

Suspected Torturer Gets Key Police Job in Jerusalem

Doron Zahavi Accused of Running Israel's Abu Ghraib

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A police officer known as “Major George” who is accused of torturing Arab prisoners in his previous role as chief interrogator in a secret military jail has been appointed to oversee relations with Jerusalem’s Palestinian population, it has emerged.

The decision has been greeted with stunned disbelief from human rights groups, who say unresolved allegations against Major George that he brutally abused Arab prisoners for many years should disqualify him from such a sensitive post.

Relations between the Israeli police and the 250,000 Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem have been on a knife edge for many months, as extremist Jewish groups — backed by the municipality — have increased their settlement drive in traditional Palestinian neighbourhoods such as Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan.

The Association of Civil Rights in Israel (Acri), Israel’s largest legal rights group, revealed last week that it had made a formal complaint in February about Major George, whose real name is Doron Zahavi.

Acri said he had threatened to demolish the home of a Palestinian community activist in Silwan for leading protests against a settler takeover of Palestinian homes in the area. During what police described as a “getting to know each other session”, pressure was also put on Jawad Siyam to become an informant.

Zahavi, however, first earned notoriety in Unit 504, a special wing of military intelligence, that oversaw the interrogation of foreign Arab nationals held in the secret prison, known as Facility 1391. Israel claims to have closed the jail following its exposure in 2003.

A Lebanese militia leader, Mustafa Dirani, who was held in Facility 1391 for many years, alleged in an Israeli court in 2004 that Zahavi repeatedly tortured him, including by sodomising him with a baton.

The civil suit for \$1.5 million damages was never settled because Israel released Dirani in a prisoner swap before the court had issued a ruling. The judge has denied Zahavi’s subsequent requests to close the case.

Although Zahavi has denied the main charges, he has admitted interrogating prisoners while they were naked and that he ordered one of his officers to undress in Dirani’s cell and threaten to sexually assault him.

Several of Unit 504’s interrogators later corroborated Dirani’s claims, revealing that they

routinely used the torture techniques he had described.

The case has attracted comparisons with Abu Ghraib, the prison in Iraq where US soldiers sexually abused Iraqi inmates.

Dalia Kerstein, director of Hamoked, an Israeli human rights group that helped to expose Facility 1391, called Zahavi's appointment "appalling".

She said the security services had a history of appointing officials who acted violently towards Palestinians to sensitive posts. The authorities' logic, she said, appeared to be that "these people know how to deal with the Arabs because they can speak the language of violence".

Zahavi's new role as adviser on Arab affairs to Jerusalem's police chief, Aharon Franco, is one of the key roles in the Jerusalem force. Zahavi is supposed to act as the main channel between Palestinian residents and the police.

According to the job description, the adviser "must be an accepted and welcome figure in the Arab community, with excellent interpersonal skills."

Melanie Takefman, a spokeswoman for Acri, said it was hard to see how Zahavi could fill such a post. "The problem in Jerusalem is that the police relate almost exclusively to the Palestinians as suspects and do not enforce the law equitably."

Zahavi's job in Facility 1391 was to extract information from important Arab prisoners.

Dirani — a senior figure in Amal, a now-defunct Lebanese militia, who was seized by Israeli commandos in 1994 — was assumed to know the location of a missing airman, Ron Arad, whose plane went down over Lebanon eight years earlier.

Dirani claimed he was left naked for his first month in detention and was sexually abused repeatedly by his interrogators.

When Dirani appeared in court in 2004, he entered walking with great difficulty and aided by a cane. He told the judge of his experience of torture: "I prayed that I'd die."

An unnamed interrogator who worked under Zahavi told the Israeli media: "I remember one instance that I still feel until today, which makes me shudder, in which a baton was used — not for hitting. Even in the field, George did what he wanted, in front of my eyes and the eyes of everyone else."

After Zahavi was dismissed from military intelligence, he joined the immigration police and later moved into police intelligence. He is reported to have taken up his new post in the past two months.

The recent meeting with Siyam suggests that he is likely to bring an uncompromising approach to his role as a liaison with Jerusalem's Palestinians.

Siyam said Zahavi spent most of their meeting shouting at him, and warning that a demolition order would be drawn up for Siyam's house if he continued his political activities. Zahavi also threatened to get him fired from his job.

Although Israel claims to have closed Facility 1391, there are suspicions it and possibly other secret prisons are still in operation. In May last year the United Nations Committee Against Torture called for the location of 1391 to be identified and the prison inspected.

No Bar to Promotion

Zahavi is only the latest example of a security official accused of violent crimes against Palestinians later being placed in a sensitive post.

Gavriel Dahan: A lieutenant in the border police, Dahan was found guilty of carrying out a “manifestly illegal” order to shoot dead Israeli-Palestinian citizens arriving at an improvised checkpoint in 1956. In total, 47 civilians were killed at Kafr Qassem. Dahan was later appointed adviser on Arab affairs in the mixed city of Ramle.

Ehud Yatom: In the infamous Bus 300 affair in 1984, Yatom admitted using a rock to smash the skulls of two bound Palestinian teenagers who had hijacked a bus full of Israelis. Yatom was later pardoned. In 2001 prime minister Ariel Sharon appointed him his counter-terrorism adviser, though the supreme court ruled him unfit for the post. He was elected to the parliament in 2003.

Benzi Sau: A state commission of inquiry harshly criticised Sau, northern commander of the border police, for his role in the fatal shootings of 13 unarmed Palestinian citizens in 2000. The panel recommended he be denied promotion for four years. In that time he was promoted twice, eventually becoming head of the national border police.

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