

Arson Seen in Attack on Ex-Israeli Spy

Exclusive: Suspected arson destroyed the Montreal home of ex-Israeli intelligence officer Ari Ben-Menashe, who says he escaped through a rear door. It's unclear if the fire was an assassination attempt to finally silence a man who has angered the Israeli government, powerful Republicans and others, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Ex-Israeli intelligence officer Ari Ben-Menashe says he narrowly survived a possible assassination attempt Sunday night when his upscale home in Montreal was set ablaze in what Canadian authorities are describing as suspected arson. Police cited how quickly the house was ravaged and noted that a suspicious person was seen fleeing the scene shortly after the fire began.

In a phone call with me on Monday, Ben-Menashe said that when he detected the fire, he alerted a woman staying in the house to flee and then was able to escape through a back door. But he said everything inside was destroyed, including his passport, personal papers and his clothing. "Everything is gone," Ben-Menashe said.

Ben-Menashe said he believed the fire was set with "a Molotov cocktail" but he had no clear idea who might have tried to kill him. He did acknowledge that he has a number of enemies around the world resulting from his past as an Israeli intelligence officer and his more recent work as an international consultant often working in global hotspots.

Among Ben-Menashe's enemies are some of his former Israeli superiors who consider him a traitor for exposing sensitive Israeli secrets and powerful Republicans, including former President George H.W. Bush whom Ben-Menashe fingered as involved in national security scandals in the 1980s.

Ben-Menashe, who served in Israeli military intelligence in the 1970s and 1980s, was arrested in the United States in 1989 for his involvement in military sales to Iran. He says the Israeli government then urged him to plead guilty to the U.S. charges, but he refused and began disclosing Israeli secrets to journalists, including me in early 1990 when I was a correspondent for Newsweek magazine.

At first, the Israeli government denounced Ben-Menashe as an "impostor" but after I obtained official Israeli letters of reference describing his decade-long work within the External Relations Department of the Israel Defence Forces,

Israeli officials changed their story. They labeled him simply “a low-level translator.” But the letters described Ben-Menashe’s service in “key positions” and said he handled “complex and sensitive assignments.”

Despite the evidence that Israeli officials had first lied and then retreated to a new cover story, the Bush administration and the Israeli government managed to galvanize friendly journalists who went out of their way to discredit Ben-Menashe as a compulsive liar. [For details about one of the key denouncers of Ben-Menashe, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Unmasking October Surprise ‘Debunker’”](#).]

However, Ben-Menashe convinced a New York jury that he indeed had been working on official Israeli business in his transactions with Iran. He was acquitted in fall 1990. Ben-Menashe also continued to give interviews and provide testimony about the secret dealings involving Republicans and the Israeli government.

October Surprise Allegations

Perhaps Ben-Menashe’s most controversial claim was that he and other Israeli intelligence officers assisted the Republicans in brokering a deal with Iran’s Islamic regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1980 to hold 52 American hostages until after the U.S. election to ensure President Jimmy Carter’s defeat. As a result of this so-called October Surprise caper, the hostages were not released until Jan. 20, 1981, immediately after Ronald Reagan was sworn in as U.S. President, Ben-Menashe said.

After leveling his October Surprise accusations in 1990-1991 and providing investigative journalist Seymour Hersh information about Israel’s nuclear program for his book *The Samson Option* Ben-Menashe was essentially a man on the run from both the Israeli government and the U.S. administration of George H.W. Bush.

Ben-Menashe sought refuge in Australia, arriving in spring 1991, still carrying his Israeli passport. After obtaining Ben-Menashe’s Australian immigration records, journalist Marshall Wilson reported that Ben-Menashe requested what amounted to political asylum.

Dated May 15, 1991, [Ben-Menashe’s 25-page declaration](#) stated: “My case is an unprecedented case of political persecution by two governments. It was an attempt by Israel and the United States to cover up their relations with Iran since 1979.”

Ben-Menashe detailed the curious circumstances of his 1989 arrest while on a private visit to the U.S. and added: “I was not willing to keep quiet and be discredited by pleading guilty to the bogus charges. I did not accept my government’s proposal to do so. Any arms sales to Iran that I was involved in

was solely in the capacity of being an employee of the Israeli government. Everything I did was authorised by the appropriate authorities in the Israeli and United States governments.

“Since I did not go along with the program and decided I would truthfully defend myself in court, I was disowned by the Israeli Government and will be prosecuted for breaking the Official Secrets Act if I return. I will be prosecuted behind closed doors, ‘for national security reasons,’ and I will never again see the light of day.”

But Ben-Menashe said his case had other implications. “As an aftermath of my [1990] trial a new scandal has broken directly involving the President of the United States [George H.W. Bush],” Ben-Menashe wrote, “about the President being involved in an arms-for-hostage release delay deal [with Iran] in 1980. I am a central witness on that issue.

“Democratic members of the US Congress are going to speak to me about that and other issues involving US sales of unconventional weapon systems to Iraq, all connected to the present [George H.W. Bush] administration of the US,” Ben-Menashe told Australian immigration. “Paradoxically speaking I am now being punished for being acquitted.”

Later in May 1991, Ben-Menashe faced an apparent plan by George H.W. Bush’s administration to divert him from Los Angeles Airport to Israel when he was en route to Washington to testify to Congress about his allegations. If he had been turned over, his fate would likely have been similar to that of technician Mordechai Vanunu, who disclosed Israel’s secret nuclear weapons program and then was kidnapped in Rome and returned to Israel for trial and imprisonment.

A Last-Minute Tip

However, before Ben-Menashe’s flight, I received a tip from a U.S. intelligence source about the plan and checked with congressional investigators who were expecting to interview the Israeli. When they couldn’t get a clear commitment from the Bush administration about Ben-Menashe’s safe passage, I called him in Australia as he was about to leave for the Sydney airport.

I suggested that he delay his flight, which he did. Later, I was informed by congressional investigators that they finally had extracted assurances from the Bush administration that Ben-Menashe would be allowed to proceed to Washington and he rescheduled his flight. Though he was not diverted to Israel, he was taken aside by U.S. authorities in Los Angeles and subjected to some harsh questioning.

That evening, I picked Ben-Menashe up at Dulles Airport and was surprised how

shaken he was. I drove him to my home in Arlington, Virginia, and he asked if he could spend the night in my guest room, thinking that he was under surveillance and fearing for his life. With some hesitation, I consented.

Months later, when pro-Israeli journalists escalated their character assassination of Ben-Menashe, one New Republic writer Steven Emerson criticized my ethics for allowing Ben-Menashe to stay over in my house, which struck me as a curious accusation not only because there is no such ethical standard but because the fact had never been made public. The reference led me to believe that Ben-Menashe had not been paranoid when he worried about being under surveillance or for his safety.

Although substantial evidence has emerged to support Ben-Menashe's claims, Republicans and the Israeli government continued to deny the October Surprise story and U.S. congressional investigations in the early 1990s confronted a stonewall of Republican obstruction. Ultimately, the investigations concluded that solid evidence of a GOP conspiracy was lacking. [For the latest details on this controversy, see Robert Parry's new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*.]

A Life of Intrigue

When published in 1992, Ben-Menashe's memoir, *Profits of War*, provided further details about the cloak-and-dagger operations conducted by U.S. and Israeli intelligence.

A Jew who was born in Iran and who emigrated to Israel as a teenager, Ben-Menashe explained how his background proved valuable to Israeli intelligence after the Shah of Iran, a close Israeli ally, was overthrown in 1979. As Israel tried to rebuild some relationship with Iran, Ben-Menashe was able to reconnect with some of his friends from his youth who were rising inside the new revolutionary government.

Ben-Menashe said those contacts led him into a role as an intermediary on military sales to Iran during the U.S.-Iranian hostage crisis in 1980 and placed him near the decision by Prime Minister Menachem Begin to throw in Israel's lot with Republican Ronald Reagan in his campaign to unseat President Jimmy Carter. Over the next several years, Ben-Menashe remained a key middleman in the arms transactions that were crucial to Iran in its long war with Iraq.

Yet, by the early 1990s, after his arrest and acquittal, Ben-Menashe had become a man without a country. On Oct. 23, 1991, he was informed that his refugee application in Australia had failed. A departmental officer declared that "there appears to have been ample opportunity for one government or another [the U.S. or Israel] to have taken action against Mr Ben-Menashe if his political

importance made him of real interest to them.” [See [here](#) and [here](#).]

Ben-Menashe appealed the finding, but on Dec. 12, 1991, the Refugee Status Review Committee confirmed the adverse ruling. A letter signed by its Chairman said in part: “The applicant’s fear of the consequences of breaking Israeli law does not warrant international protection. The applicant has, therefore, not established a well-founded fear of persecution were he to return to Israel.” [See [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).]

However, the decision was not unanimous, as Australian journalist Marshall Wilson reported. One member of the panel added, “I request a meeting to discuss aspects of this case, particularly the matters of what constitutes persecution given this extraordinary mix of international conspiracies and intrigue and the laws under which the applicant could be charged should he return to Israel.

“I believe the applicant has been an intelligence operative of the Israeli Government and has been involved in various arms deals. The American use of Israel to sell arms to Iran during the Iran-Iraq War is attested to by a number of sources. The delay in the release of the American hostages also is now widely accepted as true.”

In the end Ben-Menashe left Australia of his own free will without further resort to the courts. He eventually settled in Canada, married a Canadian woman, received citizenship and built a new life as an international consultant.

Ben-Menashe stood by his sworn testimony about the October Surprise machinations and other allegations, but his credibility continued to come under assault. It didn’t seem to matter even when some Israeli officials confirmed that Ben-Menashe, indeed, had been involved in important clandestine operations for Israel.

For instance, American journalist Craig Unger was told by a senior intelligence official, Moshe Hebroni, that “Ben-Menashe served directly under me. He had access to very, very sensitive material.” [*Village Voice*, July 7, 1992] In the Israeli daily, *Davar*, reporter Pazit Ravina wrote, “in talks with people who worked with Ben-Menashe, the claim that he had access to highly sensitive intelligence information was confirmed again and again.”

Now, in investigating the mysterious fire that could have killed Ben-Menashe – and that succeeded in destroying many of his personal papers – the authorities in Canada may have to determine if the fire resulted from some new enemy or an enemy from Ben-Menashe’s past, someone who preferred that the former Israeli spy finally be silenced.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for

The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).
