

# A tale of two assassinations: Mustafa Zibri and Rehavam Ze'evi

[Rabbani, Mouin. The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs](#) 21.6 (Aug 2002): 13-14+.

On the night of May 1, six Palestinians who, along with Yasser Arafat, had been besieged since March 29 in the Ramallah governorate compound were handed over to a joint American-British security team. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon previously had demanded extradition of the six as a precondition for lifting the blockade-and had informed his cabinet he was "prepared to go to new elections" over the issue. Following the Palestinians' arrival in a Jericho prison to be run under [Anglo-American](#) supervision, however, Israeli tanks withdrew from Ramallah, ending the month-long siege.

The U.S.-brokered deal to end the standoff in Ramallah has been widely lauded, both for defusing a confrontation with potentially catastrophic political implications, and for signaling the beginning of sustained American engagement in the Middle East. Closer examination of the facts, however, suggests the Bush administration is playing with a fire largely of its own making, and that its conduct in this affair is symptomatic of a U.S. approach which both aggravates conflict and obstructs meaningful progress toward peace.

Three of the six detained Palestinians-Hamdi Qur'an, Basil Al-Asmar, and Majdi Irhimi-are cadres of the Martyr Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades, the military wing of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) in the occupied territories. They are joined by their commander, Ahid Ghulmi; PFLP Secretary-General Ahmad Sa'adat; and Fuad Shubaki, finance officer of the National Security Service, one of the Palestinian Authority's many security forces.

The first three are alleged to have carried out the Oct. 17 assassination of Rehavam Ze'evi, Israel's minister of tourism. Ghulmi is accused of having organized the attack, and Sa'adat of authorizing or commissioning it. Shubaki is alleged to have been a key player in the Karine A affair, named after the ship loaded with 50 tons of weapons and munitions seized by Israeli forces off the coast of Yemen in January of this year.

Although Ghulmi and his three comrades were convicted by a Palestinian kangaroo court during the recent siege and sentenced to terms of between one and 18 years, Sa'adat and Shubaki have yet to be tried. This notwithstanding, most observers believe all six would be found guilty if afforded a fair and proper trial. That, however, is precisely where the trouble begins.

The Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades adopted its name in the summer of 2001 in homage to Sa'adat's immediate predecessor, Mustafa Zibri, who in July 2000 was elected to replace the ailing George Habash but who was assassinated in his Ramallah office on Aug. 27, 2001 by an Israeli aerial death squad. The Mustafa assassination was widely understood to be in direct response to what the Israeli military termed a qualitatively unprecedented Palestinian guerrilla attack on a Gaza Strip outpost several days earlier which left three Israeli soldiers dead and seven wounded.

Although the Gaza attack had been carried out by the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and not the PFLP, this was neither the first nor last time Israel implemented its policy of making no distinctions between Palestinians who resist its military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. By targeting a political rather than a military official for the first time since the beginning of the current Palestinian uprising-and, in the process, killing the head of the most influential PLO faction after Arafat's Fatah movement-Sharon simultaneously sought to send a clear message-which his spokesman, Ra'anan Gissin, termed "a signal"-to the rest of the Palestinian leadership, and to Arafat in particular.

In the immediate aftermath of the Mustafa assassination, Israel stated that the PFLP had conducted during the uprising numerous armed attacks in the occupied territories as well as a series of car bombings in Jewish settlements and Israeli cities which left several dead. The PFLP, which routinely claims responsibility for its actions, did not contest this statement of fact. Israel also claimed that Mustafa was personally involved in the preparation and deployment of PFLP car bombs, a highly implausible contention for which no substantive evidence has been produced.

The Mustafa assassination followed dozens of other so-called "targeted killings" carried out by Israel during the uprising, and resumed an Israeli tradition stretching back to the early 1970s of liquidating

Palestinian leaders and emissaries. Despite their occasional efforts to retaliate, Palestinian militants had yet to conduct a fatal attack against a prominent Israeli official. In the specific context of the Mustafa assassination, and the general one of an increasingly violent uprising in which the various Palestinian paramilitary formations not only cooperate but also compete to inflict the most painful blow upon Israel, many observers predicted the PFLP would respond by attempting to kill a senior Israeli personality.

Seen from the PFLP's perspective, perhaps the only candidate with better qualifications than Ze'evi for its retaliatory exercise would have been Sharon himself. To begin with, Ze'evi was at the time of his assassination a serving minister, leader of a political party (which formed part of Israel's ruling coalition), and a longstanding member of parliament. A graduate of the Command and General Staff College of the U.S. Army, prior to his political debut Ze'evi had attained the rank of general during a lengthy, and often bloody, military career.

Secondly, at the time of the Mustafa assassination Ze'evi was a member of both the Israeli government's full and security cabinets, and thus shared personal and political responsibility for the killing of the PFLP leader. Additionally, Ze'evi was legally culpable for each and every Israeli attack against Palestinian civilian non-combatants carried out during his term of office not justified by military necessity and conducted pursuant to government decisions he supported; a cursory reading of available human rights reports suggests eventual proceedings would have been rather lengthy.

Ze'evi was also one of Israel's most visible and bellicose racists. The Moledet ("Homeland") Party he founded during the 1980s was established for the exclusive purpose of advocating and promoting the mass expulsion of the indigenous Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (euphemistically termed "voluntary transfer" in party literature).

While one can question various aspects of the Ze'evi assassination, such as its political utility, it was by any reasonable standard a proportionate response to the Mustafa killing, because it targeted a single individual of broadly similar stature who-unlike Mustafa in relation to the DFLP's Gaza attack-shared responsibility for the act to which retaliation was being sought.

Although the Oslo agreements commit the PA to prevent any act of violence by any Palestinian (they place no such restrictions upon Israel), there is no suggestion the PA had advance knowledge of the plot and failed to stop it, or was involved in any other way. Rather, Arafat was criticized and condemned in the wake of the Zeevi killing in the context of the PAs failure to meet its broader security commitments-obligations the PFLP, which rejected Oslo from the outset, never recognized.

If it seems ironic that Sharon, who ordered the hit on Mustafa, besieged Arafat-who cannot by any standard be considered legally culpable for the Ze'evi killing-in order to force the extradition of PFLP men accused of an act of retaliation against the Sharon government (presumably with the additional objective of deterring Israel from similar attacks in future), there is more. During a previous, albeit less severe, siege of the PA Ramallah compound which commenced in December 2001 and continued intermittently until mid-March of this year, and in which Israeli demands in connection with the Ze'evi case also played a key role, the issue of extradition was never even raised. Rather, Sharon insisted then that the PA fulfil its bilateral treaty obligations toward Israel by itself arresting the remaining PFLP suspects (Sa'adat had been nabbed in El Bireh in mid-January). In order to add weight to its demands, Israel rescinded the unrestricted freedom of travel Arafat had enjoyed pursuant to the Oslo agreements and confined him to Ramallah.

Amid vociferous Israeli accusations that Arafat was extending "protection" to the fugitives in the Ramallah area, the Palestinian Preventative Security Force had located the four in March in a Nablus hideout and detained them after a shootout. The prisoners subsequently were transported to Ramallah in U.S. diplomatic vehicles and there delivered to PA security in an arrangement approved not only by Washington but by Sharon personally. (Like most of the West Bank, the territory between Nablus and Ramallah remains under full Israeli control and the PA feared the men would be grabbed by Israel if it transported them itself.) Sharon demonstratively responded that, since Arafat had met Israel's conditions, he was once again free to travel-within the occupied territories. Every foreign trip by Arafat, however, would require a separate decision, which, if positive, would not include a guarantee that the Palestinian leader would be able to return.

The U.S. Response

An examination of the U.S. response to the two assassinations does much to explain its current, direct involvement in the crisis. In August 2001, Washington refused to condemn the Mustafa assassination, did not call upon Israel to arrest those responsible for the planning and execution of the attack and bring them to justice, nor in any way suggest the assassination could influence US.-Israeli relations-an important point, given that the killing had been carried out with U.S. weapons funded by the American taxpayer. It responded instead with an oblique reference to its previously stated disagreement with Israel's policy of assassinations, expressed concern that such attacks could "inflamm" the conflict-responsibility for the resolution of which once again was placed squarely on the shoulders of Arafat and the PA-and issued its habitual appeal for mutual "restraint." If there was any criticism of the Israeli action-and this would be stretching the definition of the term somewhat-it related to the fact that 22 US. citizens (none of whom were injured) lived in the building targeted by missile-firing Israeli helicopter gunships.

Although the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz characterized the U.S. reaction as "relatively weak," a number of commentators termed Washington's response unusually severe because State Department spokesman Richard Boucher questioned the efficacy of assassinations and appealed to Israel to alleviate the suffering of ordinary Palestinians. In neither case, however, could one easily infer, on the basis of the US. reaction, that a significant turning point in the unfolding Israeli-Palestinian drama had just been reached.

Seven weeks later the U.S. took a rather different view of such acts. The White House, State Department, and numerous congressional representatives publicly, explicitly, repeatedly, unreservedly, and unambiguously condemned the Ze'evi assassination as an unjustifiable "act of terror," vociferously demanded that Arafat's forces hunt down and bring to justice those responsible (and indeed dismantle the Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades and all similar formations), severely criticized the PA and (yet again) Arafat personally for their failure to halt Palestinian violence, and made it clear that deteriorating U.S.-Palestinian relations had suffered yet another significant blow and were highly unlikely to be set right unless and until the Ze'evi matter was adequately resolved. One would be forgiven for concluding that the Mustafa killing had been the inevitable Israeli reprisal for the PFLP's felling of Ze'evi, rather than the other way around.

With the Bush administration increasingly adopting Sharon's war against the Palestinians as part and parcel of its own campaign to eradicate the al-Qaeda network, Israel had little difficulty in obtaining U.S. support for its escalating demands in the Ze'evi case. In April, it reached the point where the American president, neglecting both the Israeli-Palestinian agreements to which his predecessor had affixed his signature (which do not require extradition) and his own government's recently facilitated arrangements, publicly backed Sharon's demands that the six Palestinians be put on trial in Israel. It was, in fact, only in the context of Washington's reconsideration of Israel's intention to eliminate Arafat from the scene that it began to search for a way out of the Ramallah crisis-and, in so doing, brokered the Jericho scenario.

The U.S., however, has embarked on an extremely dangerous course by supervising the imprisonment of Palestinians accused of retaliation against an Israeli assassination which Washington effectively chose to support-a course which could yet come back to haunt it. (Indeed, as part of a deal about a week later to end the Israeli siege of Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, the CIA was instrumental in obtaining the PMs endorsement of the first deportations of Palestinian militants from their homeland since 1992-thus setting an even more dangerous precedent.)

On the basis of the available evidence-which is, to put it mildly, voluminous-it is for all intents and purposes inconceivable that Washington is serious about "11 sustained engagement" to foster peace in the Middle East. Israeli security concerns, which are formulated in a manner to preclude meaningful negotiations on a viable permanent settlement, will remain the cornerstone of U.S. involvement in the conflict. Bush administration efforts undoubtedly will engage other aspects, including humanitarian and political, of the crisis. Absent significant threats to its vital interests in the Middle East and/or substantial domestic opposition to its policy in the region, however, Washington will continue to avoid core issues such as ending the Israeli occupation and dismantling Jewish settlements, paying them only lip service and keeping other mediators either at bay or subordinate to its own agenda. It is an agenda which not only obstructs peacemaking, but aggravates what already is a very bloody conflict.