What does the Prisoner X case reveal about Israeli intelligence?

Alex Traiman/JNS.org

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The mysterious death of Australian-born Mossad agent Ben Zygier, commonly known as “Prisoner X,” in an Israeli jail has sparked international intrigue into the secret conduct of Israeli intelligence agents.

Details of the imprisonment and apparent suicide were kept quiet in the Israeli media following a directive from the Israeli government, while an Australian journalist first broke details of the story to the press.

Knesset Members from Arab parties as well as the Meretz Party, a relatively small party on the extreme left of Israel’s political spectrum, leveled charges of impropriety at the government for ordering a hush on the case’s intricate details. Yet many with advanced knowledge of Israel’s security apparatus and practices are unsure if the agent’s suicide in prison reveals more than the inherent risks of intelligence gathering in hostile environments.

“Even though this might be a great story for the movies, it doesn’t expose any major insights into the world of Israeli espionage,” Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Brigadier General (retired) Meir Elran told *JNS.org*.

While members of Israel’s opposition have been using the case in an attempt to delegitimize the Jewish state’s incumbent government and its intelligence services, there may be very little about this case that warrants answers from the government to questions swirling around Zygier’s mysterious death, according to Elran.

“We actually know very little about this case, and at this point we cannot be sure if any of the case’s details present an problem that will further concern the government or the media,” he said.

Elran currently serves as Director of the Homeland Security Program at the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) think tank, which is headed by IDF Major General (retired) Amos Yadlin. He previously served as the Deputy Director of Military Intelligence in the IDF.

“Everybody knows that Israel does what it can to infiltrate hostile areas, in an attempt to gather information and potentially interrupt behaviors dangerous to Israeli interests, and to find out what it can about potential enemies,” Elran said.

“The only thing we know about the actual case, is that the suspected agent whose actual crime we are still unsure of, committed suicide during a trial procedure that was supposed to protect him,” he added. “If anything, questions of impropriety seem to be related mostly to matters of misconduct on the part of judicial control.”

The intrigue in the Zygier case, however, has little to do with judicial controls, and much more to do with the activities of the defendant prior to his imprisonment. “Of course the case has gained attention due to the fact that this is clearly associated with Israeli espionage,” Elran said.

“Clearly, this agent and the case surrounding his death are not the government’s biggest success story, when it comes to international espionage. And the government has nothing to be proud of,” he said.

But international espionage carries tremendous risks. One such risk is an agent passing highly sensitive information to a foreign government. In the case of Zygier, it is being reported that he was about to pass information about Israeli intelligence passport usage, or on an impending intelligence gathering initiative, to a third-party government, possibly to Australian intelligence.

Many have also tried to link Zygier to a successful assassination by Israeli intelligence agents on a Hamas operative in Dubai in 2010.

“We need to recognize that we need to be more careful regarding espionage practices, and regarding the cover-up of information in the wake of a case gone bad,” Elran said.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently defended the importance of keeping details of the prisoner’s case shielded from the public.

“We are not like all other countries,” Netanyahu said during an Israeli cabinet meeting. “We are more threatened, more challenged, and therefore we have to ensure the proper activity of our security forces. Allow the security forces to work quietly so we can continue to live securely and safely.”

Israel had hoped to conceal the Zygier case from the public by imposing a domestic freeze of information by all Israeli-based media. But such a ban is not applicable to foreign media, where many sensitive Israeli stories are first revealed.

“We need to understand that media is international, and that we simply can’t conceal things,” Elran said.

In a pre-digital age, intelligence agencies had an easier time using forged passports to enter into foreign nations, but with passport scanning and security cameras, it is often easier to enter a nation using an actual passport issued by a third-party nation.

It is for this reason that foreign-born nationals present an asset for Israeli intelligence. Someone who can “lose” a foreign-issue passport or request a name change—as Zygier reportedly did on multiple occasions—can create a ticket of entry into a nation that Israel seeks to gain access to.

It is being reported that Zygier had taken advantage of an Australian law that allows citizens to legally change their name once every 12 months, and to then apply for a new passport. Zygier had reportedly changed his name four times, and his body was reportedly returned to Australia for burial under the name Ben Allen.

There are numerous methods for gathering intelligence, but among the proven methods may always be sending an agent to gather information.

“It is clear that in many cases, Israel sends actual agents, often deep into enemy countries to gather data,” Elran said.

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