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Al Jazeera

The Mossad's Secret Wars

2/18/2010

For more than half a century, the Mossad has been blamed for numerous killings around the world, and is often at the centre of conspiracy theories, including those surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the 1998 Lockerbie bombing and the 911 attacks in the US.



While some of its actions have been celebrated within Israel, the organisation has at times come under criticism for disrespecting the sovereignty of other nations and has been accused of violating international law.

The Mossad was established in 1951 by David Ben-Gurion, the then prime minister of newly-formed Israel, who set out that the intelligence apparatus would provide the "first line of defence" at a time when Israel, he said, was "under siege by its enemies".

It eventually adopted a verse from the Book of Proverbs: "Without guidance do a people fall, and deliverance is in a multitude of counsellors" as both a motto and a warning to its enemies.

While the secretive organisation forms one of three intelligence entities - Shin Bet (internal security) and military intelligence are the other two - its director reports directly to the prime minister.

Sovereignty violations

Mossad has built itself a formidable reputation, not only through suspected assassinations but also successful rescue operations and intelligence missions, such as the freeing of 100 hostages at Entebbe airport in Uganda in 1976

The first notable victory came in 1960, when its agents kidnapped Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi war criminal living in Argentina, who was then smuggled into Israel where he was tried and executed two years later.

While Eichmann's capture propelled Ben-Gurion to receive a standing ovation in Israel's Knesset, Argentina complained to the United Nations that its sovereignty had been violated.

Subsequently the UN Security Council passed a resolution saying that such acts, if repeated, could endanger international peace and security.

But such acts were repeated and the UN Security Council's resolution could not prevent Israeli intelligence agents from operating on foreign soil again.

Operation Wrath of God

During the 1970s, Mossad agents assassinated a number of people said to be connected with the Black September group, which had killed 11 Israeli athletes and a coach at the 1972 Munich Olympic games.

The so-called Operation Wrath of God, which aimed to hunt down those responsible for the attacks, began with the killing of Wael Zwaiter, a Palestinian translator living in Rome, whom Israel accused of being a Black September commander.

Although his supporters say he was an intellectual with no conclusive links to the Black September group, Zwaiter was shot dead by agents as he walked home late on the evening of October 16, 1972.

Mahmoud Hamshari, who Israel said was the head of Black September in France, was killed by a bomb that was detonated after he picked up the phone in his Paris apartment in December 1972.

Nearly one year later Israeli agents targeted Ahmed Bouchiki, a Moroccan waiter working in Lillehammer, Norway, who Mossad had confused with Ali Hassan Salameh, one of the Black September leaders.

He was shot dead in front of his pregnant wife as they emerged from a cinema on July 21, 1973.

When the Mossad agents tried to leave the country, six of them were arrested and sentenced to prison terms in Norway.

Ali Hassan Salameh was eventually tracked down by the organisation and killed by a car bomb in Beirut, Lebanon in January 1979, which reportedly killed eight other people.

Palestinians have always claimed, however, that many of those assassinated in Operation Wrath of God were not involved with Black September and were instead advocates of dialogue with Israel.

'Ambiguity'

Nevertheless, the Mossad continued to carry out high-profile assassinations, including the killing of Abu Jihad, the PLO military chief in Tunisia in 1988, and Fathi Shaqaqi, an Islamic Jihad leader in Malta in 1995.

Due to its secretive nature and policy of "ambiguity", it has not admitted to a number of operations believed by many to have been carried out by its agents.

Gerald Bull, a Canadian scientist who developed the "Super Gun" for Iraq is commonly believed to have been killed by the Mossad at his Brussels apartment in March 1990.

In 1996, Yahya Ayyash, a Hamas bomb-maker known as "The Engineer", was killed in the Gaza Strip by a booby-trapped mobile phone in an operation also attributed to the spy agency.

In September 2004, Syria blamed Mossad for the death of Izz El-Deen Sheikh Khalil, a member of Hamas, who was killed in a booby-trapped car in Damascus. But Mossad's brilliant successes are also balanced out by its embarrassing failures.

In 1954, Israeli agents in Egypt planted bombs in cinemas, trendy cafés, and US-owned installation where foreigners were known to frequent. The hope had been that the violence would undermine the government of Gamal Abdel Nasser and stall the withdrawal of British troops from the Sinai.

But the Egyptians got wind of the plot and arrested many Israeli agents, leading to the eventual resignation of Pinhas Lavon, the then Israeli defence minister. The operation - and debacle - came to be called the Lavon Affair.

On September 24, 1997, two Mossad operatives carrying Canadian passports entered Jordan under orders from Binyamin Netanyahu, the then Israeli prime minister, to assassinate Khaled Meshaal, the Hamas political leader.

The two agents were caught after injecting poison into Meshaal's ear the next day. A furious King Hussein at the time demanded that Israel hand over the antidote and the three-year peace treaty with Jordan looked set to unravel.

After US intervention, Netanyahu apologised to the Jordanian king, handed over the antidote and released Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, another key Hamas leader, in exchange for the two Mossad agents in Jordanian custody.

The botched attempt became the Mossad's most high-profile failure: Relations with Canada were strained once it was learned its passports were used in the operation; the US was displeased with the apparent setback in peace talks, and Israel was forced to release a wanted Hamas leader it would later assassinate in 2004.

In a **2008 interview with Al Jazeera** Danny Yatom, the head of the Mossad in 1997, defended his decision to assassinate Meshaal.

Meshaal continues to lead Hamas from Damascus, Syria.

The Mossad is now again under scrutiny over its alleged role in the killing of Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, a senior Hamas figure found dead in a Dubai hotel in January this year.

Its alleged use of British and other European passports has strained ties with London, Paris, Dublin and Vienna.

Smuggling Jews

The Mossad is involved in non-military operations as well. In 1938, a precursor to the modern organisation began smuggling Jews into Palestine, in violation of the British mandate there.

According to the Mossad website, the organisation "brings Jews home from countries where official Aliya agencies are not allowed to operate". In 1992, the Mossad evacuated hundreds of Bosnian Jews from besieged Sarajevo.

The current head of the Mossad is Meir Dagan, a former commander of a commando unit, who served in the Israeli army during the 1967 and 1973 wars, and in the invasion of Lebanon in 1982.