

The political significance of Israel's assassination policy

The Editorial Board
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It is time to call things by their right name and expose what is taking place on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Israel, with the support of the United States, is carrying out a policy of assassinations that has as its aim the destruction of the political infrastructure of the Palestinian national movement.

The claim that Palestinian leaders are being stalked and killed to preempt terrorist acts is little more than a cover for a policy with far broader aims. The Israeli state is employing the most sophisticated military and technological means to decapitate the leadership and terrorize the entire Palestinian population. The basic objective is to prevent at all costs the emergence of an independent Palestinian state.

The Bush administration knows full well that Israel's claim to be using targeted killings only as a defensive tactic against imminent terrorist attacks is a lie. The US government, the American media and the bulk of the liberal establishment are complicit in a policy of state murder.

Events of the past two weeks have illuminated the real motives behind the series of assassinations carried out by Israel over the past year. On August 27 Israeli helicopters fired two laser-guided missiles into the West Bank office of Abu Ali Mustafa, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Mustafa, one of the top five officials of the Palestine Liberation Organization, was the highest-ranking Palestinian to be eliminated in the recent wave of Israeli assassinations.

Four days later Israeli forces attempted to murder the head of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Khayis Abu Leila. Anti-tank missiles smashed into the home of the DFLP leader in the West Bank town of Ramallah, but Leila was not at home at the time.

The Israeli bourgeoisie is the consummate practitioner of *Realpolitik* in its most extreme and brutal form. No other state in the world so openly defends assassination and mass repression as legitimate instruments of rule. Israel uses the most advanced technological means—satellite-based communications, intelligence gathering and targeting; smart missiles; state-of-the-art attack helicopters—to track down and kill its leading political opponents among the Palestinians. Never before has advanced technology been used in so open and concentrated a manner to eliminate an entire political class.

By such means Israel seeks to render impossible any organized and politically directed struggle against its occupation of Palestinian lands. Palestinian leaders are compelled to move daily from safe house to safe house to avoid being exterminated. They are unable to hold meetings. Their communications—via telephone, email, fax—are monitored and disrupted. They are forced into a semi-underground existence under conditions in which the enemy enjoys a massive preponderance of military and economic power.

In this manner Israel seeks to disperse and ultimately wipe out the leaders of all anti-Zionist organizations in the occupied territories and throughout the Arab world. The message from the Israeli authorities is clear: no one will survive who does not secure the approval of the Israeli state.

The recourse to state murder is, in the first instance, the response of the Israeli establishment to the eruption of mass resistance in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. The second *intifada* began last September following the collapse of the Camp David Israeli-Palestinian summit and subsequent Israeli provocations.

The present policy follows a definite pattern. In April 1988, some four months after the outbreak of the first *intifada* in the occupied territories, an Israeli death squad broke into the home of Abu Jihad in the Tunisian capital of Tunis and gunned down the Palestinian military and political leader. Abu Jihad, born Khalil Al-Wazir, was a founder of Al Fatah and Yasser Arafat's closest political associate.

Abu Jihad played a central role in organizing and directing the *intifada* from the PLO's headquarters-in-exile in Tunis. His assassination at the hands of the Israeli military and Mossad secret police was aimed at the head of the popular uprising.

In 1997 the Israeli newspaper *Maariv* revealed that then-deputy military chief Ehud Barak ran the assassination operation from a command center on a navy missile ship off the shore of Tunis. Barak became prime minister in May 1999 after running as the Labor Party candidate and defeating Likud Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a landslide vote. He was voted out of office and replaced by Likud hard-liner Ariel Sharon last February.

Barak's role in the assassination of Abu Jihad makes it clear that all wings of the Israeli Zionist establishment, the so-called doves as well as the open supporters of Israeli expansionism, are tied to the policies of state murder and mass terror. It substantiates the fact that the present recourse to political assassinations is part of a strategy to destroy the Palestinian national movement that has the support of the Labor Party leadership as well as Likud.

A constant feature of this policy is the attempt to isolate PLO Chairman Arafat by eliminating all of his colleagues.

Barak's own record of infiltration and assassination goes back to his earliest years in the Israeli military. In 1973, disguised as a woman and carrying a purse packed with explosives, he led an assassination unit that killed three leading PLO officials.

Political killings, including the 1995 murder in Malta of Islamic Jihad leader Fathi Shakaki, have long been a staple of Israeli policy. Such methods are part and parcel of counterinsurgency operations conducted over many decades by imperialist powers, including the United States in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. They fall within the

range of tactics—infiltration, provocation, assassination, terror—that constitute the modus operandi of what experts in the field call “low intensity warfare.”

What is unprecedented is the way in which these methods are being openly defended by Israel and its American backers.

Since the collapse of the Camp David negotiations 13 months ago, the Israeli state has pursued a course of military aggression and provocation calculated to arouse Palestinian retaliation, which is then used as the pretext for assassinations and further attacks on the Palestinian Authority. Barak essentially gave his backing to this policy when he defended Sharon’s instigative visit to the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem in late September of 2000.

When Sharon, accompanied by a retinue of police and troops, was met with spontaneous protest demonstrations, Israeli police responded by storming the Al Aqsa mosque and opening fire on stone-throwing worshippers, killing six. This bloody provocation set off a further wave of mass protests, against which Israel employed live ammunition, tanks and attack helicopters. Within the first week of the *intifada* Israel had killed at least 60 Palestinians and wounded 1,500 more.

Sharon is one of the world’s leading exponents of the policy of creating “new facts.” This was the purpose of the settlement policy, which he championed. The goal was to create a major Israeli presence in occupied territories that had long been considered Palestinian. Now he is seeking to create a new set of facts—the absence of an independent Palestinian leadership.

In defense of their campaign to wipe out the Palestinian leadership, the Israeli authorities employ a combination of cynicism and deceit. One tactic is a variant of the “big lie”: namely, to accuse your enemy of the crimes for which you are responsible.

Thus Israel, secure in the knowledge that its claims will be parroted by the American press, charges the Palestinians with initiating the violence and brands all critics of its methods as anti-Semites. Israeli leaders have gone so far in recent days as to accuse the Palestinians of “ethnic cleansing.”

The Israeli justification for the policy of political assassination is the ultimate “Catch 22” argument. They claim they only kill those who are preparing acts of terrorism. What is the proof that the targeted individuals are guilty as charged? The fact that the Israeli state has decided to kill them.

No independently verifiable evidence is ever presented to substantiate the charges against those marked for assassination. The Israeli authorities do not seek to arrest the accused, put them on trial and present the factual case for their elimination. Instead, Israeli hit squads and the Mossad act as judge, jury and executioner.

Israel could not pursue such a bloodthirsty course without the logistical support of the US military and intelligence apparatus, and the political support of the American political and media establishment. The response of large sections of the US media has been to leap to Israel’s defense, employing frenzied anti-Palestinian rhetoric and calling for all-out war to destroy the Palestinian resistance.

In mid-August there was a veritable eruption of propaganda in the US press defending Israel’s assassination policy. On three successive days the *Washington Post* ran op-ed pieces labeling the Palestinians as inveterate terrorists and urging Israel to annihilate the Palestinian Authority and build a Berlin-type wall to keep the Arab population in a state of permanent subjugation.

Michael Kelly wrote in a column published August 15: “[Israel] can

win only by fighting the war on its terms, unleashing an overwhelming force (gosh, just what is called for in the Powell Doctrine) to destroy, kill, capture and expel the armed Palestinian forces that have declared war on Israel.”

The following day Charles Krauthammer called for “A lightning and massive Israeli attack on every element of Arafat’s police state infrastructure—the headquarters and commanders of his eight (!) security services, his police stations, weapons depots, training camps, communications and propaganda facilities (radio, TV, government-controlled newspapers)—with a simultaneous attack on the headquarters and leadership of Arafat’s Hamas and Islamic Jihad allies.” Krauthammer made an explicit call for ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population, summed up in his slogan: “Strike and expel.”

George Will followed on August 16 with a similar diatribe that included the following prescription: “Israel needs a short war and a high wall.”

These and numerous other commentators in the press and on CNN and Fox TV have declared that “we” in the US would be doing the same thing as the Israelis if faced with a similar situation. Among the public defenders of Israeli assassinations is Henry Kissinger, the chief architect of American imperialist policy in Vietnam under President Nixon.

One can only imagine the international outcry, orchestrated by the US media, were Palestinian leaders to announce that they intended to reply in kind, i.e., to identify and target those Israelis involved in planning and carrying out assassinations and other terrorist acts.

The US government has responded to the Israeli campaign of assassinations with perfunctory public criticisms, delivered by mid-level State Department officials, combined with private assurances of American support from the highest levels of the Bush administration. The US posture, dripping with hypocrisy, signals the revival by Washington of its own practice of using murder as a tool of foreign policy.

If it is acceptable for Israel to “take out” its political opponents, then the same applies to the US. Washington’s support for Sharon’s murder incorporated signals a reversion to the methods that resulted in such atrocities as the CIA assassination of Congo independence leader Patrice Lumumba in 1961, the repeated attempts to murder Fidel Castro, and the 1986 bombing of Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi’s residence.

Political assassinations were formally outlawed in laws passed in the 1970s following Congressional hearings headed by Idaho Senator Frank Church into the activities of the CIA. Today, even more crassly than under the Reagan administration, the US government flouts its own laws in order to support its main client regime in the Middle East and suppress the struggle of the Palestinian masses against foreign occupation, repression and poverty.



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