

Israel's public enemy number one

How Yahya Sinwar became October 7 'mastermind'

The attack caught Israel's military and intelligence establishment off guard and shattered the image of Israeli invincibility, as Hamas fighters killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and captured around 240 captives.

In December, Israeli forces had surrounded Sinwar's house, Benjamin Netanyahu said. "It's only a matter of time before we get him," he said.

The IDF said he is hiding underground. Obsessive and disciplined, Sinwar is Hamas's top leader inside the Palestinian territory, a rarely seen veteran who learned fluent Hebrew during years in Israeli prisons and carefully studied his enemy.

Israeli officials have vowed to kill him and crush the resistance group that was founded in 1987 and has ruled Gaza since 2007.

But as the war rages into its fourth month, Sinwar remains alive, in hiding and at the helm of Hamas's gunmen as they battle Israeli forces.

He also controls the group's negotiations over the fate of the remaining captives captured during the October 7 attack.

'Intractable' in defending Hamas interests

In March 2021, Sinwar was re-elected as the head of Hamas's political wing in Gaza, extending his tenure as the Islamist movement's de facto leader in the Israeli-blockaded Palestinian enclave. He succeeded politician Ismail Haniyeh.

Haniyeh, who was based in Qatar, congratulated Sinwar and said the election marked "a victory" for the Islamist group. After a career in the shadows, spent in Israeli prisons, and the internal security apparatus of Hamas, Sinwar rose to lead the Islamist movement in the Gaza Strip. The October 7 attacks, probably a year or two in the planning, "took everyone by surprise" and "changed the balance of power on the ground", said Leila Seurat of the Arab Centre for Research and Political Studies (CAREP) in Paris.

The ascetic mastermind has not been seen since October 7.

Known for his secrecy, Sinwar is an excellent security operator, according to Abu Abdallah, a Hamas member who spent years alongside him in Israeli jails.

"He makes decisions in the utmost calm, but is intractable when it comes to defending the interests of Hamas," Abdallah said in 2017 after his former co-detainee was elected Hamas's leader in Gaza.

Respected by Palestinians

Security sources outside Gaza say that both Sinwar and Deif have taken refuge in the network of tunnels built under the territory to withstand Israeli bombs.

If he can win the release of all Palestinian prisoners and the lifting of the 16-year blockade of Gaza, people will feel they have obtained something, said Hani al-Masri, a veteran Palestinian analyst.

A former commander of Hamas's military wing, when Sinwar became its leader in Gaza in 2017, it represented for some the hardest line within the Islamist movement, which has fought three wars against Israel since 2008.

Hamas said it launched the October 7 attack in retaliation for increasing Israeli depredations against Palestinians and the continuing occupation of the West Bank and blockade of Gaza — and to push the Palestinian cause back onto the world agenda.

Among fellow Palestinians, some respect



By James Callery
Reporter

PERSPECTIVE

The wiry, grey-haired 61-year-old is believed to have engineered the surprise October 7, 2023, attack into southern Israel, along with the shadowy Mohammed Deif, the head of Hamas's armed wing.

The mastermind of the Hamas attack on Israel that triggered the worst Israeli-Palestinian bloodshed in generations is a secretive leader, feared on both sides of the battle lines.

In Gaza, no figure looms larger in determining the future trajectory of the war than Yahya Sinwar.



Yahya Sinwar (C), the elected leader of Hamas, appears in a ceremony at Yarmouk Football Stadium in Gaza City on May 24, 2021, to commemorate Palestinian fighters killed by Israeli air strikes.
● GETTY IMAGES



Head of the political wing of the Palestinian Hamas movement Yahya Sinwar speaks during a meeting in Gaza City on April 30, 2022.
● AFP



Yahya Sinwar (C) waves to supporters as he arrives to attend a rally marking Al-Quds Day, a commemoration in support of the Palestinian people celebrated annually on the last Friday of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, in Gaza City, on April 14, 2023.
● AFP

Sinwar for standing up to Israel and for remaining in impoverished Gaza, in contrast to other Hamas leaders living more comfortably abroad.

In a show of defiance two years ago, Sinwar ended one of his few public speeches by inviting Israel to assassinate him, proclaiming: "I will walk back home after this meeting." He then did so, shaking hands and taking selfies with people in the streets.

Early taste of displacement

Sinwar was born in Gaza's Khan Younis

refugee camp in 1962.

Israel's 1948 war forced his family out of the Palestinian town of Madjal.

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced in a period known as the Nakba, which means 'catastrophe' in Arabic.

After Madjal's Palestinian population had left — with the remaining residents deported in 1950 — Israel renamed the city Ashkelon, where Sinwar would later spend time in prison.

Sinwar spoke of the lack of sanitation and the poverty of living on UN handouts, said

Mansour.

"He'd always go back to these stories when he'd tell us to struggle against the occupation," Mansour said.

Stalwart in prison

Sinwar was first arrested by Israel in 1982 when he was a student at the Islamic University in Gaza, where he was a founding member of Hamas's student movement, said Ibrahim al-Madhoun, a Hamas-affiliated columnist.

Mansour said he would stand by his decisions "even if they are harsh".

Sinwar was active during the first intifada against Israel, which started in Gaza in 1987.

He formed a close bond with Hamas's founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. They prayed together at the same Gaza City mosque.

Sinwar was detained again in 1988 when an improvised explosive device he was making detonated, said Michael Koubi.

Koubi noted that on the first day, he appeared very strong and did not want to speak.

Sinwar quickly rose through the Hamas ranks after his release from jail in 2011, along with 1,026 other Palestinians in exchange for Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier captured by Hamas in a cross-border raid.

But it was in prison that he managed to further this influence.

"He didn't come from nowhere," said Mkhaimar Abusada, a professor in politics at Gaza's al-Azhar University.

As a young man, Sinwar led the Majd, Hamas's internal security force.

He is now the man Israel wants to kill most.

Sinwar is thought to be sheltered beneath Gaza's intricate underground tunnel network as Israeli soldiers search the enclave and shower it with missiles.

The precision behind the October 7 attack was decades in the making.

His former prison mate Esmat Mansour recalled that Sinwar said his family lived in tragic circumstances and that he would never be able to shake off those memories.

Initially, he carried little gravitas in the Israeli penal system, where prisoners are split into various Palestinian factions.

But while incarcerated, he continued to search for collaborators with Israel, Mansour and Koubi said.

As Hamas's clout within the Palestinian political scene strengthened, Sinwar began his journey to power.

He was elected Hamas's leader in the prison around the time of the second intifada, where he organized strikes for better conditions.

"Being a leader inside prison gave him experience in negotiations and dialogue, and he understood the mentality of the enemy and how to affect it," said Anwar Yassine, a Lebanese citizen who spent about 17 years in Israeli jails, much of the time with Sinwar.

In June 2006, Sinwar's younger brother, Muhammad, was thought to have played a significant role in the cross-border raid that led to Shalit's capture.

"When Hamas got stronger and they kidnapped Shalit, he became the one-man show," Mansour said.

Mansour said he lost interest in meeting with prison authorities and instead received attention from Israeli intelligence and other officials asking for Shalit's release.

Sinwar addressed cheering crowds in Gaza City upon his release, urging Hamas to free those remaining in Israeli prisons. "This must turn immediately into a practical plan," he said.

'I don't want any more wars'

After his release from jail, Sinwar initially made a number of public appearances. Later, however, he disappeared from public view and was presented in Hamas media as the commander of Qassam's elite units.

According to those who know him, he still