

Foreign report: Israel has one of world's largest 'eavesdropping' intel bases

The base, near Kibbutz Urim, is central to the activities of the main Israel Defense Forces signals intelligence unit, 8200, according to report in Le Monde Diplomatique.

By Yossi Melman

Israel has one of the largest signals intelligence (SIGINT) bases in the world in the western Negev, Le Monde Diplomatique reported. The base, near Kibbutz Urim, is central to the activities of the main Israel Defense Forces signals intelligence unit, 8200, the report says.

According to the report, the base has 30 antennas and satellite dishes of different sizes and types, capable of eavesdropping on telephone calls and accessing the e-mail of "governments, international organizations, foreign companies, political groups and individuals."

One of the base's main purposes is to listen to transmissions from ships passing in the Mediterranean, the report says. The base is also the center of intelligence activity that "taps underwater communication cables, mostly in the Mediterranean, connecting Israel with Europe."

The data collected at the Negev site is relayed for processing to a 8200 base near Herzliya, the paper says. Other reports say 8200's base is near the Mossad headquarters, which receives the intelligence along with IDF units, the paper says.

The report quotes a former soldier in 8200 who said her job was to intercept telephone calls and e-mails in English and French.

"It was very interesting work, which centered on locating and identifying the 'gems' out of routine communications," she said.

The report says that the base's antennas can be identified if you go to the right websites. The antennas there are lined up in rows, it says.

The author of the article, Nick Hager, is a New Zealand investigative reporter specializing in intelligence and technology related stories involving signals intelligence. In 1996 he wrote a book on the role of New Zealand in international intelligence gathering, and discussed cooperation between New Zealand, the U.S., Britain, Australia and Canada.

Le Monde Diplomatique repeats assessments in Israeli and foreign media about 8200's contribution to Israel's intelligence capabilities.

The unit has several bases, and is described as being the main body for signals intelligence collection in Israel, according to the report and other foreign media. Besides SIGINT, which involves communications, it also deals in ELINT, collecting signals from various electronic sources, including radar.

There are also 8200 units specializing in code breaking.

The unit's great, known successes include the interception of a telephone call between Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser and King Hussein of Jordan during the first day of the Six-Day War, and the interception of the telephone call between Yasser Arafat and the terrorist group that hijacked the Achille Lauro cruise ship in the Mediterranean in 1985.

Hager compares the Urim base's capabilities to those of the U.S. National Security Agency, Britain's Government Communications Headquarters and a similar organization in France.

"However, there is one difference," he says at the end of the report. While those units were uncovered long ago, "the unit at Urim remained unknown until this report."