

Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists

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Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 2013 69: 58

DOI: 10.1177/0096340213493259

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Feature

Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists
69(4) 58–68

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DOI: 10.1177/0096340213493259

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The Lavon Affair: How a false-flag operation led to war and the Israeli bomb

Leonard Weiss

Abstract

The Lavon Affair, a failed Israeli covert operation directed against Egypt in 1954, triggered a chain of events that have had profound consequences for power relationships in the Middle East; the affair's effects still reverberate today. Those events included a public trial and conviction of eight Egyptian Jews who carried out the covert operation, two of whom were subsequently executed; a retaliatory military incursion by Israel into Gaza that killed 39 Egyptians; a subsequent Egyptian–Soviet arms deal that angered American and British leaders, who then withdrew previously pledged support for the building of the Aswan Dam; the announced nationalization of the Suez Canal by Nasser in retaliation for the withdrawn support; and the subsequent failed invasion of Egypt by Israel, France, and Britain in an attempt to topple Nasser. In the wake of that failed invasion, France expanded and accelerated its ongoing nuclear cooperation with Israel, which eventually enabled the Jewish state to build nuclear weapons.

Keywords

Egypt, France, Israel, Lavon Affair, nuclear, sabotage, Suez crisis

In 1954, Israeli Military Intelligence (often known by its Hebrew abbreviation AMAN) activated a sleeper cell that had been tasked with setting off a series of bombs in Egypt. In this risky operation, a small number of Egyptian Jews were to bomb Western and Egyptian institutions in Egypt, hoping the attacks could be blamed on Egyptian opponents of the country's leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, including members of the Muslim Brotherhood or the Communist Party. The ensuing chaos, it apparently was hoped, would persuade

Western governments that Nasser's regime was unstable and, therefore, unworthy of financial and other support.

The operation started with the bombing of the Alexandria post office and, within a matter of weeks, six other buildings in Alexandria and Cairo also were targeted. But the Egyptian government was apparently told about the next bombing target, and the bomber was arrested. Eventually, Egyptian security rolled up the entire Israeli cell.

The failed operation became a scandal and blame for the ill-conceived attempt

is still not officially settled. During the 1954–55 trial of the bombers, however, Pinhas Lavon, Israel's minister of defense, was painted as having approved the sabotage campaign and Lavon's political enemies at home echoed the charge in early inquiries into the matter. Subsequent Israeli investigations suggest that Lavon was framed, to divert attention from other Israeli leaders, but the incident has retained the name given at the time: the Lavon Affair.

This ill-conceived false-flag operation failed, embarrassingly, to accomplish its goal of undermining Nasser. Although usually ignored or portrayed as an intramural political fight among high-level Israeli politicians, the Lavon Affair also played a major role in setting in motion a chain of events that led to Israel's acquisition of nuclear weapons, via scientific and military cooperation with France. Narratives of the affair—including this one—are hampered by Israeli government secrecy and the failure thus far of those who organized and ordered its execution to reveal publicly their innermost thinking about it. But regardless of the details of how the Lavon Affair came about, the affair triggered events that accelerated the Israeli bomb program. Even absent the Lavon Affair, Israel would almost certainly have obtained the bomb. But the path to it would have been longer and more difficult, with an unpredictable impact on the power dynamics of the entire Middle East.

The Israeli–French connection

France, partly because it was excluded from cooperating with the United States on the development of the bomb during and after World War II, as well as its parlous financial condition at the

time, was significantly disadvantaged in regard to nuclear technology development at the end of the war (Goldschmidt, 1982). However, the US Atomic Energy Commission and its nuclear labs at Los Alamos, Livermore, and Oak Ridge provided a model that was followed by other countries with nuclear ambitions, including France, which created the Commissariat à l'énergie atomique in 1945 and, subsequently, the nuclear research centers at Chatillon in 1946 and Saclay in 1952. Meanwhile, Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, influenced by his science advisor Ernst David Bergmann, decided to launch a nuclear technology development program within the Ministry of Defense. Bergmann was a scientist with an international reputation in chemistry and professional connections in many countries, including France. These connections enabled Israel to send some of its budding nuclear physicists for training at Saclay (Cohen, 1998). Thus, the foundation for a future French–Israeli nuclear connection was laid.

While Israel was pleased to obtain advanced scientific training in France, its main concern in the near term was conventional military assistance, another area that the Israelis thought was ripe for cooperation between the two countries. Mohammad Naguib and Gamal Abdel Nasser had shared power after the 1952 overthrow of the Egyptian monarchy, a development that gave both the Israelis and the French cause for concern. Nasser became Egypt's sole leader in 1954 after a failed assassination attempt against him by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. The failure, witnessed by a large crowd that had gathered to hear Nasser speak, made him a hero (Rogan, 2009). He used his new, elevated status

to order one of the largest crackdowns in Egypt's history, which resulted in the arrest of 20,000 people (mostly Brotherhood members and communists) (Aburish, 2004). Then-President Naguib was removed from office and placed under house arrest, with Nasser assuming the title of president.

Nasser's ambition was to lead a pan-Arab movement that would finally expel Western colonial powers from the Middle East and eliminate the state of Israel. He encouraged terrorist attacks on the British military base in the Suez Canal Zone, putting economic pressure on the British to leave at the expiration of the 20-year agreement of 1936 that provided for the British Suez base. However, Britain's troubles with Nasser did not resonate with the United States, whose secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, was more concerned with possible Soviet encroachment in the Middle East than with the protection of Britain's colonial position. The United States saw Nasser, an opponent of the Egyptian Communist Party, as a possible bulwark against Soviet expansionism in the region.

Its other troubles with Nasser notwithstanding, Britain shared the goal of trying to keep Nasser from falling under Soviet influence and joined with the United States in providing aid to Egypt. In particular, the two countries agreed to provide substantial direct financial support (\$68 million) for the building of the high dam at Aswan, which Nasser believed would be seen as one of his most significant accomplishments as president of Egypt. The United States also promised to support a \$200 million loan from the World Bank for the Aswan Dam (Boyle, 2005).

Nasser was troubling the French during this period as well. Besides

being at odds with the French and British over the Suez Canal, which they controlled via their majority position in the Suez Canal Authority, Nasser provided assistance to Algerian rebels fighting for independence from France. The Israelis, who armed and trained militias in the Jewish-Algerian communities to help protect them from Islamist rebels, aided France in the Algerian fight. Sometimes, Jewish-Algerian reservists in the French army even commanded those militias, and the Israelis provided intelligence to the French, cracking the codes for Algerian underground messages broadcast from Cairo (Karpin, 2006).

Although there were disagreements within the Israeli leadership on how to handle Nasser, Ben-Gurion and his Army chief of staff, Moshe Dayan, were convinced that another war with Egypt was both likely and better triggered sooner than later. Thus, Israel was desperate to obtain arms in preparation for what it viewed as the inevitable and saw France as having a common interest with Israel in getting rid of Nasser.

The task of forging Israeli-French military cooperation via an arms deal was given to then-Director General of the Ministry of Defense Shimon Peres, who was spectacularly successful, thanks to Abel Thomas and Louis Mangin, the chief assistants to French Minister of Interior Maurice Bourgès-Maunoury (Péan, 1982). Thomas, though not Jewish, was a passionate supporter of Israel, partly because of what he viewed as his brother's shared history with victims of the Holocaust (Karpin, 2006). (His brother, an underground fighter, was murdered by the Nazis at Buchenwald.) Despite opposition from French Foreign Minister Christian Pineau, Bourgès-Maunoury approved the sale of 12 Mystere

jet fighters to Israel and later followed it up with an arms deal worth about \$70 million involving more planes, thousands of antitank rockets, and tens of thousands of artillery shells (Karpin, 2006). Nasser's rise to the presidency of Egypt, his vehement opposition to the Jewish state, and his efforts against the former colonial powers in North Africa and the Middle East made Israel and France natural allies. Extending that narrowly based alliance to nuclear weapons cooperation, however, required a catalyst powerful enough to overcome opposition from some parts of the French Foreign Ministry to any French–Israeli nuclear partnership. The Israelis unintentionally provided that catalyst through an improbable plan that aimed to thwart a pragmatic policy decision by the United States and Britain to provide Nasser with limited economic help.

Hubris and bombs: The Lavon Affair

While Nasser was pleased to obtain American help for the Aswan Dam project, he also wanted an arms deal, which the United States was reluctant to grant, partly because of Nasser's stated aim of eliminating the Jewish state. Nevertheless, Israeli leaders feared a strengthening of Nasser's political position in the region and a possible US–Egyptian arms deal that they considered a dire threat to Israel. In addition, because of rising Egyptian attacks on British troops in the Canal Zone, the British began to openly consider leaving the Suez base; the Israelis opposed a British departure because they believed the British troops provided a buffer and a deterrent against an attack on Israel. Some in the Israeli leadership felt that if confidence in the

stability of Egypt under Nasser could be undermined, the likelihood that the United States and Britain would sell arms to Nasser or leave the Suez base would be reduced. That is, if it could be demonstrated that Nasser did not have control over the country—that Nasser's enemies had the ability to create chaos—the West might think twice about further support. It remains unclear why some high officials in Israel thought that they had the ability to produce this result through the actions of a handful of people on the ground. On the surface, however, it appears that extreme hubris, combined with complete disrespect for Egyptian competence, enabled the logistically complicated idea that became the Lavon Affair to flourish in some circles of Israeli Military Intelligence.

In the aftermath of the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, AMAN established “sleeper cells” in Egypt; that is, small groups of Israeli loyalists who were trained secretly to be a fifth column that could engage in sabotage or terror attacks against Egypt in the event of war with Israel. The Lavon Affair involved a sleeper cell that was ordered to carry out a risky false-flag operation code-named Operation Susannah. The cell consisted of a small number of Egyptian Jews who received training in Israel and Egypt in delayed-action explosive devices and conspiratorial techniques. The plan called for the bombing of Western institutions and buildings in Egypt, under the assumption that the attacks would be blamed on Egyptian dissidents, such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the Communist Party. Among other reasons, the Muslim Brothers were upset with Nasser because he had entered negotiations with the British over the Suez Canal base; Brotherhood leaders felt that Nasser was

prepared to compromise Egypt's rightful claim to complete control over the canal (Hirst, 1977). Israel's hope was that Operation Susannah would embolden Nasser's enemies and undermine arguments for Western support.

A set of goals, ostensibly articulated by Benjamin Gibli, the head of Israeli Military Intelligence, was delivered to the ring by an intelligence officer about to join them:

Our goal is to break the West's confidence in the existing [Egyptian] regime . . . The actions should cause arrests, demonstrations, and expressions of revenge. The Israeli origin should be totally covered while attention should be shifted to any other possible factor. The purpose is to prevent economic and military aid from the West to Egypt. The choice of the precise objectives to be sabotaged will be left to the men on the spot, who should evaluate the possible consequences of each action . . . in terms of creating commotion and public disorders. (Rokach, 1986: 659, 664)

A core of Israeli agents headed by Colonel Avraham Dar, whose cover identity was that of a British businessman named John Darling, recruited and trained the original members of the ring (Geller, 2013). Operational details, including further recruitment, became the responsibility of a military intelligence agent, Avraham (né Adolf) Seidenberg, also known as Avri Elad. Elad had a positive reputation as the discoverer of methods used by wanted Nazi war criminals to escape to Arab countries; he also had a negative reputation in some Israeli quarters as a thief who had been punished for looting Arab houses. The operation began on July 2, 1954, with bombs set off inside the Alexandria post office; on July 14, incendiary devices were set off in US consulate libraries in Alexandria and Cairo. On

July 23, bombs went off in two cinemas, the railway terminal, and the central post office in Cairo (Isseroff, 2003). There were no casualties, as the bombs were detonated when no one was likely to be present.

It remains unclear exactly how the Egyptians were warned (it is believed that Elad had compromised the operation), but they were ready for the next bombing, planned for a movie theater in Cairo on July 27. They stationed a fire truck outside the theater. In a lucky break for the Egyptians, the saboteur's incendiary device detonated in his pocket as he approached the theater. The saboteur, Philip Nathanson, was arrested and interrogated, and because the ring members were not compartmentalized (they all knew one another), the sabotage ring unraveled. Elad and Dar managed to escape, but on October 5, the Egyptian interior minister announced the breakup of a "13-man" Israeli sabotage network, a number in which Elad was probably included, despite his escape. Among those arrested was an Israeli intelligence agent, Max Binett, who committed suicide upon arrest. One of the Egyptian Jews, Yosef Carmon, committed suicide in prison. The remaining 10 prisoners were tried; two were acquitted, and all the others were convicted. The death penalty (by hanging) was announced and carried out for two conspirators—Shmuel Azar, an engineer, and Moshe Marzouk, a physician. The rest received prison sentences ranging from seven years to life, but those still in prison in 1968 were released as part of a prisoner exchange in the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War.

Elad settled abroad, but was tricked into returning to Israel, where he was

arrested and tried before a secret tribunal in 1959. He was not charged with being a double agent, but was convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison for having illegal contact with Egyptian intelligence. Elad served two additional years via the administrative detention authority of the Ministry of Defense; subsequently, he was allowed to emigrate to the United States, where he lived until his death in 1993. Although he continued to profess innocence, the Associated Press reported in 1988 that the Egyptian magazine *October* cited Egyptian sources to the effect that Elad was an agent for both Israel and Egypt (Herman, 2013).

The failure of Operation Susannah was a shock to Israel's leaders, and none was prepared to accept responsibility for the activation of the sleeper cell, which, among other things, put the 50,000 Jews living in Egypt at high risk. The question of who gave the order became an issue that roiled Israeli politics for more than a decade and is still not officially settled. And the botched operation had serious consequences beyond the fate of the conspirators.

The trial that led to the Soviet–Egyptian connection

The convictions of the eight Egyptian Jews were given much publicity in Egypt and Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Moshe Sharett, who had been kept in the dark about the false-flag operation until it unraveled, provided the Israeli public narrative, which painted the proceedings as a show trial of “a group of Jews who became victims of false accusations of espionage, and who, it seems, are being threatened and tortured in order to extract from them confessions in

imaginary crimes” (Speech to the Knesset in 1954; Rokach, 1986: chapter 7). The Israeli press, and later the American press, picked up on this theme, and days after the story of the arrests and trial broke, the *Jerusalem Post*, *Davar* (the Histadrut daily controlled by the Mapai party), and *Herut* (the daily of Menachem Begin's party of the same name) began to compare the situation in Egypt with events in Nazi Germany (Beinin, 1998). At the trial, Pinhas Lavon, Israel's minister of defense, was painted as having approved the sabotage campaign. But Lavon claimed he, like Sharett, knew nothing of the affair and asked for a secret inquiry to clear his name.

In January 1955, Sharett established the Olshan-Dori Committee, named for its members, a Supreme Court justice and a former Israel Defense Forces chief of staff, to determine who had authorized Operation Susannah. The inquiry included testimony by Elad, who produced a document containing Lavon's signature that gave the order for the operation. Although the committee did not conclude that Lavon had given the order (finding that either Lavon or Gibli may have done so), Lavon was officially in charge of such intelligence operations, and he was forced to resign on February 17, 1955, while still maintaining his non-culpability.

Ben-Gurion took Lavon's place as defense minister and shortly afterward became prime minister. A few years later, a secret ministerial investigation reviewed the Olshan-Dori investigative record and concluded that Elad had submitted perjured testimony, and that the document ostensibly showing Lavon had given the order was forged, inescapably implying that Lavon had been framed. This in turn implied that Israeli

intelligence chief Benjamin Gibli, Moshe Dayan, and Shimon Peres, all of whom testified against Lavon, had been engaged in a political vendetta designed to shift responsibility away from themselves. Despite Lavon's demand for exculpation, Ben-Gurion did not publicly exonerate him, instead protecting his protégés and the security establishment from the charge that military officers were being allowed to conduct risky operations without proper civilian authorization. At the same time, the government held to the public position that the Egyptian Jewish conspirators were innocent victims of anti-Semitism. This stance was finally put to rest in March 1975 when the government allowed three of the conspirators—Robert Dassa, Victor Levy, and Marcelle Ninio—to acknowledge their roles as saboteurs in Egypt by appearing on Israeli television to declare that they had acted on orders from Israel (Beinin, 1998).

In February 1955, though, the Israeli public and news outlets were outraged over what they believed were unjustified show trials. Calls for retaliation for the executions of Azar and Marsouk provided Ben-Gurion with the public support he wanted for a military incursion against Egypt. On February 28, 1955, Israel mounted a military raid on Gaza, then under Egyptian control, that resulted in the death of 39 Egyptians.

Israel suffered no casualties in the Gaza raid, embarrassing Nasser, who realized more than ever that he needed to strengthen his military if he was going to confront the Israelis. The United States and Britain did not want to arm a Nasser-led Egypt, not only because of his public anti-colonialist stance, but also because of regional considerations (Nasser was not trusted by other Arab

leaders, especially the Saudis) and domestic political considerations. So Nasser did what the Americans and British did not want him to do: He approached the Soviets, who told him they could arrange for him to buy Czech-made arms to meet his needs.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles were incensed with Nasser for allowing the Soviets a foothold in the Middle East, as well as for recognizing the Chinese communist government, and decided to punish him as an example to others. Dulles told Nasser that the United States and Britain would withdraw their financial support for the Aswan Dam project and get the World Bank to cancel its \$200 million loan for the project. Nasser's response was to end negotiations with Britain and announce the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the closure of the British base in the canal zone. His intent was to use proceeds from the canal to build the Aswan Dam. And he now had the backing of the Soviets (Boyle, 2005).

Britain and France attempted to have the canal internationalized via a UN Security Council resolution, but the Soviets vetoed it, leading the French to believe that only military action against Egypt could alter the situation. They sent a delegation to London to try to persuade Britain, whose economy would be seriously affected by Nasser's move on the canal, to join in a military attack. British Prime Minister Anthony Eden would not agree to join a military effort unless there was a pretext that would provide some political cover; the French told him that Israel would provide the pretext. In a subsequent meeting, however, Israeli leaders told the French they would join a military effort, but not initiate the attack. The

Israeli government changed its position in return for a historically significant inducement: the French agreement to provide Israel with a nuclear reactor, uranium, and additional technology that would enable the establishment of a viable nuclear weapons program (Karpin, 2006).

Thus, the events that followed from the Lavon Affair had now created a situation that put France, Britain, and Israel at the brink of war with Egypt and solidified the Israeli–French nuclear connection in a way that would help Israel achieve a nuclear weapons capability.

The Britain–France–Israel Suez plan

It was agreed: Israel would invade Egypt and drive toward the eastern bank of the Suez Canal, conquering the Sinai Peninsula in the process. As protectors of their interests in the canal, Britain and France would demand the withdrawal of Israeli and Egyptian forces from the canal zone, under the assumption that Egypt would refuse after Israel agreed. The Israeli invasion began on October 29, 1956, shortly before the American presidential election, in which Eisenhower was seeking a second term. The British and French followed the plan, invading Egypt on November 5 and November 6, the latter of which was election day in the United States.

The invasion was a complete surprise to Eisenhower, who was furious and believed that it would give the Soviets the opening they sought for involvement in Middle East affairs. Indeed, the Soviet Union, in the midst of crushing the Hungarian uprising, issued an ultimatum that referenced its possession of nuclear weapons and demanded the withdrawal

of British, French, and Israeli forces from Egypt. Britain and France agreed to withdraw, leaving Israel in an untenable position. A UN vote that insisted on Israeli withdrawal sealed the result, but not before Israel received a reiteration from top French officials that they would live up to the nuclear deal. French Prime Minister Guy Mollet later was quoted as saying, “I owe the bomb to them” (Hersh, 1991: 83).

The Israeli–French agreement resulted in the construction in 1958 of a large research reactor and a reprocessing facility at Dimona, which became and remains the center for Israeli nuclear weapon development. Israel and French nuclear scientists worked together on weapon-design issues, and French test data were shared. When the French successfully tested their first device in 1960, it was said that two nuclear powers were being created by the test, a notion memorialized by the journalist Pierre Péan, who titled his 1982 book about the joint effort *Les Deux Bombes*. But Israel had an ongoing need for nuclear materials for its program and found ways of obtaining such materials illegally or clandestinely from a variety of countries. Heavy water for the reactor was purchased from Norway in 1959 under the false pretense that it would be used only for peaceful purposes (Milhollin, 1988). After France cut off shipments of uranium following the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, 200 metric tons of yellowcake (processed uranium oxide) presumably bound for Genoa from Antwerp was transferred at sea to a vessel going to Israel in another false-flag operation, mounted this time by the Mossad, Israel’s agency responsible for human intelligence, covert action, and counterterrorism (Davenport et al.,

1978). Israel is also suspected of illegally receiving a significant amount of highly enriched uranium from an American company, the NUMEC Corporation of Apollo, Pennsylvania, during the 1960s (Gilinsky and Mattson, 2010).

When the Dimona project was discovered by a U-2 surveillance flight in 1957, the Israelis first denied the project was nuclear related and said the complex was a textile manufacturing plant. Later, the Israelis claimed it was a water desalination project before finally admitting its nuclear character. Once Dimona was identified as a nuclear project, the United States sought an Israeli pledge that it would be used for peaceful purposes only, and inspections by American scientists and technicians would be allowed. Israel initially rebuffed the notion of inspections, then agreed to them, but kept delaying their implementation. When they finally took place, the inspections were cursory and allowed the Israelis to effectively hide the true nature of the activity (Hersh, 1991).

By this time, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was being negotiated, and the US State Department and President John F. Kennedy were eager for Israel to approve the treaty as a non-weapon state. However, Kennedy's assassination in November 1963 removed a major source of pressure on Israel, and while the State Department continued to press for an Israeli signature, using the withholding of arms shipments as leverage, President Lyndon Johnson intervened, overruling his own State Department; he saw political benefit in removing the pressure, as long as the Israelis did not make their weapons project public. Richard Nixon, who followed Johnson as president, made it clear that Israel would not be pressured

to sign the NPT and had a famous meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir in 1969 in which the basic US–Israel nuclear deal was struck (although not in writing). Israel would no longer be asked to sign the NPT; in return, Israel would maintain a position of nuclear ambiguity or opacity and forgo any nuclear testing. Israel's adherence to the bargain was implicitly incorporated into its oft-repeated public statement that it “would not be the first nation to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East.”

The most serious challenge to the bargain came on September 22, 1979 (Weiss, 2011). Despite significant evidence that a US Vela satellite recorded a nuclear test off the coast of South Africa, the United States has not admitted that a test took place, that the perpetrator was almost certainly Israel, and that alternative explanations of the satellite's signal recording of the event have little credibility. The vast majority of scientists who have examined the data, particularly those at US nuclear weapons laboratories, are convinced a test took place, but the US government has thus far not declassified or released much of the information in its possession regarding the event. The Israelis are characteristically silent on the issue, allowing a small amount of additional room for those who are so inclined to doubt that a test took place. There is, however, no doubt about the existence of the Israeli nuclear arsenal, which is estimated to contain 80 warheads with enough fissile material to construct up to 200 warheads (McDonnell, 2013), including “boosted” weapons (*Sunday Times*, 1986; Wisconsin Project, 1996).

History is replete with seemingly small events that set in motion forces

that result in major world upheavals. In a recent example, the immolation of a street vendor in Tunisia began the ongoing Arab Spring that has toppled governments in the Middle East and is far from finished. The Lavon Affair is such an event; it not only led to war and attendant upheavals in the Middle East but accelerated the proliferation of nuclear weapons in one of the most volatile regions on the planet. It is therefore important to understand what lessons the affair contains for both policy makers and ordinary citizens desiring a peaceful, just, and democratic world. The Lavon Affair can be viewed as a case history in which a small group of hubristic government officials, acting in an atmosphere of extreme secrecy and ideological fervor, put their country on a path toward war, with little or no debate. It is another cautionary tale that ought to inform policy makers of any country of the dangers of the arrogance of power, coupled with an atmosphere of secrecy that inevitably interferes with, and can trump, accountability.

As the so-called war on terror proceeds with its intrusive surveillance programs, expanding drone operations, and secret “kill lists,” prudence and accountability are more important than ever. Have our leaders absorbed the cautionary tales of the past? Time will tell, but the increasing amount of secrecy in government and the increasing number of prosecutions of whistleblowers do not provide confidence in the robustness of the American system of accountability.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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