



Humility Is Required for Improved Intelligence After the October 7 Catastrophe

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israeli intelligence failures - particularly those leading to the failure to warn of a large-scale attack, as suffered by Israel in the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023 - are typically followed by the creation of investigative committees that scrutinize intelligence processes, highlight gaps and vulnerabilities, and recommend mechanisms to prevent future failures. But without a profound cultural shift within the intelligence organization and its personnel - specifically, the integration of humility into the organizational DNA - these mechanisms will not deliver the desired outcome.

Following the end of the current war, and after it receives its historical name (which probably will not be its current name, "Swords of Iron"), a State Commission of Inquiry will likely be established. This Commission will be tasked with providing accountability for the events leading up to the Hamas attack on the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah on October 7, 2023.

One of the Commission's main areas of interest will be intelligence, which has been at the center of discussion in the weeks since the barbaric attack by Hamas. The Commission of Inquiry will investigate intelligence collection systems, research and analysis processes, the relationship between agencies in the Israeli intelligence community, the warning process and flow of information, the connection between the intelligence and political echelons, and more. As always, after the committee

examines the sequence of events, it will highlight positive aspects and strengths - but, as is often the more central aspect of such a commission's work, it will primarily focus on the intelligence lapses that affected operational preparedness and contributed to the Israeli failure to anticipate and prepare for the Hamas attack.

The Commission will make recommendations in various areas and address deficiencies in action that need to be overcome, as well as aspects related to responsibility and authority, organizational structure, and work processes among different apparatuses and units in the Israeli intelligence community. Some of the Commission's findings, it can be assumed, will concern the faulty "conception" or consensus within the intelligence community preceding the Hamas attack, similar to that found by its predecessor to have existed prior to the Yom Kippur War fifty years ago.

Within this framework, solutions and mechanisms challenging intelligence discourse will be offered. This occurred in the past with the establishment of the institutionalized "Red Team" ("*Ipcha Mistabra*"), which was tasked with generating alternative thinking to that of the consensus intelligence assessment; and the "Different Opinion" mechanism, which allowed any intelligence officer to present his or her assessment to the intelligence echelons regardless of rank or command hierarchy. However, none of these measures prevented the massive intelligence failures of October 7.

Research literature in the field of intelligence, both theoretical and empirical, is filled with learned and in-depth analyses of how intelligence agencies fail in their assessments. Sometimes there are gaps in collection and there are almost always gaps in analysis; together they adversely affect operational preparedness. Many have analyzed the cognitive biases leading to assessment failures. Some have focused on developing mechanisms to overcome these biases, such as structured analytical techniques, creating processes with built-in challenges to fundamental assumptions, diversifying those involved in intelligence work to present interpretations from different perspectives, and so on.

These ideas may be good, but none of them will lead to the necessary improvement without incorporating the fundamental component required by intelligence personnel and organizations: humility.

As long as the culture of the intelligence organization and the individuals who comprise it fail to internalize this characteristic into their professional DNA, the technical mechanisms designed to generate discourse challenging fundamental assumptions and prevailing interpretations – visible though they may be on the surface – will be limited in terms of their weight and influence on the final product of the assessment.

What does humility mean in this context? Maimonides defined humility as "the middle road between arrogance and self-abasement." In other words, it does not require one to be hesitant or evade professional responsibility (self-abasement). For generations, intelligence personnel have been educated to express their opinions, innovate, and think, and rightly so. The role of intelligence is to generate statements that contribute to operational assessment and enable decision makers to prioritize, decide, and navigate at all levels, from the national level to the military tactical field level. Humility in this context does not mean creating an intelligence system that lacks backbone and self-confidence and hides behind convoluted and ambiguous formulations.

The reality is more complex. Humility means refraining from arrogance – that is, it is a constant conscious choice to enter into unsolved or dissonant areas despite the natural instinct to avoid such areas. Faced with the natural tendency of humans (including the author of this article) to gravitate towards harmonious places where one is on solid, familiar ground, intelligence humility requires, as expressed by an educational sage, "to agree to dwell in the realm of questioning."

Former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld spoke about the concept of the "unknown unknown." In the realm of things that humans do not know, the simpler area is things we know we don't know (the "known unknown"). In other words, we know there is a gap in information, so we understand that attention should be given to either fill the gap or at least be cautious in our decision-making due to incomplete information. These are areas where, from an intelligence perspective,

there is often a high awareness, such as coverage gaps or accessibility gaps, and they are mostly an integral part of the intelligence assessment processes.

The more challenging problem is in areas where we don't know what we don't know (the "unknown unknown"). These are interpretations of existing pieces of information that might be considered peculiar or unusual. This also involves the consideration of scenarios that not only would not be defined as a possibly dangerous course of action in military assessment but would not even be considered scenarios to be evaluated. These are the "unknown unknowns" from which intelligence surprises often come.

In many cases throughout history, and apparently also with the recent Hamas attack, information was available, and there were even some who were willing to think in a dissonant way about it that contradicted the more comfortable interpretation. But in retrospect, the entire security sector and intelligence community failed to create a situation where the information received the correct interpretation and/or was translated into operational readiness in accordance with that interpretation.

As described above, in the Israeli intelligence community there are many mechanisms ostensibly designed to allow a variety of interpretations, and it is reasonable to assume that interpretations willing to accept existing information did arise. However, the results teach us that humility, the basic component that can provide the proper attention to conflicting interpretations, was lacking in the system. Humility is a fundamental characteristic that affords the willingness to break systemic thought patterns and be open to interpretations that are not the consensus and likely will require a profound change in perceptions and actions.

It should be emphasized that there is no intention of letting any hypothetical scenario divert military force employment and deployment from end to end. It is self-evident that these processes should be built and prioritized in the face of an assumed scenario, based to a large extent on intelligence and geostrategic analysis. However, an organizational and personal spirit of humility will lead to a significant tuning of the development of these scenarios, their diversification, and the addition of shadings that the absence of humility prevents from appearing.

Finally, it should always be remembered that intelligence cannot be a condition for operational preparedness but should support and assist it.

An examination of the lessons learned from the intelligence failures discussed by the Agranat Commission, which investigated the Yom Kippur War, reveals that two of the main factors that contributed to the failure in assessment were a lack of humility, as defined in this article, and an overinflated confidence in the assessment of our forces' capability to stop the threat. There was also found to be conformism in intelligence assessment. Even though there was, on the surface, room for different opinions, they didn't influence the final and official "Israeli Military Intelligence Corps position." For all the mechanisms intended to "save" the organization from being captive to a conception, both existing and those to be established in the wake of the current war, the intelligence community needs to be trained and educated to approach intelligence assessments through a lens of humility.

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