

A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD: POLITICAL AND TACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ISRAEL'S TARGETED KILLING STRATEGY

by

Kristian P. Alexander

Israel has a long track record of eliminating key leaders and operatives of terrorist organizations that pose an imminent threat to its national security. The assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran on July 31, marked the latest of these “targeted killings.”

By targeting leaders and key operatives of terrorist organizations, Israel aims to disrupt planning, coordination, and execution of terrorist activities. This strategy is often employed against groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, which have repeatedly engaged in acts of violence against Israeli targets.

One of the primary risks in using this method is [retaliation by terrorist organizations](#). The targeted killing of a leader often leads to a cycle of violence, where groups seek revenge, potentially escalating conflicts.

Preemptive Strikes or Extrajudicial Actions? Legal and Ethical Debate on Israel's Assassination Policy

In the year 2023 alone, Israel reportedly carried out numerous targeted assassinations of militants and political operatives affiliated with various groups, including [more than 55 named Hamas members](#), military commanders, intelligence officials, and political figures. Iran and Israel have been engaged in a covert war for years, with Israel also having killed over a dozen nuclear scientists and military commanders within Iran. This includes the 2020 assassination of [Iran's top nuclear scientist](#), Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, using an AI-assisted, remote-controlled killer robot.

Israel justifies its strategy of targeted killings as an extension of its right to self-defense under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, which allows nations to defend themselves against armed attacks.

By framing assassinations as [pre-emptive strikes against imminent threats](#), Israel asserts that it is acting within its legal rights. Israel often designates targeted individuals as combatants or unlawful combatants, arguing that they are actively engaged in hostilities against the state.

Israel has been criticized by some in the international community, who claim that targeted killings are extrajudicial and therefore violations of international law. This has strained diplomatic relations and fuelled anti-Israel sentiment globally. Critics argue that targeted killings undermine the [rule of law and set a dangerous precedent](#) for state conduct. Additionally, these operations often result in collateral damage, leading to the deaths of innocent civilians and exacerbating regional tensions. [Collateral damage](#) not only raises humanitarian concerns but can also create backlash against the state conducting the assassination, potentially fueling further violence and radicalization.

Israel's targeted killings of Hamas and Hezbollah leaders, it says, are justified under international law, as these leaders are considered Continuous Combat Functionaries (CCF) actively involved in hostilities, making them legitimate military targets. As Israel is engaged in a Non-International Armed Conflict (NIAC) under Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, these actions align with the laws of war, focusing on military necessity and proportionality. Rather than being pre-emptive or extrajudicial, these strikes are part of an ongoing conflict, aimed at dismantling the operational capabilities of groups actively engaged in hostilities against Israel. Distinguishing between the targeted killing of commanders with CCF in an Article 3 conflict and targeted killings outside of an armed conflict is crucial, as they involve fundamentally different circumstances and raise separate legal and ethical considerations.

One rationale for these targeted killings is that they [deter future attacks](#) by demonstrating that involvement in terrorism carries severe consequences. The elimination of high-profile figures sends a message to potential recruits and operatives about the personal risks of engaging in terrorist

activities. Assassinating leaders can also disrupt the organizational structure and operational capabilities of terrorist groups. For example, the killings in 2004 of Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Yassin and Hamas co-founder Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi aimed to dismantle the group's leadership and impede its ability to plan and execute attacks.

Hamas, however, has demonstrated resilience in the past, surviving the loss of key leaders because of their [decentralized leadership structures and ideological commitment](#). While Haniyeh's assassination might cause short-term disruptions, it is unlikely to result in a significant long-term weakening of Hamas. Following the killing of Sheikh Yassin, for example, Hamas increased its attacks against Israeli targets, though with less lethality.

High-tech Murder: How Israeli Intelligence used Spyware to Penetrate Iran's Security

The successful assassination of Haniyeh underscores the [advanced intelligence capabilities](#) of Israel. The Mossad, Israel's national intelligence agency, is renowned for its ability to conduct covert operations and gather actionable intelligence. The operation required precise knowledge of Haniyeh's movements, security arrangements, and timing, reflecting Israel's extensive surveillance and espionage networks in the region. It was reported that Haniyeh was killed by a bomb that was allegedly smuggled into the guesthouse where he was staying, a few months prior.

Reports suggest that Israel employed spyware similar to Pegasus, a tool developed by the Israeli cyber-arms firm NSO Group. [Pegasus](#) is known for its ability to infiltrate smartphones, granting access to calls, messages, emails, photos, and location data. Such technology enables intelligence agencies to conduct surveillance and gather crucial information on targets with unprecedented precision.

By potentially using spyware planted through platforms like WhatsApp, Israel could have [tracked Haniyeh's movements and communications](#), pinpointing his location in real time. This level of surveillance capability reflects the significant advancements in cyber warfare technologies, which have become integral to military and intelligence

operations. The operation also exposed vulnerabilities within [Iran's intelligence and security apparatus](#). Despite hosting a high-profile event with international attention, Iran failed to protect a significant figure allied with its interests. This failure indicates potential lapses in Iran's counterintelligence measures and its ability to safeguard key allies within its borders.

The Domino Effect: Haniyeh's Assassination Could Alter Middle East Politics

Haniyeh was a prominent political figure within Hamas, serving as the head of the political bureau. Haniyeh was not directly involved in military operations, leaving that to [Yahya Sinwar](#), the political leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip since 2017. Sinwar is known for his hardline stance and has played a significant role in shaping the group's domestic and international strategies. Haniyeh, in contrast, focused on maintaining Hamas's diplomatic channels and securing financial and political support from allies.

The targeted killing took place during the inauguration of Iran's new president, Masoud Pezeshkian, while Haniyeh was a guest of the Iranian government. This timing may have been [strategically chosen](#) to send a message to Iran about its support for Hamas and its involvement in regional destabilization. Targeting Haniyeh in Iran, a key ally of Hamas, highlights Israel's willingness to extend its operational reach into hostile territories to eliminate threats.

Haniyeh's assassination in [Iran rather than Qatar](#), where he was based for years, may also reflect Israel's geopolitical calculations. Qatar maintains a delicate balance in its foreign relations, hosting a United States military base while engaging diplomatically with Hamas. By killing Haniyeh in Iran instead of Qatar, Israel avoided straining Doha's relations with Washington and potentially jeopardizing Qatar's role as a mediator in regional conflicts.

Iran has consistently pursued a strategy of regional hegemony, leveraging proxy groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas to extend its influence across the Middle East. Haniyeh's assassination is likely viewed as a direct challenge to [Iran's regional ambitions](#), necessitating a calculated response to maintain its credibility and deter future Israeli actions. Iran's

ideological commitment to the Palestinian cause and its opposition to Israel are central tenets of its foreign policy. Retaliation for Haniyeh's assassination would align with Iran's narrative that it is the champion of oppressed Muslim populations.

Turkey, which has historically supported Hamas, has [publicly condemned the assassination](#). This will strain relations with Israel further and prompt Turkey to increase its diplomatic support for Hamas by offering political backing in international forums and potentially increasing humanitarian aid to Gaza. This support may serve to bolster Hamas' political standing and resilience.

Hezbollah could choose to escalate militarily by launching attacks against Israeli positions along the [Lebanon-Israel border](#). This could include rocket fire, cross-border raids, or other forms of asymmetric warfare designed to inflict casualties and demonstrate Hezbollah's capabilities.

The U.S. may become directly involved in the conflict, either through military support for Israel or diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions. In a recent statement, the Pentagon confirmed that they are sending an [additional fighter squadron and Navy warships](#) to the Middle East to reinforce its defensive air support capabilities. This could lead to increased international involvement, complicating the regional dynamics further and potentially leading to a protracted conflict.

As a key political figure, Haniyeh was involved in negotiations and diplomatic efforts to reach a ceasefire agreement. His removal could stall ongoing talks, as Hamas might adopt a [more hardline stance](#) in response to the assassination. Hostage negotiations, particularly concerning Israeli captives held by Hamas, could also be affected by the assassination. His diplomatic skills and political connections may have facilitated negotiations, and his absence could lead to increased tensions and reduced willingness from Hamas to engage in dialogue. The assassination might lead to an escalation of violence, with Hamas retaliating against Israeli targets. This escalation would further hinder ceasefire talks and complicate efforts to negotiate a hostage release, as both sides

may become more entrenched in their positions.

Seizing the Moment: With the U.S. in Turmoil, Netanyahu Achieves Tactical Win

The targeted killing of Haniyeh allows Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to demonstrate his government's commitment to Israeli security and counter-terrorism. Netanyahu can [present the elimination of a high-profile figure](#) as a victory in the fight against Hamas, potentially bolstering his domestic support among hardline constituents who prioritize security and military action.

Despite tactical successes, the Netanyahu government faces criticism for failing to achieve broader strategic objectives in Gaza. The ongoing blockade and military operations have not led to a long-term resolution of the conflict, and the humanitarian situation in Gaza continues to draw international condemnation. Israel might be deliberately provoking an escalation in the conflict to [divert attention](#) from its failure to meet its declared objective of eradicating Hamas in Gaza. The assassination of Haniyeh does not address the underlying issues that fuel the conflict, such as economic deprivation and political disenfranchisement.

The timing of the assassination raises questions about the level of [U.S. knowledge or approval](#). It is possible that Netanyahu acted with the tacit approval of the U.S. government, which has traditionally supported Israel's right to self-defense. Given the sensitive nature of the operation and its potential to escalate tensions, it is also plausible that Netanyahu acted independently, leveraging the U.S. election cycle and President Joe Biden's perceived status as a lame-duck president. The Biden administration may have limited capacity to influence Israeli actions, and Netanyahu could be capitalizing on this political context to pursue his security agenda without fearing significant backlash.

Dr Kristian P. Alexander is a Senior Fellow at the Rabdan Security & Defense Institute (RSDI), Abu Dhabi, UAE.