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## The Myth of a Technology Shield: Israel's Strategic Surprise and Lessons for Singapore

By Michael Raska

### SYNOPSIS

*One of the essential reminders of the Israel-Hamas conflict is the perennial illusion that military-technological superiority creates effective deterrence particularly against seemingly weaker opponents. There are lessons to be derived from Hamas' recent surprise attack on Israel, including the risks of subscribing to established assumptions purely from a bureaucratic and intellectual conformism, and the need to continue to foster a strategic foresight that would test the validity of existing defence strategies and concepts.*

### COMMENTARY

The key lesson from the ongoing conflict in Israel for Singapore's defence policymakers is that a deadly strategic surprise can still happen in the age of AI-enabled intelligence and high-tech military capabilities.

On the 50th anniversary of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the  [Hamas militant group](#) launched an [unprecedented surprise attack on Israel](#), firing thousands of rockets from Gaza and sending ground units to breach highly fortified fences separating Gaza and Israel.

This will go down in history as the one that diminished Israel's deterrent value and the myth of Israel's invincibility in the 21st century. It will spark years-long debates on the [events and consequences](#) surrounding the massive Hamas incursion.

While the violence [rages on](#), Israeli commentators are firing questions on the confluence of factors that might have led to the critical failures of Israel's concepts of deterrence, early warning and rapid military response.

Some of the questions ringing loud include the [systemic failures of Israel's intelligence community](#) and its sophisticated early warning systems to detect Hamas' operational plans in advance, Israel's prolonged political fragmentation and internal protests that undermined military readiness, and why the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) units deployed in the "Gaza Envelope" were overran.

### **The Impossible Becomes Possible**

Similar to the 1973 Yom Kippur war surprise, the Israeli political and military establishment has vastly underestimated its enemy's resolve amid the cloud of Israel's military-technological superiority, and political ideology to ignore Palestinian aspirations in a protracted and bloody conflict.

In essence, the prevailing strategic thought was that there would be no such way for a Hamas force to break through the advanced Israeli intelligence networks, penetrate high-tech border sensors and barriers, and essentially storm into Israeli homeland, all under the cover of a massive missile barrage.

The reality is that Hamas units have adapted to the IDF's operational conduct and managed to effectively combine available high-tech with low-tech forms of warfare, and utilise the elements of many previous conflicts – turning their perceived strategic weakness into political advantage.

For example, the horrifying images of Hamas militants rapidly storming Israeli border towns and dragging [Israeli civilians as hostages to Gaza](#) invoke memories of the 1972 massacre of Israeli athletes during the Summer Olympics in Munich.

The paralysis of the IDF in the early hours of the incursion are reminiscent of the 1973 Yom Kippur war, which caused tremors in the Israeli military establishment and society, leaving the entire inventory of IDF concepts in the dustbin.

The deluge of images and videos showing the Hamas incursion and the sheer brute force reflect the social media campaign by Islamic State terrorists in Syria and Iraq in 2016.

The use of cheap drones flying over the sophisticated Israeli Merkava tanks, and destroying them from the sky above, are clearly adopted from the Ukrainian and Russian tactics in the current war in Ukraine.

And the hundreds of missiles flying toward Israeli population centres have been perfected from the lessons of Iran-backed Hezbollah periodically attacking northern Israel.

### **Lessons for Singapore**

On the other side of the world, military and intelligence analysts in Southeast Asia, including Singapore, must be also pondering these developments, opening new debates on the direction and character of future conflicts that combine a mix of "high-low" military technologies, information warfare, and strategic and operational surprise.

One of the essential reminders of the Israel-Hamas conflict is the perennial illusion that military-technological superiority creates effective deterrence particularly against seemingly weaker opponents, as reflected in Israel's narratives and power projections.

Many strategists subscribe to similar perspectives – high-tech equals effective military capability, and therefore provides strong deterrence. A relentless drive to optimise manpower amid an ageing population has also seen armies pursue technology so they can maintain military prowess even with fewer servicemen.

In many ways, Singapore's security conceptions have been based on the Israeli model since its inception – historical experience of vulnerability, lack of strategic depth, lack of natural resources and asymmetries in regional demographic composition.

While Singapore's defence strategy is not based solely on high-tech deterrence, but on a comprehensive Total Defence concept that integrates deterrence with defence, diplomacy and resilience, it sees technology as a critical enabler to its "strategic edge" – the ability to deter potential conflicts and offset its perennial strategic vulnerabilities.

While there are many potential scenarios posing a strategic surprise for Singapore, they all emanate from the similar mix of "high-low" tech warfare in regional conflicts.

On one hand, regional extremists or terrorist organisations could also learn to leverage surprise, speed, resolve, mix of technologies and sheer brute force – by simultaneously using swarms of drones, social media information warfare, cyberattacks, indiscriminate shooting, and use of explosives to attack Singapore's centres of gravity.

On the other, with the ongoing China-US strategic rivalries in the Indo-Pacific and potential conflict scenarios in the South China Sea, the Malacca Strait, Taiwan and East China Sea, Singapore's security is increasingly affected by what used to be considered as "rear areas" or its "outer circle of defence".

As military-technological capabilities in the Indo-Pacific narrow, Singapore defence planners must consider what challenges this presents for the country. How will the Singapore Armed Forces operate in contested environments that include a mix of "high-low" strategies?

The current war in Israel demonstrates the risks of subscribing to established assumptions purely from a bureaucratic and intellectual conformism, and the need to continue to foster a strategic foresight that would test the validity of existing defence strategies and concepts.

Without a continuously updated, well-formulated national strategic policy, and policies on resource allocation, collaborative intelligence, training and operational experience, ensuring effective responses to evolving hybrid threats may be at risk.

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