



Netanyahu Hell-Bent on a Wider War - Trita Parsi

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Talia Baroncelli (TB): Hi, you're watching *theAnalysis.news*, and I'm your host, Talia Baroncelli. Today, I'll be joined by Dr. Trita Parsi to speak about the assassination of Hamas's top political leader, Ismail Haniyeh. We'll also be speaking about what this assassination on Iranian soil means for Iran and Iran's new President, Masoud Pezeshkian.

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Hamas's top political leader, Ismail Haniyeh, was killed in a raid in Tehran, Iran. He was killed alongside his bodyguards while staying at a guest residence close to the presidential compound. Haniyeh was attending the Iranian President, Masoud Pezeshkian's inauguration. A few hours earlier, the Israeli Defense Forces struck a neighborhood in Southern Beirut, killing a top Hezbollah Commander, Fuad Shukr. According to the Lebanese Health Ministry, three other people were killed, and 74 people were injured. The IDF says the operation was in response to a strike on a football field in Majdal Shams in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, which killed 12 teenagers. Israel immediately attributed the strike to Hezbollah and said that Hezbollah had crossed a red line. Yet Hezbollah has denied involvement in this strike, which is quite uncommon on their part. Joining me to discuss these developments is Dr. Trita Parsi. He's the Executive Vice President at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. Thanks again for making time to join me today, Trita.

Trita Parsi (TP): My pleasure. Thank you so much.

TB: Well, quite a lot has happened in the past 24 hours. Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas's top political commander, as well as party to the ceasefire negotiations, was assassinated in Iran. A few hours before that, a top Hezbollah commander was also killed in Southern Beirut. What is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu doing here? Is he trying to start an all-out war?

TP: Well, Netanyahu is escalating on all fronts right now. We're seeing intensified bombing in Gaza. We're seeing intensified repression in the West Bank, attacks in Syria, and attacks against journalists in Gaza again today, killing several *Al Jazeera* journalists. Of course, you have the attacks against the number two in Hezbollah in Southern Beirut, as well as the assassination of Haniyeh.

Now, if you're sitting in the Middle East right now and you're looking at this, you're noticing that Netanyahu just got back from Washington. You're noticing that this is happening at the same time that the U.S. has started bombing Iraq and Syria militias again. You're seeing that the U.S. is moving two more ships to the Mediterranean. Just two days ago, the current head of Mossad met with the current head of the CIA in ceasefire talks, and yet all of this happened. They're drawing the conclusion that all of this is an indication that the Biden administration was in on this. If you take a look at what the Houthis have said with the Iranian ambassador to the U.S. in his letter to the President of the Security Council today, saying that this could not have happened without American authorization and intelligence support. I understand that that is the conclusion that is drawn if you're looking at it from that standpoint. I do think, however, there's another likelihood, which is a possibility that I find more likely. Which is that Netanyahu got back from Washington, and in Washington, he met with Kamala Harris. We saw the body language. We saw a clear message from her that she was breaking in tone and in rhetoric and language, but also to a certain extent on substance, because she pointed out that he should take the deal, this ceasefire deal, meaning that he's the one that is the obstacle, not Hamas. This is a break, not just in rhetoric, but in substance from the Biden administration. I think he saw that, and he recognized that his reign of just being able to run circles around the Biden administration may have come to an end. As a result, he decided to escalate now to take maximum advantage of political disarray in Washington as a whole because of the elections and political disarray inside of the White House because of Biden's resignation from the ticket and to escalate matters as much as possible in the region, and by that, achieve several different objectives. Vis-à-vis the United States, the key one is this may be an effort to corner a potential future Kamala Harris president and force her into taking the same type of bearhug of Israel as Biden voluntarily did after October 7 and take away from her the maneuverability and the momentum she would have coming in as a new president, hoping to be able to take initiative. Instead, she's going to be forced to react to a disaster and a crisis that Biden and Netanyahu have created for her.

TB: Yeah, because the timing is obviously very suspect. Israel could have killed Haniyeh when he was in Qatar, but they chose to kill him on Iranian soil. How does this actually impact relations between the U.S., Iran, and Israel? What is Iran's position here now? They can't possibly not react in this particular case. This has been incredibly embarrassing for them. How will Iran react now?

TP: You're quite right because you point out that they could have done this when he was in Doha, but also, they could have done this on the numerous other trips that he's taken to Tehran. Instead, they chose to do it when 70 plus heads of state and foreign dignitaries were

in Tehran for the inauguration of Pezeshkian. They're doing it in such a way to maximize Iran's embarrassment. If you're maximizing Iran's embarrassment, well, then you're also maximizing the likelihood that Iran will respond.

The question, though, is, will Iran respond alone, or will it be responding together with Hezbollah, Hamas, and other actors, potentially the Houthis? If it is the latter case, one of the key things that I think we should be worried about is that when the Iranians responded to the attack by the Israelis on Iran's consulate building at the embassy in Damascus, it could coordinate and choreograph this together with the United States in order to allow Iran to respond, but without risking major escalation. That coordination, that discipline is simply not going to be present in the necessary way if you're having the Houthi, Hezbollah, militias involved in this response. The likelihood that this actually will lead to further escalation rather than a one-off and then an end to the fight for a while at least, it's just going to be much, much harder than it was in April.

TB: But how should the United States be looking at this now? They've been treating the Iranian nuclear issue, as well as the tensions and strikes between Israel and Hezbollah and the war on Gaza, as three completely unrelated disparate issues, while these issues are intertwined and tethered to one another. Do you think they'll continue this strategy, or will they have to change strategy and have a more all-encompassing approach?

TP: Well, asking for strategy at this point is perhaps asking for too much, but at a minimum, what they need to do and recognize, and they should have done it 10 months ago, is that all of the escalation risk that they themselves view as being negative for the region and negative for the United States, the most effective way of minimizing those escalation risks is to have a ceasefire in Gaza. They have refrained from using the leverage the United States has to force de-escalation. Biden has the leverage. He has chosen not to use it. If Biden stops providing the bombs, Israel cannot drop the bombs. Even in this circumstance, the United States still has the leverage to force a ceasefire in Gaza. If it were to do so and show that it is restraining Israel, that could generate restraint on the Iranian and other sides as well. But if the Iranians see that there's absolutely no restraint from the American side, the United States is either unwilling or has completely lost control, then the likelihood of the Iranians responding in order to re-establish deterrence is going to go up significantly.

TB: So newly inaugurated Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian campaigned on a rather hopeful platform of trying to reduce the impact of U.S. sanctions. His position there was quite different from the hard-line candidate, Saeed Jalili. Of course, his position is also very different from that of Ebrahim Raisi. Ebrahim Raisi being the President who died in a helicopter crash a few months ago. Given these recent developments, do you think there's any leverage left for Pezeshkian to try and get sanctions relief?

TP: It's going to be extremely difficult. It was difficult enough as it was even before all of this. But we have seen a pattern in which, for the last 25 or so years, the Israelis have done everything they can to prevent U.S.-Iran diplomacy, fearing that it will lead to an outcome that is detrimental to Israel. The most effective way of preventing that outcome is to prevent

diplomacy. The most effective way of preventing diplomacy is to raise the cost of starting diplomacy through a crisis of this kind. The window that was created by Pezeshkian's election has essentially been shut closed, at least in the short and medium term, as a result of this crisis.

TB: Just one final question before you have to go. Pezeshkian made a statement earlier, right after the attack, saying Iran will defend its territorial integrity, dignity, honor, and pride and will make the terrorist occupiers regret their cowardly act. Yet his vice president said that Iran has no intention of escalating the conflict. Do you see these two statements as being contradictory, or are they actually both trying to call for some stability and calm?

TP: I don't see them as contradictory. I think the way they are thinking about it is that precisely because the United States is not imposing any restrictions on Israel, is not restraining Israel, then the Iranians have no choice but to try to restore deterrence as a way of stopping the Israelis from doing more of this. That means then that they have to respond in some kind, but they want to do it in a way that doesn't escalate the situation. The problem, of course, is the security dilemma here, which is that from the Israeli standpoint, what the Iranians do in retaliation will nevertheless be seen and portrayed as an escalation and then justify further escalation. We talk about how the attack or the incident in the occupied Golan Heights that left 12 people killed, including several children, may have been Hezbollah or may not have been Hezbollah. It is still not confirmed who was behind this. But the Israelis have argued that they crossed the red line, and they are forced to respond. But the reality is that 83% of all of the exchange of fire between Lebanon and Israel has been the Israelis attacking Lebanon. At one point, have you run out of opportunities or justifications to retaliate when you're the one who has attacked overwhelmingly yourself?

TB: On the ceasefire negotiations, it seemed like they were dead in the water, so to speak. Is this a ship that's already sailed? Do you think that there's no chance left of the ceasefire negotiations?

TP: Well, as a negotiation in which there's some sort of an agreement between Hamas and Israel through the U.S., Egypt, and Qatar, it's definitely killed, at least in the short term, because the Israelis killed the negotiator. But a ceasefire can still be achieved because of what I said earlier on. If the United States wants to see a ceasefire, they can enforce it. If they stop providing the bombs, Israel cannot drop the bombs. You can still have a ceasefire, but it will not be the type of a ceasefire deal that is on the table that entails the release of hostages.

TB: Trita Parsi, it was great having you. Thanks so much for making time on this really busy day.

TP: My pleasure. Thank you so much.

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