

Middle East conflict

Israel's spies take their revenge



After the humiliation of October 7, intelligence services are hitting back where their enemies feel safest

Neri Zilber in Tel Aviv, **James Shotter** in Jerusalem and **Raya Jalabi** in Beirut 3 HOURS AGO

Israel's fabled intelligence services were humiliated on October 7 by Hamas. This week they took their revenge.

In the span of one night, two men at the top of Israel's hit list were tracked and killed where they felt most comfortable — in the strongholds of Tehran and Beirut.

[Israel](#) has only taken public credit for the assassination of top Hizbollah commander Fuad Shukr on Tuesday night, while conspicuously avoiding comment on the slaying of Hamas political chief Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran a few hours later.

But the [twin assassinations](#) are already being viewed by Israeli security officials as a redemption of sorts — and a stern warning to the region that more score-settling could be in the offing. For Israel's enemies, the fear and paranoia after such public security lapses are growing in direct proportion to their resolve to hit back.

“After the shock of the [October 7] attack Israel is slowly gaining the ground it lost,” said Yaakov Amidror, a former national security adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

For years, he added, Israel had given priority and allocated intelligence resources to Lebanon and Iran, and not the Gaza Strip.

“This was one of the reasons for October 7. Ironically it made the [Israel Defense Forces] much more ready for [war](#) in the north [with Hizbollah] than the south [with Hamas],” he said. “We're now taking the fruits of that effort.”

Assassinations have for decades been part of the Israeli repertoire. Iranian nuclear scientists have been gunned down on the streets of Tehran, Hamas militants have been poisoned in hotel rooms and torn to shreds by exploding cell phones, and there has been the ever-present threat of drone or air strikes.

This was the likely method deployed against Shukr, as a handful of missiles struck an apartment block in the crowded Dahiyeh suburb of southern Beirut — a Hizbollah stronghold. The attack killed at least three women and two children, and injured 72 others.





A billboard showing Hizbollah and Iranian military leaders sits next to a building damaged by an Israeli air strike in Beirut © Wael Hamzeh/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

That Shukr was within reach came as a surprise, said several people familiar with Hizbollah's operations. The group's anxiety about Israel's intelligence capabilities had already reached "full-fledged paranoia" even prior to Tuesday's attack.

In recent months, Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah's top leader, has implored his fighters to jettison their smartphones. Many switched to older technologies such as pagers, landlines and human couriers.

Two people familiar with the group's operations and several Hizbollah experts said the militant group believed Israel was deploying a combination of voice recognition surveillance software, AI and spies on the ground to deadly effect.

Shukr, described by some as the Iran-backed group's military chief of staff, is now part of a list of more than 350 fighters and field commanders killed in 10 months of escalating tit-for-tat clashes with Israel. The militant group's attacks on northern Israel, which started on October 8 in "solidarity" with Hamas, stoked tensions last weekend after a suspected Hizbollah rocket killed 12 children and teenagers in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

"We have shown that the blood of our people has a price, and that there is no place out of reach for our forces to this end," Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant said on Tuesday night, after the Beirut strike.





The scene in Hizbollah's urban home was stark. The targeted building's top floors collapsed, badly damaging an adjacent block and littering the surrounding streets with debris and broken glass. Paramedics struggled to reach the wounded in an area caked in dust. Rescuers were still sifting through the rubble on Wednesday.

Nasrallah has largely brushed off such attacks in the past, saying they would do nothing to dent Hizbollah's resolve. After a senior field commander was killed on July 10, he argued that it was "only natural" to be losing such men.



Palestinians at a protest in Hebron after the assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Iran © Musa Qawasma/Reuters

"We are in a battle with an enemy that has . . . all the technology and satellites in the world at its service," he said, insisting that the number of fallen "martyrs" was not so high considering Israel's espionage capabilities. The group, he said, was "still in great

high considering Israel's espionage capabilities. The group, he said, was "still in great shape". Yet Israeli officials expect Nasrallah's response to his close adviser Shukr's death to be far less sanguine.

Tracking Hamas's Haniyeh was probably much easier, after he attended the inauguration in Tehran of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian on Tuesday. Accounts differ as to the manner in which he was targeted in his residence — provided by the Iranian state — and whether it was via an air-launched missile, improvised explosive device or small drone.

Yet according to Amos Yadlin, the former head of Israeli military intelligence, the end result was almost inevitable after the bloodshed of October 7.

"Everyone knows Israel has a 1972 Munich Olympics list for Hamas," he said, referring to the murder by Palestinian militants of 11 Israeli athletes at those games.



The coffins of Israeli Olympic athletes killed at the Munich Games in 1972 © AFP/Getty Images

The ensuing Mossad retribution against those it held responsible — an operation dubbed "The Wrath of God" — lasted a decade and traversed much of Europe and the Middle East.

"Israel is choosing to do the same to those responsible for the October 7 attack. We will go from the top leaders to the last . . . terrorist," Yadlin added.

He emphasised that after Haniyeh's killing only two of Hamas's six most senior leaders are still alive. The locations of their deaths span from Gaza to Beirut, and now

leaders are still alive. The locations of their deaths span from Gaza, to Beirut, and now Tehran. On Thursday the Israeli military confirmed what had been strongly suspected for several weeks: Hamas's top military commander, Mohammed Deif, was killed in an Israeli air strike in southern Gaza on July 13.

For all Israel's capabilities in this area, over the decades assassinations have proven to be only a short-term fix, at best, and often a strategic liability. The assassinations this week already threaten to tip the Middle East into full-blown war, with Iran and Hizbollah vowing to avenge the killings.

"Basically, the Israelis can kill you anywhere anytime, which shows you how well penetrated the systems are, how superior Israeli intelligence is and how superior their capabilities are," said Emile Hokayem, the director of regional security at the Institute for International Strategic Studies.

"The question that we have to answer is about the risk."

One diplomat noted that while Israel had clearly demonstrated its reach with high-profile assassinations so close together, and so publicly on its arch-foe Iran's own soil, it had often erred in assessing how its enemies would react.

"They are betting they can do this without an all-out war," the diplomat said. "But it's a fine line."

Additional reporting by Malaika Kanaaneh Tapper in Beirut

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