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The Savoy Operation 1975: When al-Asifa Commandos Reached the Heart of Tel Aviv

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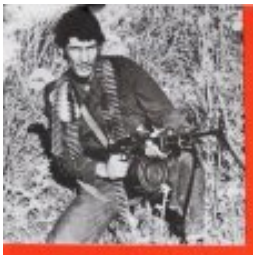

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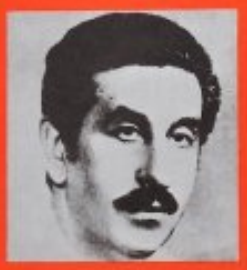

العبور الفلسطيني الى الوطن

الإعلام الموحد

On the evening of **5 March 1975** a commando unit of eight fighters from al-Asifa, Fatah's armed wing, came ashore on the Tel Aviv beach from the sea, in an operation planned and overseen by **Khalil al-Wazir, "Abu Jihad."** Its target was the war ministry building in the Kirya, to free Palestinian prisoners; when that proved out of reach, the fighters barricaded themselves in the nearby **Savoy Hotel**, took hostages and demanded the release of prisoners. [1][2]

The occupation government rejected the demands and stormed the hotel after two failed attempts; the operation ended on the morning of 6 March with seven of the fighters martyred and the eighth captured wounded, and with dozens killed and wounded, among them soldiers and guests in the hotel. It came on the second anniversary of the assassination of the three leaders Abu Yousef al-Najjar, Kamal Adwan and Kamal Nasser in Beirut, and became one of the best-known operations of the Palestinian revolution deep inside occupied land. [1][3][2]

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At a glance

Item	Details
Date	Evening of 5 March – morning of 6 March 1975
Place	The Savoy Hotel near the Kirya, Tel Aviv
Carried out by	Eight fighters of al-Asifa, Fatah's armed wing

Item	Details
Planner and overseer	Khalil al-Wazir, “Abu Jihad”
Unit commander	Khader Ahmad Jarrar, “Lieutenant Khader”
Route	By sea, in a boat captained by an Egyptian and his assistant
Demands	Release of Palestinian prisoners, and a plane to Syria carrying the hostages and the French ambassador
End	The hotel stormed on the third attempt; seven fighters martyred and the eighth captured
Israeli losses	The authorities officially acknowledged 11 dead and 20 wounded

[1][2][3]

The context

On **10 April 1973** an Israeli commando unit infiltrated Verdun Street in Beirut and assassinated three leaders of the revolution: Abu Yousef al-Najjar, Kamal Adwan and Kamal Nasser. From that day, avenging them became a declared aim in Fatah’s literature. [1][2]

After the PLO won broad Arab and international recognition in 1974, the “step-by-step” diplomacy of US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and the disengagement agreements on the Egyptian and Syrian fronts threatened to sideline the Palestinian cause, while Yitzhak Rabin’s government escalated its attacks on Palestinians and Lebanon. [2]

The eight fighters

The Martyr Khalil al-Wazir Foundation lists the eight fighters, all of al-Asifa: [2]

Name	Nom de guerre	Born	Joined
Khader Ahmad Jarrar (commander)	Lieutenant Khader	1947, Ramla; lived in Gaza	1969

Name	Nom de guerre	Born	Joined
Nayef Manjed Ismail al-Saghir	Ziyad Tareq	1954, Idhna, Hebron	1972
Omar Mahmoud Mohammed al-Shafei	Abu al-Layl al-Hindi	1955, Jenin	1972
Ahmad Hamid Ahmad Abu Qamar	Abu Ubaida al-Jarrah	1948, Gaza	1970
Abdullah Khalil Abdullah Kulaib	Musalaha Khalil al-Hazza’	1955, Tulkarm	1970
Mohammed Diyaa al-Din al-Halawani	Isam Baha’ al-Din al-Sayyafi	1948, Nablus	1972
Musa al-Abed Abu Thurayya	Musa Azmi	1957, Gaza	1969
Musa Jumaa Hassan Talalqa	Musa Ahmad	1952, Salt	1969

The boat was captained by the Egyptian Mohammed Abbas and his assistant Mohammed Hassan Mas’ad. The fighters’ ages – the youngest was eighteen – and their birthplaces, spread between Ramla, Gaza, Hebron, Jenin, Tulkarm and Nablus, made the unit a small map of all Palestine. [2]

The operation

Abu Jihad set out the operation’s aims, among them freeing prisoners from the occupation’s jails, avenging the three leaders, treating hostages humanely and killing none of them, treating women and children well, and exercising the right of return by raising the Palestinian flag. [2]

The fighters set out from the Lebanese coast and reached the Tel Aviv beach about 45 minutes before midnight on 5 March 1975, slipping past the security measures. According to Ultra Palestine, a police patrol opened fire on them and the boat carrying the ammunition and explosives blew up. Their target was the war ministry building on Kirya Street; when that proved out of reach they tried to seize a well-known cinema, found its door locked, and made for the Savoy Hotel near the general staff buildings. [4][1]

The fighters stormed the hotel, took those inside hostage and moved them to an upper floor, then mined the building. Two of them went out to take more hostages and clashed at the gate with a reserve soldier, killing him. [4][1]

At about one in the morning the Sayeret Matkal unit arrived. The fighters demanded the release within four hours of 20 prisoners, among them Archbishop **Hilarion Capucci**, and a plane to fly them, the hostages and the French ambassador to Syria, in exchange for the hostages' lives. Negotiations went on for about three hours through a hostage who spoke Arabic, and during them the fighters freed an elderly German hostage who had lost a leg. [4][1][3]

The storming

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, war minister Shimon Peres and chief of staff Mordechai Gur came to the scene and decided to reject the demands and storm the hotel. Two attempts failed and the third, at about 5:15 a.m., succeeded: helicopters landed troops on the roof, a force entered through a rear door, and tanks shelled the roof. [1][3]

When their ammunition ran out the fighters blew up the hotel, and the hotel, the surrounding area and a cinema were destroyed. Two who were still alive kept firing on the troops after they took the building; one was martyred and the other, **Musa Jumaa Talalqa**, was captured wounded. [1][2]

Among the dead was Colonel Uzi Yairi, a senior military intelligence officer who had taken part in the Verdun operation. [1][2]

After the operation

Musa Talalqa spent ten years in captivity, was freed in the 1983 prisoner exchange and later died in Jordan. Hamed Ahmad Nadim Darwish was captured in territorial waters after the operation, spent ten years in captivity and was freed in the 1985 exchange. [2]

The occupation held the bodies of the seven martyrs for 37 years, until the Palestinian Authority received them on **31 May 2012**, along with the remains of dozens of other martyrs. [3][1]

Between the accounts

Casualties: Palestinian and Arab sources say more than 50 soldiers and about 50 civilians were killed or wounded, and the Martyr Khalil al-Wazir Foundation goes as far as more than 50 military dead and 150 wounded, while the Israeli authorities officially acknowledged 11 dead and 20 wounded. [1][2]

According to Ultra Palestine, three soldiers of the assault force and eight civilians were killed, which matches the official death toll. [4]

Number of boats: Ultra Palestine says the fighters set out in two boats, while the al-Wazir Foundation speaks of a single boat that broke down at sea and was repaired by the captain after several hours. [4][2]

Date: the sources place the operation between the evening of 5 March and the morning of 6 March 1975, and the al-Wazir Foundation says the assault on the city began at seven in the evening. [2][1]

Name of the unit: Al Jazeera calls it the “Martyr Samer Oyoun” and “Martyr Jad Allah” groups, while the al-Wazir Foundation calls it the “Abu Yousef al-Najjar unit.” [1][2]

Timeline

Date	Event
10 April 1973	Abu Yousef al-Najjar, Kamal Adwan and Kamal Nasser assassinated in Verdun, Beirut [1]
Evening, 5 March 1975	The fighters come ashore and seize the Savoy Hotel [2]
About 1 a.m., 6 March	Sayeret Matkal arrives; negotiations begin [4]

Date	Event
Night of 5–6 March 1975	Prisoner-release demand rejected; two storming attempts fail [1]
About 5:15 a.m., 6 March 1975	Third assault; hotel blown up; seven martyred and Musa Talalqa captured [1]
1983	Musa Talalqa freed in an exchange [2]
31 May 2012	The bodies of the seven martyrs handed over [3]

Frequently asked questions about the Savoy operation

What was the Savoy operation?

A commando operation by eight al-Asifa fighters in Tel Aviv on 5–6 March 1975, in which they barricaded themselves in the Savoy Hotel and demanded the release of prisoners. [1]

Who planned it?

Khalil al-Wazir, “Abu Jihad,” who oversaw its planning and execution. [1][2]

Why was it carried out?

To free Palestinian prisoners, and to avenge the assassination of the three leaders in Verdun, Beirut, in 1973. [2][1]

What did the fighters demand?

The release of 20 prisoners including Archbishop Hilarion Capucci, and a plane to fly them, the hostages and the French ambassador to Syria. [4][1]

How did it end?

With the hotel stormed on the third attempt and blown up after the fighters ran out

of ammunition; seven were martyred and the eighth captured wounded. [1]

When were the martyrs’ bodies returned?

On 31 May 2012, after 37 years in detention. [3]

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Sources and references

1. Al Jazeera Encyclopedia, “The Savoy operation,” 21 March 2015 (in Arabic).
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3. Al Jazeera Net, “The Savoy operation took the resistance deep into Israel,” 31 May 2012 (in Arabic).
4. Ultra Palestine, “Video: details of the Savoy operation that remained hidden,” 7 March 2017 (in Arabic).