

Israeli assassination of Hamas leader: a provocation, incitement and prelude to stepped-up aggression

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Israel's assassination of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual head of the Palestinian Islamic militant group Hamas, is calculated to escalate the conflict on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It is a desperate and criminal effort by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to create the most favourable conditions for the major land-grab, announced in his plan for unilateral separation from the Palestinians.

The attack on Sheikh Yassin was personally organised by Sharon, who oversaw the entire operation and received constant updates from military officials at his Negev ranch. He gave the formal authorisation for the move at a cabinet meeting last week, on the pretext that Yassin was politically responsible for the suicide attack in the port of Ashdod on March 14 that killed 10 Israelis.

Sharon's aim is to provoke an angry reaction amongst the Palestinian masses and an escalation in suicide bombings. This will serve to undermine what little influence Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority (PA) still possesses, strengthening Hamas's own authority, and in doing so will open the way for a stepping up of Israel's military attacks.

No single act—other than the murder of Arafat himself—could have been more easily predicted to ignite the simmering tensions in the Occupied Territories than the killing of Sheikh Yassin, a partially deaf wheelchair-bound paraplegic, as he returned from a mosque in Gaza City. Seven others died in the Israeli attack, including two bodyguards and one of Sheikh Yassin's sons. Seventeen people were wounded.

This was the second attempt to kill Sheikh Yassin—the first was made in September 2003.

Arafat has declared three days of mourning. Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia warned, "This is a crazy and very dangerous act. It opens the door wide to chaos. Yassin is known for his moderation and he was controlling Hamas, and therefore this is a dangerous, cowardly act."

The PA's chief negotiator Saeb Erekat also warned, "This will add fuel to the fire, and the cycle of violence and counter-violence."

Hamas immediately threatened to open "the gates of hell," as tens of thousands of Palestinians took to the streets in angry protests. For the first time, Hamas also threatened the United States, saying America's backing of Israel made the assassination possible.

"The Zionists didn't carry out their operation without getting the consent of the terrorist American Administration, and it must take responsibility for this crime," Hamas said in a statement. "All the Muslims of the world will be honoured to join in on the retaliation for this crime."

The Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, which is tied to Arafat's Al Fatah,

declared, "War, war, war on the sons of Zion... He who signed the order to assassinate Yassin has effectively signed the death warrant of hundreds of Israelis."

Islamic Jihad also promised revenge.

Tens of thousands of mourners took to the streets of Gaza City for Yassin's funeral procession. Hundreds of gunmen were among the protesters, and cars mounted with loudspeakers called for revenge. There were clashes between youths and Israeli soldiers throughout Gaza and the West Bank. Three protesters and a Palestinian journalist are reported to have been killed.

In Nablus, 15,000 people gathered in the city centre. In Jenin, more than 10,000 people demonstrated. In the West Bank town of Hebron, dozens of Palestinians threw stones at Israeli soldiers, who fired tear gas.

Palestinian militants fired 10 homemade rockets toward the Neveh Dekalim Israeli settlement in Gaza. Two apartments were damaged. IDF soldiers shot dead a 13-year-old Palestinian during clashes with hundreds of protesters who flocked to a roadblock west of Khan Yunis refugee camp near the Neveh Dekalim settlement and threw stones at the guards. The soldiers fired live ammunition at the crowd, made up mainly of schoolchildren.

An axe-wielding Palestinian man lightly wounded three people, two men and a woman, outside an army base near Tel Aviv. And in the Israeli prison camp of Ketziot, hundreds of Palestinian prisoners rioted, setting tents on fire and throwing stones at soldiers.

Hamas is not the only tendency that has directly implicated the Bush administration in Sharon's crime. Ahmed Jibril, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, told Lebanon's al-Manar television, "This Zionist enemy could not have committed this crime without the United States giving it the green light. The United States is convinced that we are not a people who are defending a cause but views us as terrorists."

The tacit support of the US for Sharon's actions was made clear by Washington's singular failure to condemn the assassination. All the European powers denounced the killing of Sheikh Yassin, even America's closest ally Britain. Most warned that this act would escalate the violence.

Across the Arab world, the crime was denounced as "state terrorism in its most hideous form."

The most pro-Western Arab regime is Egypt, which has been leading the effort to get Hamas to agree to another ceasefire. President Hosni Mubarak said that Egypt would now not attend the Israeli Knesset's celebrations marking the anniversary of the signing of the

Egyptian-Israeli Camp David peace treaty. He warned that the assassination of Sheikh Yassin aborted all efforts to push forward the peace process.

Even Iraq's US-appointed Governing Council said it could escalate danger in Iraq.

In contrast, the US, though one of the first countries to issue an official reaction, did not condemn the killing. State Department spokesman Lou Fintor only stated, "The United States urges all sides to remain calm and exercise restraint."

Even when charged with complicity by Hamas, the US still did not condemn the killing. Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, denied that Washington had given Israel a green light for the assassination, adding only, "It is very important that everyone step back now and try now to be calm in the region. There is always a possibility of a better day in the Middle East."

Most analysts present the assassination of Sheikh Yassin as some sort of warning shot, meant to undermine any attempts by Hamas to present Sharon's proposed unilateral disengagement plan as a victory for the Palestinians. Only then do they warn of its supposedly unintended consequences in destabilising the PA and provoking further violence.

For example, Ze'ev Schiff, writing in *Haaretz*, states, "The message that Israel sent out by assassinating Sheikh Ahmed Yassin is that, when the disengagement from Gaza is finally implemented, Hamas will not be able to claim that the withdrawal was prompted by the group's terrorist operations and that if these attacks continue, they will lead to a complete Israeli withdrawal."

He then goes on to warn, "The danger is that the Gaza Strip will be consumed by anarchy, and that Hamas will take control of the street, preventing the more pragmatic Palestinian Authority forces from imposing law and order."

His concerns are backed up by fellow *Haaretz* analyst Danny Rubinstein, who predicts, "The more Israel hits Hamas leaders and rank-and-file members, the more their popularity climbs.... The assassination of Yassin could, therefore, merely contribute to the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, and, by creating chaos in the Gaza Strip, turn Hamas into the only side to profit from Yassin's death."

But escalating violence and destabilisation is not an unintended consequence of a rash and foolish act. It is Sharon's desired aim because he hopes it will enable him to realise his life goal of a Greater Israel.

Sharon has abandoned any pretence of supporting a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians in favour of an overt move to seize the majority of the occupied West Bank and permanently annex it to Israel. His so-called security fence, now under construction, is the physical embodiment of his unilateral separation plan. It incorporates most of the 200-plus illegal Jewish settlements into Israel and will leave one-and-a-half million Palestinians in a ghetto made up of just 42 percent of the West Bank and cut off from East Jerusalem.

In return, all Sharon has promised is the removal of 17 of 21 settlements from the Gaza Strip, which will involve relocating just 5,000 Israelis.

Even this does not exhaust Sharon's predatory aims. Anyone who believes that separation under such unjust conditions would bring an end to violence has not heeded the subtext of the government's own statements and that of its supporters. Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu supported the assassination of Sheikh Yassin, explaining that "It is highly possible that we will have to carry out many

operations in the Palestinian Authority areas."

In effect, separation would only represent an initial annexation of Palestinian territories behind a vast militarised wall. This land will be permanently settled by Zionist fanatics, while a war of attrition continues against the Palestinians who remain trapped in a glorified prison camp. In the end, moreover, nothing will satisfy Sharon other than the expulsion of all the Palestinians to neighbouring Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt.

Within Sharon's government, such plans are already openly voiced. Transport Minister Avigdor Lieberman of the National Union Party has called for the creation of four isolated ghettos in the West Bank surrounded by Israeli armed forces, while Housing Minister Effi Eitam of the National Religious Party has proposed that areas of Gaza be joined with Egypt, and West Bank residents are "confederated" into Jordan.

None of this could be contemplated without the tacit support Israel has been given for its criminal acts by the US. Despite its pretence of playing the honest broker and support for the eventual creation of a Palestinian state, the Bush administration has either ignored or endorsed every act of aggression by Israel—even when it flies in the face of Washington's so-called "Road Map" for peace in the Middle East.

Sharon knows that he has the backing of the most powerful forces within the White House for his policy of targeted assassinations and for his efforts to link his military offensive against the Palestinians to Washington's "war on terror." Predictably, Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz defended the killing of Yassin by calling him "the Palestinian bin Laden."

Israel has already benefited from the US deposing of Saddam Hussein, which has neutralised its most powerful regional rival, Iraq. And Sharon calculates that there are some within Bush's beleaguered and unpopular government who will welcome his latest action precisely because it further destabilises the Middle East and provides a propaganda opportunity in the run-up to the November presidential elections.

Sharon may calculate that he will benefit from his attack on Hamas because of its connections with Iran and Syria (through Lebanon), both of which feature in Bush's "axis of evil." He clearly hopes that reprisals for Sheikh Yassin's killing will not be confined to Israel and may indeed target US interests. Iran's Vice President Ali Abtahi has already called for revenge for the killing of Yassin, "who turned into the leader of the entire Muslim nation after his death."



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