



Sheikh Ahmad Yassin's funeral was a heavy display of Hamas artillery.

## Strange Motives

**What was the logic behind Israel's assassination of the founder and spiritual leader of Hamas? By Neve Gordon**

**J**ERUSALEM—A DAY AFTER HAMAS FOUNDER AND spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin was assassinated, the former director of Israel's intelligence agency stated that the terrorist threat would certainly increase. Indeed, as protests and riots erupted across the Occupied Territories and the Arab world, Israel went on high alert.

Ephraim Halevy, former director of Mossad, argued it would take a while before the situation would return to the level it had been before the assassination and that in the long run the threat was unlikely to decrease as a result of the extra-judicial execution.

The assassination, ordered March 22 by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, was opposed by some top officials, including Avi Dichter, head of Israel's Shin Bet security service, because it was likely to lead

to revenge attacks.

Considering that Yassin's assassination will exacerbate the violence in the region and thus further endanger Israeli citizens, one might ask why the government authorized the operation.

Israeli commentator Oded Granot seems to have an answer.

A day after the assassination, he noted that Hamas and Fatah (the largest party within the Palestinian Authority) were on the verge of reaching a cooperation agreement regarding the distribution of authority in the Gaza Strip. The two major political factions in the Strip wanted to ensure that there would be no internal strife and that joint control would be assumed over the region if Sharon went ahead with his plan to dismantle Jewish settlements and withdraw Israel's troops.

## Our Unpopular Culture

A year after President George W. Bush led the United States into war with Iraq, international public opinion about America and its foreign policy is growing increasingly negative, according to a new study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

"A Year After Iraq: Mistrust of America in Europe Ever Higher, Muslim Anger Persists," includes surveys from eight countries and reveals pervasive anti-American sentiments in Pakistan, Jordan, Morocco and Turkey. In Jordan, for instance, almost seven in 10 believe American leaders lied about WMDs and three-quarters consider U.S. terrorism concerns to be exaggerated.

Favorable opinions of U.S. foreign policy also are dropping in many European countries; in Great Britain it fell to 58 percent, compared to 70 percent last May. Only 39 percent hold a positive view of Bush.

"The numbers keep getting worse and worse," says Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Center.

French and German citizens hold particularly dim views of the president: Eighty-five percent of French citizens disapprove of Bush, placing him only eight points from Osama bin Laden; in Germany 85 percent disapprove of Bush and 96 percent bin Laden.

Many countries also believe the United States refused to reveal its true motives for invading Iraq. When asked what they believe the real reasons to be, high majorities in every country but the United States and Great Britain named control over Mideast oil. World domination, targeting unfriendly Muslim governments and protecting Israel also topped the list.

Reconstruction efforts suffer similarly low numbers. Fewer than 50 percent in every country polled, including the United States, credit America and its allies with doing a good job in post-war Iraq. In Turkey, Morocco and Pakistan, support is in the teens when asked if the effort is addressing the needs of Iraqi citizens.

To see the full report, go to [www.people-press.org](http://www.people-press.org).

—Erin Mosely

Israeli officials, Granot added, feared that if such an agreement were signed then the Bush administration would veto all Hamas assassinations. Israel consequently decided not to take any chances and killed Yassin.

Even if Granot is right, the question regarding the Israeli government's objective still stands.

One explanation is based on the assumption that Sharon actually intends to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and that he killed Yassin in order to advance this end. This view is informed by three major hypotheses.

- Sharon does not want to replicate his predecessor's mistake. Unlike Israel's rapid withdrawal from southern Lebanon, which many conceived as an act of defeat and cowardice, Sharon wants to create the impression that Israel's withdrawal from Gaza is in no way a result of pressure applied by Hamas. Accordingly, the assassination is both a symbolic act and an attempt to weaken Hamas' infrastructure. One may accordingly expect that in the coming months the Israeli military will accelerate its operations in the Gaza Strip.
- Sharon hopes that Yassin's assassination will help him garner support within his own Likud party, because his popularity is waning and because many of his allies are against any withdrawal from Gaza. The execution of the Hamas leader demonstrates to Sharon's political partners that he is still "attuned to Israel's security needs and will not hesitate to use all the means necessary to ensure it." The new Sharon is still the old Sharon.
- According to this explanation the attack's objective was to create chaos in the Gaza Strip so that following the withdrawal internal strife between the Palestinian factions would erupt.

Those who think that Sharon authorized Yassin's assassination in order to abandon his withdrawal proposal also employ this last point. Sharon, according to this explanation, hopes to use the chaos he has engendered and the violent reaction that will surely follow as pretense for keeping Israeli troops and settlements in the Strip.

While only the future will tell which explanation is more accurate, Yassin's assassination has a number of direct effects.

It will certainly lead to a series of bloody attacks against targets within Israel and perhaps even abroad. While Hamas' ability to strike against Israelis has in no

way been jeopardized, the perpetrators' will to carry out attacks is surely much greater than it was before the execution.

The Islamic group had made veiled threats that it would retaliate against the United States for the assassination but, Abdel Aziz Rantisi, named as Hamas' new Gaza chief, said the militant group had no plans to attack U.S. targets, while another top official in the organization said it has targeted Sharon for death.

"We are inside Palestinian land and acting only inside Palestinian land. We are resisting the occupation, nothing else," Rantisi told reporters in Gaza. "Our resistance will continue just inside our border, here inside our country."

In addition, the assassination has widely broadened the frontiers of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by accentuating its religious dimension. Muslims from Jakarta to Cairo have vowed to avenge the cleric's death.

While these two effects have been mentioned in the media, commentators have ignored that the Israeli attack will likely deal a harsh blow to the recent emergence of a Palestinian nonviolent resistance movement. The three-and-a-half year Palestinian uprising, known as the second Intifada, began changing its character about two months ago: from a struggle based on violent resistance led by relatively small groups of militants to a massive nonviolent grassroots movement.

The impetus for this mobilization is the rapid erection of the separation wall. The protesters used the same techniques developed by Ghandi and Martin Luther King, with hundreds of demonstrators standing or lying in front of bulldozers, chanting songs and waving flags. Although the military has been ordered to disperse the protesters, using tear gas, clubs, and, at times, even bullets, every day in the past weeks more and more Palestinians (alongside a few Israelis and internationals) have joined the ranks. For a moment it appeared that the Palestinians had adopted a tenable strategy which could actually threaten Israel's occupation.

Yassin's assassination will probably weaken the nonviolent resistance and empower those who favor violent retaliation against Israel. Thus, ironically, Israel's operation has actually strengthened the legitimacy of Hamas' military wing. ■

**NEVE GORDON** teaches politics at Ben-Gurion University and can be reached at [neve\\_gordon@yahoo.com](mailto:neve_gordon@yahoo.com).

# Meltdown Madness

**Easing regulations on an apocalyptic industry. By Heather Wokusch**

**P**RESIDENT BUSH HAS ALWAYS BEEN a good friend to the nuclear industry, but his recent overtures should sound alarm bells.

The White House has begun pushing to replace governmental safety standards at federal nuclear facilities with requirements penned by contractors. As Rep. Ted Strickland (D-Ohio) quipped, "It's like the fox guarding the hen house."

What prompted the Bush administration's move? Congress insisted the government start fining contractors for violations.

The proposed weakening of safety standards would affect more than 100,000 nuclear plant workers and comes at an especially lousy time to lower their morale.

A strike by 276 operations and maintenance workers was narrowly averted in January at the Indian Point 3 plant, 35 miles north of midtown Manhattan. When the plant's owner proposed substituting manag-

ers for striking workers, union spokesman Steve Mangione observed, "Anyone would want the people who work there every day—not managers who take a crash course—to be the ones running the plant."

Happy, well-trained workers are key to nuclear safety: When problems occur, they often result from worker error. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) reported 728 worker-caused mishaps during a recent two-year period, an average of more than three mistakes per year at each plant.

Even worse, government security contractors have apparently been lax in monitoring worker effectiveness. The Y-12 nuclear weapons plant in Tennessee, for example, made headlines recently when it reported missing 200 keys to protected areas. Then news surfaced that security personnel guarding the nation's nuclear stockpiles, including tons of enriched uranium at the Y-12 nuclear weapons plant in Oak Ridge, Tenn., had

been cheating on their antiterrorism drills.

An Energy Department investigation discovered that contract security guards at the Y-12 plant had been given access to computer models of antiterrorism drill strikes in advance, rendering the tests useless. A representative from Wackenhut, the longtime government contractor charged with securing the facility, claimed security at Y-12 was "better than it's ever been" but few are convinced. A January 2002 study found only 19 percent of Wackenhut guards at Indian Point reported feeling able to "adequately defend the plant."

Almost 25 years ago, the reactor core meltdown at Three Mile Island struck fear into the nation, but consequences could have been much worse. A 1982 study by the Sandia National Laboratory predicted an accident at the Limerick nuclear plant outside Philadelphia could result in 74,000 people killed within the first year and a further 610,000 afflicted with radiation-related illnesses. Add to that \$200 billion in relocation and clean-up costs.

By all appearances, however, stateside nuclear facilities are functioning well. Pennsylvania's Susquehanna nuclear plant just announced an electricity-gen- ➤

# Cola Wars

**Striking unionists battle Coke and paramilitaries. By Mischa Gaus**

**P**ROTESTING A MASS FIR-ing of union leaders, 30 Coca-Cola workers in Colombia began a hunger strike March 15, which was met by death threats from paramilitaries known to have worked on the company's behalf in the past.

A group of 91 workers—nearly three-fourths union leaders—was dismissed in February after Coca-Cola closed several plants. Protesters say the company targets union shops, and the hunger strikers in eight Colombian cities demand reinstatement of the fired workers.

A group affiliated with the country's most notorious paramilitaries, the AUC, released a statement declaring war on the union leaders and

promising to "finish them all off" if they do not leave the country in three months.

Paramilitaries acting with at least tacit approval of Colombian Coca-Cola officials are suspected in the murder of seven Coca-Cola unionists in recent years and the kidnapping and torture of others. About 3,600 Colombian union members have been killed in the last two decades, most at the hands of right-wing paramilitaries.

Daily updates from the hunger strikers detail threatening phone calls, police harassment, government indifference and company disciplinary hearings for strikers.

SINALTRAINAL, the Colombian Coca-Cola union, says

500 workers have been forced into retirement since September by consolidation, and when 91 workers refused the lump-sum buyout, they were fired. The workers' collective bargaining agreement says they should be transferred, and even though a Colombian judge in January upheld that principle, the country's labor ministry ruled against the workers.

"The ministry gives mixed results depending upon who is in power," says Daniel Kovalik, counsel for the plaintiffs in a lawsuit against Coca-Cola filed in a Florida court on behalf of tortured and murdered union members. "Certainly, under the current [Colombian President Alvaro] Uribe administration, it is antagonistic toward the workers."

Coca-Cola called the hunger strike "unfortunate," saying it treated all employees fairly.

Anti-sweatshop student groups are pressuring their

administrations to request an investigation of the violence against Coca-Cola workers. One school—DePaul University in Chicago—has asked the Worker Rights Consortium, which monitors compliance with the codes of conduct that corporations sign with colleges, to step in.

Acting at the behest of its affiliate schools, the WRC has investigated apparel factories worldwide. An agency official said examining Coca-Cola would be a natural extension of the group's scope because some member schools have licensing contracts with the company.

"We see this as the same issue, just in a different industry," says Jon Rodney, a University of California-Berkeley anti-sweatshop activist. "The university's logo and image is tainted by this kind of exploitation and violence." ■

**MISCHA GAUS** writes on politics and culture for *In These Times*.