

Egyptian Charged With Spying for Israel in Turkey; Israel Denies It



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CAIRO, Feb. 17 — An Egyptian student who fled the country six years ago is now sitting in jail, arrested upon his return to Cairo on charges of spying for [Israel](#).

According to his former lawyer, the man, Mohamed Essam Ghoneim el-Attar, has confessed and is “regretting everything he has done.” Mr. Attar, who has dual citizenship in [Egypt](#) and Canada, is facing a likely sentence of 15 to 25 years, the lawyer said.

“His personal circumstances — divorced parents, needs a job — are no excuse,” said the lawyer, Ragab el-Assal, who met with the defendant last week. “He is someone who sold himself for the sake of money and ambition, the destructive kind.”

Mr. Attar, who originally fled Egypt to avoid a prison sentence for what the lawyer said was his failure to pay a car repair bill, has been allowed only limited access to legal counsel since he was arrested on Jan. 1, Mr. Assal said before seeing him. In fact, at the time Mr. Assal was not even sure where Mr. Attar, 31, had been incarcerated.

“All they said to me is, ‘We do not have him,’ even though I have an official permit to see him,” said Mr. Assal, after

he had spent an entire day visiting Egyptian authorities and prisons in search of his client.

But after finally seeing his client and examining the investigation files, Mr. Assal relinquished the case, adding that he thought Mr. Attar was guilty as charged and would be convicted accordingly.

“I wish the confessions were a result of torture and the case a fabrication; I wish he was innocent,” Mr. Assal said. “But there are confessions, witnesses and evidence. It is a lost case.”

Egyptian law enforcement authorities have not disclosed the details of the arrest, which they announced more than one month later. But an account of the case was reported by Al Ahram, a newspaper with close ties to the government.

According to the newspaper, Mr. Attar left Egypt in August 2001 on a tourist visa to Turkey, where he offered his services at the Israeli Embassy and was recruited by an agent of the Mossad, Israel’s intelligence service, to gather information about Egyptians and Arabs living there.

The newspaper also said he was asked to select other potential recruits by luring them with “money and women,” and that he later moved to Canada where he converted to Christianity, changed his name to Joseph, obtained Canadian citizenship and got a job at a bank in Toronto with the help of two other Mossad agents.

Mr. Assal said witnesses included people who said they were approached by Mr. Attar in Turkey. According to the news report, the three Israelis have been charged with espionage and will be tried by Egyptian courts in absentia.

Israeli officials denied the allegations, saying they learned about the case from news reports.

“I would summarize it in one word: nonsense,” said the Israeli minister of Internal Security, Avi Dichter, while speaking to reporters last week in Ottawa.

Israeli intelligence services have been accused of using Canadian identities to shield agents before. In 1997, Mossad agents, using fabricated Canadian passports, tried to assassinate a leader of [Hamas](#) in Jordan, causing the Canadian government to file a protest. At the time, the Israeli government said it would not use false Canadian passports again, a pledge Mr. Dichter repeated last week.

“Those days are over and that’s why I say it is a fabrication,” he told reporters.