Language war

by James M. Wall in the August 29, 2001 issue

The latest battle in the Middle East language war is over how to describe the killing of Palestinian leaders by the Israeli army. Israel prefers the term “targeted killings” to describe the deaths of 40 Palestinians who have been killed in their cars, homes and offices. Most members of the international media and some within Israel refer to the killings as “assassinations,” although Robert Fisk, in the London-based *Independent* newspaper, reports that “in a major surrender to Israeli diplomatic pressure, BBC officials in London have banned their staff in Britain and the Middle East from referring to Israel’s policy . . . as ‘assassinations.’”

The *Washington Post* went both ways in its headline: “Assassination’s Aftermath: Moral Questions Surround Israeli Policy of ‘Targeted Killings.’” Meanwhile, the Jerusalem newspaper *Ha’aretz* reported that a U.S. State Department spokesman said that the U.S. “has always been against a policy of assassinations,” and that White House spokesman Ari Fleischer calls on all sides to show restraint and adds that restraint includes “opposition to the assassination policy.”

“Targeted killings” would appear to be the preferred language for U.S. politicians who strongly support Israel. According to a report distributed by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, U.S. Senator Joe Biden (D., Md.) told an interviewer on the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera television satellite network:

I don’t call [Israel’s policy] an assassination policy. When you do that you are . . . at war with a group of individuals. . . . Let me put it another way. . . . Assuming that there is . . . an organization that had its purpose to kill civilians in the U.S., our FBI would target them, attempt to find them, and if it could not capture them would use lethal force to deal with them. . . . I don’t call that assassination.

Until recently, Israel has been successful in shaping the narrative that blames the current violence on Yasir Arafat. Writing in the *New York Times*, Deborah Sontag offers a different perspective on what she calls “a potent, simplistic narrative [that] has taken hold in Israel and to some extent in the United States: Mr. Barak offered Mr. Arafat the moon at Camp David last summer. Mr. Arafat turned it down, and then

‘pushed the button’ and chose the path of violence.”

Sontag continues: “Many diplomats and officials believe that the dynamic was far more complex and that Mr. Arafat does not bear sole responsibility for the breakdown of the peace effort.” Terje Roed-Larsen, United Nations special envoy in Jerusalem, told Sontag that “it is a terrible myth that Arafat and only Arafat caused this catastrophic failure. . . . All three parties made mistakes, and in such complex negotiations, everyone is bound to. But no one is solely to blame.”

Another diplomat who questions the myth is Robert Malley, coauthor (with Hussein Agha) of the essay “Camp David: The Tragedy of Errors” (in the *New York Review of Books*). Malley served as special assistant for Arab-Israel affairs in the Clinton White House. He refutes the notion that Israel made “a historic, generous proposal which the Palestinians . . . turned down.” He argues that Arafat rejected Israel’s proposals at Camp David because Barak never actually *gave* him any proposals. Barak gave only vague promises while taking no steps to halt Israeli violations of its own interim agreements. His strategy was to placate voters by ignoring the interim agreements and focusing instead on a final peace agreement.

From Arafat’s perspective, Barak’s “single-minded focus on the big picture” failed to acknowledge that six years after the Oslo agreement there were more Israeli settlements, and the Palestinians were experiencing less freedom of movement and worse economic conditions. Barak wanted to deal with those issues *after* a peace agreement; Arafat believed that the interim suffering of his people and a permanent agreement were “inextricably linked.”

Malley notes that “America’s political and cultural affinity with Israel translated into . . . an exaggerated appreciation of Israel’s substantive moves.” This affinity also contributed to Clinton’s unwillingness to appreciate Arafat’s domestic political needs with his own public and with the larger Arab world that monitors all that Arafat agrees to regarding Jerusalem. Arafat felt betrayed when Clinton, in an effort to boost Barak’s reelection campaign (and no doubt with an eye on Hillary Clinton’s Senate race), blamed Arafat for not accepting Barak’s “generous offer.” Clinton had assured Arafat that if Arafat would take the risk of coming to Camp David, he would not be blamed for any negative outcome.

Arafat believes he made major concessions at Oslo with “the historic compromise—an agreement to concede 78 percent of mandatory Palestine to

Israel.” This also explains why the Palestinians were so sensitive to the Israelis’ use of language. “The notion that Israel was ‘offering’ land, being ‘generous’ or ‘making concessions’ seemed to them doubly wrong—in a single stroke both affirming Israel’s rights and denying the Palestinians’ [rights]. For the Palestinians, land was not given but given back.”

There was no generous offer at Camp David—only a series of vague promises designed to rush Yasir Arafat into an agreement that would have brought temporary political benefit to Clinton and Barak, and a permanent structure of injustice to the Palestinian people. Sontag and Malley are challenging the prevailing Camp David narrative. In the midst of escalating violence on both sides, they offer a hopeful sign that control in the language war may have begun to shift.