



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Captured Settlers: Implications for Palestine and Israel

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | June 2014

Captured Settlers: Implications for Palestine and Israel

Series: Assessment Report

Policy Analysis Unit – ACRPS | June 2014

Copyright © 2014 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
An Unknown Perpetrator	1
The Israeli Response	2
Brutality and Arrests	3
The Position of the PA	3
Israeli Coordination with Egypt	5
Conclusion	6

Introduction

Tensions are running high in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict following the capture of three conscript settlers in the Hebron region of the occupied West Bank on June 12. The events have prompted unjustified Israeli attempts to push through items on its political agenda that have little connection to this incident, such as a recent crackdown on Hamas in the West Bank, the prevention of Palestinian national unity, and the defamation of the recently formed Palestinian unity government as a promoter of “terrorism”.

An Unknown Perpetrator

The capture of three Israeli settlers near Hebron comes amid a political stalemate between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israel arising from the failure of negotiations. Negotiations ended because of the Israeli government’s insistence on continuing settlement in occupied Palestinian areas at an unprecedented rate, and reneging on its commitment to release the fourth batch of Palestinian prisoners. The Israelis were taken prisoner 50 days into a hunger strike initiated by Palestinian administrative detainees who have been languishing in Israeli jails for years without trial or even charges being brought against them. Israeli officials have repeatedly stated that not only will they not release them, but they will also proceed to detain further Palestinians without trial. This coincides with the first reading of a bill in the Israeli Knesset set forth to impose conditions for the Israeli government that will prevent it from freeing Palestinian prisoners as a result of negotiations with the PA or by means of a prisoner exchange. On the basis of this Israeli intransigence, many Palestinians have come to the conclusion that their prisoners will only be released in exchange for captured Israelis.

It remains unknown at this point who carried out the operation to capture the Israelis, and no known Palestinian organization has claimed responsibility. Statements from the Israeli authorities in the days following the operation show that Israel is also at a loss, even though the prisoners were taken from an area under the total control of the Israeli Army. Israeli officials have tried to suggest that the responsible party has advanced capabilities, and drew up a sophisticated plan to capture the Israelis—a good cover up for Israel’s shortcomings and failure.

According to information reported in the Israeli media, one of the prisoners called the Israeli police in the first few minutes of their capture and told them that he and his friends had been taken prisoner. It seems, the Israeli policeman who answered the call did not take him seriously, which meant that the security forces were unaware of the capture for approximately five hours, allowing the perpetrators to reach their hide-out or hide-outs in safety.

The Israeli Response

The Israeli government's response to the capture of these prisoners has been political and operational. On the political level, Israel has exploited the operation to achieve political goals that are unconnected to the capture of prisoners, but tied to its positions toward the Palestinian issue in general, and the PA and the national unity government in particular. The Israeli government has acted toward achieving a whole package of aims, most importantly:

- Striking a blow to Hamas and the Palestinian resistance groups in the West Bank
- Withdrawal of the international legitimacy obtained by the Palestinian unity government
- Ending the reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas and the dissolution of the unity government
- Collectively punishing the Palestinians in the West Bank, especially in and near Hebron, to terrorize the Palestinians and break their will to seek national action against Israeli occupation and settlement.

The extent of manipulation is revealed in a briefing note published by *Haaretz*, allegedly sent on June 15 by the Israeli prime minister's office to government and ministerial spokesmen and Israeli embassies around the world.¹ The note claimed that Hamas carried out the operation, despite the fact that Israel does not know who is behind it. It also claimed that the operation continues the escalation underway in the West Bank since the formation of the Palestinian unity government, and that the reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas was encouraging "terrorism". It held the PA, under the leadership of Abu Mazen, responsible for the operation and the fate of the three prisoners, and for what it described as "incitement against Israel" in the

¹ Briefing note from the prime minister's office, *Haaretz*, June 15, 2014, <http://blogs.haaretz.co.il/barakravid/1261/>.

Palestinian media and education system. While Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other Israeli officials took care of media rhetoric, Israel launched a wide-scale diplomatic campaign to convince the outside world, including the US administration and the EU states, of Hamas's responsibility for the operation, in a desperate attempt to end cooperation between them and the Palestinian unity government.

Brutality and Arrests

The Israeli cabinet and its national security committee convened a series of meetings during which the military and security establishment devised the repressive measures used to exploit the capture of the prisoners. All or some of these measures would be implemented according to developments and to regional and international positions over the weeks to come. The chief elements of this campaign are the detention of leaders, activists, and members of Hamas and other Palestinian organizations; the demolition of their homes; their exile from the occupied West Bank to Gaza; punitive measures against Hamas prisoners in Israeli jails; and striking at the civic infrastructure of Hamas, such as social, charity, religious, media, and economic institutions. The intention of this campaign is clear: severely weaken Hamas in the occupied West Bank and disband the resistance network. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that this campaign will succeed considering previous repressive campaigns against Hamas and Palestinian resistance groups have failed. If anything, they have had the opposite effect and contributed to increasing Hamas's popularity and Palestinian solidarity with it, which boosted its political standing.

The Position of the PA

This most recent event has put the PA's leadership in a precarious position and exposed it to a range of pressures, particularly because it happened shortly after the reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas and the formation of the unity government. A number of issues prevent the PA leadership from assertively dealing with the prisoner operation, including:

1. Israel is exploiting the operation politically and has launched a diplomatic and media campaign against the PA leadership; it holds the PA responsible for the operation and its outcome, and is pressuring it to end the reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas.

2. The PA is coordinating with Israel over the capture of the three settlers at a time when that operation enjoys broad Palestinian popular support. Its policy to coordinate with Israel, on the other hand, is broadly opposed by the Palestinian people, as well as most Palestinian organizations. The PA's position is made more difficult by the fact that this heightened security coordination with the Israeli occupation forces coincides with the imposition of collective punishment on Palestinians, their brutal treatment, and the detention of hundreds of Palestinian leaders, activists, and citizens.
3. The US and Europe are also pressuring the PA leadership to openly condemn the capture of the prisoners and cooperate fully with Israel in resolving it. There is, however, no condemnation from the United States or Europe of Israel's brutal treatment of the Palestinians in the occupied areas.

Despite the PA's security coordination with Israel from day one of the operation, Netanyahu and Israeli officials have continued to hold the PA leadership responsible, and proceeded with their defamation campaign, making relations between the PA leadership and the Israeli government—already at a low—even worse. Undoubtedly, this has played a part in the PA's reluctance to openly condemn the event, which prompted the American administration to step in to deescalate tensions between the PA leadership and the Israeli government. As a result, on June 16, a few days after the operation, PA President Mahmoud Abbas, under pressure from US Secretary of State John Kerry, called Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. In their first telephone conversation in more than a year, Netanyahu claimed that the "kidnappers" had set out from PA-controlled territory and returned there, and he asked Abbas to work for the return of those "kidnapped". Abbas retorted that the PA did not control Area C where the "kidnapping" took place, and that there was no evidence that the "kidnappers" were from Hamas. Abbas criticized the Israeli military campaign, saying that it was counterproductive, would not bring security, served to exacerbate the situation, and would lead to violence and increased hatred between the two sides.² After this conversation, the Palestinian president issued a statement in which he condemned the

² "Palestinian Source: Telephone call between the president and Netanyahu after severe pressure from Kerry," *al-Quds*, June 17, 2014.

“kidnapping” of the three Israeli settlers and the campaign of attacks being undertaken by the Israeli Army against Palestinian citizens.

In his speech at the meeting of foreign ministers of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Jeddah on June 18, 2014, President Abbas confirmed that the PA was investigating the incident and who was behind it. He noted, “In truth, the people who did this want to destroy us. So we will talk differently with them and have a different position, whoever it was”. Abbas defended the ongoing security coordination, saying, “It is in our interest to have security coordination with Israel for our protection. We will not resort to another intifada to destroy us as happened in the second intifada.” Abbas affirmed that the Israeli government is seeking to escalate the situation between the two sides in the aftermath of the capture, which causes a serious problem. “The Israeli prime minister sees in the ‘kidnapping’ a perfect opportunity to mistreat us, destroy everything, and wreak havoc, especially in Hebron, while blaming us for the incident.”³

Israeli Coordination with Egypt

At a time of increased security coordination with the PA, Israeli officials indicated the importance of Egypt’s role in dealing with the situation. *Yedioth Ahronoth*, an Israeli newspaper, reported that Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was participating behind the scenes in the efforts to release the Israeli prisoners. An Israeli security source confirmed to the newspaper that Egyptian involvement began on June 14, after Egypt received a request from Israel in that respect. The source indicated that al-Sisi was previously the official responsible for Egyptian security relations with Israel when head of Egyptian military intelligence, and that he had helped broker the prisoner exchange deal between Israel and Hamas over Gilad Shalit. The source continued that al-Sisi was keeping a close eye on the reports from Egyptian diplomats in Ramallah, who were making contacts in the West Bank with various factions to uncover the whereabouts of the prisoners, in coordination with the Israelis.⁴

³ Palestine News and Info Agency, “President calls on OIC to take serious position to defend Jerusalem,” *Wafa*, June 18, 2014, <http://www.wafa.ps/arabic/index.php?action=detail&id=176792>.

⁴ Smadar Perry, “President al-Sisi involved in helping Israel behind the scenes,” *Yedioth Ahronoth*, June 16, 2014.

Conclusion

To date, it remains unclear which group or party took the three settlers prisoner, and whether they have really been kidnapped, particularly as no Palestinian faction has claimed responsibility for this operation. It is also unclear whether the prisoners are still alive. The Israeli government believes that the prisoners are still alive and probably in one or more locations in the occupied West Bank. If this assumption is correct, then it is likely that the Israeli Army will resort to a military operation to free them. It should be borne in mind that Israel has resorted to forcefully end all previous cases of captives in the occupied West Bank, resulting in the deaths of all the captives.