



Volume 14, Number 2 February 25, 2020

Yahya Sinwar and Hamas' Strategic Crossroad

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The head of Hamas' Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, briefly moved into the international spotlight when he appeared at the funeral of Qasem Soleimani in Tehran in early January to offer condolences to the Supreme Leader of Iran, 'Ali Khamenei. The visit to Tehran was part of Haniyeh's first trip outside of Gaza since 2017. Yet despite the media attention directed at Haniyeh's visit to Iran, during the past few years, it has been Yahya Sinwar—head of the Hamas Political Bureau in Gaza—who has quietly consolidated his stature as one of the most influential figures in the movement. Sinwar's rise has occurred over a relatively short period, less than a decade, following his release from an Israeli prison where he had spent a quarter of a century.

Sinwar's personal history is engrossing, but it is his political ascent that provides a window into major contemporary developments both inside Hamas and in Palestinian public life as a whole. This essay will briefly outline Sinwar's story, and analyze how it reflects the current state of affairs in Palestinian politics. A second installment will explore the wider significance of Sinwar's trajectory, and of the choices facing the Hamas leader.

Hamas' leadership finds itself at a strategic crossroad. The organization is in dire straits, both internally and externally: it faces a deep grassroots protest movement within the Gaza Strip, and the organization has alienated an important group of external Arab actors to boot. Hamas' leadership is [now examining possible paths out of this dead end](#), including the possibility of a long term deal for "calm" ("tahadiya") 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 policy matters. Notably, Sinwar also embodies both of the two conflicting poles of Hamas: on the one hand, he grew out of the armed Palestinian wing ('Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades) and demonstrates a deep attachment to jihad (the military wing is fully subordinated to Sinwar and consider him as its supreme authority); yet, on the other hand, he also understands the importance of maintaining social stability in order to preserve Hamas' long-term control in Gaza.

Sinwar faces the challenge of navigating a way forward between these two poles. Thus far, his attempts to extricate Gaza from its profound internal crises have effectively failed. First, the intermittent effort at [rapprochement](#) with the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority (PA) in Ramallah is on its last legs. Second, the attempt to improve ties with the Iranian-led "axis of resistance" is foundering; Iran provides its limited support directly to Hamas' armed wing, taking care not to fund the movement as a whole. Third, the "March of Return" strategy of organizing [violent weekly protests](#) along the Gaza-Israel border, which began in March 2018, has largely failed and resulted in a high human cost of over 350 Gazans killed. The protests have delivered nothing significant for the nearly two million Palestinians living in dire conditions in Gaza. Indeed, the scope of these weekly protests has dwindled considerably in recent months.

Adding to Sinwar's dilemma is the deterioration of Hamas' regional standing during the past few months. Hamas is closely identified with Islamist politics, not just of Iran, but also of the Turkish-backed Muslim Brotherhood. This has provoked condemnation and even retribution from Saudi Arabia, which recently arrested dozens of Hamas activists inside the kingdom. In another potential blow to Hamas, there are indications that Qatar may reduce its very considerable and important economic aid to Gaza, which has played a key role during the past decade in preventing Gaza from sliding into a true humanitarian crisis.

In light of these recent developments, 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 (for example by granting permits to Gazan businessmen that would allow them to travel freely out of Gaza; and by allowing thousands of Gazans to work in Israel, returning to the pre-2006 situation). At this stage, however, it appears that Sinwar is avoiding a genuine strategic decision in this direction. He appears interested in maintaining some "margin of resistance," which means sustaining a basic modicum of belligerent "unquiet" in Gaza, thus allowing tension to build towards a large-scale armed

confrontation with Israel. This policy manifests itself in periodic bursts of rocket fire from Gaza into Israel.

Sinwar's indecision has resulted in a policy that oscillates between escalation and quiet. The Palestine Islamic Jihad faction has led cycles of escalation, alongside Hamas' ongoing discussions about some type of deal with Israel. Reports suggest that these discussions are being negotiated with an unprecedented seriousness. But the persistence of this dangerous combination has the potential to trigger an unintended and undesired large-scale conflagration between Hamas and Israel.

Sinwar's inclination towards a deal with Israel appears to be growing, although he has yet to come to a decisive conclusion that this is the most beneficial path forward for Hamas. Nevertheless, even if such a decision does materialize, one must bear in mind that Hamas is likely to insist on adhering to its red lines in any deal with Israel. At the very top of its list would be its [continued rejection of any formal recognition of Israel](#) and a sustained refusal to make any meaningful concessions that would compromise its military capabilities. Such concessions would simply be too much of an existential threat for the organization. Many within Hamas contend that were such concessions ever to be made Hamas as they know it would cease to exist.

Meanwhile, Sinwar has undoubtedly set his sights on achieving even greater political power in the future. The most attainable advancement would be taking over leadership of the (not just Gazan) Hamas Political Bureau. This is currently Ismail Haniyeh's position, although it is 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 a scenario would be possible if the PA were to move towards practical reconciliation with Hamas, which would provide Hamas with access to the West Bank and the internal Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) institutional structures. Sinwar would also be a strong candidate for national leadership if democratic elections for the Palestinian parliament and presidency were held.

Yahya Sinwar—who grew up in the alleyways of a Gazan refugee camp, and spent his formative years inside of an Israeli prison, only to seize the leadership of Hamas—could thus well end up reaching the summit of his nation's overall political system. Sinwar is certainly a political figure to watch, and he stands to wield major influence over the future direction of Hamas in the coming months and years.

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This article is a revised and edited version of an article that [was originally published](#) in January 2020 by the Fikra Forum at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

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