

# Liquidating Yassin:

## Implications for Israel, the Palestinians, and U.S. Middle East Policy

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### Brief Analysis

Israelis and Palestinians are locked in a stalemate that is worsening over time. The withdrawal initiative by Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon creates an opportunity to transform the situation, but the direction of that transformation remains an unanswered question. Many Palestinians view an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and an evacuation of the settlements there as unprecedented and historic—particularly since the move would be initiated by Sharon, the architect of the settler movement. The issue for Palestinians is how to take advantage of this development.

Without an agreement, it is simply a stretch of the imagination to believe that everything will improve after the Israelis withdraw from Gaza. And would be irresponsible for Israelis just to withdraw and wish for the best, hoping that the entity on the other side of the fence who assumes control will believe in coexistence and not rejection. There is an incredible convergence between representatives of the Israel Defense Forces and the Young Guard of Fatah, who both say they need to have understandings ahead of time, so that what happens the day after withdrawal will leave them both better off.

The problem is that neither side has a good sense of how to develop a coordination mechanism. In practice, it is up to the United States to establish such a mechanism. Until recently, Washington has been exclusively focusing on the Israelis, which sent the message that the Israelis were the only ones with responsibilities. This one-sided focus also produced a kind of passivity on the part of the other parties, who were simply waiting for the United States to reach a deal with Israel before objecting to that deal in some way. But now Washington is seriously talking about the withdrawal with Palestinians, Egyptians, Jordanians, and Europeans. The challenge for the administration at this juncture is to be very clear in establishing everyone's responsibilities as Sharon's initiative continues to unfold.

It is important to focus on the responsibilities of the Palestinian side. Those Palestinians who realize that they have a lot at stake and see the Sharon initiative as a revolutionary development know that it is important to take advantage of any territorial withdrawal. But they face several challenges. Yasir Arafat has no incentive to work things out in a way that produces stability; if there is stability now, it makes him less relevant. He will therefore do everything he can to ensure the perpetuation of turmoil. Another problem will be Hamas, which may try to imitate Hizballah's actions in Lebanon to some extent. In 2000, Hizballah produced the imagery that the Israelis were forced out of Lebanon by organizing a mass march on Israeli positions, to which the Israelis had to respond by withdrawing overnight. The time to think about Hamas organizing a mass march like that is not the night before it occurs, but right now.

The United States also needs to think about ways to affect the balance of forces among Palestinians, creating greater incentive for those who believe in coexistence to become more assertive. Washington can be very public about stating the kinds of responsibilities Palestinians will have in areas from which the Israelis withdraw, perhaps offering to recognize Palestinian sovereignty in those areas. And the United States should build an international consensus to send Palestinians the message that the whole world is watching how they respond to an Israeli withdrawal. The European Union (EU) can do a lot here to initiate projects in areas from which Israel withdraws. Such initiatives could demonstrate to the Palestinians—in ways that Abu Mazen could not—that there will be tangible benefits to challenging terror and violence and promoting effective self-governance.

Because of the eighteen- to twenty-four-month judicial process in Israel that will be necessary to handle the appeals of settlers, withdrawal will not be imminent. This gives time to encourage quiet discussions and tacit understandings between Israelis and Palestinians, and to discuss with the other Quartet members how to ensure that the right kinds of steps taken by Palestinians will be met by the right kinds of rewards.

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Just as it did after the death of Yahya Ayyash in 1996, Hamas will attack even more vigorously in the wake of the Ahmed Yassin assassination. At the same time, it is wrong to say that killing Yassin will spawn ten others like him. No one in the Hamas organization is as qualified or authoritative a leader as Yassin was—certainly not Abdel Aziz Rantisi or Khaled Mashal, who are sharing the Hamas leadership following Yassin's death. Rantisi lacks the skill at strategic calculation for which Yassin was known. For instance, Yassin was willing to negotiate over an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, while at the same time continuing to authorize terror attacks. Rantisi is inept enough that were the Palestinian Authority (PA) to use some measure of force against Hamas, he would respond in kind. The reaction from the street in this scenario would be extremely negative, as the Palestinian public has no interest in seeing Palestinians fighting each other.

Although every level of Hamas's structure works to support the organization's terrorist activities, the social-welfare, or *dawa*, component gives Hamas its real staying power. Yassin was the father of the latter apparatus; Rantisi is more intimately connected to Hamas as a terrorist organization. Still, the ability of the Hamas *dawa* operation to provide social services after Yassin's death will be the barometer of the group's ongoing significance.

Yassin's death will leave Hamas fragmented, not only between the interior and foreign leadership, but also within Gaza. The perception of Rantisi by local Hamas leaders will play a large role in the extent of his power. The popularity of Hamas in polls was largely due to the popularity of Yassin the person; Rantisi will never be able to garner the same level of support. Indeed, he does not seem well positioned to regain the position Hamas once held in the West Bank. In 1994, when Baruch Goldstein carried out the Hebron massacre, support for Hamas was much greater in the West Bank than it was in Gaza; this was at a time when West Bank Palestinians were unsure whether they would ever achieve autonomy. Similarly, when the PA was combating the extremists in Gaza, operational control of Hamas remained almost solely in the West Bank. If a post-Yassin Hamas is unable to reestablish itself in

the West Bank, it could become a major organizational problem in the aftermath of an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, when presumably there will be public pressure on Hamas to curtail its attacks from Gaza while continuing attacks from the West Bank.

An irony of counterterrorism is that the greater the success in decapitating command, control, communication, and information infrastructure, the more cell members without any strategic authority are pushed to make decisions on their own. Consider, for instance, the fairly new Hamas tactic to use women and children as suicide bombers. It is not clear who is making this decision at the tactical level, and public opinion seriously opposes it.

In short, Yassin's death leaves Hamas without its most valuable leader. This creates an opportunity for a reinvigorated, viable, and trustworthy Palestinian security apparatus to control the radical elements within the Palestinian camp. Hamas will not supplant the PA in a post-withdrawal period. Hamas meant what it said: it has no interest in taking over the day-to-day operations of government and has no need to challenge the PA militarily. It can continue to undermine the PA and garner support through the social-welfare infrastructure, which also assists the group in carrying out its attacks.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Jeff Cary and Ben Fishman.

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