

New Zealand imposes diplomatic sanctions on Israel over Mossad operation

By John Braddock
10 August 2004

The New Zealand government last month protested to Israel after two Israeli citizens, believed to be acting on behalf of the secret service agency Mossad, were convicted of passport fraud. Elisha Cara, 50, and Uriel Kelman, 31, were jailed for six months—far less than the maximum possible sentence of five years—after an Auckland court found them guilty of seeking to obtain a New Zealand passport through illegal means and participating in an organised crime group for that purpose. The two were also fined \$NZ50,000 each. Both men are appealing their convictions.

As soon as the sentences were handed down on July 15, Prime Minister Helen Clark issued a strongly-worded diplomatic rebuke. She said Israel had “demeaned the integrity” of the New Zealand passport system. Further, the incident constituted a serious breach of New Zealand’s sovereignty and had severely strained relations between the two countries. Her government had formally sought an explanation and apology from Israel at the time of the arrests three months earlier, but none had been forthcoming.

Following the verdict, Clark suspended all high-level visits between the two countries. She declared that an expected request by Israeli President Moshe Katsav to include New Zealand on his scheduled visit to Australia in August would be declined. Israelis visiting in an official government capacity would now need to apply for visas while foreign ministry consultations planned for later in the year were cancelled. Approval for the appointment of the new Israeli ambassador was to be delayed, and New Zealand officials would observe “strict constraints” on contact with honorary consuls.

The evidence strongly points to the men being part of an Israeli spy operation. According to media reports, New Zealand intelligence services obtained concrete evidence that Cara and Kelman were Mossad agents by bugging their phones. Covert surveillance was undertaken after officials became suspicious about the passport application. New Zealand passports attract far less attention than Israeli ones, particularly in the Middle East, where Mossad has extensive covert operations ranging from spying and political intervention to assassinations.

Further suspicions of Mossad’s role in the case arose with the discovery that Cara, a former member of the Israeli air force who claimed to be a tourist agent based in Australia, had entered New Zealand 24 times during the past three-and-a-half years. Kelman, who had belonged to the Israeli Defence Force (IDF), was discovered to be working for a firm called YTS Systems, which

was established by a former IDF special intelligence unit member and specialises in high tech surveillance services. The Canadian government is currently investigating how Kelman managed to travel to New Zealand on a Canadian passport.

Two others, who fled New Zealand before they could be arrested, are believed to be part of the ring: Ze’ev Barkan, a former Israeli diplomat based in Vienna and Brussels, and Tony Resnick, a New Zealand citizen and former member of the Auckland Jewish Council, who has previously lived in Israel.

The operation followed a well-established Mossad modus operandi. In 1997, Canada expelled the Israeli ambassador until receiving a promise that Mossad would stop using Canada’s passports for covert operations. Israeli agents had been caught in an unsuccessful assassination attempt in Jordan while carrying fraudulent Canadian passports. In the present case, the two Israelis were arrested after a New Zealand Interior Ministry official spoke to a man claiming to be a New Zealander who asked in a Canadian accent that his passport request be expedited. The official discovered that the New Zealand citizen in whose name the passport was to be issued was handicapped and had never left the country.

The New Zealand government, however, while maintaining emphatically that it had “very strong grounds” to assert the arrested men and their two accomplices were Israeli intelligence agents, sought to ensure that neither was charged with the more serious crime of espionage and that the most salient details behind the operation were kept from the court.

Clark claimed that in order to lay espionage charges it would have been necessary to make public in court “the kind of evidence which our intelligence agencies don’t like coming forward to display”. No details pertaining to the men’s alleged links with Mossad were presented, nor was anything submitted to the court which could give any clue about Kelman’s formal employment status. The entire case was treated as a serious but relatively minor criminal matter, amounting to a legal cover-up of the real situation.

Nevertheless, Clark’s outspoken response has drawn criticism from pro-Israeli and Zionist spokesmen in New Zealand. This has been fuelled by subsequent incidents in which orthodox Jewish gravesites were extensively vandalised in two Wellington cemeteries. The critics assert she should have approached the matter as is customary in such diplomatic incidents: quietly get the agents out of the country then protest privately to the Israeli

authorities. Instead, she chose to make a major public issue of the affair.

The main reason for Clark's stance has to do with the Labour government's need to put on something of a "left" face in the delicate balancing act it is conducting over the US "war on terrorism". New Zealand's foreign policy has, over the past 12 months, involved a considerable amount of tacking in the prevailing political winds. While determined to maintain good relations with the US and Australia—the country's two major trade partners—Clark has faced widespread opposition to the US-led occupation of Iraq.

After initially criticising the Iraq war, and siding with European governments, Clark was pulled into line with high-level US threats of trade retaliation. Clark quickly performed an about-face, committing troops, navy frigates and army engineers to Iraq and Afghanistan. With the occupation becoming more unpopular, the government has declared that its deployment of engineers in Iraq, together with the remaining frigate will not be replaced when their tour of duty concludes in September.

In relation to the Middle East, it has suited the Labour government to adopt a more "independent" posture, prompting the media to suggest it had a "pro-Palestinian" policy. Last year, Foreign Minister Phil Goff made an official visit to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat in Ramallah, in defiance of Israel's open hostility. More recently, he issued a statement welcoming the International Court of Justice ruling against Israel's so-called "security" barrier in the West Bank. Criticising Israel conveniently provides Labour with a means for differentiating itself from Washington's policies in the Middle East without directly confronting the US.

Clark's posturing also comes amid growing rivalries in the South Pacific involving New Zealand, Australia, France and other imperialist powers. She seized on the Israeli spy affair to demonstrate—above all to the ruling elites—that the Labour government would stand up for New Zealand's interests against its larger competitors. The scandal, she insisted, would not result in "another Hao Atoll"—a reference to the 1985 bombing of the Greenpeace vessel the Rainbow Warrior in Auckland harbour by the French secret service.

Former Labour Prime Minister David Lange is commonly regarded as having caved in to France—a Pacific rival—over the bombing. With the two agents arrested for the murder of a crew member, a deal with the French government was struck following threats against New Zealand's trade access to Europe. The two were released from prison in New Zealand to serve time on Hao Atoll in French Polynesia. France reneged on the deal shortly after, and released the agents from custody, returning them to France.

The *New Zealand Herald* indicated its approval for Clark's assertion of national interests in the Mossad case. In an editorial headed "Israel given a message to remember", it commented: "Let other countries draw a cloak over such activities if they wish. This country has shown it will not do so and for that we can be quietly proud."

At the same time, however, Clark has been careful not to alienate the Israelis too much. To do so would risk coming into

open conflict with Canberra, and more importantly with Washington. Her government has done everything it can to couch its protest over Mossad's activities in the tone of an unfortunate falling out between "good friends". Clark said the case was a "sorry indictment" of Israel with which New Zealand had long shared "friendly relations". She repeated the comment over several media interviews, stressing that "friendly" countries should not behave toward each other this way.

In not pursuing the matter of espionage through the courts, Clark has let the Israeli government and its spy agency off the hook. Refusing to either confirm or deny the Mossad link, Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom simply expressed regret at the decision of the New Zealand government to impose sanctions, saying Israel would "do everything to restore the relations to normalcy".

The Australian government has been able to remain silent on the matter, despite the fact that both Cara and Kelman used Australia as their base of operations, at least since 2001. At that time, Cara moved to Sydney where he established a branch of an organisation called Eastward Bound, purportedly to bring Israeli tourists to Australia and New Zealand. Investigations by the *New Zealand Herald* revealed that the travel agency Cara claimed to operate either does not exist, or is operating illegally.

The whole affair has highlighted again the hypocrisy that surrounds the US-led "war on terrorism" to which Clark and the Labour government wholeheartedly subscribe.

New Zealand currently has under indefinite detention without trial Ahmed Zaoui, a former Algerian MP, academic and legitimate asylum seeker, on the basis of secret information sourced from that country's military regime that he is a suspected "terrorist". Zaoui too is being held on passport charges, while the New Zealand intelligence authorities, at the behest of the Labour government, are involved in extensive international efforts to construct a case against him. An Auckland court last month rejected an appeal by Zaoui that he be transferred on remand to the Mangere Refugee Centre, after nearly 20 months incarceration, on the grounds of his deteriorating psychological state.

While Zaoui is being imprisoned without trial, two individuals with likely connections to Mossad, an organisation implicated in decades of state-sponsored terrorism, have been treated with kid gloves and charged with relatively minor offences. Foreign Minister Goff even alluded to Mossad's record when he declared that the passport the agents had tried to obtain might well have been intended for an assassination operation in a third country.

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