

# Israel's message to America

The assassination this week of the Palestine Liberation Organization's second ranking leader, Khalil al-Wazir, was both a brilliant commando operation and a stunning act of murderous political theatre.

It was easy to recognize the unmistakable hallmarks of Israel's deadly efficient hit squads: Rented cars abandoned on a lonely beach, silenced pistols, jammed communications, bullet-riddled bodies and a blonde female agent. Israel, in spite of its official silence, wanted the Palestinians to have no doubt about who had killed al-Wazir, better known by his nom de guerre, Abu Jihad. Israel had a number of reasons for assassinating Abu Jihad. As the PLO's chief of military operations, he was responsible for a number of recent unsuccessful attacks against Israel.

Actually, Abu Jihad was a failure as a military leader. The ease with which Israeli commandos infiltrated far-off Tunis and killed the PLO's No. 2 man was a perfect example of the continuing military incompetence of the PLO.

It boggles the mind that the PLO leadership could allow such a disaster after so many of its senior men have been assassinated in similar ways by Israeli hit teams. Or that Abu Jihad could live so openly in a villa after Yasser Arafat was nearly killed by an Israeli air raid on Tunis last year.

More important, Abu Jihad was the key link between the rebelling Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza and the distant PLO leadership in Tunis. Israel was clearly trying to shatter the morale of the uprising by killing one of its most respected and forceful leaders.

So much for the obvious reasons. Israel also had more subtle motivations for sending the hit team. PLO leader

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Arafat is the grand old man who holds the often feuding factions of the PLO together — and the widely venerated symbol of the Palestinian struggle. But it was Abu Jihad who ran the PLO on a day-to-day basis and was Arafat's most likely successor.

Abu Jihad was also the most moderate of the PLO leaders and the most pro-western.

In fact, Abu Jihad had long been the PLO's main contact with the United States, via the channel of the CIA and other non-official emissaries. The last senior PLO official to fill this role was Ali Hassan Salameh, sometimes called the CIA's man in the PLO. Salameh was targeted by Israeli intelligence and assassinated in Beirut by means of a remote-controlled car bomb. The PLO's main link to the Americans was thus cut. Abu Jihad's murder followed a similar pattern.

The killing may also have been Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's response to the current Mideast peace initiative of U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz. Even though Shultz is often called Israel's best friend in Washington, he has been exerting subtle but forceful pressure on Israel to give up some or all of the occupied territories in exchange for peace. The Americans are deeply worried that their interests in the Arab world will

suffer enormous damage from the rising tide of Arab anger over Israel's repression of the Palestinians. So, to put a bit of distance between the U.S. and Israel, Shultz has been trying to nudge Israel's right wing toward negotiations with the moderate leadership of the PLO.

By assassinating the leading PLO moderate, Israel's hard right ensured it would have no one to talk to.

In recent years Israel has followed a similar policy in the occupied territories. Moderate Palestinians — doctors, lawyers, journalists and teachers — have been jailed or expelled. In this way Israel has tried to decapitate any emerging Palestinian leadership — while at the same time claiming it could find no moderate Palestinians with whom to negotiate peace. The remaining Palestinian extremists happily assisted this process by killing other Palestinian moderates.

So Shultz and the PLO moderates have had their message. There will be no negotiations and no giving up the occupied territories. Shultz, who incurred Israeli wrath recently by meeting with Palestinian-Americans, has been slapped down by Shamir, who recognizes a lame duck when he sees one.

This is an election year and a new U.S. administration will be in office in only seven more months. Israel is not about to be pushed around by the Americans.

And the bullet-riddled body of Abu Jihad left another message for the Arabs. The very tough Shamir, who once headed Israeli hit teams in Europe, and his extremist allies may strike back even harder. More trouble from the Arab quarters and the next step could be the mass expulsion of Palestinians — the Arab-free Israel many of its right wingers have been demanding.