

With friends like Israel. . .

by Mark A. Bruzonsky

On 15 April, the *Washington Post* carried an exclusive story about the alleged torture of an American citizen by Israelis in southern Lebanon. Not surprisingly Israeli embassy spokesman Yossi Gal immediately termed the charges "totally baseless". He categorically denied that Israel was involved and asserted that Israeli officers had instead saved the American from the South Lebanese Army (SLA) and turned him over to the American authorities. Moreover, Gal claimed, the American was involved in attempted assassination plots against the SLA officers who arrested him. A *New York Times* story on 16 April highlighted the Israeli denials.

This is not the first time Israel has been accused of torturing American citizens as well as Palestinians. In March 1984 a middle-aged deputy sheriff from New Mexico, Mike Huzan, was visiting his family in the West Bank where he was arrested and tortured by the Israeli army (see MEI 224). Finally, after intervention by members of Congress, he was released.

In this latest case, I have seen the actual cables - classified "confidential" and "secret" - that were sent last month by the US ambassador to Israel, Thomas Pickering, to the secretary of state informing him of the "absolutely unacceptable" behaviour of the Israelis and the urgent need for the US government to act to make sure Israel ceases treating American citizens in this way. The cables render Israeli denials meaningless.

According to the cables the following is the affidavit detailing what happened to this Lebanese-born naturalised American who lives in Dearborn, Michigan:

"I, Ghazi Dabaja, was picked up from my father's house on 12 February. I was . . . placed in a room with three Israeli men. They questioned me. I gave them my American passport. The second day one Israeli whose name is Yaki started beating me on my face and all over my body. I was also subjected to electrical shocks on all parts of my body, including my penis and testicles. I was handcuffed with my hands behind my back and hung from the ceiling naked, my feet and toes barely touching the ground. Cigarette burns were applied to my hands and stomach, water was poured over me and my body hair on my chest and arms were pulled by some people while Yaki supervised. A hood was placed over my head. I was also beaten repeatedly across the back and legs with electrical cables. They twisted my breast. I lost consciousness many times. . . On ten different occasions I asked the Israelis if I could see my eight-year-old son. . . Several times I was told . . . that my son is dead. Members of the SLA secretly helped me while I was imprisoned. The SLA also took me to the hospital. I did not have any food or water for the first three days. . . I was not allowed to see anyone or contact the US embassy or anyone else. . . Everytime Yaki beat me my face was not covered and I could see my passport in his hands."

Ambassador Pickering wrote in the cable to the secretary of state: "We had interviewed the man, seen his injuries and even allowing for animus as a result of his harsh treatment, what we had seen was neither pleasant nor acceptable." In addition, Pickering noted, Dabaja "was taken to a room two metres square which was already occupied by three men. Other than a plastic bucket which served as a toilet and a single blanket on the floor, the room was bare. This was his resting place for the next 32 days."

In the first of his three cables to the secretary of state on this matter Pickering listed the actions he proposed to take:

"We propose to proceed as soon as possible with a formal protest of these reported IDF [Israeli Defence Forces] actions to the MFA [ministry of foreign affairs] . . . We consider Mr Dabaja's arrest, interrogation, and confinement without charge to be completely without foundation under international law. The refusal of IDF representatives to allow Mr Dabaja to contact American consular officials - in full knowledge of his American citizenship - is entirely unacceptable. The brutal physical and psychological treatment to which he was subjected (the evidence of which we have personally seen) is contrary to basic tenets of human rights and humane treatment of prisoners, regardless of the crimes of which they are suspected. We therefore request the fullest GOI [government of Israel] investigation of this incident, a commitment that those responsible will be punished, and seek assurance that such abuses will never recur."

Yet there has been no investigation, only a culpable denial. There has been no punishment of those responsible, only another in a long pattern of cover-ups. And there has been no assurance it will not happen again. If this were the way Iran handled such a matter few Americans would be surprised. But this is what is happening in Israel, the country to which the US gives the greatest amount of aid and seemingly unlimited moral support, the country to which the US is primarily allied, for good or bad, in the Middle East.

Ambassador Pickering was right in the actions he proposed to take. Now Secretary of State Shultz should be called upon to state what actions have actually been taken and whether Israel has agreed to punish those responsible and make restitution. But we all know how unlikely this is to happen. The Reagan administration has instead tried to help the Israelis cover up this affair. Only when disgruntled and ashamed government officials leaked the cables did the matter become public. And still the administration has done little.

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