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Hamas chief assassinated: Why this will rattle the region and worry Delhi

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Written by **Shubhajt Roy** Follow

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Hours before his killing, Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh (centre), and Palestinian Islamic Jihad's Ziad Nakhleh, met Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (right) Tuesday. AP photo

India woke up to the news of [Hamis leader Ismail Haniyeh's assassination in Iran](#), marking a defining moment in the ongoing Israel-Hamas war since the October 7, 2023 attacks.

Until Wednesday evening, New Delhi had not issued a response. On Tuesday, Union Minister [Nitin Gadkari](#) was in Tehran to attend the inauguration of the newly-elected Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian — Haniyeh was also in Tehran for the ceremony. What does this assassination mean for the region, the world and India?

First, this is the most high-profile blow to Hamas since the October 7 attacks, in which the Palestinian outfit killed at least 1,200 Israeli personnel, and took about 250 hostages. Since the Israeli military has been pounding Gaza with air strikes and carrying out ground operations, in which more than 40,000 people

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So, from the Israeli point of view, this is a major victory for its mission to neutralise Hamas — a stated objective behind launching Operation Swords of Iron.



Second, Hamas views this as a major provocation since Haniyeh was the head of its political bureau, based in Qatar. He was the public face of Hamas and was negotiating the terms of the hostage deal and the ceasefire, while Yahya Sinwar is its military leader, responsible for the October 7 attacks.

In a statement, Hamas mourned the death of Haniyeh, who it said was killed in “a treacherous Zionist raid on his residence in Tehran” after attending the swearing-in ceremony of the new Iranian President. This is certain to anger Hamas and its benefactor, Iran.

Hamis official Sami Abu Zuhri told Reuters that the assassination of Haniyeh in Iran was a grave escalation.

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Third, the venue of Haniyeh's assassination is another important element. The fact that the targeted strike took place in Tehran will be seen as a major escalatory move. Haniyeh had also met Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

The Hamas leader, who was living in Qatar, gave him immunity there. But, by killing him in Iran, it seems, Israel has made a move to signal that the group's leaders are not safe in Iranian security.

In April this year, Israel had targeted Iran in the first direct assault, after Iran had conducted strikes on Israel — its missiles were intercepted by Israel and its allies in the region. Thereafter, the temperature cooled somewhat, but this assassination has the potential to prompt another round of strikes.

Fourth, within Iran and Hamas, there will be now calls for avenging the death of Haniyeh, and that is certain to put pressure on the newly-elected Pezeshkian, who is considered a moderate and may find himself in a tight spot to respond.

Pezeshkian's own election campaign was to start negotiations with the West for economic reasons — Iran has been facing the heat of international isolation. He would have hoped for a restart to the dialogue process.

With the assassination of Haniyeh, Pezeshkian will have to respond to the IRGC and the hardliners in the Iranian establishment to respond in kind.

Pezeshkian's first few days and weeks will be a test of his skills as a politician, negotiating with the Supreme Leader on how to respond to the crisis.

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survival has been at stake with pressure on him to finally strike the hostage deal with Hamas, being brokered by the US, Egypt and Qatar among others.

The assassination will have the potential to upend all such efforts for the time being, and it is expected to prolong the war in Gaza for some more time. This will mean that Netanyahu can stay until the war is over.

Sixth, the US elections are at a pivotal stage, with Vice President [Kamala Harris](#) looking to shape the Democratic field — by being anointed as the Democratic Presidential candidate and picking the Vice Presidential nominee — in the next couple of weeks.

She has signalled that she will be tougher on Netanyahu regarding the Israeli response and the war in Gaza, as she is focused on the younger Democratic voters, and this adds a layer of complication.

Harris, who has been perceived as more vocal on the war in Gaza as compared to President [Joe Biden](#), will now have to think about how to respond in case there is escalation in the region.

Seventh, the wider region is a tinderbox, because if there is an escalation by Iran and Hamas, it will impact the entire region. Qatar, Turkey, and Yemen's Houthis have already condemned the assassination, and top regional players like Saudi Arabia, and UAE are watching the events closely.

After more than nine months of war in Gaza, this is a defining moment — after the development in April when there was a risk of escalation, Israel did not get drawn into a broader conflict.

Eighth, India is still processing the developments, sensitivities of a response. While it does not have any positive sentiments about the Hamas leaders, it will be careful in its framing — since it involves a targeted assassination on foreign soil.

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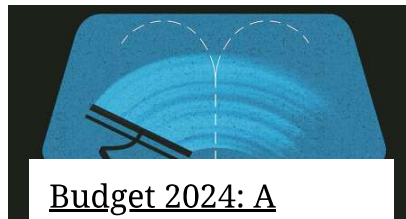
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The immediate Indian concern will be the peace and stability in the region which is home to about 9 million Indians living and working in the region, apart from the region supplying almost two-thirds of crude to India.

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