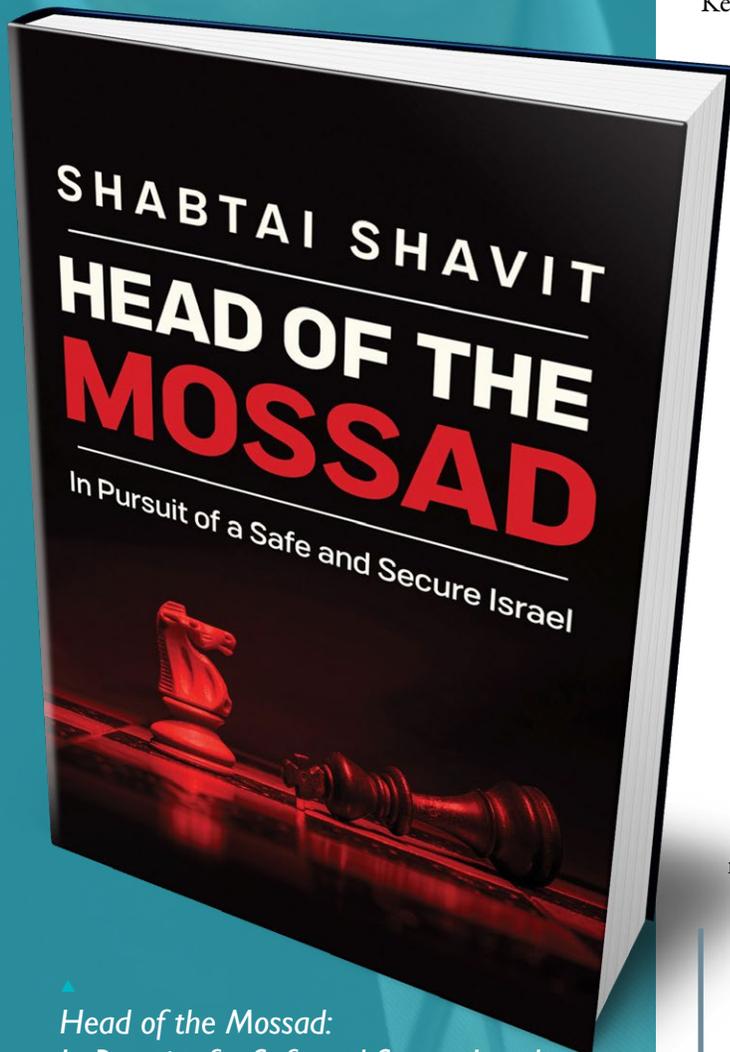


THE WRITTEN WORD

*Head of the Mossad:
In Pursuit of a Safe
and Secure Israel*

by Shabtai Shavit

*Reviewed by Major Tim Bettis,
United States Air Force*



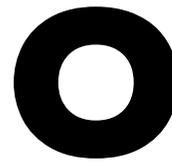
*Head of the Mossad:
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ONE EVENING IN THE AUTUMN OF 1994, secret negotiations of the utmost importance took place deep inside the al-Maqar palace compound in Amman, Jordan, home of the Jordanian royal family and the site of key government offices. On their hands and knees on the floor, with a map between them, Jordan's King Hussein and Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin delineated the boundary between their respective territories, finalizing what would become one of the region's most historic peace treaties. The nearly 50-year-old conflict between these neighbors would come to an end and bring security to Israel's longest border.¹

Key to these historic negotiations was the Mossad, Israel's national intelligence agency, whose long history of secret ties to the Jordanian royal family served as a critical diplomatic backchannel for Israeli leadership. Author Shabtai Shavit served as the Mossad's director from 1989 to 1996, leading it through a tumultuous period that included the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first Palestinian intifada, the 1990 Persian Gulf War (during which Iraqi President Saddam Hussein fired Scud missiles into Israeli cities), the signing of the Oslo Accords, and the assassination of Rabin, a man whom Shavit clearly revered.²

Shavit is only the fourth former head of the Mossad to publish a memoir of his time in service, and his book, *Head of the Mossad: In Pursuit of a Safe and Secure Israel*, is now available for the first time in English.³ An intimate look into key events in modern Israeli history told from the perspective of the spymaster in the room, this book is less an exhilarating tale of cloak-and-dagger derring-do and more a compilation of Shavit's personal notes, lectures, and accounts of his experiences within the innermost circle of the Israeli national security bureaucracy. He also devotes a significant portion of his memoir to policy proposals and his view of the future role of the United States in the Middle East.

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Born in Palestine in 1939, Shavit was the first Mossad director who had not participated in Israel's 1948 War of Independence.⁴ After completing mandatory service in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), he began his service with the Mossad in 1964. Two years later, he was shuttled off by then-director Meir Amit to an assignment in southwestern Iran—an ally of Israel prior to the revolution of

1979—where, living amidst the lush marshes and sweltering summers at the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, Shavit worked to bolster the intelligence and security partnership between Tel Aviv and Tehran. As Shavit describes the place, “The swamps were surrounded by dense and impenetrable wild vegetation, most of it reeds, and groves of trees that rose high above the swamp into which their roots were sunk.”⁵ The nearly three years that Shavit and his family spent living in Khuzestan Province between Abadan, Ahvaz, and Khorramshahr helped to shape Shavit’s perspective on Iran, a topic that would occupy a significant amount of his attention during his career. “The insight I derived from Iran’s ethnic structure and size,” Shavit recalls, “is that only an authoritarian, centralized regime, with powerful and intimidating governing systems, could control a country of this magnitude and a huge population of innumerable races and ethnic groups with no common denominator between them.”⁶ Shavit’s orientalist undertones begin to surface, however, when he recommends the book *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* to those interested in

a quick grasp of modern-day Persians. According to *The Encyclopedia Iranica*, the book, published in 1824 by former British diplomat James Morier, is a three-volume satire that “lampoons Persians as rascals, cowards, puerile villains, and downright fools, depicting their culture as scandalously dishonest and decadent, and their society as violent.”⁷ To Shavit, *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* is a “kind of encyclopedia of the Persians as a race, as a people, and as individuals.”⁸

In the immediate aftermath of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Shavit served as the head of the Mossad’s operations department. He supported Director Zvi Zamir during hearings conducted by the Agranat Commission, which investigated how the IDF had failed to anticipate and prepare for Egypt’s and Syria’s attacks. The commission’s report included recommendations for significant institutional reforms to Israeli security institutions, among them the creation of an internal research division inside the Mossad.⁹ This experience served Shavit well later in his career. As an intelligence director and



Former heads of Israeli intelligence and the IDF (from L to R): Shabtai Shavit, former head of Mossad; Amnon Reshef, former IDF Major General; Asher Levy, former IDF Brigadier General; and Giora Inbar, former IDF Brigadier General.



Shavit lays out what he believes to be Israel's redlines, its threshold for launching an attack against Iran's nuclear infrastructure, and options for how such an attack could be executed.

Arak IR-40 Heavy Water Reactor, Iran

leader of a sprawling bureaucracy, he founded a team called “Forum 2000” whose function, according to Shavit, was “to discuss the threats and opportunities that the Mossad might face leading up to the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first,” with a charge to make recommendations on how to adapt the Mossad for this emerging reality.¹⁰ Among a broad range of predictions, the forum emphasized the disruptive role that cyber technology would have on intelligence as a function, its impact on secrecy, and the necessity for Israel to pursue a competitive edge in cyber technology development, acquisition, and fielding. “A condition for victory in [cyber] warfare,” according to Shavit, “is to get ahead of the adversary by at least one and a half generations, in the area of defense as well as in the area of attack. The one-and-a-half-generations rationale is based on the assumption that if the adversary catches up to you, you will still have the advantage of being half a generation ahead.”¹¹ It is clear that Shavit’s leadership of the Mossad in the 1990s helped position it to be the formidable regional force that it is today.

Arguably, the most striking part of Shavit’s memoir is his intimate exposé of the thinking, conversations, and calculations of Israel’s senior-most national security decision-makers as they focused on their most pressing threat: the Iranian nuclear program. In the chapter titled “Intelligence and the International Arena,” the former spymaster walks through his analysis of Iran’s strategic objectives in the region, the roles that great powers like Russia, the European Union, and the United States play in the Persian Gulf, and Israel’s options and priorities to prevent Tehran’s successful acquisition of a nuclear bomb. Fearful of an American-led diplomatic outcome that permits Iran to maintain a one-to-two-year breakout capability, Shavit lays out what he believes to be Israel’s redlines, its threshold for launching an attack against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure, and options for how such an attack could be executed. For example, would the attack be conducted in conjunction with the United

States? Or would it be “blue and white” only, meaning an operation conducted solely by the IDF? Would the United States be informed ahead of time? If so, when?¹²

Shavit’s policy proposals, however, are the weakest part of his book, largely due to the biases of the author. In discussing a potential Israeli attack against Iran’s nuclear program, he argues that such an attack “could mark the end of the era of global nuclear proliferation”—a statement that seems to be grounded more in idealism than in reality.¹³ He also drifts at times into overly simplified views of neighboring Arab states; for example, he describes Qatar as a state that “aligned itself with Iran when it realized that it could not necessarily rely on the United States” to protect it.¹⁴ In reality, Qatar, as a small state, is merely engaging in a strategy of hedging, balancing strong neighbors and powers against one another in order to secure its survival in a dangerous pond—a strategy not unlike the one Israel is pursuing.

Additionally, Shavit lays out a plan for a new regional order in the Middle East, to be externally imposed upon the region by the “good guys” in order to break the area out of its decades of deadlock, insecurity, and instability.¹⁵ He cites the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the secret 1916 accord between Great Britain and France to divide the territory of the former Ottoman Empire among themselves, as the model for the future. After all, Shavit argues, it “lasted for a hundred years!”¹⁶ Such a new regional architecture, Shavit continues, would be composed of Iraq, Jordan, the demilitarized state of Palestine, an independent Kurdistan, and a newly created “Sun-nistan” (an idea also raised by John Bolton in a 2015 *New York Times* op-ed) to occupy the territory in eastern Syria and western Iraq once occupied by ISIS.¹⁷ Syria would fall under Russian patronage and, in exchange, Shavit says that the United States and NATO countries would “present Russia with a series of demands (relating to Ukraine, the Baltic states, etc.), including that Syria abandon its support for Hezbollah.”¹⁸ One might then ask what role the century-old Sykes-Picot Agreement played in creating the region’s deadlock in the first place?

Moreover, Shavit’s plan, even if it were feasible (and despite its explicit imperialist overtones), could never be achieved if the United States, which Shavit identifies as the primary enforcer, were successfully to downsize its footprint in both the Levant and the Persian Gulf in favor of an expanded presence in the Indo-Pacific, a policy change first announced by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2011.¹⁹ Indeed, Shavit recognizes this and, perhaps engaging in a bit of geostrategic flattery, argues that “if the United States wants to maintain its influence in the world, not only must it not abandon the Middle East, but it must deepen its involvement, not necessarily militarily, but diplomatically, economically, and internationally.”²⁰

Shavit doesn’t shy away from expressing his opinion of former President Donald Trump, a man whose practical strategy toward arms control and nuclear proliferation he describes as “frenetic” and composed largely through “tweetstorms” and “spontaneous statements.”²¹ According to the former Mossad director, such an approach to security on the Korean Peninsula would only push the North Koreans toward more aggressive forms of brinkmanship. Shavit predicted that Kim Jong Un would succeed in



US President Donald Trump (L) meets with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (R) in the White House Oval Office on 10 May 2017.

“knocking Trump off balance,” and that if President Trump truly wanted to bring about a peaceful, negotiated end to Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons program, then a unilateral US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal (referred to formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) would not only damage American credibility in general but also show the North Koreans that any deal they made might collapse when a new president entered the White House.²²

Israel’s partnership with the United States is highly strategic, underpinning its strategy to survive as a nation in a hostile neighborhood.

slammed Trump for “violating the unwritten codes of conduct of intelligence,” and described the president as a “bull in a china shop.”²⁴ “If tomorrow I were asked to pass information to the CIA, I would do everything I could to not pass it to them. Or I would first protect myself and only then give it, and what I’d give would be totally neutered,” Shavit said.²⁵ This is a tragic statement from an official who talks so intimately about the special relationship between the Mossad and the CIA. “Throughout my tenure as director of the Mossad . . . I made every effort to preserve the Mossad’s role as an asset for the CIA,” Shavit writes.²⁶

The year 2021 marked 25 years since Shabtai Shavit left service, yet apart from the recent agreement normalizing relations between Israel, Bahrain, and the United Arab



Al-Aqsa Mosque, Jerusalem

Shavit makes no mention of a 2017 incident, first reported in the *Washington Post*, that occurred during a meeting in the Oval Office between then-President Trump, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and Russian Ambassador to the United States Sergey Kislyak, in which Trump divulged highly classified “code word”-level intelligence—intelligence purportedly originating from sources under Israeli control.²³ Israel’s partnership with the United States is highly strategic, underpinning its strategy to survive as a nation in a hostile neighborhood, and key to this relationship is the closely guarded (and highly compartmentalized) matter of intelligence sharing. Shavit, along with Danny Yatom, another former Mossad chief, was horrified by this incident. In an interview with *The Times of Israel*, Shavit

Emirates, Israel’s neighborhood looks similar to the way it did in 1996. While Israel has concluded peace agreements with neighbors Egypt and Jordan, similar accords with Syria remain elusive. Given the history of war between Israel and Syria (and the latter’s support for anti-Israeli militant groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon), this status quo perpetuates the sense of insecurity among Israeli defense officials, who are often reminded that large, hostile military forces remain entrenched just across the borders. Iran arguably presents a greater threat to Israel today than it did in 1996, having bolstered its strategic missile force, expanded its nuclear program, and pushed its presence deeper into Israel’s immediate periphery—Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza.²⁷

**Rockets being fired from
the Gaza Strip** into Israel on
10 May 2021.





Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu,



Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett

Since 1996, when Israel welcomed its then-new Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu,²⁸ the Knesset has stalled in making any significant progress in negotiations with its Palestinian counterparts toward Palestinian self-determination, largely because of the dominance of conservatives like Netanyahu across the Israeli government. While the recent ouster of Netanyahu may signal shifting winds in Israeli domestic attitudes, the rise to power of Naftali Bennett, a former Netanyahu ally, doesn't lend much hope.²⁹ In fact, progress toward Palestinian self-determination has regressed significantly since the 1990s, as evidenced by 11 days of fighting between Israel and Hamas in May 2021 that killed at least 243 people in Gaza and 12 in Israel. Fighting between Israeli police and Muslim demonstrators during Ramadan, Islam's holiest month, led to an incident in which Israeli police broke into al-Aqsa Mosque and threw stun grenades at worshippers.³⁰

During Shavit's tenure, he dealt with the latter part of the first Palestinian intifada, and felt the early tremors of the second.

During Shavit's tenure, he dealt with the latter part of the first Palestinian intifada, and felt the early tremors of the second. In the same moment, Israel lost Yitzhak Rabin to the gun of a far-right assassin, who feared that Rabin, working to lead the nation through this period of significant domestic instability while negotiating the US-led Oslo Accords, was capitulating to Israel's enemies. Rabin is remembered by Shavit as a patriot, a leader, and a peace-maker who never hesitated to defend his nation, sometimes even from itself. Shavit reflects that near the end of his life, Rabin "became convinced that the State of Israel could not continue to live by the sword and that no opportunity to break through the wall of hostility should be neglected."³¹ Shavit himself addresses this dilemma more explicitly, openly sharing what he calls his Machiavellian view of the world: "if we chose morality over security with regard to the enemy in question, then what we would achieve would be dying with the proud knowledge that we had died as more moral beings."³² Yet Shavit also wonders, "shall the sword [of Israel] devour forever?"³³ Shabtai Shavit's memoir is a powerful contribution to the canon of literature published by senior Israeli political leaders, and is an essential read for those interested in firming up their understanding of Israel's perspective on Iran, the Middle East, and its own future role in an increasingly multipolar world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MAJOR TIMOTHY BETTIS serves in the United States Air Force.

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