

'Unyielding' in defending interests of Hamas, Palestine

Who was Yahya Sinwar?

International Desk
PERSPECTIVE

The Palestinian Resistance Movement Hamas announced on Friday the martyrdom of Yahya Sinwar, the head of Hamas' political bureau, "who sought martyrdom and attained it after clashing with a Zionist force alongside other fighters in the Gaza Strip."

Earlier on October 16, Israel said that it had killed Sinwar that day during a chance intense confrontation in the Tel Al-Sultan area of Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip. Despite being part of the Hamas politburo since 2017, his rise in public popularity did not come about until May 2021, when the political party's armed wing, the Qassam Brigades, kicked off the 'Saif Al-Quds' (Sword of Jerusalem) battle in response to repeated Israeli attacks on worshippers at Al-Aqsa Mosque. The following profile delves into Sinwar's ascent through the ranks of the Islamic Resistance Movement, his ideological convictions, and his role in shaping Hamas' strategies.



Yahya Sinwar (c) greets supporters as he arrives to attend a rally marking Al-Quds (Jerusalem) 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.
● MAHMUD HAMS/AFP

Born refugee

Yahya Sinwar, also known as Abu Ibrahim, was born on October 29, 1962, in the Khan Younis refugee camp. During the 1948 Nakba, his parents were driven out from their homes in Majdal-Askalan, which was knocked down to have the Israeli settler town of Ashkelon built on its ruins. Scarred by his experiences growing up displaced, under the military occupation of the Gaza Strip — which came about in 1967 — his father said that "Yahya's life was full of agony due to the Zionist aggression. Since his childhood, he was determined to stand up against the occupation."

Early years of political activism

A high performer academically at school, he went on to study at the Islamic University in Gaza, where he helped set up the Islamic Bloc and held several student council positions at the university. In 1982, Sinwar and other members of the student council traveled to visit Palestinian women in Jenin who had allegedly fallen victim to a poisoning attempt by Israelis. It was in response to this visit that he was arrested and thrown into administrative detention (held without charge nor trial) for six months, with the allegation against him being that he took part in subversive Islamist activities. In 1985, he was arrested again. During this second stint in prison, he met and grew close to Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin.



Yahya Sinwar is seen during one of his earlier prison sentences.
● VIA MAARIV/POST

Majd Network

At 25, Yahya Sinwar was tasked with setting up a security network, known as Majd, which earned him an uncompromising reputation for dealing with Palestinians who work with Israel. The Majd operated covertly while the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned organization that preceded Hamas, the Mujamma Islamiyya, stayed as a non-combative group until the establishment of Hamas in late 1987. "He makes decisions in the utmost calm, but is unyielding when it

comes to defending the interests of Hamas," Abu Abdallah, a Hamas member who spent years alongside Sinwar in Israeli jails, told AFP in 2017. According to Abu Abdallah, Sinwar was a security operator "par excellence."

In 1988, Sinwar was arrested and reportedly tortured heavily for six weeks after the discovery of armed cells that belonged to the Majd. In 1989, Hamas carried out its first significant armed attack, taking out two Israeli soldiers. Sinwar was convicted on allegations of masterminding the attack and handed a 426-year sentence. He would serve 22 years in prison.

Making most of prison sentences



Yahya Sinwar waves a flag on a bus on his way to Gaza after his release in the Shalit deal in 2011.
● JCPA

Sinwar is said to have kept strict discipline in prisown, learning to speak and read Hebrew fluently and becoming a leader among his fellow prisoners and a focal point for negotiations with prison staff. To fellow inmates, Sinwar was charismatic, sociable, and shrewd, open to detainees from all political factions. He was known for dishing out food to fellow inmates and making kunafa, a dessert of shredded dough stuffed with cheese. He even organized strikes to push 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. Yassine noted how Sinwar always treated him with respect, even though he belonged to the Lebanese Communist Party, whose secular principles conflicted with Hamas' ideology.

During his years in detention, Sinwar also put together a 240-page novel, "Thistle and the Cloves." It tells the story of Palestinian society from the 1967 Mideast war until 2000, when the second intifada began. "This is not my personal story, nor is it the story of a specific person, despite the fact that all the incidents are true," Sinwar wrote in the novel's opening.

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

Saif Al-Quds

In 2018, under the leadership of Yahya Sinwar, Hamas adopted the policy platform of non-violent resistance in a bid to open themselves up to diplomatic negotiations that could end the siege on Gaza. The Hamas leadership backed the mass non-violent protest movement, known as the 'Great March of Return,' which began on March 30, 2018.

However, following the US decision to unilaterally recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the killing of hundreds of unarmed protesters at the hands of Israeli soldiers, Hamas switched up its approach again. In May 2021, Hamas kicked off the battle of Saif Al-Quds, which was supported by several other armed groups inside the Gaza Strip. Lasting between May 10 and May 21, dubbed the "11-day war", both sides claimed victory.

Since then, Yahya Sinwar's speeches and public appearances have made him a very popular celebrity leader throughout the Arab World. As Israel brought in its most right-wing government in history by 2022, with government authorities making overtures at Al-Aqsa Mosque and signaling at Israeli normalization with Saudi Arabia, Sinwar and other Hamas leaders were seemingly impacted. "Sinwar is a pragmatist, shifting between polit-



ical engagement and armed violence according to circumstances," Hugh Lovatt, a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, told Al Jazeera in December 2023. On December 14, 2022, Sinwar and other Hamas leaders told a large crowd in Gaza they predicted an "open confrontation" after Israel elected the most right-wing government in its history. Sinwar's threats came up again in early 2023.

Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar (c) shouts slogans as he takes part in a tent city protest near the border with Israel east of Jabalia in the northern Gaza strip on March 30, 2018, to commemorate Land Day.
● MOHAMMED ABED/AFP