

“Intelligence failure” or a case of human misunderstanding?



by Lev Tsitrin

The war on Hamas only started, but Israel's security failures that triggered it are already under close scrutiny. *Foreign Affairs* published a piece revealingly titled "[Israel's Intelligence Disaster](#)" that is focused more on asking questions than on giving answers; the *New York Times* provided, in harrowing detail, those very answers in its "[How Israel's Feared Security Services Failed to Stop Hamas's Attack:](#)" over-reliance on modern technology – remote cameras to monitor the border fence and remotely-controlled machine guns to deal with incursions, both rendered useless when Hamas destroyed them, along with cellular towers that provided communications, using armed drones, thus blinding the remote defenders of the fence and allowing the fence itself to be destroyed without anyone

noticing; concentration of Israeli command-and-control in a single base which got overrun, senior commanders killed or taken captive, thus leaving the overall army command unaware of what has transpired, and allowing Palestinian terrorists to go on their frightful rampage.

When the dust finally settles and commissions of inquiry will start looking into this debacle, there will likely be more blame to spread around. The political decision-makers will likely be found equally at fault: after all, it was a political decision to buy off Hamas with Israeli work permits for tens of thousands of Gaza workers so as to improve Gaza's economy and make Gazans love their Hamas rulers, as well as letting Qatar pay salaries of Hamas functionaries (and giving Hamas the ability to rebuild its tunnel networks and replenish its rocket arsenal) – in the belief that Hamas has become a responsible governing party, having learned their lesson from the previous rounds of fighting, and preferring to avoid armed confrontation. No wonder the watchers of the border with Gaza relaxed, largely relegating their task to state-of-the-art technological wonders.

This raises the question: did October 7 result from intelligence failure – or from human misunderstanding? Was it the failure to detect the warning signs – or the absence of the need to look for those signs?

Consider the 2015 [San Bernardino attack](#) – in which “Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, a married couple living in the city of Redlands, targeted a San Bernardino County Department of Public Health training event and Christmas party of about 80 employees in a rented banquet room. 14 people were killed and 22 others were seriously injured.” Given that Farook was “a health inspector for the San Bernardino County Department of Public Health,” was this an “intelligence failure” on the part of his co-workers (or of the government)? Was a [rampage by Major Hassan](#) an “intelligence failure?” I don't think so. Their colleagues did not understand that they

were working with the monsters; that's all. They felt no need to listen in, to gather intelligence. They expected a normal workplace relationship – and that was all there was to it. But so did the top Israeli political echelon with regards to Hamas: the relations were frosty, but there was a modus vivendi of live and let live.

Yet, Hamas' unexpected and brutal violation of that status quo revealed not only Israel's fundamental misunderstanding of Hamas – but also, Hamas' fundamental misunderstanding of Israel – which is why, for all its brilliant planning and execution, the October 7 attack will wind up as a colossal strategic failure for Hamas, likely leading to its demise. Hamas' calculus was simple: on the one hand, killing all Israelis in sight, and broadcasting the footage of the assault far and wide was supposed to instill fear, and make Israelis run for their lives in blind horror at their impending fate, thus “liberating Palestine.” On the other hand, the hostages served a dual purpose of human shields, preventing Israeli counter-strike – as well as to be used as bargaining chips for release of imprisoned Palestinian terrorists. Both assumptions were based on the prior Israeli behavior: after all, Israelis swapped some 1,200 terrorists for a single captive soldier, Gilad Shalit. It is no wonder that on October 9, [Hamas triumphantly suggested a truce](#).

This showed a rather astonishing misunderstanding of Israel on the part of Hamas. Instead of tearfully supplicating on bent knee, Israelis girded themselves for a grim task of war – the task of eradicating Hamas as a military and political force. Their logic was ineluctable: Israel cannot live with such a neighbor. Hamas has to cease its existence – proving to Israelis themselves, and to its Arab and Moslem neighbors, both hostile and friendly, that Israel is firmly planted in the Middle East, and will not be dislodged.

It is truly a mystery how Hamas leadership failed to understand this basic Israeli mindset. One would think that

after living side-by-side with Israelis for their entire lives, they would have learned at least something about their Israeli enemy. It seems that Hamas even misjudged their closest friend – Lebanon's Hezbollah which, contrary to Hamas' expectation that its stunningly successful attack in the South would unleash the fire from the North, did not so far open the second front. Of course, the Gerald R Ford battle group moving closer to the theater is one factor that cools hot heads – but another likely factor is, that those heads may not be particularly hot in the first place. Destruction of Israel is not Hezbollah's only project, after all; keeping Assad in power is another one – as well as maintaining stability (and its badly-shaken dominance) in Lebanon itself. Syrian opposition salivates at the very prospect of Hezbollah-Israel war, since it will remove one of the main props of Assad regime from Syria. And toppling of Assad would be a gigantic blow to both Russia and Iran – the two powers that are vitally interested in keeping him in power. So some pretty big boys have key interest in Hezbollah staying put. And other, equally big boys – not just Israel, but Saudi Arabia and its allies have a strategic interest in Hamas being thoroughly beaten, and Israel emerging a victor.

Bottom line – Israel's was a colossal failure that needs to be investigated, and its lessons learned and incorporated by Israel's intelligence and the military. But so was Hamas' – which put itself in existential danger in exchange of a momentary pleasure of going on a killing rampage. It is hard to predict the future, but Hamas' fate will likely be that of Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, killed in a shootout with the police – or at best, that of Major Hassan, “paralyzed from the waist down from the bullet wounds to his spine, and [who] would likely never walk,” especially if Israelis decide that it is necessary for their security to establish a miles-wide, Israel-controlled buffer zone in Gaza's south to prevent future smuggling for weaponry from Sinai.

Israel's failure on October 7 was appalling – but it was a strategic miscalculation of Hamas, too. Hard as it seems at the moment, Israel will eventually overcome the pain caused by its errors. It is doubtful that the same can be said of Hamas.