

With murder of Palestinian leader, Israel escalates provocations and violence

Jerry White
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Abu Ali Mustafa, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), was assassinated Monday morning by Israeli military forces in the West Bank town of Ramallah. One of the top five officials of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Mustafa is the highest-ranking Palestinian to be murdered under the Israeli policy of killing Arab leaders.

The assassination—the most recent of at least 50 “targeted killings” of activists since the Palestinian uprising began last September—marks an escalation of the Israeli government’s provocations against the Palestinian population. It is, however, by no means the first attempt by Israeli authorities to exterminate leading Palestinians.

In 1988, Israeli commandos shot and killed one of Arafat’s closest comrades and the cofounder of Al Fatah—Khalil Al Wazir, also known as Abu Jihad—in a raid on his Tunis home. In 1995, Fathi Shakaki, leader of Islamic Jihad, was gunned down outside a Malta hotel in an attack widely attributed to Israel. Recently the Israelis made a failed attempt to kill Hafez Barghouti, the editor of the Palestinian newspaper *Al Hayat al Jadida*.

Witnesses to the murder of Mustafa said Israeli helicopters fired two laser-guided missiles into the windows of his office, killing the 64-year-old Palestinian leader, whose decapitated and charred body was found at his desk.

The explosion wounded several others in the three-story residential building, including two of Mustafa’s bodyguards, as well as a workman in the street who was hit by shrapnel. The PFLP offices are located one street over and barely 200 yards from Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat’s own offices.

In an outpouring of anger, Palestinians marched in the streets of West Bank towns after the killing. In

Arabe, Mustafa’s home village in the northern West Bank, some 5,000 protested the killing. Arafat declared three days of mourning for Mustafa. Various Palestinian organizations said they would avenge the PFLP leader’s murder.

Following the killing, the Palestinian Authority (PA) issued a statement saying, “By this aggression the Israeli government is opening the door to all-out war without any deterrence or taboos for red lines.” PA information minister Yasser Abed Rabbo called the attack “one of the most hideous crimes that the Israeli government has committed,” saying the Israeli government has turned the occupied territories into a “minefield that shall explode in anger.”

The Israeli army promptly confirmed the raid on the PFLP office. As they have done after previous killings, government spokesmen declared that Israel was acting in self-defense, claiming that Mustafa was responsible for a series of recent terrorist bombings. Ra’anan Gissin, an Israeli government spokesman, said Mustafa had been “taken out,” not just for past activities, but because “he was in his office planning future attacks.” As usual, Israeli officials offered no evidence to support these allegations.

The assassination was carried out shortly after Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon convened an inner cabinet meeting late Sunday night, in which he, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Defense Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezar reaffirmed the policy of targeted killings and other incursions into Palestinian-controlled areas.

Earlier on Sunday, Israeli F-16 and F-15 warplanes carried out pre-dawn bombing raids on Palestinian security installations on the Gaza Strip and West Bank, and tanks and armored bulldozers ploughed into the southern Gaza town of Rafah, destroying a security forces building and killing a Palestinian policeman.

Over the weekend a total of 11 people—seven Israelis and four Palestinians—were killed in fighting.

The murder of Mustafa was apparently in retaliation for a commando attack Saturday, in which two armed Palestinians infiltrated the well-fortified Marganit military base at an Israeli settlement in southern Gaza and killed three soldiers, before being killed themselves. The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) took credit for the raid, which shook the Israeli political and military establishment.

The DFLP is the smallest of the three factions that make up the PLO. The other two are the PFLP and Arafat's Al Fatah movement. Like Mustafa's organization, the DFLP opposed the Oslo accords signed by Arafat and Israeli officials. The PFLP and the DFLP—both of which are secular and at one time claimed to be Marxist—have been overtaken by the growing popularity of Islamic fundamentalist groups, such as Hamas. In recent days, however, they have begun to gain support in the face of Israeli violence and Arafat's conciliatory policies.

Following the Marganit raid, the Israeli daily *Haaretz* reported that Mustafa's PFLP had assumed responsibility for the attack. But Israeli security officials claimed the PFLP took credit in order to protect Arafat's Al Fatah faction, whom the Israelis said were really behind the attack. Speaking before an Israeli Labor Party conference Sunday, Defense Minister Eliezar reaffirmed the Sharon government's position that Arafat is responsible for all such attacks, calling the PA leader a "savage enemy."

The Palestinians have rightly charged that the Israeli policy of assassinations has been given a green light by the Bush administration. On Friday, just three days before the Israelis murdered Mustafa, Bush placed the onus for the violence on Arafat, denouncing him for not doing enough to stop terrorist activity. He declared, "The Israelis will not negotiate under terrorist threat. It's as simple as that."

Following the assassination, the US State Department issued a mild criticism, saying the action would further inflame tensions and make it more difficult to restore calm. However, the statement reiterated the US line that Arafat and the Palestinian Authority were the initiators of the violence, and demanded that they do more to stop attacks on Israel and arrest those responsible.

US toleration, if not de facto support, for Israeli

assassinations underscores the hypocrisy of US foreign policy. Israel is the only country in the world that systematically eliminates its political opponents and publicly proclaims its right to do so. Yet the US arms Israel to the teeth and defends it as a bastion of democracy and civilization, while it brands Iraq as a rogue state and subjects its people to military attack and economic devastation. The obvious double standard is to be explained not by reference to ideals of democracy and peace, but rather the strategic economic and geopolitical interests of American capitalism in the oil-rich Middle East, Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

According to the rationale given by the Israeli government to justify its policy of murdering Palestinian leaders, Arafat, or, for that matter, any Middle Eastern leader who supports the Palestinians, is fair game for assassination. The Israeli regime has declared itself judge, jury and executioner.

Gideon Ezra, a deputy for the Internal Security Ministry, recently went further, suggesting a policy of killing the relatives of people who kill Israelis.

The murder of Mustafa and the Israeli assassination policy as a whole reflect the utter perplexity and desperation of the Zionist regime. The Sharon government is daily stoking up the already explosive tensions in the region. Spokesmen for the Jordanian and Egyptian governments, the only two that have signed peace treaties with Israel, as well as the pro-US sheikdoms in the Persian Gulf, have warned that the assassinations are fueling social discontent and threatening the stability of their rule.

The incendiary policies of the Zionist regime are preparing an enormous tragedy that threatens to engulf the region, with terrible consequences for the Israeli working class as well as the Arab masses.



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