**[The underground arena](https://www.dawn.com/news/1789464/the-underground-arena)**

[Rafia Zakaria](https://www.dawn.com/authors/410/rafia-zakaria) Published November 15, 2023 Updated about 24 hours ago

CONCERNS have grown further with the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) reaching the Al Shifa Hospital in Gaza. According to reports from those who are inside the hospital compound, armoured personnel vehicles or tanks have surrounded the premises and armed personnel were not permitting anyone out or into the medical facility.

This meant that the fuel for the generators being used to run the hospital was also not being delivered — and a couple of days ago, it ran out. All premature babies that were relying on incubators to stay alive would die, hospital officials announced.

Many patients in intensive care units were already dead. Medical staff from Doctors Without Borders who were providing care in the hospital said that they would not leave the hospital until their patients had been evacuated. Overworked and utterly traumatised, the medical staff has remained in the hospital.

On the Israeli side, it was the same talking points since the beginning of the war. The hospital was a front for Hamas to hide fighters and hostages they insisted even as the rest of the world winced at the painful images of tiny babies in incubators that would soon stop providing them with the heat, light and oxygen they needed to survive.

Then, perhaps responding to the world that saw its actions as inordinately cruel, they shared a different explanation. In a hastily produced video, an Israeli commander appeared in what he said was the ‘basement’ of the Rantisi paediatric hospital. The items he pointed to were supposed to be proof that Hamas had been using the hospital for nefarious purposes.

Israeli soldiers are terrified of a long urban conflict against an enemy that darts in and out of view by accessing tunnels.

He pointed to a motorcycle; this motorcycle, he went on to say, had been used by Hamas fighters in the attack on the music festival on Oct 7.A little later, he entered a makeshift living room with dark vinyl couches all along the walls of the room. Behind them were curtains. This room, the audience was told, was the one used by Hamas to house the hostages.

The curtains were not covering any windows but blank walls. This, the commander insisted, was proof that the room had housed hostages and were used to film videos.

What Israeli forces had actually been hoping to find in the hospitals was some entrance to the tunnels that Hamas is known to have dug under Gaza. This tunnel network is supposed to be over 480 kilometres long with areas inside them wide enough and reinforced with sufficient concrete to transport large construction equipment such as bulldozers.

According to the [*New York Times*](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/11/10/world/europe/hamas-gaza-tunnels.html), which has published a long report on the tunnels, the latter are a vast maze of passageways under the most densely populated portions of Gaza. Often, access to these tunnels is through innocuous-looking doors with padlocks.

When Hamas fighters conduct an attack in Israel, they can slip in and then out of sight following their operation. Since there are reportedly multiple entrance and exit points in the vast network, shutting off one or two access points as the IDF forces may have planned to do is not very effective.

At the same time, the Israelis have used the pretext of destroying these tunnels as the reason why they have been bombing civilian areas. Israeli soldiers are terrified of a long urban conflict against an enemy that darts in and out of view by accessing tunnels whose entrance points are inside civilian homes or buildings.

However, Israel’s current plan to destroy the tunnels also seems like a stretch. First, the hostages that Israel purports it wants to rescue might well be in the same tunnels that Israel says it wants to destroy.

According to one of the few hostages who were released a few weeks ago, the tunnels felt like a “spider web” of mazelike passageways. She also reported feeling damp and humid until they reached a large hall in which a couple of dozen hostages were already present.

These tactical tunnels have been the IDF’s reason for its brutal bombing of the Gaza Strip. It is likely that they believe that if they destroy enough of them they would have a better chance against the Hamas fighters.

But the tactical tunnels have other uses as well. Since the 16-year blockade of Gaza, the Palestinians were forced to come up with a way of smuggling in goods into Gaza while avoiding the checkpoints above the ground that are all over the area. It is not just Israel but also Egypt that has tried to destroy these tunnels in order to put a stop to the smuggling of goods.

It is ironic to note that the scarcity and secrecy that led to the creation of this vast tunnel network are now its relative strength. There is no doubt that the Israeli blockade and the brutal bombardment is meant to crush Gaza and its people.

At the same time, the existence of this vast subterranean network, which is estimated to stretch from one end of Gaza to the other, could become a place of refuge and escape for the hapless civilians of the area.

In a few days, the aerial bombing will have to stop, either because of a ceasefire or to make way for a ground operation by the Israelis. Either way the IDF will have to contend with the fact that this tunnel system cannot be destroyed from the air, nor can it be penetrated by the ground forces without the threat of mass casualties on the Israeli side.

Israel isolated and blockaded Gaza which led to the creation of Gaza’s tunnels. These may now be the biggest threat that Israel’s defence forces have ever had to contend with.

*The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.*

**rafia.zakaria@gmail.com**

*Published in Dawn, November 15th, 2023*