

# A man in an iron mask

**M**ordechai Vanunu occupies a tiny, windowless cell inside an Israeli maximum-security prison. A TV camera monitors his solitary confinement. He is kept out of the view of other prisoners. For his pre-trial hearings, Vanunu is transported in a bus with painted-over windows. He must wear a motorcycle helmet to hide his face; a siren howls to prevent him from crying out a message to waiting reporters. He is Israel's Man in the Iron Mask.

Vanunu, according to most Israelis, is their nation's worst traitor—or at least the worst one we know about. His brother, Meir, told me there are other tiny, dark cells at Ashkelon Prison where nameless men suffer out solitary confinement for crimes against the state. Men whose cases never made the international press.

We hear a great deal about the Soviet Union's Jewish dissidents but, until the Vanunu case, almost nothing about Israel's own Jewish dissidents. One of them, Meir Vanunu, spoke to me about the case of his brother, Mordechai.

Last year, Mordechai left Israel where he had worked for 10 years at Machon 2, the ultra-secret, underground nuclear weapons production plant in the Negev Desert. He went to Australia, contacted the London *Sunday Times* and told them how Israel had been secretly producing nuclear weapons for the past 20 years—revealing, in the process, that Israel was now the world's sixth nuclear power, with 100-200 nuclear weapons.

The *Times* brought Vanunu to London. There, while the newspaper slowly checked the story for accuracy, Vanunu was picked up in the street by a pretty "American" girl named Cindy. She convinced him to join her in Rome where her sister supposedly had an apartment, and to hide out from the Israeli agents Vanunu knew were tracking him. On entering the apartment, Vanunu was attacked by two Israeli Mossad agents, injected with drugs and smuggled out of Italy on an Israeli ship. He awoke at sea, chained to his bed. A few days later he was in Israel, charged with high treason and espionage.

Israel's best efforts to cover up Vanunu's kidnapping came undone when he flashed a message, written on the palm of his hand, to waiting reporters, saying he had been seized in Rome. Vanunu's family was allowed to see him once every two

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weeks but first forced to sign an agreement, under penalty of 15 years in prison, to reveal nothing of what was said. His trial, due to begin Dec. 1, will be totally in camera—without reporters, closed to the public, off the record. Jurors will be pledged to secrecy under threat of prison.

There is no doubt that Vanunu broke Israeli law by violating the secrecy agreements he had signed when a technician at Machon 2. According to Meir, he did so for reasons of conscience, to protest Israel's secret nuclear program and what both Vanunu brothers claim is its aggressive intent. Mordechai, says his brother, is as much a conscientious objector as Russia's nuclear expert Andrei Sakharov. One Israeli left-wing MP has even proposed Vanunu for the Nobel Prize.

"What Mordechai did," Meir told me, "touched a very raw nerve in Israel." Indeed, it did. The Vanunus are Sephardic Jews from Marrakesh, Morocco. Their father is a rabbi. It is conventional wisdom in Israel that Sephardim are the bedrock of Israel's intransigent right wing dedicated to the apartheid philosophy of Meir Kahane and Gen. Ariel Sharon.

But Mordechai Vanunu broke this mould when he went to university, where he mixed with Palestinian students and befriended some. Mordechai, and then Meir, aligned themselves with the influential minority of Israeli Jews who see accommodation with Palestinian nationalism as their nation's only hope for survival as a Jewish and democratic state.

Israel has now issued a warrant for the arrest of Meir Vanunu for openly speaking of his brother's plight and echoing Mordechai's charges.

Meir claims there are other Sephardim who share his views. If so, they are a silent minority. Few Israelis, even on the far left, have spoken out in Mordechai's defence or called for legal counteraction against his medieval treatment.

Has Vanunu really done mortal damage to Israel? I don't think so. It's been known for years that Israel had nuclear weapons, as I have written many times.

What Mordechai did was reveal that Israel's nuclear weapons program was 10 times larger than we had known, and likely capable of producing thermonuclear and neutron warheads. Vanunu also revealed the startling degree of French, American and South African collusion in building Israel's secret nuclear arsenal. This information will—and should—embarrass the United States which has been trying to pressure Pakistan and South Korea into dropping their nuclear programs while turning a blind eye to Israel's immeasurably larger programs.

Mordechai Vanunu has done us and his countrymen a favor by showing just how strong Israel is and how little it has to fear from its neighbors.

**Punch**

