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THE SURPRISE STRATEGY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE DIMENSIONS OF AL-AQSA FLOOD

Every attempt to read the enemy's intentions in the bright light of intelligence and reason runs up against the illusions created by the fog of war.

Carl von Clausewitz

EVALUATION NOTE

INTRODUCTION

On 7 October 2023, we witnessed a striking event that brought the Middle East's longstanding problems into a new phase. That day, a group of Hamas members carried out Operation Al-Aqsa Flood using motorcycles, Caterpillar bulldozers and paramotors, and advancing on foot. In scenes reminiscent of a film, the operation brought down Israel's physical security barrier along the Gaza border. Not only did the security barrier collapse, but Israel's overconfident approach to security, built on assumptions about deterrence, intelligence superiority and its ability to accurately read its adversary's intentions, also suffered a severe blow. These coordinated attacks by Hamas and other Palestinian groups from Gaza into Israel killed approximately 1,200 people, most of them civilians, while 251 others were taken hostage and brought to Gaza (International Court of Justice, 2025, p. 18).

The attack came as a shock and drew the world's attention to the region. It caused deep trauma in Israeli society and was a big "surprise" that profoundly shook the regional order. Some

¹ <https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/ekibimiz/s/1046>

² <https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/ekibimiz/s/1529>

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researchers regarded 7 October as a military success for Hamas and a comprehensive failure for Israel (Hokayem, 2023, p. 57).

The strategic significance of this operation, which Hamas named “Al-Aqsa Flood,” stems not only from the scale of the attack but also from its asymmetric nature. Despite its overwhelming military, technological and intelligence superiority, Israel was unable to prevent a weaker actor from seizing the initiative by combining factors such as counterintelligence (CI), surprise, deception and effective timing.

The magnitude of the surprise becomes even more apparent when considered alongside Israel’s threat perception before the attack (Barnea, 2026, pp. 34-36). Israel’s traditional approach to security had been built on deterrence, strategic early warning and the capacity to secure swift and decisive military outcomes once war broke out. However, before Hamas’s attack, the prevailing belief within Israeli security institutions was that “Hamas had been deterred” and would not, or could not, launch a large-scale attack that would alter the status quo. This approach reflected both a flawed strategic conception and a form of *wishful thinking*.

Approximately two weeks before the attack, assessments presented to political decision-makers by military intelligence and the Israel Security Agency³ also reflected the assumption that Hamas had been deterred (Barnea, 2026, p. 38). For this reason, 7 October should be understood not simply as a breach of border security or a tactical raid, but as a “strategic surprise” that also shattered established assumptions about the adversary’s capabilities and intentions.

On the other hand, explaining this event solely in terms of Israel’s failures risks downplaying the role of the actor that prepared the attack. Understanding how an operation of this scale and level of coordination could achieve surprise also requires examining how information on targets was gathered, preparations were concealed and operational security (OPSEC) was maintained. It also requires examining the deceptive picture presented to skew the adversary’s existing assessments.

This analysis focuses on two aspects of the issue. The first is Israeli intelligence’s failure to warn decision-makers in time and prevent the attack, or decision-makers’ disregard for intelligence despite the presence of some significant indicators. The second is Hamas’s ability to keep its preparations entirely hidden from Israel’s eyes and ears, despite facing an adversary with far greater technological and intelligence capabilities. These two processes represent two sides of the same coin.

The human toll and physical destruction in the aftermath of Al-Aqsa Flood have also reached devastating proportions. As of September 2026, the reported Palestinian death toll in Gaza exceeded 65,000. On the Israeli side, approximately 2,100 people had died, and more than 11,000 had been injured (State of Israel, 2026).

According to an assessment based on satellite imagery, approximately 82% of structures in the area had been damaged, including around 135,000 that had been completely destroyed (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2026). A joint assessment by the United Nations, the European Union and the World Bank estimates physical damage in Gaza at US\$35.2 billion and economic and social losses at US\$22.7 billion. The

³ Also known by the abbreviations Shabak or Shin Bet, the Israel Security Agency is Israel’s domestic security and counterintelligence service.

same assessment puts the funding required for Gaza's reconstruction at approximately US\$71.4 billion (World Bank, European Union & United Nations, 2026).

This study seeks to answer the following central question: How did Hamas achieve strategic surprise on 7 October 2023 despite the pronounced asymmetry in military and technological power between itself and Israel, and to what extent did the operational effects of the attack's initial phase translate into sustainable strategic outcomes over the roughly three years that followed?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: STRATEGIC SURPRISE AND POWER ASYMMETRY

Strategic surprise does not simply mean that an attack occurs at an unexpected time (Wirtz, 2009, p. 73). It arises when the gap between the target's threat perception and the attacker's actual intentions and capabilities is turned into an operational advantage. According to Wirtz, surprise is a component of the strategic interaction between the attacker and the target, and the power asymmetry between them is central to understanding this interaction.

For an actor with more limited material capabilities, engaging in prolonged, symmetric competition with an adversary that is superior in personnel, technology, intelligence, firepower and economic resources may not be advantageous. The weaker side may therefore focus on methods that prevent its adversary from using its power effectively at a particular time and place, rather than seeking to eliminate that power altogether. Indeed, Wirtz (2009, pp. 80-81) draws a direct link between surprise and asymmetric attacks, noting that non-state actors in particular may find surprise an attractive option against stronger adversaries.

In this respect, strategic surprise should be regarded as a temporary force multiplier rather than a power equalizer. According to Nizamis (2026, pp. 197-200), military surprise makes it possible to achieve results disproportionate to the force employed by striking an adversary at a time, in a place or in a manner that catches it unprepared. Speed, intelligence, CI, deception, OPSEC and unexpected methods all contribute to this effect. Thus, instead of changing the structural balance of power, surprise can temporarily suspend its effects on the battlefield. Moreover, an apparently sudden attack may be the product of months, or even years, of preparation, training, secrecy and efforts to shape the adversary's perceptions.

The attacking side's activities alone are also insufficient to explain the success of surprise. According to Wirtz (2009, pp. 78-79), when the target projects its own preferences and conception of rationality onto its adversary, it may regard a risky move by that adversary as an "irrational" or "impossible" option. The problem is not always a lack of information; even when there are indicators of an attack, the analytical framework needed to turn them into a meaningful warning may be missing. Israel's traditional approach to early warning was shaped primarily around potential conventional threats from states. As the threat environment shifted toward organized non-state actors, the early warning mechanism did not keep pace with this change (Baram & Ben Israel, 2025, pp. 470-471).

The first hours of 7 October illustrated this mechanism. From the outset, the reduced effectiveness of Israel's surveillance and defense systems, simultaneous attacks and the delayed Israeli response gave Hamas temporary freedom of action and the initiative at the operational level (Sobelman, 2026, pp. 3-4). Despite the substantial disparity in military power between the two sides, Hamas viewed regional and domestic political developments as a strategic window of opportunity. The critical distinction here is between operational surprise and strategic success. According to Wirtz (2009, pp. 79-81), surprise can act as a *force multiplier* in the short term. However, when surprise increases political and social mobilization

on the side under attack, it can become a *resistance multiplier* over time. This is because, once the initial shock of strategic surprise has passed, the sense of existential threat that emerges in the targeted society generates a powerful sociopolitical response that consolidates dispersed pockets of resistance and sustains the capacity for prolonged attrition. This shock effect, which initially gives the attacker a tactical advantage, eventually disrupts the usual dynamics of asymmetric warfare and strengthens the defender's strategic capacity to resist.

HAMAS'S INTELLIGENCE, DECEPTION AND CI ACTIVITIES AND ISRAEL'S INTELLIGENCE FAILURE

The strategic surprise produced by Operation Al-Aqsa Flood cannot be explained solely by the failure of Israeli intelligence. Hamas's successful preparations must also be considered an important factor (Seloom, 2026, pp. 81-83). The events of 7 October should be examined in light of Hamas's intelligence gathering, CI, OPSEC and strategic deception activities. Strategic surprise does not arise solely from the target's blindness or passive weaknesses in its intelligence system. Surprise can also be created through the attacker's ability to influence which information is made visible and how the adversary interprets it, in other words, through cognitive manipulation and deception.

The first element of this interaction is Hamas's capacity to collect and analyze information about Israel (Seloom, 2026, pp. 88-90). Drawing on a range of intelligence disciplines, including open-source intelligence, reconnaissance using unmanned aerial vehicles, cyber activities, and human intelligence (HUMINT), Hamas accurately analyzed Israel's military deployments, border security infrastructure, surveillance systems, and routine activities. Of course, this intelligence capability was not developed immediately before 7 October. It is clear that Hamas had spent years developing CI capabilities against Israel's HUMINT activities and had turned some of Israel's intelligence sources into double agents (Flamer, 2023, pp. 63-64, 72-73). These findings suggest that the operational success demonstrated on 7 October was the product of a longer process of developing and applying expertise in intelligence, CI and covert operations.

The second element, just as critical as information gathering, is to hide preparations for the attack (Seloom, 2026, pp. 90-91). The principle of "compartmentation"⁴ was central to Hamas's approach to OPSEC at every stage and level of the operation. The number of people who knew the entire plan was kept small, while personnel at lower levels were informed only of their own tasks. Until the operation was launched, electronic communications were reduced or used for electronic deception. This approach succeeded in blunting the impact of Israel's superiority in signals intelligence. Thus, rather than trying to overcome its adversary's technological superiority in the same domain, the technologically weaker actor chose to gain an advantage by reducing the electronic footprint on which that superiority depended.

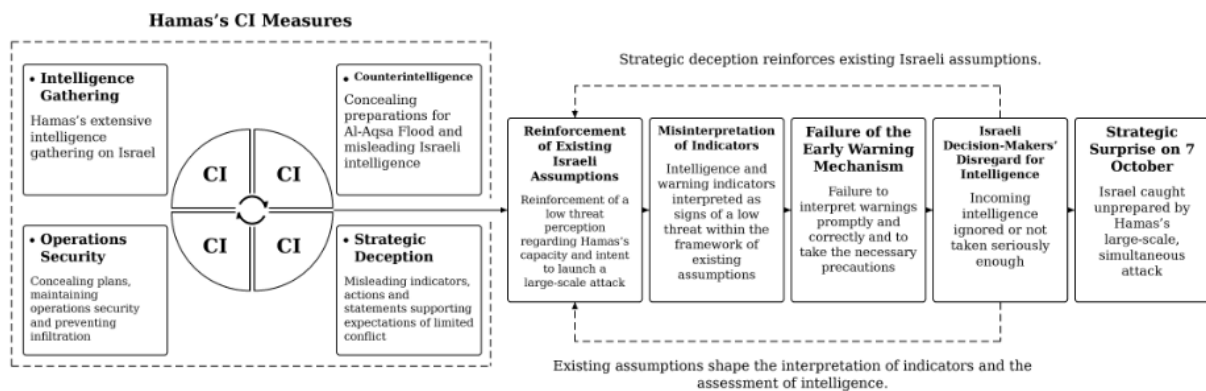
Beyond secrecy, Hamas used strategic deception to project an image that reinforced Israel's existing perceptions of the group (Barnea, 2026, pp. 34-35; Seloom, 2026, pp. 82-83). The view that "Hamas had been deterred," that it would avoid a large-scale war and prioritize preserving its administrative and economic gains, had become firmly entrenched in Israeli security circles. While this assessment has been linked to wishful thinking, numerous indications suggest that Hamas not only hid its preparations but also deliberately acted in ways that reinforced this expectation in Israel. Here, the aim of strategic deception was less to

⁴ A hierarchical security measure used in covert operations that allows personnel access only to information relating to their own tasks, thereby preventing the capture of any one member from compromising the security of the entire organization and its covert activities.

persuade the adversary to accept an entirely new narrative than to reinforce and support its existing assumptions.

For this reason, the problem before 7 October does not appear to have been a complete lack of intelligence (Seloom, 2026, p. 90). Indeed, the existence of indications of some of Hamas's preparations and Israel's possession of a Hamas attack plan known as "Jericho Wall"⁵ have long been the subject of public debate. However, it appears that the pieces of the puzzle could not be assembled into a coherent warning of an imminent attack. Unusual activity detected in Hamas's communications in the hours before the attack does not appear to have triggered a general alert because it resembled previous exercises. There are also claims that suspicious indicators from the night of 6-7 October were not given sufficient weight as evidence of a threat because of the prevailing belief that "Hamas had been deterred" (Barnea, 2026, pp. 53-55). The problem here concerns not only information gathering but also the analysis of that information. Extensive technological surveillance generated large volumes of data, but established analytical frameworks, intellectual laziness and overconfidence made it difficult to turn these data into intelligence and strategic warning (Karam, 2026, pp. 735-737).

Figure 1. Hamas's CI Measures and the Emergence of Strategic Surprise



This also makes it possible to interpret Al-Aqsa Flood through the lens of a "Cassandra metaphor" (Wyss, 2024, pp. 1-2): "The presence of warning signs does not mean that decision-makers will recognize them as a threat." Here, the Cassandra metaphor refers less to an intelligence environment in which "no one knew anything" than to a situation in which fragmented information was available but was not given sufficient importance because it contradicted prevailing assumptions. Indeed, the 7 October attack can be seen as the cumulative result of a series of problems and mindsets at the political, military and intelligence levels, rather than a single major intelligence error.

As Figure 1 shows, Hamas's intelligence gathering, CI and OPSEC activities, together with its strategic deception efforts, reinforced Israel's assumption that "Hamas had been deterred." This, in turn, led to the misinterpretation of the warnings received and paved the way for failure.

A deeper dimension of the failure on Israel's side concerns how early warning was conceptualized. According to researchers, the 7 October attack resulted not only from missed intelligence indicators but also from the failure to adequately adapt the concept of early warning, a core element of Israel's security doctrine, to the changing threat environment (Baram & Ben Israel, 2025, pp. 472-473, 480-481). While Israel's traditional approach to early

⁵ The code name for a detailed plan for a raid and invasion, approximately 40 pages long, obtained by Israeli intelligence in 2022, more than a year before Hamas's attacks on 7 October 2023. For further information, see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/30/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-attack-intelligence.html>

warning had largely been shaped by conventional threats from the regular armies of neighboring states, the growing prominence of non-state armed actors in the security environment required a reassessment of this approach. The issue, therefore, is not only whether intelligence on Hamas was obtained but also whether that intelligence could be assessed within an early warning framework suited to the changing nature of the threat.

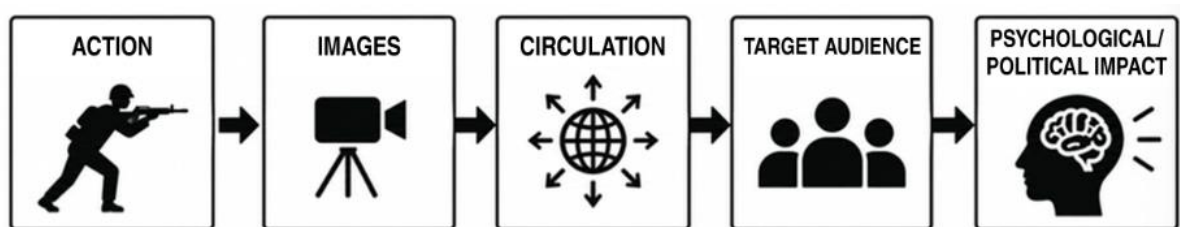
Within this framework, the failure on 7 October can be viewed as a broader system-wide problem that cannot be reduced to any single stage of the intelligence cycle (Hitman, 2024, p. 84). Israel's failure is explained in terms of interconnected problems at the intelligence, operational and political levels, with emphasis on how problems in data collection and assessment interacted with operational decisions. In this respect, intelligence failure is not limited to the inability to obtain accurate information (Baram & Ben Israel, 2025, pp. 480-481; Hitman, 2024, pp. 93-94). It also includes the failure to question available information independently of prevailing assumptions, to translate analytical findings into a timely warning that conveys the importance of the threat and to ensure that the warning triggers the necessary operational measures. This makes it possible to understand the strategic surprise of 7 October as a breakdown in the overall relationship between intelligence assessment, early warning and operational preparedness, rather than as an isolated error by an analyst or institution. Moreover, Israel's excessive confidence in technical intelligence, its structural problems and its adherence to existing political assumptions are regarded as mutually reinforcing elements of this failure (Jones & Pinfold, 2025, pp. 40-41).

FROM WEAPONS TO KEYBOARDS: PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE

Another dimension of 7 October, as significant as its military outcomes, is the transformation of violence into images, messages and psychological effects (Schleifer, 2014, pp. 1-3). The fear, loss of morale or political pressure generated by the attack became part of its operational impact. Psychological warfare, viewed as a "force multiplier," distinguishes between friendly, adversarial and neutral/international target audiences. Thus, 7 October can be examined not only as a physical attack on targets on the ground but also as a communication dynamic that produced varying effects across different target audiences.

One striking aspect of the attack was the way its capacity to generate visibility was intertwined with operational preparations (Burda & Schleifer, 2026, pp. 1-2). Hamas recorded the attack and broadcast the footage in real time, extending its psychological impact beyond the scene itself. In this context, GoPro cameras, drones, mobile phones, security cameras and social media platforms generated an intense flow of visual information during the first 24 hours (Lev-On & Gozansky, 2026, pp. 1-3).

Figure 2. The Communication Mechanism from Action to Psychological Impact



As Figure 2 shows, this communication mechanism can be understood as a chain of successive stages: turning the action into images, circulating those images, delivering them to target audiences and ultimately producing psychological and political effects. While the physical impact of violence is confined to a particular location, the target audience for the

recorded footage spans a much wider geographical area (Burda & Schleifer, 2026, pp. 1-3). However, the effects of psychological warfare are not always unidirectional. It should also be recognized that, contrary to expectations, messages intended to instill fear and undermine morale produced mobilizing effects in Israeli society.

Hostages were another prominent instrument of psychological warfare following the attack. Beyond serving as a tangible bargaining tool in negotiations, hostage-taking provides the capacity to sustain prolonged psychological warfare (Flamer & Tsachi, 2026, pp. 1-4). A study examining hostage videos from the period between 7 October 2023 and spring 2025 identified Israeli society and decision-makers as the primary target audiences of Hamas's psychological warfare activities. Public sensitivities surrounding the hostage issue were systematically exploited. The attack's psychological warfare effects were therefore not confined to the first day; they were sustained through hostage videos.

Psychological warfare should be understood not as an alternative to the attack but as a complementary tool that carries the psychological impact of kinetic action beyond the physical arena and extends its duration. Given the asymmetric balance of power, Hamas chose to turn the footage of 7 October, the "psychological surprise" it generated and the hostage issue into material for psychological warfare aimed at different target audiences, rather than seeking to match Israel's conventional military capabilities. This choice also gave Hamas a temporary psychological advantage in the short term. Before the attack, the struggle had focused on shaping the adversary's perceptions through CI and deception; afterward, it evolved into psychological warfare aimed at influencing how actions were perceived.

CONCLUSION

Al-Aqsa Flood represents an "operational" success in which asymmetric power, strategic surprise, high-quality intelligence, CI, deception and psychological warfare were employed in a coordinated and mutually reinforcing manner. The operation is a typical example of how a weaker non-state actor can gain a temporary advantage by using its limited capabilities effectively at a particular time and place, without completely eliminating its adversary's overall physical and military superiority.

For this reason, "strategic surprise" is a temporary force multiplier rather than a power equalizer. The initial advantage it provides is not permanent. As the conflict wears on, physical capabilities, resources and mobilization capacity once again carry greater weight. The political and social mobilization of the side under attack can also alter the impact of the initial advantage. A strategy of surprise that functions as a force multiplier in the short term can become a resistance multiplier over time. Thus, tactical success, operational surprise and strategic success are distinct concepts.

7 October also illustrates the two-way relationship between intelligence and psychological warfare. Before the attack, Hamas's main challenge was to remain unseen and ensure that its intentions were misread; once the attack began, gaining greater visibility became an objective. Having concealed its preparations through OPSEC and deception before the attack, Hamas subsequently used the footage and the hostage issue to generate psychological and political effects. However, the psychological warfare dimension of 7 October does not mean that all the attack's objectives can be reduced to propaganda. Propaganda serves as a complementary strategic tool that extends the impact of kinetic action to different target audiences.

A two-part answer can be given to the question posed at the beginning of this article: "How did Hamas achieve strategic surprise on 7 October 2023 despite the pronounced asymmetry in

military and technological power between itself and Israel, and to what extent did the operational effects of the attack's initial phase translate into sustainable strategic outcomes over the roughly three years that followed?"

First, a non-state actor facing a pronounced power asymmetry can achieve strategic surprise within a particular time period through intelligence, deception, the exploitation of established perceptions and simultaneous operational action, without building a military capability equivalent to its adversary's overall military capacity.

Second, this choice does not automatically translate into long-term strategic success. Once the effects of surprise have worn off, structural power asymmetry regains its importance. The military response, political mobilization, regional developments and international reactions can, in turn, alter the nature of the initial advantage.

Al-Aqsa Flood has become a powerful source of political rhetoric in Israel's domestic politics and foreign policy. The climate of fear, anger and insecurity generated by the attack has become central to Israeli political actors' rhetoric in justifying the continuation of the war and military operations to the public. The continual reproduction and, at times, amplification of the trauma of 7 October in political discourse has created a framework that serves to legitimize the government's security policies and temporarily sideline domestic political divisions that had deepened before the war.

This discursive framework has also become intertwined with the trauma of the Holocaust and the notion of "never again," both central to Israeli society's historical memory. Following 7 October, senior Israeli officials' frequent use of analogies linking the attack to the Holocaust shows that the security shock was understood through the lens of historical trauma. In this context, Israel's military campaign in Gaza has been framed in official discourse not only as a response to 7 October but also as an existential struggle for security, grounded in the idea that "Jews will not be left defenseless again." This is the other side of the psychological warfare shaping Israel's domestic politics.

Ultimately, the central insight Al-Aqsa Flood offers for asymmetric conflicts is this: "The weaker actor's ability to temporarily overcome the effects of power asymmetry through surprise and its ability to turn this momentary advantage into sustainable strategic gains are two separate issues." Hamas's ability to conceal its preparations from Israel's eyes and ears and exploit Israel's established perceptions contributed to the operational surprise achieved in the attack's initial phase. However, this did not undo the structural balance of power between the two sides. As the effect of surprise subsided, what emerged was a process in which Israel's disproportionate response eroded its legitimacy and international standing over the long term.

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