

Hamas and Yahya Sinwar's Tough Choice (Part 1)

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Brief Analysis

The Palestinian Hamas movement briefly captured renewed attention when Ismail Haniyeh, a leader from Gaza, received the Ayatollah's honors at the funeral of Qasem Soleimani in Tehran. Yet for the past few years, it has been Yahya Sinwar—head of the Hamas Political Bureau in Gaza—who has consolidated his stature as one of the most influential figures in the movement. This power shift has occurred over a relatively short period, less than a decade, when Sinwar was freed from the Israeli prison where he had spent a quarter of a century.

Sinwar's personal profile is engrossing, but it is his political history that provides a lens into major contemporary developments both inside Hamas and in Palestinian public life as a whole. This essay aims to outline that profile, and analyze how it is likely to play out in the near future, whether inside the Palestinian arena or in relations with Israel. A second installment will explore the wider significance of Sinwar's trajectory, and of the choices facing the Hamas leader.

Understanding the evolution of Hamas leadership is especially important as Hamas now finds itself at a strategic crossroads. The organization is currently caught in dire straits, both internally and externally: a deep grass-roots protest movement inside Gaza, and alienation from a notable segment of outside Arab players. Hamas leadership is **now examining possible paths out of this dead-end**

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/though-hamas-is-interested-in-negotiations-gazas-future-remains-uncertain>), including the possibility of a long-term deal for “calm” with Israel that would enable it to ameliorate the situation inside the Strip.

Sinwar is the key figure in this context, as he has the proverbial last word on Gaza policy. Notably, Sinwar also embodies both of the two conflicting poles of Hamas: on the one hand, he grew out of the armed Palestinian wing (Iz Al-Din Al-Qassam Brigades) and demonstrates a deep attachment to jihad; yet he also understands the importance of maintaining civilian social stability in order to preserve long-term Hamas control.

Today, Sinwar is now facing the need to navigate a new path between those two poles. The various means he has devised so far to extricate Gaza from its profound internal crises have effectively failed. First, the intermittent effort at **rapprochement (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/pragmatic-options-for-gaza>)** with the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority (PA) in Ramallah is on its last legs. Second, the attempt to warm up ties with the wider regional “resistance axis” led by Iran is foundering; Iran takes care to provide even its limited backing solely to

the Hamas armed wing and not to the movement as a whole. Third, the similarly unsuccessful “March of Return” strategy of violent weekly protests (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/new-polls-show-most-gazans-want-jobs-not-mobs>) along the Gaza-Israel border, despite its high human cost of over 350 Gazans killed, has achieved nothing significant for the nearly two million Palestinians in that constricted territory. Indeed, the scope of those protests has dwindled considerably in recent weeks.

Adding to Sinwar’s dilemma is the deterioration of the wider regional strategic position of Hamas during the past few months. This has occurred in part precisely because Hamas is strongly identified with the Islamist politics, not just of Iran, but also of the Turkish-backed Muslim Brotherhood. This has provoked a sharp riposte from their archrival Saudi Arabia, and even driving the recent arrest of dozens of Hamas activists inside the kingdom. In one more new twist, there are new hints that Qatar may reduce its very considerable and important economic aid to Gaza, which has played a key role over the entire past decade in preventing a true humanitarian crisis there.

In light of these constricting strategic options, Sinwar is obliged to contemplate, more seriously than before, the potential of some kind of long-term “arrangement” with Israel. On the one hand, this would threaten to rein in Hamas military actions; on the other hand, it would promise to improve the situation of civilian life in Gaza. At this stage, however, it appears that Sinwar is avoiding a genuine strategic decision. He continues to resist, allowing tensions to degenerate toward a large-scale armed confrontation with Israel, yet he is still interested in fostering some “margin of resistance,” promoted by the terrorist units in Gaza, which maintains a basic modicum of belligerent “unquiet” in that area. The latter dimension of his policy is expressed mainly in periodic bursts of rocket fire into Israel.

However, so far the response to these pressures are an oscillation in Hamas policy between escalation and quiet. We see cycles of escalation, primarily led by the Palestine Islamic Jihad faction, alongside discussions about some type of deal with Israel, with reports suggesting that these discussions are being conducted in a manner more serious than ever before. But the persistence of this mixed reality could, over time, trigger an unintended and undesired wide-scale conflagration between Hamas and Israel.

In all probability, Sinwar’s inclination toward a deal with Israel is growing, although he has yet to come decisively to the conclusion that this is the most beneficial path forward. Nevertheless, even if such a decision does materialize, one must keep in mind the red lines Hamas is likely to maintain in the attempts to negotiate such an agreement. At the very top of this list would be the continued rejection of any formal recognition of Israel (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/mutual-recognition-between-palestinians-and-israelis-is-necessary-for-peace>), and of any meaningful Hamas concessions on the organization’s military power. Such concessions would simply be too much of an existential threat for the organization. Many within the organization contend that were such a concession ever to be made, Hamas as they understand it would cease to exist.

Meanwhile, Sinwar himself has undoubtedly set his sights on higher pinnacles of political power in the future. The most attainable advancement would be taking over leadership of the overall (not just Gazan) Hamas Political Office. This is currently under the control of Ismail Haniyeh, though it is currently a largely symbolic role. Afterwards, it would make sense for Sinwar to aspire toward strengthening his stature in the larger Palestinian national arena.

The eventual passing of PA president Mahmoud Abbas—now 84—could provide Sinwar with exactly this opportunity. Such an opportunity would be particularly likely were the PA to toward practical reconciliation steps vis-a-vis Hamas, giving it a foothold in West Bank and inside the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) structures. It would be even more likely if real democratic elections for the Palestinian parliament and presidency are ever held.

Yahya Sinwar—who grew up in the alleyways of a Gazan refugee camp, and with his formative years spent between

the walls of an Israeli prison, only to capture the leadership of the Palestinian Islamist movement—could thus well end up reaching the summit of his nation’s overall political system. Sinwar is certainly a political figure to watch, who could potentially wield major influence over its entire nature and direction in future years. ❖

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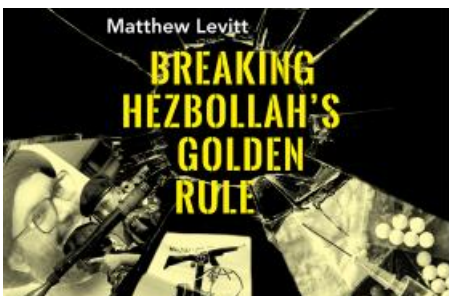
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