

The Impact of the Assassination of Ismail Haniyeh on the Securitization of the Persian Gulf

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Sadegh Shafiei¹ **Extended Abstract****1. Introduction**

This study examines the impact of the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh, a senior Hamas leader, on the escalation of tensions and the securitization of the Persian Gulf, and its subsequent influence on the foreign policy strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Employing the theoretical framework of offensive realism, we argue that this assassination significantly altered the security calculus of both Iran and the United States in the region, triggering a cycle of intensified deterrence, enhanced military posturing, and the emergence of a new security competition .

The assassination of Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran marked a significant escalation in the ongoing tensions between Iran and its allies in the "Axis of Resistance" and Israel, with direct security implications for the Persian Gulf region. This event catalyzed the re-emergence of the Persian Gulf as a central theater for power projection, deterrence, and military competition. The United States, by deploying additional naval and air forces, aimed to secure commercial shipping and its national interests, a move that itself heightened anxieties over the potential for direct conflict.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, while foregoing an immediate direct military retaliation against Israel, felt compelled to demonstrate its military capabilities within the Persian Gulf. This was intended to project strength and preempt any perception of weakness that might encourage regional states to collaborate with external actors. This dynamic, in turn, precipitated a surge in military presence and exercises by both sides. This article addresses the central research question: What effect did the assassination of

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Ismail Haniyeh have on Iran's foreign policy and the process of securitization in the Persian Gulf?

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach with a descriptive–analytical method, and data were collected and analyzed from library sources, specialized journals, and credible online platforms.

The theoretical framework of this study is based on offensive realism. One of the key issues emphasized by realists is security, or in other words, the survival, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of states. From the realist perspective, survival is the primary motivation of states in international politics. Since the international system is anarchic, with each unit responsible for its own security, states are free to pursue their domestic and foreign objectives in whichever way they deem most appropriate. In such a chaotic structure, self-help becomes the most essential principle.

Offensive neorealism focuses on the aggressive tendencies and revisionist aims of states, especially great powers, within the international system. This theory argues that anarchy in the international environment leads to constant competition among great powers. From this perspective, the international system resembles a Hobbesian state in which security is scarce. Wealthy states build large militaries, engage in extraterritorial issues, and seek to expand their international influence. They believe that the actions and outputs of great powers are decisive in shaping the international system.

John Mearsheimer and Stephen Waltz are among the most prominent scholars of offensive realism. Mearsheimer identifies three main factors driving state power-seeking:

- The anarchic structure of the international system,
- The offensive capabilities that all states possess,
- Uncertainty regarding the intentions and goals of other states.

The combination of these three factors leads states not only to be concerned with balancing power and maintaining security but also to have strong incentives to maximize their power. In this approach, survival is the primary goal, and states aim to preserve territorial integrity and domestic political independence. Power is considered the main tool for achieving objectives and attaining a hegemonic position in the international system. Offensive realists emphasize military and economic power because the greater a state's relative military advantage, the higher its security. This approach mainly focuses on great powers, as they seek to alter the status quo to achieve regional and global objectives.

The Middle East is one of the most significant regions where constant power balancing and competition among states, as well as intervention by great powers, have created serious security challenges. Its strategic importance, abundant natural resources (such as oil and gas), and geopolitically strategic location make it prone to conflicts, disputes, and the formation of alliances to secure national interests. Consequently, the region's history has been marked by numerous wars and unrest, often intertwined with the interests of global powers.

3. Discussion

The assassination of Haniyeh altered Iran's security calculus, compelling a response designed to project strength while avoiding an escalation into full-scale war. This led to an intensified "securitization" of the Persian Gulf by both camps. Iran demonstrated its deterrent capabilities through military exercises and threats to close the Strait of Hormuz. Conversely, the United States characterized these actions as a threat to its interests and global maritime security, justifying its own reinforced military presence.

Overall, the logic of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy is to restore its deterrence in the Middle East to the level prior to the assassination of Haniyeh, in order to prevent Israeli dominance in the region. This deterrence must be such that it does not escalate into a major conflict; it should both demonstrate power and maintain balance while avoiding increased tension. With the establishment of Iran's new government (the Mokhberian administration), a new approach has emerged to moderate foreign policy and revive negotiation channels with the West. However, Israel is closely analyzing Iran's political strategy. Netanyahu understands that the new government prioritizes the revival of the JCPOA and preventing the activation of the "snapback" mechanism, and will pursue this goal. Therefore, Israel's strategy is to sabotage Iran's new moderate policy—i.e., the assassination of Haniyeh was a political-strategic operation aimed at striking Tehran, even though it could have been carried out in Turkey or Qatar.

Iran's asymmetric defense doctrine is the country's most important defensive strategy in the Persian Gulf. Since Iran's military power is not equal to that of the United States, Iranian officials have aimed to strike U.S. bases in the region in the event of any military attack. Accordingly, the Islamic Republic of Iran has sought to first protect its territorial integrity and naval power in the Persian Gulf against any aggression by Western countries and regional allies. Tehran's military officials have repeatedly stated that in the event of a military attack, Israel would face enormous costs.

Convergence and asymmetric defense represent Tehran's optimal military strategy against Washington, as it maximizes damage to the adversary while minimizing its own costs. This approach is known as "asymmetric defense," and Iran has pursued it since the Iran-Iraq war.

As political and security tensions in the Persian Gulf escalated, Iran conducted a new military exercise in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. A key aspect was the invitation of Russia and China, two major powers, to participate in joint military exercises in Oman and the Pacific Ocean. Iranian officials noted that this cooperation is unprecedented in the history of the Islamic Revolution and represents the first such joint exercise between the parties. While the U.S. aimed to strengthen regional offensive and defensive systems against Iran, Russia, China, and Iran expanded their military collaboration to enhance Iran's defensive capabilities and manage potential conflicts in the Gulf. Iran also sought to establish a military coalition in the Gulf through Russia and China to increase its deterrence.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

The assassination of Ismail Haniyeh served as a pivotal event that intensified existing security trends in the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East. It triggered a new phase of mutual deterrence between Iran and the United States, characterized by increased military presence, power projection, and the pursuit of new alliances. Iran, relying on its asymmetric defense strategy and strengthened ties with Russia and China, sought to increase the costs of challenging its regional leadership. Conversely, Israel and the United States, aiming to contain Iranian influence, continued to bolster the defensive capabilities of their regional allies and maintain a robust military presence. In summary, rather than reducing tensions, this assassination plunged the Persian Gulf into a new and more complex phase of security competition, wherein actors are engaged in maximizing power and security within an anarchic environment.

5. Keywords

Ismail Haniyeh, Persian Gulf, United States, Iran, Israel

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