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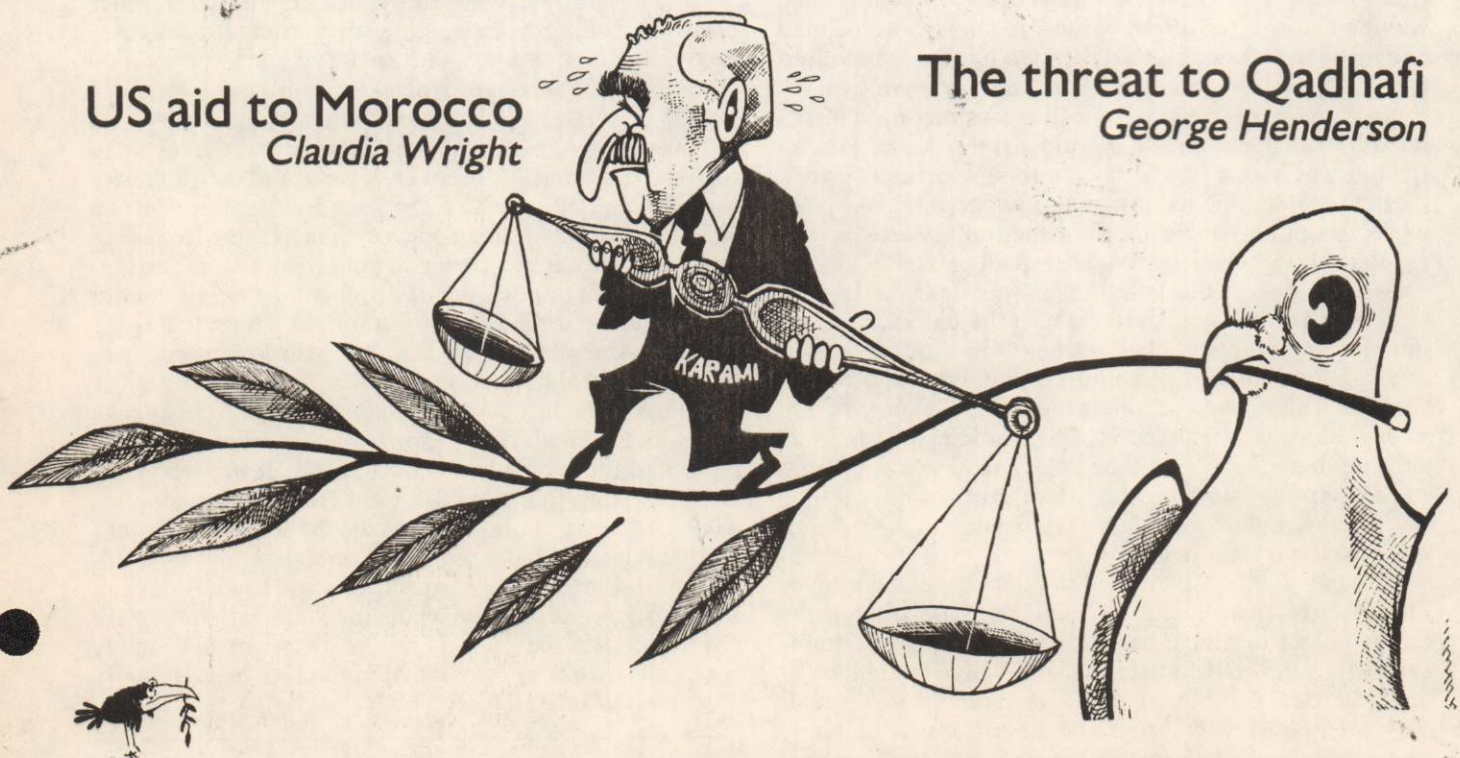
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An open letter to American Jews

by Mark A. Bruzonsky

I'm propelled into writing this open letter to my fellow American Jews by a recent sickening incident in which I find all of us implicated (however indirectly). Most American Jews take pride in Israel. They visit the Jewish state, provide a form of voluntary taxation through their contributions, and strenuously lobby the American government to provide unprecedented financial, military and political support. And they benefit from the Law of Return, being instantly welcomed in Israel. So we American Jews cannot claim non-involvement in the actions of the Jewish state. Thus the silence from American Jewry seems to me even more troubling than the terrible brutality that is officially practiced by Israel today against Palestinians.

Because of censorship by the Israeli government most American Jews may not be fully aware of the facts surrounding last month's bus hijacking, when four young Palestinians attempted to take a bus with hostages to Egypt. The Palestinian "kids" (for they lacked both the mentality and the apparatus of real "terrorists") who commandeered the bus last week in Israel were indeed reckless; yet they acted with considerable restraint. Not a

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single passenger on that bus was actually harmed by the "brutal terrorists". In fact, they let off a pregnant woman and engaged in discussions with their captives about how to bring peace between Israel and the Palestinian people. Interviewed after the Israeli assault in which an Israeli woman and two (or three) of the Palestinians were killed and many others wounded, a number of passengers volunteered that they had been well and "humanistically" treated. As the Israelis were well aware that the Palestinians had no guns and had injured no one, their attack on the bus was hardly justified, even though certain "principles" of responding to "terrorists" might at least explain what was done. But what happened afterwards is outrageous, unforgivable, and blackens all of us.

At least one of the Palestinians was not killed in the Israeli raid on the bus, during which the Palestinians still hurt no one and exploded nothing. One (possibly two) teenage Palestinian was captured uninjured and one of the Israeli news photographers took a clear picture of him being led away in handcuffs. The whole matter became such an immediate issue that even *The New York Times* ran a front-page story the day after the attack questioning the Israeli army's conduct. No one among us has a legitimate excuse for not being aware.

Not only did the Israelis within hours apply their policy of collective punishment by mercilessly destroying the family homes in which the four Palestinians lived, it now seems they may have tortured and killed in cold blood at least the one Palestinian who was captured unharmed. Yet Defence Minister Arens had the audacity to blatantly lie on American television, claiming, a few days later, that he had no information whatsoever about this. Arens has

since been forced – largely by determined press coverage – to retreat and set up a supposedly secret army commission of inquiry, though he was personally at the scene, in charge, and surely knows precisely what took place. If he does not know then he is guilty of incompetence; if he does his crime is either arrogant deceit or complicity in murder.

It's awful enough that this is what Israel has become and what the Israelis are prepared to tolerate. But when American Jewish organisations – including a number devoted to human rights and international law such as B'nai B'rith International and the World Jewish Congress – accept such conduct, when they insist on looking the other way and making excuses, then surely we are all implicated unless we cry out in anguished despair and protest in disgust. What would have been the reaction of American Jewish organisations if the homes of the Jewish families whose sons were captured fighting for Israel were blown up? What would have been their reaction if an Israeli pilot had been captured alive by Syria during the last war and then tortured and murdered in cold blood? What would be the reaction today if any of the Israeli prisoners held by the PLO were to be executed? This double-standard has gone far too far. American Jews and the organisations that claim to represent them can not stand idly by while such things are taking place and then claim to be dedicated to civil rights and human decency. Nor can they stand by while preparations are made to totally disinherit the remaining Palestinians in what the world considers occupied territories and then expect thoughtful Arabs to be "moderate" and "recognise Israel" and trust in the goodwill of either Jews or the United States.

Jews around the world have just celebrated another Passover. But how can we honestly participate in a ceremony commemorating our own people's oppression thousands of years ago, while our own people flaunt a similar oppression today with the approval (or at least acquiescence) of almost all the organisations that claim to speak in our name? Moreover, if we are to be frank with each other, the events of the past few days are but an example of what is taking place with increasing frequency in Israel – an acidic racism and militarism that is corrupting the soul of our people, destroying the integrity of our heritage and our modern institutions, and threatening the fabric of American society as the Jewish community here increasingly isolates and stigmatises itself.

Unless thoughtful American Jews begin to challenge those in Israel who are responsible for what has taken place and those "leaders" of American Jewry who have lost the ability to distinguish right from wrong, all of us will be forced to choose sides as the moderate institutions and personalities collapse into impotence, irresolution, and confusion. Some American Jews and some American Jewish organisations have claimed all along that they are different, that they are fair, that they are not simply apologists for Israel or cowards in the face of community pressures. Where are they?

Mark A. Bruzonsky, an American journalist, was from 1977-1983 Washington Associate of The World Jewish Congress.