FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 01.08.2024 | Marcus Schneider

A competition between barbarism and barbarism

Like a modern Franz Ferdinand moment, the killing of Hamas leader Haniyeh, threatens to push the middle east to the brink of a major war

If someone had written a script for a Netflix series about the events since 7 October 2023, it would likely be rejected as too grotesque and absurd. Rare are the moments in world history when such a concentration of dramatic events take place such as the tragedy that the Middle East has been experiencing over the last ten months. And all this could be just the prelude to what is yet to come.

As the eyes of the world were fixed on Lebanon, where Israel and Hezbollah were preparing to escalate to the next level, the Jewish state struck in Tehran. In the heart of the Iranian capital, the central hub of the anti-Zionist axis of resistance, Ismail Haniyeh, the political leader of Hamas, was eliminated. In a single night, the number 3 of Hezbollah and the number 1 of Hamas died in Beirut and Tehran. It is the greatest triumph for Israel since 7 October. And yet it is a victory that, like a modern Franz Ferdinand moment, threatens to push the entire region to the brink of a major war.

So far, beyond Gaza, where an unleashed war of sorts is indeed raging, the regional escalation has followed a well-calibrated choreography. The opponents danced menacingly around each other, closing in on each other and yet trying to avoid a full-scale escalation. By striking almost simultaneously at the heart of the Hezbollah and Islamic Republic power structures, Israel is sending the message that no opposing decision-maker is safe. It is the ultimate challenge. If the warring parties in Beirut and Tehran were still lacking arguments, Tel Aviv has served them up on a silver platter.

The risk of a major escalation

Beyond the symbolism, the question arises as to the strategic benefit of such targeted assassinations. If the past is a yardstick, this is rather low. In

2004, Israel killed Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, the spiritual leader of Hamas at the time. Since then, the organisation has succeeded in winning the Palestinian elections, completely controlling the Gaza Strip, invading Israel on 7 October 2023 and plunging an entire region into chaos. Hamas has certainly not become weaker. Haniyeh is also replaceable. Hamas is an ideological association and not a strict one-leader organisation. 'The devil you know' used to be the motto. What follows is often no better and certainly no more moderate. The most immediate beneficiary of the short-term vacuum at the top of the terrorist organisation is the highest-ranking Hamas leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, in his collapsing tunnel empire.

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The negotiations and with them the hopes of a ceasefire, an end to the suffering of the civilian population and a possible release of hostages from the hell of Gaza are likely to be over for the time being as a result of the Tehran incident. Haniyeh was the political head of the negotiating faction, and with him this option may be dead for good. Of course, this is entirely in line with Benjamin Netanyahu, who only days ago declared 'total victory' as his goal in Washington to the cheers of American representatives. It is therefore also a defeat for the Biden administration. The outgoing president had, at least publicly, put a lot of effort into de-escalating the situation in the Middle East and the orgy of violence in Gaza through negotiations. The strategy described as a 'bear hug' to gently but firmly persuade the Israeli ally to give in has not been successful. By killing Haniyeh in Tehran, Tel Aviv is openly risking a major escalation.

Israel is also sending a clear message to the Palestinians with this killing. No Hamas, no negotiations, no political perspective. Submission or death is the political choice facing the Palestinians. Just a fortnight ago, the Knesset finally buried the two-state solution. In Gaza, the world is witnessing the systematic destruction of all human and natural resources on a daily basis. It is completely unclear what kind of life awaits the two million traumatised inhabitants once 'total victory' has been achieved. In the West Bank, meanwhile, Israel is letting the government's official right-wing extremists, such as Ben Gvir and Smotrich, call the shots. Here, too, hatred and violence are increasing almost daily.

Revitalising an exhausted regime

The fight against terrorism - and there should be no illusions here - is itself constantly giving birth to new terrorism, creating its own justification and thus prolonging itself ad infinitum. Extremism could only be combated effectively if there was a political perspective that would deprive it of its roots in the population. However, by denying this perspective, everything moderate withers away. The way the war is being waged in Gaza has the regional effect of a gigantic recruitment programme for Hamas and its ilk. Despite the blows that the terrorist organisations are taking, they appear to be the only ones capable of acting against Israel, while the Arab regimes stand by as impotent spectators.

The orgy of violence in Gaza also exposes Western hypocrisy. The Western values appear here as accomplices in an endeavour that now contradicts everything it claims to stand for in its Sunday speeches. Instead of a battle between civilisation and barbarism, what is happening in the Middle East increasingly appears to be a competition between barbarism and barbarism.

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The crucial question that supporters of the strategy of pure violence against Islamist extremism have to face is how effective it can be in the long term. The Islamists thrive on violence and have a binary vision of politics as a battle between good and evil. As soon as they have to worry about rubbish collection, they fail. From Hamas' point of view, the cruel action of 7 October can also be interpreted as an escape from the enervating pettiness of daily politics. The same applies to the Islamic Republic of Iran, whose slogans have long since struck its own population as hollow and hypocritical. The newly inflamed regional conflict acts as a revitalisation boost for an exhausted regime.

Forcing these actors into the fight ultimately means giving them what they themselves want. 'We love life, they love death' was the slogan in the early years of the global war on terror. Admittedly, the opponents at that time were only the desperados of al-Qaeda, not the much more potent terrorist network of autonomous members whose nerve endings converge in Tehran. Nevertheless, the same applies to Hamas, Hezbollah and Houthis: The willingness of these actors to make sacrifices is far greater than anything the West can muster. What are 30 000 dead civilians, or perhaps even 300 000, against the long-term goal of conquering

Jerusalem? It is thinking in other categories. In a world where martyrdom is considered desirable, nobody is afraid of an end on the battlefield. This does not mean that these actors are suicidal or incapable of politics. But it does mean that a strategy that prioritises the military struggle and disregards the political awakens instincts in them that fuel further escalation.

Iran's reaction and the role of the US

The killing of Haniyeh, who was in Tehran as a 'state guest' on its own territory, is a shameful humiliation for Iran. It strikes at the very foundations of the Islamic Republic. It raises the question of the extent to which Iran can guarantee the safety of its own officials, including the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, with whom Haniyeh met on the eve of his violent death. It is now putting the regime under enormous pressure, not only from its own supporters, but also from its allies within the Axis, who have now been vividly shown that Tehran cannot guarantee their lives even where it supposedly exercises absolute control. Ali Khamenei has already announced revenge for the death of the 'dear guest'.

With the attack, Israel is also undermining what Iran would define as its own deterrent. Tehran countered the Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on 13 April 2024 with an unprecedented direct missile and drone attack on Israel. This was, of course, a staged attack with a week's notice. The aim was to save face while at the same time meticulously ensuring that a complete escalation was avoided. It therefore functioned as a successful *off-ramp* for both opponents. Whether such a 'show' can now be repeated is more than questionable.

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The Middle East is now at its most dangerous moment since mid-October, when the US averted a potential conflagration by preventing an Israeli pre-emptive strike against Hezbollah. Should the supporters of the retaliatory logic now prevail in Tehran and Hezbollah, the signs would point to a storm, even in the face of an Israeli government increasingly willing to escalate. The well-calibrated choreography would be gone. Israel and the Iranian axis of resistance find themselves in a kind of highly dangerous 'game of chicken', in which both sides do not actually want all-out war, but are taking ever greater risks to persuade their opponents to give in.

In view of the tarnished *lame duck* in the White House and the now assumed complicity of many in the American administration, one should not project too much hope of de-escalation onto Washington. It is unlikely that the killings in Beirut and Tehran were carried out without American collusion - even if Washington pretends to be ignorant. The hope that remains is that more rational minds will prevail in the resistance axis. Absurd and implausible? Certainly for a Netflix series.



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