

## ***Intelligence in Public Media***

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### ***The English Teacher***

Yiftach Reicher Atir (Penguin, 2013), 260 pp.

### ***Reviewed by John Kavanagh***

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*The English Teacher* is the fourth novel written by Yiftach Reicher Atir, who retired in 1996 from the Israeli army with the rank of major general. Each of his novels depicts intelligence operations. *The English Teacher* tells the story of Rachel, an experienced and resourceful deep cover Mossad operative who serves for two decades in several Middle Eastern countries, the specific locations variously described as “a large Arab city,” “an Arab capital,” or, simply, “enemy territory.” During a between-postings hiatus in London, periodic administrative contact with her goes unanswered—Rachel has disappeared. Frantic efforts to find her fail, but the few faint traces of her departure eliminate foul play or accident and point to an unavoidable conclusion: Rachel has dropped out and is on the run, her motivation unknown, and her decades’-long honing of the arts of deceit and deception will pose a serious challenge to her increasingly desperate Mossad superiors.

Mossad reaches out to Rachel’s retired handler, Ehud, who trained Rachel and guided her throughout her career via a series of brief, carefully managed third country meetings held under the auspices of her taking leave from her overseas “English teacher” duties to visit family in London. During these contacts Ehud diligently adhered to the professional rituals of agent handling, debriefing Rachel on her intelligence activities, refining her collection tasking, and—of paramount importance—assuring himself that she was vigilantly focused on maintaining her cover, fitting plausibly, seamlessly into her daily routine and interactions with coworkers and acquaintances. Rachel must do nothing to arouse curiosity or suspicion; her life depended on it.

In their relationship, Ehud was particularly sensitive to personal issues he was reluctant to bring up, as he knew owing to Rachel’s professionalism and root patriotism she would not acknowledge the strains her stress-filled, dangerous profession imposed. These were the costs Ehud knew Rachel was paying for her double life—the isolation, the enervating tension of living a lie, the constant

balancing of aggressive action and sensible caution, and always, the dread of exposure.

Called back to manage Mossad’s search for Rachel, Ehud is paired with Joe, a retired senior manager and Ehud’s former boss. Together the two take back-bearings on Rachel’s career and try to piece together a possible motive for her action. Mossad superiors organize an intense international hunt for her. Rachel had been involved in a number of sensitive activities, including lethal operations. Ehud and Joe struggle to understand why she is running and where she might go under the mounting, near panicked pressure of Mossad’s bottom line calculation—“she knows so much.”

Atir thus sets up an effective parallel narrative structure. We follow Rachel on her escape route and share her inner monologue as she reviews her career. Detailed are several exciting episodes displaying Rachel’s calculated daring in tight situations and her “in the moment” creativity when faced with an opportunity to collect valuable intelligence, by bluffing her way into a guarded restricted site, or manipulating a personal relationship with a prescribed target, a chance acquaintance, and in one instance, with a lover. We listen to Rachel’s inner tactical debates as, on her own with no on-site guidance, she measures each operational step towards a crucial risk versus gain decision. Unable to clearly estimate what gain her collected data may provide for her service, the daily risks she faces simply living where she does is never out of her mind.

Separately, we audit Ehud and Joe’s lengthy deliberations as they struggle to understand Rachel’s motivations. Their musings on Mossad’s selection and management of deep cover operatives is particularly interesting, and in the English translation takes on an elegiac tone: “In this country there are millions of Zionists, many of them are multilingual, but someone who’s prepared to volunteer is exceptional. There’s something special in him besides the ability to assume another persona and undertake opera-

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tions. He needs us. That's the point. He needs us the way we need him." In this section we begin to recognize the subliminal fixation Ehud shares with Rachel regarding the "why" in her character, the "need" that led her to volunteer and succeed as a deep cover operative—but from the "handler" perspective. It becomes clear that, while directing Rachel over the years to deployment after deployment, country after country, Ehud himself was not immune to the mounting tension, to the accumulating life-risking choices. These he could make as a decisive professional, but not as a man emotionally detached from the woman he dispatched to hostile territory. Rachel was

not a chess piece, not a simple "asset", but a colleague and friend.

*The English Teacher* rewards the general reader with an enticing premise, well drawn episodes depicting realistic, exciting renderings of intelligence methods, and a final, satisfying unraveling of Rachel's reasons for stepping away from the secret world. For the intelligence professional, Atir raises and invites serious debate on the issues we and our foreign counterparts everywhere ponder. In that vein, I believe Atir's fourth book about our profession deserves the positive description, "thought provoking."

