

## Israel - Gunman Massacres Students in Jerusalem School 6 March 2008

A brutal terrorist attack on a religious school in Jerusalem on Thursday, 6 March has shocked Israel and the international community. Eight students were killed and nine more were wounded when an unidentified Palestinian gunman entered the Mercuz Harav yeshiva, a Jewish school, on Thursday evening with a Kalashnikov rifle and a pistol. Most of the victims were adolescents studying in the school's library.<sup>1</sup> According to a student witness, the shooting went on for about 10 minutes, and police confirmed that the gunman was able to reload his weapons at least once.<sup>2</sup> The gunman was killed by a part-time yeshiva student and soldier who shot him from a nearby rooftop as he exited the school building.<sup>3</sup>



*A young victim of the shooting on the  
floor of the school's library  
Photo: Israel National News*

The terrorist attack is the first in four years, and came one day after an Israeli police report called 2007 the most peaceful year in Jerusalem since the outbreak of the Palestinian Intifadah. Jerusalem police chief Aharon Franco credited this to the security barrier erected to separate Jerusalem from the West Bank.<sup>4</sup> The security fence could not stop this gunman because he was a Jerusalem resident and therefore able to travel freely around the city.<sup>5</sup>

### *Perpetrators Unknown*

In a text message, Hamas praised the terrorist attack and promised that more like it would follow. "We bless the operation. It will not be the last," said the group.<sup>6</sup> Hamas did not, however, claim responsibility for the attack. As of 7 March, the operation has not been attributed to any terrorist group.

<sup>1</sup> Lis, Jonathan, Yair Ettinger, and Amos Harel. "Eight Killed When Terrorist Fire in Library at Jerusalem Yeshiva," Haaretz, 7 March 2008. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/961696.html>

<sup>2</sup> Erlanger, Steven and Isabel Kershner. "Gunman Kills 8 in Attack on School in Jerusalem," The New York Times, 7 March 2008. [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/07/world/middleeast/07mideast.html?\\_r=1&ref=middleeast&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/07/world/middleeast/07mideast.html?_r=1&ref=middleeast&oref=slogin)  
<sup>3</sup> Haaretz "Jerusalem Yeshiva Student: I Shot the Terrorist Twice in the Head," 7 March 2008. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/961703.html>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> The Jerusalem Post. "Israeli Police Chief: 'Security Barrier' Caused Drop in Jerusalem 'Terror,' Crime Report by Etgar Lefkovits: 'In 2007, Capital Had Fewest Violent Incidents in 7 Years, Police Report,'" 5 March 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Erlanger and Kershner, 7 March 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Hamas is still suspect. The group may have carried out the attack in anticipation of an upcoming negotiation for a ceasefire following months of trading fire with Israel from its Gaza stronghold. It may believe that carrying out such an attack would strengthen its position going into a negotiation.

### *Timing of the Attack*

The attack appeared to be an attempt to undermine peace talks which were restarted in December, 2007 and which have weathered a suicide attack in Dimona and a continuous barrage of rocket attacks from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip. Israeli Foreign Minister David Miliband said the attack was “an arrow aimed at the heart of the peace process so recently revived.”<sup>7</sup> Within hours of the attack, however, Israel said publicly that it planned to continue peace talks in spite of the brutal terrorist operation.<sup>8</sup>

This operation followed eight days of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) actions in the Gaza Strip meant to quell the near-daily rocket fire targeting Israeli communities near the Gaza border. The IDF operations have led to the death of 130 people and generated a public outcry among Palestinians, although it is unclear how many of these casualties are considered civilians and how many were members of targeted terrorist organizations.<sup>9</sup> Hamas had promised Israel it would retaliate for its incursions into Gaza.

The attack also may have been timed to coincide with Rosh Hodesh Adar, the first day of the month of Adar, in which the Jewish holiday of Purim falls. The yeshiva had planned customary celebrations on the night of the attack, according to David Simchon who heads the yeshiva.<sup>10</sup> Palestinian terrorists have periodically timed terrorist attacks to coincide with Jewish holidays in an effort to compound the psychological anguish caused by the attacks.

### *Target*

The Mercaz Harav yeshiva, located in the Kiryat Moshe quarter of West Jerusalem, is a well-known and prestigious 84-year old institution that predates the establishment of the State of Israel by 24 years. According to the Israeli paper Haaretz, the school is “widely recognized as the flagship institution of the Religious Zionist movement.” It places a heavy emphasis on Israeli nationalism and has long been associated with the settlement movement in Israel.<sup>11</sup> For these reasons, it may have been chosen over other targets for its symbolic value.

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<sup>7</sup> “Miliband Deplores ‘Shocking’ Jerusalem Shooting,” *AFP*, 7 March 2008.

<http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5jZ6qpuhNfd8YKMCCwpmGyJHWyQ>.

<sup>8</sup> Wheeler, Carolyn and Orly Halpern, “Attack on Rabbinical School Pierces Peace Talks,” *Globe and Mail*, 7 March 2008.

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20080306.israel07/BNSStory/International/?page=rs&id=RTGAM.20080306.israel07>

<sup>9</sup> Erlanger and Kershner, 7 March 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Haaretz. “Jerusalem Yeshiva Student: I Shot the Terrorist Twice in the Head,” 7 March 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid and [www.mercazharav.org/about.htm](http://www.mercazharav.org/about.htm)

Haaretz journalist Avi Issacharoff proposed that the terrorist must have been able to engage in intelligence gathering prior to the attack, because he had know how to navigate one of Jerusalem's religious neighborhoods and locate the yeshiva while carrying weapons without engendering suspicion or being caught. Issacharoff suggests that he likely had assistance from other Jerusalem residents.<sup>12</sup>

### *Reaction and Peace Talks*

Several US political figures immediately condemned the attack, including President George Bush, Condoleeza Rice, and Presidential candidates Hilary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John McCain. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas issued a statement condemning this act of terrorism as well as all attacks which target civilians.<sup>13</sup>

Israel and the Palestinian Authority agreed not to allow the attack to derail peace talks. However, images of thousands of Palestinians celebrating wildly upon hearing the news that Israeli students had been gunned down in their school library are likely to cast a pall over subsequent negotiations.<sup>14</sup> This attack highlights the fact that Mahmoud Abbas, who has continuously condemned terrorist attacks during his presidency, does not represent the entire Palestinian population and is incapable of making guarantees that terrorist attacks will stop. This could further weaken his hand at the negotiating table.

Additional violence is also imperiling peace talks. On the same day as the school shooting, Islamic Jihad killed an Israeli soldier by blowing up his jeep on the Gaza/Israel border, and a rocket fired from the Gaza Strip wounded one person and destroyed two Israeli homes in the town of Sderot.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, residents of Gaza remain outraged by deaths caused during Israeli military incursions targeting terrorist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

### *Security Council Spat Heightens Tensions between US and Libya*

As is customary after devastating terrorist events, the United Nations Security Council met to release a statement condemning the attack. The effort was derailed the by the delegation from Libya, a state which has remained hostile to Israel even as it has tried to rebuild bridges with western countries following a period of diplomatic isolation. In the United Nations Security Council, the United States drafted a statement on the attack which read: "The members of the Security Council condemn in the strongest terms the terrorist attack that took place in Jerusalem March 6, 2008 which resulted in the death

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<sup>12</sup> Issacharoff, Avi. "Analysis: Perpetrators View J'lem Attack as Unusual Success," *Haaretz*, 7 March 2008. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/961821.html>

<sup>13</sup> Shamir, Shlomo. "US Accuses Libya of Blocking UN Condemnation of J'lem Attack," *Haaretz*, 7 March 2008. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/961705.html>

<sup>14</sup> Waked, Ali. "Thousands Celebrate Jerusalem Attacks," *Ynet News*, 7 March 2008. <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3516031,00.html>

<sup>15</sup> Erlanger and Kershner, 7 March 2008.

and injury of dozens of Israeli civilians.” However, Libya, which is currently serving as a temporary member of the Security Council, blocked the condemnation.<sup>16</sup>

Commenting on the statement, Libya’s deputy ambassador, Ibrahim al-Dabbashi, referred to the Israeli government as a “terrorist regime.” Dan Gillerman, Israel’s ambassador to the United Nations, threw the label back at Libya. “Unfortunately,” said Gillerman, “this is what happens when the Security Council is infiltrated by terrorists.” He referred to the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, which was attributed to Libyan government elements.

The failure of the United Nations Security Council to release a statement on this attack “undermines the council’s effectiveness in the region,” according to US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Shlomo, 7 March 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Heilprin, John. “Libya Blocks UN Condemning Violence,” Associated Press, 7 March 2008. [http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5jBPt\\_Tm5R4AtqFpaRdXCXoYIJdgD8V8DGE80](http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5jBPt_Tm5R4AtqFpaRdXCXoYIJdgD8V8DGE80)