

Israel has lost its way

By Mark A. Bruzonsky

"What the hell is happening to us? . . . We now beat people to death? We kill with our bare hands?"

Last April 12, four teenage Israeli Palestinians commandeered a bus at knifepoint. Though no one had been injured by the Palestinians, who were not armed with guns, and though negotiations were underway, Israeli forces stormed the bus, killing two Palestinians, one Israeli woman and injuring many others. Two of the Palestinians were taken, uninjured, into custody. The next day they were dead, some reports suggesting their bodies were mutilated.

Israeli authorities went to extraordinary lengths to suppress what happened. Film was confiscated, photographs were banned, an establishment Hebrew newspaper was closed for the first time in Israel's history. Official lies were told, altered, changed.

Yet what happened was so disgusting that it repeatedly made front-page headlines around the world, as well as TV network news broadcasts in this country. In Israel itself, the killings caused an uproar. Finally, under unceasing pressure from within Israeli society, the Israeli government established a secret army commission—whose report remains undisclosed—in what now seems a successful attempt to bury the incident with the bodies.

The responsible official, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Arens, acted to cast blame elsewhere. Though in charge at the scene and actually photographed with the two captured Palestinians, he denied issuing any orders, knowing anything of their deaths or taking any responsibility. On May 28, Arens issued a statement admitting that the two teenagers were beaten to death and that "legal action shall be taken" against those responsible—but he suppressed even the army inquiry report with a "top secret" stamp.

Now, a few months after the startling admission that the Palestinians were beaten to death by Israeli soldiers, the perpetrators are still unnamed and untried. No impartial investigation has been allowed, other than the army's self-investigation. And Arens has refused to answer further questions.

But there is soul-searching. "What the hell is happening to us?"—the quote at the beginning of this comment and my own theme, writing as an American Jew—are actually the words of one of Israel's most senior commentators in Israel's most respected daily, Ha'aretz.

Yoel Marcus, Ha'aretz senior correspondent, penned his anguish early in June. Even more ominously, Marcus pointed out that Israel today has morally degenerated so that this kind of racism, brutality and criminality toward Palestinians has become commonplace.

"In justification we are told that this was a 'deviant act,'" wrote Marcus, adding, "which of course is not true."

"In the same week that we learned the bitter truth about the fate of the two terrorists, the Jerusalem

District Court was hearing a case that seemed to come straight out of the Holocaust. It concerned the abuse of Halhoul residents by three border policemen. According to the testimony, they forced children to slap their fathers and even demonstrated the required force of the slap to the children; made residents crawl on all fours and bark like dogs; stood an 83-year-old man wearing only his underwear outside in the cold of the night and as a 'grand finale' made him sing 'Hatikva' (the Israeli national anthem) and chant 'Long live Israel!' Reading these testimonies, you can scarcely believe your eyes. These are members of the Jewish people?"

Saddened and troubled by the growing incidents of murder, torture and barbarism toward Palestinians, Yigal Arens, professor of computer sciences at UCLA and son of Israel's defense minister, recently sent me a few other translations from the Hebrew press detailing similar occurrences.

"This sounds depressingly like some Central American countries we're familiar with," he concluded. "The only major difference being that the prisoners are not simply found floating in some river in the end. Unfortunately, judging from what happened to the two Palestinians a few weeks ago, it looks like this might be next in Israel itself too."

But the saddest reality of all is that the once-vibrant American Jewish community has been totally silenced into a pitiful mouthpiece for Israel crimes,

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distortions and excuses. And those who speak up—Jews and non-Jews—find themselves victims of character assassination campaigns, and worse. Former Illinois Rep. Paul Findley's soon to be published volume about the tactics and abuses of the Jewish lobby makes for intimidating reading.

In this particular case, not one American Jewish organization protested the murder of the Palestinians, nor stood publicly behind the courageous press as it battled the Israeli government. Nor has one American Jewish organization since insisted that those who beat the Palestinians to death be brought to trial.

Israel has badly lost its way. It is in danger of degenerating into a kind of democratic fascism grafted onto a Middle Eastern apartheid. The recent election made all too evident both the escalating ideological polarization and political impotency inherent in Israel today.

American Jewry has lost its voice and is in danger of allowing its independence from Jerusalem to dissolve along with its link to the universal, humanistic values of its heritage.

And the American government appears to have acquiesced in Israel's tragic distortion of Camp David into a lifeless, one-sided perpetuation of conflict rather than the faint hope it was for a fair and honorable peace that would have promoted "the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people" as well as Israeli security.

What the hell is happening to all of us?

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