

Sinwar's Rise in Hamas: An In-depth Analysis of Internal Dynamics and Regional Interactions

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ABSTRACT *This commentary examines the implications of Yahya Sinwar's election as the new head of Hamas following the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh. It highlights Hamas' internal adaptability and the significance of its electoral processes in a context marked by external pressures and regional dynamics. The assassination is analyzed not only as a tactical operation by Israeli forces but also as a strategic move aimed at destabilizing Hamas internally and undermining its regional alliances, including efforts toward Palestinian reconciliation. Sinwar's leadership is framed within the broader historical and organizational context of Hamas, emphasizing his rise due to his involvement in key military operations and his status as a founding member. The commentary further explores the potential ramifications of Sinwar's leadership for Hamas' organizational cohesion and regional relations, particularly in light of Operation al-Aqsa Flood and the anticipated role of external actors like Iran and Hezbollah. Ultimately, this analysis sheds light on how Hamas navigates its internal challenges and external relationships amid ongoing conflict, underscoring the complexities that define its political trajectory in a rapidly changing regional landscape.*

Keywords: Hamas, Israel, Palestine, Elections, Yahya Sinwar

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Introduction

This commentary examines the impact of Hamas' internal decisions and their implications for its external relations, as well as the movement's susceptibility to regional changes. Despite the ongoing conflict with Israel, Hamas swiftly elected Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, as its new head following the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh, the former head of the Political Bureau. This rapid transition demonstrates the movement's adaptability and underscores the importance of discussing the electoral context within Hamas and its effects on both internal and external dynamics.

The significance of this analysis lies in exploring the rationale behind Sinwar's election over other potential candidates, particularly considering the influence of external factors and their reflection on Hamas' internal situation. Additionally, this electoral process prompts a discussion on the dimensions of regional politics, the nature of negotiations, and their potential impact on the ongoing conflict.

Yahya Sinwar's election as Head of the Hamas Political Bureau surprised many following the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh by Israeli forces. This assassination was not merely a tactical or intelligence operation but had broader objectives, including disrupting efforts to end the conflict, undermining regional security, and obstructing the implementation of the Palestinian reconciliation agreement signed in Beijing.

Returning to Sinwar's rise as Head of Hamas' Political Bureau, those familiar with Hamas' political trajectory, particularly over the last decade, might have anticipated his leadership. His release in 2011 as part of the prisoner exchange deal for Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit significantly increased his prominence. Furthermore, Sinwar's historical involvement and personal attributes have bolstered his path to leadership, along with his status as a member of Hamas' founding generation. Both before and after October 7, Sinwar's actions and decisions, including his involvement in one of the most significant military operations in Palestinian history, have solidified his status as a key figure within Hamas. While the ultimate consequences of these events remain unclear, Sinwar has undoubtedly established himself as the most influential figure in the movement.¹

Conversely, some view Sinwar's appointment as a bold move, particularly given his role in planning and executing Operation al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, which would have taken drastically different turns had Hezbollah and Iran played a sufficient role, as Sinwar probably expected. This decision may have unforeseen consequences that Hamas did not fully consider during the leadership transition.

This comprehensive commentary delves into these critical issues, focusing on the internal context surrounding the assassination and the characteristics of Hamas' internal structure. It examines the assassination's impact

on the organization and attempts to explain how Hamas has managed to withstand this significant blow. The commentary also highlights the challenges posed by the assassination, the motivations behind Sinwar's election, and the implications of his leadership for Hamas' organizational cohesion and regional relations. Finally, it explores how Hamas might navigate these relations amid the ongoing conflict and the diplomatic challenges posed by Sinwar's unique position as the new leader of Hamas.²

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Dynamic Nature of Hamas

Hamas exhibits a uniquely dynamic ability to adapt to shifting political and military circumstances, demonstrated by its flexible leadership structure and swift responses to both internal and external pressures. Despite its strong ideological foundation, Hamas has shown remarkable flexibility in its tactics and strategies, enabling it to remain a significant force in the Palestinian and regional landscape.

Since its establishment in 1987, Hamas has faced numerous efforts to eliminate it from the Palestinian political scene. In the late 1980s, the movement's nascent structure was targeted in what can be described as an eradication operation, with hundreds of its leaders, including founders like Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, being imprisoned by the Israeli authorities. The culmination of this policy occurred at the end of 1992, when Israel expelled approximately 417 Hamas leaders to Southern Lebanon, out-

side of occupied Palestine. Despite these challenges, Hamas' leadership displayed resilience and steadfastness, ultimately securing their return, even at the cost of prolonged imprisonment. Many leaders chose imprisonment within Israeli jails over exile from their homeland.

For instance, the movement's dynamic was effective; after winning a majority of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council in the 2006 elections, Hamas had to adjust its strategies to fit its new role in the government. This dual challenge of maintaining its resistance activities while fulfilling governmental duties required significant adaptability.

Hamas' electoral system has evolved in response to these changing dynamics. The movement consistently seeks to refine its electoral mechanisms to align with shifting political conditions and surrounding circumstances. Although the electoral process is conducted in secrecy, it re-

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flects a careful balance between various factions within the movement and the influence of external factors. Operating in diverse and sometimes conflicting political, security, and legal environments –such as the difference between Gaza, under Hamas control, and the West Bank, partially controlled by the Palestinian Authority– Hamas must carefully manage its organizational structures. This complexity extends to its presence in the diaspora, including Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the Arabian Gulf, Europe, and Western countries, where varying security and political environments exist. Managing these organizational structures with precision is crucial for ensuring their alignment with specific local circumstances while still contributing to Hamas' broader objectives. These objectives include supporting Palestinian resilience, exhausting the Israeli occupation at various levels, and engaging politically and legally with international entities abroad.

Through its complex structure, akin to a union of federal groups, Hamas has maintained a centralized ap-

proach to specialized and sovereign matters while ensuring a relative separation between its consultative, executive, and judicial authorities. The regularity of elections, regardless of circumstances, has allowed Hamas to face enormous challenges, particularly during periods of significant decline for the Palestinian cause at regional and international levels. The skills and experience accumulated over time have become crucial in strengthening the Palestinian position against attempts by the Israeli occupation and its international allies, primarily the U.S., to undermine it.

Hamas' Rules of Procedure

Hamas' internal elections are a crucial mechanism for maintaining the balance of power within the movement and shaping its future direction. These elections occur in several stages, beginning with local Shura (Consultative) Council elections in various regions, including those abroad. These local Shura Councils then elect regional Shura Councils, corresponding to Hamas' three main regions: Gaza, the West Bank, and the diaspora. Additionally, different apparatuses and specializations appoint representatives to the regional Shura Councils, with representation proportional to each apparatus's importance and influence. The regional Shura Councils then elect representatives to the central Shura, which in turn elects the head of the Political Bureau and the head of the Shura Council. The head of the Political Bu-

reau forms his council in consultation with regional heads, ensuring balance among the regions. The Shura also elects the head of the judiciary. Thus, the central bodies and offices, led by members of the Political Bureau, are composed of specialists, technocrats, and experts in various fields, including politics, security, military affairs, media, organization, and finance. These elections are not merely an organizational process; they reflect the intricate structure of Hamas and the balance of power among its various factions.

Internal and external factors influence these elections. Internally, the mood of the Palestinian public, represented by the large number of participants in the elections—particularly in Gaza, where each cadre or member of the organization reflects their social environment—plays a significant role. Public sentiment encompasses various priorities, including social and political issues, alliances, foreign relations, and considerations of merit, competence, and effectiveness.

The elections are not only a test of internal balances but also a means of determining the movement's response to external challenges. The newly elected leadership is tasked with balancing the preservation of Hamas' core doctrine with the need to adapt to external changes, requiring a blend of wisdom and pragmatism.³ Externally, the relationship between Hamas and regional powers like Iran, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt heavily influences election outcomes and the movement's strategic

decisions. During the war, Türkiye and Egypt have worked to keep the Palestinian issue present on the international stage. Despite the involvement of multiple active parties, both countries made significant efforts to resist external pressures. However, with Sinwar assuming the presidency of the Political Bureau, questions arose about the potential for changes in the foreign policies of the two countries, necessitating a review of the current approach.

Sinwar's Election: Risks and Opportunities

Hamas' leadership elections typically take longer than the recent one, which occurred in less than a week following the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh. Given the exceptional circumstances and the existential threat facing the movement, leadership is more crucial than ever. This urgency necessitated swift collaboration between the executive and Shura institutions to fill the vacancy of the head of the Political Bureau, which may be a transitional appointment until the next electoral cycle begins in early 2025. It was within this context that Yahya Sinwar was chosen as Haniyeh's successor.

Following Haniyeh's assassination and the absence of both the head of the Political Bureau and his deputy, Saleh al-Aroui, who oversees the West Bank, Hamas faced two primary options for leadership: Khaled Meshaal and Sinwar, both of whom are considered deputies to the head of the Political Bureau. With Meshaal opting

Yahya Sinwar, Palestinian leader of Hamas in Gaza Strip, speaks during an event marking the 35th anniversary of the establishment of Hamas in Gaza, on December 14, 2022.

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out of the competition for reasons to be discussed separately, Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in Gaza, emerged as the natural choice, particularly given that this is a transitional administration until the next election cycle. This cycle will likely occur after the war, which, as of now, shows no signs of ending unless new developments on the ground, regional shifts, or global events alter the war's trajectory.

Although Sinwar did not nominate himself and other options could have been considered, several factors led to his appointment as the head of the Political Bureau. Traditionally, this position requires someone capable of political communication with regional and international actors, often necessitating a headquarters outside Palestine for security and political reasons. The continued presence of the head of the Political Bureau

within the country poses significant risks, including targeting or arrest, which would jeopardize the movement's security and necessitate constant communication with countries, bodies, and organizations at a minimal political and security cost. However, the current war and Sinwar's influence allowed him to assume this role without a full electoral process, driven by the necessity to avoid a leadership vacuum. Finding an alternative to Sinwar would be difficult, given the strong support behind him during this existential conflict.

Sinwar's close ties to the military wing, his popularity among Palestinian, Arab, and Islamic circles, and his control over critical issues like the prisoner exchange and the situation in Gaza, all position him as the most suitable leader for this transitional period. His leadership style,

which was evident in the events of October 7 and his subsequent control on the ground, makes him the most appropriate choice for this phase, despite the significant challenges and risks involved. As the new head of the Political Bureau, Sinwar faces heightened security and intelligence threats, supported by the U.S. and other Western countries, making his life and freedom a top priority for Israeli forces seeking to undermine the symbol of Palestinian resistance that Sinwar represents. At this juncture, Hamas' leadership has rallied around Sinwar, recognizing his strength and placing hope in his ability to manage the ongoing war and minimize losses for the Palestinian people while ensuring Hamas' continued centrality in the Palestinian political landscape.⁴

In the context of war and resistance, Sinwar's election aligns with the current needs of the movement, serving as a critical link between the political organization and the military wing. This choice is advantageous until a ceasefire is reached, as no other political leader in Hamas is as closely connected to the military wing as Sinwar. As long as the war continues, altering the leadership structure could weaken the movement's political vision and negotiating position. Thus, maintaining the current negotiating delegation has benefited mediators, enabling them to continue their efforts without disruption.

As the war progresses and restrictions on political office abroad increase, Hamas faces the challenge of reducing the burden on neighboring

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countries, a key factor in the preference for Sinwar. However, this path remains fraught with possibilities, including the risks of destabilizing Hamas' structure post-war and the opportunities for political repositioning within the Palestinian and regional political system through the adoption of new approaches.

Characteristics of Sinwar's Ideology and Choices

The close relationship between Hamas and Iran – as a Hamas official stated for pragmatic reasons – and Hezbollah presents a significant challenge following Sinwar's appointment as the head of the Political Bureau. This relationship traditionally strains Hamas' relations with other key countries, such as Türkiye, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, making it difficult for the movement to balance its alliances between its traditional regional supporters and those with differing ideological perspectives.

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With Sinwar's election, concerns arose that military strategies might overshadow diplomatic negotiations, given his background within Hamas. However, in the context of ongoing conflict, these concerns appear less justified. Hamas' strength is rooted in its military wing in Gaza, and Sinwar's leadership does not indicate a fundamental shift in the movement's approach to either military engagement or ceasefire negotiations.⁵

One of the significant challenges for Hamas in the coming phase will be its relationship with the broader Palestinian national movement. Much of this will depend on Sinwar's view of the roles of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).⁶ The Beijing Declaration will test the new leadership's commitment to pursuing a unified national strategy. While some may argue that Sinwar is skeptical of national dialogue, the ongoing conflict exacerbates the difficulties in achieving political reconciliation, creating discord between the West Bank and

Gaza and distracting factions from addressing shared concerns, particularly those related to governance.⁷

In 2017, Hamas, in its policy document, cut its official ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, aiming to evolve into a more independent Palestinian national movement, free from external affiliations. This theory is based on Sinwar's upbringing within the Palestinian movement, physically detached from the Brotherhood, and his ideological development in Israeli prisons, contrasting with earlier leaders who engaged and lived with the Brotherhood. It is also important to note that although Sinwar spent a long time in prison, his ideological upbringing is rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood. He did not abandon the Brotherhood's ideology, but he is dissatisfied with the role of Muslim Brotherhood movements in the Islamic world, believing that more armed resistance should be brought into the scene.⁸ The potential for this path depends on Sinwar's ability to balance relations between the national movement, regional powers, and the Islamic movement. However, the future of this trajectory remains uncertain, especially as Hamas grapples with the ongoing war and its impact on the organization's intellectual and structural foundations.⁹

Possible Consequences for Relations with Türkiye

Sinwar's approach to Türkiye can be described as balanced, with relatively

few political statements concerning Turkish relations. In a 2021 interview with *Anadolu Agency* following the war, Sinwar praised Türkiye's steadfast support for the Palestinian people, framing it within the context of Muslim Brotherhood and unity.¹⁰ His remarks suggest the potential for reaching an understanding on matters of war, negotiations, and the establishment of a Palestinian state, which he consistently emphasizes. Sinwar also highlighted Türkiye's solidarity and commitment to issues vital to the Palestinian resistance.

While Turkish policy may face challenges in managing relations with Hamas after the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh, who was a key diplomatic figure compatible with Türkiye's vision, this does not preclude continued Turkish efforts to end the conflict, provide humanitarian aid, and support Palestinian reconciliation efforts. The Beijing agreement between Hamas and Fatah, signed by all factions, aims to establish a national unity government to govern both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, addressing one of Israel's primary justifications for its aggression on Gaza. Success in this reconciliation is strategic for advancing Palestinian statehood in line with international resolutions and is essential for increasing pressure on Israel and the U.S. to end the war. Restoring the Palestinian Authority's jurisdiction over the West Bank and Gaza is crucial to countering Israeli claims that the Gaza Strip is a "common-owned land" due to the Palestinian Authority's weakened control, which would

only prolong the conflict and worsen the humanitarian crisis.

Effective Turkish policy in navigating this complex situation will strengthen the Palestinian position both regionally and internationally, putting the Netanyahu government in a challenging position. With the cooperation of regional powers like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Türkiye holds significant influence in achieving this objective. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' address to the Turkish parliament and the warm reception he received from all Turkish parties marks an important step in this direction. Additionally, Türkiye's strong response to Haniyeh's assassination bolsters its position and confidence in continuing a policy that protects the resistance, prevents its political isolation, supports Palestinian legitimacy, and strives for a more balanced and resilient management of the Palestinian issue.¹¹

Egyptian Interaction with Sinwar's Approach

Since the outbreak of the conflict on October 7 and the accompanying Egyptian initiatives, Cairo has sought to mitigate the impact of Israeli aggression by strengthening its relationship with Hamas, particularly under Sinwar's leadership. Egypt identified Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in Gaza, as a supporter of its security vision in Sinai. After assuming leadership in Gaza, Sinwar cooperated with Egypt to halt any operations against the Egyptian military on the Gaza-Sinai

border. Additionally, Cairo viewed Sinwar as less aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood's agenda, making him a key figure in balancing Egypt's relations with the Türkiye-Qatar axis. On a broader geopolitical scale, from Cairo's perspective, Sinwar worked to improve Hamas' relations with Syria, thereby helping to reduce sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shias. Although Hamas was not directly involved in the Syrian civil war, Cairo has always been concerned about the conflict's potential impact on Egyptian national security, especially given the support that terrorist groups like ISIS provided to militants in Sinai.

The Egyptian initiative emphasizes the need to marginalize Hamas, which is seen as a strategic necessity. Egypt views Israel as an enemy state with which it maintains a ceasefire under a peace treaty, but not as an ally or trustworthy neighbor. Hamas, like the Fatah Movement under Yasser Arafat, has been a crucial bargaining chip for Egypt, helping to limit Israeli aggression without direct confrontation. This positions Hamas as a partner in Egypt's security strategy aimed at preventing Israeli provocations and unwelcome interventions, particularly as Cairo remains focused on its internal economic and social challenges.

Egypt's vision aligns with Türkiye's stance on the importance of overseeing an agreed-upon Palestinian government to manage Gaza and the West Bank, thereby blocking Israeli plans. Cairo also recognizes the

importance of continuing the security policy established by Sinwar in cooperation with Egypt concerning Sinai's security. According to various sources and statements by Egyptian officials, there is a perceived need for the Palestinian leadership to be prepared to accept political settlements with Israel or agree to a long-term ceasefire. This would allow for the reconstruction of Gaza, which could present an opportunity for the Egyptian economy and increase its political and security influence in a region critically important to Egypt's national security.

Regional Peace Efforts after the Election

Overall, Sinwar's election did not disrupt the negotiation process, as Qatari-Egyptian communications continued unaffected. Negotiations in Doha and Cairo revealed the alignment of Qatari and Egyptian policies in proposing successive ceasefire agreements and coordinating regional and bilateral strategies. Turkish-Egyptian coordination, too, remained stable despite the leadership change in Hamas, with discussions increasingly focused on a regional solution to the Palestinian issue. During the visit of Egypt's foreign minister, the broad focus on Palestinian issues in bilateral dialogues became evident, highlighting the potential to develop a regional coalition involving Saudi Arabia and Jordan. In his speech at the Rafah border crossing, the Foreign Minister emphasized the importance of joint efforts, show-

ing solidarity with both the Palestinian Authority and the resistance.

In the same context, Saudi Arabia advocates for a comprehensive solution to the Palestinian issue, prioritizing the establishment of a Palestinian state before pursuing any other policy toward Israel. Saudi Arabia envisions a peace agreement under the United Nations' auspices and proposed by the Arab League. Regarding the ongoing conflict, Saudi Arabia emphasizes the need to establish peace in Gaza, with compensation from Israel, and is working to integrate Hamas into the PLO.

These results were reflected in the continued stance of Hamas in the negotiations. Given the security complexities of the Salah al-Din corridor, coordination between the movement and both Egypt and Türkiye increased, as shared goals strengthened the argument for the convergence of positions and common interests. The mutual actions reveal many aspects of interdependence aimed at achieving a stable security formula. It can be said that Türkiye and Egypt are addressing the reality that Israel is trying to impose, regardless of internal changes within Hamas. They are likely working to contain the conflict and create an environment conducive to activating discussions on the Palestinian issue.

Conclusion

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adapt to shifting circumstances, both internally and externally. His leadership, marked by close ties to the military wing and a pragmatic approach to external alliances, demonstrates Hamas' strategic response to regional pressures and internal challenges. As the movement navigates the ongoing conflict and prepares for future potential electoral cycles, Sinwar's role is likely to remain pivotal in shaping Hamas' direction.

Moreover, the impact of Sinwar's leadership on Hamas' regional relations, particularly with key players like Iran, Hezbollah, Türkiye, and Egypt, will be crucial in determining the movement's future trajectory. His pragmatic stance on alliances, combined with dissatisfaction toward some Islamic movements, highlights the balancing act Hamas must perform between its ideological roots and the practical realities of armed resistance. This delicate balance will influence how Hamas engages with regional powers and manages its external diplomatic relations.

Ultimately, Sinwar's leadership represents both opportunities and

risks for Hamas. While his military background and influence could strengthen the movement's resistance activities, they also pose challenges in maintaining diplomatic efforts and regional alliances. As the conflict continues, Hamas' ability to adapt its leadership and strategy under Sinwar will be key to navigating both the war and the post-conflict landscape, shaping the future of Palestinian resistance and regional politics. ■

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