The Angel: The Egyptian Spy Who Saved Israel

Uri Bar-Joseph (HarperCollins, 2016), 384 pp., cast of characters, notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Thomas G. Coffey

The first thing that jumps out about *The Angel* is the surprisingly short "Cast of Characters" section, given the book covers a major Middle Eastern war and its chief protagonists. It all makes sense, however, if your subject is a sensitive spy, whose reports were strictly disseminated and whose identity was a closely-guarded secret. The hush-hush nature of this spy's life meant author Uri Bar-Joseph had his work cut out for him in order to penetrate this need-to-know world and get at the truth. Bar-Joseph does so in a superb fashion, arguing methodically and convincingly that this individual was an authentic spy for the Israelis—not a double agent for the Egyptians—and that his intelligence "saved" Israel from being overrun on two fronts during the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War.

Bar-Joseph spends much of the book addressing whether "the Angel" was genuine. After all, Ashraf Marwan (a.k.a. "the Angel") was the son-in-law of Egyptian President Gamal Nasser and a close adviser to President Sadat. Marwan started in 1970 as a "walk-in," offering Egypt's order-of-battle to Mossad officers in London. A skeptic could not be blamed for thinking there was something too good to be true about Marwan, but the author makes a good case that sometimes intelligence services get lucky.

Marwan had a number of motives to spy for Israel, among them the desire for revenge and a need for money. First, Nasser disliked Marwan and tried to stop his daughter from marrying the ne'er-do-well. Marwan was assigned to work in the president's office but in a sidelined capacity where he could be watched. Not surprisingly, Marwan resented this second class status. Marwan also had a taste for good things that the corruption in high Egyptian office would normally afford him. Not so with Nasser, who was adamant about maintaining a spare lifestyle so his family would be beyond reproach.

To explain why Marwan continued to spy after Nasser died and during the period he worked for Sadat (who looked the other way when it came to corruption), Bar-Joseph raises complicated and less than convincing motives, including Marwan's desire to be aligned with a winner after the resounding Israeli victory in the 1967 Six Day War and his need to influence events. It may simply have been that Marwan had a problem with authority. Despite all Sadat had done for him (including being designated a key interlocutor with Libya and Saudi Arabia, in a show of Sadat's appreciation for Marwan's loyalty in helping to quash an attempted takeover of the government), Marwan was perceived by his Mossad handlers as harboring disdain for the Egyptian leader.

Beyond motive, Bar-Joseph stresses three other reasons Marwan was not a double agent. First, he argues the Egyptians were not any good at these operations, and that only the Soviets and British had the knack for them. Of course, Egypt has long been under the influence of the British and then the Soviets, making it entirely possible the Mukhabarat picked up a thing or two about running these agents. On stronger ground, Bar-Joseph notes it would have been risky for such a high level and connected Egyptian official to be involved in such an operation: if discovered and subsequently imprisoned, Marwan would have a lot to tell the Israelis about Egyptian policy and its top officials.

Most persuasively, Bar-Joseph argues the nature of the intelligence Marwan gave the Israelis was simply too destructive of Egyptian interests. From the start, the Angel gave Israel not "seed corn"—intelligence that was true but of marginal consequence—but highly damaging, order-of-battle information. As the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War would eventually show, Marwan provided accurate intelligence about how the Egyptian military would conduct itself and the signs to watch for in its battle preparations a year before the attack, giving Israel plenty of time to ready its defenses.

Of the possibility that Marwan instead was a double agent—namely that his intelligence about the upcoming start of the Yom Kippur War was late, flawed, and of little practical use—Bar-Joseph offers a convincing defense.

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Marwan was not in Egypt when Sadat gave the general order to attack in three days, and thus was unaware of the order. When he discovered through an acquaintance that Egyptian airliners were to be rerouted to Libya, Marwan knew from his understanding of the battle plans that war was imminent, and he immediately contacted his Mossad handlers. He gave an incorrect start time (dusk) for the invasion, but that was only because he did not know Sadat had made a compromise with Syrian President Hafez Assad, who wanted to start the attack at dawn, agreeing upon a militarily-unsound 2:00 p.m., broad daylight, commencement of hostilities. Even this eleventh-hour warning allowed some mobilization and call-up of reserves four hours before the fighting, enough time for Israeli defense forces to prevent a takeover of the Golan Heights.

The Angel is more than a detective story seeking to uncover the truth surrounding Marwan. It is equally a case study, filled with telling details about the traps and snags that confronted the Israeli intelligence and policymaking communities. Some of these details will sound familiar to students of intelligence history:

- Israeli military analysts fully expected Egypt to only wage a war that was winnable and aimed at retaking the entire Sinai Peninsula. Marwan himself cemented this thinking, providing the Israelis with order-of-battle plans, dubbed "the Concept," that noted Egypt would not strike across the Suez Canal and try to retake the Sinai Peninsula without first neutralizing Israeli's command of the skies. When Marwan later reported, accurately, that Sadat had changed his mind, instead choosing to fight a limited war without the need for sophisticated jet fighters and SCUD missiles, Israeli military intelligence officers refused to believe him.

- Israel had other sources on Egypt, but Marwan was the most highly-placed. Mossad chief Zamir and Israeli Military Intelligence chief Zeira limited distribution of Marwan's reports to Prime Minister Golda Meir's inner circle; for intelligence analysts, the reports were broken down, without identifying the source, into separate issue areas and distributed. This procedure helped protect the source but also undercut analysts' ability to understand the credibility and weight of the intelligence.

- "Crying wolf" was a major concern, given the huge cost of mobilization to counter threats on many fronts. When Marwan gave precise—but ultimately incorrect—warning about an Egyptian attack in the spring of 1973, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan stopped putting much stock in these reports.

- Divisions in the intelligence ranks contributed to Israel's being less prepared to halt a Sinai crossing than a Syrian takeover of the Golan Heights. After Prime Minister Meir gave mobilization orders, having received Marwan's convincing intelligence about an imminent attack, the director of military intelligence told the military commander in the Sinai that he still didn't believe Sadat would fight a limited war. As a result, this commander did not take the orders seriously; however, his counterpart in the north did—and took action. This saved Israel from having to begin a major and bloody campaign to retake the Golan Heights, and freed up forces to counterattack in the Sinai desert, where Egyptian forces crossed the Suez Canal and made major inroads into the Sinai Peninsula.

Bar-Joseph says the CIA did receive some of Marwan's reporting, but it went in a way that made it very difficult to identify the source. Some of the reporting was handed personally to Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms. Such intelligence sharing had its uses. Meir showed President Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger that Marwan had obtained minutes of a meeting between Sadat and Soviet leader Leonard Brezhnev. She reported to the Mossad chief that this act of sharing deeply impressed both Nixon and Kissinger and that the president became willing to sell Israel additional F-4 Phantoms.

The Yom Kippur War came as a surprise to the US Intelligence Community, where analysts shared the consensus Israeli Military Intelligence view that a major Egyptian attack was unlikely in 1973. However, US analysts did at least entertain the possibility that Sadat had adopted the more limited war aims about which Marwan had warned the Israelis. In the wake of the heightened Egyptian military preparations and false alarm of a spring attack, analysts in a May 1973 estimate—the most prescient piece of intelligence analysis before the war—spelled out the factors bearing on an Egyptian decision to invade:

> *Sadat's new campaign of threats to renew hostilities . . . are consistent both with preparations to fight Israel and with political/psychological efforts*

> *to stimulate diplomatic activity . . . If Sadat is once again disappointed, the temptation to resort to military action in order to force the US hand might prove irresistible…Sadat himself could be trapped by building an atmosphere of crisis to the point where failure to act militarily would seem to him more dangerous to his own hold on power than attacking and taking the consequences.*[a]

Still, like their Israeli counterparts, US analysts as late as October could not shake the compelling logic of Egypt's only fighting a winnable war, which they were in no position to launch. Up to the time of the attack, analysts recognized Egypt and Syria military moves as looking "very ominous" but "the whole thrust of President Sadat's activities since last spring has been in the direction of bringing moral, political, and economic forces to bear on Israel in tacit acknowledgment of Arab unreadiness for war."[b] Only two days before the attack, analysts continued to believe "an outbreak of hostilities remains unlikely for the immediate future."[c]

A postmortem ordered by Director William Colby poured it on a bit thick: "A thorough search of the material issued prior to 6 October has failed to turn up any official statement from any office or committee responsible for producing finished, analytical intelligence which contributed anything resembling a warning, qua warning. . . . There was an intelligence failure . . . the principal conclusions concerning the imminence of hostilities reached and reiterated by those responsible for intelligence analysis were—quite simply, obviously, and starkly—wrong."[d] The intelligence failure badly undercut Colby's start as director, and he instituted some policy changes to get things back on track. He set in motion initiatives that led ultimately to the creation of a special assistant to the director for strategic warning. To challenge orthodox thinking on some issues, he created a devil's advocacy system in the production of finished intelligence. He overhauled the watch system to include more analysts and experienced officers. Lastly, he created Alert Memoranda to provide more timely warning for high level policymakers.

In the end, this was an Israeli and Egyptian affair, and both governments seemed to want it to go away. The Israeli commission looking into the surprise came down hard on Military Intelligence and its director, who, decades later, defended himself to historians by blaming the surprise attack on Egypt's having a double agent who deceived the Mossad. He gave away Marwan's identity by allowing readers to "put two and two together." The Mossad decided to let it go, not wanting to indirectly confirm Marwan's identity by taking action against the officer, and in the process publicize its inability to protect its sources. Bar-Joseph is convinced that when the Mubarak government found out about Marwan's betrayal, its security officers in June 2007 forced him to jump to his death or pushed him off a balcony. Much of the Egyptian upper echelon attended Marwan's funeral, even declaring publicly, "He was a true patriot of his country." (2) Despite this attempt to keep up appearances, Bar-Joseph contends the Egyptians knew full well how far this angel had fallen.

a. United States Intelligence Community, *NIE 30-73: Possible Egyptian-Israeli Hostilities—Determinants and Implications*, 17 May 1973 (Approved for Release: 4 September 2012).
b. Harold P. Ford, "William E. Colby as Director of Central Intelligence, 1973–1976," in *President Nixon and the Role of Intelligence in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War*, (CIA Historical Collections Division, CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, The Richard Nixon Foundation, and The Richard Nixon Presidential Library & Museum, 30 January 2013), 17. Available online at https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/international-relations/arab-israeli-war/nixon-arab-isaeli-war.pdf.
c. DCI memorandum—prepared by the Intelligence Community Staff, "The Performance of the Intelligence Community before the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973: A Preliminary Post-Mortem Report," 20 December 1973, 2.
d. Ibid.

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