Thoughts on Intelligence Failures The surprises of 1973 and 2023

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The war in the Gaza Strip has not ended and it is still too early to draw conclusions, but from its outbreak on October 7, 2023, many people noted the similarity between situations in 1973 and 2023: both were intelligence failures which led to crushing surprise attacks and catastrophic results. We will try to shed light and understand the current event, examining similarities and differences, and particularly by looking for common sources for the surprises

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10/1973 ← Another intelligence failure after fifty years → **10/2023**
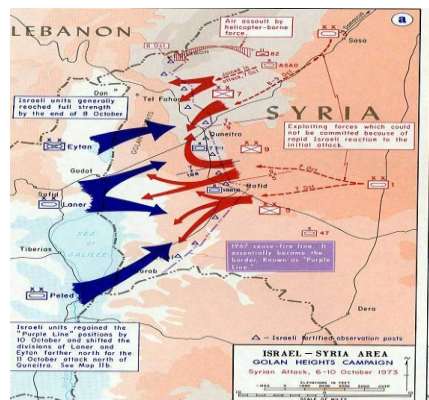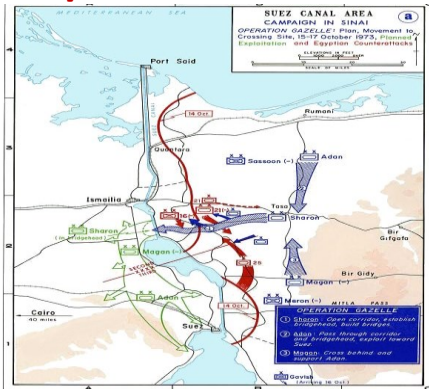
(Source: Wikipedia)

Is Israeli intelligence very strong when dealing *"secrets"*, but not so strong when dealing with *"mysteries"*?
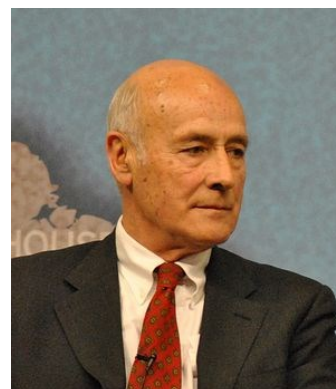
One insight we offer as a cultural-methodological root cause for recurring intelligence failures, is the development of a culture in the intelligence community, which prioritizes operational over strategic research. Over the decades, the ongoing intelligence handling of operations and countermeasures during ordinary security periods, and the management of campaigns between wars was cultivated, received significant resources and accumulated prestige. Thus, while strategic alert research, for all its importance, and without specific decisions having been made, stalled. Therefore, the intelligence community failed the two primary tests for dealing with strategic research, resulting in the two largest, most catastrophic surprises ever prepared for Israel.

The immediate, constant, not to say permanent need for operations and countermeasures, the overwhelming majority of which ended quickly and successfully, in effect gradually led to the prioritization of operational over strategic research. Over the years, a culture of rewarding investment in solving operational intelligence puzzles which hid "*secrets*" was created, rather than dealing with "*mysteries*".

Joseph Nye, a historian who served as the United States Assistant Secretary of Defense for National Security Affairs (1994-5), divided the research questions of intelligence organizations into two areas: one was "*secrets*", issues for which an answer exists and can be found by effective collection. Most of fields operations, countermeasures, air defense strikes, etc. belong to that category. The other were "*mysteries*", future issues for which no answers exist, and collecting intelligence at

Brigadier General (Res.) Itai Brun (Source: Wikipedia)

Joseph Nye (Source: Chatham House)

present cannot help. They can be resolved only by brainstorming. Thus, divining the political or belligerent intentions of global leaders, or identifying processes and assessing how they will end, mostly belongs to the field of "*mystery*". Brigadier General Itai Baron, who explained Nye's concepts to Israel in several methodological

studies, correctly stated that there were puzzles, both "*secrets*" and "*mysteries*": an army's preparedness relates not only to how many soldiers and weapons it has, which is a "*secret*", but to things that cannot be quantified: "*mysteries*", such as motivation, the quality of training and the command echelons.

Generally speaking, strategic intelligence analysis is mostly directed to interpret "*mysteries*", while operational intelligence research is directed to interpret, in varying degrees, both "*secrets*" and "*mysteries*". Tactical research, however, is mainly directed to interpret "*secrets*" (a kind of physical-mechanical concept, regarding issues that have a solution).

A look at the great intelligence successes compared to the great intelligence surprises which have accompanied Israel since its founding, teaches that Israeli intelligence's well-deserved reputation for excellence comes mainly from success in "*secret*" challenges: from many magnificent operations, like the raid in Entebbe; countless foiled attacks; strategic attacks, such as destroying the nuclear reactors in Iraq and Syria; or from successful large scale operations, like "Moked" - Israel's preemptive strike on the Egyptian air force in 1967.
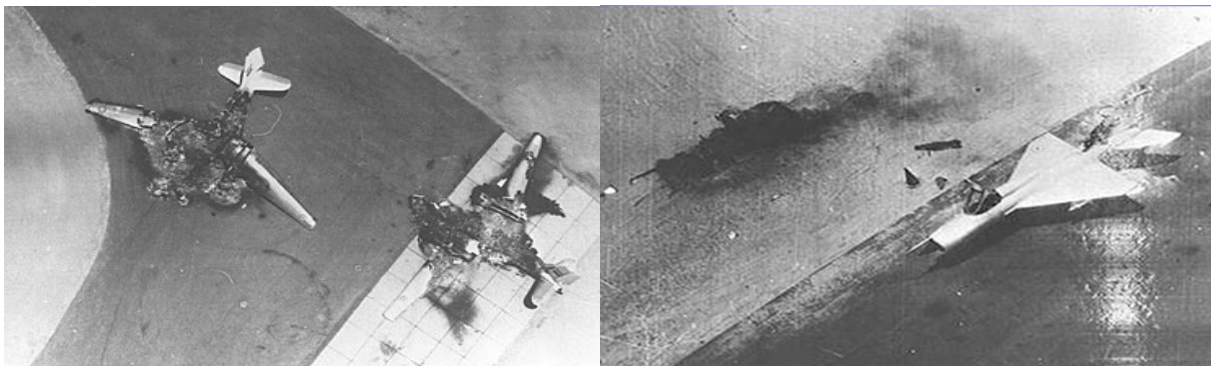
Operation "Moked": Israeli airstrike at the beginning of the Six-Day War, June 7, 1967 (Source: Malam archive)

 The strategic failures of 1973 and 2023, point to a continuing difficulty in dealing with the sphere of "*mysteries*", a world of continuous challenges, often Sisyphean, philosophical and without a solution, which do not yield immediate fame and achievements as does revealing "*secrets*". Both failures had elements of "*mystery*" and "*secrets*", although in different doses. in 1973, the "*mystery*" was misunderstanding how determined Egypt and Syria were to initiate a war, which would indeed have limited goals in light of their military capabilities, but would restore honor and resolve the political deadlock for negotiations which would lead

to getting back the lost Arab territories. Information from a Mossad strategic intelligence source codenamed "The Angel", could have solved the "*mystery*" and a revealed large part of the "*secret*". But his reports, and reports from other sources, including the meeting with King Hussein few days before the war, were not interpreted correctly. The failure before the morning of the war, was not identifying the H-hour of its breakout, and the limited objectives of the Egyptian-Syrian operative plans. Thus, the failure of solving the "*mystery*" paved the way for the failure of revealing the "*secret*"...

The Target before the attack   The Target after the attack

The Syrian nuclear reactor: before and after the attack (Source: IDF spokesman)

The intelligence failure in 2023 went deeper. Its "*mystery*" was the failure to understand the depth of Hamas' hatred for Israel and its determination to attack and massacre on such a large scale and with such unprecedented barbarity. Its "*secret*" was the D-day and H-hour of the attack, and the sheer numbers of the terrorists who invaded Israeli territory. The

Surface-to-air SA-5 missile (Source: US Air Force Base Nellis)

preparations Hamas made were difficult to hide, some of them made directly in front of Israeli surveillance. But not understanding the "*mystery*" and dealing with its consequences, made it extremely difficult to reveal the "*secret*".

The failures of the entire Israeli intelligence community in the two "*mystery*" challenges of 1973 and 2023, were not the only ones. It is always difficult to indicate negative processes of strategic significance in advance, and thus, even the processes

which led to the Six Day War in 1967, were not correctly interpreted: At the end of 1966, the Military Intelligence Directorate predicted about five years of peace, and half a year later Israel was fighting on three fronts... Some more examples: three years later, the arrival of the Russians in Egypt was not observed, what led to the unsuccessful end of War of Attrition, in 1970. And to say nothing of the huge failure of not issuing a warning for the 1973 war. Then there were the mysteries prediction failures of the First Intifada in 1987; the arrival of the Russians in Syria with their surface-to-air SA-5 missiles in 1982 after the First Lebanon War; and later, the arrival of Russian and Iranian forces in Syria in 2015. and the list goes on. They were all ongoing processes of strategic significance for Israel, which the intelligence community was unable to communicate to the decision-makers in time. Intelligence also finds it difficult to indicate in advance positive processes, such as the potential for peace negotiations, mainly because its objective is to warn of danger, while, in addition, by nature, political negotiations are isolated and conducted discretely.

On the other hand, since the Second Lebanon War, the Military Intelligence Directorate has put its emphasis on a strength that already exists, and that produces quick and glorious achievements: dealing with "*secrets*". Thus, in 2007 the Directorate's Operative Division was established, and then expanded. its objective is to bring about a quick and successful revelation of "*secrets*" by combining highly focused intelligence capabilities, with precise IDF operative capabilities. At the same time, the analysis division, which is in charge of "*mysteries*", a long-standing weak link, under some DMIs (Directors of Military Intelligence), actually became a body that mainly served the "Targets Factory", led by the Operative Division, and so was weakened future.

For the decision-makers and military leaders, and even for public, the successful and fruitful pursuit of "*secrets*", created the illusion of "Intelligence Superiority", and the mistaken belief that "our intelligence knows everything". The euphoria of intelligence supremacy, and the mutual back-slapping among intelligence, the political echelon, the military, the media and the public, magnified the illusion and, disastrously for us, created a false sense of stable security.

The failures of 1973 and 2023: selected aspects of similarity and difference. the attacker's rationale:

In 1973, President Sadat wanted to shock Israel's decision-makers and lead them to political negotiations. From the moment the war decided on October 24, 1972, he planned a limited Egyptian military move, so as not to overwhelm Israel. As far as he was concerned, a limited military attack would be sufficient to bring the political achievement he wanted.

In 2023 as well, the Hamas attack was not intended to pose an immediate existential threat to the State of Israel, but to create shock waves and cracks for the long term, a significant step on the way to Israel's future collapse, so Hamas thought.

President Anwar Sadat (Source: Wikipedia)

The reference to the Israeli deterrence:

When the intention is not achieving military decision, Israel's deterrence means very little: in 1973 the Egyptians were deterred from a full-scale war which would be an existential threat to Israel, but not from a limited war.

The same was true in 2023: Hamas recognized its advantage in the relationship of forces vis-à-vis the IDF in the area immediately adjacent to the Gaza Strip and its ability to score a significant achievement. Even if it misjudged Israel's counterreaction, Hamas was not deterred.

Yahya Sinwar, Hamas leader in Gaza (Source: A.P.)

Assessing the nature of the enemy's plan of attack:

In 1973, the Egyptians and Syrians planned a war whose military objectives were limited. In Israel, however, it was assumed that Egypt and Syria were considering either a renewal of the War of Attrition, or a full-scale war, but did not envision the possibility of a limited military move. Since it was assessed, that they would be deterred from a full-scale, existential war, the likelihood of threat, as a whole, greatly decreased. In 2023, the intelligence error was rooted in an underestimation of Hamas: no one considered Hamas could or would launch a large-scale attack, but only a limited maneuver, simultaneous raids on a few agricultural villages (Kibutzim or Moshavim), involving 15-20 terrorists in each attack, and here too, the assessment failed.

President Hafez al-Assad, (Source: Wikipedia)

Timing:

In the summer of 1973, Egypt chose Yom Kippur as the date for the attack. Behind the scenes, President Sadat's despaired at the failure of political measures to return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. Several possible dates were offered, such as the spring of 1973 (the "Blue-White Alert" of May), and finally the later date was chosen, October 6, 1973. The choice of Yom Kippur itself actually made it easier for the IDF to mobilize reserves and allowed the Syrians to be contained as early as noon on October 7, 1973; and the halt of the Egyptian advance in some sectors (against the limited target which was set).

Israeli prisoners in Egypt and a destroyed Israeli tank in Sinai (Source: IDF Archive)

In 2023, Hamas chose the dates of Passover, and later, Simchat Torah, both in a year of controversy in Israeli society regarding a legal/systemic reform, which they assumed reflected a society weaker than ever. Choosing those times was meant to exploit IDF's very limited order of battle; the holiday quiet; and the difficulty of recruiting reserves, since during the long vacations many Israelis are on holiday and traveling, both at home and abroad. It is possible Simchat Torah's falling on a Saturday, after the long Succoth holiday, made Hamas choose the day to surprise and shock Israel, a choice which proved itself correct, at least during the first day.

Hamas invasion into the western Negev (Source: media office/Handout via Reuters)

The Israeli hostages still kept in Gaza (Source: the headquarters of the Israeli kidnapped)

The grand-strategy context:

In the two years leading up to the Yom Kippur War, the preoccupation with terrorist attacks, mainly abroad, was intense, especially after the Munich massacre in September 1972, and until the al-Saiqa attack on migrant train in Austria, September 1973. Some studies of the war claimed that the decision-makers in Israel dealt with that threat, which was disturbing but limited and not existential, instead of dealing with the significant threat, being constructed and about to be realized in Egypt and Syria.

As for the 2023 disaster, alongside the claim about weakening the Palestinian Authority and strengthening Hamas, what also has to be examined is whether the preoccupation of the IDF and the intelligence organizations with the Iranian nuclear issue (including the idea of pushing the United States to withdraw from its agreement with Iran in May 2018), was not also part of a deliberate internal diversion of attention, to avoid dealing with the Palestinian issue (and not just a result of the need to deal with the Iranian threat itself). The extensive preoccupation with the Abraham Accords, which were undoubtedly initiated as an alternative strategy to find a solution to the Palestinian issue, certainly contributed to it.

**Signing the Abraham's Agreements
(Source: official white house)**

Ethical and methodological intelligence failures (within the limitations depicted so far)

The failure of Special Intelligence Operation Sources (SIOP): Regarding the two aforementioned strategic surprises, in the final analysis, the prestigious, expensive SIOP did not produce what was expected of it, namely to provide as early and accurate warning. One reason was the enemy's awareness of having its communications intercepted, and taking exceptional precautions when discussing specific issues. Fifty years ago, it was identified, clearly. in 2023, it was noticed and therefore suspected by Hamas, which probably avoided using those communications.

The SIGINT failure:

In 1973 as well, SIGINT did not produce the explicit warnings the analysts wished for, and until two days before the outbreak of the war, it still did not consider providing a warning. In 2023, from what has been published so far, no SIGINT information was produced from tactical sources, and no sufficiently specific SIGINT information was received about the expected timing of the attack.

The SIGINT information that was produced in the two years before the attack, although correctly interpreted by some of the working ranks in Unit 8200, did not, as far as we know, receive the status it deserved because of its quality, as a result of assessment errors and indulgent interpretation.
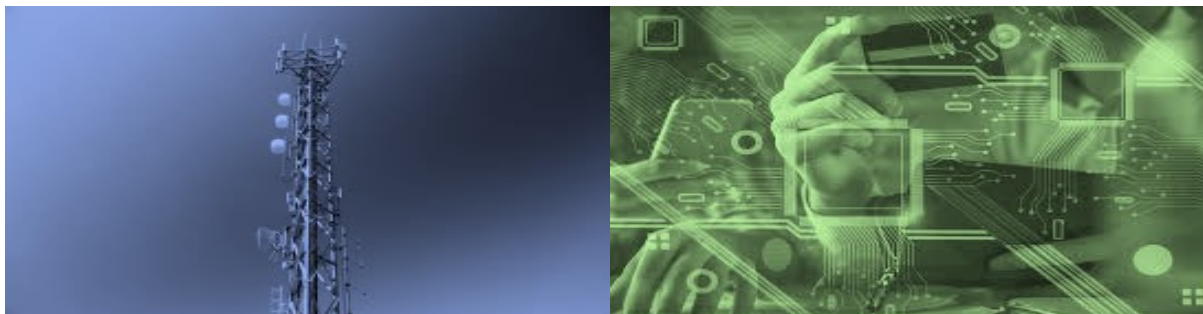
Signals Intelligence (Source: Malam archive)

The VISINT failure:

A sortie was made only two days before the outbreak of the 1973 war, after two weeks without photographs. Quality information obtained from the surveillance in the field during the two months preceding the war, failed to break through the wall of prior conceptions. In 2023, when the Gaza Strip was literally right under Israel's nose, and VISINT was immeasurably more convenient than in any other arena, it did not yield the full picture of the tunnels and the other Hamas infrastructures, and did not contribute to the immediate warning.
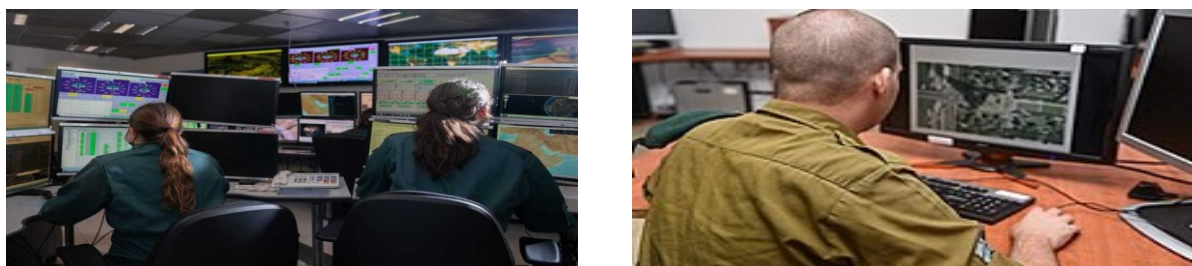
VISINT, Visual Intelligence. Operating satellites decoder at unit 9900 (Source: IDF spokesman)

It is worth emphasizing: The three aforementioned collection systems, put technology above everything else, and there is considerable concern that it was done while some of the basic elements of intelligence work in the areas of collection and analysis, were neglected.

The HUMINT failure:

In 1973, there was an abundance of accurate HUMINT information and alerts from Mossad sources. From what is known so far, on the eve of the 2023 attack and massacre, there was no such warning or information from sources within the Shin Bet, the only agency that used human resources regarding Gaza strip.

Humint: a prisoner is interviewed by an interrogator
(Source: Malam archive)

The OSINT failure:

Much visible information about Hamas' attack methods was published in the open media, but apparently, as on the eve of the Yom Kippur War, it was considered to be of little, if any, value, certainly not as a warning. Whether the consequences of the decentralization of "*Hatsav*" open source unit contributed to the overall failure, should be examined.

OSINT - Open-Source Intelligence
(Source: CSARN Global Cyber Academy)

In addition, there are prominent several cultural-methodological failures (again, within the limitations of what has been depicted so far):

The failure of imagination:

A difficulty well-known to plague analysts is the inability to assess events of an unfamiliar magnitude, which writers (Tom Clancy, for example) and screenwriters do not find difficult at all. Too little brainstorming and too much faith that quality information will produce an answer to the riddles, and perhaps even suppressing people with a different mindset, prevented an early understanding of the coming attack. One exception was 8200 Warrant Officer "V", which, according to media reports, anticipated the planned scope of the Hamas attack, but unfortunately, she did not take exploit her "duty of personal warning" and did not warn her superiors, and especially - the Director of the Military Intelligence (DMI).

Tom Clancy (Source: APE)

Failure to share and distribute information:

About a decade ago, a transition based on technology was made to production and distribution methods which rely more on internal email and less on focused distributions, as in the past. The change was in the concept of pulling or "fishing" information from a "Pool", instead of pushing it to the relevant analysts. It could result that in various places, including critical ones, a missing intelligence picture might be created, without the responsible parties knowing that part of the relevant, maybe even important information, had not reached them at all.

Personality-organizational failures:

Such failures included arrogance and hubris, conformism, groupthink and wariness of expressing a different opinion. In our view at least, arrogance is a chronic disease prevalent in organizations which rely on top quality personnel, who are highly praised for their achievements in the world of "*secrets*".

**A metaphor
(without additional words…)
(Source: Wikipedia)**

Humans also tend to reject and ignore signs of difficult situations. Those are all "sins couching at the door."

In the field of thought, there was a lack of effective activity in the Devil's Advocate

Devil's Advocate monitoring Department (Source: Malam Archive & Facebook)

monitoring department, in the years leading up to the attack in 2023. In this regard, we will not add to the many publications in the Israeli media regarding the continuous decrease in the influence of this important monitoring, over the past years.

Beyond the inherent failures, in our opinion, the fact that intelligence officers at the level of regional divisions, are now exposed to sensitive intelligence materials, some of which was not even distributed to the regional command levels in the past, allowed for and caused, unfortunately, a decrease in the value of VISINT and OSINT reports.

While in 1973, the ability to deal with "*mysteries*" was reserved for the analytical division at IDF's General Staff level, it appears to be now at two lower levels, too. Thus, due to increasing pluralistic approach and the decentralization of information to lower levels after 1973, and especially after the Second Lebanon War in 2006.

The capabilities acquired improve the handling of "*secrets*" by the intelligence officers at the regional commands and divisions levels, but apparently, they were not used to deal better with "*mysteries*" challenges.

The self-deception of the intelligence system:

The failures did not result from a lack of information or the degree to which the enemy deceived us, but from misinterpretation, a kind of self-deception. In 2023 as in 1973, the IDF was in a state of continuous defense, with the illusion of being super-defended: in 1973 it was the Suez Canal; in 2023 it was the border security barrier,

with its advanced systems. Defense by its very nature leads to familiarization in units dealing with routine security, and therefore to a natural decrease in vigilance and preparedness. In our understanding, on both occasions, concealment was greater and infinitely more influential than was deception. On both occasions, the enemy did not hide its intentions and methods from IDF surveillance, its deception was focused on hiding the D-day and H-hour of the operation.

The failure of intelligence-operation connection:

 as mentioned, the routine achievements of intelligence led to the illusion that the intelligence services "knew everything", an illusion prevalent not only among the intelligence personnel and the political decision-makers, but also among the IDF's heads and its operational elements. Thus, over the years, the operational command probably concluded that it could indulge itself and act only when there was an alert from intelligence. For the army, it was convenient and low-cost, making military training and routine security possible as long as there was no warning.

However, again and again it was forgotten that intelligence does not always bring warnings, and military preparation is obliged to deal with situations in which they are absent. One more aspect is that in both surprises, not only did intelligence influence the operational level, it was vice versa as well, as a boomerang: the intelligence bodies were influenced by the operational elements' self-satisfaction, who overestimated the intelligence bodies themselves... that, in a vicious cycle, led to an increased smugness, and probably blinded their eyes to the intelligence assessment misperception.

One final point: in our assessment, the problem lies not only in the fact that "by chance," both in 1973 and in 2023, the human composition of the leadership was the main cause of the intelligence failure. In our opinion, it is not out of the question that a different leadership would also have brought similar results...

In conclusion, we have tried to argue that the surprises of 1973 and 2023 characterized long-standing structural and cultural failures, which were forcefully exposed at both ends of a 50-year spectrum. It is important to emphasize that aside from multiple successes, there have been other intelligence failures over the years, even if their results were not as disastrous as in 1973 and 2023. However, those two were, in the end, the most significant concrete tests of the intelligence community, and both times it failed.