

WEEKEND



Yahya Sinwar. One MI colleague spoke of holding him in very high regard. One felt pity for him, another perceived him as a warm father figure; a fourth said he felt genuine hatred for him. *Mahmud Hams/AFP*



Israeli soldiers patrol near the fence of Kibbutz Nir Oz a month after the Hamas attack. In MI, they assume that the enemy thinks the way we do. *Gil Cohen-Magen/AFP*

Ofer Grosbard

From August 2021 until January 2022 I worked as a psychologist in the research unit of Military Intelligence. I am a clinical psychologist by profession, and a researcher in the field of cross-cultural psychology. The invitation to work with MI came because they felt that I represented a perspective different from what they were familiar with. I was the only psychologist in the unit, and to the best of my knowledge, psychologists haven't lasted in the system for very long.

The purpose of these lines is to level empathetic and constructive criticism, not to look for people to blame. I don't think there is a particular individual who is specifically to blame for the horrific massacres of October 7. To the best of my understanding, for many years, the system's structure has been problematic, and its forecasting failures many and consistent (Yom Kippur War, Oslo Accords, two intifadas, the massacre in October). But I have reason to believe that some of the problems I encountered during my brief tenure at MI can offer insight into the systemic failure that characterized the branch's operation leading up to the October attack.

The organization is based on a talented group of relatively young people who were carefully selected and have been working together for years as officers. Work in a closed group over a period of years is a necessity because of the training and secrecy required, but it does not permit an airing-out of ideas, and indeed creates fixed ideas, because the members of the group tend to reinforce one another's thinking.

The group is quite homogeneous, with no older people, few women in senior positions and almost no cultural diversity. I was about 20 years older than the most senior of them (who were in their 40s). Older people are usually less arrogant than younger individuals, and less likely to view the world in black-and-white terms. Women are less apt than men to engage in ego battles, and their need to be right is not as strong.

Cultural diversity is a very important tool. The talented people in the research unit are for the most part young and come from a modern, Western background in which analytical thinking takes priority, but they possess limited social skills. Most did not grow up surrounded by their extended family, and with an authoritative parent – an environment that demands that one get to know the other and get along with them.

As in every unit in every army, MI's structure is hierarchical in a manner that limits open, critical, creative thinking –

Why Military Intelligence keeps getting it wrong

When the author, a psychologist, was hired by Military Intelligence, he was told they were interested in his work in cross-cultural psychology. What he found, though, was a body so in the thrall of its own internal culture that it couldn't listen to a contrary voice

even though it aspires to just such openness. The commanders seek to rise to the top of the pyramid, which becomes ever narrower as one ascends, and therefore do not allow themselves to express their opinions freely. This is a particularly important facet of Intelligence, which is supposed to be the thinking brain of the army and the state.

I was in meetings in which not a single dissenting voice was raised when new projects were proposed. In one case a ranking figure admitted to me after a meeting that he "wanted to kick myself" for not speaking his mind in such a gathering. Clearly he was not the only one. He added that the army's chief of staff heaps so much praise on them that they are tempted to think they have no room for improvement.

I was told many times what to say and how to say it. For example, not to say in a broader forum that the research unit is a closed group whose members strengthen each other, because that would be insulting to the others (I said it anyway, simply because I had no fears about my place); and not to make counter-proposals, because "they'll do an ippon on you" (referring to a winning move in judo). When I clashed with a certain senior figure who ruled out any role for cross-cultural psychology in our work (claiming it was impossible to generalize about cultures), I was told that he was the MI director's right-hand man and that I was just a troublemaker.

When I made suggestions that I perceived as innovative, I was told they wouldn't be passed on because the political decision-makers would not accept

them, and that now was not the time. I only asked to make my opinion known and noted that it was obviously the right of my superiors to accept or reject it, but I was given the brush-off.

Also problematic is way papers are written by the research unit. Such papers, which are distributed confidentially among all the security bodies, are not written freely and openly as in academia, where the responsibility for its content is that of the writer, and the academic institution bears no responsibility for its content. In MI every paper needs to be approved by two senior personnel, who may make changes in the written material. Beyond the adverse effect on freedom of thought, the examiners often raise objections about material they know nothing about.

The choice of which different research studies, in diverse realms, to execute, with costs that can run to millions of shekels, is made by a former senior army person, who need not know anything about the subject in question. For example, projects that incorporate Big Data, and require extensive computer power. Project leaders themselves sometimes felt that the choices were bizarre. I shared with the person in charge my impression that a professional opinion from a separate expert would be beneficial for the various fields touched on by a project. He agreed, but I don't know whether a change was effected.

It's clear that the research unit should be able to turn to a psychological consultant: First, in order to allow the staff to speak freely and openly, and to protect them from any authority that might at-

tempt to restrict or neutralize that freedom. Having an experienced psychologist sitting in on their discussions could definitely further this goal.

The case of Yahya Sinwar, the top Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip (and the presumed mastermind of the October 7 attacks), can illustrate another aspect of the importance of a clinical psychologist. During my work, I met with most of the senior personnel of the research unit. Some of them had been monitoring Sinwar's behavior carefully for years. A few of them have a large photograph of him in their offices. It's clear that with a close connection of this sort, emotions develop toward the research subject, and I encouraged them to express those emotions. One said they held him in very high regard. One person felt pity for him, describing him as a person who must be constantly on the run, another perceived him as a warm father figure; a fourth said he felt genuine hatred for him.

Each of these senior figures recommended a different way to deal with Sinwar. The recommendations were backed up rationally, but it was clear that they stemmed from each person's emotional approach. Anyone who esteemed him or saw him as a father figure was less inclined to propose actions that might harm him, while the person who felt hatred toward him complained to me that he did not understand his subordinates, who thought that nothing could be done that might hurt Sinwar. "What do they think, that he's God?" he protested, and maintained that Sinwar should be eliminated. In other words, these colleagues engaged in rationalization – a defense

mechanism intended to provide practical justification for emotional positions – and not in rational thought, as they undoubtedly believed. A clinical psychologist can point out such tendencies.

A "devil's advocate" group in MI's control system has the job of posing challenges to fixed opinions and presenting thinking that veers from the conventional. The group came into being on the basis of a recommendation made by the Agranat Commission of Inquiry, following the trauma of the Yom Kippur War, in 1973. My impression was that there are voices in intelligence who are aware of the limitations of the devil's-advocate method. It is untenable to require someone to persuade others of a conception about which he himself is not persuaded, only as an exercise. In any case, my overriding impression of the research unit was that it occupies itself mainly with lofty philosophical discussions and hairsplitting that complete misses the point.

I felt that a language of sorts had actually come into being in the research unit – a highbrow language that is not intended to be used to provide recommendations but rather promotes evasion and concealment. Why should I recommend something and afterward be criticized for it? Better just to adopt diplomatic language that will allow me to rise through the ranks without really taking a stand. Instead of a devil's advocate group and the language of concealment, what MI needs are personnel who are encouraged to take risks and say what they truly feel and think. Discussions of that kind, led by a psychologist in appropriate cases, could fight the human tendency to get along with everyone.

Indeed, the human inclination is to repress danger, especially when it exists over time. We are not built for prolonged situations of anxiety that demand high adrenaline levels over long stretches. We all get tired at a certain stage, we want quiet and a good life, and we repress recognition of danger. That happens to us repeatedly. Psychological tools can help combat this natural tendency to some extent. The wisdom of Proverbs (16:18), which tells us that, "Pride goes before ruin, Arrogance before failure" ("There will not be another war for 10 years," Moshe Dayan said before the Yom Kippur War; or, "Hamas will be deterred for five years," as the current head of Military Intelligence declared – reminds us how supercilious human nature can be.

A fixed concept gives us the feeling that we are in control and understand what is going on, and it is powerful to the point of causing us to ignore many facts which, as we are now aware with regard to October 7, were also known prior to the massacre. MI actually needs people who harbor a slightly depressive tendency (research shows that the perception of

reality by that group is better than that of the average person) in order to do battle against uncontrolled optimism. Anxious individuals and those with a tendency to minor paranoia (not a pathology, but a personality line) could also combat the euphoria of a "startup nation" that relies on "all-knowing" technology. Indeed, I can attest to the fact that the feeling in MI's research unit was that we knew everything about Hamas.

If you ask the man in the street whether the other side thinks differently from us, they will undoubtedly tell you that yes, they do. But if you go on to ask in what way they think differently, you will not get a clear answer. What is obvious to the average person is hidden from the eyes of MI. They assume that the enemy thinks the way we do, and thus project our way of thinking on them. There is no attempt to learn systematically how the enemy thinks, even though many books and articles have been written about cross-cultural differences in thinking. No one can predict events to come, but such learning makes us more modest and aware of what we do not understand, and that can provide a great advantage and even immunize us from know-it-all conceptions.

When I took up my duties, I was asked to read a thick volume about the conception of MI and its work. As a clinical psychologist, I was appalled by the imposition of the cognitive agenda on the mind of the enemy. Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah, for example, was described as thinking according to the binary logic of a flowchart (yes/no selection nodes) that is appropriate for work with a computer.

My question as to whether this is really how Nasrallah thinks elicited a smile, and agreement that this is not the way he thinks. Where is consideration of the emotional world that pilots us all? Where is recognition of the defenses, of the well-known Arab sense of honor, the sophisticated lies that have led us astray for years, the ambitions to destroy us? There is no doubt that these talented young

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people are doing marvelous cognitive work with efficient technology, but both because of their age and because of their analytical tendencies, they are greatly lacking in emotional sensitivity – with regard to both toward themselves and the enemy – thus leaving the state exposed.

My work in the research unit came to an end when I wrote a letter to the director of MI in which I shared the difficulty I was having in introducing psychology overall and cross-cultural psychology in particular into MI's work, and asked for his help in carrying out my mission. My supervisor asked me not to send the letter. I refused, and sent it. For my disobedience, I was dismissed. I never heard from Maj. Gen. Aharon Haliva, the director.

Following the termination of my work, I sent my detailed demurrers to then-defense minister Benny Gantz, to State Comptroller Matanyahu Englman and to the CEO of Rafael Advanced Defense Systems, Maj. Gen. (res.) Yoav Har-Even – part of the research unit was under his auspices. None of them responded.

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Under the cover of war

Thirty-one Palestinians have been killed in the Ramallah area by soldiers and, in some cases, by settlers as well, since October 7

The Twilight Zone Gideon Levy and Alex Levac

The traffic jams in the center of Ramallah are on a Tel Aviv scale. Likewise, the crowds in the stores, restaurants and gyms. But not far away is another traffic jam – of a kind you won't see in Tel Aviv: the ever-present, kilometers-long logjam of cars snaking toward the Qalandiyah checkpoint, en route to Jerusalem. It's always congested, but since October 7, the situation has become much worse.

Israel blocked most of the entrances and exits from the unofficial Palestinian capital when the war began, including the northern entrance to the city (the District Coordination Office checkpoint). So everyone who is authorized and who

seeks to enter or leave Ramallah these days – generally, East Jerusalemites wanting to go home – must do so via the Qalandiyah checkpoint, one of the most miserable places in the West Bank, with its depressing Third World feeling, abutting a modern cityscape.

The war isn't felt in the center of Ramallah – try and find a parking space – but in its periphery it is very much present. The list of blocked thoroughfares and of villages whose access roads are now locked with imposing yellow iron gates is very long, and thus the trips local folk must make to work, school and shops, and to visit families have also become arduous.

But the most serious problem is not that the roads surrounding Ramallah have been closed off to Palestinians, or the fact that Palestinian workers have been banned from entering Israel – it's that in this part of the West Bank many people have been killed since the war broke out on October 7 – far more than usual. According to data collected by

Iyad Hadad, the regional field researcher for the B'Tselem Israeli human rights organization, 31 people have been killed here in less than two months. And in contrast to the Tul Karm area, which we wrote about here last week, where most of those killed were armed, here, in and around Ramallah, none of the victims was armed and none were active in resistance organizations.

Hadad's estimate is that six of the

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dead were probably killed by settlers, or by settlers and soldiers together. The most recent case was last Saturday evening, when the body of a Palestinian was found next to the settlement of Psagot in circumstances that have yet to be fully clarified. In his office in El Bireh, adjacent to Ramallah, Hadad has a thick folder documenting the investigations he is conducting of every case of killing since the war erupted in the Gaza Strip. The folder just keeps getting thicker.

The Ramallah region, like the entire West Bank, is bleeding profusely under the cover of war in Gaza and far from outsiders' eyes. The fact that there are a great many settlements and settler outposts in the area only heightens the violence further. And here, too, like everywhere in the West Bank, the soldiers' fingers on the trigger seem far lighter since October 7. In war as in war.

On the evening of October 12, five days after the Hamas attack in the south, Randa Ajaji, 40, a mother of seven children, was traveling with her husband and



Iyad Sus, whose teenage son Suhaib was killed by soldiers on October 20, with daughter Rital and son Mohammed, this week.

two of her children, the younger one just 18 months old, in the family car. Outside the village of Silwad they saw an improvised checkpoint, where soldiers were stopping cars headed in the opposite direction. Many such surprise checkpoints are springing up in the West Bank today.

After they drove a few more meters, the family saw figures signaling them to stop with a flashlight. Certain that these were also soldiers, they slowed down al-

most to a standstill. They then saw that the figures were civilians, and figured that they were settlers. At once they started driving again, but their car came under fire. First the older boy was wounded, in the leg. The father sped toward the clinic in Silwad, where he discovered, to his horror, that Randa, who had been sitting in the back with the toddler, had been

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