



ISRAEL INTELLIGENCE HERITAGE  
& COMMEMORATION CENTER (IICC)

## **Israel's Oct. 7 Early Warning Failure: Who Is to Blame?**

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Despite the operational and intelligence successes of Israel in Lebanon in September 2024, a troubling question hangs over the country: Who bears responsibility for the failure to anticipate the Oct. 7 Hamas assault that led also to the war in Lebanon and on other fronts? Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his intelligence chiefs appear locked in a blame game, with each side offering conflicting accounts of whether warnings were issued and, if so, why they were not acted upon. The short answer is that both are responsible. To reconcile the competing claims, one needs to peer more deeply into what exactly is an early warning issued by intelligence agencies. The civil-military clash over this issue is also a powerful reminder of the dangers in the politicization of intelligence, and its costs.

The Military Intelligence Directorate reportedly issued no fewer than four separate warnings to Netanyahu between March and July 2023. These included two letters sent directly from the then-Military Intelligence Research Division head, Brig. Gen. Amit Saar. At least one of the two letters pointed to the potential for escalation in the Palestinian arena, and he included Hamas in his warning, although it did not focus on Gaza specifically.

The Military Intelligence Directorate's warnings were echoed by the head of the Israeli Security Agency (Shin Bet), Ronen Bar. In July 2023 he explicitly warned Netanyahu that "war is coming." Bar's warning was based on his assessment that the "axis of resistance," including Iran, Hamas, and Hizballah, perceives Israel as weaker, due to internal rifts over Netanyahu's contentious judicial reforms. Bar warned the prime minister that the projected Israeli weakness created an incentive for the "axis" to attack.

Netanyahu's camp pushed back against these claims. The prime minister, as well as people close to him, insist that at no point was he presented with a focused warning about Gaza. They further argue that in the critical hours before the Hamas attack, intelligence chiefs failed to share with Netanyahu indications that Hamas was about to launch an attack.

Reconciling these conflicting narratives requires shifting from political finger-pointing to a professional examination of intelligence doctrine and theory. Understanding how different types of warnings are produced — and whether they lead to actionable decisions — is key to assessing the breakdown. Warnings, after all, are only valuable if they provoke timely and appropriate action by decision-makers.

Intelligence organizations issue three types of early warnings: tactical, operational, and strategic, each demanding different responses from political and military leaders. The attack on Oct. 7 highlights failures across these three distinct types of warnings.

There was a failure to provide a tactical warning — that is, an immediate, concrete, and focused warning — in the days before the attack and more specifically on the night of Oct. 6-7, just hours before the attack. Intelligence indicators, which should have prompted immediate preventive measures, were misinterpreted. Despite two late-night and early morning meetings among senior military and intelligence officials to assess troubling signals, no definitive warning was given. The opportunity to avert the attack was lost.

But this tactical lapse was merely the culmination of deeper, longer-term failures. Israeli intelligence should have issued an operational warning months, if not years, earlier. Israel's intelligence had full access to Hamas' plan of attack (code-named in Israel "the Walls of Jericho"), but it failed to convey this information to the relevant military planners. Consequently, Israel's southern command, the one responsible for Gaza, did not seem to have updated its defense plans to meet the nature and scale of the threat posed by Hamas — perhaps as part of a broader sense of military superiority, coupled with underestimating Hamas' military capabilities.

The other significant failure was strategic. Strategic early warnings are meant to flag broader trends in enemy behavior and intentions or shifts in the regional landscape that pose threats to, or present opportunities for, a nation's national security. These warnings are not meant to drive policymakers to take immediate steps but rather to prompt a broader rethinking of national security policies. In the case of Hamas, Israeli intelligence failed to see the movement's decision to abandon its cautious approach of limited conflicts with Israel every few years by

using projectiles, and to shift to a massive frontal ground assault by thousands of militants. At least in part, this was also the result of effective deception and concealment by Hamas.

Israeli intelligence did, however, succeed in issuing more general warnings about the growing likelihood of war across multiple fronts, especially on the northern front with Hizballah. Yet these broad strategic warnings were not translated into actionable preparations for an imminent Gaza-based offensive.

Despite the glaring failures of the Israeli intelligence community, Netanyahu cannot be absolved of his own responsibility. He can't claim that he wasn't "grabbed by his coat lapel," an argument he made to shrug off responsibility for the 2021 crowd crush of 45 worshipers in the holy site of Meron. This time, prior to the Hamas attack, the intelligence apparatus delivered a series of strategic warnings, grounded in not just assessments but also credible information. While these warnings may not have been directly focused on Gaza, they were still extraordinary in nature — warnings unlike those received by any Israeli leader in recent decades. Netanyahu rejected these warnings both in private and in public. In an April 2023 interview on Israel's Channel 14, the prime minister was asked directly about the issue. Netanyahu responded by saying the warnings were "exaggerated." He added that, still, "we are always preparing for such an eventuality." On Oct. 7 it became clear that both statements were wrong. A responsible leader would have treated such signals with the utmost seriousness, convening detailed discussions and reassessing national policy to mitigate the escalating risk of conflict, or at least prepare for such an eventuality (even more

so if the threat was focused on other, even more dangerous threats than Gaza). Netanyahu, as Israel's ultimate decision-maker, had the authority to reject these assessments — yet with that authority comes the responsibility to fully appreciate the threat and respond appropriately. In both evaluating the threat and formulating a response, Netanyahu — as well as the intelligence community and the armed forces — fell short.

The prime minister's refusal to heed the strategic warnings could have been a result of cognitive closure, as it clashed with his long-held belief and strategy. After all, Netanyahu preferred, since he was re-elected in 2009, a (weak) Hamas rule in Gaza. He authorized, perhaps even encouraged, Qatari funding for the organization in Gaza — this, in order to balance against the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority, thus preventing the creation of a Palestinian state. During Netanyahu's years in power, Israel and Hamas did exchange blows during a number of rounds. Netanyahu even stated, on occasion, that Hamas should be removed from Gaza. Yet in reality, he preferred its rule there to the possibility of a unified Palestinian Authority that might lead to a negotiated two-state solution.

As pointed by some scholars such as Adam Raz, Hamas and Netanyahu, sworn ideological enemies, had lived in a strange symbiosis since the 1990s. Hamas opposed the 1993 peace process between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. In 1994, Hamas launched into a suicide bombing campaign in Israel. Its goal: to show Israelis that the Palestinians oppose a deal, thus eroding support for it in Israel. Netanyahu, elected head of the Likud (then the main opposition party) in 1993, used these attacks effectively, and attacked then-Prime Minister

Yitzhak Rabin for moving forward with the peace process. Following Rabin's assassination in November 1995, and buoyed by public hesitation to move forward in the face of Hamas attacks, Netanyahu was elected prime minister in 1996. He lost the position three years later to Ehud Barak, and returned to power a decade later, in 2009.

Netanyahu also believed that Hamas was deterred by Israel. In a Likud party meeting in May 2023, five months before the deadly Hamas assault, Netanyahu stressed that Hamas had not fired a single rocket on Israel for two years. His conclusion then was that Hamas was "deterred," due to the massive blows it received from Israel in their May 2021 clash.

Netanyahu's approach was supported by the products of the intelligence community. Until they issued the warnings starting in the spring of 2023, the various intelligence agencies believed that Hamas was deterred by Israel. Director of Military Intelligence Aharon Haliva stated in September 2022 that the Gaza front would remain quiet in the five years following the May 2021 Israel-Hamas clash. Although he swore that, in his role, he should always doubt such predictions, it does not seem that his or any other agency seriously challenged the consensus. The previous chief of staff, Aviv Kochavi, expressed a similar position in an open session at a military think tank in December 2022. All Israeli leaders, civilian and military, drew further support for their notion that Hamas was deterred when the organization chose not to intervene when Israel conducted a five-day fire campaign in Gaza against another armed radical organization, Islamic Jihad.

The deterrence argument was coupled with political and economic arguments made by Israeli intelligence analysts. They believed that Hamas' need to provide for a population of over 2 million Gazans had the potential for the organization to evolve from a radical armed group to a more responsible governing authority. Here, the analysis may have been affected by the earlier process in the Palestinian armed struggle against Israel. After all, Fatah, the main faction in the secular Palestine Liberation Organization, evolved from a radical armed group to a semi-state, as it was awarded partial control of the West Bank in the 1990s. In line with this approach, in the years prior to the 2023 attack, Israel authorized the entry of a few thousand Palestinians from Gaza to work in Israel, with the hope that it would further strengthen Hamas' reluctance to attack Israel.

Netanyahu's miscalculation may have also been shaped by his political instincts. Faced with warnings from intelligence chiefs he perceived as politically motivated, Netanyahu appears to have dismissed their concerns as attempts to undermine his policy agenda. He may have suspected that intelligence warnings were, in fact, a disguise for a liberal-democratic preference of the heads of the intelligence community. Or, at a minimum, as he told Time magazine in August 2024, the warning by the intelligence agencies was in response to calls amongst their ranks to refuse to serve if Israel's liberal democracy would be weakened by Netanyahu. This skepticism might have been fueled by the fact that a significant number of Israel's past senior security and intelligence officials had become vocal critics and, in some cases, political opponents, after leaving office. In this case, it

seems a political calculus clouded the judgment needed to confront an imminent national security threat.

The tension between Netanyahu and the intelligence agencies also has socio-political undertones. The set of measures that he advanced since early 2023 were intended to weaken the supreme court and strengthen the executive branch. However, beneath the political battle, there was a claim by Israel's right that sectors of the intelligence community gave preference to middle-class recruits from the center of Israel, a group more identified with the left, thus leaving behind Israelis from geographic and economic peripheries, who are traditionally further to the right politically. Since the intelligence community is the main launching pad for lucrative careers in Israel's thriving high-tech industry, this preference also determines future social mobility. Aware of these disparities, the military establishment, including the intelligence community, actually launched a number of projects to encourage greater recruitment from the periphery long before Netanyahu's attack on the supreme court. Yet, the depiction of the intelligence community, or at least portions of it, as a self-serving, self-replicating, left-leaning elite added a class-based dimension to the tension in Israel over Netanyahu's push to re-shape the judicial branch more to his liking.

Politicization of intelligence usually results in suboptimal policy outcomes. In most cases, politicization comes in the form of political pressure that compels intelligence officials to produce analyses that support and justify policy choices by leaders ("intelligence to please"). Netanyahu's recent clash with his intelligence chiefs represents a reversal of this pattern. It seems that Netanyahu



suspected that intelligence officials had exaggerated certain risks in an effort to prevent him from advancing his domestic agenda, leading him to disregard their warnings. As with traditional cases of politicization, the outcome was disastrous.

As Israel launches into deeper military involvement in Lebanon, it would greatly benefit from eliminating such political calculations from the civil-military exchange on intelligence issues. A professional perspective makes clear that both Netanyahu and his intelligence chiefs bear responsibility for the Oct. 7, 2023, failures of early warning. To achieve better outcomes, the conversation must return to a professional, non-political track. A first step should be an external, effective, and impartial investigation. The most senior military intelligence officers involved in failures have left their positions or committed to doing so soon. This should make it easier to conduct an effective investigation and hopefully will end the set of leaks each side had been involved in, trying to better position themselves. Hopefully, a serious investigation would also conclude with suggestions on how to address the structural problems in the intelligence community, as well as in the interaction between the intelligence community and Israel's elected officials.