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“Thou Shalt Never Change... Thou Shalt Change”:

The absence of deep understanding about the objects of research in the intelligence community

Michael Milstein¹

1. On both sides of the Atlantic, the intelligence bodies, especially those in charge of research and analysis, have been experiencing a profound crisis in recent decades. This is a crisis rooted in questions of destiny and identity. The crisis stems mainly from the dramatic changes that have taken place in the environment and in the objects of research with which intelligence has dealt for long periods, but no less important - also from the profound change that is taking place in the image of the intelligence expert.

2. The purpose of this article is to deal with the “elephant in the room,” a phenomenon that is rarely dealt with or even noticed. The problem that will be analyzed is the significant devaluation of the weight of **in-depth understanding of the objects of research** - those that stem from familiarity with their culture, language and history - among intelligence bodies of recent decades. This is reflected in the reduction in the scope of those with skills in these fields in intelligence systems, in the reduction or disappearance of these components in the training of intelligence personnel, and in the reduction of their weight in the process of formulating a situation overview, assessment and recommendations.

And he said: “I want to add two more commandments to the ten:

The Eleventh Commandment, “Thou shalt not change”

And the Twelfth Commandment, “Thou shalt change”

So said my father and walked away from me and disappeared into his strange distances.

¹ Senior Advisor on Palestinian Affairs in **COGAT** (Unit of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories), and former head of the Palestinian arena in the Military Intelligence Research Division. Author of the books: *Between Revolution and State: Fatah and the Palestinian Authority* (2004), *The Green Revolution - The Social Portrait of the Hamas Movement* (2007), and *Muqawama - The Rise of the Resistance Challenge and its Impact on Israel's National Security Concept* (2010).

Yehuda Amichai²

3. This is not a completely new problem. The preoccupation with the devaluation that has taken place in the understandings has been a constant element in the intelligence discourse in recent decades. The topic was raised as a lesson learned in Western intelligence investigations in the wake of formative traumas such as the Yom Kippur War in Israel or the September 11 attacks in the United States. However, this old problem appears to have reached a critical stage. The control of in-depth understandings is on the verge of extinction in the intelligence bodies, the discourse about the problem is almost nonexistent, and worse, over the years, a perception has developed that these are “anachronistic skills” that are not necessary in “modern research.”

4. A sense of discomfort has accompanied intelligence officials for several decades, inter alia in light of the change in the environment, the research objects and the intelligence targets. Out of this discomfort, a mountain of research studies has emerged that attempted to identify the intelligence problems of today and offer a solution to these problems. In this context, several points of discussion were prominent: the methods of reasoning used by the intelligence expert to formulate a picture of reality and assessments; The patterns of discourse used by intelligence agencies; The organizational structure of the intelligence systems; and the dynamics between intelligence and leaders. As stated, dealing with in-depth understandings is virtually nonexistent in this discourse. Thus, **precisely in an era of dramatic changes in which the importance of interpreting the cultural components of the objects of research becomes more acute, the intelligence community faces a situation in which the group of experts on these issues is an extinct species.**

5. As in many cases of dealing with crises, it is likely that a fierce clash with reality is expected to expose fundamental problems and sharpen the understanding that the period prior to that clash was accompanied by a “hidden crisis.” In this context, it is necessary to cite former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on the variety of states of consciousness, in which he claimed that **the most problematic situation that a person can be in is not knowing that you don’t know.**³

² Yehuda Amichai, *Open Closed Open* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998), p. 85.

³ The remarks were made at a February 2002 press briefing that analyzed the evidence that Saddam Hussein’s regime possessed weapons of mass destruction, which was the key pretext for promoting a US military campaign against him in 2003.

Between “Arabists” and “analysts”: the characteristics and roots of the crisis

6. Much has already been written about the changes that have taken place in the reality and objects on which intelligence is now focused. The “old” intelligence world that focused on the intentions of leaders and on the capabilities of states and armies has been replaced in recent decades by a more diverse and complex reality, in which the weight of audiences, non-state or semi-state organizations, and cyberspace is prominent. This phenomenon is clearly manifested in the Middle East in the “era of upheaval.” It is embodied in the rise of the role played by the public in shaping reality and in the intensification of struggles stemming from religious, ethnic, tribal and clan rifts, some of which even lead to the disintegration of state entities in the region.

7. It was only natural that in this age, the need to deepen the understanding of the culture and consciousness of the “other side” would be sharpened. Here, however, the second problem that characterizes the intelligence crisis is clearly evident. This problem is related to the image and basic tools of the intelligence expert. The statement in this context is clear: In Western intelligence agencies, particularly those engaged in research and assessment at the strategic level, **there has been a decrease in recent decades in the number and weight of researchers whose professionalism is based on content-related proficiency and especially on a command of the research objects’ language and an understanding of their culture.**

8. This trend is largely a “reverberation” of a widespread global phenomenon, which has also been evident in Israel in recent decades, namely the devaluation of the status of the humanities and social sciences, and the reduction of the willingness of governments and companies to invest in their cultivation. This is due in part to the collective perception of these branches of study as “secondary” in comparison to the exact sciences or to studies with a “profitable edge.” In Israel, this is reflected in the relatively limited investment in Arabic language studies in the education system, and consequently in the decline in the number of speakers of the language and those studying Arabic and the history of the Middle East literature at institutions of higher learning.⁴

⁴ See in this context: Yehouda Shenhav, Maisalon Dallashi, Rami Avnimelech, Nissim Mizrachi and Yonatan Mendel, *Command of Arabic among Israeli Jews* (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 2015).

9. The ongoing reduction in the number of researchers with knowledge of the world of the “other side” leaves no void. The emerging alternative to in-depth understanding embodies the third problem that characterizes the intelligence crisis and is also related to the researcher’s basic tools. The study of the language, history, and culture of the research objects is gradually being replaced by a collection of “theories” - some of them fairly eclectic - that pride themselves on the desire to be portrayed as “progressive,” sometimes presenting the skills of the past as “anachronistic.” These “theories” purport to provide the intelligence researcher with a means of integrating into the discourse that deals with clarifying the reality, assessing future trends and formulating recommendations. This circumvents the need for an in-depth knowledge of the reasoning and behavior of elements that are not part of the culture in which he lives and are generally motivated by a logic that is different from his own. In this context, methods such as “competing options” and “reverse engineering” are described, are of considerable value **as additions to depth and proficiency, but often establish themselves as the almost exclusive “backbone” of the research analysis.** Thus, the modern researcher – both in Israel and in the Western world – **has gradually changed from “Arabist” to “analyst,” that is, from a professional whose essence is focused on the effort to decipher the “soul of the other” into one who attempts to identify (or impose) order and consistency in a reality often characterized by internal contradictions and chaos.**

10. Another attempt to fill the void created by the disappearance of in-depth understanding is reflected in the ever-increasing overuse of modern research tools, especially network research and Big Data. It should be made abundantly clear that **the intelligence researcher (and the academic researcher as well) of today cannot ignore these tools or make do with their limited use.** His lack of familiarity with them and his failure to make extensive use of them will make him very limited, even if he is equipped with in-depth understanding. **The warning presented in the article is against excessive reliance on these modern tools, often accompanied by the belief that they are “a reflection of reality,” and not another component, which is fundamentally limited and biased, and must be weighted into a diverse and deep picture.** The built-in availability and simplicity of these tools can be deceptive, and often deludes the researcher into thinking that he can “understand reality” while sitting in his office, typing on his keyboard and running some programs on his computer. This is based on the belief that the findings of the algorithms and graphs emerging from the screens are an authentic reflection of the entity that he is researching. **Excessive reliance on modern tools (ostensibly) makes the**

intelligence researcher more knowledgeable about reality, but does not necessarily improve his understanding of it and possibly even makes it more superficial.

11. A focused look at the world of intelligence researchers today illustrates the difference that has taken place in the way they are exposed to reality, formulate their perception of it and assess the directions of its development. Direct contact with the “other” has become a rare spectacle among intelligence personnel. Meetings with people from the “other side,” field trips or reading texts in the original language that are published in the environment of the research objects (including materials from the cultural world, and not only political and strategic analyses) - do exist, albeit on a limited scale. The alienation between the researchers and the objects of their research is sharpened, inter alia, by almost total reliance on translated materials, often without sufficient sensitivity to the discrepancies that this causes. In this context, veteran diplomat and Middle East researcher Shimon Shamir said that knowledge of the language enables the reader to grasp content and recognize nuances that are almost impossible to convey in translation. It opens a window to the world of values, attitudes, wishes and hopes of the neighboring society in an irreplaceable way.⁵

⁵ Shimon Shamir, in “S
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Brig. Gen. Yoel Ben Porat, commander of Unit 848 (8200) in the Yom Kippur War. In his testimony before the Agranat Commission, he raised the subject of the drop in the number of Arabic speakers in the intelligence community, presenting it as a fundamental and serious problem that must be dealt with.

12. A possible response to the alienation of the researchers from their subjects may be found in the patterns of activity and output of members of the **Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT)** unit, and especially the unit's intelligence and evaluation entities. The situation, assessments and recommendations formulated by COGAT are based not only on reports that originate in the mass media and on intelligence, but also on unique elements. The most important of these elements is a unique and ongoing dialogue with representatives of the "other side" (from taxi drivers and merchants in the street, through local heads of political and public organizations, to the top political and security echelons in the Palestinian arena). The other elements are a presence on the ground that will inject a tangible dimension into the learning process of COGAT personnel, and a command of the language and cultural codes of the "other." All of the above gives COGAT's personnel the ability to clearly (and sometimes even early) identify basic processes in the Palestinian arena, along with in-depth interpretation and assessment of current developments. **This is a recommended form of hands-on experience for intelligence officers, which is expected to refine their reading of reality and contrast the theoretical knowledge that they have accumulated and the insights that they have formulated with the "real reality."**

13. Aluf Hareven, an intelligence expert and Middle East researcher, has described very clearly the advantages embodied in hands-on experience such as that of COGAT. According to him, they **liberate the researcher from imprisonment in a world of abstract and theoretical concepts and from enslavement to texts, anthropomorphizing his perception of reality and giving it an experiential and tangible dimension.** He said: "A research paper on the Arabs - for example, in the field of ideology or political science - runs the risk of concealing reality from us behind a veil of abstract concepts. 'The Arab family,' when we read about it in a sociological

essay, is in many cases an abstract and therefore cold concept; But it is an experience filled with impressions when we cross the threshold of the Arab home and go inside.”⁶

The “Elephant in the Room”: The Discourse on the “Intelligence Problem”

14. For several decades, the intelligence discourse has been accompanied by a sense of unease about the gaps or flaws that exist around a number of questions: what is intelligence and what is its purpose, how relevant it is for the various consumers, how to increase its effectiveness and how to produce intelligence statements or assessments that are profound and at the same time, clear to the consumer and easy to present.

15. Many books and articles have been written about the changes that are taking place or should take place in the field of intelligence. A significant portion of the research studies attempted to establish intelligence as “science,” focusing on the logical analysis of problems or the quantification of human phenomena. Another research approach attempted to focus on maximizing the relevance of intelligence, with an emphasis on refining the patterns and channels of discourse between it and the political echelon (“strategic intelligence”), or developing the capabilities and impacts of intelligence at the tactical-operative level. In addition, there were a few relatively weak voices that also pointed out the problematic trend of reducing the intimate familiarity with the research objects and the loss of “traditional tools.”

16. Noteworthy studies in this context are those written by American intelligence officials in the wake of what they perceive as failures stemming from a lack of familiarity with other cultures, especially the Middle East. One prominent study was published in 2014 by a team of researchers, most of whom served at security agencies in the United States. Its title is: *Improving Strategic Competence: Lessons from 13 Years of War*. One of the most prominent statements in the study is that **“Technology cannot substitute for expertise in history, culture, and languages because of the inherently human and uncertain nature of war.”** The analysis criticized the revolution in military affairs (RMA) concept, whereby control of modern technology and “information dominance” could provide rapid and significant decision-

⁶ Aluf Hareven, “How will we learn what we don’t know about the Arabs?” in *Getting to Know Close Peoples: How Israel deals with the Study of the Arabs and their Culture - A series of discussions* (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, in cooperation with the Israeli Oriental Society, 1985; in Hebrew), pp. 25-26.

making capability in military systems, based on the American experience in the First Gulf War. Reliance on this concept in the complex cases of Iraq and Afghanistan proved to be a dismal failure. According to the researchers, reliance on technological superiority alone, coupled with ignorance of the cultural environment in which the military force operated, led to a failure to achieve the strategic goals. Too little and too late, the Americans realized that in order to improve the chances of advancing their goals, they must intensify their understanding of the complex political and social systems, and their knowledge of the culture in both countries, as well as promote projects at the civilian level vis-à-vis the local populations.⁷



Lessons from 13 Years of War: “Technology cannot substitute for expertise in history, culture, and languages”.

17. The Israeli discourse about the reduction in in-depth understanding is limited in comparison with that of American intelligence agencies. The discourse in Israel correctly reflects the recognition that there is a problem in the ability of intelligence to cope with the challenges of the present time. In this context, the difficulty of intelligence to address the often frenetic nature of the Middle East and the dominance of the public and cyberspace is accurately identified. However, the proposed response focuses on the “new tools,” with almost no mention of the need to deepen the understanding of the world of the “other.” In this framework, there are significant calls (which are correct in and of themselves) for establishing a flat network structure for the intelligence system, developing the internal discourse within the intelligence agencies, deepening the knowledge and use of the network world, and converting the

⁷ Linda Robinson, Paul D. Miller, John Gordin IV, Jeffrey Decker, Michael Schwille and Raphael S. Cohen, *Improving Strategic Competence: Lessons from 13 Years of War* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2014), pp. 59-63.

quantitative collection and analysis methods that were developed mainly for tracking military objects for use in tracking “soft” targets such as public conduct as well.⁸

18. Itai Brun’s essay⁹ – “Intelligence Analysis – Understanding Reality in an Era of Dramatic Changes” (2015), reflects to a large extent the foundations of the crisis described, but sometimes also the way it is disregarded. The essay attempts to describe the problems that accompany intelligence in dealing with the current challenges, and to propose possible solutions to them. The noteworthy shortcomings mentioned by Brun include the “failure of imagination” and “adherence to the concept” (the important heritage of October 1973, which is deeply rooted in the consciousness and experience of Israeli intelligence). His discussion of the possible solutions includes an analysis of methods such as “reverse engineering,” “competing options,” “the wisdom of the crowd” and “red teams.” This is in addition to increasing the use of Big Data, partly in response to the need to understand the public with its increasing role in shaping reality. However, the study does not deal with the need to improve or reinforce the in-depth understanding of the “other side.” Thus, while the study contributes greatly to improving the intelligence researcher’s working methods, while focusing on the analytical-logical dimension, it ignores the foundation without which these efforts will be fairly ineffective or inaccurate. The important advice presented in the essay is essential as an addition to in-depth understanding, not as an alternative to it.

19. All aspects of the intelligence crisis, first and foremost of course the reduction of in-depth understandings, are liable to lead to the loss of relevance of the intelligence assessment bodies, especially those dealing with the strategic dimension and operating by virtue of the status of a “national assessor.” In the “flat and network-based” world of today, strategic thinking is the domain of everyone (especially the leaders), Big Data tools are available to every user in cyberspace, and the academic research institutes strive to lead the analysis of in-depth processes. **In this world, the relative advantage of intelligence as an entity that purports to possess an in-depth and lateral understanding of reality and to analyze the direction of its development is threatened. Therefore, it is liable to be pushed into the operational-tactical space where it has a clear relative advantage and enjoys considerable success.**

⁸ In this context, see a number of prominent essays: Ephraim Kam, “The Middle East as an Intelligence Challenge,” *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (January 2014), pp. 83-93; Dudi Siman Tov and Ofer Gutterman, “Intelligence 2.0 - A New Approach to Intelligence,” *Military and Strategic Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (December 2013), pp. 27-42; Shmuel Even and Amos Granit, *The Israeli Intelligence Community - Where to?: Analysis, Trends and Recommendations* (Tel Aviv: The Institute for National Security Studies, 2009).

⁹ Head of the IDF Military Intelligence Research Division from 2011 to 2014.

Summary: Tradition and progress in intelligence - contradiction or complementarity?

20. The mere assertion that there is a crisis in the intelligence agencies of today, as stated, is not an agreed issue, let alone the claim that a significant portion of the problems stem from the reduction of the intelligence personnel's familiarity with the culture of the "other side." However, even if the problem is limited in scope, **it is imperative for it to become a subject of discussion in the defense establishment, and perhaps even be recognized by the general public.** This is because intelligence serves as the main "compass" for the country's leaders. Even a deviation of a few degrees in this compass is liable to have dramatic implications in navigating the country in the stormy ocean of reality.

21. **The response must be both integrated and up-to-date.** First, the intelligence expert must **fortify the world of proficiency and depth as a distinct relative advantage**, with an emphasis on mastery of the language of the "other side" and familiarity with its culture. It is recommended that this effort be part of a national project whose goal is to improve the familiarity of Israeli society as a whole with the Arab world, mainly by strengthening language studies in the education system. At the same time, the researcher must possess extensive familiarity with advanced research methods and must make use of them. **Without in-depth familiarity with tools such as network research and Big Data, the researcher will be very limited, just as absolute reliance on these tools alone will make him very limited.** Second, researchers, especially those in strategic-political fields, must be exposed to disciplines that are not usually prevalent in the defense establishment, such as sociology, anthropology, communications, psychology and economics. In the same context, it is also necessary to strengthen the ties and the discourse between intelligence agencies and academia (especially those that provide a long-term perspective for analysis of the present), and to maximize the use of academic and journalistic materials in the intelligence work processes.¹⁰

22. Prominent Western intelligence experts raised the aforementioned conclusions years ago, but they have apparently failed to penetrate significantly into the intelligence culture. In this context, former top CIA official Martin Petersen offered advice to intelligence researchers, especially those dealing with the political-strategic level. First, he warned that researchers are liable to lose their relevance in their

¹⁰ In this context, see Elie Podeh, The Gray Area in Intelligence Research: The Role of Long-Term Processes in the Assessment of Intelligence, *Maarachot*, Vol. 331 (August 1993; in Hebrew), p. 56.

encounters with decision-makers. He wrote: **“If the Intelligence Community is to help policymakers make the best-informed decisions possible, then analysts must bring something to the party – in short, they need to be seen as credible sources of needed expertise. [...] The key is our ability to put the political behavior that policymakers see into a larger cultural and historical context - that they do not see - with enough sophistication to demonstrate that the context matters.”** In his view, the relative advantage and credibility of the researcher will be built through the systematic study of the history, philosophy and literature of the entities that he examines, and these tools are of greater importance in dealing with non-Western entities and are not driven by a world of values and logic identical to that of the researchers. He stresses that “there is no substitute for the ability to speak or read the language of the country.” This, he says, is a tool that helps to better understand the reasoning of the “other side” and greatly strengthens the researcher’s credibility vis-à-vis the entities that he serves.¹¹

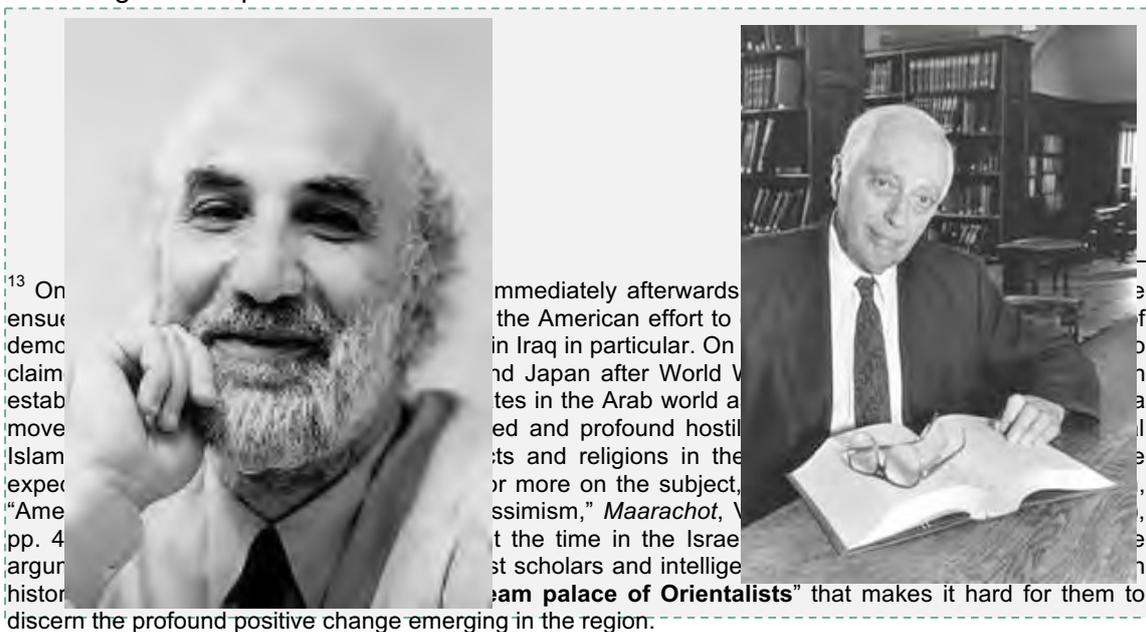
23. In the same context, over 60 years ago, Yehoshafat Harkabi, former head of Israeli Military Intelligence – who embodied a unique combination of analytical thinking, strategic analysis and profound knowledge of philosophy, coupled with familiarity with the culture and language of the peoples of the Middle East – raised seemingly “anachronistic” insights that seem relevant today:

24. ***“I saw two levels in understanding intelligence [...] One is the level of mathematical intelligence: a collection of information on facts, quantities, numbers of personnel, tactical units, weapons, arrays [...] Above the mathematical intelligence there stands a higher stage – human intelligence, the intelligence that reached man, his thoughts, his attitude, his mood and his responses [...] Human intelligence is the intelligence of feelings, feelings attained after many years of processing and studying the opponent [...] I think that we will not achieve this unless we promote Arabic in our country [...] And therefore I have placed emphasis in my work on the issue of promoting Arabic here [...] Just as it is impossible to study the State of Israel without being familiar with Zionism, so it is impossible to study the Arab nations without reaching their thoughts.”***¹²

¹¹ Martin Petersen, “The Challenge for the Political Analyst,” *Political Analysis*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (2003), pp. 51-56.

¹² Yehoshafat Harkabi, *Intelligence as a State Institution* (Tel Aviv: Maarachot Publishing and the Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Center, 2015; in Hebrew), pp. 25-26.

25. It is not possible to end the article without discussing the obvious question, i.e., whether the possession of in-depth understanding necessarily improves the ability to predict the future. In reality, there have been quite a few embarrassing encounters between Middle East expertise and attempts to predict the future. This holds true for the greatest Middle East scholars of our generation, headed by Bernard Lewis who, on the eve of the Yom Kippur War, estimated that Egypt, which was in deep financial distress, was not expected to initiate a military campaign. Shortly before the outbreak of the Second Gulf War in 2003, he believed that “the American project for the establishment of a democratic nation-state in Iraq” had a good chance of success.¹³ Fouad Ajami, another of the greatest scholars of the modern Middle East, failed at a more contemporary point in time. At the beginning of the Arab Spring, he was quick to estimate that the Arab world was at the “beginning of an optimistic era.”¹⁴ **It seems that when it comes to predicting the future, those who possess in-depth understanding enjoy no advantage, and the main contribution of this understanding is manifested in a more accurate reading of the present.** On the basis of this understanding, **more balanced assessments of the future and recommendations that are more deeply rooted in reality are formulated.** Historian Elie Podeh commented in this context that Middle East scholars cannot predict revolutions, but they can indicate the trends and circumstances that may lead to them. His conclusion was that familiarity with the contemporary culture of the research subjects should be intensified and, if possible, intelligence personnel be provided with “hands-on anthropological experience,” in particular field trips and meetings with representatives of the “other side.”¹⁵



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discern the profound positive change emerging in the region.

¹⁴ See interview with Ajami entitled “The Change Has Come, and It’s Good”: *Haaretz* Israeli daily, February 25, 2011.

¹⁵ *Haaretz*, February 24, 2011.

Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami, two of the greatest Middle East scholars of our generation: Their erroneous assessments about future developments in the Middle East in recent decades demonstrate that in-depth knowledge of the past does not guarantee accurate forecasting of the future, but rather helps to acquire a clearer understanding of the present.

26. In the current reality, where knowledge and insights are not the purview of selected groups alone, the solution proposed in the article may strengthen the added value and relevance of intelligence. It should be clarified that these are not “magic formulas” that will grant the user immunity from errors. Professional and accurate intelligence work will forever depend on the collective mentality and personality structure of those engaged in this field. In addition to nurturing his expertise, the intelligence expert is committed to adopting values of modesty and caution, and especially to recognizing the element advocated by Donald Rumsfeld - **striving to identify what you do not know.**

27. I would like to thank the readers of the article whose wise comments helped me refine my arguments: Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories **Maj. Gen. Yoav (Poli) Mordechai**, Maj. Gen. (res.) **Yossi Baidatz**, Maj. Gen. (res.) **Gershon Hacohen**, Brig. Gen. (res.) **Yossi Kuperwasser**, Brig. Gen. (res.) **Shalom Harari**, Brig. Gen. (res.) **Amos Gilboa**, Brig. Gen. (res.) **Assaf Orion**, Brig. Gen. (res.) **Guy Goldstein**, Prof. **Elie Podeh**, Prof. **Meir Litvak**, Prof. **Uzi Rabi**, Prof. **Shaul Mishal**, Dr. **Ephraim Kam**, Dr. **Dan Shiftan**, Dr. **Haggay Etkes**, Dr. **Ronit Marzan**, Dr. **Eldad Pardo**, Dr. **Reuven Erlich**, **Shlomo Kashi**, **Ziv Sharon**, **Arieh Shpitzen**, **Ofer Gutterman**, **Miki Segal**, **Shai Shabtai**, **Carmel Gil** and **Dudi Siman Tov**.