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UK denies access to cables that may aid hunt for missing soldiers

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The British Government is refusing to release diplomatic cables that could provide fresh leads on the fate of three Israeli soldiers who disappeared during the 1982 war with Lebanon.

Three decades after the soldiers – Zachary Baumel, Zvi Feldman and Yehuda Katz – were taken captive during fierce fighting in Lebanon, their fate remains a mystery. Several reports suggested they were moved to Damascus, but Syria has denied any knowledge of their whereabouts.

Relatives of the missing soldiers are now appealing to the British Government to release a confidential diplomatic report sent by

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Ivor Lucas, Britain's envoy to Syria, on the day of the soldiers' disappearance, which may confirm sightings of them in Damascus. If so, it would provide the first concrete evidence that the men were held in Syria.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has refused requests submitted under the Freedom of Information Act, claiming that the release of sensitive cables could harm Britain's relations with Syria.

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the release of Mr Lucas's report, but a date has not yet been set to consider the matter.

On 11 June 1982, five days into Israel's invasion of Lebanon, Israeli troops came under intense fire from Syrian troops and Palestinian fighters. The three missing combatants were seen escaping from their burning tanks, only to fall into the hands of enemy troops.

Two other Israelis also taken captive that day were later released in prisoner exchange deals with Syria and Ahmed Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

A Time magazine reporter later testified that he had seen an Israeli tank paraded that afternoon through the streets of Damascus with captured Israeli soldiers looking "exhausted, downcast and battle fatigued".

The Rev Bob Carroll, the founder of MIA UK, an organisation dedicated to uncovering the fate of missing Israeli soldiers, claims that he had it confirmed by the late Adrian Peck, the British military attaché in Damascus, that the Israeli soldiers were seen in the Syrian capital following the battle.

"We're trying to establish an official link on paper that the [missing soldiers] were in Damascus. At the moment, it's just hearsay," said Mr Carroll. "Then of course we'd want some answers from the Syrian government."

Tantalising details on the men's whereabouts have surfaced over the years, raising hopes that they might still be alive. In 1993, Yasser Arafat, the late Palestinian leader, presented Israel with half of Mr Baumel's dog tag, promising to provide more information, but he later refused to say anything more.

"I find that hard to believe," said Daniel Berke, a solicitor in Manchester acting on behalf of one of the families. "We just want to know any information on the welfare or fate of the missing soldiers. If there is something else in [the report], we're not interested."

Lawyers have now appealed in writing against the Foreign Office's decision to prevent



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Other reports have suggested that Mr Baumel was being held alive in Syria as recently as 2005 after his parents claimed to have obtained a coded message from him through a Syrian source.

"This is a humanitarian matter," Zachary Baumel's mother, Miriam Baumel, told the The Jewish Chronicle. "I feel the possibilities are great that he is still alive, but certainly the families of those who were seen in Damascus are entitled to closure.

"I am calling on the British Government to act in a humanitarian manner and let the families know by releasing this document, for us to go further in finding our children. If you have children, if one of your children would be lost, how would you feel?"

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