

# Growing Internal Tensions Between Hamas Leaders

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Brief Analysis

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**Kept in the dark about key aspects of the October 7 attack, the group’s external leaders are now jockeying for position in postwar arrangements that they may not have enough power to shape.**

**A**s the Hamas-Israel war has progressed, tensions new and old have surfaced between leaders in Gaza and those residing abroad. Inside the Strip, Yahya al-Sinwar remains the group’s undisputed leader and retains the loyalty of the tight cluster of military commanders around him. He is fixated on continuing the fight, believing that if Hamas can absorb Israel’s punishing hit without being completely destroyed, it can ultimately declare “divine victory,” much like Hezbollah did in 2006. Yet Hamas leaders in Qatar, Lebanon, and Turkey are already looking toward the day after the war and trying to carve out space for the group in whatever political structure will govern Gaza. Because the resulting tensions echo disagreements that have embroiled the group for years, comparing the past and present fissures is instructive.

## The Contest for Control Before the War

**E**ver since Hamas’s 2007 Gaza coup against the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority, the group’s leaders inside the territories have steadily gained control and influence at the expense of its external leadership. Based in Damascus at the time, the external leaders remained dominant for a while, largely because they still controlled the organization’s purse strings and oversaw relationships with Hezbollah, Iran, and other actors. Yet Hamas leaders on the ground were the ones issuing day-to-day decisions about running the Strip, eventually developing systems of taxation and extortion that decreased their dependence on funding from abroad.

In August 2008, a cadre of young Hamas members with ties to commanders in the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades won seats in the Gaza political bureau. By 2009, leadership divisions and contradictory statements became evident on various issues, including whether Hamas should continue the ceasefire that had ended its most recent conflict with Israel. That same year, a months-long election process for the council of Hamas prisoners in Israel resulted in Sinwar's appointment as president.

In 2010, Hamas's overall leader, Khaled Mashal, tried to bring the organization closer to Sunni Arab regimes in the Middle East and make it less reliant on Iran. Yet Sinwar and Ismail Haniyeh, the group's leader in Gaza, opposed this shift and prevented it from happening, initiating what would become a partnership of convenience between the two men. In 2011, Israel released Sinwar as part of the Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange, unintentionally setting the stage for his rise to power.

In February 2017, Sinwar was chosen as head of Hamas's Gaza political bureau in a secret election. Initially, Haniyeh and his deputy Saleh al-Arouri helped Sinwar shift the group's center of gravity to Gaza. Over the next few years, however, Sinwar's harsh ruling style and personality led Haniyeh and other top officials to depart for Qatar and Turkey, creating a pronounced rift between the internal and external leadership. Although Haniyeh remained chairman of the political bureau, Sinwar's control on the ground gave him de facto leadership over what the group did in Gaza.

## Leadership Tensions Over October 7

For years prior to the current war, Sinwar essentially duped Israeli leaders into treating him as a pragmatist who prioritized the Hamas political project in Gaza. Yet his background was telling—Sinwar started off as a Hamas enforcer who investigated and murdered Palestinians suspected of cooperating with Israel. As the October 7 attack made clear, his true priority was spearheading an assault on Israel that he hoped would galvanize Muslims around the region to join the fight.

That calculation and the specific details of the attack appear to have come as a complete surprise to Haniyeh and the rest of the external leadership. They were aware of and approved Sinwar's plans to carry out a large-scale offensive against Israel at some point, and they participated in numerous deliberations about such an attack with officials from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force and Hezbollah. But they were not informed about the scale of the plan or its timing, which apparently changed at least a couple times. (Note: These details and the points that follow are based on the authors' extensive private conversations with numerous regional sources.)

Indeed, only a core group of commanders were behind the specific planning, including Sinwar, his brother Muhammad, and de facto Hamas military chief Marwan Issa. Although Hamas units conducted much-publicized attack drills for months, the commanders of its five regional brigades and their twenty-four battalions were not given the specific plan—namely, to breach the border fences, storm Israeli military positions, murder as many civilians as possible, capture hostages, and destroy Israeli towns—until a few hours before the operation. Some commanders were instructed to dispatch fighters all the way to the West Bank and link up with Hamas followers in Hebron, though this never came to pass. Others were asked to maintain their presence inside Israel for weeks if possible. These details were unknown to the external leadership, who now find themselves trying to prevent a complete rout in Gaza and maintain a role for Hamas in whatever political structure emerges postwar.

In the immediate aftermath of October 7, the scope and brutality of the attack triggered criticism from external leaders and sent many into damage-control mode. In public, they denied that Sinwar's men had butchered women and children, blaming the Israel Defense Forces for the civilian deaths. Later, however, they expressed reservations about taking women and children hostage. And in private conversations with Arab and Palestinian interlocutors, some Hamas leaders sharply condemned Sinwar's "megalomaniac" search for grandeur.

In particular, they blame him for misunderstanding prewar messages from Iran and Hezbollah, treating ambiguous pledges of support as a firm commitment to open additional fronts against Israel and save Hamas from destruction. These misread assurances led Sinwar to pursue a massive attack with full knowledge that Israel would have no choice but to respond in kind. The group's external leaders have conveyed to foreign diplomats that Sinwar should have settled for a far more limited terrorist operation to capture hostages and pave the way for prisoner exchanges. Another Hamas figure—former communications minister Yousef al-Mansi—went a step further, [telling Israeli interrogators \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/ex-hamas-minister-in-interrogation-crazy-people-led-by-sinwar-destroyed-gaza/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/ex-hamas-minister-in-interrogation-crazy-people-led-by-sinwar-destroyed-gaza/) that Sinwar had set Gaza “200 years backwards” and essentially calling for his ouster.

## Hamas Debates Its Next Steps

**E**arlier this month, Haniyeh, Arouri, and another deputy, Khalil al-Hayya, began meeting with representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization and opposition factions in Fatah (notably, Arouri is an old rival of Sinwar's since their days in prison, despite working with him at times after their release). Participants included figures such as former PA foreign minister Nasser al-Qudwa and Samir Mashharawi, a deputy to Mohammad Dahlan in the “Reformist Democratic Current” faction supported by the United Arab Emirates. Their discussions revolved around the prospect of integrating Hamas into the PLO following the war, among other ideas for “morning after” arrangements in Gaza. When reports of these talks reached Sinwar, he told Haniyeh that he considers this conduct “outrageous,” demanded that all contacts with the PLO and dissident Fatah factions be discontinued, and insisted that no consultations or statements on the “morning after” take place until a permanent ceasefire is reached.

The external leadership has ignored Sinwar's directive, however. In a [televised December 13 speech \(https://www.palestinechronicle.com/a-roaring-flood-hamas-marks-36th-anniversary-of-its-founding/\)](https://www.palestinechronicle.com/a-roaring-flood-hamas-marks-36th-anniversary-of-its-founding/) marking the thirty-sixth anniversary of Hamas's founding, Haniyeh indicated readiness to engage in discussions on establishing a unified Palestinian leadership. Similarly, when senior official Mousa Abu Marzouk [gave an hour-long interview \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/12/shift-top-hamas-official-floats-israel-recognition\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/12/shift-top-hamas-official-floats-israel-recognition/) to Al-Monitor on December 11, he discussed how Hamas envisions the day after the war, addressed the possibility of the group joining the PLO, and even hinted at potential recognition of Israel: “You should follow the official stance. The official stance is that the [PLO] has recognized the state of Israel.” (He quickly retracted the statement once it gained traction on social media.)

In response to this outreach, PA president Mahmoud Abbas ordered PLO Executive Committee members Jibril Rajoub and Azzam al-Ahmed—who have maintained contact with Hamas for years—to initiate negotiations with Haniyeh and his colleagues. These talks have focused on drafting an outline for reconciliation between the two movements based on adopting a common policy and forming an inclusive leadership structure. The main obstacles are Hamas's refusal to abide by the Oslo Accords or relinquish its weapons; the group also insists on holding general elections “within a year.”

Yet as long as Sinwar survives, no deal negotiated abroad will work unless he signs on. And from his point of view, the current talks reflect the external leadership's inclination to doubt and undermine his goal of maintaining Hamas control over Gaza. (This echoes disagreements from as far back as 2004, when a Hamas official circulated an internal memorandum proposing that the group give up its “secret underground apparatus,” only to be shouted down by the Gaza leadership cadre.) Notably, Sinwar's trusted emissary to the external leadership, Ghazi Hamad, has fallen silent in the past few weeks, despite being dispatched to Beirut two months before October 7 and holding daily press conferences in the war's early days. Likewise, top commanders in the Qassam Brigades are increasingly ignoring the advice offered to them, while communications have become much less frequent between Sinwar's underground bunker (presumably in a tunnel beneath Khan Yunis) and members of the external political bureau residing in Doha, Beirut, and Istanbul.

Sinwar did communicate with Haniyeh earlier today—but only to bluntly warn him that he must cease his efforts to broker a new hostage deal in Cairo, since Sinwar’s previously stated precondition of a full Israeli ceasefire had not been met. His message was accompanied by a salvo of thirty-five rockets fired toward Tel Aviv and veiled threats against the remaining Israeli hostages held in Gaza, as reported on Israel’s Channel 12 television.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the manner in which the war progresses will determine whether Sinwar and other Hamas figures in the more militant camp are able to dictate the group’s future course. But one outcome should be avoided at all costs: a Hezbollah-style situation in which Hamas members assume executive and legislative roles in a Palestinian government even as the group remains an independent entity and holds onto its weapons and funding streams. Variations of this scenario have garnered support across the Hamas leadership spectrum, from Sinwar and other Gaza chiefs to external figures like Haniyeh to Arouri. Such a system—in which Hamas benefits from being involved in governance but is accountable to no one and still committed to Israel’s destruction—would be a disaster for Palestinians and Israelis alike.

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