

Why is Israel threatening to murder Arafat?

The Editorial Board
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The Israeli government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has publicly declared its intention to murder Yasser Arafat, the popularly elected president of the Palestinian National Authority.

This announcement was not an emotional outburst by some out-of-control cabinet member. It was delivered by Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Sharon's closest ally and a man frequently mentioned as his likely successor. The threat was deliberate and calculated to serve definite political purposes.

The magnitude of this proposed crime deserves careful consideration. Arafat has been a major figure on the world stage for some 35 years. Whatever one thinks of his politics—and the *World Socialist Web Site* certainly differs with his nationalist outlook—he is unquestionably identified with the national strivings of the Palestinian people, to which he has devoted his entire adult life.

This is a man who just a decade ago was invited to the White House to sign an ill-fated peace treaty and—when it served the purposes of the major powers—was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

What is the purpose of publicly announcing plans for assassinating such a person?

The Israeli government claims that the murder of Arafat is necessary because the 74-year-old Palestinian president is an intolerable “obstacle to the process of reconciliation and peace.” This from a regime that has engaged in ceaseless provocations, from the assassination of leading Palestinians to such collective punishments as the demolition of housing and the lockdown of entire towns, as well as the bombing of crowded residential neighborhoods and the uninterrupted seizure of Palestinian land.

The complaint of the Sharon government boils down to Arafat's having failed to function as its puppet and balking at launching a civil war against his own people.

There is, however, a deeper political logic to this depraved call for murder. The Israeli government is pursuing a definite political strategy that is aimed at scuttling the Palestinian national movement, annexing as much land in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip as possible and making the formation of a Palestinian state impossible.

It is pursuing a well-worn tactic to a qualitatively new level—staging a deliberate provocation with the intent of

provoking a violent reaction that can in turn be used to justify further Israeli armed aggression and expansion.

The Sharon government shrugs off warnings that Arafat's killing would provoke popular upheavals and even more acts of terrorism within Israel, because it welcomes such a confrontation. It sees an eruption of popular anger among the Palestinians as an opportunity to put an end to any possibility of a negotiated settlement and to realize its long-held aim of creating a “greater Israel” through the forced expulsion of millions of Palestinians from the occupied territories.

This is a regime that specializes in provocations and thrives upon violence. Sharon himself, it should be recalled, orchestrated the political campaign that led to one of his right-wing followers assassinating former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin for signing the accord with Arafat. In September 2000, he deliberately ignited the last three years of bloodletting with his visit to the Temple Mount in a successful attempt to instigate a confrontation and make any discussion of a peaceful settlement between Israel and the Palestinians impossible.

The murder of Arafat would represent the ultimate provocation, calculated to provoke a violent response that the Israeli regime would use as a justification for a full-scale assault on the Palestinian people.

There is also an element of psychological warfare in this threat. It is designed to send a message to the Palestinian people: resistance is futile. It is meant to impress upon a population already subjected to occupation, roadblocks, constant harassment and humiliation that it is isolated, defenseless and without hope. The Israeli government is saying to its victims that there is no crime that it cannot commit against them, and no one can stop it.

This line of thinking was spelt out by the *Jerusalem Post*, Israel's largest circulation English-language daily, in an editorial entitled simply “Kill Arafat,” published September 11. In language that can only be described as Hitlerian, the newspaper dismisses warnings that such an assassination will ignite upheavals throughout the occupied Palestinian territories and the entire Middle East:

“Arafat's death at Israel's hands would not radicalize Arab opposition to Israel; just the opposite. The current jihad against us is being fueled by the perception that Israel is blocked from taking decisive action to defend itself.... Killing Arafat, more than any other act, would demonstrate that the tool of terror is

unacceptable, even against Israel, even in the name of a Palestinian state.”

It is worthwhile considering the ideology that gives rise to the *Jerusalem Post*'s stunning conclusion that the murder of an elected president is a means of demonstrating that “the tool of terror is unacceptable.” This language reeks of fascism and exposes the extent to which the Israeli right has absorbed the outlook of the Nazis.

Present-day Zionism and the Israeli state both justify their existence by invoking the legacy of the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews. The peculiar impact that this ideological justification has had upon the behavior and psychology of the Israeli state was noted by the Israeli historian Tom Segev, in his book *The Seventh Million: the Israelis and the Holocaust*:

“The assumption is that the Holocaust requires the existence of a strong Israel and that the failure of the world to save the Jewish people during the Second World War disqualifies it from reminding Israel of moral imperatives, including respect for human rights. The sense that the Holocaust was inevitable, in accordance with Zionist ideology, and the identification with the Jew as a victim are liable to lead Israelis to conclude that their existence depends solely on military power...”

The *Jerusalem Post* “Kill Arafat” editorial provides a particularly grotesque expression of this tendency described by Segev. It states: “The world will not help us; we must help ourselves. We must kill as many of the Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders as possible, as quickly as possible, while minimizing collateral damage, but not letting that damage stop us. And we must kill Yasser Arafat, because the world leaves us no alternative.”

There is a murderous logic to this conception that the Holocaust was inevitable, and that the Nazis were merely an example of how the world works. Among right-wing elements of Israel's founding generation like Sharon, is the idea that something can be learned from the crimes of the Nazis—principally, that anything is possible provided one employs sufficient violence.

These layers explicitly rejected the universalist, humanitarian, liberal as well as socialist ideals with which the Jewish people had been identified for generations, and which made them a target for the extreme right. Embracing an ideology of ethnic and religious nationalism, they found certain elements of the Nazi outlook deeply attractive.

Compounding the historic tragedy of the Holocaust, the Israeli state that claimed legitimacy as a response to the crimes of the Nazis has adopted methods that echo those of the Warsaw Ghetto and the concentration camps.

There was a very definite purpose behind the gratuitous bestiality of the Nazis. It was to demonstrate to those under occupation and to the inmates of the death camps that they were utterly helpless; that resistance was futile.

That the Israeli state uses this same approach in its attempt to demoralize and intimidate the Palestinian people is not an

accident. Rather it is a cruel historical irony with which Israeli workers and youth must come to grips if they are not to become unwitting accomplices to another monstrous crime.

The criminal approach of the Sharon regime has been aided and abetted by the so-called world community. In the first place, Washington has provided all but declared support for the policy of targeted assassinations, branding any act of resistance to Israeli occupation as “terrorism” while excusing virtually every repressive measure carried out by the Israeli regime.

The response of the Bush administration to the threat to assassinate Arafat has been to publicly oppose it from the standpoint of expediency, not principle. Having relegated Arafat to the status of a non-person, Washington appears to quibble only with the timing of his murder, fearful that it will disrupt US attempts to win international support for its own illegal occupation of Iraq. Moreover, the Bush administration has itself made murder a tool of foreign policy on a level unprecedented in US history, further encouraging their Israeli client state.

Certainly, no one in Washington has gone so far as to suggest that killing the elected Palestinian leader would lead to any disruption to the billions of dollars in US aid that keep the Israeli economy and military afloat.

The United Nations, the European Union, the Arab League and similar international institutions have issued tepid protests at best in response to the assassination announcement. Governments routinely refer to the murder threat as a “serious mistake” or a “grave error,” rather than calling it by its right name: a monstrous crime.

It is a measure of the debasement of the political atmosphere internationally that such a threat is made and no international institution or government answers it by vowing to hold the Zionist state assassins responsible, subjecting Sharon or any other Israeli official to arrest and criminal prosecution the moment they set foot abroad.

The reactionary perspective of Zionism has found its finished and grotesque expression in the public proposal to murder Arafat. The Sharon regime has unleashed a bloody conflagration in the Middle East to pursue its expansionist aims. Only the emergence of a new independent political movement fighting to unite Jews and Arabs on a democratic, secular and socialist basis can stop it.

Meanwhile, mass protests should be organized internationally to defend Yasser Arafat and denounce the Israeli government's depraved threats.



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