

Review

This is a great read, a real page-turner. The author lays bare the deep-rooted hatreds, as well as tribal rivalries that dog the composition of the Middle East, and preclude a possible resolution. From the start, the author draws the reader into a world where modern and historical animosities are twisted together in a knot that seems impossible to untangle. The author also has an excellent eye for visual detail to paint the picture of different environments for the reader. This is a must for lovers of political thrillers.

Readers' Favorite

Books by Stefan Vucak

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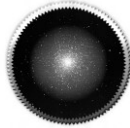
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CRY OF EAGLES

By

Stefan Vucak



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Note:

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Stefan Vucak ©2013
ISBN-10: 0987601474
ISBN-13: 978-0-9876014-7-6

Dedication

To Jaye ... when things get difficult

Acknowledgments

Information on properties of sticky labels, my thanks to Mark Gower, Adrian Van Drunen and Andrew Norman of Avery Dennison Materials Pty Ltd. Any liberty taken in the use of those facts was done on my initiative.

Cover art by Laura Shinn.
<http://laurashinn.yolasite.com>

“Where no counsel is, the people fall, but in the multitude of counselors there is safety.”

Proverbs XI:14

Mossad motto

Glossary of Terms

Action officer : The case officer designed to perform an operational act during a clandestine operation in hostile territory.

Agent : A person who has been recruited by a staff case officer from an intelligence service to perform a clandestine operation.

Al Jazeera : Meaning 'The Peninsula', an Arabic television and Internet news network headquartered in Doha, Qatar, sympathetic to extremist Islamist movements.

Al Qaida : 'The Law'—a militant Sunni Islamist organization, with the stated objective of eliminating foreign influence in Muslim countries, eradicating those they deem to be 'infidels' and reestablishing the caliphate, rulers descended from Muhammad.

Avoda : The Israeli Labor Party, formed in 1964 as center-left social democratic and Zionist party, but is now a centrist party.

Bang and burn : A demolition and sabotage operation carried out by an intelligence service.

Black operation : Clandestine or covert operation not attributable to the organization carrying it out.

Burned : When a case officer or agent is compromised.

Burqa : An enveloping outer garment worn by Islamic women to cloak the entire body. It is worn over the usual daily clothing and removed when the woman returns to the sanctuary of the household.

Case officer : An operations officer serving as an official staffer of an intelligence service.

Chametz : Leavened grain products. Must be burned or sold before Passover begins.

CIA : Established in 1947, the Central Intelligence Agency is the U.S. foreign intelligence service providing human source information (HUMINT) and analysis.

Clandestine operation : An intelligence operation designed to remain secret as long as possible.

Collections Department : Department in Mossad responsible for foreign espionage operations.

Compartmenting : Various ways information is held by those who have a 'need to know' and withheld from their superiors or colleagues.

CTAPS : Contingency Theater Automated Planning System—a computer system that supports a carrier-based strike planning process.

Cutout : A person who acts as a compartment between the members of an operation, but which allows them to pass material or messages securely.

Department of Homeland Security : Established in 2002, DHS is a Cabinet department responsible for protecting U.S. territory from terrorist attacks and responding to natural disasters.

FEMA : Federal Emergency Management Agency is an agency of DHS responsible for coordinating a response to a natural disaster within the U.S.

FIG: FBI Field Intelligence Group, one in each of the 56 field offices, tasked with analyzing data to forestall a criminal activity or provide input to solving a crime.

Hamas : Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya or Islamic Resistance Movement is a Palestinian Sunni Islamist organization and is a majority party in the Palestinian National Authority. Its charter calls for the destruction of Israel and its replacement with a Palestinian Islamic state.

Hezbollah : ‘Party of God’ Shi’ia Islamic militia and political organization based in Lebanon. Its objective is the transformation of Lebanon’s multi-confessional state into an Islamic regime and the complete destruction of Israel.

IDF : Israeli Defense Force.

JITF : FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force, a field office group charged with surveillance activities, electronic monitoring, source development and interviews to prevent a terrorist act or apprehend perpetrators.

Keffiyeh : A red-checkered headdress tied by a black rope circlet, the *agal*.

Knesset : The legislature arm of the Israeli government. The Knesset sits on a hilltop in western Jerusalem in a district known as Sheikh Badr before the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.

LAP (Lohamah Psikhologit) : Department in Mossad responsible for psychological warfare, propaganda and deception operations.

Legend : A complete and verifiable cover identity developed for an operative working in a foreign country.

MIIDS/IDB : Military Intelligence Integrated Data System/Integrated Data Base—a set of integrated computer databases that support a carrier-based strike planning process.

MOIS : Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security, also known as VEVAK.

Mossad : Israeli foreign intelligence service, headquartered in Tel Aviv's northern suburb of Herzliya, formed in 1949 by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion.

Pesach : The festival of Passover celebrating the legend of Exodus when the Israelites fled Egypt.

National Security Agency : The National Security Agency/Central Security Service (NSA/CSS) is the U.S. cryptographic intelligence agency, created in 1952, responsible for collection and analysis of foreign communication and signals intelligence (SIGINT).

Office of the Director of National Intelligence : Established in 2005, the ODNI serves as the head of the U.S. Intelligence Community, overseeing and directing the implementation of the national intelligence program.

Pasdaran : Islamic Revolution's Guards Corps (*Sepah*), a branch of Iran's military, but separate from the mainstream army, the *Artesh*. The IRGC was formed following the Islamic Revolution in 1979 which overthrew the Shah.

Political Action and Liaison Department : Department in Mossad conducting political activities and liaison with friendly foreign intelligence services, and with nations whom Israel does not have normal diplomatic relations.

Research Department : Department in Mossad responsible for intelligence synthesis.

Sakr-18 : Egyptian manufactured Multiple Rocket Launcher, a derivative of the Russian BM-21 *Katyusha* MRL, mounted on a 6x6 wheeled truck with a crew of five.

Shahab-4 : A two-stage Iran liquid-fuel missile, based on the North Korean *Taep'o-dong-1*.

Shi'ia : A branch of Islam who believe in the ascendancy of imam clerics as true interpreters of the Koran.

Shin Bet (Shabak) : Israel's internal security and counter-espionage service.

Special Operations Division (Metsada) : Department in Mossad responsible for conducting assassinations, sabotage and paramilitary projects.

Stage management : Managing the operational stage in a deception operation to ensure that all conditions and contingencies are considered.

Sunni : A branch of Islam dedicated to reestablishing the caliphate, rulers descended from Muhammad.

Taliban : A fundamental Sunni Islamist religious and political movement, created by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency in the early 1980s to counter corruption, brutality and fighting among Afghan warlords.

TAMPS : Tactical Automated Mission Planning System—an interactive, graphical computer system used as an aid in planning a carrier-based air strike.

Technology Department : Department in Mossad responsible for developing technologies to support Mossad operations.

Tefillim : Two black boxes worn by orthodox Jews. One is strapped to the forehead and the other is tied to the right arm. They contain extracts from the Torah written on parchment.

The Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations : Mossad's official name.

Prologue

Northern Israel, 1979

Town of Kiryat Shmona on the Lebanon border

Low clouds, gray and fluffy, rolled down the gentle Golan Heights slopes, obscuring the Hulla Valley in creeping shadow. Somewhere in their depths lightning flickered, followed immediately by a muted rumble of rolling thunder. A patch of clear deep blue sky still hung above the city. Warm buttery sunshine bathed the sprawling settlement and the checkered pattern of green and yellow fields surrounding it. A cool breeze gusted among the curbside trees and made the leaves whisper in alarm.

Dressed in a dark red cotton T-shirt, blue collar fluttering around his neck, black sweat pants and green-striped Asics, Matan leaned into the turn when the bike rounded the corner. The old Vespa sputtered, then surged down the street as he shifted gears. It might be old, battered and scarred, but it served him faithfully, and he would not trade it in for the plastic things they made these days for anything. With the hot, stuffy and smelly stores of the town center and its milling traffic safely behind him, he welcomed being back in the residential district. The last-minute shoppers gave him a pain; everyone wanting to finish the necessary chores before tomorrow evening's festivities. Why leave it all until the last minute? The cool shaded street looked infinitely more preferable. He fancied he could smell cut hay, probably ketchup from his last hamburger.

A group of youngsters playing hopscotch on the sidewalk looked up when he approached and waved as the worn-out little scooter, trailing a thread of blue smoke, roared past them. Matan waved back, not stopping this time. Sometimes, when feeling mellow and generous, he would give the kids a treat and take them for a spin around the neighborhood, the distinctive thrumming of his Vespa a familiar sound to everyone in the area. Today, he was in trouble and not feeling particularly mellow or generous. It wasn't as though he had actually done anything *wrong*. But try explaining that to his mother had gotten him nowhere. She simply didn't understand him or where he saw his future

taking him. Buried in Israel's 'glorious past', as she put it, that was her problem. He had lived through that past: the deprivation, missed meals, sweating in the kibbutz fields, ritual and prayers. It held little glory for him.

He slowed down as he approached his house, waved to the frail old lady next door picking up her mail from the gatepost letterbox, then gave a long sigh. Sickly, Milaka lived alone, was kind to him mostly, except when he and the guys trampled her flowerbed tearing down the sidewalk. His mother used to beat him up for those antics when he was a kid, but what could he do? It is not like they did it deliberately. The old lady should not have planted along the fence in any case; an open invitation for mischief. Anyway, he figured her to be a goner before Hanukkah. There would be mourning, tears, wailing and other unpleasantness. And he would have to stoically endure the whole miserable business, like anybody actually cared, and no one did, but the dreary observance of due form had to be obeyed, no matter how banal. Inertia, the thought came to him unbidden. And those who had gossiped the most would wail the loudest. It was all so irrelevant and hypocritical.

He pulled into the driveway, killed the engine and took off his helmet. With a quick squint at the clouds, he hung the helmet on the left handlebar. Across the street, Eben, a retired investment banker from Tel Aviv, leaned against his spade, looked at him and the Vespa, then shook his head in disapproval. Matan could clearly imagine the old relic's thoughts: 'That the boy would be working on the eve of Pesach. No respect anymore, that's what it was, and no discipline. Now, in *his* day such transgressions would not be tolerated.' Matan had heard it all before. Clearly, Eben saw no inconsistency that he was digging up his own garden on the eve of this most revered festival. Nevertheless, when Matan climbed off the scooter, he nodded politely to his neighbor. Standing behind his rough-hewn limestone fence, Eben's frown only deepened.

What made the crabby man come to this place, Matan could never figure out. The acerbic hypocrite clung to his shield of orthodoxy like a drunkard clutching the edge of a bar, assured of the superiority of his outdated convictions, refusing to acknowledge the danger of his extremist position. An investment banker? More likely a collection agency

hitman. Matan smoothed back a shock of thick black hair with an unconscious gesture. He should have a haircut, he mused ruefully, *another* thing for his mother to complain about.

“Shalom, neighbor Eben!” he shouted good-naturedly to make sure the old dotter heard him.

The old man supposedly had hearing problems. Sometimes Matan wondered whether the gambit was simply a ploy to gain attention. He had seen that gag pulled by oldsters before, and it always felt pathetic.

“Joyriding again, eh, Matan?” Eben ventured, his voice filled with veiled accusation.

“At school,” Matan countered, not in the mood to argue.

The old man’s sour demeanor hung over him like a dark blanket, cutting out the sunshine of life. They lived in two different worlds and Matan could not bridge them. He didn’t care to meet the old duffer halfway anyway. As a young impressionable kid, he liked listening to Eben’s stories, his life in Tel Aviv, the world of high finance and political intrigues, the Yom Kippur war and the never-ending lamentations on the degenerating morality of the young.

Kiryat Shmona being a stone’s throw from the Lebanese border, Matan had first-hand experience of the 1973 war, saw and heard the crash of artillery in the hills. He and his family had spent too much time in smelly bomb shelters for the adventure to be amusing. But it was exciting in its way, not understanding what all the fuss was about, not having to go to school. That was the best part. While Eben became increasingly conservative and cantankerous in his outlook, Matan’s world had expanded when education and travel, admittedly only within Israel, broadened his horizons. He found the old man’s dogmatic and pontificating pronouncements increasingly hard to digest, and moreover, extraneous. In his opinion, the guy was a senile relic who should confine himself to a rocking chair. But as a dutiful son, he nevertheless paid the man respect due an elder.

Eben raised his head and lifted an admonishing finger. “At school? Today? You’re a good boy, Matan, most of the time, but you mock the Lord with your sins.”

“He shall judge, old man,” Matan said impatiently and strode toward the front door, ignoring the cool breeze ruffling his T-shirt and Eben’s displeased stare. He looked up at the gray clouds and hoped it

wasn't going to rain tomorrow.

Built of typical white sandstone, the double-story house had a balcony bordered by wrought iron railing from which hung potted flowers on black chains. Flaked paint gaped along the white railing and rust streaks marred some of the support rods. Looking at them, Matan grimaced. He needed to sand and repaint the things, but the arduous and exacting task didn't altogether fill him with eagerness. Sooner or later though, he knew his father would take him to task over it. Probably sooner than later, he thought glumly. How can he keep up with his studies if they kept piling chores on him? But did that get him any sympathy? Hardly. According to his mother, the sooner he started 'honest work' the better. That meant working in a factory or being a field hand; both options were outside Matan's life plan and a source of ongoing irritation for his mother. Who was going to maintain the kibbutz tradition? But there, at least, his father was sympathetic, for which Matan was extremely grateful. His father understood that Israel's future lay in industry and commerce; the kibbutz was part of a romanticized past.

He opened the door and walked into the cool, shadowy interior of the entrance corridor. He shook off the runners and slid his feet into a pair of slippers parked next to an assortment of shoes on a small square of carpet as the door clicked shut behind him.

"Matan? Is that you?" His mother's shrill voice echoed from the kitchen and he flinched, knowing what was to come.

Little Raya stuck her head out from the dining room doorway and grinned with gleeful anticipation.

"You're in trouble," she pronounced comfortably, clearly relishing the coming scene.

He stuck out his tongue at his younger sister. "Am not."

"You are," she said and promptly stuck out her own tongue.

He took a step toward her and raised his right hand. She gave a shriek and vanished.

"Mommy! Matan was going to hit me!"

Peri emerged from the kitchen, wiped her hands on a somber black apron tied around her waist and glared at him.

"Where have you been? You were meant to help with the cleaning. If I find any chametz tomorrow, I'll be blaming you."

Clinging to her mother's dress, Raya beamed in expectation and

made a face at him.

Matan's shoulders drooped, knowing he could never explain it to her. Why did she put him through this torture every time?

"I had an assignment to finish, Mom, and—"

"And being at Tel Hai is more important than preparing for the Pesach?" she demanded, her voice deceptively mild whenever her anger spilled against him, and he recognized the danger signal.

"Of course not," he said defensively. "But if I didn't get the thing finished, it could affect my whole semester's grade."

"You should have thought of that before. Instead, you spend all your time with those traitorous friends of yours and leave your work until the last minute. Doesn't your family mean anything? Don't we come first?"

Matan winced, stung by her words, the cut worse for being partly true. Not wishing to talk about it, he walked to where she stood and hung his head.

"I'm sorry, Mom, that you don't understand. My friends are not bad, even if two of them happen to be Palestinians."

Her clear chocolate eyes regarded him with seething fury. "That's exactly what I mean. Those people want to destroy us and you besmirch the family name by associating with them. Your father and I raised you to respect our country, and if necessary, to fight for its freedom from those who would destroy us. Like your friends! And to have you hanging around them, well, it's a disgrace. That's what it is."

"Let's talk about it some other time, okay?" Mati countered sharply, having heard the old arguments many times before. "If you want me to help, tell me what you want done."

"We'll talk about it when your father gets home," Peri promised and wiped a trace of flour off her left cheek. "And you keep a respectful tone, you hear? You children have it too easy these days. When your father and I settled here—"

Here it comes, Matan thought with a silent groan.

"—life was harsh, but we endured, and we endured for a good reason. We had a country to fight for—"

Matan looked around. "Where is he?" he countered to break up her tirade.

"Selling chametz," his mother snapped, "and don't interrupt."

During Passover, no chametz—leavened grain products—could be held in the house. Anything found had to be either burnt or sold, usually to a local rabbi who acted as an agent, or directly to a non-Jew. A family gentile friend on the other side of town regularly bought their leftover and unused chametz, and as such transactions took a bit of time to conclude while the hospitality rituals were played out, Matan didn't expect to see his father until evening.

“And Janina?” he demanded, having got his mother distracted.

“Unlike you, you ruffian, your sister knows her duty. She's out shopping. Should be back any minute.”

Apart from kosher cakes, cookies and cereals, the treats were expensive and overly fattening, but very good to eat. Right now, that part did not even hit his list of concerns. Despite the weary ceremonial and dull ritual, Matan liked Passover and the feasting. It was celebrating a fable, he knew that, but a country needed roots. Anyway, it should take his parents' minds off him and his list of misdemeanors, at least for a while.

They just didn't understand.

* * *

Shrouded entirely in low fog, the scarred Tatra 815 truck rattled and bounced gamely along the dry, rocky riverbed. Nothing stirred along the empty terrain, far removed from prying eyes, ideal for the task at hand. The hard seats, worn out even before the Egyptians had handed over the rocket launcher, did nothing for the two occupants' humor. However, judging from the driver's rapt attention and glazed eyes, the discomfort didn't seem to matter. A deep throbbing clatter filled the cab from the worn engine, mixed with groans from the twisting truck chassis, stinking petrol fumes, burnt oil, sweat and stale cheese. Garbed in the traditional *keffiyeh*, the bearded occupant in the right seat looked up from his map and shouted. The driver didn't hear him. Exasperated, he grabbed the driver's right arm and shook him.

Khalid jerked his head around in surprise as though he had wakened from a deep sleep. In a sense, he had been, his concentration on driving total. He relished the coming operation and a chance to unleash a volley

of death against his people's enemies and those who had wantonly murdered his family. The thought of Israeli bodies torn to bloody shreds, plastered along the walls of their devastated homes, like his mother, two sisters and a brother had been when the Mirages attacked their border village, filled him with holy joy. This was payback time and war he understood. Allah was great and Khalid was the god's servant, exacting retribution against a decadent and hated invader.

"We're there!" Rashid shouted and tapped the smeared, stained map. His cell leader had chewed him out for not keeping the map properly clean and in its plastic folder, but Rashid treated the reprimand with scorn. Getting new maps didn't concern him. Besides, that was woman's work, not a fighter's.

The battered vehicle slid to a stop as Khalid pumped the brake pedal. He really should top up the brake fluid, if he could find some. Despite his cell leader's brave rhetoric about the need for courage and sacrifice, it was lack of logistics that hampered their operations, not lack of courage. A wall of red dust flew into the cab and momentarily obscured the dry gorge before them. Hands still on the steering wheel, Khalid cleared his throat, twitched his *keffiyeh* into place and glared at Rashid.

"You're sure this time?" he chided, his thin mustache and beard caked with a film of grime. "I'm not in the mood for another of your childish blunders. Last time, you had the map upside down."

Rashid winced at the painful memory. His error cost the supply convoy an additional two hours of shaky night driving and bouncing on hard seats. His cell leader had not been very understanding, although the mistake was easy to make. Half the roads in southern Lebanon didn't appear on any map at all. The excuse had not gained him any sympathy from the other men either.

"I didn't have the damned thing upside down," he snarled. "I simply took a wrong turn, okay? And you shouldn't be riding me over it. We got there in the end, didn't we?"

"Fool! Give me that." Khalid snatched the folded map from Rashid's hands and spent a minute peering at it. Satisfied, he grudgingly thrust the mangled paper into his brother's lap. "Looks okay. Right, let's get on with it."

Leaving the engine running, he opened the door and jumped down. The dust had cleared and he looked up, scrutinizing the shallow walls

of the gorge. The air smelled of rain and he hoped they would miss it. He didn't relish the idea of driving the old truck through cloying mud. A clammy wind swirled around him, making him wince at its bite, reminding him that he did not want to hang around longer than absolutely necessary. He tapped his stained jeans, brushed dust off his face, unclipped the bulky walky-talky and pressed the transmit button.

"Unit two in position," he said on the preset frequency and waited. The set crackled and he heard the familiar rough voice of his cell leader.

"You're late! Fire on schedule. Out."

Abrasive and insensitive, that was his cell leader. No sense of humor whatsoever, Khalid mused wryly. An idiot. He clipped the set to his belt and clenched his fists. He was prepared to put up with lots worse than his cell leader, as long as they kept letting him fire the rockets. With a last look at the heavy clouds above him, he grimaced and climbed back into the truck.

"We are 'go'. Let's get set up."

Rashid grinned, switched on the electric generator powering the launcher and unclipped the remote fire control unit mounted where the glove box would sit in a normal car. Trailing a finger-thick black cable, he climbed from the cab.

Khalid stared after him, shook his head and wondered why the merciful god had paired him with such a simpleton. The fact that they were brothers did not even occur to him. Before blowing his brains all over the ruins of their bombed house, taking the easy way out, his father entrusted him with the burden to look after his younger brother, and he could not get away from it. With a patient sigh, he lowered the rear chassis support jacks, switched off the engine, slid along the seat and climbed down.

Standing behind a slab of red granite that had rolled down the steep slope, Khalid watched as the Multiple Rocket Launcher assembly rotated a few degrees southwest and tilted back. This version of the Egyptian built Sakr-18 MRL, a Soviet BM-21 *Grad* variant, carried up to twenty-one 2.95 meter-long rockets with a range of some twenty kilometers. Each 122mm diameter *katyusha* missile delivered a twenty-three kilogram high explosive fragmentation or cluster munitions warhead. Due to its large circular area of probability (CEP), the *katyusha* could not be used against point targets, but against a sprawling settlement, it

was an ideal urban terror weapon. The launcher normally required a crew of five to serve it. However, there would be no reloading this time around. This was strictly a one-shot hit-and-run proposition, which suited Khalid just fine. He wasn't ready to be a martyr yet.

Right now, the launcher carried only six of the deadly missiles. It would simply have to do. Although adequately funded and provided for by Syria and Iran, the PLO did not stock an unlimited supply of the things. As Khalid's cell leader had explained in his tiresome monologue, today's raid consisted of three launchers spread behind the Menara Cliffs, designed to frustrate any immediate Israeli retaliation. This was not a set piece battle, he pounded into his drivers, and he wanted no heroics. Keep to the objective: strike quickly and melt away before enemy Mirages or attack helicopters could get to them. Given that tomorrow was the infidel's celebration of Passover, Kiryat Shmona would be packed with people and ripe for slaughter.

Khalid had grinned. Sometimes even the PLO had a good idea now and then, only mildly wondering why the strike had not been planned for tomorrow.

"All set," Rashid announced as the whine of machinery stopped and he looked expectantly at Khalid. His brother grunted.

"You sure we're safe here?" Khalid demanded and Rashid nodded.

"Safe enough." He preferred using the remote control rather than firing the rockets from the truck. Two of their colleagues had met with a gruesome death when a malfunctioning round exploded on launch, setting off the others in sympathetic detonation, ripping the truck and its occupants to bits. Their cell leader lamented the loss of valuable equipment, acknowledging with surly reluctance the martyrdom of its crew. A hard man, Rashid mused.

"Okay, let's check the connections," Khalid said and started walking toward the launcher.

Rashid muttered a soft curse and followed his older brother. What could they check? Once the rocket was seated in its boxy cell, it was ready to go. Not like there was any wiring to clip, but before a launch, Khalid insisted on checking the few connections from each launch box to the cell platform. Well, it did no harm, Rashid allowed generously, but he still considered it a waste of time. Khalid was an old woman and worried too much. *Enchala*, what the god willed.

Apparently satisfied, Khalid returned to the relative safety of the boulder and crouched. He glanced at the wristwatch on his right hand and nodded to Rashid. His brother grinned and armed the firing circuits. Two minutes later, Khalid looked up at the sky.

“Allahu Akbar min kullisay,” he muttered, and Rashid pressed the large red firing button on the boxy remote. *God is greater than anything.*

A javelin of searing fire and white smoke billowed from the launcher as the first missile ignited. Each launch tube was grooved to impart a slow rotation to the rocket. Primarily fin-stabilized, the rotation ensured accuracy at close range, and the target this time was only fourteen kilometers away on the other side of the hills.

Every three seconds the launcher spewed out one slim missile in a loud *whoosh*, imparting a velocity of 600 meters per second. Booming echoes and choking exhaust fumes filled the dry wadi by the time the last rocket arced over the cloud-shrouded hills.

When the launcher was exhausted and silence descended, heart racing, ears ringing, Khalid laughed, clapped his brother on the back and scrambled toward the truck. They could not waste time idling about, since the hated Zionists were sure to mount a mortar counterattack, backtracking along the *katyusha*'s trajectories. He planned to be well away from here before that happened. He might even get away.

* * *

Clearing the Menara Cliffs, the entire northern Hula Valley lay invitingly open. Across the valley, a bare five kilometers wide, rose the Golan Heights range and Syria. It was a terrible tactical position.

The first missile had already arced into its 350 meters per second terminal descent, having covered the range in thirty-four seconds by the time the Israeli border listening posts issued a warning. When the sirens began their wail, it was far too late to react. Silent, its engine dead, the *katyusha* arched down and slammed into Matan's Vespa. The HE fragmentation warhead detonated, sending out a hail of steel shards, accompanied by a devastating shockwave.

Caught in the open, Eben hardly had time to look up when he heard the familiar low whistle from the descending missile. He didn't hear the explosion nor feel the shrapnel as it cut through him. The blast ripped

his stone fence into fragments, which cut him into bloody ribbons before he could react. The front of his house and the houses around him were blasted apart, their remnants hurled spinning into the air.

Carrying a plastic bag of groceries in each hand, Janina had stopped at the entrance when the expanding wall of destruction slammed her body into the solid wood door before both were torn to shreds. Pushed by a giant's hand the walls of her house dissolved into their constituent blocks, ripping some into lethal fragments. The missile's shaped charge ensured maximum horizontal devastation. What was not flattened was flung into the air, causing wide area damage as debris crashed onto surrounding homes.

Standing behind the kitchen sink, Matan watched Janina walk up the driveway. She glanced at the Vespa and shook her head, setting her black bangs swaying. A small smile lit her oval face as though she understood. Matan liked his older sister, but this time, he knew her sympathies would not be with him. He took a few steps down the corridor, ready to open the door for her when he heard the anonymous whistle. For a vital second, he stood frozen and blood drained from his face.

"Mom!" he shrieked and made a desperate lunge to push her away from the window. "Under the table!" She stared at him, not moving, her eyes reflecting shock and disbelief. He grabbed her wrist and yanked her down as he dove for the table. "Raya!" he shouted in horror, knowing he could do nothing.

Thunder and smoke shook the ground and the front wall dissolved before him. Unbearable pressure squeezed his chest. Heat enveloped him and something heavy slammed into his left side. He fell into darkness and there was relief and silence.

Chapter One

Tel Aviv

Present Day

“In defiance of recently imposed UN trade sanctions, President Hamadee Al Zerkhani announced yesterday that Iran would not bow to illegal international pressure to cease what he termed is Iran’s peaceful development of nuclear power, designed to promote an alternative energy source for his people. When asked why three weeks ago, another three hundred gas centrifuges were commissioned, technology not required for civilian-grade reactors, President Zerkhani stated that Iran wished to ensure an energy supply that would guarantee his country’s independence and continued economic development. The fact that Iran already enjoys significant reserves of gas and oil seems to have escaped him. The president added that any interference with his country’s legitimate exploitation of nuclear technology would incur the gravest consequences for the United States, and Western economies in general.

“The weather forecast for Tel Aviv today—”

Namir Bethan casually stabbed one of the preset radio channel buttons and the car filled with the haunting strands of Beethoven’s sixth symphony. He relished the second movement, its subtle complexity and nuances, easily overlooked in the seemingly simple melody. The density and texture of the composition filled his soul with contentment and satisfaction. The piece was one of his favorites. Noting the turnoff, he slowed and eased the black BMW into Harav Kook Street. Nondescript office buildings lined the street, some modern, showing their reflective black or copper windows, glittering bright in early morning sunshine. Others were more conservative, built out of traditional white and yellow sandstone. A relatively new suburb of Tel Aviv, Herzliya dared to experiment with alternative architectural styles.

Tall trees lined the broad sidewalk, casting dark shadows along the street. Early starters, briefcases and bags in tow, hurried along, sometimes turning to walk into one of the buildings. Mildly curious, he wondered what their day would be like; a distraction while his brain did the driving on automatic. A sparrow made a startled dash across the street, vanishing among the thick foliage of a tree.

As the car whispered down Shival Hekochavim Street, he could see the familiar loom of an eighteen-story building, the sidewalk protected by a three-meter stone wall. Namir brought the car to a stop in the double driveway, climbed out and slid his black passkey into the security pad slot. Closed-circuit cameras mounted on each side of the wall stared down at him with intimidating curiosity. The heavy steel gate slid back without a rattle. He gave an involuntary glance up the sheer facade of the gray building, now outlined against the rising sun. With spring in the air, the days were getting warmer and his thigh didn't bother him as much. This early in the morning, the air was still crisp. He climbed into his car, slammed the door shut and drove through the courtyard.

"Welcome to the Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations," he muttered with wry amusement as he slowly drove toward the underground parking entrance. Not openly advertised, those who wanted to know where Mossad was headquartered could find out easily enough. The dashboard clock read 7:30, and had read that for a while now, he noted ruefully.

Since his wife's death two years ago to a brain tumor, undetected until far too late to do anything about it, his comfortable two-bedroom Tel Aviv apartment held nothing to keep him there. Fatalistic, the loss and guilt still hit him hard. He should have spent more time with her, valuing what he had. But as with such things, perspective came when one was powerless to undo what years of neglect had wrought. He made up for it now by burying himself in work. At least his country's needs were not being neglected—a poor consolation nonetheless. It did nothing to fill the lonely echoes of his empty apartment.

Unconsciously, he swept his eyes over an array of cars already parked in the lot, low-grade officers not entitled to an underground parking spot. He slipped his key into the security portal and waited as the heavy doors rolled up. Still not fully open, he drove into the dark maw. The underground parking lot had four levels, but his executive position allowed him a spot on the ground level. He parked the car, switched off the headlights, stepped out and leaned back in to pick up a slim brown calf-leather briefcase from the passenger seat. The parking and brake lights flashed when he automatically set the security lock. Given where he worked the action caused him to smile. Pocketing the keys, he slowly walked toward the foyer entrance. He dragged out a

biometric badge from his coat pocket and pressed it against the door sensor. Satisfied, his electronic master unlocked the door with a heavy click. Inside the spacious cool foyer the security guard, sitting behind a curved reception station, looked up and nodded sternly.

“Morning, sir,” he said with formal dignity.

“Shalom, Jaron,” Namir replied heavily as he did each morning, walking slowly toward the middle of three entrance portals, his footsteps echoing against the marble floor. He passed the badge over the sensor. The red-lit panel turned green and gave a sharp beep. He walked through, stopped before the polished steel of the left elevator that ran through the building’s core and pressed the dark access triangle. It turned soft amber. A few seconds later came a blunt chime and the double doors opened. There wasn’t much of a demand this time of day. It took a moment for the elevator to surge to the seventeenth floor—his department. Light gray carpet muffled his footsteps as he made his way between glass-fronted offices, most of them with their privacy curtains drawn. He could not hear anyone else on the floor.

When he hobbled to the left corner office, he passed his badge against the lock and the latch gave a little click. He opened the door and closed it softly behind him. Heavy beige carpet covered the rectangular room floor. A wide, brown executive desk stood tucked against the far corner; bare, except for a standard keyboard, optical mouse, an 18” rectangular LED screen and a multi-function phone terminal. A round glass coffee table filled the empty space in the center, surrounded by four soft easy chairs. A floor-to-ceiling bookshelf occupied one wall, cluttered with bound volumes and paperbacks, magazines and various periodicals. The windowpanes were standard double-glass, designed to defeat vibration and laser voice intercept devices.

Namir placed the briefcase on the desk and sat down. He clicked open the two side latches, lifted out a slim blue folder, closed the briefcase and stood it against the desk drawers. He toggled the mouse and the screen lit up with the Mossad logo and motto. The desk did not mount a processor or workstation. His connection, like everyone else’s, was provided through a secure shielded cable to high-speed servers on the fourth floor. The other equipment in the room was a color printer and a document shredder that ripped up to twenty-four pages at a time into three-millimeter square flakes.

The airconditioning sighed softly from two grilles mounted in the false ceiling.

A sharp rap on the door interrupted the thick silence. It opened and he looked up. Holding a steaming mug of coffee, two sugars, a young woman, dressed in a severe gray business jacket and pants, dark hair cut short, walked in and placed the mug next to the closed folder.

“Shalom, Mr. Bethan,” she said primly and gave him a tight-lipped smile.

“Thanks, Mira,” he growled and reached for the cup.

He gave an appreciative sniff and took a tentative sip. Black, hot and sweet, the way he liked it. His doctor told him to cut down on his sugar intake, but damn it, there were limits.

“Anything I should know?” he demanded, eyeing her over the rim of his cup.

She frowned and her pleasantly round face clouded. Pencil-thin black eyebrows added to her severe expression, highlighting her large brown eyes. A hint of red lipstick gloss softened her otherwise stern poise.

“Nothing that demands your immediate attention, sir. Unless you consider Iran’s latest bout of histrionics an issue,” she allowed with a trace of wry amusement and waited, knowing full well her boss was spending time in idle conversation. He knew everything of importance that went on around the world without having to be reminded. But it was a ritual they played out every morning and she didn’t mind.

“I do, but that’s an ongoing headache.” Namir passed a gnarled hand through his receding shock of gray hair refusing to stay combed.

“Yes, sir.” She frowned and bit her lip. “I cannot understand why the United States doesn’t do something. And the UN is just as lame, fulminating and impotent. Somebody should bomb *them!*”

“I’ll suggest it to Director Doron Kameer, but it’s complicated,” he mused, largely agreeing with her.

When the great powers did eventually reach an acceptable consensus, the original intent was so watered down that the final UN resolution held little meaning or potency. He took another sip, placed the mug down with a soft tap and spent a moment studying his ruthless-looking assistant.

Recruited from Shin Bet, Israel's internal security and counter-espionage sister service—inter-service poaching was rife, even though strictly frowned upon, but nevertheless a lively industry—the one-time Army captain's feminine exterior masked a hard no-nonsense professional. At twenty-eight and one of his star case officers, she filled a vital function by being his personal assistant. In his view, secretaries were a luxury and potential security risks. Namir indulged in neither. Capable, disciplined and dedicated, he intended to continue mentoring her, provided he himself lasted the distance. In his game it only took one unguarded step and his brother colleagues, jackals more likely, would be baying and snapping at his heels. Then again, he had a job to do and Mossad didn't operate like the UN. To advance, she needed to round off her experience by working in other departments. He would hate to lose her.

Looking through her, thinking about things, he made up his mind and squared his shoulders, but was unable to suppress a flutter of unease in his stomach. The action he contemplated would be way over authorized limits. Sometimes though, such things were necessary. He wondered whether history would agree with him.

“When Matan Irian comes in, ask him to see me, will you?” he requested in dismissal.

“Of course, sir.”

As the door closed behind her, leaving a whiff of lavender in her wake, Namir cracked his knuckles, reached for the keyboard, logged in and tapped out his search parameters with quick, efficient strokes. A number of messages waited to be opened in his Inbox, but he ignored them. The server immediately retrieved and displayed his search document. It had no classification attached to it, Namir's logon already providing the necessary access levels.

Sitting back, sipping his coffee, he quickly scanned the salient points outlined in the paper. He knew them off by heart, but the task helped him to think and reflect on what he contemplated. Written more than four years ago when Iran's uranium enrichment program was already well advanced—it never would have, had vital gas centrifuge designs not been provided by Pakistan between 1987 and 1991 by Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, to be precise—the document outlined a remarkably prophetic dissertation. In his opinion, Israel should have acted as soon as

Iran's fledgling enrichment program was unearthed. However, the then Mossad director, Ephraim Halevy, was foremost a politician and wary of adverse repercussions should an operation to disrupt Iran's march toward a nuclear capability somehow backfire. Not that Namir could exactly blame the director, but he missed the old days, like in 1981 when Israel bombed Osirak, sending Iraq's nuclear ambitions into the stone age.

A wry smile of grim satisfaction lit his face at other successes as he recalled the assassination of Fathi Shaqaqi in 1995, founder of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, by two of his agents right in front of the Diplomat Hotel in Sliema, Malta. The scum *deserved* to die. But the single wet ops which gave him the most satisfaction was having Izz El-Deen Sobhi Sheikh Khalil, head of Hamas, blown sky high, car and all, in 2004 while the guerilla fighter was in Damascus.

He understood and appreciated that type of direct action. Today, murky diplomacy and conforming to delicate international sensibilities were the norm, while Hamas terrorists targeted Tel Aviv and Jerusalem's citizens on buses and restaurants. Still, it was not as though Israel had not given them cause, he contemplated equitably. He would never say so aloud, but in his opinion the notorious wall building program, an attempt to fence off the occupied territories and stem the flow of suicide bombers, was an asinine political decision, compounded by another equally asinine decision to exploit the moment and annex additional Palestinian land. The effort failed abysmally and only served to harden international condemnation. It did nothing to placate illegal settlements, and tactically, did little to stop the bombings. Then again, how else could the Palestinians respond? Without a standing army to field in battle, terrorism remained the only weapon left to them. The old adage about a terrorist being a freedom fighter had a rather apt ring. Israel itself had used similar tactics against the British occupation after the Second World War. History was replete with lessons of failure, to the unheeding care of those who strove to repeat the mistakes.

Sometimes everything seemed so futile.

If he had his way, he would eliminate the politicians. That would solve everybody's problems. Prime Minister Sharron Ibrahim had the capacity and the will to act, but his Kadima Party coalition was hamstrung into inaction. Not that Labor or the minor parties such as Gil

and Shas were any better. And Ibrahim's often imperious and forceful attitude had not helped to push through unpalatable policies. To hold power, successive governments had sacrificed their ability to formulate and execute initiatives by catering to extremist and radical single-issue coalition partners. Lately, Israel changed governments like he changed socks, an ominous symptom of fragmented ideologies and loss of vision. In the long run, that led to internal disintegration. But knowing what to do and having the will to do it, whatever the cost in personal careers, were the hallmarks of good government everywhere. In his view, Israel seemed doomed to pursue a fatalistic course of internal appeasement, incapable of realizing that placating the ultra-orthodox elements in its ranks simply to hold onto power left no one room to reach a workable settlement. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on one's point of view, the Palestinian National Authority with its hostile Hamas government fared even worse. Sometimes a lot could be said for the value of a dictatorial regime.

Personally, he echoed Shimon Peres' sentiments that, *'Israel has no real option of turning to the political sphere in order to obtain a compromise that would constitute a genuine breakthrough—no compromise could ever satisfy the Arabs.'*

The inevitable consequence of that policy was the reinforcement of a concept that there could never be a political option on which Israel could base its security, which gave rise to a general psyche of interventionism by the Israeli Defense Force establishment in the political decision-making process. Since the military were perceived as the sole instrument capable of defending the country, any criticism or curtailment of its power was interpreted as a direct threat to national security. Namir admitted that lack of public debate on the automatic application of force as the sole mechanism to solve his country's problems had managed to derail every peace initiative to date, even if Israel's own religious extremists were willing to entertain the initiative—which they were not. Growing militancy between Fatah and Hamas, and disintegration of the Palestinian National Authority, might encourage the military to take matters into their own hands. That, of course, was but a single step from fascism, the worst of all possible outcomes.

Well, he might not be in a position to solve all his country's problems, but staring at the screen, he had no qualms about jump-starting

the process. Viewing the proposal, it had all the classic elements of a military deception: a specific objective, playing to the enemy's preconceived assumptions, a clear method selection and simple execution. At least he hoped it would be simple. The exploitation component was missing, but in this case, hardly relevant. The tricky bit was that Kameer also had access to the proposal and could conceivably connect the dots, a bridge to be crossed later. He pressed the print icon and the printer immediately began to hum as it spat out the report. He picked up the still warm pages, tapped them together against the desk and reached into his drawer for a stapler.

He was still reading when the phone went off.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Irian to see you, sir," Mira announced.

"Send him in." Namir placed the report on the desk, face down, as his tall visitor walked in, military bearing clear despite the tastefully cut dark gray suit, and closed the door behind him. It was nothing specific that marked his visitor, more a collection of small subtleties: clear penetrating eyes, aura of complete confidence, economical body movements, and that something that said 'command presence'.

"Ah, Matan, take a seat," he said warmly.

"Thanks." Matan nodded, glanced at the coffee table and settled himself into the nearest chair, his legs stretched out before him.

Namir folded his hands and leaned forward. "How is Sarah these days? Still beautiful as ever?"

"And I'm still very much in love with her," Matan declared, his voice crisp and determined.

"How about that! And Admina?"

"Growing up too fast."

Namir chuckled. "She is going to break some hearts along the way."

"As long as some slick city kid doesn't break *her* heart."

"She's lucky to have you and Sarah looking out for her."

"That's a matter of opinion. Sometimes I just don't understand her."

"The same way she feels about you, I'm sure."

"I don't doubt it. Anyway, why don't you come around some evening and straighten her out. She'll listen to you."

Namir lifted his hands and laughed. "No thanks! I'm happy to leave

that problem to you. I've had my time. But talking of problems, any further developments at tracking down that Hamas cell?"

Two weeks ago a twelve-year-old Gaza girl had walked into a Tel Aviv restaurant near Old Jaffa and blown herself up, taking eleven patrons and bystanders with her, and eighteen others injured, some seriously. Recovered from the debris were nails, nuts and roller bearings—a vicious combination to make a statement. The incident caused an outcry and much breast-beating by everybody. The Collections Department suspected that a single Hamas cell had orchestrated the attack, having carried out a similar atrocity a week earlier. That time, it was a fourteen-year-old boy. To brainwash children...

Matan stared at the Special Operations Division director and wondered why the sudden concern. It was not something that could be solved overnight, if at all, like incidents of indiscriminate roadside shooting, spraying cars and two cabs with AK-47 fire. Namir's leg had to be acting up again, he thought comfortably, although he wasn't showing it. The old codger looked fit and would probably outlast everybody.

As far as Matan knew, the director was only fifty-eight, but the thick gray hair, hard chiseled features, prominent nose and dark complexion, made him appear older; except for the eyes, deep green and lively. Despite the apparent external decrepitude, the eyes revealed an indomitable spirit, one that ruled his department with a rod of iron. Special Ops did not always follow the strict interpretation of its charter, earning a degree of enmity along the way not only from its sister departments, but from the Knesset as well. However, it did get things done, most of the time. In his book, that made up for everything else. Politicians did not need to know what their intelligence organs were up to—until it failed them. Namir made sure that his department did not fail. Matan liked that kind of thinking.

From what he knew, the Metsada chief had always been involved with intelligence, taking over the Special Operations Division in 2002 after a stint in the Political Action and Liaison Department. A former Mirage pilot, Namir was a rising star in the Air Force Intelligence before being recruited by Mossad into the Collections Department. His organizational and administrative abilities, coupled with a flair for the inno-

vative, ensured that he gravitated through Mossad's operational sections as quickly as possible. Running Metsada seemed to have given him a home. But he worried about the chief, especially after the sudden death of his wife. Work was the only thing that seemed to matter to him these days.

"I wouldn't mind seeing some of those holier-than-thou Hamas leadership strapping on a bomb themselves for the cause," Matan muttered sourly and Namir grinned.

"You and me both. Maybe we should send them a memo. How about that!"

"Something to think about. Anyway, the Research Department has given us a couple of leads, but we're not moving fast anywhere."

"The Director is looking closely at this one, Matan."

"Kameer?" Matan looked incredulous. "He's got nothing better to do than be bothered by a suicide bombing incident?"

The corner of Namir's mouth twitched in sympathy. "I wouldn't be too critical. The prime minister is giving him a hard time and we must do our duty as we see it," he deadpanned. "Sharron Ibrahim's niece was injured in that blast."

"It's an internal security matter," Matan protested. "Shabak are handling it."

"Apparently not well enough. That's why we are involved. Just keep an eye on things, will you?"

Namir regarded his senior case officer with deliberate scrutiny and no small measure of fondness. A reserve colonel, having enlisted in the Army for officer training following the death of his mother and two sisters in 1979, forty-two, wife and a daughter, Matan had proved himself to be an exceptional analyst. Recruited from the Army into the Political Action and Liaison Department, it did not take long for the hierarchy to spot a rising talent. Less than a year later, working for the Research Department, Matan had produced a number of analyses and action proposals deemed controversial even by Mossad's progressive standards. Namir had one of them on his desk now. Two years later, with his help, Matan wound up in Metsada, the Special Operations Division; Mossad's action arm dealing with assassinations, sabotage and covert paramilitary projects. The dirty tricks department, he reflected with satisfaction and a measure of pride. As a case officer and stage

manager, Matan had no equal. His operations to date were planned and executed with faultless precision and total deniability. No loose ends, simply painstaking attention to minutiae and detail. And right now, for his scheme to work, Namir desperately needed that skill.

Despite the years, Matan carried himself with confident ease, his lips pressed permanently into a thin line. Some still called it arrogance, but in reality, it was a reflection of his capabilities, exaggerated perhaps by his officer training and automatic authority. Colonels always acted like they were one rung below God. Hair still black, Namir noted, marred by a hint of white at the temples. Long face, dark complexion, square jaw, Matan could easily have passed for an Arab and spoke Farsi without an accent. The dark mahogany eyes, sunk deep into the skull, were bright with amusement. They were also eyes of a man who had suffered much and managed to survive and thrive. Namir knew that Matan yearned to be out in the field, but he was far too valuable to risk losing on some gutter-crawling ops, being groomed for a deputy's position in the Collections Department. That had rankled at first, but in the end, Matan accepted the inevitable exigency of the service. This should be especially sweet, Namir thought—bittersweet, perhaps.

"Be that as it may," he allowed, "but I didn't call you in to talk about the Hamas or Shabak's incompetence. I want to broach the possibility of a bang and burn black ops. You would be the team cutout and action officer."

Matan sat up and the small hairs on the back of his neck bristled with anticipation. A bang and burn usually involved demolition and sabotage, invariably in foreign territory. That meant *dangerous* territory. The two years spent with Metsada had been, in the main, soul-fulfilling experiences, but with little personal excitement. Namir had allowed him two opportunities to conduct a field mission, one in Lebanon and one in Jordan. Both went well and eliminated their targets cleanly—Syrian agents who were providing Hezbollah with advanced tactical training. The operations left him physically taxed and he knew that his field ops days were numbered. He'd had a taste and it was enough, content now to be a planner and organizer, the invisible man who pulled the strings. What had changed that Namir would now want him out there?

"Sounds, ah, like a challenge," he ventured cautiously, looking for traps.

Namir chuckled. He couldn't help it. The dangled bait was sniffed, but Matan was too good an operative to snap at the obvious.

"You'll enjoy this one. It's something that you dreamed up yourself."

"I've put up lots of screwy proposals," Matan muttered acidly, "which you and the Director never tire of telling me." Only one person was spoken to or referred in the third person—Doron Kameer, head of Mossad.

"Someone has to restrain your youthful enthusiasm," Namir said dryly, then cleared his throat. "Seriously, though. This time, there will be no restraints, no half measures. On this one, we're playing for broke."

"Okay, my curiosity is aroused." They had known each other long enough to be on first-name basis. Besides, Matan had sufficient seniority not to be overawed by silly bureaucratic protocol.

"What I have in mind might save us from a confrontation with Iran."

"What will save us is to simply bomb the place," Matan said evenly, perfectly serious. "Waiting for the UN or the U.S. to hammer out an acceptable solution is an exercise in futility, and you know it. A surgical strike will set them squawking, but it would also eliminate the threat."

"Not a novel idea, and something your military colleagues would love to do. Politically though, it is not an option. However, we could get someone else to do the job for us and wear the heat. How about that!"

Matan sat back in shock and his eyes darted to the overturned papers on Namir's desk. He couldn't be considering...

"You want to bring the United States into direct conflict with Iran? That's crazy!"

"Your report didn't read all that crazy when you wrote it," Namir said mildly and smiled at Matan's expression of amazement and confusion.

"When I wrote the thing, I was tossing up ideas, scenarios."

"Perhaps. Did you listen to the radio this morning?"

"Yeah, I've heard the latest."

"Hamadee Al Zerkhani has now made your scenario more than just an idea. He has made it viable. And if you think about it, it's not as crazy

as it may sound. You sketched out the tactical and strategic agenda pretty well yourself. Iran develops a nuclear weapon, mounts warheads on its Shahab-4 missile inventory and holds a trigger to our heads, to everybody's head. The next step is economic blackmail, forcing Europe and the United States into policy changes designed to make us give up the occupied territories and recognize an independent Palestinian state, or risk an oil embargo by shutting off the Strait of Hormuz. Of course, Israel would never agree, no matter how sensible the solution, because it would be an imposed one. Even if the government of the day wanted to, its single-issue coalition partners would derail any such move. Forcing the issue would cause a revolution."

"Holding onto the occupied territories is half our problem," Matan remarked sourly. "As is our continued expansion in settlement building throughout the West Bank in clear violation of the Roadmap. But the major problem is our refusal to acknowledge the Palestinian's right to a state of their own, as much as they are refusing to recognize us. We'll never move forward until everybody gets over that."

"Agreed, and that's a political dimension. I must deal with today's reality. A nuclear capable Iran would give it political and religious levers to rally all the Shi'ia in the region to their standard, and in the process making them the dominant force in the Middle East. To keep their Sunni regimes in power and the oil flowing, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states would be forced to share some of that power with their Shi'ia minorities. But it would be a fragile peace. In the end, there would be open sectarian unrest, which in turn would lead to an inevitable confrontation."

"I don't believe that anymore, and neither do you," Matan said bluntly. "There is no Shi'ia insurgency in Saudi Arabia or any Gulf state. It's a beat up perception."

"Perception or not, Iran's Council of Guardians could use the pretext to try and neutralize Israel."

"What they want to neutralize, Namir, are the Pakistani Sunnis and the emerging extremists who seek to impose a Taliban-style Islam on everybody in the region."

"What Iran wants to neutralize is Israel's extended nuclear deterrence," Namir snapped, getting rather tired of Matan's defeatist attitude. "Our ability to threaten the Arabs with annihilation, should they

get out of line, would vanish. We would be threatened as well. As a military officer, it is something that you, of all people, should appreciate. How about that!”

Matan chuckled, ignoring the implied rebuke. “That’s the first bit you said that I fully understand.”

“I’m glad that you *do* understand,” Namir said dryly.

“I also understand something else. As a military officer, I fully sympathize with the Army’s frustration at being held back from cleaning up the Hamas by politicians who are more interested in preserving their hold on power than solving the country’s problems. Beating their heads against the Wailing Wall and sticking notes in the cracks may be good publicity, but doesn’t achieve anything.”

“Perhaps, but our problems cannot be solved by application of more military force,” Namir said coldly. “At least not by our military. Iran’s current posture of belligerent defiance has given us a window of opportunity to take affirmative action that could prevent a future holocaust.”

“I don’t know that sabotaging American oil infrastructure and drawing them into a response would necessarily solve our problems,” Matan murmured, and a sudden chill filled the air. Namir wasn’t kidding when he said that on this one they were playing for broke, and playing with big chips indeed. “The political landscape has changed since I wrote that proposal, you know. Keep in mind that we’re not dealing with a homogeneous enemy here. Just because Iran, Syria and the rest are Islamic states, they’re not all Arabs.”

“To the average Israeli on the street, it’s a moot distinction,” Namir corrected him. “The threat is still the same.”

Matan sighed and shook his head. “You’re not swallowing the apocalyptic panic-mongering drivel spouted by Benny Morris at *Jerusalem Post*, are you?”

“Morris might be a rebel rouser and a pain, but he reflects the view of a significant portion of our population.”

“I’m not so sure about that. At best, I would say it’s a radical minority. But, okay, let’s say we get away with it, consider the repercussions. If Iran is destabilized, the Sunnis and the Shi’ia will be at each other’s throats for sure. The entire Middle East would degenerate into open factional warfare that would make Iraq look like a street brawl.

Well, more than it already is, with President Walters having pulled out U.S. troops. Without a stable energy supply the Western economies would take a savage hit. Tactically, you might achieve your objective, but strategically the solution sucks.”

Namir pointed a finger at Matan. “A bit dramatic and oversimplified, but this time, I think you’re wrong. There will be some inevitable economic repercussions, I agree, but I doubt on the dire scale that you paint. Iran’s population has become better educated, better fed and housed, and are starting to enjoy decadent Western luxuries decried by the hardliners. The Council of Guardians may be fanatics in our eyes, with a God-given right to subjugate the infidels, but they’re not fools. They want to stay in power. To do it, they must ensure the people do not rise up in another revolution. A strike by America against their nuclear installations might be damaging to the Council’s sensibilities, and there will be the expected protests, marches and breast-beating against the Great Satan, but business would go on. After all, a strike would not be targeting population centers. The UN, the French and the Germans will fulminate at what they would call unrestrained American aggression, but secretly, they would be relieved. They don’t like the idea of a nuclear Iran any more than we do.”

Namir’s words were soft, calm and measured, and Matan suspected, backed by enormous research. Still, his training told him that research counted for little in the face of actual experience. Something else he needed to consider, something Namir might not want aired. The problem was that Israel itself had contributed in no small way to the current mess when it supplied nuclear material to Turkey. What happened next was inevitable.

Everyone in the international community knew that since the 1980s, Turkey had sought to develop its own nuclear fuel capability and an indigenous reactor design. It also pointed to a possible nuclear weapons development, which was conveniently ignored by everybody. Provided adequate monitoring was set in place the U.S. did not object to the idea. After all, Turkey was a strategic NATO ally and a secular bastion against the more radical sectarian regimes in the south. Israel apparently did not have a problem with Turkey being a nuclear balancing counter against Pakistan and Iran either. How could it know that Turkey would actively traffic nuclear material directly to Pakistan, a nominal enemy.

In Matan's view, it should have, especially after the overthrow of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in 1999 by General Pervez Musharraf. With a large neighbor suddenly under military control and a predominantly Sunni population, Iran became understandably nervous and resumed work on its heavy-water reactor at Arak and the uranium enrichment plant at Natanz. Despite these warning signs, Israel continued to supply Turkey with information and technology.

It all came to a head in 2003, a case where Mossad stumbled badly.

One of the Collections Department agents was caught trying to sell two hundred triggered spark gaps to a Pakistani with known military and radical Islamic links. As it turned out, the CIA was on top of it and allowed the transaction to continue in order to trace the whole supply operation. The spark gaps were to be procured from a Massachusetts company, Perkin-Elmer Optoelectronics, who were prepared to make the delivery once the required end-user certificates were provided, detailing that the switches would not be sent to blacklisted countries like Pakistan. The Mossad agent knew he could not obtain such certificates and approached the head of a Mossad front company in New Jersey, Giza Technologies, which had previously supplied nuclear components and weapon designs to South Africa.

What followed could have been taken straight out of a spy thriller: rerouted shipments, front companies and multiple handoffs through a number of countries before the switches eventually wound up in Pakistan. The CIA sting exposed a smuggling network that linked Israel, South Africa and Turkey, and compromised Giza Technologies. Despite the evidence to prosecute, the U.S. State Department quietly quashed the matter to protect its Turkey interests, but Israel had to wear the embarrassment. Although the Collections Department conducted the operation without full authorization, and its director had gotten the chop, Mossad bore a lot of heat from the ensuing fallout.

What Namir proposed now could be a case of misguided zeal, a piece in a tangled web of conflicting international and domestic interests, or genuine patriotism. Matan couldn't tell. A report outlining a possible tactical scenario was one thing. Acting on it and against the United States, might not be the wisest course of action. Should the operation fail, Mossad would not be the only one feeling the heat. Whatever his doubts, it wouldn't be career-enhancing to voice them now.

“Even if we pull it off, there is no guarantee that America would blame Iran and commit to a retaliatory strike against their nuclear installations. They could hit anything.”

Namir nodded. “Agreed, but the current U.S. administration is looking for an excuse to go after Iran’s enrichment plants. Our action will give it to them. The President is young and inexperienced, bound to be influenced by Congress and public opinion. He’ll deliver. Even if he strikes some other target, Iran should get the message.”

“You hope. Still, it could work,” Matan said with objective professionalism, mulling over the tangle of practical obstacles standing in the way of such an operation. “However, you know what could happen should the United States ever find out that we were behind this.”

“You don’t have to remind me. You now know why I want you to be the team action officer. The mission must remain compartmented...forever.”

Matan understood perfectly. He did not need to have that part spelled out.

“This will entail some loss of American life, not counting likely environmental effects.”

“Worth it to neutralize Iran’s threat, but charges can be placed to minimize significant damage. After all, we want to sting America into action, not actually create an environmental disaster.”

Matan pursed his lips and gave a reluctant nod. “In theory, that’s true, and doable. Who knows about this?”

Namir’s eyes were expressionless. “No one.”

Matan stared. “This has not been authorized?”

“If you take this on, Matan, it must remain the blackest ops ever. No one can know and no one will be pinning any medals on you. However, you’ll have my grateful thanks and the ignorant gratitude of your country. How about that!”

And probably a bullet in the head at the end of it, Matan mused. He had been around long enough to know by now how the grownups played.

“That makes up for everything,” he said without humor.

“You also know why the Director can’t know, or the Prime Minister.”

“Yeah. CNN would have it on tomorrow morning’s news and Israel

would be dead. And *we'd* be shot the next day for treason. Or maybe something not that nice." Matan sighed and pulled at his chin. "Why me? You have a dozen tame action officers who are far more qualified. Doing field work is different than directing it behind a safe desk."

"Tell me about it." Namir grunted and rubbed his right thigh, result of a Lebanon ops. Not exactly a failure, but it did cost him three men. "The reason I want you is that every operation you ever handled has gone off without the smallest flaw. That cannot be said for all our ops. It was before your time, but you recall the bungled attempt in 1997 to assassinate the Hamas leader Sheikh Khaled Maskal? I wince at the thought even today. Then in 2004 we had that New Zealand passport fiasco."

Matan nodded. "It wasn't exactly your best day."

"There were others. In each case, I saw to it that heads rolled. Just goes to show you, my boy, never take a holiday in the middle of an ops. But this time, there cannot be even a hint of a loose thread or more than heads would roll."

"There is always the random element."

Namir's eyebrows dipped in a frown. "Nothing must surface. Nothing!"

"I got it, all right."

"Good. There is one other thing. Given the nature of the operation, there will be one departure from your original proposal."

"Oh?"

"Despite what your report recommends, I cannot endorse the use of one of our *Dolphin*-class submarines to attack Galveston Roads."

"I agree, and I was going to make the same point myself," Matan said evenly. "Although attractive, involving the Navy could never be contained. Sooner or later, someone would blab and we'd be compromised."

"Exactly."

"Unless you were prepared to sink the sub with all hands on mission completion." Matan meant it as a joke, but Namir wasn't smiling.

"I considered it, but as you pointed out in your own risk assessment, too many people would be involved, and after the event, there would be the inevitable questions. Besides, how would we explain the loss of

the submarine? There are also some serious logistical problems associated with that option. No, too many cracks through which we could all fall.” Namir paused, his green eyes probing his senior case officer, liking what he saw. “There is one other reason why I want you. An important reason, although you might not agree with me. It is your high level of personal ethics.”

Matan stared at the director and snorted. “My personal level of ethics?”

“All your psychological profiles demonstrate that. You left the Army because of ethics.”

“I left the Army because I didn’t see how bombing helpless Palestinians contributed to our security,” Matan growled, unwilling to have the scabs over that wound probed. He was also irritated at Namir’s theater psychology and the fact that it was working.

“My point exactly. The decision cost you a star, but it is clear to me that you didn’t want it badly enough to continue as a tank commander.”

“A man has to live with himself.”

Namir nodded in sympathy. “That’s right. It is one element that runs consistently through every one of your proposals. They were all honorable.”

“My halo does have some ragged edges, you know. Anything else?”

“Yes. I want your assessment on conducting a strike against a Soroush offshore platform connected to the Kharg Island terminal.”

Matan stared. “You’re looking to create a retaliatory trigger against Galveston? Why?”

“Easy. Having attacked their platforms before, Iran would not hesitate to accuse the Americans of conducting this raid as well.”

In 1987, asserting that Iranian oil platforms were used as staging facilities for attacks by the Revolutionary Guard against tanker shipping in the Gulf, the U.S. attacked and destroyed two Iranian offshore oil production installations in the Reshadat complex. In 1992, Iran brought an Application before the International Court of Justice against the U.S. for attacks on its facilities. In 2003, the Court at The Hague ruled the U.S. attacks were unlawful, but did not violate the 1955 commerce treaty between the two countries and the matter was dropped. Understandably, Iran had never accepted that decision.

Namir tapped the desk with his finger. “So far, Al Qaida, probably

under instructions from Iran despite the fact that Al Qaida is a Sunni front, has refrained from making direct attacks against American oil infrastructure. Both sides are too vulnerable to such acts and notwithstanding Iran's histrionics, shutting down its oil output would hurt them far more than it would the United States, provided OPEC does not retaliate in kind by curtailing production and raising prices even more than they already have, which they could do in any case."

"That's your bureaucrats talking, Namir, and they're way off the mark here."

"Oh? Enlighten me."

"With pleasure. Hitting Soroush makes the Americans out to be the bad guys. Galveston would be retaliation that everyone can understand, and more importantly, sympathize with. The objective here is to generate world empathy for America, not Iran."

"The thought *had* crossed my mind, you know," Namir said patiently.

Matan grinned, unabashed by Namir's sarcasm. "If that weren't enough, I will give you another reason—*injection and extraction*. Soroush is in the middle of the Gulf, out in the open. International naval forces, including Revolutionary Guard gunboats, constantly patrol the area. Unless you came in by submarine, a surface approach is bound to attract unwelcome attention. Take it from me, it's an awful tactical scenario. I wouldn't want my sorry ass hanging out there on some dhow pretending to be fishing while loaded to the gunwales with high explosives. Even if we somehow got in, chances of getting back in one piece would be marginal at best."

Namir shrugged. "It was just an idea."

"Then put it out of your mind. If you leave out Soroush, the mission is doable, but the economic backlash could be severe for everybody should this backfire. Our own providers, Mexico, Norway and Egypt to a lesser degree, could cut off supplies if pressured by America. Even if that doesn't happen, Israel would be an international political and economic pariah."

"Israel would weather it and we will have removed a Damocles sword hanging over us. How about that?"

Matan made a face and rolled his eyes. "Damocles sword, my ass. Israel isn't worried about a military threat. Like you said, with a nuclear-

armed Iran, we lose our bargaining chip with the Arab states, based on the fact that right now *we* have the bomb and they don't."

"You *do* believe in the necessity?" Namir asked pointedly, somewhat unprepared for the impersonal dissection of his idea.

"If I didn't, I would not have proposed the scenario," Matan said testily. "But please, don't sell me propaganda. Save it for the politicians."

"I'll keep that in mind," Namir said acidly and his eyes clouded. "I promised that you would be the action officer, and you will be. Stage management will be critical and your team's effectiveness cannot be distracted by having to worry over administrative details. In case you harbored any melodramatic ideas of playing a dashing agent, you will not be part of the actual strike team."

Matan grinned and his eyes brightened. "It never occurred to me."

"I'm sure. Seriously, you're not a field operative, and having you blunder around in a wetsuit and balaclava would endanger not only your mission, but the lives of your team."

"You don't need to spell it out, Namir. I know my limitations."

"I'm tempted to lock you in a safe and burn the combination. Unfortunately, that option is not available to me," Namir remarked, his face stern. "When you have your ops plan done, we'll go over it. In the meantime, offload any small stuff on your plate to young Ritchie. A bit of pressure will do him good."

"Does that include tracking down that Hamas cell?"

"Absolutely. It's routine work which he should be able to handle on his own." Namir stared hard at his protégé. "One more thing. I don't want you making calls or referring to this mission in any way to anyone. No paper trail or emails. Nothing. Whatever you want, you talk to me. No loose ends."

"You're acting like this mission has already started and I agreed to run with it," Matan said with a tight smile, suddenly not sure he wanted any part of this.

Their eyes locked. "It has and you are, aren't you?"

"I guess I have," Matan said slowly, then sighed and stood up. "At least it should be warm in Galveston, and I need to build up my tan."

"Just don't spend *all* your time building it."

"Talking about spending..."

“Already taken care off. You’ll get a notice of a special slush account later today.”

Matan liked this side of Namir’s setup. The director realized that fighting their own bureaucracy was sometimes half the problem and made sure the bean counters did not get too inquisitive. He kept a number of alias ‘floating’ bank accounts created for black ops, untraceable and closed on every mission completion. Matan had used the system before and found it infallible. However, there were other ways to cover his butt and he had resources of his own.

He paused as he reached for the door handle. “I’ll talk to you in a couple of days,” he said with a nod, opened the door and stepped out. It closed behind him with a soft click.

Namir stared at the door for a few seconds, then picked up his mug and took a sip. The coffee had gone cold and he put the cup down. He grew aware of muted voices from outside as his senior staffers filtered in. The airconditioning whispered in the background.

When he mentioned to Matan that this operation must be completely black, he had neglected to state the obvious corollary: how to ensure that Matan and his team were never burned. There was a way, but he didn’t want to pursue that solution. Not yet, anyway. What was Mossad coming to when they could not even trust one of their own? But Mossad wasn’t in the trust business. What he meant was that *he* was not in the trust business, which was saying the same thing. Personal feelings or not, he could not afford to get sentimental.

The necessary steps would be taken.

He swiveled the chair, locked his fingers into a pyramid and watched the sun come up, wiping out any last minute second thoughts as the shredder chewed through the report.

About the author

Stefan Vucak has written eight Shadow Gods Saga sci-fi novels, which includes *With Shadow and Thunder*, a 2002 EPPIE finalist, and six contemporary political drama books. He started writing science fiction while still in college, but didn't get published until 2001. His *Cry of Eagles* won the coveted 2011 Readers' Favorite silver medal award, and his *All the Evils* was the 2013 prestigious Eric Hoffer contest finalist and Readers' Favorite silver medal winner. *Strike for Honor* won the gold medal.

Stefan leveraged a successful career in the Information Technology industry, which took him to the Middle East working on cellphone systems. He applied his IT discipline to create realistic storylines for his books. Writing has been a road of discovery, helping him broaden his horizons. He also spends time as an editor and book reviewer. Stefan lives in Melbourne, Australia.

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Shadow Gods books by Stefan Vucak

In the Shadow of Death

An extraterrestrial craft is discovered in an ancient Mayan pyramid and the knowledge throws Earth into social and political turmoil. As a new agent in the Diplomatic Branch, First Scout Terrllss-rr is tasked to destroy the craft before international tension throws Earth into open conflict.

Against the Gods of Shadow

Facing economic sabotage by Palean raiders, Pizgor pleads for help from the Serrll government. Second Scout Terrllss-rr is tasked to find the raider base and expose Palean's duplicity. Terr is forced to battle a Fleet ship that leaves them both badly damaged and leads Terr to confront forces that threaten to destabilize the Serrll itself.

A Whisper from Shadow

An extraterrestrial craft is discovered in an ancient Mayan pyramid and the knowledge throws Earth into social and political turmoil. As a new agent in the Diplomatic Branch, First Scout Terrllss-rr is tasked to destroy the craft before international tension throws Earth into open conflict.

Shadow Masters

With his mission on Earth completed, First Scout Terrllss-rr is returning home, only to be intercepted by an Orieli Technic Union survey ship. The encounter sends ripples of consternation throughout the Serrll Combine. In an attempt to establish a link between a raider network and the AUP Provisional Committee, Terr's cover is compromised. To extricate himself, he has to raise the hand of Death.

Immortal in Shadow

On his way to a prison planet, Tanard, a renegade Fleet officer, escapes and vows vengeance. He is recruited by an extremist Palean group to raid Kaleen worlds. First Scout Terrllss-rr must find the secret base that is supporting him before the Wanderers rise up and unleash Death's wrath on the Serrll.

With Shadow and Thunder

The Orieli are caught in an interstellar war and now they are about to drag the Serrll Combine into it. Betrayed by his Wanderer brother Dharaklin, First Scout Terrllss-rr crashes to Earth in a sabotaged ship. He now has a whole world after the secrets he holds.

Through the Valley of Shadow

Bent on revenge, Terrllss-rr pursues his Anar'on brother to the fabled world of the Wanderers—and face judgment by the god of Death. On their frontier, the Serrll Combine is plunged into a savage encounter with a Kran invader, showing them a glimpse of a dark future.

Guardians of Shadow

Having destroyed a Kran invader, Terr, Teena and his brother Dharaklin, head for Orieli space where they will begin their cultural exchange mission. In a devastating Kran attack, Teena is taken and Terr seeks to rescue her. To win a war that threatens to consume the Orieli and the Serrll Combine, the fabled Wanderers must march against the Krans wielding the hand of Death.

Other books by Stefan Vucak

Cry of Eagles

2011 Reader's Favorite silver medal winner

Iran's nuclear capability represents a clear national threat to Israel, but the United States and Europe do nothing. A Mossad black ops team sabotages a refinery complex in Galveston, plants evidence that incriminates Iran, confident that an enraged America will strike back in retaliation. But the Mossad team makes one small mistake, which the FBI exploits to uncover the plot before America vents its wrath on Iran and plunges the world into political and economic turmoil. An award-winning thriller that will leave you at the edge of your seat.

All the Evils

2013 Eric Hoffer finalist

2013 Readers' Favorite silver medal winner

A researcher in the Secret Vatican Archives uncovers a papyrus that claims Jesus was John the Baptist's disciple and the second Messiah. To prevent the tractate from becoming public, the Vatican secret service engages an assassin to silence anyone who has knowledge of the papyrus. It is up to an FBI agent to unravel a series of murders and prevent the assassin from killing him.

Towers of Darkness

A Wyoming mineworker discovers a human hand bone embedded in a forty million year-old coal seam. An anthropologist, Larry Krafter is sent to recover the bone and unearths a human skull. Instead of receiving acclaim when he publishes his discovery, vested establishment interests seek to discredit him, using murder to do it.

Strike for Honor

2013 Readers' Favorite gold medal winner

In a joint exercise with the Korean navy, Admiral Pacino's son is one of the casualties from a North Korean missile strike. Enraged that the President is more interested in appeasing the North Koreans, forgetting the lost American lives, Pacino decides to make a statement by bombing military facilities in both Koreas. His court-martial puts American foreign policy under public scrutiny.

Proportional Response

2015 Readers' Favorite finalist

The Chinese populist faction, the Tuanpai, plan to trigger a global disaster that will devastate America. In the aftermath, the FBI identifies China as the culprit, but don't know if this was a rogue operation or a government plot. Fearful of American retaliation, China invites U.S. investigators to find that proof. Under a cloud of mutual suspicion, America readies itself for a military confrontation. A mind-bending expose of international politics!

Legitimate Power

What happens when a person living on the outskirts of Jerusalem digs up two ossuaries and finds a strange crystal the size of a smartphone able to repair itself when scratched and turns into a perfect mirror under laser light? When the crystal is put on the shadow gem market, suspecting that it is not natural, an American collector buys it, wanting to tap into its hidden potential. When the Israelis learn what it is, they want it back...as do the Chinese...as does the American government, which sets off a race to get it, no matter what the cost in shattered lives.