Homeland Security in Israel
Module 2: The Organizational and Operational Environments and Counterterrorism Strategies

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This second module in this series will focus on the organizational and operational environments that frame Israeli counterterrorism strategies.

Unlike the United States, Israel has only a small number of agencies that are actively engaged in various aspects of counter-terrorism intelligence-gathering, combat and law enforcement. This does not necessarily mean, however, that Israel is entirely devoid of the type of institutional jealousies and hesitance to share information across agencies that frequently plagues US counter-terrorism efforts. Nevertheless, there is a fairly clear hierarchy and delineation of responsibilities between the primary agencies and, since there are only a few agencies engaged in counter-terrorism, they are usually more than happy to leave activities outside their core mission to other agencies thus facilitating inter-agency cooperation. For example, the only agency in Israel that has the authority to enforce laws within Israel proper (that is, not including the West Bank or Gaza Strip) is the Israel Police, and the police are recognized as the lead agency in all matters relating to coping with run-of-the-mill crime. As none of the other agencies are interested in engaging in traditional
law enforcement, they are more than happy to share any information that they come across in the criminal sphere with the police intelligence division and the police intelligence division, in turn, focuses exclusively on criminal intelligence and turns over any information that it uncovers in the terrorism sphere to the domestic intelligence service, the Israel Security Agency (ISA, also known as Shin Bet or Shabak – a Hebrew acronym translated into English as GSS - General Security Service). Among the intelligence agencies, there is more room for overlap and hence for bureaucratic infighting, nevertheless here too, each agency has a clearly separate core mission and the problems usually arrive at the fuzzy edges of each agency’s mission, but not at the heart of their respective enterprises.

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**Primary Agencies: Israeli Military**

The Israel Defense Force (IDF) is the Israeli military. Israel does not have separate military branches, as in the United States, and though air force and naval personnel wear uniforms and insignia that differ from those of the Ground Forces (roughly equivalent to the US army and marines, though without their respective air, naval and anti-aircraft assets), they are placed under a unified command and subject to the orders of the IDF Chief of Staff, who in turn is subject to the authority of the Cabinet. In Israel, the Cabinet is the “Commander-in-Chief” rather than the Prime Minister (or the Israeli President, who serves in what is an almost exclusively ceremonial post). The IDF possesses the country’s largest intelligence organization, the Intelligence Branch (also known by its Hebrew acronym – AMAN) as well as its most important strategic policy planning organization, the Planning Branch. The IDF also serves as the primary operational organization tasked with combating terrorism in the West Bank (where the police role is generally limited to policing Israeli citizens living in the Settlements and engaging in some additional limited activities) and in the Gaza Strip. The IDF is the single largest and most powerful governmental agency in Israel with resources and personnel numbers that dwarf all of the other agencies mentioned here and, while it operates under civilian control, is highly influential in determining counterterrorism and defense policy. The IDF Intelligence Branch is also the country’s lead intelligence agency and responsible for providing the national intelligence assessment, which acts as the basis for national security policy decisions, to the cabinet. The Israeli equivalent of the United States National Security Agency, which serves as Israel’s primary SIGINT agency, is also housed within the IDF.
Primary Agencies: Intelligence

However, in terms of operating HUMINT resources within the West Bank and Gaza Strip, particularly in the area of recruiting Palestinian informants, the ISA, serves as the principle agency. The ISA works closely with the IDF and the Israel Police as it is a purely intelligence-gathering and analysis agency and does not possess arrest powers either in the Palestinian territories (where arrest powers reside within the IDF and Police) or within Israel proper (where only the police have arrest powers unless Israel is in a state of active war in which case the police are put under the authority of the IDF Homefront Command). In the West Bank, for example, ISA personnel, who run assets in a given area and consequently know that area and its population intimately, will typically travel with IDF units (who themselves cycle in and out of particular geographic commands and hence do not necessarily have expert knowledge of specific locales) that are tasked with making arrests in order to help pinpoint the suspects to be arrested or the bomb-making facility to be destroyed.

The ISA is also responsible for VIP protection and is tasked with guarding the Prime Minister and other Ministers as well as visiting foreign dignitaries. The ISA also provides protection at some critical infrastructure sites.

In terms of the provision of intelligence, the ISA is tasked with providing intelligence warnings to Police Security Officers (per Police Command Area) who are then tasked with providing the relevant information, appropriately sanitized, to police personnel down to the level of the patrolman.

Finally, the ISA is tasked with providing “security guidance” (regulations, training, practice drills) to Police, Ports and Airports Security Officers, Ministry Security Officers (Education, Industry, Transportation, Foreign Ministry, Energy, etc.) and private security firms working in the public sphere, such as Israeli airline security personnel. In other words, the ISA creates and enforces regulations in matters of security and counterterrorism that a broad range of security agencies, including the police, must adhere to. A common agency to enforce procedures at the federal, state and local levels as well as across much of the private sector is not something that exists in the United States, but it has proven its utility in the Israeli case as everyone follows the same or similar standard operating procedures and all are on the “same page” with respect to security procedures.

The Institute for Intelligence and Special Duties (more commonly known by the Hebrew word for “Institute” – Mossad), is Israel’s premier foreign intelligence-gathering and analysis organization (though the IDF Intelligence Branch also engages in foreign intelligence-gathering and analysis, but usually with a focus on military issues). Among other issues, it also has an active interest in gathering intelligence on terrorist threats emanating from outside Israel’s immediate geographic environment.
The Israel Police, as noted earlier, is the country’s sole law enforcement agency. It is a national organization that, aside from times of acute military conflict when it is put under the overall command of the IDF, operates under the auspices of the Cabinet, through the Minister for Public Security, who in turn overseas the senior uniformed police commander (who is a police lieutenant-general) under the title of Police Commissioner.

The Police are also the main terrorism prevention and terrorist interdiction agency within Israel proper and deal with conventional criminal activity across the Green Line in the West Bank. The Minister of Defense, however, may declare a “limited state of emergency” in which case authority for dealing with a particular incident within Israel proper, is shifted to the military. This allows the military to enforce orders for people to stay in bomb shelters and shut down schools and places of employment as necessary. Moreover, the police have very limited capabilities in dealing with WMD events and in such cases, the military’s Home Front Command (HFC) would be authorized to manage the event under the framework of the overall military command.

Field personnel in the Israel Police are assigned to stations, which in turn form part of the sub-districts that make up the country’s six police districts. While an individual patrol officer is assigned to a specific station, they are under a unified command structure and hence can be moved from location to location as needed. This allows the Police Commissioner to concentrate forces in certain locations when intelligence indicates probable threats to public safety (as in the case of terrorist threats, riots, large public events and the like). The force also includes a mobile response component for special tasks and as a reserve when additional personnel are needed. The police force also includes a highly trained anti-terrorism SWAT team, known by its acronym Yamam, which also carries out operations for the military in the West Bank.

The Israel police also includes a paramilitary component that acts as a national gendarmerie force and is known as the Border Police or Border Guards. The personnel in this force have full police powers but specialize in patrols along Israel’s borders (along with the military) and counterterrorism operations within Israel and also act as a reserve force for additional police activities. In addition, the Border Police operates in the West Bank, where they are under army command and act as a supplement to military forces conducting counterterrorism operations in Palestinian areas.
In Israel, not all full-time police personnel are salaried professionals. Israel has a fairly large force of volunteer police officers and Civil Guard volunteers. In addition, eighteen year old conscripts (Israel has a system of military conscription) may chose to request to carry out their mandatory military service in the Border Police or even the regular police force, subject to approval by the military.

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**Governmental Organization I**

Issues relating to information and intelligence-sharing in Israel are far less complex than those being dealt with in the United States for the simple reason that there are far fewer agencies at play in Israel compared to the bewildering array of intelligence, military, law enforcement and other governmental agencies in the United States.

Unlike the American system, where the President heads the executive branch, in parliamentary systems such as Israel’s, the executive branch is headed by the Cabinet (also known as the government).

As Israeli Cabinets are typically large (usually with over twenty ministers), most of the work conducted by the Cabinet is carried out by smaller Cabinet Committees (called “Ministerial Committees”), who are authorized to make policy decisions for the full Cabinet.

In matters of national security (Israel does not distinguish, as is done in the post-9/11 United States, between “national security” and “homeland security”), the Ministerial Committee for National Security Affairs (popularly known as the “Security Cabinet”) is authorized to make day-to-day decisions and consequently receives daily intelligence briefings and reports. As this Ministerial Committee is also fairly large, in practice, day-to-day decisions are carried out by a smaller ad-hoc body (which has access to the most sensitive information) that has been variously known, throughout Israeli history, as a “Kitchen Cabinet” (thus named because the grandmotherly Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, who was Prime Minister between 1969 and 1974, used to hold meetings for this group in her kitchen, where she served the Ministers coffee and cookies).

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**Governmental Organization II**

The Prime Minister is “primus inter pares” (first among equals) and, while formally wields one vote in the Cabinet, in practice controls the Cabinet and has the power to dismiss Ministers. The Prime Minister is advised by a handful of political appointees in the Prime Minister’s Bureau. These people usually are long-time associates of the Prime Ministers who have been with the Prime Minister long before he or she became Prime Minister. The
Prime Minister also sometimes heeds the advice of the National Security Council – which consists of a small staff of senior civil servants who come from the military, intelligence, law enforcement and academic communities tasked with producing analyses and policy options for the Prime Minister and assisting in national security policy planning. In general, and despite the image that some may have of Israeli decision makers being proactive and always prepared, Israeli national security policymaking suffers from the absence of long-range planning, an inability to clearly articulate policy goals and a focus on “putting out fires” rather than systematically trying to assess challenges and opportunities and fashioning policy accordingly.

The PM has direct authority over the domestic security service known by several acronyms including: ISA, GSS, Shin Bet and Shabak, as well as the external intelligence services (the Mossad). Both of these civilian intelligence agencies report directly to the Prime Minister, who, via their respective heads, sets planning and collection priorities for those agencies, receives intelligence from them, and approves (along with colleagues in the Security Cabinet or small ad-hoc committee) special operations. The head of military intelligence (Aman) also reports to the Prime Minister and Cabinet though he is also in the chain of command and is under the authority of the Chief of Staff.

In addition, the heads of the Shabak, Mossad and Aman meet to coordinate their activities in what is called the Heads of Services Committee.

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**Intelligence**

The Minister of Defense is in charge of overseeing the Israel Defense Forces, via the Chief-of-Staff of the IDF (though major military operations must be approved by the Security Cabinet and then by the full Cabinet). The IDF Intelligence Branch (also known by its Hebrew acronym, “Amman”), therefore operates under the authority of the Chief of Staff and his superior, the Minister of Defense. However, the IDF Intelligence Branch, unlike any other component of the IDF, also reports directly to the Cabinet and is under its authority. Consequently the major-general in charge of military intelligence, unlike any of his other colleagues in the IDF general staff, operates both within the military command structure as well as outside it, through reporting directly to the Cabinet. Moreover, the IDF Intelligence Branch is the largest intelligence agency in the country as well as the senior agency. It is responsible for coordinating with the other two major intelligence agencies (within the framework of what is referred to as the “Heads of Services Committee”) and providing the unified intelligence net assessment (something that in Israel is referred to as the “Intelligence Picture.”). Information-sharing between the agencies is thus mandated and a nominal pecking-order exists in which the IDF Intelligence Branch is given precedence. This does not mean, of course, that the agencies always agree, particularly with respect to their analysis and assessments of events, or that their sister agencies are kept abreast of ongoing operations in other agencies, only that the final intelligence product is vetted and
submitted jointly with military intelligence responsible for bringing that assessment to the decision makers.

The Israel Police also have an Intelligence Branch, but this focuses exclusively on “criminal intelligence” with counterterrorism intelligence largely in the hands of the ISA and the IDF Intelligence Branch (though the Mossad too, conducts counterterrorism operations overseas). Consequently, the police intelligence branch does not participate in the national security intelligence process except when invited to do so in cases where criminal activities have a terrorism nexus.

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Institutional Differences

From an institutional perspective therefore, Israel clearly differs from the United States in many ways (though it may be more similar to the United States if one analyzes things at the local governmental level).

Israel has a unified police force that, as with American law enforcement, is also involved in counterterrorism interdiction and response duties (though not in counterterrorism intelligence-gathering). The bulk of the counterterrorism intelligence-gathering work (at least with respect to the threat of terrorism from Palestinian areas or from inside Israel proper) is carried out by the ISA, Israel’s domestic intelligence service, whose mission and scope of operations parallels in many ways that of the MI5 in Britain. In addition, the Israeli military is very active in the security sphere and can be authorized to operate within Israel’s borders and even granted control over the police, fire, emergency services and health system in times of acute crises (while being responsible for overseeing these systems – including establishing directives for operations and logistics, running training exercises, etc. - during normal times).

By contrast, the United States possesses close to eighteen thousand local and state police forces as well as a wide array of federal law enforcement, intelligence and military entities. Moreover, there is not domestic intelligence service in the USA and the military (divided between federal and national guard forces) can only be used domestically in very limited circumstances. The United States, as a federal republic, has sovereign levels of government whereas Israel, as a centralized state, has very weak local government and sovereignty resides almost exclusively with the national government.

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Closing Credits

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