

**DANNY YATOM**

*Former Director of the Mossad*

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**THE LABYRINTH  
OF POWER**

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# INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**D**uring my many years of service in the IDF, the Mossad, the Prime Minister's Bureau and the Knesset (the Israeli parliament), I amassed many experiences in matters related to the State of Israel's national security.

I participated in the peace process with Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians from 1993 to 2001.

I chose to write a book that will offer readers in Israel and abroad a unique glimpse into the world of the country's leadership and national-level decision makers.

I am of the opinion that it is highly important for ordinary people to be exposed to decision-making processes in the Prime Minister and governmental levels on matters that are crucial to the State of Israel, and to each and every one of us.

The book contains a detailed description of the foremost process that Israel has gone through in the political-military area, namely the peace process.

From the following pages, one can learn about the dynamics that characterized decision makers behind closed doors, about the many uncertainties and decisions that had to be made at different crossroads during negotiations.

The book follows developments in Israeli society that led to the murder of Prime Minister and Defense Minister Yitzchak Rabin, a

traumatic murder that sent the State of Israel into a whirlpool and left us with immense pain and bloody scars that will never heal.

The various chapters cover a wide range of events, affairs and processes, but due to its limited breadth I did not include all the national experiences that have happened in recent years.

Additionally, you will find descriptions pertaining to my family and the home I grew up in. I saw much importance in including these descriptions, aimed to clarify the foundations of my worldview and behavioral patterns as they are expressed in my life and in this book.

My late parents, Pnina and Simha Yatom, may they rest in peace, greatly influenced my personality and instilled in me the core values that accompany me to this very day. They were not rich people, but they refrained from spending on themselves so that I and my brothers Ehud and Moshik and my sister Etti could be given the best education, and never feel a lack of anything.

They raised us with an eye for excellence, to love our fellow man, our people and our country, and to love the heritage of Israel. It is no coincidence that the four of us served the State of Israel for many years. I served in the IDF, the Mossad, the Prime Minister's Bureau and the Knesset, Ehud in the IDF, the Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) and the Knesset, Etti in the defense establishment, and Moshik in the IDF.

To my parents I owe tremendous thanks for the way they raised me, and the wonderful love they showered upon me.

I owe a great debt to the late Yitzhak Rabin. I was lucky to have been chosen by him as his military secretary, first during his time as Defense Minister, and later when he served as Prime Minister and Defense Minister. I learned much from Yitzhak, and working alongside him was a uniquely powerful experience. Yitzhak deeply

affected my way of thought and perceptions on military matters, peace and the way to run a country.

Ehud Barak, whom I have followed for over forty years, has been my guide and a true friend. From Ehud I have also learned very much. Ehud set a personal example for me in his courage in battles and operations behind enemy lines, and in his logical and far-reaching way of thinking. I thank Ehud for all of these.

I thank Professor Moshe Arens for choosing me to serve as his military secretary in his term as Minister of Defense. Moshe gave me a rare chance to take part in decision-making on the national level, and from him I learned what is intellectual openness and organized, systematic work.

To Shimon Peres I owe special thanks. Shimon appointed me as Director of the Mossad and has set a personal example for me in his vision and special talent to solve complicated issues in an uncommon and creative way.

Finally – special thanks go out to my dear family. To my wife Tova and my children Omer, Nir, Tal, Roey and Itai, who encouraged me throughout my journey, were my comfort at difficult times, supported me fully and were sympathetic towards the choices I made at different crossroads in my life and in the many roles I have filled. They showered me with tremendous love, encouraged me to write this book and supported me throughout its writing.

Danny Yatom  
October, 2015



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## CHAPTER 1

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# ASSASSINATION GONE WRONG

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**T**he tall brunette whispered some words into the ear of the tourist resting near the hotel pool. The man, bearded and in his forties, was careful to maintain a frozen expression, although the woman's presence there meant a nightmarish scenario was coming true. He put down the English version of *The Catcher in the Rye* that he had busied himself reading until she arrived, and followed her to a secluded corner in the garden.

The meaning of her appearance at the hotel was clear to him even before another word was exchanged. Her presence at this place was strictly forbidden, unless some horrible mishap had occurred - which meant that the operation to assassinate Khaled Mashal, head of the political bureau of Hamas on Jordanian soil had gone wrong.

Shortly afterwards, I was asked to leave an operational discussion I was holding in my office at the Mossad headquarters in central Israel. H., head of the Mossad Operational Department, was standing outside the room. "There's trouble," he told me, "Several operatives have been captured, apparently by Jordanian police, and the others have contacted me and requested authorization to evacuate to the embassy." H. gloomily advised that I authorize an evacuation.

At that moment I knew with certainty that the operation had failed and had already decided to travel to Jordan immediately in an attempt to minimize damages.

Paradoxically, the operation had been put into motion a few months earlier, just as I had returned from a vacation with my family in Jordan on July 30, 1997. During a holiday in Eilat with my wife Tova and three of our sons, King Hussein had invited us to go on a trip to Jordan. The king's royal helicopter awaited us in Aqaba and flew us to Petra for a tour, after which we were invited to a cruise on one of the royal yachts along the Jordanian coastline, finally ending the day with dinner at the Royal Palace in Aqaba. The king, who had not been present during our visit, sent one of his men to escort us throughout that pleasant day. My family and I enjoyed our excursion very much, although later my son would write in the family album, next to photos of that day: "Trip to Jordan, Summer of 1997, I have a feeling there won't be another visit like this soon."

On our way home, while we were at the airport in Eilat, I received an update that there had been a terrorist attack in the Mahane Yehuda market in Jerusalem. My wife and children went home and I immediately returned to Mossad headquarters. That same evening I participated in a situation briefing at Prime Minister Netanyahu's office. Among those present were Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, IDF Chief of Staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak and Head of the Shin Bet Ami Ayalon. At that time, Hamas had already assumed responsibility for the bombing in which sixteen people were killed and 200 were injured, and Netanyahu instructed all present to return to him with Hamas targets that could be attacked.

Several weeks later, on September 4, Hamas committed another terrorist attack in Jerusalem, this time on Ben Yehuda Street. The bombing killed four people and 200 were injured. Due to these two bombings there was an air of urgency on the side of the Prime

Minister and the Security Cabinet to receive Hamas targets which could be attacked. The IDF and Shin Bet had no recommended targets, claiming there were no valuable targets to attack, and I alone had come to the Prime Minister with a list of targets in different countries. Here is the place to present my position regarding the roles of the operational and political echelons in operational activities. The role of the operational echelon is to fight terrorism and hostile nations' attempts to obtain unconventional weaponry, recommend operations – almost always dangerous ones – which could go bad, present the possible benefits and risks, and not sit idly or explain that there are no targets, no objectives, and really nothing to be done. The political echelon's role is to supervise the operational echelon and consider the general and broad military and political ramifications before each operation is authorized.

The list of targets I presented was based, among other things, on the person's importance within the organization, the importance of removing him, the difficulty involved in reaching him and the results of his assassination. This list included eight names, and only the last ones were in Jordan. Mashal was fifth on the list and after him came Mousa Abu Marzouk, who had filled Mashal's role before him. Abu Marzouk's placement stemmed from his transfer to Jordan a short period earlier by the Americans, and there was concern that attacking him could create a problem with the United States. The targets in Jordan were at the bottom of the list because ever since the signing of the peace treaty with Jordan, operations on Jordanian soil were deemed extremely sensitive, militarily and politically.

Regarding Mashal, the summary of the Mossad's professional echelons was that his assassination, in itself, would not achieve the required objective, as it would only cause a temporary shock, and he would soon be replaced by someone else in Hamas leadership.

Members of Hamas who appeared at the top of the list presented to Prime Minister Netanyahu were central members in different countries. The material gathered about them showed that these people were recruiting and managing terrorist activities on a daily basis, and that attacking any one of them would hinder the organization's activity in the countries in which they were working. The Jordanian members were heads of the Hamas political bureau that had set the terrorist policy, funded terrorist acts and ordered others to commit terrorist attacks. Due to the sensitivity of the Jordanian field of operations and the high rank of Mashal and his counterparts, they were placed at the bottom of the list in terms of priority, and for this reason I recommended to Netanyahu an operation against a Hamas target in a different country.

The Prime Minister gave me the green light to proceed in preparations for the operation I had recommended, and operatives from the relevant unit in Mossad were dispatched to the location and began gathering intelligence.

However, a short time later on Friday evening, I received a call from the Military Secretary to the Prime Minister, Major General Ze'ev Livne, who informed me of a change in the mission. I was very surprised and asked him how there could be a change in the mission without my being consulted. Livne replied that after a meeting with the head of the Shin Bet, Ami Ayalon and Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, it was decided that one of the heads of Hamas' global apparatus – possibly Mashal – would be targeted on Jordanian soil.

I was stunned. I could not understand how the Mossad was being given a mission that I, as head of the organization, had not been involved in its decision. I tried to speak to the Prime Minister but he was unavailable. I tried to glean further details, and all I could discover was that the head of Shin Bet and the Defense Minister had been informed of the original mission assigned to the Mossad.

They subsequently turned to the Prime Minister and convinced him that the original target - that I had suggested and had been authorized by the Prime Minister - was not significant enough and that it was not worthwhile to waste the Mossad's special abilities on him. The two of them recommended targeting the heads of Hamas in Jordan.

Eventually, when I spoke with the Prime Minister I expressed my firm objection to the way the decision had been made. I argued that I had to check the feasibility of action on Jordanian soil. Finally I came to accept that Mashal or one of the other members of Hamas leadership would be the target of attack.

The issue of action on Jordanian soil was raised in my first conversation on this matter with the Prime Minister and resurfaced many more times until the date of implementation.

I was concerned about the plan being situated in Jordan, but I took broader considerations into account, weighing the importance of peace with Jordan against Hamas terrorist attacks. These attacks had already hindered the peace process with Jordan during the Peres administration, and the current attacks could hurt the peace treaty with Jordan, as intelligence reports indicated that all attacks were being directed by Hamas headquarters in Amman.

Our repeated requests to the King of Jordan to take action to halt Hamas activities on Jordanian soil had been entirely fruitless. At the time of the previous administration, after terrorist attacks in Hadera and Afula, Prime Minister Rabin had already decisively demanded of the king to take action against Hamas, which had been responsible for the attacks, and terminate its activities in Jordan, but nothing happened. The Jordanians explained they preferred to keep Hamas headquarters close so they could keep an eye on its endeavors. The Jordanians also claimed that Hamas was only occupied with publicity in Jordan, rather than operational activity. However, we had proven to them that Hamas in Jordan was supplying

financial and logistical support, outlining strategies, guiding and providing arms for terrorist activities in the Palestinian Territories. Hence, a large-scale terrorist attack originating from Jordan could potentially ruin relations between Israel and Jordan as well as the continued peace process with the Palestinians. Hamas terrorism had caused tension between us and the Palestinian Authority, which we had also expected would prevent terrorist attacks. The Palestinians' lack of preventive action had led to Israeli activity in Palestinian territory – which greatly strained our relations with the Palestinian Authority and impeded the possibility for a functional peace process.

It should be noted that when King Abdullah rose to power after his father's death, he realized the destructive effect of having Hamas' global headquarters located in his capital. Abdullah adopted a different approach to his father and was quick to abolish Hamas headquarters from Jordan along with Khaled Mashal, Mousa Abu Marzouk, Ibrahim Gosha, Mohammed Nazal and other senior officials, who since then became welcome guests in Damascus, hosted by Syrian president Assad.

On a personal level, I was faced with a twofold uncertainty; on the one hand, I was the king's friend, from as early as when I had served as Military Secretary to Prime Minister Rabin, and this was significant on many levels. On the other hand, I was head of the Mossad, and was responsible along with others for Israel's national security, and one of the Mossad's main objectives is to prevent terrorism. Due to my role, I knew in detail the terrorist activities of Hamas' headquarters in Jordan, headed by Mashal, and thus despite the problematic nature of an operation on Jordanian soil I did not disagree with the idea.

Simultaneously, it was assessed that even if an operational mishap would occur, it would not be irreparable, in light of the importance of the relations between Israel and Jordan and the

king's personality; this was an assessment that eventually turned out to be accurate.

Assassinating Mashal was also in line with my notion that the Mossad's primary purpose is to prevent terrorism and prevent hostile nations from obtaining unconventional weapons. This is in addition to the Mossad's other roles, such as to gather military, strategic and political intelligence, form connections with nations with which we do not have diplomatic relations, bring Jews from nations in which they were in duress (such as Yemen, Syria and Ethiopia) to Israel, and covert cooperation with intelligence organizations in allied nations.

Khaled Mashal replaced Mousa Abu Marzouk after the latter was arrested in the United States. His official title was Head of the Political Bureau of Hamas, but in a terrorist organization such as Hamas there is no separation between the political and military ranks, as the primary activity of the Political Bureau was dictating terrorist strategies, ordering terrorist attacks and providing financial and logistical support for their execution.

Based on the information we possessed, it was asserted that Mashal and his people in Jordan were considerably more extreme in their terrorist policies than the Hamas command posts in the Palestinian Territories. We discovered that the Jordanian headquarters had refused requests from command posts in the Territories to reduce the scale of terrorism in fear of the IDF's responses.

All of these facts were part of the decision-making process regarding the operation's target, and once the Prime Minister gave me the order to terminate Mashal, the Mossad began to look into the target and examine the operational possibilities.

A suitable method of action was chosen so as not to create tension between Jordan and us.

After the operational plan was finalized, I came with H., head of the Operations Directorate, and with Mishka Ben David, head of

the Intelligence Department within the Directorate, to a meeting at Netanyahu's office. Besides us, the Military Secretary and the stenographer were present at the meeting. I presented the plans to Netanyahu, stressing that due to the sensitivity of action on Jordanian soil, it would be an operation conducted under strict orders in regards to the terms of completion. This meant that the operation would only be set into motion if conditions were such that they would ensure a clean and seamless completion, and if this would not be the case, the operation would be immediately terminated, even seconds before it was to be carried out.

During the course of these discussions, I reported the state of preparations for the operation to the Committee of the Chiefs on Intelligence Services ('Varash'), which included head of Shin Bet Ami Ayalon and head of the Directorate of Military Intelligence Moshe "Bogie" Ya'alon. None of those present said a word in regards to the operation's target and location, and certainly none raised any objection, which of course did not prevent them in days to come from stating they had no idea of its existence.

When the operation was presented to the Prime Minister, he asked his secretaries to call the Minister of Defense into the room. Yitzhak Mordechai came in and after Netanyahu asked him to join the meeting, he said he was in a hurry and could not stay. Netanyahu asked Mordechai to meet me and learn what was happening, and we agreed to meet the following day at noon. At the end of the meeting with Netanyahu, it appeared that Netanyahu wanted to assassinate the chiefs of Hamas in Jordan by rank, one after another. Netanyahu's instruction was that after Mashal was targeted we would examine the responses of Jordan, Hamas and others as a whole, and then decide if we would continue to target other members of Hamas leadership.

On the following day, Friday, August 1, at noontime, I arrived at the Defense Minister's office along with Mishka Ben David. While

we were waiting for the appointment, the door opened and the head of Military Intelligence, Bogie Ya'alon, left Mordechai's room. I took Bogie aside and updated him on how preparations for the operation were progressing.

Immediately afterwards, Mishka and I entered Yitzhak Mordechai's office and found his military secretary there with him. I directed the Military Secretary's attention to the fact that he was about to be exposed to matters which I had not been exposed to when I had been Military Secretary to the Defense Minister, and that he must keep them top secret. The Military Secretary was present during the entire meeting and busied himself recording it in writing. We sat with Mordechai for an hour or so and presented him with all the intelligence regarding the chiefs of Hamas in Jordan. In this meeting too, just as in the meeting with Ayalon and Ya'alon, there was no objection to the target of choice and the place of operation, and no attempt was made to halt preparations or cancel the operation. Mordechai later claimed that he was not informed of the operation and there was no documentation of that meeting, but on that Friday afternoon he bade me and Mishka good luck as we departed.

My instructions to the field operatives were clear and unequivocal. The strict terms that had been determined as conditional for the operation's implementation were complete certainty of the man's identification and suitable surrounding conditions, which would allow for execution with minimal risk of the operatives being captured. The operatives were presented with detailed and precise scenarios of what they were and were not allowed to do, according to the circumstances. They were to ensure an area that was free of the presence of others in Mashal's surroundings - from companions, acquaintances and family members, to bodyguards, lookouts and Jordanian police. I made it clear to them that this was by no means a case of completion at all costs and that if conditions

did not fit the plan, it would always be possible to come back at another time and complete the mission.

This was stated repeatedly, but I am sad to say that this is not what actually happened - and nearly everything that could go wrong, did.

The Mossad's best field operatives were sent on the mission, operatives belonging to the Operations Branch. These were the cream of the crop of Israeli intelligence services - highly experienced operatives, most of whom had taken part in similar or even more complex, complicated and dangerous operations. These operatives had served in special forces units in the IDF and had later undergone extensive training at some of the highest professional levels worldwide in the Mossad. When preparations were complete, a group of operatives departed to Jordan to execute the mission.

On the morning of September 25, 1997, which was supposed to be the group's last day in Jordan, the squad informed the group that Mashal was on his way to his office and that he and his driver are alone in the car. The implementation group began preparing when the first mishap took place - the squad had failed to notice that Mashal's two young children were also in the car.

The operatives assumed their positions as planned and awaited Mashal's arrival. When he arrived and began walking towards the building's entrance, the operatives approached him and one of them raised his hand in an attempt to hit Mashal.

Mashal's driver noticed the hand in motion towards Mashal's back and began to shout. Mashal turned around, realized something was happening - although he did not know exactly what - and began to flee the scene.

Mashal turned right and ran and the operatives hastily moved towards the vehicle. When they reached the corner of the alley in which the car was parked, a messenger from Hamas headquarters named Mohammed Abu-Sief arrived there. He was carrying documents that were to be delivered to Mashal's office, and he