

# At a Crossroads: Navigating the Multifaceted Threats from Terrorist Actors

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## Abstract

Since the October 7th Hamas attack and the ongoing war in Gaza, Israel faces a complex security landscape shaped by attacks from Iranian proxies across multiple theaters, including Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Iran. Hezbollah joined the military campaign against Israel to divert its efforts from Gaza and show solidarity with Hamas. Similarly, Iranian-backed Houthi forces and Shia militias in Iraq and Syria have launched attacks against Israel. Israel aims to prevent a full-scale regional conflict through defensive measures and diplomatic efforts. However, recent escalations on the Israel-Lebanon border, driven by the end of high-intensity warfare in Gaza, stalled hostage negotiations, and prolonged displacement of Israeli citizens, have shifted focus to Lebanon. This intensified when a Hezbollah rocket attack killed 12 children in Majdal Shams, leading Israel to target Hezbollah leader Sayyed Fouad Ali Shukur.

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh was also killed in Tehran, potentially by Israel, highlighting Israel's operational reach. Despite these tactical successes, the entrenched leadership of Hamas and Hezbollah may remain unaffected. Israel's targeted killing strategy aims to disrupt terrorist activities and boost morale, despite its contentious nature. The Axis of Resistance's propaganda campaign threatens retaliation, illustrating psychological warfare's role. As Israel and Hezbollah navigate this sensitive period, the likelihood of escalation remains high, influenced by internal Lebanese pressures, international calls for restraint, and broader Middle East dynamics.

Keywords: Israel; Hezbollah; Iran; Iranian Proxies; Targeting Killings; Northern Israel; Multi-front Challenge.

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Since the October 7th terror attack by Hamas and the ongoing war in Gaza, Israel has been facing a complex security landscape shaped by attacks from Iranian proxies across multiple theaters. These attacks span a diverse range of locations, including Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and even Iran itself, presenting a multi-front challenge to Israel.

When Hezbollah decided to join the military campaign against Israel, it set a primary objective: to challenge the IDF in northern Israel. This strategy aims to divert Israel's military efforts away from the Gaza conflict and demonstrate solidarity with Hamas. Similarly, Houthi forces and Shia militias in Iraq and Syria, all backed by Iran, have adopted comparable goals in their attacks against Israel.

In response, Israel has been working to navigate these tensions, with a focus on preventing the escalation into a full-scale regional conflict. This delicate balance involves both operational defensive measures and diplomatic efforts aimed at de-escalation.

However, the situation has intensified recently in the Israel-Lebanon border area. Several factors have driven this escalation: The end of the high-intensity phase of the war in the Gaza Strip, the lack of progress in negotiations for the return of Israeli hostages, and the prolonged displacement of Israeli citizens in the northern regions—now exceeding 300 days. These developments have culminated in a pronounced shift of strategic focus towards the Lebanon front, where the stakes continue to rise.

While signs of increasing tension had been apparent in recent weeks, the situation reached a critical juncture when a rocket attack by Hezbollah resulted in the death of 12 children in Majdal Shams, a Druze town in the Golan Heights. This incident is part of a broader pattern of Hezbollah attacks that has already claimed the lives of more than 40 Israelis since hostilities intensified in the northern regions of Israel.

According to Dr. Eitan Azani, the acting director of ICT, the situation compelled Israel to adopt a more aggressive response strategy. This prompted Israel's decision to target Sayyed Fouad Ali Shukr, one of Hezbollah's most prominent military leaders, in one of the organization's headquarters in the Dahieh area of Beirut.

Following Shukr's death, Hezbollah officially lauded him as a "great fighting leader, the dear and beloved brother, Sayyid Fouad Shukr (Sayyid Mohsen)... whom they proudly present as a" great martyr on the path to liberate Al-Quds." The organization also highlighted his extensive contributions over the years: Sayyed Fouad Ali Shukr was a foundational figure in Hezbollah, playing a crucial role in organizing the early Islamic Resistance groups in Lebanon. Throughout the 1980s and beyond, he was instrumental in the resistance against Israel, notably during significant confrontations. As Hezbollah's first central military commander, Shukr strategically guided operations against Israeli forces and extended support to Muslims globally, including in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the early 1990s. He was a key planner in major conflicts, such as the July 2006 war, and continued to lead operations against various adversaries. Shukr also held influential positions within Hezbollah's central councils, contributing to the organization's strategic decisions until he died in 2024, marking him as a significant figure in the movement's history and ongoing struggle.<sup>1</sup> This formal statement, coupled with indications that he oversaw Hezbollah's accurate missile project, underscores the magnitude of his killing and the significant operational consequences for Hezbollah.

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1 Hezbollah Military Media. Telegram. 31.07. 24



Left: Official Hezbollah statement on the death of Sayyid Fouad Shukr; Right: Official Hezbollah background information on Sayyid Fouad Shukr.

In the hours following the killing of Sayyid Fouad Shukr, news emerged that Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh had been killed in an IRGC hideout apartment in Tehran by an unknown assailant. Haniyeh had been in Iran to attend the inauguration of the newly elected Iranian president and had met with the Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei just hours before his death.



Ismail Haniyeh meeting with Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, just hours before his death<sup>2</sup>

2 Telegram. 31.07.24



Suppose Israel was involved (though it remains unconfirmed) in targeting Ismail Haniyeh. In that case, it holds dual psychological significance: it demonstrates Israel's intelligence and operational success in targeting the senior leadership of Hamas, and it signifies the implications of an assassination occurring on Iranian soil.

Dr. Michael Barak, senior researcher and head of the Palestinian Terrorism Desk at the ICT, highlights that on the surface, Haniyeh is perceived as a moderate leader in Hamas. Still, he expressed support for the massacre of 7/10, encouraged violence against Israel in the West Bank, and continued to advocate for the destruction of the State of Israel.

Born in the al-Shati refugee camp north of the Gaza Strip in 1962, Haniyeh, without a strong family background, ascended the Hamas hierarchy by managing the office of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin (Hamas founder) between 1997 and 2004. He was twice appointed head of the political bureau of Hamas and established an extensive network of relations with state actors, particularly with Turkey, Qatar, and Iran, with whom he restored relations after the civil war in Syria. The close connection with Iran is best expressed in the formal reaction by the new Iranian President after Haniyeh's death: *"Today, Iran mourns its partner in sorrow and joy, the constant and proud companion of the path of resistance, the brave leader of the Palestinian resistance, the martyr of al-Quds, Haj Ismail Haniyeh. Yesterday, I raised his victorious hand, and today, I have to carry his coffin on my shoulders. The Islamic Republic of Iran will defend its territorial integrity, honor, and honor and make the terrorist invaders regret their cowardly action"*<sup>3</sup>.

Over the years, Haniyeh has also forged close connections with non-state actors such as the Lebanese Hezbollah organization. The two organizations held more than 20 meetings (also with Iran) throughout 2022-2023, which underscores the frequency and depth of their discussions on resistance actions and objectives, highlighting their coordinated efforts.<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Barak claims that in recent years, Haniyeh was also involved in fostering the establishment of an anti-Israeli ideological front together with the religious establishment in Egypt, al-Azhar Institute, headed by Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyib, and with Islamist movements such as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (the Afghan Taliban) and Jamiat Ulama-e-Islamic Pakistan. He also distinguished himself as a successful Hamas financier, managing to raise substantial funds for his movement.

Dr. Barak argues that despite Haniyeh's senior position, his elimination is only a tactical achievement and should not be seen as a factor influencing the continuation of the Hamas movement's fighting, given the entrenched internal leadership in Gaza and its willingness to accept the dictates of the external leadership of Hamas fully. Simultaneously, the targeting sent a message to the Axis of resistance that Israel is not afraid of the consequences and is prepared for a multi-regional war if necessary.

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3 Telegram 31.07.24

4 International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT). (n.d.). ICT experts Q&A: Insights on the escalation on the northern front. Retrieved from <https://ict.org.il/ict-experts-qa-insights-on-the-escalation-on-the-northern-front/>

## **Is Targeted Killing an effective tool?**

Targeted killings have long been a cornerstone of Israel's counter-terrorism strategy. Since its establishment, Israel has employed a variety of methods, including missile strikes and ground operations, across multiple geographic regions to carry out these operations. In some cases, Israel openly acknowledges these actions, while in others, it opts to maintain ambiguity regarding its involvement. Since October 7<sup>th</sup>, Israel has taken responsibility for various targeted killings in both the Palestinian and Iran-Hezbollah arenas, making it a preferred strategy in the ongoing conflict.

According to Dr. Liram Koblenz-Stenzler, senior researcher and Head of the Global Far-right Extremism and Antisemitism Desk at the ICT, claims that the practice of targeted killings has evolved in response to changing terrorist threats, geopolitical developments, and advancements in military technology. These operations are designed to disrupt terrorist activities by compelling terrorists to go into hiding, making it challenging to replace eliminated leaders, demoralizing terrorist groups, minimizing collateral damage, and bolstering the morale of Israeli citizens impacted by terrorism. However, targeted killings remain a contentious issue. Critics contend that they circumvent legal processes, potentially glorify the deceased terrorists as martyrs, and attract international criticism. Consequently, each targeted killing requires thorough evaluation to weigh its immediate and long-term benefits and risks.

## **Initial Responses to Targeted Killings: The Dynamics of Psychological Warfare**

The initial response from the Axis of resistance to the targeted killings of its officials was to launch a propaganda campaign threatening retaliation. Ms. Daniel Haberfeld, head of the Cyber-Terrorism Desk at ICT, notes that both the formal statements from Axis members, with Iran at the forefront, and the informal propaganda circulated on social media were directed and aimed to instill a fear of retaliation in Israel.

Since October 7<sup>th</sup>, there has been an increasing interconnectedness among various regional actors within the Axis of Resistance. This trend is apparent as numerous accounts on social media echo similar narratives and posts, indicating a coordinated effort to spread propaganda. Amidst the conflict, regional events consistently act as catalysts, igniting surges in online propaganda that either amplify existing narratives or give rise to new ones. In this instance, the message is clear: the killing of officials in major cities in Iran and Lebanon will not go unanswered.



Left: Pro-Iranian propaganda suggesting the targeting of the Israeli Prime Minister; Right: Hezbollah online propaganda predicting Israel's defeat in the upcoming war<sup>5</sup>

### **Navigating the Challenges Ahead**

The situation is highly sensitive; Israel and Hezbollah find themselves at a crossroads. Hezbollah faces a decision: either to engage in war or to find a way to remain within the realm of attritional warfare without significant escalation. This will include a response that wouldn't necessitate a substantial reaction from Israel. Alternatively, Hezbollah might react as it deems appropriate without being deterred by threats of war.

Dr. Eitan Azani, the acting director of ICT, claims that both Hezbollah and Iran feel compelled to respond, potentially in a coordinated manner. Consequently, the likelihood of returning to the previous situation is relatively low, with escalation being a more probable outcome. Further complicating the situation are various factors: domestically, the Lebanese pressure Hezbollah to de-escalate the situation; internationally, powers such as the United States and France are advocating for restraint to prevent the conflict from expanding into a regional war. American assurances of defending Israel, if attacked are strategically aimed at influencing the decision-making processes of the involved parties. However, as additional members of the resistance axis become involved, the likelihood of escalation increases.

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5 Telegram 31.07.24