Strategic Surprise: Following Professor Azar Gat's Article

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In September 2024, Professor Azar Gat's article ["Strategic Surprise—Always?"](#) was published by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) as part of its INSS Insight series. Gat's main argument is that in the 20th century, every attempt by states to achieve strategic surprise was successful. He also presents explanations for the extraordinary success of strategic surprise and examines what can be done in response to this unequivocal finding. In response, this article explores the issue by focusing on proposals for preventing strategic surprise rather than accepting it as an almost inevitable fate, with an emphasis on improving the intelligence community's preparedness. Azar Gat's response appears at the end of this article.

The research literature on war and national security extensively addresses the definition of strategic surprise. A strategic surprise is not an exceptional event. Nobel laureate in economics, Professor Daniel Kahneman, noted that the ability to be surprised is an essential aspect of our mental lives; according to him, surprise is the most sensitive indicator of how we understand our world and our expectations of it.[2] According to Dr. Ariel Levite, strategic surprise is defined as "a sudden realization by an actor in the international system that it has been operating based on a mistaken threat perception. This mistaken perception results from a failure to predict and/or a failure to prepare for a severe and immediate threat to vital national interests."[3] Thus, strategic surprise results in a sudden recognition by an intelligence organization that it has been operating based on an incorrect threat assessment, rendering it unable to foresee a significant threat to its vital interests. Strategic surprise is relevant to military threats and other unexpected developments that can impact national security, such as the Egyptian peace initiative in 1977 or the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989.

Professor Gat himself defines strategic surprise as "surprise at the very beginning of a war" and distinguishes it from operational or tactical surprises during a war. Since Gat emphasizes surprise at the onset of war, it can be inferred that he is referring to a "surprise attack," which is one type of strategic surprise. According to Professor Uri Bar-Joseph, a surprise attack is "a military maneuver centered on the effort to create within the adversary a mistaken threat perception, leading to an improper deployment of its forces at the onset of the attack, thereby securing a unilateral advantage on the battlefield."[4] Dr. Ephraim Kam defines surprise as "the

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[2] Daniel Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow (Matar, 2013), 85–86 [in Hebrew].

[3] Ariel Levite, *Intelligence and Strategic Surprises* (Columbia University Press, 1987), 1–3.

[4] Uri Bar-Joseph, *Surprise Attack: Leadership and Intelligence in the Ultimate Test* (Kinneret Zmora-Bitan, 2019), 28–29 [in Hebrew].

result of an action or development that occurs contrary to our expectations."[5] Surprise is achieved when the victim "fails to assess the timing, focus, and manner in which the adversary will deliver the blow."[6] As a result, the victim is militarily unprepared and significantly more vulnerable.

A surprise attack is considered a "force multiplier," enabling military victory even when the initiating side does not enjoy a clear advantage in numbers or weapons, as the enemy is caught completely unprepared.[7] For example, in Operation Focus, which launched the Six-Day War, around 200 Israeli Air Force planes destroyed more than 400 Egyptian aircraft. A similar ratio was recorded in the attack on Pearl Harbor, between the scale of the Japanese forces and the size of the American air force that was targeted.

It should be noted that strategic surprise is not limited to military threats and does not necessarily lead to war. It is also relevant to developments that can impact national security, including positive effects such as President Sadat's peace initiative in 1977. Several other notable strategic surprise events directly affected national security without leading to war, including the Czech–Egyptian arms deal in 1955, the Rotem crisis in 1960, the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the oil embargo in 1973, the fall of the Shah in Iran in 1979, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc in 1989, the fall of President Mubarak in Egypt and the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2011, and many more.

Early research on intelligence warnings initially attributed both surprise attacks and strategic surprises to insufficient information. Typically, such events were seen as failures within intelligence organizations, whose role is to provide strategic warnings to decision-makers about the emergence and maturation of threats into full-fledged attacks. Over time, this field of study has significantly evolved. A pivotal work in this research area is Roberta Wohlstetter's book on the attack on Pearl Harbor, published in 1962 (translated into Hebrew in 2023). Wohlstetter argued that the attack resulted from a lack of concrete warnings and failures in distinguishing signals from noise indicative of an impending attack. Later studies of other surprise attacks—such as Operation Barbarossa (the German invasion of the Soviet Union), the Chinese attack in Korea, and the Yom Kippur War in 1973—revealed that reliable warning intelligence was available but misinterpreted. In these cases, the prevailing threat perception remained incorrect until the attack was already underway.

It is now understood that cognitive and organizational obstacles in intelligence processing contribute to situations where early warning intelligence fails to be translated into concrete alerts. A notable example is the period preceding the 9/11 attacks.[8] Additionally, the fall of the Soviet Union and the Shah's downfall in Iran are considered "diffuse surprises"—meaning

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[5] Ephraim Kam, *Surprise Attack* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1990), 45 [in Hebrew].
[6] Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (The Brookings Institution, 1982), 4–5.
[7] Michael I. Handel, "Intelligence and the Problem of Strategic Surprise," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 7, no. 3 (1984):229–291, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402398408437190.
[8] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, "The 9/11 Commission Report, Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, Executive Summary," https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report_Exec.pdf.

that although warning signs existed, they were not clearly identified as imminent strategic upheavals.[9]

To avoid presenting a one-dimensional view—in which strategic surprises are inevitable and consistently successful—it is essential to highlight instances where warnings based on intelligence assessments helped avert surprises, even in the absence of concrete intelligence reports. One prominent example is the fall of the Shah in Iran in 1979. While this event was a strategic surprise for the United States, it was not for Israel. The Mossad had warned Israeli decision-makers—Prime Minister Menachem Begin, Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan, and Defense Minister Ezer Weizman—about the Shah's expected downfall a year in advance, allowing Israel to preemptively stockpile oil reserves in preparation.[10] Another example is the warning given to the prime minister of Ukraine in 2022 by the United States and Britain about the impending Russian invasion, including its planned date; however, he chose to disregard the warning.[11] In the field of domestic intelligence (counterterrorism) in Israel, one may recall the warning by the Shin Bet in 1985 regarding the Jewish underground's plan to destroy the al-Aqsa Mosque. Had the attack succeeded, it could have ignited a widespread conflict in the Middle East and beyond.[12]

One of the key components of Israel's security doctrine is intelligence, which is expected to provide early warnings. This principle underpins the structure of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) as a small standing army that can rapidly expand through reserve mobilization when war is imminent. An important debate occurred between the IDF's second Chief of Staff, Yigael Yadin, and Prime Minister and Defense Minister David Ben-Gurion. While Yadin opposed massive defense budget cuts and the dismissal of many military personnel, Ben-Gurion argued that to develop the country, Israel's military should be structured as a small regular army supported by a large reserve force, with reservists called up only when intelligence provides warning of an impending war.

Over the years, as significant security events have unfolded, doubts have grown regarding the ability of Israel's intelligence community to provide timely warnings of war. Despite receiving the second-largest budget in the IDF—after the Air Force—the intelligence corps and the broader Israeli intelligence community have faced persistent failures, raising difficult questions about improving their performance. Professor Gat argues that relying on intelligence warnings is unrealistic and suggests that Israel should instead focus on strengthening its standing military forces. The practical implication of this approach would be

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[9] Avner Barnea, "Strategic Intelligence: A Concentrated and Diffused Intelligence Model," *Intelligence and National Security* 35, no. 5 (2020): 701–716, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2020.1747004.

[10] Uri Bar-Joseph, "Forecasting a Hurricane: Israeli and American Estimations of the Khomeini Revolution," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 5 (2013): 718–742, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2012.742009.

[11] Kristian Gustafson, Dan Lomas, Steven Wagner, Neveen Shaaban Abdalla, and Philip H. J. Davis, "Intelligence Warning in the Ukraine War 2021—Summer 2022," *Intelligence and National Security* 39, no. 3 (2024): 400–419, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2024.2322214.

[12] Tal Lavi and Linn, "Today 26 Years Ago: "The Jewish Underground" Was First Exposed," *Haaretz*, April 27, 2010 [in Hebrew], https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/2010-04-27/ty-article/0000017f-e96c-df5f-a17f-fbfefca30000.

a significant expansion of the IDF, requiring substantial budget reallocations toward military readiness at the expense of Israel's economic growth and civilian welfare.

From an organizational standpoint, the assumption is that when systems and institutions fail to perform adequately, they should undergo reform. When an organization fails to adapt, it must undergo renewal and restructuring.[13] A common approach to reform is conducting comprehensive studies to identify best practices—examining where a function is executed most effectively and adapting those insights to local needs. However, when comparing Israel's intelligence community to those of the United States and Britain, a troubling picture emerges; unlike these countries, Israel has never undergone comprehensive intelligence reform aimed at improving its capabilities. Ironically, despite operating in a highly dynamic environment, Israel's intelligence community has failed to adequately adapt to shifting security threats.

There have been two cases where major reforms were recommended for Israel's intelligence community following intelligence failures and strategic surprises. In both cases, however, none of the recommended changes were implemented. The Israeli intelligence community resisted reforms and continued to operate as it had before despite clear evidence of its failures.

The first case was the Agranat Commission in 1974, which was established to investigate the intelligence failures following the Yom Kippur War in 1973, particularly the failure to provide early warning of war. The commission's most substantial recommendation was to appoint an intelligence advisor to the prime minister—independent of the military and supported by a small advisory team—to allow independent intelligence assessments. This recommendation echoed an earlier one by the Yadin-Scharf Commission in 1963, which examined the division of responsibility among Israel's intelligence agencies. As a result, the former head of the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate, Professor Yehoshafat Harkabi, was appointed. However, he resigned after just one year, citing a lack of resources and cooperation from the intelligence community. Since then, no intelligence advisor has ever been appointed to the prime minister. After stepping down, Harkabi stated:

The Agranat Commission recommended appointing an intelligence advisor to the prime minister. Such an advisor could assist not only in facilitating productive discussions on intelligence assessments but, even more importantly, in critically evaluating those assessments—examining their boundaries, validity, underlying assumptions, and potential weaknesses."[14]

The second case was the Steinitz Committee in 2003, which investigated Israel's intelligence system in the wake of the Iraq War. One of its key recommendations was to establish an intelligence unit within the Prime Minister's Office. This unit would continuously integrate intelligence assessments from various agencies, ensuring a broader and more balanced

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[13] John P. Kotter, "Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail," *Harvard Business Review* (May–June 1995), https://hbr.org/1995/05/leading-change-why-transformation-efforts-fail-2.

[14] Yehoshafat Harkabi, "Complexities between Intelligence and Leadership," in *Intelligence and National Security*, ed. Zvi Ofer and Avi Kober (Maarachot, 1987), 453 [in Hebrew].

national security outlook.[15] The National Security Council (NSC) delivered an annual national intelligence assessment to the prime minister and the Ministerial Committee on National Security. However, this recommendation was never implemented—nor was it even seriously considered. In addition, the Steinitz Committee proposed legislation to formalize Israel's intelligence framework, including defining the structure and jurisdiction of intelligence agencies, establishing government and parliamentary oversight, and outlining the legal foundations for intelligence activities. None of these recommendations were adopted.

While the intelligence battlefield evolved, the intelligence community did not make significant adjustments for years, preferring to maintain the status quo. Organizational theory suggests that organizations must adapt to survive. However, organizations tend to resist change to preserve their influence and power. As a result, even minor changes take a long time to reach consensus and be implemented. In the case of the division of responsibilities within Israel's intelligence community, nearly a decade passed before Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot finally approved changes in 2016.

In contrast, the American intelligence community takes a fundamentally different approach. In the United States, intelligence organizations undergo continuous reforms to adapt to changing threats rather than waiting for failures from which to learn. Since the directive to establish the CIA and the National Security Council in 1947, dozens of significant reforms have been carried out, each concluding with a presidential directive for implementation.[16] The role of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), established in 2004, is defined as coordinating and managing national intelligence efforts, guiding what should be done and how. The ODNI regularly publishes a document called the *National Intelligence Strategy*, which provides guidelines on what actions should be taken and how national intelligence should operate.[17] Such a function does not exist in Israel. The United Kingdom has a similar system, in which its national intelligence policy is derived from the National Security Strategy, although its activities are not publicly disclosed.[18] External experts with relevant expertise are consulted to update national intelligence frameworks in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Gat's assessment that intelligence warnings cannot be relied upon is based on analyzing past failures in evaluating adversaries' capabilities and intentions. He argues that the IDF must

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[15] Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. *The Committee to Investigate the Intelligence System Following the War in Iraq* (March 2004), [in Hebrew] https://irp.fas.org/world/israel/iraq_intel.pdf.

[16] Stephen Hadley and Michael Allen, "Intelligence Reform: If We Did Not Do It Then, We'd Have to Do It Now," *Studies in Intelligence* 68, no. 5 (December 2024): 15–23, https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/studies-in-intelligence/studies-in-intelligence-68-no-5-special-edition-irtpa-20-years-on-december-2024/.

[17] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *National Intelligence Strategy, 2023*, https://www.intelligence.gov/templates/intelgov-template/custom-sections/the-nis-at-a-glance/nis-2023/pdf/nis-2023.pdf.

[18] HM Government, "National Risk Register, 2023," https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64ca1dfe19f5622669f3c1b1/2023_NATIONAL_RISK_REGISTER_NRR.pdf.

enhance its readiness—necessitating a significantly larger standing army. However, Gat does not address analytical tools that could improve intelligence assessments—tools that have not been systematically utilized. Scenario analysis can be employed to better prepare for failures in assessing intentions and capabilities, and it is a method also used to prevent surprise attacks.[19] One key missing factor in evaluating these failures is the outcome. To address this, a matrix can be used, with one axis representing "probability"—the likelihood of what the adversary intends and is capable of doing—and the other representing "impact"—the consequences of an error in assessing probability. Decision-making typically assumes that issuing a warning is apparent when the likelihood of an attack is high, and the impact is severe. But what happens when the probability is low, yet the effect is severe? How should one respond in such a case?

This was the dilemma faced by intelligence and military personnel in the early hours of October 7. Their assessment that the "probability" of an attack was low likely stemmed from the belief that "Hamas was deterred."[20] However, they failed to consider how to prepare for the possibility that their assessment was mistaken. In such a scenario, greater weight should have been given to the "impact" axis—the severe consequence of an attack without prior warning. This should have prompted an immediate state of alert at dawn and the deployment of additional forces. Instead, by focusing only on "probability" and disregarding "impact," the decision was made not to issue a warning.

Another argument suggests that in the early hours of October 7, Israel's intelligence failure was twofold. First, due to the prevailing belief that "Hamas was deterred," the probability of an attack was assessed as low. Second, the expected "impact"—the potential damage in the event of an attack—was also underestimated due to both an underestimation of the enemy and an overestimation of Israel's own capabilities.

Even if the conclusion is correct that intelligence failures and strategic surprises have occurred in the past, where no warning was given before military attacks, it is impossible to abandon reliance on intelligence or diminish its importance. On the contrary, intelligence agencies continuously reform and refine their operations to improve performance worldwide. However, this has not been the case in Israel. We do not know what the outcome would have been had past proposals for significant improvements in Israel's intelligence community been implemented. What we do know is that Israel has yet to undertake any substantial reform efforts, mainly due to the entrenched mindset of its intelligence community and decision-makers.

Now, in the aftermath of the disastrous failure of October 7, the time has come for fundamental changes in Israel's intelligence community—not just more of the same. I believe that a thorough study of the intelligence reforms implemented in the United States and the

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[19] Avner Barnea and Avi Meshulach, "Forecasting for Intelligence Analysis: Scenarios to Abort Intelligence Surprise," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 34, no. 1 (2021): 106–133, https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2020.1793600.

[20] Avner Barnea, "Hamas Deterred as Wishful Thinking: Analysis of the Hamas Attack on October 7," *Maarachot* 502 (2024), [in Hebrew] https://www.maarachot.idf.il/29177.

United Kingdom—including examining which aspects could be adapted to Israel—should be conducted with external experts with relevant expertise. Such an approach could help restore Israel's intelligence capabilities to the highest standards.

Azar Gat's Response to the Criticism

It seems that Avner Barnea believes that different definitions of "strategic surprise" alter the phenomenon or the findings. However, in every instance during the 20th century where one side attempted to launch a surprise attack at the start of a war—and there are approximately a dozen such cases—it succeeded. In <u>all</u> of them, without exception. This unequivocal outcome was not affected by the structure of any intelligence community, by any intelligence methodology, or by any reforms implemented by any country. Nor was it affected by any specific cognitive failure or personality traits frequently cited in the literature as explanations for intelligence failures.

Contrary to what is written in Barnea's article, my conclusion is not that surprise is nearly inevitable. Instead, advance warning is not a binary question of all or nothing. For example, if it had not been for the intelligence provided by Israel's Military Intelligence Directorate regarding Syria's massive military deployment in the weeks leading up to the Yom Kippur War—and despite the overall assessment by the Military Intelligence Directorate that Syria was not heading to war—Israeli forces on the Golan Heights would not have been reinforced from 77 to 177 tanks. Without that reinforcement and without the warning from Israel's Egyptian agent known as "the Angel" and the mobilization of Israeli reserves on the morning of Yom Kippur, the Golan Heights would have fallen to the Syrians. It is essential to avoid oversimplification in this matter.

I did not argue that the only way to prevent surprise is to maintain a constant state of high alert; on the contrary, I wrote the opposite. Such a level of alert—based on capabilities rather than intentions—cannot be maintained anywhere, and certainly not in Israel, surrounded by enemies and relying on the mobilization of reserve forces in case of war. What must be done is to ensure that the preparedness of the IDF and Israel meets a minimum threshold that prevents a total catastrophe in the event of a surprise attack.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg