

Siege of Jericho prison: US, Britain complicit in Israeli war crime

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The lawless attack launched against the Palestinian prison in Jericho Tuesday marks a further provocative escalation in the offensive launched by Israel against the Palestinian people in the wake of last January's election victory for Hamas.

The nine-hour siege, which left three Palestinians dead and dozens wounded, is of a piece with countless acts of wanton violence and aggression carried out by the Israeli state, from the storming of the al-Aqsa mosque, to the siege of Yasser Arafat's headquarters to the ever-increasing number of "targeted assassinations" of Palestinian leaders.

What distinguishes this episode from those that have preceded it, however, is the brazenness of US and British collaboration in what can only be described as a war crime.

The Israeli attack was coordinated with Washington and London, which withdrew their monitors stationed at the facility only minutes before Israeli troops backed by tanks and armored bulldozers stormed into Jericho and attacked the prison, knocking down walls with the dozers and cannon fire and ultimately demolishing the jail.

Israeli commanders threatened to kill everyone inside the prison unless they surrendered, finally forcing some 200 to strip down to their underwear and exit the building. While releasing most of the inmates to Palestinian authorities, they held some three dozen, including six high-profile political prisoners whose capture was the immediate objective of the raid.

The six include Ahmed Saadat, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFP), and four other PFLP members, as well as Fuad Shubaki, a Palestinian wanted by Israel on charges of arms smuggling.

Saadat and the other PFLP members were wanted by Israel in connection with the October 2001 assassination of Israeli Tourism Minister Rehavam Zeevi. The PFLP took responsibility for the killing of Zeevi—an extreme right-wing Zionist who referred to Palestinians as "lice" and called for their forced expulsion from Gaza and the West Bank—declaring it an act of retaliation for Israel's own "targeted assassination" two months earlier of the

organization's secretary-general, Abu Ali Mustafa.

Saadat was elected from prison to the Palestinian parliament in the elections held in January.

The US and British monitors were stationed at the Jericho prison to oversee the Palestinian Authority's custody of the six prisoners. Their deployment was worked out as part of a US and British-brokered deal for lifting the month-long siege of Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah in 2002. Arafat refused to turn them over to Israel, but agreed that his administration would prosecute and jail the six.

Both US and British officials claimed that their decision to withdraw the monitors did not represent collaboration with Israel's plans to storm the prison, but rather was motivated by concerns for the security of their personnel. What threat was posed to their security—outside of the danger of becoming caught in the crossfire of the Israeli siege—was not made clear by either government.

The Israeli attack ignited a firestorm of Palestinian anger. Over 15,000 marched through the streets of Gaza, after news of the attack, and the next day the territory was shut down by a general strike. A similar protest strike was launched in Nablus. Crowds attacked buildings housing US, British and European-linked organizations and there was a brief flurry of hostage-taking against foreigners.

A significant share of the popular anger was directed against Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who acknowledged that he had been warned by the US and Britain of their intention to withdraw the monitors, but said he was given no indication when it would take place.

There are strong reasons to believe that this effect—the further undermining of Abbas, who is in political conflict with Hamas—was included in the calculations of the Israeli state. The Jericho action makes a mockery of the Palestinian president's arguments that progress is to be made through recognizing Israel, pursuing negotiations and counting on the benevolence of the major Western powers.

The Israeli government has welcomed the election victory of Hamas—itsself the product of the seething frustration and anger of millions of Palestinians over the unending

devastation and humiliations inflicted upon them by Israeli policy and the seeming inability of the PLO-led administration to do anything about it. The Israeli regime invokes Hamas's designation by Washington as a "terrorist" organization as a license to eschew any form of compromise and negotiations in favor of naked force.

In the first instance, it sees Hamas's ascension as giving it a free hand to redraw borders, unilaterally seizing huge tracts of the West Bank and securing it behind a massive militarized wall.

Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is pursuing this unilateralist policy, proposing to abandon some isolated Zionist settlements in the West Bank, while annexing territory without negotiations or international sanction.

Nonetheless, he faces opposition from the right in Israel's March 28 elections, in the form of the Likud Party and its candidate, former prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who opposes giving up any of the settlements, charging Olmert with planning to "hand land over to Hamas terrorists."

Within Israel, it was widely believed that the Jericho siege was initiated in large part with the aim of deflecting this right-wing opposition with a show of force. As the Israeli daily *Haaretz* put it, the raid represented the embodiment of "a favorite expression" of former prime minister Ariel Sharon's advisers: "To return territory and kill Arabs."

During a tour of police headquarters in Jerusalem staged for the media, Olmert declared, "We are proud that we have imposed justice on these killers." He affirmed that the Palestinians who were abducted by the Israeli military "will be indicted according to Israeli law and they will be punished as they deserve."

The fact that some of these same men have already been indicted, tried and convicted under Palestinian law for the same crime—making a second Israeli prosecution illegal under international statutes—is obviously of no concern to a government that considers itself immune from far more basic considerations of international law.

Indeed, the Israeli government has made it clear that it will observe no legal constraints whatsoever. Last week, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz indicated that if new terrorist attacks are carried out against Israel, the response could well include the Israeli assassination of the incoming Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniyeh. "No one there will be immune," he said when asked if such a killing was in the cards.

The Israeli regime acts with complete impunity because of the unconditional support it receives from Washington. Olmert himself made this clear, gloating that the assault on Jericho enjoyed backing from both the US and Britain. "I refer you to the statement made by Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and the State Department that all responsibility for the decision made by the US and the British governments to pull

the inspectors from the jail, and thus to make the Israeli operation inevitable, lies on the shoulders of the Palestinian Authority," he told the Israeli press.

Meanwhile, sources at the United Nations indicated that a resolution put forward by Qatar, the sole Arab state sitting on the United Nations Security Council, condemning the raid and demanding that the prisoners be returned to the Palestinian Authority would be either buried by the council or vetoed by Washington.

The official reaction in Washington to the siege of the Jericho prison was an obscene exercise in hypocrisy and double talk. White House spokesman Scot McClellan told the press Wednesday that Washington was appealing to all sides "for calm and restraint," a phrase meant to demonize the Palestinians for protesting against the act of aggression by Israel, upon which the US urged no restraint whatsoever.

He went on to declare that "Hamas has a decision that they need to make... They need to renounce violence and terrorism, they need to recognize Israel's right to exist, and they need to disarm."

Israel, on the other hand, has carte blanche to employ the methods of violence and state terrorism against the Palestinians, whose rights they are in no way bound to recognize.

The Jericho operation has once again exposed all the talk of a "two-state vision," "land for peace," and a "road map" as a cruel farce. The reality is that of a continued illegal Israeli occupation that leaves Palestinians subject to military raids, assassinations, abductions, bombings and curfews imposed by Israeli military might, which is in turn financed and politically backed by Washington.



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