Understanding the Israel-Hamas War

by George Friedman - March 5, 2024

Understanding why Hamas attacked Israel on Oct. 7 requires an understanding of Hamas' fundamental goal: the creation of a Palestinian state. The group understood that the attack would all but necessitate a shift in Israel's national security strategy, but it likely believed that weakening the alliance that was coalescing around it – comprising Arab states such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia – made the risk worth it. Hamas further understood that it lacked the military capacity to defeat the Israeli military, so ahead of the attacks, it sought support from the Arab world. It's difficult to believe Hamas could have done this without Israel finding out, so it's likely that Israel did find out and dismissed its goal as impossible to achieve.

In a sense, Israel was correct. No Arab or Islamic country or movement was prepared to ally militarily with Hamas. The group thought that while a direct, combined attack on Israel would not succeed, it was still possible to force Israel into an untenable position. We now know that this was the line of thinking because Hamas did indeed attack Israel and, in doing so, isolated it from other potential allies. This decision shows Oct. 7 was more complex and, to an extent, more successful than initially thought.

The attack surprised Israeli intelligence, which had failed to understand Hamas' thinking. Oct. 7 was designed not to break the Israeli military but to create a situation in which Israel could neither decline combat nor bring decisive force to bear because it did not want to endanger the lives of the hostages Hamas was holding. The taking of hostages was meant to drive Israel into a sense of rage and impotence and to sow seeds of doubt in Israeli intelligence.

It's possible that Hamas expected other Arab forces, particularly Hezbollah, to join the fray. When that didn't happen, Hamas went to Plan B. If reinforcements weren't coming, then it wanted to focus Israel on a target that did not have decisive value but was essential to attack and would incur political costs. Thus Hamas activated forces in northern Gaza and introduced reinforcements knowing that the cost would be high. Israel had no choice. With the hostage situation unresolved, a massive attack in northern Gaza would mean that rather than weakening, Hamas was widening its presence. Wars are political affairs, and the Israeli Cabinet had to decide to attack from the air to calm the situation and mollify the growing hostility to the government. Israel hoped that airstrikes and special operations would break Hamas. But Hamas was fighting urban warfare on its own terrain – a terrain where

disengagement and sudden counterattacks were practical choices.

I suspect that Hamas knew – or at least more sophisticated movements in the Arab world advised them – that a massive Israeli response in northern Gaza that brought the world's attention to the Palestinian casualties could bring enough pressure on Israel to force an outcome favorable to Hamas. Israel tried to counter the narrative by pointing to the hostages taken by Hamas, but Israeli public relations campaigns have been poor, to say the least. (Israel has historically been good in this regard but failed to grasp that the decisions being made and broadcast about Hamas were vastly outperforming their own efforts.)

Israel is now caught in a war in northern Gaza with a rigid Cabinet that won't accept a strategic retreat and a media ecosystem criticizing its approach. Hamas had been seen as responsible for the war; now it's Israel.

At this point, Israel's military options are limited, thanks in no small part to the shift in public opinion in its most important ally, the United States. The possibility of a successful assault on Hamas is dwindling, and even Israeli citizens are demonstrating for a deal to be made for the remaining Israeli hostages. Someone once asked: How many military divisions does opinion have? The answer is none, but it can shape the world and is thus vital to a small country like Israel.

When I look at all this, I think that Hamas by accident struck at Israel's political and military structure and that Israel has still not understood that there are different kinds of war, any one of which can defeat you. It would also seem to me that Israel made a fundamental mistake: Its military, while competent and technologically savvy, has convinced the country that it is a bigger power than it is in reality. Technology is fine, but war is driven by subtle and careful leaders who do not overestimate their power or underestimate the power of manipulating the enemy's mind. An important lesson for us all.

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