

# **Intelligence Failures in the Gaza War: An Early Assessment**

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The surprise attack by Hamas on Israel is the result of major failure by a combination of Israeli intelligence, military security planning and readiness, and high-level policymaking. Israel is now calling this attack Israel's 9/11, and it is clear while it had many causes, it involved some of Israel's most significant intelligence failures since Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack on the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur that started the 1973 October War.

The October War should have been a lasting warning that Israel must always be ready to deal with new and surprise form of attack and shape its policy towards the Palestinians in ways that prepare Israel to both deter and defend against another surprise attack or a sudden outbreak of violence as well act to limit the pressures that can lead to such attacks..

After all, few intelligence services have had stronger warnings about their past failures. the Israel undertook a major review of it failures in proving warning before the October War by the Agranat Commission, a report that has now been declassified. They also had access to much of the work done in a U.S. review of the Israeli and U.S. intelligence failures that occurred in 1973, and should have learned more from the Winograd Commission's examination of the intelligence problems that arose in its operations in Lebanon in 2006.

Such intelligence failures do need to be kept in perspective. There is no way to know at this point of time how much Israeli intelligence is to blame versus the failures of Israel military commanders to provide adequate defenses and readiness, and the actions of its political leaders in trusting Hama's apparent moderation.

There are no reliable reports on the level of detailed intelligence Israel did or did not gather on each of Hamas's preparations for its October 2023 attack, on the level of information and warnings and about Hamas's preparations, plans and intentions went forward to Israel's military command, to top Israeli military security officials, and senior policymakers and its Prime Minister. Media reports do make it clear that Israeli intelligence did provide at least some warning indicators, but how many and in what form is as unclear, as is how they were treated by Israeli commanders, top officials and leadership.

## **Intelligence vs. Military and Policy Level Failures**

It is also impossible to clearly distinguish between intelligence failures, and initial reports on Israeli military failures to properly limit the vulnerabilities of its security fence and to maintain a proper level of readiness and manning in the forces deployed around the border with Gaza. Current evidence also makes clear that the IDF's high command, civil policymakers and Prime Minister other political leaders did not properly assess how serious the continuing level of tension was between Israel and Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Here the hardline elements of the Netanyahu government continued to put pressure on the Palestinians in Gaza and as the West Bank in ways that raised Gaza's critical economic and social problems.

Any analysis of intelligence failures based on military history must recognize that users and especially senior commanders and political leaders must always act on the basis that intelligence is never perfect and is almost always vulnerable to sudden major changes in the threat. As a current case in point, press reports do indicate that U.S. intelligence had at least some warning of some of Hamas's individual preparations and shared such data with Israel, although there have been no reports the U.S. warned about the scale of Hamas's covert actions or intentions to launch a major coordinated attack.

It also seems clear that if the U.S. intelligence agencies, particularly the CIA and NSA, had information indicating that Hamas's was planning a major attack, they would have shared it with Israel. It is also likely that both U.S. intelligence and policymakers may have accepted the lack of Israeli concern rather than challenging it. The failure to keep focusing on possible worst cases, as well as the most probable cases, is one of the most basic lessons in intelligence collection and analysis, and the recent failures of several European intelligence services to take shared warnings about the seriousness of Russian preparation to invade the Ukraine is another case in point.

### **Key Questions in Measuring Intelligence Failures**

Yet, regardless of current problems in making a full analysis of the relative failures by Israeli intelligence, the IDF, and Israel's political leadership, the need to examine several key questions relating to possible Israel intelligence failures already is all too clear. These questions include:

- Exactly what indicators did the Israeli intelligence services miss that showed Hamas's rising capabilities and preparations?
- To what extent should such indicators have warned a massive attack was coming?
- Why did they fail?
- Should or did Israeli intelligence have had human intelligence that would have warned about Hamas's intentions and goals?
- To what extent was Hamas successful in deception operations?
- To what extent did both Israeli intelligence and Israeli military forces become overdependent on technical intelligence and warning data like the Israel surveillance assets in the border defenses.
- To what extent did intelligence accept political-level and military command decisions at the policy level that the risk of major action be Hamas had declined and cease to properly examine worst case options?
- To what extent did Israeli intelligence fail to understand the cumulative impact of steadily worsening civil condition in the Gaza, and in all Israel-Palestinian conditions, coupled to declining support for the Palestinians by outside Arab states, in shaping Hamas's and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's behavior?

- What was the role played by Iran, and any other outside state or movement?

### **The Role of each Element of Israeli Intelligence in Dealing with Key Indicators**

It is also important to examine the role played by each of the Israeli agencies involved, rather than make broad judgments about the entire intelligence community, including the Mossad (Israel's external intelligence service); the Israel Security Agency or "Shin Bet" (Israel's internal security service) as well as elements of Israeli military intelligence including "Unit 8200" – which is charged with SIGINT and cyber related work, and is similar to what NSA does for the U.S.

Key indicators of what Israeli intelligence may have missed includes :

- Collection and analysis of the weaknesses in the Israel border fence and readiness.
- Creation of new Hamas cells tailored to military action that could penetrate the border and operate within Israel.
- Patterns of meetings, communication, and training that warned that a new coordinated effort of some kind was under way.
- Areas where Israel suddenly lost coverage because of changes in Hamas's behavior.
- Activities by the Hamas Leadership and key elements in Gaza to disperse or take shelter.
- Volume and deployment of Iranian-supplied missiles coming into Gaza.
- Any planning by Hamas for the attacks on Israel on the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah.
- Iranian and other outside support to Hamas in the planning and execution of the attacks.
- Deception operations Hamas undertook prior to the attack.

### **Israeli Failures in SIGINT**

Another growing issue is how Israel adapted to the changing technical nature of intelligence collection. For decades, Israel has had the ability to intercept the communications of Hamas and other adversaries using what is known as "signals intelligence" or SIGINT. Here, Israel may fallen victim to an ongoing revolution in technology. Hamas operatives, and others, have all moved to the use of modern devices such as iPhones that are all Internet connected and utilize encrypted applications that are widely available – for free. The "golden age of SIGINT" is over for all the World's intelligence services. The proliferation of connected devices and good quality commercial encryption has dramatically limited even the best of collection operations.

Israel made no secret of the fact that it could monitor past Hamas communications in Gaza (and elsewhere) in earlier effort to monitor its preparation for attacks and terrorist

operations. This was one of many reasons that Hamas has transitioned to modern technologies as quickly as possible. Intelligence collection must now deal with new world where old technologies are no longer available. A review of all terrorist operations since 9/11 shows that many that have been intercepted have been ones where the terrorists have done something stupid, sloppy or both. It seems evident that Hamas largely avoided such errors carried out an effective deception effort, and Israel paid a heavy price.

Hamas has also taken other measures. For many years Israel has not only targeted the Hamas's leaders but their families as well. Many Hamas leaders recognized this and moved with their families to Beirut and later on to Qatar or elsewhere in the Arab world, which were not easy targets for the Israeli SIGINT system.

Israeli intelligence cannot be blamed, however, for failures to collect as much communications intelligence as in the past. This lack of coverage was driven by a technological revolution and target migration. What is unclear is whether Israeli intelligence fully informed its users of these limits or increased its activity in other areas to compensate up for this loss from other sources and technologies, such as collection and monitoring of social media.

### **Failures in Israeli HUMINT Operations**

Israel's clandestine services have long been regarded as having some of the best human intelligence or HUMINT collection capabilities in the world. In this case, however, the Mossad and the Shin Bet, appear to have lost much of their HUMINT capability. Gaza has been the responsibility of the Shin Bet, and its agents and networks established within Gaza by this service and the Hamas appear to have badly declined in capability or had little access to the what was taking place as Hamas stockpiles of missiles, other means of attack, and planned for the attack on Israel. Some reports about actual planning for the attack do indicate, however, that it was a highly compartmented operation within Hamas, with many leaders and operatives were not "read in" until the time of the attack.

The failure to assess the impact a major decline in HUMINT capability would be a major failure on Israel's part at every level of its security structure. Israel may have over-relied on being able to know exactly what the Palestinians are doing, in detail, from a well-developed human intelligence system. What also is unknown is the extent to which the Israeli political and military leadership was aware of such limits.

### **Failures in Analyzing Hamas's Growing Missile Strike Capabilities**

From the outset of the attack, it has been evident that Israel may have failed to properly monitor the number and nature of the missiles that Hamas was acquiring and producing, and or being supplied – at least in terms of key components or assemblies by Iran. Some seem to have come in by sea, where Israel seems to have cut back on efforts enforce or monitor the naval blockade it established years ago. Parts and assemblies also seem to have come in through the complex system of tunnels constructed by Hamas which Israel has largely failed to deal with for years as well.

This issue is critical because Israeli forces rely so heavily on the ability of the Israeli intelligence services to keep track of the rockets and missiles in Gaza and going to the

Hezbollah. Past have estimates have also estimated that most Hamas are lower quality weapons manufactured in local workshops. Unconfirmed reports indicate that the recent attacks showed Hamas had failed to detect more advanced missile technology, as well as parts and missiles being provided by Iran.

Some of these unconfirmed reports indicate that thousands of key parts and were brought into Gaza both through tunnels as well as by sea. If so, Israel failed to adequately monitor the tunnels and what was moving through them into Gaza. It may also have also over-relied on Egypt for assistance with this, as most of the smuggling into Gaza comes through tunnels at the south of Gaza where it borders Egypt.

In any case, the sheer number and quality of Hamas missiles seems to have been largely unexpected. The same was true of Hamas's capability to launch missile barrages that sometimes appear to have overloaded Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system, with some that could strikes at targets as far away as Tel-Aviv.

### **Failures to Assess and of Planning and Timing of the Hamas Attack**

There is no question that Israel was surprised by the Hamas attack and it is highly unlikely that any future information will surface that either Israel or the U.S. knew about the planning for the attack, its scale or when it might take place. So far it has also been unclear that what limited intelligence in these critical areas that was available was flagged as potentially critical to the Israeli high command leadership. The same is true of the role played in such activities by Hezbollah and Iran. Interviews with Hamas personnel published by the *Wall Street Journal* indicate that the planning for the attack had been underway since August and may have been done in cooperation with Iran sponsors.

### **Hamas Deception Operations**

Properly assessing the nature and impact of Hamas deception operations is another key issue. Hamas did take a wide range of actions to deceive Israel, and its intelligence services do not seem to have properly assessed them. Hamas deliberately backed away from tension and violence before the attack. It took steps like reducing lower-level rocket attacks from Gaza, often with the helpful mediation of Egypt.

Hamas succeeded in carrying out a massive deception operation that was compounded in part self-deception by the Israeli intelligence and policymakers who should have examined these trends and alternative scenarios more carefully. Hamas sought to convince Israel it cared more about ensuring that workers in Gaza had access to jobs across the border and had no interest in starting a new war.

Israeli intelligence, military, and senior policymakers seem to have believed enough of these deception efforts to believe that Hamas was now focusing on a longer term cease-fire in where both sides would benefit. As a result, the general security situation may have seemed more promising than it was at every level of Israel command and senior policymaking and Israel became somewhat complacent. Israel came to over-rely a costly wall between Gaza and the communities on the Israeli side of the border that seemed to protect Israel but had many serious

design defects and vulnerabilities, and over-rely on Israel's own strike capabilities and missile defenses to deter Hamas from launching a major attack

A statement by an IDF spokesperson makes it clear that these perceptions had a serious impact. "We believed that the fact that they were coming in to work and bringing money into Gaza would create a certain level of calm. We were wrong," "They caused us to think they wanted money," the spokesperson said. "And all the time they were involved in exercises/drills until they ran riot." To some extent Israel also relied on the belief that its superior forces could deter Hamas, and that Israel did not have to do far more to address Gaza's evolving problems.

Here, much of Hamas's success came from the failures of Israel's top-level policymakers to address the grim internal realities in Gaza that were being reported by virtually every source. Some 19,000 Palestinian workers commuted daily into Israel in ways that benefited the Gazan economy but faced increasing restrictions on movement and their number was tiny compared to estimates of nearly 50% unemployment in a population of some 2.1 million.

Foreign aid did flow into Gaza, but at low per capita levels and UN reporting indicates that more half of Gaza's population was dependent on such aid and living in poverty. Gaza did get potable water and electricity from Israel, but at levels far below its requirements. There were growing pressures from youth unemployment in Gaza's rising and exceptionally young population and Gazans faced growing dependence on steadily increasing and more costly food imports.

Hamas's campaign of deception ensured Israel was caught off guard when Hamas launched its devastating attack on October 7<sup>th</sup>. By some accounts this success was the result of two years of deliberate efforts by Hamas to keeping its plans secret and convince Israel that it did not want a fight. Hamas gave Israel the impression that it was not ready for a major fight, and then deliberately mislead Israel over the last months before its attack, by giving a public impression that it was not willing to go into a fight or confrontation with Israel while preparing for this massive operation.

Hamas was able to construct an impression that that it was not ready for a military confrontation with Israel. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas even mocked Hamas for going quiet, and accused Hamas leaders of fleeing to Arab capitals to live in "luxurious hotels and villas" leaving their people to poverty in Gaza. At the same time, there are other reports that Hamas fighters were being trained and drilled, sometime in plain sight, Hamas constructed a mock Israeli settlement in Gaza where they practiced a military landing and trained to storm it. The key issue is that if Israeli intelligence saw a stream of such indicators, how it could stay convinced that Hamas did not want an actual confrontation.

### **The Limits to Blaming Intelligence**

All of these issues deserve examination in detail, but once again any such analysis must be conducted with care. It cannot ignore the fact Intelligence operations are directed at the policy level, and that military intelligence is subject to the control of senior military staffs, and make intelligence a scapegoat. Hamas has always been a violent and extreme entity. The

potently explosive situation in Gaza had already caused several past wars, and continued to s  
become slowly more explosive for decades.

Blame tends to flow from the top down as senior political leaders and military  
commanders deflect it to find a scape goat. Important as analyzing intelligence failures may be,  
examining the failures at the top of the Israeli government and its command structure seem just  
as real and probably more important. It is all very well to demand that subordinates speak truth  
to power, but such efforts have little point if power does not actively seek the truth and is  
unwilling to listen.