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Subject: [imra-l] Ha'aretz: PA granted dozens of jailed Islamic Jihad, Hamas terrorists "extended vacation"  
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Ha'aretz: PA granted dozens of jailed Islamic Jihad, Hamas terrorists "extended vacation"

By Amos Harel Ha'aretz Military Correspondent Ha'aretz 18 Septemebr 2000

Over the past several weeks, the Palestinian Authority has granted extended vacation leaves to dozens of jailed Hamas and Islamic Jihad activists, among them militants who were involved in serious terror attacks against Israel.

Israeli military authorities view the return of the Palestinian "revolving door" with mounting concern.

The release of the activists is seen as an effort by the PA to soothe relations with the fundamentalist groups. Recently, convicts have been released in small groups every few days, for leaves of a week or longer.

Some of the men had been held without trial, others were serving long sentences of 10 to 20 years.

Israeli security sources said that some of those released were involved in Hamas and Islamic Jihad terror attacks carried out after the signing of the Oslo agreement, and were arrested, in the main, following the wave of bus bombings in early 1996.

A number were involved in setting bombs that later injured Israelis.

Israeli officials fear that the freed prisoners will take advantage of the vacations to resume contacts with other activists outside prison walls.

Israeli sources view the vacations as an effort by the Authority to take a middle course, instead of a full prisoner release, in order to avoid criticism by U.S. officials. The sources said the measure, intended to calm fundamentalist leaders, was also apparently made conditional on pledges to refrain from terror attacks at the present sensitive stage of peace negotiations.

It was carried out at a time when security cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian authorities is at a relatively positive level and has been lauded by Israeli defense establishment figures.

A senior military source told Ha'aretz the step may be linked to such other recent Palestinian moves as arresting suspected collaborators with Israel, and stepping up the Palestinian security presence in "B" Areas.

"From the Palestinians' standpoint, we're in a 'twilight time' now; the interim agreements have formally expired, the declaration of Palestinian statehood has been postponed at least until November 15.

"It appears that it's now time, in their view, for steps that will change, to some degree, the reality on the ground."

An IDF Central Command officer said that over the last month there had been a steep rise in the number of suspected collaborators arrested by the Palestinian intelligence apparatus. Most of the collaborators, who now live within the Green Line, were arrested while visiting their families in the territories, in areas under Israeli security control. The arrests were in violation of the Oslo accords, which forbid the Authority from arresting Israeli citizens.

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