

# Brutal blunder: U.S. supports extrajudicial killing

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [May 4, 2004](#) issue

When the United States vetoed a proposed UN Security Council resolution criticizing Israel's March 22 assassination of Hamas spiritual leader Sheik Ahmed Yassin, it was the 24th time since 1983 that the U.S. has blocked a resolution critical of Israel. By this latest veto, the U.S. gave its seal of approval to Israel's violation of Article 3 (1) of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits "the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court."

The Islamic religious leader assassinated by Israel was a 67-year-old quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down. His aides were wheeling the sheik out of a mosque following early morning prayers when he was struck by three rocket missiles fired from an Israeli helicopter. Two bodyguards and six civilians died with him.

Yes, the militant arm of Hamas has been responsible for the deaths of innocent Israeli citizens. But instead of stopping these attacks, the assassination of Yassin will only increase them. Stephen Zunes, chair of the Peace and Justice Studies Program at the University of San Francisco, writes that Yassin was not "generally considered to be in the chain of command regarding Hamas terrorist operations." Zunes also points out that at the time of his assassination, Yassin was largely blind and deaf, which "limited his effectiveness as anything more than a symbolic figure." Israeli political activist Uri Avnery describes the killing of Yassin as "worse than a crime, it is an act of stupidity."

The first time I heard of Hamas was during the first intifada, when a group of visiting American journalists interviewed an Israeli foreign ministry official in West Jerusalem. The official told us to "pay attention" to Hamas, a Palestinian Islamic group he described as doing good things for its people. Israel's support of Hamas, which was reported to initially include financial support, was not an occupier's benevolence. This blatant promotion of Hamas to visiting journalists was designed to build opposition to Yasir Arafat's secular PLO forces, then in exile in Tunisia. Israel

was following the dictum that the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

After Sheik Yassin helped create Hamas in 1987, it was generally assumed that Hamas received preferential treatment from Israel's security forces. But In 1989, after intifada leaders began to embrace Hamas, Yassin lost favor and was arrested. Sentenced to life imprisonment, he was released in a prisoner exchange after eight years by then Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

That exchange was largely ignored in reports of Yassin's death, but Robert Fisk, writing in the London *Independent*, explains what happened. In 1997, two Israeli Mossad secret agents failed in an attempt to murder Khaled Masha'al, an Hamas official then living in Amman. Their method: they injected poison into his ear. The agents were arrested by Jordanian police.

A furious Jordanian King Hussein called U.S. President Bill Clinton and "threatened to put the captured Mossad men on trial if he wasn't given the antidote to the poison and if Yassin wasn't released. Netanyahu immediately gave in." The antidote was delivered, Yassin went home to Gaza and the Mossad operatives went back to Israel. Khaled Masha'al recovered, thanks to the antidote, and now is in line to replace Yassin as head of Hamas.

Fast forward to another U.S. president and another Israeli prime minister. On March 22, the day of Yassin's death, White House spokesman Scott McClellan announced that "the United States is deeply troubled by this morning's action in Gaza." Even that mild rebuke was too strong for pro-Israel congressional Democrats.

A "Dear Colleague" letter was drafted by New York Democratic Representative Gary Ackerman demanding that President Bush "immediately repudiate" McClellan's mild rebuke. The letter was signed by such Democratic leaders as Robert Matsui (Calif.), Barney Frank (Mass.), Nita Lowey (N.Y.), Ed Markey (Mass.) and Martin Frost (Tex.). The next day President Bush was back on message: "Israel has a right to defend herself from terror."

Israel has complete military control of Gaza and could have arrested Yassin at any time. An earlier helicopter attack on Yassin failed, leaving many civilians dead. Yassin escaped injury. Clearly, Israel wanted Yassin dead, not alive. Zunes points out that "in more recent years Sheik Yassin had been considered a relatively moderate voice, supporting a series of ceasefires with Israel (each of which Israel broke by assassinating Palestinian leaders)." Yassin will be succeeded either by Khaled

Masha'al, who now lives in Damascus, or by Abdul Aziz Rantisi, Yassin's top deputy in Gaza. Both men are more militant than Yassin.

Why did Prime Minister Ariel Sharon order the assassination of Sheik Yassin after announcing an Israeli plan to withdraw from Gaza? The answer may lie with an earlier Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon on May 24, 2000, ending 22 years of occupation, a decision made by Prime Minister Ehud Barak under considerable Israeli public pressure. Sharon criticized Barak for that withdrawal.

In his recent *New York Times* analysis of Arab reactions to the Iraq occupation, Neil MacFarquhar wrote that "there have been frequent accusations that the Bush administration is mistakenly following the Israeli model." When, or if, Sharon withdraws from Gaza, he will have done so after one more act of brutal power, the extrajudicial killing of a Muslim leader. If President Bush continues to follow the Sharon model as he confronts Islamic opponents in Iraq, it will be more than a mistake; it will be a disaster.