

# When will Israel be held to account?

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Four hundred men and boys sit huddled around open fires, trying their best to shield themselves from the elements. At night, they crawl into tents and seek a few hours' respite from the cold and misery, through sleep, if it comes. Abandoned in a no man's land known by cartographers as southern Lebanon, they paint a grim picture of the state of affairs in the Arab world. As has been the case over the last centuries, Arab populations, particularly the Palestinian people, are being moved about on a desolate landscape like so many inanimate chess pieces on the checkerboard known as the Great Game.

It all began last Dec. 17, when the Israeli occupying forces in Palestine flew in the face of international law and all principles governing human rights, by deporting 415 Palestinians to nominally Lebanese territory. The punishment meted out to them—without trial or formal accusation—was justified by the Israeli government as fitting retribution for the killing of an Israeli border guard. The 415 deportees, accused of sympathizing with the cause of the Islamist Hamas organization, were pronounced collectively guilty of an assassination attributed (without trial or proof) to the Hamas. Lebanon, the puppet state of Hafez al-Assad's Syria, refused to grant them asylum, after meetings between the Israelis and Syrians in Europe. Israel refused to allow them to return to their families and homes on the occupied West Bank of the Jordan River.

Despite Israeli claims of "retributive justice," the utterly illegal deportation of these people is nothing more than another move in the cynical chess game which opened in Madrid last year under the name of "Middle East peace conference." That process, ceremoniously sponsored by George Bush's United States, aims at reproducing one, two, or more "Camp David agreements" in the region; each Arab component (Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, of which the Palestinians form a constituent part), is asked to make a separate "peace" with the occupying forces of Israel, along the lines of what Anwar Sadat's Egypt did in 1977-78. The whole arrangement is to be given the euphemistic label of an "international peace agreement." This means recognizing Israel's status as the U.S.-sponsored hegemonic power in the region, with special rights regarding military superiority (Israel is a nuclear power) and control over precious water resources.

As part and parcel of the "peace process," all opposition to the sellout is to be crushed. Thus, last autumn, a clamorous show-trial was orchestrated in Jordan by the United States

against two Jordanian parliamentarians, formally accused of plotting an Iranian-backed armed insurrection against the state, but in reality guilty of having rejected Washington's new world order and having fingered those corrupt forces within Jordan serving Washington's dictates. Laith Shubeilat and another Islamist parliamentarian were condemned in that trial to death, a sentence commuted to 20 years' hard labor, and subsequently erased by a royal pardon declared by King Hussein. Despite the clemency, the message was clearly broadcast and dutifully noted: Anyone who bucks the new world order declared by President Bush in the wake of the anti-Iraq war, would be punished. In one fell swoop, that trial, which shook Jordan to the bone, killed any effective opposition to the "peace process."

The Islamic parliamentarians behind Shubeilat, including the numerically powerful but politically cautious Muslim Brotherhood parliamentary group, cowered in acquiescence. Jordan, it then came to light, had signed a protocol with Israel guaranteeing, among other things, that it would not provide cover for Islamist activists engaged in politically challenging the "peace process."

Having silenced the vocal and effective opposition among Islamists in Jordan, the Israelis, with full backing from the United States and Britain, moved to crush the intransigents in the Occupied Territories, grouped in the Hamas. Israel already had well over 1,000 Hamas sympathizers and activists in prison, and, with the overwhelming military superiority it enjoys as the occupying power, it could easily eliminate these enemies. But Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's government chose to deport 415 Palestinians of the Hamas in order to signal to Islamist sympathizers in the territories that it would not tolerate resistance, and that no Arab power would come to their aid.

Who will win the chess game in the desert? Whatever the immediate outcome, certainly not the Israelis. On the broader, international plane, it has not escaped the notice of any observer that, while the U.S., Great Britain, and France will drop bombs on war-devastated Iraq because they found that country's "attitude" unacceptable, yet no one in the West or in the sanctimonious Security Council of the utterly discredited United Nations will lift a finger against Israel. No one can ignore the fact that while Israeli leaders wax eloquent about alleged human rights violations in Germany and shriek about an alleged revival of "anti-Semitism" there, Israel has trampled on every tenet of the code of human rights by deporting 415 persons *en masse*, many of whom even Israel had to admit were driven out of the country "by mistake." Even inside Israel, the cry of protest has arisen from pacifists as well as from human rights activists, that the Rabin government's actions were illegal and immoral.

The only question worth asking is: When will those literate persons in the West finally muster the courage to demand that Israel, like any other country, be held to account for its actions?