

Israel: Azaria manslaughter sentence presages stepped up repression of Palestinians

By Jean Shaoul
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A military tribunal sentenced Israeli army medic Elor Azaria to a derisory eighteen months in jail last week and demoted him for summarily executing 21-year Palestinian Abdel al-Fattah al-Sharif in March, 2016. The punishment, if indeed it goes ahead at all, is less than Palestinian youths get for throwing stones at Israeli soldiers.

Al-Sharif's family reacted angrily to the derisory sentence, with his father calling the trial a "farce." He told the media, "It is only a mock trial to silence people and the families."

The sentence, announced more than a month after Azaria's conviction, marks a further shift to the right in favour of the extremist forces that successive governments have done so much to promote, and on which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing coalition government depends.

These layers have been emboldened by the support of US President Donald Trump, who has promised to be the most pro-Israel president in history. They believe they now have carte blanche to do as they please in pursuit of their Greater Israel project, both within the occupied Palestinian territories and Israel itself.

The Azaria verdict gives Israel's army, increasingly dominated by ultra-nationalist and religious layers, the green light to impose an even more repressive regime against the Palestinians.

Al-Sharif was one of two Palestinian assailants alleged to have stabbed and wounded an Israeli soldier in Hebron last March. Israeli soldiers shot and seriously wounded both, killing one. More than ten minutes later, Azaria shot and killed al-Sharif as he lay incapacitated on the ground, saying that the Palestinian "needs to die."

The summary execution, like numerous others routinely whitewashed by the army, only attracted

international attention and condemnation because a volunteer for the Israeli human rights organisation B'tselem filmed the incident. The video went viral on social media, forcing the military authorities to arrest and charge Azaria. Even Netanyahu felt obliged to criticise the sergeant's behaviour as not complying with the army's rules of engagement and morals.

Far right forces, including government ministers, whipped up a ferocious campaign against Azaria's indictment with the Israeli media calling him "everyone's son." This had an impact, with the prosecution downgrading the initial murder charge to one of manslaughter.

The attempt to portray the 20-year old as a typical young Israeli conscript was soon exposed. Azaria mixed in extreme right wing circles, including the followers of the late Meir Kahane, whose pro-settler Kach party was barred from seeking election to parliament in 1988 for inciting racial hatred.

Azaria was notorious for his hatred of Arabs, which he voiced repeatedly on social media, calling for the massacre of every Palestinian in Gaza during Israel's murderous 2014 assault.

Following the guilty verdict in January, the soldier, who conducted himself as though he were a national hero, declared he would appeal and seek a pardon from Israel's president.

Riots erupted, with dozens of protestors shouting "Gadi, Gadi, beware, Rabin." This was a very clear message that Gadi Eizenkot, the IDF chief of staff, who had ordered Azaria's prosecution, would meet the same fate as Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated by a right-wing opponent of the Oslo Accords in 1995.

Netanyahu, who soon changed his line on Azaria's indictment, and several cabinet ministers called for a

presidential pardon. Netanyahu said that the verdict was “a hard day for everyone, above all to Elor and his family” and even called the sergeant’s father to express his sympathy. There was no mistaking the prime minister’s message: a murderer who said that the Palestinian “deserved to die” should go scot-free.

Such was the furore that the three judges, who unanimously rejected Azaria’s defence case, received death threats and had to be protected with bodyguards.

The case has been the subject of vicious infighting within military and political circles. Eizenkot and former defence minister Moshe Ya’alon were determined to bring Azaria to trial, not only in a thoroughly dishonest attempt to assert Israel’s pretensions to being “the most moral army in the world” but also to reduce the role of the right wing, which they believe had “hijacked” the IDF.

Most of the IDF’s daily operations involve patrolling the occupied West Bank and suppressing Palestinian opposition to the settlers who have taken their land and carry out daily provocations against the Palestinians, destroying their farms and livelihoods and attacking their property and lives. In effect, the IDF functions to protect the settlements that consume much of the government budget. At the same time, the number of officers from a national-religious background in the IDF, a largely secular institution, has risen to more than 30 percent, despite such layers constituting just 10 percent of the population.

In a particularly notorious incident, Ofer Winter, the commander of Giv’ati Brigade, exhorted his soldiers going into Gaza during the IDF’s murderous assault on the besieged enclave in 2014, to fight “the enemy who curses” God’s name. The invocation of a holy war was seen as a challenge to the IDF’s secular leadership, prompting Ya’alon and Eizenkot to try to reduce the influence of the settlers and their supporters in the army.

Netanyahu forced Ya’alon to resign weeks after the defence minister had criticised Azaria’s actions, and replaced him with the virulently anti-Arab Avigdor Lieberman, chairman of the ultra-right Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel is our Home) Party.

Bowing to the right wing media campaign and following reported attempts by the military authorities to do a deal with Azaria’s family to stop them appealing, the military judges imposed a much shorter

sentence than even the military prosecutors had demanded.

Azaria’s brutality and fascistic views are the product of Israel’s policy towards the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the Palestinian minority within Israel. The brutal suppression and dispossession of the Palestinians stems from settlements in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Syria’s Golan Heights, home to more than 800,000 Israeli Jews as of December 2015 (13 percent of Israel’s Jewish population). This is set to increase sharply following Trump’s inauguration, with the government having already approved the construction of more than 6,000 new homes in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The entire ruling elite is openly hostile to the Palestinian population, routinely describing them as terrorists or supporters of terrorism who must be dealt with by ruthless repression in an effort to force them to leave.

At the same time, the government is seeking to prevent any reporting of its brutality and human rights abuses. In the last week, Israel announced it is to stop issuing work visas to Human Rights Watch (HRW) staff, accusing the NGO of not being “a real human rights group.” The Foreign Ministry said that HRW’s “public activities and reports have engaged in politics in the service of Palestinian propaganda, while falsely raising the banner of ‘human rights.’”

This follows the introduction last year of a controversial law forcing Israeli NGOs to declare the funding they receive from foreign states. This only affects nominally left wing and human rights groups, not overtly right wing groups, including those that support the settlements, which are all reliant on private donations.

B’tselem spokesperson Roy Yellin said they felt that the government was “scapegoating” them. He told AFP, “It is part of a larger illiberal wave in recent years that is trying to portray critics as enemies of the state.”

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