**‘The Enemy Teaches Us How to Operate’: Palestinian Hamas Use of Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) in Its Intelligence Warfare Against Israel**

Netanel Flamer

All political and military organizations need intelligence to inform their activities. Theoretical and historical research tends to focus on intelligence operations by states rather than by non-state actors.[[1]](#footnote-1) This is also true with respect to research on counterintelligence designed to maintain a terrorist organization’s clandestine nature.[[2]](#footnote-2) Non-state actor intelligence should be analyzed taking into account that these actors are, inherently, the weaker player in asymmetric warfare against a state. As such, they seek to generate achievements that will provide the greatest possible impact using the most efficient means possible, given their relative poverty of resources compared to the state-enemy.[[3]](#footnote-3) While some papers seeking to shed light on this topic have been written during the last decade, there remains a substantial lacuna in academic discourse.[[4]](#footnote-4)

One of the main areas in which Hamas has been active since its inception in December 1987 is the media. Hamas has utilized this tool to communicate both with Palestinian society and world public opinion. Initially, Hamas used quite primitive methods, such as local publications and leaflets.[[5]](#footnote-5) Gradually, Hamas’s media efforts expanded and became more technologically sophisticated, as it began to operate TV and radio channels as well as several internet websites.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, Hamas media use is not limited to disseminating its own ideas and narrative; rather, it also serves as a means to learn about the Israeli enemy. From the very beginning, Hamas has collected information for its needs. Naturally, intelligence activities have developed in parallel with organizational evolution, becoming more organized, in-depth, expansive, and sophisticated, as they are conducted by institutionalized intelligence apparatuses.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) is a crucial component of every intelligence agency. It has been estimated that at least 80 percent, and some claim as much as 95 percent, of the information required for a state can be found in open sources.[[8]](#footnote-8) Gathering intelligence from open sources has two primary characteristics: It is publicly available and it is always secondhand and therefore should be vetted.[[9]](#footnote-9) As we shall see, Hamas has exploited the relative openness of the Israeli press over the past few decades in order to collect information that is valuable for its own needs.

This activity has been particularly fruitful for Hamas in light of the evolution of freedom of the press in Israel over the past few decades. In 1989, Israel’s Supreme Court significantly limited the Military Censor's authority to prohibit the publication of information. It determined that censorship should be executed only in cases where there is “a near certainty of real danger” to national security and public order.[[10]](#footnote-10) This limitation reflected a cultural change in Israeli society, attributing greater weight to the value of freedom of speech. Alongside the development, from the 1990s to the present, of new media such as the internet, social networks, and smartphones, the ability to black out sensitive information became more complex. Simultaneously, the IDF decided to strengthen its bonds with the Israeli press and to adopt an “open to the press” policy.[[11]](#footnote-11) Eventually, these relations nearly spun out of control. In 2006, during the Second Lebanon War, the IDF’s approach was to be as open as possible to the press.

During the war, the Israeli media published extensive information, including sensitive military and defense details. Except for leaks and information conveyed through prohibited connections between senior officers and journalists, much of the information came directly from the IDF, within the aforementioned “open to the press” approach. In the words of the IDF’s Chief of the General Staff at the time, Lieutenant General Dan Halutz: “The IDF must refrain from taking steps towards the media, in light of the fact that Israel is a democratic state, which accords the highest importance to freedom of the press and information.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The Winograd Commission, which investigated the war, criticized some aspects of the IDF's “open to the press” policy. However, the Commission did not recommend canceling the policy, but rather tightening its defense aspects.[[13]](#footnote-13)

This article aims to describe and analyze Hamas’s OSINT activity, collecting various important information from open Israeli sources. It will discuss the phenomenon’s development throughout the organization’s long struggle against Israel, its contributions to the organization and its inherent risks. Research is based mainly on numerous primary sources from within Hamas, many of them published in this article for the first time, and which have yet to receive serious attention from scholars in the field. Thus, the article provides a comprehensive picture on the topic, with multiple illustrations and examples.

**Hamas’s OSINT activity from the organization’s establishment until the foundation of the military wing in Gaza in 2006**

Even in the organization’s earliest days, its operatives used OSINT for a range of purposes. In the 1990s, the news agency Quds Press served as a kind of database for Hamas operatives. A search conducted by members of the Shin Bet and the Civil Administration at the Hebron Press Office in 1993 found a multitude of archival material, clippings from the Israeli press, details of events “on the ground,” and reports by the Israeli organization B’Tselem. [[14]](#footnote-14) Open source information was also collected among Hamas operatives abroad. The front organization for Hamas activity in the United States from its establishment and throughout the 1990s was called “the Islamic Center for Research and Studies.” It was located first in Illinois and later moved to Virginia. The Center collected information and drafted propaganda materials which served as the basis for decision-making by United States leadership. This Center systematically collected open source information. Translation offices in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza translated the Israeli press, and each afternoon the materials were transmitted from East Jerusalem to the United States, so that they would reach their destination as quickly as possible. Naturally, the Center also collected information from the Arabic and international press. The research center of the Islamic University of Gaza also collected information about the territories, some of which it sent to Hamas headquarters abroad. An additional source of information was the Quds Press agency and its branches, which were actually OSINT centers. The information was transmitted by telephone or fax to the main branch in London and from there to the United States or Jordan as needed. [[15]](#footnote-15)

In addition to ongoing information collection, open source media aided the organization in efforts to learn and analyze the discourse on the Israeli side. In November 1992, after the maiden attempt by the Hamas cell under the leadership of Yahya Ayyash to perpetrate a car bomb terrorist attack in Tel Aviv, one of the members of the cell learned, with the help of open source media, about the outcome of the attack. Through these means, it became apparent to him that the operation had indeed failed, since the car bomb was identified and stopped; however, he also learned how dangerous this type of operation was considered in Israel, since, according to him, the Israel Police dubbed it “the most dangerous since the establishment of the state.” [[16]](#footnote-16)

In a book written by Hamas operative Jamil Wadi for Hamas operatives, published following his death in 1993, he explains that within his research method he relies, *inter alia*, upon reports from open source Israeli media, both television and radio broadcasts, in order to see how events are perceived in Israel and which steps Israel has adopted against operations. For example, he cites the impact these operations have on Israeli civilians and the difficulty security forces have dealing with them, in light of reports from the newspaper *Yediot Ahronot*. Following the attempted kidnapping of soldier Alon Karavani in Gaza in September 1992, members of the cell learned from the Israeli press that the event led to the formulation of new IDF procedures with respect to travel (mandating travel in pairs or larger groups) on routes in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza, and later even within the Green Line. [[17]](#footnote-17)

Even after the January 1993 Hamas attack in the Israeli settlement Ganei Tal in the Gaza Strip, extensive information was collected from the Israeli media in order to see Israeli reactions to and insights from the attack. Thus, for example, Hamas operatives translated the words of Israeli commentator Alex Fishman from the newspaper *Hadashot*, in which he described the attack as innovative within the operating characteristics of Palestinian terrorist organizations, since they had infiltrated an Israeli settlement and Hamas had succeeded in surpassing the security arrangements through advance planning. In addition, his opinion was cited that the attack serves as evidence that deportation of the organization’s operatives to Marj Al-Zohour in 1992 did not significantly harm the organization’s military capabilities, as well as a similar opinion by a reporter from the Jerusalem Post. In addition, information was collected and translated from the newspaper *Al HaMishmar*. This newspaper cited sources termed “close to the Israeli leadership,” according to whom there had been a drop in Al-Qassam Brigade activity since the deportation, but the attack had made clear the need for additional, harsh steps against the organization. As background, it is worth noting that for Hamas, it was important to receive feedback about the correlation drawn in Israel between the attack and the Supreme Court decision that retroactively approved the deportation of the organization’s operatives, since that was one of the objectives of the attack’s timing. [[18]](#footnote-18)

This activity also continued during the Second Intifada. During the months of May–July 2002, members of the Silwan Cell perpetrated a number of terrorist acts within Israeli territory against high-quality targets. In May, an explosive device was placed on a fuel container that was making its way to the P-Glilot Terminal, where it was detonated by members of the cell. About a month later, cell members placed an explosive device on railway tracks in the Lod area, and about a month after that, explosives were placed on railway tracks in the Rehovot area. Following the fuel container attack, cell members followed open source media reports; they discovered, to their surprise, that the truck attack they had planned possessed far greater potential than mere explosion of the truck – it had the potential to blow up the entire P-Glilot Terminal, which would have caused far greater damage, blowing up entire neighborhoods and killing and wounding thousands of residents in the area. In addition, they were brought up to date on Israeli projections about the state of affairs following the operation, increased security, and the execution of security drills at the site in the presence of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Nonetheless, cell members did not implement this operational format again, since at this time connections with the cell’s strategic leader, Ibrahim Hamad, were severed, and cell members could not take responsibility for a strategic decision of this kind themselves. In this context, the exact words of the cell’s head, Muhammad ‘Arman, and his recommendation to Hamas members following the events are worth citing:

Any person acting within the resistance to the occupation bears an obligation to follow the enemy’s media and to know what it thinks in order to formulate the most suitable plan. In addition, following the media supplies jihadists with free information they have not even considered, and therefore the architects of resistance operations have an obligation to master the Hebrew language and to follow all Israeli news reports and analyses. This is an extremely important point, which no one can ignore at all. [[19]](#footnote-19)

Cell members also initiated an attack that included placing an explosive device on the railroad tracks. After the first attempt, on June 21, 2002, which wounded five, they followed open source media broadcasts in Israel. Within the reports, they learned from an interview with a police commander that the reason for the relatively minor damage was the use of an explosive device with just 5 kg of explosive material, and that if the device had been three times larger, or had contained 15 kg of explosive material, the damage would have been much more significant. This insight learned by Hamas members is described in the organization’s literature under the heading “the Enemy Teaches Us How to Operate,” emphasizing the obligation for every operative to know Hebrew and follow open source media, which hands out “free gifts” to Hamas of valuable information it would not receive otherwise. [[20]](#footnote-20)

In 2004, another aspect of information collection from open source Israeli media can be identified in publications by the organization, issued by the media office of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades. Thus, for example, in a collection of statements by figures in Israel based on OSINT following Operation Days of Repentance (an IDF military operation in the Gaza Strip conducted in September–October 2004) and additional Hamas operations, it is clear that there has been systematic collection from a variety of media information sources in Israel. Thus, for example, with respect to Operation Days of Repentance, based on an article in *Maariv*, Israeli concerns are described about entering into battle in built areas within the Jabalia Refugee Camp for fear of casualties. An IDF officer is quoted from the newspaper *BaMachane*, attributing to Hamas a stubborn tenacity in the face of the Israeli operation. In addition, criticism from the newspaper *Haaretz* appears regarding Israel’s failed operations, which do not lead to cessation of Hamas rocket fire, yet cause the deaths of innocent victims on the Palestinian side as well as international criticism of Israel. Information was taken from the newspaper *Yediot Ahronot*, according to which IDF officers sought to conduct a “quiet withdrawal” in order to complete the operation without international pressure.

With respect to another Hamas operation during this period, in which an explosive tunnel running beneath the IDF base in Rafah was detonated (December 13, 2004), the publication cites Amos Harel’s analysis in *Haaretz* regarding the IDF’s difficulty in coping with threats such as explosive tunnels, as well as the attack’s importance in positioning Hamas as an entity which had pushed Israel out of Gaza through military force (in anticipation of the disengagement from Gaza, which was planned for the summer of 2005). Finally, based on the media, criticism is cited by members of Knesset in the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee regarding the situation in Gaza, as well as the ever-increasing military power of Hamas and its successful operations, which present a challenge to which the IDF does not have a full response (for example, the launching of mortar shells which the IDF does not have the capacity to intercept). [[21]](#footnote-21)

In early 2005, the collection of information from open source media continued, as is reflected in the translation of an article from *Haaretz* about Israeli fears of internal civil war in light of the evacuation of Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip, and positions within Israel about this possibility, which was becoming more real every day.[[22]](#footnote-22)  The internal state of affairs in Israel ahead of the disengagement from Gaza continued to serve as a central topic of interest for Hamas members as they consumed Israeli media. Thus, in a weekly news collection on Israeli affairs, there were reports on an Israeli soldier who committed suicide because his unit received an order to participate in the planned evacuation of Gush Katif, on the secret evacuation of the residents of Eli Sinai due to continued fire on their settlement, and on a visit by Prime Minister Sharon and Minister of Defense Mofaz to the city of Sderot in order to support residents so that they would not desert the city. [[23]](#footnote-24)

**Use of open source material after the foundation of the Hamas military wing**

Around 2006, following the foundation of the Hamas military wing and the foundation of the Military Intelligence Department (MID), Hamas’s OSINT became more organized and far more extensive. Indeed, senior organization officials and organization members, many of whom had learned Hebrew over the years due to contact with Israeli entities and in Israeli prisons, continued to consume Israeli media independently. Thus, according to a representative of Ahmed al-Jabari, head of the Hamas military wing until his assassination in 2012, al-Jabari would regularly follow Israeli media and would comprehend the content of the reports even without needing translation. [[24]](#footnote-25) However, the lion’s share of intelligence activity in this area was transferred to mechanisms charged with this activity within the organization.

The Al-Qassam Brigades MID published, apparently starting in 2007, a weekly report entitled “Israeli Affairs” (*Shuun Israailiah*). The report’s explanatory notes and objective state that it contains “monitoring of news and analysis of events on the Zionist front, and detailed collection of news of a defense and political nature.” The report’s objective is to formulate “an understanding and familiarity with developments and events in order to attain a background and infrastructure upon which to rely.”[[25]](#footnote-26) It should be noted that the back cover of the report includes a notice marked “important,” indicating that the materials should be destroyed after use – evidence that Hamas regarded it as intelligence information for all intents and purposes.

To understand the characteristics of Hamas’s open source collection, the content of a sample issue of the report, issue 36, dated February 18, 2010, will be presented below. This issue is based on articles from the previous week. On the cover appear headlines from news items, one as a “main headline” and the rest as “secondary headlines.” On the first page, there is a detailed description of the main headline, which concerns details provided by former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert about the behind-the-scenes decision-making in Operation Cast Lead, *inter alia* based on an article published in the newspaper *Maariv*. This description presents the heavy weight attributed by senior Israeli officials to the number of civilian casualties on the Palestinian side in deciding on the scope and depth of the operation.[[26]](#footnote-28) On the following pages, the report is divided into four sections: “Defense Issues” (*Shuun Amniya*), “Military Issues” (*Shuun ‘Askariya*), “Related News” (*Akhbar al-Mut’aliqa*, meaning news connected to Hamas and its areas of interest in Israel), and finally news about internal and political affairs in Israel. At the end, there is an overall estimation of the state of affairs in light of the week’s news, analysis, and conclusions.

To illustrate the above, in the Defense Issues section, an article appears about the German mediator in talks between Israel and Hamas about IDF soldier Gilad Shalit, who was still in captivity at the time, on the occasion of his appointment to a senior position in the German intelligence community. The article includes a discussion of offers made by Israel to Hamas with respect to a prisoner exchange deal, and is based on publications in *Yediot Ahronot* and Channel 2 on Israeli television. The section on “Military Affairs” contains, *inter alia*, an article about construction of the active defense system Iron Fist, and about the IDF’s “tiger” armed troop vehicles and the unit which was expected to be equipped with this type of vehicle, based on an article in the newspaper *BaMachane*, distributed by the IDF. In the “Related News” section, for example, there is a detailed report, based on an article in *Maariv*, on a public opinion poll by the Maagar Mochot research institute, according to which 50% of Religious Zionists in Israel support disobeying or protesting army commands. In the fourth section, short news flashes appear about politics in Israel, Israeli-Russian relations, and developments in the Israeli political system, as well as socio-economic issues such as Jewish-Arab relations, poverty in Israel, and crime. [[27]](#footnote-30)

At the end of the report is a general analysis of the weekly state of affairs according to the open source collection. Based on the analysis, voices emanating from Israel, from the leadership, press reports, and analysis, are directed towards one main issue: Iran, and specifically halting its plans to develop nuclear weapons and sophisticated weaponry. Even Netanyahu’s visit to Russia was focused on this objective, attempting to bring the Russians on board in this battle and to attain their consent to impose sanctions on Iran until the end of the Iranian nuclear program, which according to Israel is a program for military purposes. This was also the context of Foreign Minister Lieberman’s visit to Azerbaijan. In addition, the complexity of the topic is presented in light of the continuing negotiations between Iran and the superpowers. Even Israel’s threats and declarations to Hamas and Hezbollah are connected to this issue, since according to the authors of the report, Israel views them as acting under Iranian sponsorship. In summary, and to illustrate the above, the analysis cites the words of the Minister of Strategic Affairs, Moshe Ya’alon, at the Herzliya Conference, regarding the need for Israel to prepare for an Iranian attack in light of its continued nuclear efforts. [[28]](#footnote-31)

Another example of organized OSINT collection is a broadcast produced starting in 2007, or perhaps even earlier, by the Military Intelligence Department, named “In the Margins of Events.” It is impossible to determine whether this broadcast was produced on a daily or weekly basis. In the broadcast, selected segments from Israeli media on topics of Hamas interest are reviewed with Arabic translation. A short description of the segment’s topic precedes each segment. For example, a broadcast dated April 7, 2008, which was about 17 minutes long, opens with information which, according to the Military Intelligence Department, indicates that the IDF believes that the next battle in Gaza will feature substantial subterranean combat and is therefore training for such combat. Next, the broadcast shows a segment on this topic from Channel 10 in which IDF training is documented. The next segment is described as addressing the development of anti-aircraft battery capabilities against Hezbollah aircraft. Here, too, the segment is from Channel 10 and presents IDF soldiers in training drills with this weaponry. The next segment is coverage of an interview of Khaled Mashal from the British Sky network presented on Israeli Channel 2, with emphasis on Mashal’s statement that Gilad Shalit is still alive and his statement with respect to the firing of Hamas rockets on Israeli kindergartens, according to which Hamas does not aim at kindergartens but rather the event is a statistical deviation due to the primitive weaponry possessed by Hamas. On the contrary, says Mashal – America and the West are welcome to equip the organization with more advanced, precise weapons. The last segment touches on the Knesset’s decision to grant benefits to reserve soldiers serving in the IDF with a Channel 10 report on the topic. [[29]](#footnote-32)

In order to analyze Israel’s stance and modus operandi within negotiations to free kidnapped soldier Gilad Shalit, who was captured on the Gaza border in June 2006, Hamas also activated experts to monitor declarations on this matter by senior Israeli officials in the political and military leadership. One expert, named Abu Anas, a senior Hamas official in the area of OSINT, presented an analysis to senior Hamas officials following Benjamin Netanyahu’s rise to power in 2009 according to which Israel is stalling in the negotiations and has reached an impasse because Netanyahu seeks a diplomatic, not a military, solution to the issue. This and other analyses constituted the basis for determining Hamas policy in its contacts with Israel.[[30]](#footnote-33) It is worth noting that from the time of its inauguration (March 31, 2009), the Netanyahu Government did indeed refrain from conducting a wide-scale military operation against Hamas until Gilad Shalit was released in October 2011, even though upsurges in violence of the kind that led the Israeli Government to commence a wide-scale military operation (Pillar of Defense) in November 2012 occurred even prior to Shalit’s release. In light of the above, it might be said that Hamas’s analysis and estimation regarding Israeli policy in this context were faithful to reality.

The MID even produced weekly video broadcasts which included the main information collected from open source media. For example, the November 2011 OSINT broadcast entitled “al-Mashhad al-Israili,” no. 184, is about 29 minutes long. The first segment in the first part, based on Israeli television broadcasts, is about the formalization of relations between Israel and South Sudan, including Israel’s desire to use airports in the state. In this context, there is a detailed description of a strategic decision by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to deepen Israel’s relations with states in the Horn of Africa. The second segment is actually an Arabic-language transcription of a segment from Israel’s channel 10 about the ever-increasing percentage of youths postponing IDF conscription, which was projected, according to estimations at the time, to reach almost 60 percent in 2020. This matter constitutes a problem for the IDF, since many of those postponing service are religious youth, many from Judea and Samaria, which account for a significant percentage of those recruited into combat positions. The third segment is about increasing violence among Israeli Arabs and the incompetence of the public security forces in dealing with this phenomenon, based on a report from Israel’s Channel 10. The fourth segment is about Israeli media coverage of the International Atomic Energy Agency decision to refrain from imposing sanctions on Iran in light of its continued nuclear activity. The segment includes coverage of disagreements between Israeli civil servants and politicians about the correct policy regarding the Iranian nuclear program. [[31]](#footnote-35)

The second part, based on open source media, cites an article from the newspaper *Israel Hayom* about growing Israeli concerns regarding the Muslim Brotherhood’s power in Egypt. Another segment is about the tense relations between then-Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Mossad Director Tamir Pardo and attempts by Prime Minister Netanyahu to bridge the gaps. The third segment is about the physicians’ strike in Israel and the government’s efforts to solve the crisis, while at the same time the Prime Minister threatened strikers that a continuation of the strike could harm doctors, for example by importing doctors from India. An additional segment concerns a decision by the United States to supply antitank missiles to Gulf states, and the final segment concerns a steep increase in electricity prices in Israel due to problems in the flow of gas from Egypt. The broadcast ends with political cartoons from the Israeli media about Israeli concerns related to the continuation of the events of the “Arab Spring” and fears that Iran will develop long-range missiles, as well as two additional cartoons ridiculing Prime Minister Netanyahu’s attempt to find replacements for Israeli doctors on strike. [[32]](#footnote-36)

It would appear that, beginning in 2013, responsibility for production of the broadcast was transferred from the Military Intelligence Department to the Hamas military wing’s Propaganda Office, yet beyond changes in the graphic design of the broadcast, the content clearly remained the same. In fact, it can be estimated that collection continued to be conducted by the Military Intelligence Department, and only production of the broadcast itself was transferred to the Propaganda Office (which is known for its sophisticated capabilities in the production of visual output). For the purposes of brevity, several more broadcasts will be summarized briefly below, and anecdotes cited. For example, the broadcast from the beginning of July 2013 included a large-scale drill by the Golani Brigade which included handling combat in built areas based on lessons learned, *inter alia*, from combat in Bint Jbeil during the Second Lebanon War, as well as a comprehensive brigade-wide Golani drill conducted in the Golan Heights, and new aircraft that Israel had purchased from the United States and its capabilities. In addition, the broadcast covered a report from Israeli media about the Shayetet 13 unit and its past operations, including during the Second Intifada, as well as information about Iron Dome deployment in the north. [[33]](#footnote-37)

It is apparent that Israeli open source materials served as a major source of information for Hamas in a variety of areas. Through OSINT, Hamas members learned information about weaponry, IDF units, the deployment of forces, drills and training, the Israeli state of mind, aspects of Israeli society, and more. Hamas obtained this information with great ease, without the organization needing to make any great effort; it was weighed among other factors within the organization’s estimations, alongside collection from other sources and analysis. As will be demonstrated below, alongside the many advantages and the information obtained by Hamas through OSINT, reliance on this source also had disadvantages.

**Strategic estimation ahead of large Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip**

Immediately after Israel’s disengagement from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005, and to an even greater degree after the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, a dialogue commenced in the Gaza Strip in general and within Hamas in particular regarding the possibility that Israel might again conduct a wide-scale military operation in the Gaza Strip. In March 2007, for example, a program was broadcast on the network which was devoted to the question of whether Israel would “invade” the Gaza Strip. In the program, civilians went on air to discuss the matter from several points of view. They presented a variety of considerations—military, social, political, and others—that might impact an Israeli decision regarding a wide-scale operation. [[34]](#footnote-38)

In May 2007, an extensive program was broadcast about preparations by various organizations in the Gaza Strip, among them the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine, the Popular Resistance Committees, the al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, and of course the Hamas military wing, for a wide-scale Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip. In the program, operatives from the organizations presented their predictions regarding the real possibility that such an operation might take place in the near future, as well as the preparations and training they were undergoing ahead of such an operation. In the film, a Hamas spokesman states that the organization takes such a possibility seriously in light of the Israeli Government’s desire to win points in domestic public opinion, to prove the existence of Hamas tunnels to the Arab world, as well as the desire by senior Israeli officials to rehabilitate their status, both senior political figures (particularly then-Prime Minister Olmert, in light of criminal proceedings against him) and senior military figures (in light of their failure in the Second Lebanon War and the disengagement from the Gaza Strip). [[35]](#footnote-39)

On September 14, 2007, training was conducted in the Northern Gaza Strip with senior Hamas official Nizar Rayan, within Hamas preparations to complete its defense plan against IDF forces, should they enter the Gaza Strip. Cells from the Hamas military wing designated to confront IDF’s infantry participated in the training.[[36]](#footnote-40) At the end of 2007, the Hamas military wing was already busy preparing for a wide-scale Israeli operation. Its operatives trained for such an occurrence, *inter alia* by using explosives, anti-tank missiles, and light weapons, some of which were looted from the Fatah warehouses when Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007. [[37]](#footnote-42)

The wide-scale military operation for which Hamas had prepared did indeed come to fruition: On the afternoon of Saturday, December 27, 2008, Operation Cast Lead began. The operation opened with simultaneous aerial attacks by dozens of Israel Air Force aircraft on diverse Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip. The operation was preceded by tension that began with a break in the agreed lull in fighting, the *tahdiya*, between the sides on November 4, 2008, when the IDF conducted an operation to uncover and neutralize a Hamas explosive tunnel in the vicinity of the al-Burj Refugee Camp in the central Gaza Strip. Due to the operation, in which a number of Hamas members were killed, violent exchanges commenced between the sides, until the Israeli side reached a decision to begin a wide-scale operation. [[38]](#footnote-43)

Despite advance preparation for the possibility of a wide-scale Israeli operation and despite the period of tension, there is overwhelming evidence that Hamas was surprised. At the time of the attack, senior Hamas officials were in their offices (despite the procedure according to which command centers and offices are to be evacuated when there is fear of an Israeli attack), including Ismail Haniyeh. The Saraya Complex, where the Hamas government ministries are located, was occupied. The clearest testimony is a police officers’ end-of-course ceremony held at the time of the attack at a site in the heart of Gaza City. The police formation was attacked and 89 Hamas members were killed, including police commander Tawfiq Jabari. Clearly, if Hamas had been expecting a wide-scale attack, the police formation would not have been held, certainly not in the open air in the middle of the day. [[39]](#footnote-44)

In order to identify the source of Hamas’s error in predicting Israel’s steps, it is important to present a complete picture of the organization’s information and considerations. On the Thursday prior to the attack, Egypt’s Assistant Minister of Defense, Ahmad Abdel Haleq, phoned senior Hamas official Mahmoud al-Zaher and warned him that Israel was planning to hit Hamas hard, based on messages he received in a meeting held between Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and President Mubarak. He expressed his estimation that Israel’s intentions were serious. Another senior Hamas official, Musa Abu Marzouk, received a similar message. On the other hand, Hamas also received more reassuring messages. Journalist and researcher Shlomi Adler testifies that the week before the operation broke out, he travelled on a ship from Limassol, Cyprus to the Gaza Strip. In the Strip, he met with Abed Haniyeh, Ismail’s son, who tried to learn from him whether the murmurs sounding from the Israeli side about the possibility that Israel might enter into a wide-scale military operation were serious. Adler replied that according to what he had seen in the Israeli media, Minister of Defense Barak was headed for a lull in fighting and not an upsurge. [[40]](#footnote-45)

Additional claims, emphasized by figures such as Khaled Mashal and Ahmed al-Jabari, entered into the equation of Hamas’s considerations; they did not expect Israel to commence a wide-scale ground campaign. Firstly, they believed that the upcoming elections in Israel would serve as a restraining factor, preventing the government from conducting a wide-scale operation. In addition, the fact that captured soldier Gilad Shalit was still in Hamas captivity was, according to them, a determining factor in their estimation that Israel would not conduct a wide-scale operation which would endanger Shalit’s safety. The fact that in 2007–2008, there were a number of events after which calls for war were heard in Israel, which nonetheless did not develop into wide-scale operations, also constituted proof supporting the claim that the reaction this time would be no different.[[41]](#footnote-46) Other reasons claimed as causes for the Hamas failure to predict the wide-scale attack were the negative Israeli experience from the Second Lebanon War; expectations of a lack of international support for the operation, which would cause Israel to hesitate before entering into an operation; and fears attributed to Israel about entering a wide-scale operation in light of dangers that it would deteriorate into conflict on multiple fronts, due to the possibility of an upsurge in violence in Lebanon and Judea and Samaria. [[42]](#footnote-48)

Israel made sure to help Hamas maintain its prediction that no wide-scale operation was expected at the time. According to Yoav Galant, Commander of the Southern Command at the time of Operation Cast Lead, one of the Command’s guiding assumptions was that Hamas was lacking in the area of strategic intelligence, since it relied solely on analysis of media reports in this context. This was in contrast to operational intelligence, in which Hamas operated observation points and continuously studied confrontations with the IDF, which occurred frequently during 2007–2008, and from which the organization understood the IDF’s capabilities and operational patterns, thereby increasing its ability to confront the IDF. According to Galant, this situation led Hamas to fail to identify the intention to commence a wide-scale operation in advance, since media reports in Israel during the period prior to the operation were replete with messages that terrorism could not be tamed through military means, and that the rocket fire was inevitable. This led Hamas to the conclusion that a wide-scale Israeli operation was not likely. [[43]](#footnote-49)

On the other hand, on the Wednesday prior to the Israeli cabinet decision to commence the operation, there were leaks which caused Hamas to take precautionary measures and evacuate sites, some of which were designated for attack.[[44]](#footnote-50) In contrast, in the IDF information was strictly limited, and information about the expected attack was not even transferred to the operational wings (the Ugda Division and the General Headquarters) prior to the air attack which began the operation. This was taken into consideration in planning the operation, since the ground operation was not planned to occur until four days or more after the air raid, due to the need to transfer forces (who did not receive advance warning about the operation) from other fronts to the Gaza Strip. [[45]](#footnote-52)

Misleading and deceptive actions by the Israeli political leadership also contributed: In a statement released at the end of the cabinet meeting held on Wednesday, three days before the beginning of the operation, there was just one line about the Gaza Strip among a list of topics mentioned in the statement, the most prominent of which was making multiple Islamic organizations illegal. Furthermore, on Thursday the Minister of Defense’s Office announced the opening of the crossings from Israel to the Strip and a permit to bring aid into the area. In addition, the Prime Minister’s Office announced that on the next Sunday there would be further discussions regarding a decision about an expected operation in the Gaza Strip. Moreover, some of the regular IDF soldiers along the Strip’s border were released for the Saturday on which the operation began, in order to give the impression of “business as usual.” [[46]](#footnote-53)

Israel had a sufficiently robust understanding of Hamas reliance on open source media that although the ground operation was originally planned for the Thursday following the air attack, it was postponed until Friday due to unsuitable weather. However, a report by the then-Channel 2 military correspondent that the ground operation was expected to begin on Friday led to its postponement until Saturday. These maneuvers were based on the assumption that Hamas relies on open source media in strategic aspects of its decision-making about beginning an operation or turning it into a ground operation, and therefore it stands to reason that they have received the information. [[47]](#footnote-54)

Therefore, it might be said that Hamas’s failure to predict the start of Operation Cast Lead stems from a combination of two elements: an element of collection, or the lack of high-quality intimate sources about decision-making in Israel alongside Israel’s attempts to limit information, deceive, and mislead; and a second conceptual element, or a mistaken analysis of Israel’s system of considerations at the time. The result was catastrophic for the organization and led it to sustain significant damage from the very beginning of the operation.

Several years passed, and in 2012 Hamas was surprised again following an upsurge in violence. Here, too, despite a period of tension between the sides, Hamas clearly did not expect Israel to take this step – otherwise, Jabari would of course not have traveled, completely exposed and vulnerable, in the streets of Gaza. In this case, it appears that Hamas had more reasons to predict, at least as a possible scenario, the possibility of an upsurge in violence on the Israeli side. Beyond the experience of deep defeat from Operation Cast Lead, which one might have expected would lead to greater caution, the Shalit deal had already been completed and fears of harm to the captured soldier were no longer a restraining factor for Israel. Furthermore, at that time, the Iron Dome system had already proved itself highly effective in preventing harm to the Israeli civilian population from rockets launched from the Gaza Strip, and the fear of intensive harm to civilians as a restraining consideration for Israel had also been greatly reduced.

On the other hand, at the time the operation began, Israel was at the height of an election campaign following the dissolution of the Knesset in October 2012, and was on its way to additional elections in January 2013. Here, too, Hamas should have learned from experience, as Operation Cast Lead also began during an elections period. Yet it is possible that the fact that a pro-Hamas Muslim Brotherhood regime headed by Mohamed Morsi had been in power in Egypt since August 2012 led Hamas to think that Israel would refrain from an operation in the geopolitical reality following the fall of Mubarak. Furthermore, Hamas estimated that Israel was not seeking a war at this time due to deception on the Israeli part, which, in the words of then-Minister of Defense Barak, was both on the open level and by more confidential means. The open steps include the visit by the Prime Minister and Minister of Defense to the northern border, at the height of tension and on the morning of al-Jabari’s assassination, in order to divert attention to the northern front. Add to that statements by Minister Benny Begin, a member of the nine-person forum entrusted with decisions on defense issues, that the government should exercise restraint, and that the right time should be chosen within a complex equation of considerations.[[48]](#footnote-55) Here, too, the deception, much of which was executed in the open source media, was effective and led to a temporary drop in Hamas preparedness and an incorrect estimation of Israel’s anticipated actions.

**Conclusion**

This article analyzes Hamas’s widespread use of OSINT to collect information about Israel throughout the years of conflict between the two sides. Intelligence collected in this manner has served Hamas for various purposes: to help execute terrorist attacks, to help the organization prepare for conflict with Israel, and to formulate a strategic picture about Israel and its plans for the Gaza Strip. Hamas takes advantage of the relative media openness in Israel as a democratic state, such that multiple and diverse defense information is open to all, and thereby receives valuable information in a readily available, simple, and cheap manner.

However, the article also demonstrates the intelligence limitations of Hamas in obtaining valuable information about strategic aspects and Israel’s decision-making processes. Hamas reliance on OSINT to estimate the likelihood that Israel would commence a wide-scale operation led to failures in predicting Israeli activity and caused significant harm to the organization. Israel identified this weakness, and took advantage of it in order to conduct successful acts of deception, enabling a surprise which translated into real achievements in the confrontation with Hamas.

The phenomenon described in this article testifies to the complexity of asymmetric warfare between state and non-state actors. Although in terms of “pure” military power the state player has a clear advantage and is the stronger player, it turns out that in other areas it is actually weaker. In the context of this article, the democratic state player suffers from inferiority in its ability to protect its secrets from exposure in open source media, in light of the characteristics of the regime and the society, which demand freedom of expression and respect for the public’s right to know. This inferiority translates into an advantage for the non-state actor in terms of the production of cheap, readily available, and high-quality intelligence, and requires great awareness on the part of the state actor about the intelligence aspect of open source media in order to protect information on the one hand and take advantage of opportunities provided by this phenomenon on the other.

Analysis of the non-state actor’s activity in a particular discipline, as conducted in this article, is one more layer in the developing infrastructure of research about non-state organization intelligence. As is increasingly clear, this is a phenomenon with unique characteristics; it requires continued research and development in order to be understood in full and to raise awareness about it in the academic, defense-institution, and public dialogue.

1. John A. Gentry, “Toward a Theory of Non-State Actors' Intelligence,” *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 2016, pp. 465-469. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Joshua Kilber, “Terrorist Group Structures: Balancing Security and Efficiency,” in Andrew Silke (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism,* London: Routledge, 2018, pp. 165-173. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ekaterina Stepanova, *Terrorism in Asymmetrical Conflict Ideological and Structural Aspects, (*New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 5-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Strachan-Morris, “Developing Theory on the Use of Intelligence by Non-state Actors: Five Case Studies on Insurgent Intelligence,” Intelligence and National Security, Vol. 34, No. 7, 2019, pp. 980-984. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Hamas's leaflets during the first Intifadha in Shaul Mishal and Reuben Aharoni, *Speaking Stones: Communiqués from the Intifada Underground* (New York: Syracuse University Press. 1994) pp. 201-286. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tomer Mozes & Gabriel Weimann, “The E-Marketing Strategy of Hamas,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2010), pp. 211-225. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a review and demonstration of the evolution of Hamas’ intelligence, see Netanel Flamer, “‘An Asymmetric Doubling’: A Non-State Actor Organization Using the Method of Doubling Sources Against a State-The Case of Palestinian Hamas Against Israeli Intelligence,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Steven D. Gibson, “Exploring the Role and Value of Open Source Intelligence,” in Christopher Hobbs, Matthew Moran & Daniel Salisbury (eds.), *Open Source Intelligence in the Twenty-First Century (*New York & Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Eliot A. Jardines, “Open Source Intelligence,” in Mark M. Lowenthal and Robert M. Clark (eds.), *The 5 Disciplines of Intelligence Collection,* California: CQ Press, 2016, pp. 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. HCJ 680/88, Schnitzer v. Chief Military Censor, 10 January 1989. <https://versa.cardozo.yu.edu/opinions/schnitzer-v-chief-military-censor> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Former Chief Censor of the State of Israel, Brig. Gen. (Res.) Sima Vaknin-Gil, “HaTsenzura BeYisrael – Hatamat Degem HaTsenzura VeHaTashtit Haẖukit LaNorma HaNoheget BeYisrael”, Mishpat UTsava 21, January 2015, especially pages 117-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Final Report of the Commission to Investigate the Lebanon Campaign in 2006* – Vol. 1, January 2008, p. 465 [Hebrew]. (Should this be transliterated? Who is the author?) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Author, *Final Report of the Commission to Investigate the Lebanon Campaign in 2006*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Aviva Shabi and Roni Shaked, *ẖamas: MeEmuna BeAlla LeDerekh haTeror*, (Jerusalem: Keter, 1994), p. 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Shabi and Shaked, *Hamas: MeEmuna BeAlla LeDerekh haTeror,* 174-175. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Zahir 'Ali Jabarin, *Hakaiat al-Dam min Sharaiin al-Qassam* (Dimashk: Muasasat falistin li-l-Thikafa, 2012), pp. 53, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Jamil Wadi, *Butulat al-Qassamia*, (['aza]: Kataaib al-Shahid 'Iz al-Din al-Qassam, 1993), pp. 5-7, 11, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Wadi, *Butulat al-Qassamia,* 98-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Muhammad 'Arman, *Muhandesu al-Maut* (n.p.: Dar al-Nur Li-l-nashr, 2007), pp. 13-14, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 'Arman, *Muhandesu al-Maut,* 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Al-Maktab al-I'lami liKataaib al-Qassam, “I'tarafat sahayonia Bi-al-Fashal amam al-Qassam,” *Humat al-Thughur*, Vol. 1, December 20, 2004, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Al-Maktab al-I'lami liKataaib al-Qassam, “I'tarafat sahayonia – Haarits: al-Kyan 'ala Shafa Harb Ahlia Bisabab Khutat al-Infisal,” *Humat al-Thughur*, Vol. 3, January 13, 2005, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Al-Maktab al-I'lami liKataaib al-Qassam, “Khabar al-usbu': Intihar Jundi Sahayoni fi Qa'idatihi al-'askaria,” *Humat al-Thughur*, Vol. 3, January 13, 2005, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Sliman al-Shafai’, *HaShavui – Mabat Mi’Aza* (Tel Aviv: Miskal, 2009), p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Daairat al-Istakhbarat al-'askari fi Kataaib al-Shahid 'Iz al-Din al-Qassam, “Shuun Israailiah,” issue 36, February 18, 2010, back cover. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Daairat al-Istakhbarat al-'askari fi Kataaib al-Shahid 'Iz al-Din al-Qassam, “Shuun Israailiah,” 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
27. Daairat al-Istakhbarat al-'askari fi Kataaib al-Shahid 'Iz al-Din al-Qassam, “Shuun Israailiah,” 3-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
28. Daairat al-Istakhbarat al-'askari fi Kataaib al-Shahid 'Iz al-Din al-Qassam, “Shuun Israailiah,” 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
29. Daairat al-Istakhbarat al-'askari fi Kataaib al-Shahid 'Iz al-Din al-Qassam, “ 'ala Hamish al-Ahdath,” April 7, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
30. al-Shafai’, *HaShavui – Mabat Mi’Aza*,184-185. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
31. Daairat al-Istakhbarat al-'askari fi Kataaib al-Shahid 'Iz al-Din al-Qassam, "al-Mashhad al-Israaili 184," [November 2011]. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
32. Daairat al-Istakhbarat al-'askari fi Kataaib al-Shahid 'Iz al-Din al-Qassam, “al-Mashhad al-Israaili 184.” [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
33. Al-Maktab al-I'lami liKataaib al-Qassam, “al-Mashhad al-Israaili 264,” [July 2013].

    Broadcasts produced by the Propaganda Office are edited differently, such that each article is covered separately. Therefore, in the references for the next five broadcasts, no time range is cited for the information, since it is not a film as in the previous format. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
34. “Sedaa al-Shari',” Channel *al-Aqsa,* March 25, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
35. Channel *al-Aqsa,* May 13, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
36. Channel *al-Aqsa,* September 15, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
37. *Fox News*, December 6, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
38. For background on the operation and the events of its first day, see: Terrorist Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Center, “Mivtsa ‘Oferet Yetsuka – ‘Idkun Mispar 1,” December 28, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
39. Shlomi Adler, *Lehakir et Haẖamas* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2012), *297.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
40. Adler, *Lehakir et Haẖamas* 290, 295. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
41. Adler, *Lehakir et Haẖamas* 296. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
42. Yoram Cohen and Jeffrey White, “Hamas in Combat: The Military Performance of the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy,* Policy Focus No. 97*, October 2009, pp. 5-6.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
43. Yoav Galant in a lecture at the Fisher Institute: “Aluf (Mil) Yoav Galant ‘Al Mivtsa ‘Oferet Yetsuka,” July 7, 2012 13:20 – 15:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
44. Gabi Ashkenazi in a lecture at the Fisher Institute: “Rav Aluf Gabi Ashkenazi ‘Al Mivtsa ‘Oferet Yetsuka,” July 7, 2012 17:45 – 19:25 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5XsEyYV-nE>. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
45. Galant, ‘Al Mivtsa ‘Oferet Yetsuka, 27:52 – 28:31. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
46. Ashkenazi, ‘Al Mivtsa ‘Oferet Yetsuka, 17:45 – 19:25; Barak Ravid, “’Oferet Yetsuka: *ẖashayut Honaah VeHata’ya, Kakh Tatsa LaDerekh HaMivtsa”, Haaretz,* December 27, 2008.<https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.1369969> [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
47. Galant, ‘Al Mivtsa ‘Oferet Yetsuka’, 28:35 – 29:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
48. Testimony by Ashraf Al-Ajami, former Minister for Prisoner Affairs in the PA, and Ehud Barak, Minister of Defense during the operation, quoted in a film by Nati Diner and Ori Bar On, *Shamayim BeTseva Adom –*Ma’arekhet Shlishit, Matana MiShamayim Episode 3, Kan Channel 11, broadcast in August 2020, 48:50 – 51:06 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gA_MJYb3zdE>; Udi Segal, “*Mitaẖat LePnai HaShetaẖ: Targil HaHat’aya HaYisraeli SheKadam LaMivtsa Be’Aza,”* Channel 12 News, November 15, 2012, <https://www.mako.co.il/news-military/security/Article-812624f87c00b31004.htm>*;* Avner Golub, *“HaHatraah HaYisraelit: Matara SheHusga?”* in Shlomo Brom (ed.), *LeAẖar Mivtsa “’Amud ‘Anan,*” INSS, December 2012, 22-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)