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'Israelis want Palestinian ethnic cleansing'

By Motasem A Dalloul in Gaza

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Israel has stepped up its policy of forcibly detaining members of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

On August 20, Israeli forces seized Mahmoud al-Ramhi, Hamas secretary and the fourth-highest ranking official in the Palestinian legislature.

Two days later, an Israeli court charged Abd al-Aziz Dweik, the speaker of parliament, with membership in an outlawed organisation - the Islamist movement and governing party, Hamas.

To date, Israel has detained 30 Hamas politicians and five cabinet ministers, including Nasser Shaer, the deputy prime minister.

Thirty other senior and mid-level members of Hamas were also seized on June 29 as part of an Israeli campaign against the Islamist movement following the capture of Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit by fighters on the border of the Gaza Strip on June 25.

Ahmed Bahar, the former deputy and acting speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), considers the kidnapping of the parliamentarians as well as an alleged assassination attempt against Ismail Haniya, the prime minister, part of a conspiracy to undermine the Hamas-led Palestinian government (PG).

Aljazeera.net: In pursuing its policy of detaining Hamas and government officials, what message is the Israeli government sending the Palestinian people?

Ahmed Bahar: The main message is that they want to undermine the Palestinian political regime at both levels: The government and the PLC.

They also want to humiliate Dweik, who they have put in a small dirty cell, as well as the Arabs and Muslims and all those who sympathise with them.

Despite strong condemnations and continuous contact with a lot of parliaments and parliamentarians, they are pursuing their policy as they clearly don't want a PG or a PLC.



Ahmed Bahar: Deep sorrow over Arab and Islamic silence

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The coincidence of the imprisonment of Dweik with the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Ismail Haniya shows that there is a previously manipulated plan to undermine the Palestinian regime.

What is the Palestinian government doing to secure the release of its officials in Israel jails?

We've conducted many demonstrations inside the country and abroad. We've called for demonstrations in Gaza and Ramallah, invited consuls and ambassadors, called human rights and Red Cross activists and so on.

We've sent more than 80 letters to Arab, Asian and European parliaments in order to keep them abreast of the crimes of the Zionist state. We've organised a sit-in last week and many Arab speakers of parliaments spoke with us by telephone as well as some European parliamentarians.

We've sent letters to Arab foreign ministers but regrettably, they have discussed neither the letter nor any other Palestinian issue.

We really feel deep sorrow for the Arab and Islamic silence toward the Palestinian issues.

Do you fear being seized by Israeli forces?

Yes, of course. The occupation troops may imprison or assassinate me because they want to disrupt the work of the PLC completely. If they take me away from the scene and remove second deputy speaker Hasan Khoraisa [not a member of Hamas] as well, the PLC will be formed by the second majority party and they can do whatsoever they want in the PLC and the government also.

Does the absence of about one-third of the PLC members affect it?

Of course. The absence of about 40 members from the Change and Reform bloc, a Hamas bloc in the PLC, affects the work of the parliament. But I assert that the performance of the parliament will continue regularly despite the absence of those members.

We are sure that the Israelis are implementing a well-constructed plan in order to undermine the work of the PLC as well as toppling the PG.

But I want to tell them that if they want to undermine stability in the Palestinian political arena this time, they themselves will bear the responsibility for the instability and disorder that will surely follow and affect all the Middle East.

A big part of this plot is implemented by local Palestinian hands beside the Israeli and the American hands. In addition, Arab silence is considered a supportive factor for this conspiracy.

But I am sure that the national and international position against Hamas's victory in the PLC proves that Hamas is on the right way. Hamas has adopted real democracy; however, they adopt the false democracy. Hamas will continue in its path.

How has Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, reacted to these developments?

In fact, Mr Abbas sometimes adopts ambiguous positions. He

issues decreases that hinder the work of the PG. For example, he has the ability to help alleviate the financial siege on the PA as he has the authority on the Palestinian Investment Fund and the Monetary Palestinian Fund which have billions of US dollars in their coffers.

He can facilitate the transfer of funds collected by the PG or the Arab League as the US and EU currently refuse to transfer monies except under his control. He doesn't act positively.

We should all be united against the Israeli siege on Palestine, but sometimes and unfortunately, we feel that his positions harm that national goal.

Israel has maintained a siege and crackdown on Palestinian territories after fighters in the Gaza Strip infiltrated southern Israel and captured an Israeli soldier. Are you working towards getting this siege lifted?

We have two bitter choices ahead of us: Either patience and vigilance, or submission.

But I think that we won't submit or make any change in our stance as this will be considered betraying the Palestinian voters who elected us and our political platform of national resistance to Israeli occupation.

Our people who live in Palestine and practised resistance by their hands and lived long years under the Israeli occupation recognise clearly what such a programme means. We are determined to follow this path.

Why won't you return Gilad Shalit to the Israelis?

Our key demands - the freeing of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails – have not been met.

Some Palestinian observers believe Israel will exchange the PLC officials for the safe return of Shalit. Do you see this as likely?

At first, I want to say that the Palestinian fighters captured the Israeli soldier from a tank; however, the Palestinian PLC members and ministers were kidnapped from their homes.

Their issue isn't related to Shalit at all, but it is a kind of pressure on the Palestinian people to abdicate their principles.

Secondly, different mediators – such as our Egyptian brothers - spoke about the release of the soldier. I hope to reach a satisfactory deal. But, I say that any satisfactory and acceptable deal for Palestinians is to release a reasonable number of the prisoners in return of the Israeli soldier. I myself suggest the release of all the prisoners in the Israeli jails. Then, there will be no need for kidnappings of any Israelis.

Ismail Haniya has proposed dissolving the Palestinian Authority. Will this help in lifting the siege?

The PM asked only for discussing the gains of the existence of the PA in its current form, not for the dissolution of it. He has put the issue up for debate: How can we face this siege and whether this step would be a successful solution to the crisis or not.

We believe the only solution is to form a national unity

government; and we have started the discussion with other political parties in that regard.

But Abbas has said that George Bush, the US president, will not deal with any Palestinian government which contains members of Hamas.

I want to say to those who support the removal of Hamas from the government that Israel will one day want them out as well. If the Israelis want Hamas out today and place Fatah in power, tomorrow they will turn around and fight Fatah.

They themselves nominated Arafat for the Noble Prize, and then at the end they killed him.

I want all sides to know clearly that the Israelis want ethnic cleansing for all Palestinians.

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