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"Yassin's Assassination"

By Kenneth W. Stein

Numerous ramifications can flow from Israel's assassination of the Hamas leader Shakyh Ahmed Yassin. They relate to the future of Hamas, the next expression of Palestinian-Israeli violence, and the pace of planned Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and West Bank. Whenever a Palestinian state emerges, Yassin's assassination will be reviewed as an influential if not a critical turning point.

For many Palestinians and other Arabs, Yassin was the embodiment of armed struggle against Israel. His death leaves Hamas without a charismatic leader, organizational fragmentation is not impossible. And with Arafat still confined by Israelis to Ramallah and suffering severe criticism for corrupt and autocratic ways, the Palestinian community struggles for definition, viability, direction, and leadership.

For Israelis, Yassin was seen as a terrorist with blood on his hands, directly or indirectly responsible for the killing of hundreds of Israeli men, women, children, and foreign citizens. Approaching a fourth year of violence and suicide bombings, Israelis have reached the conclusion that they must separate themselves from their Palestinian neighbors.

In a broader vein, Israel is committed to protect its population by all means. Those who kill Jews and Israelis are to be held accountable. In Israel, except for crimes against the Jewish people, there is no death penalty. In the case of Yassin, the Israeli public is not opposed to his assassination. Israel's very creation in 1948 was intended to protect Jews from violence, threats, and be a haven for Jews in crisis. In killing Yassin, a *raison d'etre* for the Jewish state's very creation is reaffirmed. With Israeli Prime Minister Sharon's announcement of withdrawal from Gaza, the Yassin assassination was a statement of Israel's preparedness to use force again to respond to future terror.

Yassin's life's work was dedicated to Israel's total destruction. Core to Hamas and Yassin's beliefs and actions are the obligations to wage jihad against Israel-- to kill Jews. Hamas sees Israel as illegitimate; it sees Jews in occupation of Muslim land, and armed struggle must be used to liberate that land. Hamas' objective is the establishment of a non-secular Palestinian state in all of Palestine, not just the lands Israel won in the

June 1967 War. Occupied territory to Yassin was all of Israel, not just the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem. Therefore, any political leader-- Western, Arab, Muslim or otherwise-- who negotiates, compromises, or talks with Israel is the enemy. In 1997, al-Rantisi told an interviewer in a Beirut newspaper that Islam does not allow support of the Oslo negotiating process (and that would include the 'Road Map') because it "boils down to relinquishing Palestine" to the Jews. An Hamas cease fire with either the PLO or with Israel is tactical, only a temporary "breather," allowing the organization to regroup its strength, and then prepared to resume its attacks against Israel. At all costs, Hamas will try and avoid a civil war between it and other Palestinian militants.

Within Hamas, Yassin was the decision-maker of last resort, managing most tactical and strategic issues, balancing foreign and domestic, political and military, more and less extreme voices within the organization. Yassin, his announced successor Abd al-Azziz al-Rantisi, and others in the top leadership of Hamas do not differ over their hatred for Israel.

Yassin's passing has many consequences. First, Hamas lost their charismatic CEO. He adjudicated differences in style, particularly the pace at which the organization moved forward. Yassin exercised patience and perseverance to destabilize Israel. However, Israeli decision-makers, it seems, could no longer tolerate a prolonged low intensity war of attrition, killing and wounding 1000 per year. Israel did not need to act against Hamas to provoke a response. Even without a Hamas act of retaliation to the Yassin assassination, Israel may have already decided that the rest of the Hamas leadership must disappear.

Second, Yassin was the only contemporary Palestinian leader to have successfully wrapped national aspirations around Islam and cemented them into a platform for mobilizing the masses. With his demise, the Islamization of Palestinian Arab nationalism, at least for the time being, will be slowed until other mosque leaders emerge to carry on Yassin's Islamic call. Then the question emerges, how will these religious leaders interact with the radical secular leadership that seems headed to drive Hamas in the immediate future?

Neither Yassin nor al-Rantisi came from families of a religious tradition. Yassin was not a trained theologian; his title of shakyh was earned through his devotion to Islam, not his formal education. Yassin's ability to lead flowed from his spoken word, and the confidence he demonstrated as a teacher. Yassin and other founding members of Hamas, including al-Rantisi, were born before Israel was established in 1948. They were children of impoverished families that fled their homes and settled in the Gaza Strip; they were educated in the professions (science, medicine,

and education) in Egypt during the 1950s and 1960s. It is reported that many of the founders of Hamas were discriminated against by the long entrenched local Gaza Palestinian elite who saw the 1948 refugees as disdained lower class elements. Many Hamas leaders who were in Gaza during the period of Israeli presence since 1967 found Arafat and his cronies who fought Israel only from far away Tunisia less authentic to govern, less attuned to the needs of the people. Unlike Arafat's Palestinian Authority, Hamas developed a successful institutional relationship with the people it serves, a relationship with staying power.

Unlike any other time in the history of the Palestinian national movement, Arab state support for the Palestinians is the least effective and most disorganized. That was part of Israel's calculus to kill Yassir Arafat. In addition, Israeli leaders must have reckoned that there will be retaliation, not necessarily immediate but revenge taken. Should Arafat be assassinated, die, and other Hamas leaders fall, the Palestinian community still must decide their political direction, if they are willing to separate from Israelis and build a separate state or fulfill the Hamas goal of liberating all of Palestine. It seems the Palestinian-Israeli negotiating process is in a coma.

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