

In the Arab-Israeli War, Intentions Matter

by George Friedman - September 23, 2024

With the situation in northern Israel now escalating, it's imperative to take stock of the purpose of the Oct. 7 attacks and what it might mean for the future of the conflict. Hamas' intent that day was not only to kill Israelis but to take Israeli hostages. Strategically, the purpose was unclear. Hamas knew the attacks wouldn't force Israel to capitulate to its demands or withdraw from positions that shield Israel proper from direct assault, nor was it surprised that Oct. 7 was answered by a bloody counterattack.

The Hamas operation was not intended to damage Israel so much as it was intended to enhance the group's standing. Hamas would lose troops, but it would gain status in the broader Sunni-Shiite conflict, or so the thinking went. But there were rumors of ulterior motives. Early in the conflict, some believed other actors would reinforce Hamas in its offensive. The only real candidate for that job would have been Hezbollah, which is either aligned with Iran or Tehran's puppet, depending on your point of view. Iran supports Hamas, but Hamas is Sunni and, therefore, not generally considered the influencer Hezbollah is. Iran is certainly hostile to Israel, but its bigger goal is the disassembly of Sunni hegemony and replacement of it with a Shiite sphere of influence. There was a rumor suggesting Hamas had known Hezbollah would not join in the attack because doing so would jeopardize its own standing. In other words, the purpose of the Oct. 7 attacks was to draw Israeli troops into a fight against a fixed urban force while weakening the Shiites.

The strategy hurt Israel but did not materially challenge its superiority. Its response, after all, has been emphatic and deadly, designed to free hostages, crush Hamas and thus secure the country. What it did do was open the door for Iran and Hezbollah. The damage done to Hamas meant that the help it sought from Hezbollah early in the conflict was marshaled late, while the impact on Hezbollah and the Iranians opened the door to a far better political position and an emerging military position, particularly in Lebanon.

At first, Hezbollah was in no position to attack, but Israel knew Hezbollah would almost certainly strike at a later date. Israel had absorbed casualties in Gaza that were painful but not crippling. It needed time to ready an assault on Lebanon. Thus came the attack last week in which Israel used small explosives in pagers and other communications devices to target Hezbollah officials, warning Hezbollah and Iran that they face an enemy now capable of having a massive impact. Iran intended

a political victory, which it saw as more practical in reach and significance.

And now we are waiting for a response from Iran and Hezbollah to these new types of attacks by the Israelis that may or may not come. So then we must ask the question: How will Israel react if Iran dominates Lebanon?

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