

Israel and Hamas: The worst-case scenario wasn't an intelligence failure.

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Introduction

One of the biggest dilemmas facing any army in the defense of a sovereign state is the difference between forecasting and predication. Prediction involves estimating an outcome with a high level of certainty, usually based on historical data and statistical modeling. Forecasting involves projecting future developments but with a certain level of uncertainty due to external factors that may impact the outcome. It is like the difference between climate and weather. The exact temperature and the amount of rain (or lack thereof) at any specific minute cannot be known until it happens. But people can be advised to take an umbrella and wear a coat in the expectation of cold and wet weather.

Similarly, the military draws up scenarios for any and every eventuality of an attack. Equipment is procured and soldiers are trained. Yet, there are external factors that inhibit intelligence in being 100% certain of when and where an attack will occur, by what size force and its fighting capabilities. This is especially if the adversary is a terrorist organization, engaged in decades of low intensity warfare, part of and hiding among civilian population, and with constant waves of escalation and de-escalation.

Just when will the worst-case scenario surface as reality? No army can maintain the highest state of readiness on a 24/7- and 365-day basis. Consequently, this is what took place starting at around 6 am on Saturday morning 7 October 2023 on the Israeli-Gaza border when Hamas attacked.

Who is Hamas?

Hamas is the Arabic acronym for the Islamic Resistance Movement, with its roots and early ties to one of the Sunni world's most prominent groups, the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in the 1920s. Hamas was founded in 1987 by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, a Palestinian refugee living in Gaza, during the first intifada, or uprising against Israel. Hamas has since vowed to annihilate Israel and has been responsible for many suicide bombings and other deadly attacks on civilians and Israeli soldiers.

Hamas refuses to participate in any talks for a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian question. The U.S. State Department designated Hamas a terrorist group in 1997. The European Union and other Western countries have followed. Hamas has received backing from Arab countries, such as Qatar and Turkey and has moved closer to Iran and its allies.

In 2005 Israel decided to unilaterally withdraw from Gaza. Since then, there have been no Jews / Israeli citizens in Gaza. There are no settlements. Israel isn't occupying Gaza. Gaza is a 100% Muslim Palestinian state that refuses to declare independence. In 2006 Hamas won the parliamentary elections held there and in 2007 violently seized control of the Gaza Strip from the Palestinian Authority (PA), dominated by rival Fatah movement, that administers semi-autonomous areas of the West Bank in accordance with the 1993/4 Oslo Accords with Israel. Hamas and the PA don't see eye to eye.

Israel responded to the Hamas takeover with a blockade on Gaza to keep the group from developing weapons. Israel retains exclusive control over Gaza's airspace and territorial waters. There is also a border with Egypt who similarly maintains blockade restrictions. Despite this Israel largely provides Gaza's water supply, electricity and communications infrastructure. Israel lets Palestinian workers into Israel daily. Israel is humanitarian.

Periodically there have been escalations with Hamas in Gaza. Hamas has crossed into Israel and perpetrated terrorist attacks. Hamas has kidnapped Israeli soldiers and held them ransom for prisoner exchanged, the most famous being Gilad Shalit exchanged for 1027 Palestinian prisoners. Hamas has launched tens of thousands of rockets and missiles at targets through Israel's south and center including major civilian urban areas of Tel-Aviv, Jerusalem, Beer Sheba, Ashdod and Ashkelon for almost two decades.

Israel Defense and Offense Systems

Israel has relied on a few methods of active and passive defense against Hamas. One is the Iron Dome anti-missile defense, and other more sophisticated similar systems and counter-electronic devices. These have been very successful in preventing most of the rockets and missiles launched by Hamas from reaching their targets.

The second has been to construct a few generations of fences along the border. Each generation has been of a different height and sophistication. These have also extended below ground as Hamas has tried to dig tunnels into Israel. There are electronic detection systems and CCTV.

Another method is human intelligence and monitoring of communications. These have been very successful in determining Hamas rocket and missiles launch sites and the whereabouts of its leadership. In response, to prevent and to deter escalations, Israel strikes these targets both with its air force and in targeted assassinations. There have been instances where Israeli land forces have also crossed into Gaza.

In sum Israel has been at war with Hamas for decades but given that Hamas is part of the local population it has constrained itself in massive attacks given the potential of the risk of high civilian loss of life. Hamas hasn't constrained itself similarly and strives to kill Israeli civilians and Jewish targets worldwide.

The worst-case scenario erupts.

At around 6 am on Saturday morning 7 October 2023 on the Israeli-Gaza border Hamas attacked Israel. There was a launch of rockets and missiles. Israel's air defense system sirens echoed across the region and together with other warning devices alerted citizens to enter protective shelters. The Iron Dome system began intercepting most of the thousands of missiles that were fired by Hamas.

Yet, there was also a full-fledged attack by Hamas waged from the air, sea and ground as hordes of Hamas militants crossed into Israel. There were initial indications of the border fence being breached at 29 different points along a 100 km stretch of border. Hundreds of Hamas armed fighters, some on motorcycles, some in pick-up trucks followed the bulldozers that breached the fence. Others swooped into Israel on paragliders and yet more in motorboats storming Israeli beaches.

The multiple locations, and the size of the force, probably more than 1500 (based on the number killed later) surprised the Israel defenders. Most likely the Hamas attackers were also surprised at the low resistance they encountered. What ensued

was a massacre of unarmed civilians. Hamas was proud to have filmed and then released to social media worldwide the videos and photos they took.

These videos and photos show how Hamas proudly killed children and women, having first raped some of them. Some next to the corpses of their relatives and friends. For example, over 260 Israeli's civilians as well as non-Jewish foreign tourists were killed at one site, a desert party and music festival.

The death toll (over a thousand) and the wounded (over three thousand) continued to rise as Hamas continued to fire missiles for days after. Israeli forces managed to secure the border and entered a full state of war with the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of reserves. At the same time there have also been tensions and frictions on Israel's northern border with another militant terrorist group, Hezbollah. Israel has attacked both Hamas and Hezbollah in response to their aggression.

Conclusion

There will be many commentators that will refer to this Hamas attack that started on 7 October as an intelligence failure. Yes, there was a failure, but the analysis needs to be deeper and wider. An intelligence failure is a too superficial an analysis. It doesn't consider the difference between forecasting and predication or all the external factors.

A more accurate understanding is to analyze facts that are well known. The intelligence data is fully available for this. The starting point is to acknowledge that the only way to counter an adversary such as Hamas, that it is a terrorist organization, is its destruction. The destruction of Hamas doesn't mean the killing of all its members and supporters.

The destruction of Hamas is the obliteration of its weaponry, and the de-linking of its support in all aspects from the local population and from larger entities such as Iran. It is the removal of all its leaders by whatever means. It is establishing a less belligerent regime in Gaza. A regime that would be agreeable to govern Gaza as an independent State of Palestine. This should be the same lesson when considering other adversaries such as Hezbollah and Iran.

The failure of Israel against Hamas has been because Israel hasn't done this. Israel being civilized and a western democracy with values and norms hasn't to date taken the steps essential for this to happen. Israel hasn't used sufficient military force against Hamas, its leadership and weaponry, or promoted a different regime in Gaza. Israel hasn't done this because it is apprehensive of killing innocent people in Gaza.

That has resulted in Hamas being able to progressively build larger and more formidable forces and sophisticated weaponry. Progressively Hamas has become more militant and more daring. There have been constant escalations with Israel over decades. Israel fell into a situation of normalcy with this and a complacency that the worst-case scenario although on the horizon, would remain there.

What then is that worst case scenario? It is not being surprised by the exact time, location or size of an attack. It is not just being attacked by rockets and missiles, or the breaching of defensive fences or even the raping and killing innocent people, including young children.

The worst-case scenario is the kidnapping and taking innocent of innocent people hostage. Hamas has now done this. By all accounts as many as 150 hostages, including children, women, foreign tourists and workers. The hostages are both Jewish and non-Jewish, Israeli and non-Israeli. The Israeli Defense Forces and indeed the rest of the world shouldn't in any way be constrained in doing what is now necessary. That is the destruction of Hamas. And similar terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and indeed those who support them in any manner, such as Iran. President Biden has dispatched an aircraft carrier battle group to the Eastern Mediterranean.

The intelligence lesson for the worst-case scenario is that the sooner and quicker that action is taken to remove an adversary, then there is no longer an adversary. The longer and slower, then the longer the adversary will remain, and the threat and its complexities will increase. Political elites should heed this intelligence instruction.