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Vanunu free after two days in prison, with no charge
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Vanunu and the question of nuclear weapons lie at the heart of the problems in the Middle-East

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Translated from French by Peter Low

As soon as we heard of Mordechai Vanunu's last arrest, we passed on this information (see the brief note of 18 November) and wrote to Israel's current Minister of the Interior, Mr Pines Paz, who is briefly holding that position, begging him to take the obvious necessary step: to restore all Mordechai's civil and human rights.

For more than four years, ACDN has been part of the international movement in support of Vanunu and has made many approaches, both to the Israeli authorities and diplomats and to the highest French authorities, firstly to obtain Mordechai's release (this did not happen until the end of his 18-year prison sentence, on 21 April 2004) and then to have the restrictions lifted that he has been subject to thereafter.

In fact since he left prison, Vanunu has been serving a second sentence that is not called a sentence: he cannot move freely even inside Israel, he cannot emigrate or renounce his citizenship as he wishes. He is a kind of "internal exile". In the time of the USSR, Soviet citizens labelled as "of Jewish nationality" who wanted to emigrate, particularly to Israel, were refused all exit visas, hence the name they were given "refusniks". Today Vanunu is, paradoxically, a "refusnik" inside Israel. Is this just, is this logical?

The reason why the State of Israel continues its vindictive treatment of this "nuclear whistleblower" is that in 1986 he brought to a British newspaper and thence to the whole world the proof of what all international information services, observers and states had already known a good while: that Israel had become an undeclared nuclear power.

To publish this was not, in itself, a revelation or treason: it was just the confirmation of a fact that Israel's enemies already knew perfectly well. It did not prevent Israel from pursuing a "policy of ambiguity": having nuclear weapons but not declaring so publicly. This continued despite the fact that the main creator of the weapon, Shimon Peres, openly acknowledged its existence about two years ago - a point that makes the harsh treatment of Vanunu even more futile and outdated.

Vanunu had decided to make revelations after resigning as technician at the nuclear centre in Dimona where the Israeli atom bombs were being made. He was acting out of conscience: he did not accept that Israel's security should rest on the possession and possible use of arms of mass destruction, or that this policy should be conducted in secret, without Israel's citizens knowing and without the public endorsement of the people's representatives.

It was a human and civic act of conscience, of "glasnost" (transparency or rather publicising of information and decisions); such publicising is of course one of the preconditions for a functioning democracy. He paid for this with nearly 18 years in prison, including 12 in solitary, showing an exceptional capacity for resistance. And the Israeli authorities continue to make him pay, despite his use of some of his legal rights (recently he regained his freedom after a legal intervention), rights which still, fortunately (at least for Israeli citizens), make Israel different from a dictatorship. This difference gives us the hope that the Israeli authorities will eventually restore all his rights, including the right to live and perhaps found a family elsewhere.

What really motivates such animosity to Vanunu is, besides a possible spirit of vengeance in the Israeli secret services, the fact that Mordechai has in no way renounced his fundamental struggle: to eliminate all nuclear

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weapons from the planet, and to create a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. This would of course imply Israel's to final renounce its arsenal and negotiate its dismantling in return for totally reliable security guarantees.

To date, Israel has preferred to trust nobody else for its security policy, having really no confidence in any external commitments, whether those of Arab or Muslim adversaries, or of western allies (who do provide substantial military and diplomatic help), or of the "international community". Given the context and the recurrent threats about destroying Israel made in the past, and even quite recently from the new president of Iran, one can understand and acknowledge this attitude.

But how can they fail to see - and if possible see in time - that this policy is doomed some day or other to cause misery to the whole region, starting with Israel itself?

It is founded on the threat of genocide. Nuclear weapons, however used, are not and will never be (even if "miniaturised", which is a cute euphemism) weapons like other weapons. They cannot draw any distinction between the combatants in a possible war and the civilians. They strike the living, but also, through their radioactivity, future generations. These two characteristics make them instruments of crime against humanity. It is paradoxical, and this paradox is heavy with meaning, that the State of Israel, which justified its founding by referring to the genocide of the Holocaust, and founded it with recourse (another paradox) to the use of terrorism - something it suffers from and condemns today - should now be brandishing, albeit silently, the threat of practising mass murders.

Admittedly, the absolutely intolerable character of these weapons of mass destruction (and of other kinds, chemical or biological) is true for all the states that possess them, for France among others. One would like France to draw the necessary conclusion, all the more so because, unlike Israel, she is far from being threatened in her very existence.

That is probably the deepest reason why the Israeli government is seeking to neutralise Vanunu by keeping him under permanent control: Vanunu's stubborn determination to ask the moral questions posed by nuclear weapons. May we see there also the reason why President Chirac feels so little eagerness to grant Vanunu French nationality, which he has requested through us and which Chirac is empowered to grant? For over a year we have been waiting for the reply of France's president.

Nevertheless, and even if "Realpoliticians", on all sides of the Mediterranean, would make fun of all moral considerations, they must necessarily end up with the same conclusion: a world and a Middle East where peace or rather a state of general non-belligerence is thought to depend on the presence of nuclear weapons cannot fail to explode some day in a hecatomb of artificial suns. We say "thought to depend", because this is not true in fact: Israel's possession of nuclear arms did not prevent the Six Day War of 1967 (where Israel took the initiative, anticipating an attack prepared and announced by Colonel Nasser of Egypt), nor the Yom Kippur War of October 1973 which took it by surprise (whether or not this war resulted, as some claim, from a Machivellian calculation by men in the Nixon administration) and which almost caused a crushing defeat before the military reversal left Egypt routed. What recourse would Israel then have had, driven into the sea? Only the effective and vengeful use of nuclear weapons, whose supposed deterrent value had been utterly shown up (whatever the Realpolitical adepts of nuclear deterrence may say). In other words it would have been Samson's act of despair, useless for anything except - only and meanly - for widening the catastrophe.

The sole way of avoiding such a conflagration is to commit as quickly as possible to a precautionary, meticulous and yet determined process of nuclear disarmament - total, general and strictly controlled - from which no state will be able to withdraw. There is no other alternative.

It is quite obvious that Israel cannot forever maintain a nuclear monopoly in the Middle East. Several states of the region are perfectly able to obtain them quickly, Iran being only one of the states suspected of wanting to. If Iran doesn't, one of its brother states will. Iraq? That nearly happened, and it took the "Gulf War" to prevent it. Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Algeria? Or Pakistan? Well, Pakistan already has, and nobody can be sure that its missiles will not increase in range or that its government and policies will not change. The "Islamic bomb" already exists, to the annoyance of Israel who did its best to prevent it. And what can we say about the "Islamic brothers" who, as individuals, have joined terrorist organisations like Al Qaeda, which cannot be "deterred" from anything by the nuclear threat, which can "do the job" in total anonymity, and can also prepare vengeful explosions?

Another peculiarity of nuclear weapons is that they invite, they virtually compel people to "raise the stakes sky-high". Their horizon is "total war". Note what Hannah Arendt said in 1948, shortly before the creation of the "Jewish State": *"One can have few illusions about the final outcome of a total war between Arabs and Jews. The Jews can win numerous battles without winning the war."* Once founded, Israel indeed fought many battles, losing some and winning a lot, and succeeded in surviving and even growing as a state. But the result of this state of permanent war, as Hannah Arendt predicted over fifty years ago (See Hannah Arendt, *Penser l'événement*, Belin edit.; here back-translated), is this:

"Even if the Jews won the war, the end of the conflict would see the destruction of Zionism's unique possibilities and unique successes. The country that would then come into being would be quite different from the one dreamed of by Jews worldwide, Zionist and non-Zionist. The "victorious" Jews would live surrounded by a totally hostile Arab population, enclosed in constantly-threatened borders, engaged in physical self-defence to the point of losing their other interests and activities. The development of a Jewish culture would cease to be the concern of the whole people: social experimenting would be ruled out as a useless luxury; political thought would be solely determined by the needs of war. Such would be the fate of a nation which, even if it absorbed more and more immigrants and pushed its frontiers out further (...) would nevertheless remain a tiny people greatly inferior in number to the hostile neighbours.

"In such circumstances (...) the Jews of Palestine would degenerate into one of those little warlike tribes whose possibilities and importance we know very well, thanks to what history has been telling us since the time of Sparta."

Can one imagine a more accurate description of what Israel was to become? Everything seems to be borne out (apart from the matter of developing Jewish culture - although that is doubtless not the "concern of the whole people", since there is such preoccupation with the economic and social effects of a war economy and with the permanent military threat). So, if the prognosis was accurate, we must grant that the diagnosis was also. The "national Jewish homeland" ought not to have given way to the "Jewish state", according to Hannah Arendt, who saw in that the predictable source of the evils she describes, because it was founded on the plundering of the Palestinian people.

Today, the existence of Israel cannot be ignored. One can always dream, as Hannah Arendt did among others, of an Israelo-Palestinian federation which would be secular, tolerant, pluri-ethnic and multicultural. That is perhaps the future solution - if the people in question say so - the solution which would calm hearts and minds, and reduce on both sides the politico-religious violence, which is the seedbed of terrorism as of state conflicts. We are a long way from that solution, or indeed any other peaceful one. The thing that keeps the cauldron bubbling, without being the full explanation, is precisely Israel's possession of nuclear weapons.

Thus, although Mordechai Vanunu denounces the policies of the Israeli government, for example what he calls the "apartheid wall", and is perceived by some parts of the politico-military establishment as an internal enemy, restricted and observed because he cannot be conveniently eliminated, he is perhaps Israel's best friend. For nuclear arms are not weapons for deterrence or survival, they are weapons for collective suicide.

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In 1942 Hannah Arendt wrote this, in quite a different context: *" just as men threatened by assassins should not trust the friend who suggests suicide as a way out, so the Jews should not believe these false friends who try to convince them that collective suicide is the surest way to collective security."*

In 1942, the Jews needed to arm themselves to fight. In 2005, on the contrary, the Israelis need to renounce, not all their arms, but all those weapons which could serve only for suicide, even if this suicide would kill their enemies too. Naturally, there's no point in asking them to do so without their obtaining, beforehand, an absolute guarantee that the others will not obtain them and will not seek to eliminate Israel by conventional means or by other weapons of mass destruction. This implies, of course, a global solution to Israel's conflicts with the Palestinians and the Arabs. Some premises of the schema which could lead in that direction are already in place, also fragile. But one essential one is missing: the denuclearisation of the region. This cannot occur except through an even more global process, involving the abolition of all nuclear weapons. We are doomed to create this "utopia", since the thing that is really utopian is to believe that humanity, sitting on a powder-keg of about 30000 nuclear weapons, can forever avoid the spark that would ignite it. Already now, while proliferation is being extended, the ingredients for that spark are present in several regions of the globe, not least the Middle East.

To deepen our analysis, we invited Mordechai Vanunu to take part in the 1st RID-NBC (Rally for International Disarmament, Nuclear, Biological and Chamental) in Saintes, France in October 2004. But Ariel Sharon's government, which was also invited to send a representative, decided otherwise, maintaining the ban on Vanunu's leaving Israeli territory.

Today we publicly renew this double invitation to the 2nd Rally of this kind (2nd RID-NBC), which will take place again in Saintes on 6-8 May 2006.

If the Israeli government does not decide soon to let Vanunu leave the country, we hope that the annual review in April 2006 of the restrictions against him will be the time when it restores that right. If then a free and calm dialogue were at last to begin, in another country, on "neutral ground" and in the presence of international observers, between the Israeli government and one of its policies' most determined opponents, that would be a wonderful sign of hope for all people of good will, wherever they be, who wish to restore peace to a world which sees every day the deaths of men, women and children of flesh and blood, and of all convictions.

SHALOM.

Saintes, 22 November 2005,

Jean-Marie Matagne, president of the Action of Citizens for the total Dismantling of Nukes

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