

The Israeli Intelligence Community and the Media

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The relationship between Israel's intelligence agencies and the media is by definition complex. While the intelligence community considers it necessary to be out of the public eye to enable covert information gathering and act against diverse targets, members of the media see themselves as the watchdog for the public. However, the agencies also require positive coverage to recruit quality personnel. The Israeli media has evolved into a highly critical press, willing to expose the overt and covert. This paper will explore developments in the taut relationship between the Israeli intelligence community and the media.

Israel's intelligence community includes three main agencies: the Military Intelligence, which is subordinate to the Joint Chief of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF); the Mossad, subordinate to the Prime Minister; and the Israeli Security Service, known by the Hebrew acronym "Shabak" and also subordinate to the Prime Minister. The three agencies combine both intelligence gathering functions, with security, counterterrorism and military capabilities. They are highly coordinated, especially in comparison to many parallel agencies around the world.

In Israel the media has evolved over the last 60 years from a "sacred cow" approach towards the intelligence community, to an openly critical approach. Until the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the Israeli media was willing to accept the position of reporting only on what the intelligence agencies were willing to leak. The change from a passive media reporting about only the successful public operations, to a critical media exposing faults and failures was gradual. The 1973 war was defined as a colossal intelligence failure, and the media grew more willing to expose problems within the intelligence community.

The transition to a media fully critical of the military, security and intelligence agencies was finalized in the first Lebanon war in 1982, when for the first time in Israel, the public and the media were openly critical during the operation and not just in the aftermath.

Since the 1980s, Israel's media has become one of the world's most critical against both the political echelons and the security agencies. This critical approach has brought extensive public exposure of intelligence operations and tactics, although there is still a large gap between the public image of the intelligence world and the hard reality.

The three Israeli agencies have responded to the media scrutiny in different ways, from establishing a media liaison unit (the Shabak) to keeping a completely closed front towards the media (the Mossad).

Security/Intelligence Relations with the Media in the 21st Century

The first agency to change its approach to the Israeli media was the Shabak. The Shabak agency director who initiated the change was Avi Dichter (2000-2005), who has since transitioned into politics and is a Kadima party Knesset member today. The years of Mr. Dichter's Shabak directorship were the height of the "second Intifada" – the Palestinian terrorist war against Israel. Media scrutiny was comprehensive – covering the intelligence and security assessments (production); the operational response (counterterrorism); and the relation between the political echelons and the intelligence community. Under these conditions, Dichter established a media department in the Shabak to assist him with media queries. He was the first Shabak director to initiate regular intelligence briefings with the Israeli press, usually published as quotes by an unnamed senior Israeli intelligence source. The media liaison department both supplied information about the assessments of the Shabak and responded to the numerous queries of the press concerning ongoing operations. Today the media liaison works extensively with the Israeli media and also with international media, most of whom are experts on security, intelligence and counterterrorism issues.

There is a clear gap between the Shabak's lack of willingness to respond to queries about operational activities and their initiatives in briefing on their assessments of the Palestinian terrorist threat. This gap usually becomes apparent after attacks against Israeli targets: the question always asked is if the attacks could have been prevented. The sensitivity of such a question is clear: it is the direct responsibility of the SHABAK to prevent such attacks. The cold statistic of 95% success in preventing attacks means that 5% succeed.

The Israeli intelligence agency "Mossad" is named after the first word in their long title – the Institution for Intelligence and Special Operations. The literal translation of the word "Mossad" is institution. The Mossad has been portrayed extensively in the entertainment world – from Eichmann's retrieval from South America, through Steven Spielberg's movie "Munich." The Hollywood image of the Mossad has been a major factor in the open public admiration of the agency. Yet in the news media the Mossad remains still relatively low key.

Over the years the Mossad remained closed to any contacts with the media, and this has been reinforced in the 21st century. The present Mossad director, Meir Dagan, a retired IDF General, has been clear in his unwillingness to open

the Mossad in any of the ways the Shabak has. The Mossad does not have a media liaison, and does not allow any direct or indirect contact with the press. The media coverage of the Mossad is therefore based on sources that are violating a direct rule of the senior Mossad office. The Mossad is presented in the media only by non-certified sources, always unnamed and always without an official response. The Mossad has been consistent in being “off limits” to the press, resisting the present trend of other organizations in being available to the press.

The third Israeli intelligence agency is the Israeli Military Intelligence, known by the acronym “AMAN”. AMAN is a corps within the military, all of whose personnel are soldiers. The bulk of the Israeli military is based on compulsory service for men (36 months) and women (24 months). Both male and female soldiers are required to serve under Israeli law and are drafted after high school at the age of 18.

The IDF has a large and active spokesperson's division. The division is responsible for initiating and responding to publications on the IDF. As AMAN is part of the IDF, the spokesperson's office has the overall responsibility to respond also on behalf of AMAN. The Israeli press has designated military correspondents who report on the IDF and they are the main contacts on both military issues and intelligence information.

AMAN chose to create an additional direct media liaison to the press, which works directly for the Director of Military Intelligence (DMI) and is coordinated by the IDF spokesperson's division. This liaison is relatively new, and presents a response to the large demand of the media for contacts with AMAN.

All three agencies have websites, which focus on the recruitment issue. Yet here again there are differences between the three. The Shabak's website has an information database about terrorism activities against the state of Israel. AMAN's website is focused on the military units, which compulsory soldiers can join. The Mossad's website is very basic, mainly focused on the use as a gateway for potential recruitment.

New Media Venues, Challenges and Opportunities

The Israeli intelligence community, under the auspices of the large-scale operation in spring 2002 against the terror elements in the PA (Palestinian Authority), initiated a new relationship with the media, when they officially injected intelligence information into the public sphere as part of the overall military operation. This media occurrence is a unique intelligence event, which has not yet been utilized in further military conflicts. The self-exposure of intelligence gathering methods and original intelligence materials has become part of the ongoing “battle for the hearts and minds” in the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict. The main activities are initiated by a combined effort of the Shabak and AMAN.

The advent of “new media” poses a formidable challenge for the intelligence world in general, including the Israeli agencies. The rapid spread of information with no “supervisor” or editing has opened areas not yet explored. The immense amount of information on the Internet – such as blogs and forums – has not been edited, thus rumors and half truths, let alone downright lies, can be invented and distributed in no time. The intelligence community has as yet to display an overall approach to the new media.

The new challenges posed by the rapid spread of unedited information will certainly be the main focus of the Israeli intelligence community, as for the intelligence communities worldwide.