TA Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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From Israel's killing of Haniyeh to a ceasefire in Gaza?

Since Hamas attacked Israel on 7 October last year, killed 1200 people and took some 250 others hostage, many red lines have been breached, both by Israel and its adversaries. However dramatic and possibly escalatory, the killing of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh should not be regarded as one of them.

Much will depend on the immediate aftermath, the reactions by Hamas, Iran and also the situation in Lebanon. But the assassination of Haniyeh, combined with the claimed killing of Hezbollah's military commander Fuad Shukr in Beirut, might not necessarily be meant by Israel to prolong and intensify the current round of violence.

It could even give Benjamin Netanyahu the off-ramp he needs to declare victory and accept a ceasefire in Gaza.

In the case of Haniyeh, neither the target nor the place are unprecedented. Starting with Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Israel has responded to the group's terror attacks by targeting its leaders.

And Tehran has been the scene of earlier alleged Israeli assassinations, in particular of Iranian nuclear scientists, without this leading to immediate escalation.

The convergence of tensions in the Middle East and the earlier crossing of different red lines, such as the destruction and death toll in Gaza, Israel's attack on the Iranian embassy in Damascus and Iran's wave of missiles aimed at Israel, raise the question of whether previous assumptions will still hold.

Hezbollah's response

There will be added urgency to the frantic international efforts to avoid all-out war. Behind the scenes messaging about the players' actual intentions can be decisive if all are interested in avoiding the worst-case scenarios.

Particularly the actions of Hezbollah and Iran, and in turn the Israeli response, will now determine whether the situation will spin further out of control or whether this could offer an opportunity for de-escalation.

Hamas, which might not be in a position currently to respond militarily, would then be put on the spot over whether it will resume cease-fire negotiations, despite Haniyeh's assassination.

> The extent of Hezbollah's response will depend on its internal considerations

Retaliation from Hezbollah, both for Shukr and Haniyeh, is almost a given. In any case, the Lebanese group has shown no inclination to stop its attacks on the North of Israel as long as that country's war on Gaza continues.

The extent of Hezbollah's response will depend on its internal considerations. In previous cases when top commanders have been killed, such as Imad Mughniyeh in 2008, the group has vowed revenge, but at a time of its choosing.

This time, though, the killing comes amidst an already mounting conflict and an escalatory cycle, thus making it harder for the group to calibrate its response, should it want to avoid all-out war.

Iran faces several dilemmas

Iran also faces several dilemmas, with the killing of Haniyeh happening not only right at the heart of its power structure but also hot on the heels of the death of its president, Ibrahim Raisi, in May, in what it said was a helicopter accident.

Many people in Iran and across the Middle East were sceptical that Raisi's death had indeed been an accident and Israel's ability to reach Haniyeh in Tehran will reignite those doubts.

Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, in a

statement emphasized Haniyeh's status as guest, which can be read as preparing his own population for an unprecedented response and escalation.

No doubt, the real reason for another direct Iranian strike aimed at Israel, should it come, would be to reassert the regime's credibility and deterrence, which is now being seriously challenged.

> Both for Tehran and for Hezbollah, the risks of an escalation could outweigh other considerations

The ascension of the country's new, more moderate, president, Masoud Pezeshkian, could strengthen, rather than weaken the resolve of Iran's real leadership, i.e. Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guard, to show strength. His election was already seen as a challenge to its authority.

Yet, both for Tehran and for Hezbollah, the risks of an escalation could outweigh other considerations. They know, for example, that part of the Israeli leadership is waiting for an excuse for an all-out attack on Hezbollah.

They're also confronted with an American president, Joe Biden, who is committed to Israel and who is not burdened by re-election considerations, even though he will try to shield Kamala Harris as much as possible from any fall-out.

If the region can avoid all-out war at this point, it will be up to Israel and Hamas to take the next steps.

The equation on the ground

In Israel, Netanyahu is benefiting from the start of the three-months-long summer recess of the Knesset, the country's parliament, which will complicate any vote to bring down the government.

This could be the opening he needs for accepting a ceasefire against the wishes of his even further-right, settler-extremist, coalition partners.

Netanyahu might be able to hold off a vote on the future of his government until the Knesset reconvenes at the end of October and he'll then still have another three months before new elections are held.

Benjamin Netanyahu will hope for an unlikely political comeback by bringing back the hostages and claiming to have decapitated Hamas by killing at least two of its top political leaders

Even though deeply unpopular now, he will hope for an unlikely political comeback by bringing back the hostages and claiming to have decapitated Hamas by killing at least two of its top political leaders, Haniyeh and in January Saleh al-Arouri, however fleetingly effective such strikes have proved in practice in the past.

Despite Israel's bluster towards its enemies, the country is teetering after ten months of war in Gaza and conflict in the North, with the border area evacuated and daily exchanges of fire.

The strain is felt by the army, the economy and society as a whole, particularly since there has been no prospect of an endgame.

Hamas, too is under immense strain, despite its defiant message in the aftermath of the killing of Haniyeh that it has always emerged stronger from such attacks.

It's doubtful that it will be able to respond with

salvos of rockets aimed at Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities.

Hamas could very possibly still hold out in Gaza against the Israeli army and at times deliver a serious blow. It might even be able to carry out an attack inside Israel.

Yet, despite Haniyeh's death, the equation on the ground remains the same and so does the imperative of reaching a ceasefire deal, particularly for the population of Gaza that has been so appallingly hit.

While that imperative applies to all side, extremism, anger or even a small mistake can now set the whole region alight. This is not something the international community can afford to let happen.