Israel and Targeted Killings: Uncomfortable Questions

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The Talmud admonishes: “If someone comes to kill you, rise up and kill him first.” That mantra has driven Israel’s national security doctrine since its 1948 founding, including its long-standing use of targeted killings by its spy services against individuals found to be responsible for terrorist attacks and other crimes against its citizens. Israeli investigative journalist Ronen Bergman’s gripping 784-page book, “Rise And Kill First: The Secret History Of Israel’s Targeted Assassinations,” chronicles this history—the evolution of what he calls “the most robust streamlined assassination machine in history.”

It’s a book that’s at once brilliant in how it draws its diverse stories, facts and sources together, and dogged in Bergman’s pursuit of information and sources. Through it all, however, Bergman manages to keep two key questions at the back of the reader’s mind, one prudential and the other moral. Have Israel’s targeted killings, shrouded in secrecy and deniability, come to do Israel more strategic harm than good? And do such killings conflict with the basic democratic and moral values of a state founded as a haven for a people victimized by genocide?

As chief defense correspondent for Yedioth Ahronoth, Israel’s largest daily newspaper by sales and circulation, and a journalist who has developed several informed sources in Israel’s national security apparatus over a distinguished two-decade career, Bergman was already in a position to tackle a subject that one can safely say has intrigued people with an interest in intelligence matters the world over. After all, defense correspondents in Israel get regular high-level government briefings on the condition that they submit their work to military censorship. Bergman’s sterling reputation, however, appears to have convinced several current and former employees of Israel’s Directorate of Military Intelligence, the Shin Bet (Israel’s internal security service), and the Caesarea division of the Mossad foreign intelligence service (the branch charged
with carrying out targeted killings abroad) to break longstanding vows of silence—sources going beyond the usual intelligence briefings. Combine that with having gained the cooperation over the years of, among others, the late Prime Minister and President Shimon Peres, the late Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, and Prime Ministers Ehud Barak and Benjamin Netanyahu, and one can easily see why Bergman’s seven-and-a-half-year project seems destined to become a classic in the area of intelligence and security studies.

The student of history will appreciate Bergman’s exposition of how the idea that the advancement and security of the Zionist cause required the use of preemptive violence against proven enemies actually predated the Holocaust. In this respect, he tells the story of how Jewish militias in Ottoman Palestine, modeled after Jewish self-defense units organized in the Russian Empire and Eastern Europe to defend against pogroms, would carry out targeted reprisals against Muslims who had harmed Jewish residents. These militias, after the 1920 establishment of the British Mandate of Palestine, were subsumed into the Haganah (Hebrew for “the Guard”), the predecessor to today’s Israel Defense Forces. But the de facto leader of Palestine’s Jewish community—future Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion—took a dim view of such reprisals and the attacks against British interests that more militant Haganah members wished to carry out, preferring to focus on more diplomatic approaches in order to convince the British government to allow for the establishment of a Jewish state in the region. That disagreement thus led to the founding of the Irgun Zvai Leumi (Hebrew for “National Military Organization”) and Lohamei Herut Israel (Hebrew for “Fighters for the Freedom of Israel,” and better known as Lehi), two organizations that were not so skittish about effecting such missions.

It was, of course, the Holocaust that led Ben-Gurion and the Haganah’s leaders to accept the need for a more proactive strategy to further the Zionist cause. The “new Jews of Palestine,” Bergman writes, had simply learned that the Jewish people “would always be under the threat of destruction” and that “others could not be relied upon to protect the Jews,” thereby necessitating the establishment of a Jewish state. There was an aspect of revenge to this new mindset, as the Haganah-approved killings of former SS and Wehrmacht officers who had perpetrated atrocities in the Holocaust by Palestinian Jewish war veterans showed. The Haganah may have shied away from such terrorist acts as the Irgun’s 1946 bombing of Jerusalem’s King David Hotel, the British Mandate’s administrative headquarters, in which many Jewish civilians were also killed. But on the whole, Haganah units too turned to such tactics as the killing of local Muslims who had murdered Jewish civilians and British officers who acted against the Jewish underground, attacks on British intelligence centers acting against Jewish weapons acquisitions, and retaliatory action when British military courts sentenced Haganah members to death.

The invasion of Israel by hostile Arab countries within hours of its 1948 establishment only cemented the conception in the young state’s government that its people were, as Bergman writes, “perpetually in danger of annihilation.” So the sort of offensive-defensive mentality of the Lehi and the Irgun became mainstream national security doctrine to a degree: Israel had to “take any and all measures, however extreme, to obtain security,” even if that meant “relat[ing] to international law and norms in a marginal manner, if at all.” It is that outlook that has driven the hundreds of targeted killing operations in which Israel has engaged, primarily against Palestinians found to have committed terrorism, but also Iranian nuclear scientists and the high-ranking military personnel of enemy states, among others.

What does Bergman great credit, however,
is his willingness to puncture the myth of invincible Israeli intelligence services that somehow never make any mistakes. The Central Intelligence Agency, for example, has been the butt of many jokes for such schemes as an alleged attempt to assassinate Fidel Castro with an exploding cigar. Perhaps, then, the reader will laugh at such exploits as poisoned baklava sent to an intended victim who did not like dessert, or a “Manchurian candidate” attempt to hypnotize a Palestinian prisoner into becoming a Mossad assassin that, of course, failed when the man turned himself in to Palestinian police after being sent on his mission with a pistol.

Then there are the astonishing errors of tradecraft. One wonders if sheer overconfidence led to Jordan’s capture of Mossad operatives who sprayed poison into Hamas leader Khaled Mashal’s ear in 1997 just outside of Hamas offices in Amman when he was surrounded by bodyguards, and Prime Minister Netanyahu’s humiliating decision to give Jordanian doctors the antidote. Also notable is Mossad operatives’ seeming ignorance of the fact that their otherwise successful efforts to kill another Hamas leader—Mahmoud al-Mabhoud—in a Dubai hotel in 2010 were extensively captured on surveillance cameras.

The most tragic errors, of course, have been those where innocents have lost their lives. Here, too, Bergman minces no words, documenting, for example, the internal Mossad turmoil that followed the 1973 killing of Moroccan waiter Ahmed Bouchikhi, mistaken for Palestinian terrorist Ali Hassan Salameh, in the infamous Lillehammer affair.

Bergman’s willingness to show Israeli intelligence services’ warts, while not apologizing for the principle that Israel must proactively defend itself from those who would do it harm, consequently makes a great contribution to the debate over whether such Israeli targeted killings have helped reach their greater strategic aims. Certainly, Israel has achieved victories in this regard. The Egyptian regime of the rabidly anti-Israel Gamal Abdel Nasser, for example, halted its 1960s nuclear weapons program after an Israeli targeted killing campaign against the German nuclear scientists on its payroll. And the killings of various Palestinians to whom the murder of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich was attributed apparently led Yasser Arafat to halt a number of terrorist activities.

Nonetheless, Bergman writes, it is “very hard to predict how history will proceed after someone is shot in the head.” So he quotes a number of Israeli officials who contend that the 1988 killing of Arafat’s chief lieutenant—Khalil al-Wazir, also known as Abu Jihad—in Tunis bolstered even more radical upstarts in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and eliminated a charismatic figure who could have contributed greatly to the peace process. The 2004 killing of Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, an opponent of Iranian regional ambitions, likely enabled greater Iranian involvement in the Hamas movement as a whole. And the massive targeted killing campaign against numerous Palestinian terrorists and Hamas “political functionaries,” in which air and drone strikes were involved, throughout the early 2000s, combined with heightened protections instituted along the borders with the West Bank and Gaza Strip, did a great deal to lessen the incidence of suicide terrorism inside Israel.

But, Bergman continues, the price for this victory was paid by innocent Palestinians who became “coincidental damage” by being killed, wounded, or left disabled, mentally scarred, or homeless. He openly states that the campaign further “delegitimiz[ed] Israel in the eyes of the world”—the case of “David ... behaving like Goliath.”

Supporters of the Benjamin Netanyahu government, then, will likely be disappointed at Bergman’s conclusion that:

[T]he intelligence community’s very success fostered the illusion among most of the nation’s leaders that covert operations could be a
strategic and not just a tactical tool—that they could be used in place of real diplomacy to end the geographic, ethnic, religious, and national disputes in which Israel is mired.

Indeed, he continues, the “majority of [Israel’s] leaders have elevated and sanctified the tactical method of combating terror and existential threats at the expense of true vision, statesmanship, and genuine desire to reach a political solution that is necessary for peace to be attained.”

Any person interested in the area of national security studies should read this book. Even American readers who think they know all there is to know about the events that Bergman describes will be astonished at his revelations and his impeccable sourcing. Anyone who supports the State of Israel thus owes Bergman a considerable debt for lifting the veil from one of the most misunderstood aspects of that country’s security policy. Lawyers, for example, will enjoy the chapter where Bergman describes the analyses that went into the legality of the 2000s targeted killing campaign carried out in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, a campaign whose legality was upheld by the Israeli Supreme Court in 2006. Given how the United States has embarked on targeted killing campaigns of its own using drones, air strikes and special forces raids in the so-called “Global War on Terror,” Bergman offers insights from those on the inside of the Israeli defense establishment that U.S. policymakers of all doctrinal stripes will certainly appreciate. And certainly, Bergman’s discussion at the end of the book as to whether Ariel Sharon ordered the killing of Yasser Arafat amounts to a spectacular tease that will leave readers wanting more.

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