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DEIR YASSIN
REMEMBERED



دير ياسين في الذاكرة

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Official Website
English@ezzedeen.net

Reports

Martyr in a Wheelchair?

The Life & Death of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin

By Ahmad Rashad

Death brings out extreme and docile responses in people. And if one is murdered a variety of other emotions enter the fray and make of man a volatile creature.

So is the case now that the Israelis assassinated Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the quadriplegic founder and spiritual leader of Hamas—the Islamic Resistance Movement, after a botched attempt last September. Reactions did and shall vary, of course.

Euphoric Israeli ministers--Ariel Sharon, Shaul Mofaz, Silvan Shalom, and other right-wingers like Binyamin Netanyahu, Uzi Landau, Natan Sharansky, Yosef Lapid—have rejoiced and will ask for more; of course, under the auspices of righteous preemptive defense.

Flaccid indignation by Palestine's ministers—Ahmed Qurei, Nabeel Shaath, Saeb Erakat, Fraih Abu Meddain, Jamil Al Tarifi. The PNA has neither authority nor might; in fact, it is hardly consequential at all, let alone competent. It can only rant by rote, so expect little else. Many Arab governments tow the same line, as has become the norm following such incidents.

Anger among Hamas' upper echelons. Although the organization is made up of a fluid leadership structure, the men to watch are Abdelaziz Rantisi, Mahmoud al-Zahar, and Khaled Meshal, as they will reflect the movement's consensus.

The question now is: How will Hamas behave after the slaying of its preeminent icon? Contrary to Israeli propaganda, Sheikh Yassin was among the movement's moderating elements, frequently calling for restraint when younger, less cautious cadres called for full fledged war.

The Early Years

Ahmed Yassin was born in 1938, spending much of his early life in the Shati refugee camp on the Mediterranean Sea's coast.

He suffered an accident after diving into shallow waters and damaging his spine in 1952. Rather than succumb to his condition, he focused on his education; and eventually became a teacher.

Having established both a career and a family, Yassin gave more attention to local community needs. Israel's occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip in 1967 not only reinforced his social commitment; it drove him further into politics.

Apolitical Roots

Yassin did not advocate revolution against Israeli occupation at first. In line with the Muslim Brotherhood charter, he initially sought the economic and moral reformation of society.

The Brotherhood set up a Jerusalem chapter on October 26, 1945. Following its inception, the group adhered rigorously to advancing Islamic social responsibility, spending its resources on charities, youth clubs, and schools. As a child, Yassin was among those who took advantage of these activities. As an adult, he expanded them.

The Brotherhood was decentralized during the 50s and 60s since Jordan administered the West Bank and Egypt the Gaza Strip; and Yassin was an integral part of eventually consolidating its operations. After the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the movement made Jordan its policy-making center. Yassin established al-Mujamma' al-Islami (the Islamic Center) in Gaza to manage the group's daily activities; and he served as its secretary-general until 1984.

Yassin worked hard to solidify the network's social base. Although his activities were initially limited to Gaza, he became known throughout the territories. He regularly visited most mosques, giving lectures and collecting donations. He also established the groundwork for educational facilities within the mosque network catering to men, women and children.

Yet, many Palestinians were skeptical. The Brotherhood admittedly provided social welfare, distributed donations, ran youth clubs, sponsored schools, and provided community health care. Yet on the other hand, it did not participate in the armed struggle against Israel; it clashed with the nationalists; and the Israelis, for the most part, did not interfere with their work, causing suspicion. In fact, the movement lost quite a few members to Fateh, the Palestine Liberation Organization's most powerful faction, during the 60s and early 70s due to its perceived pacifism.

A Change in Strategy

Yassin and his colleagues soon realized that active political involvement would be necessary. The quadriplegic sheikh convened a number of high-level meetings; and the Brotherhood decided to implement a policy of resistance via civil disturbance during 1985/86. They issued leaflets to this effect under several names, such as Harakat al-Kifah al-Musallah (Armed Struggle Movement), al-Murabitoon ala Ard al-Isra' (The Steadfast on the Land of al-Isra'), and Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya (Islamic Resistance Movement, IRM), the latter name eventually being the only one used. The communiqué's first focused on corruption and immorality; but they became more politicized as tensions escalated. The Islamists initially refrained from confronting Israeli soldiers; yet the December 1987 uprising changed everything.

Hamas

As grass-roots activists organized demonstrations, seven leading Brotherhood members—Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Dr. 'Abdel Aziz Rantisi, Dr. Ibrahim al-Yazuri, Sheikh Salih Shihada, 'Isa al-Našhar, Muhammad Shama'a, and 'Abd al-Fattah Dukhan—developed a new strategy.

They created a separate political wing—Hamas—loosely, but publicly, connected with the Muslim Brotherhood to once and for all prove the latter's commitment to liberation.

Hamas followed a decentralized yet hierarchical system of operations, composed of administrative, charitable, political, and military elements.

Yassin's active involvement, however, came to an end by the early '90s. He was among the first of many Hamas moderates jailed by Israel in 1989 (and later released in a prisoner exchange). Since then, he had played largely a spiritual, advisory role.

By incarcerating Yassin and like-minded leaders, Israel altered Hamas' political rather than military direction; and inadvertently helped hard-liners gain influence. In recent years, it has been increasingly difficult to convince, or be convinced, that restraint is the right strategy. And leaders who had previously held persuasive arguments against mass violence, have become less able to dissuade Hamas' unregimented military arm, the Izzedin Qassam Brigades, to temper their activities.

Now What

Sheikh Yassin represented a rallying point for Islamists of every hue. With his passing, Hamas has lost a strategic consultant, creating a void filled by more militant elements. Although there will be no leadership vacuum—he had long since left the ranks of daily involvement—there are few cadres that can fill his shoes. His death, however, will likely prompt a change in tactics.

Sixteen years after Hamas' establishment, the world will probably see an attack on foreign soil for the first time, as well as more local operations. Leaders of Hamas' military wing will now seek the expansion of their war against Israel. The Zionist state's interests—embassies, consulates, cultural centers, diplomats—across the globe are potential targets.

Politically too, moderates will not only lose ground, but also re-think their positions. Radicals are taking more desperate, and violent, measures. With the execution of pragmatists like Shekih Yassin, far less experienced, and more militant, leaders are taking over.

It is hard to tell if the Israelis are incredibly smart or stupid. They may be targeting the likes of Sheikh Yassin hoping to diminish the movement's resolve, fracture its leadership, or prompt internecine violence. Or they may want to provoke the Islamists into bolder moves, benefiting in two ways. First, numerous guerilla attacks would give the Israeli military an excuse to engage in a wider assault, as it did last year, under the now-standard soundbyte of "defensive" action to stop "terrorism"; and 2) much like a hunter beats bushes to force his prey into the open, provoking activists to show themselves en masse exposes them more easily to Shin Bet, which has heretofore found it difficult to capture those who guide missions against the Israelis.

Perhaps even the Israeli's don't know what they want; and they certainly haven't made it clear to the Americans.

What is certain, however, is that in the past twenty years of Islamic Palestinian activism, no amount of torture, demolition, deportation, incarceration or assassination has made much of an impact on Hamas' ability to grow in strength or popularity. So, while Yassin is dead, the Islamists clearly intend not only to continue resistance, but also to thrive. Perhaps when subsequent Israeli regimes acknowledge that military might does not bring sustainable security, a genuine quest for mutually-beneficial solutions will begin.

Ahmad Rashad, author of Hamas: Palestinian Politics with an Islamic Hue, is a Research Associate at the United Association for Studies and Research.