

# Palestine: Horror and shame

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*The torturing to death of a Palestinian Islamist by Palestinian Authority intelligence sends out shockwaves of revulsion while the occupation continues to attack Palestinian society, writes Khaled Amayreh*

Members of the Islamic Youth Association, a Hamas-linked organisation, inspect damage to their offices caused by an Israeli army overnight raid in the West Bank city of Hebron

The popular standing of the Palestinian Authority (PA), headed by President Mahmoud Abbas, suffered a serious moral setback this week when agents of the Palestinian mukhabarat, or general intelligence, allegedly tortured an Islamist detainee to death.

Majd Al-Barghouti, 44 and a father of eight, was reportedly abducted from the local mosque in the village of Kobar near Ramallah two weeks ago for interrogation pertaining to a firearm the mukhabarat alleged he possessed and was hiding.

According to prison inmates, who were being detained in a neighbouring chamber at the mukhabarat headquarters in Ramallah, Barghouti was subjected for eight successive days to severe bodily torture.

"We heard him screaming day and night. His screams were heart-rending, but we could do nothing to help him," said one detainee who was released following Barghouti's death.

The torture reportedly included severe beating, using plastic hoses, electric burns, sleep deprivation, and the notorious technique known as "shabh", or hooding, whereby an inmate is kept in an extremely uncomfortable position for many hours. These are virtually the same patterns of torture used by Israel's domestic security agency, the Shin Bet, against Palestinian detainees.

On Wednesday, 20 February, Barghouti collapsed and was taken to a private hospital in Ramallah. A doctor there advised mukhabarat agents that Barghouti was in a critical condition and should be hospitalised urgently. The agents didn't heed the doctor's advice, insisting that Barghouti was faking illness. They took him back to the torture chamber for another (and final) interrogation session.

On Friday, 22 February, Barghouti died. According to inmates released from mukhabarat custody, he cried out for help for two hours but to no avail. Then his voice grew weaker until it died out completely. Following his death, mukhabarat officials as well as Fatah and PA spokespersons switched to damage control mode, with mukhabarat chief Tawfiq Tirawi claiming that Barghouti was not tortured but died of a heart attack.

Tirawi's claim was quickly discredited as dozens of journalists — including this writer — as

well as doctors, lawmakers, human rights activists and ordinary citizens saw at first hand the large lacerations present all over Barghouti's body. In addition, Barghouti's family, outraged by PA fabrications, vehemently denied that Barghouti had had any serious health problems. They insist that Barghouti was simply murdered, knowingly and viciously, by mukhabarat torturers.

During his funeral, thousands of mourners denounced the PA as a "gang of thugs working with Israel against Palestinian interests". Villagers also closed entrances to the town, and carried Hamas's green banners in defiance of the PA government.

Obviously disquieted and embarrassed by the affair, PA President Mahmoud Abbas ordered an internal enquiry into the circumstances surrounding Barghouti's death. Hamas, with whom Barghouti was associated, and the victim's family, demanded a neutral and professional third party carry out the investigation, saying they didn't trust Fatah to investigate itself.

On 23 February, several Palestinian parliamentary blocs, excluding Fatah and Hamas, decided to form their own investigation committee to establish the truth about Barghouti's death. The committee consists of Mustafa Al-Barghouti, a distant cousin of the victim, Bassam Al-Salhi of the People Party, Khalida Jarrar of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Hanan Ashrawi of the Third Way, and Hassan Khreisha, an independent lawmaker.

The death of Barghouti, ostensibly from torture at the hands of the mukhabarat apparatus, is bound to undermine the Ramallah-based regime. Barghouti was the scion of a large clan in the Ramallah region and a relative of imprisoned Fatah leader Marwan Al-Barghouti. Moreover, many of the clan's young men are affiliated with the Fatah organisation, and their indignation at what happened could eventually boomerang on Fatah and the PA.

This abhorrent scandal is not the only problem the Abbas regime is facing and which could threaten its very survival. Last week, Mohamed Dahlan, a former Gaza strongman, said in a press interview that Fatah was collapsing as a result of an absence of democratic reforms. Other Fatah leaders have also criticised Abbas's leadership, calling it "weak" and "detached from reality".

Meanwhile, the future of the Salam Fayyad government looks increasingly precarious, having effectively alienated large sectors of the Palestinian masses, including the important teacher's sector, as a result of failing to regularly pay salaries. The government is also accused of "ensconcing itself in a cocoon" while ignoring the real problems facing the people.

This week, the Palestinian minister of culture in Ramallah submitted his resignation to President Abbas, complaining about "an all-out national crisis encompassing every aspect of our life as a people". He added: "The country is falling down, the national cause is falling down; the rift between Hamas and Fatah is destroying the unity and future of our people. In short, what we have been building for 50 years is being destroyed before our eyes."

To be sure, no small part of the blame for this situation must be laid at the door of the Israeli occupation. On Monday, even Abbas himself voiced exasperation at Israeli stall tactics. Following a private meeting with Jordan's King Abdullah II in Amman, Abbas warned that if the Bush administration didn't make good on its pledge to make 2008 the year to broker peace, "then there will never be any future chances to achieve this goal".

Israel seems totally unconcerned about what Abbas, or Palestinians in general, think. On Tuesday, hundreds of Israeli soldiers stormed and vandalised half a dozen schools, orphanages, businesses and other premises owned by the West Bank's largest charity, the Islamic Charitable Society (ICS), in downtown Hebron, in full view of Abbas's security forces.

The attacking Israeli forces seized buildings, stores and buses, and even chairs and kitchen appliances, all for "security reasons". Last week, Israeli troops raided dozens of money-changing shops, seizing hundreds of thousands of dollars and Jordanian Dinars.

Local Hebronite leaders described Tuesday's onslaught as "reminiscent of the middle ages". According to municipal officials, an Israeli army commander handed school principals a military decree stating that the "Israeli Defence Forces are from now the sole proprietor of the schools and all contents and equipment therein."

The army brought in huge trucks for moving the looted materials, including computers and teaching materials, to a nearby army base. "They even took the aluminum windows," said Mu'tasem Shawar, a charity worker.

Further, Israeli soldiers commandeered four school buses and a car, taking them to an unknown destination. The buses were being used to transport orphans from their dorms to school and back.

According to the confiscation order, any Palestinian entering the sealed buildings for whatever reason will be imprisoned for a minimum of five years and have his property confiscated or demolished.

The ICS is one of the oldest charities in Hebron, its foundation going back to the era of Jordanian authority over the West Bank. The charity denies having any connection to any political faction and vehemently denies Israeli army claims that it is affiliated with Hamas.

"We are a Muslim society but we have no connections whatsoever with Hamas or any other political groups. It is clear that Israel is waging an open war on Islam as a religion. This is the only explanation of what happened today," said Mohamed Qasrawi, an official at the ICS.

Qasrawi said Israel is trying to destroy Palestinian educational and economic institutions in order to subjugate Palestinians to the Israeli occupation. "It is clear they want us to leave, to emigrate, so that Jews will take over our homes, land and businesses. It is Nazism without gas chambers... but the outcome, which is national annihilation, is the same."

The Israeli army offered no convincing reason for seizure operation. An Israeli military spokesman said: "The seizure of property in Hebron was carried out for security reasons and within the confines of the law." He added that, "Palestinians harmed by the seizure could appeal to the Israeli courts."

Anas Al-Kawasmi, a local Palestinian lawyer, dismissed talk about appealing to Israeli courts as "a silly joke". "How can you possibly hope for justice from an Israeli court when the judge is your enemy, tormentor and grave-digger?"

The ICS has been taking care of as many as 5,000 orphan boys and girls, free of charge. "We secure all their needs, including lodging, food and schooling, as well as sport and recreation. It is for this reason that the Jewish occupiers hate us," said ICS lawyer Abdul-Karim Farrah. He added: "They [Israel] would like these boys and girls to grow up as drug

addicts, prostitutes and delinquents, so that Israeli intelligence could recruit them as informers and spies.”

Farrah challenged the Israeli occupation to provide evidence that the ICS was engaged in illegal activities. “I am sure they know that we are innocent of any violation. They want to punish us for our Islamic identity and for rejecting the occupation. It is the Israeli army that acts like thugs, terrorists and common criminals.”

Since its occupation of the West Bank in 1967, Israel has seized and closed hundreds of Palestinian civil and charitable institutions under the rubric of fighting “terror”. The Fatah-affiliated governor of Hebron, Hussein Al-Araj, said he was “astonished and shocked by this behaviour”.

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