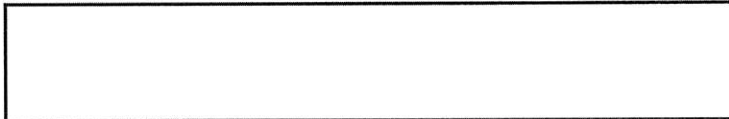


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POLITICS

Backlash brews following assassination

By Omar Karmi

Special to The Daily Star

Wednesday, March 24, 2004



GAZA CITY: The assassination of Hamas' spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin has shocked and deeply angered Palestinians. Spontaneous demonstrations erupted throughout the Palestinian areas, and scattered clashes were reported across the West Bank leaving at least four dead and dozens wounded in addition to the eight killed early Monday morning with Yassin.

"I think (Israeli Prime Minister Ariel) Sharon has given his mind a break," Hisham Ahmed, professor of political science at Bir Zeit University, told The Daily Star.

"What is he doing? What will he achieve from this? I believe he is compromising the lives of Israelis and, either he didn't know this, and is thus unsuitable for his job, or worse, he knew and didn't care."

Hundreds of thousands of mourners crowded the streets of Gaza for the funeral, chanting, "We are all Yassin, our army is Qassem," a reference to Hamas' military wing, the Izzedin al-Qassem Brigades.

"All of Gaza is paralyzed," said Ghazi Hamed, editor in chief of Al-Risala weekly. "The sky is black from the smoke of burning tires. People are deeply affected and very angry."

Hamas has vowed that the "doors of hell will now open" and Hamed and Ahmed are both convinced that an escalation is inevitable.

"In the short term, Hamas will try to prove that there is a price to pay," said Hamed.

"There is enormous popular demand for a swift retaliation, and Hamas will want to show that they have the ability, and that they have not been weakened. This I think will be the first priority."

Ahmed agreed that the conflict will now intensify and said all restraints are off.

"Sharon has chosen to attack political leaders and touch the untouchable," he said.

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Furthermore, he believes the internal Palestinian debate regarding military strategy - whether or not to strike at Israelis inside the 1948 borders - is now moot, and that "the assassination will boost the discourse of resistance and hamper the already hampered path of fruitless negotiations."

Meanwhile, Abdel-Aziz al-Rantissi emerged as the early favorite for the leadership of Hamas. If Rantissi, who escaped an Israeli assassination attempt last June, were to take over, it could signal a more uncompromising approach from the movement, according to Ahmed, author of a 1994 book on the movement titled *From Religious Salvation to Political Transformation: The Rise of Hamas in Palestinian Society*.

"Rantissi is a strong candidate to assume leadership. Hamas under Rantissi would be more strict and advocative the struggle against occupation. He is not conciliatory in the way Yassin was, who could combine the language of pragmatism with that of resistance," Ahmed told The Daily Star.

"I have not felt so unsettled before," said a Palestinian businessman from Beit Hanina, who requested anonymity. "I am seething with anger. It's bad, it's very bad, and it's going to get worse."

"It's awful," said Radwan, a 19-year-old student from Tulkarem. "He was in a wheelchair. What was he going to do? It will just make things worse. Much worse. If you walk around Tulkarm, everyone is angry. You can see it in their faces. I think if any Israeli came here now they would be killed."

The reactions from ordinary Palestinians are a testament to the presence of Yassin on the Palestinian political scene, where he was second only to Palestinian President Yasser Arafat in terms of popularity.

This is especially true in Gaza, where Yassin, according to Hamed, was not just popular as a political leader; he was well liked and respected as a person.

"He was seen as a father figure, not just in Hamas circles. He touched many people's lives in big ways and small. He helped settle family disputes, and his footprints are everywhere."

Yassin was one of the founders of Hamas, and, said Ahmed, someone who acted as a unifying force in the movement.

"He advocated resistance, but never shut the door on negotiations. He advocated unity, not just within Hamas, but also among the factions. His assassination will strengthen the hard-liners."

Hamed added: "He was and remains the compass of Hamas. Still, the movement has very strong institutions and very deep roots in society, and these will not die with him. Remember Hamas grew and grew even in the years Yassin spent in prison (1989-1997)."

Hamed also agreed that Yassin was crucial in solving any problems between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA) or other factions. He was someone everyone respected, said Hamed, though he didn't believe the relationship between Hamas and the PA would be affected.

"The leadership (of Hamas) continues to have good relations with the authority, and I don't think in the long run this is so significant in terms of the relationship between Hamas and the authority."

It may, however, affect the present government, according to Ahmed.

"There is a strong sense of unity today in Palestinian society. But the



assassination raises some serious questions about the ability of the Palestinian government to protect its people. I think the assassination is a big blow to the (Ahmed) Qorei government. In fact, had Qorei met Sharon last week, his government would have fallen. I'm ... surprised he hasn't resigned."

The assassination has also led to fears that Israel will target Arafat next. If that happens, said Ahmed, "it would put into question the whole meaning of the Palestinian Authority."

But Hamed believes Israel has identified Hamas as the spearhead of the Palestinian resistance, and the assassination is the culmination, though not the end, of two years of trying to "break the bones" of the movement.

"But, if you see the people here in Gaza, tens of thousands of them, for kilometers on end, you will realize that it is not going to work."

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