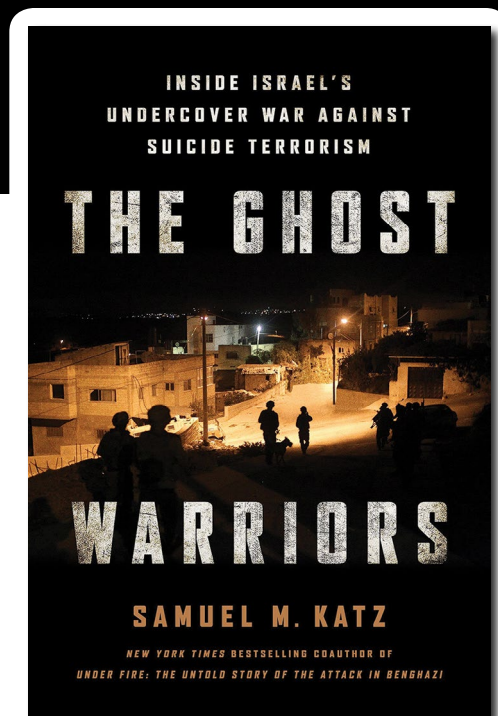


The Ghost Warriors

Inside Israel's Undercover War against Suicide Terrorism

Samuel M. Katz, Berkley Caliber, New York, 2016, 432 pages



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Samuel Katz, an internationally recognized Middle East expert and bestselling author, creates a true tour de force with *The Ghost Warriors*. Katz masterfully weaves together a patchwork of political drama, resilient and dastardly characters, innovative methods, hastily organized operations, and the inevitable fog and friction accompanying any violent conflict into a gripping, gruesome, yet easy-to-read testimony to the daily bravery and ingenuity of Israeli counterterrorism operatives.

These operatives are tasked with infiltrating terrorist networks and stopping them—on a shoe-string budget—with little or no time to prepare, leveraging actionable intelligence, keen insight, and hunches honed over decades.

One Israeli counterterrorism group in particular, *Ya'mas*, is the focus of Katz's extraordinarily detailed exposé—an exposé done with the direct assistance of many former and active members, along with members of other elite units who worked side by side with them. *Ya'mas* remains a stealthy organization, albeit not as much after the publication of this work. The organization is comprised of Arab-speaking Jewish, Druze, and

Muslim citizens of Israel who convincingly masqueraded as Palestinians to infiltrate and seize high-value targets associated with the bombing spree accompanying the Second Intifada (or Second Uprising), an explosion of violence that began in 2000 and lasted until about 2008.¹ Its chief goal was (and still is) to eliminate not just trigger pullers but the multilayered infrastructure supporting them. As Katz points out, few of the world's elite counterterror units maintain a continuous plainclothes undercover capability, and none possesses cultural and language capabilities to mirror *Ya'mas*.

Having traveled throughout Israel many times myself, when I saw the terrain and the proximity of Arab and Israeli communities against the backdrop of a tortured, tumultuous past, I was always struck by the relative tranquility despite unending reports about regional volatility. Of course, that seeming tranquility is deceptive. It is maintained (most of the time) thanks to unrelenting, often tedious, work nearly always executed behind the scenes by shadowy figures. These stalwart sentinels—tireless *Shin Bet* (Israel's General Security

Service) intelligence officers, nerves-of-steel field operatives with more coffee coursing through their veins than blood, and seasoned team chiefs juggling innumerable variables at a frenetic pace, in crowded cafés, congested streets, and the bowels of hot, dank, cramped spaces filled with smoke—patiently wait to pounce on targets with honed, cat-like senses. At once, their mandate is both simple and complicated: track, target, and eliminate the violent zealots taking refuge within the Palestinian communities of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, often aided and abetted by the infamously corrupt and morally bankrupt Palestinian National Authority (Fatah) and Israel’s nemesis in the Gaza Strip, Hamas.

The work of these units has largely gone unreported and unnoticed—until now. While this makes for a riveting read, it remains to be seen whether such disclosures are a good thing. Accounts like those detailing the operational aspects of, say the Osama bin Laden raid, are fascinating but may undermine future operations by revealing tactics, techniques, and procedures that afford special operations forces advantages in the field until the enemy learns how to adapt to them.

Surprisingly, Katz says getting the story did not involve exhaustive prying—members of these units wanted the story to be told.² Katz confides his biggest challenge was deciding which operations to include, which makes one wonder if a sequel is in the works. One can only speculate as to why these Israeli operatives (and maybe the Israeli government) felt this story had to be told now.

According to his investigation, over the course of the Second Intifada, Ya’mas units participated in thousands of missions—testimony to the scale of the threat. For perspective’s sake, he notes that crack counterterrorist teams such as the FBI’s Hostage Rescue Team or Germany’s GSG 9 might carry out ten to twenty operations per year.

Many human rights groups allege Ya’mas and other counterterrorism units are nothing more than “hit teams,” circumventing due process. That is a problematic assertion, though, since Ya’mas’s motto is, according to Katz, “We’d rather snatch you than scratch you.” Basically, there is more to be gained from apprehending the targets than killing them, because the strategic goal is to take down the entire network versus individual operatives. Unraveling the threads making up the terrorist tapestry is a painstaking process dependent upon precise intelligence obtained through a variety of means, including interrogation of arrested subjects. Katz contends such self-restraint on

the part of Ya’mas and other counterterrorism units was quite amazing given the carnage and frequency of attacks across Israel during the period in question. That may be true, but such restraint was also self-serving.

The book is a severely truncated collection of fascinating, often heart-pounding, and sometimes almost comical snippets from Ya’mas exploits in the three sectors it works: the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. Their work is deadly serious and often carried out with little time for preparation and planning. Their stunning successes, despite the hurdles, is most assuredly due to the fact members of these units are among the most elite cadre within the Israeli counterterrorism effort, who, according to Katz, think little of the long-term health and psychological consequences of perpetually living on a knife’s edge.

It would have been interesting to get more insight into their personal lives—and the stresses the career puts on them and their families—but the author may have been astounded by his good fortune and, thus, opted not to press into largely unexplored territory more aggressively. For those energized by thoughts of such a life, a closer look into their private lives—if you could call their lives private, given how much they invest in the job—would likely give many pause and raise the inevitable question: “Could I do it?”

These men (sometimes dressed as women), “walk as if between rain drops—able to understand the customs, mindset, nuances, and vulnerabilities of the Palestinian communities, and to move within them undetected.”³ Unlike more conventional counterterrorism forces, their battles revolve almost exclusively around face-to-face encounters and hand-to-hand combat, utilizing a skill set whereby they “think, look, speak, and act like the enemy they hunt.”⁴

For the American military, especially its Special Forces, there may be a lesson within these pages, but it comes with certain caveats. In the current struggle with the Islamic State, greater emphasis on co-opting local minorities, thoroughly trained and equipped, to infiltrate deep within the Islamic State

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"safe havens" might prove very fruitful. However, given the global nature of U.S. commitments versus the regional focus of Israel, such expertise, as shown by Ya'mas operatives—fighting on home turf, with their own families and friends in the crosshairs, and a deep, some would argue sacred, commitment to Israel—is not likely to be developed in considerable depth by an American force fighting in one place today and another in the not-too-distant future.

Katz asserts that the Second Intifada was actually a full-on war by Palestinian terrorist groups against Israel, despite the fact Western news organizations did not treat it as such. Thus, he characterized it as a "war" fought in the shadows. No doubt, for the people involved, the families forever scarred, and the intensity of it all, it probably did rival war. Yet, in terms of lives lost and such, and with terrain changing hands, it probably would not.

This is an outstanding work, both for the story it tells and its readability. While there is a discernible pro-Israel lean to this nonfiction tale, *The Ghost Warriors* provides readers an excellent look inside a previously unknown but very potent counter-terrorism unit that saved, and no doubt continues to save, myriad lives, both Israeli and Palestinian. The nuanced descriptions, harrowing details, and fast-paced narrative combine to deliver a genuine page-turner. This is a worthy addition to any professional reading list or library. ■

Notes

1. It may not be so surprising, given the voracious global appetite and fascination with the doings of special operators whose assignments tended to remain in the shadows until more recent times.

2. The First Intifada was the first major large-scale Palestinian insurgency in the West Bank and Gaza. It lasted from December 1987 until the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. The Second Intifada is usually dated from September 2000 when Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount to the Sharm El Sheikh summit in February 2005. Intifada is derived from the Arab word meaning to "shake off," which can be thought of as synonymous with "insurrection."

3. Berkley Publishing Group, "The Ghost Warriors: Inside Israel's Undercover War Against Suicide Terrorism," press release, 12 January 2016.

4. Ibid.