

# Shadows in Disguise: The Evolution of Mista'arvim Units in Israel's Strategic Culture

*Kılık Değiştirmiş Gölgeleer: İsrail'in Stratejik Kültüründe Mista'arvim Birimlerinin Dönüşümü*

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## Abstract

This article explores how the creation and normalization of *Mista'arvim* units reflect Israel's strategic culture and constructed perceptions of threat. Rooted in the belief that Israel exists in a permanently hostile regional environment, its strategic culture emphasizes preemptive and covert security practices. The study focuses on three interrelated dimensions of threat construction: the social production of threat, the normalization of clandestine operations, and the reproduction of threat narratives in popular culture. Employing interpretive analysis of official and media narratives as its primary methodology, the article investigates how *Mista'arvim* units—Israeli undercover forces operating by impersonating Palestinians—both embody and reinforce state narratives. The article assumes threat perception is not an objective reality but is shaped by political discourse and institutional practices. The findings suggest that these units do not merely respond to security concerns but actively participate in constructing the very threats they aim to eliminate. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between strategic culture and threat perception in Israel.

**Keywords:** Israel, Strategic Culture, Threat Perception, *Mista'arvim*.

## Öz

Bu makale, *Mista'arvim* birimlerinin kurulması ve normalleşmesinin, İsrail'in stratejik kültürünü ve inşa edilmiş tehdit algılarını nasıl yansıttığını incelemektedir. İsrail'in kalıcı olarak düşmanca bir bölgesel ortamda var olduğu inancına dayanan stratejik kültürü, önleyici ve örtük güvenlik uygulamalarını vurgulamaktadır. Çalışma, tehdit inşasının üç birbiriyle ilişkili boyutuna odaklanmaktadır: tehdidin toplumsal üretimi, gizli operasyonların normalleşmesi ve tehdit anlatılarının popüler kültürde yeniden üretilmesi. Resmî ve medya anlatılarının yorumlayıcı analizini birincil yöntemi olarak kullanan bu makale, *Mista'arvim* birimlerinin — Filistinli kılığına girerek operasyon yürüten İsrail gizli kuvvetlerinin — nasıl hem devlet anlatılarını somutlaştırdığını hem de pekiştirdiğini incelemektedir. Makale, tehdit algısının nesnel bir gerçeklik değil; siyasal söylem ve kurumsal pratikler tarafından şekillendirildiği varsayımına dayanmaktadır. Bulgular, bu birimlerin yalnızca güvenlik endişelerine yanıt vermediğini, aynı zamanda ortadan kaldırmayı hedefledikleri tehditleri aktif biçimde inşa ettiklerini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu analiz, İsrail'de stratejik kültür ile tehdit algısı arasındaki etkileşime dair daha derin bir anlayışa katkıda bulunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İsrail, Stratejik Kültür, Tehdit Algısı, *Mista'arvim*.

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*“Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness...”*

William Shakespeare – Twelfth Night

## Introduction

A state’s strategic response to perceived threats is often swift, calculated, and asymmetric—designed not only to neutralize immediate dangers but also to reinforce its strategic culture, deter future aggression, and assert dominance in the regional or global arena. In Israel’s case, this strategic posture is exemplified by the evolution of the *Mista’arvim* units—elite undercover forces whose ability to seamlessly blend into hostile environments and execute precision operations reflects a profound commitment to preemptive action, intelligence superiority, and strategic deception. These operatives embody Israel’s broader national security doctrine, which places a premium on intelligence-driven countermeasures, adaptability in asymmetric conflicts, and the integration of surprise and deception.

The term *Mista’arvim*—meaning “those who become like Arabs”—refers to operatives trained to adopt Arab identities and customs for intelligence gathering, counterterrorism, and covert tactical operations. These units, primarily composed of elite military personnel, are an integral component of Israel’s security apparatus. Their ability to infiltrate and operate within hostile environments underscores the state’s focus on intelligence superiority and its emphasis on asymmetry in warfare. The use of “deception” and “the strategic blurring” of conventional and unconventional tactics are not only reflective of Israel’s operational methods but also deeply rooted in the historical and cultural narratives that shape its national security policy (David, 2018).

A growing body of scholars underscores the multifaceted foundations of Israel’s militarization, pointing to a confluence of cultural narratives, institutional structures, and rational-functional imperatives that sustain and normalize the pervasive role of the military in both state policy and societal life. These studies emphasize how security discourses are interwoven with national identity, shaping public consciousness and legitimizing exceptional measures as routine governance components (Sheffer and Barak, 2013, Levy 2013, Fried, 2020). This paper adopts a socio-political interpretive lens while also considering bureaucratic politics and operational pragmatism to offer a nuanced analysis of the evolution and function of *Mista’arvim* units. It examines Israel’s strategic culture as a framework to understand how the state constructs, interprets, and reacts to threats, focusing on creating and normalizing these units. This study’s central question is: How does the formation of these units reflect Israel’s strategic culture and perception of threat? Using this framework, the article explores how Israel’s historical experiences, societal narratives, and military doctrines shape these undercover units’ operational tactics, identities, and decision-making processes. In addition, the study utilizes interpretive analysis to assess how official government statements, media portrayals, and national security narratives frame the role and significance of such undercover units within Israel’s broader security strategy. However, due to the inherently covert nature of their operations, there is a significant limitation in accessing comprehensive, publicly available data. The highly secretive and often classified nature of these missions means that only a limited number of cases are reflected in open sources. As a result, the study’s

analysis is constrained by the paucity of direct, transparent information and relies heavily on secondary sources such as media reports, public statements, and declassified documents. By positioning these units within the larger context of Israel's national security priorities, the article underscores the influence of existential security concerns and the dynamics of asymmetric warfare on Israel's military decision-making.

This study contributes to existing scholarship on intelligence and strategic culture by challenging the notion that military strategies result solely from rationalist calculations based on material threats. It argues that the *Mista'arvim* units represent a tactical innovation and manifest Israel's deeply ingrained security culture, shaped by historical experiences, threat perceptions, and existential anxieties. The article demonstrates that historical narratives significantly shape contemporary security doctrines by examining the interplay between these elements. The first section of the study examines Israel's strategic culture within a broader security framework, tracing the historical evolution and transformation of these forces in response to shifting security challenges. The subsequent sections analyze how these units adapt to evolving asymmetric threats and the dynamic nature of Israel's security landscape. It also focuses on how threat perceptions are reflected in the operational logic, tactics, and justification of these elite forces.

### **Decoding Israel's Strategic Culture towards Threat Perceptions**

Snyder (1977) defines strategic culture as profoundly embedded practices and beliefs that shape national security decision-making. Moreover, scholars view culture as a fundamental factor in shaping a state's behavior on the international stage, framing its strategic decisions within a broader social and historical context (Ali, 2022:122-123; Lantis, 2022). The key to understanding strategic culture is that it acts as a guiding framework through which states interpret their external environments and formulate policy responses (German, 2020; van Nieuwkerk, 2014). However, this framework alone does not fully capture the operational realities of Israel's security culture. A deeper analysis is required to understand how Israel perceives and responds to threats.

Israel's strategic culture is shaped by historical traumas, a persistent sense of existential insecurity, and a security paradigm prioritizing militarization (Ben-Ephraim, 2020:148). Lupovici argues that historical narratives play a pivotal role in shaping security policies as a foundation for strategic decisions and a mechanism for societal cohesion. In a society like Israel, where there is a constant sense of being under threat, these narratives are deeply embedded in both individual and collective memory. For example, the Second Intifada not only posed direct security threats but also contributed to ontological insecurities within Israeli society (Lupovici, 2011). In other words, Lupovici contends that these historical narratives do more than recall past events—they actively shape national security strategies, foster a collective identity, and reinforce the adoption of militarized approaches to safeguard the nation's security. Through these narratives, security is framed as both a collective responsibility and a defensive necessity, profoundly influencing Israel's approach to both internal and external threats.

However, his perspective does not fully account for alternative explanations, such as the role of political leadership in shaping security policies independently of societal narratives. Libel (2016:4-5) introduces the concept of strategic subcultures, arguing that within a nation's broader strategic culture, different elite factions advocate distinct

security approaches. In Israel, these strategic subcultures have shaped security strategies, with some factions favoring aggressive military responses while others prioritize intelligence-driven operations. This results in different groups within societies like Israel having varying views on security issues. Some factions might favor more aggressive military interventions, while others prefer intelligence-driven operations. This leads to the diversification of security strategies and sometimes results in different operational tactics.

To better understand Israel's strategic culture and its approach to threat perception, the argument can be structured around three key points. First, threats are not objective givens but are socially constructed. Perceptions of threat emerge through historical experiences, political discourse, and mediated narratives rather than being determined solely by material realities. In this context, early Jewish settlers did not merely aim to replace the native Palestinian population culturally; they also sought to appropriate the symbolic and existential "essence" of Palestinian identity and its deep-rooted connection to the land (Taussig, 1993). Assimilation, therefore, was perceived as a strategic imperative. As Karkabi and Mendel (2023: 463) argue, the more closely they could resemble the Arab population, the more effectively they believed they could infiltrate Palestinian society and ultimately overcome it.

In the Israeli context, strategic culture is pivotal in defining, amplifying, and institutionalizing particular threats within the national security discourse. As Karkabi and Mendel (2023: 464) note, the imitation of the native Arab population by Jewish agents was not merely tactical but ideologically charged, reflecting a more profound logic embedded in the settler-colonial framework. This dynamic extends beyond conventional military threats to the classification of specific identity groups, particularly Arabs, as inherent security risks. Language has continued to serve as a key medium for expressing, concealing, navigating, or transitioning between Arab and Jewish identities (Karkabi and Mendel, 2023:466). Alkhateeb (2024:4) underscores how Israel's language policies contribute to the securitization of Arabic and Arab identity, portraying them as constant sources of threat. The strategic construction of such threats legitimizes exceptional security practices and normalizes military responses under the guise of national defense.

The second one is that covert operations become normalized. The social construction of threats—where actors like Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran are discursively framed as existential and enduring enemies—has fostered a security strategy that moves beyond reactive defense to proactive and often aggressive preemption. As a result, intelligence-driven operations that neutralize internal and external threats have been institutionalized as a key feature of Israel's national security doctrine. This normalization is deeply embedded in the country's strategic culture, prioritizing deterrence and operational superiority. Over time, these operations have become not just expedient tools of statecraft but also routinized elements of how Israel understands and responds to its strategic environment. The legitimacy of such operations is often framed within the optics of international relations, where states undertake covert actions to protect their interests while circumventing normative constraints on warfare. As Crandall et al. (2016:22) pointed out, policymakers often justify covert measures during perceived crises, enabling them to sidestep public debate and democratic oversight. This reflects a broader trend in

which the normalization of covert operations is justified by their supposed efficacy and the constraints of a hostile regional landscape.

Moreover, the domestic and international implications of Israel's covert actions are far-reaching. As Cormac et al. (2022:127) highlight, the success of such operations is often assessed through immediate tactical outcomes rather than their long-term political, strategic, or ethical ramifications. This short-termism reinforces a national security paradigm heavily shaped by militaristic thinking, wherein threats are managed primarily through forceful and clandestine means. Olesker (2013:373-374) further argues that this mindset contributes to the normalization of covert operations within Israel's strategic culture. Tactics such as targeted assassinations, cyberattacks, and intelligence-driven interventions are not viewed as extraordinary measures but as routine and necessary tools to preempt existential threats. Over time, these practices become embedded in the state's security doctrine, reinforcing the belief that proactive and covert engagement is essential for national survival.

The third dimension is the role of popular culture in reinforcing threat perception. Beyond formal discourse and security policies, popular culture is a powerful medium through which national identity, violence, and statehood are reimagined within the framework of Israeli nationalism (Barak and Inbar, 2021:10–11). Israeli films, television series, and literature play a critical role in embedding and legitimizing a pervasive security culture by frequently glorifying the actions of security forces and their covert operations. These cultural products reflect existing security narratives and actively shape and amplify them, cultivating public support for aggressive security measures. By selectively portraying certain threats and valorizing state responses, popular culture fosters a binary worldview—one that consistently positions Israel as a vulnerable nation under siege, thereby normalizing a sense of permanent existential threat.

While existing literature sheds valuable light on Israel's strategic culture and its responses to perceived threats, this study builds on these foundations by focusing on a specific yet underexplored manifestation of these dynamics: the *Mista'arvim* units. By examining these operatives not merely as tactical entities but as cultural and political instruments, this study extends the conversation beyond general security practices to explore how covert action becomes institutionalized and normalized through highly specialized military frameworks. This approach allows a deeper understanding of how Israel's existential anxieties and security-driven identity are operationalized. The following sections will analyze the origin, formation, and strategic role of these operatives along with their broader implications for domestic security policy and international norms surrounding covert military engagement.

## The Origins and Evolution of Mista'arvim Units

*Mista'arvim*, literally meaning “those who act like Arabs,” has been historically used in two distinct contexts. The first refers to Jews who integrated into Arab culture. The term originates from the Arabic *mousta'aribin*, meaning “those who Arabize” or “those who become Arab.” Following the Islamic conquests, it described non-Muslims who adopted the dominant Arab culture. After the expulsion of Sephardic Jews from Spain in 1492, those who sought refuge in the Arab world used *Mousta'aribin* or *Mista'arvim* to refer to pre-existing Jewish communities that had already assimilated into local Arab cultures



(Mendel, 2014:16-17). Jews born and raised in regions such as Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen adopted the language, clothing, cuisine, and overall lifestyle of their surroundings. Culturally, they were often indistinguishable from their Arab neighbors despite maintaining their Jewish identity (Schwartzbrod, 2019).

The second and more contemporary meaning of *Mista'arvim* is associated with military and intelligence operations. Over time, the desire to internalize local culture for identity gradually shifted toward strategic mimicry for security purposes—including warfare, control, and defense (Mendel and Karkabi, 2023:165). In other words, Jews who had already assimilated into Arab culture, speaking and behaving like Palestinian Arabs, were recruited and trained to gather intelligence. Their training included operational and field exercises and instruction in Palestinian social and religious traditions, the Arabic language, and cultural customs (Mansour, 2004). A document from July 1943 titled *Classes for Mista'arvim* confirms these training programs. It outlines ten different lessons, covering topics such as “Peasant attire,” “Wearing [Arab] clothing,” “Entering a [Arab] village to look for an acquaintance,” “Being hosted in an Arab home,” “Drinking coffee,” “Eating meals,” “Passing time between meals and sleep,” “Sleeping,” “Waking up,” and “Bidding farewell” (*Classes for Mista'arvim*, 1943, cited in Mendel, 2013).

### ***Early Roots and Influences***

The origins of *Mista'arvim* can be traced back to British military operations during World War II. The British, facing increasing threats in the Middle East, sought intelligence operatives familiar with Arab cultures and languages. Jewish immigrants from Arab countries were particularly suited for such roles, leading to their recruitment in espionage missions against Axis forces. The urgency of intelligence gathering heightened after German bombers targeted strategic regions such as Aleppo in mid-1941 (Mendel, 2013:94).

Parallel to these developments, the Haganah—a Jewish paramilitary organization established in the 1920s—expanded its intelligence operations. In 1940, it formed Shay (Sherut Yediot), a national intelligence service tasked with infiltrating British and Arab forces. Shay played a pivotal role in both security operations and facilitating Jewish immigration to Palestine. Following Israel’s independence in 1948, Shay was disbanded, and its personnel were reassigned to the newly formed Israeli military intelligence structure (Denoël 2024:21).

Another significant precursor to *Mista'arvim* was Palmach’s Arab Platoon, composed of Arabic-speaking Jews who carried out covert missions akin to those of Shay’s Arab Department (Kahana and Suwaed, 2009). This unit set the groundwork for future intelligence tactics that relied on deep cultural immersion and deception.

### ***Formation and Institutionalization***

The formal development of these units occurred in the aftermath of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. As Israel faced asymmetric security threats, it refined the use of undercover operations inspired by British colonial-era tactics. The influence of British counterinsurgency strategies, which relied on intelligence-driven clandestine warfare, shaped early *Mista'arvim* methodologies (Mendel, 2013:98).

By the 1950s and 1960s, as guerrilla warfare and insurgent activities intensified, Israel recognized the need for specialized undercover units that could operate seamlessly within Arab communities. The rise of the Palestinian liberation movement and its adoption of unconventional warfare necessitated a more adaptive approach. In 1986, then-Israeli army general and future Prime Minister Ehud Barak significantly enhanced the operational capacity of Israel's undercover units by establishing Duvdevan—Hebrew for “cherry”—a more sophisticated and better-organized *Mista'arvim* force renowned for its precision and effectiveness in urban counterterrorism operations (Moussa, 2022). Barak also ensured that recruits were thoroughly trained in Arabic language, culture, and customs, enabling them to seamlessly blend in, “looking, speaking, and dressing like Arabs, and riding their bikes through the West Bank and Gaza as naturally as they would down Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Street” (Moussa, 2022).

These operatives, often native Arabic speakers, were tasked with infiltrating Palestinian territories, gathering intelligence, and executing high-risk missions. Their ability to blend in was critical during events such as the Palestinian Intifadas, where intelligence-driven operations played a significant role in Israeli security measures.

### ***Broader Implications***

In addition to Unit 217, also known as Duvdevan, which operates primarily in the West Bank, Israel's security forces employ the Shimshon (Samson) Unit 367, traditionally focused on covert missions within the Gaza Strip. In 1990, the establishment of the Yamas unit, a parallel undercover unit under the command of the Israeli Border Police, expanded the scope of covert operations within the internal security forces of Israel (Cohen, 1994).

The fourth unit, operating under the Israeli Police, specializes in missions within Jerusalem, a city marked by longstanding political tensions and contested spaces. All four elite units are known for their stringent selection processes and intensive training, which equip operatives with the linguistic and cultural skills necessary to blend seamlessly into Palestinian communities. These units are vital to Israel's counterinsurgency and internal security strategies, reinforcing the state's focus on preemptive and covert methods to manage perceived threats (Middle East Monitor, 2015).

Beyond their direct security functions, *Mista'arvim* units embody deeper ideological and identity-based struggles within Israeli society. Their operational tactics reflect Israel's history of espionage and the need for survival in a hostile geopolitical environment. The concept of *Hista'arvut* (“masquerading as Arabs”) epitomizes the intersection of identity politics, strategic necessity, and military doctrine within Israel's broader national security framework (Mendel and Karkabi, 2023:162).

As the nature of warfare and security threats evolved, so did the role of *Mista'arvim* units. Initially focused on intelligence gathering, these units have become crucial in counterterrorism efforts, especially in urban environments, where they identify and neutralize threats. Their success is mainly due to their rigorous training, which includes cultural and linguistic immersion, psychological conditioning, and tactical combat preparation. However, their operations have not been without controversy. The blending of military objectives with interactions in civilian settings raises significant ethical concerns, particularly regarding the impact on Palestinian communities. The covert nature

of *Mista'arvim* operations often fuels mistrust and heightens tensions, contributing to the perpetuation of violence rather than its resolution.

In conclusion, the origins and evolution of these units are inextricably linked to Israel's security priorities, historical experiences, and the realities of its geopolitical situation. From their initial formation as a response to British and Haganah intelligence strategies to their modern role in counterterrorism, these units exemplify the complexities of contemporary warfare, where intelligence, deception, and cultural immersion are essential tools of national defense. An ongoing analysis of their operations is crucial for evaluating their strategic effectiveness and considering the ethical implications of their deployment.

### **Positioning Mista'arvim Units within Strategic Culture**

As mentioned above, Israel's strategic culture has long been constructed on the premise that it exists in a hostile and insecure regional environment. This foundational belief drives overt and covert security measures to maintain state survival in the face of perceived existential threats. The *Mista'arvim* units—elite undercover forces embedded within Palestinian society—embody and reinforce this strategic outlook. Their very existence and actions contribute to a narrative in which Palestinians, especially in the West Bank and Gaza, are portrayed as persistent and pervasive threats. Within the broader framework of Israel's "war on terror," such operations are framed as legitimate and necessary responses to danger, even as the boundaries of that danger remain fluid and discursively shaped.

This discourse of securitization constructs threat as an ever-present feature of daily life. In 2016, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed this worldview explicitly, stating his intention to "surround all of Israel with a fence" as a way to prevent infiltration, further asserting that Israel needed protection from "wild beasts" (Beaumont, 2016). This rhetoric dehumanizes Palestinians and others perceived as threats, justifying extraordinary state measures and exclusionary policies under the guise of national defense.

The *modus operandi* of the *Mista'arvim* units illustrates how the perception of threat is responded to and actively produced through practice. These operatives are trained to assimilate into Arab and Palestinian communities, using deception, impersonation, and mimicry as a core tactic. Their operations—whether gathering intelligence or conducting arrests—rely on appearing indistinguishable from the people they surveil. By wearing keffiyehs, speaking Arabic fluently, and blending into everyday environments such as markets, mosques, and protest sites, they collapse the boundaries between soldier and civilian, enemy and neighbor. Typically operating in groups of five to ten, they insert themselves into the chaos of confrontations between Palestinians and Israeli forces, at times even participating in tire burning or stone throwing to maintain cover (Moussa, 2022).

This intimate form of warfare carried out within the spaces of everyday life illustrates how Israeli strategic culture constructs Palestinians not only as current threats but also as latent ones, concealed in plain sight and requiring constant monitoring. In one documented case, a *Mista'arvim* operative joined a convoy of Palestinian refugees under the guise of being one himself, gaining trust while psychologically shaping their beliefs



about return and exile (Mendel, 2013:109-110). These tactics demonstrate the role of operatives in producing and sustaining a state of permanent insecurity in which surveillance and infiltration are normalized.

In 2019, these units expanded their role beyond traditional covert operations to include participation in advanced surveillance programs. One of their notable contributions involved photographing individuals to feed into the Israeli army's biometric database, a system aimed at monitoring and cataloging Palestinian residents in the West Bank (Joly, 2024). This blending of physical infiltration with technological surveillance further deepens the militarization of daily life under occupation.

The operational capacity of *Mista'arvim* units is sustained through a rigorous training program reflecting the hybrid nature of their mission. As mentioned above, the 1943-titled classes led to the development of a specialized curriculum tailored to their evolving roles. Their training spans approximately fifteen months and combines conventional infantry instruction with urban warfare tactics, undercover intelligence work, and counterterrorism techniques. Trainees learn the Arabic language, cultural norms, religious customs, and even behavioral nuances. They practice civilian camouflage, including dyed hair, contact lenses, and traditional Arab clothing, to enhance their infiltration capabilities (Sof, 2013). This training prepares them for their missions' physical and tactical demands and the psychological and sociocultural immersion required to construct threats from within.

These units are not simply reactive forces but agents of anticipatory security. Trained to read physical and social cues as signs of danger, *Mista'arvim* operatives engage in preemptive logic, seeking to identify and neutralize threats before they materialize. In this context, the concept of threat becomes omnipresent and highly subjective, legitimizing extrajudicial actions and embedding military logic into civilian environments.

Moreover, these figures' role in Israeli society extends beyond security operations into the cultural realm. They have become national icons—figures of admiration in Israeli popular culture through literature, music, cinema, and television. This cultural elevation mirrors and reinforces the security ethos of the Israeli state. As Karkabi and Mendel (2023:463) note, the operatives serve as symbolic figures through which Jewish Israeli identity is articulated in opposition to the Arab “other.”

The series, such as *Fauda*, exemplifies how this narrative is consumed and reproduced. The show dramatizes *Mista'arvim* operatives as morally complex protagonists immersed in dangerous missions, often blurring the lines between self and enemy. In one scene, operatives are portrayed emotionally connecting with an Arabic love song, suggesting a momentary identification with the very culture they are sent to infiltrate (Munk, 2019:3). In another, the psychological toll of their dual identity is underscored when an operative is nearly shot by his own family while disguised in Palestinian attire (Munk, 2019: 8).

While *Fauda* has been praised for its cinematic quality and emotional depth, critics argue that it simplifies and obscures the complexities of the occupation (Ribke, 2019). The show reinforces stereotypes while dramatizing and normalizing covert military practices, ultimately contributing to the entrenchment of a securitized worldview among its audience. To enhance the show's perceived authenticity, the Israeli audience is drawn in

with scenes that “uncannily mirror real-life news reports,” thus reinforcing its narrative credibility and serving a parallel strategic function (Munk, 2019:7-8).

This convergence of military, political, and cultural narratives underscores how the *Mista'arvim* operate as soldiers and as embodiments of Israel's strategic imagination. Their function is inseparable from a broader discourse in which the “other” is always a potential enemy, and violence is a normalized mode of engagement. Through their presence and performance—on the ground and on the screen—*Mista'arvim* help sustain a national identity forged in perpetual vigilance, where a threat is not discovered but constructed, not natural but produced.

## Conclusion

This article has explored how the creation and operationalization of these units reflect the foundational elements of Israel's strategic culture, particularly its enduring perception of existential threat. By applying a constructivist lens and examining the social construction of threat across three interrelated dimensions—discursive framing, operational normalization, and cultural reproduction—it becomes evident that these operatives are not merely tactical instruments but symbolic expressions of a deeper strategic ethos.

The strategic culture of Israel is rooted in a worldview shaped by historical trauma, regional hostility, and the imperative of survival. Within this framework, threat is not an objective external condition but a socially constructed and continually reproduced narrative. The *Mista'arvim* embody this logic through their covert practices, which collapse the line between security and everyday life. By infiltrating Palestinian spaces, they render the “enemy” internal, invisible, and omnipresent—thus justifying permanent vigilance and preemptive action.

At the operational level, the normalization of undercover tactics reflects a shift from conventional battlefield engagement to intimate surveillance and preemption. The *Mista'arvim*'s unique ability to “become” the other is not simply a military advantage but a manifestation of how deeply ingrained threat perception has become within Israel's strategic culture. These units operate in ways that blur the boundary between civilian and combatant, further embedding military logic into the civilian realm.

In the realm of popular culture, *Mista'arvim* operatives have been elevated to iconic status. Through television series like *Fauda*, Israeli society both consumes and contributes to the reproduction of security narratives. These portrayals simultaneously entertain and legitimize the actions of these units, reinforcing the normalized perception of threat and the heroization of those who confront it.

Ultimately, the *Mista'arvim* are more than operatives—they are cultural and strategic constructs that mirror how Israel sees itself and its surroundings. Their existence and operations exemplify how strategic culture guides military behavior and shapes collective identity and public consciousness. The *Mista'arvim* thus serve as a lens through which we can better understand how Israel's perception of threat is not simply inherited or reactive but actively constructed, performed, and sustained across military, political, and cultural domains.

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