

Bombing a peace plan: Sharon: man of war

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [August 14, 2002](#) issue

Before the Israeli-Palestinian conflict plunges even further into its cycle of violence, we should pause to examine one day in July when peace almost broke out. After weeks of intense discussions, diplomats from the European Union and the U.S. reached an agreement with Palestinian militant factions who agreed to issue a statement that would begin: “From this moment on, we will cease all attacks on innocent men, women and children who are noncombatants. We call on all the political organizations and the Palestinian movements to cease these attacks immediately, without hesitation or conditions.”

The Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth* had a copy of the agreement and planned to publish it on July 25. Justin Huggler, in the *London Independent*, described the agreement as “an imminent commitment.” EU foreign-policy chief Javier Solana said the agreement was “within reach.” Since virtually nothing is a secret in Israel, it is safe to assume that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon also knew of the imminent publication of the peace agreement.

Sharon, however, had other plans on his desk. No doubt with the help of Palestinians influenced through fear, money or torture—or all three—Sharon knew the location of the Gaza City apartment building where Hamas military leader Salah Shehade lived with his family.

Sharon ordered Salah Shehade’s assassination. A U.S.-supplied F-16 dropped a one-ton bomb on the three-story building where Shehade lived in the middle of Gaza City, one of the world’s most densely populated cities. The building and several surrounding structures were demolished. Shehade was killed, along with his wife and three children. Fifteen people died in the attack, including nine children; 150 were wounded. Sharon’s first response was to declare the attack a “success.”

The European community was outraged. Even the White House denounced the attack as “heavy-handed,” and President Bush was reported to be “visibly angry.”

Faced with worldwide condemnation, Israeli officials began damage control. An investigation was conducted and the official conclusion was that the raid had been a “mistake.” The strategy worked: the outrage subsided, and President Bush put his “visible anger” on hold.

After Hamas resumed its retaliatory suicide bombings, Israel increased its troop and tank presence in Palestinian cities, tightened already stringent curfews and demolished the homes of the families of suicide bombers. In the Old City of Nablus, international observers reported that the Israeli army destroyed at least nine houses during the first two nights of their reentry into the city. The army was reported to have broken two water mains, leaving much of the city without water.

Meanwhile, in crowded cities and isolated villages, children put up posters with pictures of their *shahid batal* (martyr hero), many promising to become martyrs themselves. Rabah Mohanna of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine told a *Chicago Tribune* writer that “thousands of young men and women are ready to be blown up. This is a new phenomenon. You have no idea how big it is.”

Are we to believe that Sharon did not realize that his assassination of Salah Shehade would have this effect? Sharon apparently believes that his superior military force will crush Palestinian resistance. Does he not know that with each Palestinian death or home destroyed or family deported more anger is generated among Palestinians living under tight military control in their own homes?

Of course Sharon knows this. But he has clearly demonstrated that he is a man of war, not a man of peace, which is why he preempted a reconciling act from Palestinian leaders with the assassination of the top military Hamas leader. Reconciliation is not his goal. He ignores the teaching of Gandhi, who once wrote: “The goal of reconciliation is not to bring adversaries to their knees but to their senses” (quoted in Colman McCarty’s *I’d Rather Teach Peace*). At the moment that peace tried to break out, Sharon made sure it did not succeed, while Palestinian leaders fell into his trap, resuming their retaliatory attacks.

At least one Palestinian voice, however, has spoken out in favor of ending the cycle of violence. Following the July 31 bombing at Hebrew University, Palestinian educator Hanna Nasir, longtime president of Bir Zeit University, wrote an article for the Arabic newspaper *Al-Ayyam* calling on Palestinians to keep their struggle “unblemished” so that it would “reflect the justice” of their cause. “There is no way

that one can consider justifying the latest attack on the Hebrew University campus,” he wrote. “Targeting the lives of innocent civilians, whether they are enemies, or from a different religion, or from a different race, is intolerable from a moral and religious point of view.”

Nasir concluded his message “to my own people” with this admonition: Even though the “Israeli military occupation has suffocated us for more than 35 years . . . we should not allow ourselves to kill our occupier’s innocent civilians, even when they kill our own . . . We should never . . . lose our internal integrity nor our own humanity.”