The Willingness to Break and the Need to Build
Drivers and Barriers to Innovation in Intelligence Work

By Allon Sasson[1]

A few months ago, I had the privilege of interviewing Michael Morell,[2] former Deputy Director and Acting Director of the CIA, for the Modcast—a podcast by the Intelligence Methodology Research Institute. Among the various topics we discussed, I asked him what qualities make an intelligence professional truly exceptional. Morell rightly pointed out that the answer to this question varies significantly depending on the specific intelligence role—whether an analyst, an operative, or another position.

One of the key qualities for an analyst, according to Morell, is constant openness to learning. Analysts often draft reports, receive feedback, refine their work, and repeat this process multiple times. True learning occurs in these iterations. If an analyst perceives feedback as irrelevant or arbitrary, he will fail to grow. However, if he questions the reasoning behind the feedback and seeks to understand its purpose, he will improve. Morell, who once served as the CIA's chief analyst, provides a compelling explanation of how intelligence professionals develop expertise. But how does this relate to innovation?

Many argue that expertise and extensive professional experience can actually serve as barriers to innovation, due to factors such as ingrained habits and cognitive rigidity, which I will touch upon later.

The short answer to the connection between continuous openness in the intelligence field and innovation lies in the willingness to "break" what has already been constructed, written, and formulated—to recognize that better alternatives exist and actively seek them out. One way to create something new is by refining the existing approach—the path of expertise. Another is by exploring alternative methods and constructing something entirely different—the path of innovation.

Both approaches are valid, and each can yield outstanding results despite their fundamental differences. What they have in common is a willingness and ability to

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[1] Alon Sasson is a senior research fellow at the Institute for the Study of Intelligence Methodology, an innovation specialist, and a consultant for educational entrepreneurship. He previously held senior management roles in the Prime Minister's Office.
The Institute for the Research of the Methodology of Intelligence thanks Rabbi Ariel Yeshurun from Miami who volunteered to translate this article.

[2] You can listen to the full interview on the Institute for the Study of Intelligence Methodology website at: https://www.intelligence-research.org.il/post/michael-morell.

explore alternatives—a reflection of the ongoing tension in the intelligence field between two competing forces that can sometimes be hard to distinguish: expertise and innovation.

To explore the complex relationship between intelligence and innovation, this article will highlight certain characteristics of intelligence processes and products that foster innovative thinking, as well as aspects of the intelligence field that may hinder it.

This is not an argument about whether intelligence professionals are more or less innovative than those in other fields. The article does not compare different professions, nor does it focus on the personal traits of intelligence officers.

Following the events of October 7, Israeli intelligence agencies have faced significant criticism, particularly regarding their ability to think differently and their openness to alternative perspectives, diverse opinions, and ideas that challenge existing assumptions.

This article was originally written before October 2023 and does not directly address those events, although minor revisions were made in response to them. While some information has since become publicly available, there is still not enough available data to thoroughly analyze the role of innovation in this intelligence failure. In any case, that is not the purpose of this article.

Instead, the article focuses on how intelligence work methods, underlying assumptions, and core practices either encourage or constrain innovation. By understanding both the driving and limiting factors, intelligence organizations can make informed management decisions and effectively integrate innovation into their institutional frameworks.

Thinking in Reverse

I vividly remember my first major eye-opener in the world of intelligence. As a young soldier in my first year in a major intelligence gathering unit, I was quickly exposed to a vast range of operations and intelligence information. My job was to connect dots into patterns, frameworks, and an overall intelligence picture, and then extract insights from them.

During one particularly intense shift, I identified clear indications of an imminent terrorist attack organized by two operatives. Excited about my contribution to national security, I reported my findings and expected recognition for successfully applying everything I had learned in my training. A few days later, when I followed up on the case, a superior officer informed me that my analysis was indeed professional, but the situation had played out differently than I had assumed. The event I had flagged was not an actual terrorist plot but rather a controlled operation involving a human intelligence source (HUMINT). The weapons transfer I had identified had never really occurred, and the entire operation had been under full intelligence control from start to finish.

The points I identified were accurate, and the way I linked them to understand the sequence of events was also correct. However, the insight and conclusions I drew were mistaken because I failed to consider an alternative explanation for the chain of events. I perceived the situation as from the perspective of the misguided terrorist operative, but in reality, I was up against a creative and determined intelligence organization that deliberately shaped the operative's perception of reality.

For over two decades, this experience has stayed with me as a reminder of the importance of seeking alternative explanations for intelligence data—and, consequently, acting differently based on those insights. Never assume, I told myself, that the way you connect the dots is the only possible way to do so.

Key Drivers of Innovation in Intelligence

I have yet to formally define the two central concepts of this discussion—intelligence and innovation. Nevertheless, the previous example serves as a useful entry point for identifying factors that drive innovation in intelligence work. I will focus on the most significant ones, both those unique to intelligence compared to other fields, and those with particularly strong potential for fostering innovation.

1. The Adversarial challenge

One of the most defining characteristics of intelligence work, setting it apart from many other fields, is the need to contend with adversaries. Intelligence aims to anticipate enemy intentions and capabilities—to assess "the red side"—and determine strategies to counter it to secure "the blue side's" advantage. This dynamic creates a constant state of competition, compelling intelligence professionals to innovate continuously in order to stay ahead.

Unlike the business world, where competition often revolves around industry competitors, evolving consumer demands, or environmental changes (all of which exist in intelligence work as well), intelligence work differs in that the **adversary is actively working against you**. Success requires outmaneuvering the opponent, devising new and unanticipated methods to gather intelligence, disrupt enemy plans, or respond after previous tactics have been identified and neutralized. Intelligence work is, therefore, an unending learning competition.

This is the difference between running a race and engaging in judo. One is a process of continuous self-improvement and skill development, while the other requires adaptive strategies designed to counteract an actively evolving opponent. You must assume that the adversary has studied all prior encounters and is prepared for your tactics. Thus, deception and innovation often outweigh sheer strength.

The role of the adversary was a key factor in Hamas's deception campaign preceding the October 7, 2023, attack on Israel. While this tragic intelligence failure demonstrated an inability to rethink established assumptions, it nonetheless highlights the core

challenge: intelligence professionals do not merely face an evolving reality but a constantly adapting enemy.

The example of judo (or any other interactive sport) effectively illustrates **the dynamic nature of adversaries**—last year's Hezbollah is not the same as today's, just as Russian espionage has evolved over the years. Using the same intelligence-gathering or counterintelligence methods and expecting them to yield the same results is no longer feasible.

While some modern intelligence missions are not focused on adversaries—such as tackling civilian challenges or adapting to social and technological shifts, the core of intelligence work still revolves around opponents who conceal their intentions and actions while constantly refining their tactics. This serves as a major driver of innovation, or perhaps more accurately, the ultimate test of intelligence advancements: can we surprise the adversary more than we did last time?

2. The Nature of Secrecy

Many organizations and businesses protect trade secrets, proprietary processes, or confidential customer information. However, in intelligence, secrecy functions differently. Intelligence work revolves around both securing one's own secrets and uncovering those of the adversary. The intelligence process itself is defined by the need to penetrate deliberate concealment, which demands innovative thinking and problem-solving.

The routine experience of every intelligence officer involves navigating a world of hidden information, finding gaps, and piecing together fragmented insights. Intelligence professionals must constantly search for alternative access points and unconventional methods and cross-reference different perspectives in order to ascertain whether their discovery is truly secret or not. This demands both intellectual and practical efforts to "peek" from various angles, seeking unintentional cracks and gaps in order to uncover the hidden piece of information. Beyond the "puzzling" nature of secrets, which inherently requires multiple viewpoints (a clear sign of innovation), there's another equally significant aspect: simply adding more resources doesn't necessarily lead to better intelligence outcomes. For example, if we aim to access information stored on an isolated computer network, increasing resources for attempts via the internet isn't a promising strategy. Sometimes, only a completely different approach can yield results.

3. Encouraging Contrarian Thinking

Intelligence organizations, both formally and informally, encourage diverse perspectives and alternative analyses. This manifests in two critical ways:

First, intelligence favors **analytical pluralism**, rather than focusing on a single hypothesis, analysts explore multiple working assumptions, scenarios, and courses of

action. This approach fosters debate, prevents groupthink, and enables consideration of multiple angles.

Second, beyond structured scenario-building, intelligence professionals—regardless of rank or seniority—are **encouraged to challenge prevailing views**. This ethos of intellectual diversity is meant to ensure that dissenting opinions are heard and considered. In intelligence, innovation is often driven by those willing to question established narratives and offer fresh perspectives.

Following the intelligence failures of October 7, significant criticism emerged regarding the suppression of dissenting voices—particularly reports from female intelligence analysts of the 8200 unit and female monitor observers who raised concerns that were dismissed. These failures underscore the importance of fostering an environment where challenging conventional wisdom is not just allowed but seen as essential and actively encouraged.

The fourth driver of innovation might seem unusual to those coming from the business world, but for those operating in an intelligence and [military] operational organization, it is completely logical—there is no requirement to prove profitability for an innovative product.

In recent years, I have come across many companies that conduct ideation processes to identify the next generation of their product—the game changer that could capture the market on a large scale. Many of them introduce a built-in constraint, that acts as a filter for screening prospective ideas, often in the form of projected sales volume. In the intelligence world, particularly in intelligence operations, this is not always the case.

As public organizations, intelligence bodies inherently differ in how they assess the cost of a new development and the “profit” it generates. Revenue is typically not a key metric. Moreover, even “market size”—the number of times a given development can be used—is not always relevant. In intelligence, certain objectives and intelligence collection requirements (ICRs) are understood from the outset to be unique, time-sensitive, or impactful in a way that justifies their pursuit regardless of frequency. As a result, there are cases where no strict budgetary or resource limitation is set as a precondition before initiating a project.

This does not mean resources are unlimited—there are always constraints such as personnel, available funding, expertise, time, and more. However, the common business-oriented mindset of “Is this idea financially viable?” does not apply to intelligence operations that are inherently one-time efforts. Removing this mental barrier in the early stages of conceptualization is crucial, and practical limitations can always be addressed later through resource allocation adjustments or by identifying additional uses for the newly developed capability.

If we already adopt business terminology and acknowledge that the question of “demand” for an innovative product is not necessarily relevant, we can also recognize a

unique aspect of the “supply” side. In many cases, intelligence organizations operate without external partners working on the same target, ICR, or adversary (though this trend has shifted somewhat in recent years). With no external partners to draw solutions from, the full burden of innovation rests on the intelligence organization itself. This requires developing new solutions independently, and also creating mechanisms that enable continuous, sustainable innovation rather than one-off breakthroughs.

In practice, **this habit of self-reliance also has a downside**, which manifests in cases where more than one organization develops solutions tailored to its unique needs to meet its own “standard,” without considering whether a similar need or solution already exists within a counterpart organization.

The last driver of innovation I will mention here is particularly characteristic of the world of HUMINT (human intelligence) and, to some extent, to operational fields. It involves **direct engagement with a human adversary—an individual—in real-time**. Intelligence officers, case officers, handlers, field investigators, and others who interact (sometimes physically) with an individual and are required to extract sensitive information or persuade them to act against their natural instincts operate, in my view, are at the highest level of creativity required in intelligence work. The combination of direct interaction, the necessity to respond instantly to changes, and the human-personal element (on both sides) demands not only preparation and selection of innovative tools and techniques but also their precise application to succeed in the challenge.

True, one could argue that human nature remains constant and that the HUMINT world has relied on the same levers for thousands of years. However, the fact that this discipline remains relevant and provides a unique contribution even in a rapidly changing environment suggests that it successfully integrates new components that enable these levers to function under new conditions.

Summary of Innovation Drivers in Intelligence Organizations

Engagement with adversaries	A constant competition against the “red side,” an adversary who actively opposes you and evolves over time
Secrecy	Continuous maneuvering in a world of concealment, where increasing resources does not always guarantee access to classified information
Encouraging diverse opinions	A culture that invites different and challenging perspectives, developing diverse scenarios and competing hypotheses
Independence from a “profit-driven market”	Most intelligence products are not measured in monetary terms; many operations are one-time missions

Direct engagement with human adversaries	Leveraging “human” mechanisms to interact and respond in real-time to individuals

Fundamental Barriers to Innovation in Intelligence

If you reviewed the list of innovative drivers and thought that some might restrict alternative thinking or hinder the creation of new value—that’s understandable. In the next section, I will revisit how some factors can influence innovation in opposing directions. But first, I want to highlight three key characteristics of the field of intelligence that, in my view, have the potential to limit innovation compared to other domains.

1. Threat-Focused Mindset Over Opportunity Seeking

The primary factor limiting innovation in intelligence organizations is their predominant focus on threats, often at the expense of opportunity seeking. In intelligence agencies in general, and especially in counterintelligence organizations, most efforts are dedicated to identifying,
prioritizing and addressing threats. A significant portion of the organization’s resources is allocated to units tasked with identifying threats—whether military, terrorism, espionage, cyber, etc.—and accordingly, issuing warnings or initiating effective responses to prevent, contain, or mitigate the threat.

Counterintelligence can adopt a proactive (“offensive”) approach, not merely reacting but shaping the circumstances and confronting the adversary in their “staging areas” (physical or virtual). While this approach exists, it still revolves around thwarting threats rather than seeking new opportunities to disrupt and shape the environment.

There are two main reasons why intelligence agencies remain primarily threat-focused rather than opportunity-driven:

- Mission Definition – Intelligence agencies have a predefined mission imposed from “above,” which dictates their efforts, resources, and authority. If an intelligence agency were a business corporation, it might identify a new potential market or application of its assets. In such a case, it could allocate resources to pursue profit. An intelligence agency, however, cannot simply decide to ignore threats within its jurisdiction and “shift to a different revenue stream.” For instance, while Israel’s Shin Bet possesses intelligence tools that could significantly aid in combating domestic crime, crime-fighting is not within its official jurisdiction, nor does it receive relevant resources or legal authority for this role. Consequently, the agency will not pursue new “adventures” just because it has the capability to contribute.

- The Severity of Threats and the Cost of Mistakes – The second reason is more immediate and self-evident: the intensity of threats and the cost of failure. In Israel, the

magnitude, frequency, and consequences of security and intelligence threats are extreme. The physical proximity of adversaries, the short response times required, the frequency of threats across all fronts, and their public impact create a constant, around-the-clock focus on handling threats. Any intelligence failure can have life-or-death consequences and significantly affect public security, which is often perceived as more critical than economic damage.

2. Pattern Recognition and the Risk of "Conceptual Fixedness"

The second barrier to innovation in intelligence is the reliance on pattern recognition, which, in extreme cases, can lead to what is commonly known as "the conceptual trap" (or mindset rigidity). There is an argument that intelligence professionals prefer order—they like to organize information, categorize it, classify it, label it, and define it. These activities are integral to processing individual intelligence reports and constructing broad knowledge frameworks. They are essential for understanding the world.

Some describe intelligence work as assembling a giant puzzle. However, in my view, this analogy misses critical aspects of intelligence work. Unlike a jigsaw puzzle—and unlike other research-intensive professions—intelligence analysts do not know in advance what the final picture is supposed to look like, how many pieces exist, or where to find them. They must assume they will never have all the pieces, that some belong to a completely different picture, and that others were deliberately planted by a cunning adversary to mislead them.

Although intelligence professionals understand that they are not assembling a puzzle, the habit and routine of searching for patterns can sometimes override this understanding. It is much easier and more convenient to rely on previously identified patterns and attempt to fit new information into one of them. After all, we already recognize the signs of rocket launch preparations or the purchase of dual use equipment through a company that unknowingly supplies a terrorist organization. So, it is natural to assume that what we are seeing today is simply "more of the same."

It is important to note that the ability to connect distant pieces of information by recognizing a meaningful pattern is a rare and highly valued cognitive and professional skill. Skilled intelligence officers excel at identifying similarities between a single piece of intelligence and past events from different arenas or time periods. In the past, this ability might have been considered groundbreaking, but in today's data-rich and chaotic environment, it is no longer an option - it is a fundamental skill required for intelligence work.

This innovation barrier emerges when the search for familiar patterns prevents the recognition of alternative patterns, especially new ones that have never been encountered before. In the unique language of the intelligence field, we are all taught about the danger of being trapped in a rigid "conception" (or, in the Israeli terminology, *"The Conceptzia"*). On a psychological level, the tendency to perceive patterns in a sequence of events that are actually random is known as the "clustering illusion."

There is a fine line between the concept of "conception," which in Israeli intelligence terminology—since the *Agranat* Commission—refers to an organizational or group-level failure, and cognitive biases, which are inherent to individual human thinking. Intelligence processes are designed to ensure that an awareness of personal limitations protects against organizational failures, while structured organizational procedures should safeguard against individual errors. However, even before the full lessons and investigations of the intelligence failure of October 2023 have been completed, it is reasonable to assume that instead of neutralizing each other, these two barriers—the personal and the organizational—may have unintentionally reinforced one another.

This brings us directly to the third innovation barrier in intelligence: cognitive biases, particularly those that are especially relevant to intelligence work, and even more specifically, to intelligence analysis.[3]

Cognitive biases are systematic errors in thinking that affect all humans when interpreting, processing, and evaluating information. Despite extensive research on the subject, there is no single framework that encompasses all cognitive biases, especially when applied to intelligence analysis. Some well-known biases include anchoring bias, confirmation bias, and the ostrich effect, but there are many others. One possible classification of cognitive biases in intelligence work divides them into biases in assessing information, biases in estimating probabilities, and biases in determining causality. Just like other cognitive phenomena—such as fixednedd and logical fallacies—cognitive biases are particularly prevalent in intelligence work compared to many other fields. This is because intelligence is fundamentally based on data and information. Intelligence work constantly refines the ability to process raw data and information, which describe individual details and past events, and transform them into knowledge and insights, which provide context and shape future assessments.[4]

Cognitive biases are a significant barrier to innovation, not just a potential risk to the quality of intelligence products, due to a combination of two main reasons.

The first reason relates to the shared characteristic of many cognitive biases—humans' tendency to gravitate toward recurring patterns or predictable structures that simplify thinking, offering a "mental shortcut." This shortcut boosts efficiency in processing information, allowing us to quickly understand and assess large amounts of data without dwelling on trivial, obvious, or repetitive aspects. However, this shortcut reduces our ability to critically examine the "edges" of these patterns. Without an external process compelling us to overcome cognitive biases, we are left with a preference for the familiar and known, rather than the new or unexpected.

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[3] For further information on cognitive biases affecting intelligence work, please visit the Institute for Intelligence Methodology Research's website at: https://www.intelligence-research.org.il/post/cognitive-biases

[4] Shalom, D. and Levy, L. (2020). The Theory of Intelligence Research in Aman – Intelligence in an Era of Change, Internal Publication, p. 78.

Secondly, there are three primary cognitive biases that are especially prevalent in the intelligence field, and the unique labels given to them can largely explain the limitations they impose on intelligence thinking:

1. Failure of imagination
2. A bias towards classified over open sources
3. Mirror-imaging bias - The tendency to interpret cultural information through our own cultural context, rather than that of our adversaries

The most influential research into the impact of these biases on intelligence work was introduced in the book The Psychology of Intelligence Analysis by Richards Heuer[5] and have since been expanded within the intelligence community.

It seems that these three core biases were evident—based on current reports—even in the period leading up to the surprise attack on October 7.

A fourth factor that stifles innovation is the lack of competition, or more precisely, very limited competition. It may sound strange to discuss competition in the context of public organizations, as they are often monopolies in their field. Since having many overlapping entities could lead to chaos, we seek innovation but not complete disorder.

Nonetheless, it is important to make it clear: the scarcity of competition hinders innovation. A monopoly tends to solidify its position through bureaucratic systems, entrenched habits, and predefined responses that lower the motivation for change. In intelligence, a monopoly can even use secrecy to block essential questions that could lead to positive disruption or prevent new players from entering the field.

In the previous chapter, I mentioned that the absence of external “supply” partners can drive innovation. Without someone learning from or ask for ideas, the organization is forced to create new methods, technologies, and applications. But what happens once these have already been developed, embedded, and proven effective over time? This is the point where the lack of competition starts to show its effects. The effectiveness of these methods and technologies gradually diminishes, yet without competition, we may stick to what is familiar, simply because it is what we know.

One of the best examples of this barrier in recent years became evident only in retrospect, once the barrier was removed. It refers to a relatively wide range of technologies that were once the exclusive domain of the intelligence community due to its control over certain centralized resources, or because complementary and competing technologies in the civilian market were not mature enough—such as satellite imaging and image processing, language processing, artificial intelligence applications for text, data, and images, drones, and more.

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[5] Richards, J. & Heuer Jr. (1999). Psychology of Intelligence Analysis, Central Intelligence Agency. Intelligence Agency https:// www.ialeia.org/docs Psychology_of_Intelligence_Analysis.pdf

Dramatic technological changes, mainly the reduction in cost and the “democratization” of these technologies, created competition between capabilities developed internally and those that can now be purchased from civilian companies. This abundance of options gradually led to a situation where the internal technology and communications divisions of the intelligence community began to adopt commercial technologies on a large scale, as these technologies proved to be more effective and cheaper in the long run than what they could provide. At the same time, recognizing the advantage of civilian competition enables intelligence agencies to focus their critical technological development resources on unique applications for which there is no civilian alternative. In this sense, not only did the removal of the barrier lead to its identification afterward, but it also effectively increased and focused all the innovation resources available to the organizations.

The last innovation barrier I will mention is the **absence of resource constraints** in specific scenarios. The absence of resource constraints was already indirectly discussed in the section on factors that enhance innovation, but I chose to highlight it here because it has the potential to hinder innovation.

In the early stages of thinking about a new problem or new solutions, removing constraints is beneficial. It eliminates (at least partially) the discussion about the costs of a method, process, or new technological tool that hasn’t been developed yet, allowing the focus to be placed solely on the most relevant cases for discussion: If we find an excellent solution that we recognize as having enormous potential, our motivation to seek resources for it will be greater—even at the expense of existing or alternative directions that hold less value.

The problem arises when we know, even subtly, that there will be no resource issues later when it’s time to implement the new solution. To understand the issue, we need to examine the lack of resource constraints from two complementary perspectives.

On one side, the absence of a real constraint reduces the motivation to look for other solutions, but it also diminishes the ability to find them. The basic human tendency is to prefer something that works and gradually expand it (a larger, heavier tool, with a greater range…). This preference is clearly visible in the defense world when presenting new versions of weapons systems or technologies—before describing their value or new features, the focus is placed on increased throughput, storage, and carrying capacity.

When this preference meets the scale of the threat and its severity, it may create a strong tendency to stay on the existing track instead of seeking out and discovering other alternatives, which almost always start with more limited capabilities. On the complementary side, even when a new approach or capability is developed, it is added to the existing one rather than replacing it. In the intelligence world, it is hard to let go of an existing capability, even when continuing to support it hinders the development of alternatives. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as “both-and" (i.e., keeping the old while adding the new, instead of choosing between them).

In one of the dramatic discussions, I participated in regarding the formulation of a multi-year plan for one of the intelligence organizations, the discussion leader, at the level of a division head, asked for the program to include a list of systems that would be shut down during the program's expected years of operation. "Too often, we find ourselves shutting down a system long after it is no longer useful. Imagine what would happen if we shut down half of them in advance and redirected the resources to a new system." Therefore, the implication of "both-and" thinking without resource constraints is that there is no need to choose between alternatives. When this is the case, the contribution of innovation will inevitably be very partial.

Summary of Innovation Barriers in Intelligence Organizations:

Focus on threats	Prioritizing the neutralization of threats over exploiting opportunities, fixed goals that cannot be changed, the intensity of the threat, and the "cost of error"
Pattern-seeking	Reliance on patterns to fill information gaps, "the concept" (*Conceptzia*)
Cognitive biases	Human cognitive failures, intelligence-specific biases: failure of imagination, preference for designated sources, interpreting information through our cultural lens rather than the adversary's
Lack of "competition"	Exclusive responsibility for a target, method, or tool, preference for "in-house" solutions
Lack of resource constraints	Reduced motivation to seek alternative solutions (cheaper, but perhaps also more creative)

What is Innovation?

So far, I have refrained from providing a definition of "innovation," and for good reason. In the broader world, there has been a dramatic rise in its use – and a parallel dilution in its meaning - in recent decades. Most large and medium-sized companies have set up innovation bodies and processes, but at the same time, the term has become a "buzzword" that is not seen as necessary to continue making constant changes that ensure the company's continued relevance. Within intelligence organizations, there is also significant cynicism toward the term.

Similarly, there has been constant growth and dilution of both academic and practical definitions of the term. To avoid a fruitless discussion, I will use a practical working

definition of innovation,[6] one I apply in my professional work: “Thinking and acting differently to achieve your goals.”

This definition emphasizes not only the thought process and the ability to generate new ideas but also their implementation and the creation of value based on a different perspective.

As seen here, this definition does not differentiate between small-scale and large-scale innovation, between incremental and disruptive innovation, or between creating something entirely new and adopting an existing concept that had not been used before. In this “innovation marketplace,” according to this definition, there is room for everyone. This, perhaps, is the first explanation for the tension between fostering and resisting innovation in the intelligence world, as I have described so far: the unique interplay of forces will likely never result in an absolute preference for either innovation or conservatism. Innovation has always existed within the intelligence community and will continue to do so, long before the term “innovation” was even coined.

Neglecting to discuss this tension could confine us to lower levels of innovation implementation and limit the potential for creating new value within the organization and its outputs. However, a thoughtful discussion of these issues could lead to far more significant breakthroughs, as will be demonstrated in the final section of this article. This issue is particularly important when recognizing that conservatism and innovation within an organizational system are not equal forces. A system’s structure and procedures define it and ensure its stability, while innovation challenges these frameworks and seeks to introduce change. At first glance, innovation seems to have a weaker starting position. However, precisely because it often operates “on the fringes” or “under the radar,” it sometimes has the potential to evolve into disruptive innovation, as originally described by Professor Clayton Christensen of Harvard University.[7]

What Drives Innovation Can Also Hinder It

In reviewing both lists—factors that promote innovation and obstacles to innovation within intelligence workflows, I have pointed out that the same factor can serve as a catalyst for fresh thinking, introducing new directions or creative solutions to urgent problems, while simultaneously fostering resistance, entrenchment, or a desire to protect existing practices from change.

This apparent contradiction is not surprising, it ties into the principle of continuous learning, which Michael Morell discussed and which I mentioned at the beginning of this article. Intelligence organizations, like intelligence professionals (and their adversaries),

[6] 6 Levav, A (2021). What do we talk about when we talk about innovation?, SIT https://www.sitsite.com//what-do-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-innovation-2

[7] For further reading on disruptive innovation: https://www.christenseninstitute.org/key-concepts/disruptive-innovation-2

function as learning entities. As such, they are continuously engaged in cycles of deconstruction and reconstruction, drafting and refining, dismantling existing structures, and building new ones in their place.

If these were two entirely separate processes, first dismantling and then rebuilding—it would be much easier to pause between them, introduce innovative elements at the exact moment when openness to change is at its peak, and then reconstruct with new, creative alternatives. To clarify—structures do not necessarily have to be tangible, such as a technological system or an intelligence-gathering network. They can also be intangible, such as the sequence of steps in a workflow, a diagram mapping the relationships within a terrorist cell, or the interconnections between multiple future scenarios.

However, **dismantling and assembling are not** separate processes—they are intertwined and occur simultaneously, sometimes repeatedly, within the mind of a lone researcher or an operative. Likewise, **the transition to action**, which stems from the intelligence assessment or an operational directive, is not always distinct from them. It resides in the intelligence officer's mind, always present in the background, introducing considerations of feasibility and likelihood of success—factors that shape the imagination, which is meant to push boundaries. "Will this work?" "Is this practical?" These questions should be the next phase in the innovation process. Yet, the heavy workload, risks, and intensity of intelligence work—especially in Israel—often lead to prioritizing time constraints and feasibility over exploring new possibilities.

In such a scenario, the dismantling stage merely creates a false sense of innovation. In reality, what follows is a quick return to previous solutions, pre-existing "solution," with minor refinements and adjustments, rather than a broader and more daring reassessment. After another cycle of dismantling, reassembling into the previous framework becomes even faster and easier. While there is always room for further modifications, the overall direction has already been cemented. The potential for innovation, shaped by the need to counter an adversary operating in a secretive environment, may ultimately favor solutions that seem more reliably effective—especially when incorporating lessons from past incidents or adapting tools that have worked in one intelligence field to another.

A Brief Summary

This article has explored some of the factors that drive innovation within intelligence organizations, as well as those that hinder it. There are additional elements that could be discussed, such as the ingrained value of skepticism among intelligence personnel, internal competition between units, the vast access to data, a strong sense of mission, the young age at which specialization begins, and the rigorous selection process for individuals with high potential. Similarly, I could have delved further into barriers to innovation, such as compartmentalization, information security, and the system's relative insularity from external developments. Nevertheless, this is an appropriate point to pause and assess the broader implications of these insights.

Veterans of the intelligence community play a significant role in Israel's civilian entrepreneurial and technological ecosystem, spanning startups, established tech firms, venture capital funds, academia, and more. This phenomenon was highlighted in Start-Up Nation, the well-known book by Saul Singer and Dan Senor. The authors identified military service and Israel's security challenges as one of the two main drivers of the country's success in this domain—the other being immigration.

While I do not have precise statistics on the extent of intelligence veterans' involvement in entrepreneurship, whether technological, operational, or otherwise, public perception renders this question almost irrelevant. Graduates of IDF intelligence units, the Shin Bet, and the Mossad are widely seen as individuals whose very participation in a venture, initiative, or startup inherently signals potential for innovation and success. This perception is reinforced not only by frequent coverage in both mainstream and defence publications[8] but also by specialized military training programs that integrate combat soldiers into technological intelligence units, equipping them with broader career opportunities in the civilian sector.[9]

While writing, I spoke with around twenty employees and managers, some of them very senior, including active and retired personnel from AMAN, Shin Bet, and Mossad. The overall picture they painted is, of course, more complex, and this is what I've tried to describe here. Significant service in the field of intelligence does not inherently lead to innovative thinking. In fact, like in many other fields, experience and specialization can be a reliable support that, consciously or unconsciously, prevents fresh and challenging thinking. Many other factors influence the outcome of innovation, such as personal traits, the specific area of work, and direct and indirect management patterns.

One important factor I haven't yet mentioned, but which deserves significant attention, is the difference between the routine activities of organizations, during focused efforts, in operations, and certainly in times of war. Each of these situations has different characteristics, stemming from the nature of the task, the units involved, the organizational structure, the level of risk, and the time element.

For instance, in an operation, there is more room for innovation, driven by the need to respond quickly, often to specific situations, to bring together multidisciplinary teams under unified command, to deal with constraints that prevent the use of existing tools,

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[8] Behar, R. (2016). Inside Israel's Secret Startup Machine, Forbes.com. https://www.forbes.com/sites/richardbehar/2016/05/11/inside-israels-secret-startup-machine/?sh=31626d571a51 Mazor, G., & Miller, Z. (2014). Trenches to Traction: How Israel's Elite Intelligence Unit Powers the Startup Nation. YouTube. https://youtu.be/zp1SWPgb0WQ?si=bKl9iB9pHBDtzQQ7 Dvori, N. (2019). "The Battle Over 8200 Veterans and the Huge Salaries", 12-N. https://mobile.mako.co.il/news-money/economy-q1_2019/Article-dbfc249fd6b9861004.htm S. (2021). "A Small Unit, a Big Bang", Calcalist Online. https://newmedia.calcalist.co.il/magazine-07-01-21/m01.html

[9] Yehoshua, Y. (2022). "The Chief of Staff's Plan: Combat Soldiers Will Be Able to Join Unit 8200 at the End of Their Service", Ynet https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/rjvemofkq8

and to require non-conventional approaches thinking. In contrast, in routine settings, there might be a preference for strengthening and fully utilizing existing proven capabilities, and the challenge of motivating change is greater. In cases of concentrated efforts, you get a mix of routine and emergency features. What's also interesting is that during operations or focused efforts, a lot of innovative ideas emerge, some of which are quickly implemented for the first time. However, when returning to routine, there's a chance to filter, refine, and improve the ideas that were most successful, and to build them more thoughtfully in preparation for future operations.

Understanding the factors that encourage innovation and those that may hinder it is not a simple formula that can easily be applied to "create innovation," and innovation is not always necessary. The second oldest profession in the world is still relevant, not only because it has adapted but also because many of its principles have remained constant throughout human history.

On the other hand, in war, there is a different kind of innovation, as we can see since the onset of the "Iron Swords" conflict. This type of innovation comes from removing the restrictions that typically exist in routine settings and even in operations for both us and our enemy. The damage to the enemy can be much greater, and the level of friction and the scale of the threat to our forces require entirely different intelligence and operational solutions than those that were considered sufficient before the battles.

Intelligence organizations have always been at the forefront of innovation, but managing the inherent tensions more effectively can amplify innovation when necessary and lead to unexpected breakthroughs. In the intelligence field, surprise often carries a negative connotation, but it is not inherently bad—intelligence professionals anticipate surprises and are trained to handle them when they arise. If we convert more of these innovation-driven surprises into opportunities rather than just threats, we can make even greater strides in achieving the organization's goals.

The events of October 7 have called into question the emphasis on innovation as a core value and directive in intelligence organizations. Some argue that overreliance on innovation contributed, among other factors, to the neglect of fundamental intelligence skills, the erosion of institutional memory, and the failure to learn from past experiences. It is essential to strike a balance in intelligence work between established methods and new, exploratory approaches. A well-developed intelligence innovation strategy must be rooted not only in a deep understanding of the adversary but also in institutional memory and core intelligence competencies.