

## **The Israeli Secret Services & The Struggle Against Terrorism by Ami Pedahzur. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010)**

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## Book Reviews

***The Israeli Secret Services & The Struggle Against Terrorism.***  
**By Ami Pedahzur. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.**  
**ISBN: 978-0-231-14043-0. Notes. Glossary. Index. Illustrations.**  
**Pp. 232. \$22.50.**

Having read quite a few books on security and terrorism, topics that fascinated me during my civil service career with the Government of Israel, I was looking with interest for an Israeli author with an impressive security background that would for once provide balanced criticism of the Israeli counterterrorism struggle.

I believe that Mr. Pedahzur has done justice to this topic in his book, *The Israeli Secret Services & The Struggle Against Terrorism*, despite the fact that his service in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) was much like mine: he was a medic. Mr. Pedahzur is not an acclaimed, retired warrior from Mosad (the Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations, one of three main Israeli entities tasked mostly with activities outside of Israel), or *Shabak* (an acronym for the General Security Service, known also as *Shin Bet*, which specializes in intelligence gathering within Israel and the occupied territories, but occasionally operates in Israel's neighboring countries). And yet his book is well written and superbly researched, and reads almost like a thriller. In my own career, I served in the Israel National Police (INP) and in various assignments that allowed me more than a fleeting peek into the Israeli Intelligence Community (IC). I was pleasantly surprised to find this book finally tells the truth about a painful and problematic topic: Israel's struggle with terrorism.

Pedahzur has not just written another book about Israel and its six decades of being plagued (mostly) by Palestinian terrorism. He takes the reader through the country's history since the end of World War I, a war in which Jews aided the Allies by spying on forces of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Israel gained its independence in 1948, and since then its history has been marked by a struggle with terrorism. Pedahzur attempts to observe this effort mostly from the war model, which also reflects the counterterrorism policies of the United States and other countries. The "war model," or "War on Terror," deals with policies that increasingly

have undermined civil liberties and human rights, and at the same time evaded or ignored the underlying causes of terrorism, thus increasing the terrorist threat. This model deals mostly with the involvement of various IDF Special Forces units, and how they were deployed against what essentially is seen as revolutionary, or guerrilla, warfare. Pedahzur, however, is careful to omit almost no one who takes part in the counterterrorism struggle, and when applicable observes it from two other perspectives: judiciary, which deals with terrorism as a criminal act, and reconciliatory, which handles it through politics and diplomacy.

Israeli politicians and leaders are quite often prominent figures who have retired from the IDF or IC; thus, there is little wonder that for over sixty years the country has dealt with terrorism using the war model. One of Pedahzur's observations is that Israel's reputation as one of the best, most experienced terrorism opponents may not entirely be deserved. In an undated interview, he posed the question of why terrorism against Israelis has intensified and become more deadly over the years if Israel is indeed such a counterterrorism superpower. Pedahzur proposes that time and again the policymakers erred by using various military commando units, barely trained in counterterrorism warfare, instead of a superbly trained police counterterrorism commando group such as the Special Police Unit *Yehidat Mishtara Meyiuhedet* (or *Yamam*, by which I was trained in several counternarcotics operations). Until recently, Yamam was always second to one of the IDF surveillance commando units (*Sayarot*). Pedahzur covers the everyday tasks of the units belonging to the Army Military Intelligence (*Sayeret Matkal*), and a variety of other special military units, including Mossad. He explains each unit's routine duties, as well as its performance in counterterrorism operations. Through detailed descriptions of specific hijackings, kidnappings, and hostage situations, Pedahzur illustrates the success or failure of the unit(s) that took part in the operation, and describes the action's place in Israeli history.

I feel obligated to say that even sage Israelis frequently harbor incorrect conceptions of the participation and performance of these units in counterterrorism situations. Moreover, they are often wrong about which unit was involved in a certain operation. For example, after the Ma'alot hostage crisis on May 15, 1974, it was widely published that *Sayeret Golani* conducted the assault, when in reality, as Pedahzur notes, *Sayeret Matkal* carried it out. Another example of erroneous information involved the 1976 hostage rescue effort at Entebbe, during which Yoni Netanyahu, commander of the ground assault troops, was shot in the throat and died almost instantly. The media glorified his death, claiming he was shot in the chest and died over an hour later while being aided by a doctor and surrounded by his warriors. It is widely accepted that the Israeli media

are truthful but naturally somewhat biased, so sometimes might not disclose all the known facts and thus leave room for speculation. Dover Tzahal, official IDF spokesman, carefully avoids outright lies, but at times issues only partially true statements. He and the civil media seem to have tacitly agreed to delay or suppress certain national security-related facts. Only a minimal number of state security-related news articles are suppressed, but Dover Tzahal's announcements have the highest credibility and exert the strongest influence on public opinion. After any successful or failed counterterrorism operation, it is usually Tzahal who breaks the news.

Pedahzur concludes that the long-term aim of destroying Palestinian terrorism was not only unsuccessful, but led to intensified terrorist attacks. He also states that Israel has been only partially successful in deterring enemy attacks. The author claims "the psychological effect (of Israeli combat expertise) on Palestinian and Lebanese fighters was of no great consequence. Not only were they not deterred from continuing to strike at Israel, but their efforts also intensified over the years..." (p. 6). Other counterterrorism experts have asserted that Israel's military and political bureaucracies have been far too slow in adapting to changes within terrorist organizations, and thus have coped poorly with splinter cells and small terrorist groups—even with larger entities such as Hizbollah and Hamas. As a result, relatively small terrorist organizations with limited funding can terrorize Israel, especially with weapons of mass destruction. In addition, the country has been slow to develop technology and urban warfare tactics for combating terrorists, despite the fact that its military industry is one of the most fertile in the world.

I would like to briefly compare the results of Israel's counterterrorism efforts and those of the United States in Afghanistan following 9/11. As stated earlier, over the six decades of its existence Israel has fought terrorism with limited results. It has suppressed terrorism periodically, but never conclusively. Similarly, the United States—after ten long years of battling the Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other parts of the world with a large modern army, including special units and innovative technology—has failed to liquidate Afghan terrorism. Most analysts claim that al-Qaida has been dramatically weakened and splintered. Yet today it affiliates itself with other Salafi terrorist groups that have taken part in an unknown number of post-9/11 attacks, such as the 2004 railroad bombing in Spain, the 2005 subway bombing in the UK, and the foiled 2006 plan to simultaneously blow up ten aircraft on their way to the United States. Hundreds of thousands of Salafi and Shia Muslims worldwide fund and support Middle Eastern, East African, and Asian terrorist groups, as well as international al-Qaida and other Salafist groups.

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The notion of defeating America, as well as annihilating Israel and all Jews, is almost invariably sounded.

Israeli and American efforts to liquidate terrorism have thus far failed. Pedahzur correctly sees terrorism as a psychological tactic aimed at the public, which in turn influences leaders and decision makers through electoral pressure. A fast and devastating response to a terrorist attack serves to reassure the public, possibly moderately boosting morale. Besides being a temporary "Band-Aid," however, such responses truly benefit only the political leaders (p. 8).

The public's influence does not stop with politicians. It trickles down to the intelligence community and military and plays an important role in funding and disbursement. Pedahzur explains this well in relation to Israel's IC and military units deployed in counterterrorism efforts. The issue is better understood in terms of the constant turf fighting among elements of the Israeli counterterrorism community. The special ops units of the IDF and IC are secrecy-oriented. Most of their operations are so secret, in fact, that the units almost never receive overt credit for their success. Counterterrorism is a field in which participation and success hit the media very quickly, and thus the unit gets its credit much in the fashion of the U.S. Navy Seals following the liquidation of Usama bin Ladin. Hence, the military units compete with one another. This competition is also prevalent among *Shabak*, the Military Intelligence Directorate (*Aman*), Mossad, and, to a much lesser extent, the police, whose role was not mentioned in this book despite the fact that police investigators routinely participated in the arrests and interrogation of terror suspects at least until 1991 (when I left the INP). The immediate outcome of this competition among intelligence units and organizations is the familiar unwillingness to share knowledge and cooperate.

Pedahzur is correct in stating that this unfortunate feature of the Israeli IC can have a devastating influence on the struggle against terrorism. Even though certain lessons of 9/11 have been learned and changes made in the American IC, cooperation and information sharing have been limited. This "malaise" among security services is common in most democracies, and unlikely to be completely resolved. Although this unhealthy competition may distract security organizations from their original tasks involving state security and undermine national strategic interests, some may view such competition as a sign of healthy agility. I do not.

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