

holds a deep interest in the plight of Palestinian prisoners, which likely spurred the drive for the capturing of Israeli captives on October 7.

Washington accuses Sinwar of pushing for kidnapping more Israeli soldiers as a bargaining chip for Palestinian prisoners.

In public interviews before the October 7 assault — including one with an Israeli newspaper in 2018 — he said he was not looking for confrontation.

“I don’t want any more wars,” he told Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth.

In joining the political wing of Hamas, Sinwar effectively knocked down the divide between the group’s officials and fighters, said Israeli journalist Shlomi Eldar, who wrote a 2012 book on Hamas and interviewed some of its most senior officials.

Eldar said that he was a pioneering figure in the movement.

Other group leaders would have been too fearful of the repercussions to have staged an attack of the magnitude of the October 7 onslaught, he said.

In taking the risk, others suspect he was attempting to position himself as the leader of the Palestinian cause, a long-sought role.

“No one can deny that he recorded his name in history, on the one hand, and changed the static situation that Israel adopted to deal with the Palestinians,” one Palestinian official who met Sinwar numerous times said, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

As the search for the mastermind ramps up, he is likely accompanied by close confidants, including his brother Muhammad. Muhammad faked his death

in 2014 but was shown in a video issued on December 17 being escorted in a car through the four-kilometre long and 50-meter deep “strategic” level tunnel it had revealed earlier that day.

Koubi said that the leader will battle until the end.

Seeking unity with West Bank

Sinwar has come to endorse the idea of a single Palestinian administration, bringing together the Gaza Strip, the occupied West Bank — controlled by Mahmoud Abbas’s Fatah party — and annexed east Al-Quds (Jerusalem).

The same year he was elected, Hamas for the first time accepted in principle a Palestinian state in the pre-1967 borders, while not recognising Israel and retaining the ultimate goal of “liberating” all of historic Palestine.

According to the European Council on Foreign Relations, a think-tank, Sinwar has vowed to punish anyone obstructing reconciliation with Fatah.

That coming together remains elusive, but the prisoner releases resulting from the truce agreement with Israel in November saw Hamas’s popularity soar in the West Bank.

Sinwar has pursued a path of being “radical in military planning and pragmatic in politics”, according to Seurat.

“He doesn’t advocate force for force’s sake, but to bring about negotiations” with Israel, she said.

In 2008, Sinwar survived an aggressive form of brain cancer after treatment at a Tel Aviv hospital.

Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu released him in 2011 along with more than 1,000 other prisoners in ex-

change for kidnapped Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

Netanyahu was harshly criticised for releasing dozens of prisoners held for their involvement in deadly attacks.

Back in Gaza, Sinwar closely coordinated between Hamas’s political leadership and its military wing, the Qassam Brigades.

In 2017, he was elected head of Hamas’s political bureau in Gaza.

Sinwar worked with Hamas’s leader in exile, Ismail Haniyeh, to realign the group with Iran and its allies, including Lebanon’s Hezbollah. He also focused on building Hamas’s military power.

For Hamas, surviving the war in any form would defy Israel and offer a victory of sorts. Sinwar himself may not survive.

The full article first appeared in MailOnline.

Who are other key leaders of Hamas?



By Lara Keay
Reporter

PERSPECTIVE

“In order to survive as an entity, amid the threat of assassination, Hamas decided to have an internal and external leadership,” says Dr. Abdul Bashid Shaikh, lecturer in Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of Leeds.

“That way, if all the key leaders were wiped out in Gaza, at least the organisation could regrow organically.”

From the Israeli perspective, killing Hamas leaders inside Gaza does not “cause a diplomatic crisis” with countries such as Qatar hosting its leaders abroad, adds Dr. Ahron Bregman, senior teaching fellow in the Arab-Israeli conflict at King’s College London and former Israeli army major.

Although not an exhaustive list, here we look at the key Hamas leaders inside Gaza and beyond, excluding Yahya Sinwar.

Ismail Haniyeh



As a prominent member of the movement that became Hamas in the late 1980s, Ismail Haniyeh is widely considered the group’s over-all leader.

He was imprisoned in 1989 as part of the Israeli response to the first Palestinian uprising and then spent time in the ‘no man’s land’ between Israel and Lebanon in 1992.

Once back in Gaza, in 1997, he was put in charge of the office of Ahmed Yassin — one of the Hamas founders and spiritual leader — who was killed in an Israeli helicopter attack in 2004.

This increased his influence, and he was eventually elected Palestinian prime minister by its president and the leader of the rival group Fatah Mahmoud Abbas when Hamas won

the most seats in the 2006 elections. A year later, however, fighting broke out between Hamas and Fatah, ultimately ousting Fatah from Gaza and separating the Palestinian territories between the Hamas-controlled strip and the Palestinian Authority-run West Bank.

This made Haniyeh “de facto leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip” between 2007 and 2017, Dr. Shaikh says, until he was succeeded by Yahya Sinwar. He then moved to Qatar to become head of the political bureau.

He “chooses to be based in Doha as he is approaching his 70s now... and as a result of being a political interlocutor between Hamas, Qatar, Iran, and other international powers,” Dr. Shaikh adds.

Mohammed Deif



Mohammed Deif has been chief commander of the Qassam Brigades, Hamas’s military wing, since 2002. He helped engineer the network of underground tunnels that run under Gaza and into Israel, allowing Hamas fighters to access the territory.

Deif spent several years in prison, having been accused of planning bombings, kidnappings, and mass killings.

He escaped in 2000 during the second Palestinian uprising and has been almost untraceable ever since, with only three known photos of him.

Israel tried to assassinate him in 2002, which resulted in him losing an eye. Some reports claim he also lost a foot, hand, and some of his speaking ability.

A subsequent assassination attempt in 2014 killed his wife and two of his children.

Deif chose his nom de guerre, which means ‘guest’ in Arabic, to reflect the fact he is constantly on the move, often staying in other people’s homes for protection.

Marwan Issa is Mohammed Deif’s second-in-command as deputy head of the Qassam Brigades. He replaced Ahmed Jaabri in the job after he was killed in an Israeli air strike in 2012.

At 59, he is one of the younger Hamas leaders and among those based in Gaza.

“He’s very much on the operational side of things — in charge of strategy and military attacks on Israel,” Dr. Shaikh says.

As such, Issa is believed to be one of the main orchestrators of the October 7 incursion. Issa survived an assassination

attempt in 2006, as well as air strikes on his Gaza home in 2014 and 2021.

Despite his senior position, he had not been photographed until 2011, when he made a surprise appearance in a picture with exchanged Palestinian prisoners.

He was last photographed in 2015 at a Hamas security conference in Gaza.

His low profile is part of Hamas’s “psychological strategy”, Dr. Shaikh adds. “They’re willing to show themselves in public just to let Israel know it hasn’t eliminated them.”

Marwan Issa



Yahya Sinwar’s younger brother, Mohammed, is also on Israel’s most wanted list, with a \$300,000 (£237,000) reward.

At 48, he is the youngest senior Hamas figure, having joined the Qassam Brigades in 1991.

He became head of the Khan Younis Brigade in southern Gaza in 2005 and was part of the cell responsible for capturing and holding Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit the following year.

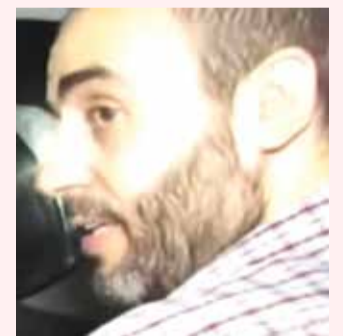
In 2014 he was widely assumed to be dead — after Hamas released images of what appeared to be his blood-soaked body.

But during the current conflict, he has appeared in a video being driven through Gaza’s tunnel network, where he is likely to have been hiding underground for the past 10 years.

Dr. Shaikh says: “A man widely assumed dead by most Western observers in 2014 appears to be well and truly alive.”

“Once again, Israeli and Western intelligence sources have been outfoxed by Hamas. And what makes this story even more sensational is that he’s played a massive role in masterminding the October 7 attacks.”

Mohammed Sinwar



Khaled Meshaal



Khaled Meshaal is one of the founding members of Hamas and, at 67, is among its older leaders.

He was head of the political bureau until 2017 but is still based in Doha, where he is now regarded as one of the group’s chief negotiators and has led discussions over October 7 hostages.

Dr. Shaikh describes his position as “interesting”, having spent far more time outside the Palestinian territories than inside.

Meshaal was poisoned by Israeli intelligence agents while he was still living in Jordan, and having survived two further assassination attempts is considered a “living martyr”.

The handover of power to the leaders in Gaza saw Meshaal “pushed to the sidelines”, but he remains an “influential figure”, Dr. Shaikh says.

His age and involvement in factional disputes may have also been a factor, he adds.

Mahmoud Zahar



Fast approaching his 80s, Mahmoud Zahar is the oldest of the Hamas leaders and one of its original co-founders.

He was imprisoned by Israel in 1988 soon after setting up the movement and was released in 1992.

Dr. Shaikh describes him as “the most hardline Islamist” of the Hamas leaders. In terms of character, he is “brazen, outspoken... sometimes coming

across as a loose cannon”, he adds.

“I would describe him as a global Islamist. He’s already said Operation Al-Aqsa Storm is just the beginning and he wants to extend Islamic domination throughout the world. In that sense, he’s presenting himself as a visionary.”

The full article first appeared in Sky News.