

WORLDVIEW

Correspondence

ISRAEL: THE INCIDENT IN QUESTION

To the Editors: Mark A. Bruzonsky's contribution to your issue of September, 1984 (Excursus: "Israel: A Shameful Silence"), is a shameful statement, mixing half-truths, innuendo, and lies.

He says: "Last April 12 four teenage Israeli Palestinians commandeered a bus." They were, he says, "not armed with guns." He fails to say that these four terrorists ("teenage") were armed with dangerous explosive devices, that the hijacked bus was an Egged passenger bus, that the terrorists held the passengers hostage and threatened to blow up both bus and passengers.

Mr. Bruzonsky talks of the length to which Israeli authorities went to suppress the evidence of "this occurrence" (the storming of the bus by Israeli forces and the death of two of the terrorists while in their custody) and observes that "for the first time in Israel's history, an establishment Hebrew newspaper was closed." He fails to disclose that the newspaper, *Hadashot*, was closed because it violated an express censorship order on suppression which was applicable to all newspapers in accordance with Israeli security considerations. This act of publication by *Hadashot* was condemned by most other Israeli newspapers, which, even among Israel's severest critics, are not generally viewed as being overly sympathetic to the government.

He says that "under increasing pressure from within Israeli society itself, the Israeli Government finally established a secret Army commission—its report undisclosed to this day...."

The incident in question occurred on April 12, 1984. Shortly thereafter, Major General Meir Zorea was appointed by the defense minister to head a commission of inquiry into the causes of the deaths of the terrorists. By May 28, 1984, barely six weeks later, the commission had issued its report to the defense minister and the defense minister had issued his statement. This public statement appeared in the press the next day and was reported in the *Jerusalem Post* on May 29, 1984. The statement was a full one. It said in part:

"12. The commission's findings on the personal level point to suspicions that some security forces personnel broke the law. Accordingly, an investigation will be con-

ducted into these suspicions, further to which it will be determined what legal steps will be taken. The investigation will be carried out by the investigation branch of the Military Police and the Israel Police, in conjunction with the State Attorney's Office. Similarly, disciplinary measures will be taken against a number of other members of the security forces who did not carry out the obligations they had in this instance.

"13. Findings on the institutional level, relating to the establishment of procedures for the detention of terrorists captured by security forces, are, for the most part, acceptable to the minister of defence, and he will take steps to have them implemented.

"14. The minister of defence regards with the utmost gravity, and strongly condemns, the behaviour that led to the deaths of the two terrorists captured on the bus, behaviour that is in clear contradiction to the basic rules and norms incumbent on all, and especially on the security forces. Not even the special circumstances of this case justify such behaviour. Therefore, legal action will be taken, in accordance with the evidence emerging in the investigation against those suspected of illegal acts or behaviour. Furthermore, all possible steps will be taken to ensure that there is no recurrence of such an incident."

Less than four months have elapsed since the report was turned over to the military prosecution so that criminal charges, if any, might be brought. Under most civilized legal systems, the process of investigation leading to indictment and prosecution is a lengthy one—far longer than the lapse of time to date in this case. A fair-minded person would have pointed out that a commission of inquiry was quickly established and its main findings made public.

Mr. Bruzonsky cites as a source for his unsupported allegations of "barbarism" toward and "murder" of Palestinians material sent to him by Yigal Arens. Neither of the two "facts" that he tells your readers about Yigal Arens—that he is the son of Defense Minister Moshe Arens and that he is a professor of computer science at the University of Southern California—provides any relevant basis for evaluating Yigal Arens's competence in the area under discussion. What would have been relevant—and what was missing from the article—is that Yigal Arens is identified with an extreme left-wing political group that is supported by

less than .1 per cent of the Israeli population. Had Mr. Bruzonsky mentioned this fact, your readers might have been better able to evaluate Yigal Arens as a source.

There was indeed an uproar in Israel over these events. Again, a fair-minded observer would view this response by the Israeli public as an indication of how uncommon such incidents are, and how much vitality there is in Israel's democratic instincts and open society. Mr. Bruzonsky's piece tries to distort and conceal this.

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Mark Bruzonsky responds:

Were Mr. Spanbock correct in his charges of half-truths, innuendo, and lies, he would indeed have something to be outraged about. But the information in his letter simply does not support his charges.

Some years ago, before I had traveled widely in the Middle East, before I had visited with Arab and Palestinian leaders in addition to hearing the Israeli side, and when I too had to rely on the general American press for information, I might have reacted much as Mr. Spanbock has. Indeed, I once did, some nine years ago, in a lengthy letter to a friend who was then an assistant to U.N. Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim—a letter, incidentally, widely distributed at that time by the American Zionist Youth Foundation. Now, frankly, I know better than to rely on government statements, embassy releases, or self-serving ministerial proclamations.

Let me reemphasize the main themes I focused upon, themes which Mr. Spanbock does not appear to challenge:

- The two Palestinians were beaten, possibly tortured, to death after being taken into custody; and a giant cover-up was attempted.

- None of the American Jewish organizations so quick to condemn mistreatment of Jews anywhere in the world protested either what happened or the fact that those involved have not been tried.

- Such brutality against Palestinians has become increasingly documented by the Israeli press and by independent observers.

As for the specifics of Mr. Spanbock's letter:

- Nothing that I wrote contradicts the additional points he makes about the hijacked bus or the newspaper that was closed. But