

[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / The Intelligence: Israeli hostages' fortunes

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

Every weekday we provide a fresh perspective on the events shaping your world. The trade in rhinoceros horn is illegal, but for those on the right side of the law, the beasts do bring in money as a tourist attraction.

But because it's expensive to protect them from poachers, there's something of a bear market for rhinos.

And coin tosses have been used to decide everything from the fates of elections to who shoots first and penalty shootouts. But are they even fair?

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First up though.

My mom is telling the horrific stories.

Jochevet Lifshitz, an 85-year-old Israeli woman held captive by Hamas and released this week, recounted her ordeal to reporters yesterday with help from her daughter.

On October 7th, Hamas entered Israel and absconded with hundreds of hostages and also perhaps even bodies.

Miss Lifshitz is one of only four who have been released.

For the families of the remaining captives, life has been constant, anxious limbo.

On Sunday, hundreds of people gathered for a silent vigil for those hostages outside the residence of President Isaac Herzog, while inside he met with relatives of those still in captivity.

It seemed like a non-political display of solidarity.

But for months before the war, crowds had gathered in that same place every Saturday to rail against the government.

Now the response to the hostage crisis may add to political disquiet that, for now anyway, has taken a back seat.

What makes this war between Israel and Hamas and the other Palestinian organizations in Gaza very different from the previous wars that we've had over the last decade and a half is that there are currently over 200 hostages being held in Gaza by Hamas and some of the other organizations there.

Anshil Feffer is our Israel correspondent and is based in Jerusalem.

Their presence there from a tactical level

will have some kind of influence on Israel's moves within Gaza.

But also on a political and social level,

the fact there are so many families clamoring for any information

[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / The Intelligence: Israeli hostages' fortunes

and for trying to work out what the government is planning to do about their loved ones is having a major impact within Israel.

So what has the government been doing about this so far?

In the early days of this war, there was a feeling that the government was totally bewildered and they were still trying to come to grips with the scale of the attack and at that point the families who knew that their loved ones were missing were simply waiting for some kind of notification from the government and the fact that they were getting no information as far as the families were concerned was the first failure.

From that perspective, they were already being let down and I think as the days passed and they were only slowly beginning to be notified officially of what the government believed happened to their relatives, they're feeling that they weren't getting the full picture continued.

And then as the talk began of how a military operation in Gaza may unfold, there was then the feeling that the fate of the hostage wasn't sufficiently a consideration in the government's and in the army's operational planning and that was the second, I think, big disappointment from the family's perspective.

And only gradually did we begin to hear government spokespeople saying, yes, of course, the hostages are the top priority for us in our planning but it really took time, I think, for that to become part of the government's message and that was very worrying for the families.

But what's behind all these missteps, that lack of communication?

Well, the Israeli government is dealing with so many issues.

There is a war, there's operations planned on the ground, there's the intelligence effort, there is the major financial issue of rebuilding the communities which were devastated in the attack on October 7 and 360,000 Israelis have been called up to their reserve units in the army so that's also something that the Israeli economy has to shoulder and there's the prisoner issue and all these things together seem to be overwhelming than the Netanyahu government which, as it is, hasn't been functioning very well since it took office nine and a half months ago.

There wasn't a government coordinator for Israeli hostage affairs which has been in the past, Netanyahu hasn't appointed someone so there wasn't really a point man on this.

He did appoint someone on the day after the October 7 attack but that person wasn't perhaps the best choice.

It's an ex-general who hasn't really got the experience for this job and it would seem that his political credentials, his personal loyalty to Netanyahu were the main reason he was appointed

and the families haven't waited for the government, they've set up their own headquarters with hundreds of volunteers, lawyers, negotiators, former diplomats every type of function that you would need in a major hostage situation is actually being carried out now on a private level by the families.

[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / The Intelligence: Israeli hostages' fortunes

So how is that kind of family organization being organized?
So among the families there are quite a few well-connected people
one of them, the uncle of one of the hostages, David Zalmanovich
is an Israeli lawyer, businessman with very good contacts
both in government and in the defense establishment
and he's the main driving force behind what's called the family headquarters
he set up the offices with a lot of help from tech companies
which helped start tracking down cell phones, signals within Gaza
analyzing hundreds, even thousands of hours of footage and social media
which was going up on October 7 and ever since
to try and see if they could recognize as many possible
of the hundreds of people missing and locate where they are
The first thing they were trying to do was just to try and establish a list
and give the families who were reporting to them that their relatives were missing
some kind of an idea of where they were
and also to coordinate with the government which was swamped by this issue
The next stage was to set up this much wider organization
which would first of all support the families in this very difficult time they're going through
and then mobilize a campaign on their behalf
whether it's in the media they're working with both Israeli and international news organizations
they're talking to diplomats from around the world
and they have people also in a much more discreet way
talking to sources in the Arab world on their behalf
and this is all being organized from the offices of David Zalmanovich in Tel Aviv
So it's clear that family groups feel let down
but there has been some progress, right?
There have been hostages released this week
Yes, there were two releases on Friday night and on Tuesday night
each time of two women
In the first case it was a teenage girl and her mother both
American-Israeli dual citizens
In the second case it was two women in their 80s
and though there is obviously huge relief for those families of those who were released
at the same time there's still over 200 prisoners there
This doesn't seem to be part of a process of release
but more sort of a gesture by Hamas to try and appease their Qatari patrons
and perhaps American and international pressure
The two women in their 80s who were released on Tuesday night
their husbands who of the same age are still there in Gaza
nobody knows what's happening with them
So it's a very small relief and comparison to the big uncertainty
of over 200 people who are still being held there for now almost three weeks
And what about the wider response

[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / The Intelligence: Israeli hostages' fortunes

for people who don't have family members' friends dragged into Gaza
What is it telling them that the government is not succeeding in any way on that score?
Well, there's a widespread disappointment
in the way the government has been acting on so many fronts
I think the civil relief operation here
where you would have expected there to be more support for thousands of families
who have just been uprooted by what's happened
And the government is slowly beginning to roll out various programs for financial relief
but it's still very faltering
And within this context
the families who are not getting information from the government
who don't feel that they're interested in being represented
they are sort of a focal point I think
what is a growing sense of anger towards the new government
So how do you think all of that disappointment in the government
will play out over the coming weeks and months?
We have to remember that this war began after nine months
in which the government was trying to pass through a very controversial plan of judicial reform
and we've spoken here on the podcast a number of times
about the very widespread protest movement in Israel
And what has happened over the last two and a half weeks
that's all been suspended
the government isn't going to push legislation during the war
and the protest movement itself has basically changed into a sort of war effort volunteer
organization
but nobody's under any illusions that this very deep split in the Israeli society
that we saw in the past nine months has now ended
and certainly when the war is over
this will burst out once again in a very angry way
People are saying there's no way that Tiniya can stay in office
after such a terrible catastrophe
probably the worst that Israel's ever experienced in its history
Now the families are saying we're not political
we don't want to go against the government
but some of the vigils until I live outside
the defense ministry have become more noisy and angry
and I think that we may start seeing this becoming a new protest movement during the war
people want to feel that the government is doing something
and does have some kind of coherent policy
and people aren't feeling that
Anshil, thanks very much for joining us
Thank you for having me, Jason
Did you ever imagine what it would look like to live on the moon?

[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / The Intelligence: Israeli hostages' fortunes

How would you breathe?
Where would you sleep?
Would you want a room with a view of Earth?
Or the celestial heavens?
Imagine sitting on a crater that is 20 kilometers wide
and you look down into the crater
and you see nothing but darkness
and above you you see nothing but darkness in the stars
Science fiction is full of stories of people living out among the stars
but science fact is fast catching up
I'm Jessica Camilla-Gire
and for The Economist I've been talking to people
about a blueprint for a moon habitat
If I would compare it to something
I would compare it to some of the Mediterranean architecture you know
but then of course the space is a continuous curve
and it has this kind of very tall almost gothic arch
What I discovered was a vision for the evolution of humanity
You've gone beyond what you thought you were capable of
You've reached the outer edge of humans' footprint on the universe
You're sort of staring out beyond
And yet weirdly you're at the lowest rung of a ladder
that generations of people are going to climb as they leave Earth
I don't know, you mark a place in history
That's the Week in Intelligence
coming this Saturday from The Economist
The Economist
Jason, as you know, I get into some scrapes
as Africa correspondent for The Economist
but occasionally I have some fun as well
so I want to show you a video of a recent trip
I made to the Northern Cape in South Africa
Now for the benefit of listeners, that's John McDermott
John, yes, we've heard about your scrapes
and the bit of fun you occasionally get to have
What I'm seeing here, kind of a big open area
there's a great many people trying to manhandle a rhino
into what appears to be the back of a truck
I don't know if anyone's ever moved house before
but it's a whole lot easier than moving a rhino, I'd suggest
A few months ago I watched a southern white rhino
which is the largest of the five main types
getting transported into a van by more or less 20 people

[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / The Intelligence: Israeli hostages' fortunes

She'd just been tranquilized by a dart
so a vet had been kind of dangling out of a helicopter
and then fired a tranquilizer dart at her sizable rear
and then she staggered with some help of this score of people
into the nearest truck
Her generous rear, are you fat-shaming this rhino, John?
I would never seek to shame a rhino
And there's another video here where you can actually see her face
She seems neither as frightened nor as angry as you might expect
but I guess that's the tranquilizer dart
Tell me why it is you were there for this rhino moving event
There's a lot of attention paid to the illegal trade in rhino horn
but far less is written or known about the trade in live rhinos
and I wanted to see how one went about receiving a rhino that had been bought
in all its staggering and grunting beauty
So tell me about the business of rhinos then
Well, today a male rhino costs about 150,000 rand
So about \$8,000 or the price of a new Ford Fiesta in South Africa
which weighs roughly the same I imagine
But that price is actually a lot lower than it was say a decade ago
According to some researchers from Stellenbosch University
the dollar price of a Southern White at auction is 70% lower than 10 years previously
So it's not a particularly elegant market as those videos show
but nor is it a lucrative one anymore
And this was spectacularly shown a few months ago when a man called John Hume
who owned 2,000 Southern White rhinos on his farm just outside Johannesburg
received no bids when he put them up for sale
So it took a deep-pocketed NGO called African Parks to step in with some donors
to take the rhinos off his hands, a fraction off the price
So I must admit to googling while you were speaking there
the average male white rhino is about twice the weight of the average Ford Fiesta
But just coming back to the numbers, why are these things so cheap getting so much cheaper?
It's a good question. Why is there this bear market in rhinos?
Well, ultimately the people who look after rhinos in South Africa are private game reserve owners
They are the ones that have managed to take Southern White numbers up to close to 20,000
But it's these private owners who are facing increasing costs from poaching
And they're finding they have to spend more and more money on guns, security guards, fencing and
so on
just to ensure that the criminal syndicates who do the poaching aren't coming and getting the rhinos
So the money they make from the live rhinos, usually from having touristic photos of them
or hunters come and shoot surplus bulls, isn't increasingly enough to cover these rapidly expanding
costs
So you say the rhino numbers now are a sign of a conservation success

[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / The Intelligence: Israeli hostages' fortunes

How much does that change in price affect the sort of conservation status of rhinos?
There's not an immediate crisis. A century ago there were barely a hundred Southern White rhinos left in the wild
Today there is close to 20,000, way more than say there are black rhinoceroses
But that number has come down over the past decade or so as there's been so much poaching in South African national parks
And that has meant what happens in these private reserves which account for now more than half of the total rhino population
is more and more important. But ultimately if more and more of these reserve owners feel it's just not worth it
then they will get out of the business of rhino conservation
So is anyone trying to do anything to sort of stop the plummeting prices?
You do see some efforts by a variety of actors to try and get ahead of things
Last year the World Bank even issued its first ever rhino bond
It's trying to raise some money for a couple of state parks in South Africa to look after black rhinos better
And there are various other ideas that blend finance and conservation to that end
But ultimately what the rhino owners themselves say would be the simplest solution to all this would be to allow them to sell the rhino horn
Wait a minute, how does that help the problem at hand?
Well they would argue that they have a renewable resource
A rhino can grow one kilogram to one and a half kilograms of horn per year
And apparently it doesn't hurt very much when you chop it off and then allow it to regrow
Rhino horn is very valuable by some estimates more so than gold
What the owners argue is that they are currently being asked to dehorn their rhinos
And put that horn in vaults to disincentivise any would-be poachers
Yet they can't do anything with this lucrative stash
That's because there's an international ban in place, one that's been there since about 1977
The proponents of that ban say if we were to legalise it we don't know that demand wouldn't go through the roof
And that would just further incentivise poaching
But what the rhino owners say, and I think convincingly, is that prohibition here, like in many other cases
hasn't worked, the problem has just been driven underground
And besides, the amount that has been taken into the black market bought and sold in the black market
is still less than the amount that could be harvested off the thousands of rhinos currently in South Africa
So it sounds as if you're convinced too that the best way to save the rhinos is to give up such a strong fight about the horns?
I think you have to be realistic. Conservation can be a very emotional field
People who go into it are incredibly passionate about nature, about animals
But the conservationists who set the rules don't have a monopoly on knowledge of wildlife,

[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / The Intelligence: Israeli hostages' fortunes

knowledge of ecosystems

And the people who are day in, day out looking after these rhinos, they know what they're doing and they understand that ultimately conservation is expensive

So legalising the rhino horn trade would seem to be at least in the short term an experiment worth trying

Because at the moment we have this macabre logic, called it the horn laws that the animals are simply worth more dead than they are alive

John, thanks very much for your time

Thank you, Jason

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They tossed a coin to decide the matter

But according to a new paper by Frantisek Bartosz, who's a grad student at the University of Amsterdam

the result might have been different if the two men hadn't been such wobbly tosses

His new paper tests a long-standing prediction that coins aren't equally likely to come down heads or tails

So Mr Bartosz is suggesting that coin tossing isn't necessarily fair

Yeah, that's basically it

Human beings aren't perfect coin tossing machines

When we flip a coin in the air, we are going to give it a slight rotation around the axis

so it doesn't just somersault end over end, it also turns a little

and that's called precession

A group of mathematicians in 2007 modelled the physics and found that this meant that coins were more likely to come down heads or tails

were more likely to face the same way they were before they were tossed

So in other words, if I had a coin that was facing heads up and I flipped it

there was a slight chance, a 51% chance, they said that it would land heads up as well

So that was the prediction, I needed testing

This is where Mr Bartosz came in

He rounded up 48 volunteers and over the course of a couple of months they flipped 350,707 coins

And did Mr Bartosz find this prediction to be accurate in practice?

So the surprising news is, yes, the coins landed same side up 50.8% of the time

So very close to the predicted 51

They tested a large number of coins, the coins themselves had no particular bias

and the only determining factor really seems to be the fact that humans can't flip a coin predictably

Okay, Gilad, 50.8% doesn't sound that different from 50%

How much does this actually matter?

[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / The Intelligence: Israeli hostages' fortunes

So it is really small, but the house advantage that casinos enjoy in several varieties of blackjack is smaller than this

So it can actually make a difference in the long run

and we should remember some elections have been decided on coin tosses

A coin toss determines who serves first in tennis, who bowls or bats first in cricket or even Ore, who buys who lunch

Ore, I have a 2P piece here, it's heads up, which side would you like?

Well, based on what you've just said, I'm going for heads

Okay

And it's heads

Gilad, thank you so much for coming on the show and thank you for my lunch

Ore, a pleasure

Thank you

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