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Israeli Spy Units Get Unwanted Publicity

Cabinet Denies Suggestions That Pollard Operation Was Wider Than Acknowledged

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JERUSALEM, June 8—Israel today strongly denied as “unfounded” suggestions by U.S. officials that the Israeli-run Jonathan Jay Pollard espionage operation was much more extensive than Washington has been told by Israel.

The sharply worded Cabinet statement came after a turbulent two weeks of disclosures and allegations that have brought an unwanted glare of publicity to Israel's intelligence organizations, long-respected by many as among the world's most efficient, and acute embarrassment to the fractious “national unity” coalition government.

Today's statement was the strongest the government has issued since Pollard pleaded guilty last week. At that time, the names of alleged Israeli coconspirators were disclosed, along with details that suggested an Israeli espionage operation in the United States far more extensive than the unauthorized “renegade” operation that Israel said had operated without the knowledge of officials at the political level here.

The Cabinet of Prime Minister Shimon Peres said in a statement released after its regular weekly meeting today that the Israeli government had “provided full cooperation regarding the Pollard case and remains in close contact with Washington in order to clarify the issues which were raised lately.”

The statement pledged “a continuation of the cooperation” but added that Israel “is concerned” about allegations by some U.S. officials “and hopes they will not continue.”

The Cabinet was referring to suggestions by some U.S. Justice Department officials that Israel withheld information from a State Department and Justice Department team that came here last year to interview Israeli officials about the case against Pollard, a former U.S. Navy civilian intelligence analyst who last week pleaded guilty in a U.S. District Court to conspiring to pass U.S. military secrets to Israel.

“The relations between the United States and Israel are very close, and it is inconceivable that attempts to disrupt these relations will succeed,” the Cabinet said, repeating its assertion that the spy unit that handled Pollard “exceeded its authority” and had been dismantled and that no espionage activities are now being conducted against the United States.

Since late last month, Israel's domestic and foreign intelligence wings have both been shaken by unaccustomed controversy. Abroad it was fresh disclosures about the extent of the spy network for which Pollard worked; at home it was allegations that Israel's highest-ranking domestic intelligence official participated in the fatal beating of two handcuffed Arab prisoners captured after a

1984 bus hijacking and then covered up the incident.

The principal Israeli figures involved in the two cases—Rafael (Rafi) Eitan, former chief of operations of the external intelligence service, the Mossad, and Avraham Shalom, chief of the domestic intelligence service, the Shin Bet—were both members of a team that in 1960 snatched Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann off a street in Buenos Aires and brought him secretly to Israel, where he was tried and hanged.

But in terms of the government's and society's reactions to the two current scandals, the similarity ends there.

In the case of Shalom, the nation is still engaged in a wrenching, introspective national debate about the conflict between the fundamental principle of the rule of law and what Israel sees as its unique security problems.

In the case of Eitan, who headed the Washington spy ring that recruited Pollard, the reaction here has been a curious mixture of muted ambivalence and stiff-necked defensiveness.

While Shalom has been condemned by some politicians and the press for his alleged cover-up—and ordered by Israel's attorney general to endure a humiliating police investigation—Eitan has been handed a comfortable new posting as chairman of a huge state-owned chemical conglomerate.

His principal “handler” of Pollard, according to the U.S. indictment, then-Lt. Col. Aviam Sella, who ostensibly was doing graduate studies at New York University, was promoted to brigadier general in the Air Force upon his hurried return to Israel and given command of the country's biggest air base.

Informed Israeli sources said that the other unindicted coconspirators in the Pollard case—Science Attache Yosef Yagur and embassy secretary Irit Erb—have been given attractive new assignments in the Foreign Service.

Even though the Peres government continues to insist that Eitan was running a renegade spy operation unknown to his superiors in Jerusalem, the former Mossad agent has not been condemned publicly by the government or parliament—or much of the public—for establishing a spy network that stole top secret military documents from a close ally and patron nation.

The fact that Eitan has not been publicly chastised but rather has been rewarded with a prestigious executive position prompted the military affairs commentator for Haaretz newspaper, Zeev Schiff, to ask in a commentary published today whether the Pollard ring actually was “renegade.”

One senior Israeli official said privately, “The only crime Eitan committed was getting caught.”

Some Israeli officials, speaking on the condition that they not be identified, have bitterly condemned the U.S. Justice Department for what they term an anti-Israeli campaign of leaks of

embarrassing details of Eitan's espionage network. These complaints have generally been coupled with charges that the American press has been "blowing out of proportion" a case that these officials view as essentially closed.

One senior official, pressed on the question of whether the \$300,000 Pollard allegedly was promised over a 10-year period by his Israeli control agents did not suggest something wider than a small "renegade" spying operation, appeared annoyed when he retorted: "Thirty thousand a year is peanuts."

Acceptance of Eitan's espionage ring as almost inconsequential—except for the embarrassment it caused—is not confined to government.

Israel's normally free-wheeling press, including opposition papers that rarely fail to turn a scandal into a political cause, have limited their coverage of the new Pollard disclosures mostly to playbacks of what the American press has uncovered about the extent of the Eitan spy ring.

With one or two exceptions, none of the usually strident Hebrew newspapers has carried a locally written story that attempted to answer such questions as how extensive Israel's espionage activity in Washington was, or whether Peres and his Cabinet knew about it, or who was the unnamed Israeli diplomat in whose suburban Maryland house Pollard held clandestine meetings, or whether Sella's military superiors knew about his role in the spying operation.

When questioned about this unusual absence of aggressive reporting, several Israeli journalists at first cited censorship. Israeli military censorship requires that all locally written stories dealing even peripherally with national security matters be submitted for review by the censors, who routinely excise sensitive material.

But when reminded about the traditional censorship dodge of leaking restricted material to foreign journalists, waiting for its publication abroad and then reprinting it here on the basis that it has already been made public, the Israeli journalists conceded that the government's blackout on any substantive disclosures on the Eitan espionage ring has had an inhibiting effect on their treatment of the story.

Mirroring the government's ambivalence on the seriousness of the case, the journalists also characterized the new Pollard disclosures as an "internal affair" between the U.S. Justice and State departments.

There is also a widely held belief here that Pollard was mostly supplying Israel with documents concerning the activities of its Arab enemies. "We were getting information about our enemies that the Americans should have been giving to us anyway. Is that the same as stealing state secrets that could harm the United States' security?" one Israeli official asked.