

# THE LAST ISRAELIS

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## Chapter 1: Existential Issues

A nightmare gripped the Prime Minister of Israel. He twisted the corner of his pillow, which had transformed into something critical in his dream, until he suddenly awoke, hyperventilating. He released the pillow and looked around, as he tried to reorient himself to reality. He realized that he was still deeply troubled, even though he was now fully awake. Stepping out of bed, the head of state tried to ignore his pounding headache; he had worked through many over the last week.

He had barely made it to the closet and stress was already assaulting him from every direction. As he got dressed, competing priorities and pressures turned in his mind: political threats to bring down his governing coalition, a ballooning budget to balance, and – above all – a potentially existential military threat. There were countless conventional and chemical warheads already pointed at Israel, and nuclear warheads could soon enter the strategic picture as well. The emergency phone on his desk rang. He rushed to answer it.

The voice of the Mossad chief came over the line: “Mr. Prime Minister, our intelligence assets indicate that we have only a week left before Iran will have placed all centrifuges and other key nuclear weapons components in Fordo.” The head of Israeli intelligence was referring to the nuclear enrichment facility near Qom that was highly fortified against aerial attack, in part because Iran had built it deep inside a mountain.

“So in a week we will have no more military option to delay their nuclear program?” he asked, in alarm.

“Yes, Sir.”

The Prime Minister hung up the phone and called the Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces or “IDF,” as his headache throbbed. “We are fast approaching the zone of immunity. Modify existing military plans to launch a strike in 48 to 72 hours.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The Israeli chief of state now needed to coordinate with his strongest ally. His first impulse was to try to call the President of the United States, but there was no telling how long it would take to get through. More importantly, the Prime Minister didn’t want it to seem as if he was somehow requesting permission to defend his own country. This was more of a courtesy call among friends, to put the American President on notice, since the United States could easily be drawn into the conflict in the event of an Israeli strike. Most importantly, the Prime Minister wanted there to be a historical record of his last attempt to persuade the world’s only superpower to eliminate a threat that no other country, including his own, could address as effectively and decisively. So he wrote a diplomatic cable to the President, knowing that a phone call from him would soon follow.

The cable detailed the many reasons to stop the Iranian threat by force. It also mentioned the closing window of opportunity for an Israeli military strike but included the following accommodation: “I am preparing a military strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities sometime in the next three to seven days. If, in the next 24 hours, you provide me with a written reassurance that the United States will give Iran a firm ultimatum, backed by overwhelming force, requiring the complete and verified dismantling of their nuclear program starting within 48 hours, then I will cancel the strike.”

Immediately after dispatching his message, the Prime Minister called his chief of staff. “Get everyone into my study for a working breakfast, starting immediately. Then inform the security cabinet that I’m convening an emergency meeting scheduled for one hour from now. Bring the entire Iran dossier with you to the breakfast meeting.”

The premier would need to brief his security cabinet on the latest developments and address any objections or concerns that might be raised regarding an Israeli military strike. There was sure to be a vigorous debate, even though the idea of preemptively attacking Iran had already been vetted in the international press, thanks in part to various public pronouncements by former intelligence officials. “Things that should have been left for careful deliberation by the security cabinet alone turned into a political football covered by the world media,” he thought to himself, shaking his head. “This must be the most ungovernable democracy on the planet!”

The Prime Minister walked into a nearby room, where his entire staff was ready for his next instructions. He and his aides were soon perusing various intelligence reports and analyses to decide what to include in his presentation to the security cabinet. As the country’s top decision-maker looked over some documents, he noticed that his vision had become a bit blurry. He ignored the issue, since he hadn’t slept much during the last few nights and figured it was just fatigue.

After the breakfast meeting, the Prime Minister walked towards the car outside waiting to shuttle him to the security cabinet meeting. His headache intensified and, before he could make it all the way to the door, he suddenly fell to the floor, with some classified documents spilling out of the folder in his hand. His aides scrambled to get an emergency evacuation to the nearby Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem. The Prime Minister was unresponsive.

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Within 20 minutes, the unconscious premier was at the hospital with his wife nearby. An entire nation would soon be worried about the health of its leader, but she was fretting about her husband. The doctors used magnetic resonance imaging and computed tomography scans to investigate the problem before concluding that the Prime Minister had a brainstem tumor that was dangerously increasing intracranial pressure. The attending physicians immediately intubated their head of state in order to decrease the pressure via hyperventilation; they also intravenously administered mannitol and high-potent steroids, while keeping his head elevated at a 30-degree angle.

The senior neurologist on the emergency medical team treating the Prime Minister addressed the leader’s wife and aides: “It’s quite serious because the brainstem affects vital functions like blood pressure, breathing, and heart rate. The good news is that the tumor is clearly separated from surrounding brain tissue, so it’s still possible to resect it with brain surgery. And advances in microsurgical techniques are making such surgery much more successful than in the past. Because he’s the Prime Minister, he should also be able to get the very best treatment fast enough for his cognitive function to be preserved.”

“What’s the bad news?” his wife asked.

“We generally have world class medicine, but the best specialists for this particular procedure are not in Israel. He needs the surgery as soon as possible, so we

don't recommend flying all the way to the USA. There are top neurosurgeons specializing in brainstem operations that we can recommend in Germany."

The Prime Minister's chief of staff reminded the doctors of the need for absolute secrecy: "We don't want the public to panic. And we don't want our enemies to think that the country is without effective leadership right now."

"We understand. We will abide by our professional duties toward the Prime Minister as we would toward any patient."

About 90 minutes after he had fallen to the floor, the Prime Minister was transported from Hadassah Medical Center to an emergency military evacuation plane. Following the three-hour flight to Frankfurt, the Israeli leader was carted under tight security into the emergency room of a Frankfurt hospital with one of Europe's top neurosurgeons.

During the Prime Minister's hospitalization in Germany, the Deputy Prime Minister would take over the leadership of the country. The developments behind the power transfer would be disclosed, under the strictest of confidentiality, only to him and the remainder of the Prime Minister's security cabinet. The rest of the country and the world would be told only that the Israeli premier had been hospitalized for a medical procedure. Once his prognosis became clearer, his aides – together with the Deputy Prime Minister and the rest of the security cabinet – would decide how much more to disclose to the public.

As important as the Prime Minister was to the fate of his country, a group of men on a submarine would be even more important. However, they wouldn't realize their historic role until after they enjoyed a brief, but much-needed visit with some of their loved ones.

## **Chapter 2: A Drill Cut Short**

As captain of the Israeli Navy's mightiest vessel, Daniel Dayan rarely felt powerless and anxious. But something sinister was astir and neither his rank nor his formidable submarine could help him. Why had Admiral Rafi Levy suddenly ordered him to cut the submarine drill short and return to shore after just ten days?

This unexpected command came on the heels of two other surprising developments over the last eight days, both of which Daniel had learned from the daily updates sent to his submarine by headquarters. Eight days ago, naval command relayed to Daniel what international news channels were all reporting: that the Prime Minister of Israel had been hospitalized overseas. Then, yesterday, naval command sent him an update with another alarming piece of headline news: Iran had declared that its nuclear program was now safely hidden in Fordo and therefore impervious to any Israeli military attack.

Was there some kind of connection between these dramatic developments from the last eight days and Admiral Levy's abrupt order to return to shore briefly before a major mission? Daniel searched his commanding officer's voice for a clue. But his deep and perfectly calm voice sounded almost purposely indecipherable.

"We need to resupply the Dolphin. And we'll be hosting a four-hour picnic for the entire crew and their family and friends," Rafi added. "We've arranged quite the feast for everyone. It's the least we can do, since your next mission will commence immediately after that."

Thus, even though Daniel controlled the Dolphin submarine, equipped with eight torpedoes and ten Popeye Turbo cruise missiles that could deliver a 200-kiloton nuclear warhead 1,500 kilometers away, the captain could do nothing in the face of

Rafi's command. In a simple, two-minute exchange over the submarine's high frequency radio, the admiral had summarily revoked the two-week shore leave that Daniel and his crew had been impatiently awaiting for the last ten days.

"Sir, with so little notice, we may be the only people at the picnic."

"I realize that. It was a spontaneous decision in naval command. We just have to invite everyone and hope for a good turnout," Rafi said. "Not many people can change their schedule and show up with just two hours' notice. But we should at least make the effort. So I'll need contact details for any additional guests the crew may want to invite, to increase the odds that someone will be waiting for them upon arrival."

"Yes, Sir. I'll speak to them about it."

Daniel earned his rank in part thanks to his keen instincts, and there was definitely something inauspicious about the hasty change of plans. "What mission could be so urgent that our naval exercises and two-week shore leave had to be abruptly cancelled?" he wondered to himself.

The captain knew from experience that insufficient breaks from the submarine could set his men off. Physical and mental pressure – from thousands of kilometers of water traveled in a small, enclosed space – tended to shorten the crew's temper, lower its morale, and decrease its efficacy. With enough uninterrupted time in a submarine, things had a way of deteriorating quickly and dangerously. But his superiors knew this as well as Daniel did. So there must have been a good reason for them to do this.

"Maybe this is a picnic before doomsday," he joked darkly to himself. "One last taste of heaven before hell." In the absence of facts, speculation could easily take over, and Daniel didn't have the whole picture – just an uneasy gut. Even his superiors didn't have the whole picture. Only God and History had that.

Daniel and the other 34 men who manned the Dolphin were a motley collection of extraordinary individuals who could not have looked any more ordinary. Each was of slight build and no taller than 5'10 inches for easier maneuvering within the cramped quarters of their deadly stealth ship. None of the sailors looked as if he were part of a vessel that could kill 20 million people in under an hour. And yet they were collectively responsible for the fate of an underwater craft with enough destructive power to vaporize entire countries.

Each of the men under Daniel's command was certain to feel crestfallen upon hearing about the change in plan and would be looking to the captain for assurance. Daniel resolved to do everything he could to rally his men through the disappointment. Whatever baleful challenges awaited the crew on their next mission, their responses to them would have to be flawless, Daniel thought to himself, so their emotions would need to be carefully managed along the way.

As the captain once remarked to an old university classmate, "Each of my men is like an instrument in an extremely complicated orchestra that I must conduct perfectly. One false note and the entire performance can be killed – literally, when the symphony is at sea." What he hadn't revealed to his friend, however, was how responsible he felt for the equally complicated, non-military life that continued in each crewmember's absence.

As Daniel delivered the new orders from headquarters, he tried his utmost to ignore the dejected reactions of his men. Experience had taught the captain the power of concentration: With enough intensity, mental focus could quickly divert the mind from the upsetting to the practical. The sooner his commands moved on from the disappointing news, the more likely he was to deflect the crew from their most natural and immediate reaction to it.

“Naval command is already inviting each of your family members, but if there’s anyone else you want them to invite, I need to know right away,” he explained over the public announcement system. “The sooner I have an updated list, the more notice your additional guests will have, and the more likely they are to show up in time.”

It wasn’t until the 1,700-ton Dolphin was finally advancing towards the dock that Daniel allowed himself to relax a little. He relished the sight of the submarine’s 60-meter-long, aqua-green hull glistening under the splashing water of the Mediterranean Sea. Uplifted by the crews’ cheers at the sight of the assembled guests in the distance, Daniel finally surrendered to the giddy anticipation of reuniting with his family. No matter how many times he and the other submariners had experienced a homecoming, those final few hundred meters before arrival were always exhilarating.

Daniel wondered who from his world would show up on such short notice. He was fairly certain that his wife Sivan would be there with their youngest daughter, Esty. He couldn’t wait to see the four-year old, who was turning into quite the character. “All sweetness and light,” he chuckled to himself, “with her adorable manipulations!” His mood dimmed slightly as he predicted that his two older children would probably be unable to leave their high school classes.

Standing atop the mast, Daniel peered out across the water at the shady lawn near the base, trying to spot Sivan among the distant faces of the gathered guests. Within a few minutes, he could finally make out her dark, wavy hair and the outline of her figure. She crouched down next to little Esty so that she could point out the part of the submarine where she might be able to spot Daddy. They waved to him, not knowing for sure that it was he on the mast. He waved back and breathed a long sigh of relief. “I wouldn’t trade the next four hours for anything,” he thought to himself.

Protocol requires that the captain disembark first from the submarine, in symbolic homage to his rank and because there was often a military or political VIP waiting to greet him on land. So once the Dolphin was moored to the pier and placed into a safe idle mode, Daniel was the first of the submariners to climb down the ladder from the top of the hoisted mast to the land base. The other 34 sailors were queued up in the submarine, except for the deputy captain, Yisrael, who stood at the top of the ladder, waiting for Daniel to finish his exchange with Admiral Levy so that he could go down next.

As each man descended from the final rung to the safe and sturdy ground below, he experienced a joy that only a submariner could truly grasp. With endless room to run around and swing their limbs – free to move about without calculation or contortion – the crewmembers were positively elated. The guests who had gathered on such short notice to visit their loved ones were buoyed by seeing them relish the mundane pleasures that most people would take for granted. For those submariners lucky enough to see visitors waiting for them on the fenced lawn nearby, their next steps from that final rung, after respectfully greeting the admiral, quickened to a restrained run ending in a joyful embrace.

On the far end of the lawn, facing the sea, were several long picnic tables full of delicious food for the guests and – most importantly – the submariners who hadn’t tasted such delights in weeks and were expecting to be deprived for many more weeks. Just as they reveled in the pleasure of unimpeded movement, the men would equally savor the gustatory gratification of fresh food. The cuisines waiting for them were as diverse as the crew: Indian, Vietnamese, Persian, Ethiopian, and Druze dishes, along with an abundant variety of Middle Eastern dips and meats, salads

chopped from vegetables fresh from local farms, and plenty of chocolate desserts and fresh fruits. The men would soon be gorging greedily and guiltlessly, trying to compensate for the ten days of culinary mediocrity that had just ended and the even longer period ahead. The delectable spread would also ensure that some mingling among the crew and their guests would take place, even as each sailor re-connected with his own private world for a precious few hours.

The younger, unmarried submariners would be visited by parents, siblings, girlfriends, and friends. The senior officers would be greeted mostly by their wives, and in some cases also by their children. The six crewmembers whose family and friends were too far away to visit on such short notice would use the time to call their loved ones by phone, kick around a soccer ball, have a beer, and indulge in some truly carefree relaxation.