

{APRIL 24 2004}

VANUNU: THE TERRIBLE SECRET

In the darkness of a cinema, a woman's voice: "Hey! Take your hands off! Not you! YOU!" This old joke illustrates the American policy regarding nuclear armaments in the Middle East. "Hey, you there, Iraq and Iran and Libya, stop it! Not YOU, Israel!"

The danger of nuclear arms was the main pretext for the invasion of Iraq. Iran is threatened in order to compel it to stop its nuclear efforts. Libya has surrendered and is dismantling its nuclear installations.

So what about Israel?

This week it became clear that the Americans are full partners in the creation of Israel's "nuclear option".

How was this exposed? With the help of Mordecai Vanunu, of course.

Throughout the week, a festival was being celebrated around the prisoner, who was released on Wednesday.

The Security Establishment has not stopped harassing him even after he has sat in prison for 18 years, 11 of them in complete solitary confinement - a treatment he himself described on leaving the prison as "cruel and barbaric". After he was "set free", far-reaching restrictions were imposed on him (e.g. he is forbidden to leave the country, is restricted to one town, cannot go near any embassy or consulate, may not talk with foreign citizens). All this under the colonial British emergency regulations that were condemned at the time by the leaders of the Jewish community in Palestine, as "worse than the Nazi laws".

Not, God forbid, because of any desire for revenge!

The security people declared from every podium that this is not revenge for all the shame Vanunu caused the security services, and is by no means just more persecution, but an essential security requirement. He must not be allowed to leave the country or to speak with foreigners and journalists, because he is in possession of secrets vital to the security of the state.

Everybody understands that he has no more secrets. What can a technician know after 18 years in jail, during which technology has advanced with giant steps?

But gradually it becomes clear what the security establishment is really afraid of. Vanunu is in a position to expose the close partnership with the United States in the development of Israel's nuclear armaments.

This worries Washington so much, that the man responsible in the State Department for "arms control", Under Secretary John Bolton, has come to Israel in person for the occasion. Vanunu, it appears, can cause severe damage to the mighty super-power. The Americans are afraid of sounding like the lady in the dark cinema.

(By the way, this John Bolton is an avid supporter of the group of Zionists neo-cons who play a central role in the Bush theater. He opposes arms control for the United States and its satellites, and was installed in the State Department against the wishes of the Secretary of State himself.)

In the short address Vanunu was able to make to the media immediately on his release, he made a strange remark: that the young woman who served as bait for his kidnapping, some 18 years ago, was not a Mossad agent, as generally assumed, but an agent of the FBI or CIA. Why was it so urgent for him to convey this?

From the first moment, there was something odd about the Vanunu affair.

At the beginning, my first thought was that he was a Mossad agent. Everything pointed in that direction.

How else can one explain a simple technician's success in smuggling a camera into the most secret and best guarded installation in Israel? And in taking photos apparently without hindrance? How else to explain the career of that person who, as a student at Beer-Sheva University, was well-known as belonging to the extreme left and spending his time in the company of Arab fellow-students? How was he allowed to leave the country with hundreds of photos? How was he able to approach a British paper and to turn over to British scientists material that convinced them that Israel had 200 nuclear bombs?

Absurd, isn't it? But it all fits, if one assumes that Vanunu acted from the beginning on a mission for the Mossad. His disclosures in the British newspaper not only caused no damage to the Israeli government, but on the contrary, strengthened the Israeli deterrent without committing the government, which was free to deny everything.

What happened next only reinforced this assumption. While in London, in the middle of his campaign of exposures, knowing that half a dozen intelligence services are tracking his every movement, he starts an affair with a strange woman, is seduced into following her to Rome, where he is kidnapped and shipped back to Israel. How naive can you get? Is it credible for a reasonable person to fall into such a primitive trap? It is not. Meaning that the whole affair was nothing but a classic cover story.

But when the affair went on, and details of the year-long daily mistreatment of the

man became public, I had to give up this initial theory. I had to face the fact that our security services are even more stupid than I had assumed (which I wouldn't have believed possible) and that all these things actually had happened, and that Mordecai Vanunu was an honest and idealistic, if extremely naive, person.

I have no doubt that his personality was shaped by his background. He is the son of a family with many children, who were quite well-to-do in Morocco but lived in a primitive "transition camp" in Israel, before moving to Be'er-Sheva, where they lived in poverty. In spite of this, he succeeded in getting into university and got a master's degree, quite an achievement, but suffered, so it seems, from the overbearing attitude and prejudices of his Ashkenazi peers. Undoubtedly, that pushed him towards the company of the extreme left, where such prejudices were not prevalent.

The bunch of "security correspondents" and other commentators who are attached to the udders of the security establishment have already spread stories about Vanunu "imagining things", his long stay in solitary confinement causing him to "convince himself of all kinds of fantasies" and to "invent all kinds of fabrications". Meaning: the American connection.

Against this background one can suddenly understand all these severe restrictions, which, at first sight, look absolutely idiotic. The Americans, it seems, are very worried. The Israeli security services have to dance to their tune. The world must be prevented by all available means from hearing, from the lips of a credible witness, that the Americans are full partners in Israel's nuclear arms program, while pretending to be the world's sheriff for the prevention of nuclear proliferation.

"And the lady cried: "Not you! YOU!"