

Israel's assassinations will not defeat Hamas and Hezbollah, but they are an effective tool for weakening them

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Eliminating key leaders of terror organisations is a practice often used by states such as the US and Israel in their war against terror. Muhammad Deif, Fouad Shukr and Ismail Haniyeh follow many of their predecessors in the Palestinian terror organisations (Abu Jihad, Fathi Shikaki, Ahmad Yassin to mention a few) and in other terror groups (Osama Bin Laden, Qasem Soleimani, Imad Moghnieh; Abu Bakr AlBaghdadi for example).

No one expects that killing those figures will – by itself – bring about the defeat of these organisations, which thrive on strong commitment to an extreme interpretation of religious and/or nationalist ideas. Yet it seems that those who use this method of fighting terror consider this tool to be quite effective and the terror organisations themselves probably think the same, judging by their efforts to prevent it from happening.

Though eliminating the terror leaders does not constitute a decisive and existential blow, it inflicts psychological damage on them and a very painful hit to their morale – and exposes how easily they can be penetrated and how vulnerable they are. It is supposed to sow fear and distrust in their ranks, especially among the remaining leaders. It may degrade the quality of their leadership and weaken their operational competence. True, in some cases the successor maybe as capable or even more dangerous than the outgoing leader, but in most cases the replacement is less impressive. It is also a way of handing these terrorists the punishment they deserve and preventing them from carrying out more terror operations.

One lesson is clear. If the elimination of a terror leader is a stand-alone operation, its impact is usually limited – but if the eliminations repeat themselves within a relatively short period of time, are directed against the entire leadership echelon

and are part of a wider effort to weaken and defeat the terror organisation, their impact can be more significant.

This is the context in which we should consider the recent attacks against Hamas and, to a lesser extent, Hezbollah's military leadership. The killing of Deif and Haniyeh is a major step in the war aimed at defeating Hamas in Gaza (and abroad) and hitting their leaders. Many were already hit (Salah AlArouri, Marwan Issa, Shabana and Salama are some high-ranking Hamas operatives). The same is true for Hezbollah.

The logic behind this effort is not only to weaken Hamas and Hezbollah and charge them a heavy price for their terror attacks, but to reestablish Israeli deterrence by showing its intelligence and military capabilities and making the terror groups and their supporters realise that launching the terror war on October 2023 was a very costly move, so they will not even think about it in the future.

Hitting terror leaders is also leveraged domestically to promote confidence in and support for the country's leadership and security system, though this effect is usually short lived.

Eliminating terror leaders often has some disadvantages. First, in some cases it requires operating in problematic locations from the point of view of political and human collateral damage – and if the attempt fails, it builds the image of the targeted leader as a hero. Furthermore it may lead to escalation, since the terror groups and their patrons feel obliged to take revenge and retaliate as they feel humiliated, shocked and frustrated. This reaction may be relevant especially in the short term, but in certain circumstances it may lead to an unintended and unwanted widescale escalation – as may be the case now.

In the Israeli specific case, a major question is how the killing of Deif and Haniyeh may affect the prospects of concluding a deal for releasing the hostages. My assessment is that in the short term Hamas may delay the negotiations, fearing it may seem to be affected by the blow it suffered, but after a while it is going to resume the process. The fear that Israel may hit more leaders, including Sinwar, and the growing military pressure may convince Hamas to show more flexibility, though not necessarily enough to meet Israeli security demands.

To sum up, in the current situation eliminating Hamas leaders and Hezbollah key

military figures makes sense and may help Israel in the medium term accomplish its goals in the war – defeating Hamas, releasing the hostages and creating a new situation vis-à-vis Gaza and Lebanon, so that the population can come back to their communities safely. But in the short term there might be a considerable escalation.

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