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Britain-U.S. rift over Rantisi assassination

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LONDON, APRIL 20. The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has distanced himself from Washington by pointedly condemning the Israeli assassination of the Hamas leader, Abdel Aziz Rantisi, at the weekend.

The George Bush administration refused to criticise the killing and said Israel had a right of self-defence.

Mr. Blair told the British Parliament: "We condemn the targeted assassination of Hamas leader Abdul Aziz Rantisi just as we condemn all terrorism including that perpetrated by Hamas."

While Mr. Blair in the past has been quick to condemn Palestinian suicide bombings against Israel, he has been less ready to criticise action against Palestinians.

What makes Mr. Blair's intervention even more stark is that it is made on behalf of the leader of an organisation that has launched hundreds of suicide attacks against Israel over the last four years.

Mr. Blair could easily have opted, as he has done in the past, to have left the criticism to the Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, who at the weekend condemned the assassination.

Mr. Blair claimed Israel's unilateral decision to

withdraw troops from the Gaza Strip, and parts of the West Bank could yet be the first step on a full settlement outlined in the Middle East road map.

Putting an optimistic gloss on events, he told members of the Parliament that the international community had a responsibility to prevent a vacuum and must instead help Palestinian authority in those areas from which Israeli Government withdraws.

He told MPs: "The fact that there is a withdrawal by Israel from Gaza and the West Bank at least gives us a chance, not just the Palestinian authority, but the international community, to play a role in building the necessary economic, political and security capability within that part of the territory controlled by the Palestinian authority."

MPs from his own Labour Party and from the Opposition Conservatives demanded, and won assurances, that Mr. Blair would not accept the plan of the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, for the Palestinians as a final settlement, or that the demand for a withdrawal of Israeli settlements from the West Bank was being shelved. "Of course it is not a final step, or a final settlement". — ©Guardian Newspapers Limited 2004