



Know Thine Enemy: The Curious Casefile of Reuel Marc Gerecht

July 23, 2025

Featuring Reuel Marc Gerecht

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

GERECHT: I developed a fun friendship with a GRU [Russian Main Intelligence Directorate] officer. I spent a lot of time with him. It's amazing the two of us didn't get killed given how much we drank. But my favorite moment with him, I looked at him and said, "I just want you to open up that big, beautiful safe behind your desk. Yes, this one." I said, "Yeah, just open it up, give me everything that's inside." And he goes, "Okay." So he spins the big, beautiful dial, opens it up, and there are 12 bottles of vodka.

DUBOWITZ: Today's guest is a former CIA case officer with decades of work on the Iran file. He has since become my FDD colleague and he's one of the most eloquent thinkers on Iran. As a matter of fact, since he's also my very good friend, I'll take the liberty of saying he's full-blown obsessed with it. So obsessed, that he once smuggled himself into Iran in the bed of a semitruck. True story.

Over the last few months, Reuel Marc Gerecht has been writing in *Foreign Affairs*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *The Dispatch*, about Tehran's fractured power centers, the limits of its strike-back capabilities, and the preconditions for real regime change. In the first half of my special two-part conversation with him, we'll get a firsthand account of his extraordinary career. Some parts sound like the screenplay for a spy thriller. Many others, a comedy. After that, in the second part of our conversation, we'll draw on these insights to map America's intelligence successes and setbacks, dissect last month's joint U.S.-Israeli air raids on Iran's nuclear and missile sites, AKA the 12-Day War. I'm your host, Mark Dubowitz, and this is "The Iran Breakdown". So let's break it down.

Well, welcome.

GERECHT: Pleasure.

DUBOWITZ: It's great to have you on "The Iran Breakdown." We decided to do about 15, 16 episodes first before bringing you on. And the reason for that is, we needed to give our listeners some background, before we started talking to you, because you use words that I have to look up in the dictionary.

(LAUGHTER)

And also, you've been working on this issue for so long, and you have such depth, so it's really great to have you.

I want to start with your personal story, which is where we often start in these episodes. Who is, Reuel Marc Gerecht? Sounds like a Belgian-French biblical name. You must've been born in some exotic place. Where are you from?

GERECHT: Actually? I'm from Kansas City, Missouri.

DUBOWITZ: Kansas City, Missouri?

GERECHT: Yes, yeah.

DUBOWITZ: Wow, exotic.

GERECHT: Truly exotic. And the name, I mean, that obviously, my father's responsible for the last name, and my mom is responsible for the first name, because she believes that her sons should have first names that don't require a last name. And she found that.

DUBOWITZ: Like Rocky, or Madonna.

(LAUGHTER)

GERECHT: She found that name. And it's actually an old biblical name. It's technically Edomite, and not Hebrew. And –

DUBOWITZ: Didn't the Hebrews slaughter the Edomites?



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GERECHT: You know?

DUBOWITZ: Were they enemies?

GERECHT: No, no, no, they were too far apart.

DUBOWITZ: Okay.

GERECHT: Because they were in Mesopotamia.

DUBOWITZ: Okay, got it.

GERECHT: But I mean, it is the King James version of the Bible. It is Jethro, it's Moses's father-in-law. And as I always like to book out, certainly the most famous man who ever carried that name. It's the second R in J.R.R. Tolkien.

DUBOWITZ: Interesting. Well, it's a great name. Obviously, probably misspelled and mispronounced numerous times in the course of your life.

GERECHT: Oh, reliably. Actually, by my brother, who still can't do it. Right.

DUBOWITZ: All right. So Reuel Marc Gerecht, I love the Marc. French Marc, right? With a c?

GERECHT: Yes, correct.

DUBOWITZ: Yes. The only, that's –

GERECHT: You call it French. We often used to call it the Hebrew Marc.

DUBOWITZ: The Hebrew Marc?

GERECHT: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, I got the –

GERECHT: You got the Christian Mark.

DUBOWITZ: I got the Christian Testament Mark.

GERECHT: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, the New Testament Mark. All right, so you're born in Kansas City, and you decide, at some point in your life, you want to study the Middle East?

GERECHT: Yeah, I mean, to make the long evolution short, I actually wanted to do, and started doing, medieval European history. And in that process, I ran into a teacher who made a very persuasive argument that, to do medieval European history, you have to do medieval classical Islamic history.

It was sort of amusing. He was actually, he was Austrian, an Austrian White Russian. And he'd actually been an intelligence officer for Rommel in the Afrika Corps, and survived that war, and ended up –

DUBOWITZ: So wait, sorry. So this was where? At Princeton?

GERECHT: No, this was at Johns Hopkins.

DUBOWITZ: This is at Hopkins? So Hopkins was hiring former Nazi intel officers as professors? Wow. So the academy has been quite complicated and corrupted for many decades.

(LAUGHTER)



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GERECHT: I think George would put it, perhaps, in a slightly different way. But yes. And he'd studied in Cairo at Al-Azhar.

Anyway, George made a very persuasive argument that I had to do Islamic history. And as I started doing more Islamic history, as I started doing more Islamic languages, I just sort of shifted.

So I moved from the European Christian world to the Islamic one. And if you do that, and you study the classical period, into the medieval period, you have to do three languages.

You have to do Arabic, you have to do Persian, you have to do Ottoman Turkish. And I would make an argument that if you start, once you hit Iran, and you hit Persian, then it's just much more magnetic than the other two.

And Iran really has a certain centripetal eminence that pulls you in. And it pulled me in.

DUBOWITZ: Centripetal eminence?

GERECHT: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: Okay, I'll look that up after the podcast. So you're at Hopkins, you're becoming a medievalist, but of the Islamic world, and what's the evolution from there? Where do you go next academically?

GERECHT: Well, with a few diversions here and there, I ended up going to Princeton, to study with Bernard Lewis and Martin Dickson. And my primary area that I fall in love with is Safavid history, which is, the Safavid dynasty is the dynasty that actually converts Iran from Sunnism to Shi'ism. And it is really the foundational dynasty for modern Iran.

DUBOWITZ: And this is circa what century?

GERECHT: Well, the process starts in the early 16th century. Actually, it starts a little before that, because the Safavids had been a Sufi sheikhdom. They were Sufis, and they became Sufi holy warriors, and they flipped from Sunnism to Shi'ism.

And when they flipped, then things got interesting, as is usually the case. When people go Shi'ite, it's a more interesting process than when they're Sunnis.

DUBOWITZ: So you're studying under the late, great Bernard Lewis?

GERECHT: Bernard Lewis, and very importantly, I always have to mention him, Martin Dickson, who unfortunately also is no longer with us, who was a phenomenal historian of medieval Iran, also medieval Iranian art. He just was an all-around wunderkind, and also had numerous languages.

And Bernard, who'd been at MI6, Martin had been in the U.S. military intelligence, OSS [Office of Strategic Services], during World War II, and actually had worked on China. He had flawless Chinese.

DUBOWITZ: Interesting. So you've been educated by people who served in British intelligence, American military intelligence, and Nazi intelligence. So you've gotten a very good, well-rounded education, as it turns out.

(LAUGHTER)

GERECHT: Yes. I usually delete the German part of that. But yes, I suppose everyone that I was involved with, and even a few others who I was involved with, but do not admit to being in a Western intelligence service.

DUBOWITZ: So how do you go – that's interesting to me. So you're at Princeton, I guess, a recruitment ground for the agency for many years, and maybe like a number of your predecessors?

GERECHT: Yeah, those recruitment networks had almost completely fallen apart.

DUBOWITZ: Interesting.



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GERECHT: I actually looked into that, once I got into the agency.

DUBOWITZ: So the CIA doesn't recruit you from Princeton?

GERECHT: No, I come up with that idea on my own. Because I had made a discovery, which Bernard and Martin agreed with, that I didn't want to spend my life in the academe. I wanted to get out, and that I enjoyed going to clubs too much, and other things.

And so, they agreed to help me. Though, as I discovered later, I mean, all of Martin Dickson's efforts to recommend people for Langley mostly went nowhere, because the agency system of recruitment in the Ivy League had really fallen apart.

But I had a lot of inside information. I had friends who had girlfriends who were already in the agency, so I had sort of scoped out everything.

DUBOWITZ: And you've got Persian, you've got Turkish, you've got Arabic.

GERECHT: My Turkish was not good. It got good. My Arabic was okay then.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah.

GERECHT: Yeah, though, the funny thing about that whole process, and it's very disappointing, is that I'm not sure any of that really matters in the recruitment process. It's bizarre, once you start finding out.

When I was already in, I had a very good friend of mine, who will go nameless, who went on later to become a great academic, but at the time, he was uncertain whether he wanted to make that his life. And so, he wanted to explore other options.

This young man had multiple languages, lived overseas. I mean, it was really everything the agency would want, in theory. Yet when I tried to push his application, I was told by one of the senior people and personnel that, "You know, I just don't think he's a good fit."

I said, "So why? Why don't you think he's a good fit for the clandestine service?" He says, "He seems really bright."

(LAUGHTER)

DUBOWITZ: Oh.

GERECHT: Which, of course, made me feel good.

DUBOWITZ: Right. Wow. Oh, well, that may be a damning indictment, but we're going to connect this to some more contemporary events.

But I mean, it would seem that if you're going to actually go into the clandestine services, and you're going to work on Iran, you'd want somebody with impeccable language skills.

GERECHT: You would think. You would think.

DUBOWITZ: Somebody who's a complicated character, who has traveled –

GERECHT: The one thing I can say for the agency, for example, when I got in, and it's a fairly lengthy process to get in. When I got in, and got through all the variety of tests and training, and all the rest, I was the one who decided I wanted to work on Iran. And the system at that time was sufficiently malleable, that I was able to do so.

I could simply walk in to the deputy chief of Near East Division, look at him and say, "These are the five reasons that you should let me do what I want to do on Iran." And I had an entire strategy set up. And he went, "Oh, that sounds good."



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So you could actually pull it off, where, that would be impossible in the State Department, it's a totally different creature. It was far more bureaucratic.

Now, I don't know if you could do that in the agency today, but back then, you could. It was run effectively by a very small group of men. And if you could convince them of your virtue, then you could do things.

DUBOWITZ: So you become, I guess what is then known, I don't know if they still use the terminology, but you become an Iran targets officer.

GERECHT: Targets officer, correct.

DUBOWITZ: So what is that?

GERECHT: Well, my primary objective is to recruit Iranians. Now, in the agency, you can be an Iran targets officer, and you'll spend a lot of time on many other things. I spent a fair amount of time, for example, on the Russians, but that was circumstance, as it turned out, and luck.

DUBOWITZ: Sorry, why on Russians? Why would they take someone who doesn't speak Russian, who speaks Persian?

GERECHT: Because I developed a fairly fun friendship with a GRU officer. Now, I knew that GRU officer was not going to be recruited, but we had a delightful time with each other. So I spent a lot of time with them.

DUBOWITZ: Again, in clubs or bars?

GERECHT: All over the place.

DUBOWITZ: Right.

GERECHT: It's amazing the two of us didn't get killed, given how much we drank. But my favorite moment with him, who also will go nameless, is that we'd known each other for awhile and I finally, looked at him and I said, "You know, I just want you to open up that big, beautiful, safe behind your desk." And he looks at me, and he goes, "This one?"

I said, "Yeah, that one. The really ornate one, with a really big dial. Just open it up. Give me everything that's inside."

And he goes, "Okay." So he spins the big, beautiful dial, opens it up, and there are 12 bottles of vodka.

(LAUGHTER)

DUBOWITZ: Amazing.

GERECHT: That is the only thing in the safe, are 12 bottles of vodka. And then he calls a party. And all the KGB guys come in, and we start drinking, until we could drink no more.

DUBOWITZ: So your language skills, your knowledge of medieval period of the Islamic world, and your drinking skills become handy in the –

GERECHT: Yes. Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: But then, you have to recruit Iranians?

GERECHT: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: Where maybe your drinking skills aren't as important?



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GERECHT: No, no. They have less play. Yeah. I mean, without going into the too many details, when I was posted in Istanbul, which is where I wanted to go, and it worked out well, I mean, that was sort of *Tehrān-e Kuchak*, Little Tehran, at that time. It was during the Iran-Iraq War, the place was flooded with Iranians. It's hard to get a figure on how many of them.

DUBOWITZ: Iranians who were fleeing Iran, because of the war?

GERECHT: They were either fleeing Iran, or taking a break.

DUBOWITZ: Right. Or, I imagine, Iranian intelligence operating there.

GERECHT: Oh, yeah. No, Iranian intelligence was all over the place. They were good at killing people, I'm not sure they were good at much else, but no, it was quite the place.

There were huge neighborhoods in Istanbul, where the lingua franca was Persian, not Turkish. That's all gone now. But at that time, it was an extremely vibrant place.

And back then, the United States issued a lot of visas to Iranians. That's no longer the case. But back then, it was huge numbers, and I was responsible for them all. So I would oversee and look at everything.

DUBOWITZ: So having that ability to grant visas to United States, to Iranians, obviously, becomes a very useful point of leverage in recruitment.

GERECHT: Yeah, it's an opportunity to play God.

DUBOWITZ: Right. Okay, so you're in Istanbul, I assume, other places, recruiting Iranians, as an Iran targets officer. I'm sure you're quite ambitious, and you're recruiting lots of Iranians, while also killing your liver, and –

GERECHT: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: – and taking considerable risk. How long are you in the CIA for?

GERECHT: Nine years.

DUBOWITZ: So you're nine years in the CIA. And then, tell us a little bit about – you leave the CIA, but you've never been to Iran, correct?

GERECHT: That is correct. The agency wouldn't allow officers to go inside of Iran. It did not run those type of operations. So I would send Iranians back in, of course, but I did not go in personally, which is the reason why I decided to go in, after I left the agency.

And so, I then actually went into Iran in a truck, with assistance from an individual who was quite considerate, and quite brave.

DUBOWITZ: One sec. So you smuggle yourself into Iran, right? Presumably from some border country, you go inside Iran in a truck, you're hidden in a truck.

GERECHT: Yeah. I mean, I would come out all the time.

DUBOWITZ: Right.

GERECHT: But at the crucial moments, I would be hidden. And yeah, I did it, because I just wanted to –

DUBOWITZ: Are you crouching behind the seats, or you're in a box, or?



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GERECHT: Ah, no, there was a box. Technically, the big semi is where you have some place you sleep, a bed, all of those things that you usually have, also a compartment underneath. And security at that time in Iran really wasn't that severe.

DUBOWITZ: So you're going through checkpoints, and at that point –

GERECHT: Occasionally, you go through checkpoints.

DUBOWITZ: Right.

GERECHT: It wasn't, I mean, in the Islamic Republic, it goes up and down, but as a general rule, internal security isn't as severe as you would think it is. It's one of the reasons why I suspect the Israelis were able to do what they did, is because they figured it out.

So it's not the former Soviet Union. Even the Soviet Union, I think there was maneuvering around, but. So I wanted to get the sensation I'd sent to other people under Iran, and I asked them to put their lives on the line, and I sort of just wanted to do that myself.

DUBOWITZ: So you're there for some time, and then you write a book, correct?

GERECHT: I do. I come out, and I write a book. The spinal column of the book is that trip, but the, it's more about more than that. I use the trip to sort of talk about Iranian history, and what makes Iranians tick.

I mean, I suppose that that was my ultimate objective. It was try to explain Iranians for people who don't know them.

DUBOWITZ: And you write it under your, is it your CIA pseudonym?

GERECHT: No, it's not. It was a tribute. It was Edward G. Shirley, and it was a tribute to Edward G. Browne, who was the great Persianist in Cambridge.

And then, it was also to Robert and Anthony Shirley, who were my favorite mercenaries of all time, who had gone to Iran to represent the English Crown. And then they decided to flip, and they went back for Shah Abbas, to represent Iran at the English Court.

DUBOWITZ: So for our listeners, I would highly recommend they get a copy of the book, it's out in print. It was one of the first books that I read on Iran, when I got started, and it's a great book. Just tell us the title.

GERECHT: "Know Thine Enemy."

DUBOWITZ: "Know Thine Enemy."

GERECHT: Which I-

DUBOWITZ: Edward Shirley?

GERECHT: Edward Shirley.

DUBOWITZ: S-H-I-R-L-E-Y.

GERECHT: I actually owe that title to my daughter, because I was searching for a title for the book, and I was traveling with her when she was a baby, and she wouldn't stop crying on the plane. And I was down on the floor playing with her. And while looking at her, trying to stop her from crying, I went, it just flipped in my mind. "Know Thine Enemy."

DUBOWITZ: I'm sure all these years later, she's delighted to know that she was the inspiration for your book, and at the time, your enemy.

(LAUGHTER)



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July 23, 2025

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Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

GERECHT: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: So Reuel, okay, so you've left the CIA, spent nine years as a CIA targets officer, you've gone into Iran, smuggling yourself in the back of a truck, you've written a book on it. And then you have a very interesting and colorful think tank career, and worked for the American Enterprise Institute.

GERECHT: I did. I mean, the most pivotal, I have to always thank him, he's still with us. Also, Cullen Murphy at *The Atlantic Monthly* helped me enormously. He gave me a big break.

DUBOWITZ: And you're writing for *The Atlantic*?

GERECHT: I'm writing for *The Atlantic*, and it was a very important break for me, because a lot of people back then wouldn't touch you, it's still true, I think, if you have those three initials on your forehead, particularly –

DUBOWITZ: FDD or CIA?

GERECHT: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: CIA? Okay. Yeah, right.

(LAUGHTER)

GERECHT: That's an excellent question, which initial is the worst one.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah.

(LAUGHTER)

GERECHT: But it was very, very difficult. A lot of folks, particularly in the journalistic world, were very pristine, and virtuous. But Cullen was a great friend, and he helped me enormously break through, as did Bernard.

DUBOWITZ: And then you were at AEI [American Enterprise Institute], for a number of years.

GERECHT: Right.

DUBOWITZ: And then we make an incredibly smart decision, recruit you to come to FDD, and help us build out our Iran program, which we've been working on for many, many years.

So let's, given that background, I think our listeners understand we've got somebody here, who really has seen Iran from the inside, has worked Iran from the outside, has an incredible historical perspective on Iran, but also. A deep understanding of the contemporary reality of the Islamic Republic.

Let's fast-forward to what has happened in the 12-Day War, which some have said is twice as effective as the Six-Day War. We can debate that, but I want to focus specifically on Mossad.

Clearly, you know Mossad, I assume you, over the years, probably worked with Mossad when you were in the agency, met people from Mossad. Were you surprised by their success?

GERECHT: Oh, I was greatly surprised. And I've written about that. I mean, as an outsider looking in, you could make an argument that the Mossad in the 1990s and the early 2000s was in trouble. That they had a lot of sloppy operations, in Lebanon and elsewhere. Assassinations either didn't work, or embarrassing, or when they did work, they still weren't done very well. And you could look at it, and you could say, "Mossad is in trouble."

But I think, after what's happened, the correct way to look at that is the Mossad was learning, in that they were engaged in the necessary activity, which inevitably includes pratfalls of trying to do, truly daring things. The type of things that the agency wouldn't do, because it wouldn't assume the risk is worth it.

Know Thine Enemy: The Curious Casefile of Reuel Marc Gerecht

July 23, 2025
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And we certainly have seen the results of that, in the recruitment operations, the covert action, the technical intelligence, which I don't think people have probably spoken about, but I'm going to guess occurred. It is the single most overwhelming intelligence war that I think I've ever seen, in its achievements, and the risks taken. It's certainly greater than anything I'm aware of that the CIA or MI6 engaged in during the Cold War.

So it's a very, very impressive achievement. And I hereby take back any criticism I made of Mossad in the 1990s, or early 2000s, because I think I was wrong. I was looking at it from the wrong angle. I wasn't looking at it – that the Mossad actually did that. Which is truly rare, it's a bureaucracy reformed, and that's almost impossible to do in an open bureaucracy. And to do it in a closed one is exponentially more difficult.

Now, granted, Mossad is small. In small countries, small organizations are much more adept, and they have greater range, and they're more informal, they're less standardized. They don't have rules for achievement. I mean, objectivity for a bureaucracy is death.

So if you start standardizing how you test things, and how you test people, you're inevitably going to create a fairly mediocre place. What you need are enlightened individuals who have the intestinal fortitude to see it through, and who personally pick good people. And I think that happened at Mossad, so it's just a very, very impressive achievement.

DUBOWITZ: Well, it's interesting. I mean certainly the history of Mossad, I mean you talk about the 1990s, and the early 2000s, but I think many people would point to a decision made by then-Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, to bring in Meir Dagan as the head of Mossad, and told Dagan, "I want you to turn Mossad into an organization with a dagger between its teeth."

GERECHT: No, I agree. I think Dagan should get a lot of credit. Perhaps that's what Mossad needed, it needed an outsider, a general, someone who was very un-Mossad-like, to come in and shake the place up, and start the process.

And I have to give Bibi Netanyahu credit, too. It takes people on the political side to stand with people on the inside to handle the troubles, the growing pains, the mistakes, and there are always going to be mistakes. And just to stick with it, while you get better.

And obviously, for Israel, Iran is an existential threat. So it adds that extra juice, that extra fear factor, which I think is essential to do what they have done. If you did not have that, you wouldn't take the type of risks that they have taken. And hats off, it is a truly impressive achievement.

It's the standard by which I think intelligence services, going forward, have to judge themselves when they operate in what we would call denied areas. That is, areas you can't freely travel in.

DUBOWITZ: Well, I want to talk about that, the ability to operate in a denied area, like the Islamic Republic of Iran, and particularly given the fact that majority of Iranians just despise this regime. Obviously, a very fertile recruitment ground for an organization like Mossad, that's willing to go in, and recruit Iranians.

And I guess it's interesting for me, just as somebody who thinks about FDD, as well, and sort of how we judge success. I mean, you were an Iran targets officer. Were you judged based on the quality of recruitment, the number of agents you recruited, the impact of your recruitment? How were you assessed?

GERECHT: The agency was very statistical with numbers.

DUBOWITZ: It's numbers.

GERECHT: Yeah, I had a high head count, but I have to be honest with myself. It's very difficult for me, looking back at it, to say this was, what I did was significant. I'm not sure it was.



Know Thine Enemy: The Curious Casefile of Reuel Marc Gerecht

July 23, 2025
Featuring Reuel Marc Gerecht
Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

And there were some recruitments that had to do with the early nuclear program, that I look back on, that I think that value was worthwhile. It was worthwhile. It was sufficiently worthwhile to put a man's life at risk. I mean, Iranians themselves choose that.

So, as a case officer, you don't really have – I don't know if that's right. It's not your position, really, to determine whether someone should risk their lives. That's for the agent, for the person.

DUBOWITZ: But I want to ask you just, I'm just interested in the cultural differences between CIA and Mossad. And of course, one could go back in CIA history, when it was "Wild Bill" Donahue and it was the OSS, and they were operating behind enemy lines in World War II, and it was a smaller, very assertive organization, that took some significant risks.

But as it becomes part of the Washington bureaucracy, and CIA workers are mostly living in the DC area, there's some obviously, of course, that are abroad, and the sort of bureaucratic inertia of most big organizations kicks in, it's just interesting to think about the differences.

I mean, if you, for example, are a CIA Iran targets officer, and let's say, you're going the whole year, and you've recruited nobody. And then, you recruit, I don't know, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh.

GERECHT: That would count, that would count. No, it would count, yeah.

DUBOWITZ: The sort of Oppenheimer, Leslie Groves of the Iranian nuclear program, and you just recruited him, and rolled him. And now, you have this incredible access within the Iranian nuclear system, that would count.

GERECHT: Yes. No, that would count. I mean, without going into details, I'm aware of officers that essentially received assets thrown at them by Yasser Arafat, at a time when the agency didn't have any assets inside the PLO [Palestinian Liberation Organization].

And those individuals' careers were made, even though they didn't really recruit them, they were thrown at them. So if you were to get a good recruitment for any reason, and it was a significant one, well, that would count.

DUBOWITZ: So it's numbers, it's quality, but there also seems to be a very different culture, in terms of willingness, not only to take risk, but I mean, to actually eliminate our enemy.

GERECHT: Well, I mean, the agency took a much bigger risk in the early years.

DUBOWITZ: And after 9/11.

GERECHT: Yes, though the early years of the Cold War, I would say, though, the risks were even bigger. And many of those risks did not pan out, by the way. There were a lot of spectacular failures, where a lot of people lost their lives, but they were doing it, because the fear factor was there. I mean, they really did believe that tomorrow could be the Great War.

And they really did believe, but I think correctly, that all of Europe was at risk. And then it expanded. So under those circumstances, you do take a bigger risk. But the United States, because of its power, because of its military forces, because of its distance, it's very hard for it to feel that fear. Really, I mean, there's a lot of rhetoric out there about fearing your enemy, and blah, blah, blah. But the real truth is, bureaucratically, we didn't, not in the agency.

So you just don't develop programs in the same way. I mean, I tried to develop certain programs targeting Iranians abroad, and again, I couldn't get people to buy off on them, because they did have a significant element of risk, and it was just deemed that the gain from them was unlikely to be sufficient to justify that risk.



Know Thine Enemy: The Curious Casefile of Reuel Marc Gerecht

July 23, 2025

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Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

I can't actually, in retrospect, or even at the time, argue with that judgment. It was probably true. I mean, most significant operations, that is, they're technically demanding to run that operation, you may not have great reward from it. You just don't know. Might work might not work.

You just don't bloody know, but you do know the risk that's going to be involved in it. So I can understand the American caution. So it's a completely different situation for Israel and Mossad, because, I mean, they are, in theory, whether you believe in MAD [Mutually Assured Destruction] or not, dealing with an enemy that might conceivably wipe them completely off the map.

DUBOWITZ: Right.

GERECHT: And so, you have to take that risk really seriously.

And at the very same time, they're engaged in a paramilitary combat, essentially, with these folks. I mean, they really are going around the world killing Israelis, and you know they really are trying to kill Jews. So it's just a different world where, even at the worst with the Soviets, they might on a rare occasion kill someone – kill an American.

There have been instances where they killed American officials. And they might capture CIA officers, and beat them to pieces. But there were informal rules at work. That obviously wasn't, isn't, won't be the case with the Iranians.

DUBOWITZ: And I guess also, and then, I want to move on from this, but I just sort of find it fascinating to think about how you operate as a CIA case officer, versus a Mossad case officer. I mean, you're in Washington, too, because now, you also have Congressional oversight, from the House and Senate Intel Committees.

GERECHT: Oh, you always, always, and it's demanding.

DUBOWITZ: Demanding, right? It's always –

GERECHT: I mean, that's why I would make the argument, the age of great covert action is over for the United States. Perhaps in the future, if China does this or that, you might have a bipartisan consensus to try to do something. But essentially, you can't do much at all, unless both Democrats and Republicans on the committees agree with what you're doing.

Because if they don't, one, you won't get the money. The President of the United States doesn't have authority to give you the type of money usually that you need. The CIA itself doesn't want to go there, because of past bad experiences, though they're very leery of doing things, even in a Presidential directive, without congressional approval. And two, they'll leak on you.

DUBOWITZ: Right.

GERECHT: They'll just leak.

DUBOWITZ: Right, that's the key. They'll leak on you.

DUBOWITZ: They'll leak on you, yeah.

GERECHT: Then you're dead in the water, in most circumstances. I mean, who cares if you have a covert action program, like supplying stingers to the Afghans? Everybody knows it. So it's not really a secret covert action program. But a lot of programs, they need to be secret. And if they're not, they're over.

So I don't think the Americans, because of our own differences in opinion, because of our leanness to get engaged, I'm dubious that you're going to see significant covert action, at least if you use the standard of the 1940s and 1950s.



Know Thine Enemy: The Curious Casefile of Reuel Marc Gerecht

July 23, 2025
Featuring Reuel Marc Gerecht
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DUBOWITZ: Yeah, that's depressing. I mean, I think the interesting thing in Israel, which is, Israel is a very chatty society. People chat. People in the political sphere certainly do, because you've got different ministers representing different political parties, all gunning for each other, all gunning for the Prime Minister.

But I think within the security establishment, when people sign that letter of non-disclosure, I mean, they take that seriously. And what's remarkable about the recent events in the 12-Day War is – and certainly even before that, I mean, against Hezbollah, against Hamas, against the Assad regime, it's the Houthis, and some pretty remarkable clandestine and overt military activities, the extent to which, most of this didn't leak. You would have expected in a chatty society like Israel, that it does. But I think when people sign that letter, they know, end of the day, this is their lives on the line.

GERECHT: Yeah, and I mean, I also suspect there was consensus.

DUBOWITZ: Right.

GERECHT: So –

DUBOWITZ: Right. That matters.

GERECHT: That matters a lot.

DUBOWITZ: Right. That's a good point.

GERECHT: And consensus is pretty bloody hard to come by in the United States.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. Okay, so let's talk about, let's move beyond Mossad's incredible intelligence successes. And by the way, I want to make sure we emphasize this. It's not just at Mossad, because Aman, IDF's military intelligence, played a really remarkable role in the successes, including, but not limited to, their Unit 8200, which is their Israeli NSA [National Security Agency]. Israeli Air Force, obviously, some remarkable achievements.

GERECHT: We may discover, or we may not, that actually, that aspect, the technical intelligence, was as important as any human achievement, so –

DUBOWITZ: It wouldn't surprise me. I mean, the ability of Israel to listen in, I think, has certainly demonstrated its success, and they just seem to have that country in Iran wired up, figuratively.

GERECHT: Yes. I mean, it certainly appears that they had multiple points of access. Now, going forward, will that access sustain itself during the crackdown? Will that access expand, or will people get rolled up?

The worst case scenario for the Israelis is, you take whatever human intelligence network they developed, that in the crackdown, which is going to become, and probably already has become quite ferocious, that they will find some of their assets, and not kill them immediately.

DUBOWITZ: But torture them.

GERECHT: Well, of course. I mean, they'll torture the hell out of them, but they'll turn them.

DUBOWITZ: Turn them. Right.

GERECHT: So then, you've got the added problem of dealing with all that. I mean, all intelligence services have to deal with it. The Israelis, I think, are in a very demanding situation, because they have to assume, even if their verified assets tell them differently, I think they have to assume, that the Islamic Republic is – would like to rush to a bomb. I don't think they can do that.

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I suspect if they have assets in a position to know, those assets will tell them they can't do that. But I think, to be on the safe side, they have to assume the worst case scenario. And that is going to be extremely demanding for the Israelis to do that in an environment which is going to be much more severe to operate in than it was before.

Maybe the Israelis have still figured it out, and they know the gaps in Iranian internal security, so they can continue to maneuver. Obviously, they've been able to successfully operate in a tightening environment, because I mean, the Israelis have probably started assassinating scientists in 2010. So –

DUBOWITZ: I want to ask you about the scientists, the nuclear weapons scientists, Reuel, because I think there's been so much discussion of this 12-Day War, and the incredible intelligence and military successes of Israel, and also, of the United States too, in terms of the B2 bombers and the massive ordnance penetrators, and the severe degradation, particularly, of Fordow.

But I think the one operation that still, for me, boggles my mind is, how do you kill, almost simultaneously, 16 high-level nuclear weapons scientists? I mean, to me, it just sort of defies logic and analysis. You've so deeply penetrated the nuclear weapons program that you've, A, identified the, let's say, the top 16 nuclear weapons scientists, right?

This is like Oppenheimer and Leslie Groves of the Manhattan Project, and there are 14 top, Fermi and others, who've been brought in to build the bomb in 1944, '45, right? It's January '45, it's four months before the Trinity Test, before we test our nukes, and the entire upper echelon of the Manhattan Project gets eliminated simultaneously.

Now they're all living together, in a remote location in the desert, so maybe that's easier to do that. But in this case, presumably they're all spread around the country. As soon as one guy gets hit, you would think everybody goes to ground.

And yet the Israelis, in a span of a few days, just take out 16 of these top nuclear weapons scientists. I mean, as a former CIA case officer, thinking about planning operations against Iran as you did in the past, do you find that as extraordinary as I do? Or do you think there's a reasonable explanation for that?

GERECHT: Oh, no. I mean, it's very impressive. I mean, two primary possibilities always pop into my mind. I mean, they could have gotten lucky with human intelligence.

I mean, the Israelis, before the Six-Day War, had a list of all Egyptian pilots. They just happened to have one asset in the right place, that gave them an entire operating schedule and roster. So, mutatis mutandis, maybe that has occurred with the Iranian nuclear program.

DUBOWITZ: Mutatis mutandis is the name of an Iranian agent?

GERECHT: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

(LAUGHTER)

DUBOWITZ: But that's another word I have to look up in the dictionary.

GERECHT: Yeah. Two words, actually.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, yeah.

GERECHT: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: I'm making a note of this.

GERECHT: Yeah, yeah. They still do Latin in Canada.

(LAUGHTER)



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July 23, 2025
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DUBOWITZ: Not really, no. Yeah, we did a lot of Greek, but not so much Latin.

GERECHT: So I mean, it's possible that they had a human source in just the right place, and that was able to give them that. It's also possible, because Iranians are chatting, that the Israelis patiently were able to use technical means, and were able to locate them via their phones, because Iranians blab constantly, and they exercise as a general rule, pretty poor operational security, and they all have families, and everybody's calling them at all times, asking favors, blah, blah, blah.

I mean, the Iranian family is probably the great enemy of OPSEC [operational security]. So they could have done that, and then, they just figured out how to launch the operation, on how to hit everybody in sequence, what was the right sequence to do it. And they pulled it off.

I mean, so it would be fascinating to know. It would be fascinating for one day, for the Israelis to share. I don't know if they would share with the Americans, they might not, but it would be great if they did, just so people could see how it was done, because that type of education could be valuable on a lot of targets.

DUBOWITZ: That's it for the first part of my conversation with the one – the only – Reuel Marc Gerecht, who I'd like to thank for sharing his captivating journey, his experiences inside the CIA, and the insights he gained about the Islamic Republic—including from on the ground inside it.

Join us next time for part two of our conversation. We're going to shift gears from Reuel's personal adventures to strategic analysis, breaking down the latest in intelligence and the recent U.S.-Israeli operations against Iran, otherwise known as the 12-day war.

I'm Mark Dubowitz, and this has been "The Iran Breakdown." I'll see you next time.