

Intelligence in Public Media

Eighteen Days in October: The Yom Kippur War and How It Created the Modern Middle East

Uri Kaufman (St. Martin's Press, 2023), 386 pages, illustrations, maps.

Target Tehran: How Israel Is Using Sabotage, Cyberwarfare, Assassination—and Secret Diplomacy—to Stop a Nuclear Iran and Create a New Middle East

Yonah Jeremy Bob and Ilan Evyatar (Simon & Schuster, 2023), 351 pages, photos.

Reviewed by Alissa M.

Timing of the publication of books can be both a matter of forethought and, more rarely, serendipity. The first of the books reviewed here, *Eighteen Days in October*, appeared in late August, timed to fall shortly before the 50th anniversary of the surprise attack on Israel by Egypt and Syria in 1973. The second of these books, *Target Tehran*, appeared barely two weeks before Hamas's attack on October 7, 2023, against Israeli settlements near what was thought by the Israelis to be a secure border.

Eighteen Days in October

As of the day it was published, Uri Kaufman's history of the Yom Kippur War was the story of the biggest intelligence failure in Israel's history. That label now might be more aptly applied to events of October 2023. But there's no doubt the war was a defining event for the Israeli state. The battlefield status quo at its conclusion—Israeli, Egyptian, and Syrian positions at an ill-communicated moment of cease-fire—resulted in Israel's present borders.

It is hard to imagine a more engaging and engrossing telling of the political and battlefield developments of the 1973 conflict. Kaufman explains exactly what led to the intelligence failure of Egypt and Syria's surprise attack on Israel—both the collection failures (a small factor) and the analytic failures (the larger problem).

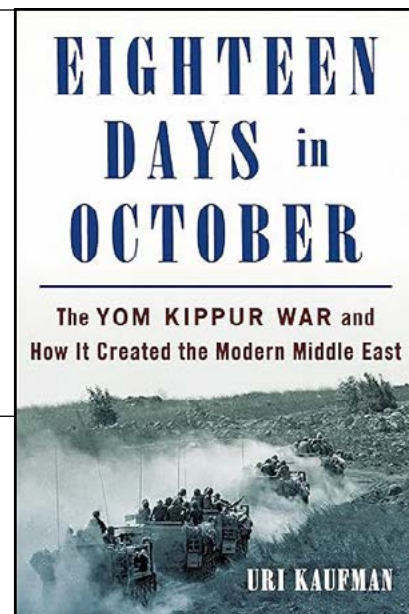
The book is organized as a straightforward chronology of the conflict. In the first five chapters, Kaufman describes the status quo after the previous conflicts (the 1967 Six-Day War in which Israel essentially routed Egypt, Syria, and Jordan and the War of Attrition, which dragged on until 1970) and sets the stage of the Egyptian, Israeli, and US politics in this period. Kaufman does this

quite effectively, conveying the broad complexities of the Middle East in the Cold War, establishing the strategic imperatives of the

region, and introducing us to some of the region's major players. Kaufman explains how precious every single Israeli F-4 Phantom fighter jet was at the start of the war, and the extent to which Egyptian success was predicated on the idea that they would pull Israel into a protracted conflict that Egypt (with its massive population) could fight for longer than Israel (whose economy would pause during a war, with an army so heavily dependent on reservists).

Chapter six ("The Angel and the Noise") is a crucial chapter for readers interested in the practice of intelligence collection and analysis. The Israelis had three intelligence gems to inform their decisionmaking—two human sources inside Egypt and one technical penetration of Egyptian communications. Even better than raw intelligence, Aman (the Israeli military intelligence service) had an analytic framework it called "The Concept" for understanding Egyptian military decision making, namely, that Syria would not go to war without Egypt and Egypt would not go to war without Scud short-range ballistic missiles.

The problem was that when sources reported that Egypt had its missiles and alongside Syria was in position to start a war, Aman's leadership refused to follow its own analysis to its logical conclusion. Instead it clung desperately to any evidence that pointed to sustained calm.



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Kaufman sums it up succinctly, and searingly: “[Military intelligence chief] Eli Zeira had by now imprisoned himself inside the intellectual trap of the Concept, skillfully repairing it each time some new piece of evidence offered him a chance to escape.”

The rest of the war was a series of close calls, near miracles, and slim margins that mostly fell in Israel’s favor. Thanks to what amounts mostly to luck and a bit of moxie, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) clawed its way back from a precipice it could have avoided if Zeira and company had recognized the cognitive biases undermining their own perfectly good analysis.

Chapters 7–14 cover the bulk of the fighting days of the war, with vivid descriptions of the sometimes razor-thin temporal margins between tactical progress and strategic disaster. For example, Kaufman judges that a few tank brigades arriving to the Sinai a few hours earlier might have shorted the war considerably. On the other hand, when the Syrian army moved into the Golan, the Israeli military leadership felt the difference between survival and defeat might be so slim that Defense Minister Moshe Dayan suggested readying nuclear weapons to save a few hours of preparation time if it became necessary to use them. (Prime Minister Golda Meir answered this request with a hard no, one of several moments of shining leadership by a leader Kaufman portrays as both heroic and very human.)

This midsection of the book also includes several entertaining tales of division commander (and future prime minister) Ariel Sharon’s famously brilliant insubordination. For example, at a low point in the campaign on the Sinai, Sharon disobeys explicit commands from his superior officer not to attack and radios back that “in accordance with your instructions, we are advancing slowly [west] toward the Missouri hill.” Kaufman dryly adds, “Of course, those were not his instructions.” One of the many pleasures of this book is the vibrancy of Kaufman’s descriptions of even well-known Israeli leaders like Meir, Sharon, and Dayan, who come newly alive in his telling.

Chapters 15–23 are the tale of the timing of the cease-fire, which might seem like a lot of space to devote for such a specific part of the story, but the positions of Egyptian, Syrian, and Israeli forces at the moment of cease-fire had enormous consequences for the status quo postbellum. Sadat rejects one cease-fire offer, resulting in time for the United States to resupply the Israeli Air

Force, which at that point had dangerously few combat-ready aircraft, and leaving opportunity for the tables to turn.

After the Egyptians lost a critical tank battle, Sharon seized the opportunity to cross the Suez Canal and establish an Israeli foothold on the African continent. This was a massive risk, and it paid off, theoretically leaving Meir in a stronger position to negotiate a ceasefire from Jerusalem. But after crossing the canal, the Israelis were no longer ready to offer the ceasefire that Sadat was now asking for. At this moment—22 October—there was a lot of winking and nodding between Israel and the United States about allowing the IDF to encircle the Egyptian Third Army to leave Israel in the most advantageous possible position when the cease-fire terms were solidified.

Chapter 18, “The Chinese Farm and the Men Who Conquered It,” describes a smaller intelligence failure: Aman had photos of a key piece of territory in the Sinai where Egyptian tanks and soldiers had dug in. But the IDF troops and commanders on the ground did not receive the images in time to make use of them on the battlefield and instead took cover in irrigation trenches watching antitank missiles fly overhead and pondering their mortality as Egyptian forces attacked.

After the war, Israel established the Agranat Commission to identify the root of the surprise of the Yom Kippur War and to account for those first terrifying days of intelligence failure, before luck and leadership pulled Israel from the brink of disaster. The commission determined that intelligence assessments are “more accurate when they rely upon numerous indications gathered from the field, rather than on a single source, no matter how good that source might be.” (315)

Kaufman treats all sides with a wry sense of humor, informed by history but appreciative of how complicated the Egyptian, Syrian, and Israeli decisions were at the time. Although he focuses more on the Israeli side of the conflict, his analysis is dispassionate and his primary-source research includes archival material from Egypt, the Soviet Union, and even East German Stasi archives. The acknowledgments offer profuse gratitude to Kaufman’s Russian-, German-, and Arabic-speaking research assistants who helped him access material not available to him in English or Hebrew.

There's little to critique in Kaufman's achievement here, which is all the more surprising when one learns he is neither a historian nor a political scientist, but a real estate developer for whom this book was a passion

project, decades in the making. We followers of Middle East security issues are lucky that he committed to seeing his avocation through to a published volume because it is really a masterpiece of readable military history.

Target Tehran

If *Eighteen Days in October* benefited from timing, *Target Tehran* is especially unlucky, because two weeks after the book's release, one of its major premises—that Israel is a master of the Middle East and has shaped regional politics to its liking—was dramatically undermined by Hamas's attack in 2023.

There are two distinct stories in this book: one of Israel's covert operations against Iran and the other of Jerusalem's diplomatic courting of Arab states. They are not perfect complements, leaving this volume somewhere between a description of the process leading to historic change and a compendium of the best of Israel spy stories (that book already exists—*Rise and Kill First*, by Ronen Bergman).

Authors Yonah Jeremy Bob and Ilan Evyatar open with an account of the raid in which Mossad stole the documents comprising Iran's nuclear archive, which is undoubtedly one of the highlights of Netanyahu's political career. The narrative is gripping and engaging and the archive raid was clearly an operational success, but Netanyahu made a bit of a miscalculation in assessing that the international policy community would care about the biggest public revelation to come from the archive—that Iran had a prior military component to its nuclear research, which Tehran had denied for years. Netanyahu's claim that "Iran lied" went over like the claim that "water is wet."

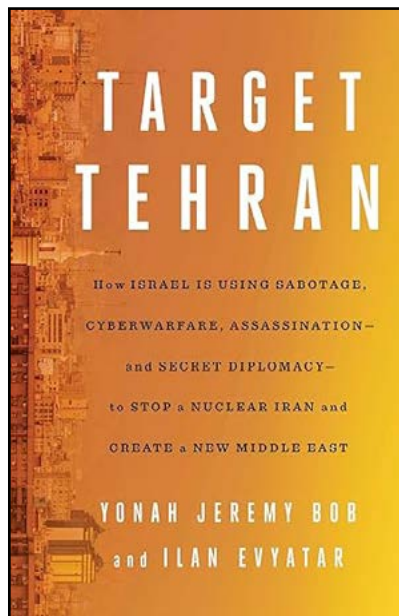
After the opening chapter on the nuclear archive heist, the authors move on to more Israeli high-stakes derring-do (five Iranian nuclear scientists dead on their commutes, the bombing of the Syrian nuclear reactor, the infamous Stuxnet computer virus). From there, the chapters mostly alternate between the story of covert

intelligence operations and the tale of the covert diplomacy that ultimately resulted in the Abraham Accords—with the Mossad director often appearing in both the operational and diplomatic channels.

The Israel portrayed in *Target Tehran* is a country with a sophisticated operational intelligence capability that outwits and outperforms its primary foe. That Israel is also a diplomatic Svengali that develops new friendships with Arab countries through careful statesmanship, close cooperation with a particularly helpful US administration, and a bit of fortuitous timing. That image is at odds with the Israel currently dealing with the aftermath of the biggest intelligence failure in its history, with uncertain long-term diplomatic and security consequences.

It is no surprise that this volume amplifies Israel's biggest intelligence and diplomatic achievements of the last decade, since the authors' sources include a who's who of Israeli and US intelligence and policy officials who helped steer the decisionmaking that resulted in the sabotage, cyber, and lethal operations the book recounts, and the diplomatic breakthroughs of the Abraham Accords. Sometimes their sources are even the decisionmakers themselves. The authors' close and repeated access to Israeli officials in particular gives the narrative real credibility when describing Israeli perspectives. But the same is not true when conveying the Iranian perspective. Many of the references to Tehran's thinking and decisionmaking are sourced to interviews with Israeli officials (69), which is hardly authoritative attribution, or not sourced at all.

The book is otherwise quite good at attributing specific information to specific sources and there is a thorough



index, so in that regard it is useful for the scholar or analyst looking at Israeli operations against Iran, though with the necessary caveat that it heavily reflects Israeli perspectives and treatment of Arab and Iranian perspectives lack nuance.

The intelligence operations and diplomatic accords described in *Target Tehran* are consequential and worth examination, though this volume is more like long-form journalism describing the ticktock of operations and diplomacy than a historical or political science analysis seeking to contextualize and explain the factors driving them. One red flag indicating that the authors are not dispassionate observers of events is that they consistently refer to Iranian leadership as “the ayatollahs.” (23, 49, 149, 209) It is certainly true that Iran is a theocracy, but referring to its leaders collectively as “the mullahs” or similar is sloppy use of language that elides the complexity of decisionmaking authority between Iran’s elected governing officials and unelected institutions. *Target Tehran* would have benefited from a more evenhanded approach to describing Iranian decisionmaking and priority-balancing, which are no doubt as nuanced as the Israeli ones the authors capably describe. On the other hand, when one side makes its intelligence chiefs and prime ministers available for interviews and the other would not allow the authors into the country even if they asked, it is inevitable that the perspective of the storyteller will be skewed.

As with all books dealing with Israeli covert operations authored by Israelis, this one bears the censors’

imprint: coy references that might be summed up as “If Israel did the secret thing, here’s one way they *might* have done it,” along with oblique allusions to “foreign reports” when Mossad has not taken credit for something they are widely assumed to have done. (229)

The chapters on covert operations are, unsurprisingly, a lot more thrilling than the chapters on diplomacy. A lot more creditable, too, since those stories are more easily told with just an Israeli perspective. As with the discussion of Iran, the diplomacy chapters are sourced mostly to interviews with Israeli and US officials rather than Emirati and Saudi counterparts. (83, 107)

The book offers some relevant insights into the current crop of Israeli leaders. In chapter 3, the level of shock from then IDF Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi and then Mossad chief Meir Dagan in reaction to Netanyahu’s aggressive advocacy for a kinetic strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities offers a glimpse into the uncompromising Netanyahu. And chapter 14 shows the attention Jerusalem pays to the thinking of US decisionmakers. Then Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, for example, told the authors he chose the timing of a release of information about Iran’s deception of the IAEA to influence Washington.

Such criticisms notwithstanding, *Target Tehran* is a comprehensive telling of Israel’s intelligence operations against Iran and documents—from Israel’s perspective—the rationale and planning for those activities. It’s a worthy addition to the canon of Israeli covert missions literature.



The reviewer: Alissa M. is a CIA analyst focused on governance issues.