

The Implications of the Elimination of Ismail Haniyeh and Mohammed Deif Need to be Contained to Prevent an Escalation

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Introduction

The assassination of Ismail Haniyeh who was widely considered Hamas's overall political leader in Tehran took place in the early hours of 31 Jul. Within twenty-four hours the Israel Defence Force announced that Mohammed Deif had been killed in an Israeli air strike in the Khan Younis area of the Gaza Strip on 13 Jul. The military said that it had received additional intelligence to confirm Deif's death to a complete certainty, taking into account that the defence establishment had been confident for the last two weeks that its air strike had killed him. Israel's Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant, said the death of Deif is 'A significant milestone' in the dismantling of Hamas. However, Hamas is yet to confirm his death.¹

In a statement, Hamas said Haniyeh was killed after he attended the inauguration of the new Iranian President, Masoud Pezeshkian. According to Al Jazeera, Hamas has said that Haniyeh was killed in "A treacherous Zionist raid on his residence in Tehran".² Spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said Hamas will wage "Open war to liberate Jerusalem" and the group is "Ready to pay various prices" to do so, as per Al Jazeera. Israel's Heritage Minister Amihai Elihayu, however, celebrated Haniyeh's death on X by stating that the killing "Makes the world a little better", he wrote in Hebrew.

Ismail Haniyeh

Haniyeh was born in 1962 in the Shati refugee camp north of Gaza City, to Palestinian parents who in 1948 had been displaced from their home in Ashkelon now in Israel.

A popular leader, he grew up in a refugee camp and represented the vast majority of the people who are the descendants of the refugee families who were displaced in 1948. A prominent member of the movement in the late 1980s, he was imprisoned by Israel for three years in 1989 during the first Palestinian uprising.

In 1992, he was then exiled to a no-man's-land between Israel and Lebanon, along with a number of Hamas leaders. After a year in exile, he returned to Gaza. His rise to power in Gaza was aided by his mentor, the spiritual leader and a founder of Hamas, Sheik Yassin, for whom he served as personal secretary. The two were targets of an attempted Israeli assassination attempt in 2003; the next year, Mr Yassin was killed by the Israeli military.

Haniyeh was appointed as Palestinian Prime Minister in 2006 by President Mahmoud Abbas after Hamas won the most seats in national elections, but was dismissed a year later after the group ousted Abbas' Fatah party from the Gaza Strip in a week of deadly violence. He was elected head of Hamas's political bureau in 2017

succeeding Khaled Meshaal. In 2018, the United States (US) Department of State designated Haniyeh a terrorist.³

He had recently spent much of his time in Qatar and Turkey and was the negotiator in the ceasefire talks between Israel and Hamas, mediated by Egypt, Qatar and the US, to end the war in Gaza in exchange for hostages captured in the Hamas-led attack on Israel.

Al Jazeera's Hani Mahmoud, said the killing was 'Significant' for the people of Gaza because he was the leader of negotiations that they hoped would lead to a ceasefire. "Palestinians across Gaza and the West Bank also viewed Ismail Haniyeh as a moderate leader who is much more pragmatic compared to other leaders who head the military side of the movement", he said. His funeral procession in Tehran on Wednesday drew thousands of people and Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, led prayers.⁴

Mohammed Deif

Mohammed Deif was born in Gaza's Khan Younis refugee camp in 1965, when the territory was occupied by Egypt. He headed the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military arm of the Hamas movement and was widely seen as the second-ranking Hamas official in Gaza, behind Yahya Sinwar. Israeli authorities imprisoned him in 1989, after which he formed the al-Qassam Brigades with the aim of capturing Israeli soldiers.

After his release, he helped engineer the construction of tunnels in Gaza. Deif remains one of Israel's most-wanted men. Israel imprisoned him in 2000, but he escaped at the beginning of the second Palestinian uprising, or intifada. He survived an assassination attempt in 2002, but lost one of his eyes. Israel says he also lost a foot and a hand, and that he has difficulty speaking. Israeli security forces again failed to assassinate Deif during a 2014 assault on the Gaza Strip, but killed his wife and two of his children. During the current conflict, Deif is believed to have directed Hamas' military operations from within underground tunnels inside Gaza.

For decades, he has been seen as one of Israel's most wanted men. "Deif was responsible for the terrible massacre of Oct 07 and for many murderous attacks against Israeli civilians," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a statement. "He was Israel's most-wanted person for years. His elimination establishes a very clear principle — whoever harms us, we will retaliate against them."⁵

Implications

There are worries that Haniyeh's killing could now lead to a setback in ceasefire negotiations and further escalation of the conflict. Tensions were already high after Israel said it targeted a senior Hezbollah Commander in a 'Precision Strike' on Beirut on 30 Jul. As per Sami al-Arian, the Director of the Centre for Islam and Global Affairs at Istanbul Zaim University, "This is a huge escalation – what happened yesterday in

Lebanon, what's happening today in Tehran. It's an escalation by [Israel] and that's going to have significant ramifications." ⁶

On the other hand, Lord Peter Ricketts, the United Kingdom's former National Security Adviser, has stated that Haniyeh's assassination is "A very powerful demonstration of Israel's ability to reach out right across the region".

He said it gives Israel the "Political room to begin now to wind down the operation in Gaza because he can now say he has really delivered a major blow against Haniyeh's leadership". ⁷

While details of the attack are yet to fully emerge, its political consequences are also coming into focus. The most obvious being the likely damage to fragile efforts to negotiate a ceasefire in Gaza as Haniyeh was a critical interlocutor in negotiations brokered by Qatar, the US and Egypt. ⁸

Progress on the talks now seems distant in view of the assassination of Haniyeh. This brings out a larger question regarding his targeting by Israel. Beyond the desire to exact revenge on the Hamas leadership, Israel's aim seems unclear. Turkey's Foreign Ministry is now accusing the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of having "No intention of achieving peace".

Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, whom Haniyeh had met before the swearing in of President Pezeshkian's swearing said; "With this action, the criminal and terrorist Zionist regime prepared the ground for a harsh punishment for itself, and we consider it our duty to take his revenge", Khamenei said.

Whereas, the US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin said, "That even with the events of the past 24 hours, Washington hoped that Israel would be able to come to a diplomatic solution and deescalate the situation". "I don't think that war is inevitable", he told reporters in Manila, Philippines. "I maintain that. I think there's always room and opportunity for diplomacy, and I'd like to see parties pursue those opportunities." ⁹

Conclusion

Though Haniyeh and Dief are prominent figures and their elimination undoubtedly will be counted as a major success for Israel, but Sinwar still remains.

The reactions of Hamas will now be awaited as also the succession of Haniyeh. It is most likely that a more extremist leader may succeed him. The fact remains that while the killing of senior leaders is a setback for the organisation, Hamas as an ideology will not change and they are unlikely to surrender or make concessions.

Striking Haniyeh in Tehran soon after he met with the top Iranian leadership is a message both to Iran and Hamas that the top leadership of Hamas is not safe. Further, the assassination could not have taken place without human intelligence on the ground and if the theory of planting a bomb in a guest house is correct then Iran needs to introspect regarding its internal security.

Israel has also demonstrated its capabilities and resolve to carryout precision eliminations. They are also clearly discounting Iran's ability to hit back.

What is important now for the international community is to prevent an escalation of the war as a larger conflict could engulf the world with cascading global implications.

To quote the US Secretary of State Blinken "The path that the region is on is toward more conflict, more violence, more suffering, more insecurity". "And it is crucial that we break the cycle, and that starts with a cease-fire. It's urgent that all parties make the right choices in the days ahead".

Endnotes

¹ "Israel says Hamas military wing chief Mohammed Deif was killed in a July strike." The Hindu, August 1, 2024. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/israel-says-hamas-military-wing-chief-mohammed-deif-was-killed-in-a-july-strike/article68472626.ece>.

² "Hamas political chief Ismail Haniyeh assassinated in Iran." Al Jazeera, July 31, 2024.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/31/hamas-political-chief-ismail-haniyeh-assassinated-in-iran-state-media>.

³ "Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh assassinated: All you need to know about the former Palestine PM." The Economic Times, July 31, 2024. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/hamas-leader-ismail-haniyeh-assassinated-all-you-need-to-know/articleshow/112154043.cms?from=mdr>.

⁴ "Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh killed in Iran: What to know, what's next?" Al Jazeera, July 31, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/31/hamas-chief-ismail-haniyeh-killed-in-iran-what-to-know-whats-next>.

⁵ VSM, Maj Gen Jagatbir Singh. "Assassinations of Haniyeh and Deif could spark escalation - The Sunday Guardian Live." The Sunday Guardian Live, August 4, 2024. <https://sundayguardianlive.com/investigation/assassinations-of-haniyeh-and-deif-could-spark-escalation#:~:text=For%20decades%20he's%20been%20seen,most%2Dwanted%20person%20for%20years>.

⁶ Singh, Maj Gen Jagatbir. "How Ismail Haniyeh's killing may weaken Hamas but not its ideology." Firstpost, August 1, 2024. <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/how-ismail-haniyehs-killing-may-weaken-hamas-but-not-its-ideology-13799756.html>.

⁷ BBC News. "Iran vows to avenge killing of Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh," July 31, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/c4ng7g74xppt?page=3>.

⁸ Adams, Paul. "Haniyeh killed: What does it mean for Gaza ceasefire?," July 31, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clly4v4l13vo>.

⁹ "Highlights: Hamas political leader Haniyeh is killed in an alleged Israeli strike. Iran says revenge is 'our duty,'" July 31, 2024. <https://apnews.com/live/hamas-haniyeh-iran-israel-live-updates>.