

The Peripheral Alliance Strategy

The History of Mossad's framework for creating clandestine relations with countries and national movements under the principle that “my enemy's enemy is my friend.”

The aims of this book do not include recounting the history of the secret triangular relationships between Iran, the United States and Israel in the period prior to the rise to power of Ayatollah Khomeini. Nevertheless, one cannot grasp the magnitude of the blow that the revolution dealt to the defense establishments of America and Israel and their intelligence agencies, as well as the hostility that the new regime felt towards those countries, without a brief description of the clandestine aspects of those relationships.

From day one, Israeli strategic planners realized that their country could survive only short wars that featured an immediate shift of the battle to enemy soil. This required military strength and the capability for skilful maneuvering, coupled with a rapid reserve force mobilization system that would be able to powerfully engage the enemy's formations shortly after the outbreak of hostilities. Israel's economy could never withstand a prolonged high-alert situation with its entire army on the border.

In adopting this defense strategy, reliable intelligence about enemy capabilities and intentions became absolutely crucial. This led Israel to establish a strong, well-financed, and influential intelligence community. Later on, espionage agencies were also used for other objectives, mainly for

procurement of valuable technological know-how and acquisition of strategic raw materials, as well as for counter-terrorism. The size of Israel and the threats it faces also created the need for a weapon of last resort, an Armageddon solution. Israel used its intelligence services to advance its nuclear program, acquiring essential materials and technological know-how. It is highly doubtful whether Israel could have developed this capability without the help of its intelligence community.

Israel came to realize that its position in the Third World was hardly secure. It would face an uphill diplomatic struggle with the Arabs, and possibly also with Russia.ⁱ If it wished to achieve its foreign and strategic policy targets in Asia and Africa, it would have to do so through the back door, in secrecy.ⁱⁱ

Thus, Israel aimed to forge regional alliances with forces that were hostile to its own enemies, mainly the Arab states, on the principle that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” The founder of the Mossad, Reuven Shiloah, termed this effort the “Peripheral Alliance Strategy,” a reference to the establishment of contacts, mostly clandestine, with countries located in the “outer belt” surrounding Israel (namely countries that border Israel’s neighboring enemies from the other side – Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia) and with underground movements of minorities having shared interests (like the Kurds in Iraq or Christians in Lebanon and Southern Sudan). David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, was a strong proponent of this policy. With the Mossad taking the lead, the Peripheral Alliance Strategy provided a compass for Israeli activity in the Middle East and Africa.ⁱⁱⁱ

Another cornerstone of Israel’s foreign policy was the attempt to forge itself into a strategic and intelligence asset to United States. The latter had tried

to establish a presence in several African states, but was rejected by some because of the fear of imperialist motives common among the young political entities of Africa. Israel was eager to demonstrate that despite its diminutive size and lack of natural resources, it could succeed where Uncle Sam could not. Israel sought to position itself as the final frontier protecting the West from the spread of Communism into Asia and Africa.^{iv} Harel says that it was then that he realized how Israel could operate as “the long arm of the United States” in these arenas.

Isser Harel, who headed the Mossad from 1952 to 1963 and was probably the most influential figure in the history of Israeli intelligence,^v refers to the Suez Campaign of 1956 as a turning point in his ability to gain a foothold in the Third World.^{vi} Though a political fiasco, the Sinai Campaign bolstered the prestige and image of the IDF as a first-rank fighting force and convinced many decision-makers around the world that Israel – eight years after its establishment – was a fact of life in the Middle East, and that it was there to stay. Later on, Iranian military personnel conveyed to their Israeli counterparts how deeply impressed they had been by the IDF’s performance in the Sinai Campaign.^{vii}

After the Suez Campaign, the Mossad spearheaded the Israeli offensive in Asia and Africa. With Ben-Gurion’s blessing, Harel sought to help friendly countries build up their domestic secret services and military strength, not to confront external enemies, but against what he describes as “the fifth column that Russia and Egypt tried to establish wherever they could, through coercion and subversion.” Harel insisted that though intelligence instruction would be

provided by the intelligence services and military training by the army, the Mossad would retain overall control.^{viii}

In the mid- and late-1950's Shiloah, then adviser to the Foreign Minister and envoy to the United States, forged a special relationship between the Israeli and American intelligence communities. He made the Asian and African initiative one of his top priorities and used his contacts in the State Department and CIA to convince the United States of the importance of an Israeli presence on those continents.^{ix} Shiloah met with high-ranking African officials on American soil.^x This was also one the topics discussed between him and James Angleton, the CIA's head of counterespionage, and probably the most powerful and loyal ally of Israel within the agency, past or present.^{xi} As early as 1960, CIA director Allen Dulles was quoted as saying that Israel was now the only ally in the Middle East on which the CIA could rely.^{xii}

The foundations built by Shiloah, together with the evidence of the Mossad's ability to collect information that was made available to the CIA,^{xiii} resulted in a close relationship between the two organizations with regular, daily discussions since the mid-1960's and the sharing of top secret information and assessments. Apart from the political and diplomatic angles, from the intelligence point of view the bottom line was a genuine American interest in Israeli intelligence achieving deep penetration of both the Middle East and Africa. For its part, Israel wanted to prove itself extremely important to the Americans, and thereby qualify for funding and for information obtained with technologies that, at the time, were far beyond Israeli reach such as advanced communications interception (SIGINT), and satellite and aerial photography (IMINT).^{xiv}

The Mossad's cooperation with the CIA evolved at the same time as DID relations between the IDF and the American army and navy, between the U.S. National Security Agency and Unit 8200 (Israeli Military Intelligence's SIGINT unit), between the Shin Bet, Israel's internal security agency and its American counterpart the FBI, and between the Israeli Defense Ministry and the Pentagon, concerning weapons sales and joint development projects.

Israel maintained close surveillance over Egyptian and Soviet activity in Asia and Africa, including even in spheres such as agriculture and commerce.^{xv} The information it derived was used in barter deals with Western intelligence agencies, mainly the CIA. Israel supplied the United States with information about collaboration and military transactions between countries in the Middle East and Africa and the Soviets that, according to Harel (in the last interview he gave in his life, to the author of this book) "were on a scale that amazed the Americans."^{xvi} The American government did not fail to acknowledge Israel's contribution.^{xvii}

The Peripheral Alliance Strategy^{xviii} was given the codename "Klil" (Hebrew for "perfection"). Within its framework, a cooperation agreement was signed in August 1958 between the Mossad and its Turkish counterpart, MIT (Milli Istihbarat Teskilati, National Intelligence Organization). Later, through the mediation of Reuven Shiloah, it was joined by the Iranian SAVAK, the Persian acronym for "the Royal Organization for Security and Intelligence."^{xix} The tripartite agreement was named Trident, or "Ultra-Watt"

Immediately afterwards, Ben-Gurion sent a personal letter to President Eisenhower, in which he explained: "With the goal of erecting a high dam to stem the Nasserite-Soviet tidal wave, we have begun tightening our links with

several states on the outside perimeter of the Middle East Our goal is to organize a group of countries, not necessarily an official alliance, that would be able to resist Soviet expansion by proxy, such as Nasser.”

The Trident agreement called for periodic meetings between the heads of the intelligence bodies of the three states, with a different country serving as host each time. Israel considered this an unprecedented strategic achievement, having positioned itself as the central axis between two Muslim countries in a military-intelligence pact. In regional disputes that arose between Turkey and Iran, Trident served as a platform and Israel as arbitrator. Harel even ordered the construction of a special luxury installation near the Mossad Academy, north of Tel-Aviv, in order to host these meetings and other secret guests.^{xx}

The Six-Day War of June 1967 gave a sharp boost to the military and intelligence ties between Iran and Israel. The shah was highly appreciative of Israel’s military achievements and admired Moshe Dayan, Israel’s charismatic defense minister, and his orders for weaponry grew in direct proportion. From 1967 and up to his ouster in 1979, the shah was Israel’s greatest friend. His fear of a Soviet invasion and his detestation of the Arabs brought him closer and closer to the state of the Jews and of course, the arsenal of deadly playthings that it possessed.

After the Six-Day War, relations between Israel and another target of Klil, the Peripheral Alliance Strategy, Ethiopia, peaked as well, particularly in the intelligence realm. Israel’s grasp of Ethiopian domestic affairs was so highly-rated that the Iranian intelligence attaché to Addis requested permission to use the Mossad’s annual assessment of Ethiopia for his own reports.^{xxi} Given the close relationship, Mossad director Maj. Gen. (res.) Meir Amit (who had

succeeded Isser Harel in 1963) decided that the time had come to make Ethiopia the fourth prong in Trident.

Emperor Haile Selassie, who considered it a great honor for Ethiopia to be asked to cooperate with other regional powers, gladly agreed to join in.^{xxii} In early 1968, the annual meeting of the intelligence alliance took place in Addis Ababa. Three relatively large delegations from the Mossad, the SAVAK and the Turkish MIT landed in Ethiopia in special aircraft. For three days, the delegations discussed the mutual strategic interests of all the parties and, to the host's delight, dedicated special time to Ethiopia's place in the pact.^{xxiii}

"At the time," observed a former top Mossad official who was involved in planning the Klil meetings: "All the heads of intelligence in Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia had a direct link to the boss, whether it was the shah or the Turkish prime minister or Haile Selassie. Through Klil, it was possible to pass messages and ideas directly to the ruler. It gave us a double orgasm, and with the inclusion of Ethiopia, a triple orgasm."^{xxiv}

Israel's successes in enhancing and enlarging the Klil agreement enhanced its position in Washington, strengthening James Angleton's ability to promote his pro-Israel approach in the CIA.

The most secret operation of that period was carried out by Israel with the cooperation of the United States and Iran, behind Turkey's back though literally in its back yard. As part of the Peripheral Alliance Strategy, the Mossad had established covert ties with the Iraqi Kurdish underground, headed by Mulla Mustafa Barazani, which was fighting the central government in Baghdad with the aim of achieving independence for Iraqi Kurdistan. The Israelis decided to come to their help, in order to make them into as much of a

nuisance to the Iraqis as possible, and to establish an intelligence foothold in the Arab world's rear.

Two problems had to be surmounted: Firstly, to get agents and materiel into Iraqi Kurdistan, permission was required from the Iranians and secondly, any mention of the Kurdish issue was like a red flag to the Turks, who had a large Kurdish minority and were battling its underground militia, the PKK. Mossad director Amit relates: "The Americans were also interested in links with the Kurds, mainly to bolster their intelligence surveillance of the Soviet Union, but in view of their close ties with Turkey they were in an even more delicate situation and had an even more difficult problem than us. The upshot was that the CIA asked us to handle the matter, to build a secret channel of communications with the Kurds, so that the Americans could use it without the Turks knowing about it."

Amit met the shah, and persuaded him to give the Israelis free passage to Kurdistan, without telling the Turks. After clearing it with the United States, the Iranian monarch agreed, but without any great joy. For seven years, Israel provided assistance to the Kurds in a variety of fields – intelligence and military advisers, instructors in commando and terrorist tactics, enormous amounts of weaponry, food, medical equipment and more. All of the shipments passed through Iran, whether by sea or by air. CIA personnel were allowed to use these supply channels in order to infiltrate Iraq and the Soviet Union and carry out various missions there, enjoying the protection and means provided by the Israelis. The Mossad managed to combine the operation with another assignment: the rescue of tens of thousands of Jews from Iraq, where they

suffered persecution and humiliation because of their religion, and to bring them to Israel via Kurdistan and Iran.

Shimon Peres, who was Israel's defense minister in the mid-1970s (and in 2007 became Israel's figurehead state president, at the age of 83): "The shah was trying to put Iran through a revolution of modernity, and that revolution seemed very problematic indeed. One day I came to see the shah, and he suggested that we go and take a look at his helicopter base. There were thousands of the things there, from America, at five million dollars each. I spoke to some of the pilots. Some were village boys who'd hardly finished elementary school, not to speak of the education that a pilot needs. I asked the shah why he needed all those helicopters. He replied in all seriousness that if the Russians invaded Iran, they would do so in thousands of tanks across the mountains, and the helicopters would be higher than the mountains." It's clear Peres didn't think much of the shah's strategy, but to grasp what he really thought, you had to see his eyes as he spoke.

In those days, Iran was being very careful not to put all its eggs in one basket. It did not purchase complete weapons systems from Israel, but only spare parts and ammunition, buying its tanks from Britain and its aircraft from America. And to maintain a balance, it bought "soft vehicles" and artillery from the Soviet Union. The Israelis were trying to increase Iran's dependence on the local military industries. "We wanted to get a grip on the buyer," explains a source who was involved in the deals. "We understood that if they bought an entire system, later they would have to have the parts and the technicians and the upgrades. That way, they are tied to us for ever and ever."

The point man in these endeavors was Uri Lubrani, the Israeli ambassador to Iran. At first, they bore little fruit, and even a secret visit to Iran by prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in July 1975 and his meeting with the shah never helped. The way was cleared only in the wake of Egypt's rapprochement with the United States once Gamal Abdel Nasser was out of the way and Anwar Sadat had taken over, and Henry Kissinger had begun his relatively successful efforts to thaw the freeze in the political processes between Israel and the Arab states. Once the shah sensed that a peace process between Israel and the Arabs and was making headway, he felt more comfortable with strengthening his secret ties with the Jewish state.

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