

France: Ilan Halimi tortured and murdered for money

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6 March 2006

The details of the kidnapping of Ilan Halimi, his torture and death from his treatment after three weeks of captivity, have provoked a reaction of profound shock and repugnance throughout France. Found dying, near Sainte-Geneviève-des-bois station in south Paris, in the early hours of February 13, naked and with two knife wounds to his throat and burns over 80 percent of his body, the 23-year-old Jewish man died in the ambulance taking him to hospital.

Some 80,000 people marched through Paris on February 26 to express their horror at the crime and oppose anti-Semitism and racism. All religious faiths and ethnic groups were represented, including Muslim organisations. There were also demonstrations in other French cities.

Ilan was abducted on the night of January 22 after having been lured to a meeting where his abductors were waiting. The bait was an attractive girl who had pretended to flirt with him in the shop where he worked in the XI arrondissement of Paris. She had worked the other telephone shops in the district.

The alleged leader of the kidnap gang from the Plate-Pierre housing estate in the south Paris suburb of Bagneux is Youssouf Fofana (26), who calls himself in English "Brain of Barbarians." He is being held, pending extradition to France, by the police of the former French colony Ivory Coast, the birthplace of his parents.

Evidence is mounting that since 2004, and perhaps before, the criminal gang that abducted the young sales assistant was linked to attempts, without success, to extort money with threats of violence from 20 people. Some of these people are prominent residents of the south Paris suburbs, including Jérôme Clément, the president of the Franco-German TV station Arte.

The gang is also suspected of targeting seven doctors for extortion and of six attempted abductions before that of Ilan. A quarter of the people targeted by the gang are Jewish. The gang appears to have masqueraded at one

time as Palestinian and, at another, Corsican terrorists, and also as rap gangsters.

Fofana, a French national, was arrested February 21 in Abidjan, the capital of the Ivory Coast. Although Fofana is a Muslim, the 21 people arrested so far by the French police, largely people who grew up with Fofana on the Plate-Pierre council estate, are from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Four girls were reportedly involved in the enticement of potential victims, and, allegedly, up to 12 boys, promised a few euros, took turns guarding Ilan for three weeks in a flat and a basement cellar on the estate, the keys of which were provided by a janitor.

Plate-Pierre is an estate of mixed council and private blocks of flats in the working class suburb of Bagneux, which, in comparison with other working class suburbs, has a relatively low unemployment rate of 12.5 percent. It has a well-kept appearance, though the tenants of the private blocks complain of negligence. Few cars were burned there during the autumn youth disturbances.

However, social workers there admit that they have lost contact with the 15- to 19-year-old age group, from which most of the arrested suspects come. The parents had no inkling of what was happening and are horrified and shocked at what happened to Ilan. Fofana and three or four lieutenants appear to have been the hard core, and the rest were drawn in.

The ring leaders in the kidnapping are still at large, and only one suspect is being held by the police: Christophe Martin-Valet (22), who is said to be the driver for the gang. He reportedly took girls to clubs in search of victims.

A blond girl of Iranian extraction, whose identikit photograph had been widely displayed by the media as the one who enticed Ilan into the trap, gave herself up to the police on January 16. The information she gave, as well as that from a boy of Portuguese background who had

guarded Ilan and been repelled by the situation, enabled the police to carry out the immediate arrest of 13 suspects.

The police have ruled out any connection between the gang and Islamic fundamentalist organisations. The Paris Prosecutor's Office informed the press February 16 that it believed the kidnap gang had not acted from anti-Semitic motives. It pointed out that some of the gang's victims were not Jewish, and no anti-Semitic insults or messages had been sent to Ilan's family.

Fofana has consistently denied any anti-Semitic motivation and maintained that the kidnapping of Ilan was purely "for financial ends." Teddy Cohen, the lawyer representing one of the detained suspects, declared that his client had not acted out of anti-Semitism.

The initial emphasis on the purely criminal nature of the horror endured by Ilan provoked the question: How is it that French society can produce such bestial behaviour? There is no doubt it is the product of a social breakdown affecting the poorest sections of French society, largely concentrated in desolate housing estates on the periphery of urban centres.

Decades of neglect since the end of the post-war boom and the imposition of austerity policies in 1982-1983 by the Socialist Party government of President François Mitterrand and Prime Minister Pierre Maurois, continued since by successive governments, have led to chronically high levels of unemployment, especially among the youth, and a climate of despair.

The failure of the Communist Party, mostly in coalition governments with the Socialist Party since 1981, and the trade unions, notably the CP-linked General Confederation of Labour (CGT), to pose an alternative has meant the de facto abandonment of these sections of society. These organisations act purely as providers of palliatives and keepers of the peace, seeking to contain the ever-present threat of social explosions, such as those of immigrant youth in the working class suburbs last October and November.

The alienation of working class and immigrant youth has been exacerbated by local and national government policies of police repression, rather than social progress. Racial discrimination and the ideological offensive against Muslims in the name of the "war on terrorism" have played a part.

In France, this has taken the form of a law against girls wearing the Muslim scarf in school, and Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy has sought to whip up anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment. He has paid visits to estates, flanked by heavily armed police, declaring his intention to

clean up the neighbourhoods and rid them of human "scum" and "gangrene."

At the same time, there has been an escalating legislative offensive to curtail immigration.

These conditions have allowed a gang culture to develop in many communities, where unemployed and low-paid youth take part in an underground economy and engage in petty criminality. It has also left them open to reactionary and communalist ideologies, including anti-Semitism. The local high school in Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois has reported incidences of anti-Semitic graffiti.

The endemic nature of the social breakdown is confirmed by reports of a man of 54, not Jewish, abducted in eastern France and found, on February 25, dumped in a forest, naked and dying. His abductors had forced him to give the code of his bank card. Not content with the thousand or so euros thus extracted, the group, said to be known as local delinquents, beat the man in a horrific manner for two days in an attempt to extort more money.

The response of the government to last year's youth revolt has been a vast increase in the repressive powers of the state, particularly directed at immigrants, and the Equal Opportunities Bill, now passing through parliament, which reduces the compulsory school leaving age to 14 for failing pupils, criminalises parents of pupils who are absent from school, and creates, as the spearhead of a general attack on workers' rights, the First Job Contract (CPE), which gives employers the right to sack young workers without cause during the first two years of employment. A large movement is now developing against the CPE.

There is no doubt that the social policies of Sarkozy and the Gaullist-led government, like those of governments throughout the world, create a layer of demoralised and dehumanised people. No doubt, the use of torture by British and American imperialism at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo and the "rendition" of prisoners for elimination or torture all over the world, carried out with the complicity of France and other European governments, has a brutalising effect, as do the atrocities of Al Qaeda. The cynicism and brutality of much popular entertainment also play a role.



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