Insight

INSS
המכון למחקרי ביטחון לאומי
THE INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES
TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY אוניברסיטת תל אביב

It's Not All About Culture: The Risk of Overcorrecting Intelligence Analysis Following October 7

Raz Zimmt and Neomi Neumann[1] | No. 2216 | November 16, 2026

The October 7 attack underscored the need to deepen familiarity with the language, culture, and ideological sources of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran. Yet the lessons-learned process carries a risk of overcorrection: shifting from an underestimation of ideology to an overestimation of it, and from Western "mirror-imaging" to an essentialist perception holding that the adversary acts solely out of religious conviction. Islamist actors, as well, combine an ideological vision with strategic considerations, practical constraints, balances of power, and changing opportunities. Therefore, while proficiency in Arabic or Persian and familiarity with Islam are essential, they are no substitute for the analysis of the capabilities, intentions, and conditions required to realize them. High-quality intelligence research requires integrating regional expertise, analytical thinking, knowledge of the social sciences, data analysis, and technological tools, alongside a constant willingness to re-examine fundamental assumptions and avoid replacing one fixed *conceptzia* with another.

In August 2006, the renowned historian Bernard Lewis warned that Iran might launch a nuclear attack against Israel on the 22nd of the month. The date, he explained, was not random: it coincided with a religiously significant date in Islam associated with the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey on his legendary steed, Buraq. Lewis argued that Iran's president at the time, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and his inner circle held an apocalyptic worldview according to which the End of Time was near. Unlike the leaders of the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War, they might not be even deterred by the prospect of mutual annihilation. In their view, the deaths of millions of Iranians and Palestinians could be considered a justified sacrifice on the path to Islam's victory.

The prediction did not materialize. Iran did not attack Israel on August 22, nor in the days that followed. This does not mean that religious beliefs or ideological declarations can be ignored. Yet the episode illustrates that even deep familiarity with an adversary's history, religion, and culture does not guarantee a correct understanding of its decisions. At times, it may even lead to misinterpretation, when decisive importance is attributed to religious symbols while other considerations are overlooked.

---

[1] *Neomi Neumann, an adjunct fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, served as head of the research and policy design division at the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet) from 2017 to 2021. She is a doctoral candidate at Tel Aviv University.*

This lesson is particularly relevant to the debate that has emerged in Israel since the attack on October 7, 2023, featuring sharp criticism of the declining state of Arabic-language and Middle Eastern cultural and historical studies in Israeli society, particularly within the security establishment. According to this criticism, growing reliance on technology, artificial intelligence, and Big Data has come at the expense of direct, unmediated familiarity with the adversary's world. Intelligence analysts, it is argued, tried to understand Hamas through concepts and considerations characteristic of themselves, rather than recognizing that the organization's leaders act from a fundamentally different religious and revolutionary worldview.

A recent example of the approach emphasizing the importance of religion and ideology appears in a review published in October 2026 by the Amit Terrorism and Intelligence Research Institute, which examined the religious component of Hamas's mindset ahead of and during the October 7 attack. Drawing on captured documents and statements by senior Hamas officials, the researchers concluded that religious considerations played a significant role in Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif's decision to launch the attack. According to their assessment, although Hamas's leadership understood that the Israeli response would likely be forceful and that Iran and Hezbollah would not necessarily join the campaign, the belief in a divine promise of victory and the idea that martyrdom itself is tantamount to victory, helped make the decision.

The review highlights the use of Quranic concepts, including "The Second Promise" (*Wa'd al-Akhira*), as well as the religious indoctrination given to the Nukhba fighters. At the same time, it acknowledges the political and military considerations behind the decision, including the desire to thwart normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, secure the release of Palestinian prisoners, and exploit Israel's internal crisis. The review notes that Western intelligence services sometimes struggle to contend with the worldview of radical? extremist organizations. This appears to stem in part from a shortage of experts in language, culture, and radical religious thought. Moreover, intelligence analysts are often caught in the "mirror-imaging trap"—applying their own rationale while assuming the other side shares a similar one. Attempting to get inside a "different mindset," whose thought patterns are fundamentally different and at times perceived as irrational, is challenging and not infrequently doomed to failure.

In his article *"Once Again, We Failed to Learn About the Enemy,"* written after October 7, Michael Milshtein pointed to the failure to understand the adversary, attributing it, in part, to a lack of familiarity with the language, culture, and history of the Middle East, as well as growing reliance on technological tools and Western analytical models. According to Milshtein, researchers analyze the adversary without understanding its world in depth, creating a need to return to the direct, unmediated study of Israel's surroundings. In a review of Sagi Polka's book *"Thinking Islamic – Reviewing the Contemporary Muslim Discourse*," Milshtein emphasized that command of language and cultural tools helps foster a more accurate reading of the present and reduces the inherent disconnect between the thought patterns of researchers and their subjects. Nevertheless, he added, knowledge of language and culture is not a magical formula that makes academic researchers or intelligence officers immune to errors stemming from cognitive biases.

This criticism helps explain the decisions made over the past two years by the IDF Intelligence Directorate and the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet) to expand instruction in Islam and Arabic for their personnel. In 2025, the Intelligence Directorate's senior leadership reached a decision to require every

soldier and officer in the directorate, regardless of their field of specialization, to undergo training in Islam. Some were also required to study Arabic. Under this decision, instruction in Islam would be mandatory in every training track in the directorate, from pre-military preparatory programs to advanced courses for officers and career personnel, including those in technological roles such as cyber and software. It was recently reported that, in light of the October 7 investigations, the Shin Bet will soon open a school for Islamic studies for personnel serving in a wide range of operational roles. The new school will operate alongside the Shin Bet's veteran "Ulpan" for Arabic language instruction and will also encompass the study of Islam.

This criticism is largely justified. The danger, however, is that in drawing lessons from the intelligence failure, the pendulum will swing from one extreme to the other: from underestimating ideology to overestimating it; from assuming that the adversary acts just as we do to assuming it acts solely in accordance with its religious beliefs. The debate over the role of ideology in the conduct of Islamist actors stood at the center of a professional forum held at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in November 2024. In the discussion, which brought together scholars from the fields of Middle Eastern and security studies, there was broad consensus on the importance of ideology, yet sharp disagreements emerged over whether the events of October 7 warrant a fundamental shift in the weight assigned to it.

Some participants argued that the failure to understand Hamas stemmed from a tendency to analyze Islamist organizations through Western concepts and from insufficient familiarity with their religious outlook. In their view, Sinwar did not act merely to achieve limited political objectives, but saw the struggle against Israel as a religious mission and a life's calling. They cautioned against assuming that extremist organizations necessarily moderate once they assume governing responsibilities, emphasizing that pragmatism is not synonymous with moderation. According to them, the difficulty in deciphering Hamas reflects deep-seated issues within Israeli society, as fewer and fewer of its members, including those integrated into academia, the media, and even the intelligence services, are proficient in the region's languages, understand its culture in depth, or know its history. Moreover, many secular researchers have great difficulty comprehending religious ideology. For example, some struggle to understand the conduct of Iran, whose fundamental need for deterrence stems from ideology and a Shiite worldview according to which Iranian-Islamic culture is threatened by the West, first and foremost by the United States. Hezbollah and Hamas also acted on the basis of ideology when they invested vast resources in building military infrastructure over the years. Even when these actors take pragmatic steps, it does not mean they have abandoned their ideological vision.

Other participants, by contrast, maintained that even actors with a religious-revolutionary worldview make calculated decisions based on strategic considerations. According to this approach, Sinwar sought to trigger a regional shockwave that would return the Palestinian issue to the center of the agenda and prevent Israel from establishing irreversible facts on the ground. Hassan Nasrallah's decision to join the campaign was also based, in this view, on an assessment of the balance of power, deterrence, and risks, rather than ideological commitment alone. Although he spent years building up his organization's military capabilities, unlike Sinwar, he would not have carried out the plan to "conquer the Galilee" unless he believed there was a high probability that he could defeat Israel.

The dispute is not between those who understand the importance of religion and those who ignore it. Rather, it concerns a more complex question: how do ideological vision, practical constraints, assessments of capabilities, and opportunities interact in the decision-making process? Precisely because the adversary does not necessarily think as we do, we should not assume that it always acts according to a single, fixed model. The Islamic Republic of Iran is a prime example of this complexity. As early as January 1988, the founder of the Islamic Revolution, Ruhollah Khomeini, declared that the interests of the Islamic state could take precedence even over fundamental Islamic precepts, including prayer, fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. He also made clear that the regime is permitted to demolish a mosque if public necessity required it. A few months later, despite his deep reservations about the move, he agreed to a ceasefire with Iraq. Over the years, Iran has prioritized strategic considerations over religious solidarity. It maintained close relations with Christian Armenia despite its conflict with Shiite Azerbaijan, and supported Russia's territorial integrity during the wars in Muslim Chechnya.

Iran's approach toward Israel has likewise reflected a complexity that extends beyond ideological considerations. Hostility toward Israel and the United States is a fundamental component of its revolutionary outlook, but its policy is not dictated by ideology alone. If the vision of Israel's destruction had been the sole determinant of its decisions, one might have expected Iran to seize the opportunity to realize it after October 7. This is not evidence of moderation, but rather a rational and pragmatic approach. Although the revolutionary vision regarding Israel's destruction has never been abandoned, Iranian policy has increasingly relied on strategic objectives defined by Iran's leadership on the basis of its security needs and shifting interests.

Moreover, holding a deep Islamic religious worldview can not only justify localized pragmatic flexibility, but can also coexist with a moderate diplomatic strategy and principled support for peaceful relations with Israel. The late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat carefully cultivated his public image as "The Believer President," and one of his most recognizable outward markers of his piety was his *zabiba*—the calloused mark on the forehead formed by repeated prostrations during prayer. Egypt's current President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi—who, despite his personal reservations about Israel, has not hesitated in the past to acknowledge the depth of military cooperation with Israel against Islamist terrorist elements in Sinai—argued in his master's thesis written during his studies in the United States that, to gain public legitimacy, Egypt's government would not be able to rely on Western democratic values for the foreseeable future. Instead, it would have to draw on Islam's political heritage, rooted in the model of the caliphate: a ruler to whom the public pledges allegiance (*bay'ah*).

Furthermore, those who call for giving greater weight to the Islamic-religious component in analyzing adversaries' conduct generally aim to highlight the depth of their foundational hostility toward Israel, their propensity for deception, their principled opposition to compromises and final concessions, and their long-term conception of time (associated with concepts such as patience or endurance [*sabr*] and steadfastness [*sumud*]), in contrast to the "presentism" supposedly characteristic of the secular, liberal view. Paradoxically, however, those who call for analyzing the conflict through a religious and cultural lens often tend to overlook, or downplay, the religious sensitivities and feelings of vulnerability and humiliation that adversaries experience in response to Israeli actions. This is evident, for example, in the context of the ongoing changes to the status quo on the Temple Mount (al-Aqsa). Claims that Israel was violating the sanctity of al-Aqsa featured prominently as a religious justification for the October 7 attack

in public statements issued by Hamas spokespeople and in the organization's internal discourse, even prior to the attack. Yet they are barely mentioned in Israeli academic and media discussions of the roots of the intelligence surprise.

Ultimately, it is impossible to understand Hamas, Hezbollah, or Iran without knowing their language, their ideological sources, and the history that shaped them. But precisely because of the risk of "mirror-imaging," it is important to remain cautious of the opposite error as well: an essentialist perception that assumes an actor's membership in a particular religious or cultural framework predetermines its behavior. Knowing Arabic or Persian does not make a researcher immune to errors of assessment, and an in-depth knowledge of religious texts does not guarantee the ability to predict political and military decisions. Even eminent Middle East experts have erred over the years, at times precisely because they gave too much weight to a single cultural interpretation.

Deepening knowledge of language, religion, and culture is essential, but a simplistic and fixed perception of actors in the Middle Eastern arena is not the solution to the failures that led to October 7. Nor should expanding this knowledge come at the expense of other research capabilities. Today's intelligence analyst also requires an understanding of economics, sociology, and political science, alongside the ability to use artificial intelligence tools, analyze data, and integrate diverse research methodologies. Technology is no substitute for cultural familiarity, yet cultural familiarity is likewise no substitute for technology and analytical thinking. Moreover, given that Arabic proficiency and familiarity with Islam remain uneven among intelligence analysts despite efforts to improve them, there is a risk that these "experts" in language and religion will become the sole authorized interpreters of adversaries' worldviews and intentions.

Furthermore, overestimating the role of ideology can carry a heavy practical cost. If every extreme declaration is interpreted as an immediate operational plan, and every long-term vision is perceived as an imminent threat, Israel risks finding itself in a perpetual state of preparation for worst-case scenarios, while failing to distinguish between intentions, capabilities, and the conditions required to realize them. Israel cannot afford to ignore its enemies' ideological vision. But neither can it base its policy on intentions alone, without a sober assessment of their capabilities, limitations, and the costs they are willing to pay. Such an approach could lead to unchecked defense expenditures, heavy economic and social costs, and missed opportunities created by changing realities.

The failure of October 7 necessitates deep self-reflection and a transformation in the culture of intelligence analysis. However, the failure must not be corrected by replacing one fixed set of methodological assumptions and organizational culture with another. The lesson is not that a choice must be made between Middle-East experts and analysts, between Islamic studies and artificial intelligence, or between ideology and rationality. The lesson is that high-quality intelligence research requires integrating these approaches and, above all, a constant willingness to question its own basic assumptions. The problem lies not only in the limited ability to understand another's culture. It also arises when a deep conviction takes hold that understanding that culture is sufficient to know how the adversary will act.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurz, Rinat Harash, Eldad Shavit and Keri Rosenbluh