

ISRAEL'S WAR ON ORPHANS

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Israel's war on orphans

The fate of hundreds of orphans is in the balance after Israel's army attacked their schools and residence, writes **Khaled Amayreh** in Hebron

Israel has of late been waging a dirty war against established Islamic institutions in this southern West Bank town of nearly 200,000, the largest in the West Bank, Hebron.

Under the rubric of fighting Hamas, Israeli troops and agents of the Shin Bet, Israel's notorious domestic security agency, have been raiding and vandalising charities, orphanages, boarding schools and affiliated businesses.

The unprecedented campaign began mid-February when Israeli troops stormed two orphanages run by the Islamic Charitable Society (ISC), one of the oldest charities in Palestine, and the local Muslim Youth Association building. Having thoroughly terrorised hundreds of sleeping children, the soldiers moved to one building after the other, confiscating furniture, smashing glass, looting valuable items and leaving a trail of destruction.

Before they left, the Zionist vandals handed charity officials a tersely worded order signed by the local army commander stating that all the schools, orphanages, eateries, apartment buildings and support businesses owned by the charity were confiscated and that the Israeli army was the sole legal proprietor of all the expropriated premises.

As to the fate of more than 1,000 orphaned boys and girls, poor students, and charity employees, the army said: "it is none of our business. We are only carrying out orders."

Justifying the harsh action, Israeli military officials claimed that the ICS was connected with Hamas, a claim Hebron civil leaders and charity officials vehemently deny. *Al-Ahram Weekly* spoke to Mohamed Farrah, a lawyer and legal advisor to the charity.

"When we approached them, [the Israeli authorities] cited generalities and abstract issues, such as teaching the Quran and Islamic history and encouraging students to lead an Islamic lifestyle based on moral purity. I told them that if these things were indicting evidence, then the entire Muslim world from Jakarta to Casablanca belonged to Hamas. You are making a superpower out of Hamas," Farrah said.

Farrah argues that the Israelis are waging a dirty war on Islam as a religion under the pretext of fighting Hamas and other Islamic organisations opposed to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. "This is simply a brazen violation of our religious and human rights. Israel is an occupying power and it has no right to prevent us from teaching or practising our religion. If there is any tangible violation, let us know what it is, but making insinuations and concocting charges is unacceptable," he said.

Farrah urges the international community to intervene "because obviously we can't receive justice under Israel's unjust justice system. Here Israel is policeman, plaintiff, judge and enemy combined. How can we possibly receive justice under such circumstances when the occupation authorities view all Palestinians as guilty even if proven innocent?"

Demonstrating utter disregard for due process, the Israeli army went as far as raiding the kitchens and clothes inventories of the two orphanages, confiscating dairy products, frozen meat, fruit and vegetables, refrigerators and baking ovens.

Meanwhile, the deadline for vacating the orphanages and boarding schools expired 8 April. Hundreds of orphans, with the encouragement of charity officials and foreign peace activists, decided to stay put “because this is our home and our school and we have no other place to go.”

Last week, a group of Christian Peacemaking Team (CPT) activists from North America and Europe spent a night with the children at the main orphanage to boost their morale and help protect them from an expected storming of the building by the Israeli army.

On 7 April, the Popular Committee for Supporting Orphanages, composed of local community leaders, hosted a press conference at the Hebron Girls Orphanage, with dozens of peace activists, clergymen and journalists as well as some of the victimised orphan girls attending.

Farrah spoke at the conference, accusing the Israeli authorities of lying with regard to the charity’s alleged connections with Hamas.

“They are making sweeping charges and allegations, but when we challenge them to prove these charges and allegations, they tell us they have secret evidence. I challenge our accusers to prove their charges, and if they can’t, they should have the guts to admit that they made a mistake,” he said.

Mohamed Salhab, head of the Muslim Youth Society, which was also closed down, argues that Israel had no right to invade, let alone close down and confiscate, Palestinian institutions. “We are based in Area-A, which according to the Oslo Accords, falls under exclusive Palestinian control. This is therefore an act of sheer aggression that is illegal and immoral.”

Salhab accuses the Israeli army of acting like “gangsters and common criminals”. “Where in the world would regular army troops storm nurseries and kindergartens and orphanages and terrorise children as little as four or even three years old?”

Salhab notes that some of the children are now having nightmares and displaying other signs of stress as a result of the storming by Israeli soldiers.

During the conference, Rabbi Arik Aschermann, head of Rabbis for Human Rights, spoke to the audience by speakerphone, saying that the closure and confiscation of the orphanages and boarding schools and affiliated institutions was “incompatible with the Jewish concept of justice”. “If the army has any evidence, let them present it before a court of law.” Aschermann added that Jews who follow the Torah could not accept what the Israeli army is doing in Hebron.

One US CPT member said he and his fellow activists would be at the orphanage if the Israeli army decides to storm the premises again. “We will videotape them and expose them all over the world,” he said. Following the press conference, the peace activists moved to one of the targeted boarding schools, located in the Dweirban neighbourhood of Hebron’s western suburb.

“Our people back home think that Israel is a true democracy, that it upholds human rights and civil liberties. Now, having witnessed Israeli behaviour, I can say that Israel is a fascist and terrorist state,” said one activist from Canada.

A number of civic leaders in Hebron have expressed outrage at “the disgraceful reactions” of the Palestinian Authority (PA) to the Israeli army onslaught against local Islamic charities and institutions. Ahmed Kawasmeh said he was “110 per cent sure” that the Israeli campaign against the charities was “fully coordinated with the PA and the government of Salam Fayyad.”

Kawasmeh added: “PA behaviour from the very inception suggests that they are silent accomplices in all of this. The PA simply wants to take over these charities in order to appease the enemies of Islam, especially the United States. Eventually, they want to dump thousands of orphan children unto the streets in order to obtain a certificate of good conduct from America and Israel.”

Earlier this week, a representative of the Palestinian Interior Minister summoned an official from the Muslim Youth Association to propose a “deal” whereby Israel would cancel the closure and confiscation in exchange for the ISC administration agreeing to place the entire association under the authority of the PA Waqf (Religious Endowments) Ministry.

The Muslim Youth Association official dismissed the proposed deal as a “cheap conspiracy”, arguing that the charitable institutions targeted by Israel were licensed and regularly overseen by the PA’s interior and education ministries. One charity official intimated that donors in general don’t trust the PA and wouldn’t donate money to institutions run by Fatah operatives.

“If they [the PA] take over the ISC, the society will collapse in a few months. This is why we would prefer that the Israelis close it down rather than see Fatah run it.”

PA officials in Hebron dismissed “these strange charges” as “fictional”. Hussein Al-Araj, Hebron’s PA-appointed governor, said the Palestinian government was trying to solve the problem quietly and away from the media.

2 Comments

1.



[shunra](#) said,

April 19, 2008 at [7:31 pm](#)

Perhaps related - Riad Hamad, whose charity was the Palestinian Children's Welfare Fund (www.pcwf.org) was found drowned in an Austin lake this week. He was bound and gagged; the police are calling it a Suicide.

Here's are a couple of reports about this:

<http://www.590klbj.com/News/Story.aspx?ID=89252>

<http://www.statesman.com/news/content/news/stories/local/04/18/0418body.html>

2.

MOHAMMAD SYED said,

April 19, 2008 at [9:22 pm](#)

AN APPEAL TO ALL ISRALIS: TODAY, YOU ARE IN POWER. YOU HAVE THE POWER TO DO RIGHT AND YOU HAVE POWER TO DO WRONG. WHY HAVE YOU CHOSEN TO DO WRONG? WHAT BENEFIT WILL YOU DRIVE BY TERRORISING PALESTINIAN CHILDREN, WOMEN, AND MEN, OLD AND YOUNG? WILL YOU HAVE PEACE OF MIND AND PERMANENT SECURITY THAT YOU LOVE SO MUCH, BY TURNING THE WHOLE PALESTINIAN POPULACE AS YOUR ENEMY? DON'T YOU HAVE LORD WHO WILL ASK YOU ABOUT YOUR MISDEEDS? PLEASE COME TO YOUR SENSES! TREAT OTHERS WELL, SO YOU WILL BE TREATED WELL. YOUR POWER IS TEMPORARY. MAKE FRIENDS NOT ENEMIES. O, GOOD PEOPLE OF ISRAEL, ONLY YOU CAN BRING SENSE TO YOUR NATION. THANK YOU FOR STANDING UP AGAINST THE EVIL DOERS. MAY GOD REWARD YOU.

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