

US raid on Palestinian embassy in Baghdad: an act of political gangsterism

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5 June 2003

US troops raided and ransacked the Palestinian embassy in Baghdad at the end of May. They arrested 11 members of its staff, including its top diplomat, and nothing has been heard of the Palestinians since then. The raid is an act of political gangsterism carried out by US armed forces that have occupied Iraq on the basis of an illegal war. It was instigated at the direct request of Israel's finance secretary and former Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

An AP report cites Mohammad Abdul Wahab, a member of staff at the embassy, as saying, "They even took all our water bottles and food cans. They behaved like common thieves."

According to Wahab, on May 28 dozens of US troops escorted by several armoured vehicles entered the embassy. After the guards opened the gate, they were immediately arrested and handcuffed by the soldiers who burst into the building and held up officials, drivers and gardeners, including Charge d'Affaires Najah Abdul Rahman who was running the legation in the ambassador's absence. Wahab said that they were taken to a US base in the centre of the city and are still in custody.

The soldiers kicked and smashed their way in—many of the doors in the building had the marks of combat boots—and used shotguns to blast open office doors, although they were all either unlocked or had keys in them. Filing cabinets were ransacked and their contents removed. Troops broke off the hinges of an embassy safe and cleaned it out. They smashed an official photo of Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian president, and threw it on the ground.

Wahab said that the soldiers had taken away two embassy flags and seized three AK-47 automatic rifles and a hand gun that the sentries had used to guard the building during the looting that destroyed much of the city after the US seized Baghdad.

"To attack a foreign embassy is a criminal act and a breach of diplomatic immunity," Wahab said.

The US troops had told the embassy staff that the mission did not have "authorisation" to possess automatic weapons, claiming this as proof of the embassy staff's involvement in

terrorism. But Wahab explained that they had had a licence from the Saddam Hussein government. "Every embassy has guns. We used them to ward off looters," he said.

Many foreign organisations and rich Iraqis have hired armed guards since the collapse of law and order after the US overthrew the Hussein regime.

Following the raid, the troops sealed off the embassy, putting up barbed wire around the building and locking the main gate.

The next day, US General David McKiernan, commander of US ground forces in Iraq, confirmed the raid but claimed that only eight people were detained—seven Palestinians and one Syrian. McKiernan said that he did not know how many of them had diplomatic status. "This happened in a part of Baghdad where we lost a soldier," he said. He clearly meant to imply that the Palestinians were responsible and that the embassy was being used as a weapons store for terrorists.

The following day, US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher announced that all diplomats accredited under the Saddam Hussein regime could no longer expect diplomatic immunity or any of the rights accorded under accreditation to Saddam Hussein's government. The US was "discouraging" foreign diplomats from entering Iraq until a new government was in place as "at this point there is really no purpose" for them to be there. Even those who were there with the approval of the US forces did not have diplomatic immunity, he added.

The raid follows the deliberate bombing of the embassy on April 7. The attack from an air-to-ground missile launched by US military aircraft in broad daylight severely damaged the building and its contents. The embassy is located in Baghdad's diplomatic quarter.

A Palestinian Authority spokesman at the time said, "No other embassies were targeted for bombing, which proves that the targeting of the Palestinian embassy was premeditated and not an accident." He denounced it as a flagrant violation of all diplomatic norms and laws, which give foreign embassies immunity and safety and considers them outside the theatre of military operations.

The attack followed the bombing the previous day of a civilian neighbourhood of Palestinian refugees, who have been in Iraq since the establishment of the Zionist state in 1948.

The US has ripped up every international convention of wartime conduct. It is now open season. Anything goes. During its illegal war on Iraq, Washington has shot and killed journalists covering the war and bombed the Al-Jazeera TV station in Baghdad. It also bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the NATO-led war on Serbia in 1999, to name but a few of its most egregious acts.

The recent attacks on the Palestinian embassy are important for what they reveal. Firstly, this is an undisguised attempt to link the Palestinians to Iraq and terrorism in an effort to intimidate the Palestinian Authority at Israel's behest.

There is every indication that this attack was mounted at Israel's insistence. An article on Israel's finance minister Binyamin Netanyahu's website by Joseph Farah states: "As I report in the latest edition of G2 Bulletin, there is plenty of substantial evidence to suggest the Palestinian embassy in Iraq knows plenty about where Iraq's weapons of mass destruction were hidden.

"Sources said the site's diplomatic immunity kept the documents beyond the reach of UN arms inspectors for years and may still present a hurdle for US-led forces. The documents relate to the purchase of raw materials required for Iraq's manufacture and deployment of weapons of mass destruction. The PA embassy is situated in Yasser Arafat's private residence in Baghdad, a heavily guarded palatial structure well inside a compound.

"One of the Iraqi opposition groups' American sympathisers, who worked with them in London from 1991 to 1994 and resumed activity on their behalf in Washington, said that the hidden documents refer to Iraq's chemical weapons, VX nerve gas, "and possibly nuclear arms."

Netanyahu is the political favourite of the far-right, Christian fundamentalist and extreme Zionist elements that exercise such political sway within the Bush administration. With this raid and arrests, the Bush administration is sending out a message writ large. It intends to impose its "road map" and the Palestinian Authority (PA) had better fall in line with the demands of the Zionist state, or face being linked directly to the so-called war against terrorism in line with the repeated demands of the Likud government. To avoid this fate, the PA must police and pin down their own people in fenced off reservations—cynically termed an "independent" state—in the interests of US imperialism and its local sheriff in the region, Ariel Sharon, in Israel.

More generally, this action is aimed at intimidating everyone and anyone who steps out of line. Libya certainly

got the message. Two days after Boucher's announcement, Libya announced that it was breaking off diplomatic relations with Iraq and closing its embassy in Baghdad. "Libya has decided to cut diplomatic relations with Iraq, to close its embassy in Baghdad and recall all its personnel," the Foreign Ministry said.

It added that the decision was taken as a result of "the practices of the American and British occupation forces against diplomatic missions in Baghdad and the announcement that their diplomatic immunity had lapsed". It stressed that the US-led occupation was responsible for the safe return of the Libyan diplomats and the protection of their embassy.

One of the most significant features of the raid is the lack of opposition to them from right across the official political spectrum. One has to ask: where is the outrage at such acts of US barbarism and lawlessness? Just what does the Bush administration have to do before suffering some form of censure?

The United Nations and the European Union that have bankrolled the Palestinian Authority have kept silent, fearful of upsetting Washington and provoking a chain of social unrest that will threaten their own imperialist interests in the region. The craven Arab regimes have not uttered a word of condemnation. The Libyans pulled out of Baghdad without so much as criticising the US.

Nor have there been any angry outcries from the world's press. Large sections of the nominally liberal press failed even to report the affair or dropped it like a hot potato after an initial cursory article.

Such silence paves the way for similar bullying, intimidation and the tearing up of social norms and basic democratic rights all over the world including in the US and in the European metropolitan centres.



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