacks marked a significant escalation in urban warfare. Following Hamas' unprecedented assault, Israel declared a state of war and announced the ground operation "Swords of Lion" (Levush, 2023). The densely populated strip presented complex operational challenges for 'Operation Swords of Lion,' embedded in most modern warfare (Eisenstadt, 2023).

At the strategic level, Hamas employed a decentralised strategy, leveraging asymmetry and Gaza's urban density to counter Israel's military superiority (Livermore, 2023; Moyano, 2024). Calling it irregular warfare, Hamas focused on fear mongering with raids, sniper attacks and taking hostages (Petrila, 2024). As experts pointed out, another key element of its strategy is the use of extensive tunnel networks, referred to as the 'Metro', for logistical operations and ambushes (Bertolotti, 2024a; Spencer, 2024a). Hospitals, schools, and residential areas were utilised for storing weapons and as makeshift command centres, complicating Israeli targeting (Schmitt, 2023). Additionally, Hamas adopted a cyberwarfare strategy where Western social media is often targeted with propaganda and data manipulation (Bertolotti, 2024b).

The IDF, by contrast, focused on overwhelming Hamas with technological and strategic superiority (Watling and Reynolds, 2024). IDF (14th Armoured Reserve Brigade) deployed drones, satellites, and cyber-intelligence to map and locate Hamas assets (Frantzman, 2024). Continuous airstrikes targeted critical infrastructure while elite commando forces carried out urban clearing operations (Watling and Reynolds, 2024). AI-assisted strikes were used for the first time in combat history, while water pumps and excavators were deployed to flood tunnels (Brumfiel, 2023; Sari, 2023). Israel also relied on advanced psychological operations (PsyOps) to capture psychological advantage and target crowd control, including dropping leaflets to the public and constant sonic booms (The New Arab, 2025; Eid and El Dilati, 2024).

At first glance, both sides seem to structure their approaches according to their perceived urban environment. However, the war in Gaza displays a new level for the means of urban warfare (Barno and Bensahel, 2023). As discussed in the previous section, Bakhmut proved to be a military engagement designed to keep the enemy pinned in a single position, thus resulting in greater personnel casualties (Wright, 2023). In Gaza, however, conflict takes the shape of a multi-domain urban warfare, where the urban itself becomes a forever war (Rosenberg, 2025).

3. From Bakhmut to Gaza: A Change of Perception in Urban Warfare

Professor Mary Kaldor coined the term "new war" in her 1999 article, where she defines the concept of urban warfare as facing off a decentralised army with the capabilities of

producing or replicating high technology (Kaldor, 1999). Indeed, in Gaza, war is not just between two parties but multiple factions that engage each other on multiple levels (on the ground and underground) (Bolaños, 2024). Unlike Bakhmut, where conventional armies face each other in large battalions, the IDF is bound to force itself to calculate multi-domain strikes and pace down the operation's continuum (Bolaños, 2024; Petrila, 2024). This is also evidently pushing urban warfare to a model that presents no clear-cut goals as the designated enemy often hides or evades complete defeat (Weissmann, 2023). One example of this phenomenon is the intense “rubblisation” of the conflict zone, as the continued bombing of Gaza caused IDF forces to lose control of the environmental coordination and move further (Watling and Reynolds, 2024, p. 14). In contrast, the levelling down of the terrain caused Hamas to go underground and conduct raids, which forced IDF troops to evade going deeper on the enemy side (Abuamer, 2024). Unlike the Ukrainian soldiers in Bakhmut who were able to manoeuvre, the IDF has been forced to conduct micro-sieges, resulting in a slow war of attrition (Fox, 2023).

What differentiates this war from others, and what makes it postmodern, is the blurred lines of urban warfare (Watling and Reynolds, 2024). Unlike the previous examples, the case of Gaza is a war of irregularities (Petrila, 2024). Bakhmut was marked by a traditional-form of urban warfare between Ukraine and Russia, one between two near-peer combatants (Spencer, 2021). In Gaza, the IDF had total technological domination but failed to achieve control over the population (The Economist, 2024). This renders it the civilianisation of warfare, meaning that it becomes an intersection of different methods rather than having a large total war (Baratz, 2025). In Bakhmut, one sees the traditional aspects of urban warfare with adaptation to technology (Molloy, 2024). However, the IDF's operation was an integration of war with minimum limits (Dworkin, 2023). The use of AI-assisted targeting, 3D modelling of buildings and media tools questions to what degree the international laws can be applied and, more importantly, how can a closed AI model be controlled and sustained to minimise collateral damage to the civilians (Brumfiel, 2023; Bolaños, 2024).

On the other hand, Hamas' asymmetric warfare transforms the conflict into a ‘living organism’ (Livermore, 2023). As conflict spreads into civilian infrastructure, urban warfare replaces the reality of the civilians, therefore creating a blurred continuum of peace and war at the same time (Bolaños, 2024). Ethically, this results in a loss of accountability and human decision-making (Brumfiel, 2023). As the state loses its initial justification for war and war instead becomes central to the state's existence, a constant military presence emerges as a natural consequence of the conflict, aligning with Deleuze's observations (Evans and Guillaume, 2010). Considering the IDF's engagement with post-structuralist thought (Weizman, 2006), the case of Gaza offers new perspectives on how European forces can adapt to the growing civilianisation of warfare in urban environments.

4. Redefining the Urban Warfare Conjuncture - What Europe Needs

The changing nature of the war and increased urban warfare concept is already acknowledged by Western military experts, especially in Europe after the invasion of Ukraine. Professor Anthony King (2021) distinguishes the evolving nature of urban warfare as the world's urban population grows and big armies are being replaced with irregular groups capable of defending a particular urban setting. One can also observe this change in the military size and total spending of Western armies (Baratz, 2025). After the end of the Cold War, almost every NATO member state underwent a reduction in size and spending (Larres, 2014; Baratz, 2025). This army model can be perhaps best explained by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the multilateral complexities of European armies (Bieri, 2015; Monaghan et al., 2024). The post-modern liberal world structure, following Fukuyama's footsteps and 9/11, led to the Americanisation of European security where the role of European land forces is limited to the transatlantic security framework instead of grand battle narratives (Grand, 2024). However, this strategic deficit in defence failed to achieve its purpose (Dempsey, 2024). Both Ukraine and Israel showed that states will not hesitate to launch an urban offensive and a brutal war of attrition if they perceive that their existential security is threatened (Fox, 2023; Hamzawy, 2024).

The better question to ask is whether Europe is prepared to accept the changing environment of land warfare. Although the EU does not possess a single strategy, the current doctrine is mostly based on NATO's New Force Model (NFM) (Barry et al., 2023). While NFM provides a comprehensive land readiness against a possible Russian attack, it is still very much a land doctrine based on just war with Russia (Monaghan et al., 2024). Today's weaponisation of postmodernism and information (particularly by Russian channels) pushes Europe to think of the land as information, and information as land (Craik, 2019). Moreover, post-modern war creates its own truth, where two wars are being fought in one (Dickson, 2004).

Both cases show that the future of warfare is unlikely to be limited in time/size/violence and modern, but rather primitive in its brutality and intensity (Golsteyn, 2022). Buriachenko (2024) states that the tactics of warfare are becoming unpredictable and complex, hence traditional doctrines fail to establish a victory or contain the outbreak of a conflict. In this context, another critical factor to consider is the rise of non-state actors. Non-state actors like Hamas can operate globally and have smaller scopes, therefore war termination or control over urban populations become much more obscure and complicated (Pfaff, 2024). The future conjuncture of land warfare doctrine for European forces is undoubtedly bound to adapt to human and technological capital. Therefore, land forces must restructure their

strategies to confine the objective in multi-domain in this post-modern stage of warfare (Karadeli, 2022).

Conclusion

This paper examined the evolving nature of urban warfare through the lens of two pivotal case studies: the Battle of Bakhmut and the Gaza conflict. By analysing historical precedents, modern strategies, and advanced technologies, this paper highlighted how urban combat has transitioned into a post-modern battlefield. Both conflicts showcased the interplay between precision weaponry, asymmetric tactics, and the psychological dimensions of warfare, including the use of information and trauma. For Europe, understanding these dynamics is essential for adapting defensive strategies, ensuring operational readiness, and addressing ethical challenges in urban environments where conflict is increasingly intertwined with civilian life.

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