The 7 October Hamas Attack

A Preliminary Assessment of the Israeli Intelligence, Military and Policy Failures

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On 7 October 2023, Palestinian militants led by Hamas launched a complex coordinated attack on Israel from the Gaza Strip, triggering an Israeli ground invasion combined with an aerial bombing campaign. The Hamas fighters killed around 1,200 people and took more than 250 hostages, while the death toll from Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip exceeded 31,600 in mid-March 2024. The Hamas attack not only shocked the whole world but also caught most people by surprise. Probably only a few could have imagined that the Palestinian organisation that controls the Gaza Strip could carry out such an attack on Israel. Following 7 October, several questions arose. Why Israeli intelligence could not predict the attack, and why did security and defence forces not react in time? The Israeli Government promised a full investigation once the Gaza ground offensive launched in response to the attack was over. But even without knowing more details of the events, we might still be able to provide a preliminary assessment of the surrounding Israeli intelligence failures based on the reports and accounts made public in the international media. Three months after the attack, the publicly available information showed that the Israel Defense Forces were unprepared and there was no battle plan in place in case Hamas militants broke out of the Gaza Strip with large forces. Clarifying what happened will be crucial not only to learn from the mistakes, but also because other actors or adversaries can learn from Hamas and copy its tactics.

Keywords: *Israel, Hamas, Palestine, Gaza, terrorism*

Introduction

It probably goes without saying that the historical background of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is not easy to summarise in a simple but adequate and still, somewhat comprehensive way, with all the various surrounding issues. Some call this conflict the

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"maze of conflicts", not without any reason. Answering the tough questions, like why the Holy Land became a focal point throughout history and whether there can be lasting peace in the region, is a more complex endeavour than one might think.[2] It is beyond debate that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is one of the longest-running in the Middle East, with deep historical roots, which divides both the great powers and the world's public opinion. The essence of the dispute is that Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs claim the same historical land[3] based on the ideology of political Zionism and Palestinian nationalism, not to mention the religious beliefs of the two sides. Although the area in question is only around 24,000 square meters, approximately 15 million residents share this land, having very serious grievances and disagreements. The answer to the question of why the Israelis and the Palestinians are fighting over such a small area of land is far from simple, and it is well beyond the scope of this paper. But after the deadliest Hamas attack and after Israel's military response using overwhelming force exacting a heavy death toll on the Palestinians, I am afraid the solution has never been farther than it is today in 2024.

7 October, and the Israel–Hamas war that followed was not the first time that a confrontation between the two sides took a heavy human toll, caused severe economic damage, and increased mutual enmity and mistrust to levels hindering dialogue, not only about resolving the conflict but even on its management.[4] As neither side expects the conflict to last long or escalate ferociously, it tends to become intractable, dominated by uncontrolled violence. The failure of both sides and the international community to resolve it quickly, or even to moderate its intensity, results in a protracted confrontation.[5]

In the following pages, I will first briefly summarise the events of 7 October, and then I will explain what mistakes or "failures", based on the information that has been made public so far, may have played a role in the fact that Israel was unable to prevent the attack or react quickly to it. I will show how an overreliance on technology, misjudgment of threats, a false sense of security and unpreparedness, combined with flawed policies, have increased Israel's vulnerability in recent years. After this, I will also touch on Israel's defence strategy so that 7 October and the subsequent events can be more easily put into context. In the end, the paper concludes with conclusions.

Hamas, and the events of 7 October

Hamas (its official name, the Islamic Resistance Movement) is a Palestinian Sunni Islamist political and military organisation governing the Gaza Strip. It was established in 1987, after the outbreak of the First Intifada, by members of the Muslim Brotherhood

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[2]   For a rigorous overview of the Arab–Israeli and the Palestinian–Israeli conflicts see MILTON-EDWARDS–HINCHCLIFFE 2008: 8–35. For more information on the historical background see PAPPÉ 2007; BUBER 2005.

[3]   The territory of the former British Mandate for Palestine, which consisted of Palestine and Transjordan.

[4]   Conflicts that defy resolution for one reason or another can only be managed, as management remains the default option, which is usually also perceived as an incipient stage toward resolution (BAR-SIMAN-TOV 2007: 3).

[5]   BAR-SIMAN-TOV 2007: 1.

and religious factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).[6] In 2006, Hamas surprisingly won the Palestinian legislative election and took control of the Gaza Strip in the following year from the secular rival Fatah. After the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip, Israel declared Gaza under Hamas a hostile entity, introduced a series of sanctions, and implemented a strict blockade with Egyptian assistance. Since then, multiple wars have taken place between Hamas fighters and Israel, including in 2008–2009, 2012, 2014 and 2021.[7] The organisation has carried out attacks against Israeli civilians, including suicide bombings and indiscriminate rocket attacks. The United States and the European Union, among others, designated Hamas as a terrorist organisation, while in contrast, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently described the Hamas militants as "resistance fighters" trying to protect their lands and people while calling Israel a "terrorist state".[8]

On 7 October 2023, during the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah, the Palestinian militants launched an attack on Israel, combining gunmen breaching security barriers and a massive barrage of rockets fired from the Gaza Strip. The surprise attack came 50 years and a day after Egyptian and Syrian forces launched an assault against the State of Israel during the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur in an effort to reclaim territory taken by Israel in 1967. According to Ely Karmon, the strategic goals of Hamas in its attack on Israel were the disruption of the normalisation process between Saudi Arabia and Israel and the weakening of the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority in the West Bank.[9]

According to Reuters, at about 6:30 a.m. local time, Hamas fired thousands of rockets into southern Israel hitting several cities including Tel Aviv, Rehovot, Gedera and Ashkelon.[10] Mohammed Deif, the head of the Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, announced the start of "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood". By 7:40 a.m., it was clear that the barrage of rockets served as cover for an unprecedented multipronged infiltration of Hamas fighters into Israel while it also managed to overwhelm the Israeli Iron Dome

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[6] The historical background of Hamas can be traced back to 1967. According to the Palestinian movement's narrative, the organisation evolved through four main stages, the first of which was the construction of the main elements of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gaza Strip between 1967 and 1976. The leading figure behind the Muslim Brotherhood's rise was Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, who founded the Islamic Center in Gaza in 1973, which served as the centre for the administration of religious and educational Islamic institutions in the Gaza Strip (Mishal–Sela 2000: 18–19).

[7] For a historical context on Israel's war against Hamas see Shlaim 2009: 307–317. Avi Shlaim argues that the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the aftermath of the 1967 war was rather about territorial expansionism than security, and Gaza is a "classic case of colonial exploitation in the post-colonial era". According to Shlaim, the Palestinian people are a "normal people with normal aspirations", and their aspiration is to have a piece of land to call their own on which they can live in freedom and dignity. Although, as Shlaim notes, Hamas is not an innocent party in this conflict either.

[8] Encyclopaedia Britannica 2023; The Times of Israel 2023b. For more on Hamas, see Mishal–Sela 2000. Considering the complexity of defining terrorism and the lack of a widely accepted general definition, in this paper, I will refrain from using this term, as questions like, what is terrorism and who is a terrorist would require a detailed answer and more clarification which cannot be covered here as part of this paper. According to Richard English, terrorism represents a "subspecies of warfare", involving heterogeneous violence used or threatened with a political aim, a variety of acts, targets and factors, possessing a psychological dimension producing terror or fear. For more on these questions see English 2009: 1–26. For more on Hamas and Palestinian terrorism see English 2016: 148–185.

[9] Karmon 2023.

[10] Williams 2023.

missile defence system. As come to light, Palestinian fighters had crossed into Israel through breaches in security barriers separating the Gaza Strip and Israel. As reports kept coming in, videos and photos of the unfolding events started to appear online on social media platforms and news sites. One video showed at least six motorcycles with fighters crossing through a hole in a metal barrier.[11] Another one uploaded to social media showed a bulldozer tearing down a section of the security fence.[12] While most of the gunmen entered Israel through breaches of the security barrier, a video was circulating on the Internet showing one Hamas fighter using a paraglider, and even a motorboat carrying gunmen was seen heading to Zikim, an Israeli coastal town with a military base.[13]

Around 9:45 a.m., the Israeli Air Force started carrying out attacks in the Gaza Strip. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said at 10:00 a.m. that Palestinian fighters penetrated at least three military installations around the border – the Beit Hanoon border crossing (called Erez by Israel), the Zikim base and the Gaza division headquarters at Reim. According to news reports, Hamas gunmen raided the Israeli towns of Sderot, Be'eri and Ofakim, 30 km east of the Gaza Strip. Although residents of southern Israel fortified their homes to function as bomb shelters, now they were using them as panic rooms as Israel's military ordered residents to shelter inside. But by late evening, Israeli troops were still working to clear communities overrun by Hamas militants.[14] The preliminary assessments said some 700 were killed in the attack while the number of wounded was above 2,000. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused Hamas of going house-to-house and killing civilians, while the Israeli media reported gunmen seized at least 150 hostages. Palestinian Islamic Jihad said it was holding soldiers. Israeli air attacks continued during the night, as did rocket fire into southern Israel. The fact that the IDF was still fighting hundreds of Hamas infiltrators overnight in 22 locations near the Gaza Strip was a clear sign of the breadth of the surprise attack and indicated the scale of the escalation of the conflict in Israel and Gaza.[15]

Many Israelis had no idea that Hamas gunmen infiltrated Israel because they had turned their phones off for the Jewish Sabbath. When they found out that Palestinian militants, armed with rifles and rocket launchers, had infiltrated their neighbourhood, they did not understand what was happening.[16] Details of the events of 7 October started to emerge only on the following day as survivors recounted the most complex and brazen attack on their nation since the 1973 Arab–Israeli war.[17] As it turned out, on 7 October, some 3,000 Hamas fighters crossed the border from Gaza into Israel, killing about 1,200 people (including 360 at a music festival called Nova), engaging in widespread violence, including sexual assault,[18] and taking some 240 hostages.

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[11]   The Washington Post 2023.
[12]   The Times of Israel 2023a.
[13]   Al Jazeera 2023a; WILLIAMS 2023.
[14]   Al Jazeera 2023a; WILLIAMS 2023.
[15]   DUTTA et al. 2023.
[16]   KINGSLEY et al. 2023.
[17]   BYMAN et al. 2023.
[18]   GETTLEMAN et al. 2023.

Overreliance on technology is a vulnerability

The surprise attack by Hamas proved to be a stunning intelligence failure by Israel that involved undetected warnings, overwhelmed missile defences, and a slow response by apparently unprepared security and defence forces. It appears that Hamas pulled off a total tactical surprise, as evidenced by the approximately 1,200 Israeli deaths. The Palestinian militant group broke through walls with the help of bulldozers, sending thousands of fighters through, killing soldiers and civilians in long-lasting shooting sprees. Reading the initial reports, it was difficult to believe that none of Israel's intelligence services had specific warnings that Hamas was planning a sophisticated attack involving coordinated land, air and sea strikes. The attack surprised even many Western intelligence agencies, although they do not track Hamas activities as closely as Israel or Egypt do. Experts were taken aback by the attack's success as well because, over the years, Israel has established a network of sensors, electronic intercepts and human informants throughout the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, the Jewish State and its neighbours have previously made significant efforts to locate and disrupt Hamas networks, frequently stopping the shipment of missile parts. After 7 October, a series of questions about Israel's intelligence and defence failures started to become more and more pressing. Why was Israel's Iron Dome missile defence system, which is now more than ten years old, apparently overwhelmed by a barrage of inexpensive missiles? How did Hamas amass such a large arsenal of rockets without Israeli intelligence noticing the growing stockpile? Was Israel focusing too much on Hezbollah and the West Bank rather than on Gaza with its military and intelligence resources? And why were so many Israeli forces on leave or far away from the border, allowing Hamas to capture Israeli military bases near the Gaza Strip?[19]

The Iron Dome system got overwhelmed because Hamas was able to fire more rockets into Israel than the system's interceptors could handle, and in effect, it became oversaturated with targets. It was designed to protect densely populated areas, so it will not launch any interceptors if it determines that an incoming missile or rocket will land in an unpopulated area. Also, it has only a limited number of Tamir interceptors, and reloading the system takes time. Judging from the way Hamas used the rocket barrage as a cover for the ground assault, the Palestinian group has probably studied the system's vulnerabilities over the years. In addition, it is possible that Hamas used even a new type of missile on 7 October, which was perhaps harder to intercept. According to Janes, a defence and open-source intelligence firm, Hamas used a mix of missile systems during the attack, and we also know that the Palestinian group employed small drones that dropped munitions on Israeli military positions. Overall, Hamas fired a wide variety of rockets and missiles, combining the new ones with the older models. Many of these rockets and missiles were Soviet and Iranian-designed weapons (Grad, Fajr-3 and Fajr-5 rockets) smuggled into the Gaza Strip

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[19] Barnes et al. 2023a.

as components and then assembled covertly, while a large part of Hamas's rocket arsenal (Qassam-type rockets) was domestically manufactured.[20]

Since Hamas took control of the coastal strip in 2007, Gaza has been under an Israeli blockade supported by Egypt. The blockade restricts the import of goods that could be used to manufacture weapons while also preventing most people from leaving the territory. Tensions between Israelis and Palestinians have been rising for months before the attack, as have warnings of an impending war.[21] But recently, the focus has been on the West Bank, where recurring Israeli military operations have resulted in frequent gun battles with Palestinians, although tit-for-tat battles have also occurred in the Gaza Strip between Israel and Palestinian militants. In addition, Israeli intelligence agencies believed that Iran and Hezbollah posed the most serious threat to Israel, and this belief diverted attention and resources away from the fight against Hamas.

The IDF was convinced that the security fence along the border – a long, underground, and above-ground wall made of reinforced concrete that was finished in 2021 – would successfully keep Hamas militants out of the border communities. Additionally, a surveillance system consisting primarily of remote-operated machine guns, cameras and sensors was also in place at the border. Senior Israeli military officials thought that the wall would make it nearly impossible for Hamas militants to enter Israel, thereby reducing the number of soldiers that needed to be stationed nearby. However, the shortcomings of that technology were made clear by Hamas's attack.[22] The Palestinian militants exploited vulnerabilities created by Israel's reliance on technology at the Gaza border neutralising long-range cameras, sophisticated sensors and remote-controlled weapons to breach the high-tech fence.[23] As Emily Harding points out, while Israel's technological advancement has resulted in some impressive intelligence wins in the past, this overreliance on technology most likely contributed to the intelligence failure in October 2023.[24] This time, the Hamas fighters were better prepared than the Israel Defense Forces. They had a sophisticated plan and must have been training for months, if not years, for its execution.

Incorrect threat assessment and a false sense of security

Israel has used extensive human networks in Gaza and intercepts of electronic communications to pick up any signs of a potential attack.[25] Reportedly, members of Israel's

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[20] Janes 2023; Hambling 2023; Ben-David 2021. According to Israeli military and intelligence officials, unexploded ordnance was a main source of explosives for Hamas. In addition, thousands of bullets and hundreds of guns and grenades had been stolen from poorly guarded military bases (Abi-Habib–Frenkel 2023).

[21] According to news reports, the CIA issued a pair of classified intelligence reports in the days leading up to the Hamas attack on Israel, warning of a potential escalation in violence (Barnes et al. 2023b).

[22] Bergman et al. 2023; Bergman–Kingsley 2023.

[23] Swaine et al. 2023.

[24] Davis et al. 2023.

[25] Human intelligence (HUMINT) is intelligence gathered by means of human sources. Signals intelligence (SIGINT) is intelligence gathered by interception of signals, communication (COMINT) or electronic signals (ELINT).

domestic security service, Shin Bet,[26] monitoring Hamas activity in the Gaza Strip on the eve of 7 October, assumed at first that the Palestinian organisation was only conducting an exercise. They must have believed that Hamas had no interest in carrying out terrorist attacks against Israel anymore.[27] Moreover, Unit 8200, Israel's signals intelligence agency, even suspended eavesdropping on Hamas communications in 2022 because they deemed it unnecessary.[28] Nevertheless, the head of Shin Bet, Ronen Bar, thought that Hamas might attempt a small-scale attack. He ordered a group of elite counterterrorist forces to deploy to Israel's southern border, who soon found themselves in the middle of a battle with thousands of Hamas gunmen.[29]

One possible explanation for 7 October is that Israeli intelligence was caught completely off-guard by the attack. This scenario would suggest that Hamas fighters avoided discussing the plans over mobile phones or other means of communication that could have been intercepted by Israeli intelligence agencies. For this to work, everyone aware of the attack plans had to have used face-to-face planning exclusively, and the number of participants had to stay small for Hamas to be able to elude detection. However, if hundreds of people were aware of the plans, Hamas essentially proved that its attempts to disrupt Israel's informant network were successful and managed to deceive its adversary. On the other hand, as others have noted, despite Hamas's designation as a terrorist organisation, the Israeli Government previously decided to ease some of its stringent regulations to improve the lives of Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip and issued more than 15,000 work permits to Gazans who were allowed to work in Israel.[30] Hamas might have used this opportunity to gather its own intelligence, to recruit informants, and to facilitate its operations while preparing for the 7 October attack.[31]

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[26]   The Israel Security Agency (ISA) or Shin Bet, is Israel's internal security service. It has a crucial role in providing intelligence for counterterrorist operations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

[27]   Regarding the characteristics of the operational environment, according to the IDF's military strategy, there was a "decline in threats from regular national armies and a rise in threats from irregular or semiregular substate organizations supported by Iran". The document also notes that there was a "decline in the threat of maneuvers into Israel's territory with limited threat of infiltration to carry out hostile terrorist activity or for propaganda purposes" (Belfer Center Special Report 2016: 8).

[28]   Unit 8200 was not even operational near the border on the morning of 7 October due to a two-year-old decision to reduce personnel and halt operations overnight and on weekends. This move left the IDF without a key-asset for wiretapping and code decryption. According to media reports, the decision was made after the IDF's Intelligence Corps concluded that intelligence gathering methods utilised by 8200 would not help detect a threat from Gaza in real time. As a result, the intelligence unit could not provide a clearer picture of what was happening during the first hours of the attack (The Times of Israel 2023c).

[29]   BERGMAN et al. 2023.

[30]   Palestinians working in Israel earned ten times as much as they would have earned in the Gaza Strip. These permits allowed Palestinians to cross into Israel from Gaza and work mostly menial jobs that paid far higher wages than those available inside the strip. More than 100,000 Palestinians from the West Bank have similar permits that allow them to enter Israel for work. The Israeli Government believed that the permits – while considered as goodwill measures – gave a form of leverage over Hamas, which was genuinely interested in preserving economic understandings with the Jewish State that have provided economic opportunities to Palestinians (AKRAM–MCNEIL 2022).

[31]   Critics say the work permits were rather a vulnerability then leverage, as they allowed Hamas to gain detailed intelligence on Israeli positions and targets (GREENFIELD 2023).

It appears that Israeli officials underestimated the threat that Hamas posed for years, as Israeli Military Intelligence[32] assessments since May 2021 have indicated that Hamas had no intention of attacking Israel and possibly provoking a catastrophic counterattack. Instead, Israeli intelligence determined that Hamas was trying to provoke violence in the West Bank, which is under the control of the Palestinian Authority, its rival.[33] Thus, according to Tricia Bacon, Israel's primary intelligence failure was not recognising the shift in Hamas's intentions in addition to its capabilities,[34] despite the fact that both are vital to evaluate the threat posed by any militant organisation. 7 October proved that the Israeli calculus failed as a highly capable group managed to conceal a change of intent.[35]

According to Jessica Davis, it is also astonishing that Hamas could plan and finance the preparations for the attacks of 7 October, likely over the course of at least two years, without being detected by Israeli or U.S. intelligence. As she notes, after 11 September 2001, the international community has made financial intelligence and counterterrorist financing a key pillar of counterterrorism. The Hamas attack was complex and expensive, and it is still too early to tell what it might have cost, but according to Davis's estimates, 7 October cost probably way more than one million USD. The fact that Israeli intelligence, and especially the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing network, missed millions of dollars' worth of procurement, planning and preparation activities by Hamas is troubling.[36] This also shows that the Palestinian organisation had not been a counterterrorist focus for many years, and not just for Israel. At the same time, as Beth Sanner, a former Deputy Director of National Intelligence for Mission Integration, points out, there is no such thing as perfect intelligence collection, and Israeli intelligence services are among those who are good at learning from their mistakes.[37]

Unprepared, disorganised and without a plan

Reportedly, Israeli officials obtained Hamas's 40-page battle plan for the 7 October attack more than a year before it happened, but military and intelligence officials dismissed the plan as merely aspirational, considering it too difficult for Hamas to carry out. The document, code-named "Jericho Wall" by the Israeli authorities, outlined the invasion point by point, describing a methodical assault designed to overwhelm the fortifications around the Gaza Strip, storm military bases and take over cities. The plan also included

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[32] The Israeli Military Intelligence, or Aman, is the central military intelligence body of the Israel Defense Forces, and as such, it is the largest component of the Israeli intelligence community, next to Shin Bet and Mossad.

[33] AL-MUGHRABI 2023.

[34] To provide military commanders with an understanding of an enemy's style or way of war, intelligence analysts are taught to use Military Capabilities Analysis, to assess how conventional military forces intend to fight. But this approach is of little help in uncovering how non-state/substate actors or militant organisations fight. Understanding unconventional is more challenging, and as such, requires a different approach (SCHULTZ–DEW 2006: 17–37).

[35] DAVIS et al. 2023.

[36] DAVIS et al. 2023.

[37] BARNES et al. 2023a.

details about the location and size of IDF forces, communication hubs and other sensitive information, raising questions about how Hamas gathered its intelligence and whether there were leaks inside the Israeli security establishment.[38]

Three months prior to the attacks, an analyst from Unit 8200 warned that Hamas had carried out an intense, daylong exercise that resembled the details in the previously acquired plan. However, the senior officers dismissed the worries about a possible Hamas attack. According to other reports, surveillance soldiers belonging to the Combat Intelligence Corps and serving on a base in Nahal Oz reported signs that something unusual was underway at the Gaza border. The activity reported included information on Hamas operatives conducting training sessions multiple times a day, digging holes and placing explosives along the border. According to the accounts of the soldiers, no action was taken by those who received the reports.[39] It seems that the top commanders of the IDF were aware of Hamas's preparations but failed to act. Despite the series of consultations that took place in the hours leading to the attack, the senior officers concluded that no definitive explanation could be reached regarding questions of the unusual Hamas activity, so they sought additional intelligence from Unit 8200.[40]

Although we cannot rely solely on analysis published in the mainstream Western media, and we must always read news reports with some healthy skepticism, it is worth reading the various reports from different sources while looking for answers. A New York Times investigation published on 30 December 2023 found that on 7 October, the Israeli security and defence forces were disorganised, the troops were out of position, and there was no plan in place for a massive Hamas attack that would have involved thousands or even hundreds of fighters breaching the security barrier into Israel attacking towns and military bases.[41] According to their sources, when a commander from the division overseeing military operations along the Gaza border called the IDF General Headquarters (GHQ) in Tel Aviv, requesting all available reinforcements because their base was under attack, still nobody could accurately describe the scope of the attack yet.[42] The first orders for deployment came from Tel Aviv more than an hour after the rocket barrage from Hamas began (7:43 a.m.), at which point all available units were ordered to move south. It took hours for the military leadership to recognise that there was a Hamas invasion underway.[43] The slow response of the Israel Defense Forces on 7 October gave Hamas militants many hours to infiltrate more than 20 towns outside of the Gaza Strip, where they killed around 1,200 people and took an estimated 250 hostages.[44]

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38   BERGMAN–GOLDMAN 2023.
39   SILKOFF 2023.
40   The Times of Israel 2023d.
41   GOLDMAN et al. 2023.
42   The Israel Defense Forces has four regional commands, the Northern Command, the Central Command, the Southern Command and the Home Front Command. The division responsible for military operations on the border with the Gaza Strip is known as the Gaza Division, also called the 143rd Division or Fire Fox Territorial Division, and it is subordinated to the Southern Command. See the description of the regional commands on the IDF's official website at www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/regional-commands.
43   GOLDMAN et al. 2023.
44   LEATHERBY et al. 2023.

The civilian guard of Kitat Konnenut is supposed to serve as the first line of defence in the towns and villages close to the border. However, they were poorly equipped, had varying training levels, and were disorganised.[45] Furthermore, the training of Israeli military reservists presumed that Israeli intelligence would be able to provide warning of a looming invasion, allowing reservists to prepare for deployment within 24 hours. Meaning reservists were not ready to mobilise and deploy quickly enough. They were unprepared for a Hamas invasion. This was well known to the Palestinian militants who took advantage of these mistakes.[46] To hinder Israeli mobilisation and to deny access to areas under attack, they blocked key highway intersections and main roads. Hamas managed to paralyse the Israeli military response for long hours by attacking the Reim military base in southern Israel, the regional command post, and headquarters for the Gaza Division.[47]

Commando units were among the first to mobilise after they learned about the infiltrations. While some units were on standby and received activation orders, others charged into the battle after reading the news on social media or receiving private messages. But these were mostly just small teams armed with assault rifles and handguns; they were ill-prepared for a massive clash with enemy forces. According to reports, the Palestinian militants broke through Israel's border fence in over 30 locations prepared to fight for days. They carried heavy machine guns, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, mines and more. They swiftly advanced deep into southern Israel, while the IDF misread the situation and – even during the attack – believed that Hamas would only be able to breach the security fence in just a few places. At 9 a.m., realising the dire situation, while the Shin Bet does not normally activate with the defence forces, even the head of the domestic security agency ordered all combat-trained, weapons-carrying employees to go south. There were only three infantry battalions and one tank battalion along the border with the Gaza Strip, and since 7 October was a Jewish holiday, approximately half of the 1,500 soldiers stationed in the area were on leave. In addition, as the former head of the Southern Command, General Yom Tov Samia highlighted, the three commanders of the brigades and division were housed together close to the Gaza border, which was clearly a mistake from an operational perspective, offering a high-value target for the attackers.[48]

The Hamas fighters had undergone extensive training for the attack, which had been planned for at least a year. The militants were most probably organised into different units according to their specific objectives, minimising the number of people with comprehensive knowledge of the plan. In terms of intelligence gathering and choosing their targets, Hamas had detailed information on Israel's military bases and the layout of kibbutzim. Videos of the attack, interviews with security officials, and documents found on the Hamas militants, according to media reports, reveal that the Palestinian group had

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[45] This does not mean that the civilian guards were overrun everywhere. In Mefalsim and Sa'ad, the volunteer guards engaged in firefights with the attackers and managed to protect their communities (TOLAN et al. 2023).

[46] GOLDMAN et al. 2023.

[47] FRANTZMAN 2023; GOLDMAN et al. 2023.

[48] GOLDMAN et al. 2023.

a thorough understanding of how the Israeli military operated, where it stationed specific units, and even how long it would take for reinforcements to arrive.[49]

In contrast, Israeli soldiers had to rely on social media posts and messenger apps for communication and targeting information during the chaos of the first hours of the attack. As both General Samia and former Gaza Division deputy commander Amir Avivi said, the Israel Defense Forces did not have a plan in place to respond to a large-scale surprise Hamas attack on Israeli soil.[50] Meanwhile, due to the country's lack of strategic depth, Israel's national security doctrine follows an offensive military concept according to which the IDF must always anticipate attacks and fight its battles in enemy territory.[51]

Deterrence and the use of disproportionate force

Israel's military strategy states that "Israel is a peace-seeking nation that aspires to avoid confrontations", but "if a confrontation is forced on Israel, it will concentrate its capabilities and will win".[52] According to some Israeli experts, the Hamas attack "proved beyond doubt the Israeli argument that it is fighting a war of self-defense against a murderous terrorist organization", thus "Israel is fully justified to act in such a way that ensures that Hamas cannot continue attacking the country or threaten its security". At the same time, they note that Israel is obligated to act by the rules of war. However, this time, those "rules give Israel much greater room for maneuver because of the immense threat that Hamas poses to its security".[53]

There are four general principles for deploying the IDF's force:[54]

1. Prevent confrontation and deter the enemy: harm the enemy's capability, expand and deepen regional and international cooperation against the enemies.
2. Early warning and intelligence: maintain intelligence superiority that will provide sufficient early warning on the enemy's capabilities and intentions.
3. Defence and protection: defence in land, sea, air and cyber; defence of Israel's citizens and inhabitants, infrastructure, and its physical integrity securing its sove-reignty; preventing the enemy from making any territorial gain at the conclusion of a confrontation and reduce its achievements in all other dimensions.
4. Victory and defeat.

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[49]   KINGSLEY–BERGMAN 2023.
[50]   GOLDMAN et al. 2023.
[51]   Belfer Center Special Report 2016: 4.
[52]   Belfer Center Special Report 2016: 7.
[53]   BARUCH–CANER 2023: 3–4; The Israeli strategy also highlights that the "enemy is deployed and integrated in inhabited civilian areas in order to make it more difficult for the IDF to fight it, to increase the attacks on noncombatants, and to hinder the IDF's freedom of action". The IDF cannot allow its enemies to limit its freedom of action, which means that while it is making efforts to minimise the number of civilian casualties, depending on the operational environment, it is ready and willing to accept the risk of causing collateral damage (Belfer Center Special Report 2016: 8).
[54]   Belfer Center Special Report 2016: 11–12.

Regarding victory and defeat, the document states that the "IDF must use military superiority to achieve the objectives of the operation as defined by the political echelon in order to improve Israel's strategic situation". And, in case the use of force become necessary, one of the key political and strategic goals is to "radically change the situation until there is a shift in the strategic balance which finds expression in neutralizing players or in a significant change in their capabilities or status". In addition, the strategy mentions that in a war situation, the use of force is "characterized by a significant mobilization of military and state resources for action together with readiness to take high risks and using force at continuous high level in order to achieve victory".[55]

As per the Israeli military strategy, in emergency and war situations, at the strategic level, the aim of a campaign or military operation is to achieve victory "by creating a situation in which a cease-fire or political arrangement can be forced on the enemy from a position of strength, based on its military defeat or on its inability or lack of desire to continue fighting", as "a victory based on defeat makes an important contribution towards creating or restoring deterrence". That is why Israeli officials stated several times that the war against Hamas would last months and ruled out chances of a cease-fire despite global calls for one, as concerns grew that the conflict could escalate further while the Palestinian death toll kept rising.[56]

The IDF's strategy also includes the description of defensive efforts, where defence is to prevent the enemy from attaining territorial gains in the border areas, which refers to defence against raids, attacks and complex terrorist attacks (including from the air and sea). As the strategy points out, this capability is based on the flexibility in using IDF forces in the border areas, on reducing civilian weak spots (and evacuating civilians) in the border area, and on collecting intelligence and early warning systems.[57] This part of the strategy shows that Israel began carefully choosing its priorities and relying on flexibility over maintaining forces for every possible need and scenario.

Another relevant element of Israel's strategy that must be mentioned here is deterrence. According to the document, "deterrence is created in perception but based also on physical and concrete elements that constitute part of the enemy's considerations", and "it must be specific and adapted to each enemy". It is worth highlighting that the first and probably the most critical component of deterrence in Israeli strategic thinking is "a credible threat of severe offensive operations that will exact a heavy toll" if Israel gets attacked.[58] All of this may explain why the Israel Defense Forces would use such an amount of force that can be considered disproportionate[59] or – according to some experts and human rights organisations – even a war crime.[60] The IDF's top priority is to achieve complete victory

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[55] Belfer Center Special Report 2016: 12–14.
[56] AL-MUGHRABI et al. 2023.
[57] Belfer Center Special Report 2016: 21–22.
[58] Belfer Center Special Report 2016: 24–25. Deterrence and the use of disproportionate force in its military response in case of war was established in the so-called "Dahiya Doctrine", which dictates the use of overwhelming force and the targeting of government and civilian infrastructure during military operations (KATZ 2010).
[59] ROGERS 2023; SIBONI 2008.
[60] Amnesty International 2023.

and to restore deterrence through a credible threat. Considering the scale of the Hamas attack and the atrocities of 7 October, the IDF had to respond with overwhelming force. At the same time, it must be mentioned that before 7 October, the Israeli strategic thinking was that as long as the IDF was able to establish deterrence, it would not be necessary to destroy the capabilities of Hamas and Hezbollah.[61] Behind this rationale was that when these organisations are aware that they are responsible for the economy, services and the lives of their people, they will not dare to use violence and engage in terrorist activities against Israel. Which also means that in case Israel temporarily loses its ability to maintain its deterrence, the IDF must restore it.

Conclusions

There is still much to learn about what Israeli intelligence knew and what warning signs were ignored or missed. There was an intelligence failure indeed, but probably it is too early to determine how serious it was. And it was more of a combination of intelligence and policy failures than a mistake solely by the intelligence agencies.[62] The IDF bears almost exclusive responsibility for national intelligence assessment and strategic planning. The basic professional interest of the military echelon requires identifying military risk elements in political and military policies, analysing them, and preparing an appropriate response. Furthermore, the military echelon tends to think in terms that increase the state's security threats (worst case scenarios), because the army, by definition and essence, must be prepared for the worst.[63] The military rarely receives a clear mission, and in the absence of a clear political-security directive, it has to interpret the political leadership's intentions for itself to translate them into military actions to further the intentions of the political level.[64]

Since intelligence agencies are supposed to be apolitical and there is no such thing as perfect intelligence, as Daniel Byman points out, they make convenient scapegoats. But their failures should not excuse the policy decisions that shaped intelligence priorities and capabilities and the very nature of the threat. Since policymakers set a state's priorities and allocate funds to intelligence agencies, there is a close relationship between intelligence and policy. And intelligence services frequently struggle to persuade decision-makers that a threat exists.[65] According to Richard Betts, many supposed intelligence failures stem from policymaker disbelief. As he notes, psychological characteristics of leaders are more likely to cause significant shortcomings in attack warning, operational evaluation, and intelligence for strategic planning than the inability of analysts to identify relevant data.

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[61] See quotes from Moshe Ya'alon, former Israeli Minister of Defense (2013–2016), and Amos Yadlin (2006–2010), the former chief of Military Intelligence on deterring Hamas and Hezbollah (Belfer Center Special Report 2016: 1, 24).
[62] BERGMAN et al. 2023; BARNES et al. 2023a.
[63] KOBI 2007: 102.
[64] KOBI 2007: 105–106.
[65] DAVIS et al. 2023.

Since officials frequently hear accurate estimates but disregard them, policy failure and intelligence failure are inextricably linked.[66]

It is important to highlight that the military can influence the decision-making process of the political leadership. As Michael Kobi notes, civil control over the military defines the political orders of priority and subordinates the military level to them in order to carry out the goals set by the political level. However, the decision-making process that takes place between the political and the military level can be described as a reciprocal influence. In this context, the influence of the military can also be viewed as a challenge to civil control. There is an inherent imbalance between the military echelon and the political level, which is likely to be exacerbated when managing a violent confrontation due to the traditional structural weaknesses of the political level. In certain cases, the political leadership can even find itself in a situation where it is incapable of efficiently reviewing the military's activity.[67]

The military's influence on political decision-making is based on three main inputs: intelligence assessment, strategic planning, and the implementation of the directives of the political level. The potential influence of Military Intelligence (MI) on policy formation has grown in Israel due to its proximity to the prime minister, elevated status and expanded role. The primary function of MI in the Israeli national security establishment is to provide warnings by focusing on identifying potential security threats to the country and signs that indicate security deterioration and escalation of violence, which are prelude to war. However, this method focuses on military-security concerns, and the assessments typically highlight risks rather than prospects. In the past, this tendency of intelligence has resulted in errors in assessment or flawed assessments of the adversary's political initiatives. As Michael Kobi puts it, such errors are liable to produce a "surprise" for the intelligence level, and thus for the political level as well. The intelligence agencies devote significant effort and resources to collecting detailed information, but far less effort is given to research and intelligence assessment itself. In addition to the description and analysis of the facts about the adversary and the assessments themselves, the evaluations of the research units in the intelligence community presented to the political level also contain basic assumptions and a general conception. However, the basic assumptions serve only as a starting point for understanding the goals, military and political plans of the enemy.[68]

Reportedly, Israeli intelligence and security officials tried for months to alert Benjamin Netanyahu, the country's prime minister, to the fact that the political turmoil brought on by his domestic policies was undermining national security and giving Israel's enemies more confidence.[69] Despite these warnings, Netanyahu disregarded them and persisted in pursuing his policies, which likely left Israel vulnerable and exposed to an attack. On 7 October, the Prime Minister moved quickly to declare war on Hamas in Gaza, later repeatedly stressing that Israel will not stop its military operations until it accomplishes all its objectives, chief among them being the destruction of Hamas. Three months after

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[66] Betts 1978: 61–89.
[67] Kobi 2007: 106–107.
[68] Kobi 2007: 108.
[69] Fabian–Fulbright 2023.

the launch of the Israeli ground invasion of the Gaza Strip, as a new phase of the war had just begun, it was still not clear if the main objective of the military response was even realistic, and what have the IDF achieved so far in Gaza.

In 2009, Avi Shlaim noted that "no amount of military escalation could break the spirit of Hamas or its hold on power", since it is a movement that glorifies victimhood and martyrdom, and dealing with such a movement, military force has its limits. And while Israel keeps justifying its resort to force by invoking its right to security and self-defence, it denies even the most elementary security to the people living in the Gaza Strip.[70] Whether Shlaim was right about Hamas being unbreakable remains to be seen.

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[70]   Shlaim 2009: 316.

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