

Israel's shortsighted policy of assassinating Palestinian political figures is a great example of winning the battle but losing the war.

assassination became an official policy and went through three phases. The first phase came after the launch of the Palestinian armed struggle in 1965, where dozens of Palestinian key figures were eliminated. The second wave came after Oslo in the mid-1990s and targeted primarily Hamas operatives accused of masterminding suicide bombings in Israel. The Second Intifada in 2000 saw a third but particularly intense wave of assassinations that killed tens of resistance

to organise and recruit, but only for a short period. None has amounted to a strategic gain in the long run. Quite the opposite, it often backfired in terms of revenge, re-recruiting, and boosting general antagonism toward the Zionist entity. A study by the US Department of Justice shortly after the end of the Second Intifada concluded that Israeli targeted killing did not have a significant impact on the rate of Palestinian attacks on Israeli targets. It did, in fact, result in increased attacks over a short or long period. One reason for the failure is the in-

Ahmed Jabari was second in command to Mohammed Deif, chief of the Al-Qasam Brigades and Israel's most wanted for two decades. Deif survived multiple assassination attempts and lost his wife and children in one of them in 2014. The Israeli alleged attempt on his life in Mawasi in southern Gaza in early July resulted in a horrific massacre. Israel's policy of 'targeted killing' has become progressively comprehensive, indiscriminate, and mindlessly brutal in the past decade or so, reaching a level of mass atrocities in the current Gaza onslaught. In October 2023, an Israeli jet levelled



Late Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh (C) gestures the victory sign at the Iranian Parliament in Tehran on July 30, 2024.   
 ● ABEDIN TAHERKENAREH/EPA



Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin (L) talks with future Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh at his home in the Gaza Strip in 2002. Israel assassinated Yassin in 2004 and Haniyeh in 2024.   
 ● AHMED JADALLAH/REUTERS

the heart of Jabalia refugee camp and killed fifty people to allegedly hunt a Hamas commander. To kill Deif, several jet fighters were deployed and much more firepower was unleashed on an area designed as a 'safe zone' for the displaced Gazans by the Israeli army. Throughout the war, the pattern has been repeated: level areas and kill dozens of innocent people to target a single individual. Not only in the war-torn Gaza Strip but also in the occupied West Bank, with the Israeli army resorting to drones and jet fighters to target Palestinian activists.

**Israel: A rogue 'state'**

In his book *Rise and Kill First*, Israeli journalist Ronan Bergman claims that, since World War II, Israel has assassinated more people than any other country in the Western world. Up to 2019, the time of the book publishing, Israel carried out 2,300 operations, killing several thousand people. There are no official figures to affirm the accuracy or lack thereof of Bergman's claims. However, no other nation has been more forthcoming, and openly comfortable, about assassination as a "state" policy and frequently executed practice as Israel. Jewish terrorist group Lehi initiated the assassination policy in 1944 by killing British politician Walter Guinness, who opposed illegal Jewish immigration to Palestine. After Israel was established in 1948,

figures and, with them, more civilians. Israel's 'targeted killing' has repeatedly come under fire on legal and moral grounds; firstly, because these assassinations are extrajudicial executions — and thus, forbidden under international law — and secondly, because of its sheer disregard for innocent lives. However, Israeli decision-makers prioritise the perceived strategic value of these assassinations over the legal or moral costs, such as international criticism or excessive collateral damage. Israeli officials argue that killing is a last resort when arrest is not an option. It also boosts the Israeli public morale. The goal is selective disincentives that up the cost of 'militancy' — anti-occupation resistance in Palestinian terms — and deter activists and organisations from planning or carrying out attacks against the occupying entity or its civilians. Another typical assessment would be that target killing is disruptive; it deprives dissident groups of valued members and forces them into hiding instead of focusing on resisting/fighting. In part, the practice complements Israel's doctrine of pre-emptive strike — hence the Talmudic reference: "rise and kill first", as per Bergman's book title as well.

**Hamas the Hydra**

That said, experience shows that Israeli extrajudicial killing has reaped tactical benefits by disrupting the target group's command chain and ability

ability, or sheer impracticality, of the Israeli intelligence to strike a balance between the 'repression' of Palestinian dissidence and stopping the flow of resources, which is a replacement for the assassinated leader.

It fails to fully appreciate that — theoretically — demoralising Palestinians by murdering their leaders does not — realistically — amount to a mass or long-term acceptance of the status quo. A reason above all else is the settler colonial context, which leaves Palestinians no options but to fight Israel's occupation, regardless of the cost. The alternative would be the loss of their right to self-determination and, subsequently, national oblivion. Every Palestinian or Arab key figure that Israel has assassinated, including senior leaders, since 1948 has been replaced. Israel killed most of the active front-line members of the PLO between 1965 and 2005, but the movement took the blows and readapted. The Mossad killed Fathi al-Shiqaqi, the founder of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, in Operation Kidon in Malta in 1995, but today's PIJ is much fiercer and better armed.

The core leaders of Hamas — Yassin, Rantisi, and Jabari — were all assassinated, but they were replaced by Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif who are less compromising than their predecessors and have successfully reshaped Hamas' military wing into a capable army-like force to fight Israel's occupation.

The same goes for Hezbollah. Israeli planes blew up Hezbollah's military chief, Emad Mughniyeh, in Syria in 2008, but the Lebanese group has since grown in strength and is today actively and successfully engaging the Israeli army in Northern Israel in support of Gaza.

Israel may have rationalised and justified extrajudicial murder as a way to provide security, but doing so augmented the very antagonism that makes it insecure. Instead of tackling the root of the problem, the occupation and colonialism, Israelis can only see and deal with the symptoms of their deeds.

This headhunting never worked and will not work in the future, unless repeating the same thing over and again and expecting a different result is no longer the definition of insanity.

*The article first appeared on The New Arab.*

**It's both criminal, desperate**

That's why Israel assassinated Ismail Haniyeh



By Ramzy Baroud  
Author, journalist

**OPINION**

*Israel's assassination of the head of the Hamas political bureau Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran on July 31 is part of Tel Aviv's search for a wider regional conflict. It is a criminal act that reeks of desperation.*

*Almost immediately after the start of the Gaza war on October 7, Israel hoped to use the genocide in the Strip as an opportunity to achieve its long-term goal of a regional war — one that would rope in Washington as well as Iran and other Middle Eastern countries. Despite unconditional support for its genocide in Gaza and various conflicts throughout the region, the United States refrained from entering a direct war against Iran and others. Though defeating Iran is an American strategic objective, the US lacks the will and tools to pursue it now. After ten months of a failed war on Gaza and a military stalemate against Hezbollah in Lebanon, Israel is, once more, accelerating its push for a wider conflict. This time around, however, Israel is engaging in a high-stakes game, the most dangerous of its previous gambles.*



People hold up the Palestinian flag and a portrait of assassinated Hamas negotiator Ismail Haniyeh during a rally at Tehran University in the Iranian capital Tehran on July 31, 2024.   
 ● AFP

The current gamble involved the targeting of a top Hezbollah leader by bombing a residential building in Beirut on Tuesday — and, of course, the assassination of Palestine's most visible, let alone popular political leader. Haniyeh succeeded in forging and strengthening ties with Russia, China, and other countries beyond the US-western political domain.

Israel chose the place and timing of killing Haniyeh carefully. The Palestinian leader was killed in the Iranian capital, shortly after he attended the inauguration of Iran's new president Masoud Pezeshkian. The Israeli message was a compound one — that of Israel's readiness to escalate further — and to Hamas, that Israel has no intentions to end the war or to reach a negotiated cease-fire.

The latter point is perhaps the most urgent. For months, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has done everything in his power to impede all diplomatic efforts aimed at ending the war. By killing the top Palestinian negotiator, Israel delivered a final and decisive message that Israel remains invested in violence, and in nothing else.

The scale of the Israeli provocations, however, poses a great challenge to the pro-Palestinian camp in the Middle East, namely, how to respond with equally strong messages without granting Israel its wish of embroiling the whole region in a destructive war.

Considering the military capabilities of what is known as the 'Axis of Resistance', Iran, Hezbollah, and others are certainly capable of managing this challenge despite the risk

factors involved. Equally important regarding timing: the Israeli dramatic escalation in the region, followed a visit by Netanyahu to Washington, which, aside from many standing ovations at the US Congress, didn't fundamentally alter the US position, predicated on the unconditional support for Israel without direct US involvement in a regional war.

Additionally, Israel's recent clashes involving the army, military police, and the supporters of the far right suggest that an actual coup in Israel might be a real possibility. In the words of Israel's opposition leader Yair Lapid: Israel is not nearing the abyss, Israel is already in the abyss. It is, therefore, clear to Netanyahu and his far-right circle that they are operating within an increasingly limited time and margins.

By killing Haniyeh, a political leader who has essentially served the role of a diplomat, Israel demonstrated the extent of its desperation and the limits of its military failure.

Considering the criminal extent to which Israel is willing to go, such desperation could eventually lead to the regional war that Israel has been trying to instigate, even before the Gaza war.

Keeping in mind Washington's weakness and indecision in the face of Israel's intransigence, Tel Aviv might achieve its wish of a regional war after all.

*The article first appeared on The Palestine Chronicle.*



An Israeli protester wearing a mask representing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu holds a mock rocket during a demonstration on November 11, 2020.   
 ● JACK GUEZ/AFP