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Making Life and Taking Life: The Psychology of Assassination in the Mideast

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Abstract. This article explores the variants of assassination through linguistic analysis of political conflict within and between Israel, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and a global context of nation-states and non-state political actors.

A common construct in public discourse on political violence between representatives of the nation-state of Israel and representatives of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), Hamas, and Islamic Jihad is the Israeli policy of assassination. This policy most often denotes the identification, surveillance, and killing of individuals alleged to have been involved, be involved, or planning to be involved in the killing of Israeli citizens, destruction of Israeli material infrastructure, or threats concerning killing and destruction. The identification, surveillance, and killing are said to be perpetrated by Israeli military and intelligence operatives and other agents controlled by these operatives. The killing, destruction, and threats pertaining to Israeli targets are said to be perpetrated by representatives and agents of the PNA, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and their allies.

A salient issue informing public discourse on the Israeli policy is the moral and ethical aspects of assassination. Many adversaries and some allies of the Israeli government strongly assert that the policy is immoral as it pertains to personal behavior and unethical as it pertains to social, cultural, political, and military roles during conflict. Parsing the language related to assassination and conflict not only yields a complex determination of morals and ethics but also of so-called facts to which such a determination can be applied.

First of all, much already has been assassinated pertaining to the ongoing conflict well before the Israeli policy at issue. As an example, there have been assassinations of identity. A case in point is the identity of who is a Palestinian. One might think that anyone who has lived, lives, or wishes to live in one of the various incarnations of some territory labeled "Palestine" might qualify as a Palestinian. Or, perhaps, anyone who has or has had family who live, has lived, or wishes to live there would be labeled as a Palestinian. However, in a brilliant and extremely noteworthy operation featuring combined activities often termed psychological warfare, psychological operations, active measures, disinformation, and propaganda, PNA leader Yasir Arafat and various colleagues and supporters have succeeded in acquiring a virtually global lock on the name. Even their Israeli adversaries employ "Palestinian" denoting and connoting the people that Mr. Arafat claims to represent.

This assassination of identity, this soul killing, of those--living and dead--who don't fall under Mr. Arafat's umbrella may be as existentially devastating as the killing of the body. This may be even more the case if one considers that those killed by representatives of the Israeli government are publicly considered to be martyrs dying in a holy political and sacred course by the PNA and by other groups that Mr. Arafat may have less than full control over. In essence, as martyrs, they are assured eternal life in heavenly circumstances congruent with those of the Islamic faith who killed enemies of Islam in the service of Islamic authorities and from whom the term assassination intermediately reaches us today. In essence, those assassinated by representatives of the Israeli government verily become transubstantiated into the Assassins' heirs from their earthly role as assassins and assassin supporters of

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Palestine. By killing Palestinians, the Israelis even further lose identity as Palestinians, while killed Palestinians live on as Palestinians.

Second, the essential meaning of assassination has itself been assassinated. Going back to the Latin language, one notes the term *assassinus* referring to the (usually unexpected but intended) killing of a person extremely significant to a society, culture, or polity. (Of course, earlier languages contained other terms or signifiers but quite similar significations.) The killing of such a person was to be viewed and often was viewed even by the perpetrators of assassination as something of heightened egregiousness--well above a common criminal murder or fatality of war. Because of this, assassination today still can elicit an involuntary shudder or strong sense of a transgression above and beyond common habituated and desensitized responses to murder. However, the targets who can be considered to be assassinated have apparently changed. Not only is the term being used to describe political and religious leaders who have been intentionally killed but (through the auspices of opponents of the Israeli policy and the ever-ready sensationalistic mass media) to anyone regardless of station who becomes an Israeli target for killing regardless of intention of the killer and the killed.

There are two important consequences of this assassination of meaning. One is that each target of the Israeli policy receives and takes on the special status of those for whom assassination originally pertained. The second is that the context of the ongoing violent interaction between the Israeli government and the PNA and others is ignored or discounted. While assassination possessed its original and greatest sense of terror through occurring in a time of peace--even with peace's concurrent internecine non-violent conflict characterizing a polis--its least evocative power occurred in times of war or salient political violence. Opponents of the Israeli policy have wittingly and unwittingly contributed to generating maximum outrage in a context that has historically and, perhaps, morally and ethically generate much less.

This last observation brings us to a more traditional ethical and moral calculus of killing: of killing all or some of one's adversary during a sequence of political violence; of those killed being directly or indirectly involved in acts of violence; of killing being expected or unexpected, intended or unintended, or deserved or undeserved by participants in the social configuration of killing; or of the effects of killing on the killers, the survivors, and the observers of killing. Purveyors of variants of reason and logic can differ in this calculus. So can purveyors of variants of rhetoric and so can political and emotional provocateurs. The fact remains, however, that what is called the Mideast conflict exemplifies the Cartesian duality wherein the material world is only the metaphysical arena for a very emotional cogitans. (See Chasseguet-Smirgel, J. (1991). Sadomasochism in the perversions: Some thoughts on the destruction of reality. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 39, 399-415; Dubcovsky, S., de Schutt, F.E., & Teper, E. (1996). Anti-Semitism: The magic reality conflict. *American Imago*, 23, 132-141; Gibson, J.T. (1991). Training people to inflict pain: State terror and social learning. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 31, 72-87; Haberman, C. (August 11, 2001). Israelis grieve and strike back. *The New York Times*, pp. A1, A6; Kelley, C.R. (1971). In defense of military psychology. *American Psychologist*, 26, 514-515; Lion, J.R. (1984). Ethical Issues and violent behavior. *American Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 4, 9-11; Pontius, A.A. (1974). Threats to assassinate the king-president while propitiating mother: Some aspects of dangerousness. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 38-53; Rustin, M., & Rustin, M. (1994). Coups d'etat and catastrophic change: Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 11, 242-259.) (Keywords: Assassination, Israel, Mideast, Palestinian National Authority.)