The Elephant in the Room When Discussing Intelligence Failures לחשוב אסלאמית — book cover image:

The Elephant in the Room When Discussing Intelligence Failures

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Since October 7, many professional conferences have been held with the aim of deciphering the roots of the intelligence failure surrounding the Hamas attack. Most of the conferences have focused on the attempt to analyze the methodological errors of assessment agents, including the presentation of analyses by former heads of security and intelligence agencies, as well as academic researchers, most of whom deal with various kinds of theoretical aspects, such as the psychology of individuals and groups, philosophy, and decision-making processes. Conspicuously absent or marginally present were researchers that specialize in in-depth content, chiefly the culture and language of the "other."

This reflects a deep change that has taken place in the fundamental concepts of intelligence and of the portrait of the intelligence agent in recent decades. A very problematic picture emerges from books and journals published in the West, including Israel, which contain plenty of theories on logic, system analysis, and group behavior patterns, accompanied by an ongoing effort to quantify conclusions and render intelligence as a science. The "tools of the past" that aimed to decipher the mind and soul of someone who is not from your culture, in particular by gaining proficiency in their language, are pushed aside and seen as "background material" that is important but not critical for formulating a picture of reality, assessing the future and recommending action.

October 7 was a wake-up call for Israel as a whole, regarding its lack of understanding of the region surrounding it. The failure to decipher Hamas's intentions stems not only from mistaken decision-making processes or faults in the way information was transferred—a claim that aims to give the debacle the image of a technical or organizational failure—but from an extreme misunderstanding of the reality. At its center is the difficulty in "reading" an ideological organization and adopting the mistaken assumption that it is undergoing evolution by becoming more moderate and civilian-focused, such that its arm can be twisted via "economic carrots."

The fundamental problem cannot be detached from the fact that more and more Israelis, including in the intelligence agencies, tend to rely on technologies from AI or Google Translate, as tools for deciphering another culture, with little familiarity with its deep foundations. The concept of acquiring

knowledge through reading and exposure to new content has been replaced by the term "developing knowledge," meaning sitting in a closed group and holding "echo chamber"-type discussions, that is, with the participation of people whose way of thinking is fundamentally different from that of the "other."

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At this highly appropriate and quite tragic time, Dr. Sagi Polka's book *Thinking Islamic—Reviewing the Contemporary Muslim Discourse: Understanding Language and Culture as a Key to Knowing the Neighbors* appeared. The study presents readers with a broad panorama of all shades of green (the symbol of the Muslim Brotherhood) and black (the color that represents the global jihad stream). The book analyzes the historical development of the streams and their conceptual and practical characteristics. It does so while examining in depth their basic terms (for example, *Jihad, Istishhad,* or *Da`awah*) and core issues, that in Israel usually tend to be analyzed from a strategic realpolitik perspective while omitting their cultural dimension, such as the *Hudna* (whose deep meaning, which was not fully understood before October 7, is a lull for the purpose of enabling Muslims to gain strength and then to attack their enemies by surprise, while violating every existing agreement), or the attitude towards Iran (utilitarian cooperation alongside deep ideological and political hostility).

The volume is another link in the long chain of books published in recent decades that attempt to decipher the cultural bases of the ongoing unrest that characterizes the Middle East and radiates out towards the entire world— what well-known historian Bernard Lewis called "the unending crisis." Radical Islam is the most prominent and lethal representative of this phenomenon. Fundamentally, it expresses a civilization that has been in crisis for over 200 years that is accompanied by an incisive, violence-filled polemic over identity and purpose. The attacks on September 11, 2001, were a powerful expression of this civilizational crisis, as was October 7, 2023: the first created a short-lived reckoning that was quickly replaced by a sense of victimhood given the campaigns that the United States pursued to change the face of the Middle East; the second did not arouse sweeping criticism from intellectuals, religious leaders or journalists in the Muslim world and in particular in the Arab world. Instead, the commission of war crimes was conspicuously ignored and emphatically denied, alongside praise filled with dehumanization of Israelis and claims that they are all the enemy and a legitimate target.

Major General (res.) Gershon Hacohen chose a fitting title for the book's foreword: "The West's Conceptual Barrier in Understanding the Muslim World." Hacohen points out a fundamental problem in the Israeli discourse (including the military discourse) in its failure to understand the depth of the logic of the challenges surrounding it, and even worse—the tendency to impose our logic on actors from a culture that we do not understand. For example, in Israel people tend to see a contradiction between messianism and rationality—something that in practice exists together without contradiction in the brain of Yahya Sinwar. In the Israeli discourse in recent years, he has been called "delusional" and "detached from reality" but he has proved that he is rooted in it, and that the problem lies in his Israeli interpreters, who did not manage to decipher the yearnings of his ideological world.

The book takes readers on a 150-year-long journey, from the end of the nineteenth

century to the present time. In this framework, it provides an analysis of the development of political Islam as a response to the fundamental illnesses of the Muslim world and describes its conceptual and practical expressions in the modern Middle East, including the strategic challenges that Israel currently faces. Polka does not limit himself to the narrow frameworks of political or intellectual analysis; he also touches on issues related to the social and cultural realms. In this respect, the chapter on attitudes towards women in the various Islamist streams stands out. It includes a presentation of complex dilemmas for the Western way of thinking about women, some of which attempt to combine religious piety with feminism and to maneuver within a world that from the outset puts them at a built-in disadvantage.

Polka ends the book with an important chapter, which should have been expanded, that discusses, among other things, the significance of language and culture (and the lack thereof) as part of the effort to reduce the gaps in understanding between Israel and her surrounding neighbors. Like most Middle East researchers and commentators, he did not foresee the October 7 attack. However, on the eve of that trauma, he explained the complexity of Hamas's worldview and its ability to be simultaneously pragmatic and to maintain its long-term ideological vision. The following should be inscribed in the consciousness of Israelis, including decision-makers: "Studying the conceptual world and the ideas of our neighbors, some of which are our enemies, is no less important than learning about military values and different kinds of weapons or studying the politics of Islamic countries" (p. 340).

Knowledge of language and culture is not a magic formula that makes academic researchers or intelligence officers immune to mistakes. Throughout history, there were more than a few distinguished Middle East researchers whose strategic assessments collapsed, especially when they were involved in decision-making

processes, or their hearts' yearnings biased their professional assessments. Bernard Lewis stands out in this respect: when involved in the strategic planning of the conquest of Iraq in 2003, he defined it as the beginning of a stable and democratic Middle East. However, proficiency in the tools of language and culture supports a more accurate reading of the present and reduces the built-in alienation between the patterns of thinking of the researcher and the object of their research.

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These kinds of conclusions must not be pushed to the sidelines of the discourse on the roots of the October 7 debacle, as occurred in the discussion regarding the sources of the 1973 surprise, which also stemmed in large part from ignorance of the culture of the "other" and underestimating its capabilities. Every intelligence agent engaged in deciphering the other side must be proficient in its language and culture. The incoming director of the Military Intelligence Directorate, Brig. Gen. Shlomi Binder, would do well if, along with rehabilitating the directorate's units, he would begin with the study of Arabic and the history of the Middle East, make it mandatory in the directorate's basic courses, and thus serve as an example and a symbol of renewal. Reading Polka's book would doubly benefit Binder in particular and intelligence personnel in general: it would enrich them with essential content regarding the challenges that Israel is facing, and

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bring up fundamental problems and dilemmas that are relevant to the directorate after the upheaval of October 7.

Intelligence is a reflection of Israeli society as a whole. Just as the 1973 conception existed within a public and political discourse that reflected deep contempt for the Arabs, the 2023 debacle embodies national defects. Chief among them is the reduced scope and standing of the study of other cultures—which reflects a society that scorns the humanities, sanctifies material achievement and technology, and large parts of which turn their backs on the region surrounding us. Arabic, especially spoken Arabic, must become a mandatory subject in the education system, starting in elementary school. This is necessary in order to know our enemies better, but also in order to be able to create a deep and realistic relationship with friends.

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