

Vanunu affair lays bare the vindictive and undemocratic nature of the Israeli state

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Mordechai Vanunu continues to be subject to “state supervision” (i.e. repressive restrictions on his movements), even after his release on April 21 from 18 years in prison.

Vanunu was incarcerated in 1986 following a sting operation, in which he was kidnapped by Israel’s secret service Mossad and secretly returned to Israel after being lured to Italy from London by a female agent. Prior to this Vanunu had given an interview to the British *Sunday Times* exposing Israel’s covert nuclear weapons programme, which was being undertaken beneath the nuclear research centre at Dimona in the Negev desert.

Vanunu was sentenced to 18 years in prison for espionage and treason in a trial held in camera (in secret) at which he was not allowed to testify. He was denied parole or probation. The first 11 years of his sentence were served in solitary confinement, and for the remainder Vanunu was banned from speaking with Palestinian prisoners, and denied access to a telephone. His mail was and is censored.

He has faced a number of death threats and has received hate mail since his release, notably from extremist right-wing groups in Israel. Following his release, the state imposed a number of restrictions on his movements that are in clear violation of his democratic rights.

Vanunu has recently expressed a desire to leave Israel. But under the terms of his “supervision” he is not allowed to leave the country for one year from his release. He must also give 48-hours notice to change his residency address, and 24-hours notice to leave his city of residence. This would also have to be accompanied by details of where he would be visiting and for how long. He must give 24-hours notice if he wants to sleep anywhere other than his home.

In addition Vanunu is prohibited from being within 500 metres of a border crossing or port, and he is prohibited from attempting to enter any foreign mission. His telephone is tapped and he is prohibited from attempting to speak to, or exchanging information with, any foreign resident or citizen, including via Internet chat sites.

The Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) which represents Vanunu has been attempting to overturn these

restrictions and has petitioned the Minister of the Interior. ACRI point to his rather unique position as a former prisoner only recently released from a lengthy prison term, and who needs flexibility, mobility and the opportunity to reintegrate into society—a basic right.

ACRI also points out that the restrictions not only infringe his free movement, but condemn him to social isolation since he is obliged to interact only with Israeli citizens, amongst whom he has been branded a traitor or dangerous enemy. This means that he is unable to renew his life, or seek employment, or undertake any of the functions that are considered normal in a democratic country.

The Israeli government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon maintains that Vanunu continues to be a threat to the state of Israel since he still has secrets to divulge concerning its nuclear capability. They claim they are seeking to prevent him from “committing additional security crimes”. This assertion is supposedly based in part on evidence from a former inmate at Shimka prison in Ashkelon, who claimed that Vanunu expressed satisfaction at Palestinian terror attacks on Israel. This is part of an orchestrated campaign to discredit Vanunu and legitimise his continued persecution.

The ACRI petition observes that he was a technician and not a scientist, and therefore his knowledge of the nuclear procedures was limited to those areas in which he worked. American nuclear weapons researcher Thomas B. Cochran has backed this up, determining that Vanunu has no additional information that is liable to undermine the Israeli state’s deliberate policy of “obscurity”, or provide information about operational policy. He states that Vanunu never had information regarding deployment and even if he had it would now (20 years later) be redundant.

Dr Frank Barnaby, an internationally renowned nuclear physicist, supports the view that there is no discernible reason why Israel should continue to impose restrictions on Vanunu, and even former senior security officials have agreed with this.

The ACRI petition points to the fact that the quotations used as evidence in order to place the restrictions on Vanunu

have been used selectively and out of context. Even the psychiatric assessment used as the basis for claiming that he is a danger to the state was prepared using only video tapes and letters, without the psychiatrist actually meeting with Vanunu.

Vanunu's first interview on leaving Ashkelon prison was with Israeli journalist Yael Lotan for the BBC. In it he explained that the Israeli invasion of the Lebanon in 1982 influenced his decision to divulge his country's nuclear weapons programme. "It was not a real war. It was an invasion and they give us a lot of propaganda to justify it," he said.

"It wasn't a war, it was just an assault on the Palestinians and Lebanon, just radicalism to invade Lebanon and to fight the Palestinians."

"And I find myself, I am identifying, accepting the Arab's side. Slowly, slowly I find myself in the left side," he reasoned, explaining that the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 had also influenced his decision by raising fears of nuclear contamination.

He described his feelings when he saw his interview and photographs published in the original *Sunday Times* article after his capture. "I was glad and very happy to see that I succeed, that the *Sunday Times* had at last published it. So that my mission was accomplished," he said.

"On the other side I saw, now I am in their hands, they can take their revenge."

Vanunu has always maintained that what he did was not anti-Israeli or anti-Zionist, but was an attempt to prevent a nuclear holocaust, and to raise the issue for debate. "It's not about betraying, it's about reporting," he explained. "It is about saving Israel from a new holocaust."

Since Vanunu represents no threat to Israel or its nuclear programme, one must conclude that the restrictions placed on him by the state are simply vindictive. In addition they are an attempt to stifle any discussion or debate on the nuclear question. A number of comments in the Israeli media point to concern at high levels that the government's actions will have the opposite effect and, rather than stifling debate, they will promote it. They fear that Vanunu will become a focus of anti-nuclear and anti-government supporters.

Vanunu's revelations about the scope and sophistication of Israel's nuclear programme were never denied or challenged by the Israeli authorities or defence experts. Israel was estimated to have 100-200 warheads and is exceeded only by the US, Russia, China, France and the UK in its capabilities.

Israel is one of the very few countries not to have signed up to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and it refuses inspections by the United Nations watchdog, the

International Atomic Energy Agency. This is part of an arrangement with the United States, in which Israel does not divulge its nuclear capability and the US considers Israel an exception to its global policy. Israel still refuses to publicly acknowledge the existence of its weapons programme.

The double standards of the US administration are becoming ever more apparent. One has only to compare its attitude to Israel's proven nuclear arsenal, with the attitude taken to Iraq's non-existent possession of undefined "Weapons of Mass Destruction", which was the ostensible basis for unleashing war.

The *Sunday Times* journalist who did the original interview, Peter Hounam, has kept in touch with Vanunu over the years and has campaigned for his release. Hounam had been in Israel for several weeks prior to Vanunu's release, but was arrested at the end of May by the Shin Bet security forces. He was held on spurious grounds for 24 hours whilst he was questioned about the BBC interview and searched for copies of it.

His arrest provoked vigorous criticism from fellow journalists and human rights groups and Shin Bet subsequently admitted that it had made a mistake in its investigation. The ACRI said that Hounam's arrest damaged journalistic freedom and placed Israel in "a shameful light".

Hounam was questioned for four hours. After his release he complained of being held in a "dungeon with excrement on the walls" and of being allowed only two hours sleep.

"I really have to question the standards in this country," he said. "This is a country which prides itself on being a democracy in the Middle East, and yet what I've experienced in the last 24 hours I'm afraid doesn't stand up to that."

Shin Bet also interrogated the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, Riah Abu Al-Assal, in connection with the Lotan interview to ascertain whether the bishop had played any part in arranging it.

The bishop reported that he was body searched, photographed and then interrogated. He stated that the interrogators hinted that Vanunu should vacate the St. George Church in Jerusalem, where he has stayed since his release from prison.

Shin Bet also detained the BBC journalist Chris Mitchell and confiscated tapes in his possession. Mitchell was preparing a documentary on Vanunu and was arrested the day after the Lotan interview.



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