



Israel Reportedly Eliminates Senior Hamas and Hezbollah Leaders

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In less than 24 hours, two senior leaders of Iran-backed terrorist groups were killed. Israel struck Hezbollah's most senior military commander, Fuad Shukr, on July 30 in Beirut, Lebanon as a response to a July 27 Hezbollah attack that killed 12 Israeli youths. On July 31, Hamas's political leader, Ismail Haniyeh, was killed in a reported strike in Tehran, Iran, although no one has taken credit for it yet. The strikes bring justice to two of the terrorist leaders most guilty for violence against Israelis, ensuing regional turmoil, and, especially in Shukr's case, numerous American deaths. If both were carried out by Israel, it would reinforce that terrorists who kill Israelis are not safe anywhere and marked a remarkable display of Israel's military capabilities.

The deaths of the Hamas and Hezbollah leaders might delay ongoing efforts to reach a cease-fire and hostage release deals, but they could just as well facilitate an eventual deal, by strengthening Israel's negotiating position. And, although retaliation from both Hezbollah and Iran is likely, it could very well be muted. It is not Iran's job to protect Hamas. Moreover, after successful U.S.-led efforts to defend against the massive Iran barrage against Israel on April 13, Tehran's options for directly striking Israel are limited. Nor is it certain that Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah is willing to escalate and risk a full-scale war.

To further discourage any major retaliations by Iran or Hezbollah, the United States must make clear that it will stand beside and support Israel, including taking action directly against Iran if need be. The United States should also coordinate defensive plans with Israel and other regional partners, as it did on April 13-14. A trip to Israel and other regional capitals by General Michael E. Kurilla, the commander of U.S. Central Command, would send a strong signal of U.S. support at this critical juncture.

What Happened?

- On July 30, an Israeli-launched strike in Beirut, Lebanon [killed](#) Fuad Shukr, Hezbollah's most senior military commander. The strike also killed an [Iranian military advisor](#), Milad Bedi.
 - » The Israeli strike was in response to Hezbollah's [rocket attack](#) on July 27 that killed 12 Druze children and teenagers in the Golan Heights of Majdal Shams.
 - » Shukr was also wanted by the United States for his role in the [bombing](#) of the 1983 Marine Barracks in Lebanon that killed 241 U.S. military personnel.
- In the early morning hours of July 31, Hamas's political leader Ismail Haniyeh was assassinated in a building in Tehran. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hamas blamed Israel for Haniyeh's death.
 - » The Hamas leader was visiting Iran for the inauguration of Iran's new president, Masoud Pezeshkian.

- » Israel's *Channel 12* reported that Iranian officials had concluded that the strike was launched from within Iranian territory.
- » Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamanei reportedly ordered Iranian forces to strike Israel directly in retaliation, according to [The New York Times](#).

Why Is It Important?

- Israel's reported strikes against senior Hamas and Hezbollah leaders in Beirut and Tehran demonstrated its capability to conduct successful military operations deep into Lebanese and Iranian territory. The operations sent a clear message that terrorists who kill Israelis are not safe anywhere. To prevent further escalation, the United States now has to send a clear signal of support for Israel.
 - » The death of Haniyeh and Shukr could delay the ongoing efforts to reach a ceasefire and hostage release deal but will not necessarily prevent diplomacy from succeeding.
 - » While early reports indicate that Iran is preparing to attack Israel directly, it may not feel the need to mount a massive retaliation directly against Israel in response to the death of its proxy leaders, since those groups exist to protect the Islamic Republic, not the other way around.
 - » It also remains unclear if Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah is prepared to move to a full-scale war.
- The killings of Haniyeh and Shukr mark substantial strategic victories for Israel. They should also be celebrated as victories for the United States.
 - » As the political leader of Hamas, Haniyeh's death will not change the group's ability to fight in Gaza.
 - But it represents a powerful symbolic victory and fulfillment of Israel's promise that Hamas leaders will be held accountable and punished for the [October 7 attack](#).
 - » Unlike Haniyeh, Shukr's elimination degraded Hezbollah's operational capabilities given his role as a military advisor to Nasrallah and senior commander of the terrorist group's forces.
 - The strike against Shukr was direct retaliation for a July 27 Hezbollah rocket attack that killed twelve youths in the Israeli village of Madjal Shams.
 - Shukr was an enemy of the United States, as much as Israel. He participated in the planning and execution of the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing that killed 241 American troops.
 - Shukr's death marks the most senior Hezbollah leader that Israel has killed since a joint CIA and Mossad operation in 2008 [killed](#) Imad Mughniyeh, Hezbollah's former chief of international operations.
- The Israeli strikes further signaled that Israel has the will and capability to conduct operations against its enemies deep inside Iran and Lebanon.
 - » In January, Israel [launched](#) a strike in Beirut that killed a senior Hamas official, Saleh al-Aroui, who was Haniyeh's former deputy, but the strike targeting Shukr was the first known Israeli operation against a Hezbollah target in Beirut since the war began on October 7.
 - » Haniyeh was likely the second terrorist leader that Israel has killed in Tehran.

- In 2020, Israeli operatives were [likely responsible](#) for killing Abu Muhammad al-Masri—responsible for the deadly 1998 attacks on U.S. embassies in Africa—who was the second highest ranking leader of al-Qaeda at the time of his death.
- U.S., Israeli, and Iranian officials have not publicly acknowledged the killing.
- » On April 19, in response to Iran’s [unprecedented attack](#) against them on April 13-14, Israel targeted an air defense radar site guarding a nuclear facility near Isfahan, Iran.
 - After the Israeli strike, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant [posted](#) on X that the deadly Hezbollah attack on July 30 that killed twelve youths in Majdal Shams indicated to Israelis that Hezbollah “crossed the red line.”
- By targeting Haniyeh in Iran, Israel avoided the geopolitical complications of potentially killing him in Qatar or Turkey, where he typically resided.
 - » Both nations have close military relationships with the United States, and Qatar has served as an intermediary for negotiations with Hamas.
- Iranian officials have threatened to respond against Israel directly for the strike that killed Haniyeh.
 - » Khamenei [posted](#) on X after Haniyeh’s death that Israel “martyred our dear guest in our territory and has caused our grief, but it has also prepared the ground for a severe punishment.” He [added](#), “following this bitter, tragic event which has taken place within the borders of the Islamic Republic, it is our duty to take revenge.”
 - » Pezeshkian [posted](#) on X that “Iran is mourning” and “will defend its territorial integrity, honor and honor, and make the terrorist invaders regret their cowardly action.”
 - » Haniyeh had [met](#) with both Khamenei and Pezeshkian on July 30.
 - » Iranian officials will seek to recover from the severe embarrassment caused by an Israeli strike in Iran’s capital, Tehran, that killed the political leader of one of its proxies who was a guest visiting for the inauguration of the new Iranian president.
- Despite an Iranian desire to save face after Haniyeh’s death, it is not clear that they will choose, or are able to, mount a major attack on Israel.
 - » After an Israeli strike that killed senior IRGC officers in Syria on April 1, Iran responded on April 13-14 with a massive aerial attack against Israel of over 350 drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles.
 - With the assistance of a U.S.-led regional coalition, that attack was almost completely thwarted, with only four munitions landing in Israel, doing negligible damage.
 - As former CENTCOM commander General Kenneth “Frank” McKenzie noted during a JINSA webinar after the April 13-14 attack, that strike [depleted](#) much of Iran’s ballistic missiles and other launch capabilities that could reach Israel. Therefore, it is unlikely Iran could mount a bigger salvo so soon afterward.
 - » With that April attack having been so thoroughly defeated, and likely lacking any greater capabilities with which to directly strike Israel, Iran’s ability to mount an effective retaliation to Haniyeh’s death is quite limited.
 - » It is also not certain that Iran would want to expend significant assets for the sake of Haniyeh.
 - Iran’s proxies exist to wage war against its enemies and protect it from attacks, not the other way around.

- » Ultimately, how Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei chooses to respond will signal the extent of his tolerance for strikes that target IRGC officials abroad compared to an Iranian proxy leader who was a guest within Iranian territory.
- Similarly, both Hamas and Hezbollah will likely seek to respond to Israeli strikes targeting their leaders, but the responses might also be muted.
 - » Hezbollah’s willingness to escalate remains to be seen, particularly after Israel demonstrated its ability and willingness to reach the terrorist group’s leadership in its stronghold in the Dahiya neighborhood of Beirut.
 - » Israel’s operations in Gaza have degraded Hamas’s capacity to launch a substantial attack against Israel.
- The Majdal Shams strike and the deaths of Shukr and Haniyeh might delay ongoing efforts to reach a ceasefire and hostage deal between Israel and Hamas as well as negotiations to de-escalate fighting between Israel and Hezbollah. But they are unlikely to thwart negotiations altogether and could make a deal more likely by putting increased pressure on Hamas and Hezbollah.
 - » It was not clear that Haniyeh was critical to diplomatic talks or had operational control over Hamas’s leader in Gaza Yahya Sinwar, but the terrorist group will now need to pick a [successor](#) at a time when Hamas is at its weakest.
 - Israel primarily needed to negotiate with Sinwar, who has told Arab negotiators that he will [not accept](#) a ceasefire deal unless Israel agrees to a full ceasefire that ends the war.
 - » The elimination of Haniyeh and Israel’s demonstrated ability to reach Hamas leaders as far as Tehran likely increased its negotiating position.
- U.S. officials signaled their support for Israel after the deadly Hezbollah attack on July 27 and for its right to defend itself but urged restraint and support for continued diplomacy.
 - » *Axios*’s Barak Ravid [reported](#) on July 28 that U.S. officials cautioned Israel against striking Beirut due to projections that in response, “Hezbollah would respond by firing long-range missiles at Israel, which would likely lead to even further escalation.”
 - » After Israel targeted Shukr, Vice President Kamala Harris [stated](#) that she “unequivocally support[s] Israel’s right to defend itself against terrorism—and that is precisely what Hezbollah is doing. However, we must work toward a diplomatic solution to end the attacks.”
 - » On July 31, hours before Israel launched the strike against Shukr, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin released a [statement](#) following a conversation with Israel’s Defense Minister Yoav Gallant in which Austin “reaffirmed his unwavering commitment to Israel’s security and right to self-defense.”
 - Such statements are particularly important given that, in June, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General C.Q. Brown [argued](#) that “from our perspective, based on where our forces are, the short range between Lebanon and Israel, it’s harder for us to be able to support [Israel] in the same way we did back in April.”
 - » After Haniyeh’s death, Austin [indicated](#), “we certainly will help defend Israel. You saw us do that in April [during Iran’s attack]. You can expect to see us do that again.”
 - » White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby [argued](#) after Haniyeh’s death that “all of this adds to the complicated nature of what we’re trying to get done” in terms of a ceasefire and hostage deal. He added, “When you have events,

traumatic events, violent events caused by whatever, it certainly doesn't make the task of achieving that outcome any easier."

- U.S. officials also denied knowledge of the attack that killed Haniyeh, creating needless daylight between U.S. and Israeli leaders and decision-making.
 - » U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [noted](#) that "this is something we were not aware of or involved in. It's very hard to speculate."
- In the week before the Israeli strikes against Shukr and Haniyeh, Iranian proxies in Iraq and Syria resumed strikes against U.S. forces, which was most likely in response to U.S. and Iraqi officials meeting in Washington. Tehran could respond to Israel's strikes in Tehran and Beirut by resuming its escalation of proxy attacks against U.S. troops.
 - » Iranian officials gave their "full blessing" to Iraqi proxies to continue their "full scale" attacks on U.S. forces if Israel conducted a massive retaliatory assault in Lebanon against Hezbollah, according to the *BBC's* [Nafiseh Kohnavard](#). An Iranian official also told Kohnavard that "this time some other groups that didn't take part in previous attacks in the last 9 months, will join the resistance operations too."
 - » In 2021, Iran's Syrian partners had not wanted attacks against Israel launched from their territory, fearing an Israeli retaliation. Instead, members of Iran's elite Quds Force, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iran's other proxies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen agreed to retaliate to Israeli strikes by attacking U.S. forces in Syria, according to [The New York Times](#). The Iranian-linked groups determined that the U.S. responses would be less forceful than Israel's.
 - » Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria have launched at least 180 attacks involving over 300 rockets, missiles, and drones on U.S. personnel since October 17, 2023, according to JINSA's [Iran Projectile Tracker](#).

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The closer the United States stands with Israel, the more likely Iran will be deterred from attacking, as JINSA argued in its June 2023 report, [No Daylight: U.S. Strategy if Israel Attacks Iran](#). Therefore, U.S. officials should:
 - » Make clear in public statements that the United States supports Israel's right to self-defense by targeting the leaders of terrorist organizations;
 - » Deliver a message to Iran that any effort to retaliate against American troops, citizens, or interests in the region, or to strike the core political and economic interests of Gulf nations, will trigger a severe U.S. military response, including against vital interests of the Iranian regime itself; and
 - » Conduct an immediate and comprehensive resupply effort for Israel's self-defense, prioritizing air and missile defense interceptors, precision-guided munitions (PGMs), ammunition, and spare parts.
 - The United States should prepare to deploy Patriot systems to Israel under U.S. control to assist in Israel's air defense.
- Similar to the preparations before Iran's attack against Israel on April 13-14, the United States must coordinate with Israel and other regional partners to coordinate regional air defenses against a multifront attack by Iran, Hezbollah, and other Iranian proxies, including the Houthis in Yemen.

- » Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) General Michael E. Kurilla should travel to Israel and other regional partner nations to signal U.S. support and prepare the joint defense against an escalation from Iran and/or its proxies, as he did in the days before the April 13-14 attack.
- » The United States should temporarily redeploy the Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group to the Eastern Mediterranean, in particular its guided-missile destroyers, which is [currently](#) in the Gulf of Aden.
- The Pentagon and CENTCOM should prepare for Iranian proxies in Iraq and Syria to target U.S. forces, as they have done previously in response to Israeli strikes. These preparations should include increased force protection measures and rapid, forceful strikes against Iranian and proxy fighters and leaders responsible for attacks against U.S. troops.