

Mossad Operation Threatens Israeli Journalist

Whistleblowing reporter treated as ‘fugitive felon’

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Nazareth — An Israeli journalist who went into hiding after writing a series of reports showing lawbreaking approved by Israeli army commanders faces a lengthy jail term for espionage if caught, as Israeli security services warned at the weekend they would “remove the gloves” to track him down.

The Shin Bet, Israel’s secret police, said it was treating Uri Blau, a reporter with the liberal Haaretz daily newspaper who has gone underground in London, as a “fugitive felon” and that a warrant for his arrest had been issued.

Options being considered are an extradition request to the British authorities or, if that fails, a secret operation by Mossad, Israel’s spy agency, to smuggle him back, according to Maariv, a right-wing newspaper.

It was revealed yesterday that Mr Blau’s informant, Anat Kamm, 23, a former conscript soldier who copied hundreds of classified documents during her military service, had confessed shortly after her arrest in December to doing so to expose “war crimes”.

The Shin Bet claims that Mr Blau is holding hundreds of classified documents, including some reported to relate to Operation Cast Lead, Israel’s attack on Gaza in winter 2008 in which the army is widely believed to have violated the rules of war.

Other documents, the basis of a Haaretz investigation published in 2008, concern a meeting between the head of the army, Gabi Ashkenazi, and the Shin Bet in which it was agreed to ignore a court ruling and continue carrying out executions of Palestinian leaders in the occupied territories.

Yuval Diskin, head of the Shin Bet, who has said his organisation was previously “too sensitive with the investigation”, is now demanding that Mr Blau reveal his entire document archive and take a lie-detector test on his return to identify his sources, according to Haaretz. The newspaper and its lawyers have recommended that he remain in hiding to protect his informants.

Haaretz has also revealed that, in a highly unusual move shortly before Israel’s attack on Gaza, it agreed to pull a printed edition after the army demanded at the last minute that one of Mr Blau’s stories not be published. His report had already passed the military censor, which checks that articles do not endanger national security.

Lawyers and human rights groups fear that the army and Shin Bet are trying to silence investigative journalists and send a warning to other correspondents not to follow in Mr

Blau's path.

"We have a dangerous precedent here, whereby the handing over of material to an Israeli newspaper ... is seen by the prosecutor's office as equivalent to contact with a foreign agent," said Eitan Lehman, Ms Kamm's lawyer. "The very notion of presenting information to the Israeli public alone is taken as an intention to hurt national security."

The Shin Bet's determination to arrest Mr Blau was revealed after a blanket gag order was lifted late last week on Ms Kamm's case. She has been under house arrest since December. She has admitted copying hundreds of classified documents while serving in the office of Brig Gen Yair Naveh, in charge of operations in the West Bank, between 2005 and 2007.

Under an agreement with the Shin Bet last year, Haaretz and Mr Blau handed over 50 documents and agreed to the destruction of Mr Blau's computer.

Both sides accuse the other of subsequently reneging on the deal: the Shin Bet says Mr Blau secretly kept other documents copied by Ms Kamm that could be useful to Israel's enemies; while Mr Blau says the Shin Bet used the returned documents to track down Ms Kamm, his source, after assurances that they would not do so.

Haaretz said Mr Blau fears that they will try to identify his other informants if he hands over his archive.

Mr Blau learnt of his predicament in December, while out of the country on holiday. He said a friend called to warn that the Shin Bet had broken into his home and ransacked it. He later learnt they had been monitoring his telephone, e-mail and computer for many months.

In a move that has baffled many observers, the Shin Bet revealed last week that Mr Blau was hiding in London, despite the threat that it would make him an easier target for other countries' intelligence agencies.

Amir Mizroch, an analyst with the right-wing Jerusalem Post newspaper, noted that it was as if Israel's security services were "saying to Syrian, Lebanese, Palestinian, Hizbullah and Iranian intelligence agents in London: 'Yalla, be our guests, go get Uri Blau'." He added that the real goal might be to flush out Mr Blau so that he would seek sanctuary at the Israeli embassy.

Ms Kamm is charged with espionage with intent to harm national security, the harshest indictment possible and one that could land in her jail for 25 years. Yesterday another of her lawyers, Avigdor Feldman, appealed to Mr Blau to return to Israel and give back the documents to help "minimise the affair".

"The real question is whether this exceptionally heavy-handed approach is designed only to get back Kamm's documents or go after Blau and his other sources," said Jeff Halper, an Israeli analyst. "It may be that Kamm is the excuse the security services need to identify Blau's circle of informants."

Mr Blau has already published several stories, apparently based on Ms Kamm's documents, showing that the army command approved policies that not only broke international law but also violated the rulings of Israel's courts.

His reports have included revelations that senior commanders approved extra-judicial assassinations in the occupied territories that were almost certain to kill Palestinian bystanders; that, in violation of a commitment to the high court, the army issued orders to execute wanted Palestinians even if they could be safely captured; and that the defence ministry compiled a secret report showing that the great majority of settlements in the West Bank were illegal even under Israeli law.

Although the original stories date to 2008, the army issued a statement belatedly this week that Mr Blau's reports were "outrageous and misleading". No senior commanders have been charged over the army's lawbreaking activities.

B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights group, said its research had shown that "in many cases soldiers have been conducting themselves in the territories as if they were on a hit mission, as opposed to arrest operations".

It added that the authorities had "rushed to investigate the leak and chose to ignore the severe suspicions of blatant wrongdoings depicted in those documents".

A group of senior journalists established a petition this week calling for Mr Blau to be spared a trial: "So far, the authorities have not prosecuted journalists for holding secret information, which most of us have had in one form or another. This policy by the prosecution reflects, in our view, an imbalance between journalistic freedom, the freedom of expression and the need for security."

However, media coverage of the case in Israel has been largely hostile. Yuval Elbashan, a lawyer, wrote in Haaretz yesterday that Mr Blau's fellow military reporters and analysts had in the past few days abandoned their colleague and proven "their loyalty to the [security] system as the lowliest of its servants".

One, Yossi Yehoshua, a military correspondent with the country's largest-circulation newspaper, Yedioth Aharonoth, who is said to have been approached by Ms Kamm before she turned to Mr Blau, is due to testify against her in her trial due next month.

Chat forums and talkback columns also suggest little sympathy among the Israeli public for either Ms Kamm or Mr Blau. Several Hebrew websites show pictures of Ms Kamm behind bars or next to a hangman's noose.

A report on Israel National News, a news service for settlers, alleged that Ms Kamm had been under the influence of "rabidly left-wing" professors at Tel Aviv University when she handed over the documents to the Haaretz reporter.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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