Strategic Surprise—Always?

Azar Gat[1] | No. 1893 | September 18, 2024

Hamas's successful surprise attack on October 7, 2023, exactly 50 years after October 6, 1973, in the Yom Kippur War, has once again raised the question, in all seriousness, of why and how strategic surprises occur. After the trauma of the Yom Kippur War, which preoccupied the Israeli Military Intelligence Directorate (AMAN), defense establishment, and the public at large for decades, all the elements of that surprise recurred—with catastrophic results.

It is well recognized in the literature on strategic surprise that historical experience demonstrates the great difficulty of preventing such a surprise. The fact that <u>every single attempt</u> during the 20th century to achieve a strategic surprise was successful—<u>without a single exception</u>—is less well known. Most of the cases cited in this article are familiar enough, although the bottom line is far from being universally recognized. The article also provides additional explanations for the extraordinary success of strategic surprises and examines what can be done given this unequivocal, striking find.

The Complete Success of Strategic Surprises in the 20th Century

A strategic surprise is a surprise at the very beginning of a war. This is in contrast to operational or tactical surprises during a war, which have a mixed record—some succeed and some fail.

It is agreed that the failure to recognize an impending attack is usually attributed not only to the intelligence agencies per se, but also to the underlying political conception and military command. As in other cases of strategic surprises in the 20th century, the failures of October 6, 1973, and October 7, 2023, were not confined to intelligence shortcomings alone. They also involved the political leadership, beyond just the level of formal responsibility. In this context, some have argued that heads of government have a better understanding than the intelligence agencies of the adversary's leaders, culture, and goals. This argument was particularly true of the Israeli cabinet in 1973. As members of Israel's founding generation, they, especially the then Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan, had extensive political and military experience. However, it is doubtful whether this argument applies to all other cases, or to the events of October

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7, 2023. Nevertheless, it does not change the fact that the prevailing political conception in Israel of Hamas played a significant role in that failure.

Throughout the 20th century, the advent of mechanization made it possible to deliver a stunning military blow at the outset of a war for the first time. Some dozen cases of war began with surprise attacks, catching the defending side unprepared and leading to extremely severe consequences, at least in the short term. These cases are well known and are frequently cited in the literature on surprise (with the possible exception of the first case):

- the Japanese attack on Russia in 1904
- Barbarossa—Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941
- the Japanese attack on the United States at Pearl Harbor in 1941
- the North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1950
- China's entry into the war against the UN forces in Korea in 1950
- the Israeli attack on Egypt that began the Sinai War in 1956
- the Chinese attack on India in 1962
- the Israeli attack on Egypt in the Six-Day War in 1967
- the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968
- the Egyptian and Syrian attack on Israel on Yom Kippur in 1973
- the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980
- the Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982
- the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990

This is not a selective list of successful strategic surprises but rather includes every attempt at achieving strategic surprise at the beginning of a war. Without exception, all these were crowned with success.

It is this author's impression that those informed about this record, including senior officials in Israel's AMAN, past and present, were unaware of this unequivocal fact. Upon hearing it for the first time, people raise two main objections. The first is there may be many unsuccessful attempted surprises at the beginning of a war of which we are simply unaware. In other words, this could be a case of what is called "sampling bias." The other objection is that the party attempting to achieve the surprise can postpone its attack if it thinks that the other side is prepared, and avoid failure by

waiting for the opportune moment when the chances of achieving a surprise are better. These objections, however, have little substance.

First of all, our knowledge of 20th-century wars is extensive, and we should not assume the existence of failed planned attacks at the start of a war about which absolutely nothing is known. Secondly, even if a party can delay a surprise attack when they believe the other side is prepared, the fact that every decision to proceed with such a surprise attack has resulted in success is nothing less than mind-boggling.

How, then, can we explain the unbroken string of successful strategic surprises at the beginning of wars during the 20th century?

Accepted Explanations for the Failure of Advance Warning

Although explanations focusing on cognitive and personality bias, conceptual closed-mindedness, and groupthink are not incorrect, they lose their validity when faced with the universal success of strategic surprise during the 20th century. There is no variation in the outcomes between cases that can be attributed to differences in these factors.

Various other explanations for the success of strategic surprises have been proposed in the scholarly literature, particularly in the works of Richard Betts and Ephraim Kam. First of all, a state of war is rare compared to long periods of calm. As General Eli Zeira, the head of AMAN in 1973, explained in Aviram Barkai's comprehensive inquiry *The Flap of Error's Wings* (115–117, in Hebrew) "Assume that you have a red parrot who predicts a war every day and a blue parrot who says that there will be no war, and that the blue parrot is right day after day for thousands of days, while the red parrot is wrong about all of them. Which one would you believe?" In a state of prolonged conflict like the Arab–Israeli conflict, in which flareups can always occur, it is nearly impossible to maintain a high level of readiness and alertness for the outbreak of war at every single moment. A routine develops, along with a "cry wolf" syndrome. This contrasts with an active state of war, where readiness for enemy attacks is greater and explains why some operational and tactical surprises succeed while some fail, unlike strategic surprises, which have consistently succeeded.

Furthermore, as explained by Roberta Wohlstetter, a pioneering researcher of strategic surprise, intelligence services are swamped with thousands of signals before an attack. Some of these signals are indeed indicative of an imminent attack ("signs") while others are misleading distractions ("noise"). Only in retrospect is it possible to distinguish between the two.

In addition, erroneous assessments of the balance of power between adversaries—and therefore the strength of deterrence—can play a key role in intelligence failures. Needless to say, this factor was prominent in both the October 6, 1973, and October 7, 2023, surprises.

Still, the mystery of the unbroken success of strategic surprise remains. This is especially so given that in surprise attacks on land (less so in naval attacks, such as at Port Arthur in 1904 and the Falkland Islands in 1982, and even less in air attacks, such as at Pearl Harbor in 1941 and Israel's Operation Focus at the outset of the Six-Day War in 1967), an attack is usually preceded by massive concentrations of forces, equipment, supplies, and munitions along the designated front. These concentrations cannot be concealed; indeed, they were clearly visible to the attacked side in almost all of the cases in the period preceding the surprise attack and the outbreak of war. This was true of the massive concentrations of the Egyptian and Syrian armies in September and early October 1973, although it applies far less to the lightly armed terrorist army deployed on the Gaza border in October 2023.

Additional Explanations for the Success of Strategic Surprise in the 20th Century

Even when the enemy's concentrations of forces and logistical preparations on the other side of the border are clearly visible, they can be interpreted as part of a threatening political brinkmanship campaign in a conflict situation. According to this interpretation—which is valid in many cases that do not lead to war—war is merely a threat, a form of saber-rattling meant to appear credible to apply pressure on the other side without any real intention of beginning an armed conflict.

In part, this is how Stalin interpreted the concentrations of German forces on the Eastern Front in the months preceding Operation Barbarossa, given the tensions between the Soviet Union and Germany over the division of Eastern Europe, particularly Romania, whose oil resources were crucial for Germany.

This is also how the United States interpreted Iraq's massive troop deployment ahead of the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. There was nothing in Iraq's buildup that American satellites, capable of reading a newspaper from outer space, could not detect. Both the United States and Kuwait, however (along with Israel's military intelligence) believed Iraq was merely posturing to force Kuwait into conceding ownership of a disputed oil field on their border. A few days before the invasion of Kuwait, the American ambassador to Iraq even assured Saddam Hussein that the United States did not necessarily support Kuwait's position on this issue.

In addition, force deployments used for exerting diplomatic pressure are sometimes interpreted as gestures for internal purposes, aimed at domestic public opinion and the armed forces. Sadat's war threats after 1971, for example, were seen as directed not only at Israel and the international arena but also at appeasing Egyptian public opinion in the absence of any real military action. Similarly, AMAN viewed Hamas's intensive maneuvers simulating a large-scale border incursion before October 7, which were visible and even televised, as primarily aimed at maintaining operational readiness and jihadist tension within its combat units.

Another interpretation of the concentration and deployment of enemy forces along the border is that the enemy fears it will be attacked <u>by us</u> and positions its forces defensively. Again, this is partly what Stalin believed regarding the German deployment in 1941. Contrary to the conspiracy theories that surfaced after the fall of the Soviet Union, Stalin had no intention of attacking Germany, even if the Red Army's operational plans were offensive. Stalin greatly feared Hitler and Germany's power and hoped to buy time to allow the Red Army to recover from the damage caused by the purges of its ranks in 1937–1938. In the months leading up to the war, Stalin increased Soviet shipments of raw materials to Germany and forbade any actions that the Germans could interpret as a provocation or suggest an offensive Soviet intention, including cross-border land and air patrols.

As is well known, AMAN attributed the Syrian troop concentrations in the Golan Heights in 1973 to Syria's fears of an Israeli attack following the air battle on September 13, in which the Israeli air force shot down 12 Syrian warplanes. Even after receiving warnings of an impending war on the Egyptian front on the day of Yom Kippur, Israeli armored forces were not moved to advanced stations until it was too late, for fear that the Egyptians would interpret the move as preparation for an Israeli attack.

Another way of concealing the intention behind troop deployments for an attack is to disguise them as exercises. One famous case was the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which was presented as a Warsaw Pact exercise. Despite being aware of this precedent, Israeli Intelligence interpreted the large Egyptian force buildup along the Suez Canal as an exercise, consistent with the Egyptian routine of many years.

What Can Be Done?

The findings presented here are unequivocal. The experience during the 20th century, when mechanization allowed for a lightning surprise strike at the beginning of a war for the first time, shows that preventing strategic surprise is very difficult. In a large number of renowned cases, the surprise achieved was of critical importance. Indeed, it teaches us that surprise was achieved in <u>every</u> single attempt during the 20th century—<u>without exception</u>.

This momentous finding raises extremely difficult questions about the feasibility of advance warning of war and the value of the large intelligence agencies established for this purpose. The function of these agencies has been regarded as especially critical for Israel, given its small size and the essential role of the reserve forces in its military strength. Intelligence warnings of war have been defined as a major pillar of Israel's defense doctrine and as the national mission of AMAN. Nevertheless, despite impressive achievements in the operational sphere, AMAN failed to provide warning in two cases in which Israel was the target of surprise attacks, in 1973 and 2023 (in addition to the undetected entry of the Egyptian army into Sinai during the 1960

Rotem crisis). The ostensibly obvious conclusion from all this, along with the record of intelligence services in all cases of strategic surprise throughout the 20th century, is that intelligence is ineffective in providing advance strategic warning of an imminent war. The evidence seemingly supports this paradoxical and counter-intuitive conclusion, but how valid is it?

Before addressing this question, let us first move forward from the 20th century to the 21st century—to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The familiar factors supporting a successful surprise were also present here. The Russians disguised the deployment of their forces in Donetsk and Belarus as a large-scale exercise, and the Ukrainian authorities believed that the concentration of Russian forces was part of a campaign of threats and political coercive efforts by Putin that would not lead to war and invasion. (With the sole exception of Zeev Elkin, a former cabinet member of Soviet descent, the author heard all experts in Israel state that they also believed there would be no invasion.) However, American intelligence announced in the days preceding the war that an invasion was imminent, even giving the date on which it would occur (it was subsequently postponed by two days). No information about the source behind this American intelligence announcement has been provided, but the accuracy of the announced invasion date could indicate that it came from internal information, possibly a senior source in the Russian political or military leadership, rather than being deduced from circumstantial evidence.

Thus, as with all human phenomena, there are exceptions and significant variations in strategic surprises, which are worthy of attention. Keep in mind that even on the night before Yom Kippur 1973, Sadat's confidant Ashraf Marwan, "The Angel," gave Israel advance warning about the coming war, which prompted an IDF alert and mobilization. This contrasts with the October 7, 2023 surprise, in which the Israel Security Agency (ISA) and other intelligence bodies did not have a single informer among the thousands of Nukhba terrorists who spent the night and predawn hours preparing for the attack.

Two linked claims are made following successful strategic surprises. One is that deployments and alerts should be based on the enemy's capabilities, not presumed intentions. The other is that a high level of forces and alert should be maintained at all times. These two arguments are criticized, to a large extent justifiably, as impractical—both in general and certainly with respect to Israel. Threats of war against Israel come from various directions, and Israel is unable to maintain its reserve forces, the bulk of its army, mobilized for prolonged periods. Defining the question in absolute terms, however, misses the point.

During early October 1973, following the flow of information about the Arab deployment on Israel's borders, and despite AMAN's assessment that no war was intended, the 7th Armored Brigade was sent to reinforce the Golan Heights, increasing

the number of tanks there from 77 to 177. The Golan front was considered more critical due to a lack of strategic depth provided by the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan's proximity to civilian communities and central Israel. This reinforcement, along with the advancement of the rapid mobilization reserve Armored Brigade 179 to a more forward camp as part of the Blue-White Alert earlier that year, saved the Golan Heights. AMAN's assessment of capabilities, given the concentrations of enemy forces, therefore had a critical effect on the IDF's readiness and the results of the ensuing campaign.

From this perspective, the situation on October 7, 2023 was much worse. The intelligence services erred in their assessment of both Hamas's intentions and capabilities. They also failed in providing precise advance warning, despite receiving various signs and reports throughout the night. Consequently, the forces on the Gaza border were completely unprepared, resulting in a disaster. Even though there were signs of unusual activity by Hamas, the forces in the area were not even put on a standard "alert at dawn."

Israel had a more accurate assessment of the capabilities of Hezbollah and its Radwan Force to penetrate Israeli territory. However, in retrospect, it is clear that there was no adequate preparation for the realization of this threat. The IDF relied on AMAN's ability to provide sufficient pinpoint advance warning that would allow for suitable preparation before such an attack. It is impossible to know if AMAN would have met these expectations. Nevertheless, in hindsight, it appears that Israel should have never relied on such a warning, and that the IDF's deployment along the Lebanon border— by the regular army, reserve units, and local emergency teams in the towns and villages—was far from the minimum necessary to prevent a disaster, which could have been even worse than the October 7, 2023, catastrophe.

Therefore, the question of advance warning of a war does not depend solely on a clear specific warning, such as the one uniquely obtained by the Americans in Ukraine, or partially obtained by Israel on the eve of Yom Kippur in 1973. The question of intentions versus capabilities is similarly not measured in terms of "all or nothing." Even in the absence of a precise warning, countries and militaries must always ask what would happen if a hostile and dangerous enemy were to attack. What defensive deployment exists if the threat materializes without any pinpoint advance warning? This is the question that was asked, despite AMAN's assessment, in the week preceding the Yom Kippur War, and a critical response to it, albeit incomplete, was given then. By contrast, the question was not asked about Hamas and Hezbollah with the required seriousness in 2023.

The picture of the intelligence failure in terms of strategic surprises is therefore even more comprehensive and consistent than commonly assumed. However, it is also

complex and multidimensional, leaving room for cautious hope when drawing intelligence and operational lessons from the total failure on October 7. The series of past failures makes it clear that there is no panacea for this problem. Efforts to augment the ability to provide specific warning of an imminent war should continue, including intelligence aimed at discerning intentions, even if experience has shown that this can never be fully trusted. At the same time, however, a defensive response to threatening enemy capabilities, which will at least prevent total collapse in the event of a surprise, must always be in place.

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