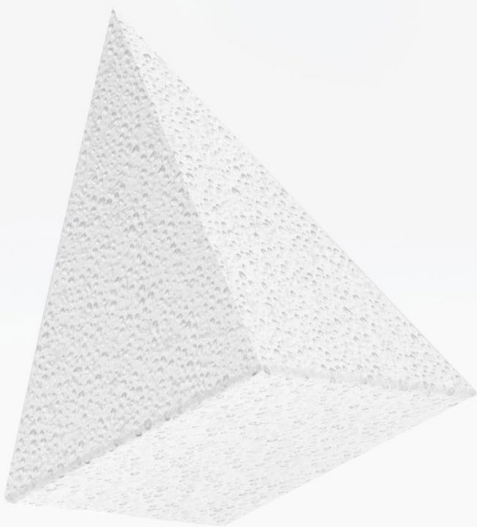
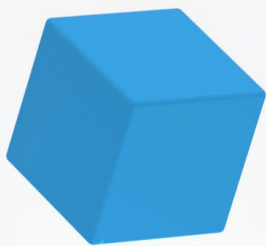
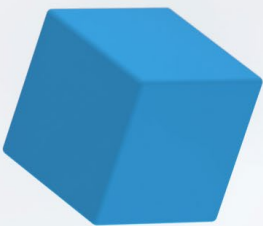


Bringing Politics Back In: The Neglected Explanation of the Oct. 7 Surprise Attack

Janice Gross Stein



Civil-military relations are a neglected dimension in the explanation of surprise. I integrate the worldviews and political priorities of civilian leaders with the psychological processes and organizational pathologies within the military and intelligence agencies to explain the surprise of Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. In this case, psychological and organizational explanations reinforced one another, yet both missed the importance of political leaders in preventing surprise. The worldviews and political priorities of civilian leaders explain whether and when they challenge, discount, or ignore the warnings that they receive. I demonstrate that the political priorities of leaders amplified and reinforced the prevailing strategic concept when they were fully aligned but trumped estimates of a high probability of war when they were not. There are no technical or organizational fixes to the political roots of surprise. In this case, surprise can best be explained as a political as well as a psychological and organizational failure.

Hamas' attack on Oct. 7, 2023 was the most serious surprise in Israel's history and its most consequential failure of defense. Hamas attacked along the line of contact between Israel and the Gaza Strip and took over parts of the region for hours and, in some cases, a day. That morning, Hamas used inexpensive drones and other low-tech measures to neutralize Israel's sophisticated border surveillance and disable its warning systems. Firing over 4,000 rockets into Israel, a brigade-size force of several thousand — many riding on motor bikes — swarmed across the border in more than 100 places.¹

Mounting a successful combined arms operation, Hamas fighters overran the headquarters of the Gaza Division and the two regional brigade headquarters that were attached to it. In so doing, they disrupted the chain of command and deprived the General Staff and Southern Command headquarters of situational

awareness, forcing them to deal directly with battalion and company war rooms along the entire front that were under attack. Commanders were clustered in a single base on the border that was overrun in the opening phase, and communication was disrupted with the rest of the armed forces. Hamas fighters overran more than 22 villages in southern Israel along its border with Gaza and moved east along the road to the city of Be'er-Sheva and southeast toward the Negev Nuclear Research Center near Dimona before they were stopped.² They infiltrated Israel with detailed battle plans that included maps of the internal structures of military bases and civilian towns, extensive lists of weaponry and equipment used by each of the units on these bases, and checklists for killing and capturing men, women, and children.³ Hamas fighters almost broke into the Yarkon base near Kibbutz Urim that housed sensitive intelligence assets and only a random navigating

1 For a prescient analysis, see Leo Blanken, Kai Thaxton, and Michael Alexander, "Shock of the Mundane: The Dangerous Diffusion of Basic Infantry Tactics," *War on the Rocks*, February 27, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/shock-of-the-mundane-the-dangerous-diffusion-of-basic-infantry-tactics/>.

2 Benjamin Z. Kedar, "October 7: Two Comparisons - And a Forecast That was Realized," *Ha'aretz*, June 21, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-06-21/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/october-7-two-comparisons-and-a-forecast-that-was-realized/00000190-3c45-d8cb-a19d-7d47bcde0000>; Amos Harel, "Half a Year After Hamas' Attack, Parts of the October 7 Puzzle Are Still Coming Together," *Ha'aretz*, March 29, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-03-29/ty-article/.premium/parts-of-oct-7-puzzle-coming-together-half-year-later/0000018e-869e-d0d3-a98e-d6ffa4d00000>; Ronen Bergman and Patrick Kingsley, "How Israel's Feared Security Services Failed to Stop Hamas's Attack," *New York Times*, October 10, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-security-failure.html>.

3 Shira Rubin, "As it planned for Oct. 7, Hamas lulled Israel into a false sense of calm," *Washington Post*, December 6, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/06/israel-knew-hamas-attack-oct-7/>.

mistake led them to turn around at an intersection and head instead for a command base.⁴ They had planned to penetrate deeper into Israel and were stopped only by military commanders who hastily organized themselves under pressure.

How could this have happened? This is, after all, a country that was starkly shaped by a serious surprise attack almost 50 years ago to the day. While the surprise in 1973 was structurally different, the muscle memory of that surprise and the reforms instituted in its wake are still present in organizational and military routines, even though no serving officers remain.⁵ How could Israel's leaders have been so badly surprised and unprepared for an attack again?

Surprise, as Robert Jervis argued, is ordinary and routine because intelligence is "a game between hiders and finders, and the former usually have the easier job."⁶ The hider has an inherent advantage in a noisy, dynamic, and complex environment where the facts do not speak for themselves. Contrary to conventional wisdom, however, surprises are often not "black swan" events. "The possibility of Hamas attacking Israel was not some far-fetched, black swan event hatched by unknown adversaries in distant lands," argues a leading expert on intelligence. "It was precisely the kind of worst-case disaster scenario that Israeli intelligence and defense officials were supposed to worry about, plan for, and prevent."⁷

In this essay, I integrate the concept of worldviews and the political priorities they shape into the explanation of surprise. I situate psychological processes and organizational pathologies in the intelligence community and military command structure — two of the most prominent explanations of surprise —

in the larger context of the relationship between military and civilian leaders. This essay pays special attention to the worldviews and priorities of those political leaders who have the ultimate responsibility for decisions.

Worldviews are a set of beliefs that mediate the relations between an individual or group and the world. "Worldviews create narratives about what is possible, what is worth doing, and what needs to be done, as well as what is impossible, what is shameful, and what needs to be avoided. They thus have effects on the purposes and interests that shape policies and practices."⁸ Because they are foundational, Peter Katzenstein argues, worldviews are important for understanding and evaluating human choice. Worldviews set priorities and shape which beliefs political leaders protect. They provide the content that informs the processes that are so prominent in the explanation of surprise. Drawing on the political priorities generated by worldviews, the argument in this essay goes beyond psychological processes that explain *how* leaders preserve beliefs to explain *whether* and *when* they are likely to challenge, discount, or ignore the intelligence warnings that they receive. Integrating the worldviews of political leaders in the explanation of surprise links content to process and brings politics back in.

I begin by identifying the two processes that receive the most attention in explanations of surprise. The first process is psychological. Political psychologists have identified systematic patterns of biased assimilation, discounting and denying information that are inconsistent with prevailing beliefs to maintain consistency and avoid cognitive

4 Amos Harel, "In 2014, IDF Intelligence Foiled a Major Hamas Raid on Israel. Why Did It Fail in 2023?," *Ha'aretz*, September 13, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-09-13/ty-article/.premium/before-oct-7-key-israeli-army-intel-unit-eschewed-thoroughness-that-foiled-hamas-in-14/00000191-ec80-d1c1-adbf-fdb2fa140000>.

5 I explore the differences in the role of political leaders in 1973 and 2023 in the concluding section of this article.

6 Robert Jervis, "Reports, politics, and intelligence failures: The case of Iraq," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 1 (2006), 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390600566282>. The scholarship on surprise is vast. Classics are Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford University Press, 1962), and Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons For Defense Planning* (Brookings Institution Press, 2010). Particularly relevant to the arguments in this paper are Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Cornell University Press, 2010); Robert Jervis, "Intelligence and Foreign Policy: A Review Essay," *International Security* 11, no. 3 (1986), 141–161, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538887>; Robert Jervis, "Why Intelligence and Policymakers Clash," *Political Science Quarterly* 125, no. 2 (2010), 185–204, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400885336-009>; Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence* (Cornell University Press, 2011); Jon R. Lindsay, "Abducted by hackers: Using the case of Bletchley Park to construct a theory of intelligence performance that generalizes to cybersecurity," *Journal of Peace Research* 61, no. 1 (2024), 87–102, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433231217664>; and Ephraim Kam, *Surprise Attack: The Victim's Perspective* (Harvard University Press, 1988). See also Amy Zegart, Joshua Rovner, Michael Warner, Jon Lindsay, Lennart Maschmeyer, Michael P. Fischerkeller, and Richard J. Harknett, *Deter, Disrupt, or Deceive: Assessing Cyber Conflict as an Intelligence Contest* (Georgetown University Press, 2023); and Ariel Levite, *Intelligence and Strategic Surprises* (Columbia University Press, 1987).

7 Amy Zegart, "Israel's Intelligence Disaster: How the Security Establishment Could Have Underestimated the Hamas Threat," *Foreign Affairs*, October 11, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/israels-intelligence-disaster>.

8 Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *Uncertainty and Its Discontents: Worldviews in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 9. The concept of worldview operates at a higher level, Katzenstein argues, than several related concepts that scholars of world politics use. "Foreign policy ideologies, belief systems, strategic cultures, operational codes, causal beliefs, cognitive maps, narratives, and policy and political paradigms are all related to though distinct from overarching worldviews" (Katzenstein, *Uncertainty and Its Discontents*, 12). See also Lorraine Daston, *Against Nature* (The MIT Press, 2019), 33. For a contrary view, see Raymond Guess, *Who Needs a World View* (Harvard University Press, 2020).

dissonance.⁹ They have also identified overconfidence as an important driver of surprise. Overconfidence in technology — both to warn and to help defend in the early critical hours if warning fails — is especially relevant to explanations of surprise. Political and military leaders can become so confident that advanced technologies will provide warning that they do not allow for the possibility that a determined adversary can design around these technologies using far less sophisticated means. Organizational processes that create pathologies in organizational culture, the second explanation, are also a common explanation of surprise. Organizational theorists focus on structures and processes that block or silo communication and prevent analysts from connecting the dots so that they can see the whole picture.¹⁰

Both psychological and organizational processes provide a partial explanation of the Oct. 7 surprise attack. In this case, the processes were mutually reinforcing. It is possible that at least one could have challenged the other and made the surprise less likely. Military and intelligence leaders could have been less confident about what technology could do, or intelligence officers could have been more open to the repeated warnings of observers posted along the border. If either had happened, it is possible that warning signals might have flashed red. That did not happen. In this case, both processes converged, reinforced one another, and made surprise more likely.

A second opportunity to prevent surprise was missed. Political leaders discounted the warnings of war breaking out and did not challenge assessments that Hamas was deterred and incapable of launching a major attack. In the summer of 2023, intelligence leaders of two of the agencies in Israel warned that the domestic polarization created by the government's political agenda was being read as weakness by Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas, who would seize the opportunity and go to war. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu discounted these warnings because they challenged his political priorities. He signaled that he expected detailed, granular information to support any future warning of war. In December 2022, two parties from the far right religious-nationalist move-

ment joined the governing coalition for the first time. The two most important elements of the “strategic concept” developed by intelligence — that Hamas was deterred and that it was incapable of mounting a large-scale attack — served the larger political purposes of the far right-wing members of the new government. Consequently, the prime minister and his right-wing allies had no incentive to challenge the prevailing view that Hamas was deterred from attacking. Worldviews and political priorities explain why the prime minister discounted warnings of war when they conflicted with his political priorities and why, at other times, he failed to challenge estimates that dismissed the likelihood of attack.

This article broadens the explanation of surprise by integrating the worldviews and political priorities of civilian leaders with the psychological processes and organizational pathologies in the military and in the intelligence agencies. In this case, surprise can best be explained as a political as well as a psychological and organizational failure.

Worldviews, Strategic Concept, and Context before the Surprise

A “strategic concept” refers to the set of ideas that leaders develop to explain the behavior of an adversary that then inform their strategies. The strategic concept that Hamas was deterred from attacking set the context of the surprise. Israel fought its last war with Hamas in May 2021. In the aftermath, the Israel Defense Forces conducted two short operations — the first in 2022 and the second in 2023 — against Palestine Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip. In both instances, Hamas remained on the sidelines.¹¹ Military and intelligence analysts concluded that Hamas had not intervened because its leaders were deterred.¹² Director of Military Intelligence Aharon Haliva explicitly said at the annual Herzliyah Conference in May 2023 that, since the end of the last round of fighting between Israel and Hamas in May 2021, Hamas had come out of that war “with the perception that engaging in combat and clashing with Israel in the form of rocket fire into the south in

9 Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1976, revised edition, 2017); Robert Jervis, *How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2017); Charles G. Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper, “Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: The effects of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 11 (1979), 2098, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.37.11.2098>. Foundational research in psychology is Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, eds., *Judgement under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge University Press, 1982).

10 Amy Zegart, “9/11 and the FBI: The organizational roots of failure,” *Intelligence and National Security* 22, no. 2 (2007), 165–184, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684520701415123>.

11 The first occurred from May 5 to 7, 2022 and the second between May 9 and 13, 2023.

12 Sami Peretz, “The War in Gaza Demands Daring Beyond the Battlefield,” *Ha'aretz*, May 14, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2024-05-14/ty-article-opinion/.premium/the-war-in-gaza-demands-daring-beyond-the-battlefield/0000018f-7837-df8f-a78f-fdff91e50000>.

the Gaza Strip does not really serve [its purposes].”¹³ Aviv Kochavi, chief of the General Staff from 2019 to 2023, also believed that Hamas was deterred.¹⁴ This belief, so central to the prevailing strategic concept, was further strengthened by the late spring of 2023.

In December 2022, a new radical government, the most right-wing in Israel’s history, came to power, albeit under a prime minister who had led center-right governments for most of the last two decades. In this new government, Netanyahu was beholden to far-right nationalist and religious coalition partners for his political survival — if they defected, the government would fall. The worldviews of two of the leaders of these parties were especially influential within the governing coalition: Itamar Ben Gvir, the Minister of National Security and the leader of Otzma Yehudit, an extreme far-right nationalist party, and Bezalel Smotrich, the Minister of Finance and the leader of the National Religious Party – Religious Zionism that fused religious and nationalist views.

The leaders of these two parties held a distinctive worldview characterized by an “extreme, messianic ultranationalism” that was deeply rooted in a particular religious tradition and a literal reading of the Old Testament.¹⁵ This worldview — long present at the fringes of Israel’s society but now held by leaders who had come to power for the first time — was reflected in the overwhelming priority that the two small far-right parties gave to the West Bank. They focused relentlessly on advancing settlements and cementing Israel’s control permanently in the West Bank — territory they regarded not as occupied but as the lands of Judea and Samaria that were divinely promised in biblical texts.¹⁶ Their vision for the West Bank not

only reinforced but far exceeded Netanyahu’s longstanding determination to prevent the creation of an independent Palestinian state without necessarily supporting rapid settlement as a precursor to full absorption or formal annexation.

The decade-long division and intense rivalry between Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank had made it difficult to resume a “peace process.” They repeatedly tried and failed to agree on a shared strategy. That suited Netanyahu who, responding to a proposal by the intelligence community, began in 2018 to allow financial support to flow from Qatar to Palestinians even though some of that support was siphoned off by Hamas. The policy of “keeping Gaza quiet” accelerated after 2021 and, by 2023, the scope of the financial transfers had grown to billions of dollars. Netanyahu also allowed thousands of workers from Gaza to work in border communities within Israel.¹⁷ The economy in Gaza had improved significantly by 2023, as did Palestinian employment and living conditions.

The two core components of the strategic concept — that Hamas was deterred and that it was incapable of a large-scale military attack — were firmly in place by May 2023.

Netanyahu’s newly formed coalition, like its predecessors from 2018 to 2023, considered a Hamas government in Gaza as an “asset” as long as it weakened the Palestinian Authority and obstructed the creation of an independent Palestinian state.¹⁸ The analysis, however, was especially resonant with the religious-nationalist worldview of the far-right mem-

13 Haliva subsequently resigned. Cited by Uri Bar-Joseph, “Israel’s Deadly Complacency Wasn’t Just an Intelligence Failure,” *Ha’aretz*, November 11, 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>.

14 Yaniv Kubovich, “Bloody Arrogance: How Israel’s Top Brass Misjudged Hamas Before October 7,” *Ha’aretz*, March 21, 2024, <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>.

15 Yeshayahu Leibowitz, a well-known scientist and philosopher in Israel, so described the fusion of religion and nationalism after the war in 1967. It became even more apt when a relatively new but increasingly influential segment of the religious Zionist movement, the Hardal, came to power for the first time at the end of 2022. Cited by Ilan Z. Baron and Ilai Z. Saltzman, “The Undoing of Israel: The Dark Futures That Await After the War in Gaza,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 12, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/undoing-israel>.

16 Both parties speak of Judea and Samaria, Old Testament names for the territory of the West Bank. See Peter Beaumont, “Israeli far-right minister speaks of effort to annex West Bank,” *The Guardian*, June 24, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/24/israeli-far-right-minister-bezalel-smotrich-annex-west-bank>; and Calev Ben-Dor, “The Rise of Itamar Ben Gvir,” *Fathom*, September 2022, <https://fathom-journal.org/the-rise-of-itamar-ben-gvir/>.

17 The policy was opposed by Naftali Bennett, then the education minister in Netanyahu’s government in 2018, and by the head of the Mossad, yet when Bennett became prime minister he did not stop the transfers that grew in size over the years. See Mark Mazzetti and Ronen Bergman, “Buying Quiet: Inside the Israeli Plan That Propped Up Hamas,” *The New York Times*, December 10, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/10/world/middleeast/israel-qatar-money-prop-up-hamas.html>.

18 As early as 2015, in a tweet, far-right Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich described Hamas as an “asset” for Israel and the Palestinian Authority as a “burden.” See “Israeli Far-Right Minister Bezalel Smotrich Described Hamas as ‘Asset’ in Unearthed Tweet,” *The National*, January 23, 2024, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/palestine-israel/2024/01/23/israel-bezalel-smotrich-hamas-asset/>. Netanyahu made a similar point at a Likud faction meeting in early 2019, when he was quoted as saying that those who oppose a Palestinian state should support the transfer of funds to Gaza, because maintaining the separation between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza would prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state. See Tal Schneider, “For years, Netanyahu propped up Hamas. Now it’s blown up in our faces,” *Times of Israel*, October 8, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/for-years-netanyahu-propped-up-hamas-now-its-blown-up-in-our-faces/>.

bers of this coalition and made political leaders more receptive and less likely to challenge the strategic concept that Hamas leaders were deterred and were now mostly preoccupied with the governance of Gaza.

That strategic concept did not fully account for the internal leadership dynamics within Hamas. Yahya Sinwar became the leader of Hamas in Gaza in 2017 and was given overall responsibility for the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military forces of Hamas in Gaza led by Mohammed Deif, a close ally. In 2018, Sinwar spoke openly of the futility of fighting a nuclear power, but by the spring of 2021, he began to change his views.¹⁹ He became increasingly uninterested in the governance of Gaza, believing that it distracted attention and resources from an attack on Israel, and made clear that he thought the governance of Gaza was a U.N. responsibility.²⁰

Israel's military and intelligence leaders also believed that Hamas lacked the capability to mount a large-scale attack across a broad front. Israel's leaders tended to view Hamas, unlike Hizballah in Lebanon, as a second-tier paramilitary organization that was incapable of mounting a large-scale attack.²¹ The two core components of the strategic concept — that Hamas was deterred and that it was incapable of a large-scale military attack — were firmly in place by May 2023. These two strategic beliefs meshed well with the political priorities of the far-right political leaders in the new government. At times, the line between the two was difficult to find.

Two Explanations of Surprise

Two explanations of surprise are prominent in the literature. Psychological explanations emphasize systematic processes of biased assimilation and the protection of beliefs, and the dismissal, discounting, and denial of inconsistent evidence.²² People tend to explain away contradictory evidence, often until they are surprised and overwhelmed by what they

do not expect and have not wanted to see. A closely related psychological process is overconfidence. In a military context, especially relevant is overconfidence in technology to collect intelligence that will provide timely warning of an attack.²³ A second explanation looks to organizational pathologies and focuses on structures and processes that stifle dissent or block communication so that relevant pieces of information are lost or analysts miss the bigger picture and leaders fail to receive adequate warning. The evidence shows that both processes were in play before the Oct. 7 attack, that they converged, and that each amplified and reinforced the other's impact. Yet neither explicitly incorporates the dynamics of civil-military relations and the role of political leaders in accepting or rejecting the warnings of the intelligence community and military leaders.

Psychological Processes

Biased Assimilation and Denial

Prominent dimensions of psychological explanations are processes of biased assimilation, denial, and discounting of inconsistent information. There is ample evidence that these processes were at work in civilian and military intelligence agencies in the weeks and days preceding the Hamas attack. In April 2022, 18 months before the attack, Israel's military intelligence Unit 8200 obtained Hamas' attack plan from October 2021, named "Jericho Walls."²⁴ The plans called for an initial barrage of rockets, drone attacks to knock out security cameras and automated machine guns along the border fence, and gunmen on paragliders and on motorcycles to capture military outposts and villages and to take hostages.²⁵ The plan did not specify a date for the attack. But intelligence officers understood that Hamas was planning to launch its forces on a Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, or on a Jewish holiday, when fewer soldiers would be guarding the border. Unit 8200 commander Brig.

19 Francesca Borri, "Sinwar: 'It's time for a change, end the siege,'" *Ynet News*, October 5, 2018, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5364286,00.html>.

20 David Remnick, "Notes from Underground: The Life of Yahya Sinwar, the leaders of Hamas in Gaza," *The New Yorker*, August 3, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/08/12/yahya-sinwar-profile-hamas-gaza-war-israel>.

21 Ariel (Eli) Levite, "How Was Israel Caught Off-Guard?," *War on the Rocks*, February 22, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/02/how-was-israel-caught-off-guard/>.

22 Charles G. Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper, "Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: The effects of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 11 (1979), 2098, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.37.11.2098>.

23 There is a large literature on the distorting impact of overconfidence on estimates and choices. See Dominic D. P. Johnson, Rose McDermott, Emily S. Barrett, Jonathan Cowden, Richard Wrangham, Matthew H. McIntyre, and Stephen Peter Rosen, "Overconfidence in wargames: experimental evidence on expectations, aggression, gender, and testosterone," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 273, no. 1600 (2006), 2513–2520, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2006.3606>.

24 Unit 8200 is a unit in the Military Intelligence, one of three most important agencies in the intelligence community in Israel. See John Reed, "Unit 8200: Israel's cyber spy agency," *Financial Times*, July 10, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/69f150da-25b8-11e5-bd83-71cb60e8f08c>.

25 Amos Harel, "Half a Year After Hamas' Attack, Parts of the October 7 Puzzle Are Still Coming Together," *Ha'aretz*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-03-29/ty-article/.premium/parts-of-oct-7-puzzle-coming-together-half-year-later/0000018e-869e-d0d3-a98e-d6ffa4d00000>; "IDF leaders didn't know intel chiefs obtained Hamas battle plan in April 2022 – report," *The Times of Israel*, August 18, 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-leaders-didnt-know-intel-chiefs-had-hamas-battle-plan-since-april-2022-report/>.

Gen. Yossi Sarial, Gaza Division commander Brig. Gen. Avi Rosenfeld, and then-Israel Defense Forces Southern Command chief Maj. Gen. Eliezer Toledano as well as Haliva were all briefed on the plan. Intelligence leaders dismissed the plan as unrealistic and overambitious. They concluded that Hamas did not have the capability to mount and execute such an ambitious plan. No report of the plan reached senior military leaders, the minister of defense, or the prime minister.²⁶

Immediately after the attack, Egyptian intelligence claimed that it had warned Netanyahu directly that Hamas was planning “something big.” Egyptian intelligence minister, Gen. Abbas Kamel, personally called Netanyahu only 10 days before the attack and warned that Hamas was likely to do “something unusual, a terrible operation.” Kamel claimed that Netanyahu displayed little interest in the warning and was “preoccupied” with the West Bank. After the attack, Netanyahu strongly denied receiving any such warning. “No early message came from Egypt and the prime minister did not speak or meet with the intelligence chief since the establishment of the government — not indirectly or directly,” his office said in a statement.²⁷

Female soldiers, known as *tatzpitaniyot* or lookouts, were routinely deployed to military bases in Israel along the border with Gaza. One of these lookouts observed differences in Hamas training beyond the border fence and sent a message shortly before Oct. 7 to her superior officer:

The training shows us that the ‘Jericho Walls’ plan is realistic and rehearsed, and Hamas already has forces practicing these scenarios and knows how to execute them when ordered ... It is likely that we will not be able to give warning in advance sufficient to prevent the incident. This is the time for formulating strategies to minimize the damage when the event happens. The other side is determined to execute the plan. If the plan is activated, we are expected to fight a bitter and hard battle. The exercise resembles the plan that

*appeared in ‘Jericho Walls’ to destroy the Gaza Division’s defense system. The raid training into the country’s territory indicates that the ‘Jericho Walls’ plan is no longer just on paper ... This email is like the horn sounding because the sword is coming — the time to warn people is now.*²⁸

This was one of several reports observing a change in Hamas behavior that soldiers positioned in border outposts filed in the weeks preceding the attack. When Hamas drones started flying regularly in their sector, lookouts noticed and reported the change in behavior. “In the past couple of months, they [Hamas] began to put up drones every day, sometimes twice a day, that came really close to the border. Up to 300 meters from the fence — sometimes less than that. A month and a half before the war, we saw that in one of Hamas’ training camps, they had built an exact replica of an armed observation post, just like the ones we have. They started to train there with drones, to hit the observation post.” After the attack, one soldier recalled their effort to warn the senior officers. “We yelled at our commanders that they have to take us more seriously, that something bad is happening here. We understood that the behavior in the field was very strange, that they were basically training for an attack against us.”²⁹

All these warning reports were discounted and dismissed by senior intelligence officers. The dismissal of information that contradicts the prevailing strategic concept is a classic psychological process that was repeated many times in the weeks before the attack. One of the border lookouts later observed: “There were so many warning signals along the way. Hamas didn’t do this under the radar. It’s just that nobody thought to accept the opinion of some spotters when intelligence people were thinking completely differently.”³⁰

The psychological processes of biased assimilation, discounting, and denial were amplified by confidence — overconfidence is only obvious in retrospect — among senior intelligence officials that Hamas was incapable of carrying out a major attack across multiple points along the border. In September 2023, the

26 Commanders claim to have sent a report on the plan to the offices of the chief of the defense staff, the defense minister, and the prime minister. The reports never reached them. Nadav Eyal, “To Whom was the ‘Wall of Jericho’ Distributed?” *Yediot Aharonot*, October 10, 2024. In Hebrew: https://www.ynet.co.il/yedioth/article/yokra1411106?utm_source=ynet.app&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=general_share&utm_term=yokra1411106&utm_content=Header. Shira Rubin, “Intel had Hamas’ Oct. 7th plan, but hidden from IDF, gov’t leaders,” *World Israel News*, August 18, 2024, <https://worldisraelnews.com/intel-had-hamas-oct-7th-plan-but-hidden-from-idf-govt-leaders/>.

27 “Egypt intelligence official says Israel ignored repeated warnings of ‘something big,’” *Times of Israel*, October 9, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/egypt-intelligence-official-says-israel-ignored-repeated-warnings-of-something-big/>.

28 Reported by Channel 12 in Israel, cited by Vered Weiss, “IDF Female Soldiers Knew about Hamas Invasion but Were Ignored,” *Israel News*, July 4, 2004, <https://worldisraelnews.com/idf-lookout-soldiers-knew-about-hamas-invasion-but-were-ignored/>. See also “Report: Israeli Army Ignored Warning by Spotter That Hamas Held ‘Unusual’ Training Near Border Days Before October 7,” *Ha’aretz*, June 20, 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>.

29 As one of the spotters explained, as relatively low-ranking officers, “Nobody really pays any attention to us. As far as they’re concerned, it’s ‘sit at your screens’ and that’s it. They’d say: ‘You’re our eyes, not the head that needs to make decisions about the information.’” Yaniv Kubovich, “The Women Soldiers Who Warned of a Pending Hamas Attack – and Were Ignored,” *Ha’aretz*, November 20, 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>.

30 Cited by Kubovich, “The Women Soldiers Who Warned of a Pending Hamas Attack.”

media in Gaza reported that Hamas had held field exercises with Palestine Islamic Jihad and other armed factions, conducting drills on rocket launches, kidnapping soldiers, and “storming settlements.”³¹ Intelligence officials in the Gaza Division compiled a report, distributed on Sept. 19, 2023, describing Hamas units practicing raids and kidnapping hostages on simulated outposts in the Gaza “envelope” — territory bordering the Gaza Strip within Israel. Hamas units were also observed training on how to hold captives and under what conditions they could be executed.³²

Hamas activity was explained away as a training exercise or, at worst, a small-scale attempt at hostage-taking.

Intelligence officials nevertheless were convinced “there was *no chance*” Hamas could execute a significant ground attack across the border into Israel. Instead, they believed Hamas could only launch long-range rocket attacks.³³ The language used by intelligence officials in the Gaza Division was not that of possibility or even probability that leaves room for hedging strategies against surprise. They were convinced of the “impossibility” of a major ground attack across the border.

Military officers continued to discuss whether Sinwar would permit massive demonstrations during the upcoming Day of Atonement on Sept. 24–25. If he did, this would signal that he was planning a limited attack. Some Southern Command officers considered the likelihood of a limited attack — raids on a few outposts and hostage-taking — to be so high that they recommended a pre-emptive strike against Hamas. Although the army’s leadership rejected the proposal, Southern Command nevertheless increased its readiness level. During that week in September, Israel’s

military deployed additional infantry battalions to the Gaza border, alerted the air force, and mobilized reserve intelligence officers. When no attack took place, confidence that deterrence was working grew among military leaders in Southern Command. “Once he realized that we were preparing on the other side of the fence and willing to engage him, Sinwar decided to wait,” one military officer said. Another concluded: “They [the army’s leadership and the Shin Bet] became so arrogant that they believed Hamas was afraid of us and that Sinwar had reconsidered his position.” Senior military officers subsequently justified repositioning forces away from the Gaza border as a way to avoid escalation and to signal to Sinwar that “quiet will be met with quiet.”³⁴

Late in the evening of Oct. 6 and in the early morning hours of Oct. 7, Israeli intelligence obtained two pieces of new information, prompting urgent consultations among senior military and intelligence officials. First, around 2300 hours on Oct. 6, a young military intelligence officer received indications that a well-known Hamas commander, Ali Ali Qadhi, appeared to be preparing for a cross-border raid. This report was quickly sent up the Gaza Division chain of command and officials concluded that it was “business as usual,” dismissing the activity as “just routine Hamas training.”³⁵ At 0000 hours on Oct. 7, a quorum of officials — including the head of the Operations Directorate, Maj. Gen. Oded Baysuk, the head of the Southern Front Command, Maj. Gen. Yaron Finkelman, other Southern Front Command senior officers, Shin Bet southern department officers, and senior intelligence officials — discussed the report over the phone. The consensus was that Hamas was engaged in an exercise. Second, early the next morning, Israeli intelligence detected that Hamas had activated hundreds of mobile phones with Israeli SIM cards.³⁶ In response, senior military and intelligence officials consulted once more, but the activation of cards was considered “a weak

31 Steve Hendrix and Hazem Balousha, “Tensions ‘beginning to boil’ in Gaza as fears of new conflict mount,” *Washington Post*, September 21, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/21/gaza-israel-hamas-palestinians-conflict/>.

32 Reported by *Kan News*. See Vered Weiss, “IDF knew of Hamas’ plan to invade, take 250 hostages weeks before October 7th,” *World Israel News*, June 17, 2024, <https://tvjnews.com/2024/06/idf-knew-of-hamas-plan-to-invade-take-250-hostages-weeks-before-october-7th/>. Unit 8200 in Military Intelligence either received the document from the Gaza Division or received almost identical information at the same time.

33 Yaniv Kubovich, “Disdain, Denial, Neglect: The Deep Roots of Israel’s Devastating Intelligence Failure on Hamas and October 7,” *Ha’aretz*, May 9, 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> (emphasis added). See also Yaniv Kubovich, “Bloody Arrogance: How Israel’s Top Brass Misjudged Hamas Before October 7,” *Ha’aretz*, March 21, 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> for details of warnings in the days before Oct. 7 in the section on Hamas’ intentions.

34 The Israel Defense Forces denied that any warnings were received and that a pre-emptive strike was ever considered. Yaniv Kubovich, “Israeli Army Braced for a Yom Kippur Attack. A Month Later, Hamas Found a Defenseless Gaza Border,” *Ha’aretz*, March 21, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-03-21/ty-article-magazine/premium/idf-braced-for-a-yom-kippur-attack-a-month-later-hamas-found-a-defenseless-gaza-border/0000018e-6225-d507-a1cf-62f7f0a10000>.

35 Kubovich, “Disdain, Denial, Neglect.”

36 David Rosenberg, “IDF detected Hamas terrorists switching to Israeli SIM cards hours before October 7th invasion,” *World Israel News*, February 26, 2024, <https://worldisraelnews.com/idf-detected-hamas-terrorists-switching-to-israeli-sim-cards-hours-before-october-7th-invasion/>.

signal” since cards had been activated in the past and Hamas had not followed up with an attack.³⁷ The chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi, was briefed on the warnings and the earlier consultation and a second consultation was held at around 0300 hours on Oct. 7, this time with the director of the Shin Bet, Ronen Bar, and an official from the prime minister’s office on the line. The consensus that Hamas was engaged in a training exercise or, in the worst case, preparation for an isolated attempt to take hostages, was reaffirmed.³⁸ Nevertheless, there was sufficient concern that Hamas might be preparing for an isolated kidnapping that senior military officials ordered a special military team trained in dealing with limited incursions to Israel’s southern border and alerted another team from a Shin Bet operational unit as well as a commando unit.³⁹ During both these urgent phone consultations, the prevailing strategic concept held. Hamas activity was explained away as a training exercise or, at worst, a small-scale attempt at hostage-taking. Military leaders did not order the deployment of additional forces, as they had in late September. Crucially, the prime minister was not informed.

Overconfidence in Technology

Another psychological process that contributes to surprise is overconfidence. Overconfidence in technology was clearly present in the lead-up to Oct. 7 and was deeply entangled with processes of denial and biased appraisal. Several months before the attack, military intelligence cut back on the technical collection of information about the intentions of Hamas battalion and brigade commanders and focused almost entirely in the months preceding the attack on gathering information about Hamas’ military capabilities, particularly the capacity to assemble and fire rockets. To the extent military intelligence did focus on the intentions of senior leaders, they relied heavily on monitoring personal communications to support

their estimate that Hamas was deterred. That information may well have been deliberately misleading, as Hamas leaders apparently staged conversations they knew would be intercepted and refrained from using mobile phones or other devices until the final hours before the attack.⁴⁰ Determined and nimble adversaries can weaponize an opponent’s technical apparatus, as Hamas did throughout most of 2023, to conceal their intentions and deceive their opponents. As the pace of technological advances and innovation quickens, low-technology methods, augmented by human intelligence where possible, are likely to become more, not less, significant in preventing surprise.

In a predictable failure of technology somewhere in a complex system, a technical intelligence system in Unit 8200 experienced a serious fault at 2300 hours on Oct. 6. The system’s operators were forced to shut it down during the hours when troubling information was received. The system became operational again only at 0500 hours on Oct. 7, just 90 minutes before Hamas fighters crossed the border. The commander of Unit 8200 claimed to have sent a report about the system failure to Haliva, Halevi, and Bar. For unknown reasons, the report was not received.⁴¹ Had senior intelligence leaders known the system was not working that night, they might have changed their evaluation of the limited information they did receive. In an amalgam of psychological and organizational processes, the absence of corroborating information that would have come from the Unit 8200 system if an attack were imminent colored the interpretation of the information that was available at the time.

An underground and above-ground 40-mile-long fence along the border with Gaza, built at a cost of over a billion dollars, was an important element of Israel’s warning system.⁴² The fence was equipped with advanced sensing technologies, cameras, and remotely operated machine guns. Military leaders believed that the advanced sensing equipment above

37 Amos Harel, "Israeli Army's Top Brass Received Troubling Info Night Before Hamas Attack," *Ha'aretz*, October 12, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-10-12/ty-article/.premium/israeli-armys-top-brass-received-troubling-info-night-before-hamas-attack/0000018b-24e2-d680-af9b-26eed7b10000>.

38 Harel, "Israeli Army's Top Brass Received Troubling Info Night Before Hamas Attack." A secret memorandum circulated by intelligence officers at 03.17 hours read: "It is estimated that Hamas is not interested in escalation and entering into a confrontation at the present time." Cited by Ronen Bergman, Adam Rasgon, and Patrick Kingsley in "Secret Documents Show Hamas Tried to Persuade Iran to Join its Oct. 7 Attack," *New York Times*, October 12, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/12/world/middleeast/hamas-israel-war.html>.

39 Amos Harel, "Israeli Intelligence Agencies Detected Israeli SIM Cards Activated by Hamas Hours Before Oct 7 Assault," *Ha'aretz*, February 26, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-02-26/ty-article/.premium/israeli-intel-detected-hundreds-of-israeli-sim-cards-activated-by-hamas-early-on-oct-7/0000018d-e5c3-dc4b-a1cd-f5efc8380000>. See also "Shin Bet Source in Gaza Reportedly Warned of Major Hamas Attack on Israel Set for Early October," *Ha'aretz*, December 27, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-27/ty-article/shin-bet-source-in-gaza-reportedly-warned-of-major-hamas-attack-in-early-october/0000018c-acab-d22c-a98c-fcefb17e0000>.

40 Bergman and Kingsley, "How Israel's Feared Security Services Failed to Stop Hamas's Attack"; Uri Bar-Joseph and Avner Cohen, "How Israel's Spies Failed -- and Why Escalation Could be Catastrophic," *Foreign Policy*, October 19, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/19/israel-intelligence-gaza-nuclear-weapons-hezbollah-iran-escalation-could-be-catastrophic/>.

41 Batya Jerenberg, "IDF Intelligence System Crashed Just Before October 7th Massacre," *United with Israel*, June 16, 2024, <https://unitedwithisrael.org/idf-intelligence-system-crashed-just-hours-before-oct-7-massacre/>. No official explanation of why that system failed has been provided.

42 "The Iron Wall: What is the Gaza-Israel Fence?," *Al Arabiya English*, October 11, 2023, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/11/The-Iron-Wall-What-is-the-Gaza-Israel-fence->.

ground would provide warning and that the formidable concrete underground barrier would prevent Hamas from tunnelling underneath and carrying out a large-scale attack on the military outposts and villages within the envelope along the border and taking soldiers and civilians hostage. At a meeting, Toledano was asked about a scenario in which Hamas forces would breach the fence and mount a large-scale attack against communities and outposts. He reportedly dismissed the question, stating:

*We have a sniper [a system equipped with a camera and a machine gun along the fence], a strong obstacle, and there is no such scenario in which thousands will rush into Israel on the ground without us thwarting it. They won't be able to pull off such an attack.*⁴³

Confident that the equipment atop the fence would warn and that the guns would defend, military and intelligence leaders largely stopped collecting information about Hamas' intentions at the battalion and brigade level and thinned out defensive deployments along the Gaza border.

Experienced military and intelligence officials placed a great deal of confidence in the reliability of technology, even though glitches and crashes can be common in complex systems that then take time to find, fix, and reboot. Even more remarkable was the extraordinary confidence in a high-technology fence.

Hamas' leaders found a low-tech solution to defeat the high-technology fence. They used paragliders to fly over the fence and cheap attack drones to disable the cellular towers that transmitted signals to and from the surveillance systems along the fence. The cameras, disconnected from the cellular system, were unable to transmit video of Hamas attackers

bulldozing the barricades. The soldiers stationed in control rooms behind the front consequently could not see the breaches in the fence and did not call for reinforcements. The drones also knocked out an estimated 100 remotely operated machine gun towers.⁴⁴ The technology deployed along the fence, once it was disabled, could not warn, defend, or provide time for military units to arrive. The disabling of the technology deprived military commanders of crucial situational awareness and severely impaired the capacity to defend in the early hours after the attack.

Experienced military and intelligence officials placed a great deal of confidence in the reliability of technology, even though glitches and crashes can be common in complex systems that then take time to find, fix, and reboot. Even more remarkable was the extraordinary confidence in a high-technology fence. In a simulation in 2016, a few dozen Hamas fighters successfully breached an earlier version of the fence.⁴⁵ Theoretically, the construction and the technology had improved by 2021, but confidence in the technology was so high that the new fence was apparently not tested.

Strategies of Deception

The mirror image of flawed information processing and overconfidence are strategies of deception that adversaries determined to attack develop. They deliberately craft strategies to reinforce defenders' existing strategic concepts, design around their weaknesses, and play to their psychological predispositions. Adversaries vary in the complexity and skill of their deception. Four days after Oct. 7, a Hamas official publicly acknowledged that the group had begun to secretly plan an attack more than two years earlier.⁴⁶ Hamas military leaders designed and executed a sophisticated strategy. They deliberately created the impression that they were deterred for at least a year or longer before they attacked. Beginning early in 2023, and with greater frequency during the summer, they disguised their training for an attack by openly and repeatedly approaching the border fence to desensitize those who were monitoring their movements. They designed an elegant and simple solution to disable the sophisticated technology mounted atop the fence and confuse those in intelli-

43 Kubovich, "Disdain, Denial, Neglect" (emphasis added).

44 Hamas did not test the underground barrier during the attack. It is premature, therefore, to conclude, as some analysts have, that the barrier held. See Bar-Joseph and Cohen, "How Israel's Spies Failed."

45 In the simulation, a few dozen fighters used cars, motorcycles, and paragliders to breach the fence and then move toward communities in the south. After a few hours, the commanding officer, Maj. Gen. Mickey Edelstein, stopped the exercise when "the enemy" reached the Ad Halom junction near Ashkelon in the north and Kiryat Gat in the south "without the Southern Command and the Gaza Division knowing how to respond." Cited by Kubovich, "Disdain, Denial, Neglect." A similar exercise was supposed to take place in 2019, simulating a breach of the border fence, but the senior command opposed simulating a breach of the fence and insisted only on practicing an incursion from the tunnels.

46 For a discussion of the detailed planning by Hamas leaders for an attack and their deliberate strategy of deception, see Bergman, Rasgon, and Kingsley, "Secret Documents Show Hamas Tried to Persuade Iran to Join its Oct. 7 Attack." These documents were captured by the Israel Defense Forces in Khan Younis and verified by the *New York Times*. See also Matthew Levitt, "What Hamas Wants in Postwar Gaza: The Power to Fight Without the Burden of Governing," *Foreign Affairs*, May 10, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/what-hamas-wants-postwar-gaza>.

gence centers who were monitoring the video feeds. Hamas' senior military leaders withheld the timing and scope of the attack from everyone, including the political leadership of Hamas and their allies in Tehran and Beirut, until the final hours before the attack. In addition, they refrained from using communication devices that could be intercepted by signals intelligence until the final hours. They succeeded in surprising Israel's intelligence. Military leaders did not receive the timely warning they expected and did not have enough time to organize a defense against the attack before it was too late. Hamas' strategy not only surprised Israel's military commanders but also deprived them of situational awareness and led to a catastrophic failure of defense.

Hamas implemented a sophisticated strategy of deception, but even the most elaborate deception can leave a trail. As early as September 2021, Hamas leaders held a conference at the Commodore Hotel in Gaza City called "Promise of the Hereafter: Post Liberation Palestine." The conference focused on the future after Israel was defeated. The plans were detailed. Hamas had a comprehensive registry of educational institutions and power, sewage, and gas stations they intended to seize after an attack. They also had lists of those within Israel whom they would kill, whom they would expel ("send back"), and those they would detain to prevent a brain drain as they worked to establish an Islamic state after they defeated Israel. Although Sinwar did not attend the conference, he sent a representative to assure the attendees that "victory is nigh." In May 2022, Sinwar also praised a television series that celebrated Hamas fighters who stormed military outposts along the border and took hostages. And at the annual commemoration of the founding of Hamas in December of that year, the rallying cry "We are coming with a roaring flood" echoed through the crowd.⁴⁷ Hamas called the Oct. 7 attack the "al-Aqsa Flood."

It is inevitable that intelligence estimates of an adversary's intentions lag behind any change in those intentions, largely because updating assessments is so challenging. There is some information that suggests that Sinwar did indeed favor what he described

as "quiet for quiet." "The truth is that a new war is in no one's interest," he admitted in a 2018 interview, "For sure, it's not in ours. Who would like to face a nuclear power with slingshots?"⁴⁸ Sinwar changed his views, however, as early as 2021 and began to embrace more aggressive plans. The shift to active planning for an attack and the kidnapping of hostages was likely the result of internal politics within Hamas. In leadership elections in the early spring of 2021, it took Sinwar four ballots to win re-election as military leader.⁴⁹ But when Hamas twice stayed out of the fighting between Palestine Islamic Jihad and Israel, first in August of 2022 and then again in May of 2023, military and intelligence leaders in Israel deepened their conviction that Hamas was deterred and preoccupied with the governance of Gaza. The strategic concept became more deeply embedded in 2023 even though the intelligence community had assessed as early as 2021 that Sinwar's intentions had become less predictable and, in the spring and summer of 2023, began to warn that the political divisions within Israel could lead to an attack.⁵⁰

Psychological Explanations and Worldviews of Political Leaders

The evidence suggests more than simply lags in updating information and estimates. And it suggests more than sophisticated deception because even that sophisticated deception left a scattered evidentiary trail that could be followed. "There is no such thing as 'letting the facts speak for themselves' or drawing inferences without using beliefs about the world," Jervis rightly argues. "It is inevitable that the perception and interpretation of new information will be influenced by established ideas."⁵¹

Psychological explanations of biased assimilation, systematic discounting, and denial to preserve a strategic concept of Hamas' incapacity and inferiority — amplified by overconfidence — explain a great deal of the surprise. Senior military and intelligence officials systematically discounted any information that challenged the consensus that Hamas was deterred and did not consider the possibility that Hamas had the capacity to attack simultaneously and broadly

47 The conference is described in detail in Remnick, "Notes from Underground." See "Hamas-Sponsored 'Promise Of The Hereafter' Conference For The Phase Following The Liberation Of Palestine And Israel's Disappearance: We Must Differentiate Between Jews Who Should And Should Not Be Killed, And Prevent A Jewish 'Brain Drain' From Palestine," MEMRI, <https://www.memri.org/reports/hamas-sponsored-promise-hereafter-conference-phase-following-liberation-palestine>. See Remnick, "Notes from Underground" as well for Sinwar's praise for the television series and the slogan of the annual commemoration in December 2022.

48 Borri, "Sinwar: 'It's time for a change, end the siege.'"

49 Remnick, "Notes from Underground."

50 The intelligence community in Israel commissioned a psychological profile of Sinwar in 2021. Analysts concluded that Sinwar's intentions had become unpredictable. See Yaniv Kubovich, "There's Something New About Hamas' Leader in Gaza Since the War — and Israel Is Concerned," *Ha'aretz*, July 20, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2021-07-20/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/theres-something-new-about-hamas-leader-in-gaza-since-the-war-israel-is-concerned/0000017f-e3e6-d568-ad7f-f3eff09c0000>. See the discussion of the politicization of intelligence that follows for details of these warnings.

51 Jervis, "Reports, politics, and intelligence failures," 23–24.

along the border or that it was engaged in systematic deception to conceal its intentions.

Leaders generally process information in ways that are not ideal even when they are not surprised. Psychological explanations consequently struggle to specify *ex ante* which among a broader set of interlinked beliefs are likely to be fiercely defended against inconsistent information. Cognitive-emotional explanations therefore cannot provide a fully satisfactory explanation of surprise. While psychological processes can explain *how* ideas become fixed, they cannot explain *which* ideas are likely to become fixed. Nor can they explain *when* leaders are especially likely to become overconfident and *what* they are likely to be overconfident about.

The worldview of the new government in Israel and the political priorities it engendered help to answer these questions. The two core assumptions of the strategic concept that were deeply embedded by mid-May of 2023 — that Hamas was deterred and that it was incapable of mounting a large-scale attack — were wholly consistent with the worldview of the far-right coalition that understood the West Bank as a fundamental part of ancient Israel. No challenge to the conclusions of senior intelligence officials were likely to come then from the leaders of the new coalition government. Nor were they likely to challenge the confidence of senior military and intelligence leaders in the border fence and more broadly in what technology could do. Netanyahu and his far-right coalition partners considered a “quiet” Hamas an “asset” to their larger political project.⁵² In 2021, after the war with Hamas ended in May, Netanyahu visited the border fence to celebrate its completion. He also spoke of the military’s ability to interdict Hamas fighters in the tunnels. “Hamas can no longer hide,” the prime minister boasted.⁵³ This exaggerated confidence in technology served Netanyahu’s larger political objective of keeping Gaza quiet so that he could prevent any kind of peace process that could culminate in a two-state solution. Avoiding these trade-offs became far more important

in the new government that he formed in December 2022. His government could devote attention and resources to expanding settlements in the West Bank without worrying that Hamas would attack. The sophisticated border fence was one more layer that made a large-scale military attack by Hamas “impossible.” Decision-makers are much more likely to be overconfident about what technology can do when it helps them to avoid difficult trade-offs they do not want to make.⁵⁴

Had political leaders been less committed, it is at least plausible that they might have asked intelligence leaders for information about Hamas’ intentions that would support their conclusion that Hamas was deterred. As the next section shows, there was very limited direct information. Indirect information about Hamas’ intentions was that Hamas had not joined the fighting with Palestine Islamic Jihad. Political leaders were motivated — likely far more so than senior military and intelligence leaders — to believe estimates that avoided difficult trade-offs that might compromise their ability to pursue their priorities. By the summer of 2023, the worldview and political priorities of the government and the prevailing strategic concept were so closely aligned that they were difficult to disentangle. One military official described the shared “disdain from the senior ranks in *the military and political spheres* ... for an organization [Hamas] that we did not know at all.”⁵⁵

The argument is rather that the political priorities of a radical right-wing government meshed seamlessly with the estimates of senior military and intelligence leaders. They became entangled in ways that precluded a meaningful challenge by political leaders that can potentially prevent or minimize error.

My argument is not one of linear causation. It is not that the priorities of political leaders “caused” senior intelligence and military leaders to conclude that Hamas was deterred. The argument is rather that the political priorities of a radical right-wing government meshed seamlessly with the estimates

52 Smotrich described Hamas as an “asset” for Israel and the Palestinian Authority as a “burden.” “Minister Bezalel Smotrich Described Hamas as ‘Asset,’” *The National*, January 23, 2024, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/palestine-israel/2024/01/23/israel-bezalel-smotrich-hamas-asset/>.

53 Kubovich, “Disdain, Denial, Neglect.” During the war with Hamas in 2021, the Israel Defense Forces tried to convince Hamas that it was planning a ground operation so that Hamas fighters would go into the tunnels. The air force then bombed the tunnels and military leaders claimed that they had succeeded in killing Hamas fighters. Subsequently it became clear that the deception had not succeeded and that very few fighters had gone into the tunnels. The chief of staff at the time claimed that the Israel Defense Forces had “dealt a severe blow to the underground tunnel system that was intended to be the main dimension of Hamas warfare.”

54 Franz-Stefan Gady, “Israel’s Military Tech Fetish is a Failed Strategy,” *Foreign Policy*, October 26, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/26/israel-hamas-gaza-military-idf-technology-surveillance-fence-strategy-ground-war/>.

55 Cited by Kubovich, “Disdain, Denial, Neglect” (emphasis added).

of senior military and intelligence leaders. They became entangled in ways that precluded a meaningful challenge by political leaders that can potentially prevent or minimize error. " Hamas is very, very restrained and understands the implications of further defiance," said Tzachi Hanegbi, the prime minister's national security adviser, six days before Hamas stormed the fence.⁵⁶ It is not difficult to imagine how leaders with a different worldview — less committed to and distracted by their determination to absorb the West Bank and less motivated to avoid difficult trade-offs — might have challenged the assessment that Hamas was deterred, especially as the pace of Hamas' training activity increased in September. Even though they could not prevent surprise, for reasons that I examine in the conclusion, political leaders in 1973 repeatedly challenged intelligence estimates.

Organizational Processes and Culture

Israel's intelligence community consists of more than a dozen agencies. Three are especially prominent. Two principal intelligence organizations are tasked with providing strategic warning and a third provides foreign intelligence. The first is the General Security Service (known as Shabak or Shin Bet), which has primary responsibility for collecting information about Hamas in Gaza through human and signals intelligence. The second organization is the Military Intelligence Directorate (Aman) that houses Units 8200 and 81, which focus on signals intelligence, and Unit 9900 responsible for geospatial intelligence.⁵⁷ Military Intelligence is also home to a special research unit that was created, after the surprise attack of Oct. 6, 1973 by Egypt and Syria across Israel's southern and northern borders, to provide an independent voice that could challenge a prevailing consensus among military and intelligence officials. The third, the Central Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations (the Mossad), focuses on foreign intelligence. It has both human and signals intelligence collection capabilities as well as an analytic unit. It is also responsible for covert operations.

What organizational missteps can explain the failure of these agencies to provide warning of Hamas' intention to mount a large-scale attack? There are several threads to pull. The first is organizational processes that sustained a dysfunctional culture. One veteran analyst

of Israel's intelligence points to organizational culture as a significant contributor to the failure, alleging that under Kochavi, dissent was actively discouraged. "It's hard to admit this today," one senior officer acknowledged, "but officers were afraid to speak to their seniors within the army and even with the political echelon, which didn't want to hear anything — except maintaining order and attempting to achieve calm in Gaza."⁵⁸

Similar allegations have been made about the culture in Southern Command and the Gaza Division. "The atmosphere of smugness descended from top to bottom, from senior political leaders to senior IDF [Israel Defense Forces] and Shin Bet officials, and from there it also seeped into the middle ranks, who tried to issue warnings, but when there was no one to listen, they also gave up. They internalized that no one was really interested in hearing their position."⁵⁹ And when young female soldiers who were "spotters" in border units logged information about unusual behavior by Hamas in the weeks preceding the attack, and persistently warned that the behavior of Hamas units that were approaching the fence was inconsistent with the prevailing strategic concept, their warnings were repeatedly dismissed and at times they were personally belittled. Young women soldiers deployed in these front-line observation units who were not on duty that morning complained bitterly after the attack about hierarchy, laced with male chauvinism, that led more senior officers, all men, to push aside their warnings that Hamas behavior was different from what they were used to observing and could be indicators of preparations to attack.⁶⁰

A second thread is a decision, as military and intelligence officials became more convinced in the late spring of 2023 that Hamas was deterred, to cut back on collecting information about the intentions of Hamas leaders except for a few senior Hamas officials. Resources were redirected to collecting information about Hamas' long-range rocket capabilities and anti-tank squads. At the same time, military and intelligence personnel were transferred out of units in the Military Intelligence Directorate, the Southern Command, and the Gaza Division that had previously focused on invasion and defense planning. Only three junior personnel remained in the department tasked with warning of an invasion. An intelligence officer

56 Bergman and Kingsley, "How Israel's Feared Security Services Failed to Stop Hamas's Attack."

57 Bar-Joseph and Cohen, "How Israel's Spies Failed."

58 Cited by Kubovich, "Disdain, Denial, Neglect."

59 Kubovich, "Disdain, Denial, Neglect." There is a subtext hinting at the politicization of intelligence that I explore explicitly later.

60 Levite concludes that male chauvinism explains the "systematic undervaluation of warnings sounded by junior women in various observation and collection units and perhaps reflecting the fact that women are hugely underrepresented in the higher echelons of Israeli intelligence." Discussed in Levite, "How Was Israel Caught Off-Guard?" One of these young women officers told a senior officer from the Gaza Division that "there was going to be a war and we're simply not ready." He responded by berating her for addressing him directly rather than going through the proper channels. Kubovich, "The Women Soldiers Who Warned of a Pending Hamas Attack." The role of spotters posted on the front lines provided a solution to the opposition within the military to the long-standing demand by women to be assigned combat roles. These women routinely reported "up" but never knew what happened to their reports. The role, in other words, was normalized within the existing hierarchy in the long lead-up to the surprise. Email to the author from Ron Levi, August 18, 2024.

complained after the attack that “The intelligence on the tactical level of Hamas ... decreased dramatically and reached almost zero.”⁶¹

The organizational culture was different in Northern Command, where differences in opinion between Military Intelligence and officers in the field about the intentions of Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hizballah in Lebanon, were discussed frequently. Not so in the south, where “everyone toed the same line.”⁶² The prevailing strategic concept that Hamas was deterred, a conviction that only deepened without systematic collection on the intentions of Hamas units and their leaders, enabled the organizational culture in the south. The one reinforced the other in a loop.

Political leaders and senior intelligence and military leaders always have limited bandwidth and tend to focus on what is important or challenging to their priorities. Arguments that invoke the “attention economy” rightly treat human attention as a scarce resource.⁶³ Long preoccupied by the strategic threat posed by Iran and by Hizballah’s large arsenal of missiles and rockets on Israel’s northern border, as well as by the possibility of violence in the West Bank in response to growing provocation by settler organizations, political leaders willfully took their eyes off Hamas. The intelligence community cut back on collecting intelligence on the intentions of battalion and brigade leaders in Hamas and focused their attention increasingly on operational capabilities.

Organizational Pathologies and Worldviews

Several questions immediately emerge. First, could organizational “fixes” have avoided the surprise? Certainly, reducing the collection of intelligence on the intentions of Hamas leaders at the battalion and the brigade levels and focusing largely on Hamas’ capabilities, particularly their arsenal of rockets, screams out as a significant error that had devastating

consequences. This was not, however, the archetypal inadvertent error that is the focus of organizational theorists. It was not the result of sloppy organizational processes or of lack of oversight, or even of poor organizational communication across silos. Although the organizational culture of Southern Command discouraged challenge and dissent and reinforced psychological processes of denial of inconsistent information, the decision to shift resources away from collecting information on Hamas’ intentions was deliberate and driven by overconfidence that Hamas was deterred. Here too, organizational and psychological processes converged and reinforced one another.

In the face of organizational failures, review panels and commissions of inquiry that are established after the fact tend to recommend organizational redesign.⁶⁴ No official commission of inquiry had been established a year after the attack because the prime minister refused to establish a commission during wartime, although civilians, frustrated by Netanyahu’s decision, have stood up an unofficial inquiry.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the conversation about reform has already begun in Israel, before most of the internal investigations have concluded and years, if not decades, before definitive information will be declassified.⁶⁶ Most of the recommendations are broadly familiar: increase the capability of the prime minister’s military secretary by increasing the number of intelligence officers that work directly in that office; develop closer connections between intelligence collection and analysis; and, more far-reaching, institutionalize the Committee of the Heads of Intelligence Service (the Varash), which includes, among others, the chiefs of Military Intelligence, the Shin Bet, and the Mossad, and at times the prime minister, and transform it into a fully staffed National Security Council.⁶⁷

61 Kubovich, “Disdain, Denial, Neglect.”

62 Kubovich, “Bloody Arrogance.”

63 Thomas Davenport and John Beck, *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* (Harvard Business School Press, 2001), 20.

64 See National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (9/11 Report), July 24, 2004, <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GPO-911REPORT>, which identified siloed communication between the FBI and the CIA as one of the major contributing causes of the surprise and recommended organizational redesign and improved communication among agencies. The Agranat Commission Report released on January 30, 1975, which investigated the causes of the surprise attack by Egypt and Syria on Oct. 6, 1973, found as the primary cause the dominance of a strategic concept (the “conceptzia”) within military and intelligence. It nevertheless made some 47 recommendations that focused largely on organizational redesign, independent research units outside Military Intelligence, and better communication across agencies. Some of those recommendations were implemented but all had atrophied by October 2023. Agranat Commission, *Agranat Commission Report: Commission of Inquiry; Yom Kippur War* (Am Oved, 1975). The report includes only a redacted version from which all classified information was removed, as well as all supporting classified documents. Over the next 40 years, many but not all of these documents were declassified and released. For declassified documents from the Agranat Commission, see Ministry of Defense Archives on the Yom Kippur War, <https://yomkipurwar.mod.gov.il/Pages/default.aspx>.

65 There is widespread speculation that the prime minister has resisted a ceasefire because an end to the war would force the appointment of an official commission of inquiry whose findings would imperil his leadership. Certainly, his personal and political incentives are poorly aligned with governmental incentives to investigate and “learn” from the failure.

66 It took almost 40 years for a piece of information that is critical to the explanation of the surprise of October 1973 to be released.

67 The current National Security Staff is a support staff for the prime minister and the cabinet. Chuck Freilich, “Can Israel’s Intelligence Services be Saved? The Concept of Intelligence is in Need of Revision,” *Sapir* 13 (2024), <https://sapirjournal.org/resilience/2024/06/can-israels-intelligence-services-be-saved/>.



Culture, unfortunately, cannot be legislated or redesigned, and organizational cultures are no exception.⁶⁸ The promotion and institutionalization of dissent through the creation of devil's advocates have been tried repeatedly and have failed again and again. Decades of experimentation suggest that there are no easy organizational fixes to organizational pathologies. Group consensus, hierarchy, and routinization mitigate the impact of these reforms over time. A default to organizational re-engineering, moreover, risks distracting attention from the deeper causes of failure.

A second question is the interaction between psychological and organizational processes. Organizational pathologies certainly strengthened the ease with which military and intelligence officials engaged in biased assimilation and denial of inconsistent information. Had collection of intelligence of Hamas intentions at the battalion and brigade level not been cut back, officials might have uncovered information that was sufficiently arresting to challenge the strategic concept. And had hierarchy been less rigid, the persistent reporting by observers on the border on the change in Hamas training and movements might, as I argued earlier, have raised an alarm. The challenge, however, is that the officers who dismissed these reports also made the decisions to shift resources and discount the on-the-ground reports coming from the spotters. It is difficult to identify the levers that could have opened up the conversation. The organizational pathologies were both a consequence and a reinforcement of psychological processes. The two were so entangled that it is difficult to separate them. That is a large part of the reason that organizational reforms so often fail. The problem goes deeper.

The organizational pathologies were both a consequence and a reinforcement of psychological processes. The two were so entangled that it is difficult to separate them.

A third question is whether a government led by leaders with a different worldview and different priorities could have pried open the conversation and reduced the impact of organizational pathologies. This government was all too comfortable with the prevailing strategic concept that advanced their political priorities. A different government with different priorities

and a willingness, for example, to explore negotiations for a two-state solution could have pressed harder for information about Hamas' intentions.

In the cases where political leaders do reach inside intelligence agencies, intervention can be construed as inappropriate political interference or, at the extreme, as the politicization of intelligence. That raises the question: Was the process of intelligence politicized in this case? The next section grapples with that question.

The Politicization of Intelligence

Scholars have paid attention to the politicization of intelligence as a process that explains failure. An intelligence process becomes politicized when analysts tailor their estimates to fit what they think are the preferences and expectations of the political leadership. Senior intelligence officials change their estimates to fit expectations because they fear retribution from political leaders who have signaled clearly what they expect to hear. Politicization can be so extreme that analysts worry that they will lose their jobs if the assessment they produce does not align with the priorities of political leaders. It can also be subtle, as it was in the lead-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, when intelligence chiefs did not bother to bring forward dissenting estimates because they were convinced that they would fall on deaf ears.⁶⁹

There is some evidence of these different types of politicization. There are often subtle pressures to tailor and soften estimates to avoid a direct challenge to a prime minister and it would not be surprising if these kinds of pressures were at play.⁷⁰ In this case, there is direct evidence that intelligence leaders gave the prime minister bad news and that then, in reaction to that information, Netanyahu subtly politicized the conditions for warning. The evidence is relevant not only because of what it reveals about politicization, but also because of what it reveals about the weight of political priorities on the receptivity of the prime minister to a serious warning of war that challenged his priorities.

Shortly after the government took office in December 2022, it launched a plan for judicial reform. That plan, labelled a "judicial coup" by its domestic opponents, led to a warning by reserve air force pilots that they would refuse to serve if the legisla-

68 Richard K. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security* (Columbia University Press, 2009), 42.

69 See the pioneering work by Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence* (Cornell University Press, 2011).

70 A frequent adviser to the Shin Bet claims that some in the intelligence community feared losing their jobs if they challenged the prime minister. Uri Bar-Joseph, a respected academic analyst of Israel's intelligence community, reports this claim by Matti Steinberg, an adviser to several leaders of the Shin Bet. See Bar-Joseph, "Israel's Deadly Complacency Wasn't Just an Intelligence Failure."

tion were passed, brought hundreds of thousands of Israelis into the streets to protest against the bill, and led the Minister of Defense, Yoav Gallant, to publicly demand on March 25, 2023 that the prime minister postpone the legislation, which he considered a danger to national security. Netanyahu then fired him and only reinstated Gallant under intense public and political pressure.

Intelligence community leaders did not hesitate to warn Netanyahu privately of the dangerous consequences of the domestic division for national security. On March 19, 2023, Brig. Gen. Amit Sa'ar, the head of the research division of Military Intelligence and one of the first senior officials to accept responsibility for the surprise of Oct. 7 by resigning, wrote to the prime minister, warning that the domestic crisis was projecting an appearance of weakness and was encouraging Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas to initiate military action against Israel, perhaps even simultaneously. Attaching raw intelligence reports to his letter, he cautioned: "An opportunity has been identified to create the perfect storm, internal crisis, broad escalation in the Palestinian arena and challenges from other areas, which would create continual multidimensional pressure."⁷¹

Sa'ar wrote to the prime minister again on July 16, further warning that: "The situation is doing damage to the three pillars that comprise deterrence — Israel's alliance with the U.S., the cohesion of Israeli society and the IDF's might." A week later, the head of the Shin Bet cautioned the prime minister explicitly that war, possibly on all three fronts, was likely because of the domestic division over the government's plans for judicial reform. "War," he said, "is coming."⁷² Yair Lapid, a leader of one of the principal opposition parties, subsequently testified before an independent civilian commission of inquiry, that Netanyahu sat, "bored and

indifferent," when his military secretary spoke about the looming disaster in their meeting on Aug. 21, 2023.⁷³

This evidence, admittedly not definitive — but no definitive evidence will be available until an official commission is established and reports — is suggestive.⁷⁴ The direct warnings from the intelligence community to the prime minister about the negative impact of pending legislation to reform the judiciary suggest that, unlike in the Bush administration before the invasion of Iraq in 2003, in the spring and summer of 2023 intelligence officials were not fearful or reluctant to present challenging information and arguments to the prime minister. Politicization came after these warnings.

Directly relevant to the argument here is the weight that Netanyahu gave to the political priorities of his coalition partners when they conflicted with the intelligence estimate that he was given. He regarded the warnings as inappropriate interference by the intelligence community in the political agenda of his government. From the prime minister's perspective, it was not the government that was politicizing intelligence but rather the intelligence community, and he did not like it.⁷⁵ Netanyahu claimed in response that the warnings were "exaggerated."⁷⁶ These public and private warnings had serious consequences for civil-military relations. They created a strained, if not toxic, relationship between the prime minister and the two right-wing parties on which his government depends, on the one hand, and the defense minister, military leaders, and senior intelligence officials who had issued the warnings on the other.

The warnings led the prime minister to subtly politicize the process. In the wake of the crisis, Netanyahu intimated that he expected detailed situational information to support warnings of war in the future. "Don't come to me with bad news," he signaled, "unless you

71 He also cautioned: "Other actors in Iran, Hizballah, Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad, think that Israel, in its weakness, might shift public attention to the security situation and will therefore initiate an escalation." The text of the two letters became available in response to a freedom of information request and was subsequently published in full by *Ha'aretz*. Cited by Chaim Levinson, "Israeli Military Intelligence Warned Netanyahu: 'Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas See Opportunity for Perfect Storm,'" *Ha'aretz*, November 21, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-21/ty-article/.premium/israeli-army-warned-netanyahu-iran-hezbollah-hamas-see-opportunity-for-perfect-storm/0000018b-f18c-d36e-a3cb-f1dfa34d0000>.

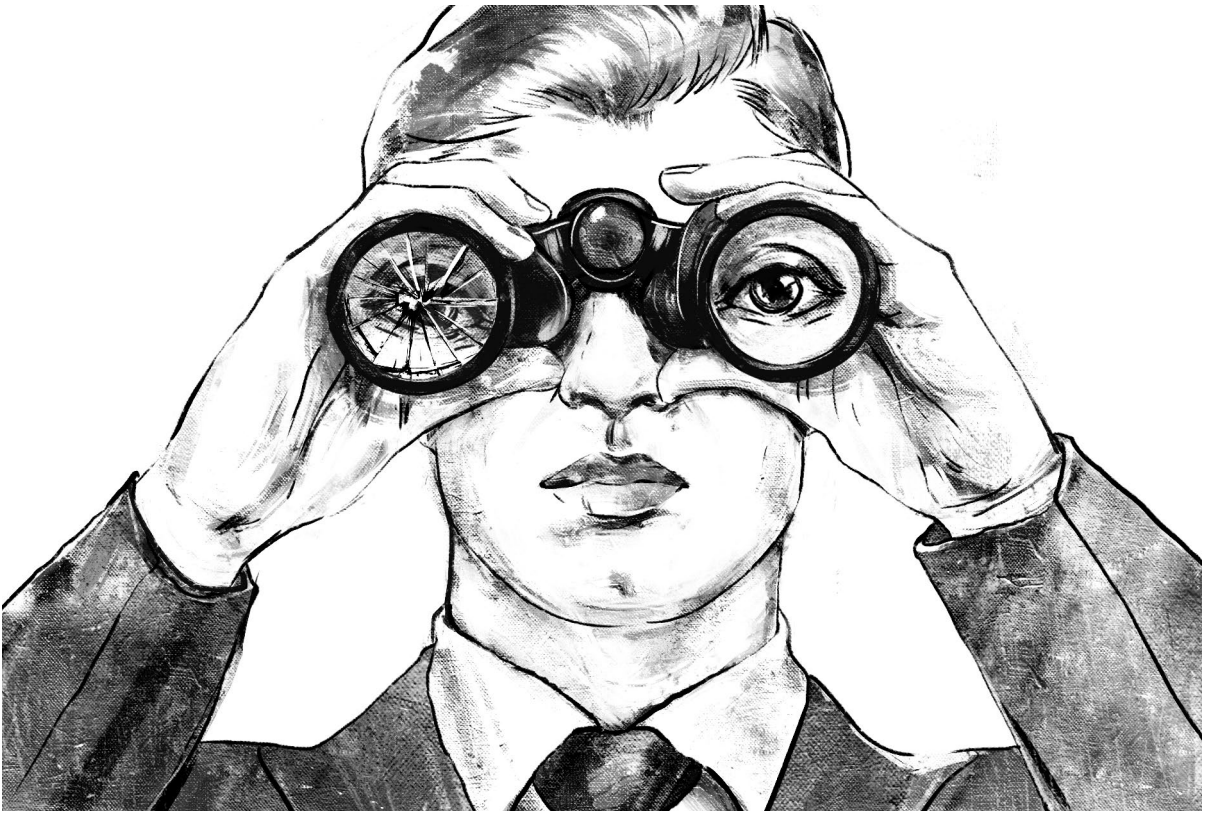
72 Ehud Eiran, Ofer Guterman, and David Simantov, "Israel's Oct 7 Early Warning Failure: Who is to Blame?," *War on the Rocks*, October 4, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/10/israels-oct-7-early-warning-failure-who-is-to-blame/>.

73 Aluf Benn, "There's One Person Who Has the Full Picture of What Netanyahu Knew Before Oct. 7," *Ha'aretz*, August 31, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2024-08-31/ty-article-opinion/.premium/theres-one-person-who-has-the-full-picture-of-what-netanyahu-knew-before-oct-7/00000191-a9cc-d4e9-a199-aded750a0000>. The minutes of Hamas' secret meetings suggest that Israel's "internal situation" was indeed one of the reasons Hamas' leaders felt "compelled to move toward a strategic battle." Two others were the entrenchment of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the growing presence of Israelis in and around the al-Aqsa mosque compound. All three of these, directly related to the worldview and political priorities of the most right-wing members of the government, contributed to Hamas' motivation to attack. Two other reasons that Hamas identified were the disruption of an impending normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia and Israel's announced intention to deploy a sophisticated laser anti-air defense system by the end of the year. See Bergman, Rasgon, and Kingsley, "Secret Documents Show Hamas Tried to Persuade Iran to Join its Oct. 7 Attack."

74 In the absence of an official inquiry, the Israel Defense Forces conducted internal inquiries designed explicitly to focus on "operational" aspects of the failure and excluded the role of civilian leaders. Very little information has been released to the public. The current state comptroller, an appointee of Netanyahu, began his own inquiry but the Supreme Court approved an injunction to discontinue the investigation.

75 Zvi Barel, "In Netanyahu's Mind, Military Intelligence Was Out to Get Him," *Ha'aretz*, November 21, 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>.

76 See his interview on Israel's Channel 14 on April 13, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=St_hTlguqxk. Cited by Eiran, Guterman, and Simantov, "Israel's Oct 7 Early Warning Failure."



have detailed information.”⁷⁷ Netanyahu’s signaling is evidence of subtle polarization that came out of a process when the political priorities of his coalition conflicted with intelligence estimates.⁷⁸

When Netanyahu was warned repeatedly that pursuing judicial reform would signal weakness and that an attack was likely, he prioritized the survival of his coalition and delayed for months before he withdrew the legislation.

Weakening the power of the Supreme Court was centrally important to Netanyahu’s coalition partners, because the court stood in the way of continuing deferments of religious young men from military service. It had also ruled at times that some settler activity violated the rights of Palestinian communities in the West Bank. The Supreme Court, in short, was an obstacle to the core political priorities of the two extreme right-wing parties in the new government and so judicial reform was at the top of their agenda. When Netanyahu was warned repeatedly that

pursuing judicial reform would signal weakness and that an attack was likely, he prioritized the survival of his coalition and delayed for months before he withdrew the legislation. His worldview and his priorities trumped the estimates of both intelligence and military leaders that war was likely if he continued to press for judicial reform.

Counterfactual Arguments: The Primacy of Worldviews and Political Priorities

The surprise of Oct. 7 can be traced back through two pathways — psychological processes and organizational pathologies — that at times overlapped and reinforced one another. Any explanation of the surprise that draws on only one of these pathways is then incomplete. It is also difficult to establish the precise contribution of each to the devastating surprise and to the failure to defend that occurred that morning.

In a counterfactual thought experiment, it is possible to argue that had there been less confidence in the

77 Interview by the author, retired senior official, July 23, 2024. Netanyahu later claimed that the warnings were very general and that he was never warned specifically of an attack by Hamas. Michael Hauser Tov, “Netanyahu Denies That the Israeli Army Warned Him Before October 7 of Hamas’ Intention to Attack Israel,” *Ha’aretz*, May 23, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-05-23/ty-article/.premium/netanyahu-denies-the-idf-warned-him-before-oct-7-of-hamas-intention-to-attack-israel/0000018f-a5b0-d0b4-a3cf-b7bc32b10000>.

78 For a related argument, see Eiran, Guterman, and Simantov, “Israel’s Oct 7 Early Warning Failure.” They argue that “a political calculus clouded the judgment needed to confront an imminent national security threat.”

technical intelligence collection methods, the failure to defend might have been less although surprise would likely still have occurred, given the short time left after the Unit 8200 system crashed late on the evening of Oct. 6. Had there been less confidence in the high-tech border fence, back-up arrangements might have been put in place to improve situational awareness and several hours might have been gained that might well have made a significant difference to the defense of the communities that were attacked.

Psychological processes of denial, made easier by a sophisticated strategy of deception, also played a significant role in enabling surprise. At issue here is *not* the existence of a strategic concept. All military commanders and intelligence analysts have organizing strategic concepts.⁷⁹ It is not the concept itself but the openness of leaders to revising that concept in the face of disconfirming information that matters. There is considerable variation in openness across individuals, driven largely by cognitive and emotional processes and by historical sensibility.⁸⁰ Intelligence and military leaders in Israel, who consulted twice during the night and early morning of Oct. 6–7 to consider information that challenged the prevailing strategic concept, showed little openness to revision. In the last few hours before the attack, they ordered only the most minimal deployment of forces to defend against what they thought might be a limited attack against a small number of outposts.

Similarly, had the organizational culture been less hierarchical and dysfunctional, warnings from those close to the ground might have prompted more extensive precautionary deployments and here, too, the consequences of the surprise could have been attenuated. It is even possible that visible evidence of preparedness might have led Sinwar to postpone the attack, as military and intelligence leaders believed he had a few weeks earlier when additional military deployments were obvious.⁸¹ Much the same argument can be made for an over-stretched intelligence community and the exaggerated confidence that the intelligence community would provide warning. Had this pathway been closed off, it is possible to imagine that hedging could have mitigated the worst of the consequences.

The question that is central to the argument here is the impact of the worldviews and priorities of

political leaders on the unfolding of the surprise. I have argued that the right-wing government that Netanyahu led from Dec. 29, 2022 did not forcefully exercise the challenge function that is the responsibility of political leadership. There were certainly points of entry after May 2023 for leaders to question the widely shared and publicly discussed strategic concept that Hamas was deterred. The chief of staff spoke publicly with great confidence that Hamas was deterred. So did Netanyahu's national security advisor. Yet, as we have seen, the compelling information was the absence of information — Hamas did not join in the fighting between Palestine Islamic Jihad and Israel. Contrary to this line of inference, the press in Israel had reported publicly in 2021 on a newly updated profile of Sinwar by the intelligence community that described how his intentions had changed and concluded that he had become unpredictable. There was also information, as I showed earlier, about the conference in Gaza that was also reported in the press in Israel. At a minimum, publicly available information should have led leaders to question the estimates and the high degree of confidence that senior intelligence and military leaders expressed in their accuracy.

It is worthwhile to compare the information available in 1973, when Israel was surprised by a coordinated Egyptian and Syrian attack. At that time, intelligence and military leaders relied heavily on intercepted communications among senior Egyptian military officers who said repeatedly that they would not attack until they received advanced fighter aircraft from the Soviet Union. The information about Egyptian intentions, in other words, came from the ways Egyptian military leaders thought about the war.⁸² In 2023, the most compelling argument that Israel's military and political leaders made was not based on direct information about the intentions of Hamas leaders but rather the absence of information. Israel's leaders reconstructed Hamas' intentions based on information about what they did not do.

There were also opportunities to question the high level of confidence military and intelligence leaders had that technical intelligence collection would provide warning, and that the high-technology border fence would both warn and delay an attack long

79 In this sense, many review panels of intelligence failures are misguided in their conclusion that it is the concept ("conceptzia") that explains the failure. See the *Agranat Commission Report*.

80 Brian C. Rathbun, Joshua D. Kertzer, and Mark Paradis, "Homo Diplomaticus: Mixed-Method Evidence of Variation in Strategic Rationality," *International Organization* 71, no. S1 (2017), S33–S60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818316000412>. In a related argument, Francis Gavin argues in a forthcoming manuscript, *Thinking Historically*, that thinking historically does not enable better prediction of the future. Rather those who do think historically will recognize more quickly when their concepts are wrong, adapt and adjust more effectively, and by understanding the historical roots of their beliefs, be more willing to let them go if necessary.

81 See the analysis of biased assimilation and denial above for a discussion of the intelligence analysis that Sinwar postponed an attack. There is no independent confirmation that he did so.

82 Janice Gross Stein, "Calculation, Miscalculation, and Conventional Deterrence II: The View from Jerusalem," in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 60–88.

enough for reinforcements to arrive. Political leaders had no incentive to do so, because their worldview and political priorities were aligned with the content of the strategic concept in the months preceding the attack. The impact of political priorities was amplified by the strained relationship between leaders of the intelligence community and Netanyahu, indeed by the prime minister's suspicion that intelligence leaders had a political agenda. The alignment and the suspicion worked together to close off both the incentives for political leaders to challenge intelligence estimates and the willingness by intelligence leaders to warn of surprise unless they had detailed, granular information. Together, they amplified and reinforced the impact of psychological and organizational processes that shielded the strategic concept from the information that was inconsistent with its core elements and from dissent by younger officers. Neither psychological processes alone, nor organizational pathologies alone, nor the worldviews and political priorities of a government dependent on its most radical members can satisfactorily explain the surprise. It was the interaction among all three, the way each at different times reinforced and amplified one or the other or both, that best explains the devastating surprise early on the morning of Oct. 7.

A close examination of the role political leaders played 50 years earlier in the days leading up to the surprise of October 1973 shows significant differences in the ways leaders handled intelligence assessments in the two cases. In 1973, the Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan, visited the northern border a few days before the attack, where there was a large increase in Syrian forces, met directly with northern commanders and asked about the estimate of a low probability of war. On his return, he insisted that additional forces be deployed. He met with the Head of Military Intelligence, Eli Zeira, the day before the attack and asked again about the estimate of the low likelihood of attack. Three days before the attack, Prime Minister Golda Meir also asked why intelligence leaders were so confident. She and Dayan held several critical meetings the day before the war and repeatedly asked both the Chief of Staff David

Elazar and Zeira whether they were confident in their estimate.⁸³ The evidence shows that, unlike in 2023, in 1973 political leaders repeatedly and insistently challenged military and intelligence leaders to explain and support their confidence that warning would be forthcoming and that, in the absence of that warning, the probability of war was low.

This evidence shows a significant difference in behavior by the political leadership and points to a political failure in 2023. Or does it? If this insistent and persistent questioning of professionals by political leaders in 1973 was unable to prevent the surprise, why would it have worked in 2023? The answer lies in an important piece of information that was declassified and released only in late 2012, almost 40 years after the surprise attack and explains why the political leadership had good reasons to be reassured.

Declassified documents revealed that Military Intelligence had developed a "special means of collection" about Egyptian intentions that could listen to conversations among the most senior officials in Cairo and would provide a definitive warning.⁸⁴ Meir was informed about this technical collection capability in the summer of 1972 by the Commander of Military Intelligence's signals intelligence unit when she visited their base. The system was tested in May 1973 when the Egyptian army ran a large-scale exercise focused on crossing the Suez Canal. At that time, King Hussein of Jordan, as well as Ashraf Marwan, a close advisor to Egyptian President Anwar Sadat who was a Mossad agent, warned that the exercise was a cover for a large-scale attack across the canal. The "special means of communication" provided the critical information that the exercise was not a cover for war. Egypt did not attack.

In the days before the attack on Oct. 6, 1973, Meir asked officials explicitly about information that was collected through these "special means." In newly declassified testimony to the Agranat Commission, Meir said that it was her knowledge of the "special means" that gave her confidence that war was unlikely to start without a warning.⁸⁵ Dayan asked Zeira explicitly if there was anything of interest in the communication traffic lines from Egypt and he

83 Uri Bar-Joseph, *The Watchman Fell Asleep: The Surprise of Yom Kippur and its Sources* (SUNY Press, 2005), 141–186; Uri Bar-Joseph and David Hazony, *The Angel: The Egyptian Spy who Saved Israel* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2017); Janice Gross Stein, "'Intelligence' and 'stupidity' reconsidered: Estimation and decision in Israel, 1973," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 3, no. 2 (1980), 147–177, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402398008437044>; Michael Handel, *Perception, Deception, and Surprise: The Case of the Yom Kippur War* (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1976); Avi Shlaim, "Failures in national intelligence estimates: The case of the Yom Kippur War," *World Politics* 28, no. 3 (1976), 348–380, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009975>; Yigal Kipnis, *1973: The Road to War* (Just World Books, 2013).

84 What exactly those "means" were is still classified. Uri Bar-Joseph, "The 'Special Means of Collection': The Missing Link in the Surprise of the Yom Kippur War," *Middle East Journal* 67 no. 4 (2013), 531–546, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43698074>. One analyst has speculated that the "means" were battery-operated devices attached to phone and cable connections buried deep in the sands outside Cairo that allowed Israel to eavesdrop on conversations in the rooms where the telephones and telexes were located. Howard Blum, *The Eve of Destruction: The Untold Story of the Yom Kippur War* (Harper Collins, 2003), 120.

85 "'Edut Golda Me'ir, Rosh ha-Memshelah' ["The Testimony of Golda Meir, Prime Minister"], February 6, 1974, Agranat Commission Testimonies, <http://www.archives.mod.gov.il/Pages/Exhibitions/Agranat2/mywebalbum/index.html>, 67. Cited by Bar-Joseph, "The 'Special Means of Collection,'" 538.

asked again the morning of the attack. Both times Zeira replied that the lines were “absolutely quiet.”⁸⁶

The evidence clearly shows how political leaders repeatedly challenged the assumptions of intelligence. They were repeatedly reassured and believed that reassurance because they were so confident in the technology of warning. The surprise of 1973 is not explained by the failure to challenge, as it is partly in 2023, but by the apparently misplaced confidence the political leadership in 1973 had in what technology could do. Here there does appear to be similarities with the overconfidence of Israel's leaders in 2023. New evidence, however, sheds light on why the technology failed in 1973 and how the two cases are different.

In 1973, the technical collection system was not turned on. A few months before the war, one of these “special means” was discovered by Egypt. The decision was then made to restrict their use and only the Director of Military Intelligence was authorized to turn it on. On Oct. 4, two days before the attack, in response to repeated requests from his intelligence officers, Zeira allowed a test to take place but ordered the system turned off at the end of the test. He did not tell Elazar or Dayan or Meir that the system was turned off, even though he knew it was. When asked repeatedly by them on Oct. 5 about the information that was collected by the system, he replied only that the lines were “absolutely quiet.”⁸⁷ He only turned it on the next day, the morning of the attack, when the information that arrived was too late to make a difference. Why Zeira misled his superiors about the operational status of the warning system remains a mystery. It has never been explained.

That the West Bank was allocated a force five times larger than the one in the north and more than 10 times larger than the one in the south reflected the worldview and political priorities of the most right-wing parties in the government.

The comparison of the two cases of surprise is instructive. Although there are similarities between the two cases, tracing the process in 1973 shows important differences. As Uri Bar-Joseph concludes, the evidence shows “the extent to which the decision making process before the war rested on the assumption that the “means” had been activated at least for a few days without yielding any warning indicators.”⁸⁸ The failure

was not the result of overconfidence in technology, as it was partly in 2023, but rather the product of extraordinarily poor judgment by the director of military intelligence who actively misled his superiors. Absent that, it is entirely plausible that the persistent challenges that came from the political leadership in the 72 hours before the attack in 1973 could have mitigated both the surprise and the worst consequences of the attack.

What work do worldviews and the political priorities they generate do in explaining the pathways to surprise in 2023 and the failure of defense that followed? Psychological processes identify biased appraisal and the denial and discounting of information by senior intelligence and military leaders as explanations of their failure to question whether Hamas was indeed deterred. Psychological explanations also explain the overconfidence of military and intelligence leaders that they would deliver a timely warning and that advanced technology would provide enough time if deterrence failed for the military to hold off Hamas long enough so that reinforcements could arrive. And organizational pathologies suppressed dissent by young soldiers who could not persuade their senior officers that there were changes in Hamas' behavior and that these changes were significant. The two processes reinforced each other in their most important dimensions.

The responsibility for surprise does not rest entirely, however, with the intelligence community and the military leadership. First, the toxic relationship between the prime minister and senior intelligence leaders, which grew out of the explicit warnings of war because of the political division within Israel

over the prolonged struggle over judicial reform and the weakness it projected to Arab and Iranian leaders, raised the level of detailed information that Netanyahu expected intelligence leaders to provide to support an assessment of war. Senior intelligence leaders knew that. Second, civilian leaders have an ability to challenge that, in this case, they failed to exercise. They had no in-

centive to do so because their priorities aligned with the two core dimensions of the strategic concept — that Hamas was deterred and that it did not have the capability to launch a sophisticated attack. The alignment made it possible for Netanyahu and his right-wing colleagues to ignore the difficult trade-offs and pursue their agenda of expanding settlements and deepening control over the West Bank. Masking

86 “Eduto shel Sar ha-Bitahon Mosheh Dayan, Yeshivah 66” [The Testimony of Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, Meeting 66], February 11, 1974, Agranat Commission Testimonies, http://www.archives.mod.gov.il/Pages/Exhibitions/Agranat2/MosheDayan/66/mywebalbum/index_2.html, 21; cited by Bar-Joseph, “The ‘Special Means of Collection,’” 538.

87 Bar-Joseph, “The ‘Special Means of Collection,’” 543.

88 Bar-Joseph, “The ‘Special Means of Collection,’” 546.

difficult trade-offs in an unresolved conflict with a determined adversary can sooner or later become an enabler of surprise.


The political priorities of the new government translated directly into the distribution of military forces the morning that Hamas attacked all along the border with Gaza. The disposition of Israel's forces on its three borders on Oct. 7 mirrored the political priorities of the government. A dozen tanks and 400 combat soldiers were stationed on the "quiet" border with Gaza. A larger force, four or five battalions, was deployed on the Lebanese border against the far larger and more dangerous forces that Hizballah commanded. Hizballah had approximately 150,000 missiles, multiple divisions, and an elite fighting force, the Radwan. The force stationed in the West Bank on that day, where there was no organized fighting force, was 21 or 22 battalions. It was bolstered at the last minute with two companies from the Southern Command's reserve due to simmering tensions created by settler activity. That the West Bank was allocated a force five times larger than the one in the north and more than 10 times larger than the one in the south reflected the worldview and political priorities of the most right-wing parties in the government. "The settlements came first," observed one analyst, "and communities in the Galilee and along the Gaza border barely made it into last place."⁸⁹

What are the implications of this analysis for policies that might lessen the likelihood that a surprise of this scale will happen?

A change in worldview and political priorities, impossible to orchestrate from the outside, resets the conversation between military, intelligence, and civilian leaders. It alters which ideas become fixed, changes organizational priorities, and disrupts embedded practices. In the face of a frustrated and determined adversary, a change in worldviews also helps to rebalance leaders' confidence in what technologies can deliver. All of these — ideas, organizational priorities and pathologies, and confidence in the solutions that technology can deliver — are often treated as "sticky" and resistant to change, but different worldviews can redirect these intermediate mechanisms in the ongoing relationship between civilian and political leaders. The worldviews and political priorities of leaders who form government matter. They tell us which concepts their psychological processes will defend, when they

are likely to trust technologies too much, when they are least likely to challenge the estimates they are given by intelligence analysts and military leaders, and, ultimately, what kind of attack leaders are least likely to expect.

Organizational or technical fixes can impact these intermediate mechanisms only at the margins. They cannot provide a solution to political trade-offs. Worldviews matter because some choke off thinking about discontinuous change, shut down consideration of the possible, and push people toward certainty rather than toward uncertainty. They close off worlds rather than open them up, encourage the illusion of control, and make it easier for leaders and analysts to imagine that they can make difficult trade-offs disappear.

The challenge of preventing surprise is much deeper than organizational re-engineering. Meeting that challenge requires recognizing the importance of the relationship between elected leaders and their civilian and military counterparts. Attention to differences in worldviews forces an acknowledgement that there is more than one way to see the world, that an adversary sees the world differently, and that those who see the world differently will have different priorities and will act differently. Worldviews are at their core an understanding of the world and of one's role and responsibilities in the world. Preventing surprise begins with a deep understanding of the worldview of "the other," of how "the other" sees "us," and then imagining what a determined adversary might do. 

Janice Gross Stein is the Belzberg Professor of Conflict Management and Founding Director of the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Toronto. She is an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Science and a senior scholar at the Kissinger Center at the School for Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. A frequent analyst of the Arab-Israeli conflict, her recent scholarship is on great-power competition and technology policy.

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Image: *Spokesperson unit of ZAKA (CC BY-SA 4.0)*⁹⁰

89 Aluf Benn, "The West Bank Occupation Outweighed Israel's Defense of the Gaza Border on the Eve of October 7," *Ha'aretz*, February 21, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2024-02-21/ty-article/.premium/west-bank-occupation-outweighed-israels-defense-of-the-gaza-border-on-eve-of-october-7/0000018d-c828-ddae-a18f-ffbe2ecd0000>. Shany Mor suggests that there were 32 combat battalions in the West Bank and only two on the border with Gaza. See Shany Mor, "The Failed Concepts that Brought Israel to October 7: How four interlocking ways of thinking combined to leave the Jewish state at the mercy of its enemies," *Mosaic*, October 7, 2024, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/israel-zionism/2024/10/the-failed-concepts-that-brought-israel-to-october-7/>.

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