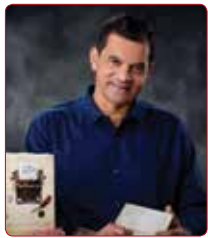


Surprise on Simchat Torah: How Hamas' Strategic Planning Led to an Unprecedented Assault" and Israel's Iron Response



Ajay Singh

Hamas' 'Operation Al Aqsa Flood' was a calculated assault aimed at rallying the Muslim world and highlighting the plight of Palestinians, amidst Israel's growing acceptance by Arab states post-Abraham Accords. Israel's robust counter, 'Operation Swords of Iron', sought to decisively crush Hamas' military capabilities and recover hostages, despite facing a challenging urban and tunnel warfare environment. A look at the military aspects of the ongoing war

The sheer scale of the attack by Hamas on 07 October ensured that many of the missiles broke through the Iron Dome protective system and landed in Israeli territory, some as far as Tel Aviv. Even as the first salvos were fired, Mohammed Deif, head of the al-Qassam Brigade – the military wing of Hamas- tweeted, “We announce the start of OPERATION AL AQSA FLOOD with the first strike of 5000 missiles and rockets that targeted enemy positions, airports, military fortifications ...”

The crude and unguided rockets caused confusion and panic, but little actual damage. Under cover of the salvos, at around 7.30, Hamas fighters broke through the security barriers surrounding Gaza and entered Israel from 22 different places. One detachment flew in using powered parachutes. Another sailed in on motorboats into the Israeli coastal town of Zikim; but most simply broke through the security fence using explosives and bulldozers. Video footage showed it to be a very well-coordinated operation. Explosives weakened the security fence for bulldozers to smash a path and create gaps through which hundreds of Hamas fighters poured in on foot, motorcycles and pickup

trucks into Israeli territory.

By ten in the morning, Hamas fighters had even managed to penetrate three military installations along the border, including the Beit Hanoon border crossing, the Zikim base and the Gaza Division Headquarters at Reim. The unprepared soldiers were taken by surprise and Hamas fighters entered the bases, killed the soldiers (and then put up gruesome videos of beheading them with spades and shovels), set alight at least two Merkava tanks and half a dozen other vehicles, and took back soldiers as hostage.

But the real carnage took place in the settlements of Sderot, Be’eri, Ofakim and others, some almost 30 kilometers deep inside Israel. Hamas fighters entered the settlements firing indiscriminately in the streets, and then went from house-to-house killing and taking hostages. Panic stricken residents were pulled out from their homes and shot. The worst carnage took place at the Nova music festival near Reim, where around a thousand young men and women attending an all-night music festival, were attacked by gunmen in a well-planned massacre. Two groups took up positions along the only exits while another

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concealed itself in the parking lot. As the panic-stricken revelers fled, they were picked up one by one near the exits and in their cars. Over 250 perished in a two-hour carnage, and many were taken hostage.

It took the IDF almost two hours to understand the gravity of the attacks, and at around 1030 a.m. launched a wave of air and rocket attacks on Hamas positions inside Gaza. Israeli commandoes had also reached the beleaguered settlements of Okakim, Be'eri, Sderot, Sufa, Magen, Kfar Aza and others that Hamas had penetrated. Frightened citizen, hiding in their cellars and bomb shelters were contacted on cell phones and guided the commandoes towards their locations, and also passed information of the terrorists. It took three days to clear the last vestiges of Hamas, but by then, the damage had been done. Over 1400 were killed in the largest single day loss of life in Israel since its birth, and over 240 hostages carried away into Gaza. Israeli security had been breached as never before and it had lost its aura of invincibility.

How did Hamas Plan and Execute the Attacks

How could Hamas deceive Shin Bet (Israel's internal intelligence agency) and Mossad – arguably amongst the best Intelligence agencies in the world – so effectively? The last time Israel had been taken so much by surprise was exactly 50 years and a day earlier. Then, on 06 October 1973, the combined armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan attacked Israel on the holy day of Yom Kippur. Israel was again taken by surprise on a holy day. Hamas, chose the day of Simchat Torah - a holy day of prayer and rest when Jews complete the annual reading of the Torah - and

as on Yom Kippur Day caught them completely by surprise. Hamas had prepared for the attack for over two years. In an elaborate subterfuge, it convinced Israel that it was weary of war and was now focused only on economic development. So successful were they, that Israel loosened its earlier restrictions and began giving work permits for Gazans to work in Israel. Over 20,000 Gazans crossed the fence as daily workers, with Hamas operatives in the ranks gathering information and giving an impression of normalcy.

They also prepared meticulously for the attack.



Hamas breached the Iron Wall with ease

A mock Israeli settlement was created close to Gaza City where they practiced mock attacks and even prepared training videos of their maneuvers. Rockets and missiles were secretly stockpiled in the Gaza Metro - the 500 kilometer long network of underground tunnels within Gaza – and no firing took place from Gaza into Israel

for months preceding the operation. Through his broadcasts and speeches, the Hamas Chief Yahya al-Sinwar convinced Israel that his aim was on managing Gaza, rather than waging war, even as the al-Qassam Brigade were training for the operation.

Even during training, none of the operatives were told of the scale or the exact nature of the operation. All communication was made by secure line communication, and no mobiles, internet or radios used. Fighters were merely told to assemble at designated points at specific times and travel in small groups so as not to arouse suspicion. They were issued weapons and ammunition and briefed of their tasks only at the last moment. None, but a handful of the top Hamas leadership were aware of the plan, and even Israel's formidable network of intelligent operatives had an inkling of what was about to



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happen. The operation was coordinated in fine detail - as the scope of attacks across a 30-kilometer-long area shows - and the attackers seemed to be aware of the exact locations and layout of the military installations and settlements they penetrated. Almost invariably, they blew up the communication centers at these locations, in the first phase itself, to prevent information from being relayed towards the rear.

Gaza is surrounded by a twenty feet high, double fence, which is bristling with razor wire, cameras, sensors and remotely operated Machine Guns and is fortified with a concrete base to prevent tunnelling. It maintains 24 X 7 electronic observation, and is touted as the best surveillance system in the world. How was that breached? Hamas had collected the location and details of each camera and communication system and used armed drones to drop bombs on communication centers, surveillance systems and the remotely operated Machine Gun posts. Snipers simply disabled the cameras before the operation, preventing any video information from flowing back. Perhaps there was an overreliance on the high-tech system, because it was thinly manned, and though initial images of the ongoing attacks were streamed back, they were not detected in time. The Israelis were confident that none could breach their formidable barrier.

The internal situation in Israel was artfully exploited. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's divisive policies had caused wide divisions in Israeli society – especially the judiciary overhaul designed to reduce the powers of the judiciary over the government. These controversial measures had drawn tens of thousands of protestors into the streets and formed a schism in civic society. Netanyahu was focused on the survival of his fragile coalition government and had redeployed many of the security and intelligence staff to focus on the internal situation.

Hamas took advantage of all these factors to time their attack to perfection. The operation was designated 'Operation Al Aqsa Flood' and designed to gather the attention of the Muslim world. Hamas wanted to draw attention to the violation of the Al Aqsa Mosque – the third holiest Islamic site - by Israeli security forces. They also wanted to bring out the conditions of the Palestinians in the occupied

territories – most of whom lived in a state of siege under extreme hardships.


But the major issue was the growing acceptance of Israel by the Arab world. Since the signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020, Israel had reestablished ties with UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco and was slowly gaining acceptance in the Arab World. A deal with Saudi Arabia was on the cards and an Israel-Saudi summit was due to be held. With the leaders of the Muslim world now willing to sup at the same table as Israel, the Palestinian cause would soon be forgotten, and the two-state solution would be swept under the carpet, perhaps permanently.

Hamas would be sure that an attack as horrific as this would invite a disproportionate Israeli response, and perhaps that is exactly what they hoped for. The Israeli response reignited the Palestinian issue and effectively scuttled Israel's rapprochement with its Arab neighbors. Israel may succeed in its aim of destroying Hamas, but could eventually lose the larger war in the Middle East.

The Israeli Response

The Israeli response was fast and vehement, as Hamas hoped it would be. At 1030, the same day, Israeli jets struck targets in Gaza, hitting the Hamas Headquarters and flattening the residential building in which it was based. The very next day, Israel called up over 300000 reservists to beef up its 1,69,000 strong army for "a long war." Israeli cabinet approved a formal declaration of war for the first time in half a century and "OPERATION SWORDS OF IRON" was launched with the goal to "eliminate Hamas by destroying its military and governing capabilities, and bring our hostages back home."

It would not be easy. The military wing of Hamas – the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigade has over 25,000 fighters and over 80-90,000 sympathizers, who would be willing recruits for the battle. Their strength was complemented by another 6-8000 fighters of sister organizations like the Islamic Jihad. The fighters were not as well trained or equipped as the Israelis, but held a wide array of automatic rifles, rocket propelled grenades, anti-tank missiles, machine guns, drones and a huge stockpile of rockets



IDF's response has been massive as large parts of Gaza especially in the North have been reduced to rubble

that continued firing into Israel throughout the war. And they had the defender's advantage of fighting in tunnels and built-up areas which would create immense collateral damage – and help turn world opinion against Israel.

Israel had been preparing for an invasion of Gaza for years. Specialist troops had been training for urban warfare in a center called 'Mini-Gaza' located in Southern Israel, which was an exact replica of Gaza City complete with a warren of tunnels and tightly packed buildings. They had created specialist teams of Engineers, dozers, tanks and infantry called Yahalom and canine combat teams called Oketz, specifically for this role. They had also formulated explosive gels and expanding foam that could be used in tunnels before the troops entered them.

Operation Swords of Iron was planned in three phases. First, was an intense series of air and missile strikes to neutralize Hamas infrastructure; then a ground assault to eliminate its leadership, cadres and war-waging potential; and finally, the establishment of a new security mechanism in Gaza, to preclude any return of Hamas. For three weeks Gaza remained in a complete state of siege, with no fuel or supplies permitted from the single crossing on the Egyptian border at Rafah. The blocking of fuel – though essential to the population – was a deliberate measure. It deprived Hamas of fuel to power the generators that ran the lighting and ventilation systems of their tunnels, forcing them to come overground. The land offensive was delayed for three weeks, ostensibly at the request of USA which needed to beef up air defense resources for its bases in the region, should its troops be attacked in an expanding war.

On 21 October, Israel issued a warning to all civilians of North Gaza – those living north of the Wadi Gaza, a dried up river bed that divides Gaza into the Northern and Southern regions - "Urgent Warning. Your presence north of Wadi Gaza is putting your life in danger. Leave immediately." Over 1.1

million civilians left their homes fearing an imminent Israeli offensive and trudged to what they hoped were safer areas in the south.

The Israeli invasion began with a series of raids and incursions into Gaza, perhaps to gauge the response and to try and identify the likely location of hostages. Over half a dozen minor raids were conducted, with the major one on 26 October, when approximately two battalions of tanks, armoured dozers, infantry and engineers crossed the heavily fortified border fence and attacked suspected Hamas positions. They withdrew later in the night and the action was probably to assess the Hamas defenses before their ground invasion.

The ground invasion began on 28 October, as Israeli ground troops entered Gaza in three prongs – from the North, the North east and the South east – under an intense land, air and sea bombardment. They also targeted the internet, telecom and all other communication systems and effectively cut off communication between Gaza and the rest of the world, enabling it to control the flow of information and thus shape the narrative.

The offensive moved towards its primary target of Gaza City, where the main Hamas positions and leadership were based. A three-pronged advance, effectively cut it off. It also cut off the North-South highway which was the only avenue of escape for citizens fleeing the war. In the fighting, 16 Israeli soldiers were killed on 30 October and brought out the dangers of fighting in built up areas. Amongst the dead was Sergeant Harel Solomon, a person of Indian origin. But in the operation, the Israelis also managed to rescue Private Ori Megidish – a female soldier captured by Hamas during the 7 October attacks.

One of the major aims of the war was the release of the 240 hostages taken by Hamas, and that was the most difficult task. Negotiations were ongoing for their release and two were released in a deal brokered by Qatar. Hamas claimed that another 50

were killed in Israeli air strikes. Hamas stated that it is willing to release all the surviving hostages in exchange for the 5900 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. Israel is not loath to take up that offer. In 2011, they released 1027 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for Corporal Gilad Shalit, who had been captured and held captive for five years. One of the prisoners released was Yahya Sinwar, who is their tormentor in chief now!

Israel insists that Hamas is using civilians as human shields, and Hamas claims that Israel is deliberately targeting civilians. A bombing attack on Jabalia – Gaza’s largest refugee camp killed Ibrahim Biari, a pivotal Hamas commander behind the 7 October attacks. But it also killed fifty refugees and wounded 150 others – many of whom had just come there from the war-torn north. The attacks also brought out what Arab media has termed, “The War on Hospitals.” In Gaza City, Israeli tanks closed in on Al Shifa and Al Quds hospitals – Gaza’s largest hospitals – and surrounded it, claiming that it housed a Hamas communication center and armory, beneath it. The placing of civilians and hospitals in the line of fire, has resulted in disproportionate civilian casualties – and is slowly turning world opinion away from Israel.

The war is entering a critical stage, with Israel now moving towards the even more densely populated areas of the South. They have warned civilians to evacuate the towns on the outskirts of Khan Younis – the largest town in the South – in what could be a prelude to an action to clear the town of Hamas. The south is even more densely populated than the north, and actions here will be even more difficult.

What Next?

Even though world pressure has intensified, Israel has so far refused all calls for a ceasefire, agreeing only to humanitarian pauses of 4 hours daily. It has also opened the Rafah crossing from Egypt to permit much needed humanitarian aid into Gaza. But the humanitarian toll is rising by the day and the 12000 civilian deaths in Gaza, in just two months of fighting, already exceeds the 9000 odd civilian deaths caused by Russia in its two-year war with Ukraine.

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“As we go to print the first breakthrough of the war has come with a Qatar brokered deal in which 50 hostages will be released by Hamas in return for 150 Palestinians in Israeli jail. There will also be a four day truce to implement it. Hopefully, this will set the trend for a complete release of hostages in return for a ceasefire. But for a lasting peace in the Middle East, the Palestinian issue would have to be addressed in the long term.”

There are fears that the war could spiral out of control and envelop the region. The Hezbollah in Lebanon has intensified its actions and are firing into Israel virtually on a daily basis. The restive West bank too has erupted with greater attacks on Israeli settlements and soldiers than at any time in the past decade. From the South, Houthi rebels in Yemen have fired drones and missiles in to Israel forcing it to deploy missile boats and corvettes in the Red Sea. Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and the Iraq and Syrian militia are all Iranian proxies, and should they intensify their actions, Israel would be under threat from three sides.

The USA has stood staunchly by Israel, even sending in two carrier groups based on the USS DWIGHT EISENHOWER and USS GERALD FORD, into the Mediterranean. But they too are being singled. Over 60 attacks have taken place on US bases in Iraq and Syria, forcing them to fire missiles at suspected Republican Guard locations where the attacks reportedly originated. And they too are realizing the shift in world opinion. For a change, they have refused to use their veto power to block a UNSC resolution calling for a humanitarian pause in Gaza, and President Biden has begun endorsing “a two-state solution” as the only means of attaining lasting peace in the region.

After 3 weeks of air assaults and a month into the ground offensive, Israel is nowhere near its goal of eliminating Hamas or getting its hostages back. For how long can they continue the pressure and at what cost? They are being increasingly seen as the aggressor and not the victim. They may eventually accept a truce for the return of hostages in exchange for a cessation of their actions. Israel may succeed in its aim of eliminating Hamas – at least in its present form – but till they address the root of the Palestinian issue, the problem will remain and the Middle East will continue to stumble from one crisis to the next. [SA](#)

Ajay Singh is a regular contributor to DEFSTRAT. This article is excerpted from his forthcoming book, “Ukraine, Gaza, Taiwan..... A World at War.”