

The Jericho Prison Raid

Israel reminded the Palestinian leadership that those with the bigger guns will always have the final say

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Could it be possible that the Israeli army raid on a Jericho prison on March 14 was done without careful coordination between Israel, the United States and Britain? Could it also be possible that the timing of the onslaught was equally innocent, of no political consequence, and not linked in any way to the Palestinians' ability to withstand Israeli blackmail, US threats and European intimidation following the Hamas election victory in January 2006?

Arab League Secretary General Amr Musa — a man known for being particularly cautious with his choice of words — told Al Jazeera on the day of the attack: "Clearly, there (was) some sort of coordination". Many others concur. But before examining the Israeli raid itself, one should quickly scrutinize its surrounding political milieu, for without such comprehension, the Israeli attack which resulted in the death of a prison guard, a prisoner and the abduction of several leading political prisoners would seem just like any other day of violence in the fractious occupied territories.

The Palestinian parliamentary elections last January, which introduced Hamas as a power player, have yielded a most unfavorable formula from the point of view of the US and Britain. Both governments have invested in a carefully designed and self-serving democracy program that would cement and justify their costly meddling in the region and, of course, their lost war in Iraq. Whether they wish to admit it or not, the advent of Hamas, which has provided a moral boost to Islamic political movements everywhere, has most likely signaled the end of the US-led quasi-democracy project.

Israel, on the other hand, has arguably benefited from the Hamas victory since, surly, no one would expect Israel to negotiate with a political force that calls for the Jewish state's demise; now Israel can further twist its masterful rhetoric of having a moral right and obligation to secure itself from theoretical annihilation at the hands of Hamas through more unilateral action, or so the incongruous logic goes.

Indeed, acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert could hardly conceal his enthusiasm and has embarked on all kinds of unilateral plans, by walling off Palestinians completely and, further, by drawing his country's own version of permanent borders — of course at the expense of Palestinian land and amid near complete American and European silence.

Europe, even after it agreed to pass some funds on to the Palestinian Authority, is yet to grow weary of warning Palestinians of dire consequences if certain conditions are not met (conditions that are of course applicable to Palestinians only).

The United States government unabashedly demanded some meager funds it delivered to the Palestinian Authority prior to the vote back. Palestinians complied. The Congress, on the other hand, has forged and is quickly processing various laws to further punish and alienate Palestinians for making their democratic choice.

Even Israel's initial sense of vindication has turned sour, as Hamas — despite its lack of experience in international politics — has managed to win the trust of various governments outside of the Western hemisphere, and is proving equally savvy in making its conditions for a final settlement with Israel appear plausible.

In other words, despite the intense blackmail and arm-twisting to cripple one of a few truly democratic Middle East experiences, Palestinians have successfully managed to impress their political will as an irrevocable part of the region's political reality; a very disturbing realization indeed in the eyes of the US and Israel who have diligently worked for decades to undermine the Palestinian people's aspirations.

But even more dangerous is the fact that Palestinians were quietly reworking their political and ideological divergence in intense meetings in Gaza, with the hope that a national unity government would replace the less favored option of a Hamas-only government.

Of course it's not the workings of Palestinian politics that Israel and the US administration (and less significantly Britain) found troubling. What's troublesome is the fact that a national unity government that includes the defeated pro-US Fatah movement would deny the Bush administration and Israel the chance to scrutinize, undermine and eventually topple a lone Hamas government.

Thus, the US response to the unity talks in Gaza between Hamas and Fatah representatives was uncompromisingly clear. "Diplomatic sources said strict US restrictions on contacts and assistance to Hamas would apply to Fatah and other parties if they joined a government under the militant group," Reuters reported on March 13, a day before the Israeli raid on the Jericho prison. One should try to approach the analysis of the Israeli raid on the West Bank prison' against this backdrop.

The prison has been under the watchful eye of American and European monitors for over four years. Their mission was to satisfy Israel's demand to keep Ahmed Saadat, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), locked in, without trial, due process or conviction. Saadat is arbitrarily connected by Israel to the killing of an Israeli minister, Rehavam Zeevi, five years ago. His imprisonment by the Palestinian Authority, under foreign monitoring, was for long a source of embarrassment for the PA and its formerly leading Fatah party.

Abruptly, on March 14, Americans and British monitors reportedly abandoned their posts, a move that was followed minutes later by a well-calculated and well-executed Israeli attack that resulted in a bloody episode and the abduction of Saadat and a few other political prisoners. A military penetration of such a magnitude would've surely consumed days, if not weeks in the making. For the US administration and the British government to claim that they didn't coordinate their decision to withdraw their monitors with Israel is utter nonsense.

What followed was most predictable: violence, chaos, threats of vengeance and the kidnapping of a few foreigners, a most suitable conclusion to an event that was meant to spur just that: to shatter the relative peace, to harden Hamas' mission in forming a

government, to provoke Palestinians into breaking their one-sided ceasefire, thus their rank. But ultimately, with its brutal show of force, Israel meant to remind the Palestinian leadership, democratically elected or not, that those with the bigger guns will always have the final say.

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