Strategic Digest

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IDF Targets Hamas Military Chief

The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) on 13 July conducted an air strike in the southern Gaza Strip that purportedly targeted the head of the Hamas military wing Muhammed Deif. The IDF Chief of Staff Lt Gen Herzi Halevi in a statement on 14 July noted that the operation was jointly conducted by the IDF along with the Israel Security Agency (ISA) on a compound in which intelligence indicated Deif was present along with the head of the Khan Younis Brigade of Hamas, Rafa'a Salameh.

Gen Halevi reiterated that the IDF was 'determined to continue and pursue senior Hamas officials, those who planned and carried out the October 7 Massacre and dedicated their lives to the murder of innocent civilians'. The office of Prime

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a statement noted that he was briefed about the operation. It stated that the prime minister had given a 'permanent directive to eliminate senior Hamas officials' at the beginning of the war itself in October 2023.

The area where the IDF strike took place was designated as a humanitarian zone. Hamas claimed that over 90 civilians were killed in the Israel Air Force (IsAF) strike, which led to a huge crater on the ground. Analysts noted that heavy ordnance and explosives could have been used in the strike given the high-profile nature of the target, which was a departure from the targeted strikes that were being conducted by the IDF and IsAF in recent months.

Deif's deputy, Marwan Issa was earlier killed in an Israeli air strike in March 2023. Reports noted that the IDF had dropped flyers in Gaza offering a reward of $100,000 for information regarding Deif. The same flyers had offered a reward of $400,000 on Yahya Sinwar, the alleged mastermind behind the 7 October 2023 terror strikes against Israel.

On 14 July, IDF released the results of an operational enquiry into the battle at Kibbutz Be'eri. 340 terrorists had infiltrated this community on 7 October, out of which at least 100 were killed. 101 civilians were murdered here while 30 hostages were taken, 11 of whom continue to remain hostage. 18 IDF soldiers and 8 Israel Police were killed in the operations to counter Hamas in this area.

The IDF noted that it failed in its mission to protect residents of the Kibbutz, given that it was not prepared for the extensive infiltration scenario that occurred on 7 October. The enquiry report highlighted that no additional reserve forces were present in the area and that the IDF struggled to create an accurate situational assessment in the initial hours due to a lack of effective coordination and command and control. It pledged to incorporate these lessons in future operational plans.

In other developments, the IDF strongly refuted a report in the journal Lancet 'Counting the Dead: Difficult but Essential', published on 5 July 2024. The article noted that 'applying a conservative estimate of four indirect deaths per one direct death to the 37,396 deaths reported, it is not implausible to estimate that up to 186,000 or even more deaths could be attributable to the current conflict in Gaza'.

The IDF in its response asserted that Israel was fighting against a terrorist organisation in Gaza and that its conflict with Hamas was 'fundamentally different from other wars in the 21st century'. It noted that Hamas was deeply embedded 'amidst and beneath' the civilian population in Gaza with significant military capabilities. The IDF asserted that it has 'gone above and beyond the requirements of international humanitarian law in mitigating harm to civilians in conflict zones'. The IDF's Deputy Chief of Staff, Major General Amir Baram visited the US and met with senior officials and commanders of the US Central Command (CENTCOM) on 28 June. Among the key issues that were discussed during the visit included the need to speed up the rate of supplies of required munitions from the US. The IDF noted that 'joint mechanisms for acceleration and control were agreed' towards this end.

Israel's northern borders continued to be tense with multiple instances of rocket and UAV launches. The IDF pointed out that at least one in six Hezbollah launches hit Lebanese civilian areas and that Hezbollah was endangering Lebanese civilians to attack Israelis. The IDF on 19 June noted that operational plans for an offensive in Lebanon were approved and validated and decisions were taken on increasing the readiness of troops on the field. The IsAF also struck targets inside Lebanon in the Bekaa Valley area on 22 June.

NATO's 75th Anniversary Summit- Key Takeaways

NATO celebrated its 75th anniversary in April and held its annual leaders' summit in Washington, DC on 9–11 July 2024. The Washington Summit was the first summit for Sweden as a full NATO Ally after officially joining the Alliance on March 7, 2024. This week's mood was largely jubilant given the alliance's role in ensuring peace and stability in the Atlantic theatre for the past 75 years. With the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and emerging threats such as cyber warfare and climate change, NATO's strategic direction and responses were considered crucial for maintaining peace and stability. A cornerstone achievement of the summit was the strong reaffirmation of Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, emphasizing that an attack on one member is an attack on all. This commitment to collective defence remains vital in deterring potential aggressors and maintaining the alliance's credibility.

The Washington Summit Declaration showed that the convening was more than an opportunity for commemoration, it served as an inflection point for the Alliance's future and a call to action for maintaining support for Ukraine. NATO

emphasized the importance of expanding partnerships beyond its traditional membership to address global security challenges. Strengthening ties with the European Union, enhancing cooperation with non-member countries, and engaging with international organizations will enhance NATO's ability to respond to global security challenges. Collaborative efforts in areas such as counterterrorism, maritime security, and disaster response will be essential.

The declaration said the allies intend to provide Ukraine with minimum funding of 40 billion euros ($43.28 billion) in military aid within the next year but stopped short of the multiyear financial pledge that NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg had sought. The declaration says the alliance will continue to support Ukraine "on its irreversible path to full Euro-Atlantic integration, including NATO membership" as Kyiv continues the "vital work" of democratic, economic and security reforms.

NATO reiterated its support for Ukraine's long-term goal of joining the Euro-Atlantic community. While immediate membership is not on the table, the alliance promised to continue supporting Ukraine's aspirations through the Enhanced Opportunities Partnership program. The term "well-lit bridge" was used by NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg to describe the path for Ukraine towards eventual NATO membership. The "well-lit bridge" provides Ukraine with interim security guarantees which would serve as a deterrent against further Russian aggression. As part of this pathway, NATO will provide increased political and military support to Ukraine. This will include closer cooperation through the Enhanced Opportunities Partnership program, joint military exercises, and strategic advisory services.

In response to the heightened security threat posed by Russia, NATO committed to enhancing its military presence on its eastern flank. This includes deploying additional troops, pre-positioning equipment, and conducting more frequent and larger-scale military exercises in Eastern Europe. These measures aim to deter Russian aggression and reassure member states in the region of NATO's commitment to their defence.

The alliance also condemned Russia's "irresponsible nuclear rhetoric and coercive nuclear signalling, including its announced stationing of nuclear weapons in Belarus," adding that Minsk continues to enable Russia's war in Ukraine. But allies remain willing to maintain channels of communication with Moscow to "mitigate risk and prevent escalation," the declaration said.

A recurring theme at the summit was the emphasis on fair burden-sharing among member states. NATO reiterated the call for all members to meet the defence spending target of 2% of their GDP. This is crucial for ensuring that the alliance has the necessary resources to respond to threats and maintain its capabilities.

Several countries pledged to increase their defence budgets, demonstrating a collective commitment to strengthening NATO.

For the first time, NATO formally acknowledged China as a strategic challenge. This recognition signifies a major shift in the alliance's strategic priorities, traditionally focused on the Euro-Atlantic region. The summit underscored the need for a comprehensive approach to address the security implications of China's rise, including its military modernization, cyber threats, and economic practices. The declaration also strengthened past NATO language on China, calling it a "decisive enabler" of Russia's war in Ukraine and saying Beijing continues to pose systemic challenges to Euro-Atlantic security. The statement called on China to cease all material and political support for Russia's war effort.

While NATO is a North Atlantic alliance, the summit acknowledged the growing strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region. With a focus on security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region, the summit underscored the need for a cohesive and proactive approach to managing China's rise and its implications for global stability. NATO leaders agreed on the importance of extending the alliance's strategic horizon to include the Indo-Pacific region.

Iran's Presidential Election of 2024- Reformist Masoud Pezeshkian Elected

Masoud Pezeshkian, 69 years old cardiac surgeon, an ethnic Azeri Turk and a reformist parliamentarian from East Azerbaijan province secured 53.6 per cent of

votes in a presidential runoff, defeating hardliner Saeed Jalili. The snap election in Iran was held following the death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter accident on 19 May.

A total of four candidates including Pezeshkian, Jalili, Mohammad Baqer Ghalibaf, a former IRGC commander and current parliament speaker, and Mustafa Pourmohammadi, who served as deputy intelligence minister under former President Rafsanjani, had competed in the first round. Two other candidates who had been qualified to run by the Guardian Council, namely Alireza Zakani, mayor of Tehran since 2021, and Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi, a former parliamentarian and head of the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs, withdrew from the race to endorse Jalili. Ali Larijani, former parliament speaker, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, former president, Abdonnaser Hemmati, Ex-Governor of the Central Bank of Iran, who had contested as a sole reformist in the 2021 election, and Eshaq Jahangiri, who served as Vice President Hassan Rouhani, were disqualified.

Pezeshkian's approval as the sole reformist in the race reversed the trend since the 2020 parliamentary election, when a majority of reformist and moderate candidates were disqualified, reducing elections to a contest within the conservative camp and a plummeting voter turnout. The March 2024 parliament

election recorded a turnout of 41 percent, the lowest in Iran's electoral history. In a bid to attract alienated voters, Pezeshkian took 'Baraye Iran' (For Iran), the anthem of the recent protests, as his campaign slogan. He also received the backing of two former presidents Muhammad Khatami and Rouhani, while Javad Zarif, former foreign minister, played an active role as a foreign policy advisor. Jalili, who is known for uncompromising stance as chief nuclear negotiator under President Ahmadinejad, received support from hardliner 'Endurance Front', known by its Persian acronym Paydari. Ghalibaf, who had the backing of the pragmatic conservative camp, refused to withdraw in Jalili's favour even after pre-election surveys indicated Jalili's substantial lead over him.

A triangular contest made a run-off including Pezeshkian almost inevitable. The initial vote on 28 June recorded a turnout of 40 percent from the over 61 million eligible voters. Pezeshkian garnered 42.45 percent of votes, while Jalili came second with 38.61 percent. Pezeshkian's lead of nearly one million over Jalili overturned the conventional wisdom that reformist prospects depend on high turnout. The most plausible explanation is a shift of conservative votes in his favour. Jalili and Ghalibaf together garnered 12.8 million votes, a decline of 5.2 million from the 2021 elections when Raisi emerged victorious with no serious challenger.

Pezeshkian maintained a wide lead over the conservatives in the three north-western provinces, where the majority of Azeris comprising 16 percent of Iran's total population lives. Pezeshkian's campaign focus on addressing the long-standing neglect of border areas and ensuring the inclusion of Sunni Muslims and ethnic minorities in government posts may have helped in making inroads into traditionally conservative votes in these regions. But as Pezeshkian failed to secure more than fifty percent of the votes, the election went into a runoff.

The Pezeshkian-Jalili runoff was a showdown between two polar opposite visions for the future of the country. Pezeshkian criticised Jalili's track record as chief nuclear negotiator under Ahmadinejad by saying that diplomacy was not about an uncompromising stance and revolutionary slogans. Instead, he attempted to present a people-centric and development-oriented foreign policy narrative. By linking diplomacy with the West to securing peoples' livelihoods and a positive face for Iran, Pezeshkian said that "negotiations are not humiliating for me." At the same time, he referenced Supreme Leader Khamenei to make his case for negotiations with the West based on "dignity, wisdom and expediency." Like Rouhani, he argued for implementing global financial standards set by the Financial Action Task Force.

Criticising the "single-option approach" of Look East' supported by his conservative rivals, Pezeshkian maintained that "neither should the Eastern powers think they are our only option, nor the Westerners." Pezeshkian's supporters painted a dystopian image of a potential Jalili presidency as living under the Taliban. The 10 percent increase in voter turnout was widely seen as a no to Jalili's brand of politics based on revolutionary slogans detached from the reality of people's lives.