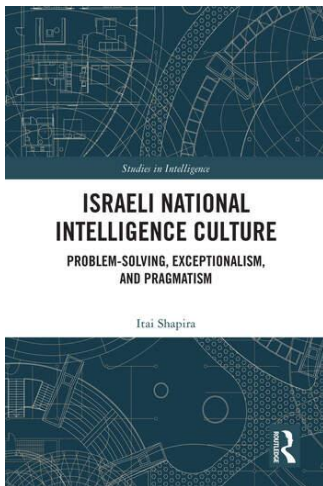


REVIEWS AND NOTES



Itai SHAPIRA, *Israeli National Intelligence Culture: Problem-Solving, Exceptionalism, and Pragmatism*, London: Routledge, Studies in Intelligence Series, 2026, 258 p., presented by Cătălin DUMITRIU

The events of 7 October 2023 constitute one of the most consequential intelligence failures in contemporary history, prompting an urgent and far-reaching reassessment of the conceptual, organisational, and cultural underpinnings of the Israeli intelligence apparatus. It is within this profoundly significant context that Itai Shapira's monograph, *Israeli National Intelligence Culture: Problem-Solving, Exceptionalism, and Pragmatism*, emerges as a seminal contribution to the field of intelligence studies. Published in 2026, by Routledge in the esteemed Studies in Intelligence Series¹, the volume represents the first systematic scholarly inquiry dedicated exclusively to the concept of Israeli national intelligence culture, thereby filling a conspicuous lacuna in both the theoretical and empirical literature.

Shapira, a retired colonel with over twenty-five years of service within Israeli Defence Intelligence (IDI) at the tactical, operational, and strategic echelons, occupies a distinctive epistemic position as a practitioner-turned-scholar. He holds a doctorate from the University of Leicester, where his research centred on the cultural determinants of

¹ Cover retrieved from <https://www.routledge.com/Israeli-National-Intelligence-Culture-Problem-Solving-Exceptionalism-and-Pragmatism/Shapira/p/book/9781032779294>

intelligence practice, and has subsequently served as a lecturer in the Master of Science in Intelligence Analysis programme at Johns Hopkins University². The book is an expanded and refined iteration of his doctoral dissertation, enriched by post-October 2023 reflections that lend the work an acute contemporary salience³.

The theoretical architecture of the volume is anchored in the concept of national intelligence culture, which Shapira conceptualises as the constellation of deeply embedded beliefs, values, norms, and cognitive dispositions that shape the manner in which a given polity perceives and practises intelligence. Drawing upon and extending the frameworks of strategic culture theory, the author advances a novel analytical model that integrates insights from organisational theory, political culture studies, and the sociology of intelligence communities. This conceptual apparatus enables a granular examination of the distinctive characteristics of Israeli intelligence praxis—characteristics that, as Shapira persuasively argues, are deeply rooted in broader Israeli strategic culture, historical experience, and national ethos (Chapter 1, 13-46).

Methodologically, the study is grounded in an interpretive qualitative approach, relying on thirty-four elite interviews conducted between 2021 and 2023 with serving and former senior practitioners from the three pillars of the Israeli intelligence community: IDI (Aman), the Mossad, and the Shabak (Shin Bet) (Introduction, 1-12). The calibre and breadth of these interlocutors imbue the analysis with a degree of empirical depth and insider authenticity that is seldom encountered in the published literature on Israeli intelligence. A complete roster of interviewees is provided in the appendix, further enhancing the work's methodological transparency (248).

The monograph unfolds across eight substantive chapters, bookended by an introduction and a concluding epilogue devoted to the October 2023 intelligence failure. The first chapter establishes the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study, situating the concept of

² Biographical details drawn from the author's note in the volume (pp. ix-x) and from the Johns Hopkins University AAP Faculty Directory, <https://advanced.jhu.edu/directory/itai-shapira/>

³ Itai Shapira, "Israeli National Intelligence Culture," PhD diss., University of Leicester, 2023. The monograph is an expanded iteration of this dissertation. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003485445>

national intelligence culture within the broader comparative intelligence literature (Chapter 1, 13-46). The second chapter provides a structural anatomy of the Israeli intelligence system, delineating the respective mandates and institutional dynamics of IDI, the Mossad, and the Shabak, as well as the mechanisms—or lack thereof—of interagency coordination (Chapter, 47-72). Of particular note is the elevated status of IDI as the national intelligence estimator, a function that in most Western democracies is assigned to civilian agencies. The third chapter examines the historical, societal, and ideological origins of Israeli intelligence culture, tracing the formative influence of the perpetual existential threat perception, the pervasive securitisation of Israeli society, the ethos of military service, and the enduring legacy of national traumas—most notably the Yom Kippur War of 1973 (Chapter 3, 73-98).

Chapters four through eight constitute the analytical core of the volume, each addressing a distinct dimension of Israeli intelligence culture (Chapter 4, 99-122). Chapter four explores the marked preference for informal, decentralised organisational structures and the cultivation of bottom-up initiative. Chapter five examines the deep integration of intelligence production with decision-making processes and the attendant action-oriented ethos (Chapter 5, 123-148). Chapter six—arguably one of the most intellectually stimulating sections—analyses the tension between the traditionally intuitive, artisanal approach to intelligence analysis and the increasing reliance on advanced technological capabilities, drawing instructive comparisons with the intelligence cultures of the United States and the United Kingdom (Chapter 6, 149-174).

Chapter seven addresses the Israeli intelligence community's deeply ingrained aversion to theoretical abstraction and scientific methodology, a disposition that has simultaneously fostered a culture of pragmatic innovation and adaptive problem-solving (Chapter 7, 175-198). The eighth chapter foregrounds the normative ideals of contrarian thinking, moral courage, and individual accountability that are held to constitute the bedrock of Israeli intelligence professionalism (Chapter 8, 199-222). The epilogue (Epilogue, 231-247), devoted to the catastrophic intelligence failure of October 2023, serves as both a coda and a provocation, inviting the reader to interrogate the extent to which the very cultural traits valorised throughout the preceding chapters may

have, paradoxically, contributed to the systemic blindness that permitted the Hamas assault.

The central thesis of the book is both compelling and methodologically well-substantiated: that Israeli intelligence practices are not merely the product of organisational design or resource allocation, but are fundamentally shaped by a distinctive national intelligence culture characterised by pragmatic problem-solving, a conviction of Israeli exceptionalism, and a predilection for action over contemplation (see Conclusion, 223-230). While certain traits of this culture—such as adaptability, improvisation, and an entrepreneurial disposition—have historically contributed to Israel’s formidable intelligence reputation, others—including overconfidence bordering on hubris, excessive reliance on technological solutions, and resistance to theoretical self-reflection—may have contributed to the conditions that enabled the failure of 7 October, as Shapira argues in the Conclusion (223-230).

A notable tension within the text, also identified by other reviewers (see Hamilton Bean’s review in *Intelligence and National Security* 40, no. 4, 2025; and the INSS review at https://www.inss.org.il/strategic_assessment/shapira/), concerns the relationship between the research conducted prior to October 2023 and the trauma of that event, which appears to have exerted a retroactive shaping influence on the final manuscript. In particular, the book’s emphasis on contrarian thinking and moral courage as defining features of Israeli intelligence professionalism sits somewhat uneasily alongside the documented suppression of dissenting assessments in the period preceding the attack—most notably the widely reported case of a junior analyst from Unit 8200 whose warnings regarding Hamas operational planning failed to reach the appropriate echelons of command (Epilogue, 231-247). This internal contradiction, while reflective of the genuine complexity of organisational culture, warrants more systematic exploration than the volume affords.

Notwithstanding this reservation, the volume’s contributions to the field are substantial and manifold. First, it provides the first comprehensive empirical mapping of Israeli national intelligence culture as a coherent analytical category, thereby establishing an invaluable baseline for future comparative research. Second, the interview-based

methodology yields rich, practitioner-grounded insights that illuminate aspects of intelligence culture inaccessible through documentary analysis alone. Third, the comparative dimension—particularly the sustained engagement with Anglo-American intelligence models—enhances the theoretical generalizability of the findings. Fourth, the rhetorical questions appended to each chapter serve as effective pedagogical devices, inviting critical reflection on the relationship between cultural dispositions and strategic outcomes.

In terms of potential limitations, the work presupposes a considerable degree of prior familiarity with intelligence studies and Israeli security affairs, which may render certain passages less accessible to non-specialist readers. The proliferation of names, ranks, and institutional acronyms—while attesting to the author’s intimate knowledge of the subject matter—occasionally risks overwhelming the reader. Furthermore, the epilogue on October 2023, while understandably included given the magnitude of the event, introduces a retrospective analytical frame that does not always cohere seamlessly with the pre-October research upon which the monograph is primarily founded.

In conclusion, Shapira’s *Israeli National Intelligence Culture* constitutes an indispensable addition to the intelligence studies canon. It is a work of considerable analytical sophistication, empirical richness, and practical relevance, one that illuminates the deep cultural substrata underlying both the triumphs and the failures of one of the world’s most closely scrutinised intelligence systems. The volume will be of paramount interest to scholars and doctoral researchers in intelligence studies, strategic culture, Israeli security policy, and comparative politics, as well as to practitioners engaged in intelligence reform and institutional learning. As the Israeli intelligence community embarks upon what will inevitably be a protracted and painful process of institutional introspection following the events of October 2023, Shapira’s culturally informed analytical framework offers an indispensable lens through which to understand both the pathologies of strategic surprise and the wellsprings of institutional resilience⁴.

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