Behind Israeli assassination policy: Sharon seeks pretext for military onslaught

Patrick Martin
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After a five-hour meeting Wednesday, the Israeli war cabinet has reaffirmed the policy of systematically targeting Palestinian leaders and militants for assassination, in the face of outraged protests on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and growing international criticism.

The decision came after the bloodiest week of violence in nearly two months, with a marked escalation of the intensity of Israeli military attacks on Palestinian targets. In the worst incident, eight Palestinians, two of them small boys, were killed July 31 when Israeli missiles slammed into a building used by the Islamic militant Hamas organization in the city of Nablus on the West Bank.

The location was not a "bomb factory"—the usual pretext given by the Israelis for such a strike—but a building where Hamas political leaders meet and the group administers social welfare services. Two of the principal leaders of the group, Jamal Mansour and Jamal Salim, were decapitated instantly by the missile blast, along with three aides and a journalist who had come to interview them for the official Palestinian newspaper *Al-Hayat al-Jedida*. Witnesses described the room hit by the missiles as a charnel house of charred flesh, blood and body parts, as every person present was killed.

Two young boys, brothers Ashraf and Bilal Khader, were killed by shrapnel as they stood in front of the building waiting for their mother. The Hamas facility is in the center of the city in a densely populated neighborhood where any attack using heavy weapons would be sure to produce additional casualties besides those specifically targeted for murder.

It was fourth such mass-assassination attempt by Israeli forces in four days. On July 28, helicopter gunships fired missiles at a building in the Khan Younis refugee camp on the Gaza Strip, wounding several people. On July 30, helicopter gunships destroyed the Palestinian Authority police headquarters in downtown Gaza City, wounding seven policemen. Israeli spokesmen claimed the building was a workshop producing arms for terrorists. The same day six Palestinians died in a huge predawn explosion which destroyed an auto parts shop near Jenin, outside Nablus.

Palestinian sources said the six men had been targeted and killed by Israeli tank shells, but the site was so heavily damaged that it was impossible to determine the exact cause. Israeli government sources claimed that the blast was a car bomb that detonated prematurely. All six men were members of the Aksa Brigades, an armed unit of Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's Fatah organization. Three were named on a wanted list issued by the Israeli government.

The assassinations sparked the largest outpouring of mass protest on the West Bank since the beginning of the *intifada* last September. As many as 100,000 people marched in Nablus Wednesday in the funeral for the murdered Hamas leaders and the two small boys, amid cries for revenge and threats of renewed terrorist attacks within Israel. The Palestinian Authority, which had jailed the Hamas leaders several times in the past, declared two days of official mourning.

Israeli officials gloated over the outcome of attack. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said, "Today is a day of one of our most important successes." Interior minister Uzi Landau declared, "Such attacks must continue, and more intensively." Another cabinet minister, Ephraim Sneh, said, "I'm very glad that we succeeded in hitting the head of the snake, not the tail."

Despite this rhetoric, however, a five-page summary of allegations against Mansour and Salim, distributed to foreign correspondents by the Israeli government, provided no concrete evidence to back the claim that the two victims were engaged in the planning of terrorist operations. They were not underground conspirators but rather public figures, opponents of the Oslo peace agreement which established the Palestinian Authority, frequently seen by the populace of Nablus at funerals, rallies and other political events.

Yossi Sarid, one of the few members of the Israeli Knesset to criticize the attack, pointed out that the killing of the two Palestinian boys was not an accident, but an inevitability. "When you give an order to shoot missiles at a seven-story building in the middle of a crowded city," he said, "there has to be a real miracle not to hit innocent people." He added that despite support for such assassinations by many Israelis, the policy was completely counterproductive. "Perhaps Israel's citizens should be told the brutal truth," he declared. "Even when we assassinate a terrorist, we create with our very hands 10 new terrorists in his place."

The Nablus events produced widespread condemnation of the Sharon government outside Israel, with official statements

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issued by most governments in Europe. The US government issued two statements—one from the State Department, strongly criticizing the assassinations, and another from the White House, taking a more muted tone. This reflects divisions within the administration. Bush's immediate entourage is preoccupied with possible political fallout at home and seeks to downplay the overt US role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Secretary of State Colin Powell (backed by former officials of the first Bush administration like former National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft), holds that the US must restrain the increasingly provocative Israeli policy, lest it undermine the position of American imperialism throughout the Middle East.

Even before the latest atrocities, the European powers banded together at the G-8 summit in Genoa July 21-22 to push through a resolution calling for the deployment of international monitors to separate Israeli military forces and the Palestinians on the West Bank and in Gaza. With Britain, Germany, France and Italy all backing the plan, the Bush administration reluctantly agreed.

The Sharon government's public, brazen adoption of murder as state policy might appear inexplicable from a diplomatic standpoint, given the risk of international isolation. (The Israeli foreign ministry recently issued an advisory against travel by high officials to countries like Belgium, Denmark and Sweden, where they might face arrest for war crimes or human rights violations.) Likewise, when Yossi Sarid warns that killing one Hamas leader produces ten more desperate young men willing to give their lives as suicide bombers, it is certain that Sharon & Co. have made similar calculations.

The only logical conclusion is that the Israeli government actively seeks to cause more terrorist attacks by provoking the Palestinians, and thereby accomplish Sharon's larger goal: providing a pretext for Israel to break off all relations with the Palestinian Authority, put an end to the Oslo process and reoccupy the West Bank and Gaza Strip with full military force.

Two pieces of evidence to support such a theory have recently emerged. On July 6, in an unusual interview with a US newspaper in the West Bank city of Ramallah, Yasser Arafat produced a report from the Palestinian intelligence service about the June 1 suicide bombing outside a Tel Aviv discotheque that killed 21 young people.

The report said that the man who drove the suicide bomber to the beachside location was a longtime informant for Israeli intelligence who had been granted Israeli citizenship and resettled in Israel like many "collaborators." Asked whether he was suggesting the Israeli authorities contributed to the bombing themselves, Arafat replied, "I'm giving you facts and leaving it for everyone to arrive to realities."

The obvious suggestion was that while the suicide bomber was a disoriented Palestinian youth, he may have been the subject of manipulation by the Israeli secret service Shin Beth. It is worth pointing out in this context that the June 1 atrocity took place at a nightclub frequented mainly by recent immigrants from Russia and Ukraine, young people who are secular, educated, do not speak Hebrew and are regarded with hostility (and even derided as non-Jews) by the religious fundamentalists who are Sharon's political base.

The other piece of evidence comes from a source that can in no way be considered anti-Israeli or pro-Palestinian: the *New York Times*. The newspaper published July 26 a lengthy behind-the-scenes account of Israeli-Palestinian contacts during and after the breakdown of the Camp David talks a year ago. Much of the article debunks Israeli and US government claims that the talks collapsed because Arafat turned down a deal which was highly favorable to the Palestinians.

One passage provides new information about secret talks between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Arafat during the two months after Camp David. According to the *Times*, "During August and September, Mr. Erekat [Arafat's negotiator Saeb Erekat] and Gilad Sher, a senior Israeli negotiator, drafted two chapters of a permanent peace accord that were kept secret from everyone but the leaders even from other negotiators, Mr. Erekat said."

Then-US Ambassador Martin Indyk confirmed that the Clinton administration had produced a revised version of the peace plan in September. Barak hosted Arafat at a private dinner party at his home, during which he telephoned Clinton to suggest that progress was being made. On September 27, the Clinton administration invited the Israeli and Palestinian negotiators to return to Washington to resume talks.

The next day, however, Ariel Sharon, then leader of the opposition in the Knesset, staged his provocative visit to the Temple Mount site in Arab-populated East Jerusalem, surrounded by a thousand policemen, and touching off widespread Palestinian protests that were met with brutal violence. The *intifada* had begun, and the talks did not resume until December, with Clinton a lame duck and Barak little better.

While the *Times* account does not draw any conclusions, the timing of these events cannot be coincidental. Sharon would have been well informed from his own sources within the Israeli state about a possible revival of the talks with Arafat and the PA, and he certainly carried out his provocative appearance at the Temple Mount for the purpose of sabotaging such a possibility.

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