

Understanding the Middle East:

A View from inside the Mossad

May 25, 2006



Brief Analysis

On May 3, 2006, Efraim Halevy addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Efraim Halevy is head of the Center for Strategic and Policy Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He served as head of the Mossad from 1998 to 2002 and head of Israel's National Security Council from 2002 to 2003. He was previously Israel's ambassador to the European Union. His most recent book is *Man in the Shadows*. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

Intelligence in Policymaking

In the current global circumstances, the role of intelligence gathering and analysis in policymaking has become increasingly important. As a result, intelligence leaders have ever more influence in the policymaking process. This is particularly the case in Israel, where some of the political leadership's most significant decisions came on the heels of Mossad and Military Intelligence initiatives and assessments.

One case in which the decisions of intelligence personnel were adopted by the political leadership is the construction of Israel's security fence. At the time the fence was first proposed, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon opposed it, believing that it would ultimately be the point of departure for determining the final borders of Israel. Sharon only accepted the plan when he was pressed by the heads of the security services, who argued that without the fence, the Israeli military and security establishments would be unable to provide Israelis with adequate protection from Palestinian terror attacks.

As a result of intelligence becoming increasingly important to political decisions, leaders have become immersed in intelligence and read it in enormous quantities. Former Israeli prime ministers Yitzhak Shamir and Sharon were particularly attentive to intelligence. Shamir often spent nights reading intelligence reports; he knew the names of sources and was often able to point out discrepancies from one report to the next. Sharon had previously served as the intelligence officer of northern and southern command; as prime minister, he would delve into intelligence operations almost compulsively. As a consequence, intelligence chiefs had the ear of these prime ministers, and the role of intelligence officials in influencing policy increased.

Intelligence officers are uniquely positioned to effectively advise political leaders on policy. This is because they are equipped with sensitive, often exclusive information, as well as the ability to extrapolate from it a series of policy options. In Israel's approach toward the Palestinians, security services have been critical in making assessments and proposing policies after terrorist attacks.

Given the increasing importance of intelligence officers in policymaking, governments must insure that their intelligence offers are recruited from the best and the brightest. It is critical that intelligence officers enjoy the support of the greater public—not just that confidence of the president or the powers that be.

The Art of Intelligence

In the field of intelligence, it is essential that responsibility be wed to authority. There must be a direct line of authority, command, and responsibility between the head of state and the highest operational level in the intelligence community. In this vein, the creation of the post of director of national intelligence in the United States was a mistake. Its ultimate consequence is removing the president from oversight of each intelligence agency. Given the stakes in today's global environment, it is critical for leaders to be intimately involved in the intelligence services. As a matter of principle, there should be a clear chain of command within the intelligence community, and the senior level should report directly to the political leadership, not to a liaison.

The commission appointed to investigate the September 11 attacks faulted the American intelligence community with a lack of imagination. It argued, compellingly, that given all the facts known at the time, such an attack should have been imagined. On the other hand, the Senate committee that investigated the use of intelligence in the runup to the Iraq war faulted the intelligence community for being overzealous in assuming that Iraq still possessed weapons of mass destruction. This sends the conflicting messages that intelligence agencies should imagine the worst cases and that they should restrain their imaginations.

The Value of Leadership in the Arab World

In the months before the 1991 Gulf War, Jordan's King Hussein met regularly with Israeli intelligence officials; a relationship of confidence developed. When discussing the countdown to war, King Hussein often observed that the West failed to understand Saddam Hussein. Too often, the King argued, Saddam was viewed as a bloodthirsty dictator and, in his invasion of Kuwait, a violator of international law. To the Arab masses, however, Saddam was a modern day Nebuchadnezzar who commands respect. Visits to other Arab capitals confirmed this: the simultaneous fear and respect for Saddam was profound. As war was about to break out, thousands demonstrated in Muslim capitals.

The importance of leadership to a nation is a key element within the Muslim world that cannot be ignored. Too little weight is given to the fears and reservations of people in the region on matters of such consequence. The West has erred in this respect.

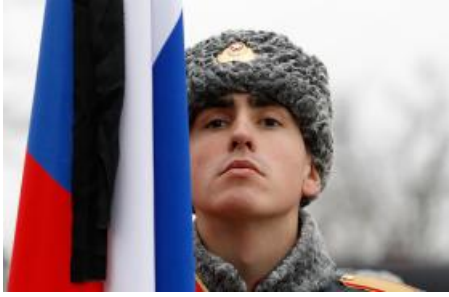
Challenges Facing Israel

Hamas is a central element in Palestinian society—it is well organized and highly motivated, and has put in motion an effective machine of education, health, and social welfare. The strength of Hamas's popularity within Palestinian society is even greater than the percentages indicate, and no resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can come about without Hamas being part of the solution. This is not the official view in Israel.

Every word of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad must be taken at face value. He is sincere in wanting to destroy Israel and will certainly do everything he can to achieve success in this area. But he will not succeed. Currently, Iran is maneuvering very effectively, but it is also feeling mounting pressure. While the final outcome is difficult to predict, the international community is unlikely to allow Iran to obtain nuclear weapons capabilities. Because Iran was at the center of the Israeli intelligence community's work for the last fifteen years, Israel has many options for dealing with Tehran. Israel is amply prepared to head off this challenge should it boil over.

This rapporteur's summary was written by Eric Trager. ❖

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