

## A Moment Lost

Jun 12, 2003



Articles & Testimony

**T**he Israeli-Palestinian conflict has taken a turn for the worse. On Wednesday, a suicide bomber blew himself up on a bus in central Jerusalem, killing at least 16 Israelis and wounding scores of bystanders. Within hours, Israeli attack helicopters fired rockets into the Gaza Strip, killing nine people, including four Palestinian militants, two of them Hamas terrorists.

In the past, President Bush might have responded to this bloody exchange by affirming Israel's right to self-defense. But his close friendship with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon may be wearing thin.

The reason: The Israel Defense Forces are accused of crossing the line Tuesday in their attempt to assassinate Abdulaziz Rantisi, the highest-ranking Palestinian leader to be targeted since the second intifada began almost three years ago.

The Israeli strike not only failed to take out Rantisi, it accidentally killed five Palestinian bystanders. Predictably, Palestinian leaders condemned the "criminal attack," and the Arab League immediately followed suit.

What was surprising, though, was the White House reaction. Gone was the typical mantra demanding the need for "Israeli security" and "Palestinian dignity." This time Bush lay the blame squarely on Israel. The military strike was not only a personal affront, the president declared, it risked derailing the entire peace process. The resulting escalation, by implication, is therefore Israel's fault.

This interpretation is dubious. To justify it, you would have to believe that Rantisi did not pose an imminent threat to Israel, and that Hamas was currently a viable partner for peace. Both ideas need a rethink.

Rantisi, although not a typical terrorist foot soldier, is a senior Hamas leader and, as such, was and remains a legitimate military target. Terrorism apologists commonly draw a distinction between the political and military wings of terrorist groups. And detractors of Israel have suggested that Rantisi belongs to the former but not the latter. But this would be akin to saying that Osama bin Laden was not a terrorist because he did not actually fly the planes.

Although Rantisi gives orders instead of following them, he is no less dangerous to Israel.

A founding member of Hamas in 1987, Rantisi has been among the most powerful rejectionist voices in Gaza. After the botched assassination attempt, Rantisi gave reporters a sample of his teachings: "I swear we will not leave one Jew in Palestine. We will fight them with our might."

Such incantations expose the fallacy of trying to separate the political wing from a fundamentally terrorist organization.

If Rantisi is the rhetorical equivalent of Bin Laden, Hamas is a model for Al Qaeda. Although Al Qaeda has a larger international presence and scope, Hamas has killed a percentage of Israelis that would make Bin Laden envious. Since 1993, Hamas has dispatched 113 suicide bombers to Israel, 72 of them since September 2000. As a result, hundreds of Israelis have been killed and, along with them, any chance for Israeli-Palestinian peaceful coexistence.

Not only has Hamas carried out the majority of terrorist attacks against Israel since the Oslo period, it remains committed to obstructing the "road map" for peace. Indeed, Hamas' role as the lead spoiler of Oslo seems likely to repeat itself. This is Rantisi's stated goal.

At last week's summit in Aqaba, newly appointed Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas called for an end to the "armed intifada." What was the Hamas response? It derided Abbas as a stooge of the West and Israel, while pledging to heighten terrorist activity. That weekend, five Israeli soldiers lay dead. The provocation for the attack was not an Israeli incursion into the disputed territories but, rather, a chance for peace.

The shootings brought home the chasm between the Palestinian prime minister, considered moderate for believing in negotiations over terror, and the rejectionists who simply do not accept him as their leader. Significantly, Hamas has issued a joint declaration with Islamic Jihad and the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade taking responsibility for the attack.

Now that the Palestinian prime minister has legitimacy in Washington and Jerusalem, the trick is for Bush to help shore up Abbas' support among his own people.

This will not be easy. Rejectionist leaders such as Rantisi continue to threaten Israel -- in some cases even from their hospital beds.

The road map does not make targeted strikes illegal, but it does ban Palestinian incitement and the type of terror that scuttled Oslo. Only when this happens will Israelis find security and the Palestinians dignity -- as President Bush used to say. ❖

Los Angeles Times

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