



BOOK REVIEWS*

A High Price: The Triumphs and Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism, Daniel Byman (Oxford University Press, 2011,) 496 pp.

Reviewed by Carl A. Wege, College of Coastal Georgia.

In *A High Price: The Triumphs & Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism*, Daniel Byman has written one of the best definitive histories of Israeli counterterrorism efforts available. Dr. Byman's narrative is arranged in chronological sections detailing the major permutations of the Israeli experience from the 1920s creation of the Haganah and the foundations of the state through the first and second Lebanon wars and the contemporary environment. In addition to the incisive analysis, this work is distinguished by extensive interviews with political and human rights leaders, officials in Arab governments, as well as Israeli military and intelligence officers, conducted by the author, all of which which inform the larger story.

Byman recounts the partisan twists and turns within a counterterrorism bureaucracy at odds with itself as well as the tumult between Israeli politicians, as all develop their responses to countless threats against the Jewish state. The 1967 War becomes a Rubicon triggering the ongoing political brawl between Israelis who believed in the Promise of a Greater Israel and those who conceive state boundaries as politically fungible in the Enlightenment tradition.

Byman describes Israel's tactical success in fighting the Palestinians in terms of the struggle to liquidate the terrorist middle managers. The terrorist political leadership has some measure of immunity by virtue of their prominence, and low level terrorist operatives are generally the least dangerous. The terrorist middle managers have both the operational skills and the experience to pose the greater danger to the Israeli state. The first targeted killing of such a middle manager is recounted by Byman in the 1956 assassination of Col. Mustafa Hafez, then commanding Palestinian Fedayeen units for Egyptian intelligence.

Unsurprisingly, the shadow of Yasser Arafat darkens much of Byman's narrative as the Chairman manipulates the internecine clashes that define the snake pit of Palestinian terrorism. Whether ostensibly nationalist or Marxist in theory, the myriad Palestinian factions from the Democratic and Popular fronts to Arafat's venerable Fatah, all display a toxic combination of arrogance and corruption more



than they illustrate a national movement.

Touching on Lebanon, Byman describes Iran's creation of Hizballah as the birth of a monster. It was a monster however that Israel would never slay. Familiar with the venality permeating Palestinian terrorist groups, the IDF approached Hizballah with an imperial hubris that was, in fact, its undoing. The Israeli counterterrorism apparatus learned to manage Hizballah but they could never defeat Hizballah. Byman notes that a rough deterrence emerged between the combatants but neither Israeli politicians, nor Israeli intelligence or the IDF ever understood that Hizballah voiced a socially mobilized Shi'a population that was more than the sum of its terrorists.

The contemporary Islamist movements, be they Shi'a Hizballah, Salafists, or of the Ikhwan variety, are all at war with modernity in their own way and they present a much different threat to Israel than the more secular Palestinian groups from earlier decades. The fatal embrace Byman describes between the terrorist organizations, the Israeli counterterrorism apparatus, and modernity must now engage this new dynamic Islamist cause. How that Islamist movement confronts both Israel and modernity and how Israel adapts to this Islamist cause is yet to be decided.

Thematically, Byman recognizes in this work that Israeli tactical success has been rooted in what he calls "grind it out" intelligence to the end that "Jewish blood will not be spilled with impunity." That end however drives a counterterrorism history of tactical genius undermined by strategically obtuse politicians. The tactical genius of the Shin Bet understood that engaging a finite universe of recruiters, weapons makers, and organizers would break the back of the second intifada. Yet strategically obtuse Israeli politicians failed to understand that building a wall to keep Palestinian bombers out also kept Israeli citizens in. Mowing the grass is a Duvdevan tactic and not a political strategy.

The failure of a significant faction of Israeli politicians to conceive of political arrangements whose scope encompasses more than the threat of terrorism with the Palestinians twists the Israeli body politic into a Gordian knot of contradictions. The fundamental failure of the Palestinian public to create a political community with the ability to coalesce into a partisan movement that does not default to terrorism leaves their aspirations forever frustrated.

In *A High Price: The Triumphs & Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism*, Dr. Byman describes both country and a place of mind that has grown over the last sixty odd years in schizophrenic fits and starts seeking a democratic Zion in a wilderness of terror.