Australian government complicit in “Prisoner X’s” death in Israel

Mike Head
16 February 2013

Many unanswered questions remain about the murky circumstances surrounding the death of a dual Australian-Israeli citizen in a “suicide-proof” Israeli prison cell in 2010, which the media reported for the first time this week. One thing is clear, however: the Australian government knowingly allowed one of its citizens to “disappear” into Israeli detention and die in solitary confinement.

It is a chilling demonstration of the readiness of the Labor government to accept the destruction of the most basic legal and democratic rights of an Australian citizen, and indeed his death, at the hands of the police-state regime in Israel, the key ally of the US in the Middle East.

Following an initial report on the Australian ABC’s “Foreign Correspondent” television program last Tuesday, it is now known that Ben Zygier, a 34-year-old Australian thought to be working for the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad, was detained in early 2010. He was thrown into Israel’s highest-security cell, where he supposedly committed suicide by hanging himself on December 15, 2010.

After first denying that the Australian government knew anything about the case until after Zygier had died, Foreign Affairs Minister Bob Carr has since conceded that the government was informed of Zygier’s detention through “intelligence channels” on February 24, 2010. Carr also admitted that the Labor government had done nothing to assist Zygier. Instead, the government had “relied on” Israeli assurances that Zygier “would be treated in accordance with his lawful rights as an Israeli citizen.”

It remains unclear why Zygier, also known as Ben Allen, Benjamin Burrows and Ben Alon, was incarcerated. No information has been released about what, if any, charges he faced. His case was regarded by the Israeli government as such a threat to “national security” that Zygier’s identity was kept disguised even from his jail guards—he was known as Prisoner X—and an extraordinary media gag order was imposed.

The censorship order, issued by an Israeli court at the request of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government, banned any public discussion, mention or hint of “Prisoner X,” “Mister X,” “cell number 15 in Ayalon Prison,” the conditions in the prison or “anything about that cell.” Even to mention or hint at the existence of the gag order was an offence.

Zygier was locked away in a special cell, where cameras inside the room were monitored around the clock. Israeli newspapers have reported that the cell contained sensors to monitor the prisoner’s temperature and heartbeat, throwing doubt on the official claim that he killed himself.

For almost a year, Zygier was subjected to what his Israeli lawyer, Avigdor Feldman, described as “stupid, inhumane and repulsive” conditions, totally sealed off from the outside world. Despite this brutal regime, Feldman said he had seen no visible signs of depression when he had visited Zygier just two days before his client’s death. On the contrary, the lawyer told Israel’s Channel Ten this week: “I met with a balanced person … who was rationally weighing his legal options.”

Several friends of Zygier also cast doubt on the suicide story, saying Zygier had never displayed any such inclinations, and had much to live for, including a wife and two young children. One daughter was born four days before her father’s death.

Yet the Australian government, when notified of his death, also did nothing to challenge the Israeli version of events. Instead, it facilitated the secret return of Zygier’s body to be buried in a Melbourne cemetery.

International legal conventions spell out that when a foreigner is jailed, their diplomatic mission must be informed. Asked at a Senate committee hearing last Thursday why no embassy official had gone to visit Zygier in jail, Department of Foreign Affairs secretary Peter Varghese said that because Zygier was a dual national, he was “not under the relevant conventions.”

This claim soon proved false as well. Australian National University international law professor Don Rothwell said Israel had broken the international convention on consular relations. He said Varghese had made a “very significant concession” to Israel that could set a precedent that would imperil other dual citizens.

Lawyer Dan Mori, who formerly represented Guantanamo Bay prisoner David Hicks—who was incarcerated by the US for almost six years, with the full support of the previous Australian Liberal government—said Australia had failed in its basic duty to look out for one of its citizens. “It boggles my mind that they sit back and not say, ‘He’s one of our citizens and we’re not going to have a consular visit’.”

There are clear parallels between this affair and that of Julian

© World Socialist Web Site

Assange. The WikiLeaks founder has been forced to seek asylum in Ecuador's London embassy because Prime Minister Julia Gillard's government is doing everything it can to help the Obama administration railroad him to jail in the US, even changing Australia's laws to allow the extradition of someone charged with a "political offence." (See: "Australian government reinforces conspiracy against Assange").

In Assange's case, the motivations behind the operation against him are obvious: WikiLeaks has exposed US-led war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as other crimes, conspiracies and machinations perpetrated by governments around the world. In Zygier's case, the reasons for Israel's determination to silence him are not yet known.

Unnamed Australian security sources, cited by Fairfax Media outlets, have suggested that Zygier may have been about to disclose information about Israeli intelligence operations, including the use of fraudulent Australian passports.

The timing of Zygier's detention points to a connection to the January 20, 2010 assassination of Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, a Palestinian Hamas leader, by an Israeli Mossad squad in Dubai. Israeli intelligence informed the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) of Zygier's arrest on February 24, 2010, just eight days after authorities in Dubai had revealed that suspected Israeli agents had used Australian passports in the assassination.

A Kuwaiti newspaper, *Al-Jarida*, has reported that according to Western sources, Zygier belonged to "band 131," the Mossad team that executed al - Mabhouh. The newspaper said Zygier had been arrested in Dubai, and had provided the authorities there with "names and pictures and accurate details" about the Mossad team in exchange for protection, but Israel had kidnapped him from a hiding place and imprisoned him about a month after the assassination operation.

This report is plausible because the Dubai authorities were quickly able to identify 26 people whom they alleged were involved in the assassination. The assassins are said to have carried fake passports: 12 British, six Irish, three French, one German and three Australian. (See: "More details emerge on assassination of Hamas leader in Dubai").

These revelations generated international controversy over Israel's use of foreign passports. In an article on the Zygier affair, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* yesterday noted that "some of the methods and employees of the Mossad were uncovered in a ruinous and paralyzing manner."

Another possibility is that Zygier might have been privy to information that Iran's nuclear program was not the threat that Israel and the US claim it to be. According to reports in the Israeli media and the London-based *Times*, Zygier had worked for a front Mossad company, based in Italy, selling electronics to Iran, where they could be used to sabotage Iranian facilities. ASIO had reportedly interrogated Zygier about this activity when he returned to Australia in 2009 to obtain a new passport, his fourth.

All of these media leaks should be treated with caution, given Mossad's long record of spreading disinformation to cover up the criminal activities of the Israeli state apparatus.

In May 2010, after much delay, the Labor government, then headed by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, publicly condemned Israel's use of Australian passports and expelled an Israeli diplomat, echoing a similar response by the British government. (See: "Australian government expels Israeli diplomat over forged passports"*)*.

It is now clear that while professing to protest against Israel's conduct, the Australian government was deeply involved in covering up Zygier's detention.

Nevertheless, the Rudd government's public show of concern over Mossad's methods angered both the Israeli and US governments, and may have become a compounding factor in Rudd's replacement two months later by Gillard, who has extremely close relations with the Zionist lobby in Australia. Rudd was ousted, in a backroom coup by Labor Party figures working in concert with the US embassy, after he had sought to head off conflict between the US and China, cutting across the Obama administration's increasingly confrontational stance throughout Asia against China. (See: Political stench of 2010 coup haunts Australian PM").

The sensitivity of the Australian political establishment to anything that might upset relations with Israel was highlighted last November when a cabinet revolt overturned Gillard's stated intention for Australia to join the US and Israel in voting against a UN general assembly resolution to upgrade Palestinian membership. The decision was heavily criticised in the media and her leadership questioned. (See: "Australian prime minister defeated on UN vote").

What has been revealed so far about the "Prisoner X" affair underlines the extraordinary influence over Australian politics exercised by Washington and its allies, particularly Israel, and the willingness of successive Australian governments to sacrifice the basic rights and lives of Australian citizens who in any way become a threat to those interests.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site