

# ADL Controls American Library Association

## An Act of Censorship:

### American Library Association Becomes Another Israeli Occupied Territory

By Jeffrey Blankfort | Editor Middle East Labor Bulletin

### Criticism of Israel Stopped Cold



NEW ORLEANS – The embattled Anti-Defamation League’s National Director, Abraham Foxman (photo left), is “going to war – and he’s going to enlist American Jews as his foot soldiers,” wrote the No. California Jewish Bulletin’s Garth Wolkoff this past May, and he wasn’t joking. The first battle took place in this picturesque Gulf Coast port city at the end of June and the ADL and its allies emerged victorious.

The occasion was the annual membership meeting of the American Library Association and answering the call to the colors were hundreds of Jewish librarians who descended on New Orleans for a dual purpose: to overturn a resolution criticizing Israeli censorship that had been approved at last year’s convention and to demonstrate to their fellow librarians that judging Israel was not only not the business of the ALA, but also was not without career-threatening risks. And they succeeded, overwhelmingly. No, the colors they rallied to weren’t visible, but then they didn’t have to be.

For a little under a year, 363 days to be exact, the American Library Association had stood alone as the only major American institution that had publicly and unequivocally condemned Israeli human rights violations and specifically, acts of censorship directed against Palestinian journalists, universities, and libraries.

Headquartered in Chicago, the ALA, with 56,000 members is the oldest and largest library association in the world, and according to its outgoing president, Marilyn Miller, “it has engaged in issues of human rights and intellectual freedom around the world since its establishment in 1876.” In past years it has criticized censorship in Chile, South Africa, the Soviet Union, and, according to Miller “was one of the first and strongest voices to defend Salman Rushdie.” Taking on Israel, however, is another matter.

Largely as a culmination of a nine-year effort on the part of Chicago Public Library Research Librarian David Williams, (MELB 4/1 and 4/2) and the International Human Rights Task Force that

he took over as chair in 1990, the ALA had passed two resolutions at its July 1, 1992 meeting in San Francisco. The first condemning Israeli censorship and human rights violations and the second, protested the threatened expulsion of Palestinian librarian Omar Al-Safi and may have been a factor in having the order withdrawn. (MELB 4/1).

The main resolution referred to the "special relationship" enjoyed by Israel with the United States, "as the recipient of the largest amounts of annual U.S. aid per capita, and declared "the U.S. a party to these censorship practices and other violations of human rights."

To bolster the impressive documentation he presented substantiating Israel's censorship policies, Williams arranged for Israeli journalist, Michal Schwartz, an editor of Challenge magazine and herself a victim of her country's censorship, to address the convention. An Israeli brought by the opposition was unable to offer credible rebuttal and both resolutions passed by large margins. Copies of the resolutions were sent to the U.S. government, to Israel and to the PLO.

## **Can't Afford a Single Public Relations Defeat**

Obviously the matter would not end there. The ADL believes, perhaps correctly, that neither it or Israel can afford a single defeat in its hasbara, the Israeli word for public relations. If the ALA was able to get away with criticizing Israel, who knows who might do it next? The counterattack against the resolution and the character assassination of Williams began virtually the next day and continued up to and after the vote in New Orleans.

In a statement following the rejection of the resolution, Williams pointed out the implications of the entire issue: "The significance of ALA's breaking with the public taboo on criticizing Israel was taken very seriously by the Anti-Defamation League and other Israel lobby groups whose role is to censor, intimidate, and otherwise stifle public criticism of Israel in the United States. It is precisely because of the importance of U.S. aid that they could not afford to let Israel be criticized in such fashion by a mainstream professional organization."

## **ADL's Foxman Takes Charge**

It became clear to Williams that reversal of the censorship resolution had become an ALA priority, as it increasingly came under the influence of what he described as the "highly-organized and well-financed [pro-Israel] political lobby." Quickly taking charge was the ADL's Foxman who, according to the Chicago Jewish Star (June 11-24), held several meetings with ALA leaders "to clarify Israel's position and to put the claims against Israel into context."

"The longer these resolutions remain on the books as ALA policy, the more legitimacy they gain among librarians and educators," wrote Foxman in a letter to Peggy Sullivan, ALA's Executive Director.

This was not the first time the ADL had gone up against Williams. In 1989, it challenged a bibliography he had prepared on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that Chicago's chief librarian and a number of Middle East scholars had considered balanced, and through a "full court" mobilization of the area's Jewish community, would have got away with censoring both the list and Williams, had not their plans been exposed in a local newspaper column. But as the Village Voice's Robert Friedman points out (July 27) **"this is not just a cautionary tale about one librarian's battle against book burning in the occupied territories. It is part of a larger story about the**

**most powerful Jewish organization in America, and its attempt to determine what should be read in our nation's schools, what should be read in our nation's libraries, and what should publicly be discussed at public forums.**

**"Through its 31 offices across the country, the ADL monitors school curricula, library acquisition lists, and public conferences and symposiums, working behind the scenes to stifle intellectual freedom."**

## **Hadassah Plays Most Visible Role**

The ADL, of course, would not have to go it alone, since its policy of defending "Israel, right or wrong," is the guiding principle of all the major Jewish organizations. So it was to be expected that the 1000-member Association of Jewish Libraries would weigh in with a letter protesting the resolutions. "Members of AJL have been outraged by the actions taken by ALA, AJL President Ralph Simon told the Jewish Star (June 11-24). That was just once response. (By the time of the convention, the largest Jewish womens' organization, Hadassah, would play the most visible role, with the ADL content to stay in the shadows due, most likely, to the fear that publicity about its spy network would inhibit its effectiveness.)

Sometime after the San Francisco convention, an ALA attorney, commenting on the resolution, implied it was close to being "seditious" and in American Libraries (March '93), ALA Councilor Charles Bunge referred to the "embarrassing situation" caused by the Council's passage of the resolution. It was also apparent, from American Libraries' Midwinter report, that "although the resolution could not be rescinded, the Council would have done so if it had not "already been widely distributed." As an alternative step, the Council referred the resolution to the ALA's International Resolutions Committee for "study and recommendations."

## **Critics of Israel Called "Facists" and "Anti-Semites"**

At its Midwinter meeting in Denver, the wheels that were to crush the resolution were picking up speed. With the cooperation of the ALA leadership, mass-produced letters and materials were distributed denouncing the anti-censorship efforts as a front for the "terroristic" and "fascist" PLO (as well as Hamas) and suggesting, as Williams pointed out in a task force "Urgent Action Alert," that "anyone who challenged Israel's repressive policies was an antisemite and part of a plot to destroy Jews."

Williams reported that functionaries of the ADL and other pro-Israel lobby groups were very much in attendance at conference sessions, and that "the ADL representatives arranged with the ALA Executive Office to have the customary guest registration fee waived, were outfitted with membership instead of guest convention badges," and directed to the business meeting of the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) International Human Rights Task Force Meeting.

"There," wrote Williams, "they copied down the names and institutional affiliations of everyone present." In one instance, an ADL operative grabbed a task force member who was engaged in conversation, and whirled him around, saying he wanted to see the name on his badge. The tangible intimidation, says Williams, was only beginning:

"With the active complicity of the ALA leadership, pressure was brought to bear on librarians at all levels of the Association to go along with revoking the resolution. Wilfully distorting the facts and

context of Israel's repressive practices, the organizers of this campaign also engaged in the most vicious personal vilification of me – repeatedly equating criticism of Israel with antisemitism.”

Typical of this attack was a passage in a letter sent two weeks before the convention to ALA President-Elect Hardy Franklin by Ellen Zyroff Ph.D, the Principal Librarian of the San Diego County Library, and distributed to ALA members by the ALA Council.

***"This man is wild-eyed and dangerous," wrote Zyroff. "I do not know where his hate comes from, but it is palpable.*** I do not know who paid the fare for the speaker who flew from Tel Aviv University, an institution known for activists against the state of Israel, or for that of the other out-of-town-speakers (referring to a 1991 forum in Atlanta)". (emphasis added).

## **Jews Attempt to Sabotage Forum**

Marty Goldberg, head librarian at Penn State and co-chair of the Jewish Librarians Committee (JLC), a subgroup of the ALA, told the Jewish Star, that Williams "uses this as a platform for his political agenda. We should condemn the resolutions and get the ALA out of the business of singling out one people, one nation, one religion. This has no place in the ALA. There are issues of far more importance than censorship in Israel." For Goldberg, the ADL and the Jewish librarians, a "far more important issue" was protecting Israel.

At the convention, Goldberg sent out a letter to JLC members, suggesting they stay away from a Sunday night forum, sponsored by Williams' task force, preceding the vote on the resolution, because of "the danger of physical violence." (At the Midwinter conference, Williams relinquished his chair of the International Human Rights Task Force and was authorized by the SRRT to initiate a new Task Force on Israeli Censorship and Palestinian Libraries.)

Goldberg's warning was ironic, since last year, a panel arranged by Williams featuring Michal Schwartz and Khader Hamide, one of the Palestinians fighting deportation in Los Angeles, was repeatedly disrupted, first by noisy pro-Israel activists and then by a false fire alarm.

This year's forum, entitled "Israeli Censorship: Here and There," drew an audience of about 120, and proceeded without interruption with members from the audience who supported Israel receiving ample time to respond to the speakers: Williams, Jay Murphy, former editor of Red Bass magazine, and myself.

Williams informed the audience that the ADL's Foxman had once again been invited, and for the third time had declined. In a letter to Williams he had written that "We have consistently refused to participate in your events because of the blatant anti-Israel agenda" Moreover, he didn't believe "that the activities of the Anti-Defamation League are an appropriate subject for your roundtable discussion."

In another clearly centralized attempt to sabotage the forum, a 450 word "anonymous letter" was sent to and published in Jewish newspapers across the country signed alternately by "Concerned Jewish Taxpayer," "Jewish Taxpayer," "Anonymous Librarian" and "a librarian whose job would be jeopardized by identification," (the latter being a classic example of the victimizer pretending to be the victim).

The thrust of the letter was to infer that "since public libraries are funded chiefly by local tax dollars," Jewish taxpayers ought to know about the forum and its title. In a thinly concealed threat in the next to last paragraph, the "writer" warns that "If public opinion causes enough institutions and individuals to stop sending in their hefty membership dues (often paid for with public funds) perhaps the ALA will reconsider its priorities."

## **The Fix Is In**

Foxman and the ADL didn't need to debate, nor did Goldberg need to attend the forum to state their case. The "fix" was already in. Goldberg, speaking at a meeting of the Jewish Librarians group the day before had all but admitted as much. Acknowledging that he was usually a pessimist, he told his listeners that they "shouldn't worry" about Monday night's vote. "The ALA Council," he repeated several times, "wants out of this situation."

The meeting of the Jewish Librarians next morning was attended by the Village Voice's Friedman, which caused Goldberg to declare the proceedings "off the record," a ludicrous request at what was advertised to be, and what has been ALA policy at all its events since 1971, a public meeting.

At the meeting, ALA trustee from New Orleans, Helen Kuhlman, who preceded her remarks with the same "this is off the record," caveat described how on the Thursday evening preceding the convention, she had hosted a reception for the ALA Council, the ADL and Hadassah, and that they had nothing to worry about. What exactly was going to happen she didn't say, but it was clear that the long arm of Israeli censorship was about to be extended to embrace the New Orleans Convention Center.

## **Cover-up and Spin**

The Jewish Librarians later heard from a Young Republican stockbroker type named Aaron Albert, who said he had worked with CAMERA, a pro-Israel propaganda agency, as well as AIPAC, but evidently had been brought to the convention by Hadassah. Albert brought with him a flyer, published by the women's group which was to be distributed to ALA members the night of the vote.

The flyer carried a bold 48-point headline, "Let's stop fighting yesterday's wars." It suggested that "a new era has dawned" since the resolutions were drafted, and that the charges of censorship against Israel were "outdated and nuanced.; [and] grossly incompatible with the scholarly pursuits of the ALA." The failed "peace" talks in Washington became the cover for the coverup: "With the peace process between Israel and its Arab neighbors now well underway; this is not the time for divisive, counter-productive resolutions, etc."

Whether the flyer was actually needed or provided just a convenient cover is debatable. Within an hour and a half of the Jewish Librarians meeting, the first bomb landed. The ALA Council, without any previous indication that the subject was to be on its agenda, revoked the 1992 resolution. Moreover, the Council approved guidelines for the future that will, in effect, allow them to overturn votes of the membership. At that meeting, according to the report published in *American Libraries* (July/Aug. '93), Pres. Miller noted that "The mail has been intense," and that criticism has included the condemnation in the Jewish press of the annual conference program on Israeli censorship. She was referring to the "anonymous" letter published in a number of Jewish papers mentioned earlier.

Nancy John, chair of the International Relations Committee informed the Council that the Israeli censorship was the only item on its agenda. At an earlier Executive Board meeting, citing the "countless hours" the issue had consumed, suggested that in the future, "refer these things to us; we know a little something about international relations" (Amer. Lib., *ibid.*). Now, ALA parliamentarian Edwin Bliss was asked to present the options available to the Council for dealing with a resolution it had passed, acted on, and now regretted.

"An organization has a right to change its mind," he said, accord to the American Libraries report. Sticking by the opinion rendered at the Midwinter conference that it was impossible to "rescind" something that had been distributed around the word, he suggested the term "revoke." And thus, Councilor Bernard Margolis so moved, the Council voted, and by a "safe margin" the resolution was interred. "By all accounts," noted American Libraries, "it is the first time in its history that the ALA has taken such an action."

## **Jews Target Williams**

Prior to the vote, Pres. Miller announced that a special "fact-finding" Task Force made up of three former ALA presidents had been appointed to "review" charges that Williams engaged in "censorship, personal harassment and suppression of freedom of expression."

Moreover, Williams was requested to appear before the ALA Executive Board the following day, preceding the full membership meeting, to answer criticisms that had been made against him.

Also on the carpet was SRRT chair Stephen Stilwell who was questioned by the chair, Pres. Miller regarding the SRRT's control over Williams' task force; the use of the ALA's name by the task force; whether or not it received outside funding (clearly implying a PLO connection) and why Israel was being singled out all of which he calmly fielded in defending the work of the task force and the resolution.

Miller acknowledged to Stilwell that the Council had received "a huge stack of letters," and that "we all have been receiving these letters and we're all under pressure."

Cesar Cabellero, head of Extension Services for El Paso Community College, was the only member of the largely silent 13-person board to speak up in the defense of the resolution. "All our members have an inherent right to take stands on social issues. I don't think he should be questioned. SRRT has the right to take positions. I think this organization has a right to single out countries for violations of international freedom. Some of our members are so sensitive they can't separate principles from politics." There would be few such voices heard for the rest of the convention.

Williams was up next and took his seat at the foot of the long table. After he asked for and received permission to make a statement Miller repeated her criticisms about using the ALA's name and her "concern that we continue to pound on one country." "If you go to such extraordinary lengths to prevent Israel from being singled out, " Williams replied, "you become an extension of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the U.S."

When asked, "How do you verify your facts?", Williams cited the Committee for Article 19 (the human rights convention against censorship), the Fund for Free Expression and the work of Israeli sociologist and demographer, Meron Benvenisti and noted that the ALA's International Resolutions Committee "did conclude, that the documentation was, in the main, very accurate."

Having failed to refute Williams' arguments, the Council shifted to another tack – how he conducted the work of his task force, and would not let go of it. It would be used on the floor of the convention, and afterward not only to undermine the resolution but to isolate Williams and effectively terminate his task force.

"We have no problems with what you do," he was told, in seeming contradiction to everything that had just taken place. "it's just sometimes how you do it."

It was clear, that night, as we were passing out flyers "Williams' facts competing with Hadassah's fiction" that something was afoot. **Jewish librarians in extraordinary numbers began arriving for the meeting**, most of whom, apparently, were not regular participants in ALA meetings. (Since ALA is not a union, its conventions are not delegated. Every member has a vote if she or he can get there).

When the issue of reaffirmation of the Israeli censorship resolution came to the floor – it was now certainly necessary since the Council had revoked the previous one – the atmosphere was so intimidating that a resolution condemning Egypt, which the SRRT was also going to present never got to the floor. SRRT Chair Stillwell arose to defend the resolution, citing its consistency with other actions by the Council such as its resolution opposing the Gulf War. He pointed out that **no one had "disputed the truth of the allegations" in the Israeli censorship resolution; rather the Council had succumbed to outside pressure in deciding to revoke it.**

His fellow SRRT member Sanford Berman called on the membership to show its disapproval of the Council's revocation action and reaffirm the resolution, but the votes just weren't there. Speaker after speaker got up to defend Israel, to denounce the resolution, to question the ALA's wisdom in taking positions on international issues – something that never seems to be a problem until it comes to Israel – and, in the atmosphere of triumphant intolerance that inundated every corner of the room – to all but **ask for Williams head on a platter**, calling for a special investigation of his activities and the end of the Task Force on Israeli Censorship. He certainly had pushed their button. Under those conditions, other librarians, some of them Jewish, who had supported the resolutions were clearly afraid to speak.

This time there was no progressive Israeli voice to shame the flag-wavers with the truth.

## **It Is Done**

Following an overwhelming vote to cut-off debate, the resolution came to the floor. The relative handful still having the courage to swim against the tide, and who rose when the "aye" vote was called, was no match for the hundreds of Jewish librarians (and their intimidated colleagues) who loudly stood up to declare the ALA another occupied Israeli territory.

"The vote was so lopsided it was ridiculous," said ALA trustee Kuhlman. "What happened at ALA has been put to rest in a very definitive way" (No. Cal. Jewish Bulletin, July 16) The following day, the SRRT "got the message." By a 9-4-1 vote, it stripped David of his task force chair, with the stipulation that until a replacement was found, every piece of correspondence or literature he wished to circulate, had to be approved by the SRRT chair. Goliath had won this round.

The Jewish Librarian's Goldberg told the Washington Jewish Week's (July 8) Sam Skolnik, that one of his committee's goals was to take international political issues off the ALA's front burner and put

more apparent concerns up front. "Libraries in this country have tremendous problems," he said. [The ALA] shouldn't be involved in these complicated issues. Let's stay out of it."

Williams has other ideas and the last word.

"Although we were overpowered in New Orleans, this may well turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory for the Israel lobby. In the course of this long struggle, thousands of librarians were made aware of Israeli human rights abuses, and the ALA officially criticized them – causing great embarrassment for defenders of Israel in the U.S.

**"The subsequent spectacle of the ALA leadership going down on its knees before the Israel lobby to exempt Israel from criticism will not go unnoticed by all those who sincerely believe in the consistent application of human rights principles. This issue will continue to haunt the ALA and the Israel lobby, until the time comes when America is fed-up with supporting an apartheid state in the Middle East."**

*In the weeks following the convention, the special task force appointed to investigate Williams was canceled after (one would like to think) the ALA comprehended the Kafkaesque nature of the project and the sad contribution the ALA had already made to the history of censorship.*