Israeli Intelligence: Not Just the Mossad

Maria Cattini | 06/08/2024 | OSINT

Is Israeli intelligence still a cornerstone of the country's defense?

Following Hamas's attack on October 7, Israeli security forces were sharply criticized for their failure to anticipate the assault. According to Haaretz, Hamas exploited logistical weaknesses within the IDF and serious intelligence shortcomings. The incident exposed limitations in Israel's surveillance and intelligence infrastructure.

Mossad: The Icon Everyone Knows — But It’s Only One Piece

Across the globe, the word “Mossad” is often used synonymously with Israeli intelligence — as if it were the only agency. In reality, it’s a relatively small part of a much larger and more intricate ecosystem.

The Mossad, formally known as the Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations, is responsible for operations outside Israel’s borders. It works in close partnership with Aman, the military intelligence directorate. Many of those working inside Mossad offices are actually soldiers seconded from the IDF. Much of their intelligence comes directly from Aman, with the Mossad producing only a portion on its own.

While its high-profile missions — such as targeting high-risk individuals — tend to dominate headlines, the core of Mossad’s activity lies in geopolitical operations. These are coordinated by the TEVEL unit, whose name literally means “world” or “globe.”

To maintain secrecy, the Mossad operates through a web of front companies and fictitious organizations worldwide. In many cases, individuals unknowingly work for Mossad while believing they’re employed by regular businesses.

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A Vast Intelligence Network

Israeli intelligence isn't a monolith. It’s a vast and complex system known as the “intelligence community.” Most of its entities are unfamiliar even to Israelis, and many units operate entirely in the shadows.

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IDF Intelligence: Embedded in Defense

Israel’s geographic size may be small, but its strategic challenges are immense. The **Israel Defense Forces (IDF)** are central not only to the country’s defense but also to its intelligence gathering.

Established in 1948, the IDF comprises ground forces, the air force, and the navy. Its primary mission is territorial defense, but it also plays a significant role in national intelligence — often working alongside Mossad and Shin Bet (Shabak), the domestic security agency.

Unit 8200: Israel’s Cyber Brain

Among the IDF’s elite intelligence arms is **Unit 8200**, often compared to the U.S. National Security Agency. It specializes in cyberwarfare, communications interception, and electronic surveillance. Its reputation in the cyber-intelligence field is formidable.

Yet the IDF’s role in intelligence isn’t just about cutting-edge tech. Because military service is mandatory for most citizens — both women and men — the IDF mirrors Israeli society. This mandatory service helps forge a tight bond between the army, the population, and the state.

AMAN: The Strategic Core

Aman (short for *Agaf Hamodiin*, literally "intelligence branch") is the largest intelligence body in Israel. As the IDF’s military intelligence directorate, it’s responsible for analyzing threats ranging from terrorism to regional instability.

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Its job isn’t only to collect intelligence but also to provide strategic forecasts and real-time threat assessments to political and military leadership. These insights help shape the country’s defense and foreign policy decisions.

Aman also maintains strong working relationships with both domestic and international intelligence partners. This cooperation ensures rapid intelligence exchange and allows for efficient coordination on joint operations.

Special Combat Intelligence Units

Some of Aman’s most secretive assets are elite combat intelligence units. Their names are classified, their missions undisclosed. Each one specializes in a particular form of technology or fieldcraft. Entry into these units doesn’t happen during the standard military draft. Instead, soldiers are selected during their service and undergo a rigorous evaluation process before being reassigned.

These units update the national “target database” — the list of active threats — in real time during both routine operations and wartime scenarios.

SHABAK: Homeland Shield

Shabak (*Sherut Bitahon Klali*, or General Security Service) is Israel’s internal security agency. Its operations are confined to Israel and the Palestinian territories. Shabak handles counterintelligence, anti-terrorism, and the protection of politicians, embassies, public institutions abroad, commercial flights, and maritime assets.

Like the Mossad, Shabak collaborates closely with Aman. The two agencies cross-monitor and audit each other to improve service performance.

Beyond the Big Three

While Mossad, Aman, and Shabak are the three pillars of Israeli intelligence, other smaller bodies exist — each with highly specific missions. These range from high-tech surveillance to nuclear research, and from unconventional weapons development to future warfare strategies. Their role: to keep Israel ahead of potential threats, both known and emerging.

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