



By: *The Editorial Board*

# Shadow of retaliation—how is Israel's regional strategy changing the Middle East?



The public **admission** made by Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz about the assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran sets a precedent in Israel's long-lasting covert war against regional adversaries.

As Israel continues its intensive military operations in Gaza and faces increasing tensions with Iran, Lebanon, and Yemen, Katz's statement signals a carefully calculated escalation with significant consequences for the already fragile geopolitical balance in the Middle East.

What does this bold admission mean for Israel's strategic goals, and how could it influence the course of conflicts in the region?

## Exposing Israeli covert operations

The confession about assassinating Haniyeh is striking in content and timing. Historically, Israel has practiced a policy of ambiguity when it comes to assassinating high-ranking officials, using denials as a tool to minimise diplomatic consequences. Katz's direct declaration of the "removal" of Haniyeh, **Yahya Sinwar**, and **Hassan Nasrallah** signifies a significant change in Israel's power projection and defence authority building.

This change is part of a larger message. Katz's words came at a time when the Houthis, Iran's ally in Yemen, are stepping up attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea, further complicating Israel's security situation.

The open association of Haniyeh's assassination with actions against Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran was designed to reinforce Israel's image as a dominant regional actor, capable of striking enemies across borders without consequences.

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However, this recognition also carries risks.

The Iranian government, which has already accused Israel of Haniyeh's assassination last July, could interpret Katz's words as a further provocation.

Iran, which has for years invested in its allies such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, could be forced to respond directly or indirectly, thus exacerbating an already tense situation.

## Yemen—a new frontline

Katz's open reference to the Houthis in Yemen indicates a broadening of Israel's strategic focus. Last year, the Houthis have **intensified** attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea, a key maritime corridor for global trade and Israeli security. These attacks, justified by the solidarity with the Palestinians, placed Yemen at the forefront of Israeli interest.

The Houthis' ability to threaten naval operations is not negligible. With increasingly sophisticated drones and missiles provided by Iran, this group poses an increasing challenge not only to Israel but also to regional stability. Katz's claim that Israel will "destroy their strategic infrastructure" and "eliminate their leaders" indicates a readiness to escalate military operations in Yemen, potentially including air and naval strikes similar to those in Gaza and Lebanon.

However, Yemen is an unstable scene of conflict with numerous actors. Any Israeli intervention risks drawing Israel into a protracted conflict involving not only the Houthis but also regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which have their own interests in the Yemeni civil war.

**The assassinations of Haniyeh and Sinwar are part of a broader Israeli campaign**

The assassinations of Haniyeh and Sinwar are part of a broader Israeli campaign aimed at weakening Hamas' leadership and destroying

its operational infrastructure in Gaza. While Israeli officials present these as key blows to the "axis of evil," the long-term effects on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remain uncertain.

Hamas, despite losses in leadership and resources, has shown a remarkable ability to adapt and survive during decades of conflict. The assassination of Sinwar, identified as the mastermind of the 7 October 2023 attack, may temporarily weaken Hamas, but it will not extinguish its influence. On the contrary, these assassinations may encourage support for Hamas among Palestinians and strengthen its position as a symbol of resistance to Israeli aggression.

In addition, the humanitarian consequences of Israeli military operations in Gaza are drawing increasing condemnation from the international community. As civilian casualties mount, Israel risks further diplomatic isolation, particularly among European allies who are increasingly calling for a ceasefire. This criticism could limit Israel's freedom of action and complicate its long-term strategy against Hamas.

## Iran's response—calculated retaliation?

Iran's reaction to Katz's statement will be crucial in determining the further course of the conflict in the region. Tehran has already shown a willingness to respond to Israeli actions asymmetrically, using its network of allies to exert pressure on Israel from various fronts.

However, Iran also faces significant constraints. Its economy is in bad shape due to international sanctions, and internal unrest is exposing the regime's weaknesses. A direct confrontation with Israel carries the risk of further destabilisation. Iran is more likely to resort to covert actions, such as increasing support for Hezbollah and the Houthis, to indirectly respond to Israeli moves.

## What awaits us?

**Expanding Israel's regional operations:** Katz's rhetoric suggests Israel is planning a more aggressive strategy in Yemen and potentially other regions where Iran's allies operate. The Red Sea, a key maritime corridor, is likely to become the epicentre of Israeli naval operations, with possible consequences for global trade and regional alliances.

**Escalating conflict with mediators:** As Israel intensifies its campaigns, Iran and its allies are likely to step up their activities. This could include missile attacks on Israeli cities, naval confrontations in the Red Sea, or renewed confrontations on the Israel-Lebanon border. The Houthis could try to demonstrate the ability to attack high-value targets, increasing the risk of a wider conflict.

**Diplomatic consequences:** Israel's increasingly open approach to its operations risks alienating international allies, particularly in Europe. Calls for a cease-fire in Gaza will become louder, which could further strain Israel's relations with key partners. At the same time, Arab states that normalise relations with Israel within the framework of the Abraham Accords could face internal resistance, which would complicate their diplomatic calculations.

**Tenacity of Palestinian resistance:** Despite leadership losses, Hamas and other Palestinian factions are unlikely to back down. The organisation's decentralised structure and deep-seated support among Palestinians make it a long-term challenge. As Israel continues military operations, it risks fuelling new cycles of violence, entrenching the resistance it is trying to eliminate.



*The assassination of Ismail Haniyeh and the public confession of Israel's defence minister mark an escalation in a complex conflict spilling over the borders of the Middle East - Israel Katz*

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Although Israel wants to send a message of determination and dominance with these moves, the consequences could be far-reaching.

With Iran almost certain to step up its support for its allies and with the growing humanitarian crises in Gaza and Yemen, Israel risks opening more fronts than it can control.

This moment has the potential to significantly impact not only the relations between Israel and its enemies but also the broader regional dynamics.

Each side now faces a crucial choice—whether to continue spiralling towards total conflict or find a way to redefine their strategies through negotiation and mediation.

In the end, it is the decisions of the coming months that will shape the fate of not only Israel and Palestine but the entire Middle East. If diplomacy and pragmatism do not prevail, the region could face destabilisation of unfathomable proportions, which has the potential to affect global peace and security.