# State-directed political assassination in Israel: A political hypothesis

## Nir Gazit
Ruppin Academic Center, Israel

## Robert J Brym
University of Toronto, Canada

## Abstract

Extant theories explain reasonably well why the Israeli state exercises a given level of violence against substate actors. Based on economic or sociological models of human action, these theories attribute the level of state violence, respectively, to the narrow cost-benefit calculations of state officials or the institutionally embedded norms that govern their deliberations. The strength of such theories notwithstanding, this article argues that they fail to account for the willingness of Israeli officials to order the assassination of high-ranking political opponents during the second *intifada*, or Palestinian uprising against Israel. This article's analysis of published sources concerning the assassination of Hamas leaders Ahmed Yassin and Ismail Abu Shanab and of interviews with 74 Israeli counterterrorist experts suggests that the decision to engage in state-directed political assassination in the period 2000–5 was based less on narrow calculations and institutionally specific norms than on identifiable political contingencies. Specifically, the second *intifada* appears to have led many Israeli decision-makers to favour creating chaos in the Palestinian political system, a goal that was well served by the policy of political assassination. The policy's effect was to forestall the founding of a viable, independent Palestinian state.

## Keywords
communal violence, military sociology, political sociology, violence

## Introduction: Israel's assassination policy

Two months after the outbreak of the second *intifada* in September 2000, Israel openly acknowledged its policy of assassinating selected Palestinian insurgents (Abdel-Jawad,

**Corresponding author:**
Robert J Brym, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, 725 Spadina Avenue, Toronto M5S 2J4, Canada.
Email: rbrym@chass.utoronto.ca

2001; David, 2002; Gross, 2003; Kasher and Yadlin, 2005). The United States initially expressed strong disapproval but muted its criticism following al-Qaeda's attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001. It all but fell silent on the subject after November 2002, when CIA operatives in Djibouti directed a Predator drone to fire a missile that killed a suspected al-Qaeda operative and planner of the 2000 USS *Cole* bombing. Insurgents who launch suicide attacks, lack easily identifiable bases of operation and blend into local populations make it difficult to use large-scale conventional military force and increase the temptation to respond by unconventional means. The extraordinary nature of the violence visited on Israel and the US has encouraged both countries to respond extraordinarily.

Since the Second World War, a new international norm has crystallized: either in court or on the battlefield, political leaders must answer for their states' actions. Unusually, however, large segments of the public in Israel and the US agree that this principle should extend to the assassination of political leaders they identify as terrorists. Public opinion polls show that as early as 1998 a majority of Americans favoured the assassination of individual terrorist leaders (Appleton, 2000: 507). Some 90 percent of Israelis support the policy (David, 2002: 7). Accordingly, between October 2000 and July 2005, some 210 state-directed assassination attempts took place in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, resulting in 399 Palestinian deaths (Brym and Araj, 2006a).

Some students of Israel's assassination policy focus on its legal and moral implications. Such issues do not concern us here (David, 2002; Eichensehr, 2005; Kasher and Yadlin, 2005; Keller and Forowicz, 2008; Kremnitzer, 2006; Kretzmer, 2005; Stein, n.d.). Instead, we are among those researchers who seek to explain variation in the level of Israeli retaliation against Palestinian insurgents, the consequences of such retaliation and the logic (or lack thereof) underlying Israel's counterinsurgency policy (Brym and Maoz-Shai, 2009; Byman, 2006; Cohen, 2008; Hafez and Hatfield, 2006; Honig, 2007; Kaplan et al., 2005, 2006; Kober, 2007; Luft, 2003; Maoz, 2007; Mitchell, 2004; Ron, 2003; Zussman and Zussman, 2006). Specifically, this article is motivated by our finding that extant explanations account less well for variation in the rate of assassination of political leaders (about 9 percent of targets between October 2000 and July 2005) than for variation in the rate of assassination of military operatives (about 91 percent of targets during this period) (calculated from Brym and Araj, 2006a).[1] We regard this shortcoming as serious because Israel's assassination of political leaders typically causes more Palestinian outrage and intransigence, and has more negative implications for Israel domestically and internationally, than does the assassination of military operatives.

Only 11 Palestinian political leaders between were assassinated between 2000 and 2005. We are therefore obliged to generalize cautiously, stating our findings not as firm conclusions but as hypotheses requiring study in other times and different contexts. Furthermore, we recognize that several assassinated political leaders also played important military roles in their organizations, just as civilian leaders in sovereign countries are sometimes in charge of their state's security agencies. What distinguishes the 11 men we studied is that they all served as members of the central leadership (nine cases) or regional leadership (two cases) of their political organizations. All other assassination targets lacked these characteristics.

To make our case, we first highlight the limitations of rational choice and new institutionalist theories – the two most popular theories that have been used to explain Israeli

violence against substate actors. We then analyse the circumstances surrounding the assassination of Ismail Abu Shanab (21 August 2003) and Ahmed Yassin (22 March 2004), two of Hamas's most senior political leaders. Yassin and Abu Shanab represented opposite ideological poles in Hamas. Yassin was Hamas's top political and spiritual leader. Strongly influenced by the religious and political ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood, Yassin was a hardliner and one of the most radical voices opposing compromise with Israel. Abu Shanab, although subject to Yassin's leadership and committed to Hamas ideology, expressed Hamas's more moderate and pragmatic side. He supported the idea of a two-state solution and a long-term ceasefire with Israel. Consequently, analysing the assassination of these figures ought to maximize our understanding of the broad strategic rationale underlying the Israeli policy of political assassination.

Our information comes in part from Hebrew-language newspaper accounts of, and published research reports pertaining to, state-directed political assassination during the second *intifada*, the Yassin and Shanab assassinations in particular. In addition, we analysed a series of semi-structured, approximately 90-minute interviews that were conducted in Hebrew in 2005 and 2006 by Yael Maoz-Shai with 74 senior Israeli security decision-makers and advisers from various state and academic organizations (for sampling details, see Brym and Maoz-Shai, 2009).

Israeli decision-makers regard Palestinian political leaders as terrorists, and thus as legitimate targets for assassination. However, the evidence we present is consistent with the view that the strategic motivation underlying the policy of assassinating political leaders is broader than the desire to thwart terrorism. It seems to encompass the wish to promote instability in the Palestinian polity, thus delaying if not preventing the creation of a viable Palestinian state.

## Extant explanations and their shortcomings

Researchers who endorse an economic model of human action have demonstrated that the Israeli state typically behaves rationally in a narrow sense: the level of violence wielded by the state is strongly and positively correlated with the severity of preceding attacks on its citizens, while the exercise of state violence typically brings about a decline in anti-Israel attacks in the short term (Almog, 2004–5; Berrebi and Klor, 2006; Bronner, 2009; Frisch, 2006; Jaeger and Paserman, 2006, 2008; Morag, 2005).[2] Generally, rational choice theorists do not concern themselves with the social origins of the strategies and goals that frame human action because they assume that particular means and ends are optimal and therefore 'given' (Kiser and Bauldry, 2005: 173). In the case of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, they usually fail to discuss the rationality of responses to anti-Israel violence other than measured state violence, and outcomes other than a short-term decline in violent action on the part of substate actors, because they apparently assume that alternative means and outcomes are suboptimal and therefore non-rational.[3]

Researchers who favour a sociological model of human action take a different tack. They argue that norms associated with different institutional settings affect the level of violence visited on substate actors, to some degree independently of the strategies and goals of state officials. Following are three examples of new institutionalist arguments and findings relevant to the case at hand:

1. States are not free to use violence as their governments might like in response to threat from dissenting minorities because the international community imposes constraining norms on them. Defying international norms incurs costs, knowledge of which limits state action (Gordon and Berkovitch, 2007; Hajjar, 2001, 2005; Risse et al., 1999; Shor, 2008).
2. The stronger the economic ties and bureaucratic state regulation between core states and their occupied territories, the greater the degree to which core-state norms influence the treatment of dissenting minorities, and therefore the lower the likelihood of core states engaging in acts of indiscriminate violence against dissenting populations residing in occupied territories (Ron, 2000, 2003).
3. Organizationally embedded conventions guide the response of state decision-makers to threat. These conventions remain intact until changing domestic and international circumstances cause growing awareness of their non-viability, at which time a new set of conventions is created. The very definition of what constitutes threat, the maximum level of violence by dissenting minorities that is deemed tolerable, the appropriate means for dealing with such violence and the desirability of various outcomes that flow from these means are thus shaped by institutionalized norms that vary over time (Kuperman, 2005).

The foregoing arguments are based on research findings, not speculation. Rational choice and new institutionalist theories offer credible, evidence-based accounts of variation in state violence against dissenting minorities in a variety of settings. However, saying that the theories have strengths does not mean that they lack flaws.

In the case of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, we are struck by the strong correlation between the frequency of Israeli deaths at the hands of Palestinians in a given month and the frequency of Palestinian deaths at the hand of Israelis in the following month ($r = .629$ for the period January 1987 to December 2007; Brym and Andersen, forthcoming). Also noteworthy is the more modest but still positive correlation between the frequency of Palestinian suicide bombings in a given month and the frequency of Israeli state-directed assassination of *military operatives* in the following month ($r = .241$ for the period October 2000 to July 2005). However, the correlation between the frequency of Palestinian suicide bombings in a given month and the frequency of Israeli state-directed assassination of Palestinian *political leaders* in the following month is close to zero ($r = .097$, again for the period October 2000 to July 2005).[4] True to rational-choice theory, more Palestinian suicide bombings in one month tend to be followed by more Israeli killing of Palestinians, including more assassinations of military operatives. However, the argument that Israeli response is proportionate to Palestinian threat appears to break down when applied to the assassination of political leaders. In the latter case, the narrow game rules specified by adherents of rational choice theory seem not to apply.

New institutionalism is also of limited utility in explaining Israel's extrajudicial execution of Palestinian leaders. The new institutionalist school of thought emphasizes the search for legitimacy as a central element in state action (Kerremans, 1996; March and Olsen, 2005; Meyer et al., 1997). The international environment structures possibilities for state action by shaping opportunities, offering incentives and constraining particular forms of statecraft (Vertzberger, 1998: 143; Wendt, 1987: 342). Consequently, states are

inclined to take into account the international setting insofar as it affects the payoff structure of their actions.

Following this line of reasoning, we would expect Israel to limit assassinations to field operatives who represent a clear and imminent threat to its security (so-called 'ticking bombs'). Yet during the second *intifada*, Israel persisted in assassinating Palestinian politicians even in the face of harsh worldwide condemnation. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan repeatedly urged Israel to end its assassination policy, saying it violated international law (United Nations, 2003). A motion condemning the Yassin assassination was brought before the UN Security Council and failed only because of a US veto. Turkey, a major trading partner and military ally of Israel, recalled its ambassador in protest (Harel and Isakharof, 2004: 212).

Political assassination is costly also because it enrages the Palestinians, increases their motivation to retaliate violently and makes them more intransigent in the long run (Brym and Araj, 2006b; Löwenheim and Heimann, 2008; Zussman and Zussman, 2006). This is so, first, because political leaders enjoy higher status than do military leaders and are typically better known to the Palestinian public; and, second, because most Palestinians seem to view the targeting of political leaders as beyond the rules of the game. As a result, killing political leaders radicalizes Palestinians and undermines ceasefires. For example, the assassination in 2001 of Abu Ali Mustafa, Secretary-General of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, sparked the revenge killing of Israeli Minister of Tourism Rehavam Ze'evi two months later. Similarly, the assassination of Palestinian Islamic Jihad's Muhammad Seeder and Hamas's Ismail Abu Shanab in 2003 led Hamas to rescind a ceasefire with Israel. International criticism heightened as Israel was widely held to be unwilling to respect the truce, and the cycle of violence between Israel and the Palestinians resumed (Honig, 2007: 566).

Some analysts argue, to the contrary, that the assassination of Palestinian political leaders is beneficial. For example, they hold that killing Hamas's top leaders (Yassin and his successor, Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi) in April 2004 resulted in a leadership vacuum that caused the organization to suspend hostilities with Israel and effectively end the second *intifada* (Kober, 2007). Such arguments strike us as questionable to the degree that they overlook other plausible and sufficient explanations. For example, Israel resumed control of the West Bank in 2002 through Operation Defensive Shield and started constructing the West Bank separation barrier a year later. These actions alone may account for the failure of Hamas to retaliate for the Yassin and Rantissi assassinations. Indeed, given that the Israeli leadership's top priority is to protect the lives of Israeli citizens, and knowing that taking out Hamas's top leaders would normally cause a violent reaction, is seems likely that the decision to assassinate Yassin and Rantissi was not made until near the end of the second *intifada*, when Hamas's military infrastructure was deeply degraded.[5] The Israeli public seems to understand that political assassination is counterproductive. That may be why the Israeli stock market typically declines immediately after the assassination of Palestinian political leaders (but rises immediately following the assassination of senior military operatives) (Zussman and Zussman, 2006).

Given its controversial nature and obvious costs, how can we explain the Israeli policy of assassinating Palestinian political leaders during the second *intifada*? In the following discussion, we layer a third, supplementary explanation for Israel's assassination

policy on top of existing theories. We argue that the desire to decapitate the Palestinian political leadership was consistent with the expressed desire on the part of Israeli decision-makers to maximize Palestinian political instability, one consequence of which was to delay if not prevent the formation of a viable and independent Palestinian state. In other words, the assassination of Palestinian political leaders does not seem to have been a response to immediate threat. Nor did international norms and condemnation prevent it. Seemingly, the policy existed because it helped to achieve a political goal to which much of the Israeli leadership was committed.

## The assassination of Ahmed Yassin and Ismail Abu Shanab

As noted earlier, immediate threat to Israel as measured by the frequency of suicide bombing precipitates the assassination of Palestinian military operatives. The correlation between threat and response would probably be even higher if not for operational considerations that often stand in the way of rapid response. It takes time-consuming intelligence work to identify targets and plan their assassination. Targets may be elusive. Political circumstances, domestic or international, may render an immediate response unwise (Catignani, 2005; Honig, 2007; Kober, 2007).

For the assassination of Palestinian *political* leaders, such considerations are less salient. For one thing, senior political figures are well known and highly visible, and Israeli intelligence constantly monitors their movements. Target identification and planning are therefore less time-consuming tasks. Moreover, as we saw earlier, Israel has routinely flouted world opinion when it comes to the assassination of political leaders. The correlation between the exercise of violence against Israel and Israel's violent response is near zero for political assassinations, not because of operational or tactical considerations but because the logic that drives such action seems to be different from that which drives the assassination of military operatives.

We may begin to appreciate how these logics may differ by noting that about half the political assassinations during the second *intifada* were carried out in periods of relative calm and even ceasefire between Palestinians and Israelis. Thus, deaths of Jews due to suicide attacks averaged 2.4 per month during the second *intifada*. In the month preceding five of the 11 political assassinations, the number of Jewish deaths was below the monthly average (see Table 1).

Even when the number of deaths due to suicide attacks in the month before a political assassination was above average, the assassination target was not necessarily affiliated with the organization responsible for most of the suicide attacks. For example, the month before the Yassin assassination saw 18 Jews die in two suicide attacks, but neither attack was perpetrated by Hamas. The al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, the military arm of Fatah, took credit for them (see Table 1). We may therefore rule out the notion that the Yassin assassination was quick retaliation for an especially bloody series of Hamas assaults. A political interpretation of the assassination seems more credible.

In particular, it may have been the growing power of Hamas that motivated Israeli decision-makers to send a helicopter gunship to launch Hellfire missiles at Yassin, the undisputed leader of the party he helped found in 1987. By 2004, Hamas was threatening to overtake Fatah as the dominant voice on the Palestinian street, an unacceptable

**Table 1.** Palestinian political leaders assassinated during the second *intifada*

| Name | Organization | Location | Date | Jewish deaths from suicide attacks in preceding month |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Thabit Thabit | Fatah | West Bank | 31 December 2000 | 0 |
| Jamal Salim | Hamas | West Bank | 31 July 2001 | 2 |
| Jamal Mansur | Hamas | West Bank | 31 July 2001 | 2 |
| Abu Ali Mustafa | PFLP | West Bank | 27 August 2001 | 15 |
| Jihad Ahmed Jibril | PFLP-GC | Lebanon | 20 May 2002 | 17 |
| Salah Shehadeh | Hamas | Gaza | 22 July 2002 | 1 |
| Ibrahim al-Maqadma | Hamas | Gaza | 8 March 2003 | 14 |
| Ismail Abu Shanab | Hamas | Gaza | 21 August 2003 | 25 |
| Ahmed Yassin | Hamas | Gaza | 22 March 2004 | 18 |
| Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi | Hamas | Gaza | 17 April 2004 | 1 |
| Izz al-Din Khalil | Hamas | Syria | 26 September 2004 | 18 |

*Source:* Brym and Araj (2006a).

development from the Israeli viewpoint insofar as Hamas rejected the idea of a Jewish state. For Yassin, historic Palestine was Islamic land, 'consecrated for future Muslim generations until Judgment Day', and he considered any reconciliation with the Jews (not only with Israel) a crime (quoted in *Al-qds al-'raby*, 2000). It seems that Yassin was assassinated not because he was a security threat but, as Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz said, because he was a strategic threat to Israel (Harel and Isakharof, 2004: 208).

In 1987, Israel's perception was quite the opposite. It viewed Hamas as a conservative counterweight to the nationalist ambitions of Fatah and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Consequently, Israel did not object to the founding of Hamas, allowed it to receive financial aid from abroad and permitted its activists to speak publicly, organize, publish and demonstrate while punishing Fatah and the PLO for similar activities (Robinson, 2004). However, things did not work out as Israel expected. Soon after the founding of Hamas, its militants started participating in anti-Israeli demonstrations and riots. In 1993, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad became the most radical opponents of the Oslo Accords, which were intended to nurture a final peace agreement between Israel and the PLO. Hamas initiated the first suicide bombing campaign in Israel in an attempt to derail the peace process and revive the dream of an Islamic state encompassing the entire country (Kydd and Walter, 2002).

After the effective breakdown of Israeli–Palestinian peace talks in 2000 and the consequent eruption of the second *intifada*, the popularity of Hamas soared (Brym and Araj, 2008). Israel countered the wave of suicide bombings with a massive counterinsurgency campaign in March 2002 (Operation Defensive Shield), but Hamas's popularity continued to climb as it received credit for leading the resistance against Israel. According to one set of polls, the ratio of Fatah to Hamas popular support stood at 3.5 in July 2000 (just before the outbreak of the second *intifada*), 2.0 in May 2002 (immediately after Operation Defensive Shield ended) and just 1.3 in March 2004 (the month that Yassin was assassinated) (Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre, 2005). Another poll found that Hamas's popularity actually exceeded Fatah's for the first time in the month

of Yassin's assassination (*Al-qds al-ʿraby*, 2004). Hamas was no longer just a security threat but a threat to the Fatah leadership and therefore a serious political risk.

The approaching Palestinian elections and Israel's planned withdrawal from Gaza seem to have sealed Yassin's fate. Hamas's involvement with the Palestinian Authority (PA) had been ambivalent. After all, the PA was established as part of the Oslo Accords, which Hamas rejected. Hamas declined to participate in the first elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council in 1996. Until 2006 it took part only in local elections (Araj and Brym, 2010; Mishal and Sela, 2006). However, as the 2005 presidential election and the 2006 legislative election approached, and Hamas's stock continued to rise, its opposition to electoral participation softened. In Israel, the fear grew that Hamas might soon take over the PA – an intolerable situation from the Israeli perspective. Israel's planned pullout from Gaza in 2005 reinforced its anxiety that the region might fall into the hands of Hamas because the party was especially popular in Gaza and its leadership was concentrated there.

When interviewed, the former head of Israel's anti-terror unit explained that the time had come for Israel to use its assassination policy to damage Hamas's political popularity:

> It is very important to use [political assassination] in a particular way. You have masterminds, master terrorists, including the ideologists, Yassin for example. Yes, I would use targeted killings against the ideologists. Send a message to the [Palestinian] population. I know that in the short term it might increase their popularity, but not in the long run.

The former head of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) operations branch concurred:

> Ahmed [Yassin] was very popular and suddenly he is gone. . . . It generates great fear. . . . There was no doubt that . . . [the assassination] would result in a victory or at least a temporary solution [for Israel]. It is obvious that demonstrating your supremacy would paralyze [the enemy] and even generate political alternatives.

The broad strategic significance of political assassination is also evident from the involvement of the Israeli political leadership in approving such moves. The assassination of field operatives took place frequently during the second *intifada* without direct involvement by the Israeli political echelon. In contrast, the decision to eliminate political leaders was subject to specific directives and formal approval by the Israeli Prime Minister and his cabinet. As the former head of the Israeli National Security Council and National Security Adviser to the Prime Minister said:

> Roughly speaking, we can distinguish between two groups of [assassination] targets. The first group does not require specific authorization from anyone. Let's say I am brigade commander and I identify a truck that contains Kassam rockets. I can shoot the guy immediately. The same goes for other similar targets. [Targeting this truck] is a decision that is taken on the tactical level by brigade commanders. What makes this guy a legitimate target is what he is doing right now. [Yet] there is this other group [of targets], the more senior ones, who are usually not 'ticking bombs' in the sense they are not carrying an explosive belt. They activate other people. Some of them have special significance, whether political, religious or other. The decision to target such people is taken in advance by a much more senior level of decision makers. . . . It is not up to the brigade commander to decide whether to eliminate Yassin.

Although the decision to kill Yassin was apparently based on political rather than security considerations, and required approval by Israel's top politicians, statements of Israeli decision-makers regarding this and other political assassinations resembled the rhetoric that surrounded the assassination of field operatives. The rhetoric might be interpreted as an effort to legitimize political assassination internationally and domestically. However, it may also have reflected the strategic aim of the policy, namely to erode the capacity of the Palestinian people to govern itself. This goal was accomplished in two steps. First, the distinction between military operatives and political leaders was obscured, thus delegitimizing the political leadership. Second, the possibility of negotiating with the political leadership was ruled out on the grounds that it lacked legitimacy. Without legitimate leaders, no serious discussion of Palestinian statehood was possible.

Extending the metaphor of the ticking bomb did much to blur the line between military operatives and political leaders. A former commander of the Strategic Planning Unit of the IDF put it this way:

> There was a gradual development of the term 'ticking bomb'. At first it was related to a specific person. Later on it was extended to encompass others, for example, the people who dispatch [suicide bombers]. Eventually it also included the [Palestinian] political echelon. . . . The distinction between the political and operational echelon is very problematic. Sure, there are people who practice the operational aspect of facilitating terror. But there is also the political echelon that legitimizes these actions; it is involved in the policy of terror. He is the one to make the principled decisions . . . Yassin, for example.

The former head of the Israeli National Security Council and National Security Adviser to the Prime Minister said much the same thing: 'Sheikh Yassin is the one who formulated [Hamas] policy. He was part of the ticking bomb.'

The second step in the Israeli rationalization of assassinating Palestinian political leaders involved undermining the legitimacy of the Hamas leadership because of its involvement in the anti-Israeli insurgency. In the words of a former IDF chief of staff:

> Khaled Mashal is a political leader. But he is a political leader of a terror organization. Now, whoever gives instructions, whoever's organization practices terror activity, he is a leader of a terror organization. Now, every terrorist leader has charisma, he controls people . . . then we can call him a 'political leader'. And we can call Hamas a movement, a political movement. Hamas, Hezbollah, they are all political movements that participate in the political processes in their societies. This is fine. But, since the political leadership also leads terror it is a terrorist political leadership.

Another senior IDF officer explained matters this way:

> I consider the distinction between the political and non-political echelon irrelevant. At the end of the day, Yassin was the one to formulate the aggressive policy [against Israel]. He was the one to outline [their] strategy. Hamas's [so-called] pragmatism was not accepting the existence of the State of Israel. This is why I thought it was justified eliminating them.

The decision to blur the line between military operatives and political leaders was not supported by all Israeli policy-makers, some of whom were concerned that political

assassinations would end any possibility of political reconciliation. For instance, a former head of the Research and Assessment Division of Israeli Military Intelligence maintained that it was in Israel's long-term interest to maintain the distinction:

> There is a [Palestinian] political echelon. There are people whose terrorist involvement is minor. The Palestinians have no non-terrorist organizations. Fatah is also a terror organization. Therefore, in the current Palestinian political reality, you could say that each and every political activist is a 'terrorist'. Hence, we must be careful with our classifications. Our problem with the Palestinians is the opposite; there are too many candidates for elimination. Therefore we should not [eliminate them all]. What I am trying to say is that we should calculate [our actions] and reduce [the number of assassinations].

However, this was a minority view. Most Israeli decision-makers believed that it was better for Israel to promote unrest and chaos among the Palestinian leadership than to build long-term understanding with them. In the words of the former head of Israel's anti-terror unit:

> In the short run, the assassinations might increase the motivation [to engage in terrorism], but not in the long run. It brought the organization to chaos. They were forced to calculate their moves. No one can deny the fact that Hamas started to moderate its moves after we targeted Yassin and Rantissi, not before.

Significantly, however, Israel did not choose to eliminate only radical political leaders like Yassin and Rantissi. It also targeted more moderate Palestinian political figures, such as Thabit Thabit of Fatah and Ismail Abu Shanab of Hamas. We believe that this fact strengthens our argument concerning the ultimate political goals of political assassination.

Ismail Abu Shanab was not the most obvious assassination target. Although most Israelis heard his name for the first time only after he was assassinated, he was one of Hamas's top political leaders and a relatively moderate voice. A US-educated engineer and a university professor with excellent command of English, Abu Shanab was Hamas's most visible spokesperson in the western media. He acted as Hamas's liaison to Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas when Abbas was trying to persuade militant groups to stop attacking Israelis (Blitzer, 2003).

If there was any potential for political pragmatism in Hamas, Abu Shanab represented it. For example, in an interview with *Time* magazine several months before his death, he expressed support for a two-state solution: an independent Palestinian state in the occupied territories alongside Israel, not in place of it (McGeary, 2003). Certainly, Abu Shanab was not the most dovish Palestinian leader. Yet he represented a clear alternative to the Hamas leadership's traditional radicalism.

His moderation did not grant him immunity. On 21 August 2003, Abu Shanab was hit by an Israeli helicopter missile strike. His assassination ended an informal truce between Hamas and Israel, and in response to his assassination Hamas resumed its suicide attacks.

Predictably, a senior Israeli foreign ministry official explained that from the Israeli point of view there is no distinction between Abu Shanab and those who carry out suicide attacks (McGreal, 2003). The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs website reiterated that Abu Shanab was assassinated because he was a senior Hamas terrorist who was in close

contact with Yassin and acted as deputy Hamas leader when Yassin was abroad (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003).

The assassination of Abu Shanab and other Palestinian leaders, whether radical or moderate, suggests that Israel's assassination policy was largely insensitive to political nuance. No real political pragmatism is possible in Hamas from the perspective of Israeli decision-makers. Pragmatism may be expressed, but it is fraudulent, a mere tactical trick. In the words of a former IDF chief of staff:

> Hamas pragmatism was not to accept the existence of the State of Israel. This is why I thought it was justified eliminating them. This is why I think it was not only legitimate but also vital to target Hamas's so-called political leadership. Not only Yassin, the entire group.

## Conclusion

Assassination – the killing of a public figure for political reasons – is among the highest-profile acts of political violence (Iqbal and Zorn, 2008). Although it is an attack against an individual, the motives for assassination are necessarily political (Khatchadourian, 1974). As such, we believe that Israel's policy of political assassination policy should be seen as a part of its larger strategic outlook and not just as an aspect of its military campaign against Palestinian insurgents.

During the second *intifada*, the pattern of assassination of Palestinian political leaders seems to have differed from the pattern associated with the assassination of military operatives. As rational choice theory predicts, the frequency of military assassination correlated positively with threat level as measured by frequency of suicide bombings. However, no such correlation existed for political assassinations. Most political assassinations took place in periods of relative tranquillity or when the target did not belong to the organization responsible for most suicide attacks in the month preceding his assassination. And although most assassinated Palestinian leaders belonged to Hamas, which strongly opposed compromise with Israel, political assassinations were not restricted to Hamas or to the most radical Palestinian leaders.

Similarly, contrary to what new institutionalism predicts, Israel's decision to engage in repeated acts of political assassination ignored strong countervailing norms and protests from the international community. Instead, interviews with key Israeli counterterrorist experts and decision-makers are consistent with the view that the driving force behind political assassination was the desire to erode the Palestinian leadership and maintain instability in the Palestinian polity. We do not know whether the ultimate goal of Israeli decision-makers was to deny the self-determination of the Palestinian people, as some analysts have argued (e.g. Kimmerling, 2003), but the effect of their actions was just that.

Political contingencies apparently overrode narrow cost-benefit calculations and institutionally embedded norms regarding the assassination of Palestinian political leaders in the period 2000–5. Specifically, the second *intifada* weakened the appeal of the Israeli left and the peace movement, one result of which was that an increasing proportion of senior elected officials and decision-makers in the military and intelligence communities saw increased instability in the Palestinian leadership as a desirable outcome that could be facilitated by engaging in a series of political assassinations.

In showing how such political contingencies may influence state officials to order the assassination of opposing leaders, we do not claim either to have supplanted extant theories or to have offered a rigorous empirical test of our argument. We have sought merely to identify certain apparent limitations of rational choice and new institutionalist theories when applied to the problem of political assassination and to develop a supplemental hypothesis in an effort to overcome these limitations. It may be that certain categories of state violence or certain constellations of political circumstances are relatively less susceptible to the influence of rational-choice and normative forces, allowing the override function of contingent political considerations to come into play. These are matters requiring further investigation in other times and contexts.

## Funding

## Acknowledgements

## Notes

1. An independent tally of type of assassination target for the period September 2000 to April 2004 is virtually the same as ours (Kober, 2007).
2. Researchers in this tradition have little if anything to say about long-term effects, but at least one examination of the use of limited force against substate actors from 1949 to 2006 discovered that, in the long term, aggressive actions by Israel consistently failed to lower the frequency and lethality of enemy attacks and had adverse military and diplomatic effects (Maoz, 2007).
3. Classical rational choice theorists claim that 'widespread and/or persistent human behavior can be explained by a generalized calculus of utility-maximizing behavior, without introducing the qualification "tastes remaining the same" ' (Stigler and Becker, 1977: 76). For classical rational choice theory, tastes (or 'preferences,' to use the now more common term) are similar among people and remain stable over time. Therefore, the explanation of any particular behaviour requires only the discovery of the utility-maximizing principle(s) governing it, not the discovery of the origins of preferences, which one may safely assume to be fixed.
4. The first correlation is reported in Brym and Maoz-Shai (2009: 615). The second and third correlations are calculated from Brym and Araj (2006b). Only the third correlation fails to reach statistical significance at the .05 level.
5. We are grateful to Bader Araj for this point.

## References

Abdel-Jawad S (2001) *The Israeli Assassination Policy in the Aqsa Intifada.* Jerusalem: Jerusalem Media and Communication Center.

Almog D (2004–5) Cumulative deterrence and the war on terrorism. *Parameters* 34(4): 4–19.

*Al-qds al-'raby* (2000) Al-Shaykh Yassin yṭalb al-wfd al-flsṭyny bal-nshab mn Camp David [Sheikh Yassin asks the Palestinian team to withdraw from Camp David]. 18 July, p. 5.

*Al-qds al-'raby* (2004) Hrk-a Hamas al-akthr sh'by-a byn al-Flsṭynyyn [Hamas movement is the most popular among the Palestinians]. 22 April, p. 5.

Appleton S (2000) The polls – trends: Assassinations. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64(4): 495–522.

Araj B and Brym RJ (2010) Opportunity, culture and agency: Influences on Fatah and Hamas strategic action during the second intifada. *International Sociology* 25(6): 842–868.

Berrebi C and Klor EF (2006) On terrorism and electoral outcomes: Theory and evidence from the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50(6): 899–925. 925?

Blitzer W (2003) *Who Was Ismail Abu Shanab?* 21 August. Available at: www.cnn.com/2003/US/08/21/wbr.hamas.leader/

Bronner E (2009) Parsing gains of Gaza War. *The New York Times*, 19 January. Available at: www.nytimes.com

Brym, RJ and Andersen R (forthcoming) Rational choice and the political bases of changing Israeli counterinsurgency strategy. *British Journal of Sociology.*

Brym RJ and Araj B (2006a) Database on collective violence during the second intifada. Department of Sociology, University of Toronto. Machine readable file.

Brym RJ and Araj B (2006b) Suicide bombing as strategy and interaction: The case of the second intifada. *Social Forces* 84(4): 1965–1982.

Brym RJ and Araj B (2008) Palestinian suicide bombing revisited: A critique of the outbidding thesis. *Political Science Quarterly* 123(3): 485–500.

Brym RJ and Maoz-Shai Y (2009) State violence during the second intifada: Combining new institutionalist and rational choice approaches. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32(7): 611–626.

Byman D (2006) Do targeted killings work? *Foreign Affairs* 85(2): 95–111.

Catignani S (2005) The strategic impasse in low-intensity conflicts: The Gap between Israeli counter-insurgency strategy and tactics during the Al-Aqsa intifada. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28(1): 57–75.

Cohen S (2008) Les assassinate ciblés pendant la seconde intifada: Une arme à double trenchant [Targeted assassinations during the second *intifada*: A double-edged weapon]. *Critique Internationale* 41: 61–80.

David SR (2002) *Fatal Choices: Israel's Policy of Targeted Killings.* Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 51, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel. Available at: www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/david.pdf

Eichensehr K (2005) On the offensive: Assassination policy under international law. *Harvard International Review* 25(3): 36–39.

Frisch H (2006) Motivation or capabilities? Israeli counterterrorism against Palestinian suicide bombings and violence. *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 29(5): 843–869.

Gordon N and Berkovitch N (2007) Human rights discourse in domestic settings: How does it emerge? *Political Studies* 55(1): 243–266.

Gross ML (2003) Fighting by other means in the Mideast: A critical analysis of Israel's assassination policy. *Political Studies* 51(2): 350–368.

Hafez MM and Hatfield JM (2006) Do targeted assassinations work? A multivariate analysis of Israel's controversial tactic during Al-Aqsa uprising. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29(4): 359–382.

Hajjar L (2001) Human rights in Israel/Palestine: The history and politics of a movement. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 30(4): 21–38

Hajjar L (2005) *Courting Conflict: The Israeli Military Court System in the West Bank and Gaza*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press.

Harel A and Isakharof A (2004) *Ha-milkhamah ha-shvi'it: aikh nitsakhnu ve-lamah hifsadnu ba-milkhama im ha-Palestinim* [The Seventh War: How We Won and Why We Lost the War with the Palestinians.] Tel Aviv: Yediot Akharonot.

Honig O (2007) Explaining Israel's misuse of strategic assassinations. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30(6): 563–577.

Iqbal Z and Zorn C (2008) The political consequences of assassination. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52(3): 385–400.

Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2003) *Hamas Terrorist Ismail Abu Shanab – 21 Aug 2003.* Available at: www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Communiques/2003/Hamas+terrorist+Ismail+Abu+Shanab+-+21-Aug-2003.htm

Jaeger DA and Paserman MD (2006) Israel, the Palestinian factions, and the cycle of violence. *The American Economic Review* 96(2): 45–49.

Jaeger DA and Paserman MD (2008) The cycle of violence? An empirical analysis of fatalities in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. *The American Economic Review* 98(4): 1591–1604.

Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre. (2005) *Palestinian Opinion Pulse.* Available at: www.jmcc.org/publicpoll/opinion.html.

Kaplan EH, Mintz A, Mishal S and Samban C (2005) What happened to suicide bombings in Israel? Insights from a terror stock model. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28(3): 225–235.

Kaplan EH, Mintz A and Mishal S (2006) Tactical prevention of suicide bombings in Israel. *Interfaces* 36(6): 553–561.

Kasher A and Yadlin A (2005) Assassination and preventive killing. *SAIS Review* 25: 41–57.

Keller H and Forowicz M (2008) A tightrope walk between legality and legitimacy: An analysis of the Israeli Supreme Court's judgment on targeted killing. *Leiden Journal of International Law* 21(1): 185–221.

Kerremans B (1996) Do institutions make a difference? Non-institutionalism, neo-institutionalism, and the logic of common decision-making in the European Union. *Governance* 9(2): 217–240.

Khatchadourian H (1974) Is political assassination ever morally justified? In: Zellner H (ed.) *Assassination*. Cambridge MA: Schenkman, 41–56.

Kimmerling B (2003) *Politicide: Ariel Sharon's War against the Palestinians*. London and New York: Verso.

Kiser E and Bauldry S (2005) Rational-choice theories in political sociology. In: Janoski T, Alford R, Hicks A and Schwartz MA (eds) *The Handbook of Political Sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 172–186.

Kober A (2007) Targeted killing during the second intifada: The quest for effectiveness. *Journal of Conflict Studies* 27. Available at: www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/JCS/bin/get.cgi?directory=Summer07/&filename=jcs27art06.html

Kremnitzer M (2006) *Ha-im ha-kol kasher ba-hitmod'dut im ha-teror? Al mediniut ha-hariga ha-mona'at (ha-sikul ha-m'mukad) shel Yisrael ba-yu'sh u-ba-aza* [Are All Actions Kosher in the Face of Terror? On Israel's Policy of Preventative (Targeted) Killing in Judea, Samaria and Gaza.] Jerusalem: Ha-makhon ha-yisraeli l'demokratiya [The Israeli Institute for Democracy].

Kretzmer D (2005) Targeted killing of suspected terrorists: Extra-judicial executions or legitimate means of defence? *European Journal of International Law* 16(2): 171–212.

Kuperman RD (2005) *Cycles of Violence: The Evolution of the Israeli Decision Regime Governing the Use of Limited Military Force*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Kydd A and Walter BF (2002) Sabotaging the peace: The politics of extremist violence. *International Organization* 56(2): 263–296

Löwenheim O and Heimann G (2008) Revenge in international politics. *Security Studies* 17(4): 685–724.

Luft G (2003) The logic of Israel's targeted killing. *Middle East Quarterly* 10(1). Available at: www.meforum.org/article/515.

McGeary J (2003) *Hamas: Target of Retribution: My Last Encounter with Ismail Abu Shanab.* 1 September. Available at: www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1005564,00.html#ixzz0aMhv5Ifg

McGreal C (2003) *Killing of Hamas Leader Ends Truce.* 22 August. Available at: www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/aug/22/israel3

Maoz Z (2007) Evaluating Israel's strategy of low-intensity warfare, 1949–2006. *Security Studies* 16(3): 319–349.

March JG and Olsen JP (2005) *Elaborating the 'New Institutionalism'*. Working Paper No. 11. Centre for European Studies, Oslo. Available at: www.arena.uio.no/publications/working-papers2005/papers/05_11.xml

Meyer JW, Boli J, Thomas GM and Ramirez FO (1997) World society and the nation-state. *American Journal of Sociology* 103(1):144–181.

Mishal S and Sela A (2006) *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mitchell NJ (2004) *Agents of Atrocity: Leaders, Followers, and the Violation of Human Rights in Civil War*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Morag N (2005) Measuring success in coping with terrorism: The Israeli case. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28(4): 307–320.

Risse T, Ropp SC and Sikkink K (eds) (1999) *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Robinson GE (2004) Hamas as social movement. In: Wiktorowicz Q (ed.) *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 112–139.

Ron J (2000) Savage restraint: Israel, Palestine and the dialectics of legal repression. *Social Problems* 47(4): 445–472.

Ron J (2003) *Frontiers and Ghettos: State Violence in Serbia and Israel*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Shor E (2008) Conflict, terrorism, and the socialization of human rights norms: The spiral model revisited. *Social Problems* 55(1): 117–138.

Stein Y (n.d.) *Israel's Assassination Policy: Extra-Judicial Executions*, trans. M Johnston B'Tselem: The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. Available at: www.crimesofwar.org/onnews/btselem_extrajudicial_killi.pdf

Stigler GJ and Becker GS (1977) De gustibus non est disputandum. *American Economic Review* 67(2): 76–90.

United Nations. (2003) *Statement Attributable to the Spokesman for the Secretary-General on the Middle East.* Available at: www.un.org/apps/sg/sgstats.asp?nid=387

Vertzberger YYI (1998) *Risk Taking and Decisionmaking: Foreign Military Intervention Decisions*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Wendt AE (1987) The agent-structure problem in international relations theory. *International Organization* 41(3): 335–370.

Zussman A and Zussman N (2006) Assassinations: Evaluating the effectiveness of an Israeli counterterrorism policy using stock market data. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 20(2): 193–206.

## Biographical notes

Nir Gazit is a Sociology Lecturer in the Department of Behavioral Sciences at the Ruppin Academic Center, Israel. His research interests include transnational civil–military relations, governance and sovereignty and political violence. His recent articles have appeared in *Armed Forces and Society*, *International Journal of Politics*, *Culture and Society* and *Qualitative Sociology*.

Robert J Brym is Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. His recent articles on state and collective violence during the second *intifada* have appeared in *Social Forces*, *Political Science Quarterly*, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, International Sociology,* and the *British Journal of Sociology* (forthcoming)*. His latest book, *Sociology as a Life or Death Issue*, 2nd Canadian ed. (Toronto: Nelson, 2011)*, is a foray into public sociology.

## Résumé

Des théories encore en vigueur expliquent relativement bien pourquoi l'État d'Israël exerce un certain niveau de violence à l'encontre d'acteurs infra-étatiques. Selon qu'elles sont fondées sur des modèles économiques ou sociologiques de l'action humaine, ces théories attribuent cette violence d'État respectivement aux stricts calculs de coût-bénéfice réalisés par les représentants de l'État, ou aux normes institutionnelles qui régissent leurs délibérations. Malgré l'intérêt de ces théories, nous soutenons qu'elles sont insuffisantes pour expliquer le choix des responsables israéliens de commanditer l'assassinat d'opposants politiques de premier plan pendant la seconde Intifada, ou soulèvement palestinien contre Israël. Notre analyse des publications concernant l'assassinat des dirigeants du Hamas Ahmed Yassin et Ismail Abu Shanab, ainsi que des interviews de 74 experts israéliens de la lutte antiterroriste, donnent à penser que la décision de recourir à des assassinats politiques commandités par l'État sur la période 2000-2005 reposait moins sur d'étroits calculs et des normes institutionnelles spécifiques que sur des contingences politiques identifiables. En particulier, il semble que la seconde Intifada ait incité un grand nombre de responsables israéliens à introduire le chaos dans l'appareil politique palestinien, objectif que le recours aux assassinats politiques a aidé à atteindre. L'effet de cette politique á été d'empêcher la fondation d'un État palestinien viable et indépendant.

Mots clés: Sociologie politique, sociologie militaire, violence, violence intercommunautaire

## Resumen

Las teorías existentes explican razonablemente bien por qué el Estado de Israel ejerce un determinado nivel de violencia contra los actores subestatales. Basándose en modelos económicos o sociológicos de la acción humana, estas teorías atribuyen el nivel de violencia estatal a cálculos de coste-beneficio de los agentes del Estado o a las normas incrustadas institucionalmente que rigen sus deliberaciones, respectivamente. A pesar de la fuerza de tales teorías, se argumenta que no llegan a explicar la decisión de los agentes israelíes de ordenar el asesinato de oponentes políticos de alto rango durante la segunda intifada, o levantamiento palestino contra Israel. Nuestro análisis de las fuentes publicadas sobre el asesinato de los líderes de Hamas Ahmed Yassin y Ismail Abu Shanab, así como entrevistas con 74 expertos israelíes en lucha anti-terrorista, sugieren que la decisión de promover asesinatos políticos ordenados por el estado en el periodo 2000-05 estuvo menos determinada por estrechos cálculos de beneficio o normas específicas institucionalizadas que por contingencias políticas concretas. Específicamente, la segunda intifada parece haber llevado a muchos responsables israelíes a favorecer la creación del caos en el sistema político palestino, un objetivo que ha sido bien servido por la política de asesinatos políticos. El efecto de esta política ha sido retrasar la creación de un Estado Palestino independiente viable.

Palabras clave: Sociología política, sociología militar, violencia, violencia comunal