

The Assassination of Ephraim Elrom, the Consul General of Israel

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İsrail Başkonsolosu Ephraim Elrom'un İnfazı

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اغتيال القنصل العام الإسرائيلي إفرام إلروم

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Rifat Bali, known for his prolific body of research on the non-Muslim minorities, the Jewish community, anti-Semitism, conspiracy theories, and social and cultural change in Turkey, has published a new study on a crucial event involving Turkey and Israel: *The Assassination of Ephraim Elrom, the Consul General of Israel*: “He was a very courageous man. He resisted until the end”.

In the book Bali focuses on the period 18-22 May 1971, when radical leftist militants kidnapped and assassinated Ephraim Elrom. The work is divided into two main chapters. Chapter 1 is entitled “The Background of the Kidnapping of Ephraim Elrom,” and Part 2 “Ephraim Elrom’s Kidnapping

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and Assassination.” An extensive appendix is found at the end of the book, including memoirs about the event, obituaries, and photos. Bali draws upon a vast amount of source material in the work, ranging from oral history studies and personal interviews to contemporary news reports and op-eds. A remarkable aspect of the work is Bali’s efforts to draw upon the testimonies of as many individuals involved in the Elrom case as possible. Among these are the members of THKP-C (the radical left-wing organization that assassinated the Consul General), the victim’s acquaintances and neighbors, and Turkish and Israeli officials.

In Chapter 1 Bali offers a detailed analysis of the Turkish political background in the years leading to the murder of Elrom, dwelling in particular on the changes that the Turkish left underwent in these years. Between 1965 and 1967, the Turkish left had functioned through the channel of parliamentary politics, where it was represented by the Turkish Labor Party. However, it faced harsh criticism from the left as well as from the right. Some groups on the left believed that legal political activity in the parliament would be inadequate for realizing their goals and argued in favor of activism, including that of a violent sort. Some tactics of the international left at the time, such as boycotts, occupations, and kidnappings, as well as the influence of young, charismatic, militant leaders, came to prevail in the Turkish left as well. The military interventions of the United States in Cuba, Vietnam, and Latin America were identified with imperialism, and the same approach was adopted toward Israel’s policies in Palestine as well. It became typical for the Turkish left at this time to regard Israel as an instrument of American imperialism in the Middle East. In the late sixties, moreover, around three thousand youths from the Turkish left went to the Palestinian camps in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon to receive training in guerilla warfare and deploy the newly gained military skills in their political struggle in Turkey. What made this possible was their mingling with Palestinian students in venues like the METU (Middle East Technical University), getting acquainted in the process with the Palestinian cause. Among other political developments that sharpened the left-wing’s so-called “anti-imperialistic” stance were President Johnson’s letter of 1964, which warned the Turkish government against Turkish military intervention in Cyprus, and the Vietnam War.

Bali points out that the particular brand of revolutionary anti-imperialism popular among the Turkish left in this period was quite problematic because it was not based on a realistic analysis of the conditions in Turkey or a close knowledge of the contemporary developments in the world. Instead, members

of the Turkish left were motivated mainly by the newly translated handbooks on guerilla warfare as well as by the intense rivalry between different factions competing with each other to carry out the most sensational acts. Consequently, they remained unaware of the fact that the leftist movement in Turkey, unlike its counterpart in Latin America, did not have a firm basis in the society or among the state cadres. Significantly, Bali also notes that the opinion of the contemporary Turkish left about the minorities in Turkey was no better than that of Turkish policymakers: They saw the minorities as “exploiters of the people” and openly supported past measures against them, like the Capital Tax of the 1940s. As the representatives of the Turkish left viewed the global scene with this intellectual make-up, they saw anti-imperialism simply as anti-Americanism, and Israel simply as the chief instrument of American imperialism in the Middle East. In his insightful analysis of the background of the Elrom assassination, Bali takes into consideration all these factors effective within the contemporary Turkish left: guerrilla ethos, inter-factional rivalry, unawareness of the Turkish social and political context, and a superficial anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism.

Turning in Chapter 2 to the more immediate causes of the event, Bali explains that the left-wing organization THKP-C, led by Mahir Çayan, decided to outdo THKO, led by Deniz Gezmiş, who had kidnapped four US airmen but ended up releasing them on their own accord. Looking for a proper target, they considered the consulates of the United States and Israel. Since the former was well protected, while the latter was not, they decided to kidnap the consul of Israel, Elrom, whom they saw as the very embodiment of Zionism and American imperialism. Bali also refers to additional considerations that might have led to this choice. One of these was the allegation that Elrom had handed over the lists of the Turkish militants in the Palestinian camps to the Turkish authorities. Another was the leftist militants’ sense of indebtedness to the Palestinians for having been allowed to receive guerilla training in their camps.

An interesting detail here, as Bali points out, is that while Ephraim was previously working as a police chief in Israel, he had contributed considerably to the preparation of the legal case against Adolf Eichmann, the former Nazi official responsible for the organization of the transport of European Jews to death camps. While the vehemently anti-fascist political stance of the Turkish left could have led one to expect that the militants would have some sympathy for Elrom on that account, this did not turn out to be the case. Indeed, a militant standing guard over Elrom asked him a few questions about his role

in Eichmann's kidnapping from Argentina and trial in Israel, but when he told his friends that the man was an anti-fascist, they seemed utterly unimpressed. As made clear by Bali, they did not have a coherent ideology that would have rendered such details significant for them. They saw in Elrom simply a representative of Israel, the instrument of imperialistic US policies in the Middle East, and were eager to outshine Deniz Gezmiş and THKO whom they openly criticized for having released the kidnapped airmen.

In this chapter, Bali presents the reader with a detailed chronological account of the kidnapping and the subsequent developments, relating the measures taken by the Turkish authorities, the reactions of Elrom's wife and colleagues, their unsuccessful efforts to persuade the militants to release the consul, the assassination, and the arrest of the militants. A criticism that might be brought at this point is that the author refrains from making any direct observations or criticisms within the chapter, and saves them all for the conclusion of the book. Until the conclusion, therefore, the reader is denied a full grasp of the errors of judgment involved in certain measures taken by the Turkish authorities. Chief among these was their order for home searches, which caused the militants to panic and hasten to murder Elrom, and their failure to inform the militants about the offer of ransom made by Elrom's family. The reader also has difficulty realizing the significance of the turning point in the whole process, when a police officer forgot to notify his superiors about a timely denunciation of the kidnapping that he had received on the phone. Thus, the critical mistakes committed by the Turkish officials do not receive due consideration within the narrative, before the brief concluding chapter, and even a contrary impression is created by Bali's repeated emphasis that the Israeli authorities refrained from criticizing the Turkish authorities for their failure to provide adequate security or their ill-judged order to conduct house searches.

The author then proceeds to consider the various theories in existence about who had decided to kill the consul and who had carried out the task. Here Bali's preference for impartial reporting of the different versions of the event proves confusing from time to time. Although it emerges that the leader Mahir Çayan was responsible for the actual murder, it does not emerge clearly how it was decided to assassinate the consul. Was it Çayan and Ulaş Bardakçı who took the decision, or was it decided by a ballot among the militants in various cells in Istanbul, or did the kidnapping team discuss it face to face? While the first version emerges from the narrative of the events, the second version seems to prevail in the section on the responsibility for the decision.

However, that section ends rather abruptly with the assertion that it was Çayan alone who had decided to murder the consul. Further on, another section in the chapter offers the third version.

Bali next offers a detailed examination of the reactions of the Turkish and Israeli press, public opinion, and government to the event, as well as dwelling on the reactions in the Arab world and the international community. He also dwells on Elrom's place in the collective memory of the Turks and Israelis, as well as among the Jewish community in Turkey. All this helps the reader understand how the event was experienced and interpreted from different angles. In the last section of the chapter, Bali also reports some of the conspiracy theories in circulation about the assassination of Elrom. Although these provide an interesting insight into the popular perceptions of the event, an accompanying analysis of what they imply about the event's impact on the general public would have been welcome.

Based on a wide variety of sources, Bali's study successfully sheds light on this important event in which Ephraim Elrom, the nemesis of Adolf Eichmann, ironically met a tragic fate at the hands of young Turkish ultra-leftists. Bali takes special care to cover the accounts of all the parties and carefully avoids ideological or value-based references. The study is particularly valuable insofar as it offers a snapshot of the mindset of the Turkish radical left in the late sixties and early seventies.