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# Regional War or the Last Chance for a Ceasefire? Likely Outcomes of the Assassination of Ismael Haniyeh

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: [situation Assessment](#)

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In a significant escalation of hostilities, the Political Leader of Hamas, Ismael Haniyeh (1962-2024), was assassinated in a targeted attack in the early hours of Wednesday morning, on 31 July. The airstrike on Haniyeh's residence in Tehran, where he had attended the inauguration of the new Iranian President, Masoud Pezeshkian with a Hamas delegation, also killed one of his companions. The strike came mere hours after Israel announced it had killed Fuad Shukur, Hezbollah's top military commander in South Beirut's Dahieh suburb.<sup>1</sup> Although the strike on Haniyeh was widely assumed to have been carried out by Israel, and accusations by both Hamas<sup>2</sup> and the Iranian authorities<sup>3</sup> that it was behind the operation, the Netanyahu government is yet to claim responsibility for Haniyeh's assassination.

## Potential Outcomes

The assassination of Haniyeh, who enjoys widespread popularity, represents a dangerous development in the course of Israel's war on Gaza. With two major assassinations under his belt, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has managed to increase his own domestic popularity, as he no doubt had hoped from the operations, and consequently his mandate to continue the war that has been subject to ever greater criticism ten months in. With this much needed restoration of his public image, after months of criticism, he is likely seeking to justify prolonging the onslaught in the Gaza Strip until he is able to impose his vision for the "day after". He could also be counting on the dual assassination subduing the more fanatic elements of his government so that he can proceed with the ceasefire agreement proposed by US President Joe Biden in May 2024, to which these fascist extremists stand fervently opposed. But the attacks risk a dangerous expansion of the conflict should Iran respond. Not only was this an attack on Iranian soil against one of its most prominent guests, but the fact that Haniyeh was attending the inauguration ceremony of its new president makes the strike all the more provocative. Likewise, Hezbollah is likely to respond with force to the assassination of its leading military commander.

### 1. Expansion of the Conflict

Any expansion is inextricably linked to Iran's calculations and its expected response to Haniyeh's assassination and to the extent Israel would go to demonstrate its regional power. Meanwhile the Arab world stands idly by while Israel continues to rampage across the region with impunity.

In the early morning following news of the assassination, Iranian statements were remarkably restrained, none of them indicating Israel's involvement in the operation, nor making any commitment

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1 "Israel confirms the assassination of Fuad Shukur, and Hezbollah comments," *Al Jazeera*, 31/7/2024, accessed on 31/7/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zOfp>

2 Hamas mourns its political leader, the brother, the martyr, the *Mujahid*, Ismail Haniyeh," The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) Website, 31/7/2024, accessed on 31/7/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zOU6>

3 Yaqut Dandashi, "Khamenei expresses condolences for the assassination of Haniyeh: Israel has prepared the ground for 'severe punishment'," *Anadolu Agency*, 31/7/2024, accessed on 31/7/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zOWU>

to respond, especially those issued by the Revolutionary Guards<sup>4</sup> and the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>5</sup> But the Iranian response quickly stiffened following the National Security Council meeting, attended by the commander of the Revolutionary Guard and senior leaders of the army, interior ministry, and intelligence services. The account of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, on X (formerly Twitter), published a statement in which he threatened Israel with “severe punishment,”<sup>6</sup> while a statement released by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards vowed that “the response to the Zionist entity will be harsh and painful.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite Iran’s hesitation to immediately accuse Israel of the assassination, as it was likely conducting an investigation into what happened, the scale of the attack and the infringement of its sovereignty means Iran is forced to respond. However, its retaliation may be limited to something resembling the measured operations it carried out in its response to the US assassination of the Commander of the Quds Force wing of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Qassem Soleimani, at Baghdad Airport in early 2020, and Israel’s airstrike on its consulate in Damascus last April.

As its new president, who was elected on a manifesto seeking to open dialogue with the West, especially with the US, ushers in a new era, Iran finds itself facing a major test. While it needs to retaliate, Tehran has no desire to be dragged into a full-blown war with Israel. Nor does it want to sabotage its chances of dialogue with Washington, especially since that was another of Netanyahu’s goals in ordering the assassination in Tehran. The recent operations in Yemen’s Hodeidah, in Dahieh, and in Tehran itself have all targeted Iran and Netanyahu was emphatic about the need to confront Iran in his recent speech to Congress, as well as the importance of the US-Israeli alliance against it.

## 2. Pushing Peace Talks Ahead

At a time when both domestic and US pressure is building on Netanyahu to reach an agreement to release the prisoners and stop the war, and as the exchange of strikes between Israel and Hezbollah escalates, threatening to ignite a wider conflict, Haniyeh and Shukur’s assassinations have raised the stakes. However, this may be the peak that precedes the de-escalation process considering so many regional and international parties fear the situation spiralling out of control and dragging the US and other Western states into a wider war.

This means that pressure will increase on Netanyahu to make do with the picture of glory he sought to project through the attacks in Tehran and Beirut and to move toward concluding a ceasefire agreement in Gaza. It seems that Netanyahu understood this during his recent visit and respective

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<sup>4</sup> Laila Mousizadeh, “The Martyrdom of the Political Head of Hamas, Mujahid Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran,” *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, 31/7/2024, accessed on 31/7/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zPbs>

<sup>5</sup> “Kanaani: The pure blood of the martyr Haniyeh will not be in vain,” *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, 31/7/2024, accessed on 31/7/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zOQh>

<sup>6</sup> “The criminal, terrorist Zionist regime martyred our dear guest in our territory and has caused our grief, but it has also prepared the ground for a severe punishment.” X, 31/7/2024, accessed on 31/7/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zOxS>

<sup>7</sup> “The Revolutionary Guard in second statement: The response to the Zionist regime will be ‘harsh and painful,’” *RT Arabic*, 31/7/2024, accessed on 31/7/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zOC2>

meetings with the candidates of the Democratic and Republican parties, Kamala Harris<sup>8</sup> and Donald Trump,<sup>9</sup> who, despite outbidding each other on support for Israel during their meetings with Netanyahu, called for the necessity of ending the war and reaching an agreement to return the Israeli prisoners.

Although Qatar's Prime Minister, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, the main mediator in the conflict, took to X to ask: "How can mediation succeed when one party assassinates the negotiator on the other side?"<sup>10</sup> reaching an agreement seems inevitable. But the operation seemed to be a last-ditch effort by Netanyahu to strike a final blow to the negotiation process, which it may in fact turn out to do. Hamas, along with the other resistance factions and its popular incubator, have a real interest in ending the war, in light of the genocide that Gaza has been subjected to for the past ten months. So do the other regional and international parties that are worried that the conflict will spill out into the wider region.

For Israel's part, although Netanyahu does not seem interested in reaching an agreement yet, the options are limited. Today, after months of failed attempts, it does not seem any closer to achieving either of the stated war aims of eliminating Hamas and releasing prisoners, while pressure from the streets and the military, which has begun to insist on a truce out of fatigue, is increasing.

## Implications of Haniyeh's Assassination for Palestinian Politics

The reaction of the Palestinian Authority, whose president lamented the loss of a great national leader, and its declaration of mourning and lowering flags at half-mast, represents a serious opportunity to build on the recent Beijing Agreement, signed on 23 July 2024, and establish the Palestinian national consensus that has seemed out of reach since the beginning of the war. This matter reinforces the demands of popular forces, national Palestinian figures and factions, and regional powers, for the formation of a unified Palestinian leadership within the framework of the Palestine Liberation Organization. This is the only option for Palestinians to invest in the great sacrifices they have made, especially over the last ten months, and not let them be for nothing.

For Hamas itself, the assassination of Haniyeh puts its leadership, especially abroad, once again at the centre of public debate, given that it is paying the price for its positions with its own blood and the blood of its children. It is thus making the same sacrifices as the people of Gaza who are besieged at home. Thus, the occupation itself has shattered the narrative that it has pushed about the disconnection of the resistance leadership abroad from the concerns of the Palestinian street.

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8 "Kamala Harris Tells Benjamin Netanyahu 'It is Time' to End War in Gaza," *BBC News*, YouTube, 26/7/2024, accessed on 31/7/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zOq2>

9 "Trump, Ahead of Netanyahu Meeting, Urges Quick End to War, Return of Hostages," *Reuters*, 25/7/2024, accessed on 31/7/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zOwY>

10 "Qatar after the assassination of Haniyeh: How can mediation succeed when one party assassinates the negotiator on the other side?," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 31/7/2024, accessed on 31/7/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zP8g>



## Conclusion

The assassination of Haniyeh in Tehran may constitute a turning point in the ongoing genocidal war in the Gaza Strip. It could open the door wide to a major escalation in the region if Iran (and Hezbollah) decides to respond with force to Israel's major violation of its sovereignty. At the same time, Iran is pushing for more regional and international pressure on the Netanyahu government to accept the proposal presented by President Biden for a truce agreement to prevent this scenario. Many countries around the world are running out of patience with Israel's behaviour, as it tears about like a rogue state that cannot abide by the simplest rules and customs agreed upon in international rules of engagement, to the point of killing the party with whom it is negotiating.