

Israeli official: Ex-Egyptian envoy spied on Israel

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Former Egyptian ambassador Mohammed Bassiouny took part in espionage activities against Israel during his 18-year-term, Israel's ex-ambassador to Washington Danny Ayalon told *The Jerusalem Post* on Thursday.

"I knew him well, we kept in touch during the time he worked in Israel," Ayalon said.

Bassiouny overstepped the bounds of the normal information-gathering carried out by all ambassadors, and strayed into spying, Ayalon said.

"What is the definition of a spy? Someone who handles agents and receives information that is sensitive. I believe he [Bassiouny] was involved in that," he said.

Ayalon drew a clear distinction between espionage and "legitimate information-gathering," which took the form of scanning the press and meeting with government and opposition officials and senior military officers, which "all diplomats do."

In a speech at Egypt's Alexandria national library, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, on Saturday, Bassiouny was quoted as saying:

"There is no such thing as friendship [with the Israelis]... Besides, I was sent there as an intelligence officer and not because of my character. Do you really think that I worked there as an ambassador?"

Bassiouny denied making the comments in an interview with the Taiba-based Arabic-language newspaper *Panorama* on Wednesday, calling the reports "libel."

But Ayalon said Israel's defense and diplomatic communities had been fully aware of the true nature of Bassiouny's activities in the country.

"The Prime Minister's Office knew he dealt in intelligence," Ayalon said. Bassiouny was Egypt's military attache in Syria during the Yom Kippur War. He was also dispatched to Iran as a military attaché.

During his time in Israel, he forged links with many leading politicians and diplomats, and was known to enjoy mingling with political elites at social functions.

"A diplomat who deals in espionage has immunity, but can be kicked out as a *persona non grata*. I believe he was not ejected because Israel did not wish to harm relations with

Egypt," Ayalon said.

Zalman Shoval, who also served as ambassador to the US, said it was "certain" that Israeli intelligence agencies knew what Bassiouny was up to during his long stay in the country.

"There are all kinds of ways to keep tabs, and I don't want to get into the details," Shoval said. It was "no secret that Bassiouny was an intelligence man."

Several states tended to appoint veterans of intelligence services as ambassadors, he added.

Meir Elran, a former deputy director of Military Intelligence who took part in peace talks with Egypt, said, "Every good ambassador in the world reports to his superiors, and acts as the long arm of information-gathering."

"This is especially true when speaking of rival countries that were enemies up until recently. So of course there is mutual hostility and information-gathering, including military intelligence," said Elran, a senior researcher at Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies. "In the context of Egyptian-Israeli relations, this is almost natural."

Bassiouny's recent anti-Israel remarks are believed by some to be linked to the sex scandal in which he was involved nearly 10 years ago.

The affair, which seriously embarrassed Bassiouny and the Egyptian government, erupted when a belly dancer from Ramat Gan, Shlomit Shalom, accused him of attempted rape.

Shalom said Bassiouny got her to the home of a friend, a surgeon who was out of the country at the time, under the pretext that he would help her find a job.

"He offered me gifts: leather bags, jewelry, shoes and many work offers," she said in an interview back then. "But I refused to have sex with him. He insisted, and when I resisted, he was enraged and resorted to force."

Bassiouny denied the allegations, arguing that he was being extorted by Shalom and "enemies."

Egypt initially refused to replace Bassiouny.

Under pressure from the Foreign Ministry, the case against Bassiouny was eventually closed "due to lack of substantial evidence."

Shortly before he left Israel, Shalom filed a lawsuit against Bassiouny, demanding NIS 1 million in compensation.

A former Egyptian diplomat said Thursday that Bassiouny left Israel with "bitterness and frustration" because of the allegations against him.

"He felt that his friends in Israel betrayed him," the former diplomat said. "He was very angry with the whole affair, which he saw as an attempt to defame him and destroy his

reputation."

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