

Israel Knew Hamas's Attack Plan More Than a Year Ago

A blueprint reviewed by The Times laid out the attack in detail. Israeli officials dismissed it as aspirational and ignored specific warnings.



By Ronen Bergman and Adam Goldman

Reporting from Tel Aviv

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Israeli officials obtained Hamas's battle plan for the Oct. 7 terrorist attack more than a year before it happened, documents, emails and interviews show. But Israeli military and intelligence officials dismissed the plan as aspirational, considering it too difficult for Hamas to carry out.

The approximately 40-page document, which the Israeli authorities code-named "Jericho Wall," outlined, point by point, exactly the kind of devastating invasion that led to the deaths of about 1,200 people.

The translated document, which was reviewed by The New York Times, did not set a date for the attack, but described a methodical assault designed to overwhelm the fortifications around the Gaza Strip, take over Israeli cities and storm key military bases, including a division headquarters.

Hamas followed the blueprint with shocking precision. The document called for a barrage of rockets at the outset of the attack, drones to knock out the security cameras and automated machine guns along the border, and gunmen to pour into Israel en masse in paragliders, on motorcycles and on foot — all of which happened on Oct. 7.

The plan also included details about the location and size of Israeli military forces, communication hubs and other sensitive information, raising questions about how Hamas gathered its intelligence and whether there were leaks inside the Israeli security establishment.

The document circulated widely among Israeli military and intelligence leaders, but experts determined that an attack of that scale and ambition was beyond Hamas's capabilities, according to documents and officials. It is unclear whether Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu or other top political leaders saw the document, as well.



A woman running to the concrete shelter at her home in Ashkelon, Israel, after a rocket siren sounded on Oct. 7. Tamir Kalifa for The New York Times

Last year, shortly after the document was obtained, officials in the Israeli military's Gaza division, which is responsible for defending the border with Gaza, said that Hamas's intentions were unclear.

"It is not yet possible to determine whether the plan has been fully accepted and how it will be manifested," read a military assessment reviewed by The Times.

Then, in July, just three months before the attacks, a veteran analyst with Unit 8200, Israel's signals intelligence agency, warned that Hamas had conducted an intense, daylong training exercise that appeared similar to what was outlined in the blueprint.

But a colonel in the Gaza division brushed off her concerns, according to encrypted emails viewed by The Times.

"I utterly refute that the scenario is imaginary," the analyst wrote in the email exchanges. The Hamas training exercise, she said, fully matched "the content of Jericho Wall."

"It is a plan designed to start a war," she added. "It's not just a raid on a village."

Officials privately concede that, had the military taken these warnings seriously and redirected significant reinforcements to the south, where Hamas attacked, Israel could have blunted the attacks or possibly even prevented them.



Israeli soldiers were deployed in an area where civilians were killed in the southern city of Sderot on Oct. 7. Oren Ziv/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Instead, the Israeli military was unprepared as terrorists streamed out of the Gaza Strip. It was the deadliest day in Israel's history.

Israeli security officials have already acknowledged that they failed to protect the country, and the government is expected to assemble a commission to study the events leading up to the attacks. The Jericho Wall document lays bare a yearslong cascade of missteps that culminated in what officials now regard as the worst Israeli intelligence failure since the surprise attack that led to the Arab-Israeli war of 1973.

Underpinning all these failures was a single, fatally inaccurate belief that Hamas lacked the capability to attack and would not dare to do so. That belief was so ingrained in the Israeli government, officials said, that they disregarded growing evidence to the contrary.

The Israeli military and the Israeli Security Agency, which is in charge of counterterrorism in Gaza, declined to comment.

Officials would not say how they obtained the Jericho Wall document, but it was among several versions of attack plans collected over the years. A 2016 Defense Ministry memorandum viewed by The Times, for example, says, "Hamas intends to move the next confrontation into Israeli territory."

Such an attack would most likely involve hostage-taking and "occupying an Israeli community (and perhaps even a number of communities)," the memo reads.



Vehicles caught fire in Ashkelon, Israel, as rockets were launched from the Gaza Strip on Oct. 7. Ilan Rosenberg/Reuters

The Jericho Wall document, named for the ancient fortifications in the modern-day West Bank, was even more explicit. It detailed rocket attacks to distract Israeli soldiers and send them hurrying into bunkers, and drones to disable the elaborate security measures along the border fence separating Israel and Gaza.

Hamas fighters would then break through 60 points in the wall, storming across the border into Israel. The document begins with a quote from the Quran: “Surprise them through the gate. If you do, you will certainly prevail.”

The same phrase has been widely used by Hamas in its videos and statements since Oct. 7.

One of the most important objectives outlined in the document was to overrun the Israeli military base in Re'im, which is home to the Gaza division responsible for protecting the region. Other bases that fell under the division's command were also listed.

Hamas carried out that objective on Oct. 7, rampaging through Re'im and overrunning parts of the base.

The audacity of the blueprint, officials said, made it easy to underestimate. All militaries write plans that they never use, and Israeli officials assessed that, even if Hamas invaded, it might muster a force of a few dozen, not the hundreds who ultimately attacked.

Israel had also misread Hamas's actions. The group had negotiated for permits to allow Palestinians to work in Israel, which Israeli officials took as a sign that Hamas was not looking for a war.

But Hamas had been drafting attack plans for many years, and Israeli officials had gotten hold of previous iterations of them. What could have been an intelligence coup turned into one of the worst miscalculations in Israel's 75-year history.



A truck reportedly transported a captured Israeli woman in Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip, on Oct. 7. Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

In September 2016, the defense minister's office compiled a top-secret memorandum based on a much earlier iteration of a Hamas attack plan. The memorandum, which was signed by the defense minister at the time, Avigdor Lieberman, said that an invasion and hostage-taking would "lead to severe damage to the consciousness and morale of the citizens of Israel."

The memo, which was viewed by The Times, said that Hamas had purchased sophisticated weapons, GPS jammers and drones. It also said that Hamas had increased its fighting force to 27,000 people — having added 6,000 to its ranks in a two-year period. Hamas had hoped to reach 40,000 by 2020, the memo determined.

Last year, after Israel obtained the Jericho Wall document, the military's Gaza division drafted its own intelligence assessment of this latest invasion plan.

Hamas had "decided to plan a new raid, unprecedented in its scope," analysts wrote in the assessment reviewed by The Times. It said that Hamas intended to carry out a deception operation followed by a "large-scale maneuver" with the aim of overwhelming the division.

But the Gaza division referred to the plan as a "compass." In other words, the division determined that Hamas knew where it wanted to go but had not arrived there yet.

On July 6, 2023, the veteran Unit 8200 analyst wrote to a group of other intelligence experts that dozens of Hamas commandos had recently conducted training exercises, with senior Hamas commanders observing.

The training included a dry run of shooting down Israeli aircraft and taking over a kibbutz and a military training base, killing all the cadets. During the exercise, Hamas fighters used the same phrase from the Quran that appeared at the top of the Jericho Wall attack plan, she wrote in the email exchanges viewed by The Times.

The analyst warned that the drill closely followed the Jericho Wall plan, and that Hamas was building the capacity to carry it out.

The colonel in the Gaza division applauded the analysis but said the exercise was part of a "totally imaginative" scenario, not an indication of Hamas's ability to pull it off.

"In short, let's wait patiently," the colonel wrote.



An Israeli soldier in the southern city of Sderot near the bodies of Israelis killed by Palestinian gunmen who entered from the Gaza Strip on Oct. 7. Tsafir Abayov/Associated Press

The back-and-forth continued, with some colleagues supporting the analyst's original conclusion. Soon, she invoked the lessons of the 1973 war, in which Syrian and Egyptian armies overran Israeli defenses. Israeli forces regrouped and repelled the invasion, but the intelligence failure has long served as a lesson for Israeli security officials.

"We already underwent a similar experience 50 years ago on the southern front in connection with a scenario that seemed imaginary, and history may repeat itself if we are not careful," the analyst wrote to her colleagues.

While ominous, none of the emails predicted that war was imminent. Nor did the analyst challenge the conventional wisdom among Israeli intelligence officials that Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas, was not interested in war with Israel. But she correctly assessed that Hamas's capabilities had drastically improved. The gap between the possible and the aspirational had narrowed significantly.

The failures to connect the dots echoed another analytical failure more than two decades ago, when the American authorities also had multiple indications that the terrorist group Al Qaeda was preparing an assault. The Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were largely a failure of analysis and imagination, a government commission concluded.

"The Israeli intelligence failure on Oct. 7 is sounding more and more like our 9/11," said Ted Singer, a recently retired senior C.I.A. official who worked extensively in the Middle East. "The failure will be a gap in analysis to paint a convincing picture to military and political leadership that Hamas had the intention to launch the attack when it did."



The breached security fence in the village of Kfar Azza, Israel, three days after it was attacked by Hamas. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

Ronen Bergman is a staff writer for The New York Times Magazine, based in Tel Aviv. His latest book is “Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel’s Targeted Assassinations,” published by Random House. More about Ronen Bergman

Adam Goldman writes about the F.B.I. and national security. He has been a journalist for more than two decades. More about Adam Goldman

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