

Hamas under Sinwar

Being the highest-profiled Hamas leader released in a 2011 prisoner swap deal, Sinwar made his way back to Gaza. Once released, Sinwar quickly climbed up the ladder in Hamas. In 2013, he was elected as a member of Hamas's politburo in Gaza. In 2017, he took on the role of the movement's leader, taking over from Ismail Haniyeh. In the same year, Hamas went through a re-branding and update of its statute, which indicated that the Islamic Resistance Movement would be open to accepting a Two-State Solution. Another war with Israel is "definitely not in our interest," he said at the time. Meanwhile, Sinwar took on a major role in attempting to patch up ties between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, led by the Fatah Party, but to no avail.



Hamas late leader Ismail Haniyeh (L) and freed Palestinian prisoner Yahya Sinwar, founder of Hamas' military wing, wave as supporters celebrate the release of hundreds of prisoners following a swap with captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit on October 21, 2011, in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip. **● SAID KHATIB/AFP**

Regional outreach

In his role leading Hamas in Gaza, Sinwar focused on building up ties in the region. He restored ties with Egypt's leadership and rebuilt links with Iran after disagreements over the war in Syria. "Sinwar has shown himself to be a

skilled leader," Daniel Byman, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, told Al Jazeera, adding that Sinwar pushed the political stakes "even higher" for Israel "because he was released as part of a previous prisoner exchange".

'Mastermind'?



Yahya Sinwar (R), leader of the Palestinian Hamas movement, greets supporters during a rally in Gaza City on May 24, 2021. **● MOHAMMED ABED/AFP**

Israeli officials say Sinwar was one of the masterminds behind the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. The surprise attack dealt the most severe blow to that date on the Zionist regime's self-purported invincibility as approximately 1,200 were killed. Mohammed Deif, commander of Hamas's military wing the Qassam Brigades, and Marwan Issa, Deif's deputy, were also said to be behind the attack. Analysts like Lovatt believe Mohammed Deif was the true mastermind of the October 7 attack. But unlike Sinwar, who is known for his fiery public speeches, Deif has not been seen publicly in years. Israel claims that it took out Deif in a

July 13 attack, though Hamas has not confirmed his death. In February, the Israeli military put out images that it claimed show Sinwar — along with his wife, children, and brother Ibrahim — in a tunnel complex in Khan Yunis. The images were reportedly taken just days after the October 7 attack. During the same briefing, Israeli spokesperson Daniel Hagari claimed the military had taken many of the family members of Sinwar and other Hamas leaders captive and were interrogating them. Numerous reports from rights agencies, including the United Nations, have documented the frequent use of torture by Israeli interrogators.

After October 7

Sinwar had operated from Gaza throughout Israel's genocidal 12-month war on the enclave, taking over overall control of the group following the assassination — widely believed to be by Israel — of Hamas politburo head Ismail Haniyeh in late July. Analysts believe that even before Haniyeh's assassination, Sinwar was playing a key role in negotiations for a cease-fire and the exchange of captives and prisoners between Hamas and Israel. Under Sinwar's direction, Hamas kept up its military pressure in Gaza — de-

spite reportedly being affected by Israeli assaults — launching attacks on Israeli positions, as well as keeping up civil administration across the Gaza Strip. Sinwar has been a high-profile target of the Israeli military throughout its Gaza campaign, with numerous claims of the Hamas leader having been trapped or even killed proven false. A devout believer in the Palestinian Cause, his tactician mind that saved him and Hamas members from months of manhunt will be missed in the Resistance Front.

Who might succeed Sinwar?

Israeli analysts weigh in

International Desk PERSPECTIVE

Israeli media have been discussing the potential candidates to succeed Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas, and Iran's role in this selection process. Here's their list of potential candidates.

According to the Israeli website Globes, in the absence of Sinwar — who was assassinated like former Hamas political bureau chief Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran and Muhammad Deif, the commander of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, who was killed in an Israeli airstrike on Al-Mawasi — the list of potential candidates for Hamas leadership has been narrowed. However, the resistance group still has figures capable of stepping into Sinwar's role.

The United States and the European Union Hamas have listed the resistance group as a terrorist organization. Reserve Brigadier General Eitan Dangot told Globes that Muhammad Sinwar, Yahya Sinwar's younger brother, who was imprisoned in Israel for years, is one of the figures inside Gaza who may want to succeed his brother.

However, Idan Zelkovich, a Middle East studies expert, does not see Muhammad Sinwar as a suitable candidate for this position because, at best, he was just a military commander of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam and never had the profile of a political leader among Hamas leaders.

According to Zelkovich, the center of gravity of Hamas leadership is likely to shift back to figures outside Gaza, making Khaled Meshaal and Khalil al-Hayya two potential candidates.

Khaled Meshaal served as the chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau from 1996 until May 2017, when he was succeeded by Ismail Haniyeh. Khalil al-Hayya is a Palestinian politician who serves as the Deputy Chief of the Political Bureau of Hamas since August 2024. Israeli television channel Kan has also mentioned Musa Abu Marzouk, saying he has apparently taken over the military command of Hamas.

Zahar and Hayya have close relations with Tehran, and Hayya recently visited Tehran. However, Khaled Meshaal is known as a prominent figure in Hamas whom Iran does not see fit to lead Hamas. Reserve General Amir Avivi, director of the Bitachonistim (or "Security Experts") group, told Maariv that Hamas still has an active organizational hierarchy, but Hezbollah's recent calls for a ceasefire, unrelated to the situation in Gaza, will isolate Hamas.

Reserve General Amos Yadlin, former head of the Israeli military intelligence organization, wrote on the Maariv website that killing Sinwar was a significant symbolic, tactical, and strategic goal, and it is important that he is no longer on the scene.

Will Sinwar's death end Gaza war?

The death of Hamas' leader has shortened Israeli regime's list, but is this the end of the Gaza war? However, Lucas Weber is skeptical about the impact of Sinwar's death on the outcome of the war in Gaza. The threat intelligence analyst at the Technology Against Terrorism Center emphasized Sinwar's vast experience and high standing within Hamas and among its supporters, saying, "I don't think his killing will fundamentally alter the course of the conflict." Weber continued that Hamas has been fighting for about a year after Israel's retaliatory invasion of Gaza, and defeating this group will be a tough nut to crack.



This screen grab from a handout video released by the Israeli army on October 17, 2024, shows what it says is a drone footage of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar moments before he was killed in the neighborhood of Tal al-Sultan in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. **● ISRAELI ARMY**

The son of senior Hamas official Mazen Fuqaha sits on the shoulders of Hamas's late Gaza chief Yahya Sinwar (C) at a memorial service for Fuqaha in Gaza City on March 27, 2017. Ismail Haniyeh (L), Sinwar's late predecessor as Hamas's politburo chief, accompanies him. **● MOHAMMED SALEM/REUTERS**



In his view, Sinwar's death may necessitate a "change of direction" in Hamas' policies, but it will not significantly impact Israel's efforts to win the war. Weber described Sinwar as a "valuable target" and said that killing him was

In this file picture dated May 26, 2021, the leader of the Palestinian Hamas movement's political wing, Yahya Sinwar (2nd-L), tours the Al-Rimal neighborhood in Gaza City, to assess the damage caused during the recent bombing by Israeli forces. **● MOHAMMED ABED/AFP**



a tactical success. Israel eliminated a high-value target at a time when they needed domestic support to expand their military campaign both at home and abroad.

According to Weber, the death of Hamas' leader has revealed a high level of change within the resistance group's senior ranks.

Thanassis Cambanis, director of the Century Foundation based in the United States, also weighed in on the issue, saying that assessing the impact of Sinwar's death on Hamas' ability to maintain power in Gaza is difficult.

However, he claimed that this event will have two consequences: Firstly, Israel will be emboldened to pursue a complete defeat of Hamas and Gaza with greater intensity, and secondly, this death will create space for negotiations that could ultimately lead to an end to the conflict.

The director of the Century Foundation added that neither Hamas nor Israel has shown a serious interest in ending

the war so far, and both sides see the continuation of the war as being in their favor.

He foresaw two possibilities for Hamas: After periods of intense resistance, more pragmatic individuals have taken the reins, it has also been observed in some factions or parties that individuals have become even more entrenched in their positions, and with the killing of each leader, their successor has been even more hardline.

Trita Parsi, co-founder of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, also warned that the idea of Hamas' formation, "i.e., the creation of a Palestinian state solely through armed resistance against Israel, has not only not disappeared but has probably grown."

He added that Israel's indiscriminate bombing of Gaza and the widespread killing of civilians, including forced starvation, has likely radicalized the Palestinian people and provided more fertile ground for Hamas to recruit.