

Reflections on the killing of Shaikh Ahmad Yasin

By William R. Polk

Before a few days ago, few people in the West had ever heard of Shaikh Ahmad Yasin, but among Muslim Arabs he had long been a major figure. Who was he, why was he important, why was he killed and what can be predicted as the aftermath of his death? These are the questions I will address in this article.

First, it is important to be clear about the nature of terrorism. Terrorism is a tactic not a “thing” or movement or group that can be attacked. It is, moreover, not confined to any race, religion or national group. It has been employed all over the world throughout history and in recent times has been practiced by the Irish, Basques, French, Italians, Algerians, Libyans, Jewish Zionists, Palestinian Arabs, Sudanese Christians, Tamil Hindus, Tibetan Buddhists and many others. Americans today forget that, when they began their war of independence against the British, terrorism was their favored tactic.

Why have so many peoples adopted this tactic? The simple answer is that they are driven to use it because they do not have other means. When political expression is stifled and when enemies have overwhelming power, it is the tactic of last resort. In sum, terrorism is the weapon of the weak.

It is, of course, a horrible weapon. All weapons are. That has always been the intent of those who make and use them. A visit to any museum shows the skill with which ancient daggers were designed to inflict the worst possible pain and so to terrify the enemy. No one who has seen the effects of napalm or land mines or car bombs can believe that modern peoples have become more humane.

What particularly horrifies us about terrorism is its randomness. Blowing up a train, a bus or a building kills or mutilates many innocent people. Of course, this is also true of aerial bombing. But aerial bombing is more abstract – the bomber is often miles away from those he kills – whereas the terrorist is often right among his targets. Indeed, in a suicide attack, he makes himself also a target. He often has to do so because, as Shaikh Ahmad Yasin wrote of his own struggle, “The Palestinian people do not have Apache helicopters or F-16s or tanks or missiles...The only thing they have is themselves to die as martyrs.”

So who was Shaikh Ahmad Yasin? A less likely militant can scarcely be imagined: he was paralyzed from the neck down, confined to a wheelchair and nearly blind and deaf. Born in Palestine at an uncertain date in the 1930s and made a refugee by the Israeli occupation of his home town, he was the spiritual leader of the most important nationalist religious group in that country, *Hamas* (Arabic: “bravery” or “determination”).¹ Ironically, his movement was originally encouraged, perhaps even

¹ The translation fails to catch the deep resonance of the word for Arabic speakers. The most famous “archive” of Arabic culture, a collection of ancient poetry, is known by the same word.

financed, by the Israeli intelligence service in an attempt to undercut the *Fatah* movement of Yasir Arafat.

Yasir Arafat and Ahmad Yasin were both involved in the uprising (*intifada*) of the late 1980s, but both their aims and their supporters were different. Arafat, whose movement was in large part secular, was willing to compromise in return for Israeli recognition of his movement as “The Palestinian Authority.” He reached an agreement at Oslo in 1993 with the then dominant Israeli Labor Party, led by General Yitzhak Rabin (who was later murdered by Israeli terrorists), to end the fighting.

Meanwhile, Shaikh Ahmad Yasin had been tried in an Israeli court and put into prison. In all, he spent nearly 10 years in Israeli detention where he claimed to have suffered grievously and lost his hearing. Unwilling to compromise, he viewed the ultimate collapse of Israel as a historical inevitability, and he was certainly willing to help the process.

When Shaikh Ahmad would not bend, both the Israelis and Arafat decided that *Hamas* must be broken. Soon, the prisons began to be filled with *Hamas* figures, and Israel, by then under a Rightist (*Likud*) government led by Benjamin Netanyahu, embarked upon a policy of assassinating the leaders, and destroying or seizing property and stifling people in Gaza.

“In Gaza,” as Jennifer Loewenstein recently reported,² “your livelihood is diminished each day by an impoverishment that is as deliberate as it is merciless.” In the Gazan town of Rafah, she found 80% of the population refugees “sometimes two and three times over” and, that in the last 4 years, the Israeli army had killed 275 people, including 76 children, and destroyed 1,759 homes, displacing 12,643 people. The Israelis destroyed even water wells. In Rafah, unemployment hovers around 70% and malnutrition and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder are evident among the young. While few journalists have been allowed to see for themselves, and almost nothing has been reported in the Western press, the inhabitants of course know what life there is like. That knowledge feeds the hate that *Hamas* epitomizes.

That is the negative side. The positive side is that, drawing on Islamic traditions, *Hamas* is the one local organization that has tried to succor the inhabitants. Operating in the morass of Gaza, it draws strength from grass roots work in schools, clinics and welfare projects. It has not done much, but the little it has done has given it a legitimacy in the eyes of the Palestinians beyond that now commanded by Yasir Arafat’s *Fatah*.

So, what the Israelis have found is that, despite their draconian measures, they have been unable to break *Hamas*. The more punitive and oppressive their actions became, the more the Palestinians became convinced that Israel was determined not only to take their land but also their lives. Rightly or wrongly, they believe they are the

² In the January 16-31, 2004 issue of *CounterPunch*. There has been very little reporting from Gaza in the Western press for years although various Western humanitarian organizations and “peace activists” have been active there along with the United Nations Refugee organization.

objects of genocide. Thus, in their eyes, Israeli policy justified the position of Shaikh Ahmad Yasin. His death, apparently under the personal supervision of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon,³ will serve only to confirm that conclusion.

Prime Minister Sharon obviously believes that the death of Shaikh Ahmad will convince the Palestinians that they cannot win against Israel and must give up their fight. This is a misreading of history. The founders of his own party, then the terrorist organization *Irgun Zevai Leumi b'Eretz-Israel*, told him this would not happen.⁴

Half a century ago, *Irgun* proclaimed that “Force will be answered with force...Our comrades, the fighters of the underground, have shown that just as they know how to fight for their people they know how to suffer for it. They languish for years in prisons and concentration camps. They do not ask for mercy. They guard their dignity. They suffer proudly...The enslaver must be smitten by every means and wherever possible...war is the hope, the only hope...And this, too, must be remembered: the fate of a people fighting for its freedom is not dependent on this or that attitude of one Power or another...We shall smite the enslaver, and victory will surely come.”

Words that Shaikh Ahmad Yasin himself would have approved.

So what are the implications for the Israelis and for the rest of us?

Israel has found that despite everything it has done, insecurity has grown rather than diminished. And there is no end in sight. There are more Palestinians today than ever before and most apparently now believe that Israel is intent on their destruction. Those who attempted compromise have been at least temporarily discredited. Few, if any, seem to be willing – or indeed able – simply to give up or even to imagine what giving up would entail. Half a century of war has brutalized Palestinian society.

It has also brutalized Israeli society. It is a sad but undeniable fact that we all learn more from our enemies than from our friends. In Algeria, the French carried out vicious repressions reminiscent of what they had experienced under the Nazis; then when the Algerians became free, they began to do to one another what the French had done to them. Israeli torture, casual brutality, racism and murder are constantly reported in the Israeli press and lamented by concerned Israelis. They are an inevitable part of guerrilla war. To say so is not to be “anti-Semitic.” Americans in Vietnam were similarly sullied. The longer such conflicts last, the more difficult it is for societies to recover “normality.”

As Uri Avnery, a former member of the Israeli Parliament, commented: killing Shaikh Ahmad Yasin was “worse than a crime, it is an act of stupidity [which will] endanger the future of the State of Israel.” It will further damage the thin veneer of civility that separates all of us from the bestial.

³ Reported by *Arutz Sheva Israel* national news on March 22, 2004.

⁴ Set out in “Fighting Judea,” a mimeographed collection of broadcasts and broadsheets from 1946 and 1947 produced by the *Irgun* in English.

The rest of us may be affected differently from the Palestinians and the Israelis but also in important ways. As Spain learned from putting troops into Iraq, doing so made it a party to that struggle.

America, which furnished the helicopter that fired the rockets that blew Shaikh Ahmad Yasin out of his wheelchair and into mangled pieces as he returned from prayer as well as the tanks, bulldozers and fighter-bombers that the Palestinians fear and hate, will almost certainly be identified as an “enemy combatant.” *Irgun* proclaimed, and *al-Qa^cida* demonstrated, that those perceived to be enemies will “be smitten by every means and wherever possible... war is the hope, the only hope...”

“An eye for an eye...” is a policy that lasts as long as there are eyes to gouge out.

If even a small part of the world’s 1 billion Muslims conclude that what the Israelis (and we) call “the war on terrorism” is really a war is against them, there can be no end of insecurity, danger, destruction and death ahead of us all. As we are beginning to learn, *al-Qa^cida* is not an organization but a state of mind: through much of the “third world,” otherwise differing movements have been energized by the residues of a century or more of imperialism -- Russian on Çeçens, Chinese on Uigurs, British on many peoples, French on Algerians and Americans on Filipinos.

None of these movements has been defeated by force.

What has been proven to work is, in principle, simple: implementing what President Woodrow Wilson called “the self determination of peoples.” In the Palestine conflict, that means allowing the Palestinians to form their own state. Independence will certainly not bring immediate peace; setbacks will be many and painful. But over time independence is the only practical “road map,” the only way toward a saner, safer more decent future.

Are we likely to take that road? Prime Minister Sharon, facing a parliamentary no-confidence vote by Israelis even more extreme than he for vaguely suggesting a possible withdrawal from Gaza, has announced his decision to kill all the *Hamas* leaders.⁵ President George Bush, catering to American Christian fundamentalists who form his political base, is unlikely to tamper with their espousal of Sharon. Moreover, the Neoconservative strategists whose program Mr. Bush has adopted agree one hundred percent with Sharon. Not much hope can be placed on either government.

Ironically, for whatever else may be said of him, it was Shaikh Ahmad Yasin who sought to confine the struggle within Palestine; he also issued a statement shortly before his death offering “a new phase of calm” and negotiation in return from the evacuation of Gaza.⁶ His death has removed whatever restraint there was.

⁵ *The Guardian*, March 24, 2004.

⁶ Quoted by Harvey Morris in *The Financial Times*, March 22, 2004.

The killing was almost universally condemned, but that is unlikely to offer much satisfaction to Palestinians or much comfort to us. A new and more radical generation is coming to the fore. The cry for vengeance has already sounded and will almost certainly spill over into Iraq, Afghanistan, Europe and America. Attack and reprisal will surely follow in rapid succession, and each escalation of conflict will make taking the road toward peace more difficult and less likely.

The death of Shaikh Ahmad Yasin has made all of us targets.

[1972 words]

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