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Israel's Leadership Decapitation Strategy

By Matthew Ho

SYNOPSIS

Israel's strategy of targeting the top leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah offers short-term gains by disrupting command structures and boosting the morale of the Israeli public. However, its long-term effectiveness is uncertain, as the resistance groups have demonstrated the ability to adapt and to emerge stronger. Addressing the deeper political and territorial issues remains critical to achieving lasting peace.

COMMENTARY

The elimination of Yahya Sinwar, Hamas' leader and mastermind of the October 7 attacks on Israel last week, saw him joining a list of Hamas and Hezbollah leaders Israel has reportedly killed in recent months. The assassination of his predecessor, Ismail Haniyeh, in Teheran, and more recently, the killing of Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut, has brought to the fore Israel's strategy of targeting people whom it considers top leaders of terrorist organisations.

Leadership is often described as a moral centre of gravity that holds an organisation together. A strategy of leadership decapitation seeks to disrupt command and control in the organisation and to reduce the effectiveness of its operations. While such a strategy has short-term benefits, its long-term effectiveness for the Israelis is uncertain.

Short-term Gains

In the short run, leadership decapitation could paralyse organisations that rely on key commanders for decision-making and strategic direction. Considered a "[dead man walking](#)" by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), Yahya Sinwar was reported to be constantly on the move in Hamas' elaborate network of tunnels in Gaza, using Israeli hostages as human shields and on extended periods of [silence](#) in his communication

with Hamas members in Qatar. The fear of being discovered by the IDF and Israeli intelligence agencies had hampered the ability of the Hamas leaders to coordinate attacks. This had reduced the effectiveness of their militant activities.

Notably, Yahya Sinwar's death served to raise the morale of a war-weary Israeli public, as they flooded social media with [scenes of joy and celebration](#), satisfying their desire for vengeance for the events of October 7. Macabre as it is, leadership decapitation is often a tangible way of communicating progress in a terrible war of attrition. It is also a way of avenging the killing of Israelis and a deterrent to other actors planning to do the same.

Short-Term Risks

Besides triggering retaliatory attacks in the short term, the killing of revered leaders risks an escalation of the conflict into a wider regional war. Iran, of which Hamas and Hezbollah are proxies, has already [sworn](#) retaliation in response to the killings of Hassan Nasrallah, Ismail Haniyeh, and other senior members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). It has demonstrated its will and capacity to attack Israel, having launched up to [two hundred](#) ballistic missiles at Israeli targets earlier this month.

The killing of key leadership figures could also stall efforts in negotiating a ceasefire in the Israeli-Hamas war, decreasing the effectiveness of diplomacy in achieving Israel's aims of hostage release and the return of its displaced civilians to northern Israel.

The killing of Hamas and Hezbollah's leaders, especially outside the areas of conflict, casts a spotlight on the legality and morality of such a strategy. These [extrajudicial killings](#) violate the laws of armed conflict and are costly to Israel at a time when it is already on the back foot in the court of global public opinion.

Furthermore, the collateral damage resulting from the manner of killing draws further condemnation. In the targeting of Hassan Nasrallah, the use of [bunker bombs](#) in a densely populated part of Beirut destroyed several residential buildings, killing and injuring many civilians and leading to widespread protests and global condemnation.

In the short term, the martyrdom of revered figures amongst them could serve as a rallying point for militants in the region. Their thirst for revenge could lead to an increase in radicalisation and militant attacks in the coming weeks.

In the Long-Term

Israel's threat to Hamas' leadership is not lost on the organisation. For long, Hamas has endured the threat and prepared for it. Led by a political bureau in Qatar, its fighters have been famously able to fight in a decentralised fashion, with elaborate succession plans to keep the resistance going.

In the early 2000s, the killing of Hamas' founders, Hamas Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, resulted in an even more effective Hamas led by Ismail Haniyeh. The latter led Hamas to win most of the seats in the Palestinian Parliament in 2006.

Haniyeh himself was replaced by Yahya Sinwar, a [notoriously brutal](#) leader. In the long term, the decapitation of Hamas' leadership may facilitate the rise of a more radical or strategically competent figure.

Among the Palestinians, Hamas has gained popularity and legitimacy as a symbol of resistance to the Israeli occupation. It also has the communal support of the Palestinians, having had a record of providing them with [social services](#) and institutions. The popular support it enjoys will facilitate recruitment efforts, access to resources, and the dissemination of its ideology. Additionally, it enjoys considerable support from external actors like Iran, which provides financial and military backing that helps it to recover from leadership losses.

Groups that rely on charismatic leaders might suffer from leadership decapitations, but Hamas is beyond personalities. It represents a cause and a resistance movement that enjoys widespread support among Palestinians. The killing of Hamas' leaders might instead generate deep sympathy for them. They would be celebrated as martyrs and folk heroes, lending sustenance and adding fuel to the cause. The ideological commitment of its fighters ensures that the removal of a leader does not significantly alter their objectives.

A leadership decapitation strategy does little to address the underlying issues of an old conflict driven by deep-seated nationalistic differences rooted in a history of political, territorial, religious, and identity complexities. As long as these issues remain unsolved, the cycle of violence will persist.

The Way Ahead

Despite the long-term risks and short-term strategic value, Israel will likely continue with its strategy of leadership decapitation. The short-term benefits, i.e., deterrence, psychological victory for the Israeli public, and disruption to Hamas and Hezbollah operations in Gaza and Lebanon, are seen as worth the risks.

Throughout their histories, Hamas and Hezbollah have shown remarkable resilience in the face of Israel's strategy. More competent leaders have replaced those killed, while the organisations have demonstrated the ability to regenerate and remain effective. Israel's resolve in the current round of intense leadership targeting, might aim to slow this regeneration, as it seeks to achieve its immediate war aims.

For Israel, the successful killing of Hamas and Hezbollah's leaders might generate euphoria, but it is not a long-term solution. Addressing the deeper underlying issues will remain critical for Israel to achieve lasting peace and security.

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