



Who Should Provide Israel with Strategic Warning? Some Lessons from Its History

Jonathan Roll

Arguments about the national security *policies* of Israel can be heated, outside and inside the country. But what about the *structures* of Israel's national security establishment? Are they fit for their purpose? Are alternatives possible and, if so, of what kind? Is it appropriate to consider them now? In fact, even as the Israel-Gaza War that started in October 2023 is still ongoing, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in February 2025 published the findings of its internal review of the events leading to the October 2023 surprise and the deficiencies in military readiness. The topics involved—Israel's security doctrine, force structure, and intelligence performance—are likely to stay at the center of attention for some time, as Israel's "lessons learned" process has just begun via preliminary steps.

As evidence and analysis of the events of the past year and a half mount, and more twists and turns seem likely, we offer here some historical insight in support of the ongoing debate about the optimal structure of responsibilities within the Israeli system to support strategic notifications of war.¹ The key questions right now are: How far will Israel go in reforming its system? What are the key lessons, and will they be learned and acted upon? Will Israel leverage its decades-long experience in confronting similar security lapses to its current and future benefit, not just in better-informed debates but in improved performance of national security agencies and the government?

The warning debacle on the part of the Israeli intelligence community regarding the October 2023 attack by Hamas resurfaced questions that had been lingering in the back of the minds of Israel's defense planners since the 1960s. However, since October 2023, Israel's intelligence community has played a crucial role in Israel's military achievements, some of them astonishing, in particular on the northern front.² These successes should not be overlooked when discussing potential remedies for previous inadequacies. To the same extent, the deficiencies should not be forgotten in light of the more encouraging successes. The overall objective of Israel's planners should be to optimize the system's

structure regarding all of its important functions and, in particular, minimize the risk of a future strategic surprise.

To be sure, the mistakes made by the establishment in assessing Hamas, and in failing to provide decision makers with apt strategic warning before the attack and when it started, were not the result of conceptions held by the defense establishment alone. The same conceptions and assessments were shared by, and to a considerable extent originated with, Israel's political leadership, which built its Palestinian strategy and some pillars of its regional strategy based on that assessment.³ In a nutshell, the Israeli political leadership (in place almost continuously since early 2009) had grown to believe that Hamas, while extremely hostile to Israel, cherished its position of leadership within the Gaza Strip above all else and had "no interest" in rocking the boat and initiating an attack against Israel, which would lead to war; in other words, it was believed that Hamas would be deterred by Israel's retaliatory capacity.⁴ Thus, Hamas had allegedly been a good solution to Israel's Gaza problem: It would rule the Strip and would respect "the rules of the game" with Israel, keeping the Strip in relative order. It would also continue to provide the Israeli leadership with the argument that, as long as Gaza was governed by a hostile terrorist organization and in any case did not share political leadership with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, there would be little to no point in negotiating with any Palestinian leadership over the future of land and statehood.⁵

The fact that Israel's political leadership was adhering to a mistaken assessment and therefore implemented a flawed regional strategy does not, however, revoke the system's responsibility for its analytic mistakes; it does mean that the role of the political leadership is as at least as significant.

OLD DEBATE, SEVERAL COMMITTEES, NO FAR-REACHING ACTION

The division of labor among Israel's security agencies regarding strategic intelligence analysis and strategic planning is rather unique among liberal democracies. For starters, unlike the United States and the United Kingdom, Israel does not have a committee or a director of national intelligence function integrating the intelligence community's analytic work.⁶ Second, and even more significantly, Israel's military intelligence (Aman) is traditionally seen as the leading body responsible for providing strategic intelligence for the government and carrying the classic "national estimator" responsibilities.⁷ As such, it has the largest strategic analysis unit and leads the yearly discussions on national intelligence estimates with the government, being considered the foremost authority on national-level intelligence on most subjects.⁸ This arrangement leaves Israel's domestic security service (Shin Bet) and its national foreign intelligence agency (Mossad) for the most part focused on operational activity, although each service also has its own strategic intelligence function.⁹ Additionally, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has its own analytic research unit. The statement that Aman is usually regarded as the organization most immersed in strategic intelligence does not, of course, imply anything about the quality of analysis done by other organizations and does not ignore the contention

that in recent decades Aman's hegemonic position vis-à-vis strategic analysis has markedly declined.¹⁰ Yet in terms of resources, orientation, influence, and responsibilities, it still has the dominant role. Regarding the Gaza Strip arena in particular, it shares analytic responsibilities with Shin Bet, although not necessarily equally.¹¹

The meaning of this division of labor, which goes back to the state's earliest days, is that military officers, rather than civilian intelligence analysts, are in essence the leaders of Israel's intelligence community insofar as providing analysis to national decision makers, including warnings about impending war, is concerned.¹² The main problem with this order of things, beyond Aman's past intelligence mistakes, which have not prompted a far-reaching reform, is that the military officers and regulars, military culture, and the military as an institution are probably not the most suitable institutional framework within which strategic intelligence can meet its already tough functional objectives.¹³ Another recurring argument against this structure has been that the military intelligence's dominance prevents analytic pluralism within the intelligence community.

This last argument has been central to the conclusions of each public commission in Israel that has attended to this question in the past. First among these task forces was the Yadin-Sherf commission of 1963. That commission was convened by outgoing Prime Minister (PM) David Ben-Gurion, who wanted to guarantee, among other things, that after his departure the prime minister would still receive the full intelligence picture from the various agencies, avoiding the creation of imbalances of power between any future PM and his minister of defense (Ben-Gurion held both positions simultaneously). Another mandate of the commission was to discuss the division of authorities between the agencies (an intelligence debacle in 1960 and the failed covert operation known as the Lavon Affair in 1954 were probably behind that request by Ben-Gurion). In its recommendations, the commission called for a strengthening of the research department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs so that it could be a counterweight to Aman and could provide independent assessments "on Middle East and other political issues."¹⁴ Moreover, it recommended assigning an advisor for intelligence to the prime minister to assist the PM and the government in establishing independent assessments. The recommendations of the commission, however, remained largely unimplemented by Ben-Gurion's successor, Levi Eshkol.¹⁵

The 1973 Yom Kippur War was the next watershed event for the intelligence community, as it was in many other respects for Israel and the region. The Agranat Commission of Inquiry, responsible for finding remedies to the intelligence failure of October 1973 that was dubbed "Israel's Pearl Harbor," reached conclusions similar to those of its less frequently cited predecessor, the Yadin-Sherf commission, although naturally harsher in tone.¹⁶ The Agranat team called for (1) establishing an intelligence advisor to the PM, outside the military; (2) strengthening the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' research unit, which it declared should be responsible for the political-diplomatic analysis within government; (3) focusing Aman's research on the military aspects only, its area of relative expertise or advantage; and (4) establishing an analysis unit within Mossad, which would assist in creating "analytic pluralism" in the intelligence community.¹⁷

The commission found that Aman's dominance within the assessment process has been a primary cause of the intelligence failure.¹⁸ Moreover, it implied that it viewed military intelligence as an organ that does not possess the most suitable expertise, or any relative advantage, when addressing strategic or foreign policy issues and is better suited to focusing on the intelligence needs of the IDF—operational and military issues—but not of the entire nation.¹⁹

For the most part, the Agranat Commission's recommendations also failed to take long-term root.²⁰ In his 2011 book, *Eyes Wide Open*, Zvi Zamir, Mossad chief during the Yom Kippur War and one of very few people within the establishment who provided the government with a correct, yet unheeded, warning about Egyptian and Syrian intentions prior to the war, strongly lamented this inertia.²¹ Zamir argued that the inertia's causes lay in Aman's refusal to change (and the loss of its preeminence) after the war, and in unwillingness by Israel's leadership in 1974 to implement the extensive changes, something Zamir attributed to political reasons: At the time, Shimon Peres and Yigal Alon, foreign and defense ministers, respectively, had not wanted the prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, to have the far-reaching authority over intelligence that would come with the recommended changes. Rabin, for his part, did not seek a political quarrel over matters that did not seem crucial to him.²² Therefore, reform was not fully implemented. Zamir himself, who warned throughout his book in harsh terms that the lessons of 1973 had not been learned by the system, a situation likely to lead to similar national calamities in the future, died, aged ninety-eight, some three months after October 7, 2023.

Three more task forces were mandated to address the intelligence community structure's shortcomings after Agranat. First, the 2003–2004 team examining the intelligence community's conduct facing the war in Iraq and Libya's progress toward acquiring nuclear weapons, a commission assigned by the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, recommended that Mossad, rather than Aman, should be responsible for strategic-political intelligence, leaving Aman to focus on the military side (including warning about impending war based on the adversary's capabilities).²³ Second, the Meridor Committee, which had been assigned to review Israel's security concept, recommended establishing an intelligence staff adjacent to the prime minister and the cabinet.²⁴ Third, the Winograd Commission, which was assigned to review the military's performance during the Second Lebanon War, recommended in 2007 that as long as Aman continued to serve as the de facto "national estimator" without available replacement, it should deepen its capacities, primarily when conducting strategic and politico-military intelligence.²⁵

To be sure, many of the dilemmas involved in organizing the Israeli system also appear from time to time in other liberal democracies. Some Israeli scholars have compared the Israeli system to those of some of its key Western counterparts, tying the Israeli case to a broader discussion about types of intelligence community arrangements and drawing some applicable lessons. Shmuel Even and Amos Granit, for example, have shown that the Israeli system is rather unique in not having an integrator for the intelligence community, like the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) in the US or the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) in the UK. But

Even and Granit do not go so far as to suggest that such an integrator should provide national intelligence assessments, like the DNI does, but rather just coordinate the system's organs more efficiently.²⁶ Another difference pointed out is that in the UK, each agency is subordinate to one cabinet minister, with the exception being the Foreign Office, which encompasses both the foreign intelligence service (MI6) and the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ); this model is different from the US model, and perhaps even more so from the Israeli one, in which the largest agency is part of the military, subordinate to the chief of the general staff.²⁷

THE OCTOBER 2023 CONCEPTION(S) AND THEIR AFTERMATH

Since the strategic surprise and traumatizing events of October 7, 2023, Israel has been embedded in a war of survival. Until September 2024 and the ceasefire with Hezbollah in November of the same year, existential fears were probably the highest experienced by the Israeli society since 1973. This struggle, and the reluctance by the present government to form an official national commission of inquiry, mean that addressing the structural roots of the analytic failure has included so far only very timid initial steps.

It has been widely accepted that a flawed understanding of Hamas, its calculations, and its intentions predated October 2023 by at least several years and has been a systemic feature, not unique to any particular official, cohort, or agency. As happened in 1973, some voices dissented but were decisively rejected by more authoritative figures. As in 1973, the warning debacle was standing on the shoulders of a much broader mistaken read of the adversary and its world. But unlike in 1973, there has not been a senior figure thinking differently and promoting alternative views for months; there has also not been a "golden piece" of intelligence collection as valuable as the one provided in 1973, although evidence contrary to the prevailing view on Hamas was available in abundance in 2023; and last, there has not been one sole agency given a mandate to provide assessments on Gaza, as was the case in 1973 with assessments on Egypt and Syria. In some respects, the debacle of 2023 has been more severe and has run deeper than the one of 1973. Full parallels cannot be drawn, but one troubling feature of the post-1973 period should be avoided in the post-2023 one: the institutional resistance to change, even when previous practices led to national and human catastrophes.

In early 2025, some parts of the internal review undertaken by the IDF of the events of October 7 were published. The conclusions relating to the military intelligence's performance state that one of the primary sources of the flawed assessments provided by Aman was its belief that Hamas would be deterred by Israel and that its leader, Yahya Sinwar, was vying for quiet—something that Aman's chiefs were also saying publicly months before the attack. These assumptions prevented the branch's officers from correctly interpreting the signs that Hamas was preparing an attack, which it had been planning for years. Information contradicting the leading interpretation was present, even in the few hours before the attack itself. The evidence, however, was not correctly assessed, and it was not used to challenge assumptions or treated immediately to provide warnings.

A problem of prioritization had also been at play, reflecting again the broad belief throughout government that Hamas was not planning to attack Israel and therefore was not a critical arena for attention. For years, Israel had allocated more resources to the northern (Lebanon and Iran) fronts than to the southern (Gaza) front. In May 2023, the intelligence officer of the IDF's southern command warned that the IDF's central collection unit, 8200, had directed too little collection effort to the Gaza Strip front due to low prioritization, a problem that had to be addressed. But these collection gaps were not remedied.²⁸ In March 2025, Shin Bet published part of its internal review, which showed that it had largely failed to read the signals pointing to a coming attack and had suffered from collection deficiencies in the Strip in the years prior to 2023.²⁹

In August 2024, some six months after the publication of some of the IDF's conclusions, the head of IDF military intelligence resigned. But the problems that arise from these preliminary reviews, supported by evidence and interviews with the media in the past year and a half, run deeper than the errors of specific individuals. These problems can be divided into two categories, in line with the unfolding events. One category is problems relating to the long-term, broad-based flawed understanding of Hamas. The other category concerns the warning failure itself and relates to short-term intelligence, in the time frame beginning perhaps one day before the attack at the most and focused on the crucial hours of the night between October 6 and 7, given the information that had been flowing and the internal discussion and actions by the army and services chiefs. These two categories are interconnected but are differentiated by type, methodology, and the structural solutions that must be offered.

PAST LESSONS, A CHALLENGE FOR THE FUTURE

After 2023, some military thinkers argued that the main strategic lesson is that accurate assessment of the adversary is impossible (that is, surprise is essentially inevitable). At the very least, the argument goes, it is best not to rely upon strategic intelligence as strongly as Israel has been forced to do for many years due to its limited resources and multiple antagonists. This approach has been advocated, for example, by Colonel (in reserves) Hanan Shai, whose main point is that Israel's security concept must rely more heavily on its ability to defeat the adversary, even in cases in which intelligence warning fails.³⁰

Passing judgment on that conclusion necessitates a discussion of analytic methodologies that is beyond the scope of the present paper. Certainly, it makes sense that Israel will have to rely more heavily on proactive measures, attributing worst-case intentions to its potential adversaries and depending less on strategic intelligence. It has already started to implement that approach in Syria, behaving more offensively and with a more interventionist approach than ever before, in the face of uncertainty about the long-term intentions of the new leadership in Damascus. However, to this author's mind, the idea that strategic intelligence is obsolete as a reliable pillar of Israel's defense strategy is still premature.

The recurring strategic intelligence debacles in Israel suggest that the time for serious structural and methodological reform has arrived. If all the mechanisms that lead to an outcome remain in place, what reason do we have to believe that in the future, the outcome will be

different? Moreover, if we believe that providing apt strategic warning is a difficult task, as Shai and others imply, optimizing our institutions to meet the challenge becomes an even more urgent challenge than it would have been otherwise.

What should be done, then? One argument in favor of an army-centered strategic intelligence is that Israel's hostile environment means it faces immediate military threats. The military aspect of intelligence, rather than the political, geopolitical, or economic aspect, becomes the most critical factor, giving the military as an institution primacy in leading national intelligence.³¹ Another argument, advocated by Shmuel Even and Amos Granit, two former Aman officers, is that moving the center of gravity from Aman to a civilian body would incur significant economic costs.³²

Ultimately, however, the main reason why past recommendations to transfer the center-weight of strategic analysis to another institution have not been implemented has to do with organizational inertia and opposition by Aman, alongside lack of interest on the side of the political leadership. Partial pluralism in the intelligence community has been achieved over the years, but as community insiders said repeatedly before 2023, the center of gravity regarding strategic assessment responsibilities did not change.

At some point, an official commission of inquiry will be assigned to assess what happened before and in the early hours of October 7, 2023. This inquiry will have to study the evidence thoroughly and then have a new look at what must be improved, *inter alia*, within the strategic assessment processes. The commission will have to examine methodological, organizational, and personnel policies, as well as the links between agencies and the political leadership and the links between collection and analytic functions. Interwoven across all these is a pivotal question: Who should be Israel's national estimator? Were past commissions wrong when they recommended dispersing or transitioning this authority, or were they correct yet impractical in their approach?

This report should not be seen as a call for replacing Aman as the national estimator. But it does call for a thorough examination of this enduring question in light of the legitimate question marks raised in the past about Aman's suitability for this task, and with an eye on potential far-reaching functional and organizational changes. The review outlined here shows that the problems are not new—and will not go away, unless seriously addressed.

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NOTES

1. The sources for this report include primary documents (reports of past commissions or task forces that were mandated to study the preferred structure for the defense community), open-source media

articles from Israeli outlets that inform on particular recent events or interviews of defense leaders, and reports published by Israeli think tanks or analytically oriented books from the last two decades with direct bearing on the discussed dilemmas. All titles and quotations from sources originally in Hebrew have been translated by the author.

2. Laila Bassam, Tom Perry, and Maya Gebeily, "Still Counting Its Dead, Hezbollah Faces Long Road to Recover from War," Reuters, November 27, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/hezbollah-faces-long-recovery-officials-fear-thousands-fighters-lost-israel-2024-11-27/>.
3. Nadav Argaman, "If the Prime Minister Will Act Illegally, I Will Tell Everything I Know: Nadav Argaman Speaks," interview by Yonit Levy, *N12 News*, March 13, 2025, https://www.mako.co.il/news-n12_magazine/2025_q1/Article-64f7a6b540f8591027.htm.
4. Ronen Bergman and Yuval Robovich, "Dragged Foot on Peace Plan and Ignored Intelligence: Netanyahu's Conception," *Ynet*, February 28, 2025, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/yokra14273670>.
5. Yoav Zeitun, "A Years-Long Deception and a Complete Surprise: Inquiries of the October 7 Debacle," *Calcalist*, February 27, 2025, https://www.calcalist.co.il/local_news/article/hy11tqzrcye; and Efraim Lavi, "Aman's Contribution to Policy Failures in the Palestinian Issue," *Mabat Malam* 97 (2024).
6. Shmuel Even and Amos Granit, "Possible Models for Intelligence Communities," in *The Israeli Intelligence Community: Where To?*, Memorandum 97, eds. Shmuel Even and Amos Granit (Institute for National Security Studies, 2009), 35.
7. Shmuel Even and David Siman-Tov, "Intelligence Assessments at the National Level in Israel," *Strategic Insight* 1, no. 18 (2015): 76–77, <https://www.inss.org.il/he/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/12/f-2371344733.pdf>; Even and Granit, "Possible Models," 21, 34; Meir Finkel, *Aman in a Complex and Changing Environment* (Modan Publishing House Ltd. 2024), 21; and "National Intelligence Estimate," Center for Intelligence Heritage, accessed May 27, 2025, https://www.intelligence.org.il/?module=articles&item_id=17&article_id=214&art_category_id=21.
8. Yaakov Amidror, *Intelligence: Theory and Practice* (Ministry of Defense Press, 2008); and Udi Golan, "Leaning on a Broken Staff? Intelligence on Partners and Allies," *Strategic Insight* 14, no. 3 (2011): 68.
9. "Loaned from Mossad to Aman: Comparing Organizational Cultures from a Personal Perspective," Center for Intelligence Heritage and the Institute for the Research of the Methodology of Intelligence, October 2023, <https://www.intelligence-research.org.il/editor/assets/%D7%94%D7%A9%D7%90%D7%9C%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%A1%D7%93%D7%9C%D7%90%D7%9E%D7%9F.pdf>.
10. Even and Siman-Tov, "Intelligence Assessments," 75–76.
11. Shlomo Gazit, *Between Warning and Surprise: On the Responsibility for Formulating Intelligence Assessments in Israel*, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies (Memorandum 66), October 2003.
12. Finkel, *Aman*, 34–35; and Shmuel Even, "Commissions Reviewing the Israeli Intelligence Community: Why Their Recommendations Repeat and Are Not Implemented," *Iyunim beModi'in* 1, no. 1 (2007): 30–31.
13. Even, "Commissions Reviewing," 25; and Zvi Zamir and Efrat Mas, *Eyes Wide Open: The Mossad Director Warns, but Is Israel Listening?* (Dvir Publishing, 2011), 224.
14. The State of Israel, "Commission of Inquiry: The Yom Kippur War, Partial Report," April 1, 1974, 18, <https://archive.kippur-center.org/agrant-reports/agrant-report1.pdf>. Note that the Hebrew word that has been used by the commission, *mediniyim*, is commonly translated as "political" in English, and thus the same approach has been followed here. However, in its essence, within Israeli policy jargon, it would more closely mean "diplomatic" or "international-political."
15. Amir Oren, "Whatever Happened to Alternative Views in Intelligence Analysis?" *The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, April 2022, <https://jstribune.com/oren-alternative-views-in-intelligence-analysis/>.
16. Oren, "Whatever Happened"
17. State of Israel, "Yom Kippur War," 18.
18. State of Israel, "Yom Kippur War," 18.
19. Shmuel Even's interpretation of the Agranat report is that it sought, in essence, to move the center-weight of political analysis—including the more strategic aspects of intelligence—to a civilian agency. See Even, "Commissions Reviewing."

20. Two important exceptions to that statement are (1) the founding of a strategic research unit within Mossad and (2) a short-lived strengthening of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' research unit in the mid-1970s under Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan.
21. Zamir and Mas, *Eyes Wide Open* (see note 13).
22. Zamir and Mas, *Eyes Wide Open*, 221-23.
23. The recommendations met with sharp criticism by some former Aman officers, who warned that adhering to the commission's guidance would risk massive damage to the system; see, for example, Efraim Kam, "If You Have Seized a Lot, You Have Not Seized: The Commission on the Intelligence Apparatus's Report," *Research Platform/Strategic Insight*, July 2003, <https://www.inss.org.il/he/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/02/FILE1193821495.pdf>.
24. Dan Meridor and Ron Eldadi, *Israel's Security Concept: The Committee Report on the Formulation of the Security Concept (Meridor Committee), Ten Years Later*, Memorandum 182 (Institute for National Security Studies, 2019), <https://www.inss.org.il/he/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/10/memo182.pdf>.
25. The State of Israel, "The Commission for the Events of the Campaign in Lebanon in 2006: The Winograd Commission," Final Report, 418, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140513195049/http://www.nrg.co.il/images/news/doah.pdf>.
26. Even and Granit, "Possible Models," 81-82, 92.
27. Even and Granit, "Possible Models," 105; and Moshe Ya'alon, "Intelligence from the Decision Maker's Perspective," in *Challenges Facing Israel's Intelligence Community*, eds. Shmuel Even and David Siman-Tov (Institute for National Security Studies, 2017), 15.
28. Omri Meniv, "8200 Failures as Part of the October 7 Failed Warning," *MAKO N12*, July 6, 2024, https://www.mako.co.il/news-military/2024_q3/Article-2e92c5b61698091026.htm.
29. Yaniv Kobovich, "Shabak October 7 Inquiry: Organization Admits to Have Failed Reading Hamas's Intentions, but Recommended Acting Against It," *Ha'aretz*, March 4, 2025, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/2025-03-04/ty-article/.premium/00000195-6199-d73d-a5f7-e79f8db40000>.
30. Hanan Shai, "The Lessons of 'Iron Swords' War," *Misgav*, November 20, 2024, <https://www.misgavins.org/shai-lessons-of-war-with-iron-swords/>; and Hanan Shai, "Blaming the Intelligence for the Failure of 2023, Like in 1973, Is Insufferable," *Meleg*, November 13, 2023, <https://www.meteg.co.il/%D7%94%D7%90%D7%A9%D7%9E%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%93%D7%99%D7%A2%D7%99%D7%9F-%D7%91%D7%9E%D7%97%D7%93%D7%9C-%D7%A9%D7%9C-23-%D7%9B%D7%9E%D7%95-%D7%91-73-%D7%94%D7%99%D7%90-%D7%91%D7%9C%D7%AA/>.
31. Even and Siman-Tov, "Intelligence Assessments," 76.
32. Even and Granit, "Possible Models," 42. In their recommendations section in the same memorandum, Even and Granit do not discuss the possibility of changing the center of gravity, and they conclude that the national estimator should remain Aman (p. 85).



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JONATHAN ROLL

Jonathan Roll is the Barry and Teri Volpert Family Postdoctoral Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His PhD degree in international relations was completed at Tel Aviv University in 2024. His research areas include international relations theory, the nexus between economics and foreign policy, and Israeli foreign policy.

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