Ten soldiers, including two senior officers, killed in Gaza fighting and deadly ambush

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Ten Israel Defense Forces soldiers, including two senior commanders and several officers, were killed in heavy fighting in Gaza, the army said Wednesday, bringing the death toll in the ground offensive to 115.

Nine of the soldiers were killed in a battle in the heart of Shejaiya, one of the deadliest single encounters since troops pushed into the Strip.

The IDF named those killed in the battle in Shejaiya as Col. Itzhak Ben Basat, 44, head of the Golani Brigade’s commander’s team, from Sde Ya’akov; Lt. Col. Tomer Grinberg, 35, the commander of the Golani Brigade’s 13th Battalion, from Almog; Maj. Roei Meldasi, 23, a company commander in the 13th Battalion, from Afula; Maj. Moshe Avram Bar On, 23, a company commander in the Golani Brigade’s 51st Battalion, from Ra’anana; Cpt. Liel Hayo, 22, a platoon commander in the 51st Battalion, from Shoham; Sgt. Achia Daskal, 19, a soldier in the 51st Battalion, from Haifa; Sgt. Eran Aloni, 19, of the 51st Battalion, from Ofakim. Maj. Ben Shelly, 26, a squad commander in the Israeli Air Force’s Unit 669, from Kidron; and Sgt. First Class Rom Hecht, 20, of Unit 669, from Givatayim.

Ben Basat is the most senior IDF officer to have been killed in the ground offensive against Hamas.

Staff Sgt. Oriya Yaakov, 19, of the Combat Engineering Corps’ 614th Battalion, from Ashkelon, was killed in a separate incident in northern Gaza. The army said another three soldiers were seriously wounded.

The Times of Israel was told that according to an initial investigation, on Tuesday evening infantry soldiers from the Golani Brigade, working together with armor and engineering forces, were carrying out search operations in the kasbah, or the heart of Shejaiya, long seen as one of the most heavily fortified Hamas strongholds in northern Gaza.

The initial force of four soldiers entered a cluster of three buildings — believed to have been abandoned — surrounding a courtyard, to carry out searches and found the entrance of a tunnel. As the troops entered one of the buildings, Hamas terrorists ambushed them, hurling grenades, detonating an explosive device, and opening fire on them.

All four soldiers were hit by the explosive inside the building, as gunfire continued from outside the structure.

At this stage, a second group of troops outside tried to reach them, but contact with the officer of the force was lost. Local commanders then initiated emergency procedures amid fears the soldiers could have been captured.

Several senior Golani officers immediately led forces to the area, including Ben Bassat, who led the rescue operation, Grinberg, of the 13th Battalion, and two other battalion commanders, who set up a perimeter to give the rescue force cover.

Grinberg led a flanking movement from the north, while the commander of the Golani’s reconnaissance battalion made a similar move from the south, and the commander of the 188th Armored Brigade’s 53rd Battalion did so from another angle.

During the rescue attempts the forces were under continuous gunfire from terrorists inside the buildings, who also threw grenades and set off several more large blasts.

The rescue force reached the initial group of four soldiers but found that they had all been killed. During this battle two soldiers from the Air Force’s elite Unit 669 search and rescue team were killed as they tried to break into the compound.

At that stage, Grinberg’s force came under massive fire from a second building. Troops responded, including by firing a shoulder-launched missile into the building which apparently detonated several other explosives inside and blew up the entire building.

The military believes Hamas’s Shejaiya battalion’s command and control is largely disrupted, and the terror group is operating in the area in a less organized manner, with smaller squads of terrorists. The military did not give an indication of how many operatives were killed in the fight. Hamas has not made any statements about the battle.

The deadly incident continues the Golani Brigade’s [bitter connection with Shejaiya](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-releases-details-on-shejaiya-battle-in-which-7-soldiers-died/).  During the 2014 Gaza war, seven brigade soldiers were killed when their APC was hit in fighting in Shejaiya.  The remains of one of the seven, Sgt. Oron Shaul, were captured by Hamas and are still in their hands.

Grinberg’s 13th Battalion has also been one of the hardest hit units during the October 7 Hamas onslaught, when some 3,000 terrorists overran IDF bases and communities in southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people, most of them civilians, and taking a further 240 hostage.

The battalion lost 41 soldiers that day. Nevertheless, they have been involved in some of the heaviest fighting since the launch of the ground operation aimed at freeing the hostages and destroying Hamas’s military force in the Strip.

In early November, the IDF [released audio](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/idf-releases-recording-of-tank-commander-helping-infantry-troops-before-being-killed-in-gaza/) of Grinberg speaking to Lt. Col. Salman Habaka, the commander of the 188th Armored Brigade’s 53rd Battalion, shortly before Habaka was killed during fighting in the Gaza Strip.

Habaka had assisted the Grinberg’s battalion during a fierce overnight clash, in which troops managed to fend off a Hamas ambush.

“Can I help you with something? Immediate extraction? Over,” Habaka is heard saying over the radio to Grinberg.

Grinberg asks Habaka to keep his forces in the area to cover them, in order to deploy more troops out of their armored vehicles amid the battle. “I rescued you, now you’ve come to help me. Over,” Grinberg says.

Habaka was killed later that night during clashes with Hamas gunmen.

Ben Basat, who was in the middle of retiring from the IDF but decided to remain when the war broke out, was the most senior officer to have been killed in the ground offensive against Hamas. He previously served as head of the Yiftah Brigade, a reserve commando unit, and before that as the head of the Paran Regional Brigade.

Grinberg is the eighth IDF lieutenant colonel killed since Oct. 7, and Ben Basat is the fifth colonel.

Recent days have seen intense battles in northern Gaza, particularly in the Jabalya and Shejaiya neighborhoods. There has also been fierce fighting as forces have pushed into Khan Younis, the Strip’s second city in the south.

Despite the bitter results of Tuesday’s battle, the military believes it is in the final stages of clearing Hamas from Shejaiya, which lies closest to the border with Israel and where the terror group was believed to have its strongest fortifications and stationed a major force.

The army has also said that has no alternative but to send ground troops and engineering forces into the dense warren of alleys and tunnels in order to completely destroy Hamas’s infrastructure and that airstrikes alone were not sufficient.

Illustrating the intense close combat fighting, the IDF released a video Tuesday showing a reservist of the Combat Engineering Corps’ elite Yahalom unit killing two Hamas operatives in an apartment in Shejaiya.

The clip from the soldier’s helmet camera shows him killing the first Hamas gunman in a brief exchange of fire, before a grenade is hurled at him.

The soldier, despite being wounded, gets up and rushes at the second operative, killing him from point-blank range.

Also Wednesday, the IDF said it carried out more than 250 strikes in the Gaza Strip over the past day, targeting Hamas operatives and infrastructure belonging to the terror group.

In one incident, the IDF says troops of the Bislamach Brigade and the Border Defense Corps’ 636th Combat Intelligence Collection unit identified a Hamas cell in Shejaiya preparing to fire rockets at Israel.

The soldiers directed an airstrike on the cell, the IDF said, releasing footage of the strike.

The United Nations said Tuesday that its satellite analysis agency UNOSAT had determined that 18 percent of Gaza’s structures had been destroyed since the outbreak of war with Israel.

The estimate is based on an image taken on November 26, the agency said, a 49 percent increase in the total number of structures affected since a previous assessment on November 7.

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza has claimed that since the start of the war, more than 18,400 people have been killed, mostly civilians. These figures cannot be independently verified and are believed to include some 7,000 Hamas terrorists, according to Israel, as well as civilians killed by misfired Palestinian rockets. Another estimated 1,000 terrorists were killed in Israel during the October 7 onslaught.

Reports on the intense fighting came a day after the IDF said that it had recovered the bodies of civilian [Eden Zacharia](https://www.timesofisrael.com/taken-captive-eden-zach-zacharia-went-to-rave-for-sense-of-freedom/) and IDF Warrant Officer Ziv Dado, who were taken hostage by Hamas on October 7.

The operation to recover the bodies from the Gaza Strip was carried out by the Military Intelligence Directorate’s Unit 504, and the 551st Brigade. They were found in a tunnel deep in the enclave, near the home of [Ahmed Ghandour](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-confirms-senior-commanders-killed-in-earlier-gaza-fighting/), the former commander of Hamas’s northern Gaza Brigade, who was recently killed in an Israeli strike.

Zacharia, 27, was taken hostage from the Supernova rave near Re’im, It was not immediately clear whether she had died during the attack or at a later date. Dado, 36, a logistics supervisor in the Golani Brigade’s 51st Battalion, was killed during the October 7 onslaught. He already had a funeral held on October 25, having been declared a “fallen soldier held by a terror group.”

After their bodies were brought back to Israel and identified by medical and rabbinical authorities, their families were notified.

During the operation to recover the bodies, Master Sgt. (res.) [Gal Meir Eisenkot](https://www.timesofisrael.com/son-of-war-cabinet-minister-and-ex-idf-chief-eisenkot-among-2-soldiers-killed-in-gaza/) — the [son of war cabinet minister Gadi Eisenkot](https://www.timesofisrael.com/your-loss-will-not-be-in-vain-war-minister-ex-idf-chief-eisenkot-eulogizes-slain-son/) — and Master Sgt. (res.) Eyal Meir Berkowitz were killed, and other soldiers were wounded.

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant revealed Tuesday that Israeli troops were “operating deep underground” in Gaza, in a statement following an assessment with the 162nd Division and shortly after the return of the bodies was announced.

“These operations are also being carried out above ground, but there is also a deep descent into the depths, to find bunkers, war rooms, communication centers, ammunition depots and meeting rooms,” Gallant said.

“We will see these things in footage in the coming days,” he added.

It is believed that 135 hostages remain in Gaza — not all of them alive — after 105 civilians were released from Hamas captivity during a weeklong truce in late November. Four hostages were released prior to that, and one was rescued by troops. The Israel Defense Forces has confirmed the deaths of 18 of those still held by Hamas, due to new intelligence and findings obtained by troops operating in Gaza.