

Israeli Intelligence Community's Role in Managing Conflicts in the Middle-East

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„Arab-Israeli conflict began 60 years ago and has not yet ended. Nevertheless, 60 years ago, it was considered a «minor problem»”.

(Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Lebăda Neagră. Impactul foarte puțin probabilului*, ediția a II-a revizuită și adăugită, Editura Curtea Veche, București, 2010, p.193)

Abstract

Israeli intelligence community's unique character stems from Israel's current security problems. Solutions cannot depend on the goodwill of the great powers. As a complex result of this unique position of Israel in the Middle East, the action theatre of the Israeli intelligence agencies community has become increasingly broader and the threats to the Jewish state security have become global.

Keywords: Middle East, security interests, Israeli intelligence community, “the Arab Spring”.

Introduction

The Middle East experienced influences from extra-regional powers and had to adapt to their balance of power. Initially, Israel was not part of the Middle East political project, the way it has been conceived by the Great Powers. Moreover, when the Jews began to settle in the so called “Land of Israel” at the end of the XIX century, their national independence was not a political priority. The Zionist project, formally launched at the 1897 congress, was not generally accepted or formed, but the Zionist leaders were

emphasizing the strategic advantages for Great Britain, due to the existence of a Jewish state in Palestine, and of “the Suez Canal guard” respectively.

Israel’s emergence as a state in 1948 promoted it immediately in the centre of international attention, especially that of the US and the Soviet Union, the two superpowers of the moment. The proclamation of the Israeli state (14th of May, 1948) was a blow to the Arab states, which, in the following weeks, invaded Israel and Palestine, thus launching the first Arab-Israeli war (May 1948- February 1949).

International attention forced Israel to shape its regional politics by taking into account international interest. In this area, the community of intelligence, especially Mossad, played a crucial role.

The country’s population numbered at the beginning no more than one million inhabitants. Nevertheless, Israel had to carry the huge burden of absorbing millions of emigrants, great part of its resources serving to finance defence, intelligence agencies and national security. At that time, Israel estimated that these domains had to cover not only the immediate assessments on the Middle East, but a global scale. To this respect, Israel rapidly developed an approach method in which almost the whole world was seen as a “theatre of war”. If a state actor got involved in the Middle East, especially in the developing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel could not satisfy the strategic interests within the regional framework. It became imperative to act and to become visible on the international scene. Europe, Asia and Africa became part of the extended action theatre in which the security sector was operating.

Every doctrine and strategy conceived by Israel for the projection of its security interests in the region started from one fundamental principle: the obligation to create and maximize alternative resources in order to balance the natural resources clearly superior held by the majority of the Arab states¹.

Israel’s political defence doctrine stipulated the need to maintain an intimidating attitude towards their enemies. This was considered to be the starting point of the entire security policy. If Israel had abstained from action when it was directly attacked, its intimidating image would had been

¹ Efraim Halevy, *Omul din umbră. În culisele crizei din Orientul Mijlociu împreună cu omul care a condus Mossadul*, Editura Rao, București, 2007, p. 73.

irreparable affected, which in its turn, would have permanently deteriorated Israel's defence and security foundation. Moderation, in this case, would have usurped the very meaning of existence of the Israeli defence forces - Tsva Haganah Le-Israel (Tsaah). The definition of this unique position for a modern state was the result of the project that was defined and put into practice by one of the leading historians of the Israeli state, David Ben Gurion: *"when it was discussed to decide between the integrity of Eretz Israel and a Jewish state, I chose the Jewish state instead of integrity"*.

Israel, a state with a population of approximately four million inhabitants in 1989, had become by that time a leading player in the region. It was a skilful and efficient actor in the Middle East conflicts, which surpassed regional significance. Israel was also acutely aware of the global dimension of its influence and of the unique status of its intelligence services in promoting state security interests and unrolling peace negotiations with its neighbours. Its network of secret intelligence channels consolidated along the years the strategic capacity of Israel's leaders and the Jewish state. As a result, it is no wonder today that when it comes to important negotiations, Israeli leaders prefer undercover channels instead of an open approach. Only this way did Israel succeed to realistically weigh the implications of each step on the way to peace in the context of general strategic interests.

Israel's strategic situation

At the beginning of the 90's, Israel's strategic situation was particularly favourable in comparison to all other important regional actors: Iran and Iraq were military and strategically exhausted after almost a decade of war, at which Israel had passively assisted; Syria realized it had no chance to obtain a strategic equality with Israel, especially after the Soviet Union's financial, military and strategic disengagement from the region; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reflected through the unfolding of the first Intifada had minor effects on the Israeli authority and state; Jordan had given up claiming West Bank and had detached of the so called "Palestinian problem"; Egypt was the only Arab state that had signed a peace treaty with Israel and who was emerging again as a regional leader in the Arab world – after a seclusion period imposed by the Arab League.

In the last six decades, the recurrent strategic approach that characterized Israel's politics was focused on the necessity and wish to promote and develop consensual alliances with non-Arab / non-Muslim countries, cultures or minorities. Special attention was also given to countries that had a shared interest in defending against neighbours closely linked to Islamic militant states or groups². As a consequence, Israel, in the 70's, 80's and early 90's, looked for and discovered favourable partners such as South Africa; in the 60's it had also pleaded for Singapore independence to Malaysia's detriment. On the list of "desired allies" were also the Maronite Christians in Lebanon or the Kurds in Northern Iraq, during the first and second Gulf War.

In the last twenty years, the region was described by the conflict between two groups: the pro-status quo forces (the existing regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan and Saudi Arabia) and the anti-status-quo ones represented by Iran, the Islamic movement, Hezbollah and their allies. For two decades, the US had been the predominant superpower and the main force of maintaining the status-quo.

As Israel's current president, Shimon Peres, estimated in an interview given in 1998, in the mid 90's the situation evolved from strategic alliances directed against enemies (state actors) to alliances conceived against dangers. *"We go out from a world of enemies to enter one of threats. And, if the enemies are national, the dangers are regional or global"*³.

According to Efraim Halevy, in the Israeli intelligence community *"there didn't seem to be much enthusiasm towards giving priority to these new threats rather than to the conventional and traditional ones. The bitter experience and failure of the intelligence agencies that led to the Yom Kippur War in 1973 motivated those that wanted to continue monitoring classic threats and conflicts the way they always have done – that is on a daily basis. Instead of searching for new, unknown and unexploited threats, the conservative intell'officers preferred to concentrate on what was happening nearby. They wanted, for example, to focus on whether Syria was going to launch a surprise raid in Israel, in order to conquer new*

² Efraim Halevy, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

³ Revista *Lumea*, nr. 9 (65), 1998, p. 22.

territories. This is only an example of a daily routine at the highest level of Essential Elements of Information – EEI”⁴.

During this period, negotiations for the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were decisively influenced by the involvement of the Israeli security sector. These system institutions formed the fundamental conditions that governed the implementation of the successive political initiatives taken by the political class, starting from the assumption that the security theme had always dominated Israel internal and international landscape. Shi Bet had an important role in maintaining the connection with the Palestinian security institutions and with the Palestinian political leaders. Mossad was a connecting element with the Arab regimes, especially with Egypt, Jordan, Turkey or Morocco.

Israel's intelligence services constant implication as a mediator between the states in the region was doubled by the implication, at decision level, of the main beneficiaries of these negotiations, namely of Israel's political leaders. During the last decade of the XX century and the first decade of the XXI century, there were at least five prime-ministers in Israel that influenced peace negotiations. Each one of them took over his predecessor's initiatives and transformed them in a policy not only different, but exactly contrary to the one of the last leader.

New security reality in the Middle East after „*The Arab Spring*”

Now, in 2012, the situation looks significantly different as the Middle East comes over a period of major changes. The threat represented by the Iranian nuclear program and the increasing international community embargo on the Iranian economy, the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the Syrian crisis, the protests in Yemen, Bahrain and Jordan, the three fault lines in the Middle East: Arab vs. non Arab, Sunni vs. Shiite and Sunni vs. Sunni (Salafi and the Muslim Brotherhood) are the result of major internal evolutions: the economic stagnation, the deep social alienation, the loss of capacity of these ossified regimes led by some of the leaders in the 70's-80's projects to discourage internal discontent⁵. The Iranian threat is the

⁴ Efraim Halevy, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁵ Octavian Manea, „Noua ordine”, în *Foreign Policy România*, 01.05.2011. Publică un interviu cu Shmuel Bar, director de studii la Institute of Policy and Strategy, Herzliya, Israel.

most serious challenge, because a nuclear Iran poses a threat to Israel's very existence. In accordance with the report of the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS), "*Iran now could produce enough weapons-grade uranium to arm a nuclear bomb within two to four months, but still would face serious «engineering challenges» and much longer delays before it would be able to use the material in an atomic warhead*"⁶.

For the next three up to five years it is foreseen a period of major instability, maybe even the disintegration of some states as Yemen, Libya, Saudi Arabia or Bahrain. As a matter of fact, Iraq, Libya or Lebanon are states made of divergent ethnic groups and religious minorities, a political construct facing potential political disintegration as a result of systemic changes. The situation of the monarchies in the region is somehow different, the only exception being the one of the Hashemite Kingdom, where the demographic explosion of the Palestine groups can disturb Jordanian society when faced with the problem of occupied territories. How is the reconfiguration of the region seen from Tel Aviv? The repressed tribal identities, the traditional cleavage between the Shiites and the Sunnis, the tensions between the centre and the suburbs, a Facebook generation that doesn't find its place in the old regime, possibly disappointed by the uncertainty of the next transition, threaten the stability.

After the upheaval of what is called the old regime it is possible to assist to the polarization of these societies, to the appearance of some multiple centres of powers and of groups that fight among themselves, disputing the "real" inheritance of the revolution as well as the next direction to be followed. The new Arab governments will be mainly concerned with an internal agenda. They will be less willing to devote themselves to external politics. Fundamentally, their attitude could be oriented towards a similar outlook as that embraced currently by Turkey – less pro-American, occasionally against the West and Israel, especially at declarative and rhetorical level – in order to respond to common people's expectations and pressure.

⁶ George Jahn, "Think tank issues warning on Iran nukes", <http://www.washingtontimes.com>, october 8, 2012, accessed on 23.10.2012 and William C. Witt, Christian Walrond, David Albright, Houston Wood, *Iran's Envolving Breakout Potential*, ISIS Report, october 8, 2012, <http://isis-online.org>, accessed to 23.10.2012.

As a trend, we will witness increasing disintegration of the Arab states and, at the same time, a consolidation of the regional influence of Iran and Turkey. As a matter of fact we are confronting with “a change of guard”, and, as a result, it will be more and more difficult for Israel to reach a common denominator with the Arab states and especially with the new leadership of the Middle East.

As a result of all of the above, it is our strong opinion that Israel will have to face in the short and medium run a fundamentally changed geopolitical panorama. The country finds itself more and more isolated, under an increased pressure to operate. The 13 Palestinian factions, including the National Palestinian Authority and Hamas, signed a reconciliation agreement, which gives new strength to their sovereignty demanda in the future.

Nevertheless, the political transformations in the region fundamentally change the conditions needed to surpass security challenges. Having a policy adjusted to the local realities in the Middle East, western actors can contribute to the improving of the essential conditions needed to solve these security problems in the Middle East region.

The American vision towards the Middle East changed once Internet's and new technologies powers in spreading freedom and democracy ideals was demonstrated. To this effect, in January 2010, Hillary Clinton said: “We want to put these tools in the hands of people who will use them in order to promote democracy and human rights. Call it the Agenda for the Internet Freedom: the idea that technology can succeed in enlarging consesus, where offline efforts failed”⁷. The regime changes occurred in the Middle East in 2011 reflected these new trends in the American foreign policy.

Anyway, the emergence of a new Middle East is an opportunity to establish a new regional order that reflects the legal interests of all those involved, by ensuring secure borders and replacing hegemonic aspirations with transparency and cooperation. If actors of the future do not comply with these requests, the new Middle East will become an even more dangerous place than the old one.

⁷ Evgheni Morozov, “Libertate. gov”, în *Foreign Policy România*, nr. 20, 01.01.2011.

Undeniably, the Middle East crisis is one of the most dangerous in the world. An attack, a war or failed peace initiative here is expected at any time. Even if the attraction for an Al Qaida ideology has decreased, terrorism will remain a potential problem and an instrument of the weak against the powerful. It's dangerous effects stems from the relatively easy access to weapons of mass destruction or to their manufacturing technology.

How will events evolve and how will the Middle East look in the near and medium term represents a challenging question. The answer is undeniably interdependently linked with international evolutions.

Also, by taking a closer look at military and political past events (outbreak of the "Al-Aqsa Intifada" in September 2000, the 34 days war in southern Lebanon in 2006, the Gaza Strip war in 2008/2009 or, more recently, "the Arab Spring" we can better understand that what we witness is the entrance into a new cycle of conflict, which refers to the multiplication of confrontations between Israel and non-governmental organizations focused on the Palestinian cause. This time, Israel is not only surrounded by hostile countries in the region, but by terrorist non-governmental organizations, promoting a radical Islam, hostile to Israel.

If Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian territories controlled by Fatah still embodies the ancient Middle East, one can speak of a new Middle East formed of new non-governmental realities and represented by political Islamic fundamentalist organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, or terrorist organizations, such as Hezbollah or Hamas.

Intelligence analysts also underline the transition to a new phase in the Israeli-Arab confrontation, in which the military / informative structures of the terrorist organizations Hezbollah and Hamas are involved. The ballistic capacity the Hezbollah has now is much greater than the one it had during that 34 days war in 2006. Its military capacity to efficiently respond in case of an Israeli attack is also superior. In 2006, Hezbollah's military and intelligence capacity to resist to the Israeli army attacks, namely those of the IDF, was much longer than that recorded by the Arab armies in the War of June 1967, also called "the Six Days War".

Furthermore, today Israel's leaders see their country's positioning in the region as being seriously threatened by the emergence of a hostile Islamist regime in Egypt. The Sinai Peninsula has become more insecure

after decades of relative calm; the possibility that a similarly hostile regime will eventually emerge in Syria, where the Lebanonization of the country is a real scenario, becomes more and more probable. Other elements in this threat picture are represented by: the threat posed by Al Qaida armed groups unconnected to the elected government roam Libya, where tribal identities make the central control difficult to achieve; the fragility of traditionally friendly Jordan; and the dangerous boost that the regional Islamist awakening has given to Israel's sworn enemies, Hamas and Hezbollah⁸.

As Robert D. Kaplan mentions, *“the Middle East has evolved in stages from organized interstate warfare during the Cold War decades (1956, 1967 and 1973) to the relative anarchy of the Cold War’s aftermath. Though the possibility of interstate warfare remains palpable because of one non-Arab state, Iran -- even as major Arab states such as Iraq, Syria and Libya have in varying degrees weakened or dissolved while Islamic militants run amok and intercommunal tensions flare. Jihadism also will flourish in this power vacuum created by the replacement of strong central authority with weak democratic rule”*⁹.

At this point, Israel’s intelligence activities are conducted at the highest level and record achievements, but fail to substantially reduce the level of danger in Israel. However, although intelligence activity is extremely important, only the diplomatic and military decisions will assure Israel’s long-term security.

According to the Israeli analysts, the Israeli intelligence community is obliged to adopt flexible strategies to combat these threats and focus not only on the defensive element, but especially on the offensive mode of action. This would contribute, in their view, to the total defeat of the enemy – not only to a successful prevention. The targets, both locally and from abroad, must be covered in advance and are not to be related to a possible terrorist / nuclear attack. As the terrorists or their (state / non-state) supporters concluded that the entire planet is their legitimate theatre of operations, so the intelligence services were and are obliged to respond accordingly and to consider the whole globe as a theatre of operations. The

⁸ Shlomo Ben-Ami, “Israel versus America versus Iran”, [http:// www.project-syndicate.org](http://www.project-syndicate.org), october 3, 2012, accessed to 23.10.2012.

⁹ Robert D. Kaplan, “Will U.S. benefit from the Arab Spring?”, [http:// www.globalpublicsquareblogs.cnn.com](http://www.globalpublicsquareblogs.cnn.com), september 27th, 2012, accessed to 23.10.2012.

specificity of the Israeli intelligence community consists precisely in the fact that it has imposed itself or, rather, was forced to impose itself and act globally even before the emergence of Israel in 1948. The very existence of Israel depends on the effectiveness, adaptability and flexibility of the Israeli intelligence community, in particular, and of the security sector in general.

Moreover, Israeli intelligence's role in securing the regional security is a constant reference point for researchers as well as military and intelligence analysts as long as we do not witness a long-term solution to the Middle East security problems.

Israel is considered to have the best, most offensive and pervasive information services worldwide. This reality is primarily based on secrecy of its activity and on the enormous mass of information provided by the Hebrew Diaspora worldwide. Israel intelligence agencies' role is to provide the first alert in case of military or terrorist aggression against the state or the compatriots.

Conclusion

According to Maj.-Gen. (res.) Aharon Ze'evi Farkash, head of Military Intelligence between 2001-2006, Israel is standing before five major and simultaneous security challenges requiring appropriate decisions: These include a possible attack against Iran, a possible attack to stop the proliferation of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal, a growing terrorist threat in the Sinai Peninsula, a looming operation in the Gaza Strip to stop rocket attacks and the constant need to be prepared for a possible confrontation with Hezbollah and their arsenal of missiles¹⁰.

In this context, the question that the Israeli intelligence community, along with the other structures of the Israeli state, try to find an answer to is not "how to make peace in the Middle East", but "is peace possible in the Middle East?"

The mandatory condition for the success of such an approach is ensuring the security. Without progresses in the security area, the political process itself will never bring the peace in the Middle East: "*security was (and is A/N) the key, because one can talk about sovereignty, borders,*

¹⁰ Yaakov Katz, "Defense: Don't attack Iran now, warns ex-intell chief", <http://www.jpost.com>, accessed on 23.10.12.

elections, territories, but as long as a simply man does not feel safe, nothing else matters”¹¹.

Given this complex situation in the region, Israel is trying to promote and expand the peace process with its neighbours, while maintaining its policy of intimidation. There are many shared interests though between Israel and the Arab moderate actors.

Winston Churchill once said: “*it is not enough to do the best we can, sometimes we must do what is necessary*”. In our opinion, the two parties should do what is necessary.

A regional security concept is also a necessary element in order to establish peace in the Middle East, providing a protective umbrella under which peaceful solutions can be addressed by Israelis and Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese.

But perhaps the most important lesson learned by the Israeli intelligence community, that at the same time can be an example for other modern information structures, is that related to the way a state uses its intellectual and material resources to defend democracy, prosperity and security of its citizens and to play a role on the international scene, against those threats generated by regional non-state actors. The key word in this equation remains the strategic knowledge.

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