

## The Missing Link In the Palestinian Organ Theft?

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Law and Justice](#)

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Nazareth: The hyperventilating by Israel's leaders [1] over a story published in a Swedish newspaper last month [2] suggesting that the Israeli army assisted in organ theft from Palestinians has distracted attention from the disturbing allegations made by Palestinian families that were the basis of the article's central claim.

The families' fears that relatives, killed by the Israeli army, had body parts removed during unauthorised autopsies performed in Israel have been overshadowed by accusations of a "blood libel" directed against the reporter, Donald Bostrom, and the Aftonbladet newspaper, as well as the Swedish government and people.

I have no idea whether the story is true. Like most journalists working in Israel and Palestine, I have heard such rumours before. Until Bostrom wrote his piece, no Western journalist, as far as I know, had investigated them. After so many years, the assumption by journalists was that there was little hope of finding evidence — apart from literally by digging up the corpses. Doubtless, the inevitable charge of anti-semitism such reports attract acted as a powerful deterrent too.

What is striking about this episode is that the families making the claims were not given a hearing in the late 1980s and early 1990s, during the first intifada, when most of the reports occurred, and are still being denied the right to voice their concerns today.

Israel's sensitivity to the allegation of organ theft — or "harvesting", as many observers coyly refer to the practice — appears to trump the genuine concerns of the families about possible abuse of their loved ones.

Bostrom has been much criticised for the flimsy evidence he produced in support of his inflammatory story. Certainly there is much to criticise in his and the newspaper's presentation of the report.

Most significantly, Bostrom and Aftonbladet exposed themselves to the charge of anti-semitism — at least from Israeli officials keen to make mischief — through a major error of judgment.

They muddied the waters by trying to make a tenuous connection between the Palestinian families' allegations about organ theft during unauthorised autopsies and the entirely separate revelations this month that a group of US Jews had been arrested for money-laundering and trading in body parts. [3]

In making that connection, Bostrom and Aftonbladet suggested that the problem of organ theft is a current one when they have produced only examples of such concern from the

early 1990s. They also implied, whether intentionally or not, that abuses allegedly committed by the Israeli army could somehow be extrapolated more generally to Jews.

The Swedish reporter should instead have concentrated on the valid question raised by the families about why the Israeli army, by its own admission, took away the bodies of dozens of Palestinians killed by its soldiers, allowed autopsies to be performed on them without the families' permission and then returned the bodies for burial in ceremonies held under tight security.

Bostrom's article highlighted the case of one Palestinian, 19-year-old Bilal Ahmed Ghanan, from the village of Imatin in the northern West Bank, who was killed in 1992. A shocking picture of Bilal's stitched-up body accompanied the report. [4]

Bostrom has told the Israeli media that he knows of at least 20 cases of families claiming that the bodies of loved ones were returned with body parts missing, [5] although he did not say whether any of these alleged incidents occurred more recently.

In 1992, the year in question, Bostrom says, the Israeli army admitted to him that it took away for autopsy 69 of the 133 Palestinians who died of unnatural causes. The army has not denied this part of his report.

A justifiable question from the families relayed by Bostrom is: why did the army want the autopsies carried out? Unless it can be shown that the army intended to conduct investigations into the deaths — and there is apparently no suggestion that it did — the autopsies were unnecessary.

In fact, they were more than unnecessary. They were counterproductive if we assume that the army has no interest in gathering evidence that could be used in future war crimes prosecutions of its soldiers. Israel has a long track record of stymying investigations into Palestinian deaths at the hands of its soldiers, and carried on that ignoble tradition in the wake of its recent assault on Gaza.

Of even greater concern for the Palestinian families is the fact that at around the time the bodies of their loved ones were whisked off by the army for autopsy, the only institute in Israel that conducts such autopsies, Abu Kabir, near Tel Aviv, was almost certainly at the centre of a trade in organs that later became a scandal inside Israel.

Equally disturbing, the doctor behind the plunder of body parts, Prof Yehuda Hiss, appointed director of the Abu Kabir institute in the late 1980s, has never been jailed despite admitting to the organ theft and he continues to be the state's chief pathologist at the institute.

Hiss was in charge of the autopsies of Palestinians when Bostrom was listening to the families' claims in 1992. Hiss was subsequently investigated twice, in 2002 and 2005, over the theft of body parts on a large scale.

Allegations of Hiss' illegal trade in organs was first revealed in 2000 by investigative reporters at the Yediot Aharonot newspaper, which reported that he had "price listings" for body parts and that he sold mainly to Israeli universities and medical schools. [6]

Apparently undeterred by these revelations, Hiss still had an array of body parts in his possession at Abu Kabir when the Israeli courts ordered a search in 2002. Israel National

News reported at the time: “Over the past years, heads of the institute appear to have given thousands of organs for research without permission, while maintaining a ‘storehouse’ of organs at Abu Kabir.” [7]

Hiss did not deny the plunder of organs, admitting that the body parts belonged to soldiers killed in action and had been passed to medical institutes and hospitals in the interests of advancing research. Understandably, however, the Palestinian families are unlikely to be satisfied with Hiss’ explanation. If the wishes of a soldier’s family were disregarded by Hiss, why not Palestinian families’ wishes too?

Hiss was allowed to continue as director of Abu Kabir until 2005 when allegations of a trade in organs surfaced again. On this occasion Hiss admitted to having removed parts from 125 bodies without authorisation. Following a plea bargain with the state, the attorney general decided not to press criminal charges and Hiss was given only a reprimand. [8] He has continued as chief pathologist at Abu Kabir.

It should also be noted, as Bostrom points out, that in the early 1990s Israel was suffering from an acute shortage of organ donors to the extent that Ehud Olmert, health minister at the time, launched a public campaign to encourage Israelis to come forward.

This offers a possible explanation for Hiss’ actions. He may have acted to help make up the shortfall.

Given the facts that are known, there must be at least a very strong suspicion that Hiss removed organs without authorisation from some Palestinians he autopsied. Both this issue, and the army’s possible role in supplying him with corpses, needs investigation.

Hiss is also implicated in another long-running and unresolved scandal from Israel’s early years, in the 1950s, when the children of recent Jewish immigrants to Israel from Yemen were adopted by Ashkenazi couples after the Yemenite parents had been told that their child had died, [9] usually after admission to hospital.

After an initial cover-up, the Yemenite parents have continued pressing for answers from the state, and forced officials to reopen the files. [8] The Palestinian families deserve no less.

However, unlike the Yemenite parents, their chances of receiving any kind of investigation, transparent or otherwise, look all but hopeless.

When Palestinian demands for justice are not backed by investigations from journalists or the protests of the international community, Israel can safely ignore them.

It is worth remembering in this context the constant refrain from Israel’s peace camp that the brutal, four-decade occupation of the Palestinians has profoundly corrupted Israeli society.

When the army enjoys power without accountability, how do Palestinians, or we, know what soldiers are allowed to get away with under cover of occupation? What restraints are in place to prevent abuses? And who takes them to task if they do commit crimes?

Similarly, when Israeli politicians are able to cry “blood libel” or “anti-semitism” when they are criticised, damaging the reputations of those they accuse, what incentive do they have to initiate inquiries that may harm them or the institutions they oversee? What reason do

they have to be honest when they can bludgeon a critic into silence, at no cost to themselves?

This is the meaning of the phrase “Power corrupts”, and Israeli politicians and soldiers, as well as at least one pathologist, demonstrably have far too much power — most especially over Palestinians under occupation.

*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](http://www.jkcook.net).*

## Notes

- [1] <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1109437.html>
- [2] <http://www.tlaxcala.es/pp.asp?reference=8390&lg=en>
- [3] <http://www.slate.com/id/2223559/>
- [4] <http://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/article5652583.ab>
- [5] <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3766093,00.html>
- [6] <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=1173179>
- [7] <http://www.israelfaxx.com/webarchive/2002/01/2fax0104.html>
- [8] <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/90518>
- [9] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/israel-seeks-lost-children-of-yemen-exodus-1318037.html>

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