

Twilight Guardians

Covert Operations and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

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In every conflict in human history, from minor skirmishes to wars that change the destiny of humanity, information is vital. In conflicts which rage through the Middle East—through the hearts and minds of the people—knowledge means the difference between life and death. The conflict fought on the ground belays an even deeper conflict; one fought across continent and culture. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict these covert actors take on many forms. The Palestinian intelligence organizations—functioning as a wide collection of different people and groups—siphon intelligence back to Palestinian paramilitary organizations which then strike against Israel. The Israeli response to such a threat is Mossad¹; its secretive foreign Intelligence service.

Mossad is tasked with foreign intelligence, and operates outside of the state of Israel—Internal affairs are handled by Shin Bet.² Both organizations work in cooperation with the Israeli Defense Forces to provide for the security of the Israeli people and the apparatus of government. Aside from Intelligence gathering, Mossad has additional roles. Historically, it assisted in the immigration of Jews to Israel from countries that prohibited or limited immigration, and carried out covert actions such as assassination.

Mossad's role is deeply engrained with Zionist ideology. Zionism at its core is the expression of Jewish nationalism, and like all previous forms of nationalism, includes certain hereditary elements. It lives on the belief of community and close ties with a certain group. However, it transcends ethnic identity unlike most forms of nationalism. To be a Zionist is to belong to a confessional group—a

group where one's ethnic origin does not come into effect. The Zionist movement has existed for as long as there has been a Jewish religion. However, it has become more popular in the early stages of the 20th century where it had attracted popular attention at the end of the first world war³ and again at the end of the second world war with the creation of Israel—a manifestation of the Zionist movement. It is important to note that Zionism, while being nationalist, is not committed to a specific ideological backdrop, but instead is rife with debates over various tenets of social, cultural, and political thought.⁴ It would be more accurate to describe Zionism as a belief in a Jewish Civilization, rather than a Jewish nation.

To state the obvious, Mossad is a committed Zionist organization and exists only to further the Zionist agenda. It kills in the name of Zionism, it steals in the name of Zionism, and it exists only to perpetuate the Zionist State of Israel.

Like virtually every other spy agency in the world, Mossad uses whatever tools it can to accomplish its mission, and true to many popularized movies, Mossad is not above using passports and identification of its allies to mask its movements. Canada plays a central role in the intelligence community; not only is CSIS a valued organization which passes information throughout the world to other spy agencies, but the Canadian passport is a favourite of covert operatives' world-wide. The assassin of Leon Trotsky had one; the assassin of Martin Luther King Jr had one; a member of Al-Qaeda was caught with one; and members of Mossad use Canadian passports regularly⁵.

Mossad uses varied forms of assassination—from shootings to bombings—to do what is necessary to safeguard Israel. During the highly popularized hunt for Black September, the Palestinian terrorist group responsible for killing the Israeli Olympians in the 1972 Munich Olympics, Mossad used a

³ Balfour Declaration

⁴ As evidenced by the writings Martin Burber, Issah Berlin, and Gershon Scholem.

⁵ Hewitt, Steve. The Secret History of the Canadian Passport. Beaver 2004 84(2): 40-42 3p.

¹ Translates from Hebrew to English as "The Institute"

² Translates from Hebrew to English as "The Unseen Shield"

variety of methods to kill its targets. In one case it used a bomb under the bed of a terrorist who was staying in a hotel. Others were gunned down.⁶ Aside from bombing and shooting targets, Mossad agents have favoured poisons to carry out their missions.

In 1997 Mossad attempted to assassinate Khaled Meshal, one of the leaders in the militant Islamic movement Hamas, by way of poison. The Mossad agents were caught in Jordan with Canadian passports after successfully poisoning the leader. However, when they were caught the international community was placed into an uproar, the Canadian government threatened to pull its ambassador from Tel Aviv, the United States secured the antidote for Meshal, and the Israeli government was forced to release the founder of Hamas, Sheik Ahmed Yassin.⁷ Out of this failure for Mossad, Jordan's King Hussien was to benefit the most. The successful negotiation of the aforementioned deal would provide the King with the ability to secure domestic relations and further his own rule of Jordan.⁸

Sources on Mossad's victories can be hard to find, as is proven by the above, a source only admitted to 20 years after the event occurred. What is more common is the publication of embarrassments for the Israeli spy agency. The backlash from such failures can have unforeseen consequences. In the poisoning of Meshal, Israel acknowledged that Hamas was a serious threat to Israel's security. The attempts on Meshal's life caused Hamas to become a serious rival to Arafat's PLO and become a new

voice for the Palestinian cause; one that endures to this day.⁹

The effectiveness of assassinations has always been under debate. If you chop off the head of a snake will the body die? Or will two heads grow in the place of the one? Do assassinations embolden the movement and turn the leaders into martyrs? Or does the assassination of a leader cause the

movement to collapse? There are many factors which ought to be taken into consideration when making the decision to assassinate someone. The type of organization that they work for; the views of the organization on martyrdom; the popularity of the organization and how the death of a leader will be received on the international stage are all important considerations before the assassination is used.¹⁰

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There are generally two types of leaders in an organization. The prophetic and the administrative.¹¹ The prophetic leaders are those that form the spiritual basis for the movement; administrative leaders handle the organization of the movement, and coordinate attacks. It is possible to be a prophetic leader and an administrative leader at the same time.

Administrative leaders “excel at the critical but quotidian tasks of Institution building, internal communication, and alliance formation.”¹² The work of an administrative leader is very valuable to the organization, but is often overlooked in comparison to the more public role of the prophetic leaders. The administrative leader will also wield less individual authority than the prophetic leader, but in contrast will establish

⁶ Hunting Black September: Now it can be told. Newsweek; 12/6/93, Vol. 122 Issue 23, p35, 1/4p.

⁷ Cooperman, Alan and Carey W. English. .S. News & World Report; 10/13/97, Vol. 123 Issue 14, p42.

⁸ Albreclit, Kirk and Neal Sandler. A FIASCO IN THE MIDEAST-FOR EVERYONE BUT KING HUSSEIN. BusinessWeek; 10/20/97 Issue 3549, p62-62

⁹ McGeough, Paul. Kill Khalid: The Failed Mossad Assassination of Khalid Mishal and the Rise of Hamas. New Press. 2009.

¹⁰ Bob, Clifford and Sharon Erickson Nepstad. *Kill a Leader, Murder a Movement?*. American Behavioral Scientist. Vol. 50 Issue. 10, June 07, 1372

¹¹ *ibid*, 1376

¹² *ibid*, 1378

institutional arrangements which will create future leaders more readily.¹³

A prophetic leader will be one who provides vision to a movement; one who can speak persuasively about a movement and its goals. The prophetic leader will recruit the masses into the organization and use their support to effect change far above what could normally be achieved by the organization. In effect, a prophetic leader will add charisma to the organization.¹⁴

In the Middle East, the most common targets for Mossad assassinations are religious organizations which support the Palestinian movement. With the organizations centred on religion, a power motivator itself, the risk of increasing the strength of the movement is greater. With this in mind it would be prudent to focus the assassinations of Palestinian leaders to administration leaders, rather than the prophetic ones. However, this proves to be difficult as most of the administrative leaders are also prophetic leaders—or at the very least, they are members of the clergy.

When Mossad assassinates a bomb maker, or a Hamas spymaster, they are also assassinating a religious leader. A leader whose force of personality is required to hold the movement together will be a more effective target than one that is already cohesive.¹⁵ The movement to establish a Palestinian homeland is not reliant on a single personality to see it through the days—its membership is cohesive and ideologically independent from a single person. This makes assassinating leaders of the movement virtually pointless without additional measures being taken. The usual side-dish to assassination is repression of the population by overwhelming force.¹⁶ However, if the repression is not enough then it permits the organization to quickly reorganize, and to continue to act.¹⁷

Organizations like Hamas are perhaps the worst sort to practice assassinations. The leadership is more symbolic than effective. There are vast networks of supporting organizations which will provide funding, arms, and training to the organization. They are backed by religious fundamentalism, and they share in a common culture. The effectiveness of assassination is reduced to removing individual skill sets and talents that the organization can easily replace. For every Khalid Meshal that Israel succeeds in killing, two more are being groomed to replace him.

When talking about assassinating someone, the moral implications are always a concern. From a legal standpoint, international law provides for the assassination of combatants. The difficulty comes in identifying who are combatants and who are not. In recent years what defines a non-combatant has been narrowed, and the definition of a combatant expended. Is someone who simply finances terrorists a terrorist themselves? Should they be eligible for assassination? In terms of punishment the selective targeting of terrorist leaders is more equitable than collective punishment of a population. If a small subset of people is what is causing problems for the Israeli government, it makes sense for Mossad to target that subset, rather than impose harsh restrictions on the entire population.¹⁸ The United States has repeatedly used assassination as a tactic during war.¹⁹ Were assassination prohibited under international law it would be difficult, if not impossible, to conduct warfare on any level.

The main moral issues revolve around the acceptable collateral damage. Is it acceptable to bomb a car containing your target even though the explosion would surely kill the driver and any other passengers? The key in evaluating the moral stance of assassination is the degree of civilian casualties incurred while removing the target. The more civilians dead during the assassination, the less

¹³ *ibid* 1378

¹⁴ *ibid*, 1378

¹⁵ *ibid*, 1378

¹⁶ *ibid*, 1378

¹⁷ Bob, Clifford and Sharon Erickson Nepstad. *Kill a Leader, Murder a Movement?*. American Behavioral Scientist. Vol. 50 Issue. 10, June 07, 1378

¹⁸ Dershowitz, Alan. *The Case for Israel*. Willy & Sons. New Jersey: 2003. 173

¹⁹ *ibid*, 174

moral that the assassination becomes. While there is no arbitrary amount 'dead civilians' that need to be accumulated to make an assassination wrong, at best the civilian casualties must be kept to a minimum.

In addition to the worries about the moral character of assassinations and the civilian casualties associated there is also a worry about the inherent justice involved. When a target is selected for assassination, there is no recourse to appeal the decision, and often there is no open trial for the target. The target does not get to plead his case why they should not be assassinated. Instead a government official simply signs the death warrant for an individual, and that individual is killed. Can such a system be in accordance with justice?²⁰

Democracies in general, turn their collective backs on those who make frequent use of assassinations, or those who have been perceived of dominating their neighbors through military means. Israel finds itself in a strange position, while the other democratic nations are more than willing to use the same tactics and methods that Israel has been forced to use, they condemn Israel for their need to constantly use assassination and military occupations.

Israel has been, essentially, at a state of war since its inception. Every few years there is another threat to Israel, another war, another attack. This has provided many Israeli's with a siege mentality and a distinct sense of paranoia—albeit justified. When speaking on the most recent conflict in Lebanon, former chief of Mossad Efraim Halevy was questioned about the frustration that Israeli's are feeling about the performance of their military and intelligence forces. Halevy replied that the goal of removing Hezbollah completely from Lebanon was never a capability of the Israeli military, and that success can be measured in many different ways.

He drew upon the previous experiences of Yom Kippur and the Six Day War to provide a contrast to the engagements in Lebanon.²¹

When questioned about the ongoing conflict with Lebanon, Halevy stated that he believed that it would only be a matter of time until hostilities resumed with Lebanon. This is indicative of Israeli relations with its neighbors. Each conflict is viewed as a prelude to the next major conflict in the region in a never ending cycle. Halevy was correct when he said that all Hezbollah had to do was survive an

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encounter with Israel, whereas Israel would have to completely eliminate the entity of Hezbollah's membership as well as any infrastructure that they have accumulated in the region.²² At the end of the day the power of Mossad and the Israeli Defense forces seem to be unable to effect real, positive change for Israel.

The above analysis highlights one of the major themes in Middle-Eastern politics that is often untouched when examining the situation. The Israeli's have powerful emotional motivations for the actions that they take. Israel feels abandoned by the West, abandoned by the rules of international law, and under siege by its neighbors. These factors contribute to a culture of terror within Israel. The actions of the Israeli government may seem irrational to the outside observer, but it must be understood in the terms of those who are part of that culture. Many horrible acts throughout history have been justified on the irrationality of the other. In this conflict it is important to understand the

²⁰ *ibid*, 175

²¹ Frum, Linda. "Former Mossad Chief Efraim Halevy talks to Linda Frum about the war in Lebanon and who won and who lost" *Maclean's*; 9/4/2006, Vol. 119 Issue 35, p16-17. 2p

²² *ibid*

powerful emotional, cultural, and historical forces which drive the conflict.²³

The emotional factor is something which permeates the Israeli subconscious mind. It's not something that takes a forefront in the minds of Israeli leaders and the average citizen. Instead it is a backdrop to the actions that they take and the worldview that they hold. When attacked by suicide bombers, or rockets that are blasted into Israeli settlements, a response is necessary by the government. The emotional factor plays a critical role in that decision making process. By feeling that they are surrounded by enemies who do not wish to come to an agreeable solution²⁴, Israel feels that it must use force to solve its problems. Sometimes that force is soldiers invading enemy territory, and sometimes that force is Mossad, working behind the scenes to disable international infrastructure and resources that are used to attack Israel. Sometimes, it is both.

It is clear that Mossad plays a vital role of the defense of Israel, and the security forces of the West, but the extent of its long term ability to help any given situation is uncertain. In a perfect world, its services would not be needed, but the conflicts that consume the Middle East are far from simple, and it is doubtful that they will ever be resolved. Until such a solution can be found, however, Mossad will be the silent guardian of Israel. It will ensure that Israelis live to see another day, and that the dream that is Israel is never extinguished.

²³ Moisi, Dominique. "The Geopolitics of Emotion." Doubleday: Toronto. 2009. 128-130

²⁴ I think it is critical to point out, at this point, that an agreeable solution is a *subjective* term. What amounts to agreeable is in the minds of the Israeli's and the Palestinians. What we think is a proper solution here in the West has no bearing on the situation from the perspective of those affected by the conflict.

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