

Intelligence in Public Media

Harpoon: Inside the Covert War against Terrorism's Money Masters

Nitsana Darshan-Leitner and Samuel Katz (Hatchette Books, 2017), 336 pp., photographs, notes, index.

Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel's Targeted Assassinations

Ronen Bergman (Random House, 2018), 753 pp., photographs, notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by J. R. Seeger

Since its founding in 1948, Israel has been known for its successful intelligence and special operations, beginning with the dramatic kidnapping of Adolf Eichmann in Brazil in 1960, through the 1976 special operations raid to free the hostages in Entebbe, Uganda and continuing well into the 21st century. As with every major intelligence service, most of the successes in Israeli intelligence have been hidden from the public through secrecy laws and an unwillingness on the part of members of the various Israeli services to speak to the press or to write tell-all memoirs. Balanced against this shroud of secrecy has been an effective effort on the part of multiple Israeli governments to carefully leak stories of their own ingenuity to gain political support for the state of Israel at home and abroad. The government of Israel also selectively leaks material—especially on their assassination programs—as a deterrent, so the enemies of Israel know they face an implacable foe. At the same time and for the sake of international audiences, Israel maintains “plausible deniability” in their most enterprising intelligence and special operations.

While Israeli military history is filled with audacious conventional air force and army operations in their various wars against the Arab states, the best known of Israeli military operations have been counterterrorism operations. By the early 1960s, the Israelis were defending against a series of Palestinian terrorist organizations—well funded by hostile Arab states and well trained by those same states, as well as by Warsaw Pact countries, most especially the German Democratic Republic. Palestinian terrorist groups including the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Abu Nidal Organization (ANO) started out conducting small scale raids into Israel, followed by bombing campaigns, hijacking aircraft, and, the most public of all Palestinian terrorist efforts, the murder of members of the Israeli Olympic team in Munich in September 1972.

Palestinian terrorist organizations continued to threaten Israel during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

By the mid-1980s, though, Israel was facing yet another terrorist foe—the Lebanese Shia organization known as Hizballah (the Party of God). Funded by the Islamic Republic of Iran and trained and advised by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Hizballah became a worldwide threat to Israel and Israeli citizens. The end of the Cold War reduced (but did not eliminate) the Palestinian threat to Israel as the radical, secular terrorist networks lost their funding and support and international counterterrorism operations expanded and improved. In April 1994, the Islamic Resistance Group (HAMAS) conducted its first suicide bombing in Israel. Palestinian terrorism took on a new face, with young recruits willing to commit suicide to attack Israeli citizens inside Israel itself.

In this century, Israel continues to face the HAMAS Palestinian terrorist enterprise, an organization that shares religious and political doctrine with the hardline factions of the Muslim Brotherhood, such as the former Egyptian Islamic Jihad. The threat to Israel from Hizballah has never ended and, arguably has become much more serious. Over the last two decades, Hizballah transformed from a simple terrorist/guerrilla group with small arms and bombs to a hybrid warfare adversary with sophisticated weapons and electronics. In sum, Israel has suffered from terrorism, suffers from terrorism, and likely will continue to suffer from terrorism in the future until and unless there is a dramatic change in both the terrorist enterprises of the region and the regional players who remain Israel's adversaries.

There are certainly political choices that successive Israeli governments have made over the last quarter century that have exacerbated the hostilities with the Palestinians and the Lebanese Shia, and have had the unintended consequence of assisting and expanding terrorist

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recruitment in the region. However, even without these decisions, any unbiased analysis would argue that terrorist attacks in Israel and against Israelis on the world stage would have continued even if the Israelis had done everything possible to end the conflict with the Palestinians and the Lebanese Shia.

The two books in this review address in detail the Israeli intelligence and special operations responses to the threat of terrorism. In *Harpoon*, Nitsana Darshan-Leitner and Samuel Katz outline the efforts of the Israeli intelligence and special operations services to disrupt the financial infrastructure of terrorist groups. The book focuses the greatest attention on early work against the Palestinian terrorist groups who were focused on the destruction of Israel, and the subsequent, expanded work in disrupting Hizballah and other terrorist financial efforts.

According to the authors, at the center of this effort was an Israeli named Meir Dagan. He began his career in the special operations community as the leader of an Israeli Defense Force (IDF) element known as ZIKIT (Chameleon) and built a reputation for conducting lethal “direct action” raids against Palestinian targets. Dagan moved up the chain of command in the IDF to a position in the counterterrorism office of the Chief of Staff and, eventually to the commander of the IDF General Staff’s Operations Brigade; in this role, he was responsible for special operations and counterterrorism. Ultimately he became chief of Mossad, shifting his focus from conducting lethal special operations to attacking the terrorist financial infrastructure. As Darshan-Leitner and Katz state,

Meir Dagan read the intelligence reports from Gaza and Hebron, and from outside Israel’s frontiers. He understood that regardless of intentions, cash was vital for continuing terrorist attacks. Dagan understood that if Israel focused on the money that fueled the organizations that dispatched suicide bombers, it could achieve long-term tactical and strategic results.
(41)

In 1995, Dagan began to create an Israeli intelligence and special operations capability to disrupt and destroy terrorist finances. That capability was codenamed Harpoon.

In *Rise and Kill First*, Ronen Bergman focuses on the integrated Israeli special operations effort to conduct lethal operations against any and all enemies of Israel. He begins his history with a dramatic account of the assassi-

nation of a British Criminal Investigations officer named Tom Wilkin in the last days of the British occupation of Palestine. Bergman expands the first chapter to address the assassination programs of other Jewish groups, such as the Haganah, the Irgun, and Lehi (aka the Stern Gang), who engaged in resistance against Palestinians and British political and military leaders in Palestine. He draws a straight line from the efforts of these Jewish terrorist organizations to the use of assassination by the Israeli state using whatever means necessary. In the 1950s and early 1960s, this might have included a secret air-to-air attack to shoot down a plane carrying the Egyptian general staff (Operation ROOSTER) to letter bombs against known Egyptian military officers supporting Palestinian resistance groups.

Bergman takes the reader through a very detailed discussion of the various organizations involved in Israeli assassination operations. These organizations include IDF surveillance elements associated with strategic reconnaissance; IDF special operations forces such as ZIKIT; the Mossad organization Caesarea focused on sabotage, assassinations, and intelligence collection in Arab countries; and KIDON (Bayonet) focused on direct action worldwide. Bergman states clearly that targeted assassination is a part of the larger mission of Israeli defense and has always been managed by the Israeli prime minister.

Since World War II, Israel has conducted more state-sanctioned assassinations than any other country in the world. On innumerable occasions, its leaders have weighed what would be the best way to defend its national security and, considering themselves without other options, have time and again decided on clandestine operations—with assassination the method of choice. This, they believed, would solve difficult problems faced by the state, and sometimes change the course of history. In many cases, Israel’s leaders have even determined that in order to kill the designated target, it is moral and legal to endanger the lives of innocent civilians who may happen to find themselves in the line of fire. Harming such people, they believe, is a necessary evil. (xxii)

The two books offer a very clear image of the Israeli perspective on counterterrorism. They also point to friction between the intelligence and special operations communities in Israel and between Israel and the Western world. On the one hand, there is a longstanding tradition in Israeli counterterrorism of decapitating terrorist leadership. On the other hand, there is a different effort—that

takes more time and is less exciting—which attacks the funding that pays salaries and underwrites terrorist operations. The two books make it clear that both tactics have had strategic value to Israel as the state and its citizenry have confronted terrorist threats over the 70 years of its existence. Both books underscore that these tactics have not been without cost—both to Israel’s standing in the world and to its relationship with the United States.

The two books are very different in their approach. In the case of *Harpoon*, the authors are determined to convince readers of the brilliance and righteousness of the Israeli counterterrorism effort and, specifically, the effort to destroy terrorist financial networks. Along the way, *Harpoon* often crosses the line, becoming polemical when some of the main players are characterized as “heroic” or “legendary,” while others are depicted as “feckless” and presenting both European and Americans as reluctant counterterrorism allies or, at times, working against the “righteous” Israeli effort. This is a valid, unvarnished description of the Israeli sources’ views on counterterrorism operations and—given Nitsana Darshan-Leitner’s own role as a litigator in US courts—likely an author’s perspective as well. A more even-handed approach might have taken at least a brief look at US, UK, and European finance efforts supporting counterterrorism and counter-proliferation operations which were ongoing well before *Harpoon* was established and continue to this day.

In *Rise and Kill First*, Bergman does not subject the reader to polemics; in fact, he spends considerable time

both on Israeli failures (such as when innocents were killed in the wake of an assassination attempt) and the strategic consequences of counterintelligence mistakes (as in the case of the assassination of Mahmoud al-Mabhouh in 2010, an otherwise successful operation undermined by several small security-related mistakes). He isn’t afraid to use the term *hubris*, and makes no attempt to present the individuals involved in these operations as anything other than human beings who are capable of brilliance and heroism, but also prone to mistakes and jealousy. In fact, both in the introduction and the conclusion, Bergman leaves it to the reader to decide if these techniques, on balance, are worth the cost.

In sum, the two books offer a modern view of Israeli intelligence and special operations in the 21st century—and that makes them valuable. Given the nature of the US Intelligence Community relationship with the Israeli intelligence services, these books should be a must-read for anyone in the US counterintelligence or counterterrorism fields. Previous books on Israeli intelligence apparatus such as *Every Spy a Prince* (Houghton, Mifflin, and Harcourt, 1990), *Gideon’s Spies* (Thomas Dunne, 1995), or even *Israel and the Bomb* (Columbia University Press, 1998) are decades old and were limited by available research material. *Harpoon* and *Rise and Kill First* are topical and well written. They provide insight into the terrorism threat we share with the Israelis and how the Israelis have used their own set of tactics, techniques, and procedures to counter that threat.



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