

COERCIVE DISCLOSURE: ISRAEL'S WEAPONIZATION OF INTELLIGENCE

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COMMENTARY

War on the Rocks

Conventional wisdom holds that intelligence data is collected and safeguarded to gain an advantage on the battlefield if and when war breaks out. In recent years, however, Israel has come to increasingly rely on deliberate public disclosure of intelligence data as an instrument of influence and coercion.

Such was the case, for instance, when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu presented, during his annual speech at the United Nations General Assembly last September, photographs of what [he claimed was a “secret atomic warehouse”](#) in a Tehran suburb. Five months earlier, Netanyahu publicly revealed with great fanfare [Iran’s nuclear archive](#) — thousands of documents, photos, and videos related to Iran’s secret nuclear program, stolen by Israeli Mossad agents from the Iranian capital in January 2018.

These instances, which have received major international attention and may have provided extra motivation to the International Atomic Energy Agency to inspect the suspected nuclear site (and reportedly [to uncover incriminating evidence](#)), represent a notable shift in Israel’s basic approach to intelligence use.

Evidence of this shift appeared in 2010, when the Israel Defense Forces Northern Command established a precedent by [making public](#) a detailed intelligence map specifying the military deployment of Hizballah in a village in southern Lebanon. The following year, Israeli military officials provided the *Washington Post* with a [far more detailed map](#) of Hizballah’s military deployment. Had a war broken out that day, many of the 950 Hizballah installations on that map would have been targeted by the Israeli Air Force. But Israel preferred to use the intelligence it gathered to avoid war, whether by deterring Hizballah or by creating other pressure on it. At the time, this unprecedented move was met with apprehension in the defense establishment: as then-Northern Command Chief Gadi Eizenkot, who later became chief of staff, [noted](#), “some people leveled accusations such as ‘how can you publish such hard-earned targets’.” We argue that what had started out as a hesitant experiment has evolved into a coherent modus operandi.

While intelligence disclosure is not new either in Israel or globally, most Israeli senior security and government officials, journalists, and analysts we interviewed in recent months agreed that the sheer volume and prevalence of this phenomenon is unprecedented. Among them was the former head of the military’s intelligence research division, retired Brig. Gen. Eli Ben-Meir, who noted that “over the past five years” the volume of intelligence disclosure has been “much higher than ever before.”

The notion of simply revealing one's most secret intelligence data is counterintuitive. That Israel has increasingly come to rely on this practice is especially intriguing. As veterans of Israel's military intelligence, we know that it runs against its very DNA, too. Nonetheless, as the examples cited above suggest, Israel has been employing this method as a tool of strategic influence; not only to deter, delegitimize, and otherwise bring pressure on adversaries, but also as a way to gain international legitimacy and shape domestic public opinion.

In this article, however, we choose to focus on the systematic public disclosure of intelligence for coercive purposes — or as we call it, “coercive disclosure.” Similar to the way in which states wield military hardware and economic power to reshape others' perception and strategic calculations, we argue that intelligence, too, can be used to threaten other actors that, absent a change in behavior, they are likely to suffer painful costs, including by military force.

Israel's revelation of Iran's nuclear archive represents perhaps its most high-profile use of coercive disclosure. Nonetheless, Israel has been publicly leveraging its intelligence dominance surprisingly frequently, sometimes daily, mostly against non-state adversaries such as Hizballah.

Perspectives on Intelligence Disclosure

The practice of publicly disclosing secret intelligence is not new to foreign policy. In 1917, at the height of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson disclosed the contents of [“the Zimmermann Telegram,”](#) a cipher sent by the German Foreign Office and decrypted by British intelligence, to the American media. The very act of publicizing the cipher, which suggested that Germany may be seeking to join forces with Mexico against the United States, prompted American intervention in the war. In October 1962, President John F. Kennedy revealed detailed evidence of [the deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba.](#) Kennedy's dramatic revelation, in a live television address, was designed to reinforce his ultimatum to the Soviets to remove the missiles from the island. In August 1995, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright [revealed before the Security Council](#) aerial photos suggesting the slaughter of thousands of Muslims at the hands of Bosnian Serbs in Srebrenica.

These prominent but infrequent instances of public intelligence disclosure point to the intricate dilemma underlying this practice, often referred to as the [“Coventry Dilemma.”](#) After World War II, a former Royal Air Force officer argued that British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had refrained from deploying air defenses to the city of Coventry despite concrete intelligence indications — obtained through the cracking of Germany's formidable Enigma cipher — of an upcoming massive German air force bombardment of the city. Although [rejected by later historians,](#) the dilemma reflects a common real-world predicament: policymakers are sometimes forced to choose between acting upon their most sensitive intelligence data in order to influence other actors and shape outcomes, and safeguarding the sources that produced the intelligence.

In a recent article, [Allison Carnegie and Austin Carson](#) tackled this tough tradeoff in the context of the Trump administration's recent exceptional revelations of incriminating intelligence data — some of which had [been provided by Israel](#) — on Iranian military activities in the Persian Gulf. While revealing intelligence can be necessary to win domestic and foreign support, it almost inherently compromises intelligence collection methods. An adversary whose secrets are publicly exposed will quickly look for the security breach and alter its behavior to reduce its vulnerability. If the information was gathered through human intelligence, its revelation could put people's lives on the line. But most importantly, the anticipated short-term benefits of an intelligence disclosure will almost always come at the expense of the revealing state's ability to use it in the ultimate moment of truth.

The Israeli Perspective

It is hardly surprising that throughout Israel's eventful diplomatic history the pendulum most commonly swung towards safeguarding its intelligence data, sources, and methods. Since Israel regards intelligence as a matter of survival, [per Walter Laqueur](#), secrecy, as its cornerstone, is [considered](#) a sacred value, binding both the public and the elites.

Hence, Israel publicly revealed highly sensitive intelligence data for strategic purposes on merely two celebrated occasions. On June 7, 1967, the third day of the Six Day War, Israel's Army Radio broadcast a [full telephone conversation](#) between Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and Jordan's King Hussein, in which the two leaders conspired to fabricate reports that the West took part in the military assault on the Arab states. Similarly, in October 1985 Ehud Barak, then the head of the Intelligence Directorate, [played a recording on television](#) of a telephone conversation between the terrorist hijackers of the Achille Lauro cruise ship and their commander, thus proving the links between the hijackers and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which Israel sought to delegitimize at the time. Both disclosures encountered fierce resistance from within the intelligence establishment.

In sharp contrast, recent years have been witnessing a recurring, systematic public use of intelligence by the Israeli government and its intelligence agencies themselves. As Ronen Manelis, the spokesman for the Israeli Defense Forces, told us, "I definitely use much more intelligence, compared to both my predecessors and myself with each passing day."

Releasing to the world its hard-earned intelligence has been anything but an easy process for Israel's intelligence community. But as Netanyahu [explained last year](#), Israel was ultimately "a country that has intelligence services," not "intelligence services that have a country." Similar to coercion in general, coercive disclosure is ultimately designed to maintain deterrence and avoid conflict. While privately communicating with an ally or a third party, let alone the adversary itself, allows the coerced party to easily defy the coercer, public disclosure of intelligence simultaneously engages multiple

audiences, including domestic audiences. It draws attention that cannot be easily ignored or dismissed.

A coercive disclosure of intelligence data does not necessarily have to include an explicit threat of action. The disclosure itself amounts to an implied “informational threat,” and signals that the actor is aware of its adversary’s private plans. The released intelligence maps of Hizballah’s deployment in southern Lebanon are a good example of this. If the state has a track record of preemption, the revelation of such plans could signal an upcoming attack. A state can also selectively disclose intelligence, gradually imposing a price on the coerced party until it changes its behavior.

Coercive Disclosure in Action

Most cases of Israeli intelligence disclosure pertain to the country’s various non-state adversaries. For clandestine groups, secrecy has to do with more than their identity. It is a vital prerequisite for their ability to function and survive. Exposing their closest-held secrets carries similar effects to those achieved through military force. If carried out consistently, intelligence disclosure can potentially make such groups perceive themselves to be particularly vulnerable, and even fracture the trust that binds them together.

Over the past decade, Israel has engaged in several campaigns against such armed groups, usually affiliated with Iran. Among other things, it was especially interested in curtailing Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps procurement of advanced weaponry for Hizballah in Lebanon, and later the manufacturing of long-range precision-guided missiles in Lebanon itself. Concurrently, it sought to prevent Iran and Hizballah from establishing a strategic foothold in southern Syria, across from the Israeli border.

These campaigns were conducted under different circumstances, using varying measures, while intelligence disclosures were accordingly playing different roles. In Lebanon, Hizballah was able to [establish mutual deterrence with Israel](#), while delineating military attacks in Lebanon as a “red line” not to be crossed without severe punishment. Conversely, in war-torn Syria, Israel has regularly employed military force since early 2013. However, it targeted mostly military hardware, and steered clear of targeting personnel as much as possible. Therefore, the [campaign against Hizballah’s military build-up in Lebanon](#) was restricted to diplomacy, with a strong emphasis on coercive intelligence disclosures. In Syria, Israeli military force and public intelligence disclosures were combined to prevent Iranian-backed militias from entrenching themselves in the country.

Precision-Guided Missiles in Lebanon

The overt struggle against the manufacturing of missiles in Lebanon began with an “informational threat” issued by the Israelis. In a public lecture at a security conference near Tel Aviv, the commander of the Military Intelligence Directorate, [Maj. Gen. Herzi Halevi, stated](#) that, “Over the last year Iran has been working to set up independent

production facilities for precise weaponry in Lebanon and Yemen. We cannot remain indifferent to this and we don't." This statement, followed by additional reports on Israeli and [international](#) media regarding the alleged manufacturing facilities and a contingent Israeli strike against them, as well as a [report](#) on cabinet deliberations surrounding the dilemma whether to attack in Lebanon or not, created somewhat of a "war scare." The fright peaked during a Northern Command drill in early September 2017. Later that month, Eizenkot [stated in an interview](#) that, "today there is no precision capability in Lebanon threatening Israel's strategic assets." His remark suggested that work on the project was stalled, or at the least posed no threat for the time being.

Either way, Israeli concerns over the manufacturing of precision-guided missiles in Lebanon were once again making headlines in early 2018. Although Israel and Hizballah exchanged unveiled threats, the former did little more, kinetically or diplomatically, to eliminate the threat until September 2018. In his dramatic speech at the United Nations, Prime Minister Netanyahu presented a map of Lebanon's capital, indicating three "secret sites to convert inaccurate projectiles into precision guided missiles." This limited, exemplary disclosure of secret intelligence illustrated the quality and intimacy of Israel's penetration of Hizballah's weapons procurement effort and reinforced the gravity with which Israel perceived the matter.

The direct achievement fostered by this intelligence disclosure, [as noted by a senior official in the Military Intelligence Directorate](#), was the hasty evacuation of the sites within days, and the fact that Hizballah was forced to find new sites. In and of itself, this disrupted their plans in the short term. Conversely, Israel achieved limited success on its broader objective to draw attention to the threat and to prod the international community into exerting pressure on Iran and Hizballah to give way. Hizballah proceeded with its plans, while Israel has since harnessed [U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo](#) to leverage the Lebanese government to hold Hizballah accountable; and continued to publicly disclose [updated intelligence about the project](#).

Terrorists in Southern Syria

Amid the raging civil war, leading to waning military posture of the Syrian Army on the Israeli front, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hizballah sought to establish local armed groups of Syrian Druze and Palestinian refugees, designed to carry out attacks against Israel and deterring it from operating freely inside Syria. In [January](#) and [December](#) of 2015, the Israelis assassinated prominent Iranian and Hizballah commanders, allegedly in charge of orchestrating these endeavors. Hizballah retaliated against Israel and took revenge for their deaths, but the work on the project was stalled for a while. Since late 2016 and throughout 2017, Israel reinitiated the occasional targeting of [low-rank local militiamen](#) and materiel (e.g. military posts and surveillance equipment).

With the return of the Syrian Army to southern Syria and its redeployment along the border with Israel, following Russian-brokered ceasefire agreements, Iran and Hizballah resumed their efforts to form a local operational infrastructure. Still arguably hesitant to

return to targeted killings of Hizballah commanders, Israel adhered to a policy of large-scale intelligence disclosures. During 2018 and 2019, Israel publicly disclosed the [identity of a Hizballah regional commander](#) in southern Syria, and the identities of the [different men](#) supervising the local armed groups. Last March, under the snappy title "[The Golan File](#)," the Israeli Defense Forces revealed comprehensive details surrounding the project. These included exclusive facial photos of its leaders, raw footage from intelligence observation posts depicting their operations along the border, maps indicating different sites of operation, and information pertaining to their plans.

The coercive objectives of these extensive disclosures were twofold. First, the immediate intent was to make the senior echelons of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hizballah realize that their covert operations were exposed and prone to a military assault, and thus needed to be forestalled. Moreover, it perhaps aspired to make them reevaluate the benefits of pursuing their overall strategy. Secondly, the public disclosure was meant to raise the awareness of Russia, and perhaps the Syrian government as well, who had vouched to push Iran and Hizballah back to a distance of 50 to 60 miles from the Israeli border, by invoking their pride and motivating them to make good on their promise.

The increasing prevalence of the public use of intelligence as a tool of coercion in international politics requires the attention of both scholars and practitioners. Coercive disclosure is gradually appearing to be a convenient tool for pursuing foreign policy objectives, despite the relatively constant costs of disclosure and the fact that the conditions for successful use are not fully clear. While the existing evidence indicates that intelligence disclosure is often insufficient by itself, it has the potential to inflict pain and set in motion processes that could achieve the desired policy goal, especially when the intelligence disclosure is coupled with credible threats and military force. With states becoming ever more risk-averse, shying away from military use of force, coercive intelligence disclosures are demonstrating an ability to walk a tight rope between coercion and conflict.

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