

Egypt intelligence official says Israel ignored repeated warnings of 'something big'

Cairo official says Israel focused on West Bank instead of Gaza; Egypt's spy chief said to warn PM of 'terrible operation,' Netanyahu denies it

Mounting questions over Israel's massive intelligence failure to anticipate and prepare for a surprise Hamas assault were compounded Monday when an Egyptian intelligence official said that Jerusalem had ignored repeated warnings that the Gaza-based terror group was planning "something big" — which included an apparent direct notice from Cairo's intelligence minister to the prime minister.

The Egyptian official said Egypt, which often serves as a mediator between Israel and Hamas, had spoken repeatedly with the Israelis about "something big," without elaborating.

He said Israeli officials were focused on the West Bank and played down the threat from Gaza. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government is made up of supporters of West Bank settlers who have demanded a security crackdown there in the face of a rising tide of violence over the last 18 months.

"We have warned them an explosion of the situation is coming, and very soon, and it would be big. But they underestimated such warnings," the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to discuss the content of sensitive intelligence discussions with the media, told The Associated Press.

Netanyahu denied receiving any such advance warning, saying in the course of an address to the nation Monday night that the story was "fake news."

"No early message came from Egypt and the prime minister did not speak or meet with the intelligence chief since the establishment of the government — not indirectly or directly," his office said in a statement earlier in the day.

In one of the said warnings, Egypt's Intelligence Minister General Abbas Kamel personally called Netanyahu only 10 days before the massive attack that Gazans were likely to do "something unusual, a terrible operation," according to the Ynet news site.

Unnamed Egyptian officials told the site they were shocked by Netanyahu's indifference to the news and said the premier told the minister the military was "submerged" in troubles in the West Bank. An Israeli Heron military drone flies over the southern Israeli city of Ashdod on November 13, 2019. (Ahmad Gharabli/AFP)

However, Israel was not only reportedly ignoring clear warnings from its allies.

For Palestinians in Gaza, Israel's eyes are never very far away. Surveillance drones buzz constantly in the skies. The highly secured border is awash with security cameras and soldiers on guard. Intelligence agencies work sources and cyber capabilities to draw out information.

But Israel's eyes appeared to have been closed in the lead-up to the surprise onslaught by the Hamas terror group, which broke through Israeli border barriers and sent hundreds of terrorists into Israel to

carry out a brazen attack that killed over 700 people and wounded over 2,000.

Israel's intelligence agencies have gained an aura of invincibility over the decades because of a string of achievements. Israel has foiled plots seeded in the West Bank, allegedly hunted down Hamas operatives in Dubai and has been accused of killing Iranian nuclear scientists in the heart of Iran. Even when their efforts have stumbled, agencies like the Mossad, Shin Bet and military intelligence have maintained their mystique.

But the weekend's assault, which caught Israel off guard on a major Jewish holiday, plunges that reputation into doubt and raises questions about the country's readiness in the face of a weaker but determined foe. Over 48 hours after the start of the attack, Hamas terrorists continued to battle Israeli forces inside Israeli territory, and over 100 Israelis were in Hamas captivity in Gaza.

"This is a major failure," said Yaakov Amidror, a former national security adviser to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "This operation actually proves that the [intelligence] abilities in Gaza were no good."

Amidror declined to offer an explanation for the failure, saying lessons must be learned when the dust settles.

Families of civilians abducted by the terrorist organization Hamas hold a press conference in Kfar Maccabiah, Ramat Gan, October 8, 2023 (Miriam Alster/Flash9)

Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, the chief military spokesman, acknowledged the army owes the public an explanation. But he said now is not the time. "First, we fight, then we investigate," he said.

Some say it is too early to pin the blame solely on an intelligence failure. They point to a wave of low-level violence in the West Bank that shifted some military resources there and the political chaos roiling the country over steps by Netanyahu's far-right government to overhaul the judiciary. The controversial plan has threatened the cohesion of the IDF, seen as the people's army.

But the apparent lack of prior knowledge of Hamas's plot will likely be seen as a prime culprit in the chain of events that led to the deadliest attack against Israelis in decades.

Israel withdrew troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip in 2005, stripping it of a close handle on the happenings in the territory. But even after Hamas overran Gaza in 2007, Israel appeared to maintain its edge, using technological and human intelligence.

It claimed to know the precise locations of Hamas leadership and appeared to prove it through the targeted killing of terror leaders in surgical strikes, sometimes while they slept in their bedrooms. Israel has known where to strike underground tunnels used by Hamas to ferry around fighters and arms, destroying miles (kilometers) of the concealed passageways.

Despite those abilities, Hamas was able to keep its plan under wraps. The ferocious attack, which likely took [months of planning and meticulous training](#) and involved coordination among multiple terror groups, appeared to have gone under Israel's intelligence radar.

Palestinians ride on an Israeli military vehicle taken from an army base overrun by Hamas terrorists near the Gaza Strip fence, in Gaza City, Oct. 7, 2023. (AP Photo/Abed Abu Reash)

Amir Avivi, a retired Israeli general, said that without a foothold inside Gaza, Israel's security services have come to rely increasingly on technological means to gain intelligence. He said terrorists in Gaza have found ways to evade that technological intelligence gathering, giving Israel an incomplete picture of their intentions.

“The other side learned to deal with our technological dominance and they stopped using technology that could expose it,” said Avivi, who served as a conduit for intelligence materials under a former military chief of staff. Avivi is president and founder of Israel Defense and Security Forum, a hawkish group of former military commanders.

“They’ve gone back to the Stone Age,” he said, explaining that terrorists weren’t using phones or computers and were conducting their sensitive business in rooms specially guarded from technological espionage or going underground.

But Avivi said the failure extends beyond just intelligence gathering and Israel’s security services failed to put together an accurate picture from the intelligence they were receiving, based on what he said was a misconception surrounding Hamas’s intentions.

Israel’s security establishment has in recent years increasingly seen Hamas as an actor interested in governing, seeking to develop Gaza’s economy and improving the standard of living of Gaza’s 2.3 million people. But Avivi and others say the truth is that Hamas, which openly calls for Israel’s destruction, sees that aim as its priority.

Israel in recent years has allowed up to 18,000 Palestinian laborers from Gaza to work in Israel, where they can earn a salary about 10 times higher than in the impoverished coastal enclave. The security establishment saw that carrot as a way to maintain relative calm.

Palestinian workers enter Israel after crossing from Gaza, on the Israeli side of Erez crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip, March 27, 2022. (AP Photo/Oded Balilty, File)

“In practice, hundreds if not thousands of Hamas men were preparing for a surprise attack for months, without that having leaked,” wrote Amos Harel, a defense commentator, in the daily Haaretz. “The results are catastrophic.”

Israel has also been preoccupied and torn apart by Netanyahu’s judicial overhaul plan. Netanyahu had received repeated warnings by his defense chiefs, as well as several former leaders of the country’s intelligence agencies, that the divisive plan was chipping away at the cohesion of the country’s security services.

Israeli soldiers patrol near the West Bank city of Tulkarm after clashes between Palestinian gunmen and Israeli forces on October 5, 2023. (Photo by Zain JAAFAR / AFP)

Martin Indyk, who served as a special envoy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations during the Obama administration, said internal divisions over the legal changes was an aggravating factor that contributed to the Israelis being caught off guard.

“That roiled the IDF in a way that was, I think, we discovered was a huge distraction,” he said.

Times of Israel staff contributed to this report.