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This article examines Israel's intelligence failures and successes in its ongoing conflict with Hamas. It distinguishes between occasional (intelligence assessments) and causal factors (structural and political inputs). Critically, it illustrates that Israel's intelligence agencies deferred to the prevailing, but incorrect, assumptions and short-sighted policy priorities set by the Prime Minister's Office. Clive Jones and Robert Geist Pinfold also explore the over-reliance on technical intelligence, the lack of structural reform and the militarised nature of Israel's intelligence cycle.

In the early morning of 7 October 2023, The Palestinian Islamist militant group, Hamas, launched a surprise attack along the length of the Gaza–Israel border that caught the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) and its intelligence services entirely unprepared. Over the next few days, approximately 1,200 Israeli soldiers and civilians were killed. A further 251 people, including women, children and the elderly as well as nationals of other countries were abducted and taken back inside the Gaza Strip as hostages. For Israel, it was the most devastating attack suffered since its foundation in 1948, and also the worst massacre of Jewish people since the Holocaust.

In a nation traumatised by the unprecedented failure of intelligence in the lead up to the 7 October attacks, the pager and walkie-talkie attacks against Hezbollah operatives just under a year later, on 18

and 19 September 2024, reminded Israelis and the wider world why Jerusalem's intelligence agencies are so feared and respected in equal measure. But the significant change came a week later, when Israel killed multiple senior members of Hezbollah's leadership, including its political and spiritual head, Hassan Nasrallah. On 7 October 2023, multiple Israeli news panellists openly wept and despaired for their country's future. By contrast, when news of Nasrallah's death was announced, the same panellists toasted Israel's successes live on air.¹ Initially, Israel remained tight-lipped about its involvement in the pager attacks, but few doubted that, for sheer daring and ingenuity, Israel was responsible. It was a national catharsis. We now know from interviews with two former Mossad officers broadcast by the CBS current affairs programme, *60 Minutes*, that the 'pager plot' was a decade in gestation.²

1. Sam Kiley, 'The Real Genius Behind Extraordinary Attack on Hezbollah', *The i*, updated 18 September 2024, <<https://inews.co.uk/opinion/unprecedented-pager-attack-leaves-hezbollah-fearing-its-own-technology-3282220?srsId=AmBOoo6cQ1y7f8mLHITZtyE696ogj-ojea4ji4qwqvYoQYBlcx78so>>, accessed 21 September 2024; Neri Zilber, James Shotter and Raya Jalabi, 'Israeli Spies Take their Revenge', *Financial Times*, 1 August 2024.
2. Mehul Srivastava et al., 'How Israeli Spies Penetrated Hizbollah', *Financial Times*, 29 September 2024; Souad Mekhennet and Joby Warrick, 'Mossad's Pager Operation: Inside Israel's Penetration of Hezbollah', *Washington Post*, 5 October 2024; Lianne Kolirin, 'Israel's Exploding Pager Plot Was "Planned for a Decade"', *The Times*, 23 December 2024; Yossi Melman, 'The Real Reason Why Israel's Mossad Cooperated with "60 Minutes" Tell-All on Hezbollah Pagers Attacks', *Ha'aretz*, 24 December 2024, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2024-12-24/ty-article/.premium/>>



Damaged building in Israel, following the 7 October attacks by Hamas. Israel's system that had enabled the pager attacks and the assassination of Nasrallah was partly to blame for the strategic failure to predict the 7 October attacks. *Courtesy of Government Press Office of Israel / Wikimedia Commons*

Whether in fact Israel's conspicuous acts of supply-chain sabotage and a succession of decapitation strikes based on precise intelligence will prove decisive in delivering long-term political victory and not just a series of operational successes remains to be seen. Nevertheless, the long-term damage to Hezbollah's command, control, communication and intelligence networks is palpable. Indeed, if disrupting and then degrading the decision-making process of an adversary is the epitome of battlefield intelligence success, then Israel's actions vis-à-vis Hezbollah are a clear triumph. While far from defeated, Hezbollah has been crippled and its response to Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon piecemeal and fragmented – far

from the doomsday scenario of the group indefinitely firing 3,000 rockets a day that some observers had predicted.³ Israel's recent kinetic successes, then, are a far cry from the soul-searching and existential fears immediately after 7 October.

Much ink has also been spilt on the calamitous intelligence failure that facilitated Hamas's attacks just over a year ago.⁴ This article revisits some of these debates. The authors acknowledge that unless or until a formal state inquiry into those failures is conducted, these findings are only partial. Still, enough material is now in the public domain – notably in the printed media – to at least draw a distinction between what occasioned the failure and its longer-term causal features. In part, this distinction draws

the-real-reason-israels-mossad-cooperated-with-60-minutes/00000193-f86b-d1b4-add7-fe6fc19c0000>, accessed 4 January 2025.

3. Peter Beaumont, 'Israel's Iron Dome Risks Being Overwhelmed in All-Out War with Hezbollah, Says US', *The Guardian*, 23 June 2024.
4. See for example, Amy Zegart, 'Israel's Intelligence Disaster: How the Security Establishment Could Have Underestimated the Hamas Threat', *Foreign Affairs*, 11 October 2023, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/israels-intelligence-disaster>>, accessed 1 December 2023; Boaz Atzili, 'Dereliction of Duty: Israeli Blunders on the Way to Oct. 7', *War on the Rocks*, 3 April 2024, <<https://warontherocks.com/2024/04/dereliction-of-duty-israeli-blunders-on-the-way-to-october-7/>>, accessed 4 October 2024; Amos Yadlin and Udi Evental, 'Why Israel Slept: the War in Gaza and the Search for Security', *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 103, Issue 1, January/February 2024); Avner Barnea, 'Israeli Intelligence Was Caught Off Guard: The Hamas Attack on 7 October 2023 – a Preliminary Analysis', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* (Vol. 37, No. 3, March 2024), pp. 1056–82.

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upon the work of Avner Barnea and the difference between what he termed ‘concentrated intelligence’ and ‘diffuse intelligence’. The former relates to specific and immediate estimates about the likely unfolding of clear threats; the latter regards intelligence assessments as they relate to shifts in a wider (international) environment that evolve over time but can and do impact policy domains in less immediate but nonetheless profound ways. In short, Barnea’s approach is about how the ‘diffuse’ might best be understood to develop intelligence requirements that help state actors better anticipate the realisation of threats in what, ultimately, is a prescriptive approach towards preventing strategic intelligence failure.⁵

For the purposes of this article, however, such ‘diffuse’ intelligence is better seen as causal. The definition offered here is the impact of how long-term interests are framed and diffused by military and political elites among subordinates. These in turn shape the political boundaries under which intelligence gathering and assessments take place. Occasional factors, by contrast, refers to short-term intelligence assessments that, individually or cumulatively, might question the validity of causal assumptions but which, equally, can be subject to confirmation bias. Indeed, we suggest that despite ample evidence that intelligence analysts did identify a clear shift in the modus operandi of Hamas that pointed to a potential game-changing attack, such assessments never carried sufficient weight to shift prevailing assumptions – the causal effect – in a hierarchical structure in which policy priorities set by the Prime Minister’s Office in Jerusalem remained fixed.

The selective deafness that caused one of the worst losses of Jewish life in Israel’s history has been called hubris. Israel’s vaunted intelligence services and its increased reliance on world-leading technical intelligence (TECHINT) capabilities, including AI associated with Unit 8200, the cyber and signals unit of Agaf Modi’n (the Directorate of Military Intelligence of the IDF (DMI)), seemingly created an all-seeing, all-hearing and all-knowing panopticon that reduced reliance on human intelligence (HUMINT).⁶ Whether in fact Israel’s internal security service, the Shin Bet, or even Unit

504 (the HUMINT arm of military intelligence) were running sources in Gaza remains unknown. But this does raise an enduring issue. While HUMINT is integral to understanding the intent of a target, what they are planning, the seismic shift in TECHINT, including the development of programs that can remotely hack mobile devices, allegedly closed the intent versus capability gap.⁷ Hitherto, TECHINT, an umbrella term that encompasses, for example, Imagery Intelligence (IMINT) and Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) was focused on determining the capabilities of an adversary. The events of 7 October, though, have reopened that debate.

But this is only part of the story. A longer-term issue of the overly securitised nature of Israel’s intelligence cycle remains. This might seem like an oxymoron given that Israel is the archetypal security dilemma writ large. But Agaf Modi’n, which is allocated resources that consume the bulk of Israel’s intelligence budget, remains at the epicentre of Israel’s intelligence gathering and analytical processes in the military and civilian realms. As Unit 8200 remains an integral unit within Agaf Modi’n, the suspicion remains that information gathered, before being assessed by the Research Division of Military Intelligence, was filtered through a securitised lens that dilutes or detracts from understanding wider political trends.⁸

As this article observes, the hegemony of military intelligence has been challenged before, only for proposed reforms to fall foul of bureaucratic turf wars. It is of course impossible to know for sure if such reforms would have changed the causal dynamics that led to the 7 October attacks. But as the adage goes, if you have the military comfort of a hammer and see every problem as a nail, then seeking long-term political solutions becomes all but impossible. Therefore, while this article notes the intelligence failures that occasioned the events of 7 October, its primary focus is on the causal factors that defined it within Israel’s broader intelligence cycle and political culture. This includes longer-term assumptions and policies set by the political leadership that shaped Israel’s erroneous intelligence assumptions regarding the intent and capabilities of Hamas. The irony is that the system that enabled the pager attacks and the assassination

5. Avner Barnea, ‘Strategic Intelligence: A Concentrated and Diffused Intelligence Model’, *Intelligence and National Security*, (Vol. 35, No. 5, 2020), pp. 701–16.
6. Elizabeth Dwoskin, ‘Israel Built an “AI Factory” for War. It Unleashed it in Gaza’, *Washington Post*, 29 December 2024.
7. See Matthew Crosston and Frank Valli, ‘An Intelligence Civil War: “Humint” vs. “Techint”’, *Cyber, Intelligence, and Security* (Vol. 1, No. 1, January 2017), pp. 67–82.
8. See Uri Bar-Joseph, ‘Military Intelligence as the National Intelligence Estimator: The Case of Israel’, *Armed Forces and Society* (Vol. 36, No. 3, April 2010), pp. 505–25.

of Nasrallah, was, conversely, partly to blame for the strategic failure to predict the 7 October attacks.

Intelligence Failure: Factors of Occasion

Israel's media has been replete with stories that have cast blame far and wide for the intelligence debacle of 7 October. Among the more emotive stories has been the testimony of young female conscripts who, acting as spotters (*tatzpitaniot*), monitored a bank of television screens from surveillance cameras peering deep into Gaza. Such visual intelligence, meant to detect behaviour apart from the daily patterns of life (DPL), has been the subject of scrutiny, because many of these intelligence operatives were killed when Hamas attacked their military bases. Of note was the testimony of a junior non-commissioned officer, Noa Melman, who, months before the attack, wrote three reports detailing extensive and unusual training activities being conducted suspiciously close to Israel's barrier around the Gaza Strip.⁹

But Melman was not the sole spotter to raise the alarm. The shift in the DPL of known Hamas activists was the latest in a series of reports that, throughout

the summer of 2023, had been noted by other *tatzpitaniot*: Hamas activists had been filmed openly training to destroy border posts, as well as attack mock-ups of Israeli tanks and border posts.¹⁰ Such activity, however, was dismissed by higher ranking career officers in military intelligence as geared towards maintaining the martial skills (and morale) of Hamas fighters, rather than demonstrating any avowed intent to launch a surprise attack.¹¹ When intelligence on these events did make it further up the chain, they were rapidly dismissed. For instance, the senior intelligence officer for IDF Southern Command dismissed these reports as alarmist.¹² It is tempting to suggest that there might have been an element of gender bias in the failure of senior commanders to take warnings from conscripted female soldiers seriously. Perhaps. That the IDF extols the virtues of junior ranks speaking truth to power, most notably in military intelligence, but the dismissal of such warnings suggests a patriarchal and hierarchical bias.¹³

Still, we should be careful of placing too much weight on such explanations, as tempting as it might be. An investigative report by journalists Ronen Bergman and Adam Goldman revealed that Israeli officials were in receipt of Hamas's attack

9. Yaniv Kubovich, 'Disdain, Denial, Neglect: The Deep Roots of Israel's Devastating Intelligence Failure on Hamas and October 7', *Ha'aretz*, 9 May 2024, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-05-09/ty-article/.premium/disdain-denial-neglect-the-roots-of-israels-intelligence-failure-on-hamas-and-oct-7/0000018f-5811-d348-a7bf-feb907a80000>>, accessed 10 May 2024; Amos Harel, 'Chilling Warnings Picked Up by Israeli Intelligence Months Before the October 7 Massacre', *Ha'aretz*, 27 November 2023, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-27/ty-article/.premium/chilling-warnings-picked-up-by-israeli-intelligence-months-before-october-7-massacre/0000018c-1261-dd2e-a5ae-d36ba6240000>>, accessed 27 November 2023; John Paul Rathbone and Neri Zilber, 'How Israel's Spymaster's Misread Hamas', *Financial Times*, 9 November 2023.
10. *Ha'aretz*, 'Israeli Army Ignored Warning by Spotter That Hamas Held "Unusual" Training Near Border Days Before October 7', 20 June 2024, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-06-20/ty-article/idf-ignored-warning-by-army-spotter-that-hamas-held-unusual-training-days-before-oct-7/00000190-36e0-d6fa-abb4-77ef0c840000>>, accessed 21 June 2024.
11. These activities and accompanying pictures were detailed in the aftermath of the attack by *BBC Arabic*. See Abdelali Ragad et al., 'How Hamas Built a Force to Attack Israel', *BBC Arabic*, 27 November 2023, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-67480680>>, accessed 15 October 2024.
12. Yaniv Kubovich, 'The Women Soldiers Who Warned of a Pending Attack – and Were Ignored', *Ha'aretz*, 20 November 2023, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-20/ty-article-magazine/.premium/the-women-soldiers-who-warned-of-a-pending-hamas-attack-and-were-ignored/0000018b-ed76-d4f0-affb-eff740150000>>, accessed 25 November 2023; Mehul Srivastava, 'Israeli Intelligence "Dismissed" Detailed Warning of Hamas Raid', *Financial Times*, 23 November 2023.
13. Kubovich, 'The Women Soldiers Who Warned of a Pending Attack – and Were Ignored'. The Agranat Commission, established in the aftermath of the October 1973 Yom Kippur War, highlighted two reports submitted by a junior IDF intelligence officer, Lieutenant Binyamin Siman-Tov, to his superiors just days before Egypt's surprise attack. He assessed that a series of ongoing exercises by the Egyptian army along the length of the canal were meant to disguise preparations for an all-out assault. See Avi Shlaim, 'Failures in National Intelligence Estimates: The Case of the Yom Kippur War', *World Politics* (Vol. 28, No. 3, April 1976), pp. 348–80. On the *tatzpitaniot*, see Harel, 'Chilling Warnings Picked Up by Israeli Intelligence Months Before October 7 Massacre'. See comments by former director of the Mossad, Efraim Halevy, in Carnegie Endowment for Peace, 'The Israel–Hamas War: Intelligence, Strategy and the Day After', YouTube, 11 December 2023, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hchzdcqsqKk&t=7s>>, accessed 18 December 2023.

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plan, codenamed 'Jericho Walls', almost a year before 7 October.¹⁴ The plan included details of IDF positions, communications hubs and other military facilities adjacent, and in near proximity, to Israel's border with Gaza. How Jericho Walls came into the position of military intelligence remains unclear, but it was yet again dismissed as aspirational, rather than a realistic blueprint for future action. As the former chief of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, Alex Younger, opined: 'Hindsight is a wonderful thing, but it seems the big failure [in Israel] was a failure of imagination, as was the case with 9/11. There is always the danger of conflating what you want with what is [...] and Israel felt that Hamas had been derided.'¹⁵

Younger's assessment might appear overly harsh. After all, the producers of *Fauda*, a drama centred around the activities of a team of undercover operatives (*mistaravim*)¹⁶ that has enjoyed global success on Netflix, rejected a script that had Hamas fighters storming the Gaza fence as 'implausible'.¹⁷ Moreover, no evidence has emerged to date that the political echelon was informed of Jericho Walls. If, as it appears, Jericho Walls was the blueprint for what Hamas came to call 'Al-Aqsa Flood' (the actual 7 October attacks), the failure to appreciate its significance rests at the door of Israel's military intelligence and the Shin Bet security agency.

The accusation has been made that following the country's physical withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, recruiting agents close to the epicentre of Hamas has proved increasingly difficult.¹⁸ The veracity of this assertion is hard to judge. Certainly, Hamas was extremely aware of the capabilities of Unit 8200 and its ability to extensively monitor communication systems inside Gaza. Indeed, amid the various rounds of fighting between Israel and Hamas that punctuated the period from 2005–23, Israel was always keen to minimise damage to mobile

infrastructure across the Gaza Strip. But this turned out to be a double-edged sword: Hamas was able to turn this compromise into an advantage. Likely, it enabled Hamas operatives to engage in deception operations by playing to a confirmation bias – by saying things the Israeli eavesdroppers wanted or expected to hear. This reinforced accepted beliefs that while its intent might be deadly, Hamas was politically deterred, and its military capabilities were restricted to small tactical operations and raids. This coincided with Israel's overreliance on TECHINT to close the gap in the absence of sufficient HUMINT sources. As two former senior IDF officers told *Washington Post*, 'the emphasis on technology eroded 8200's "culture of warning"'.¹⁹

It is not known at this stage how many active Shin Bet agents were inside the Gaza strip or whether the organisation was able to recruit assets from among those Palestinians allowed to cross into Israel for work, a known *modus operandi* for recruitment in the past. If so, it cuts both ways as, allegedly, these workers could have gathered tactical information that helped Hamas breach the Gaza fence in at least 60 places. This remains to be confirmed. What we do know, however, is that Shin Bet was increasingly diverting resources to countering increased violence in the West Bank, stoked in no small measure by extreme right-wing settlers egged on by the Israeli far-right Minister for National Security, Itamar Ben Gvir.²⁰ Such were the tensions that on the eve of the Al-Aqsa Flood, the IDF redeployed its Gaza Division to the West Bank. In total, 32 IDF battalions were deployed in the West Bank, leaving only two around Gaza.²¹ This was based on an intelligence assessment that the most pertinent security threats emanated from the West Bank. But it proved to be fatally flawed.

The tensions in the West Bank came amid the wider social *mahapach* (upheaval) and nationwide

14. Ronen Bergman and Adam Goldman, 'Israel Knew Hamas's Attack Plan More Than a Year Ago', *New York Times*, updated 2 December 2023.
15. John Paul Rathbone and Neri Zilber, 'How Israel's Spymasters Misread Hamas', *Financial Times*, 9 November 2023.
16. *Mistaravim* is the name given to undercover soldiers who, disguised as Arabs, conduct covert operations in the occupied territories.
17. Rathbone and Zilber, 'How Israel's Spymasters Misread Hamas'.
18. See Avner Barnea, 'Israeli Intelligence Was Caught Off Guard', *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* (Vol. 37. No. 3, 2024), p. 1073.
19. Dwoskin, 'Israel Built an "AI Factory" for War'.
20. Ronen Bergman and Mark Mazzetti, 'The Unpunished: How Jewish Extremists Took Over Israel', *New York Times Magazine*, 16 May 2024, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/16/magazine/israel-west-bank-settler-violence-impunity.html>>, accessed 3 March 2025.
21. Shany Mor, 'The Failed Concepts that Brought Israel to October 7', *Mosaic Magazine*, 7 October 2024, <<https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/israel-zionism/2024/10/the-failed-concepts-that-brought-israel-to-october-7/>>, accessed 10 October 2024.

protests against a series of judicial reforms (*Hamahapech'a Hamishpatit*) in 2023 that many Israelis saw as undermining the independence of the supreme court that, hitherto, had the power to strike down laws deemed unconstitutional. The supreme court is viewed by observers of Israeli politics as the last bastion of liberalism against the ever right-wing and religious shift across society.²² Because Israel lacks a written constitution and a second chamber, the court also plays a fundamental role as a check and balance on legislative and executive power. Moreover, some commentators argued that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu needed to back the reforms to appease his far-right partners who frequently seethed at the court's influence and its multiple rulings demanding that the government dismantle several settlements.²³

Netanyahu's true motive was as personal as it was political, given his desire to avoid a potential prison sentence on three counts of corruption. Among the laws proposed in the judicial reform package was immunity for a sitting prime minister. Yet the public reaction to the proposed reforms was unprecedented. Judicial independence is a long-term cornerstone of Israel's democracy; thus, claims by supporters of the reforms that any changes to the court's function would be minor and procedural failed to sway public opinion. For a year, mass protests took place across Israel's towns and cities. Notable among these were those organised by Achim Veahyot Linshek (Brothers and Sisters in Arms), a movement of IDF reservists – many of them pilots and intelligence officers – who stated their refusal to serve should the reforms be

passed.²⁴ Such was the level of anger directed at Netanyahu and his Minister for Justice Yariv Levin in particular, that one former director of the Mossad, Efraim Halevy, urged reservists not to report for duty if called upon to do so. For an individual who had dedicated his life to the service of the state, this was unprecedented.²⁵

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Such were the fissures across Israeli society that the head of the Shin Bet, Ronen Bar, wrote to Netanyahu in July 2023, warning that war was increasingly likely as Iran, backed by its 'Axis of Resistance', looked to exploit Israel's political unrest.²⁶ Defenders of the Prime Minister have been quick to point out that a specific threat from Gaza was never mentioned by Bar, although subsequent reports suggested that Netanyahu's military secretary, Major General Avi Gil, re-emphasised the seriousness of Bar's intelligence assessment. But it had negligible effect. Netanyahu was also given at least two warnings between March and July 2023 by Brigadier General Amit Saar, head of the Military Intelligence Directorate's Research Division, that tensions with the Palestinians were so high that conflict could soon erupt.²⁷ Further, IDF

22. Bernard Avishai, 'Israel's War Within: On the Ruinous History of Religious Zionism', *Harpers Magazine*, February 2024, <<https://harpers.org/archive/2024/02/israels-war-within-bernard-avishai/>>, accessed 1 December 2024.
23. Noam Gidron, 'Why Israeli Democracy is in Crisis', *Journal of Democracy* (Vol. 34, No. 3, July 2023), pp. 33–45.
24. Amos Harel, 'The Judicial Coup is Damaging Israel's Army Like No Public Battle Before', *Ha'aretz*, 10 September 2023, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/judgment/2023-09-10/ty-article-magazine/.premium/the-judicial-coup-is-damaging-israels-army-like-no-public-battle-before/0000018a-6e97-d8b9-affe-7e9f94190000>>, accessed 25 November 2023.
25. Ben Samuels, 'Ex-Mossad Head: Israeli Reservists Have Every Ground for Refusal Over Netanyahu Judicial Coup', *Ha'aretz*, 15 March 2023, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-03-15/ty-article/.premium/ex-mossad-head-reservists-have-every-grounds-for-refusal-over-netanyahu-judicial-overhaul/00000186-e683-d8a3-a9ae-e6a39f910000>>, accessed 16 March 2023. Three weeks before the attacks, the author spoke to a senior security official who had served in the Mossad. This individual feared that within six months, civil war would break out across the Jewish state. There is an argument that the Hamas attack saved Israel from itself.
26. *Ha'aretz*, 'Report: Shin Bet Chief Warned Netanyahu of Imminent War before Oct 7; PM: Gaza Not Mentioned', 30 August 2024, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-08-30/ty-article/report-shin-bet-chief-warned-netanyahu-of-imminent-war-pm-gaza-not-mentioned/00000191-a2a6-d0ae-af93-e6ff12900000>>, accessed 2 September 2024; Yossi Verter, 'Netanyahu's Lies Laid Bare: How Israel Ignored the Roadmap to the October 7 Disaster', *Ha'aretz*, 31 August 2024, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-08-31/ty-article/.premium/netanyahus-lies-laid-bare-how-israel-ignored-the-roadmap-to-the-october-7-disaster/00000191-9fbc-d453-ab9f-ffbc6ec50000>>, accessed 31 August 2024.
27. Ehud Eiran, Ofer Guterman and David Simantov, 'Israel's Oct 7 Early Warning Failure: Who is to blame?', *War on the Rocks*, 4 October 2024.

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officials repeatedly warned then Defence Minister Yoav Gallant that Israel's enemies were aware of the judicial reforms and the subsequent protests. They also perceived that Israel was more divided societally and politically than ever before, while the growing number of reservists refusing to serve particularly worried defence and military officials.²⁸ In July 2023, IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi took an unprecedented step for a serving official and publicly warned that the reforms were a national security threat that 'imperilled Israel's existence'. Yet Netanyahu and his associates dismissed all these warnings as scaremongering.²⁹

Intelligence Failure: Causal Factors

In the aftermath of the October 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israel established the Agranat Commission to investigate the causes of the war and what had been, up until then, Israel's worst intelligence failure.³⁰ Among its many findings, the Commission noted that the *conceptzia* (concept) that had framed Israel's pro-war government policy and military strategy was far from accurate. It was thought that while Egypt undoubtedly wanted redress over its loss of the Sinai Peninsula in the June 1967 Six Day War, it would be at least a decade before it had the military wherewithal to go to war. Similar assessments were made of Syrian capabilities. As events have now shown, this framing proved significantly flawed.

In the 7 October attacks, the recrudescence of the term *conceptzia*, and with it the parallels drawn with the events of October 1973, was inevitable.³¹

The symmetry of time – the 7 October attacks took place five decades later to the day – has an eerie resonance. Nevertheless, the question remains as to what caused the wider recurring failure. A future state commission of enquiry in the same mould as the Agranat Commission might well find that Netanyahu was given no explicit warning of an impending attack. Even so, evidence has emerged that the Prime Minister's priorities shaped policy and strategy towards Gaza. This was the *conceptzia* that, in part at least, informed intelligence assessments over Hamas's intentions if not its capabilities. Ronen Bergman and Mark Mazzetti opined that: 'This strategy was buttressed by repeated intelligence assessments that Hamas was neither interested in nor capable of launching a significant attack inside Israel.'³² At the heart of this *conceptzia* was a view attributed to Netanyahu that peace with the Palestinians was impossible and undesirable; instead, Israel should pursue conflict management.³³

Netanyahu has long claimed that it was 'the Iranian threat' – not Israel – that was the real obstacle to peace and regional order. In part, he was correct. Shared fears of Tehran's ambitions facilitated Netanyahu's greatest foreign policy triumph: the Abraham Accords. These agreements, signed between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain in September 2020 vindicated Netanyahu's argument that peace with Arab states could be achieved before any deal was reached with the Palestinians.³⁴ This 'outside-in' approach – negotiating with key state actors first to reach diplomatic agreements and then dealing with the issue of Palestine from a position of relative regional strength – was consistent with his clear

28. Emmanuel Fabian and Alexander Fulbright, 'Gallant Calls to Pause Judicial Overhaul Citing "Tangible Danger" to State Security', *Times of Israel*, 25 March 2023, <<https://www.timesofisrael.com/gallant-calls-to-pause-judicial-overhaul-citing-tangible-danger-to-state-security/>>, accessed 3 March 2025.
29. Emanuel Fabian, 'IDF Chief: Overhaul Debate Splitting Military, Israel's Existence Could be Imperilled', *Times of Israel*, 23 July 2023, <<https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-chief-overhaul-debate-splitting-military-israels-existence-could-be-imperilled/>>, accessed 20 October 2024.
30. On the origins of the intelligence failure of 1973, see Uri Bar-Joseph, *The Watchman Fell Asleep* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005); Aryeh Shalev, *Israel's Intelligence Assessment before the Yom Kippur War: Disentangling Deception and Distraction* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2010).
31. Calder Walton, 'Four Paths to Israel's Intelligence Failure', *Engelsberg Ideas*, 12 October 2023, <<https://engelsbergideas.com/notebook/four-paths-to-israels-intelligence-failure/>>, accessed 30 October 2023; Anver Barnea, 'Attack on Israel Points to Systemic Failure at All Levels', *IntelNews.Org*, 11 October 2023, <<https://intelnews.org/2023/10/11/01-3311/>>, accessed 30 October 2023.
32. Mark Mazzetti and Ronen Bergman, "'Buying Quiet": Inside The Israeli Plan That Propped Up Hamas', *New York Times*, 10 December 2023.
33. Adam Raz, 'A Brief History of the Netanyahu-Hamas Alliance', *Ha'aretz*, 20 October 2023, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-10-20/ty-article-opinion/.premium/a-brief-history-of-the-netanyahu-hamas-alliance/0000018b-47d9-d242-abef-57ff1be90000>>, accessed 25 October 2023.
34. Clive Jones and Yoel Guzansky, *Fraternal Enemies: Israel and the Gulf Monarchies* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 22.

aversion to a Palestinian state. In allowing Hamas to control the Gaza strip, while at the same time, deliberately undermining the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank, Netanyahu effectively stymied Palestinian statehood. While it might seem counter-intuitive to strengthen a movement sworn for so long to Israel's destruction, Israel's exclusive control of the land and sea borders around Gaza gave the illusion of containment. It also assumed that despite the clear animus between Israel and Hamas, the leadership of the latter, according to Yossi Kupperwasser, former head of the Research Division of Military Intelligence, would 'be strong enough to rule Gaza but weak enough to be deterred by Israel'.³⁵

Netanyahu's strategy was long in gestation. Addressing members of his Likud party in March 2019, Netanyahu allegedly claimed that allowing Qatari funding to reach Hamas was part of his wider strategy of divide and rule. It was, as one commentator noted, meant to 'preserve the diplomatic paralysis and forever remove the "danger" of negotiations with the Palestinians'.³⁶ Other commentators went further. The one-time ally and now vehement Netanyahu critic, Avigdor Lieberman, noted that in office, Netanyahu 'continuously thwarted all the targeted assassinations' of Hamas's leadership. It was a position echoed by the former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, when he claimed in 2019 that: '[Netanyahu's] strategy is to keep Hamas alive and kicking [...] even at the price of abandoning the citizens [of the south ...] in order to weaken the PA in Ramallah'.³⁷ In short, Netanyahu could legitimately claim that on the one hand, Hamas did govern Gaza, but it was too illegitimate to negotiate with, while the PA, on the other, was too institutionally weak and corrupt.

What he failed to articulate was Israel's key role in fomenting and perpetuating this status quo.

Netanyahu denies that this strategy existed. Indeed, he has been keen to place clear distinction between what he claims he was told by military intelligence and what his critics claim he should have known. This in part reflects the vexed relationships Netanyahu has experienced with Israel's security establishment. His first tenure as prime minister between 1996–99 was marked by fraught relationships with the IDF general staff and his intelligence chiefs. An innate suspicion born of perceived ideological difference and relative inexperience in the realm of national-security decision-making was largely to blame but, as political scientist and historian Uri Bar-Joseph notes, it also reflected the perennial question in intelligence studies over the correct relations to be struck between the producer (the intelligence community) and consumer of intelligence (the political elite).³⁸ More recent scholarship has revived this debate.³⁹ But having served longer as Israel's prime minister than any other incumbent of that office, Netanyahu no longer stands in awe. Indeed, his efforts to besmirch members of the intelligence community following 7 October underscores the influence he now exercises over the security establishment.⁴⁰

Still, it is hard not to see Netanyahu's political understanding of the Palestinian condition informing an approach towards Hamas that was premised on containment and conflict management. This assessment was shared by members of military intelligence and senior IDF officers including IDF Chief of Staff Halevi. While serving as commander of Israel's Southern command in 2019, Halevi opined that 'Hamas has gone in the direction of an arrangement and calm, and a rift has opened between it and Islamic Jihad ... We aren't seeing anyone who

35. Mazzetti and Bergman, "Buying Quiet".

36. Dmitry Shumsky, 'Why Did Netanyahu Want to Strengthen Hamas?', *Ha'aretz*, 11 October 2023, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-10-11/ty-article/.premium/netanyahu-needed-a-strong-hamas/0000018b-1e9f-d47b-a7fb-bfd8f30000>>, accessed 15 October 2023.

37. Raz, 'A Brief History of the Netanyahu-Hamas Alliance', *Ha'aretz*, 20 October 2023.

38. Uri Bar-Joseph, 'A Bull in a China Shop: Netanyahu and Israel's Intelligence Community', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* (Vol. 11, No. 2, June 1998), pp. 154–74.

39. In the Israeli context, see Shay HersHKovitz and David Siman-Tov, 'Collaboration Between Intelligence and Decisionmakers: The Israeli Perspective', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* (Vol. 31, No. 3, 2018), pp. 568–92; Itai Shapira, *Israeli National Intelligence Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2025), pp. 123–40.

40. On Netanyahu's relationship with his generals, see Guy Ziv, *Netanyahu Vs the Generals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024); Anshel Pfeffer, 'Why Israel's Generals are Now Openly Briefing Against Netanyahu', *Ha'aretz*, 12 May 2024, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-05-12/ty-article/.premium/why-israels-generals-are-now-openly-briefing-against-netanyahu/0000018f-6d15-d8c9-a3cf-6d5deb5b0000>>, accessed 12 May 2024; Zvi Barel, 'In Netanyahu's Mind, Military Intelligence Was Out to Get Him', *Ha'aretz*, 21 November 2023, <<https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2023-11-21/ty-article-opinion/.premium/in-netanyahus-mind-military-intelligence-was-out-to-get-him/0000018b-f32f-d117-abcf-f7ef28910000>>, accessed 22 November 2023.

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can take on the governance of the Gaza strip instead of Hamas'.⁴¹ This allowed Hamas to entrench its rule politically, while clandestinely developing its offensive capabilities.

As Israel's primary intelligence consumer, the increasingly sprawling Prime Minister's Office oversees the intelligence services; it also sets the tone of the intelligence it requires. But if that requirement is premised upon a management and containment strategy, it pre-determines the analytical stage of the intelligence cycle. Imbibing these top-down cognitive preferences from the political level functioned as a powerful filter. Analysis of Hamas fell under the Research Division of Military Intelligence and the Shin Bet. As Major General Aharon Haliva, the former head of the Military Intelligence Directorate, noted publicly in December 2022, Hamas had an interest in maintaining quiet. He opined:

I expect the quiet right after the Guardian of the Walls Operation [the Hamas–Israel conflict in May 2021] to continue for five years ... I am still standing behind this statement, not with a grain of salt, although it is my role to always doubt something ... But in Gaza I do identify that alongside the two turns against Hamas [a vindication of Israel's restored deterrence] ... for economic stability, for allowing people [from Gaza] to work in Israel – this holds the potential for a long period of quiet, for many years.⁴²

As we have seen, such assumptions also impacted at a granular level, where intelligence officers self-censored information that might have challenged the view that Hamas had bought into this conflict management paradigm. It consequently led Bar-Joseph to conclude: '[N]one of the ranking intelligence officials dared say [...] to Netanyahu [that his policy was flawed], in part because they feared clashing with him would cost them their jobs. If this turns out to be the case, it will entail the criminal mixing of political considerations with professional intelligence assessments in order to please a leader.'⁴³

Unlike the UK's Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), Israel lacks a dedicated all-source intelligence assessment body which is able to come to a collective view that might have challenged assumptions underpinning the analysis of Hamas as contained. The closest Israel has to such a body is the *Verash*, an ad-hoc committee of the heads of the main intelligence agencies, chaired by the director of Mossad. They share intelligence assessments between them, sometimes once a week, but often less frequently. Israel does have a National Security Council, established, ironically, by Netanyahu in 1998, to break the monopoly of military intelligence in preparing national intelligence estimates. While it reports directly to the Prime Minister's Office, it has little qualitative influence and is a rubber-stamp body.⁴⁴

Attempts to impose reform on Israel's intelligence community from the outside have usually floundered. For example, the Steinitz committee, named after the former Likud Knesset member – Yuval Steinitz – was set up in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, to explore why intelligence assessments regarding Iraq's WMD were so wrong. A key finding was that the information gathered was viewed primarily through a military prism, while political analysis of Iraq was weak. The committee recommended that Unit 8200, the jewel in the crown of military intelligence, be made a civilian signals and cyber intelligence agency, akin to the American National Security Agency or British GCHQ.⁴⁵ This recommendation was never implemented.

But there have been internal attempts at reform too, and these have frequently left a more salient footprint on Israel's intelligence cycle. Since 2006, successive directors of military intelligence, as well as IDF chiefs of staff, have pushed through several important reforms. The real change occurred after the 2006 Second Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah. While Israel enjoyed intelligence success in locating and destroying much of Hezbollah's rocket arsenal at the outset of the war, a success

41. Yaniv Kubovich, 'Bloody Arrogance: How Israel's Top Brass Misjudged Hamas Before October 7', *Ha'aretz*, 14 May 2024, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-03-14/ty-article-magazine/.premium/costly-arrogance-how-israels-top-brass-underestimated-hamas-before-oct-7/0000018e-3ccb-d670-a5be-fdcf13d60000>>, accessed 15 May 2024.
42. See Haliva's comments in International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 'Major General Aharon Haliva at ICT21 - Translation', YouTube, 1 December 2022, [19:42–20:25], <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUG3uw1cMXc>>, accessed 8 January 2025.
43. Uri Bar-Joseph, 'Israel's Deadly Complacency Wasn't Just an Intelligence Failure', *Ha'aretz*, 11 November 2023, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-11/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/israels-deadly-complacency-wasnt-just-an-intelligence-failure/0000018b-b9ea-df42-a78f-bdeb298e0000>>, accessed 13 November 2023.
44. Charles D Freilich, *Israel's National Security: A New Strategy for an Era of Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).
45. Shlomo Brom, 'The Steinitz Report: Israeli Intelligence after Iraq', *Tel Aviv Notes* (No. 103), 4 April 2004, <<https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/systemfiles/103.pdf>>, accessed 6 June 2004.

born from a well-placed Mossad agent, military intelligence was widely criticised for its subsequent performance. In particular, the IDF lacked real time intelligence of Hezbollah's movements, and knew little about its weaponry, particularly its widespread possession of Russian-made Kornet anti-tank missiles. Israel's intelligence agencies not only failed to identify where Hezbollah commanders were physically situated; in many cases, they did not even know who these individuals were.⁴⁶

The region-wide perception that Hezbollah's fighters had at least achieved a draw against the IDF damaged Israel's ability to project its deterrence. Nowhere was hand-wringing more pronounced than in Israel itself. As a result, two commissions of enquiry argued for better integrations of intelligence in real time at the operational and tactical levels. First, the Winograd Commission noted that Israel failed to properly integrate collection and analysis of intelligence into the IDF's operations, particularly its targeting capabilities. The result was the formation of the 'operational division' within military intelligence, which, in time, developed innovative technologies, most notably the use of AI, in helping to realise this vision.⁴⁷

Second, the Committee on the Formulation of Israel's National Security Doctrine, better known as the Meridor committee after its chairperson, former Likud Knesset member and minister Dan Meridor, went even further and sought to completely overhaul Israel's national security doctrine – long premised on deterrence, early warning and rapidly taking the fight into enemy territory. The Meridor committee argued that the decline of state-based threats, the proliferation of non-state actors and the changing character of war, required that Israel reform its national security strategy. While not focused specifically on intelligence, the committee advocated for Israel to develop a more communal, inter-agency

approach to intelligence that would ensure jointness and better exploit inter-organisational capabilities. It also recommended the establishment of an intelligence fusion centre that would work closely with the cabinet and have oversight of all intelligence activity, akin to the UK's JIC. This recommendation has yet to be implemented.⁴⁸

The reports validated a new approach to resource allocation across the IDF and in military intelligence, as Israel became embroiled in the 'war between wars', a series of low-intensity clashes with non-state armed groups, including Hamas, but with a primary focus on Hezbollah and Syria.⁴⁹ This process reached its apogee under Aviv Kochavi, a former head of the Military Intelligence Directorate and later IDF chief of staff. His four-year operational plan, *Tnufo* (momentum), was designed not only to fully integrate intelligence into military operations at the tactical level, but also to impose intelligence superiority on the battlefield and beyond, by using Israel's clear advantage in cyber operations. This approach was integral to his broader 'concept of victory', a strategic approach that required Israel to harness and combine big data tools and signals intelligence. In the digital world, intelligence analysts are increasingly faced with too much data to filter, rather than too little. Kochavi sought to remove human cognitive limitations. He would do so by employing AI to conduct target mapping, with human oversight.⁵⁰ The killing of Fuad Shukr and Hassan Nasrallah proved, for Israel at least, the efficacy of this approach.

This more proactive approach to using intelligence in conducting kinetic operations came at a cost. While inclusive of Hamas, the spotlight of these reforms concentrated primarily on confronting Hezbollah and its Iranian sponsors. Focus on the threat from Gaza was downgraded, precisely because the Prime Minister's Office

46. Authors' interview with former Israeli intelligence official, Tel Aviv, 7 September 2023. Name withheld on request.

47. Itai Shapira and David Siman-Tov, 'Israeli Defense Intelligence (IDI): Adaptive Evolution in the Interaction Between Collection and Analysis', *Intelligence and National Security* (Vol. 38, No. 3, 2023), p. 412.

48. Dan Meridor and Ron Eldadi, *Israel's National Security Doctrine: The Report of the Committee on the Formulation of the National Security doctrine (Meridor Committee) Ten Years Later* (Tel Aviv: INSS/Memorandum 187, 2019), pp. 46–47, <<https://www.inss.org.il/publication/israels-national-security-doctrine-report-committee-formulation-national-security-doctrine-meridor-committee-ten-years-later/>>, accessed 30 September 2024.

49. Eden Kaduri, 'The Campaign Between The Wars in Syria: What Was, What is, and What Lies Ahead', INSS Special Publication, 6 March 2023, <<https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/special-publication-060323.pdf>>, accessed 4 October 2024.

50. Amiram Barkat, 'Chief of Staff Launches Plan for "More Lethal" IDF', *Globes Business*, 30 February 2020, <<https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-chief-of-staff-launches-plan-for-more-lethal-idf-1001318466>>, accessed 5 October 2024; Yagil Levy, 'The Israeli Army Chief's Geometry of Death', *Ha'aretz*, 27 May 2021, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-05-27/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/the-israeli-army-chiefs-geometry-of-death/0000017f-dc02-d3a5-af7f-feae8b4a0000>>, accessed 30 May 2021.

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deemed Hamas to be contained. This assumption fed down the IDF chain, where it was accepted with little dissent. The IDF's Southern Command, which oversaw Gaza, had no active intelligence assessments on known Hamas commanders, nor did it undertake a proper investigation of the scale and calibre of training exercises, or appreciate the changes to the DPL of known Hamas activists. This was despite all the above being repeatedly flagged up by low-level intelligence personnel. This cognitive and bureaucratic negligence was summed up by one military intelligence officer who, recalling the stypitic intellectual atmosphere that brooked no dissent from the prevailing view, wrote that: 'We knew about every barrel of fuel that made its way to Iraq and Syria, but we knew nothing about the hundreds of Nukhba fighters [Hamas' special forces] who came out of Khan Yunis.'⁵¹ This focus on tactical and targeting intelligence came at the expense of strategic early warning.

Conclusion

Israel has yet to launch a formal state inquiry into the intelligence failures of 7 October. Prime Minister Netanyahu has promised that a formal reckoning will follow once the war in Gaza and Lebanon finally ends.⁵² But many doubt his sincerity, particularly given his reluctance to agree to a ceasefire-for-hostages deal and his willingness to prolong and expand Israel's wars in Gaza, Lebanon and elsewhere. Still, if a state-led commission of inquiry is ever held, it will surely note that Hamas's willingness and ability to launch a mass-casualty attack were underestimated. Intelligence agencies fell in line with political priorities dictated by the Prime Minister's Office, who believed that Hamas was contained and refused to accept any evidence to the contrary. This is because that containment strategy served a wider political purpose of freezing

and prolonging the status quo. As a result, Israel is now trapped in an escalation cycle it did not initiate or plan for. In short, Israel's failures are primarily due to a mindset that looked but did not see. As Guy Hazoot, a former Brigadier General in the IDF, noted: 'the intelligence people see everything with their eyes but are prisoners of the conception [*conceptzia*] that the other side doesn't want a war'.⁵³

Internal reforms to Israel's intelligence cycle also played a part. While collation, collection and analysis remained part of the military intelligence repertoire, priority was given to integrating intelligence into the frontline, offering analysis and targeting information in real time. Israel has clearly used these changes to its advantage in its ongoing conflicts with Hamas. But this shift in priorities came at the expense of the patient gathering and analysis of material that might have better predicted Hamas's surprise attacks, and which would then have allowed Israel to put in place mitigation measures. As a result, many young Israeli conscripts paid with their lives for a *conceptzia* that was set by the Prime Minister's Office and accepted all too readily by those who should have known better.⁵⁴ ■

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51. Yaniv Kubovich, 'Disdain, Denial, Neglect: The Deep Roots of Israel's Devastating Intelligence Failure on Hamas and Oct 7', *Ha'aretz*, 9 May 2024, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-05-09/ty-article/.premium/disdain-denial-neglect-the-roots-of-israels-intelligence-failure-on-hamas-and-oct-7/0000018f-5811-d348-a7bf-feb907a80000>>, accessed 21 October 2024.
52. Ruth Michaelson, 'Netanyahu Rejects Calls for Immediate Inquiry into 7 October Security Failures', *The Guardian*, 17 July 2024.
53. Amos Harel, 'How Israel's Army Sowed the Seeds of its October 7 Disaster', *Ha'aretz*, 2 August 2024, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-08-02/ty-article-magazine/.premium/how-israels-army-sowed-the-seeds-of-its-october-7-disaster/00000191-13ba-db7e-a99d-1fba4cca0000>>, accessed 4 October 2024.
54. Barel, 'In Netanyahu's Mind, Military Intelligence was Out to Get Him'.