

official said.’ (*Times*, 27 Mar., p. 24) This political strength is what frightens Sharon. The assassination is designed to produce more terror, push Arafat and Fatah into cracking down on Hamas, and to drive Hamas apart from Fatah.

### THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT FEARS PEACE

Israel’s justification for its 1982 invasion of Lebanon was that a Palestinian terror group at war with the PLO, and whose head (Abu Nidal) had been condemned to death by the PLO, tried to assassinate Israel’s Ambassador to Britain. Israel ‘retaliated’ by bombing Palestinian and Lebanese targets in Lebanon (where the Abu Nidal group did not even have an office), including a four-hour bombardment of the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, killing over 200. Palestinian forces had for nine months held to a US-negotiated ceasefire despite repeated Israeli provocations, but they finally responded to this assault by shelling northern Israeli settlements, giving Israel the pretext for a full-scale invasion of Lebanon. (See Noam Chomsky, *The Fateful Triangle*, s. 5.4.4)

Noam Chomsky points to the real reason for the invasion, quoting Yehoshua Porath, one of Israel’s leading scholars. Porath dismissed the official justifications, and argued, ‘It seems to me that the decision of the government (or more precisely its two leaders [Begin and Sharon] **flowed from the very fact that the cease-fire had been observed.**’ Arafat had imposed discipline on the many PLO factions, creating ‘a **veritable catastrophe** in the eyes of the Israeli government’, with the prospect that Israel would not be able to avoid a political settlement. (*Ha’aretz*, 25 June 1982, cited in *Fateful Triangle*)

Porath defined the purpose of the Begin/Sharon invasion: ‘The government’s hope is that the stricken PLO, lacking a logistic and territorial base, **will return to its earlier terrorism**: it will carry out bombings throughout the world, hijack airplanes, and murder many Israelis. In this way, **the PLO will lose part of the political legitimacy that it has gained** and will mobilize the large majority of the Israeli nation in hatred and disgust against it’. (Cited in *The Fateful Triangle*, chapter 4.6.1)

A senior Israeli military official ‘said Yassin’s death would likely prompt militant organizations to conduct **more joint operations** against Israelis.’ (*Washington Post*, 23 Mar, p. A01) The Sharon administration hopes that Hamas and other groups will devote themselves to wild terror, turn away from ceasefires and a two-state solution, discredit themselves, and undermine the possibility of any cooperation with Arafat’s Fatah in governing ‘free Gaza’.

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# ASSASSINS

## Israeli Strategy And The Assassination Of Sheikh Yassin JNV Anti-War Briefing 59 (27 March 2004)

### THE ASSASSINATION OF SHEIKH YASSIN

Israeli Prime Minister ‘Ariel Sharon personally approved the missile attack that killed the quadriplegic Hamas founder as he was pushed in his wheelchair outside his local mosque.’ (*Guardian*, 23 Mar., p. 1) ‘Sheikh Yassin was believed to be **the highest-profile Palestinian ever killed by the Israelis.**’ (*Times*, 23 Mar., p. 1) ‘While Yassin was reviled in Israel for his support for suicide bombers and a prediction that Israel would one day cease to exist, **opinion polls of Palestinians consistently ranked him second to Yasser Arafat** as a popular and trusted leader.’ (*Washington Post*, 23 Mar., p. A01)

‘**Like a Mandela** – unseen, unheard, yet charismatic in his prison cell – now half blind and deaf as well as crippled, **Yassin’s prestige grew inexorably**, just as that of Arafat, the official Mr Palestine, an ever-greater travesty of all that Mandela ever stood for, withered beneath the glare of a publicity he could no longer escape.’ (*Guardian*, 23 Mar., p. 25)

[‘Israeli army chief of staff, Lieutenant General Moshe Yaalon, hinted that the **targets could now include Yasser Arafat...** a government source said the promise given by Mr Sharon not to harm Mr Arafat applied only to the run-up to the war in Iraq last year.’ (*Guardian*, 24 Mar., p. 1)]

### TIMING: THE WITHDRAWAL FROM GAZA

Why now? Jonathan Freedland suggests that ‘The key to the timing is Sharon’s plan for unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza’. He quotes ‘a high-ranking Israeli official’, ‘We’re not going to leave Gaza with our tails between our legs.’ (*Guardian*, 24 Mar. p. 19) According to Israeli journalist Ben Kaspi, it was Sharon himself who said this. (*Maariv*, 22 Mar., website)

### TARGET: MODERATION IN HAMAS

Why did Israel target Sheikh Yassin rather than military commanders? Sheikh Yassin founded Hamas, but he was not the most aggressive figure within it. Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia said of the assassination, ‘It opens the door wide to chaos. **Yassin was known for his moderation and he was**

**controlling Hamas.**' (*Guardian*, 23 Mar., p. 1)

Much commentary has focused on the political differences within Hamas. 'Sheikh Yassin staved off strong opposition from [Hamas leader] Dr [Abd al-Aziz] Rantissi last year to the ceasefire that raised hopes among ordinary Palestinians and Israelis, but collapsed amid mutual accusations of sabotage. Now Dr Rantissi is in charge.' (*Guardian*, 24 Mar., p. 4) Dr Rantissi, a paediatrician, 'is viewed by Israeli intelligence officials as a hardline fighter with no political plan.' (*Telegraph*, 24 Mar., p. 14)

While there are divisions in Hamas over the idea of holding ceasefires prior to Israeli withdrawal, Seumas Milne writes in the *Guardian* that Dr Rantissi 'told me in Gaza a couple of months back, Hamas is ready to call a ceasefire that "should be seen in terms of years" in exchange for full Israeli withdrawal from the territories it has illegally occupied for the past 37 years.' He quotes Dr Rantissi: 'We can accept a truce... live side by side and refer all the issues to the coming generations.' (25 Mar., p. 24)

On his trip to Palestine, Milne discovered through face-to-face interviews with faction leaders that '**every significant Palestinian political and armed force is, for the first time, now prepared to accept a de facto end to conflict in return for a fully independent state on only 22% of pre-1948 Palestine. This is unprecedented in the history of the conflict.**' ('Too late for two states?', 24 Jan., *Guardian* website)

**THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT FEARS A POLITICAL HAMAS**  
**It is this moderation that is the danger for Israeli leaders. It is this moderation they are attempting to destroy through force, including by the assassination of Sheikh Yassin.** 'There is a belief among some Hamas supporters that Israel has targeted the organisation not because of its use of violence but because some of its leaders, including Sheikh Yassin and the pragmatic Ismail Abu Shanab, who was assassinated last year, gave increasing weight to the political strategy.' (*Guardian*, 24 Mar., p. 4)

Ghazi Hamed, editor of the pro-Hamas newspaper *al-Resala*, points out that, 'Over the past two years, Hamas has become more political. It agreed to an internal solution, to a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. **That makes Sharon very uncomfortable. He does not want Hamas playing a political role.**' (*Guardian*, 24 Mar., p. 4)

By targeting Sheikh Yassin, and by now targeting the entire Hamas leadership (*Independent*, 24 Mar., p. 1) Prime Minister Sharon is attacking not the military capacity of Hamas, but the political capacity of Hamas.

## STOKING THE FIRES OF TERRORISM

The Israeli Government understood that the assassination would increase rather than decrease the military capacity of, and threat from, Hamas: 'All the terrorist organizations will try and do their utmost to carry out attacks in coming days and weeks,' admitted Israel's chief military spokeswoman, Brig. Gen. Ruth Yaron. (*Washington Post*, 23 Mar., p. A01) At the security cabinet meeting which took the assassination decision, 'Avi Dichter, head of Shin Bet, the [Israeli] intelligence organisation, said he expected a reaction... "They will start with terror attacks overseas against Israelis. So they will turn into al-Qaida. They will be in the whole world's sights."' (*Guardian*, 24 Mar., p. 4) These are acceptable costs for Israeli leaders.

## HAMAS-LAND IN GAZA

The real 'danger' for Sharon is not military, but political. The problem is that the 'extremists' have been developing worryingly 'moderate' tendencies recently. For example their joint ceasefire declared in June 2003 which ended after 'Five Israeli missiles incinerate [moderate Hamas leader] Ismail Abu Shanab in Gaza City yesterday, **killing one of the most powerful voices for peace in Hamas and destroying the ceasefire** that Palestinian leaders believed would avert civil war.' (*Guardian* website, 22 Aug. 2003)

Recently, 'At the time of his death, the Hamas spiritual leader had been negotiating with the leadership of Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement in Gaza on administration of the territory once the Israelis go. **Both organisations accepted that Hamas would play a political role**, although they disagreed as to what it would be.' Diab Allouh, a Fatah central committee member in Gaza City said, 'Whatever Sharon wants, Hamas will have to be part of any political settlement in Gaza. We look to Hamas as a partner and we look to Hamas to play a role on the ground in order to be part of the solution.' (*Guardian*, 24 Mar., p. 4)

Israeli Army chief of staff Lieutenant General Moshe Ya'alon said, 'In the long run, the assassination is likely to calm the situation in the Gaza Strip and **encourage moderate forces to prevent the founding of "Hamas-land" in the Strip.**' (*Independent*, 24 Mar., p. 11)

'Mr Arafat's Palestinian Authority still holds power in Gaza, controlling the Palestinian police and security forces, but Hamas is fast winning hearts and minds through its grassroots network of charities, mosques, welfare and educational organisations. "Hamas has the general street support in Gaza. If there were elections tomorrow, it would win easily," one Palestinian