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## The Killing of Ismail Haniyeh – A Defeat for Hamas or Conflict Escalation?

*By Ghada Soliman*

### SYNOPSIS

*The belief that the killing of Hamas leaders like Ismail Haniyeh would lead to the defeat of Hamas is a misconception rooted in a misunderstanding of the movement's organisational structure. On the contrary, it is an act that threatens to escalate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and feed into broader regional tensions.*

### COMMENTARY

On Wednesday, 31 July 2024, Hamas announced that its leader, [Ismail Haniyeh](#), had been killed in an Israeli air strike in Iran. The senior Hamas leader was assassinated at his residence in Tehran after attending the inauguration ceremony of the new Iranian president, Masoud Pezeshkian.

Haniyeh has been the most prominent figure in Hamas' leadership and has primarily operated from Qatar. However, the killing of Haniyeh is not expected to disrupt the operations of Hamas as the movement is not a single entity led by one individual but a complex movement with deep-rooted social, political and military structures.

The leadership of Hamas includes various figures who have been groomed to take on important roles within the movement. The death of a leader like Haniyeh can create a temporary vacuum but does not destroy Hamas' ideological or operational capabilities.

The assassination of Haniyeh may not only fail to dismantle or disrupt Hamas but could even escalate tensions, leading to a broader conflict that would involve not only Hamas and Israel but possibly Hamas allies like [Kataib Hezbollah](#) and [the Houthis](#).

## **The Resilience of Hamas' Leadership**

The killing of Ismail Haniyeh is [a major setback for the ongoing truce negotiations](#) between Israel and Hamas. However, Hamas will remain as a movement with [Yahya Sinwar](#), who is perceived to be [one of the masterminds](#) of the October 7 attacks on Israel, continuing as a leader operating within Gaza.

Haniyeh had played a significant role [in the negotiations](#), facilitated by [Egypt, Qatar, and the United States](#), to bring an end to the hostilities in Gaza in exchange for the release of hostages taken by Hamas during their attack on October 7.

Hamas' leadership has demonstrated resilience in facing targeted assassinations in the past. For example, the killing of [Ahmed Yassin](#) and [Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi](#), the founders of the Hamas movement, in 2004 did not bring an end to Hamas. On the contrary, the movement grew even stronger.

Despite Haniyeh's grief over the loss of his three sons and several grandchildren to an Israeli air strike last April, he was defiant in his announcement on 10 April 2024 that "this tragedy [would not diminish Hamas' resilience](#) or its commitment to its objectives".

## **The Involvement of Hamas' Allies**

Hamas has been supported by Iran and other non-state players such as Kataib Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, all of whom have demonstrated solidarity with the Palestinians since the October 7 attacks. Indeed, a parallel conflict has emerged involving the Iranian-backed Houthis since the latter's July 19 [attack on Tel Aviv](#).

According to the leader of the Houthis, Abdel Malik Al-Houthi, this attack signifies the commencement of what he refers to as the "fifth phase" in their ongoing struggle against Israel. In a televised speech on 25 July 2024, [Abdel Malik declared that an inevitable response](#) to the Israeli assault on Hodeida's port, which took place on 20 July 2024, is yet to be forthcoming.

The assassination of Haniyeh could provoke the Houthis to launch attacks on Israel and its allies out of solidarity with Hamas. Concurrently, Kataib Hezbollah could also attack Israel in retaliation for its [strikes on Lebanon's capital, Beirut, on 31 July 2024](#).

As of now, Iran remains in support of its allies in the conflict. However, if it should become directly involved, the conflict would spiral into a regional war.

## **Implications of Haniyeh's Assassination**

The assassination of Ismail Haniyeh could significantly influence public sentiment throughout the Arab world and among Muslim communities globally. It may trigger calls from various factions across the region for action or intervention against Israel and its allies. This situation could also exert additional pressure on governments in the Middle East and Muslim-majority countries worldwide.

Arab countries such as Egypt and Jordan, which have historically been mediators in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, may find their roles increasingly difficult as they attempt to manage the escalating tensions between Israel and various Palestinian factions. There is also an increased likelihood of violence spilling over into neighbouring countries if militant groups choose to launch retaliatory strikes across borders.

In Southeast Asia, where various militant groups operate under different ideologies but share common grievances on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Haniyeh's assassination could serve as a rallying point for recruitment efforts. Terrorist groups could leverage the narrative portraying Haniyeh as a martyr to justify violent actions against not only Israel and its allies but also the interests of their governments as well. It is still too early to predict what Hamas and its allies would do in response to the assassination of Haniyeh. The possibility that retaliatory actions by Hamas and its allies could spiral into a regional war cannot be ruled out.

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