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Israel Lets Reporters See Devastated Gaza Site and Image of a Confident Military

By [ETHAN BRONNER](#)

GAZA — To the west, the Mediterranean sparkled and winked. To the east, columns of black smoke rose and gunfire pounded. In between, Israeli Merkava tanks plowed through potato and strawberry fields on Thursday as paratroopers guarded their ground, a mix of ruins that once were handsome two-story houses and farm fields that had been turned into rocket-launching pads against [Israel](#) by [Hamis](#).

On a day of unusually harsh Israeli attacks inside the center of Gaza City to the south, this neighborhood of Atatra, in northwest Gaza, was a scene of devastation on Thursday, filled with impromptu tank-track roads, rusting greenhouses and blown-up houses that had been booby-trapped with mannequins, explosive devices and tunnels.

The area was a major site for Hamas launchers over the past eight years. But for the past 10 days, it has been a ghost town inhabited only by Israeli soldiers, many of them from a paratroopers' unit, the 101, founded in 1953 by [Ariel Sharon](#), the former prime minister, as the first elite Israeli unit aimed at striking [Palestinian](#) guerrillas infiltrating from Gaza.

The fact that more than half a century later Israel remains at war with the children and grandchildren of those guerrillas has served as a kind of overpowering historical backdrop to the 20-day-old military confrontation that Israel says is aimed at ending Hamas rocket fire onto Israeli towns. No one believes this will be the last war.

Israelis face harsh censure abroad for their tactics, but a visit by 10 foreign reporters to this position arranged by the Israeli military showed an army that feels serenely confident that it is doing the right thing. The army, which has banned foreign journalists from entering Gaza on their own, has begun taking small groups to outer positions for briefings with commanders in the field.

"It is a very righteous war and has the full support of public opinion," said Brig. Gen. Avi Ronzki, the military's chief rabbi, a West Bank settler who spends most of his time these days on the battlefield encouraging the troops and who happened to be at a military campground in Israel earlier on Thursday. "Our army is showing the way to stop terrorists. And in order to win against terror we need to use a lot of force like the Americans are doing in Iraq and Afghanistan."

Across the border region, Israel has lowered a kind of electronic curtain to prevent remote-control bombs, disabling even remote car locks well into Israel.

The paratroop brigade commander, Colonel Herzi (military rules forbid his giving a family name), was the chief briefer for the visit. He arrived late in a massive Merkava, popped out of a hatch and, M-16 and binoculars hanging from his neck and shoulders, expressed his regrets.

“What you see here is not a pleasant scene,” he said, looking down at a military-issued briefing book with talking points. “War is not pleasant. I don’t like this environment. I don’t like war.”

His soldiers took this area on the first night of the ground invasion a week into the war. The rocket launchers, which sent deadly projectiles into Ashdod and Ashkelon, Israeli cities due north, were placed among the potatoes and peppers, explosive devices around them to prevent their dismantling.

Colonel Herzi said the soldiers found improvised explosive devices in the houses and, on Wednesday, in a mosque. The typical ruse for the houses was a mannequin with an explosive nearby and a hole or tunnel covered by a rug.

“I can say that one-third of the houses are booby-trapped,” he said. “You get into the houses and you see many I.E.D.’s. We had one officer who got married one day before this operation started, and then five days into it he was badly wounded and is now between life and death after an I.E.D. exploded in a booby-trapped house.”

Colonel Herzi showed large glossy pictures of what had been seen and captured, including mannequins and tunnels with ladders, I.E.D.’s and rocket launchers.

The idea behind the setups in some of the houses, he and other officers said, was that Israeli soldiers would shoot the mannequin, mistaking it for a man; an explosion would occur; and the soldiers would be driven or pulled into the hole, where they could be taken prisoner.

None have yet suffered that fate.

That may be partly because shortly after taking this neighborhood, the soldiers found a hand-drawn map with the booby traps laid out.

The elaborate nature of the snares impressed Colonel Herzi, but he and his men said they had grown increasingly less impressed with the Hamas fighters themselves.

“They are villagers with guns,” said Sergeant Almog, a gunner on an armored personnel carrier. “They don’t even aim when they shoot.”

Seven members of his unit were wounded by a rocket-propelled-grenade attack on Wednesday, he said. But he added, “We kept saying Hamas was a strong terror organization, but it was more easy than we thought it would be.”

The war has been successful, but not necessarily decisive, from Israel’s perspective, Colonel Herzi said, especially as talk of a cease-fire has grown.

“I know that in the end Hamas will say they won,” he said. “It doesn’t matter what will be the end of this war. We know they know today that they have a problem. Will they put down their weapons forever? For sure, no,

but I think they have learned a lesson from this war.”

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