

**REPORT**

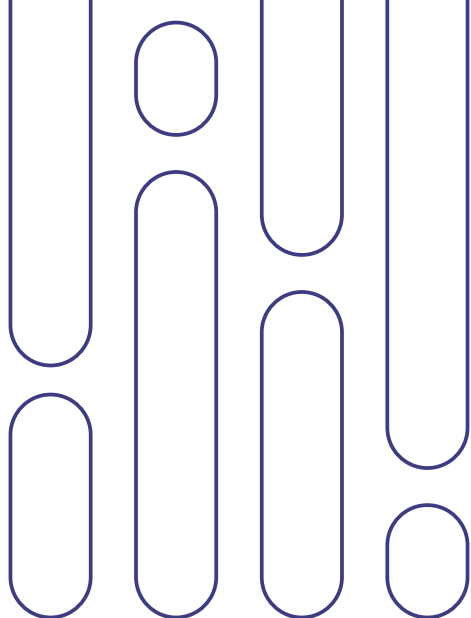
# **Assassination as a Political Tool: The Killing of Ismail Haniyeh Ends the Iran-Israel Shadow War With Grim Effects**

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The assassination of Ismail Haniyeh, the head of Hamas's Political Bureau, in Iran, immediately raised important questions about the timing and location of the attack. Haniyeh was in Tehran to attend the swearing-in ceremony of Iran's newly elected President Masoud Pezeshkian. The event was attended by diplomatic, political and military representatives from roughly 80 countries. The assassination prompted speculation regarding its underlying intent and significations. Despite the various hypotheses that have emerged, these remain speculative until further developments unfold. Conflicting reports about the circumstances of Haniyeh and his bodyguard's assassination only add to the complexity of the situation. In the days ahead, new information is likely to shed light on this pivotal event. The killing of Haniyeh is shrouded in numerous scenarios and questions: Was the deadly strike launched from outside Iran using a missile or an air-to-air projectile from within Tehran? Could it have been the result of an explosive device planted in his room two months prior to the incident? These questions raise further inquiries about how Haniyeh's location was pinpointed. Were security protocols in place at his residence, or were Haniyeh and his entourage left unprotected? Was the assassination carried out with the knowledge and approval of the United States or not?

This report aims to explore the complexities of the assassination, including its location and strategic significance. Such analysis helps understand how this high-profile event impacts regional and international policies, and how political assassinations are used as a tool to achieve political and military objectives. Amid the ongoing tensions in the Middle East, such acts could further escalate hostilities between Iran and Israel, affecting peace and security in the region.

## **Israel's Relentless Escalation Strategy: Dangerous Provocations to Expand the War**

Observers of Middle Eastern affairs will recognize that the regional conflict transcends mere competition for dominance and influence over the balance of power. Rather, this is a struggle about existence and survival, contrasted against the threat of disappearance and the challenges of continuity. The Israelis are acutely aware that engaging in a unilateral war with the Palestinians is strategically “unwinnable” in the medium and long term, regardless of any short-term gains it might offer. Such a war is ultimately detrimental to Israel both domestically and internationally. The presence of multiple parties in the conflict ironically serves to ensure the continued existence of Israel in its current form.

Internally, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is facing the most challenging period of his political career. Recent opinion polls indicate a significant decline in his popularity since he launched the assault in Gaza, resulting in the deaths of over 39,000 Palestinians and injuries to more than 90,000 others, according to Gaza's Ministry of Health. Public dissatisfaction with Netanyahu's “extremist” policies has reached unprecedented levels since the onset of the war. This discontent is particularly evident as families of Israeli prisoners have been protesting continuously since October 7, demanding that the war cabinet swiftly negotiate the return of the hostages held by Palestinian groups, which some media outlets estimate to number around 120 Israelis. Some families have accused Netanyahu of failing to broker a deal between the two sides. Worse still, the Israeli opposition argues that Netanyahu has no real intention of securing a swift resolution or an agreement for a prisoner exchange with Palestinian groups. Instead, according to unverified reports, he is deliberately stalling negotiations to delay elections, anticipating unfavorable results due to a loss of trust among his

support base. Echoing domestic criticisms, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer previously stated that Netanyahu is “a major obstacle to peace ... and all too frequently bowed to the demands of extremists.” Schumer has called for Netanyahu to step down and for early elections to be held.

In light of Netanyahu’s declining popularity, his strategy involves escalating tensions, opening new fronts, and continually targeting leaders of Palestinian resistance groups and Iran-aligned figures across the region. This approach seems to be an attempt by Netanyahu to divert attention from Israel’s setbacks in Gaza by broadening the war’s scope and pressuring the opposition to either support him or tone down their criticism. Additionally, this escalatory strategy aims to push Israel’s international allies to rearrange the regional power balance. This could involve drawing the United States into the conflict, bringing it out of the shadows, or creating secondary fronts in the Middle East to deflect global attention from domestic developments. Such actions raise the specter of a broader regional war, with Israel presenting itself as the victim of regional threats or, from its perspective, extremist groups that endanger its existence and national security. Netanyahu is leveraging this narrative to win voter support and strengthen ties with Israel’s allies abroad while simultaneously buying time to restore his diminishing status as the defender of Israel’s national security.

Netanyahu’s statements before the US Congress clearly indicate his resolve to continue the war and leverage its outcomes with his key allies. Simultaneously, Netanyahu is intent on showcasing any military successes, such as high-profile assassinations, to the Israeli public as domestic achievements that highlight the success of the war cabinet under his leadership. Among these assassinations are figures like Saleh al-Arouri, the deputy head of Hamas’s Political Bureau; Mohammed Deif, the commander-in-chief of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades (though Hamas has not confirmed his assassination); Fouad Shukr, a

leading military figure and senior advisor to Hezbollah's secretary-general; and Haniyeh, who topped the list of those wanted by Israel and its Western allies.

These assassinations mirror tactics employed by past US presidents, such as George W. Bush, who executed Saddam Hussein on the morning of Eid al-Adha, Barack Obama, who ordered the killing of Osama bin Laden, and Donald Trump, who authorized the assassination of Qassem Soleimani. In each case, Israeli attacks were projected as political and military victories to bolster the internal standing of the respective war cabinet and to open avenues for increased external support. The impact of such operations extends to Israel's primary allies; as Israel solidifies its strategic position in the region, it faces the potential risks of provoking a broader conflict. The war cabinet in Israel appears willing to involve its allies, especially the United States, in a new regional conflagration following recent escalations. Despite the dangers of simmering tensions, these operations serve to reinforce Israel's position and leverage international alliances to their advantage.

Opening new war fronts provides Netanyahu with opportunities to survive and maintain his grip on power, a strategy he has successfully employed thus far, particularly against Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and militias in Iraq and Syria. Meanwhile, Netanyahu has delegated the issue of the Houthis to his Western allies, particularly the United States, reflecting his strategy of shifting military and political burdens to his allies. International and regional responses indicate that Israel has effectively implemented its strategy of opening new fronts, as Tel Aviv managed to secure international and regional support following Tehran's attack on April 13, 2024. Although the attack had limited success, many countries issued statements condemning Tehran and expressing support for Israel, even though Israel initially violated international law by bombing the Iranian embassy in Damascus, killing 16 people, including Mohammad

Reza Zahedi, the second-highest-ranking military commander in the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Expanding the scope of the conflict and involving multiple parties has pragmatically advanced Netanyahu's extremist policies on the international stage, especially following the Gaza-focused student protests that embarrassed Israel's allies. By broadening the conflict, Netanyahu found an opportunity to redirect the focus of leaders and supporters, effectively stalling discussions on a Gaza ceasefire and shifting attention to secondary issues. As a result, instead of debating a ceasefire at the UN Security Council, the focus shifted to condemning Iran. This strategy was previously employed by the United States in Iraq and other countries during the Arab Spring uprisings. Known as "reprioritizing the agenda," this approach involves diverting attention from critical issues to secondary or less important ones, whose outcomes are already known. By emphasizing these topics in the media, they are imposed on political agendas, steering public opinion away from more sensitive issues. Interestingly, if there is a notable success for Netanyahu following his setbacks in Gaza, it is his achievement in drawing Iran out of the shadows — a strategic objective that Israel has pursued for some time, as previous confrontations were limited to the decades-long shadow war between the two sides. After Iran openly emerged on April 13, Tel Aviv exploited this move to advance its agenda. Israel capitalized on the situation to loosen recent restrictions imposed by its allies, particularly regarding military escalation. Furthermore, direct confrontation has compounded Iran's isolation on the international stage. This situation has provided Netanyahu with a significant boost, enhancing his standing both domestically and internationally, in contrast to Iran's limited options under the new President Masoud Pezeshkian. The latter faces considerable challenges, including the need to make substantial changes in foreign policy and establish positive relations with the West — something Is-



rael is unlikely to allow unless Tehran makes significant concessions.

The potential for retaliatory strikes by Iran following the assassination of Haniyeh in Tehran is high. However, such actions could further entangle Iran in a conflict it prefers to wage through regional proxies, given its history of relying on proxy warfare. Through these successive high-profile assassinations, Israel has effectively provoked and embarrassed Tehran, as Iran now faces the challenge of responding in a proportionate manner in light of the status of the target and the modes of attack. A robust Iranian response might trigger counteractions from Israel, supported by the United States and its allies, potentially leading to a vicious cycle of escalation. This could shift the focus of conflict dynamics in the Middle East and alter the roles of regional players. Such a scenario might push Gaza off the immediate agenda for settlement and lessen the pressure on Israel to adhere to a ceasefire. Consequently, Gaza could again become a casualty of the broader conflict, exacerbating its humanitarian, health, and environmental crises.

Overall, the risk of miscalculation remains high on both sides. Analyzing the official political discourse from Iran and Israel reveals that both countries are focused on maintaining their deterrent reputations in the region. Both employ the strategy of “teaching lessons” as deterrent mechanisms. Following the Iranian attack, the Israeli Foreign Ministry declared that “Iran must pay a price for its aggression,” while the Iranian Foreign Ministry responded to Haniyeh’s assassination by asserting, “We will use our legal right to punish Israel.” These statements highlight Israel’s intent to embarrass Tehran and underscore Iran’s efforts to justify its military stance while preserving its deterrent image, reminiscent of the situation Israel faced on October 7.



## Potential Scenarios for Iran: Emerging From the Shadows and the Employment of the War With Israel

Since the overthrow of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1979 and the establishment of the Iranian republic, the ruling establishment has focused on consolidating its power and enhancing its regional influence. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become a central element of Iran's political and propaganda strategy. Iran has made concerted efforts to strengthen its regional influence, positioning itself as a key player opposing Western powers, particularly the United States and Israel, which it refers to respectively as the "Great Satan" and the "Little Satan" — deeming both the original sources of evil in the region.

Tehran's manipulation of the Palestinian crisis is evident in its support for what is known as the "axis of resistance," which has become prominent in the Syrian and Yemeni conflicts. Iran has successfully expanded its regional influence by exploiting political crises in many Arab countries, undermining regional governments and demonizing its opponents. This propaganda strategy has contributed to exaggerating Iran's power in the Middle East while seeking to erode the influence and sovereignty of Arab states.

Tehran's stance against Washington serves to bolster its domestic policies and foster national unity. Maintaining conflicts or volatile situations in its spheres of influence aligns with Iran's strategic goals. These conflicts are used as leverage in international and regional negotiations and as propaganda tools to galvanize popular support and reinforce national legitimacy under the banner of the "axis of resistance." This approach allows Iran to expand its regional influence and participate in or influence decision-making processes, often overshadowing the influence of major powers in the region. This strategy was evident in the

Astana process meetings on the Syrian crisis, where Iran played a crucial role in shaping the negotiations. Similarly, in the Gaza conflict, Iran has emerged as a key player in managing escalations and ceasefires by influencing the actions of its regional allies.

Iran is expected to exploit regional conflicts to further its interests, aiming to strengthen its influence and safeguard its gains and national sovereignty. Iranian officials view the material and logistical support provided to Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as to groups in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, as crucial for Iran's safety. However, while exploiting these regional crises can advance Iran's strategic goals, it may not always align with its broader agenda, particularly at the local level. Such exploitation could potentially trigger popular protests that threaten the stability of the ruling elite.

In recent years, Iran has experienced a wave of protests across the country, with demonstrators calling for broad political, economic and legislative reforms in response to worsening social conditions and declining freedoms. Protesters have voiced their frustration with the leadership's focus on external resistance, exemplified by the slogan "neither Gaza nor Lebanon... my soul is a sacrifice for Iran," which reiterates their discontent with the regime's prioritization of foreign interests over domestic development. Despite these internal dissenting voices, unity often reemerges as the conflict expands, with various forms of support to proxy groups being justified as acts of self-defense. This approach involves deploying proxies to the forefront of conflicts while Iran itself avoids direct involvement.

Iran has struggled to sustain its approach of managing conflicts through proxies after failing to protect a key symbolic figure in the regional conflict. Tehran now faces new field challenges that complicate its strategy, with direct confrontation becoming more imminent than ever. This shift limits Iran's military options compared to the pre-assassination period. This long-

standing reliance on proxies has been effective in achieving its regional goals, particularly in preserving its borders and sovereignty by addressing potential threats before they reach its territory. Lebanon and Syria have been central to Iran's strategy for advancing its ambitions and securing its borders.

In conclusion, the world is awaiting Iran's response to the recent escalation with Israel. Historically, Tehran has avoided direct confrontations with Israel to prevent uncontrolled, comprehensive asymmetric warfare. However, Israel's success in drawing Iran into direct conflict has severely limited Iran's options for retaliation. Although Tehran prefers to use its main proxies such as the Houthis and Hezbollah, it now faces pressure to respond militarily to preserve its credibility and counteract the perceived erosion of its deterrence. Expected Iranian responses may include:

- Attacks on Israel using drones and ballistic missiles targeting specific sites.
- Coordinated strikes involving Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and militias in Iraq and Syria.
- Targeting Israeli diplomatic missions abroad.
- Attacks on locations where Iranian agents are active, particularly in Iraq and Lebanon.

