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BOOK REVIEW


Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center (IICC)\(^1\) is an Israeli non-governmental organization (NGO), dedicated to preserving the memory and heritage of the fallen members of the Israeli Intelligence community and also constitutes a place of congregation, knowledge sharing, and reminiscence for its high-ranking veterans. As part of the Center’s ongoing activities, which include, among other things, running of seminars and publishing a quarterly magazine, in recent years it has also published a number of interesting books in Hebrew. One of these books – Melekhet Mahshevet (Masterpiece) – has been recently translated into English, with a few additions and omissions, under the title Silent Defender: An Inside Look at Sixty Years of Israeli Intelligence (for some reason, the name of the translator, Elizabeth Yuval, who did a great work, is mentioned only somewhere in the editors’ preface and does not appear, as in most cases, on the book’s cover).

This most illuminating and well-organized book – which has been carefully edited by Amos Gilboa and Ephraim Lapid, two high-ranking veterans of the Israeli Military Intelligence, AMAN – contains no less than 37 short essays written by both past and present senior officers in the Israeli Intelligence, as well as by several academic experts, and is divided into six sections.

The first section contains three rare essays written by the directors of Israel’s main Intelligence agencies – AMAN, the MOSSAD, and Shin Bet – in which they portray their vision and detail the challenges with which each agency is faced (as of 2006, when the Hebrew edition was published on the occasion of Israel’s 60th anniversary; perhaps not surprisingly, these challenges are still valid, to a large extent, also today, almost a decade later). The second section contains a brief description of how these three agencies were founded in the late 1940s, and the third brings a collection of some well-known successes of the Israeli Intelligence throughout the years – such as its part in the 1967 Six-Day War and in the 1981 Airstrike on the Iraqi Nuclear Reactor – as well as some of its failures, headed by the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

The next section is dedicated to the special characteristics and challenges presented by the different arenas with which the Israeli Intelligence is dealing, including Lebanon, the Palestinians, fighting terror, and the ongoing Iranian nuclear program. The last two sections of the book are, in my opinion, the most interesting ones. The first presents a description of each of the main Intelligence collection methods used by Israel (or any other nation) – SIGINT, HUMINT, VISINT, and OSINT (Signal, Human, Visual, and Open Intelligence, respectively) – as well as some other unique specializations, such as Counterintelligence and Air Force and Naval Intelligence.

The last section of the book touches on several fascinating aspects of Intelligence practice and theory. In this framework, former MOSSAD director Efraim Halevy reviews some historical

and current aspects of this well-known, though quite clandestine, agency; former AMAN chief of staff David Tzur describes the operational demands placed on Intelligence in light of present-day challenges with which Israel is faced; former head of AMAN and MOSSAD Meir Amit (to whom this book’s English edition is dedicated) analyzes, from a personal point of view, the often-complicated relationship between the decision-makers and the head of Intelligence; Shmuel Even, former head of AMAN’s revision department, which was established as a lesson learned from the Yom Kippur War fiasco, explains the significance of the revision process in Intelligence; and finally, former AMAN director Shlomo Gazit elaborates on potential problems with collective thinking.

This last essay, though very short in length, deserves special attention. General Gazit, who headed AMAN in the years following the agency’s fiasco in the Yom Kippur War, explains how collective thinking, which is usually recommended for minimizing the risks of flawed assessments and decisions, may sometimes bring about precisely the opposite effect. The risk of conceptual collectivism and silencing of unconventional opinions – deliberately or otherwise – is well known in almost every organizational-hierarchical system. Gazit suggests a number of ways to address this challenge and to create an atmosphere that invites free speech and thought regardless of seniority and hierarchy, though he admits that he is ‘in no way convinced that he found a solution to this human problem.’ Thus, Gazit’s attempt in the 1970s, to encourage AMAN’s officers to personally approach him in any case when their contrary Intelligence assessment is hushed by their direct commanders, resulted in merely four or five such complaints during his five-year term as AMAN director. None of the complaining officers – as Gazit describes – ‘claimed to having had contrary opinions blocked by their superiors; they only wanted me, as AMAN director, to notice them ….’

The book also includes a collection of interesting historical photos and concludes with three appendices: a historical timetable, bringing a chronology of key Intelligence events in Israel, accompanied by influential national and international events; a brief review of several interesting topics that were not included in the book’s main articles, such as the 1966 MOSSAD operation to bring an Iraqi MiG-21 jet fighter to Israel or the 2002 Shin Bet Law – an important milestone in the process of subjecting this agency to Israeli law; and a third appendix, which brings the photos and short bios of all AMAN, MOSSAD, and Shin Bet directors since the establishment of the State of Israel.

The wide variety of topics covered in this book naturally limits the length of each article to a few pages only, resulting in a somewhat concise writing that leaves the reader with a taste for more. In addition, one who seeks sensational disclosures or revealing of secrets will not find them in this book. However, its significance lies less in its details but rather in the entire collection as a whole – a rich and rare collage of articles – and as such, it can be of great value for those who want to acquire basic knowledge on the Israeli Intelligence community and its history. Moreover, and although most of the book’s essays do not contain references, the mere identity of its publisher – an official Israeli institution – and the reputation of its editors and writers guarantee that one can trust this book’s credibility more than that of many other books that have been written on the Israeli Intelligence (and especially on the MOSSAD) and constitute a mixture of known facts, estimated facts, and rumors.

However, and although it is, indeed, reasonable to assume that at least most, if not all, of Silent Defender is true, it is undoubtedly only a partial truth, either due to the Israeli Censor’s restrictions or self-censorship imposed by the writers, who are fully aware of their duty to keep most of their activity for defending the citizens of the State of Israel silent. As indicated by former MOSSAD director Efraim Halevy in the introduction to the book, ‘Security constraints dictated that the vast majority of the greatest and most successful operations not be revealed at all.’ Yet, the small portion that has been disclosed is compiled in this very unique
and interesting collection, now available also to the English-speaking reader, thanks to the much appreciated initiative of the IICC.

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