

WASHINGTON POST
2 October 1985

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-1

Israeli Air Raid Destroys Arafat's Base in Tunisia

Many Die in Attack; U.S. Defends Action

By Jonathan Randal
Washington Post Foreign Service

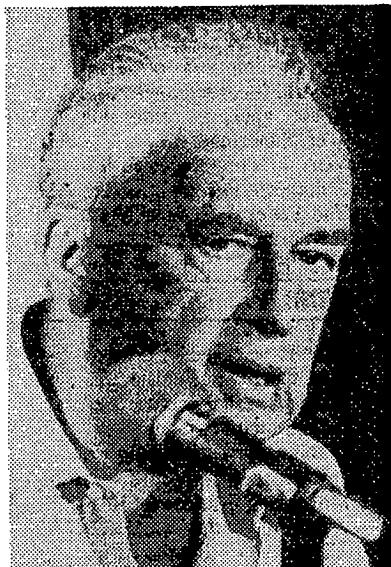
TUNIS, Oct. 1—Israeli warplanes today destroyed the personal headquarters here of Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, in a daring precision attack that required midair refueling to reach the target 1,500 miles from home base.

Hours after the six-minute, mid-morning bomb and missile attack on the seaside complex 21 miles south of Tunis, the official Tunisian news agency TAP said the death toll had reached more than 50. Earlier, a PLO spokesman provisionally put casualties at 156 without providing a breakdown between the dead and wounded.

Arafat, who reportedly was at another PLO site, was not injured, although there were indications that the raid was timed to kill him. Witnesses said his L-shaped headquarters building had all but disappeared into a deep crater.

Israeli officials said the raid was in retaliation for the assassination in Cyprus last Wednesday of three Israelis at the hands of Palestinian gunmen, although the PLO had denied involvement. Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin said it was a warning to terrorists "that the long arm" of Israel's military will reach them wherever they are. [Details on Page A20.]

The raid, Israel's first outside the Israeli-Lebanese region since 1981, brought wide condemnation from Arab countries, including Egypt, from U.N. Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar, and from several Western European capitals.



YITZHAK RABIN

... calls raid a warning to terrorists

But in Washington, President Reagan and other U.S. officials strongly defended the Israeli raid, with White House spokesman Larry Speakes calling it "retaliation against a terrorist attack" and "a legitimate response and an expression of self defense." [Details on Page A20.]

The Tunisian government tonight asked the U.N. Security Council to meet to discuss the raid, which Tunisian Foreign Minister Beji Caid Essebsi said was a case of state terrorism aimed at sabotaging Middle East peace efforts.

The number and types of warplanes used were not known and Israeli military statements about the raid gave no details, although

Israeli television said that they had been refueled in the air for their 3,000-mile round trip.

Witnesses here told reporters that they counted six planes, which some said were F4 Phantoms. But the Palestinian news agency Wafa said eight U.S.-made F16s were involved in the attack, which heavily damaged or destroyed buildings used by Force 17, the PLO's elite security wing blamed by Israel for the Cyprus killings, while leaving others in the complex untouched.

A visibly affected Arafat, who visited the scene in early afternoon but made no statement, was reported to have been in Marsa, a northern suburb of Tunis, when the attack began at 10:07 a.m., diplomats said. Tunisian sources said there had been plans for Arafat to preside over a meeting with Force 17 officials between 9 and 11 a.m.

Since Arafat moved his headquarters to Tunisia after the Israelis forced the PLO to leave Beirut in 1982, various Palestinian offices have been purposely dispersed into many neighborhoods to avoid running the risk of the Israelis' destroying all the leadership at once.

Tunisian witnesses said two Israeli aircraft remained high in the sky while the others attacked in pairs with air-to-ground missiles. Wafa said 500-pound bombs, some of them delayed-action, also were dropped.

Diplomats quoted Tunisian military sources as saying Israeli planes reportedly started skimming just above the Mediterranean when they reached the island of Malta, 250 miles to the east, to avoid radar detection.

Tunisian radar screens picked up the intruders only minutes before they attacked, the diplomats added.

Except for frequent raids into Lebanon, today's was the first abroad by Israel since their aircraft destroyed a French-built nuclear reactor near the Iraqi capital of Baghdad on June 7, 1981.

Continued