

### Murder Of Nablus Mayor Blow To Israel West Bank Policy

JERUSALEM (WNS) — Zafer Al-Masri, the Israel-appointed Mayor of Nablus, was assassinated there March 1 two months after he took office. The Palestinian moderate, who had close ties with Jordan, was shot to death by an unidentified assailant as he stepped from his car outside the Nablus City Hall. Two extremist groups have claimed responsibility for his "execution" as a "traitor" to the Palestinian cause.

Israeli forces clamped a curfew on the area of Nablus where the killing occurred as troops searched for clues to the killer. Col. Ephraim Sneh, chief of the Israeli military administration in the West Bank, said Al-Masri, 45, was targeted by an extremist group but declined to identify it.

An anonymous telephone caller to the French News Agency in Paris said Al-Masri had been "condemned to death" by the Fatah Revolutionary Council, a terrorist splinter

group led by Abu Nidal, and that the execution was carried out by "The Nasser Abdel Azziz Martyr Group." The caller, who spoke Arabic with a Palestinian accent and said he was telephoning from Beirut, warned the Masri family to "cease at once all activities in political affairs." A similar call was made to a foreign news agency in Beirut. But responsibility for the murder of Al-Masri was also claimed by the Damascus-based Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Both terrorist groups have broken with the PLO wing headed by Yasir Arafat and fiercely opposed efforts by King Hussein of Jordan and Arafat to work out a formula to bring the PLO into the peace process with Israel. Hussein announced last month that he has abandoned the effort.

Al-Masri comes from a prominent Palestinian family which has been active in Jordanian political life and in the Arab Gulf states. His brother, Hikmat Al-

Masri, is Deputy Speaker of the Jordanian Parliament and a cousin, Taher Al-Masri, is Jordan's Foreign Minister. Only last week, Hikmat, who lives in Nablus, joined with another West Bank Palestinian leader, Anwar Al-Hatib, to urge Hussein and Arafat to resume their talks to find a formula for joint participation in peace negotiations with Israel.

Until last December, Zafer Al-Masri headed the Nablus Chamber of Commerce. His appointment as Mayor was approved by Jordan and by relatively moderate elements of the PLO after some 18 months of indirect contacts between Israel and Jordan. His murder was viewed as a serious setback for moderate elements seeking to involve Palestinians along with Jordan in peace talks with Israel. He accepted the appointment as Mayor of Nablus, the largest town in the West Bank after it was governed for four years by an Israeli army officer. The latter had been installed to replace Basam Al-Shaka whom the Israelis removed from

office because of his pro-PLO views. Nablus, a city of 100,000, has long been a hotbed of Palestinian nationalist sentiment.

The Israeli authorities considered Nablus as a successful test and were said to be planning to install Arab mayors in Ramallah, El Bireh and Hebron. Premier Shimon Peres has said on many occasions that it would be advantageous to Israel and the Arab population in the administered territories to have Palestinians administer their municipal affairs.

The assassination was discussed at the weekly Cabinet session March 1. Peres sent condolences to the Al-Masri family. He said the killing was a blow to the residents of the administered territories but would not deter them from leading their normal lives. He

pledged that the government would take every possible step to track down the killers and bring them to justice. Peres added that the murder "proved that Arab terror harms Arabs first."

President Herzog spoke in a similar vein. The murder of the Nablus mayor was "a continuation of the Palestinian tragedy which proved that the core of the problem was Palestinian extremism," he said. "This extremism costs one calamity after another at the Palestinian people."

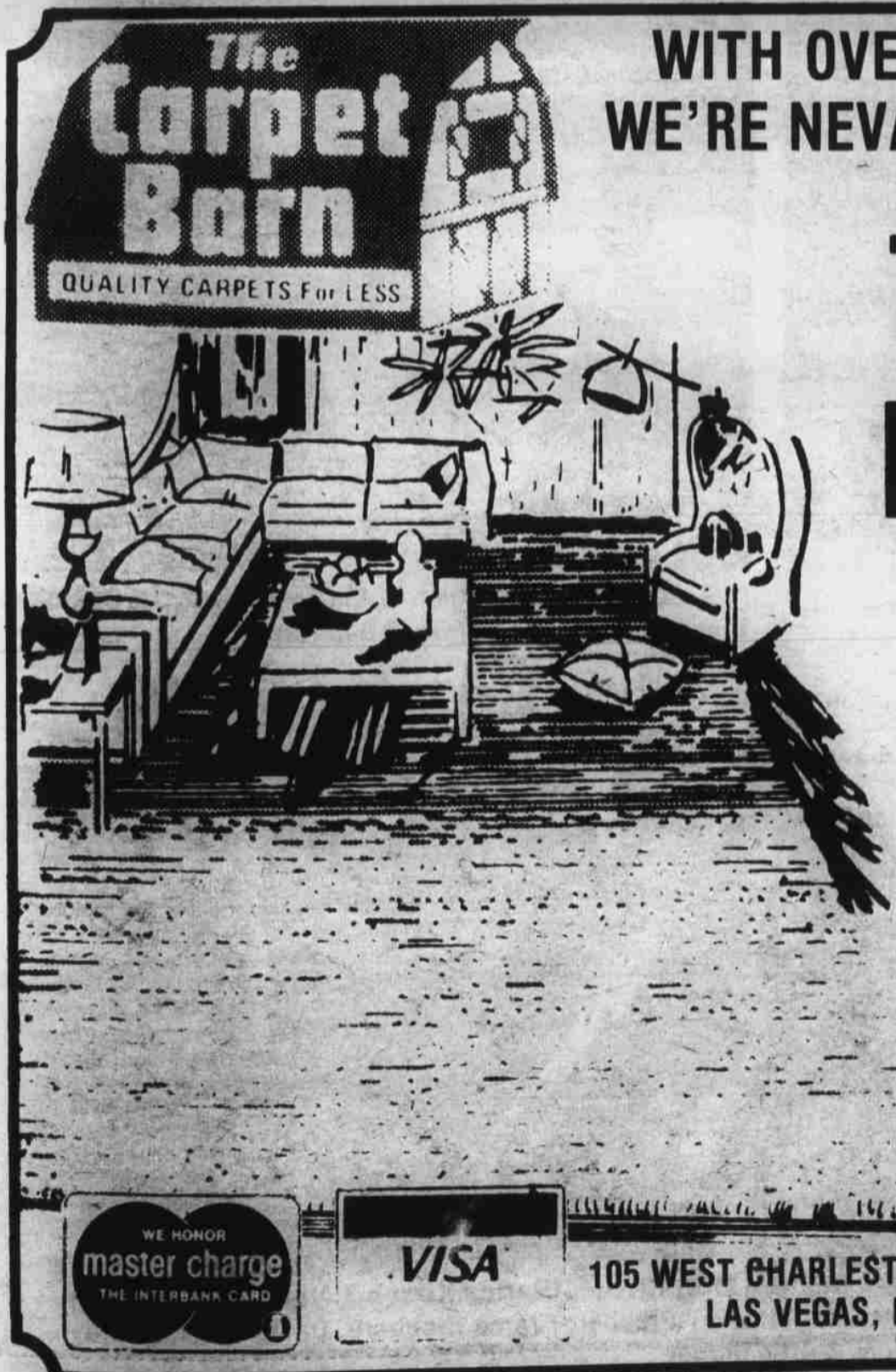
A Jordanian government spokesman said in Amman that the killing was "a new link in the chain of criminal attacks." Anwar Nusseibeh, another leading West Bank Palestinian, spoke of Al-Masri as "a very close friend...a decent person. He is the sort of

person we the Palestinian people can little effort to lose."

Al-Masri was the third Palestinian mayor or ex-mayor to fall victim to an assassin in little more than two years. Fahed Kawasme, the former mayor of Hebron, was gunned down in Ammon on December 30, 1984. He had lived there since being deported by Israel in 1980 for pro-PLO activities. On September 4, 1984, Mayor Abdul Mahmoud Kishta of Rafa, in the Gaza Strip, was fatally wounded by bullets from a passing car on a street in Rafa.

Meanwhile, several candidates for mayor in the West Bank towns of Ramallah and El Bireh announced that they would not run for the office.

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