

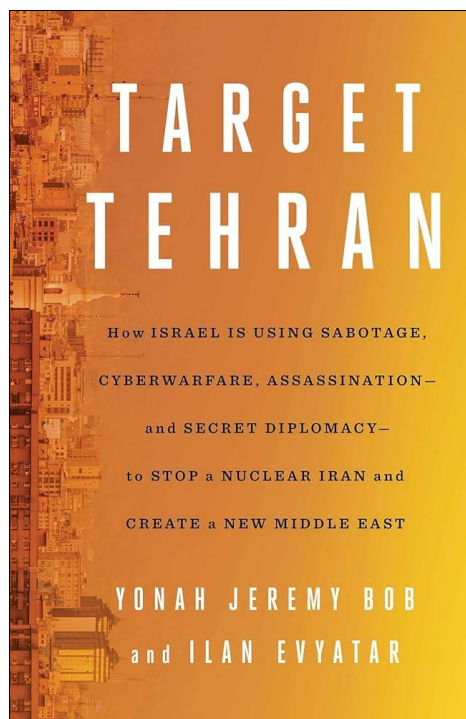
Israel's Secret Wars and Diplomatic Offensives

by Jonathan Spyer

In a new book, two Israel based correspondents portray the combination of covert action and bold diplomacy which has characterized Israel's regional strategy in recent years. The events of October 7 have cast a new, less flattering light on Israel's defense structures. But 'Target Teheran' provides a well written and comprehensive account of an important chapter in Israel's long fight for security and recognition in the Middle East.

Target Tehran: How Israel is using Sabotage, Cyberwarfare, Assassination—and Secret Diplomacy—to Stop a Nuclear Iran and Create a New Middle East. By Yonah Jeremy Bob and Ilan Evyatar. Simon & Schuster, 2023. 368 pp. \$14.49.

This book, written by two experienced Israel-based correspondents, sets out to provide the first comprehensive account of Israel's clandestine war against the Islamist regime in Tehran, and of the diplomatic offensive that has accompanied this effort. The authors suggest that these two campaigns should be seen as part of a similar effort, in which Israel's ability to show itself as the most determined and effective enemy of Iranian ambitions in the nuclear sphere and beyond has helped to produce diplomatic achievements, most significantly in the form of the Abraham Accords signed with a number of Arab countries, but also in other relationships yet to be formalized.



The authors are well placed to tell this story. Yonah Jeremy Bob has emerged in the recent period as one of the most astute commentators on Israeli intelligence matters in English and Hebrew. He maintains links with a broad network of Israeli officials both serving and retired in this field. Ilan Evyatar is a veteran Israeli journalist writing in the

English language media, with a rich, nuanced, and unidealized take on Israeli society and its defense institutions.

Target Tehran begins with the discovery of the clandestine nuclear program maintained by the Islamist regime in Teheran, and the first Israeli efforts to slow down and frustrate the program by use of direct covert action methods. The book contains vivid character portraits of many of the individuals involved, together with shrewd assessments of their motivations. In this regard, Mossad head and former General Meir Dagan is identified as the individual who set the campaign of the Israeli external intelligence service against the Iranian nuclear project in motion, under the direction of then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, a short time after the project became known.

The campaign has continued under the prime ministerships of Ehud Olmert, Benjamin Netanyahu, and the short incumbencies of Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid. The book includes detailed set-piece descriptions of some of the most well-known actions of the campaign, revealing hitherto unknown details. Two descriptions that particularly stand out, and on which the authors devote considerable space, are the 2018 theft by Mossad of documents from the regime's nuclear archive in Tehran, and the 2020 assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh on the road to Absard in Iran.

The descriptions of both these events are rich in fascinating detail and paced for dramatic affect. But the purpose of the authors is not merely to provide a thrilling narrative. Rather, these events, and particularly the theft of the archival documents, are utilized to introduce the core thesis of the book—namely, the process by which Israel's covert campaign served and was used to advance

Israeli diplomacy in the Arab world. The authors note that disagreements exist among former Mossad directors regarding the efficacy of this process, the precise mixture of covert action and diplomacy which Israel should apply, and the extent to which the covert campaign has in fact served as a useful or sufficient tool in preventing the advance of the Iranian nuclear program.

In this regard, the book interestingly identifies former Mossad director Tamir Pardo as representing a school of opinion which advises against what it sees as excessive reliance on covert direct action against Iranian capacities, while abandoning or opposing diplomatic efforts.

Standing against this school of thought and exemplifying an approach that considers that formal diplomacy regarding the Iranian regime is of severely limited use, but that covert action against it may produce diplomatic results elsewhere, is former Mossad director Yossi Cohen. Cohen is a central figure in this narrative. In close partnership with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, he both presided over many of the boldest operations described here, but also was instrumental in the diplomatic breakthrough with the Arab world formalized in the Abraham Accords of 2020.

The authors' central thesis is that, as they write:

The Middle East now is very different from what it was when the Mossad's war against Iran began nearly three decades ago. ... [T]he Abraham Accords is the biggest such difference. ... This is testimony to the gulf countries' fear of Tehran ... but also to Israel's skill in advancing its interests simultaneously on two separate but related fronts; forging a

historic peace with former enemies and waging a bitter, gritty, risky shadow war against Iran.

In this regard, Bob and Evyatar devote equal space in the book to portraying and discussing the process of diplomacy that led to the Abraham Accords, and Israel's emergent relationship with Saudi Arabia, as they do to focusing on the details of Israel's clandestine operations against Iran. In this area, I found the section dealing with Sudan to be particularly useful. The authors correctly point out that unlike other Abraham Accords countries, Sudan had played an active role on Iran's side during the period of rule of Omar al-Bashir and had formed an important conduit for the transfer of Iranian arms to the Hamas controlled Gaza Strip. As such, the flipping of Khartoum to the pro-Israel or at least non-aligned side of this struggle represents a significant strategic achievement usually given insufficient attention in discussion of the Abraham Accords.

So, do the authors succeed in their chosen task of recounting the Mossad's exploits "in all their riveting detail" while ascertaining whether the result of these actions amounts to a "strategic victory"? Largely, yes. The reader of *Target Tehran* will emerge with a greater knowledge of the players, the motivations, and many of the details of Israel's covert war against Iran and its diplomatic fruits.

Reading the book from the vantage point of Israel post October 7, 2023, it is impossible not to note that the achievements that the book recounts now have a large historic shadow over them—namely, that while Israeli policymakers and intelligence operatives were engaged in the vital tactical actions of the covert war against Iran, and the

diplomatic great leap forward of the Abraham Accords, they were simultaneously failing to notice the planning and slow build up to the strategic attack from Gaza on October 7, which would take Israel's guardians and leaders entirely by surprise. This, however, belongs to a historical account still to be made. It may well significantly change history's view of some of the players portrayed in *Target Tehran*. It in no way, however, lessens the achievement of the authors, who have produced a readable, sometimes gripping and always engaging account of a vital chapter in the history of Israeli strategy, diplomacy, and covert warfare.

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