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Sinwar's last stand:

What lies ahead for the Palestinian resistance?

The martyrdom of Yahya Sinwar, the mastermind behind Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, has left Hamas facing an uncertain future. Yet his legacy of steadfast resistance continues to inspire the movement's strategy as Israel takes the bait in opening multiple fronts.

The martyrdom of Yahya Sinwar, the powerful and intelligent Hamas leader and 'architect' of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, who died fighting invading Israeli forces on the frontlines in Rafah, marks a pivotal moment in the history of Israel's occupation of Palestine. As one of the movement's most prominent military and strategic leaders, Sinwar had long been a prime target of the Israeli occupation forces.

For years, he was Israel's most wanted figure, owing to his critical role in advancing the capabilities of the resistance and orchestrating strategic operations—most notably the recent Al-Aqsa Flood, which led to the deaths of over 1,500 Israeli soldiers and settlers, and the capture of more than 200 others, the majority still held by the Qassam Brigades.

With Sinwar's heroic last stand on the Gazan battlefield, Hamas faces unprecedented challenges in leadership and continuity. The Israeli occupation's targeted killings of senior leaders — Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, Saleh al-Arouri in Beirut, and now, accidentally, Yahya Sinwar in Gaza — have created a leadership vacuum that threatens the movement both at home and abroad. Moreover, Hamas' long-standing ties with Iran, which were strained over the war in Syria, were also solidified under Sinwar's watch.

Filling the void left by Sinwar

To address this crisis, Hamas has several options. The first involves selecting a new leader from among its prominent figures. Khalil Al-Hayya, Khaled Meshaal, and Zaher Jabareen are among the most likely candidates. Reports have also shed light on Sinwar's younger brother, senior Qassam commander Muhammad Sinwar. However, Israeli outlets speculate that he is not being considered for the position of politburo chief, but instead could take over as top leader in the Gaza Strip. Hayya, Sinwar's deputy in Gaza, is a strong contender to lead. He has considerable support within Hamas, heads the Office of Arab and Islamic Relations, and maintains strong ties with Iran and Egypt.

Meshaal, a founding member of the politburo and survivor of an assassination attempt ordered by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, also has extensive international relations and political influence. Though he previously announced he would not return to leadership, there are growing calls for his reappointment amid the current crisis. However, future relations with both Syria and Iran may come into question under his skeptical leadership and support of the Syrian opposition.

Zaher Jabareen, a founding member of the armed wing and Hamas leader in the occupied West Bank, is another key figure. He has a long history of struggle and is seen as an influential force within the movement. This is significant, as strengthening the West Bank resistance has long been an ambition of the Islamic Republic of Iran as part of its support for the Palestinian liberation struggle.

Collective leadership as a viable strategy

Another option for Hamas is adopting a collective leadership model, avoiding the concentration of power in a single figure to minimize risks amid ongoing assassination threats. This more flexible structure could help spread the burden of leadership, making it harder for Israel to decapitate the movement, as recently experienced by Lebanon's Hezbollah.

A third path involves relying on the movement's internal institutions, such as the Shura Council. Currently headed by Abu Omar Hassan Darwish, the Shura Council could provide a stable, institutionalized leadership model that also focuses on collective decision-making.

Despite the challenges, Hamas has a strong organizational structure and institutions capable of making appropriate decisions in the absence of a leader as crucial and experienced as Sinwar.

Yahya al-Sinwar's journey in Hamas began in the mid-1980s, when he established the security wing of the movement, which was called "Majd," under the supervision of late

founder, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin. It is said that Sinwar met with Sheikh Yassin, asking for support for the movement to confront the Israeli occupation, and said: “We will fight it, even with dirt.”

This unwavering dedication to the resistance made him a close confidant of the movement’s spiritual leader, and he began to form the nucleus of the movement’s military wing, which later developed into the Qassam Brigades.

In 1988, coinciding with the outbreak of the First Intifada, Sinwar was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment, but despite his presence in detention, he played an active role in exposing the agents. Sinwar spent over 22 years in Israeli prisons, only to be released in 2011 in a prisoner exchange deal known as the 'Loyalty of the Free,' which included the release of occupation soldier Gilad Shalit in exchange for more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners.

Sinwar’s strategic leadership

Following his release, Sinwar assumed new responsibilities in the movement, the most prominent of which was his championing of the Qassam Brigades in the Executive Committee of the Hamas movement, that is, the position of the Ministry of Defense in Hamas.

This stage was transformative, as Sinwar began laying the foundations for a comprehensive strategy to develop the military capabilities of the movement. He worked on developing the tunnel network, which became one of the strategic weapons of the resistance, as well as developing the missile and anti-armor system, which proved effective in confronting invading Israeli forces.

Sinwar also contributed to the establishment of the *Nukhba* (“elite”) Force, designed for offensive operations behind enemy lines. One of his most important achievements during that period was supervising operations “behind enemy lines” during the 2014 war, which lasted 51 days.

The *Nukhba* was able to carry out dozens of successful operations inside the occupied territories, which led to the killing of more than 100 Israeli soldiers and the capture of two soldiers, who remain in the custody of the Qassam Brigades to this day.

In both 2017 and 2021, Yahya Sinwar was elected head of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and worked on three main strategic axes: strengthening the movement’s military capabilities, striving to achieve internal Palestinian reconciliation, and strengthening relations with Egypt and other regional powers.

Sinwar succeeded in improving relations with Egypt, especially on the issue of managing the crossings and easing the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip. In 2018, he led the unarmed ‘Great

Return' marches, which aimed to highlight the suffering of Palestinians under siege and peacefully demand their right of return.

Closer to the Resistance Axis

Despite the brutal Israeli suppression of these marches, Sinwar was able to achieve some breakthroughs, such as permanently opening the Rafah crossing and partially easing the siege, which contributed to improving living conditions in Gaza.

During his period leading the military wing of Hamas, Sinwar focused on strengthening relations with the Axis of Resistance, especially with Hezbollah and Iran. These relations resulted in significant military and logistical support for the Qassam Brigades, enabling them to develop their capabilities qualitatively.

Al-Aqsa Flood was the largest military offensive in the history of the 'Arab-Israeli Conflict.' Israeli authorities had assumed Hamas had succumbed to pressure from the ongoing blockade, but Sinwar had been meticulously planning this strike for years. The Qassam Brigades inflicted heavy losses on Israel, collapsing its military's Gaza Division and killing and capturing many, shocking settlers and officials alike.

Sinwar, who was known for his superior ability to evade and plan long-term, succeeded in deceiving the Israeli intelligence services for years, as all their attempts to reach him failed. Even when he was martyred, the occupation had no knowledge of his presence in the Tal al-Sultan area, where he was killed while leading a field operation.

The end of an era, the start of another

Amid the conflicting narratives surrounding his last moments, "The fact that he was killed in combat fatigues and a combat vest after firing and hurling grenades at Israeli soldiers, even lashing out at an [Israeli] drone with a wooden baton thrown with his one remaining working arm in a final gesture of defiance, sets Sinwar apart from his predecessors who were assassinated while they were on the run," observes the *Guardian*.

While a *Wall Street Journal* headline reads, "In death, Hamas leader may have won wider support than when he was alive," underscoring the difficult position of US-backed governments across West Asia as citizens and religious authorities openly recognize Sinwar's sacrifice for the Palestinian cause.

The martyrdom of Yahya Sinwar is undoubtedly a significant blow to Hamas, yet it marks an honorable end for a leader who became synonymous with steadfastness, dedication, and resistance. Under Sinwar's leadership, Hamas emerged as a central player in the Palestinian struggle, has grown its military capabilities exponentially, and placed the Palestinian national cause back on the international map.

Sinwar's death is not just the conclusion of a visionary commander's life but the beginning of a new chapter for Hamas and the broader Palestinian resistance. As the Palestinian people endure an existential struggle, with Israeli aggression escalating to include regional fronts, Hamas has reemerged as a pivotal member at the forefront of West Asia's Axis of Resistance. The movement now faces the critical challenge of maintaining its cohesion, resisting Israeli offensives, and protecting its people in the face of an ever-growing campaign of genocide.

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