

[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / Hamastrophe: a bloody assault on Israel

Hello, and welcome to The Intelligence from The Economist.

I'm your host, Aura Ogumbi.

Every weekday, we provide a fresh perspective on the events shaping your world.

Today, we're focusing on one story.

Over the weekend, the militant group Hamas launched a large-scale attack on Israel.

It began on Saturday when thousands of rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip, the Palestinians' tiny coastal enclave, and into Israeli cities.

Then, smashing through border defenses with trucks came wave after wave of Hamas fighters.

In small Israeli towns, militants were filmed going door-to-door firing on civilians.

At a music festival, party-goers fled as dozens of Hamas militiamen arrived at dawn in jeeps and motorized paragliders.

Bursts of automatic fire cut through the crowds of ravers.

More than 260 bodies have so far been recovered at the site.

Many have been captured.

Chilling images show Israelis being dragged across the border in Toghaza before being paraded through the streets.

Israeli special forces were scrambled.

Fights have been called up, and retaliatory airstrikes have flattened parts of Gaza.

But the country's defenses have been exposed, and Israelis, taking cover in their bomb shelters, are in shock.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced a state of war, promising retribution for those killed.

And this morning, ahead of a Security Council meeting in New York, Israeli Ambassador Gilad Erdan described the events in uncompromising terms.

This is Israel's 9-11, and Israel will do everything to bring our sons and daughters back home.

Israel has requested international support, and that call to arms is being answered.

The United States stands with Israel.

We will not ever fail to have their back.

We'll make sure that they have their back.

President Biden announced that America is ramping up deliveries of military hardware, and has sent warships and an aircraft carrier towards Israel.

As fighting continues into its third day, more than 700 people have been reported dead in Israel, and Hamas claims to be holding more than 100 people hostage.

According to Palestinian authorities, more than 400 are already dead in Gaza.

For many Israelis, it was a chilling reminder of the Yom Kippur War, when Egypt and Syria took Israel by surprise in a coordinated attack on the most holy day on the Jewish calendar.

The attack took place on October 6, 1973, 50 years and a day ago.

For now, the border is still not secured, and the destruction is far from over.

At this point, we're more than two days since the original attack at 6.30 on Saturday morning, and there still are a few groups or individual Hamas fighters on the ground in Israeli territory around borders of Gaza, and security forces still hunting them down.

Daniel Feffer is the Economist's Israel correspondent, who's currently in Jerusalem.

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People were fighting on their own with their personal weapons. There were firefighters and police officers and men in their 70s and 80s fighting with their personal weapons and many of duty soldiers who kind of joined up in the middle of the battle. And the feeling was that the big state of Israel, the big Israel Defense Forces, these organizations, which Israelis have had so much pride and trust in, have basically failed the people of southern Israel.

And, Anshul, how much do we know about the hostage situation? The information on the hostage situation right now is far from being clear. There's talks of Hamas and Islamic jihad claim to have 130 captives. Israel hasn't put out a number. I'm hearing from Israeli sources that they think it's not as high as that. It wasn't just live captives that they took. They took also dozens of bodies. So the number isn't clear. Obviously, those of them who were alive have already been put in various hiding places within Gaza to be used soon. One assumes when Hamas and Islamic jihad issued their demands as bargaining chips for the release of Palestinian prisoners. And how does this compare to other flare-ups that have happened in recent years? Well, obviously, Israel has been the target of terror attacks many times over the years, but nothing ever on this scale. We're talking here now about 750 dead. That number will probably go up. That's partly soldiers, but mainly civilians. This is the biggest civilian tragedy in Israeli history, the biggest terror attack in Israeli history. There were bigger wars. Obviously, Israel has been through wars where thousands have been killed. But I think on any scale of an attack which was mainly targeting civilians, there's never been anything like this. There have been lots of comparisons to the Yom Kippur War. Why do you think people are making those comparisons? And do you think they're justified? I think those comparisons are justified. The Yom Kippur War is remembered, among other things, for being a strategic surprise in which the Egyptian and the Syrian armies simultaneously attacked Israel on Yom Kippur, the Holy Day, on the Jewish calendar. And the intelligence failure that led to the surprise of the Yom Kippur War is in many ways similar to the one that seems to have happened here on Saturday morning with Israeli intelligence focused on Gaza in so many different surveillance and electronic sensors and other resources focused on it. And still they managed to miss this massive operation, which would have been prepared and trained for for months and months.

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And still, Israel had no inklinger.

There was no high alert around Gaza.

The level of forces around Gaza was low on Saturday morning.

And that surprise with which Israel was hit on Saturday morning is indeed very similar in many ways to that of the Yom Kippur War.

Obviously, there's also the dates.

The attack took place 50 years and one day since the Yom Kippur War broke out.

Why do you think that these attacks have happened now?

Well, there obviously was a number of motives for Hamas to carry this out.

The timing seems to, in part, at least to be an attempt to, if not derailed, at least make it much more difficult for Israel and the Saudis to continue their negotiations on establishing diplomatic relations.

Hamas has also been trying for years to get more Israeli captives so they can try and bar to them for the release of Palestinian prisoners.

This isn't just for the prisoners.

This is also a political play of Hamas trying to establish itself as the preeminent Palestinian movement in an attempt to topple Fatah, which is Hamas's main Palestinian rival.

And they're the ones who run the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah.

So Hamas have many reasons to try to launch this.

It's hard at this point to say exactly why they did this at this moment.

When you pick up some scratches because you want a fun break at the plate for where you scratch the next choice you should make.

You can make your dogs leg kick and scratch with that.

You could even grab a laser pointer and use your cat.

You could build yourself a homemade scratching machine or use a piece from your chest set.

Go ahead, grab the queen.

Scratch like a DJ with your record player.

But cactus can scratch off that scratchable layer because when it comes to scratching there's a million play for a waste.

Thanks to scratchers from the California lottery.

Over the plate can make your day.

Please play responsibly.

Must be 18 years older to purchase, play or claim.

Anshul, you mentioned the failure of the Israeli intelligence services.

How did this happen?

How big of a failure are we talking here?

The failure is a failure at every level.

It's at the basic level of field intelligence.

It's a failure to notice preparations on the ground, both in weeks leading to the operation and on the morning itself.

There would have been at some point some mass fighters gathering at many locations near the border fence.

There were bulldozers and other vehicles being brought forward.

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So there is a failure in spotting that.

Then there's the higher level of failure of not detecting among Hamas leaders and senior operatives the fact that they were planning this.

The circle of planners may have been small, but Israeli intelligence would have been expected to penetrate that and get some kind of idea of what they were planning.

And then there's the highest level of failure is a conceptual failure.

Israel for the last two years has been the intelligence analyst, the military chiefs and the politicians have all been saying that the Hamas is deterred by previous rounds of warfare and Hamas has made a decision to focus on for now on building the economy in Gaza rather than going for another round of warfare.

That concept, that assessment has now been proven very wrong.

How do you think Israel's military is going to respond to these attacks?

We've already seen airstrikes, but is there bound to be a ground invasion as well?

Well, the ground invasion is being prepared as we speak.

Tens of thousands of reserve soldiers have been called up.

The armoured brigades and divisions, which would be needed for such a ground operation are already

mustering around Gaza.

They are being prepared.

The question of when and if the Israeli government decides to launch that campaign, we still don't know.

The army's job is to present the politicians with options.

A ground campaign is one of those main options.

Airstrikes is another one.

Airstrikes are already happening.

Maybe we may see much more intense airstrikes.

Other options that the Israelis could choose to use are targeted assassinations of Hamas leaders, both in Gaza and in other places.

And we may also see smaller operations carried out by special forces in attempt to rescue some of the hostages or to hit other Hamas high targets.

Which of the options the Israeli armies will be told to use by the politicians?

We're still waiting to see, though.

The expectation is that there will be a large ground campaign.

What would this retribution mean for the civilians in Gaza?

Gaza is a small, crowded area.

So this would be, as we've seen in the past, a very intense urban warfare.

In such situations, civilians who remain in the area will certainly be at risk.

And we saw in the past what that meant.

It means many civilian casualties and much destruction of homes and public buildings.

Looking forward, what can we expect to see in Israel over the next few days?

Well, there's a lot of anger, a lot of frustration.

I think we're still at the point where the anger and the frustration at the failures and the chaos that we've seen in the last two days has yet to focus specifically on the government

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or on the Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu.

At the same time, the government and the army of the ones who are now running the response and will be expected to take care of the war going forward in the next few weeks.

So I don't think at this point the feelings in Israel will coalesce into a demand to remove the government or to fire the generals at this point.

But that will certainly be something that will come once the fighting is over.

And she'll thank you so much for joining us.

Thank you for having me.

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The feeling right now is just how shocking and horrific this attack's been.

Not just the scale of it in terms of it being by air, land, and sea, but the number of people who've been killed, the atrocities including the murder of 250 people at a festival, and the taking of hostages, which gives this a terrible human drama.

Ed Carr is the Economist's deputy editor.

And so the feeling right now will be completely consumed by the enormity of this event and what you do about it. But at the same time, I think we have to try and look beyond the real significance of this. And I think you can draw some conclusions.

And tell me more about those. What kind of conclusions are we talking here?

Well, the first is to understand the policy and the set of conditions under which this has happened.

And that's really an attempt by the Israeli government to put the entire Palestinian issue to rest, just to leave it aside, not to try and deal with it, just to the belief you can contain it, you can manage it, there'll be violence, but you can cope with it. And meanwhile, Israel can get on with the things it really wants to do, improving its economy, a lot of domestic politics, as we know, and, crucially, a lot of foreign policy with the neighbouring Arab countries. I think that is all now completely crumbled.

And why is that?

Well, I think a number of reasons. The first is that it was based on the idea that you could keep Israelis safe. A combination of overwhelming Israeli military superiority and fantastic intelligence meant that the threat to ordinary Israelis, there was a threat. It sometimes killed Israelis. But basically, it was manageable. I think that is now no longer the case, even if, as I believe, Israel Defense Forces will be able to reestablish dominance and that there will be a large destruction of Hamas infrastructure. I don't think ordinary Israelis will feel you can just go back to the status quo and they'll be safe. That's one reason.

The other reason is that part of this policy involved playing different factions of Palestinians against each other. In the West Bank, you have Fatah and in Gaza, you have Hamas. And Israel has played these two off very successfully against each other. If any moderate-minded Palestinians were inclined to pursue peace, they were always outflanked by the extremists. This division,

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however, is at least part of the reason why this attack now. Because I think Fatah is, as the West Bank is in trouble, as Fatah is losing control there, as its leader, Mahmoud Abbas, is ailing. I think this is part of a claim by Hamas to show that it is the true leaders of the Palestinian people. How do you show that? You show that by attacking Israelis. So this policy of divide and rule was supposed to keep Israelis safe, but it's partly made them a target. Now, something that Mr Nesanyahu has been very focused on is this question of regional diplomacy. And how do these events of the last weekend impact Israel's standing in the Middle East? It's been an incredibly successful strategy. You've had the Abraham Accords with a number of powers. Until this moment, Israel was enjoying a kind of freedom and quality of relations in the regions that were unprecedented. Palestinians were looking very isolated, as if really it was becoming clear that the governments in the region didn't much care for their situation. And there was a lot of talk, as people know, about the kind of biggest of these rapprochements and datants between Saudi Arabia and Israel that the United States was working hard to engineer. I don't think all of those are now destroyed off the table, but they just won't work as well. And the Saudi deal particular will be very hard to do now. And I think it shows that the Palestinians, they don't have a veto over this, but they do have a voice. They've been pretty much ignored in this regional process up to now, and now they've made themselves heard. And it'll be difficult for Arab governments completely to ignore what's going on on their own street and among their own people. And their own people do have sympathy for the Palestinians. And Ed, you mentioned that Israel needs new policies to answer this Palestinian question, but surely negotiation is the furthest thought from Israel's political leadership right now. Yeah, you're completely right, Ori. It's unthinkable that that would happen now. The first thing that's got to happen is a major operation in Gaza, probably by land troops. And that will go on for a long time, a number of weeks. But I think you have to ask yourself, what next? Let's imagine that Israel has managed to destroy Hamas. Does it let then Hamas reform just to take power again in Gaza? I don't think that'll be acceptable. If you leave a vacuum, that's not acceptable, either. Who knows what goes on in a vacuum? Something even worse could come out. Does Israel want to occupy Gaza? It really doesn't. So there is really no obvious answer as to what comes next. And that in itself requires a new policy. Just say one more thing, which is that even though Hamas and Israel are, as we've seen, the bitterest of enemies, they do kind of work together. Israel's always wanted a counterparty in Gaza and in the West Bank in order to help manage the situation there. It needs a counterparty. That is another reason why you just have to have some sort of new arrangement coming up. And I don't know what that is. It's really hard to see what it is. There's no kind of UN peacekeeping force or regional security force that wants to get involved. But something's going to have to change. And could a different government in Israel be the answer? Well, I don't think it would come about in order to do this. If it comes about, there's a new coalition or even a new prime minister, it comes about because someone has got to carry the can for this catastrophic failure of intelligence and preparedness. That's both within the Israeli intelligence services and the Israel defense forces. But ultimately, there's a tradition, a good tradition, a right tradition, that in Israel the politicians have ultimate responsibility. Israel's pulling together as it must now when it's under attack like this. It's right it should.

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It's important it should. But afterwards, it's also important there's an examination of what went wrong. And in that examination, I think that people will lose their jobs, including possibly Mr. Netanyahu eventually. Ed, thank you so much for your time. Thank you, Ori.

So that's all for this episode of The Intelligence. As you heard, we're launching a new subscription, Economist Podcast Plus, next month. Follow the link in our show notes to find out more about how to join us if you want to keep enjoying our specialist weekly shows and the new ones coming up. We'll see you back here tomorrow.