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Fallout from an Intelligence Failure in Gaza

By Kwa Chong Guan

SYNOPSIS

It is inevitable that a Commission of Inquiry will be set up to determine why Israel's intelligence community failed to provide early warning of Hamas' breaching of Israel's defence wall on Saturday 7 October. From past experiences, the search for answers will look into three areas of intelligence failures: [1] the quantity and quality of information on Hamas preparation for an attack on Israel; [2] the implicit assumptions underlying the assessments of information gathered; and [3] Israeli policy maker's reception of intelligence assessments about Hamas' intentions and capabilities for an attack on Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his political colleagues must be aware that their policy decisions and actions in the leadup to Hamas' attack and thereafter will be closely scrutinised by any Commission of Inquiry. They will have to start crafting narratives defending their actions which can be presented to a Commission of Inquiry.

COMMENTARY

Exactly fifty years ago, a Commission of Inquiry headed by Chief Justice Shimon Agranat was established to inquire into how Israel was fundamentally surprised by Egypt's unanticipated crossing of the Suez Canal to invade Israel.

The Commission found that Israeli military intelligence had the information of Egyptian troop movements along the Suez Canal which might portend a possible invasion. But the information was dismissed as indicators of a forthcoming attack because of what the Commission termed "the Concept." This referred to the implicit assumption that Egypt would not invade Israel unless it had air superiority over Israel's air force and the assurance that Syria joined Egypt in invading Israel from the Golan Heights. Only then could Egypt be assured of victory.

As the Agranat Commission concluded, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) senior command erroneously inferred that Egypt's lack of military capability to defeat Israel should have dissuaded then President Anwar Sadat from invading Israel. But they did not realise that Sadat's intention in invading Israel was to break the political stalemate of Egypt-Israel relations. The Commission excoriated IDF senior commanders for their failure to anticipate Egypt's surprise attack, but exonerated the political leadership, including then Defence Minister Moshe Dayan. Then Prime Minister Golda Meir resigned in the controversy which followed the Commission's release of its report of several hundred pages.

Similar commissions of inquiry were established by victims of surprise attacks leading to wars. Commissions of Inquiry were established by the US to examine the circumstances of Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 and more recently, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States of America. The British government appointed a committee of Privy Counsellors chaired by Lord Oliver Shewell Franks to examine the decisions taken by the British government in the run-up to Argentina's unanticipated invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will have to establish a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the circumstances of his government's decisions preceding Hamas' breaching of Israel's security wall as soon as the dust of current combat has settled.

Searching for Intelligence Failure

Any Commission of Inquiry into Hamas' surprise attack will probably be looking *first* into the quantity and quality of information on Hamas' planning and preparations for this attack. Surprise attacks, whether on Pearl Harbor or the Falklands Islands, do not occur like a bolt of thunder out of a clear blue sky. There will be movement of troops, artillery and other heavy weapons and logistics for any surprise attack. It will be surprising, if not shocking that the IDF's military intelligence and the Israeli Military Intelligence Directorate (Aman), the largest component of Israel's military community along with the Mossad and the Shabak, did not pick up signals of Hamas troop movements, massing of rockets and movement of bulldozers to punch through Israel's security wall.

If the IDF's military intelligence and Aman did pick up signals of Hamas troop movements, then the *second* set of issues follows as to why this information was not translated into intelligence assessments and early warning of a Hamas attack. Were there, as the Agranat Commission concluded fifty years ago, "concepts" which filtered and shaped how information of Hamas troop movements along the Gaza border was read? If so, what were these "concepts" or implicit assumptions shaping the processing of raw information into intelligence assessments? Did the IDF assume wrongly that it would be suicidal for Hamas to attempt any attack on Israel because they must be aware that they would be crushed in an IDF counter-attack?

Third, how were the Israeli intelligence community's briefings and assessments received by Prime Minister Netanyahu and his Cabinet colleagues? Would the echo chamber enclosing PM Netanyahu and his Cabinet colleagues have squelched any early warning of increased probability of a violent Hamas response to escalating Israeli settler attacks on Palestinians on the West Bank? Press reports suggest this may have been so when the head of Shabak, the internal security agency of Israel, warned of

retaliation from Palestinians threatened by Jewish settlers encroaching into the West Bank and was denounced by Likud Party politicians for having gone soft on the Palestinians.

A New Peace Agreement?

Fifty years ago, Israel was fundamentally surprised by Egypt's invasion. The shock of that surprise attack led Israel to rethink its relations with Egypt and to negotiate a new peace with Egypt. Fifty years later, Israel is again fundamentally surprised by Hamas' attack, which Israeli intelligence failed to provide early warning of, or if it did, was ignored or dismissed by the political leadership.

Undoubtedly, various narratives will emerge as the search for answers proceeds. The aftermath of Hamas' surprise attack on 7 October will lead both Israelis and Palestinians to rethink their respective strategies for the future. Will there be a new peace deal?

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