

YAHYA SINWAR AND THE NEW ERA IN HAMAS

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SETA | ANALYSIS

SEPTEMBER 2024 NO.91





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SETA Yayınları

ISBN: 978-625-6583-68-9

Layout: Said Demirtaş

Printed in Türkiye, İstanbul

by Turkuvaz Haberleşme ve Yayıncılık A.Ş., 2023

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SUMMARY

This analysis begins by examining Hamas's motivations behind electing Sinwar as the new leader and considers his potential to exert a Yasser Arafat-like influence in Palestinian politics, given his distinct personal traits and strong grassroots appeal.

Ismail Haniyeh's assassination during his visit to Tehran for the inauguration of the country's newly elected president, sent shockwaves across the globe. Aimed at regaining psychological superiority and weakening the resistance after strategic setbacks since October 7 by the occupying state, it dealt a serious blow to hopes for a resolution in Gaza and sparked debates about who would succeed Haniyeh as Hamas's new leader. In a bold response to this hostile move, which underscored the Zionist regime's ongoing commitment to its aggression, Hamas's Shura Council elected Yahya Sinwar, the movement's chief in Gaza, as Haniyeh's successor.

Having spent many years in the prisons of the occupying state, where he became fluent in Hebrew and gained insights into Israeli political life and system, Sinwar's leadership has revitalized Palestinian resistance while unsettling the Israeli public. Known as one of the masterminds behind Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and at the top of the occupying state's most-wanted list, Sinwar has the potential to significantly reshape both Hamas and broader Palestinian politics, owing to his political charisma, strategic intelligence, and compelling rhetoric. Observers are curiously waiting for the strategic direction of Hamas in the upcoming period and the initial statements of Sinwar who, despite being a member the movement's political wing from the beginning, remains one of its most controversial figures, given his substantial influence over its military operations and his favorable stance toward Iran, due to the logistical support Tehran provides to the resistance.

This analysis begins by examining Hamas's motivations behind electing Sinwar as the new leader and considers his potential to exert a Yasser Arafat-like influence in Palestinian politics, given his distinct personal traits and strong grassroots appeal. The study further delves into the potential risks associated with Hamas due to some of the controversial issues around Sinwar, and provides insights and predictions about how Hamas might navigate its relationships with global and regional actors in this new era.

INTRODUCTION

Following Ismail Haniyeh's assassination on July 31, Hamas swiftly announced its new leader on August 6, 2024. Yahya Sinwar, the movement's chief in Gaza, was unanimously elected to this post by the Hamas Shura Council where, in deliberations about Haniyeh's successor, his name emerged prominently alongside Khaled Meshal. While there was a high expectation that Meshal would succeed Haniyeh, given the former's assumption of deputy chairmanship after the assassination and his widely perceived ability to engage more effectively in diplomatic moves, Sinwar was ultimately seen as the most suitable choice because of his alignment with the realities on the Palestinian ground and his capacity to galvanize the resistance. Although some were surprised by Sinwar's election, recent comments from Khalil Hayye, Hamas Political Bureau member, about the election process and ongoing consultations indicated that Sinwar was to become the movement's new leader.

Hamas has expectedly and swiftly resolved the leadership succession following Haniyeh's assassination. Given the movement's longstanding challenges and traumas it suffered to this day, this decisive action underscores its resilience and organizational preparedness, ensuring a smooth transition even when the departed leader was a figure of Haniyeh's stature, who played a pivotal role in aligning Hamas with contemporary realities. This strategic move by Hamas leadership aims to maintain internal cohesion and boost the morale of resistance efforts in both Gaza and the West Bank. Furthermore, the decision to select a leader from Gaza amidst ongoing violence underlines the movement's deep-rooted connection to the realities on the ground. With Sinwar expected to exert considerable influence over both Palestinian territories and the occupying state, Hamas is clearly delivering a calculated and multifaceted message, fully cognizant of the potential complexities and challenges his leadership may entail.

WHY SINWAR?

Following the official announcement of Sinwar as the new Hamas leader, questions about his selection over other potential successors quickly surfaced. In particular, Turkish public opinion showed a range of early reactions. Some critics viewed the decision as a misstep, suggesting it might lead to a deviation in Hamas's trajectory. Others believed Sinwar was the only figure capable of guiding Hamas back to its established path. The rationale behind his appointment is grounded in well-founded, strategic considerations, reflecting internal consultations with key individuals and adherence to Hamas's institutional framework. Viewing Sinwar's rise solely through the lens of Iranian influence—either in support or opposition—fails to capture the

depth of the movement's intrinsic strategic autonomy and decision-making processes.

It is essential to evaluate actions and decisions made under exceptional circumstances within their unique context and rationale. Shifts in conditions can transform previously improbable options into primary choices or enable individuals and strategies with inherent significance to reemerge at the forefront. Analyzing Sinwar's election as Hamas's new leader through the lens of the post-October 7 context highlights the strategic priority placed on continuity and consistency in the movement's approach.

When Haniyeh was named Hamas's new leader in May 2017, it enabled a more seamless integration between Hamas's leadership in Gaza and its diaspora. This Gaza-based leadership bolstered the connection between the political and armed factions of Hamas, which helped to mitigate internal risks and decrease structural and institutional vulnerabilities, even amidst ongoing pressures from the occupying state. Haniyeh's political skill, strategic vision, and charisma increased Hamas's influence within the Palestinian territories while concurrently, the Izz ad-Din Qassam Brigades managed to unify various resistance groups under the collective framework known as the "Joint Operations Room." During this time, Hamas cemented its role as a key player in Palestinian politics, while the Qassam Brigades gained recognition as a national liberation army of Palestine, noted for their resistance efforts against the occupying state.

Under Haniyeh's leadership and his innovative arguments, Hamas, which derives its legitimacy from its people and maintains its independence from external influences, achieved substantial regional and international momentum. The Zionist regime's assassination against a pivotal figure like Haniyeh underscored its unwavering commitment to a strategy of geno-

cide and annexation in Gaza and demonstrated its readiness to cross any boundary to fulfill its objectives. By so doing, the occupying state strongly challenged all Palestinian resistance movements, most prominently Hamas, and their allied nations. In a firm response, Hamas sent a decisive message back to the Zionist government by electing Sinwar as its new leader.

Sinwar's political vision and personal charisma resonate strongly with Palestinian communities, and his election as Hamas's leader will maintain unity and prevent potential rifts within the movement over the short to medium term.

Sinwar has been deeply embedded in every aspect of Hamas since his early years. Arrested by the Zionist regime, he spent many years in prison and survived several assassination attempts by the occupying state. His time in Israeli prisons allowed Sinwar to become fluent in Hebrew and gain a profound understanding of the political system and mindset of the occupying state, often surpassing the insights of many Israeli politicians and analysts, which positioned him as a formidable and dangerous figure in the eyes of the Tel Aviv administration. His intimate knowledge of the internal conflicts and vulnerabilities within the Zionist regime has enabled him to offer strategic guidance to the resistance in Gaza through his leveraging a critical analysis of Israeli political dynamics. Sinwar's political vision and personal charisma resonate strongly with Palestinian communities, and his election as Hamas's leader will maintain unity and prevent potential rifts within the movement over the short to medium term.

With Sinwar's election, Hamas has unequivocally affirmed its commitment to the ongoing struggle against the occupying state, highlighted its resolve to preempt and neutralize any internal tensions or divisions that might have arisen following Haniyeh's leadership, underscored its capacity to develop and implement more nuanced and effective strategies across local, regional, and global arenas under the leadership of a figure deeply informed about the Zionist administration, and demonstrated its determination to preserve the long-standing hierarchy between political and military wings.

The supportive and congratulatory messages from other Palestinian resistance groups following Sinwar's election indicate that the leadership dynamics within the Palestinian resistance will remain consistent. Although the occupying state sought to gain psychological superiority over the Palestinian resistance by assassinating Haniyeh, Hamas's made sure that the upper hand stays with the resistance through two primary ways. First, it elected a leader who is both the most significant figure on the ground and one of the masterminds behind the Al-Aqsa Flood. Second, by elevating Sinwar—a figure sought by Israeli security forces for over ten months—to leadership, Hamas showed the intelligence fiasco of the Zionist government in Gaza to the Israeli public opinion.

CAN SINWAR BECOME THE NEW ARAFAT-LIKE LEADER OF THE RESISTANCE?

The past ten months have demonstrated that the upheavals instigated by the Aqsa Flood will leave a lasting impact on the trajectory of the modern Middle East for many years to come. Haniyeh's

assassination marks a similarly pivotal moment, ushering in a new reality where regional events may now be interpreted through a before-and-after framework anchored on October 7. This moment serves as a crucial inflection point, not only by probing the limits and strategic capabilities of the occupying state—which has long pursued an aggressive expansionist policy underpinned by Jewish theopolitical ideology—but also by testing the resilience of Iran, a nation that has established its regional legitimacy through its 'axis of resistance' narrative. The ramifications of Haniyeh's martyrdom possess the potential to intensify existing political, economic, military, and social crises, thereby accelerating instability on both a regional and global scale. In this swiftly shifting environment, characterized by a departure from traditional paradigms and the emergence of new geopolitical realities, substantial developments within Palestine seem increasingly likely.

Haniyeh's assassination highlighted the occupying state's intent to assert full control over Palestinian territories, blatantly disregarding international norms and regulations. With diplomatic negotiations becoming nearly untenable without a significant show of force to deter the Zionist government, Sinwar's role in potentially reshaping Palestinian politics takes on heightened importance. Sinwar, known both for his political acumen and as a symbol of resistance, emerges as a pivotal figure in this context. Yasser Arafat had skillfully navigated the strategic vacuum created by the Arab defeat in the 1967 war and the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970, to become the legendary leader of the Palestinian struggle by gaining regional and international legitimacy through his charisma and leadership. Arafat's unique ability to integrate political diplomacy with guerrilla tactics fundamentally reoriented Palestinian politics during a time of shifting paradigms in late 1960s and early 1970s.

Sinwar, embodying both political savvy and a commitment to resistance, has the potential to introduce a new paradigm and steer Palestinian politics in a different direction amid the current upheaval. His leadership during the Aqsa Flood, marked by a strategy of mass and collective resistance against the occupying state, suggests that his approach—free from a rigid separation between political maneuvering and active resistance—could generate positive outcomes for the future of Palestinian politics. As the struggle against occupation has intensified following Haniyeh’s assassination, Sinwar’s charisma, rhetorical skill, strategic acumen, and unwavering commitment to resistance could create an atmosphere reminiscent of Arafat’s influence. If Sinwar continues to uphold the diplomatic gains and traditions established during the Meshal and Haniyeh eras on both regional and global stages, he is likely to inject new energy and vision into Hamas, potentially serving as a unifying figure among various Palestinian political factions.

SINWAR AND POTENTIAL RISKS

Yahya Sinwar’s capabilities and influence on the ground are unequivocal. However, certain personal traits that bolster his leadership, along with his extended presence in Gaza, pose potential risks during his tenure as Hamas’s leader. Without substantial external or internal pressure, it is unlikely that Netanyahu and his cabinet will engage in negotiations with a Hamas led by Sinwar. In this scenario, the occupying state is expected to escalate its attacks on Gaza and intensify mass casualties to demoralize the resistance.

Given the current climate, where the genocidal Netanyahu government faces severe legitimacy issues internationally due to its aggressive

policies, it is crucial for Sinwar to carefully manage his public statements and align with the strategic framework established by Haniyeh. With anticipated negative perception campaigns likely to be orchestrated by both the Zionist government and the US, Sinwar must exercise heightened caution in his actions and rhetoric. Failing to navigate this complex landscape with precision could result in coordinated efforts by the Zionist regime and Washington to undermine Hamas’s legitimate resistance and weaken its political stance.

A potential risk for Sinwar’s administration is that relations with Tehran might not be sustained at the level seen during the Meshal and Haniyeh periods, potentially creating a hierarchical dynamic within the Hamas-Iran relationship, even if this scenario appears unlikely.

Sinwar has effectively managed Hamas’s strategy in Gaza, but his new role demands that he broaden his focus to represent the interests of all Palestinians and engage constructively with both regional and global stakeholders. His extended experience under blockade, with a primary focus on dismantling the siege and confronting the occupying power, raises concerns that he might overly rely on local tactics. Such a localized approach could potentially upset the equilibrium between Hamas’s internal and external factions and make it more challenging to establish and sustain essential diplomatic relationships with regional and global partners.

While Sinwar’s comprehensive knowledge of the occupying state’s political landscape sug-

gests he will take broader regional and global dynamics into account, his past experiences and ingrained habits could lead him toward a leadership style focused predominantly on local concerns. To avoid this potential limitation, it would be beneficial for Sinwar to work closely with Khaled Meshaal and Musa Abu Marzouk, two of Hamas's key diplomatic figures. Their active involvement and strategic counsel could help ensure that Hamas's international relations are managed effectively which would in turn enhance the movement's strategic positioning on the international stage.

A potential risk for Sinwar's administration is that relations with Tehran might not be sustained at the level seen during the Meshal and Haniyeh periods, potentially creating a hierarchical dynamic within the Hamas-Iran relationship, even if this scenario appears unlikely. Historically, Hamas has effectively maintained a pragmatic relationship with Iran, driven by the need to continue its resistance efforts and by Iran's desire to bolster its legitimacy within the broader Muslim world. However, the course of Iran-Hamas relations under Sinwar's leadership should be closely monitored. Although there are no current signs of ideological shifts, the possibility that Tehran's support for active armed resistance in Gaza could exert ideological influence on Sinwar should not be underestimated.

Hamas's Sunni identity, deeply rooted in its Muslim Brotherhood origins and integrated into Palestinian political culture, is unlikely to undergo substantial change. However, any significant deviation from the established norms of Hamas-Iran relations during Sinwar's leadership could provoke internal discord and potentially lead to fragmentation within the movement. Managing the relationship with Tehran will be a crucial test of Sinwar's leadership, and regional actors are likely to recalibrate their positions

toward Hamas or explore alternative strategies depending on the evolution of this relationship. Additionally, the dynamics of Hamas's engagements with Türkiye, Egypt, and Qatar, alongside its interactions with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) under Sinwar, will play a pivotal role in either mitigating or amplifying these potential risks.

HAMAS IN A NEW ERA: REGIONAL AND GLOBAL RELATIONS

While early predictions suggested that Sinwar's leadership might lead to a more pronounced focus on Hamas's military wing, it is crucial to consider Sinwar's notable political acumen and strategic foresight. It is anticipated that Hamas will continue the diplomatic practices established by its previous administrations and that Sinwar's strong leadership will help uphold the movement's foundational principles during negotiations. Given Hamas's transformation into the key actor in Palestinian politics, with broader international engagement than it had in the 1990s and 2000s, it is unlikely that the organization will retreat into isolation or limit itself to purely military resistance under Sinwar's leadership. Thus, the relationships cultivated with regional and global actors during his tenure will play a significant role in determining the future trajectory of the movement.

The unease that Sinwar has generated among the Israeli public is mirrored in the sentiments of the Western world, particularly in the US. While the specific strategic direction of Sinwar's leadership has yet to be fully articulated, prevailing discourse in the West suggests a belief that under Sinwar, Hamas will likely remain excluded from any negotiation processes. This nar-

rative aligns with the occupying state's broader efforts to legitimize its aggressive actions in Gaza. Sinwar, with a keen understanding of Gaza's limitations and the broader resistance, is expected to act pragmatically, taking strategically calculated steps on the international stage to ensure the movement's resilience and sustainability. Given the longstanding impracticality of fostering a sustainable, cooperative relationship between Hamas and the U.S. or major European powers, the existing dynamics in these relationships are expected to remain unchanged during Sinwar's tenure. The Western world, having previously sidelined and marginalized leaders like Meshal and Haniyeh, is not using Sinwar as a pretext to reinforce an anti-Hamas narrative, which is no more than a strategy to bolster its own legitimacy. Consequently, it is anticipated that Hamas will continue to uphold the traditional diplomatic approach established under Meshal and Haniyeh when engaging with the West.

The trajectory of Hamas' global relations with Russia and China under Yahya Sinwar's leadership will play a pivotal role in shaping the future of Palestinian politics. Since October 7, Hamas has maintained active engagement with both Moscow and Beijing, and this engagement is expected to continue, particularly given Sinwar's anti-Western stance. Sinwar's involvement as a key figure in the implementation of decisions made by fourteen Palestinian political factions during reconciliation talks in Beijing on July 23, 2024, aimed at forming a national consensus government, underscores the importance of closely analyzing developments along the China-Palestine and China-Hamas axis. As China expands its political footprint in the Middle East, it is likely to deepen its engagement with a leader like Sinwar, who is assertive, charismatic, powerful, and defiant. Through this relationship, China aims to send strategic signals

to the broader regional populace, leveraging its influence with Palestine to bolster its position in the Middle East.

It is anticipated that Hamas will continue to uphold the traditional diplomatic approach established under Meshal and Haniyeh when engaging with the West.

Sinwar needs to cultivate balanced and sustainable relations with both regional actors no less than with global powers, to ensure Hamas's survival and continued influence. Therefore, it is anticipated that the traditional relationships with Türkiye, Egypt, and Qatar will be upheld during Sinwar's tenure, much like they were under Haniyeh's leadership. Sinwar is acutely aware that maintaining the resistance and facilitating Hamas's engagement with the outside world is heavily dependent on relations with Cairo. Recognizing the challenges that could arise from strained relations with Egypt, it is expected that Hamas will maintain its positive ties with Cairo in the new era. Additionally, based on the legitimacy and diplomatic leverage that Türkiye and Qatar have afforded Hamas on the international stage, the movement will most likely continue to consider the demands and recommendations of Ankara and Doha while at the same time preserving its unique and independent character. In this context, despite the potential risks mentioned earlier concerning its relations with Iran, Hamas leadership will expectedly implement all necessary measures to prevent any disruptions in relations and avoid any shifts in its alignment with key regional actors.

Hamas's decision to engage or not to engage with Saudi Arabia and the UAE will signifi-

cantly shape its political and strategic direction in the new era. Saudi Arabia's influential role in regional politics is well recognized. Although Riyadh has not officially entered into a normalization process with Israel in recent years, signs of rapprochement and diplomatic gestures suggest that a new phase in Saudi-Israeli relations could emerge, particularly following the U.S. presidential elections in November 2024. Such developments could pose a substantial challenge to Hamas's existential struggle, making it crucial for Sinwar to carefully balance his rhetoric and strategic decisions. However, if Saudi Arabia refrains from formalizing ties with Tel Aviv, there remains a possibility that, given regional sensitivities and the global outcry over the situation in Gaza, a new chapter could open in the relationship between Hamas and Riyadh.

The strategic approach of the UAE will play a pivotal role in the ongoing process when Hamas is expected to escalate its political and military activities against the occupying state. If Abu Dhabi, which turned out to be the most significant regional ally of the occupying state, deploys Mohammed Dahlan to undermine Hamas, this can potentially have a profound impact on the future of Palestinian politics. In the run-up to the Palestinian presidential elections planned for 2019, efforts were made to build public support for Dahlan by factions within Mahmoud Abbas's circle. However, due to insufficient backing and potential threats to the stability of the Abbas administration and Fatah, these elections were ultimately not conducted.

If the UAE strategically positions Dahlan to counter Sinwar, it could trigger internal power struggles within the Palestinian politics and jeopardize the fragile consensus recently reached in Beijing. Thus, Hamas's diplomatic strategy toward Abu Dhabi will be the most vital test in regional relations under Sinwar's leadership. Notably, if Sinwar effectively leverages his influence on the ground, using rhetoric and strategies reminiscent of Yasser Arafat to appeal to members of Fatah, this could undermine the influence of both Abu Dhabi and Dahlan and complicate their strategic objectives.

CONCLUSION

Given Yahya Sinwar's strong leadership abilities, it remains uncertain whether he will bring substantial changes to Hamas's ideological framework. What is evident is that the Shura Council has unanimously selected a leader capable of filling the void left by Haniyeh and preventing any internal vulnerabilities. The precise consequences of Hamas's institutional strategy still remain to be seen. However, as Sinwar takes on his leadership role, the choices he makes regarding his place of residence, the priorities he highlights in his early statements, the specific messages he communicates, and his approach to maintaining continuity in relations with global and regional powers will all offer clearer insights into the future trajectory of Hamas and the broader dynamics of Palestinian politics.

YAHYA SINWAR AND THE NEW ERA IN HAMAS

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Ismail Haniyeh's assassination during his visit to Tehran for the inauguration of the country's newly elected president, sent shockwaves across the globe. Aimed at regaining psychological superiority and weakening the resistance after strategic setbacks since October 7 by the occupying state, it dealt a serious blow to hopes for a resolution in Gaza and sparked debates about who would succeed Haniyeh as Hamas's new leader. In a bold response to this hostile move, which underscored the Zionist regime's ongoing commitment to its aggression, Hamas's Shura Council elected Yahya Sinwar, the movement's chief in Gaza, as Haniyeh's successor.

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