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### Police believe they've exposed Haredi modesty patrol

By Yair Ettinger

Tags: Israel, Jerusalem >>

In an old office in a residential building in Jerusalem's Geula neighborhood, sparsely furnished and with no air conditioning, four men sit behind desks piled high with papers and old issues of Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) newspapers. The hands on the yellowing clocks show that it is already 5 P.M., but activity here is at its height. The secretary lights another cigarette and picks up the ringing phone. Someone wants to know whether it is permitted to bathe at Tel Aviv's single-sex Sheraton Beach. The conversation will last for five seconds: "Taref [unclean], pork," he rules dryly. "It's not only the beach, all the entrances are no good. Both for men and for women."

#### Deviants and pedophiles

That is how the headquarters of the Committee for Preserving Our Camp's Purity works. The Jerusalem-based committee is in charge of modesty issues among the ultra-Orthodox public. This is where questions about what is permitted and what is prohibited stream in; this is where pashkevils [posters] are produced against businesses that sell "unclean appliances" like MP4s, or anything else that could "cause many casualties" among the Haredi public. This is also the address for complaints or informing against those who have strayed from the path: deviants, traitors and pedophiles.

"What we do is confirm the details, a public service," said the secretary. "At

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most we issue a warning. Everything is done in a pleasant manner."

Yet in one serious case that was recently publicized by the police, and that has set off riots in Jerusalem over the past three weeks, it looks as though some of the tracks lead back to this office, which is all humdrum bureaucratic routine.



The police believe they have discovered the "modesty patrols" that terrorize the ultra-Orthodox public, and have even investigated the committee's head, Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Shpernovitz.

Police have already arrested Binyamin Meirovich, who used to frequent this office; they believe he played a central role in a case in which a formerly Haredi woman was attacked because she was suspected of having improper ties with married men. They also arrested Shmuel Weissfish, on suspicion of harassing and torching shops in the Geula neighborhood. And an indictment was filed against Elhanan Buzaglo, which accuses him of being a "fist for hire" in the service of the modesty patrols and Meirovich and of playing an active role in attacking the formerly ultra-Orthodox woman. Meirovich and Weissfish were recently released under restrictive conditions, but police promise that they will be indicted, and there may be additional indictments as well.

The phrase "modesty patrols" hovers perpetually over the Haredi community. They may be a journalistic myth, or they may be part of life among the ultra-Orthodox.

But the police and the Jerusalem District Attorney's Office treat them with all seriousness. The indictment against Buzaglo stated that he "worked for the modesty patrols ... and one of the ways the organization works to carry out its goals is by means of threats, violence and other crimes." The organization, it continued, has used violent means in "dozens" of similar cases.

## Murder

In June 1990, the body of Avi Edri was found in Jerusalem's Ramot Forest bearing marks of severe violence. The police then declared that the murdered man had been a victim of modesty patrol members, who suspected him of carrying on an affair with a married ultra-Orthodox woman.

Though the police believed the attackers had meant only to frighten Edri, not to kill him, they were convinced that they had finally cracked the modesty patrols. But their investigation did not yield a single indictment.

Does the latest indictment mean that the modesty patrols have finally been caught?

The attack in question came to light due to a complaint by a 31-year-old woman who lives in Jerusalem's Ma'alot Dafna neighborhood. Until her divorce three years ago, she led a Haredi lifestyle, and after she abandoned this way of life, she continued to live in the Haredi neighborhood. According to the indictment, the modesty patrols suspected that she "was carrying on improper relationships with married men," and therefore planned to attack her in order to cause her to leave and to "pay her back" for her deeds.

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Buzaglo participated in the attack for a fee of \$2,000, the indictment said, and his fingerprints were found in the plaintiff's apartment. On June 1 of this year, it continued, he showed up in the woman's apartment along with six other men, armed with cudgels and tear gas.

"The defendant and the others pushed the plaintiff, threw her to the floor, banged her head against the floor and kicked her all over her body," the indictment stated.

"The defendant or one of the others sat on her head to prevent her from seeing what was going on and also to prevent her from fighting back. The defendant and the others also gagged the plaintiff with a piece of fabric and threatened that if she opened her eyes, tear gas would be sprayed into them. The defendant or one of the others interrogated the plaintiff regarding her relationships with men and asked for details about those men."

The assailants also took two cell phones away with them, in order to check the names of her callers, the charge sheet continued. And before leaving, they threatened that if she did not move out of her apartment, she would be murdered.

Cudgels and tear gas have also been used in other attacks on people suspected of sexual licentiousness in Haredi neighborhoods.

In an article on the modesty patrols published in the Haredi weekly Mishpaha in 1995, these weapons were mentioned as a key part of the patrols' arsenal.

The article also addressed a more interesting question: What is the group's mandate? A "veteran activist" told the newspaper: "There are no spontaneous blows, every blow requires permission from a Torah sage ... We have instructions in particularly severe cases to break arms and legs, not to kill."

Many people interviewed for the current article, however, believe that the recent attack in Ma'alot Dafna was a local operation "related to family honor," and had no connection to the modesty patrols or the Committee for Preserving Our Camp's Purity.

Either way, caution is warranted about the police's declaration that they are engaged in "a campaign against the modesty patrols." It is doubtful whether Weissfish, for example, is connected to the attack on the woman, and as far as is known, he is also not connected to the committee for preserving purity, but rather to a relatively new and nonestablishment extremist gang that operates in Jerusalem's Mea Shearim neighborhood and is called the Sicarii ("dagger men," after a group of extremists active during the Second Temple period). "As opposed to the Sicarii, who operate as a violent and disdained street gang, the modesty patrols are a positive thing, and are essential everywhere," said one Mea Shearim resident.

Yoel Kreuz, who is nicknamed the "operations officer" of the ultra-Orthodox Eda Haredit, believes that the police are more interested in the leaders of the Sicarii than in stopping the activity of the modesty patrols.

"The patrols' activity does not disturb the police, on the contrary," he said. "They know that the modesty patrols do not resort to violence. If there is a pedophile in the neighborhood, only the modesty patrols can get him. But they usually don't beat people up."

Back to the office of the Committee for Preserving Our Camp's Purity: When Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Shpernovitz sits in his office toward evening, it is hard to see him as the infamous mashgiah (spiritual supervisor) of the Gur Hasidim's

yeshivas, who reportedly terrorizes hundreds and thousands of young boys. "You probably thought you would arrive in a dark cave here," he told the visitor.

Shpernovitz asserted that what is now being attributed to the modesty patrols is nothing more than journalistic myth.

"Once, there was such a thing as the modesty patrols," he said - perhaps defensively, or perhaps waxing nostalgic about days gone by. "Today, there are no such things. The things that the police are attributing to Meirovich are nonsense. After all, a Haredi person cannot engage in such activity."

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1. they hire their thugs for the dirty work...	10:00   eric	01/09/08
2. not very critical about the haredi terror sponsored by rabbis	11:17   dan	01/09/08
3. Think about this Israeli officials	11:50   debit & credit	01/09/08
4. Taliban-like behavior, who needs it?!	12:24   Akiva P	01/09/08
5. I thought modesty patrols were legal	12:26   Paul Wood	01/09/08
6. Let them dare to beat me. I'll shoot the sons of bitc#es	12:26   Rueben	01/09/08
7. Haredi modesty patrol	12:48   Leeza Cohen Coleman	01/09/08
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11. `religious criminals` and Israel allows this?	13:23   Petra	01/09/08
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14. Modesty Police - just like in Iran. Is that what we want?	13:58   S.	01/09/08
15. WHY CONDEMN A WHOLE COMMUNITY JUST BECAUSE OF 4 SUSPECTED GUYS?	14:08   AVI	01/09/08
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**18. Paul Wood's antisemitism**

14:28 | El\_Justiciero

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