

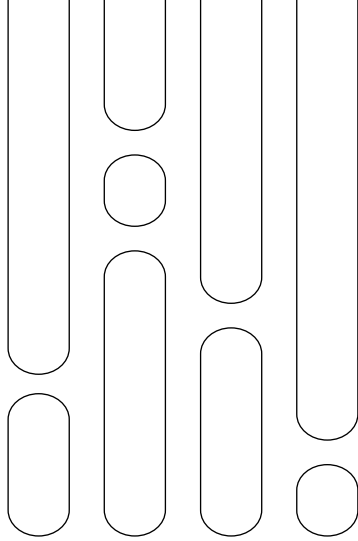
Position Paper

HIGH-PROFILE ASSASSINATIONS: ISMAIL HANIYEH IN TEHRAN AND FOUAD SHUKR IN BEIRUT — MOTIVES, INTENDED MESSAGES AND CONSEQUENCES

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Israel recently conducted a series of strategic strikes resulting in the deaths of Hamas Political Bureau Chief Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran and Hezbollah military commander Fouad Shukur in Beirut. These moves are part of Israel's efforts to apply pressure as peace talks with Hamas remain at an impasse, with both sides unwilling to make concessions. The conflict's complexity is further compounded by the increasing involvement of the Houthis who have launched attacks against Israeli targets and disrupted maritime navigation in the Red Sea. In response, Israel has intensified its military actions, including major airstrikes on the Yemeni port of Hodeidah. This report sheds light on the motivations behind Israel's targeting of Haniyeh and Shukur, analyzing the broader implications for regional stability and the likely reactions from Iran and its allied "axis of resistance" as the conflict continues to escalate.

Targeting Haniyeh and Shukur – Israel's Motivations

In a significant escalation, possibly the most perilous since the onset of Israel's assault against the Gaza Strip, Iran announced that Haniyeh, the head of Hamas's Political Bureau, was assassinated in an Israeli airstrike targeting his residence in Tehran. This attack followed Haniyeh's attendance at the inauguration of Iran's newly elected President Masoud Pezeshkian. The assassination of Haniyeh occurred just hours after Israel conducted a raid in the southern suburbs of Beirut, killing Fouad Shukur, a prominent military leader in Hezbollah and its strategic affairs official.

Israel has not officially claimed responsibility for the assassination of Haniyeh, and the office of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu instructed ministers not to comment on the operation. However, following the announcement of Haniyeh's death, accusations were immediately directed at Tel Aviv. Israel had previously vowed to target Haniyeh and other Hamas leaders in retaliation for the attack last October, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Israeli soldiers and the capture of approximately 250 Israelis.

Haniyeh was regarded as one of the most influential leaders within Hamas, significantly shaping the group's decisions. He also maintained strong ties with key figures in the Iranian establishment. Israel aimed to eliminate Haniyeh to weaken Hamas's leadership and diminish its capabilities, thereby pressuring the group to accept Israeli terms for a ceasefire agreement.

After almost 10 months of Israel's deadly onslaught against Gaza, the Israeli opposition continues to criticize the Netanyahu government for failing to meet its objectives, particularly its promises to eliminate Hamas leaders. The Netanyahu government sought to assassinate Haniyeh to gain political advantage domestically, easing the pressure it faces and restoring the image of the Israeli military, which was significantly tarnished after Operation Al-Aqsa Flood.

The assassination of Haniyeh occurred just hours after the Iranian president's constitutional oath, serving as a warning to the new Iranian leader. During a phone call with French President Emmanuel Macron, the Iranian president cautioned that

any Israeli attack on Lebanon would have severe consequences. He also reassured Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah of Iran's unwavering support for the Lebanese group and the broader "axis of resistance," emphasizing that defending this resistance is a core policy of the Iranian establishment. Iran's backing of the so-called resistance axis poses a significant challenge for Israel, which views this coalition as a threat to its future security and a hindrance to its regional diplomacy. The assassination also acts as a warning to Iranian leaders, demonstrating Israel's advanced military capabilities and its willingness to target Iranian figures unless Tehran ceases its support for the "axis of resistance."

Shukr, a military adviser to Nasrallah, was viewed by Israel as a key planner and director of wartime operations. Israel regarded him as the principal figure managing Hezbollah's response to Israeli actions since Hamas's Operation Al-Aqsa Flood against Israeli settlements in Gaza last October. Additionally, Israel held Shukr responsible for the strike on the town of Majdal Shams in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights on July 26, 2024. Shukr's assassination is therefore perceived as a significant victory for Israel as his role in managing Hezbollah's military strategy was a concern. Israel feared that his continued presence could intensify the conflict if the current escalation between the two parties leads to a full-scale war in the near future.

The Haniyeh and Shukr Assassinations — Significations

The deaths of Haniyeh in Tehran and Shukr in the southern suburbs of Beirut in Israeli strikes are highly significant due to the high-profiles of both targets, the timing of the operations, the locations, and the methods used. Haniyeh, as the top leader of Hamas, represented a key figure in the leadership structure of the organization. Similarly, Shukr was a senior Hezbollah commander. Thus, Israel will likely present the two assassinations as a symbolic victory over Hamas.

The timing of these operations is particularly critical amid heightened tensions in the Middle East. The region is already strained due to the ongoing Israeli war in Gaza, rising hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah — especially following Israeli accusations that Hezbollah was involved in the Majdal Shams incident in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights — and increased conflict between Israel and the Houthis, who have launched missiles at Israel, allegedly of Iranian origin. Additionally, Israel's strikes on the port of Hodeidah have added to the volatility. The assassinations of Haniyeh and Shukr occurred shortly after Netanyahu's visit to Washington and just hours after Haniyeh's meeting with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Pezeshkian. This timing could further escalate the conflict and diminish prospects for peace.

Haniyeh's assassination in Iran, a country that actively supports the so-called axis of resistance, which Israel accuses of supplying missiles and drones to the Houthis and Hezbollah to target Israeli interests, was a shocking event. This support is ostensibly an attempt to influence Israel's decisions regarding the Gaza con-

flict. Haniyeh was in Iran to attend the inauguration ceremony of President Pezeshkian, with his last public appearance on July 30, 2024, following his meeting with the new president. The attack targeted not just Haniyeh but also conveyed a sharp message to Tehran and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), as Haniyeh was staying in an IRGC guesthouse in the Velenjak area, north of Tehran. The strike, executed by a missile launched from the air, occurred near key Iranian institutions, highlighting significant security vulnerabilities. Iran initially responded with official silence, and later, after acknowledging the strike, sought to downplay the incident — insisting it was carried out by external actors — and mitigate the embarrassment over its security failure.

The assassination of Haniyeh represents the most significant escalation by Israel, not just targeting Hamas and Hezbollah but directly challenging Iran itself. The attack on Iranian soil places Tehran in a difficult position, exposing its vulnerabilities and ongoing issues with intelligence breaches affecting the IRGC. While Iran's response might involve intensifying support for resistance fronts, the key question remains: will the actions of Iran's allied militias adequately address what several observers perceive as an "Israeli insult" to Iran?

The assassination of Haniyeh is likely to hinder opportunities for ceasefire negotiations in Gaza and create major obstacles for the new Iranian president's efforts to improve relations with the West. However, it may not entirely derail his ambitions for nuclear negotiations. Despite past experiences in which prominent Iranian nuclear scientists and senior military figures were targeted, including those linked to the Quds Force under Qassem Soleimani, Iran did not abandon its pursuit of negotiations or lifting sanctions. The new president is likely to continue focusing on nuclear talks and sanctions relief as a strategy to address Iran's internal crises.

Israel's execution of this operation within Iran underscores its belief that the Iranian response will be minimal, based on Iran's historically limited reactions to similar incidents. Israel aims to send dual messages: firstly, to Iran and the "resistance axis," demonstrating that Israel is fully aware of the role Iran plays in supporting Hezbollah and the Houthis in their attacks on Israeli targets, and that Israel is prepared to escalate the conflict further. Secondly, the operation serves as a show of strength to the Israeli public, illustrating Israel's capability to conduct high-impact operations deep within Iranian territory. Additionally, the assassination of Hamas's top leader is intended to bolster Israel's position politically, while pressuring external parties and negotiators to push Hamas into accepting Israeli terms, including maintaining control over southern Gaza and continuing military operations while recovering hostages.

The Consequences of Assassinating Haniyeh and Shukr for Regional Militias

A crucial question to consider is the impact of the Haniyeh and Shukr assassinations on the "axis of resistance," specifically on Hamas and Hezbollah. Both are

ideological groups, thus assessing the impact involves understanding how such actions affect their ideological and doctrinal foundations. The consequences of the assassinations can be viewed from two perspectives:

Regarding Haniyeh, his assassination is unlikely to impact Hamas's military operations directly. Although Haniyeh was involved in the political and diplomatic aspects of the group, his role was not primarily focused on the military side. Operational command and strategic planning are handled by the military leaders of the Al-Qassam Brigades within Gaza. Haniyeh's death may, however, intensify the desire for revenge among Hamas members and be used by leaders to reinforce their ideological stance and commitment to the "jihadist path" as outlined in their doctrinal literature. Additionally, the assassination could boost Hamas's standing and popularity both within Gaza and the West Bank, reinforcing its image as a resistance group and countering criticisms of its leadership's perceived detachment from the conflict — the debate over the "hotel-trench binary" — which were highlighted after Operation Al-Aqsa Flood.

The assassination of Haniyeh could also impact the political and diplomatic functions of Hamas. This followed the earlier assassination of Saleh al-Arouri, deputy head of the Hamas Political Bureau, in Beirut last January. These events may restrict Hamas's political movements, forcing the group into more covert operations and reducing its participation in official events. Moreover, the elimination of Haniyeh might complicate the emergence of new, popular leaders within Hamas, as Israeli efforts to dismantle the group since October 7, 2023 have hindered the rise of fresh leadership. This situation is compounded by the fact that the current leadership has been in place since Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, with little room for new leaders to develop. Additionally, the assassination sends a broader message to all "resistance groups," including armed militias in Iraq and Syria, signaling that their leaders are not immune to similar fates if they target Israeli interests. As Haniyeh was not a major ideological figure within Hamas, his absence will not weaken the group's ideology. Yet, his presence in Doha facilitated crucial consultations with Israel and the United States through Qatari mediation, a diplomatic role that current leaders may be less inclined to continue, potentially affecting negotiations aimed at ending the Gaza conflict.

Hezbollah recently confirmed the death of its senior military commander Shukr in an Israeli strike in the outskirts of Beirut. Earlier, Hezbollah stated that Shukr was present in the building which was targeted in the attack and the search for him was underway. Shukr's assassination will significantly impact Hezbollah's military operations, given his prominence as one of the group's top military leaders. However, Hezbollah's history of dealing with the loss of key figures in Israeli operations indicates its ability to recover from this setback. The group might also use the situation to bolster its position within Lebanon, addressing internal challenges and political rivalries by portraying itself as a resilient force against Israeli aggression.

Potential Reactions to the Haniyeh and Shukr Assassinations

Following the assassinations of Haniyeh and Shukr, the regional conflict is entering a new, more ominous phase. This escalation could potentially lead to a broader regional war, depending on how Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and Shiite militias in Iraq respond. The situation remains fluid and is open to various developments.

Iran faces significant pressure to respond to the assassination of Haniyeh, especially since the attack occurred on its soil. The response must address this challenge while restoring Iran's reputation. However, Iran's options are fraught with complexity: a direct strike on Israel could escalate into a regional war, a scenario that Iranian leaders are likely keen to avoid, particularly given US statements supporting Israel's defense in such an event. Instead, Iran might focus on encouraging its allied militias to intensify attacks on Israeli and US targets, emphasizing the involvement of the IRGC. However, if Iran's supreme leader follows through on promises of retaliation for Haniyeh's assassination, the region would be drawn into a wider war.

Hezbollah's reaction to the assassination of Shukr could also lead to a regional conflagration, if it breaches the established rules of engagement. Tehran might encourage Hezbollah to heighten the confrontation as a means of indirectly addressing the situation and restoring Iran's standing, while avoiding direct repercussions. However, the internal pressures on Hezbollah and its past experiences, including the 2006 war, may lead the group to adopt a measured response which does not exceed the traditional limits of engagement, preventing a full-scale war with Israel. In the event that Iran decides to respond directly, it is likely that Hezbollah's reaction could also violate the established rules of engagement.

Hamas's response to the assassination of its Political Bureau leader is likely to be minimal, given its ongoing conflict with Israel and the limited options available to it. The group might resort to some significant missile strikes or activate cells in the West Bank, but its capacity for a substantial reaction is restricted. The Houthis, who have been escalating recently due to Israeli airstrikes on Hodeidah following their drone attack on Tel Aviv, could coordinate their attacks with Iran's potential retaliatory response. Iraqi militias, meanwhile, remain a potential source of further escalation, particularly with the United States, following a truce after the killing of three US soldiers in Jordan last January. The recent US missile strikes on Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) bases in northern Iraq could have been a preemptive measure to discourage Iraqi militias from joining a broader response with Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas. However, if Tehran decides to escalate, it is unlikely that these strikes will prevent Iraqi groups from targeting US or Israeli interests.

In conclusion, these high-profile assassinations could serve as a strategic move by the Israeli prime minister to demonstrate that the war has yielded significant achievements. This narrative might be used to justify the operations and potentially limit the reactions from Iran and its affiliated forces, as it could suggest that the conflict has met some of its objectives.



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