

# Real reason Israel assassinating Hamas, Hezbollah leaders

## And why it won't stop resistance



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OPINION

*On the night of July 30, Israel escalated its military operations, targeting its adversaries across multiple fronts, including Lebanon, Iran, and Palestine. The Israeli cabinet claimed a significant success with the assassination of a Hezbollah commander in the densely populated neighborhood of southern Beirut. Simultaneously, Israel launched a bold strike in the heart of Tehran, killing Ismail Haniyeh, the current politburo chief of Hamas. After 10 months of slowly but steadily losing the escalation dominance it had maintained for decades, Israel is now attempting to reclaim the initiative and reestablish the upper hand by targeting both Beirut and Tehran in under 24 hours.*

Israel's actions are not merely about projecting strength; they are also designed to increase pressure on the Axis of Resistance. The strategic objective here is to fracture the unity of this coalition by leveraging its military capabilities to flirt with the prospect of an all-out war — an outcome that neither Israel nor Hezbollah and, by extension, Iran truly desire. This calculated brinkmanship aims to unsettle the adversaries, forcing them to reconsider their unified stance and possibly leading to concessions in Israel's favor.

Israel is banking on the notion that fear of further escalation will push Hezbollah and Iran to exert pressure on Hamas to meet some of Israel's demands during cease-fire negotiations. Additionally, Israel anticipates that any real escalation — particularly one provoked by its targeted actions — would compel the United States and its allies to offer military and diplomatic support. While Washington may not actively seek a major conflict, Israel is confident that the US will not hesitate to come to its aid if the situation escalates. In other words, Israel is pursuing a policy of entanglement and in doing so is taking calculated risks, knowing that if things go awry, the American military will rush to its defense in another war in the Middle East.

For some time now, Israel has been gauging the reactions of its adversaries, particularly noting the subdued Palestinian response to its proclamations that it had successfully assassinated Hamas's military commander in Gaza, Muhammad al-Deif. This observation has led Israeli strategic planners to conclude that while a diplomatic deal remains a priority, such targeted assassinations are unlikely to derail these efforts.

Additionally, Israel's calculations suggest that although Hezbollah and Iran might view incursions into Beirut or Tehran as significant escalations requiring a response, both actors are likely to avoid triggering an all-out conflict that could lead to open warfare. This belief underscores Israel's confidence in its ability to carry out targeted actions without provoking a broader regional conflict.

These maneuvers would likely have taken place regardless of the incident in Majdal Shams. The current operations and series of escalations are occurring at a moment when Israel stands to benefit strategically, even if it ultimately signs an agreement. By accumulating tactical successes, Israel aims to reassert its escalation dominance in its ongoing conflicts with adversaries. This approach reflects a calculated effort to strengthen its negotiating position while ensuring it maintains a decisive upper hand in any potential confrontation. It also seeks to showcase its resilience and will to fight even though the war has dragged on for months on end, with signs of fractures within Israeli



A Palestinian carries a picture of the late Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, who was killed in Iran, during a march to condemn his killing at the Burj al-Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut, Lebanon, on July 31, 2024.

IBRAHEEM ABU MUSTAFA/REUTERS

society and the loss of trust in the military. This has most recently culminated in mutinous and insurrectionary riots outside the notorious prison of Sde Teiman protesting the detainment of nine Israeli soldiers accused of gang-raping a Palestinian prisoner.

### Israel's history of assassinating Palestinian leaders

The notion of assassination is deeply embedded in the history of the Arab region, with the term itself originating from the region. During the 11th to 13th centuries, amid the turmoil of the Crusades, the Nizari Ismailis — commonly known as the "Hashashin" — employed assassination as a strategic tool to eliminate leaders who opposed their cause. Yet, the significance of assassination in the region extends far beyond mere etymology. This region, long subjected to colonial encroachment and artificially induced disunity, has become a theater where the conventional rules of war can be suspended. In this context, political actors who do not align with Western hegemonic interests are often rendered exceptions, making their leaders legitimate targets in ways that violate rules and norms upheld elsewhere.

In the past century, Israel has refined the practice of targeted assassinations, often coupled with the arrest of key leaders, to eliminate influential political and military figures. This strategy is not merely about neutralizing immediate threats; it is also about shaping the composition and character of the re-

sistance it faces in the region. Through these lethal interventions, Israel seeks to cultivate a leadership class within Palestine and the broader Arab world that aligns more closely with US and Israeli interests, thereby manipulating the dynamics of resistance against its policies of land appropriation, ethnic cleansing, and colonization.

These tactics have proven effective in removing key Palestinian leaders at critical junctures of the struggle. For instance, during the pre-Oslo years, the assassinations of pivotal figures such as Yasser Arafat's second and third in command — Abu Iyad (Salah Khalaf) and Abu Jihad (Khalil al-Wazir) — cleared the way for the emergence of a more pliant leadership, which now has been ultimately epitomized by Mahmoud Abbas.

During the Second Intifada, Israel arrested popular Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti and PFLP General Secretary Ahmad Saadat. It also possibly poisoned Yasser Arafat, and it assassinated the PFLP's military commander, Abu Ali Mustafa, along with key figures within Hamas such as Abdul Aziz Rantisi and Hamas's founder, Ahmad Yassin, ensuring that no real opposition to the entrenchment of Palestine's own comprador class could gain dominance in Palestinian politics. Through such operations, Israel sought to remold the consciousness of the very leadership class that opposed it. After all, if Palestinians, Arabs, or their leaders give up on the cause, then there would be no cause to speak of. New leaders would

not only fear for their lives but would also be more amenable to Israeli goals and objectives.

This policy has served Israel well in the past but has also created unintended consequences. Today, Palestinian disunity is not within a specific coalition or political group; it is disunity marked by a pragmatic comprador class ruling the West Bank, while more homogeneous resistance groups operate from places like Gaza. While the PLO once incorporated various currents, like the stance of Mahmoud Abbas, into its organizational fabric, the current disposition of resistance groups contains fewer disagreements about its strategies vis-à-vis Israel. What differences do exist among the resistance are largely tactical or tied to choices of alliances systems. In other words, assassinating Ismail Haniyeh does not automatically lead to more compliant leadership emerging in his place because the movement from which Haniyeh descends remains united around the framework of resistance.

Moreover, Israel's rejectionism and refusal to accommodate figures like Mahmoud Abbas, or to grant Palestinians even a bantustan state, have shaped Palestinian consciousness in a way that reinforces the belief that only resistance can bring about strategic shifts. This attitude has been bolstered by the fact that negotiations are futile with an Israeli society that is both arrogant and supremacist, epitomized recently by the riots in the Sde Teiman protests for the right to rape Palestinian prisoners.

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### Declining efficacy of Israeli assassinations

Israel's fear of peace, coupled with its insistence on maintaining dominance through force and the ironic presence of figures like Mahmoud Abbas, who, by enabling Israel's colonization in the West Bank without resistance, have led Palestinians and Palestinian resistance groups to dismiss any serious approach towards negotiated solutions. These dynamics have deepened the conviction that meaningful change cannot be achieved through dialogue with an entity that continues to prioritize force and hegemony over genuine peace efforts.

Moreover, Palestinians have both reframed their resistance and institutionalized its organizational structures. The character of these organizations has evolved, becoming less dependent on a cult of personality or deep emotional ties with individual leaders, and more focused on organizational roles and operational efficacy. Gone are the days when resistance groups would collapse into disarray following the loss of a key figure.

Today, Palestinian and Lebanese resistance movements have adapted to the reality that the assassination of a prominent leader may cause a tactical setback, but it does not lead to the disintegration of their operations. In fact, in many instances, these groups have demonstrated resilience, using such incidents as a catalyst for the further consolidation and strengthening of their organizational frameworks. This