



Between Intelligence and Diplomacy: The Information Revolution as a Platform for Upgrading Diplomacy

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The subject of this article is the new opportunity facing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the intelligence community to upgrade the work of Israel diplomatic missions and staff, through closer and more effective connection to the work process of the intelligence community. It focuses on the opportunity to transform the reality whereby the intelligence arm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is engaged in the work of intelligence as an accompanying body, and promote it as a vital body that receives and contributes information in its areas of expertise as equals. Diplomats in the field have significant relative advantages of years of hands-on service in the field, better understanding of the local mentality, and close acquaintance with the local players: politicians, interlocutors, and analysis bodies. The new rules of the game present diplomacy with new systemic opportunities to better express its capabilities and address frustrations and limitations on access to information and decision makers.

Keywords: diplomacy, intelligence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, decision making, information revolution

Background

Intelligence is part of the diplomatic effort that aims to promote the strategic goals of the state through both contacts behind closed doors and public contacts. This definition contains a structural impediment stemming from the definition of the national interest. The various arms of the security establishment, intelligence included, view the existential needs of the state and the struggle against military threats as the supreme national interest and the top priority dominating all other state interests. In contrast, and in addition to the [overall aims of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), the foreign service highlights the need to build foreign relations based on Israel's image as a legitimate member of the family of nations, and to consolidate its power as the nation state of the Jewish people that, like other nations, is committed to international law and justice.

The [aims of intelligence](#) are typically perceived as gathering information and engaging in analysis for the consumers of intelligence, and covert work outside the borders of the state to promote strategic goals and thwart subversive internal threats. In times of peacemaking, intelligence must have the ability to know and assess everything that can help decision makers identify factors that promote peace and identify factors that endanger peace (Hareven, 1998).

In 1949, early in Israel's existence, the Military Intelligence Department (which subsequently became the Intelligence Directorate of the IDF) viewed itself as a body aimed at providing intelligence only on military matters, whereas the required surrounding strategic intelligence was provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the same time, the Military Intelligence Department began to expand its activity to include strategic political issues. This occurred in part due to its mastery of signals intelligence (SIGINT), which gave it a great advantage over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in gathering intelligence and formulating intelligence assessments in this realm.

At the same time, the Department had a prominent interest in bolstering its own status and prestige by establishing closer direct relations with the state leadership. With its consolidation during the 1950s, and its transformation into an independent directorate of the General Staff in 1953 (the Intelligence Directorate), it assumed senior standing vis-à-vis the other bodies in Israel's intelligence community. Its direct connection with state leaders was established, and it became the state's major assessment body and a body with major influence over decision making, not only in the military realm but in the strategic realm as well.

The Intelligence Research Center in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was established after the Yom Kippur War following the report by the Agranat Commission (1974), which recommended that Israel strive toward intelligence research pluralism and strengthen [the political research department by organizing it as an independent body within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#). The decision to establish the Intelligence and Planning Research Center also included structural and geographic divisions with an emphasis on the Middle East, intelligence gathering roles, planning, and warning. In 1976, Finance Minister Yehoshua Rabinowitz decided not to implement the second stage of establishing the Political Research Center due to financial constraints. In late 1977, Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan, who sought to rid himself of responsibility for warning, appointed a commission headed by Aharon Yariv, which recommended removing the responsibility for political planning, i.e., including warning, from the Center. A notice to this effect, which also announced the change in name to the Political Research Center, was issued to the government secretariat. In 1992, Foreign Minister Peres resolved to establish a political planning division that was separate from the Political Research Center.¹

The Situation Today: Diplomacy's Goals, Limitations, and Frustrations

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for formulating recommendations in the realm of foreign relations. The test of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is its ability to screen and analyze problems when they appear, to recommend courses of action, and in particular, to implement decisions that were made by others outside the Ministry. In practice, it is required to deal on its own with all the other aspects of implementing foreign policy, such as cultural and economic relations and the implementation of existing agreements (Gazit, 2002).

Today, the official responsibilities of the Political Research Center include, inter alia: research and analysis of countries, issues, trends, and processes in the Middle East and the international arena; regular updating and dissemination of information to the staff and the headquarter units and diplomatic missions abroad, while addressing their needs and their requests; meetings and dialogues with peer bodies in foreign ministries around the world; political briefings for the decision making echelon and for international and other parties (such as foreign diplomats, academics, and the media); management of the interface between the intelligence community and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at the Ministry in Israel and abroad; and presentation of the annual intelligence assessment within the political-security cabinet.

The establishment regards the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a marginal partner in strategic consultations, due primarily to a number of images and claims, specifically: the Ministry's professional orientation is to talk, rather than to do; and the correspondences of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its diplomatic missions around the world deal mostly with insignificant and boring reports. In addition, Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials do not tend to take responsibility or adopt daring stances in their meetings. They will always prefer to take the official approach, recite Israel's formal

position, and incur no risk. Rather, they will always look for the common denominator, similar worldviews, and values—not points of contention. In doing so, they become irrelevant for problems solving (Drori & Oren, interview with Giora Eiland, 2016).

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For these reasons, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regularly, and at different intensities, suffers from under-estimation among those making strategic decisions. At the same, the security and intelligence system has become increasingly involved in the diplomatic realm.

Former head of the Intelligence Directorate Aharon Ze'evi Farkash has explained the importance of intelligence in the realm of diplomacy, with its integration into the struggle against global threats and Israeli foreign relations.

Ze'evi Farkash highlighted two major realms in which it is imperative for Israeli intelligence to cooperate with other intelligence agencies around the world: global terrorism and the realm of nuclear weapons in general; and the Iranian nuclear program in particular. He regards intelligence as making a meaningful contribution to the diplomatic arena (Ze'evi, 2007)—an observation that no one disputes.

Former head of the Mossad Ambassador Efraim Halevy has stated that the military

echelon plays an important role in Israeli foreign policy, in its responsibility for Israel's relations with many different Arab states. He described cases in which Israel's prime minister acted contrary to the opinion of the professional political echelon, and emphasized that this has usually resulted in the failure of the effort. Such was the experience of the Oslo Accords that did not receive support of the professional political echelon, and for this reason (among others) it was not successful. On the other hand, Halevy has depicted the military leadership as a powerful echelon that has had a significant impact on the course of events. In addition to influence on the decisions of the political echelon, the military echelon maintains contact and work relations with Israel's adversaries (Halevy, 2006).

Erez Meisel, who until recently headed the army's foreign relations department within the Planning Directorate, has explained the military's increasing involvement in the diplomatic realm as a result of the regional and global changes of recent decades. From his perspective, the activity of the IDF's foreign relations department is part of Israel's "foreign relations community." That is, foreign relations are no longer a diplomatic service but rather a decentralized national effort, with the IDF's foreign relations system playing an important role in Israeli political diplomacy and the efforts of the state to expand its relations with other countries. In this context, Meisel refers to a future plan for empowering the IDF foreign relations system, [which in part is intended to project Israel's power and preserve and expand its strategic depth](#).

In contrast to this approach is the voice of the diplomat Ronit Ben-Dor, who recommends qualifying Meisel's vision of "military diplomacy" and reducing its scope to a less threatening definition of "security diplomacy," as part of the national strategic effort. In her view, this framework should take advantage of the ability of the IDF's foreign relations system to convey messages quickly and reliably to adversaries

and enemies in order to prevent escalation and a downward spiral into war. These efforts according to Ben-Dor will not be able to replace the diplomatic practices added value of presenting non-military ways of thinking about complex political-security problems.

The question of the asymmetric cooperation between intelligence officials and diplomats also surfaces in Israel's diplomatic missions. Within the most important Israeli embassy, in Washington, DC, intelligence enjoys an advantage in access to decision makers. The chief Mossad representative in Washington has direct access to the director of the CIA and his associates, who brief the US President on a daily basis (Drori & Oren, interview with Yoram Hessel, 2016). The communication room in the Washington embassy is managed by the Mossad, whose chief representative is not subordinate to the ambassador. As a result, the chief Mossad representative reads all the reports sent from the embassy, while no one is allowed to read his reports, unless he chooses to share them with relevant officers inside the embassy (Hessel, 2016).

The heavy workload of the ambassador and his staff usually leaves very often room for intervention in "grey areas." In cases such as the unit responsible for liaison with the US Congress, which plays an essential diplomatic role for the entire Israeli establishment, the Israeli Defense Ministry strives to create—within the security establishment and detached from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—a parallel and independent liaison with Congress.

The bolstered abilities and insights within Israel's security establishment sometimes lead to an effort by defense officials to blur the boundaries through meetings with State Department officials, while at the same time they prevent Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials from entering the Pentagon. The boundaries are not sufficiently clear, and reason dictates that they should be made clearer and that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should insist on them,

to the extent that this is required for orderly staff work.

Joint military-diplomatic staff meetings are undoubtedly recommended. They allow transparency within the system, but only as long as it is clear who is in charge of access and content. Access to the US Congress and State Department, for example, should be the exclusive responsibility of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while access to the Pentagon and the US army would naturally be in the hands of Israel's Ministry of Defense. Elsewhere, work procedures in other major missions likewise have no regular open intelligence briefings for diplomats, despite the sometimes essential need to provide representatives with appropriate background in preparation for their political talks, and in some cases in preparation for tours on the ground. The recurring feedback from the intelligence community regarding reports of the diplomatic representatives is provided sparingly and not on a regular basis, and in most cases only after screening at the administrative level.²

The Political Research Center, which is charged with updating the intelligence and assessments for all missions, which in turn provide it with updated assessments, remains of modest means and a lean budget. In light of the recommendation for intelligence analysis pluralism, and despite its fluctuating status, the Center struggles for its proper recognition and rightful share as a body contributing to the national situation assessment. It is generally agreed that prior to war, leaders do not take action without hearing its intelligence. In peacetime, however, the situation is completely different, in part because peace, unlike war, requires greater attention to the internal sphere and to political considerations. Most statesmen feel that they understand the overall context just as well as the professional echelon, especially when some of the study has been conducted directly vis-à-vis the other side (Barak, 1988). This approach is also reflected in the words of former Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir: "I need

intelligence to warn me of war, not to teach me how to make peace" (Barnea & Shiffer, 2002).

Whereas most of the world's foreign affairs ministries receive internal information or rely on research institutes, the Political Research Center operates on its own intelligence gathering and research, with the effective integration of policy recommendations, both inside and outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As examples of successful results, former Political Research Center head Benny Dagan has mentioned promoting the application of sanctions against Iran and placing Hezbollah on the list of terrorist organizations. Similarly, the refusal to lament Bashar al-Assad and the warnings of possible deterioration in Gaza before Operation Protective Edge were important components of the assessment. The intensive analysis of energy as a strategic factor is considered a major success. Another relative advantage is the researchers, who have been in their positions for many years, which is more than others in similar positions within the intelligence community, and so is the Center's access to foreign ministries all over the world.

The intelligence gathering apparatuses are inundated with information that obligates and enables diplomats on the ground, who deal with it in any event, to become efficient "gathering officers" of immense importance, thanks to their access, training, and experience.

According to Dagan, until 2006 most of the Center's employees were diplomats and the scope of its activities was limited. Following the Second Lebanon War and the implementation of the Winograd Commission's conclusions, the number of Center employees doubled and the volume of inter-system summaries shared with it grew significantly. The Center became a partner to more discussions, and it enjoys better relations with other agencies of the intelligence communities. However, there is still room for

improvement in the intelligence community's attitude towards the Center as an equal partner.

The Information Revolution and the Future of Intelligence Analysis

Over the past few decades, the information world has undergone a revolution characterized largely by the flood of political, social, and economic information of the utmost intelligence value, in quantities and quality that could not have been gathered in the past. The intelligence gathering apparatuses are inundated with information that obligates and enables diplomats on the ground, who deal with it in any event, to become efficient "gathering officers" of immense importance, thanks to their access, training, and experience.

Data gathering of that kind obviously requires analysis and evaluation. The information revolution leads to the ongoing undermining of the traditional separation between the realms of gathering and analysis. Itai Brun, former head of the Intelligence analysis division of the Israel Defense Forces, pointed that while the direct access of analysts to the ocean of information is expanding, the logic of collaborating with the gathering branch in the analysis process is increasing (Brun, 2015). Hence the relative importance of diplomats' reports may increase, since their potential contribution to this process is the core of their occupation—updates, evaluation, and analysis.

Intelligence experts recommend establishing a network-based "joint space," which enables the development of shared knowledge in continuous discourse, crossing the organizational boundaries of gathering arrays and becoming a fundamental component of analysis work (Brun, 2015). The contact between the realms of research and gathering in a joint space of this kind affords research personnel a better understanding of information whose importance and value is not always recognized by intelligence gathering personnel. Moreover, the intelligence gathering personnel have in this case immediate feedback and a deeper

understanding how to channel better their activities.

According to Brun, the information revolution also requires a change in the way intelligence is disseminated to the various consumers. Intelligence analysis bodies are required to provide "analysis products" at a faster pace than in the past and in a different, more accessible, and clearer configuration. The "iNet" system, developed by the Intelligence Directorate's Research Division, makes it possible to present a continuous integrative intelligence picture in a new intelligence language, including the integration of text and pictures, video clips, audio, and infographics, and invites the presentation of other, different opinions. It obviously requires intelligent integration at the appropriate level of classification of the diplomatic system including most of its branches and missions. (Brun, 2015).

Opportunity and Recommendations

The information revolution has resulted in a situation in which the intelligence services in Israel, which are responsible for the gathering and analysis of information, can barely shoulder the load. Consequently, there is an opportunity to take full advantage of the capabilities of the MFA Research Center and accept it as an equal partner in the intelligence community. This junction also provides an opportunity to upgrade the work of the missions, and may add further depth and value to their political work. The way to realize this value change and increase influence and contribution necessarily runs through the Center for Political Analysis. It requires changes in thinking mode and perceptions of the intelligence community.

The main necessary measures include:

- a. The establishment and incorporation of the Political Research Center personnel and relevant headquarter elements in the proposed cross-organization "research analysis," which will also include representatives of the intelligence community and the different bodies on the ground. The

rise of the internet-based communications networks as an ongoing process, and with greater intensity during the current period of the Covid19- pandemic, enables the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to expand the circles of internet-based consultation significantly. These circles of periodic consultation, which will include representatives of the intelligence communities on a regular basis with an emphasis on the analysis branches and external research bodies, will be documented, their summaries and conclusions disseminated, and the writing of research papers designated. Clearly, the more the other research bodies, i.e., the Mossad and the Intelligence Directorate, initiate such circles with the necessary coordination, the more the product will improve and its benefit will increase. The dividers between the intelligence attachés and IDF attachés will be removed in the regular work of the missions in key countries around the world, and joint EEI (essential elements of information), updating, and situation assessment meetings will be held. The process proposed here is a product of today's reality and an understanding that the more compartmentalization is removed, especially with regard to gathering and assessment from open sources, the more the benefit to all the systems will increase. In this case, emphasis will be placed on fieldwork, in which diplomatic representatives enjoy a marked advantage due to their direct relationships with local elements and the fact that they know the local language, culture, and mood better than any analysis personnel working from the staff headquarters.

- b. As opposed to the claims that diplomats' shallow reporting and the failure to take a position constitute a "professional illness," political reporting must be more central in the work of diplomats—including in the case of diplomats who are not political advisors or Middle East experts. Political reports must

be a regular part of all diplomats' duties and a basis to the appraisal of their role.

- c. The possibility of the Political Research Center and designated missions entering two different levels of iNet networks should be considered as soon as possible, in two levels: the field level and the level of bureaus and leaders, which are updated regularly and at the appropriate security clearance in all realms of EEI, gathering reports, and analysis. Such a measure would set regular and binding work procedures that will significantly help ensure the flow of the raw material, the processed information, and the assessment material in all directions.
- d. The new Minister of Foreign Affairs is advised to regard the implementation of this measure as part of his responsibility and requirements vis-à-vis the Prime Minister.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic is likely to generate substantial changes to the world order. Although the scope and significance of the pandemic are still not fully clear, it has already resulted in a dramatic increase in the scope of digital communication in its various forms as a relatively effective substitute for personal meetings, work meetings, and professional discussions. This trend serves to reinforce the assumptions underlying the opportunity that is presenting itself to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs today—to change and adapt the method of work of the diplomatic missions around the world with regard to intelligence gathering and analysis. The information revolution, and the mounting importance of the social networks for intelligence gathering and the creation of joint networks for analysis, has endowed the diplomatic corps with the ability to undertake reorganization in which the missions are instructed to operate according to EEI, alongside the regular work based on the political agenda and the work schedule in the realms of public diplomacy.

The opportunity presented to the diplomatic missions—updating with the main points of intelligence gathering and analysis that are on the agenda and contribute directly to their efforts—stands to improve the work of the missions in their other realms of activity, increase the standing of the Political Research Center of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the eyes of the intelligence community, and contribute directly to the national security of the state and the promotion of its strategic goals.

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Notes

- 1 Personal interview with Harry Kney-Tal, former head of the security services, 2020.
- 2 Ibid.