



Palestinian reactions to the escape of six terrorists from Israel's maximum security Gilboa prison

September 9, 2021

Overview

► **Before dawn on September 6, 2021, six Palestinian terrorists from Samaria broke out of the Gilboa prison** in northern Israel through a tunnel they had been digging for approximately half a year. As soon as news of the jailbreak was received the Palestinian media instructed the public to defend and protect the fugitives, and **appealed to the Palestinian security forces not to assist Israel in finding them**. The Palestinian social networks issued calls for mass marches at the roadblocks and friction points in Judea and Samaria to keep IDF forces occupied instead of searching for the terrorists. The social networks also directed Palestinians to vandalize and sabotage Israeli security cameras to keep them from detecting the fugitives. The Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) leaderships said local residents should shelter them, while the Palestinian media outlets gave extensive coverage to "Israel's security fiasco."

► **On September 9, 2021, two of the fugitive terrorists were recaptured; and on September 10, 2021, two more. See the Appendix.**

► The Palestinian terrorist organizations, led by Hamas and the PIJ, as well as their military wings, threatened they would respond accordingly if Israel recaptured or harmed the fugitives. However, no organization issued Israel an ultimatum or made a specific threat, merely threatening that "all options were on the table."

► **The escape of Palestinians from an Israeli prison was a seminal event for the Palestinians and a "success story" in the "struggle" against Israel.** The six immediately became heroes of the Palestinian street. Generally speaking, the Palestinian Authority (PA), Fatah and the other terrorist organizations regard all the terrorists imprisoned in Israel as national heroes. The PA supports terrorists of all the organizations, including those with the blood of women and children on their hands, considering them the "fighters" of Palestinian society. In practical terms the PA provides the prisoners, released prisoners and their families with generous financial support, despite the sanctions imposed by both Israel and the United States. The prisoners also receive considerable moral support from the PA,

expressed by ceremonies and other events held to honor them and their families, attended by the senior PA leadership.

► In addition, PA support for the prisoners enjoys broad public consensus in Palestinian society and is one of the main issues (alongside the Temple Mount compound and the Islamic holy sites) that close Palestinian ranks and can bring them into the street to demonstrate and/or carry out terrorist attacks.

The Jailbreak

► Before dawn on September 6, 2021, six Palestinian terrorists originally from the Jenin area escaped from the Gilboa maximum security prison. For approximately six months they had been digging a tunnel in the floor of the toilet in their cell. The six entered it and crawled several dozen yards to the end opening, which was under a watchtower only a few yards from the prison wall.



**The tunnel used by the prisoners to escape
(Israel Prison Service spokesman's unit, September 6, 2021).**

► Once their escape became known **reinforced Israeli security forces began searching for them** in towns and villages, erecting dozens of roadblocks throughout the country. A security assessment mandated an extension of the Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) closure of Judea and Samaria to midnight, September 11, 2021, depending on ongoing security updates (IDF spokesman, September 8, 2021). Palestinian media reports elaborated on Israel's search for the fugitives.

► A number of Palestinians were detained during the search, including relatives of the fugitives, and their cellphones were examined. According to reports, Israel threatened the

families, claiming that if the fugitives were not turned over to the Israeli authorities, they would not be detained, they would be shot on sight. The families were also warned not to help or contact the fugitives (al-Akhbar, September 8, 2021). During the search local residents in several villages clashed with the Israeli security forces.

Measures taken by the Prison Service

► On the afternoon of September 6, 2021, the Israel Prison Service decided to move terrorist prisoners to new cells in different jails with prisoners from other Palestinian terrorist organizations. The objective was to make it difficult for the Palestinian prisoners to unite against the guards and to prevent another jailbreak (Israeli media, September 6, 2021). Prisoners, mainly from the PIJ, objected to the move, set fire to their cells in the Ketziot and Rimon prisons in the center of Israel and threatened to set fire to any wing that was evacuated. The PIJ prison leadership said they would "resist" any "oppressive step" taken by the prison authorities, were prepared to "sacrifice shaheeds" in their defense and would go on **an unlimited hunger strike**.



**Cells torched by prisoners in the Ketziot prison
(Israel Prison Service spokesman's unit, September 8, 2021).**

► The Palestinian media reported that the prison atmosphere was tense, especially in the Gilboa prison, and that the prisoners authorities had imposed limitations on the relocation of inmates to other prisons. They also reported that the leaders of the prisoners in the Gilboa

prison were being interrogated. The Palestinian media reported the measures as "revenge" against the prisoners because of Israel's failure (al-Quds, September 7, 2021).

► Fatah described Israel's measures as "war crimes" against the prisoners and called on the international community to intervene. Fatah also called for an immediately popular "awakening." **Hussein al-Sheikh, PA minister of civilian affairs and a member of Fatah's Central Committee**, said the "heroic" Palestinian prisoners were being subjected to "unprecedented oppression" which was liable to cause an "explosion" in the prisons. He demanded the immediate intervention of international organizations and institutions to stop Israel's "oppression" and demanded the Israeli government cease and desist (Hussein al-Sheikh's Twitter account, September 8, 2021).

Palestinian Reactions to the Jailbreak

► The prisoners' escape was immediately celebrated by the Palestinian street in Judea, Samaria, east Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip as a holiday, and candy and pastries were distributed to passersby in the large cities. Dozens of cartoons glorifying the escape were posted to the social networks.



Right: Hamas-PIJ celebration in Jabalia in the northern Gaza Strip (Safa Facebook page, September 7, 2021). Left: PIJ support rally in Gaza City (Safa Facebook page, September 6, 2021).

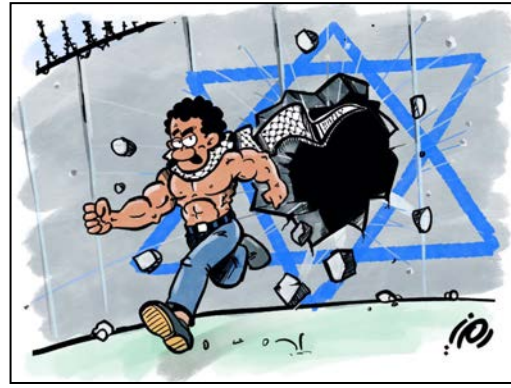
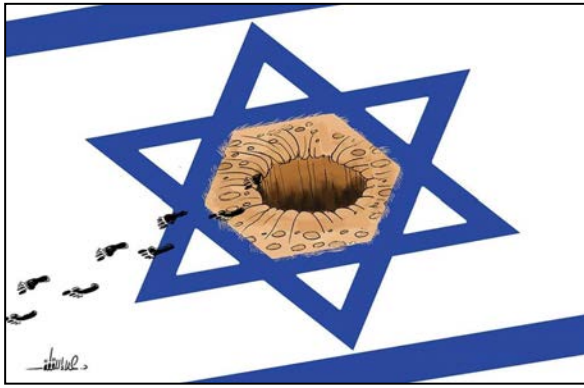


Right: Operatives of the balloon-launching units prepare balloons with pictures of the fugitives (Twitter account of Ashraf Amara, September 7, 2021). Left: A passerby in Gaza City receives baklava to celebrate the prison break (Safa Facebook page, September 6, 2021).



The night harassment unit in the PA village of Bayta marks the prison break (Safa Facebook page, September 6, 2021).

- The Palestinian media conveyed a message that **the fugitives had to be defended and protected, and appealed to the Palestinian security forces not to help Israel**. The social networks launched a campaign calling for mass rallies at the roadblocks and traditional friction points to keep the Israeli security forces occupied and distract them from searching for the fugitives. There were calls for the Israeli security cameras to be vandalized and sabotaged. Hamas and the PIJ called on the PA not to cooperate with Israel in searching for the fugitives.
- The Palestinian media outlets gave extensive coverage to what it called "Israel's security fiasco." According to an article in Safa, a Hamas-affiliated news agency, the "freedom tunnel" had turned Israel's security establishment into a laughing stock. **Muhammad Draghma, a political commentator**, claimed the prisoners had "brought Israel to its knees" before the Jewish New Year and "ruined the holiday" (Safa, September 6, 2021).



Palestinian cartoons mocking Israel (Palestinian cartoon Facebook page, September 6, 2021).

► The PA leadership, headed by **PA Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh**, sympathized with and supported the jailbreak, stating that Israel was fully responsible for the lives of the escaped prisoners. He said every Palestinian prisoner wanted to be free and every Palestinian prisoner had the right to look for every way to gain his freedom. He demanded Israel release all the prisoners, especially women, children and the ill (Muhammad Shtayyeh's Facebook page, September 8, 2021). Mahmoud Abbas and Muhammad Shtayyeh had the PA foreign ministry instruct all its legations around the globe to enlist international support to end Israel's [alleged] "aggression" against the prisoners (Wafa, September 9, 2021).

► **Fatah spokesman Usama Qawasmeh** said the Fatah movement gloried in and was proud of the "heroic prisoners," who were "fully entitled to liberty." He claimed it was "only natural" for them to be with their families and not in Israeli prison cells, and that they were all "prisoners of war" whose convictions had no validity (Usama Qawasmeh's Facebook page, September 8, 2021). **Senior Fatah figure Abbas Zaki** called the jailbreak an "achievement" and "heroic feat" which had to put the issue of the prisoners at the top of the national agenda (al-Mayadeen, September 7, 2021).

Palestinians demonstrate and clash with Israeli security forces in riots

► Public figures and institutions supporting the prisoners called on the Palestinian public go to the friction points in Judea, Samaria and east Jerusalem to hold demonstrations and protest rallies in support of the prisoners. The social networks issued a call with the #prisonsystem hashtag (al-Quds, September 8, 2021). Similar calls were heard in the mosques. The PA ministry of Muslim endowments instructed that the Friday sermons be devoted to the issue of the prisoners in Israeli jails and the need to release them as soon as

possible. Hamas called on the Palestinians to escalate friction and clash with Israel in support of the prisoners (Hamas website, September 8, 2021).

► Hundreds of Palestinians responded to the call and took to the streets on September 8, 2021, and clashed with the Israeli security forces at a series of locations in Judea, Samaria and east Jerusalem. Demonstrations were held in Hebron, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Anabta, Nablus, Jenin and Tubas. Palestinians clashed with Israeli police at the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem and threw rocks at a bus; Palestinians also rioted in Issawiya in east Jerusalem (Israeli media, September 8, 2021). Palestinians reported firing shots at the Israeli security forces at the northern entrance of al-Bireh and in the Jenin region. The Palestinian Red Crescent reported approximately 100 Palestinians had been wounded, most of them by inhaling tear gas (al-Risalah, September 8, 2021).



Right: Fatah riot near the Hawwara roadblock, south of Nablus. Left: Palestinians riot at the northern entrance to Bethlehem (Wafa, September 8, 2021).



Right: Palestinians draped with green Hamas flags riot in the center of Hebron (QudsN Twitter account, September 8, 2021). Left: Demonstration in support of the Palestinian prisoners, Manara Square, Ramallah (Safa Facebook page, September 8, 2021).



Right: Palestinians riot in Issawiya in east Jerusalem. Left: Bus window broken by rock near the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem (Palinfo Twitter account, September 8, 2021).

► **Jenin Fatah secretary Ataa Abu Rumila** said they would not allow Israel to keep them from celebrating the escape of the Palestinian prisoners. He said Israel was trying to exact revenge by sending its security forces to the wings of the prisons where Palestinians were kept, and the prisoners threatened they would burn the prison cells if Israel continued (al-Jazeera, September 8, 2021).



Right: Demonstration in Jenin (Safa, September 8, 2021). Left: Jenin Fatah secretary Ataa Abu Rumila threatens Israel at a rally held in Jenin in support of the fugitives (aljazeera.net, September 8, 2021).

Palestinian threats

- The leadership and spokesmen of the Palestinian terrorist organizations, headed by **Hamas and the PIJ**, threatened they would respond to the situation as required if Israel harmed the escaped prisoners. However, no organization issued an ultimatum or specific threat such as rocket fire, but rather said that "all options were on the table."
- The terrorist organization leadership held a press conference in Gaza City on September 8, 2021, where the threats were repeated. Speakers claimed the jailbreak was a "blow to the Israeli security system" and demonstrated the Palestinians' determination and willpower.

They called on the Palestinian people to help the prisoners in every way possible and to disrupt Israel's security actions to find them. They also appealed to the Egyptian mediator, demanding intervention and pressure on Israel to keep the Palestinian prisoners from being harmed before the situation exploded and became uncontrollable (Safa, September 8, 2021).



The Palestinian terrorist factions in the Gaza Strip hold a press conference (Safa, September 8, 2021).

► **Senior PIJ figure Khaled al-Batash** said they supported the "six heroes" and would not leave the prisoners to cope with the "crimes of the occupation" alone, adding that all options were open. He called on the Palestinian public to protect the fugitives and prevent Israel from finding them. **Popular Resistance Committees spokesman Abu Mujahed** said everyone everywhere had to support and protect the fugitives, and warned Israel not to harm them (Shehab, September 8, 2021).

► According to the Lebanese daily newspaper al-Akhbar, **the Palestinian organizations sent a strong warning to Israel** through the Egyptian mediator not to even think of killing the fugitives, and to stop pressuring their families, because it could cause the situation to deteriorate into a military confrontation. According to "Palestinian sources," **a military action is a possibility** if the pressure [from Israel] continues (al-Akhbar, September 8, 2021).

PIJ reactions

► The PIJ warned Israel not to harm or punish the [Palestinian] prisoners in Israeli jails. The organization's military-terrorist wing said in a statement that harming the prisoners was a red line. They claimed they were monitoring prison conditions and would not allow aggression against the inmates to continue. **Jamil Alian, who holds the PIJ prisoners' portfolio**, said an increase of Israeli pressure on the prisoners would lead to military "resistance" and a popular intifada (Paltoday, September 7, 2021).

► **PIJ leader Ziyad al-Nakhalah** said the six had broken through Israel's security and taken the battle into Israeli territory. He called on the Palestinian people in Judea and Samaria to do their duty and protect the "brave fighters." **PIJ spokesman Da'ud Shehab** said five of the fugitives were PIJ operatives. He claimed their action had been great and heroic, had shaken the Israeli security establishment and was a slap in the IDF's face. He said the timing of the action [the eve of the Jewish New Year] along with the blow Israel received from the Gaza Strip [the shooting of the IDF soldier at the Gaza Strip border] only served to deepen Israel's failure and its helplessness (qudsnet.com, September 6, 2021).

► **Abu Hamza, spokesman for the Jerusalem Brigades**, the PIJ's military-terrorist wing, congratulated the fugitives, claiming the jailbreak led by PIJ operative Mahmoud Abdallah al-Ardah and carried out with five of his comrades was a victory for the organization. He said the "resistance" would "continue digging through rocks day and night" to demand the prisoners' freedom (Abu Hamza's Telegram channel, September 7, 2021). **Senior PIJ figure Khader Adnan** said the prisoners in several prisons were planning to burn their cells and would not agree to oppression. He called on the [Palestinian] public to go to friction points to embarrass Israel and support the prisoners (Sada4Press, September 8, 2021). **PIJ leader Khaled al-Batash** said Israel would pay a high price if it harmed the fugitives. He called on the residents of Judea and Samaria to give the prisoners every possible protection (Safa Facebook page, September 8, 2021).

Hamas reactions

► **Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau**, called Ziyad al-Nakhalah and congratulated him on the success of "operation achieving freedom." Haniyeh called it another "page of victory," one of many, and stressed the need to protect the six fugitives. **Saleh al-'Aroui, deputy head of Hamas' political bureau and responsible for the organization's activities in Judea and Samaria**, said the "heroic action" had to be considered "a new dawn for the resistance to the occupation" everywhere (Hamas website, September 6, 2021). A rally was held in the Jabalia refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip in support of the "heroes of [operation] freedom tunnel."

► **The Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades, Hamas' military-terrorist wing**, praised the jailbreak and said the freeing prisoners was the duty of every Palestinian. Every Palestinian had to capture Israeli soldiers and trade them for prisoners – a strategy the "resistance" would

never abandon. The fugitives had to be protected to keep them free and to prevent Israel from capturing them (Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades website, September 6, 2021).

► **Musa Dudin, a member of Hamas' political bureau and holder of the organization's prisoners' portfolio**, said the Palestinian people would protect the "freedom tunnel fugitives" and warned Israel not to do anything "stupid." He also warned Israel not to harm the prisoners' families, and called for escalating the confrontation with Israel by helping the prisoners (QudsN Twitter account, September 8, 2021).

Appendix

The prisoners

► Five of the fugitive terrorists, most of them sentenced to long prison terms, are PIJ terrorist operatives, and one is a Fatah operative.

◆ **Mahmoud Abdallah Ali al-Ardah**, 45, from Arraba near Jenin. A leader of the PIJ prisoners and apparently the commander of the escape, he was detained in 1992 for terrorist activities during the first intifada, and served a term of 41 months before being released as part of the Oslo Accords. In 1996, less than a year after his release, he was detained again, convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment plus 15 years for membership in the PIJ and terrorist attacks that led to the deaths of IDF soldiers. In 2014 he tried to escape from prison by digging a tunnel with **Yaqoub Qadri**, who escaped with him from the Gilboa prison. **PIJ spokesman Da'ud Shehab** nicknamed him "the prince of the [Palestinian Islamic] Jihad prisoners." He said al-Ardah had been in jail since 1996. **Khader Adnan, a PIJ leader in Judea and Samaria**, who went on a hunger strike while under administrative detention and became a symbol of the "resistance," said Muhammad al-Ardah was one of the first prisoners who would be released in a prisoner exchange deal (al-Risalah, September 7, 2021). **Note: He was recaptured on September 9, 2021.**

◆ **Muhammad Qassem al-Ardah**, 39, from Arraba near Jenin. A PIJ terrorist operative and Mahmoud al-Ardah's brother. In 2002 he was sentenced to three consecutive terms of life imprisonment plus 20 years for murder and membership in a terrorist organization. He was detained in Ramallah by the PA security forces and after his release, in 2001 he was involved in a suicide bombing attack on a bus in Wadi Ara in northern Israel which killed three Israeli civilians. **Note: He was recaptured on September 10, 2021.**

◆ **Yaqoub Muhammad Qadri**, 48, from Bir al-Basha, near Jenin. An operative in the PIJ's military-terrorist wing, he was serving two consecutive sentences of life imprisonment plus 35 years handed down in 2004 for the murder of an Israeli near Mevo Dotan, southwest of Jenin in Samaria, membership in a terrorist organization and participation in other terrorist activities. While imprisoned he studied for a BA in

history at the al-Quds Open University in the Gaza Strip. **Note: He was recaptured on September 9, 2021.**

◆ **Ayham Naif Kamamji**, 35, from Kafr Dan, near Jenin. A PIJ terrorist operative who was serving a sentence of life imprisonment as of 2006 for participation in the abduction and murder of Israeli civilian Eliahu Oshri in Ramallah. In 2003 he was detained in the PA's prison in Jericho, escaping in 2004.

◆ **Munadhel Yakoub Infeiat**, 25, from Ya'bed, near Jenin. A PIJ terrorist operative, he was detained in 2017 and imprisoned in 2019 for a shooting attack. One of his cousins was shot while carrying out a stabbing attack in the Israeli community of Mevo Dotan (Israeli Channel 11, Kan, September 6, 2021).

◆ **Zakaria Zubeidi**, 45. A Fatah terrorist operative, he is the most famous of the six prisoners. He was a symbol of the second intifada, during which headed a Fatah terrorist network in the Jenin area (Fatah's Tanzim/al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades). Beginning in the summer of 2002 he was involved in planning and carrying out deadly terrorist attacks in Samaria and inside Israel, causing the death and wounding of Israeli civilians and soldiers. He was involved in orchestrating the shooting attack at the Likud branch in Beit Shean which killed six Israeli civilians (November 28, 2002). Some of the attacks were carried out in collaboration with the PIJ network in Jenin. Zakaria Zubeidi was part of the "wanted felons agreement" of 2007, in which terrorist operatives in Samaria agreed to end their involvement in all violent and illegal activities and leave the terrorist organizations to which they belonged. On February 27, 2019, Zakaria Zubeidi was detained again, this time with Tareq Barghouti, a lawyer from Jerusalem and a member of the Israeli bar association. The Israeli Security Agency investigation led to an indictment of the two for a number of **shooting attacks targeting Israeli vehicles. Note: He was recaptured on September 10, 2021.**



Top row, left to right: Munadhel Infeiat, Zakaria Zubeidi, Muhammad al-Ardah. Bottom row, left to right: Ayham Kamamji, Yakoub al-Ardah, Mahmoud al-Ardah (al-Watan News, September 8, 2021).