
Book Reviews**Ronen Bergman, Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of****Israel's Targeted Assassinations** (New York, NY: Random House, 2018), 784 pp., US \$35.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-4000-6971-2.

reviewed by Joshua Sinai

Targeted killing is a term used for premeditated extrajudicial assassination by a state organization, usually by its covert intelligence and special forces units. The targets are enemy operatives (e.g. managers of terrorist operations) who are perceived as posing an imminent security threat due to their involvement in murderous activities that endanger the state. An important consideration for opting for targeted killing is that the capture of the targeted persons for arrest is made impossible by their protected presence in hostile territory. Over the years, due to the protracted nature of conventional military and terrorist threats by some of its Middle Eastern adversaries against Israel, such as Iran, Syria, the Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Palestinian Fatah and Hamas groups, the Jewish State has developed one of the world's top covert special operations capabilities to target selected adversaries for assassination worldwide.

As explained by Ronen Bergman, one of Israel's top investigative journalists in the field of national security, Israeli covert agencies have conducted targeted assassinations against the country's Middle Eastern adversaries throughout its pre- and post-statehood periods. The total numbers of such spectacularly conducted targeted assassinations are staggering. Bergman's informed account is based on "thousand" interviews with "sources ranging from political leaders and chiefs of intelligence agencies to the operatives themselves." Many of them provided him with highly sensitive government documents, as he writes, that they "never received permission to remove...from their places of employment, and certainly did not have permission to pass them on to me" (p. xiv).

While the author may have received unparalleled access to the workings of Israel's targeted killing program over the years, his use of figures to estimate the total numbers of such killings is open to debate. For example, he explains that until the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada (uprising) against Israel in September 2000, Israel had conducted some 500 targeted killing operations, killing at least 1,000 people, both combatants and civilians (p.xxii). Following the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada in September 2000, Palestinian suicide bombers deliberately targeted Israeli citizens on a daily basis, causing the deaths of some 887 Israeli civilians and 250 military personnel - figures which do not appear in Bergman's text. In response, the author reveals, Israel carried out some 1,000 targeting operations, of which 168 succeeded in killing terrorists - which, in this reviewer's judgment, is a low success rate. An additional 800 operations were conducted against dangerous individuals from 2005 (when the intifada ended) until late 2017 (p. xxii). However, the author does not explain how many of these operations had succeeded, and numbering the adversary combatant and civilian deaths resulting from these targeted killing operations.

Once the author shifts his account to describing the stories behind Israel's targeted killing operations, his analysis is on more solid ground. These killings, he explains, were mostly carried out against leading Hamas operatives, such as the firing by a helicopter gunship of a rocket bomb against Hamas's leader, Ahmed Yassin in March 2004, killing him at his hideout in the Gaza Strip. Another operation involved a revenge targeting of selected senior Hezbollah operatives, such as the notorious terrorist mastermind Imad Mughniyeh, who was killed by a remotely controlled car bomb explosion in Syria in February 2008. This was followed, on January 19, 2010, by a fatal poisoning by an Israeli hit team of Mamoud al-Mabhouh, a Hamas financier, at his hotel room in Dubai. The hit team's movements were captured by the hotel's surveillance cameras, but in an example of "bazaar diplomacy," despite the international storm that ensued (with the Israeli team using foreign passports belonging to innocent citizens), there were no repercussions against Israel, supposedly due to a "behind the scenes" understanding that let Israel off-the hook for the operation. Other spectacular operations included a series of killings in Iran by Israeli covert operatives (and, as the author speculates, by Israeli allies in the region) against numerous scientists who were involved in developing Iran's nuclear weapons program, which

was directed against Israel, between the years 2010 and 2012.

Employing the tactic of targeted assassinations to protect a country's security and the lives of its citizens, the author argues, involves two difficult dilemmas for a democratic state like Israel. As Bergman writes: "First, is it effective? Can the elimination of an individual, or a number of individuals, make the world a safer place? Second, is it morally and legally justified?" (p. xxi)

Regarding the first question, Mr. Bergman writes that at its height Israel's targeted killing campaign significantly weakened the PLO's terrorist commanders and, together with other defensive measures, had greatly diminished the rate of Palestinian suicide attacks. It also significantly damaged the PLO's and Hamas's top echelons, beginning with the assassination of Hamas's founder, Yassin, in March 2004. While PLO leader Yasir Arafat was repeatedly targeted for assassination over the years, he was able to continuously evade his assassins. The author reveals that, in the late 1970s the Israeli Mossad intelligence service had also engaged in a program to delegitimize Arafat, with evidence of his engaging in homosexual relations with his bodyguards, but the Mossad had decided not to publicize it. The author speculates that when Arafat later "succumbed to a mysterious internal disease" that killed him in early November 2004, "traces of polonium, a radioactive material used in assassinations," were found on his "clothes and remains," and that "the timing of Arafat's death was quite peculiar, coming so soon after the assassination of Yassin" in March of that year. Although the author may know whether Arafat's death was a product of an Israeli assassination operation, he explains that "If I knew the answer to the question of what killed Yasser Arafat, I wouldn't be able to write it here in this book, or even be able to write that I know the answer. The military censor in Israel forbids me from discussing this subject" (p. 562).

Regarding the second question, Mr. Bergman explains that the targeted killings were justified when the target for elimination "must be an individual directly linked to terrorism" and that "there should be no killings when there was a 'reasonable arrest alternative'..." (p. 537).

In the conclusion of the book, Mr. Bergman insightfully observes that while Israel's highly successful campaign of targeted assassinations (along with other intelligence operations) "provided Israel's leaders sooner or later with operational responses to every focused problem they were asked to solve. But the 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," and that this "tactical method of combating terror" have been "elevated and sanctified....at the expense of the true vision, statesmanship and genuine desire to reach a political solution that is necessary for peace to be attained" (pp. 629-630).

Despite the author's questionable use of figures at the beginning of the book, this insider-based work make this an indispensable book in explaining the successes and dilemmas facing Israel in its efforts to fend off the continuous and implacable hostility of some of its Middle Eastern adversaries. But, as the author explains, the targeted killings campaign should also have been accompanied by a stronger commitment to achieving a political solution with the Palestinian adversary.

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