Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel’s Targeted Assassinations

By Ronen Bergman

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This book begins with a quote from the Babylonian Talmud: ‘If someone comes to kill you, rise up and kill him first’. This is a well-known Jewish approach that contrasts with the Jesuit adage of offering the other cheek, arguing that evil should be eliminated rather than contained. According to this fascinating book by Dr Ronen Bergman, a journalist with the popular Israeli newspaper Yediot Acharonot and the Middle East correspondent for the New York Times, who specialises in studying Israeli intelligence, this same approach also characterises Zionism’s response to its enemies.

The book focuses on the operations launched by the Mossad, Israel’s espionage agency. There would hardly seem to be any connection between this book and the new comedy series launched by Sasha Baron-Cohen, ‘Who Is America’. However, the success of this book and of Baron-Cohen’s series both rely on the myth surrounding the Mossad, while at the same time helping to preserve and intensify a myth that gets stronger with the passing years.

If this book is to be believed, those who staff the Mossad themselves believe in the myth that they are invincible. In the opening chapter, former Mossad chief Meir Dagan explains that through a combination of assassinations and preventing the import of vital components for developing a nuclear capability, the Mossad was able by itself to halt Iran’s nuclear program. Prime Minister Netanyahu disagreed with the agency and did not believe that the Mossad would be able to perform this task, and accordingly he sought to prepare for a military attack. From 2010, this led to a deterioration in the relations between the two sides. Dagan resigned, and the two men have since wrangled publicly in the media.

In picturesque and gripping language, and on the basis of careful and ground-breaking research, Bergman presents a series of incidents and anecdotes from the history of the Mossad’s assassination missions. He even reveals an attempt to adopt a young Jewish orphan and raise him as a fearless assassin, under the inspiration of the tactics adopted by the KGB. His stark conclusion is that ‘since world war 2 Israel has assassinated more people than any other country in the Western world’ (page xx).

This assessment raises a moral dilemma. Is Israel responsible for hundreds of incidents that could be termed extra-judicial killings? According to Dagan, who also participated in assassination missions as part of his service in the IDF in the Gaza Strip in the 1970s, and in Lebanon in the 1980s, the reality is the opposite. Dagan argues that targeted assassinations are a more moral alternative than wide-scale military raids or wars, since they target only those directly responsible for terror attacks, without causing collateral damage. The second question is whether such assassinations are efficient in security terms. Dagan is convinced that they are: while no person is irreplaceable, he explains that not all replacements are equal. History would have been completely different without Hitler or, on the other side, without Churchill in Britain and President Wilson in the US.

As noted, the Mossad operations form the central theme of the book, but it also extends its gaze to include operations by the Israeli military, beginning with the assassinations undertaken during the period of terror that accompanied the establishment of the State of Israel. Among other tales, Bergman describes the operations launched by the Lehi, which was known by the British authorities in Palestine as the ‘Stern Gang’. This radical Jewish underground organisation advocated the use of personal terror and assassinated British and Arab police officers. In November 1944, two of its members killed the British Minister of State in the Middle East, Lord Moyne, whom the Lehi considered an anti-Semite and an opponent of the Zionist project. For the sake of accuracy, if Bergman’s goal was to show that assassinations have accompanied Zionist history since its inception, he could also have opened his book with an earlier attempted assassination. In 1903, six years after the First Zionist Congress, an inflamed Jewish student opened fire on Max Nordau, the deputy chairman of the Congress, due to Nordau’s support for Jewish settlement in Uganda rather than in Palestine. The would-be assassin failed to hit his target.

Be this as it may, it is interesting to note that the Mossad, which is responsible for defending Israel outside the country’s borders, was established by David Ben-Gurion, the state’s first prime minister, without any legislative regulation of its status, except for the determination that it is accountable to the prime minister. Accordingly, while Israeli law does not permit the death penalty (with rare exceptions), the prime minister is required to authorise personally any operation with the potential for assassination and therefore is empowered to order such actions. Since its establishment, the Mossad has developed a tradition that Jews are not to be killed, even when they are suspected of serious treason. Accordingly, even when the Mossad caught Mordechai Vanunu in 1986, after he sold Israel’s nuclear secrets to the Sunday Times, he was not assassinated but kidnapped from Rome after being seduced by a female spy and brought to Israel to stand trial.

However, Bergman also reveals an earlier incident in 1954 when the Mossad wished to bring to Israel a man by the name of Alexander Yisraeli, who attempted to sell military secrets to Egypt. After his capture, however, Yisraeli died on the way to Israel from an accident overdose of sedatives injected into his body (p. 37). Israel’s assassination methods have become increasingly sophisticated since then, and in the twenty-first century they include unmanned aircraft that conduct assassinations from the air – a tactic that has since been adopted by many other militaries. However, Bergman concludes that the effectiveness of assassinations remains ambiguous. In some instances they can indeed prevent terror (as in the many assassinations of Palestinians who led the Second Intifada in the period 2001-2003). In others, assassinations may serve only to fuel the circle of combat (as in the case of the assassination of the Hizbullah leader ‘Abbas Musawi in 1992, which led to a revenge attack on the Israeli embassy in Argentina).

In the final analysis, of all the dramatic incidents related by Bergman in his book, the most significant assassination in Zionist history receives little attention, since it was not undertaken by the Mossad of the IDF. In November 1995, the extreme right-wing Jewish assassin Yigal Amir fired three shots at the head of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin due to his willingness to withdraw from the territories occupied in 1967 in return for a historic peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. With hindsight, Rabin’s assassination appears to have changed the course of history, causing damage from which the peace process has yet to recover.