

A Decades Old Israeli Campaign to Disrupt Palestinian Unity

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Last week’s Israeli army raids and closures of seven Palestinian civil society organisations based in the occupied West Bank cities of Ramallah and Al Bireh are the latest manifestation of a decades old Israeli campaign to remove influential Palestinian leaders, undermine Palestinian institutions and disrupt Palestinian unity.

Before dawn a week ago, Israeli forces broke into their offices, searched them, confiscated computers and files, and sealed their premises. Israel branded them “terrorist” and “unlawful”, alleging ties to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a leftist resistance group outlawed by Israel.

Israel’s latest victims cover a broad range of activities essential for the wellbeing of Palestinians struggling for existence under Israeli occupation. These are human rights defender Al Haq, prisoner support group Addameer, the Union of Palestinian Women’s Committees, the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, the Bisan Centre for Research and Development, Defence for Children International, Palestine branch and the Union of Health Workers Committees which operates hospitals and clinics across the West Bank. The first six were banned as unlawful “terrorist” organisation last October and the seventh in 2020.

Adding insult to injury, Israel’s domestic security agency Shinbet followed up by summoning for questioning Khaled Quzmar, director of Defence for Children, who endured two hours of interrogation at Ofer military base, and Shawan Jabari of Al Haq who refused to present himself. The Al Haq caller made “threats of imprisonment and other measures if Al Haq continues its work,” which it has, by reopening its office and recalling staff.

The Gaza-based Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) condemned the raids as an “assault” on these organisations and warned that such closures are part of the Israeli army’s “systematic policy” of eliminating Palestinian civil society due to the role it plays in “supporting the Palestinian resistance under occupation”. The PCHR argues that Israel has [tightened] “the screws” on such organisations since the Durban Conference against Racism

held in 2001 in South Africa and Israel has escalated its efforts since Palestine “acceded to the International Criminal Court in 2015”. The PCHR demanded the international community intervene to reopen these civil society bodies, which the Palestinian Authority regards as “state institutions”.

The UN, European Union, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have criticised the move and nine European countries, Germany, Italy, France, Spain, Holland, Belgium, Ireland, Denmark and Sweden have expressed “deep concern” over the closures while even Israel’s best friend, the US, voiced “concern.” All said Israel had offered no evidence to justify its “terrorist” designation. None has proposed to exert pressure on Israel to reverse its bans and return the property of the raided organisations or punish Israel if it refuses. This means, once again, Israel will get away with a major assault on Palestinian civil society just as it escapes serious censure for its nightly arrest raids on West Bank Palestinian cities, towns and villages and military offensives against Gaza.

However, if Israel provides firm evidence to justify the closure of these organisations, action would be taken making it all too clear once again that double standards will apply on the case of the banned organisations while Israel will continue to enjoy impunity.

By raiding the organisations in Ramallah, the Israeli army also violated the terms of the 1995 Oslo II agreement, signed by Israeli Prime Minister Yizak Rabin and Palestinian Liberation Organisation Chairman Yasser Arafat. Ramallah is located in Area A, the 18 per cent of the West Bank under full Palestinian Authority control. Israeli citizens, colonists, and forces are banned from entering Area A. However, since Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s full scale invasion of the West Bank in 2002, its forces have conducted routine raids into Ramallah and environs Bethlehem, Nablus, Jenin, Tulkarem, Qalqilya, Jericho, Nablus, 80 per cent of Hebron, and the 40 per cent of Al Bireh which is classified as Area A. Five per cent of this town is Area B, and 55 per cent as Area C.

In Area B, 22 per cent of the West Bank, the authority administers Palestinian enclaves while Israel has full security control. Israel is meant to exercise total control over Area C, 60 per cent of the West Bank but in violation of Oslo II, Israel has extended the reach of its military to Area A, in defiance of the Palestinian Authority.

Israel does not confine its military raids to civil society organisations but also targets cultural centres and research organisations. In July 2020, Israeli forces raided the Yabous Cultural Centre and Edward Said National Conservatory of Music in occupied East Jerusalem and confiscated thousands of documents, files, computers and surveillance cameras. The military also entered the Beit Hanina home of Rania Elias and Suhail Khouri, the directors of the centres, seized files and arrested the couple.

Israel conducts drone and air strikes against cultural facilities in Gaza. In May 2021, Israel flattened two of the strip’s main bookshops and in 2018 Israel bombed the Said Al Meshal Cultural Centre in the Rimal neighbourhood of Gaza where musicians and artists practised and performed.

The most destructive raid conducted by Israel took place at the Arab Studies Society located in occupied East Jerusalem’s 1897 Hussein mansion, a graceful stone building of great historic importance and a symbol of the Palestinian presence in the city. The raid took place shortly after the death of Faisal Hussein, East Jerusalem’s leading Palestinian figure, who

founded the Society in 1980 and moved it into Orient House in 1983. The Israelis carried away the library's 17,000 books in English and Arabic as well as its collection of documents on Palestinian land ownership during the Ottoman era and British mandate period. Israel's aim was to deprive the Palestinians of proofs of their existence and ownership of the land Israel claims and colonises.

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