

# Israeli majority supports killings

Israelis widely applauded the two recent slayings of Palestinian Hamas leaders

By Michael Matza  
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

JERUSALEM — Does Israel's policy of marking Palestinian extremist leaders for death make the Jewish state a safer place? Does it save Israeli lives, or put them at greater risk by upping the ante for retaliation?

The recent targeted killings of Hamas leaders Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Abdel Aziz Rantisi were widely applauded here, even as countries around the world condemned them as "extrajudicial" executions.

"Illegal and disgusting," Sweden's Prime Minister Goeran Persson said of the airstrike that killed Rantisi in the Gaza Strip on Saturday. "Unlawful, unjustified and counterproductive," British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said.

The United States, for its part, issued a muted call for Israel "to consider the implications of the actions it carries out," while affirming its right of self-defense.

Israeli officials say that the policy is effective and that recent events prove it: Hamas' military capability has been dramatically eroded, and Israel has not been forced to pay an unbearable price. Despite bitter cries for an "earthquake" of revenge after the March 22 killing of Yassin, Hamas has been dysfunctional, unable to mount a serious attack, the officials say.

Further, they say, the fact that Hamas was unwilling to publicly identify Rantisi's chosen successor Sunday shows the organization is on the defensive.

The closely spaced attacks, and Israel's vow to step up pressure in

advance of its planned evacuation of settlements from the Gaza Strip, have sown "panic" and "serious distress" among Hamas activists, Maariv, the Israeli daily, wrote Monday, quoting unnamed security sources.

Overall Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal, speaking from the relative safety of Damascus, Syria, vowed Sunday to respond with "100 unique attacks."

Israel, which has targeted Mashaal and once tried to kill him with poison, said over the weekend that it is considering an attack on Hamas' Damascus headquarters.

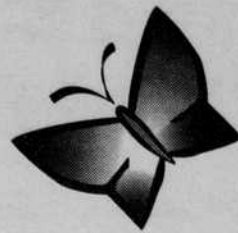
Avraham Rotem, a reserve army major general and senior researcher at Bar Ilan University's Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, said Israel's rationale for targeted killings is three-fold: To decapitate Hamas, causing it to writhe "like a snake without its head;" to force its leaders to spend more time worrying about safety than planning attacks; and to sow dissension in the organization in order to improve the climate for recruiting collaborators who may be more vulnerable because of internal disarray.

Israeli security sources say intelligence warnings about pending attacks by Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian extremist groups are routine, sometimes exceeding 50 a day.

Critics of the targeting killings say they make sense as the law of the jungle, but not as government policy, despite the heinousness of the targets.

Moreover, parliament member Yossi Sarid said, "I don't believe it decreases the level of terror. Sometimes it's the other way around. It strengthens extremism and fanaticism. You can assassinate an evil person, but you can't assassinate a whole movement."

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