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By Shabtai Shavit. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame
Press, 2020. ISBN 9780268108335. Hardcover. 434 Pages.
\$29.00.**

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Reviewed by Nadav Morag, Sam Houston State University

This book consists of the views of Shabtai Shavit, who served as the head of Israel's civilian external intelligence agency, Ha Mossad le Modi'in ve Tafkidim Meuchadim (the institute for intelligence and special duties), more commonly known as the Mossad (institute). Shavit served as head of the Mossad between 1989 and 1996, an eventful period in Israel's history (though one would be hard-pressed to find any period in Israeli history that was not eventful) that included the end of the Cold War, peace negotiations with the Palestinians and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, the debut of Palestinian suicide bombing attacks in Israel, and the first Gulf War. Consequently, there is undoubtedly a great deal of interesting information and a range of insights that Shavit could convey on how these momentous events affected Israel and how Israel responded to them, at least within the context of the Mossad's role.

A book written by a former Mossad head could be an extremely valuable addition to the literature, not only on this covert Israeli agency, but on the manner in which intelligence impacts decision-making in Israel. Such a book could also provide insights into the nature of intelligence cooperation between Israeli intelligence and security agencies and between the Mossad and foreign intelligence agencies. Furthermore, such a book could contribute to the understanding of the Mossad's role as Israel's "secret foreign ministry" with respect to countries that do not have diplomatic relations with Israel (particularly those that are technically enemies of the State of Israel). The problem with Shavit's book is that it does none of this. Of course, this type of information is heavily classified and therefore he is not at liberty to disclose any of this, but, herein lies the rub: Many thoughtful works by scholars (including those with intelligence experience) and good journalists have been written on the Mossad (Melman and Raviv), on the nature of intelligence (Lowenthal, Laquer, Wirtz, Dahl), and on Israel's covert relationships with various countries (Ben-Zvi, Posner, Jones), etc., and thus the added value of a book by a former Mossad head lies in his experiences and insights with respect to

sensitive matters he was directly involved with, and yet it is precisely these matters that he cannot disclose.

Instead, Shavit offers us a broad range of his opinions on various issues relating to intelligence, the Arab-Israeli conflict, national security, diplomacy, world events, terrorism, and others. To be fair, Shavit does not claim that he has produced a scholarly work and he notes that his book "...does not purport to present scientific research; rather, it conveys the author's personal opinions" (p. xix). But it is not clear what the value is of his personal opinions if he cannot demonstrate their validity through his actual experiences and it is therefore unclear as to what led him to take certain positions on certain issues. The literature on intelligence, the Arab-Israeli conflict, national security, covert diplomacy, and related issues is rich and varied and there is a plethora of scholarly books, articles, and think tank publications, properly footnoted, that address the issues covered in Shavit's book in clearer and more comprehensive ways, with evidence provided for assertions made.

It is true that Shavit held a very senior role and that he was in a position to observe, and possibly to influence, policy making at the Prime Ministerial level, but his views on Israel's national security and fundamental interests, at least as expressed in this book, are not unique or particularly insightful. The fundamental interests of a given country (or at least one that is widely known and therefore holds interest for scholars, analysts, and journalists) can be discerned by anyone with the time and patience to do some reading. There is no magic insight afforded by access to intelligence or other classified information when one is focused on larger strategic issues (as opposed to tactical intelligence, which can be incredibly valuable). In the United States alone, there are over one hundred think tanks and universities that produce high-quality scholarship and analysis on national interests, challenges, domestic political considerations, military capabilities, economic and social issues, etc. relating to many countries, Israel included.

Shavit recognized the value of this type of strategic analysis in his establishment of the Mossad's Research Department, thus, as he notes, transforming the Mossad from "...an intelligence-gathering and special operations agency to an intelligence-gathering, special operations, and research and assessment agency..." (p. 6). However, when he describes

some of the conclusions reached by this department, or by a team he established in 1995 (known as Forum 2000) in order to assess threats and opportunities for Israel in the new century, those conclusions are no different, and in many cases less sophisticated, than those that can be found in the better assessments by think tanks and scholars. For example, recommendations for fighting Jihadi terrorism include:

“improving intelligence gathering, better technology for sampling airborne agents, tracking the flow of terrorist funds, increasing cyber capabilities, use of intelligence to build criminal cases, enhancing intelligence cooperation between national agencies, and integrating intelligence into combat operations” (pp. 81-82).

There is nothing new or particularly insightful in this list of proposed measures. Similarly, when considering the potential impact of an Israeli attack on Iran, Shavit provides a series of issues for Israeli policymakers to consider such as: Whether Hezbollah will respond to an attack on Iran by Israel, when the United States should be informed of an imminent attack on Iran, whether Israel should target only Iran’s nuclear sites, or try to disrupt the government by attacking government targets, and whether it might be possible to attack Iran in such a way that allows plausible deniability (p. 121). Nothing here is new or absent from a range of analytical works on this issue (including, for example, analysis by Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies).

Nevertheless, had Shavit’s work distilled much of this into one organized and well-substantiated volume, this would have provided a useful service to those less familiar with these issues. However, Shavit’s objective was to provide his opinions on various issues, not to create a primer on intelligence, national security, the Arab-Israeli conflict, covert diplomacy, or other such issues. Moreover, the book meanders from topic to topic without any clear attempt to build on information from previous sections in order to draw conclusions. For example, on one page, the author discusses the relationship between the Mossad and Israeli law enforcement and in the next few pages, the author moves on to discussing the Iranian threat to Israel. There appears to be little organizational logic in the manner in which topics are introduced and addressed.

In summary, there can be little doubt that Shabtai Shavit possesses a wealth of experience and insight by virtue of his former key role in the

Israeli intelligence system. At the same time, he is legally and morally bound not to divulge national security secrets and thus cannot share these experiences and insights. Given these constraints, and given his apparent lack of desire to create a work of evidence-based research (something that he presumably would have expected from the Mossad's Research Department when he headed the agency), he has produced instead a book of opinions. There may be, perhaps, some residual value in reading the opinions of a former head of the Mossad as it may demonstrate the thinking of some in the Israeli security community during a particular historical period, but I can think of better ways to educate oneself on the issues addressed in this book.