

The October 7 Attack: An Assessment of the Intelligence Failings

By Michel Wyss

Hours after the Hamas attack of October 7 began, they were widely attributed to an apparent Israeli intelligence failure, with pundits pointing to several possible sources, including a misunderstanding of Hamas' intentions, cognitive biases, and an overreliance on the country's technological superiority. To date, however, there have been few systematic analyses that examine in detail the various causes of the apparent inability of Israel's intelligence services to provide warning before the attack. This article reviews the relevant data that has since become publicly available. Building on previous literature on surprise attacks and intelligence failures, it examines both Israel's political level and intelligence level prior to October 7, 2023. Drawing some preliminary conclusions, its findings suggest that the attack was likely not the result of a single glaring failure but rather the accumulation of several problems at both levels.

A year after Hamas' onslaught in Southern Israel, which resulted in the deaths of at least 1,195 civilians and security personnel and the abduction of an additional 251, tensions across the region remain high.¹ In Gaza, the Israeli Defense Forces continue military operations amidst a large and continuing death toll and extensive damage to infrastructure. The Israeli government's initial stated aims were to degrade the military capabilities of Hamas and associated terrorist groups, secure the release of Israeli hostages, and remove the Islamist movement from power.² But the conflict Israel is engaged in is much wider than Gaza now. A year on from October 7, Israel is waging an intense military campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon, engaged in a confrontation across the region with the various nodes of the "Axis of Resistance," including the Houthis and pro-Tehran Iraqi militias, and—in the wake of the October 1 ballistic missile strikes on its territory—is on the brink of direct war with Iran.

At the time of publication, many aspects of the October 7 attack

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remain uncertain, murky, and contested. Some analysts, the U.S. intelligence community, and reportedly even Hamas leaders themselves have noted the group's surprise at the ease with which its operatives breached the barrier separating the Gaza Strip from Israel, as well as the slowness of the Israeli response.³ A number of articles have invoked the notion of a "catastrophic success"^a that, while briefly overwhelming Israeli security forces, would lead to devastation among the Palestinian population of Gaza.⁴ Other pundits have argued that Hamas meticulously planned its operation with the primary objective of "[goad] the Israelis into Gaza for a prolonged confrontation."⁵ Some media reports even suggest that the attackers had prepared to penetrate even deeper into Israeli territory, carrying supplies for several days to push as far as the West Bank, with the intent of attacking larger Israeli cities along the way.⁶

Finally, an assessment by the Royal United Services Institute states that "Hamas fighters deviated significantly from their own plan during its execution [...as the] original planning documents showed that Hamas had intended to fortify the positions it had seized and use hostages to complicate the IDF's retaking of these positions." However, the chaotic massacre, carried out in large part by some 1,000 Gazans who followed the Hamas strike force through the barrier, "diverted efforts to prepare for a deliberate defense."⁷

A similar panoply of different interpretations and assessments concerns the sources of Israel's failure to anticipate and prevent the October 7 attack. The first takes on who or what was to blame for the security lapse emerged even as the attacks were still unfolding, and they multiplied in the days that followed.⁸ Among other things, pundits and experts pointed their fingers at Israeli intelligence relying on a flawed "conception" relying on "wishful thinking:" namely that Hamas was deterred from seeking a violent confrontation with Israel and was instead busy with governing Gaza, leading subsequent governments to allow Qatari funds streaming into Gaza; "the toxic relationship between a far-right government and the intelligence services;" "political instability;" an overreliance on "technological superiority;" as well as a lack of appreciation for the "the creativity and competence" of Hamas and

a Writing about regime change, Alexander B. Downes has described "catastrophic success" as the achievement of short-term objectives that ultimately lead to disastrous long-term consequences. See Alexander B. Downes, *Catastrophic Success: Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Goes Wrong* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), p. 5. Similarly, James J. Wirtz has argued that while surprise attacks may succeed at the operational level, success at the strategic and political level is far more elusive, and that successful operational surprise "may even hasten defeat by mobilizing the victim (e.g., the U.S. response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor) or by expending scarce assets without achieving a decisive victory (for example, the fate of the Nazi offensive through the Ardennes forest in the winter of 1944)." See James J. Wirtz, "Theory of Surprise," in Richard K. Betts and Thomas G. Mahnken eds., *Paradoxes of Strategic Intelligence: Essays in Honor of Michael I. Handel* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 104.

its “operational capabilities,” to name only a few.⁹

Early analysis was further compounded by several alleged “facts” that were initially taken at face value but later turned out to be controversial, dubious, or outright false. First, within days there were media assertions about a deep Iranian involvement in the operation,¹⁰ but evidence has remained elusive¹¹ and Iranian government officials have offered contradictory statements.^b Initially, there were also assessments that Israeli intelligence had received no prior warnings and indications at all about a possible Hamas attack,¹² which as will be elaborated below, turned out to be wrong.^c Finally, there were also rumors about Gazan workers in Israel gathering intelligence for Hamas,¹³ which were later dismissed by Israel’s domestic intelligence service Shin Bet.¹⁴

In contrast to these early takes, however, systematic analyses are few and far between.^d This is not surprising, given that many of the facts and facets of the October 7 attacks are likely to remain classified for decades while at the same time, the establishment of an official commission of inquiry has become a highly politicized matter in Israel.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the anniversary of the Hamas attacks provides an opportunity to revisit the plausible sources of Israel’s failure to uncover them. As such, this article does not purport to be a final judgment or an exhaustive account. It is also important to note that it is strictly limited to the time period leading up to the assault and does not examine the actions of both Israel and Hamas during the course of the attack. Neither does it discuss other shortcomings that directly impacted the outcome of Hamas’ onslaught, including failures in military preparedness prior to the attack and the failure to respond in a timely manner. Instead, the article reviews what has become public knowledge about the intelligence failures leading up to October 7, and, with the benefit of

hindsight, offers several insights that speak to the issue of surprise and intelligence, including relating to non-state armed groups in particular.

To this end, this article first offers a brief summary of the main lessons from surprise attacks and intelligence failures, as well as their applicability to non-state armed groups. The next section examines plausible Israeli failures in the run-up to the October 7 attack at two levels of analysis, building on the previous section as well as the existing assessments and analyses. The first level is the political level, which includes Israel’s leadership, its strategic assumptions, assessments, and courses of action vis-à-vis Hamas. The second level deals with the operational/tactical aspects of intelligence, thus consisting of the various components that make up the idealized model of an “intelligence cycle,” namely planning and direction, collection, analysis, and dissemination.^e The final section of the article offers some preliminary conclusions and lessons from the failure to uncover the attacks.

Are Strategic Surprises and Intelligence Failure Inevitable?

One of the primary tasks of any intelligence service is to avoid strategic surprise.¹⁶ Yet, as numerous case studies from Pearl Harbor to 9/11 illustrate and as conventional wisdom holds, surprise (and thus failure to anticipate it as such) is almost inevitable.¹⁷ There are a number of competing schools of thought about the reasons for this conundrum. According to Erik Dahl, the so-called “traditional school” holds that although warnings and indicators typically become apparent in hindsight, intelligence failures are not only inevitable but quite natural due to cognitive biases and other psychological factors such as groupthink, mirror-imaging,^f and so on.¹⁸ Moreover, intelligence scholars such as Michael Handel, Richard Betts and others argue that often the problem is not the intelligence analyst’s warning but the policy maker’s unwillingness to believe it and subsequent failure to act on it.¹⁹

In contrast, the so-called “reformist school” tends to locate failures at the organizational and structural level, rather than at the individual level.²⁰ According to this line of thinking, intelligence failures are primarily the result of bureaucratic deficiencies such as stovepiping, rigid organizational barriers, etc.²¹ Compared to the traditionalists, the reformist school has a somewhat more optimistic outlook on the prospects of improving intelligence performance through organizational reform.²²

Furthermore, what Erik Dahl calls the “contrarian school” challenges the notion that pathologies at the individual-analytic level or the organizational-structural level are the main culprits in intelligence failures.²³ Instead, such failures are seen as the result of problems in the collection of relevant intelligence.²⁴ For example, according to Ariel Levite, actual signals and accurate warnings may have not been available in advance.²⁵ Yet “in hindsight, observers are too willing to identify all sorts of information as accurate signals of

b The U.S. intelligence community assessed early on that Iran was “surprised” by the October 7 attack and has so far offered no contradictory evidence. See Zachary Cohen, Katie Bo Lillis, Natasha Bertrand, and Jeremy Herb, “Initial US intelligence suggests Iran was surprised by the Hamas attack on Israel,” CNN, October 11, 2023. Iran’s leadership has also denied any direct involvement. See Hamidreza Azizi and Erwin van Veen, “Iranian Reaction to 7/10 and the Invasion of Gaza,” Clingendael, November 30, 2023. On the other hand, there are some statements by Iranian officials, including claims about the “strategic role in the planning and execution of the attack” of General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, who was killed by an Israeli airstrike on April 1. See “Iranian Officials Acknowledge Iran’s Role In Planning And Executing October 7 Hamas Invasion And Massacres In Southern Israel,” MEMRI, July 10, 2024. Already in December, an IRGC spokesman had characterized the attack as “revenge for the for the assassination of General Soleimani,” but the statement was retracted after a spat with Hamas. Yaghoub Fazeli, “Iran’s IRGC retracts statement on Oct. 7 attacks after rare public spat with Hamas,” Al-Arabiya, December 28, 2023.

c Israel was aware of Hamas’ plan to invade southern Israel for several years but dismissed it as “aspirational.” See Ronen Bergman and Adam Goldman, “Israel Knew Hamas’s Attack Plan More Than a Year Ago,” *New York Times*, November 30, 2023.

d So far, there are two major exceptions. The first is Avner Barnea’s preliminary analysis in the *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, which concludes that October 7 was a strategic surprise with elements of tactical surprise, facilitated primarily by cognitive biases and an inability to interpret “weak signals” accurately. See Avner Barnea, “Israeli Intelligence Was Caught Off Guard: The Hamas Attack on 7 October 2023—A Preliminary Analysis,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 37:4 (2024): pp. 1,075-1,077. The other is James J. Wirtz’s article in the *Military Strategy Magazine*, which draws on Michael Handel’s theory of surprise, and in particular his “risk paradox,” to explain how and why the events of October 7 unfolded as they did. See James J. Wirtz, “Michael Handel, October 7, and The Theory of Surprise,” *Military Strategy Magazine* 9:3 (2024): pp. 4-10.

e There are various conceptions of the intelligence cycle, some of which add “processing and exploitation” as an additional step in between collection and analysis, for example. See Mark Phythian ed., *Understanding the Intelligence Cycle* (London: Routledge, 2013).

f According to the late CIA analyst Richards Heuer, mirror-imaging occurs when analysts fill “gaps in [their] own knowledge by assuming that the other side is likely to act in a certain way” based on how they would expect their own side to behave or think. See Richards J. Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Langley, VA: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999), p. 70.

what was about to transpire when in fact these signals just share some sort of similarity with subsequent events.²⁶

A related problem arises from the fact that broad strategic warning may not provide enough clues to act on, as opposed to precise tactical warning that indicates “who is doing the acting, what is about to happen and where, when, and why it is about to occur.”^{27 g}

Finally, studies of surprise attacks and intelligence failures have mostly focused on cases of conventional interstate conflicts. Some work, particularly spurred by the 9/11 attacks, has highlighted additional challenges in dealing with surprise by non-state actors. These include the small size, diffuse nature, and comparatively short life span of a non-state actor’s organizational structure, the potentially global reach of their networks, and their specific efforts to evade surveillance.²⁸ In consequence, human intelligence (HUMINT) is often cited as a particularly important type of intelligence in order to defeat non-state armed groups—while also noting the difficulties in obtaining it.^{29 h} It has even been argued that the “lack of clear boundaries around organizations and ambiguous links between individuals and threatening groups” significantly weakens and limits the applicability of the conventional threat assessment model (threat = intent x capability).^{30 i}

The Failures to Stop October 7

For decades, Israel has faced a complex threat environment that includes numerous non-state adversaries as well as several—actual and potential—state adversaries.³¹ In the past decade alone, and before October 2023, Israel has fought several limited conflicts in Gaza, namely Operation “Protective Edge” in July–August 2014,³² “Guardian of the Walls” in May 2021,³³ “Breaking Dawn” in August 2022,³⁴ and “Shield and Arrow” in May 2023.³⁵ It has also faced large-scale protests at the Gaza border in 2018–19, dubbed the “Great March of Return,”³⁶ as well as waves of lone attacker terrorism in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Israel proper in both 2015–2016³⁷ and 2022.³⁸ There have been frequent attacks against security forces and Israeli civilians,³⁹ and—in the months leading up to the Hamas onslaught—a low-level insurrection throughout the Palestinian territories that observers at the time feared could turn into a full-scale uprising.⁴⁰ At the regional level, Israel has waged the so-called “campaign between the wars” to impede Iran’s efforts to build up offensive capabilities and entrench itself in Israel’s immediate neighborhood, and to interdict arms

transfers to Hezbollah and other Iranian proxy groups.⁴¹ Before October 7 this “whole-of-government” approach had included covert action and diplomatic efforts as well as cyber-attacks and kinetic operations in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and reportedly even Yemen.⁴² As a result, Israel’s intelligence and military assets were necessarily stretched and had to be prioritized against a wide range of adversaries.⁴³

The Political Level

The surprise nature of the October 7 attack suggests that Israel’s political, security, and military leadership in recent years neglected the threat by Hamas, focusing instead on Hezbollah and Iran.⁴⁴ As retired Israeli intelligence official Miri Eisin noted in these pages, many in Israel had been “waiting for a very similar kind of attack to be carried out by Hezbollah in the north” in the years before October 7, 2023.⁴⁵ However, it is important to consider that for more than a decade, there has been little doubt that Hezbollah’s capabilities have indeed exceeded those of Hamas and that a new war in Lebanon would be devastating for both sides, so it seems unsurprising that the Lebanese terrorist group was given a higher priority by the Israeli security establishment.^{46 j} At the same time, it would be wrong to conclude that Israel was completely unaware of the potential threat of Hamas. The IDF’s new operational concept introduced in 2019, for example, refers to both Hezbollah and Hamas as “rocket-based terror armies,” that are “organized, well-trained [...] well-equipped for their missions, with straightforward operational ideas and tactics.”⁴⁷ Israeli planners also appear to have been aware of Hamas’ increasing military capabilities including precision guidance and the use of UAVs.⁴⁸

Beyond the group’s capabilities, it also seems evident that Israel misread Hamas’ intentions. There are several parallels with the infamous conception that had guided Israel intelligence prior to the 1973 war. Before October 1973, Israel’s “conceptziya” had assumed that its Arab neighbors would not mount an attack as long as they could not hope to defeat the IDF militarily.⁴⁹ It does not take much fantasy to imagine that Israel’s basic assessment prior to October 7 relied on a similarly misguided conception, namely that Hamas would be deterred from seeking another military confrontation and that Israel’s intelligence would provide timely warning if the group nevertheless decided to attack.⁵⁰ There is at least some evidence

g According to Erik Dahl, this leads to a “strategic warning paradox” in which “strategic-level intelligence and warnings are surprisingly easy to acquire and are often readily available before major attacks [b]ut unlikely to be acted upon by decision makers, [and in] any case are too general to be useful” whereas “tactical-level intelligence is much harder to acquire, but when available it is much more likely to be useful and actionable.” See Erik J. Dahl, *Intelligence and Surprise Attack: Failure and Success from Pearl Harbor to 9/11 and Beyond* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), p. 22.

h In contrast, Daniel Byman has argued that overemphasizing the importance of HUMINT risks ignoring the equally critical role of signals intelligence (SIGINT). See Daniel Byman, “The Intelligence War on Terrorism,” *Intelligence and National Security* 29:6 (2014): pp. 846–848.

i This formula can be traced back to a 1958 article by J. David Singer in which he proposes a “quasi-mathematical form” of the relationship between two adversaries—namely, “threat-perception = estimated capability x estimated intent.” See J. David Singer, “Threat-Perception and the Armament-Tension Dilemma,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2:1 (1958): p. 94.

j In fact, recent decapitation strikes against Hezbollah’s military and political leadership and covert action against Hezbollah operatives such as exploding pagers and hand-held radios are a testament to Israel’s extensive preparations for a new conflict with Hezbollah.

that Israeli policymakers thought Hamas indeed was restrained,^k not least because it had been sitting out several rounds of fighting between Israel and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, including one as recently as May 2023.⁵¹

The belief in having successfully contained Hamas may also explain why Israel recognized the group as the de facto ruler of Gaza as it conducted “negotiations with Hamas using Egypt’s help,”⁵² and why successive Israeli governments decided to keep Qatari money flowing into Gaza.⁵³ To be clear, Israel might have had few viable alternatives to recognizing Hamas’ de facto authority in Gaza. Meanwhile, Qatari officials have insisted that the monetary donations were “fully coordinated with Israel, the UN and the US” and “distributed directly to needy families and public servants in Gaza.”⁵⁴ Future inquiries will undoubtedly scrutinize these donations and the corresponding oversight mechanisms or the lack thereof. Yet, even if they indeed were not diverted, they might have still indirectly helped Hamas preparing for the attack by freeing up funds that without Qatari financial support would have been earmarked for social services and paying the salaries of Hamas officials. While Israel argued that its measures were designed to preserve the calm in Gaza, a less charitable reading suggests its primary aim was to marginalize the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, “treating the terror group as a partner, at the expense of Abbas and Palestinian statehood.”⁵⁵

Finally, it should not be omitted that several former government officials had repeatedly warned against underestimating Hamas.⁵⁶ In addition, both former senior security officials as well as a leading national security think-tank cautioned between the spring and summer of 2023 that the political crisis and triggered by the government’s attempted judicial reform and public tensions between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the White House could erode Israel’s regional deterrence and prompt Israel’s enemies to seek renewed confrontation.⁵⁷ Indeed, a travel advisory issued by Israel’s National Security Council on August 31, 2023, mentioned “increased motivation on the part of Hamas and PIJ terrorists to carry out kidnapping attacks in Israel, in order to increase their bargaining chips against Israel.”⁵⁸

The Intelligence Level

With regard to Israeli intelligence activities vis-à-vis Hamas prior to October 7, publicly available information on many specific aspects remains unsurprisingly scarce. According to Israeli scholars Uri

k For example, Brigadier General (Reserves) Nitzan Nuriel, former director of the Counter-Terrorism Bureau in the Prime Minister’s Office of Israel, told this publication in July 2022 that “by observing what’s going on right now in Gaza, the results of the last year’s operation—Guardian of the Walls—maybe we created a new level of deterrence. Based on the intelligence, and I cannot share everything with your readers, Hamas is very disturbed and it’s doing almost everything it can to avoid its organization and its supporters opening fire against us and is also preventing others from doing so. How long is it going to stay like that? I don’t know; it’s too soon to say.” See Stevie Weinberg, “CTC-ICT Focus on Israel: A View from the CT Foxhole: Brigadier General (Reserves) Nitzan Nuriel, Former Director of the Counter-Terrorism Bureau in the Prime Minister’s Office of Israel,” *CTC Sentinel* 15:7 (2022): p. 13. Also, *The New York Times* reported that Israel’s National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi described Hamas as understanding “the implications of further defiance” and that unnamed intelligence officials “barely mention[ed] the challenge by Hamas,” characterizing the group as “deterred” in the week before the attack. See Ronen Bergman and Patrick Kingsley, “How Israel’s Feared Security Services Failed to Stop Hamas’s Attack,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2023.

Bar-Joseph and Avner Cohen, the Shin Bet has been primarily responsible for HUMINT in Gaza and Israel’s Military Intelligence Directorate (AMAN) for SIGINT.⁵⁹ In addition, AMAN has its own HUMINT unit (Unit 504) that reportedly operates and manages informants outside of Israel’s borders.⁶⁰ It is generally believed that Israel has a sophisticated network of human sources in Gaza,⁶¹ and a Israeli media report recently claimed that “Israel uses thousands of informants in Gaza to gain information needed to locate and eliminate senior Hamas officials and terror infrastructure.”⁶² At the same time, there are some indications that in recent years, Israel may have increased its reliance on technical means,⁶³ and that the overall quality of intelligence collection on Hamas’ intentions has declined.⁶⁴ As Avner Barnea puts it, “the capability of the ISA [i.e., the Shin Bet] to act internally in Gaza has been seriously damaged” after Israel’s disengagement from Gaza in 2005 and Hamas’ takeover in 2007.⁶⁵ While Hamas has repeatedly arrested and tried “collaborators” in recent years,⁶⁶ it remains unclear to what extent Israel has been able to penetrate its organizational structure.⁶⁷

Beyond HUMINT, *The New York Times* reported on October 30, 2023, that Israel had stopped monitoring Hamas hand-held radio communications about a year before the attack.⁶⁸ The impact of this decision is difficult to measure, however, as Hamas reportedly made deliberate use of wired phones in the planning stages of the attack.⁶⁹ Apparently, Hamas intended to offset Israel SIGINT capabilities by limiting the use of digital communications.⁷⁰ There is also speculation that Hamas operatives tried to deceive Israel about the group’s intentions by communicating a desire to avoid a new confrontation on channels they could assume were monitored by Israeli intelligence.⁷¹ Hamas also reportedly sought to reinforce this impression by providing Israel with information about the PIJ.⁷² In addition, there are several indications that Hamas’ efforts to gather intelligence, including through open-source information as well as cyber-attacks, have in part gone undetected.⁷³

At the same time, and notwithstanding early reporting, Israel had managed to collect some information that could have been considered indicators pointing to the attack, even if they were supposedly “weak signals.”⁷⁴ These included the annual “Strong Pillar” exercises by Hamas, PIJ, and other groups that make up the so-called “Joint Operations Room,”⁷⁵ including drills in which attacks against Israeli military structures and kidnappings were staged, as well as the digging of holes and planting of explosives along the border, as reported by female surveillance soldiers in the IDF’s Combat Intelligence Corps.⁷⁶

In addition, for more than a year before October 7, the IDF had reportedly been in possession of a document, the “Jericho Wall” file, that outlines a plan to invade Israel that largely corresponds to the October 7 events, as well as the training required to carry out such an operation.⁷⁷ A report by Channel 12 alleges the document

l As Ariel Levites noted in *War on the Rocks*, “intelligence officials are reported to have concluded in the months preceding the attack that the quality of their coverage of Hamas’ intentions was slipping and required bolstering.” It is plausible that this affected HUMINT in particular. See Ariel Levite, “How was Israel Caught Off-Guard?” *War on the Rocks*, February 22, 2024.

m According to the report by *Israel Hayom*, Hamas’ Military Intelligence Department consisted of approximately 2,100 operatives and included five main areas—namely, observation, cyber, SIGINT, OSINT, and HUMINT. See Itay Ilnai, “The road to Oct. 7: How Hamas got the intelligence it needed,” *Israel Hayom*, March 16, 2024.

had been seen by IDF intelligence chief MG Aharon Haliva, 8200 commander BG Yossi Sariel, Gaza Division commander BG Avi Rosenfeld, and then IDF Southern Command chief Maj. Gen. Eliezer Toledano.⁷⁸ However, it was neither shared with the IDF's top leadership nor with the top political leadership such as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, or the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee.⁷⁹

Meanwhile, in July 2023, a non-commissioned officer in AMAN's 8200 SIGINT unit warned that a recent exercise by the group "closely followed the Jericho Wall plan, and that Hamas was building the capacity to carry it out."⁸⁰ The soldier issued additional warnings about Hamas' plans over the coming weeks.⁸¹ According to Israeli media, these warnings reportedly led to a meeting between the soldier, an intelligence officer in the IDF's Gaza Division, and others.⁸² While there was no specific information regarding time, date, and exact location, the Gaza Division subsequently prepared a document warning that Hamas was planning a large-scale invasion and intended to take up to 250 hostages.⁸³ The same noncommissioned officer from Unit 8200 sent another warning to a number of IDF officers a few days before October 7, urging them to make preparations to minimize the impact of the expected attack.⁸⁴ According to *The New York Times*, the soldier's superiors dismissed her analysis, calling the plan "aspirational," "totally imaginative," and therefore beyond Hamas' capabilities.⁸⁵ One of the former heads of Israeli military intelligence, Amos Malka, has argued that these warnings were never passed on "to the top echelons of Military Intelligence or the top political decision-makers."⁸⁶ There have been some allegations that male chauvinism may have played part in dismissing her as well as the reports of the above-mentioned surveillance soldiers.⁸⁷ However, it is possible that there was a reluctance to pass on these warnings due to an earlier warning in early 2024 of an attack that did not materialize.

Some reports indicate that Hamas had originally planned its assault for the eve of Passover but then canceled it, fearing informants in its ranks after detecting changes in the IDF's force posture,⁸⁸ thus creating a textbook case of the "warning paradox." Such a paradox occurs when an adversary calls off an attack in response to detecting action (such as raising alert levels, sending reinforcements etc.), which itself is the result of intelligence accurately determining the adversary's intention and providing timely warning.⁸⁹ In typical fashion, the IDF then dismissed the incident as a false alarm.⁹⁰

There has been additional noteworthy reporting on the warnings that went out before October 7. On the one hand, Israel apparently received alerts by Egypt's intelligence services that "something big" was about to happen, including "an apparent direct notice from

Cairo's intelligence minister" to Prime Minister Netanyahu.^{91o} It is not clear, however, that they included specific information that could be considered tactical intelligence.^p On the other hand, Channel 12 in Israel reported in January 2024 that the head of AMAN's "Devil's Advocate" or "Red Team" unit ("Ipcha Mistabra" in Hebrew), which systematically challenges prevailing assessments, issued four warnings in the three weeks before October 7 that Hamas "would soon launch a confrontation with Israel, because it identified deep processes that were fundamentally changing the strategic situation."⁹² The officer has claimed that two of his written assessments "were widely distributed among all decision-makers in the military and the political echelons."⁹³

Finally, in the late hours of October 6, 2023, Shin Bet was reportedly alerted to the activation of a large number of Israeli SIM cards in Gaza.⁹⁴ While such activations had occurred during previous Hamas training exercises, the event seemed serious enough for Shin Bet Director Ronen Bar and the top officers of the IDF's Southern Command to arrive at their respective headquarters.⁹⁵ While, reportedly, there were several situational assessments, at least one of which included IDF Chief of Staff LTG Herzi Halevi at 4 a.m. on October 7, neither Shin Bet nor AMAN were able to detect additional indicators and suspicious activities.⁹⁶ There are some indications, however, that an intelligence officer in the Southern Command tried to alert more senior military officers, including AMAN chief MG Aharon Haliva and Southern Command chief MG Yaron Finkelman, to what he recognized as "something extremely unusual going on — heightened readiness on the other side [in Gaza]."⁹⁷ Haliva at the time was on vacation in Eilat and—while being updated at 3 AM—took no part in the IDF leadership's consultations.⁹⁸ Eventually, the IDF reportedly decided to cautiously raise the alert level in the air and at sea, but not on the ground, for fear that Hamas would notice changes in the force disposition.⁹⁹ In the end, Prime Minister Netanyahu's military secretary, MG Avi Gil, was reportedly briefed on the still ambiguous situation at 6:15 AM, just 15 minutes before Hamas launched its attack.¹⁰⁰

Preliminary Lessons

Many facets of the October 7 attack and the events leading up to it will likely remain classified for decades, if not longer. Nevertheless, based on the information that has become public so far, it is possible

n Reports by *The New York Times* and *The Jerusalem Post* indicate that Israel had been aware of Hamas' invasion plans for several years. In 2016, a top-secret memorandum signed by then-Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman referenced an earlier attack plan, noting that Hamas "had purchased sophisticated weapons, GPS jammers and drones" and was looking to increase its fighting force to 40,000 by 2020. See Bergman and Goldman. According to Yonah Jeremy Bob, "Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu essentially presented to the Knesset State Control Committee in 2017 the threat of a Hamas invasion along the lines of the terrorist group's 'Walls of Jericho' battle plan, which Israel later intercepted." See Yonah Jeremy Bob, "Ex-IDF intel. chief: These are the failures that led to October 7," *Jerusalem Post*, April 2, 2024.

o While Netanyahu initially denied receiving such advance warning, U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul later confirmed Israel had received them three days prior to October 7. This, in turn, was denied by Israel's National Security Advisor Hanegbi. See "Egypt warned Israel days before Hamas struck, US committee chairman says," BBC, October 12, 2023, and Jonathan Lis, "'Utterly Fake': Israel's National Security Adviser Denies Receiving Egyptian Warning of Hamas Attack," *Haaretz*, October 13, 2023.

p A report in *The Financial Times* quoted unnamed officials familiar with the matter characterizing it as "not hard intelligence about a specific attack" but instead a "general warning" that "relayed concerns that 'matters could explode because of the political and humanitarian situation in Gaza.'" See Samar Al-Atrush, "Egypt claims it warned Israel that Gaza could 'explode' before Hamas assault," *Financial Times*, October 11, 2023.

q As *The Times of Israel* noted, "Haliva was quoted as later telling those around him that, even if he had participated in the consultations, he would have concluded that it was apparently a drill and dealing with the matter could wait until the morning." See "More details unveiled of IDF intel on Oct. 7 plans, consults hours before Hamas attack," *Times of Israel*, December 5, 2023.

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to draw at least some preliminary conclusions about Israel’s intelligence failure.

First, it seems likely that Israel’s inability to detect the impending attacks was not the result of a single glaring failure but rather the result of multiple problems at different levels and across the various intelligence services and the top political and military echelons. Some of these problems may be more crucial than others, but it is likely that their combined effect caused the Hamas attack to unfold as it did. As the previous paragraphs show, failures and negligence hampered both Israel’s overall political assessment as well as collection, analysis, and dissemination at the intelligence level. Investigations in the coming months and years will scrutinize both the source of Israel’s mistaken belief in having Hamas successfully contained as well as seek to determine whether additional signals had been missed. At the same time, it also seems clear that not only Hamas’ intentions but also its capabilities were incorrectly assessed.^r The exact reasons for these misjudgments remain to be determined. Yet, in all likelihood, there will be no monocausal explanation, but instead several sources including a general underestimation of Hamas, an overestimation of Israel’s technological capabilities, or perhaps—as Amos Malka has suggested—an “obsession with the tunnel threat” that led intelligence and political officials to dismiss Hamas’ ability to launch a mass attack above ground.¹⁰¹ From an academic point of view, the October 7 attack also suggests that each of the schools of thought outlined in this article on intelligence failure offer partial but at the same time incomplete explanations.

Second, the Hamas attack on October 7 once again demonstrated how a determined non-state armed group can successfully confront a much stronger adversary, precisely because it is—and rightly so, according to objective criteria—considered to be an order of magnitude weaker. Michael Handel’s “risk paradox” thus appears to hold.¹⁰² According to Handel, the riskier a surprise attack appears to be, the quicker it will be dismissed as unlikely to occur, thus in fact becoming *less* risky and likelier to succeed.^s There are also unanswered questions about Hamas’ intelligence-gathering capabilities as well and the role of deception in the attack’s

preparations. In addition to the aforementioned intercepted communications making Hamas seem like it had a general aversion to conflict and Hamas’ reported provision of information about PIJ to Israel, there is some speculation that Hamas deliberately staged border protests in Gaza.¹⁰³ It is possible that Hamas purposefully ended these protests a week before to the attack to create a false sense of calm.^{104 t}

A third point relates to the challenges of designing effective mechanisms to prevent intelligence failure. Given Israel’s own history, the country and its intelligence services are well aware of potential weaknesses including cognitive biases and bureaucratic pathologies.¹⁰⁵ On paper, Israel has implemented several measures to reduce the likelihood of intelligence failures and challenge conventional wisdom, including the “Devil’s Advocate” unit and the “Different Opinion” mechanism, that is designed to ensure that dissenting assessments are received at higher levels, regardless of the rank of their authors.¹⁰⁶ However, the limitations of a devil’s advocate, including the fact that he or she will presumably be wrong most of the time, which in turn leads to a “routinized and ritualized” role, have long been recognized.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, implementing a speak-up culture that disregards rank and command hierarchy in a *hierarchical* organization is probably easier in theory than in practice.

This leads to a final point, made by Netanel Flamer, about the importance of humility. As he argues, no mechanism designed to prevent future failures will have the desired effect unless humility is built into the DNA of intelligence services.¹⁰⁸ This is as true for intelligence analysts as it is for outside observers who, in retrospect, tend to quickly identify “obvious” errors and omission that may have been far more ambiguous or even contradictory signals at the time. Humility also includes the recognition that even seasoned intelligence analysts can fall prey to their own blind spots and “don’t see the elephant in the room because they don’t think that there’s supposed to be an elephant in the room.”^{109 u} And finally, as Israel’s own experience shows, even deriving lessons from the past will not necessarily protect against novel incidents. The prevalence

t The violent protests along the border in mid-September 2023 coincided with the Jewish High Holidays and were organized by a previously unknown group called the “Revolutionary Youth,” which is reportedly affiliated with Hamas. By its own accounts, the group protested various topics including the treatment of security prisoners in Israel and Jewish visits to the Temple Mount. Nidal Al-Mughrabi, “Three Palestinians wounded in clashes on Israel-Gaza border, Palestinian officials say,” Reuters, September 23, 2023. Israel reacted to the protests by bringing in IDF reinforcements while also promising more entry permits for Gazan workers, the expansion of fishing zones, and more funding from Qatar. Once the group declared the protests over around September 28 (and after Hamas promised Egypt a return to order), security tensions decreased and the IDF lowered its troop presence again (although likely not below its regular strength). Some of those forces were redirected to the West Bank where Hamas may have also deliberately stoked tensions. See Itay Ilanai, “The signs were there: How the brightest minds failed to sound the alarm on the night of Oct. 7,” *Israel Hayom*, March 18, 2024.

u Miri Eisin also makes a related point regarding the attack’s “unthinkability” before the fact: “The second thing that shocked me to the core that I still can’t grasp, is the unthinkability of it. Why do I say unthinkability? I could not think of the kind of atrocities they did. As terrorism and counterterrorism experts, you have to understand the other side. You have to think like the other side. That’s part of how you counter it. But it was unthinkable. We knew atrocities were committed by ISIS against the Yazidis, yet none of us here projected that onto a potential attack. Not by Hezbollah, not by Hamas. So that’s the unthinkability.” See Morrow and Spain, p. 22.

r As Miri Eisin argued, one of the major surprises of October 7 “was the military breadth of the planning of what was a military terror attack: to simultaneously do rockets, missiles, air assaults under that cover. This is a new kind of modus operandi.” Sean Morrow and Asher Spain, “A View from the CT Foxhole: Colonel (Ret.) Miri Eisin, Director, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT),” *CTC Sentinel* 17:4 (2024): p. 22.

s In Michael Handel’s most succinct formulation, “the greater the risk, the smaller it becomes.” See Michael Handel, “The Yom Kippur War and the Inevitability of Surprise,” *International Studies Quarterly* 21:3 (1977): p. 468.

of “unavoidable cognitive trap[s],”¹¹⁰ bureaucratic deficiencies as well the often-fraught relationship between policymakers and the

intelligence community all mean that October 7 will be far from the last intelligence failure. **CTC**

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