

Israel-Hamas war

Have Israeli assassinations diminished Hamas?

Country's intelligence services have for decades tracked down and killed Palestinian militant group's senior leadership

James Shotter in Jerusalem, **Neri Zilber** in Tel Aviv and **Mehul Srivastava** and **Andrew England** in London 8 HOURS AGO

The assassination of Hamas's political leader Ismail Haniyeh was not short on symbolism. Hours after attending the inauguration of Iran's new president, he was killed in an attack in a guesthouse in Tehran — the seat of power of Hamas's political patrons.

The high-profile killing is expected to elicit a [retaliation from Iran](#) against Israel, which it blamed for the strike. But the long-term impact on Hamas itself, and its war with Israel in Gaza, is likely to be more limited, according to diplomats and former Israeli security officials.

Since [Hamas](#) was founded in 1987, the reach of Israel's intelligence services has enabled them to track down and kill many of the Palestinian militant group's leaders in locations across the Middle East.

The killings of experienced commanders have often set back Hamas's operational capabilities. But the dead have ultimately always been replaced — and some of the attempted killings have backfired.

“All these actions are very impressive, very spectacular, but they're pointless without a political policy behind it,” said Micky Aharonson, who previously served on Israel's National Security Council. “You can continue killing till tomorrow comes, but there has to be a bigger strategy.”

Israel has eliminated most of Hamas's top leaders

Ismail Haniyeh

HAMAS POLITICAL LEADER —
DEAD

Mohammed Deif

COMMANDER OF HAMAS'S
MILITARY WING — DEAD

Marwan Issa

DEPUTY COMMANDER
HAMAS'S MILITARY WING —
DEAD

Haniyeh was killed in a strike on a building in Tehran on Wednesday morning. Iranian officials have blamed Israel for the assassination, which is likely to complicate US-led efforts to broker a hostage release deal.

Israel said on Thursday that it had killed Deif, known as "The Guest", in a July air strike in Gaza. Hamas has not confirmed his death. As commander of the Al-Qassam Brigades, Israel considered him to be one of the masterminds of the deadly October 7 attack.

DEAD

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One of the early high-profile killings of a senior Hamas figure was the assassination of Yahya Ayyash, a senior military commander nicknamed “the engineer” for pioneering suicide bombings in the 1990s.

He was killed in 1996 by a booby-trapped mobile phone, planted by an Israeli agent, which exploded after Ayyash took an incoming call. His death sparked a wave of retaliatory bombings by Hamas that killed dozens of people in Israel in the space of just nine days.

The following year Israeli agents attempted to kill another Hamas leader, Khaled Meshaal, by injecting him with poison on a street near his office in Jordan — which had become only the second Arab country to sign a peace treaty with Israel just three years earlier.

But the agents’ getaway failed, and two were arrested by Jordanian police. An outraged King Hussein threatened to sever relations with [Israel](#) if it did not hand over the antidote.

Israel, led by a young Benjamin Netanyahu, backed down, and handed over the antidote — as well as allowing Ahmed Yassin, Hamas’s co-founder and spiritual leader, to return to [Gaza](#) from exile in Jordan.

“What started as an operation to demonstrate the costs to the Hamas leadership outside the territories ended with Israel permitting the spiritual leader of Hamas to return to Gaza as a hero,” wrote Dennis Ross, Middle East envoy to then-US president Bill Clinton, in his memoir, *The Missing Peace*.

“An operation ill-conceived from the beginning ended with yet another blunder,

strengthening Hamas in the process.”

In the years that followed, Israeli forces killed a succession of Hamas leaders. Yassin was assassinated by a missile in Gaza in 2004, after a failed attempt the year before. Barely a month later, his successor as leader in Gaza, Abdel-Aziz al-Rantisi, was killed in another air strike in Gaza City.

Those killings, along with others who played a crucial role in the uprising known as the second intifada, such as the commander Salah Shehade, were painful blows to Hamas. But they did not derail the organisation, and helped advance a new generation, among them Haniyeh, who would take on prominent roles over the next two decades.

Michael Milshtein, a former intelligence officer with the Israel Defense Forces, and senior analyst at Tel Aviv University, said the policy of targeting Hamas leaders made sense as a way to weaken the group’s ability to carry out attacks. But in strategic terms, he continued, the impact of the killings was limited.

“During the second intifada, Israel killed all Hamas’s key leaders, but two years later Hamas won elections, and three years later it took control of Gaza,” he said. “In 2012, Israel killed Ahmed Jabari, who was a political, military and ideological leader in Hamas, but a decade later it carried out its most dramatic ever offensive against Israel [on October 7].”

In the months since Hamas’s October 7 attack ignited the [war in Gaza](#), Israel has carried out another round of assassinations of senior figures from the militant group. Saleh al-Arouri was killed in an air strike in Beirut and military commanders Marwan Issa and Rafa’a Salameh were killed in strikes in Gaza. Israel said on Thursday that it was confident it had also killed Hamas military commander Mohammed Deif in a strike last month. Hamas would not confirm his killing.

Analysts said that while the apparent loss of Deif and other high-ranking commanders officials had dealt a blow to Hamas’s military capabilities, the death of Haniyeh was unlikely to have big ramifications for the war in Gaza, since he was a political leader, and not involved in Hamas’s military operations.

Yaakov Amidror, a former national security adviser to Netanyahu, said the killing of Haniyeh was a “very symbolic action” but that the organisation would “find a replacement for him in 48 hours”. He also said that Yahya Sinwar, Hamas’s military leader in Gaza, who remains at large, “was much more important”.

However, other officials said Haniyeh’s killing would — in the short term at least

However, other officials said Haniyeh's killing would — in the short term at least — complicate US-led efforts to broker a deal to free the Israeli hostages still held by Hamas in Gaza and secure a ceasefire, as he had been the group's main interlocutor with mediators.

“You cannot kill Hamas with bombs — it's an idea. This will not stop Hamas,” said an Arab diplomat. “All it will do, is it will make the [hostage and ceasefire] negotiations a little harder.”

Former security officials said that among the candidates to replace Haniyeh were Meshaal, who was Haniyeh's predecessor as Hamas's political leader, and Mousa Abu Marzouk, another of the group's leaders overseas. Another possibility would be Khalil al-Hayya, who is close to Sinwar, and has also been involved in the negotiations to reach a hostage deal.

But none of them was likely to make radical changes, according to Milshtein. “There's not a conspicuous difference between Meshaal, Abu Marzouk and al-Hayya,” he said.

“When you are dealing with radical organisations like Hamas, the ideological pillar is much stronger than the identity of a single leader.”

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