

Israeli officials threaten to assassinate Palestinian prime minister

Rick Kelly
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Acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's threat to assassinate Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas's nominated prime minister for the incoming Palestinian Authority government, underscores both the lawlessness of the Israeli state and the complicity of the United States and the rest of the so-called "international community."

Taken together with the attack by Israeli forces on the Palestinian prison in Jericho on Tuesday, which killed three prisoners and left dozens wounded, these murder threats confirm that Tel Aviv—which enjoys the full backing of the Bush administration—feels no need to pay even the slightest obeisance to international law.

Olmert issued the threat last week during an interview with the *Jerusalem Post*. Asked if he agreed that Haniyeh was a legitimate target for Israel, he replied, "Whoever is involved personally and directly in terror is a target."

He added: "We haven't forgotten that Haniyeh was an aide to Sheik [Ahmed] Yassin and Yassin was targeted because he was involved in terror. So if Haniyeh commits acts of terror, he is opening himself up to the possibility of being targeted."

Olmert's reference to Yassin is telling. In March 2004, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon ordered a missile attack on the 67-year-old blind and quadriplegic Islamist leader. The state murder was widely condemned around the world. Just one month later Israeli forces assassinated Yassin's successor, Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi.

The acting Israeli prime minister's threat against Haniyeh was no isolated remark. In the past fortnight, a series of senior government figures have issued similarly menacing statements.

On March 7, Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz threatened to assassinate the Hamas leader unless the Islamist organisation repudiated its previous positions. "If Hamas, a terror organisation that doesn't recognise agreements with us and isn't willing to renounce violence, presents us with the challenge of having to confront a terror

organisation, then no one there will be immune. Not just Ismail Haniyeh—no one will be immune."

The Israeli government's claim that its assassination campaign is directed against terrorism is a smokescreen for a policy aimed at intimidating and brutalising the entire Palestinian people and eliminating any Palestinian political leadership that it deems an obstacle to its annexationist and expansionist plans.

Hamas, meanwhile, has reaffirmed its public commitment not to conduct offensive operations against Israeli targets during the "period of calm" that was announced 12 months ago. Within the Islamic fundamentalist leadership, Haniyeh is widely regarded as a moderating force. He has advocated revising the anti-Semitic references contained in Hamas's founding charter and pursuing political negotiations.

The reality is that the Israeli government is pursuing a policy of systematic state terrorism against the Palestinians. Since Hamas's victory in January's legislative elections in the West Bank and Gaza, Israeli armed forces have staged daily operations, raiding refugee camps, arresting and assassinating militants, and killing civilians, including children. The entire Israeli political establishment, including the Labour Party and the left-Zionist Meretz Party, has backed these measures. The only dissent from within the establishment has come from Likud and the fascistic right-wing parties, which accuse Olmert of not going far enough.

The Israeli government has denounced the Palestinian legislative election result as illegitimate, and has used Hamas's victory as a pretext for implementing wide-ranging repressive measures. In February, the government seized Palestinian tax and customs revenue worth \$50-60 million a month, with the purpose of destroying the PA's financial base and forcing the collapse of the Hamas-led government that is due to be formed by the end of the month.

The Israeli measures not only violate international law, but are fundamentally antidemocratic. Hamas's electoral victory expressed the growing hostility of many Palestinians towards the long-ruling Fatah faction. It's claims that living standards could be improved and Israeli violence ended by negotiations for a two-state solution have been exposed, as successive Israeli governments staged countless provocations and continued to expand Zionist settlements in Palestinian territory. International monitors, including former US President Jimmy Carter, oversaw the vote and vouched for the election's fairness.

Yet because the result is not to its liking, Israel is threatening to kill those who have been elected, including the nominated PA prime minister. With an Israeli general election scheduled to be held March 28, an extraordinary situation now exists in which Olmert's Kadima Party is set to win office with one of its official policies being its right to murder a neighbouring head of government.

One can imagine the international outcry if a senior Hamas official had declared the Israeli prime minister a legitimate target for assassination. The US and others would immediately denounce such a threat as terrorism, whilst Tel Aviv would undoubtedly respond by launching a military offensive in Palestinian territories.

Olmert's declaration, however, was completely ignored by foreign governments and institutions such as the United Nations. The international media barely reported the prime minister's statement, and, outside of the Arab press, no critical editorials or op-ed pieces appeared on the subject.

The prime minister has repeatedly cited the absence of any international censure against his government as justification for its actions. Interviewed by *Haaretz* last week, Olmert was asked about an Israeli missile attack on Gaza City on March 6, which killed three Palestinian children as well as two Islamic Jihad militants.

"Of course this is a tragedy, (but) it was a one-time event from among some 10 interceptions that the IDF [Israeli Defence Forces] has carried out recently, and there is not a single word of criticism anywhere in the world," Olmert replied. "And do you know why? Because the disengagement gave us degrees of freedom in carrying out everyday security activities which we never had before.

"Yesterday we took the head of the Hamas unit in Nablus out of his home and arrested him," he continued. "In an action by a military unit, of course. The day before that we did another targeted interception. Not a critical remark, not a hint of a critical remark, has come from

anywhere in the world."

The Bush administration bears primary responsibility for this state of affairs. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were conducted on the basis of lies and contravened international law, and the crimes of the US-led occupation forces in both countries have only further emboldened the Israeli ruling elite to take whatever measures it deems necessary to subjugate the Palestinian people.

Moreover, Washington has lined up squarely alongside Israel in rejecting out of hand the Palestinian legislative election result. Prior to the vote, the Bush administration had repeatedly hailed the pending election as evidence of its democracy drive in the Middle East. Washington's subsequent reaction has revealed the reality behind its supposed democratic crusade.

As Olmert indicated to *Haaretz*, the "unilateral disengagement" strategy first adopted by Sharon has given Israel a free hand in the Occupied Territories. In Gaza, the withdrawal of the settlements has allowed the military to conduct offensive operations without the need to worry about vulnerable settlements. More fundamentally, disengagement has been promoted by the US as a step towards peace, despite the fact that the plan was designed to obviate any negotiations with the Palestinians.

In his interviews with *Haaretz* and the *Jerusalem Post*, Olmert declared his intention to complete the disengagement strategy in the West Bank by 2010. By this time, the Israeli prime minister plans to have consolidated the major settlements behind the separation wall and have secured US support for the annexation of East Jerusalem and as much as 50 percent of the West Bank. Israel's permanent borders would then be set in defiance of international legal requirements and United Nations' resolutions requiring the Zionist state to withdraw to the pre-1967 borders.

On March 13, *Haaretz* reported that Olmert had briefed Washington on his plans for the West Bank before he issued his public statements. "According to government sources, Olmert wanted to avoid surprising the Americans with his statements on the future of the political process," the newspaper stated. "The Americans understood the message and refrained from public comment."



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