

# Slate

Home

News & Politics

Arts & Life

Business & Tech

Health & Science

Style & Shopping

Travel & Food

Sports

Slate on NPR

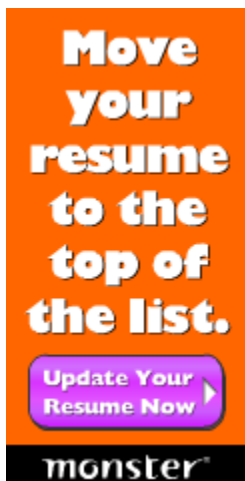
Output Options

About Us

Search Slate

Go

Advanced Search



*the gist* A cheat sheet for the news.

## Mossad

By Franklin Foer

Posted Sunday, Oct. 12, 1997, at 12:30 AM ET



Last month, Israel's vaunted intelligence agency, Mossad, botched an assassination attempt on a Hamas leader in Amman, Jordan. Soon after agents had injected a poison into their target, they were captured by Jordanian police. Jordan demanded that the agents

hand over the antidote, which they did. Bemused reporters wondered how the legendarily effective agency had been foiled so easily. What is Mossad? Does its track record live up to its reputation?

The Institute for Intelligence and Special Tasks, a k a "Mossad" (Hebrew for "institute"), is the Israeli equivalent of the CIA. It engages in **foreign espionage** and **covert action**. (Another agency, Shin Bet, is in charge of domestic intelligence-gathering and security.) Only rarely does the Israeli government publicly acknowledge Mossad. The agency is accountable only to the prime minister and has little civilian oversight; even the size of its budget remains a secret.

[Continue Article](#) ▾

### Also in Slate

#### Business & Tech



#### Starbucks Economics

Here's a little secret that Starbucks doesn't want you to know: They will serve you a better...

[More](#)

#### Arts & Life



#### Jon Stewart, Oscar Host


Reactions to last night's announcement that Jon Stewart will host this year's Academy Award... [More](#)

#### Health & Science



The New York Times


\$2.90 ▶  
a day



Get home delivery.

CLICK HERE ▶

**IQ QUESTION:**  
Which does not belong in the group?



Tickle Your Brain

Click Here!

**Lightning Detection 101**  
According to a local newspaper report, a series of lightning strikes may have caused this w... [More](#)

\$599 E310 DESKTOP  
from Dell Home.  
Offer ends 1/11.



CLICK HERE

**FEATURED ADVERTISER LINKS**

- Refinance a \$200,000 loan for \$770/mo.

Mossad was founded in **1951** when newly independent Israel reorganized its national defense. It assumed control over the network of agents in Europe and the Middle East that had organized **illegal Jewish immigration** to Palestine. Mossad stationed its agents in Israel's European embassies, where they cultivated "volunteers"--Jews working in foreign governments who fed them information. Other newly recruited agents were assigned to infiltrate Arab governments. The most famous example: In the '60s, Mossad agent Eli Cohen befriended Syrian President Amin al-Hafez and was nearly named Syria's defense minister.

Mossad established its international credibility with **two important finds**. It obtained a copy of Khrushchev's 1956 Party Congress speech about Stalinist atrocities, much sought after by American and British spies. And Mossad uncovered a 1961 plot by right-wing French army officers to assassinate President Charles de Gaulle. The agency traded information about the plot with France for nuclear-weapons technology.

Mossad's covert missions have been more successful than its intelligence gathering. In 1960 agents kidnapped Nazi war criminal **Adolf Eichmann** from Buenos Aires, Argentina, spiriting him away to Israel. And in 1976 Mossad planned the famous raid on Entebbe, Uganda, rescuing passengers on an Air France jet hijacked by Palestinian terrorists. Only one passenger and one Israeli commando--Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's brother Yonathan--died during the raid.

Mossad has been largely unable to procure intelligence that would prevent Arab terrorist attacks such as the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre by the Palestinian group Black September. Instead, Mossad

washingtonpost.com

**Today's Headlines**

- [Report Rebutals on Spying](#)
- [A Tribe Takes Satisfaction in Abramoff's Fall](#)
- [Electronic Eye Grows Wider in Britain](#)

[More from washingtonpost.com](#)

**Newsweek**

**Today's Headlines**

- [Why the Bush White House Ignores the Rules](#)
- [Review: Wonkette's Novel Lacks Sex Appeal](#)
- [Clift: Can Gingrich Help Reform Washington?](#)

[More from Newsweek](#)

has attempted to deter terrorism by assassinating terrorists. Unlike the CIA, which tries to keep its covert actions secret, Israel has meant for its assassinations to be **highly visible**. After Munich, for example, it killed Black September's most important operatives, forcing the group out of operation by the end of the '70s. In 1996, Mossad assassinated the "Engineer," a notorious Hamas bomb designer, by wiring his cell phone with explosives.

Mossad has tried to incite conflict within Arab countries to mixed effect. **Egypt** foiled a 1954 plot to discredit Egyptian ultranationalists by planting bombs in Cairo buildings. Egyptians hanged the two Mossad agents behind the campaign. More successful was Mossad's arming and training of Kurdish rebels in Iraq. Between 1963 and 1975, Israeli-affiliated units killed more than 10,000 Iraqi soldiers.

**T**he failed Egypt plot and the bungled Amman mission are not Mossad's only **embarrassments**. In 1973, the agency was widely chided for assassinating an innocent man they mistakenly believed to be a Black September operative. (It did kill its man--six years later.) Also in 1973, Mossad was criticized for failing to predict the surprise Arab attack that began the Yom Kippur War. It was similarly criticized for not foreseeing the intifada, the Palestinian uprising that began in 1987. These breakdowns are attributed to Mossad's failure to penetrate Arab governments. Israel has no diplomatic relations with most Arab nations, making it difficult for its agents to gather foreign intelligence.

Mossad has **weakened** significantly in recent years. After Yasser Arafat's return from exile in 1994, it has spent more resources tracking potential terrorists within the West Bank and Gaza, a responsibility of Shin Bet rather than Mossad. Interagency competition has eroded Mossad's morale.

**M**ossad has also been handicapped by **U.S. mistrust**. In 1986, the FBI caught Jonathan Pollard, a Jewish-American naval-intelligence officer, shipping sensitive satellite photos to Lakam--a now-defunct arm of Israeli intelligence largely devoted to stealing nuclear secrets. Following the Pollard affair, rumors circulated that Israel had penetrated other agencies. The flow of information



between the CIA and Mossad is said to have slowed since.

And revelations about the agency's Cold War malfeasance have damaged its prestige. Recent best-selling memoirs by former agents tell of colleagues who **ran drugs and free-lanced as mercenaries**. Mossad also brokered secret, dubiously legal, private arms sales to Central American regimes and South Africa's white government. The Israeli press, which historically has respected the agency's request not to probe its workings, splashed these stories across the front pages. Perhaps even more demoralizing has been a controversial TV melodrama called *Mossad*, which, according to the agency, depicts agents as buffoonish playboys.

**M**ossad, which employs about 1,200 people, now has difficulty competing with **private-sector recruiters**. Its early agents were well-educated, European-born cosmopolitans who ran the agency like an exclusive club. But most current agents are career military men, and the conventional wisdom is that they're less intelligent and creative than their predecessors.



The Amman fiasco could cost both Israel and Mossad. In exchange for Jordan's return of the captured Mossad assassins, Israel released Hamas' spiritual leader, **Sheik Ahmed Yessin**, who had been imprisoned in Israel since 1989. Some worry he will become a major political force in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, endangering peace negotiations. Others worry that Mossad's botched mission will occasion a new, high-profile panel that will dig up more dirt about the agency.

*Franklin Foer is a senior editor at the New Republic and a contributing editor at New York. He is the author of [How Soccer Explains the World](#).*

Slate

*More the gist*

## [Filling Sharon's Shoes](#)

Handicapping the Israeli elections.

posted Jan. 6, 2006

Rebecca Sinderbrand

Search for more [Gist, The](#) in our archive.



What did you think of this article?

**Join the Fray, our reader discussion forum**

[POST A MESSAGE](#) [READ MESSAGES](#)

Ads by Google

### [BigPond Broadband](#)

Want 12 mths ½ price access? For eligibility, visit [bigpond.com](http://bigpond.com)  
[www.bigpond.com](http://www.bigpond.com)

### [Broadband Guide Australia](#)

Bigpond, OptusNet, Dodo & iPrimus Compare prices & features online  
[www.BroadbandGuide.com.au](http://www.BroadbandGuide.com.au)

[Feedback](#) | [About Us](#) | [Help](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Newsletters](#)

©2005 Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive Co. LLC | [User Agreement and Privacy Policy](#) | All rights reserved