

The CIA and Israel's Intel Services & Zionism: A History

By Jefferson Morley – May, 2024

Why the spy agency's infamous James Angleton midwived modern Israel—and its bomb—into existence

SUDDENLY, “ZIONISM” IS A FIGHTING WORD. The term for the nationalist movement to build a Jewish state in Palestine has not often figured in American political debate over the half century since the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Patrick Moynihan, denounced a 1975 United Nations resolution asserting that “Zionism is a form of racism.” Now Zionism has returned as epithet and issue in the 2024 election.

Anti-Zionism is “incontestably” anti-Semitic, argues Bari Weiss of the Free Press, an online news site devoted to “the ideals that were once the bedrock of American journalism.” Anyone who doesn’t support the existence of a Jewish state, she asserts, is a hater of Jewish people. **“We need an exodus from Zionism,”** counters Naomi Klein in the Guardian. She calls political Zionism “a deeply immoral path that now has them justifying the shredding of core commandments: thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not covet.” And so, like “genocide” and “anti-Semitism,” “Zionism” is now a flash point in Jewish conversation and American politics.

This is the lexicon of a seismic political conflict. The generationally solid consensus behind Israel in the Democratic Party has fractured over Gaza. The conflation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism distills a potent pro-Israel Republican talking point. The issue has defenestrated two female Ivy League university presidents and prompted a third to order the massive arrest of student protesters. The result: campus demonstrations proliferating across the country—and ever more widespread debate about the meaning of Zionism.

Nowhere is the story of Zionism in America more influential and less well known, than that of the Central Intelligence Agency. As the siege of Gaza continues with U.S. supplying the bombs and the bullets for Israeli forces, the CIA is deeply implicated in the war, providing intelligence on Hamas leadership and taking the lead in the hostage negotiations. (Prior to Oct. 7, the CIA relied on Israel for intelligence on Hamas.)

At the same, the agency has also shown its independence from Israeli state narratives. U.S. intelligence analysts agree Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will fail to eliminate Hamas as a fighting force. The brutal siege, now in its sixth month, will likely generate future generations of people willing to take violent action against the United States, say U.S. intelligence analysts.

The agency has taken stands at odds with Israeli leadership, most notably on the Iran nuclear deal negotiated by President Obama, with the help of senior

State Department official Bill Burns—who is now CIA director. Despite vehement opposition from Israeli leaders, the CIA consistently affirmed that the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action effectively restrained Iran's nuclear ambitions and advanced U.S. interests. Under pressure from then-President Trump and the Israel lobby to change the agency's position, even a pliant CIA director Gina Haspel refused. Unlike many institutions, the CIA was not swayed by hardline Zionist pressure.

Yet it is also true that the CIA was influenced by Zionism from its very inception, and this influence was decisive in enabling the Zionist state to expand and dominate the Middle East.

The Ghost

The story begins with James Angleton, a deceased CIA spymaster celebrated in popular fiction and Hollywood film. His name is less noticeably carved in a stone planted unobtrusively on a garden path winding through a park overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem.



Meir Amit, chief of Mossad, left, with James Angleton, CIA counterintelligence chief, right. (Credit: Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center)

I was directed to this modest memorial by Efraim Halevy, a long-time friend of Angleton's who served as the chief of Mossad in the late 1990s. In 2015 and 2016 I interviewed Halevy at his apartment in the northern suburbs of Tel Aviv for my biography of Angleton, *The Ghost*.

With a combination of candor and tact, Halevy told me about Angleton and his Jewish friends who knit together U.S. and Israeli intelligence services in the 1950s. Their bond grew into the strategic alliance between the United States and Israel, which has been tested many times over the years and now again by the Oct. 7 attack.

Angleton was a protean spook, a multilingual literary critic trained in the black arts of espionage and false flag operations. His career traced the CIA's ascent after World War II. **He was famously duped by Soviet spy Kim Philby, launched the notorious MKULTRA mind control program, hunted for KGB moles, exposed communists, plotted assassinations, and**

influenced wars. When his illicit domestic surveillance program was exposed by the New York Times in 1974, he fell from power and was disgraced.

Yet Angleton still impressed. He was “very British in cut and manner,” said Joseph Persico, a historian who interviewed him in retirement. “A collection of angles. ... Clearly impatient with stupidity. Tall and cadaverous. ... the most sinister man I have ever seen.”

Angleton became an archetypal American spy: paranoid, perhaps mad, living on the fine line between genius and monster. Congress took his closed-door testimony. Richard Avedon took his photograph. At least four best-selling novels (*Orchids for Mother*, *The Spike*, *SpyTime*, and *Harlot's Ghost*) revolved around his persona, as did two network mini-series (*The Company* and *A Spy Among Friends*). In Robert DeNiro's 2006 CIA movie *The Good Shepherd*, Angleton was the model for Edward Wilson, the bright Yale man who embodied the agency's corrupted aspirations .

Halevy succeeded in persuading me that Angleton was a world-historic figure, not the least because of his unshakable belief in Zionism, in Israel's right to control historical Palestine.

Amoral Ambition

Angleton was perhaps an improbable ally of the Jewish state. The son of a self-made millionaire who owned the National Cash Register franchise in Italy, Angleton went to Yale and ingratiated himself with Ezra Pound, the expatriate poet whose anti-American, antisemitic radio broadcasts from Rome would get him indicted for treason.

In December 1939, Angleton wrote to Pound complaining about U.S. news coverage of Nazi Germany's domination of Europe. “The press carries all the accounts from British sources and leaves Berlin out,” he commented. “Everything is British and the Jews cause a devil of lot stink [*sic*]. Here in New York will be the next great pogrom, and they do need about a thousand ghettos in America. Jew, Jew and Jew, even the Irish are losing out.”

Such raw views were not out of step with his fellow elite contemporaries. (President Truman, too, was an anti-semitic in private, but it would take him only 11 minutes to recognize Israel as a state in 1948.)

In the beginning

When the U.S. entered the war, Angleton joined the Office of Strategic Services and was sent to England's intelligence school, where he learned the arts of espionage from Philby, the rising star of British intelligence who was also a KGB spy. Fluent in Italian, Angleton was assigned to run counterintelligence operations in Rome, where he excelled with amoral ambition. As he cultivated sources for U.S. intelligence, he protected the likes of Eugene Dollman, Hitler's translator, and Valerie Borghese, the

Black Prince of Italian fascism, as well as reporting regularly on “Jewish escape routes.”

These were networks organized by the Jewish Agency to smuggle desperate survivors of Nazi Germany from Central Europe to the Mediterranean coast and then, via boat, to Palestine, then under British control. One of Angleton’s sources, a German journalist named Arthur Pier, ran agents for Aliyah B, the agency’s pipeline to the Holy Land where the Zionists hoped to establish a Jewish state. With Israel’s victory in the 1948 war, Pier changed his name to Asher Ben-Natan. He became a diplomat for the new Jewish state—and Angleton confidant.

With the creation of the CIA in 1947, Angleton’s Jewish friends gave the new agency some of its first contacts in the Israeli leadership. In 1950 Angleton arranged for Reuven Shiloah, the founder of Israel’s first intelligence organization, to visit Washington. Impressed by the structure of the CIA, Shiloah returned home to reorganize his fractious service into a new agency called the Institute for Intelligence and Special Tasks, inevitably known as the “Mossad,” the Hebrew word for “Institute.”



Reuven Shiloah, founder of the Israeli intelligence service, and Angleton were very close. (Credit: Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center)

In 1951, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion came to the United States and brought Shiloah with him. Ben-Gurion met privately with President Truman and CIA director Walter Bedell Smith.

“The purpose of the meeting,” Halevy told me, “was to clarify in no uncertain terms that, notwithstanding that Russia had been a key factor in Israel’s survival, Israel considered itself part of the Western world, and it would maintain the relationship with the United States in this spirit.”

Secret Pact

The resulting agreement, negotiated by Angleton, laid the foundation for the exchange of secret information between the two intelligence services and committed them to report to each other on subjects of mutual interest.

Thus was born, “the Israel account,” an unusual arrangement in which Israeli operations were effectively removed from the agency’s Near East Division and put under Angleton’s sole control.

In 1975 Angleton detailed the relationship to Senate investigators.

“The Israelis were told we would *not* work with them against the Arabs, that we would work with them on Soviet intelligence, Soviet bloc intelligence, and communism where it existed,” he said in closed door testimony. The arrangement had not been cleared with Congress, nor put in writing. “It is a custom of intelligence that intelligence supersedes writing,” Angleton explained.

(As SpyTalk reported last June, the Israel account is one of the U.S. government’s most closely guarded secrets. The latest partially declassified version of Angleton’s 1975 testimony, released by the CIA last year, still contains dozens of redactions about key details.)

In 1951 Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion replaced the furtive Shiloah with Issar Harel, a gregarious spy who believed secret intelligence was key to the survival of a small nation surrounded by enemies.

"Jim had enormous admiration for Isser, as he always called him," Halevy said. "He often talked about Isser to me and to others as the epitome of Israel's success in collection and foreign intelligence operations."

Angleton also bonded with Amos Manor, chief of counterespionage for Israel's domestic intelligence agency, known as Shabak or Shin Bet. Born in Romania as Arthur Mendolovitchy, Manor had grown up in a wealthy Jewish family, most of whose members died in the Holocaust. In 1948 he emigrated to Israel, using a forged passport. Manor headed up what the Israelis called Operation Balsam, their conduit to the American intelligence service.

"In Jim's eyes Isser was the 'ultimate' intelligence officer, just as Amos was the ultimate security chief foiling Soviet espionage and catching traitors and spies," Halevy said.

“Jim's initial attitude toward us was very wary, but later he became a devoted admirer of Israel from an American standpoint," said Memi DeShalit, a Lithuanian-born military intelligence officer who befriended Angleton while stationed in the Israeli Embassy in Washington in the 1950s.

In 1963, Meir Amit, the IDF commander in Israel’s abortive campaign to seize control of the Suez Canal, became chief of Mossad and eventually a close friend of Angleton’s. Amit visited Angleton at his home in Tucson, Arizona and they went sightseeing in the American West, where Amit like to dress up as a cowboy.

With Amit's arrival, CIA-Mossad collaboration expanded. One result, according to authors Leslie and Andrew Cockburn, was an operation known as KK MOUNTAIN (KK was the CIA's designation for Israeli operations.) Millions in annual cash payments flowed to Mossad, the Cockburns reported in their 1991 book *Dangerous Liaisons*. In return, the Israelis authorized their agents to act as American surrogates throughout North Africa and in such countries as Kenya, Tanzania, and Congo.

"At that time, the East-West conflict—USA versus the Soviet Union—raged throughout the [African] continent," Halevy said. "The struggle for control over the mineral and other natural assets, many of key strategic importance, was a major feature of the Cold War. Angleton immediately understood the significance and value of the Israeli role and applauded it and encouraged it."

The Israelis, Angleton came to believe, were a model for the United States and the West. Their uncompromising strategy to control Greater Israel was a model for the defense of the Free World from communism. The anti-Semitic schoolboy had grown up to be an intuitive Zionist.

Angleton's control of Israel operations from 1951 to 1973 and his working relationship with the various Israeli intelligence chiefs proved enormously beneficial for Israel. On Angleton's watch, the Israelis obtained nuclear weapons and gained control of the Arab West Bank. His central role in both developments shows the profound influence of Zionism on the U.S. intelligence service. Israel's pursuit of nuclear weapons originated in the mind of David Ben-Gurion, founding father of the Jewish state, who decided early on that Israel needed nuclear weapons to defend itself. It was an audacious idea at a time when only four nations in the world possessed atomic arsenals. Ben-Gurion surrounded himself with a group of trusted like-minded Israelis to make it happen.

Angleton already knew some of them.

When diplomat Memi DeShalit and his wife moved back to Israel in the 1950s, Angleton continued their friendship with regular visits. Amos DeShalit, brother of Memi, was a professor of nuclear physics in Tel Aviv and a major contributor to the Israeli nuclear program. Angleton's close ties with the DeShalits "made it inevitable that he would learn about the construction [of the Dimona reactor] in the Negev," Seymour Hersh wrote in *The Samson Option*.

In 1956 Asher Ben-Natan, Angleton's source from OSS days, helped arrange for the initial transfer of French nuclear technology to the Dimona facility, which Israel insisted was only a research lab.

In early 1961 the CIA sent up a U2 spy plane, which returned with high-altitude images of unusual on-going construction at Dimona. A formal intelligence estimate concluded that "the secrecy and deception surrounding the undertaking [at Dimona] suggest that it is intended, at least in part, for the production of weapons grade uranium.

"Angleton was not concerned, said Dino Brugioni, then-deputy director of the CIA's National Photographic Interpretation Center, who briefed the counterintelligence chief on the U2 photos of Dimona.

"He was a real funny guy," Brugioni told Hersh. "I'd meet with him, brief him; he'd ask a few questions, you'd leave— and never know what he's holding. Sometimes he'd have his office real dark and have a light only on you. He was a real spook."

The U.S. Intelligence Board, which reviewed CIA operations on behalf of the White House, recommended the agency "expeditiously disseminate all information" on the Israeli nuclear program to the rest of the government, for the sake of upholding President John F. Kennedy's policy of nuclear non-proliferation in the Middle East.

Angleton simply ignored the recommendation. JFK's successor, Lyndon Johnson, cared less about nuclear proliferation and relaxed U.S. demands for on-site inspection of Dimona, which Israel insisted was only a research facility.

In 1965, Angleton learned from an FBI liaison officer, Sam Papich, that the Bureau and the Atomic Energy Commission were investigating the disappearance of several hundred pounds of fissile material from a uranium enrichment facility in Pennsylvania.

The company was owned by David Lowenthal, a U.S.-born businessman who had joined the Haganah, the Jewish self-defense force, after World War II. Lowenthal helped purchase a ship, the *Pan York*, which enabled some eight thousand Jews to immigrate to Palestine. During the 1948 war, he served in the armed forces under the command of Meir Amit, who as Mossad chief was witting to Israel's secret nuclear program. "I remember you as a big Zionist," Amit told Lowenthal late in life.

Lowenthal returned to the United States in 1955 to go into business in Pennsylvania. With two other investors, he created a company called the Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corporation, or NUMEC. Lowenthal planned to develop a new product: nuclear fuel for use in commercial reactors. To run the company, Lowenthal turned to Zalman Shapiro, a metallurgist then working for the Atomic Energy Commission. Within months, Shapiro had applied for and received a nuclear materials license from the AEC.

Angleton's deputy, Tel Aviv station chief, John Hadden, would note the coincidence: the AEC issued its first license to handle highly enriched uranium to a private company, which was financed by a group of active Zionists at the same time when Israel was accelerating its secret effort to acquire nuclear weapons.

Hadden concluded that Angleton had assisted the Israeli effort to obtain the bomb. As I reported in *The Ghost*, Hadden wrote up a list of 29 reasons to believe the counterintelligence chief had betrayed the U.S. policy of non-

proliferation in the Middle East, enabling Israel to build its first nuclear weapon in late 1968.

"The fact they stole it from us didn't worry him in the least," Hadden told his son, who recounted the story in his fascinating memoir, *Conversations with a Masked Man*. "I suspect that in his in-most heart, he would've given it to them if they asked for it."

Hadden did his own field investigation in Dimona and found traces of a radioactive isotope unique to the NUMEC facility in vegetation near the Israeli reactor. The CIA's Science Directorate later unanimously concluded Israel had "diverted" its nuclear fuel from the United States.

But enabling a nuclear arsenal was not Angleton's only accomplishment on behalf the Jewish state.

The Green Light

In the spring of 1967, Israel feared Egypt, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, was planning to avenge the humiliation of 1948 with a military offensive across the Suez. The Israelis wanted to strike first but feared President Johnson might follow President Eisenhower's response to Israel's attack on Egypt in 1956 Suez and withhold U.S. support, forcing Israel to surrender at the negotiating table what they had won on the battlefield. But Angleton arranged for Amit to meet with Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. He made the Israeli's case. McNamara called President Johnson to consult. "After the call Amit deduced that we had the green light, or at least a 'flexible' light," Halevy told me.

On the morning of June 4, 1967, Israel struck, leaving the Egyptian air force in smoldering ruins and seizing the Palestinian West Bank and Syrian Golan Heights. In the course of a week, Israel had effectively doubled the territory open for Jewish settlement. The war fulfilled the Zionist dream of conquering Greater Israel and burnished Angleton's legend in Langley.

"His total identification with Israel was an extraordinary asset for us," Amit wrote in his Hebrew language memoir. "We could not have found a better advocate for us than him."

In September 1969, Prime Minister Golda Meir visited Washington and privately told President Nixon that Israel had built a usable nuclear weapon. Meir asked the U.S. to adopt a policy of "opacity" on the subject, meaning no public comment, a policy which remains in effect to this day.

A new strategic relationship was consecrated: Israel was not just another Middle East country, but a U.S. ally, like England or France.

"Jim saw this as a wonderful development that should have happened a long, long time ago," said Halevy, who then served as chief of the Mossad station in Washington.



Efraim Halevy (Jefferson Morley photo)

Legacy

Angleton's undoing began with an intelligence failure that bears a remarkable resemblance to the intelligence failure of Oct.7. In October 1973, the Egyptian armed forces launched a surprise attack on Israel while the country was celebrating the Yom Kippur holiday. The Israeli intelligence services were caught off guard and so was the CIA. As in 2023, Israel suffered devastating losses and was only able to respond massively against its Arab foes thanks to America's resupply of weapons and ammunition. Angleton's excessive dependence on Israeli sources had blinded the agency to the realities of Egypt's intentions.

Angleton's position was suddenly in danger. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was furious to find an American ally embroiled in a war for which he had no warning. CIA director William Colby took the occasion to end Angleton's exclusive control of the Israel account while allowing him to stay on the job. ("I believed there was inadequate coordination in the Arab areas," he sniffed.)

When the New York Times' Seymour Hersh learned in the months that followed about Angleton's massive domestic spying operation, Colby confirmed the story, off the record, as a way to purge his irksome colleague. The resulting banner headline in the Times enabled Colby to do what he wanted to do all along: fire Angleton.

And so the Israelis lost their righteous gentile in Langley. Relations between the two intelligence services would never be so simpatico again. Close cooperation between the two services continued, but the 1986 arrest of Jonathan Pollard, a U.S. Navy intelligence analyst spying for Israel, alienated many top CIA officials. Pollard had stolen massive amounts of U.S. intelligence for years. Feeling betrayed by their Israeli counterparts, the CIA brass consistently opposed the efforts of the Israel lobby to secure Pollard's release. As with Edward Snowden and Julian Assange, the mere mention of Pollard's name will still send some CIA veterans into bouts of clenched-jaw vitriol. Pollard served 30 years in prison

before being freed in 2015 as part of the Obama administration's campaign to mollify Israel about the Iran nuclear deal.

Of course, Angleton was hardly alone in his Zionist sympathies in post-war Washington. Many elected officials and policymakers in the nation's capital contributed to the strength of the U.S.-Israeli strategic alliance over the years. But Angleton's roles in the creation of Israel's nuclear arsenal and the capture of the West Bank were central, formative, and enduring—which is why his story is relevant to today's Gaza debate. When it came to Israel's allies in Washington, Mossad chief Meir Amit called his friend Angleton “the biggest Zionist of the lot.”