

Ze'evi Assassination and Its Possible Aftermath

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



Brief Analysis

The assassination of Israeli cabinet minister Rehavam Ze'evi today outside his hotel room in Jerusalem is unprecedented. With the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) taking responsibility, it marks the first time that an Israeli cabinet minister has been assassinated by a Palestinian since Israel was established. According to Israeli security officials, the assailants fled in the direction of Palestinian Authority (PA)-controlled territory, that is, Ramallah. In front of the cameras, PFLP in Gaza immediately took responsibility, declaring that the assassination was in retaliation for Israel's killing on August 27 of PFLP leader Abu Ali Mustafa.

Ze'evi had an illustrious military career and was involved in the Israeli military since serving as a Palmach commando in the prestate days. He reached the rank of general while serving in most of Israel's wars. Ze'evi headed a far-right Israeli political party, and had just resigned in protest of Israel's withdrawal from the hilltops of Hebron and its loosening of restrictions on Palestinians. His resignation was to go into effect today. However, as a result of the tragedy, the 6 other parliamentarians poised to quit rescinded their resignations from the 83-member coalition in the 120-member Knesset.

Palestinian Steps May Influence Israeli Actions

The way PA chairman Yasir Arafat deals with killers may influence Israeli actions. In a special memorial ceremony at the Knesset today, Sharon blamed Arafat for Ze'evi's death. The prime minister charged that Arafat is responsible because "he has done nothing serious against terror." He said at a top security meeting that "everything has changed." Member of Knesset (MK) Yossi Sarid, head of the Meretz opposition and at the polar opposite of the Israeli political spectrum from Ze'evi, warned from the Knesset podium: "The murder of Rechavam Ze'evi puts the Palestinian Authority to a harsh test. It cannot remain silent for a long time over [Ze'evi's] spilt blood and it must carry out particularly sharp measures to suppress the murderers. No more dodging and no more avoiding. This test of the Palestinian Authority and Arafat is immediate and there is no possibility to postpone it. If they fail the test the land will burn with a fire that no one will be able to extinguish."

PFLP spokesman Ali Jaradat was detained in the aftermath of the killing, but was immediately released. He subsequently gave an interview on Al-Manar Hizbullah satellite television, and reportedly said that the PFLP will continue to avenge the death of Mustafa. Jaradat said after the killing of Mustafa that the Israeli government "has opened the gates of hell on itself and now the fire is approaching it."

Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer urged that Arafat extradite the killers. It should be pointed out that the PA has never extradited killers of Israelis to Israel. The call for extradition comes, however, amid a backdrop of the PA tending to release terrorists shortly after they are jailed.

As a result of the killing, the domestic political pressure on Sharon is likely to intensify. Sharon had already received a clear warning shot across the bow from the announcement by seven rightists that they were defecting from the coalition. Former prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu was clearly expected to be beneficiary of the defection, led by his former chief of staff Avigdor Lieberman. While the parliamentarians may remain in the Sharon coalition for now, the message is that Sharon's ideological base is shaky. This has not been offset by support by the left flank of his coalition. He cannot count on Labor to automatically endorse his policies.

Halting of Arafat's Momentum?

The Ze'evi assassination comes at a bad time for Arafat. Arafat has racked up many political achievements in the last few weeks, despite Israel's complaints about the lack of arrests. Specifically, Arafat won a Bush administration declaration that the United States has a "vision" for a Palestinian state. This idea is expected to be elaborated upon in a speech by Secretary of State Colin Powell in advance of the gathering of foreign ministers from all over the world for the UN General Assembly meeting in mid-November. Moreover, Arafat won an imprimatur for fighting terrorism as he was hosted this week by British prime minister Tony Blair at Ten Downing Street. Moreover, amid fears that he would be on the wrong side of the Osama bin Laden issue, Arafat has put distance between himself and bin Laden internationally: last week his troops shot at a few Palestinian demonstrators at an Islamic college in Gaza. According to a Bir Zeit University poll taken last week, the Palestinian public overwhelmingly opposes U.S. action against the Taliban in Afghanistan by a 76 percent margin.

Impact on Bush Administration Efforts

The killing of Ze'evi comes as the Bush administration had been pressing both the Sharon government and the PA to reach a truce during the U.S. prosecution of its war in Afghanistan. This killing will at minimum delay, and perhaps derail, the American efforts.

The Ze'evi killing could engender an effort by Sharon to extricate Israel from Bush administration initiatives. In the aftermath of the September 11 bombings, Sharon has felt increasingly uncomfortable with U.S. efforts to assemble a coalition involving Arab parties for support in the war against bin Laden. The apex of this discomfort came two weeks ago, when Sharon publicly suggested that the Bush administration was engaged in appeasement of the Arabs just as Britain's Neville Chamberlain sacrificed Czechoslovakia to the Nazis. The reaction to the "Czech" speech was fierce in the United States, and Sharon subsequently apologized. Yet Sharon has been irked by what he privately believes is an American double standard in dealing with terror. While President Bush openly declared that he wants bin Laden "dead or alive," the State Department expressed disapproval this week for Israel's killing of a Hamas operative whom Israel charges was involved in the the killing of twenty-one Israeli teenagers at a Tel Aviv disco in June. In the aftermath of the killing of Ze'evi, Powell called Sharon. After expressing condolences, according to Israel Army Radio, Powell urged Sharon to exercise restraint. This urging was reportedly rejected by Sharon. It should also be pointed out that President Bush condemned the Ze'evi killing, and the White House made clear that it expects the PA to fight terrorism.

Sharon may see the Ze'evi killing as changing the current equation; he has been in a tight spot. Until now, Sharon has found it difficult to resist a war-time administration led by President Bush with a "ninety-plus" approval rating. Especially in face of threats by his own foreign minister, Shimon Peres, Sharon has heretofore acceded to U.S. insistence that he comply with certain terms. Thus, Sharon agreed to withdraw the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) from incursions it made last week into certain Hebron hilltops where Palestinian snipers had killed a Jewish settler's

baby; this, apart from easing roadblocks and expanding to twelve miles the area permitted for fishing opposite the northern Gaza Strip. Sharon has chafed that of the list of 108 people that Israel gave Arafat to arrest on grounds that they were involved in terrorism, Defense Minister Ben-Eliezer reports that only one was arrested. Moreover, while the amount of violence in the West Bank and Gaza is much lower than before, Palestinians have suggested that the killing of IDF soldiers and settlers remains "fair game" and cannot be seen to be part of any truce.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.

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