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HAMAS AFTER RANTISI

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Coming just three weeks after the liquidation of the former leader of Hamas in Gaza, Shaykh Ahmad Yassin, the killing this weekend of his successor, Abd al-Aziz Rantisi, is likely to have far-reaching implications for the balance of power within Hamas and for its relations with the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Although Yassin was technically not a religious dignitary, he did enjoy the reputation of a spiritual leader in the Palestinian and Arab publics. Consequently, his assassination was seen as a challenge to all Islamist movements and it provoked strong expressions of anti-Israel sentiment by leaders throughout the Muslim world, including Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Iraq; Shaykh Yusef al-Qardawi, a Qatar-based jurisconsult considered a leading authority of the Islamist movement; and even the Shaykh al-Azhar, Sayyid Muhammad Tantawi, the highest Muslim legal authority in Egypt.

Rantisi, by contrast, was essentially an organizational leader who lacked Yassin's aura. Even in the Gaza Strip, his leadership was not unchallenged, and despite the rage his liquidation provoked, it will probably not have the same long-term impact in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Even within narrower Palestinian circles, it is doubtful whether this event will confirm the

widespread claim that Israel's counter-terror actions, especially its targeted killing of Hamas leaders, inevitably leads to further radicalization of the movement. First of all, it is worth recalling that Hamas began its string of suicide bombings in 1994-95, long before Israel began targeting its leaders.

Secondly, Rantisi himself always embodied the most extreme line within Hamas. For example, he rejected any compromise during an internal debate in 1996 about suspending terrorist attacks. Yassin tended to adopt a more pragmatic tone in his dealings with the western media, though he always took a harder line in Arab media and insisted that the destruction of Israel was Hamas' strategic objective. And though he rejected any talk of peace, he was prepared to approve a temporary truce in return for complete Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, including Jerusalem, and the return of refugees to Israeli territory. Rantisi gave only the most grudging endorsement of Yassin's position. Moreover, Yassin was prepared to declare his acceptance of the continuing presence of Jews as a client population in the Islamic state destined to arise in place of Israel, whereas Rantisi repeatedly declared that peace could only come after the Jews had all returned to their countries of origin. Rantisi also published articles denying

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the Holocaust and accusing the Zionists of collaborating with the Nazis in the murder of Jews. He even claimed that the comparison of Zionists with Nazis was an insult to the Nazis. It is therefore difficult to imagine how any successor could adopt an even more extreme declaratory position. As for his actions, Rantisi was the one who pushed to upgrade Hamas relations with Hizbullah and Iran, and he always clung to the policy of permanent struggle without compromise or constraints.

In fact, it might be argued that by granting effective immunity to Hamas leaders and forcing only lower-level operatives to pay a price, Israel had actually encouraged the top leadership to be more audacious. By contrast, the decision in summer 2003 to begin targeting the top leaders may well explain their agreement with PA representatives to endorse a limited, temporary ceasefire (which collapsed shortly thereafter). Moreover, it seems that what really encouraged the further radicalization of Hamas was the feeling, reinforced by Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in June 2000, that Israel always folds under pressure because it cannot tolerate heavy casualties and that more military operations are the only way to get Israel to withdraw from Palestinian territories without any political compensation or any need to renounced the aspiration to liberate all of Palestine at some future point in time.

Hamas has portrayed Prime Minister Sharon's decision to withdraw from Gaza as a victory for its long-standing political-military line. Israel's decision to eliminate Yassin, Rantisi and other terrorist leaders may therefore have been prompted, at least in part, by the desire to deflate Hamas' sense of accomplishment and undermine its prestige as the movement that had defeated Israel. It may even be the case that what really determine the level of Hamas operations are its operational capabilities at any given time and the anticipated degree of public support, and that reactions to targeted killings by Israel are a minor consideration. For example, there has

been an appreciable decline in Hamas operations in the West Bank in the last three months, during which large numbers of leaders and operatives have been arrested or killed. Among many outside analysts, the conventional wisdom is that such actions by Israel would lead to an upsurge in terrorist attacks.

Inside Gaza, Rantisi's liquidation may actually facilitate a Hamas-PA dialogue in advance of Israel's anticipated withdrawal. Rantisi was long considered the PA's toughest rival. In 1998, he was even imprisoned for 15 months by the PA. His disappearance may therefore make it easier for others who want to turn Hamas into the dominant political force in Gaza by infiltrating Palestinian government institutions.

The killings of Yassin and Rantisi may also lead to a significant change in the balance of power between the "inside" leadership in Gaza and the "outside" leadership based in Damascus and dominated by the Head of the Political Bureau, Khaled Mash'al. The Gaza leadership has hitherto been seen as slightly more pragmatic than Mash'al, although Rantisi, himself, always sided with the harder "outside" line. But Yassin enjoyed a status at least equal to that of the external leadership. By contrast, that leadership decisively blocked Rantisi's attempt to portray himself as the inheritor of Yassin's mantle and declared him the leader only in Gaza. And Mash'al's instructions to Hamas-Gaza to choose a new leader but not to publicize his name is further evidence of the outside's supremacy; such concern about the physical wellbeing of Rantisi's successor reflects the difficulties of continuing to operate under the ongoing threat of liquidation.

That threat, alone, will not cause Hamas to disappear as a serious political actor. But it has already produced the unprecedented decision to act henceforth under anonymous leader, and that raises serious questions about how the movement can function in the public domain when its leaders' identities remain secret.

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