

UN report on Jenin: A whitewash of Israeli war crimes

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The past weeks have seen the publication of numerous smug and at times even triumphalist statements by the Israeli government and its apologists, proclaiming that a slander perpetrated by the Palestinians has been refuted. The occasion for this crowing was the United Nations report supposedly confirming that no massacre was committed by Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) in the Palestinian refugee camp at Jenin.

Look beneath the froth and invective, however, and it becomes apparent that substantively the UN report counts for very little, given that it simply repeats the findings of various governmental organisations and human rights groups. Politically it presents an account heavily slanted in favour of the government of Ariel Sharon—at least as far as this is possible given the appalling war crimes that *have* been perpetrated.

The UN report is forced to acknowledge that there was indiscriminate killing of civilians by the IDF. It states, “By the time of the IDF withdrawal and the lifting of the curfew on 18 April, at least 52 Palestinians, of whom up to half may have been civilians, and 23 Israeli soldiers were dead.”

It also concludes “It is impossible to determine with precision how many civilians were among the Palestinian dead.”

The figures cited are in line with the findings of groups such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International, who sent teams to carry out limited investigations at the scene. The UN can do nothing else but repeat these findings because their investigation was blocked by Israel, which has also refused to cooperate with the report since it was instigated. Therefore the UN report admits that it “relies completely on available resources and information”.

If anything, the UN report is both factually and substantively weaker than even those partial reports already in the public domain. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty both cited more examples of Israeli atrocities against civilians than the report issued in the name of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and mandated by the Security Council.

Moreover these organisations were prepared to call Israel’s actions war crimes that were in breach of the Geneva Conventions. Peter Bouckaert of HRW said, “We are very disappointed with the [UN] report because it doesn’t make any factual determination of what happened in Jenin.” He added

that the document “effectively lets the Israelis off the hook”, given that the IDF had committed “war crimes” in Jenin, “And there were deliberate killings of civilians.”

In truth, no one knows definitively how many people died at Jenin, thanks largely to the cowardice and capitulation of the UN in the face of Israel’s threats. The report admits that all events from April 3 to April 18 2002, when the IDF entered Jenin and the refugee camp, were shielded from public scrutiny by Israel’s curfew.

Fears of a massacre were entirely legitimate, given that Israeli Major General Ron Kitrey put the death toll in Jenin alone at between 200 and 300 and only later issued a statement saying that figure included dead *and* wounded. Palestinian eyewitnesses also spoke of mass burials and bodies being taken away.

Even when the curfew was officially lifted, for several crucial days Israel prevented the UN and others from investigating what had happened. Annan and Sharon’s offices were involved in negotiations over allowing access to Jenin that came to nothing and Annan finally disbanded the team on May 3.

Those investigators and reporters who did get in hardly had the powers that would have been available to the UN. Even given these limitations the UN does not draw on all the available accounts of Israeli atrocities. Britain’s *Independent* newspaper, for example, wrote the day after the UN report was issued: “An investigation by the *Independent* inside Jenin shortly after the fighting unearthed numerous corroborating accounts of atrocities.

“Of the many victims whose stories were published on 3 May in the *Independent*, only Fadwa Jamma, a Palestinian nurse who was shot through the heart while trying to tend a wounded man is mentioned in the new UN report. She was in full uniform and could be clearly seen.

“Fourteen-year-old Faris Zebein, who was shot dead by an Israeli tank when he went shopping when the curfew was lifted, is not mentioned.

“Nor is Afaf Desuqi, killed when Israeli soldiers blew open the door of her house as she tried to open it for them. Nor Kemal Zughayer, shot dead as he tried to wheel himself up the road in his wheelchair.”

The *Independent* was also moved to complain that there is no

description of the Israeli army's "complete bulldozing of an area of housing that measured 400 metres by 500 metres", of evidence "found by both HRW and Amnesty International that extra-judicial killings of Palestinians by Israeli soldiers took place." In conclusion, it notes with complete justification, "The UN report is carefully worded not to give offence to Israel or its allies. It deliberately draws no conclusions, but only compiles evidence from various sources."

Instead of dealing honestly with what happened at Jenin, and explaining the full implications of Israel's efforts to prevent an investigation, the report cites, "A senior Palestinian Authority official" having, "alleged in mid-April that some 500 were killed". This figure, they make a special point of noting, "has not been substantiated in the light of the evidence that has emerged."

It is this line of the report that was seized on by the pro-Zionist media. Following the UN's cue, they claim that if *only* 50 were killed rather than 500, then there has been no massacre.

In truth the figure of 500 was never even uttered in reference to Jenin. Palestinian Authority spokesman Saeb Erekat cited the figure during an April 10 interview with CNN only in reference to all Palestinian casualties throughout the West Bank since Israel's launch of Operation Defensive Shield. But *refuting* the claim that 500 died at Jenin is a welcome red herring, one that serves to divert attention both from the actual war crimes committed by Israel in Jenin and more generally from the far more numerous atrocities committed throughout the West Bank during Operation Defensive Shield.

Despite the UN's best efforts to assume a "plague on both your houses" stance, the report's description of Israel's military operation makes clear that what took place on the West Bank cannot be called anything other than a massacre.

Israel invaded civilian areas using vastly superior weaponry and went on a rampage that left thousands wounded and hundreds dead. The report notes, "A total of 497 Palestinians were killed in the course of the IDF reoccupation of Palestinian area A from 1 March to 7 May 2002 and in the immediate aftermath"—a figure not dissimilar to the prediction made by Erekat at the time. On top of this, "Palestinian health authorities and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society reported approximately 1,447 wounded with some 538 live-ammunition injuries (for the same period)".

These extraordinary figures, which are much higher than earlier estimates of Palestinian casualties, are buried halfway into a report that delivers the mildest possible rebuke to Israel while taking pains to cite the allegedly equivalent crimes of the Palestinians in justification.

Given that the report admits that it contains no new information on what took place at Jenin, why did the UN even issue it?

On May 3, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote that Annan's decision to call off the UN mission to investigate allegations of Israeli war crimes at Jenin, "is proof, if proof were needed, that

the body is little more than a pliant tool of imperialist policy. Above all it demonstrates the UN's willingness to roll over at the behest of Uncle Sam. For the decision to abandon the Jenin inquiry was taken in Washington days before UN Secretary General Kofi Annan proposed the action to the body's Security Council on May 1."

Annan's report on Jenin is also smeared with Washington's fingerprints.

The US is intent on launching a war against Iraq in the coming weeks. It will do so as the detested defender of the Zionist state and the sponsor of Sharon's bloody repression of the Palestinians. Annan's report therefore goes as far as it can in whitewashing the crimes of the Sharon government and painting the Palestinians as being at least partially responsible for their own oppression.

But all that Annan has succeeded in doing is shooting himself in the foot. An unnamed UN spokesman attempted to distance the body from media claims that its report had exonerated Israel, by insisting that Annan had deliberately not used the emotive and controversial term "massacre", preferring instead a factual presentation that could not be so easily dismissed. Such claims are only in order to try and rescue the UN's flagging reputation amongst the Arab masses, thousands of whom demonstrated after the report was issued carrying a coffin symbolising the UN's corpse.

Through bitter experience millions of the world's oppressed know that the UN acts as a cat's paw of the United States and its Israeli ally. They will not accept its evasions and hypocrisy, nor those Arab rulers and western social democratic and liberal politicians who advance the UN as a counterweight to US military ambitions on the Middle East.



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