

Iran's supreme leader says Israel provided grounds for 'harsh punishment for itself'

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TEHRAN:

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said Israel had provided the grounds for "harsh punishment for itself" and it was Tehran's duty to avenge the Hamas leader's death. Iranian forces have already made strikes directly on Israel earlier in the Gaza war. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh was assassinated in the Iranian capital Tehran early on Wednesday morning, an attack that drew threats of revenge on Israel and fuelled further concern that the conflict in Gaza was turning into a wider Middle East war. The Palestinian militant group and Iran's Revolutionary Guards confirmed Haniyeh's death. The Guards said it took place hours after he attended a swearing-in ceremony for Iran's new president. Although the attack was widely assumed to have been carried out by Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government made no claim of responsibility and said it would not make any comment on the killing. Haniyeh, normally based in Qatar, had been the face of Hamas's international diplomacy as the war set off by the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7 has raged in Gaza. He had been taking part in internationally-brokered indirect talks on reaching a ceasefire in the Palestinian enclave. The assassination took place less than 24 hours after Israel claimed to have killed a Hezbollah commander in the Lebanese capital Beirut in retaliation for a deadly strike in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. The latest events appear to set back chances of any imminent ceasefire agreement in the nearly 10-month-old war in Gaza between Israel and Palestinian Hamas. Hamas' armed wing said in a statement Haniyeh's killing would "take the battle to new dimensions and have major repercussions". Vowing to retaliate, Iran declared three days of national mourning and said the US bears responsibility because of its support for Israel. In Jerusalem, an Israeli government spokesperson declined to comment on the killing of Haniyeh but said the country was on high alert for any Iranian retaliation. Spokesperson David Mencer told a briefing with journalists

that Israel was committed to Gaza ceasefire negotiations and securing the release of Israeli hostages held by Palestinian militants in Gaza. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, at an event in Singapore, sidestepped a question on Haniyeh's killing, saying a ceasefire deal in Gaza was key to avoiding wider regional escalation. He told Channel News Asia that the US had neither been aware of nor involved in the killing. Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant said Israel was not trying to escalate the war but was prepared for all scenarios. Qatar, which has been brokering talks aimed at halting the fighting in Gaza along with Egypt, condemned Haniyeh's killing as a dangerous escalation of the conflict. "Political assassinations and continued targeting of civilians in Gaza while talks continue leads us to ask, how can mediation succeed when one party assassinates the negotiator on other side?" Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani said on X. Egypt said it showed a lack of political will on Israel's part to calm tensions. China, Russia, Turkey and Iraq also condemned it. Iran's top security body met to decide strategy in reaction to the killing, a source with knowledge of the situation said. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas condemned the killing and Palestinian factions in the Israeli-occupied West Bank called for a strike and mass demonstrations. In Israel, the mood was buoyant as Israelis welcomed what they saw as a major achievement in the war against Hamas. Residents in besieged Gaza feared Haniyeh's death would prolong the fighting that has devastated the enclave. "What a loss. We lost one of our very own," said Gaza resident Fatima Al Saati. Another neighbour, Hachem Al-Saati, said: "This news is scary. We feel that he was like a father to us." Appointed to the Hamas top job in 2017, Haniyeh has moved between Turkey and Qatar's capital Doha, escaping the travel curbs of the blockaded Gaza Strip and enabling him to act as a negotiator in the ceasefire talks or to talk to Hamas' ally Iran. Three of his sons were killed in an Israeli airstrike in April. His deputy Saleh Al-Arouri was killed in January by Israel, leaving Yehya Al-Sinwar, the Hamas chief in the Gaza Strip and the architect of the October 7 attack on Israel, and Zaher Jabarin, the head of the group in the West Bank, in place but in hiding. That assault by Hamas-led fighters killed about 1,200 people in southern Israeli communities and some 250 people were taken to Gaza as hostages, Israeli tallies say. In response, Israel launched a ground and air offensive in the coastal enclave that has killed more than 39,400 people, according to Gaza health officials, and

left more than 2 million facing a humanitarian crisis. No end appears to be in sight for Israel's campaign there as the ceasefire talks falter. The risk of a deepening war between Israel and the Lebanese group Hezbollah has also grown following the strike in the Golan Heights that killed 12 children in a Druze village on Saturday and the subsequent killing of senior Hezbollah commander Fuad Shukr. Hezbollah has not yet confirmed Shukr's death but said he was in the building hit by an Israeli strike.

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