

Thinking About Intelligence

by George Friedman - October 13, 2023

The news from Israel has been stunning, and the explanation that many are providing for what happened is that there was an “intelligence failure.” This reminds me of a Yankees baseball pitcher who had a no-hitter going into the 9th inning. On the second out of the inning, a White Sox player squished a sad little grounder toward third base, forcing the Yankees third baseman to charge and pivot to throw to first. The runner outran the throw. The newspapers ignored the magnificence of a one-hit game and ripped the pitcher for the one lonely hit. The critics could not make it to the lowest rungs of the minor leagues but sat in smug condemnation of a great pitcher.

Pitching in the majors is grueling. But people in the intelligence field have so much more at stake and far less control of the process. They might need to take a satellite image, then comprehend and analyze it to build a picture of reality, all before the enemy takes his next step. A satellite image, like most pieces of intelligence, is not a crisply clean picture but a mystery that has to be decoded while experts debate what it means. Or take human intelligence, where a spy agency might penetrate an office or palace to observe and gather information, all while pretending to be everything they are not and being aware that the enemy is on guard for espionage. A single misstep – usually after a very painful conversation with a man who makes his living making men reveal the truth – could cost them their life.

Failure is, regrettably, built into intelligence. Reacting to some intelligence failure, a reader suggested once that the lapse had been deliberate in order to achieve some end. The lack of understanding of how hard and dangerous intelligence is can cause us to have unreasonable expectations. I have sometimes wondered whether intelligence is not worth the trouble. But intelligence is what we have. It tells us something, and over time it can tell us a great deal. The fear of being discovered can also affect the enemy, who knows that his target’s intelligence will ultimately unscramble some important part of his plan and that he must move at flank speed to strike before being struck. The success of a military operation may well depend on guessing how much time one has. And that may lead to failure.

In analyzing the Hamas attack, the first step is figuring out what you don’t know. The military will task the intelligence organizations and tell them what it needs, which is usually far more than it is going to get. So assume that the question is whether the Iranians were funding Hamas. How would you find

out? Accessing transactions is tough. Penetrating the national bank would be nice, but that assumes the Iranians are using the national bank. And when you think about it, finding out who is getting the money is also tough. And at the moment it is not a question of great importance.

Israel is fighting Hamas, which is holding hostages it will likely kill during an assault. Israel's worry now is to determine precisely where the hostages are and what routine has been set, and to let special operations forces devise and execute an attack plan. The enemy is holding children, and for the moment that outranks money. The Iranians are a hostile force; deciding how bad they are is academic.

For me, a more interesting question is who supplied Hamas with the weapons and other supplies and what route they took to get to Gaza. It is a long journey from Iran, and supplying an attack from there would entail crossing many borders, which would trigger many alerts – or so Hamas would have to assume. But there was no alert, so that means that the supplies were moved slowly to a forward base, with the fighters approaching through misdirection. This is a more important question than money because the answer would mean that several U.S. allies were involved and therefore other threats might materialize. The word “might” is the operant term, except that unless Hamas built up its arsenal in Gaza, Egypt and a line of countries might have been involved, turning the intelligence challenge into something monumental.

The primary issue is understanding not whether Iranian money was used but the politics that permitted Hamas to amass and equip its assault force, whether it occurred in Gaza or elsewhere. How do you hide the movement of many men, carrying arms and moving through some very empty country? That is my question, but I don't know if it is the right one. And that is the nightmarish problem of intelligence. Finding answers is doable in several ways. More difficult is knowing what question needs answering and putting into operation collectors from the places the weapons may be found.

My own approach to intelligence has developed into forecasting things that will happen and often leaving out the date they will take place. I like to think there is value in having a sense, however imprecise the timing, about the future. But knowing the right questions to ask within hours of an attack, and tasking collectors to find the answers, is a job that does not permit error. And that's where the intelligence nightmare begins.

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