

[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / Shell shocked: Israel fights back

Hello and welcome to The Intelligence from The Economist. I'm Jason Palmer.

And I'm Aure Ogumbi. Every weekday we provide a fresh perspective on the events shaping your world.

If I ask you to think of Brazil, odds are you're going to think of sun-kissed beaches.

But both industries and people are flocking to the country's interior.

That's led to a rise in American-inspired cowboy culture and more political power for the cowboys.

And you might be thinking about learning a new language, but which one?

Our language columnist has some advice on which ones might be most suited to you and which to avoid.

But first.

It's been three days since Israel was hit by a surprise attack.

When Hamas terrorists broke into the country, murdering at least 900 civilians and taking others hostage.

The state now claims to have regained control of the border fence around Gaza.

But the situation is far from contained.

So far, the bodies of 1,500 members of Hamas have reportedly been recovered from within Israel's border.

Yesterday, a siege was declared on the Gaza Strip and its 2.3 million people.

Israel has now cut off Gaza's water, food, medicines, electricity and internet and carried out a steady barrage of airstrikes on the Palestinian enclave, one of the most densely populated territories on Earth.

Officials in Gaza said the strikes have killed at least 700 civilians.

Hamas has continued sending rockets over the border fence, putting Israel's iron dome defence system under strain.

Israel has called up 300,000 reservists, an indication that it could be preparing for a ground offensive.

In a show of military support, America has repositioned its navy and confirmed that it will be dispatching arms supplies.

In the meantime, Israel, the wider region and the world are still coming to terms with what has happened

and, crucially, what happens next.

I think the mood for Israelis has really transitioned from one of shock and grief in the hours after the attack on Saturday to one of anger.

Obviously, that anger is directed at Hamas for carrying out the attack,

but also directed at their own government, which seems to have presided over a really catastrophic intelligence and security failure here.

I think when the dust settles and the war ends, this is going to have serious consequences for the Israeli government.

On the Palestinian side, in Gaza, I would say the predominant emotion is fear.

People in Gaza, unfortunately, have lived through numerous wars before,

but there is a feeling in Gaza, just speaking to Palestinians over the past few days,

that this is going to be bigger than anything that has happened before,

and there's a real fear and a real apprehension about what this is going to mean for the 2 million-plus people who live there.

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And we discussed the potential of a ground assault yesterday. What might that look like in Gaza? I mean, it's an extremely built-up place. There are many, many civilians, children. I think given the public mood in Israel right now and given the political dynamics as well of this right-wing government, I think it is likely to go ahead with the ground invasion, and it will be bloody. It will be devastating for Gaza and also probably very costly for the Israeli army. For people who haven't been there, Gaza, it's densely populated. It is a place where there are neighborhoods with extremely narrow streets ordered on both sides by multi-story apartment blocks, so it is a very difficult environment to fight in. It's also a place where people have nowhere to flee. There are no safe spaces in such a small territory. The Israeli army has told people, you should leave if you live near something that we might consider a Hamas target. But other than going to shelter in United Nations schools, which people typically do in wartime in Gaza, there are no safe places. And how about the hostages that were taken by Hamas? What do we know about that situation? We have a rough number. We know that there are likely between 100 and 150 Israelis taken hostage. They include men, women, even children and elderly people who were brought across the border into Gaza. Last night, Hamas issued a very dire threat. It said that if Israel continued to attack buildings in Gaza without giving advance notice of what it was going to target, that Hamas would execute a hostage every time such an airstrike happened. Some people don't believe that. Some people think these hostages are worth more alive than dead. So I think the Israelis are still trying to figure out what to make of that threat, but a very ominous warning from Hamas last night. We've also seen some rockets fired across the Lebanon border in the north. Is there a threat of wider regional conflict here? There is, and it's a threat that everyone in the region is worried about at the moment. To step back to Sunday, there was a bit of shelling from Lebanon into a disputed area in the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. That was within the established rules of engagement here, where that particular area, Hezbollah, has attacked it before, and what happens there tends to stay there. What we saw yesterday was much more worrisome. There were gunmen who crossed the border from Lebanon into Israel, got into a firefight with the Israeli army. Three of the gunmen were killed. Also, a quite high-ranking Israeli army officer was killed in that firefight. The Israelis responded by attacking southern Lebanon. Supposedly about seven members of Hezbollah were killed in that bombardment, and so the group then fired rockets at an Israeli army post last night.

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I think the logic on both sides would dictate that they don't want a war, but logic doesn't always guide these things, and there's a concern that these sorts of small incidents can escalate into something larger. Now, looking beyond the region, what do you make of America's military show of support for Israel? Could that also have some regional implications?

It could.

We've seen two pieces to that show of support so far.

One is what looks like almost an air bridge of munitions going between depots in America and military bases in Israel.

We've seen planes taking off and landing in the past 24 hours.

The Israelis, if this is going to be a long war,

have said that they will need resupply of things like precision-guided bombs from America, and President Biden has said that he will provide that.

That's something that tends to happen whenever there is a conflict between Israel and Gaza.

What's a bit different this time is also, for example, the news yesterday

that America was moving an aircraft carrier group into position in the Mediterranean near Israel.

That is meant as a much bigger show of support than a show of force to other actors in the region, like Hezbollah in Lebanon, that might want to get involved.

Now, I'm not sure quite how they're going to interpret that.

I don't see a very high chance that America is going to get involved in, say, an Israeli-Lebanese war.

But I think America is trying to signal above all to Iran that if this becomes a regional conflict, that it might be forced to get involved.

And Greg, how have the last few days changed Israel and the Middle East more broadly?

They have changed Israel and the Middle East, but to tell you how,

I think we are going to need the benefit of many, many months of hindsight.

I've been amazed speaking to people around the region over the past few days.

Everyone is in shock. This really is an unprecedented situation, and no one quite knows how to analyze it.

So you can talk about Israel and the obvious analysis here

is that this is the end of Prime Minister Netanyahu's political career.

I mean, he presided over the deadliest attack in Israel's history.

It's hard to imagine that he will find a way to survive as Prime Minister, but that's not a foregone conclusion.

In terms of what this means for Gaza,

the Israelis are talking quite seriously about going in

and trying to remove Hamas from power,

fighting this war different from the way they have fought wars in the past

and trying to change the status quo.

But what does that look like to remove Hamas from power?

And then what comes next? What fills the vacuum?

No one has an answer to that.

What does this mean for the succession struggle in the occupied West Bank

where Mahmoud Abbas, the president, is 87

and likely to need a successor in the next few years?

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This has shaken up Palestinian politics,
but again, where that goes, we don't know.
I think we're all fumbling around in the dark a little bit here,
trying to figure this out in real time,
knowing that this is an inflection point for the region,
but not knowing what direction the region will go.
Greg, thank you so much for coming on the show.

Thank you.

To hear more on the view from Washington on the situation in Israel,
listen to Checks and Balance, our podcast on American politics,
available this Friday.

Checks and Balance, like our other weekly feature shows,
will soon only be available to those who subscribe to Economist Podcasts Plus.
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It's just one facet of a far wider shift that's going on.

The census came out this summer,

and it shows that the fastest growing parts of Brazil are in the Farm Belt.

Seven of the ten fastest growing municipalities were all in the centre west and south of the country.

So people used to move from the poor northeast to the industrial hub around São Paulo.

And São Paulo and some other coastal cities had a lot of jobs in manufacturing.

Manufacturing made up around a third of Brazil's GDP in the 1980s.

But today, it only makes up around 10% of GDP.

And now, cultivation is making a comeback.

Mainly because of demand from China for things like soybeans, grains and meat,

and agricultural exports as a share of the total have more than quadrupled since 2000.

Because farming is where the money is at, basically.

I mean, how much movement are we talking about here?

The centre west, which includes states like Goiás and Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul,
have grown by around 1.2% over the last 12 years, double the national rate.

And more importantly, the GDP in some of these places has grown significantly more than the
national rate.

So Mato Grosso's GDP over the last two decades has grown by more than twice the national average.

And what you've seen a lot in the past few years is growth in mid-sized towns rather than big cities.

So a good case study for this is a town called Sinopi,

which is in the middle of soybean heartland in the state of Mato Grosso.

So why is that a good case study? What's happened there?

Sinopi's population has grown by 73% in the past 12 years.

It now has 200,000 inhabitants.

It kind of has this feel of like rural Texas.

There's a lot of cattle ranches and cowboy hats and pickup trucks.

I even saw a petrol station that calls itself Texas.

So I went out to visit a farm and the farmer there grew soybeans and maize and also had 4,000 heads of cattle.

And he uses really high-tech equipment like drones to spray fertilizer.

And he pays an average wage that's three times Brazil's median salary.

And he sells most of his produce to a Chinese food giant called Kofco.

So this is quite typical of what happens in that region.

And this booming farming creates other jobs as well.

Like what?

Like there's been a big boom in construction or people working in hotels and restaurants.

But I also visited the world's biggest corn ethanol plant, which is also based in Sinopi.

So the head of comms showed me around the plant and explained to me how they turned corn into corn ethanol.

So he goes through a whole process of mowing until it becomes very thin.

She said last year the company's gross revenues were almost \$2 billion.

So as a result of this growing demographic and economic cloud, we're also seeing cultural and political repercussions.

Let's start with the cultural then. What's going on there?

So the most notable cultural shift has been in music.

There's a country music craze right now in Brazil.

So, for example, Ana Castella, who's only 19 years old, she's among Spotify's 500 most-streamed artists in the world.

And in one of her songs, which is called, We're From the Country Baby, she says, beer and barbecue, to get to my heart, take the dirt road.

A lot of country singers call themselves roughs or brutes, and they call boys from the city playboys.

And there's another country music duo called Antenille Gabriel.

And in one of their songs, they say, too bad playboy, the farm won, and we're spending the money from the cattle we sold.

So rodeos have become a really big thing.

And we're spending the money from the cattle we sold.

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So rodeos have become a really big thing.

If you look at professional bull riders, which is a league in Colorado that ranks the best bull riders in the world, five of the 10 top bull riders are from Brazil's interior.

So it sounds as if Brazil is borrowing a lot from the American traditions when it comes to the country lifestyle and ethos, but you mentioned also changes in politics.

That's right, Jason.

So today, the Agri Business Lobby commands around 350 seats out of 594 seats across both houses of Congress,

and that's up from 280 in 2018.

And this means that Agri Business has a lot more sway.

Right now, the Agri Business Lobby is in a feud with the Supreme Court over indigenous land rights,

and it's gotten to the point where they're threatening to ground Congress to a halt until they get their way.

And farmers and ranchers are about to get a little bit more political power because as a result of the census,

the Supreme Court ordered Congress to reapportion seats in the lower house.

And generally, the states where farming is booming are going to get more seats.

We've spent a lot of time on this show talking about environmental protections and the state of the Amazon.

How does this farming boom fit into all of that?

Brazil is one of the few countries in the world where agricultural production is still significantly expanding.

And some of that is a result of topping down trees in the tropical savanna known as Cerrado.

The Amazon rainforest under the country's forest code is super protected.

But if you don't land in the Cerrado, it's not that protected.

You only have to preserve around 20 to 35% of it.

The Cerrado is actually Brazil's second biggest biome, and a lot of the deforestation happening there is legal.

And it's the Cerrado, not the Amazon,

that covers a lot of the interior of Brazil, like Mato Grosso.

And already, we're seeing signs of climate stress beginning to appear.

The president is giving record amounts of subsidized loans to farmers in order to cajole them to go greener.

And a lot of farmers are doing this.

But still, big picture is that one day, sertanejo Brazilian country music could lose its swagger.

Ana, thank you very much for your time.

Thank you, Jason.

Music

Most people intuit that some languages are harder to learn than others.

And the main thing that makes a language difficult to learn is how different it is from your own language.

Lane Green writes Johnson, our column on language, and he's the enforcer of the Economist's style guide.

The American State Department ranks various languages on the time it takes an English-speaking diplomat to learn them.

And of the top 10 languages spoken in the world outside of English, it only takes about 24 to 30 weeks of full-time study

to learn French or Spanish or Portuguese.

It takes about 44 weeks to learn Bengali, Hindi, Russian, or Urdu,

and it takes fully 88 weeks of full-time study to get to a professional level in Arabic or Mandarin.

OK, let's get to the bottom of this.

What are the differences you're talking about?

Languages differ in quite a few ways.

A big one that really strikes you as soon as you see it is the writing system.

But they also differ in their sounds, in their vocabulary, and in their grammar.

A lot of people think that the writing system is going to be the hardest one, but that really depends a lot on whether you use an alphabet or a character-based system like Chinese.

None of those most difficult languages on the State Department's list use the Latin alphabet that we use to write most of the European languages.

And especially hard is, for Chinese, a learner needs to learn at least about 2,000 characters to read a newspaper.

But even that is a level of kind of basic literacy

in which you're still going to be looking up unfamiliar characters all the time.

And by the way, using a Chinese dictionary is extremely difficult

because there's no alphabetical order.

Arabic, by contrast, looks really complicated, but in fact, it's fully alphabetic.

It's got just a few dozen characters, just like the Latin alphabet does.

It does have a few tricks because the letters can change shape

depending on whether they show up at the beginning or middle or end of a word.

And Lane, there's also the way a language sounds, right?

I mean, for example, I'm Yoruba and our language is very musical

and it depends on lots of intonations,

which is probably why English speakers really struggle to say my name correctly anyway.

OK, can you say it correctly for me and say how you would say it incorrectly?

OK, so, ORE is my name.

My full name is ORE Oluwa, and there's a dot under the O and a dot under the E to show that it is ORE and not O-ray.

And there's an accent on the U and the A to show that it goes ORE Oluwa.

It goes up and down.

Excellent, I wouldn't have known that.

It would have helped me a little while to get it perfectly, so if I get it wrong, do let me know.

So the sounds of the world's languages vary quite a bit indeed.

For example, many African languages have click sounds where something like ORE is used as a consonant,

which involves the sudden release of tension between two parts of the mouth.

You get what are sometimes called ejective sounds.

That's where you sort of build up the pressure behind a consonant and then let it out in a little explosion of air.

So you might hear something like, ah, in the languages of the Caucasus, including Georgian.

Some languages make distinctions between two sounds that English does not make.

For example, in Hindi, you can have a retroflex D, like ba, and then a non-retroflex D, which sounds

like the English da.

So ba and da are crucially different in Hindi and can make one word into an entirely different word.

One word, moti, means fat, and the other one, moti, means pearl, for example.

And finally, going to tone, your name has tones, and so do the Chinese languages.

So in Mandarin, there are four different tones, and ma, ma, ma, and ma are four different words, and Cantonese actually has even more tones than that.

That is just amazing. When it comes to words, I guess, does it make sense if a language has similar words for things as your own?

Does that make them any easier to learn?

Absolutely. If you've ever learned another European language, you get a lot of vocabulary for free, and there's two reasons for that.

One is that the European languages are mostly cousins to one another, so French is closely related to Spanish and slightly more distantly related to German or English.

So they have a sort of genetic relationship, which means that words like Spanish agua and Italian aqua obviously mean the same thing, and that can get you to English aquatic.

They all mean water.

And finally, Lane, the dreaded grammar. I consider myself a pretty decent French speaker, but the subjunctive still trips me up to this day.

Things like that French subjunctive or distinguishing the passé composé from the imperfect, the two different past tenses.

We often think of grammar as those long lists of conjugation or maybe like declensions from Latin that make a language hard.

And indeed, if a language has lots and lots of those things, Arabic, I'm looking at you, then it makes the language really hard to learn.

In the case of Arabic, not only suffixes, but prefixes and even little bits stuck into the middle of words that change the words meaning and how it's used in a sentence.

So I speak French as well as Yoruba. What would suit me to learn as a next language?

Well, for your Yoruba having tone, you'll probably be a lot faster at learning something like Thai or Cantonese because speakers with any tonal language will kind of be attuned to tone in words and so be better at learning another tonal language.

And French will give you the kinds of grammatical endings that will make, for example, Russian easier to learn because though they're distant cousins, they still are cousins.

And so Russian makes a lot of the same kinds of grammatical distinctions that French does. So you can see that cousin relationship.

In summation, I'd say if you can add up these four factors, the writing system, the sound system, the vocabulary and the grammar, you could kind of get a total score for how long it's going to take you to master the language.

So if you want to learn lots of languages and you're a native English speaker, I'd say you probably want to stay in Europe and start with things like Swedish and Spanish.

Lane, thank you so much for coming on the show.

And thank you. Alright.

See you back here tomorrow.