

HIGH SYRIAN OFFICIAL REVIVES BLOOD LIBEL SLANDER; SHULTZ ORDERS U.S. PROBE

By Kevin Freeman

NEW YORK, July 15 (JTA) -- The Syrian Defense Minister, Mustafa Tlas, is being accused of authoring an anti-Semitic book said to be widely distributed in Syria which revives and gives credence to the ancient blood libel accusations of the Middle Ages.

Secretary of State George Shultz, alerted to the book's circulation in Syria, has instructed the United States Embassy in Damascus to investigate the charges raised against Tlas by the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center.

Shultz, in a letter dated July 3 to the Center, said: "I can assure you I share your deep sense of outrage that individuals continue to write such works, which clearly serve only to further hatred and anti-Semitism against the Jewish people

"I have asked that a copy of the book, your translated excerpts and letter, be provided to the U.S. Embassy in Damascus with instructions that this matter be raised with the Syrian government. I strongly agree with you that we must make our views known when confronted with efforts of this kind anywhere in the world," Shultz said.

A spokesperson for the Syrian Embassy in Washington told The New York Times Monday that the Embassy had no knowledge of the book. "Syria is against Zionism, not Judaism," the spokesperson said.

According to the Wiesenthal Center, Tlas' book, "The Matzah of Zion," constitutes "a dangerous campaign" against the Jewish people. The book is said to be widely distributed in Syria, although it is not available in the libraries or research centers of Western countries, the Center reported.

Statements In The Book

The book calls the true religious beliefs of the Jews "black hatred to all humanity and all religions," and contains such statements as "from that moment on, every mother was warning her child, do not stray away from home. The Jew may come by and put you in his sack to kill you."

The reference to "every mother was warning her child" revives the infamous 1840 blood libel which claimed that Christians were killed by Jews in the Syrian capital and their blood was used in preparing the unleavened bread.

At that time, the Syrian Jewish community totalled some 10,000 persons, including many refined and wealthy Jewish families. An investigation into the disappearance of a Capuchin friar, Father Thomas, led to an investigation by the authorities and accusations of Jewish responsibility for the crime.

The Jewish community was subjected to brutal harassment and, in one instance, 60 children of the ages three to ten were locked in cells without food in order to move their parents to make a confession. Several Jews died in prison, one under torture. An international effort brought an end to the campaign against the Jews.

According to the Center's translation of the book, Tlas writes that the West and East alike preceded the Islamic world to recognize the "destructive badness" of Jewish beliefs and this is why Jews were forced into closed ghettos.

Formal Protest Urged

After reviewing the book, officials of the Center contacted government leaders in Washington, Canada, France, West Germany, Great Britain, Italy, at the Vatican and the UN Human Rights Commission requesting that they "formally protest this revival of anti-Semitism at the highest levels of the Syrian regime." Shultz is the only government official to reply to the Center's request.

Tlas is the author of numerous books and poems which are widely distributed throughout the Arab world, the Center reported. The former President of the Damascus Military Tribunal and Chief of Staff and Deputy of Syrian President Hafez Assad, Tlas has won a reputation as a tough and ruthless leader of the Syrian elite.

Tlas wrote in the "Matzah of Zion," that "I intend through publication of this book, to throw light on some of the secrets of the Jewish religion based on the conduct of the Jews -- their blind fanaticism ..."

Rabbi Marvin Hier, dean of the Wiesenthal Center, said: "The fact that such a high ranking cabinet officer of the government of Syria could direct such a campaign of hatred and anti-Semitism against the Jewish people is an indication that the Golan Heights dispute is only a smoke screen for the real intentions of the current Syrian regime who would obviously like to rid themselves of any Jewish presence in the Middle East."

Present Plight Of Syrian Jews

But while the blood libel charge is being raised again in Damascus, the Jewish community there is now fewer than 5,000. Jews are required to carry identity cards with the word "Jew" stamped on them, whereas other Syrian citizens do not have their religion written on their papers. Jews have no right to travel abroad, or even outside their own city.

Syrian Jews have their activities monitored, and are subjected to other restrictions, according to sources reporting on Syrian Jewry. "At least in the Soviet Union if a Jew does not want to identify with Israel he is left alone. This is not the case in Syria. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Syrian Jewry live in more distressing circumstances than any other diaspora community," David Avayou, head of the World Zionist Organization's Sephardi communities department, was quoted as saying recently.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES ISRAEL AND NEWS LEAKS

By Judith Kohn

WASHINGTON, July 15 (JTA) -- There seems to be a virtual consensus these days that never since the establishment of Israel have American ties to the Jewish State been more ideal. This is the side of the coin that Israeli officials and some in the Jewish community hasten to point out lest anyone should misinter-

pret their distress at the recent spurt of highly publicized investigations into alleged illegal activities by Israel in this country.

Accordingly, the disclosure last week that law enforcement authorities were investigating an alleged Israeli attempt to illegally obtain American technology for the production of cluster bombs brought not only an angry denial from Israel, but a warning that the raising of the subject threatened to "cloud the good relations between the U.S. and Israel."

Questions were aired about motivations for the leaks, and there were suggestions from Jerusalem that sources in the Justice Department and the U.S. Customs Service were seeking to drive a wedge between Washington and the Jewish State.

"I have the impression that several factors within the United States are uncomfortable with the nature of U.S.-Israeli relations," Abba Eban, chairman of the Knesset's Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee, said on Israel Radio. His suspicions were reportedly echoed by senior Israeli officials who have regarded a series of accusations against Israel played out through the media rather than through diplomatic channels as part of a deliberate effort to undermine U.S.-Israeli ties.

A Variety Of Conjectures

Sources within and outside the American Jewish community offer a variety of conjectures about the roots of this series of irritants to an American-Israeli relationship that is otherwise flourishing. They range from ignorance about the foreign policy ramifications of the accusations and of the manner in which they have been disclosed, to a deliberate effort by mid-level officials to ruin Israel's reputation.

Some attribute the development to what they see as over-zealousness on the part of some law enforcement authorities who are less concerned with foreign relations than with a bloated sense of their own responsibility. One source suggested that "personal considerations of publicity" could be involved as well.

These sources, however, appear to agree that whatever the motivation, the officials involved have been all too eager to pick up a phone and leak sensational "scoops" to the news media about their suspicions of Israeli misconduct in this country.

A Matter Of Timing

The Israeli government, for example, had barely got word last week that a new investigation was underway, when CBS TV evening news disclosed that subpoenas and search warrants had been issued for employees of the Israeli Ministry of Defense Procurement Mission in New York and for several U.S. companies suspected of efforts to illegally export technology to Israel.

The timing of the investigation and manner of its disclosure could hardly have contributed more to the suspicions of some that an orchestrated attempt by individuals in the Justice Department and Customs was being made to embarrass the Jewish State and cause tension between Washington and Jerusalem.

It followed a string of allegations in the press by anonymous Justice Department officials that the espionage activities of navy analyst Jonathan Pollard were part of a large-scale, government-authorized Israeli spying operation in the U.S. and suggestions that Israel had misled American authorities whom they had promised full cooperation.

The State Department and White House have continued to assert that Israel has extended its full cooperation in the case and that the spy ring did not extend beyond the four Israelis mentioned in the indictment of Pollard as unindicted co-conspirators.

High Publicity Cases

The cluster bomb investigation also followed the arrest in Bermuda last April of a retired Israeli General, Araham Bar-Am, who was among a group of people of various nationalities accused of attempting to smuggle \$2 billion in American weapons to Iran. Bar-Am, who two years previously resigned from his position as chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces manpower branch amid allegations of improper conduct, reportedly maintained that the Israeli defense establishment was aware of his activities.

Officials here have not accused Israel of any involvement in the arms smuggling case. But one journalist who has followed these cases closely told the JTA that none of the investigating authorities with whom she had spoken "could believe this wasn't sanctioned" by the Israeli government. Israel has vigorously denied any connection.

Just as the Pollard case was unraveling last December, news broke of another investigation into the alleged illegal export of U.S. military technology to Israel. In that case, which concerned chrome-plating technology for tank cannon barrels, a correspondent and camera crew for the NBC evening news accompanied Customs authorities as they conducted a search of one of the companies suspected of involvement in the alleged illegal scheme.

Sources concerned about the recent series of leaks and publicity point to the tank barrel search as a clear example of an investigation that was designed from the beginning as a high-publicity case.

Deliberate Efforts To Get Publicity Denied

But James Polk, the NBC investigative reporter who covered the case, indicated in a telephone interview with the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that his foreknowledge of the raids was not the result of any plan on the part of Customs to get publicity for the case. Asked if someone had actually called to advise him of the imminent search, he said "that didn't happen."

"Part of the investigative reporting for television is anticipating what's going to happen and keeping one's ear to the ground," Polk observed. "No one told us we could go along. In fact I don't know how happy people were that we were there," he added, recalling there had been "rumblings" from the Customs Service about the crew's presence at the site.

Similarly, Rita Braver, the CBS correspondent who reported on the cluster bomb case last week, maintained that suggestions of a deliberate effort by the law enforcement authorities to publicize the case are "not true." "I don't think, as far as I can tell, there was anyone in the Administration who was real thrilled that this story got out," Braver told the JTA.

With respect to the arms smuggling investigation, NBC found out about the case by following up rumors from a mistaken source, according to Polk, who covered the arrests.

"When we first started working on that, our grapevine rumbling had something to do with Libyan authorities," Polk said. He noted it was not until later that anyone was aware that the arms smuggling ring included a retired Israeli General. Polk said that uncovering the arms smuggling investigation involved "intensive pulling of teeth."

Nevertheless, sources concerned about what they regard as a change in the manner in which suspicions of Israeli misconduct are handled, focus not only on the publicity but on the nature of the investigations themselves. They note that such allegations, where they have arisen in the past, have been handled through diplomatic channels and thus resolved quietly and amicably. Search warrants, subpoenas and grand juries were simply not a part of the procedure.

But one Administration source maintained that the recent series of investigations and the manner in which they have been conducted represent "the ordinary course that a criminal investigation takes." He stressed that the string of cases reflect no animosity on the part of the officials concerned and that in fact there was "a great deal of sympathy" for Israel in those circles.

Journalists who have followed not only the recent cases concerning Israel but also a series of espionage investigations involving other foreign governments, suggested, in telephone interviews with the JTA, that the recent cases and accompanying publicity stem from two factors now working together. First, they noted, there has been a general change in the way suspicions of espionage or other violations of American law by foreign governments are handled.

"It's not just Israeli cases. In the old days they didn't prosecute any cases," one journalist observed. He noted that a recent incident involving another friendly country -- South Korea -- resulted in indictments against members of Congress who were accused of accepting bribes in exchange for positions supportive of Seoul.

The Pollard Case

The other factor cited by journalists is what one correspondent characterized as "uniform dismay" in the Administration over Israel's failure to inform investigators about the role of Col. Aviem Sella in the Pollard affair. Sella, who allegedly served as a chief liaison between Pollard and the Israelis involved in the espionage, was cited as an unindicted co-conspirator in Pollard's indictment.

Authorities, however, were not told of Sella's role when a delegation interviewed other Israelis involved in the case last December in exchange for a promise of immunity from prosecution. The Israeli government has maintained that it first heard of Sella's alleged involvement from the Pollard indictment.

Other sources close to the Departments of Justice and State maintain that in spite of a pervasive feeling in the Administration that Israel did not fully cooperate in the Pollard case, there has been a natural difference of opinion between the two agencies as to how the affair should be handled.

"The job of the Justice Department is to prosecute; the State Department's job involves another consideration which is that they don't want to upset relations with allies," one correspondent pointed out.

Another source who has followed similar cases in the past recalled an investigation by the anti-trust division of the Justice Department into oil company pricing which caused a media feud between the two agencies much like that which has marked the Pollard affair. In that case the State Department protested vehemently when Justice subpoenaed records of foreign operations in Saudi Arabia.

Some have suggested that the string of cases involving Israel and the manner in which they have been handled reflect a lack of control over law enforcement authorities, some of whom, for whatever motive, are working in conflict with basic U.S. foreign policy concerning American-Israeli relations.

Issue Taken Up With Administration Officials

Hyman Bookbinder, Washington representative for the American Jewish Committee, told the JTA that he had recently taken up the issue with Administration officials.

"Some of us had talked with key officials in the White House, asking how this kind of thing can happen," Bookbinder said. He said he was given some assurances that a review was being made of the procedure for pursuing these cases.

Bookbinder stressed he was convinced that at the highest levels the Administration is committed to strong bonds with the Jewish State. But he suggested there are some mid-level officials who have resisted this closer relationship with Israel because they feel it would be at the expense of relations with the Arab world. "Nevertheless, Bookbinder stressed, "the overwhelming majority is adhering to the basic policy of the Administration."

In the case of the cluster bomb technology, however, sources familiar with the case maintain that the manner of the investigation did not appear to raise objections within the Administration. "I don't think that [Israeli Ambassador] Meir Rosenne would have been called into the State Department on this if it weren't interested in pursuing this," the source observed.

Role Of The Press

Beyond their resentment about how government agencies have handled these cases, some sources have charged that the press is all too eager to break news of alleged Israeli misconduct before the public, but fails to follow up if the allegations are not borne out because such news would lack sensational value. One source noted that nothing more has been heard on the cannon barrel case precisely because no evidence of illegality had been found.

But the failure to back up allegations of illegal conduct are not considered as newsworthy as the allegations themselves, the source protested.

Polk, who has been following up on the cannon barrel case, said that the facts of the case were not disputed and that its outcome would rest on whether those facts are interpreted as amounting to a violation of American law. "If there are indictments, you'll hear something about it," Polk told the JTA.

Another correspondent maintained that if the press were consistently to cover both investigations that develop into something and ones that fizzle out, it would also have to pursue an embarrassing case which broke last year involving the illegal export of 800 krytrons -- devices that can be used to trigger nuclear explosions.

Israel, which claimed it had been unaware that the krytrons were obtained illegally, returned those which the government said had not been used. Those that were not returned, according to the Israeli account, had either been used in non-nuclear research or disposed of as unusable. The case was not pursued in court because the American accused in the case, Richard Kelly Smyth, was out of the country when the indictment was issued and never returned.

PERES; POLICE PROBE OF SHIN BET WILL NOT SPARE PROBE OF MINISTERS By David Landau

JERUSALEM, July 15 (JTA) -- Premier Shimon Peres stressed Tuesday that a police investigation of the Shin Bet affair, rather than a judicial inquiry, is not intended to short circuit an investigation of the role the political echelon -- that is Ministers -- had in covering up the unexplained deaths of two Arab bus hijackers in custody of security agents in April 1984.

Speaking at a high school in the north of the country a day after the Cabinet had decided to turn the Shin Bet affair over to the police for investigation, Peres said that "the law is equal for all, and all are equal before the law ... and no one is immune from police investigation The police does not interrogate echelons, it interrogates persons."

Peres noted that in the past, Ministers had been investigated by the police and there had even been a case of conviction.

At an all-day Cabinet meeting Monday, Peres and his Labor colleagues had supported Attorney General Yosef Harish's recommendation that the affairs be investigated by a judicial commission of inquiry, but a majority of Likud and Religious Ministers rejected this. Harish, therefore, has ordered the police to go ahead with their inquiry, originally launched by former Attorney General Yitzhak Zamir.

Peres said Tuesday that there had been Ministers who believed before Monday's Cabinet meeting that the affair could be buried without any inquiry. But they had learned that this would not be possible.

More Shin Bet Officers May Seek A Pardon

Haaretz reported Tuesday, in a lead front page story, that more than 10 Shin Bet officers would apply for Presidential pardons in the wake of the Cabinet decision which had meant, in effect, allowing the police inquiry to go forward.

The head of Shin Bet, Avraham Shalom, and three of his top aides were awarded Presidential pardons by President Chaim Herzog last month for their alleged roles in the cover-up that followed the illegal killing of two captured terrorists who had hijacked a bus near Gaza in April 1984.

Those Presidential pardons are presently the subject of a judicial examination by the High Court of Justice, following challenges by several groups of private attorneys and by the Citizens Rights Movement.

Had the Cabinet agreed to a judicial commission, its terms of reference (they are drawn up by the Cabinet) could conceivably have been limited so as to avoid triggering prosecutions of Shin Bet personnel. A police inquiry, on the other hand, cannot be limited in this way.

Haaretz cited legal observers to the effect that if the High Court upholds the validity of the original Presidential pardons, Herzog "will have no choice but to" award pardons to the new group of Shin Bet applicants who were involved in the killings and the cover-up.

Press Restrictions Sought

Meanwhile, Police Minister Haim Barlev said Monday night the police would seek a blanket secrecy order from the courts, forbidding all and any reporting of the police inquiry into the Shin Bet affair.

Barlev said such an order, if obtained, could bar publication of the names of the investigators, the witnesses, the time and place of the inquiry sessions, and virtually any other relevant information.

ISRAELI JOURNALISTS HELPING ARAB EDITOR TO FIGHT CLOSURE OF HIS PAPERS

JERUSALEM, July 15 (JTA) -- The Association of Israel Journalists is urging the Interior Ministry Sunday not to shut down the Arabic daily Al-Mithak and the weekly Al-Ahd, both published in East Jerusalem. Their action is in response to an appeal for help by the editor of Al-Mithak, Mahmoud Khatib. It is the first time an Arab editor has asked Israeli colleagues for assistance. The Association for Civil Rights in Israel is also calling on the Interior Ministry to allow both publications to continue.

The Jerusalem District Commissioner, who is an official of the Interior Ministry, notified both last week that he was considering closing them down on grounds that they were "operated and directed" by a terrorist group, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Al-Mithak has been identified with extremist elements of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

The Civil Rights Association argued that closure would "violate the freedom of expression of the entire Israeli press." It pointed out that the law and censorship regulations are sufficient to prevent security violations.

The military censorship in fact confirmed Sunday that it has been cracking down on Arabic publications in East Jerusalem. It was responding to complaints by Arab editors. According to the censors, there has been a growing incidence of incitement in the Arabic press against Israel and also against Jordan.

The editors complained that the censors delete material critical of Jordan for shutting down the PLO offices in Amman last week. In the past few days, the Israeli authorities banned distribution of East Jerusalem newspapers in the administered territories.

DECLINE IN THE NUMBER OF TOURISTS TO ISRAEL

JERUSALEM, July 15 (JTA) -- The number of tourists arriving in Israel in the first six months of this year was 531,900, as compared with 649,200 in the same period last year -- a decline of 19 percent, the Central Bureau of Statistics reported.

During the first six months of 1986, 448,600 tourists arrived by air, as compared with 559,900 in the same period in 1985 -- a decline of 20 percent -- while 75,800 tourists arrived overland.

Not including the return of persons who spent up to a week in Sinai, the number of tourists arriving overland in the first six months of this year was 60,700, as compared to the 76,500 who arrived in the same period last year.

There were 7,500 tourist arrivals by sea in the January through June 1986 period, as compared with 8,400 in the same period last year, the Bureau reported. Another 32,500 arrived on pleasure cruises, as compared with 68,300 in the first six months of 1985. The number of tourists arriving in Eilat by direct flights in January through June was 35,800, up from 26,900 in the same period last year -- an increase of 33 percent.