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Killing the peace:

Israel assassinates chief negotiator across the table

Israel's killing of Hamas politburo chief Ismail Haniyeh was designed not just to eliminate the top Palestinian negotiator in ceasefire talks but also the man most capable of unifying the disparate Palestinian factions in Gaza, the West Bank, and abroad.



(Photo Credit: The Cradle)

The assassination of Hamas Political Bureau leader Ismail Haniyeh has killed any chance for a lasting ceasefire in Gaza – on terms favorable to Palestinians – and leaves a huge political vacuum within the resistance movement.

The assassination, which took place during an official visit to Tehran for the inauguration of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, coincided with 300 days of Israel's genocidal war on the Gaza Strip. Haniyeh was the chief Palestinian negotiator in indirect months-long ceasefire talks with the Israeli delegation, among them Mossad Chief David Barnea, whose organization reportedly executed the shocking kill operation.

This targeting of the head of the political movement reflects Israel's systematic policy of assassinating leaders who can unify ranks and deepen relations with regional and international powers. This also explains the reasoning behind Israel's 2 January [assassination](#) of Saleh al-Aroui in Beirut, the key Hamas figure managing relations between Tehran, Ankara, Lebanon, and Doha.

Haniyeh, too, was distinguished not only by his ability to bridge the vision gap between Hamas' military and political wings but also by successfully liaising with various regional and international powers and playing a major role advancing the interests of the resistance group in its three target regions – Gaza, the occupied West Bank, and abroad.

Haniyeh's assassination has created an urgent need to reorganize Hamas' internal house – particularly urgent given Israel's ongoing genocidal war on Gaza – and reconcile the disparate views of its leaders, such as Yahya Sinwar in Gaza and Khaled Meshaal abroad.

Today, nothing would suit Israel more than seeing Meshaal, in particular, regain the reins at Hamas. The former Hamas politburo chief, after all, controversially [split up](#) Tel Aviv's biggest regional adversaries – the Resistance Axis – at the start of the Syrian war by turning his back on the only Arab state member of the Axis, Syria.

It has taken Hamas years to fully reintegrate into the Axis after that betrayal, which is often blamed on Meshaal and his cohorts who decamped from Damascus to Doha. It was only through tireless efforts by leaders like Haniyeh and Aroui that Hamas' relations with the regional resistance were publicly mended.

Meshaal has since suffered the indignity of being spurned by Syrian, Iranian, and Hezbollah leaders, so his return to the top would be manna to Israeli ears – even though Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had, almost successfully, undertaken to kill Meshaal in 1997.

Those were different times, though, and alliances and interests in the region have shifted many times since. Today, it is the unifying, pro-resistance qualities of leaders like Haniyeh and Aroui that pose a far bigger threat to Israel.

Rising role

Haniyeh was, by consensus, a popular Hamas leader able to straddle the breadth of the Palestinian political community, and led an exceptional career that began with the establishment of the Hamas movement in the 1970s.

He was born in 1964 in the Shati refugee camp, where he lived, breathed, and experienced the suffering of Palestinian refugees in all its painful details. Haniyeh joined Hamas early under the guidance of the charismatic founder, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. His memorization of

the Quran before the age of 14 made him an eloquent preacher – he had a beautiful recitation voice that drew the respect and admiration of many.

Haniyeh toiled alongside Sheikh Yassin in the earliest stages of building important Islamic institutions in Gaza, including the establishment of the Islamic Society and the Islamic University. Despite his young age, Sheikh Yassin relied on him heavily and would call him one of the leaders of the future who would play a great role. Haniyeh joined the Islamic University, became the head of its student council, and then assumed a professorship there after graduation.

Having played a prominent role in the first intifada in 1987, Haniyeh was arrested alongside other Hamas leaders for three years. Although released from Israeli detention in 1991, he was deported a year later with the movement’s leaders to Marj al-Zuhur in Lebanon, where they cemented their resistance mindset before returning to Gaza in 1994.

Under the Oslo Accords, which Hamas strongly rejected, Haniyeh emerged as one of the movement’s most critical voices to politically challenge the agreement, especially in the media. He swiftly rose to become director of Yassin’s office and helped reorganize the Hamas’ security, military, and religious apparatuses in the Gaza Strip, paving the way for the Second Intifada in 2000.

After Israel’s assassination of a stream Hamas leaders, Haniyeh was elected as the movement’s Gaza leader in 2004, which marked a new chapter in the organization’s history – a phase of comprehensive resistance, which culminated in Israel’s troop withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005. With a resounding victory for the “Change and Reform” platform Haniyeh led in the 2006 Palestinian elections, he became the head of the first elected Palestinian government in history.

As a government steeped in resistance doctrine that refused to recognize Israel, his administration was placed in direct confrontation with the occupation state. Haniyeh led Gaza and Hamas during three wars launched by Israeli military forces, in which he became a key target for assassination.

In 2017, Haniyeh was elected Hamas leader, succeeding Khaled Meshaal. Although forced to leave Gaza in 2019 for security reasons, he remained a powerful symbol for Palestinians in the strip and ‘abroad,’ able now to communicate regularly with heads of state, international organizations, and global media.

When Israel launched its brutal military assault on Gaza last October, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly threatened to assassinate Hamas leaders – despite knowing that targeting Haniyeh would have to be done in a third country. The assassination of Haniyeh is a

violation of international law on so many levels: political assassination, breaching the sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations, an act of aggression, and the targeting of a diplomatically immune person. Haniyeh was an international and Islamic symbol, and his killing is the stuff that triggers wars.

But will this blow to Hamas and the Palestinian people end their resistance to the occupation and deter them from retaliating against Israel? Decidedly not. Tel Aviv has murdered countless Palestinian leaders, thinkers, politicians, and military commanders in decades past, yet the events of 7 October 2023 took place, unhindered. The resistance and the broad segment of its population that supports these sacrifices wholeheartedly are likely to transform grief into further strength and resolve.

Furthermore, they are calling – alongside West Asia’s entire Axis of Resistance – for a hard retaliation against Israel, a punishment for a heinous crime that violated global laws and conventions.

Current challenges

Hamas has a strong organizational structure that includes its Shura Council and Political Bureau – institutions that play an important role in managing the movement’s affairs and making decisions. This is in addition to the judicial bodies that ensure internal justice and control of disputes.

The killings of Haniyeh and Arouri have left a gaping vacuum in Hamas, both at the leadership level and in its coordination with regional and international allies. But the movement has also historically proven its ability to overcome crises, as demonstrated in the aftermath of an Israeli assassination rampage against most of its leaders in Gaza and the West Bank in 2003 and 2004. Hamas showed remarkable resilience by overcoming its ordeal and went on to expand its clout, develop some astounding military and strategic capabilities, and continue its resistance struggle.

Furthermore, today, Hamas’ military wing, the Qassam Brigades, has stand-alone capabilities, resources, and funding, having expected the deepening of Israel’s siege of Gaza and prepared for that eventuality. In recent days, messages coming from Gaza have emphasized the continuation of Al-Qassam’s military operations.

If anything, Israel’s killing of Haniyeh is interpreted by the resistance as a failure by Tel Aviv to achieve its military goals and a manifestation of deep weakness.

Hamas’ next leader?

Several prominent Hamas officials are likely replacements for Haniyeh. One is Hamas’ Gaza chief, Yahya Sinwar, who is Haniyeh’s deputy. Sinwar played a major role in engineering

Operation Protective Edge with the Qassam Brigades and enjoys very close ties to the movement's security and military apparatuses. Despite his presence in Gaza, which is experiencing an ongoing war, Sinwar remains a strong leadership option.

Meshaal is expected to play a pivotal role in leading the movement during this transitional period, given his prior experience as head of the political bureau until 2017. Although not a Resistance Axis favorite, Meshaal is familiar with regional political complexities and has strong relations with some key regional states, which could bridge the leadership vacuum for some time.

Although tensions with Iran remain, Meshaal was among those who established relations with Tehran and strengthened cooperation after the Syrian war. He could endeavor to overcome any current differences by emphasizing the importance of Arab and Islamic unity at this crucial juncture, displaying preparedness to continue Hamas' confrontation with the Israeli occupation, and cleaving closely to the late Haniyeh's policies.

Other prominent candidates include Nizar Awadallah, secretary of Hamas' executive committee and political bureau, a leader close to Haniyeh with broad acceptance within the movement. Despite his lack of media exposure, Awadallah's organizational competencies make him a possible choice.

There's also Musa Abu Marzouk, a former leader and head of the International Relations Office, who reportedly enjoys deep ties with countries such as China and Russia and is widely accepted within the movement.

Khalil al-Hayya, deputy to Yahya Sinwar and head of the Arab Relations Office, is a politically decisive figure with solid relations with Iran, Qatar, Turkiye, and Egypt. Hayya played an important role in the current ceasefire negotiations, has strong ties with the Resistance Axis, and is in constant contact with Hamas operatives inside and outside of occupied Palestine.

Decades after its inception, Hamas has demonstrated that it is both a political institution and a strong grassroots movement capable of making critical decisions in the most difficult of circumstances.

The Shura Council, which has decision-making authority, will decide who leads the movement at this critical stage. Despite the great challenges facing Hamas – and its cadres on the battlefields of Gaza – it is likely to continue its resistance struggle and rearrange affairs to achieve its goals.

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