

The National Intelligence Estimate Mechanism in Israel

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What is a National Intelligence Estimate?

A national intelligence estimate is the product of research by the country's official intelligence organizations for the sake of undertaking situation estimates, formulating policy, and making strategic decisions in the field of national security. In Israel, for example, this means decisions concerning war and peace, strategic foreign relations, the management of security risks, the defense budget, security forces buildup and operation, internal state security, and more. An intelligence estimate at the national level (henceforth: "intelligence estimate" or "assessment") is also necessary for processes of thinking and planning in staff organizations.

A national intelligence estimate referring to the external environment (i.e., outside the country) differs from a national intelligence estimate referring to the internal environment, which deals with terrorist activity, subversion, and espionage carried out primarily by citizens and foreigners residing within the country. This essay deals principally with the estimate referring to the external environment.

An intelligence estimate at the national level is presented several times a year. The estimate may be given in the context of a particular strategic event (e.g., a heightened risk of war), issue (e.g., terrorism), or geographical arena, or serve as a prelude to an action on the part of the security forces. At least once a year, the government is presented with a comprehensive intelligence assessment, called the National Intelligence Estimate, covering the entire strategic environment. This is only one of the many intelligence estimates at the national level discussed by this essay. The initiative for preparing

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an estimate may come from the intelligence organizations themselves or from intelligence consumers.

An intelligence estimate is meant to include three components: a current intelligence estimate (including a process analysis), a forecast (at times through the use of scenarios), and the significance for decision makers, i.e., risks and opportunities. Maximizing the estimate of risks and opportunities, analyzing methods of operation, and making recommendations are processes enabled by a situation estimate that includes an intelligence estimate. Intelligence organizations may append their recommendations separately from the intelligence estimate they have prepared.

An estimate consists of many layers and includes integration of material from different research disciplines: political, military, social, economic, technological, psychological, and demographic; integration between intelligence situations in different geographical arenas; integration between an estimate of capabilities and an estimate of intentions; and more. These components are part of a comprehensive intelligence situation estimate, with the integration a research endeavor unto itself. In addition, intelligence estimates must be adjusted to supplement situation estimates: e.g., how would certain players in the arena respond if national forces act in a certain manner.

It is possible to delineate three tests to determine the quality of an intelligence estimate:

- a. *The professionalism test.* The estimate must meet research standards, among them completeness of information, cross-checked information, cause and effect analysis, and clarity. The estimate should be free of any extraneous considerations.
- b. *The reality test.* In hindsight, the estimate must be judged whether or not it was “right” (matched reality) or “justified” (appropriate to the time it was presented). There is often a large gap between the decision makers’ expectations and what intelligence estimates can say about the future.¹
- c. *The utility test.* The relevance of the estimate and the use made of it must also be examined. For example, one should be able to question the value of providing annual intelligence estimates after the defense budget for the following year has already been passed.

The National Intelligence Estimate in Israel: Process and Content

The Israeli intelligence community includes the IDF’s intelligence bodies, headed by Military Intelligence (MI), the Israel Security Agency (ISA),

and the Mossad, which are subordinate to the Prime Minister. Other less dominant members are the Israel Police Investigative and Intelligence Division and the Center for Political Study at the Foreign Affairs Ministry.² The national intelligence estimate is undertaken by the research bodies in these organizations, each within its field and independently of the others. Any cooperation, to the extent it exists, is entirely voluntary.

Intelligence estimates are submitted to the political echelon and security establishment both in writing and in person. The primary recipients of the intelligence estimate are the Prime Minister and Defense Minister, as well as the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the chair of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. At MI, the head of the research division may submit written intelligence estimates to the Prime Minister independent of the head of MI, who himself may express his opinion independently without prior consultation with the IDF chief of staff. Presentation of the annual intelligence estimate before the Cabinet or the government is a major event with much educational significance, but its importance should not be overstated. The political echelon may decide to act on the basis of the intelligence estimate or may decide not to adopt it. Given Israel's governing structure, a Prime Minister's decision not to adopt the MI intelligence estimate, such as a war alert, may require the government's agreement.

Security risks are a major component of estimates. For example, the 2014 intelligence estimate, presented before the Cabinet in November 2013, dealt, inter alia, with terrorist organizations, the Iranian nuclear project, the stability of regional regimes, and the situation in Syria. Even then, it was reported that Gaza was making concerted efforts at digging attack tunnels through which it would be possible to attack communities in the Negev.³ In the political sphere, the prominent question concerned whether Abu Mazen was likely to make an historic decision on an agreement with Israel. The estimate concluded the chances were slim.⁴ Unlike military intelligence estimates, in the political field it is sometimes difficult to assess what is a risk and what is an opportunity. For example, would the fall of Assad's regime in Syria be a risk or an opportunity for Israel? In some issues, the question of opportunities is not disconnected from the subjective political position of the beholder.

In recent years, intelligence estimates have become a more difficult challenge because of the collapse of the old order in the Middle East, which has given rise to many new entities, unstable spheres, and interactions of unforeseeable result. Social and cultural processes, of which no intelligence

organization took sufficient heed, rose to the surface to affect the arena more than the familiar armies that until then had been at the center of the EEI (essential elements of information). In January 2015, Brig. Gen. Itai Brun, the head of the research division at MI, said that under the current circumstances it was nearly impossible to expect intelligence services to forecast events accurately. In the past, processes took a long time; at present, much happens with dizzying speed. According to him, cyberspace and the use of missiles and rockets, which do not require a long planning process, shorten the enemy's path from thought to action.⁵

In terms of the peace process, the greatest decisions by Israel's heads of state were not made in consultation with the intelligence assessors. Perhaps the heads of state received information through secret channels of their own; or perhaps the decisions were subject to political disagreement and the heads of state were worried about leaks to political rivals on both sides that might have undermined the contacts. However, ignoring intelligence estimates has its price. For example, during the Oslo Accords period (1993-95), Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres rejected the MI estimate that the Palestinians would not accept a compromise on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state at the stage of the permanent settlement, and relied on their own estimate that the PLO would be willing to settle for autonomy.⁶ In general, the "new Middle East" school of thought among Israel's heads of state at that time was not supported by the intelligence estimates. By contrast, the IDF intelligence estimates, which warned of a violent Palestinian response resulting from the failure of the July 2000 Camp David talks, contributed to the preparedness of the IDF when the second intifada broke out.⁷

National Intelligence Estimate: Division of Labor in the Intelligence Community

Israel's military research is carried out in the IDF at MI (in its research division) and at the research departments of the various commands and branches. Research on terrorism takes place in the IDF, the ISA, and the Mossad. Research on nonconventional weapons takes place at MI and the Mossad. Research on political issues takes place in MI, the Mossad, the Foreign Ministry, and ISA (on the Palestinian arena).⁸ There are several reasons for these redundancies, as explained below. ISA alone is in charge of research and internal national intelligence estimates in terms of terrorism, subversion, and espionage.

The status of MI in the critical channel of Israeli security decision making processes means that since its inception, one of its traditional missions has been to provide a national intelligence estimate on the environment external to Israel. It is therefore also known as “the national assessor,”⁹ with the research division being the body that undertakes MI’s research and estimate.

Over the years, the MI status as national assessor has waned. At first it was the result of the MI failure to issue a warning on the Yom Kippur War in 1973, whereupon it was decided that Israel needed pluralism in research to elicit a variety of opinions in the intelligence community so as to reduce the failures stemming from a fixed, institutionalized way of thinking, groupthink, and the political leadership’s dependence on a single source of information. Pluralism is to this day one of the reasons for the overlap in the research system of the intelligence community. For example, when it comes to war alerts – both a political and a military matter – different opinions on military issues may emerge from the MI research division and the research departments of the commands, just as different opinions on political matters may emerge from the MI research division, the Mossad, and the Foreign Affairs Ministry. However, research in both fields takes place only in the MI research division, and it is impossible to provide a reliable alert without integration between the two.

According to the pluralism principle, when it comes to issues on which research is shared by MI and civilian organizations, all research should theoretically carry similar weight in terms of government influence. Sometimes the civilian organizations’ estimates will be preferred to MI’s. The difficulty liable to arise in the former’s estimates is that both the responsibility for the threat estimate and the responsibility for foiling the threat are subsumed under the same authority, in a relatively small and clandestine institution with direct, unmediated access to the Prime Minister. These features are liable to shorten the road from an erroneous estimate to a strategic crisis, as was the case, e.g., in the Mossad’s failure to assassinate Khaled Mashal in Jordan in 1997.

Another stage in the downgrading of MI was the result of the growing strength of the civilian intelligence services (ISA and Mossad) as the war on terrorism and the nonconventional weapons threats intensified, especially since the beginning of the new millennium.¹⁰ The rise in their status was attended by their desire to affect the political agenda, in part by providing intelligence estimates at the national level to the government

on both security and political issues – not merely as a second opinion to the MI estimate, in the name of the pluralism principle, but as the first opinion from organizations equal in rank to that of the IDF. Thus, the presentation of the annual national intelligence estimate to the Cabinet has become a series of presentations by intelligence organizations on various important topics, rather than a central, integrated presentation on the strategic environment around which other presentations and opinions are presented, as was the case in the past.

Although MI has long since ceased to be the exclusive national assessor, it still leads in the field of national estimates. Its senior status in the field is demonstrated by the two hats it wears. The first – MI as the IDF's intelligence officer, whereby it provides the intelligence estimates for situation estimates, operational plans, and the IDF's working plan, approved by the chief of staff, defense minister, and government – the army's supreme commander. The second hat – MI as "the national assessor": it provides a comprehensive intelligence estimate to the political echelon as part of the annual estimate, as well as during complex events such as Operation Protective Edge, in which integration across several areas (military, political, economic) was required and cut across all the nations and organizations involved. The MI research division is the only body that undertakes in-depth research of all these topics, and this capability is a national resource the country must use effectively.

The Problem: The Weakening of the National Estimate Mechanism

Because of the change in the status of MI as the organizational axis of the intelligence estimate at the national level, recent years have seen the emergence of a problematic alternative whereby every intelligence organization presents its independent opinion and leaves the government to make the decision. This situation, unknown elsewhere in the world, entails the following risks:

- a. *Qualitative risk*: The lack of clarity about the differences among the estimates and their sources, with insufficient distinction between estimates and opinions that are not informed by in-depth research, and the evolution of an estimate into a non-binding discourse. In addition, there is the lack of integration and gaps in covering the intelligence situation on basic or less intriguing or seemingly more marginal issues (e.g., the surprising upheavals in the Arab world, beginning in Tunisia

- in 2010), and even the detachment of the estimate from its primary objective – the force buildup and operation of the IDF.
- b. *Organizational risk*: Organizational isolationism, lack of clarity as to responsibility, a dearth of shared research activity in the intelligence community. Pluralism and the desire for autonomy might serve as justification for unnecessary and costly redundancies in operative areas, while the challenges and constraints on resources require concentrated efforts and the effective use of national resources.
 - c. *Risk to the decision makers*: Flooding the leadership with information and estimates and damage to the effective use of discussion time. Decision makers do not have the time to identify the differences among the estimates and do not have the tools to make an informed decision about them. The military secretary to the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister's intelligence aide may help the Prime Minister in sorting the many documents reaching the Prime Minister's Office,¹¹ but they are not qualified to make estimates; moreover, filtering estimates flies in the face of the pluralism principle.

An International Perspective

The United States

The US intelligence community is composed of 16 different intelligence organizations, including the CIA, the NSA, organizations within the Defense Department, and others subordinate to the US Army, intelligence and enforcement bodies in the Justice Department (e.g., the FBI) and the Homeland Security Department, and the intelligence agencies of the State Department and the Treasury.

The community is headed by the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), who serves as the President's advisor on intelligence and is directly subordinate to him. He is supervised by the intelligence committees of the House of Representatives and the Senate. Subordinate to the DNI is the National Intelligence Council (NIC), which is responsible for the formulation of the national intelligence estimate. The NIC employs, among others, 13 estimate officers, each of whom is in charge of assessing a geographical region or field.

The process of formulating an estimate may be regularly scheduled or undertaken in response to a request by a senior member of the administration, the military, or Congressional committee chairs. After receiving the approval of the DNI, the relevant NIC office prepares a preliminary outline that

includes key questions that will be discussed in the document and a schedule for formulating the estimate. The draft is forwarded to the intelligence agencies for comment. The estimate team at the NIC conducts a dialogue with these agencies in order to reach an agreement; if it is not attained, this is noted in the document. At the end of the process, the estimate is approved by the DNI and provided to the requesting party and to other relevant consumers in the administration.

In March 2009, Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair noted that in the future, the intelligence estimate would also include an identification of opportunities for the United States.¹² However, the risk aspect remains the leading element of estimates. Estimate fields go beyond security and politics and include, e.g., estimates on global water security, the threat to national security from organized crime, the effects of climate change by the year 2030, the strategic effect of global health, and more.¹³ Non-classified versions of the intelligence estimate are made public, especially during testimony by senior intelligence figures to the Senate, such as the testimony of the DNI to the Senate in 2014.¹⁴ Issues on the political agenda relating to Iran, Iraq, and the war on terrorism command much public attention.

The annual intelligence estimate is considered one of the preeminent products of the intelligence community. Its formulation takes place in a complex, inter-departmental process led by the NIC, headed by the DNI.¹⁵ In September 2014, DNI James Clapper said that integration among the intelligence institutions is critical and exactly the reason and justification for the existence of his office.¹⁶ The intelligence community exerts much influence on decision makers, yet the sense is that for several reasons the annual estimate usually has little impact.¹⁷ One reason is the gap between the expectations of the political echelon and what intelligence researchers are capable of forecasting. For example, the political echelon expects to receive clear forecasts about unstable nations, even though forecasting in this case is virtually impossible. The second reason is the inferior quality of the product. Often because of so much input and the desire to bridge disagreements, the estimate reflects a very low common denominator of the estimates of the various bodies, i.e., a not-necessarily successful compromise. Similarly, groupthink in the estimate process wears down dissenting voices.¹⁸ Furthermore, equal status is granted to the estimate of each and every agency, whereas in reality, not all have the same level of knowledge at their disposal. All of these flatten the estimate and delay its formulation, making the final product blunt, uninteresting, and inelegant.

There are several steps that could improve the process:¹⁹

- a. Strengthening routine contact between the political and intelligence echelons by means of intelligence briefings as positions in the administration are filled; placing intelligence personnel in working ranks in government ministries and the administration; holding periodic meetings for discussing routine issues where feedback will be received from the political leaders for dissemination in the intelligence community.
- b. Raising the status of Congress in terms of oversight of the estimate. To achieve this, it is necessary to familiarize members of Congress further with the intelligence process.
- c. Straining less for agreement and allowing a greater voice for minority opinions.
- d. Promoting the tools for undertaking ongoing networked estimates among the members of the intelligence community so that there is an estimate in real time rather than an annual document.

The United Kingdom

The UK intelligence community consists primarily of the Ministry of Defense intelligence bodies, MI6 (subordinate to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office), MI5 (subordinate to the Home Office), and the Government Communication Headquarters. The Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), subordinate to the Cabinet, coordinates the national intelligence estimate.²⁰ In addition to the permanent staff on loan from the intelligence agencies, members of the committee include the heads of the intelligence agencies, the heads of the intelligence organizations of the armed forces, and representatives of other government ministries (such as Her Majesty's Treasury and the Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills) who all meet weekly. The chair is a neutral figure, subordinate to the Secretary of the Cabinet, who operates on the basis of consensus rather than by imposing his/her authority.

When it comes to the national intelligence estimate, the function of the JIC is to formulate the integrated estimates so as to help the heads of state make decisions, for example, regarding the national budget.²¹ Work on the national intelligence estimate is carried out by the committee's research institution, composed of officers and intelligence personnel on loan from the various intelligence agencies. It drafts a document in consultation with the other intelligence agencies and experts at all the government ministries. The draft is brought before the committee for approval before

it is disseminated to the relevant ministers.²² The committee's estimate group is much smaller than the community's biggest research institution, which is part of the Ministry of Defense.²³ Therefore, when the JIC is asked to assess security and strategic issues such as terrorism and the proliferation of nonconventional weapons, issues that are researched in depth by the Ministry of Defense, the committee relies on the former and contributes less of itself to the estimate. Some sources therefore feel that the JIC has been weakened and marginalized in recent years and that its ability to undertake intelligence integration has been damaged due to reforms and changes in the British intelligence community.²⁴

The Estimate Processes: Israel vs. the United States and United Kingdom

Israel does not have a body that coordinates the national estimate of all the intelligence services, as do the United States and the United Kingdom (the DNI and JIC, respectively). Moreover, in Israel, there is no binding dialogue among the intelligence organizations about intelligence estimates, and there is no systematic clarification of disagreements before the estimates are presented before the cabinet. By contrast, the United States and United Kingdom make an effort to reach a broad consensus, and disagreements are presented as part of the estimate. Still, in Israel there is freedom of estimate and there is little chance that the opinions of the organizations will be flattened or that the estimate will be politicized.

In Israel, MI has a unique standing in terms of the national estimate compared to the situation in the United Kingdom and especially the United States, where the CIA enjoys preeminence in the estimate process. Still, the civilian espionage agencies – closed and clandestine – do not necessarily enjoy an advantage over a military organization in the democratic process. In Israel, the intelligence estimate occurs only in the fields of security and foreign affairs. In the United States, the estimate also covers issues related to national security in the broader sense, such as the economy, society, climate, energy, and more. Like Israel, the United States and the United Kingdom focus more on the risks and less on the opportunities. Finally, claims in the US discourse about the annual estimate are also made about the Israeli intelligence estimate concerning the length and clumsiness of the process, the overload of data, and the gap between the political echelon's expectations and the intelligence community's capabilities.

Conclusions

Based on the comparison above, it appears that it would be best were Israel to avoid establishing a central estimate body to stand above the intelligence organizations, similar to the situation in the United States and United Kingdom. This model has drawbacks, including flattening the estimate in the process of generating consensus, placing another layer between the decision makers and the intelligence mechanisms, giving too much power to the central estimate body, and the constraint on resources.

At the same time, Israel would do well to implement ideas from the processes in the United States and United Kingdom described above, such as the need for the existence of an organizing axis for presenting the estimates and clarifying disagreements before debate in the government.

Thus for Israel, MI should remain the leader in the comprehensive national intelligence estimate as long as security and the operation of the IDF remain at the top of Israel's national agenda. This means retaining MI's full responsibility for research of all issues in the external arena, including integrating and formulating the overall picture, as has always been the case. While presenting the annual estimate, the other organizations should present their findings, each in its particular field, with emphasis placed on the essential differences among the research bodies in the community and avoiding redundancies. This recommendation does not suggest fundamental changes in the research bodies in the community, other than expanding them to fields in which there is little coverage. For now, transferring the leadership to a civilian espionage organization, such as the Mossad, is a less favorable alternative. The organization does not deal in-depth with military research and the task is not suited to its nature – clandestine, operational, and compact – or to its major mission, i.e., foiling nonconventional weapons threats and terrorism abroad. In addition, chances are slim that the IDF would be operated by the political echelon on the basis of intelligence estimates that had not gone through the decision making axis of the chief of staff and defense minister.

Presentation of the intelligence estimate to the political echelon should be regulated by means of a government procedure that ensures it is complete, sequential, integrated, relevant, uses a common language, expresses the differences among the estimates, assumes responsibility for the presentation, and so on. Such a format would provide reference to the following:

- a. Renewal of responsibility in the intelligence community's research and estimate field, both in terms of sharing the responsibility among

the organizations and in terms of areas of responsibility and the limits of the intelligence community's responsibility, so that the research coverage of the community would be full and integrated, with controlled pluralism on key issues.

- b. Systematic clarification of the agreements and disagreements among the organizations. Before being presented to the political echelon, a preliminary debate about it should be held among the intelligence organizations at the Ministry of Intelligence together with the National Security Staff, and earlier still in a meeting among the heads of research in the intelligence community. When it comes to areas in which there is agreement, there would be no need to present the issue to the government twice; when it comes to areas in which there is disagreement, each would present its agency's stance. Before the debate, a document on the issue would be distributed.
- c. It is important to present dissenting opinions by foreign intelligence organizations to the political echelon on relevant issues.
- d. Institution of a common estimate language in the community, while avoiding vague and/or ambiguous terminology. Uncertainty must be described clearly (e.g., by using a scale). A common language would allow a comparison among estimates and be more useful to the intelligence consumers.
- e. The annual intelligence estimate would be presented at relevant times for preparing the security establishment's working plans and defense budget decisions.
- f. At least once every three years, the government would be presented with a multi-year intelligence estimate that would be devoted to long term trends.
- g. Every intelligence estimate would also be submitted in a detailed document that would make sure the estimate was reasoned and supported, based on full information, and documented.

In addition, there should be increased cooperation on research within the intelligence community. To this end, an inter-service research committee should be established, subordinate to the committee for the heads of the services. The committee would deal with cooperation in methodology, research training (joint courses, preparation of literature), clarification of disagreements, coordination of research coverage, mobility of personnel

within the community, initiation of debate, external research relations, and a community-wide working program for basic research.

The relationship between the political echelon and the intelligence community should be strengthened, including: giving intelligence briefings for politicians entering office, not only on intelligence contents but also on the nature and limitations of intelligence estimates; holding periodic meetings between intelligence personnel and the political echelon; having the heads of state brief the intelligence community on their needs; and providing feedback on the quality of the intelligence community's output. Knowing Israel's official positions – as far as this is possible – would make it easier for researchers to understand the positions of the other players.

Research areas should be broadened so as to include society, demographics, religion, and other fields, in conjunction with institutions of higher education. In addition, intelligence research relations with foreign sources should be strengthened. However, it is best to avoid dealing with estimates on controversial political issues that are liable to be used to cast aspersions on Israel's political echelon. The internal intelligence estimate dealing with domestic threats (in ISA purview) should be strengthened, in part by means of in-depth studies of national, social, and economic topics. This estimate is at least as important as the external intelligence estimate. Finally, an oversight body for the community's intelligence estimates should be established in the framework of the committee for the heads of the service or at the bureau of intelligence affairs or at the National Security Council.

Notes

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