

BACKGROUND

Hamas



Palestinian Hamas fighters in Khan Younis, Gaza. Source: Eyad Baba/AFP via Getty Images.

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

Hamas (*Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya*, Islamic Resistance Movement) is a prominent Palestinian militant Islamist organization with roots in Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood that has ruled the Gaza Strip since 2007. The group [emerged](#) as a significant player in Palestinian politics, promoting armed resistance against Israel, in December 1987, at the onset of the [First Intifada](#). This Palestinian uprising, spanning from 1987 to 1993, was marked by widespread protests, civil disobedience, and unrest across the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem [fueled](#) by frustration over prolonged Israeli occupation and a desire for self-determination.

Hamas was founded by Palestinian cleric [Sheikh Ahmed Yassin](#), who had been active in local branches of the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) in Egypt, as the brotherhood's political arm in Gaza. Hamas published its [charter](#) in August 1988, calling for the creation of an Islamic state throughout mandatory Palestine and the destruction of Israel. The establishment of Hamas was a response not only to the Israeli occupation but also to the perceived inefficacy, corruption, and secularism of the [Palestine Liberation Organization](#) (PLO), which had dominated the Palestinian national movement for decades.

Hamas [positioned itself](#) as an alternative to the PLO, which lost support following its [1988 decision](#) to acknowledge Israel's existence and accept United Nations Security Council [Resolution 242](#) calling for a two-state solution. Hamas [set up](#) its military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, in 1992 and began engaging in violent resistance, including [suicide bombings](#) against Israeli targets. With this shift in tactics, Hamas sought to [derail](#) the Arab-Israeli peace process by [disrupting negotiations](#) between the PLO and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1993, and subsequently to undermine the [Oslo Accords](#), which established limited self-governance for Gaza and the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority (PA).

A pivotal moment for Hamas came with its [victory](#) in the 2006 Palestinian [legislative elections](#). Hamas secured a majority of seats in the [Palestinian Legislative Council](#) by [campaigning](#) on promises of a corruption-free government and advocating for resistance as a means to liberate Palestine from Israeli occupation. Following these elections, tensions between Hamas and its rival [Fatah](#), the main faction in the PLO, intensified, culminating in 2007, when Hamas forcefully [seized control](#) of the Gaza Strip. In response, [Israel](#) imposed restrictions and blockades, limiting the passage of goods, people,



Hamas leadership, including Yahya Sinwar (3rd R) and Ismail Haniyeh (4th R), in Gaza on March 27, 2017. [Source: Mahmud Hams/AFP via Getty Images.](#)

fuel, and electricity to the enclave. No elections have been held in the occupied Palestinian territories since 2007.

The period between 2006 and 2017 saw the eruption of several major conflicts in which Hamas lobbed locally made rockets into Israel and Israel launched large-scale military operations in Gaza: [Operation Cast Lead](#) (2008-09), [Operation Pillar of Defense](#) (2012), and [Operation Protective Edge](#) (2014). Meanwhile, despite multiple reconciliation attempts with Fatah ([Mecca Agreement](#) in 2007, [Doha Declaration](#) in 2012), the Palestinian political-governance landscape remained [divided](#). Throughout this period, Hamas [developed](#) its military capabilities with assistance from [Iran](#), including an [extensive tunnel network](#).

On May 1, 2017, Hamas revised its [charter](#) in “A Document of General Principles and Policies.” In this document, Hamas accepted the concept of a Palestinian state within the 1967 [borders](#), i.e., the territory demarcated by the Armistice of 1949

and occupied by Israel in the Six-Day War of 1967, without formally recognizing Israel.

IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

Hamas’ ideology merges Palestinian nationalism with Islamist principles, drawing heavily from its roots in the Muslim Brotherhood. The group’s founding [1988 charter](#) contained anti-Zionist and antisemitic language, framing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a religious struggle rather than merely a territorial dispute. Unlike secular Palestinian nationalist factions, Hamas has consistently presented Islamic principles as fundamental to Palestinian identity and liberation. The group incorporates religious rhetoric and symbolism throughout its political messaging, positioning itself as defending not only Palestinian land but also Islamic values against perceived Western and Zionist threats.

Hamas’ revised 2017 charter [represented](#) a shift in the organization’s earlier positions while still

maintaining its core principles. Notably, it accepted the creation of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders as an “interim solution” but did not recognize Israel’s right to exist or renounce the use of armed resistance. The document also scaled back its antisemitic rhetoric and attempted to characterize resistance as one against “Zionism” rather than “Jews”:

Hamas affirms that its conflict is with the Zionist project not with the Jews because of their religion. Hamas does not wage a struggle against the Jews because they are Jewish but wages a struggle against the Zionists who occupy Palestine.

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

Hamas has a sophisticated organizational [structure](#) that includes both political leadership and military capabilities. At the apex of this hierarchy sits the [Political Bureau](#), which functions as the supreme decision-making body determining the group’s strategic direction and policies. The [Shura Council](#) serves in an advisory capacity, providing religious and strategic guidance to the group’s leadership. Hamas also [maintains](#) delegations abroad to manage international relations and secure external support. Since 2012, its political office has operated out of Doha, Qatar, though Qatari officials [asked](#) Hamas leaders to leave in late 2024, under pressure from the United States. Hamas has also maintained a presence in countries like [Turkey](#) and [Iran](#), using these bases to engage with regional allies and coordinate funding and diplomacy.

The organization [divides](#) its territorial administration between a division that oversees activities in the West Bank, although the PA [maintains](#) political and administrative authority there, and the Gaza Affairs division. Within Gaza, Hamas established what effectively functions as a government structure complete with ministries, local authorities, and security forces that operate independently from the internationally recognized PA. Prior to the onset of

the war with Israel in 2023, Hamas ran an extensive and popular [social welfare network](#) that included an [education system](#), [healthcare facilities](#), [tax collection](#), [courts](#), and [police force](#), although these, like much of the infrastructure in the enclave, have been badly [damaged](#) or [destroyed](#) in the conflict.

The [Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades](#) operate with some autonomy but ultimately answers to the Political Bureau. Additionally, Hamas maintains

YAHYA SINWAR

Yahya Sinwar, considered the [mastermind](#) behind the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel, was born on October 29, 1962, in the Khan Younis refugee camp and grew up in southern Gaza. His parents had been [displaced](#) from Ashkelon during the war that followed the founding of Israel in 1948, which Palestinians call “al-Nakba” (the Catastrophe). He earned a bachelor’s degree in Arabic from the Islamic University of Gaza and was influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, which was popular in Gaza at the time. In the mid-1980s, Sinwar developed close ties with Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and established the group’s internal security organization. According to Israeli officials, he was responsible for the killing of Palestinians who collaborated with Israel and for the abduction and killing of two Israeli soldiers, for which he was convicted and sentenced to four life terms. He was arrested by Israel in 1982, 1985, and 1988, ultimately spending 22 years in Israeli prisons before being released in a 2011 prisoner exchange. In 2013, he was elected to Hamas’ Political Bureau and became the head of the organization in 2017. He was [killed](#) on October 16, 2024, by Israeli forces who encountered him while on patrol in Rafah.

[independent cells](#) that can execute smaller tactical operations as well as specialized administrative [divisions](#) that handle specific concerns, including an Imprisoned Members' Affairs Team and a Palestinian Diasporic Affairs department.

After Israel [assassinated](#) Political Bureau Chief [Ismail Haniyeh](#) in July 2024, [Yahya Sinwar](#), then Hamas' Gaza head, became de facto leader of the group. Sinwar is considered the [mastermind](#) behind the October 7, 2023, attacks and was [killed](#) in Gaza by Israeli forces in October 2024. Following Sinwar's death, Hamas formed a [five-member committee](#) in Doha to act as the collective political leadership. Out of these committee members, Khalil al-Hayya has played the most active role with regard to [hostage negotiations](#).

“Iran has provided Hamas with financial aid, weapons components, and technical expertise, such as assistance in developing rockets and drones.”

Sinwar's brother, [Mohammed Sinwar](#), briefly assumed the role of overall leader and commander of the Qassam Brigades from October 2024 until his own death by an Israeli airstrike in May 2025. [Izz al-Din al-Haddad](#), also known as the “Ghost of al-Qassam,” subsequently became the military and operational leader in Gaza.

MILITARY TACTICS AND CAPABILITIES

Hamas' primary military [tactics](#) include small- and large-scale attacks against Israeli civilians using [improvised explosives](#) and rockets while occasionally taking hostages. Hamas has also built an extensive [tunnel](#) network beneath Gaza to [smuggle](#) goods and weapons, launch [surprise attacks](#) into Israeli territory, and provide protected movement and storage. The construction and maintenance of the tunnel network reportedly consumed a significant

portion of the group's military budget, with estimates suggesting that it [diverted](#) substantial amounts of construction materials meant for civilian infrastructure to expand this underground system.

Over the years, Hamas' military capabilities have been significantly [enhanced](#) through external support, particularly from Iran. The [relationship](#) between the two was established in the early 1990s, rooted in Iran's broader strategy of backing a coalition of state and non-state actors opposed to Israel and Western influence that became known informally as the “[Axis of Resistance](#).” Iran has provided Hamas with [financial aid](#), [weapons components](#), and technical expertise, such as assistance in [developing](#) rockets and drones based on Iranian designs but

made in Gaza with “common materials such as pipes, castor oil and scavenged spent Israeli munitions.” That relationship is pragmatic rather than ideological. Unlike [Hizballah](#), which operates as a close proxy

and ideological [ally](#) of Tehran, Hamas maintains greater operational independence. As a Sunni Islamist group, it also does not fully subscribe to Iran's revolutionary Shi'a worldview. The [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC), Iran's primary militant force and a central actor in its foreign policy, has played a major role in supporting Hamas by facilitating [training](#) through both the IRGC itself and allied groups like Hizballah.

THE ATTACK OF OCTOBER 7, 2023

At 6:30 AM on October 7, 2023, Hamas [launched](#) an unprecedented attack on southern Israel, firing at least [2,500 rockets](#) within a 20-minute window. [Using](#) paragliders, boats, motorcycles, and other vehicles, militants breached Israel's border fence and carried out the [deadliest attack](#) on Jews since the Holocaust. Organized formations of Hamas fighters attacked 22 Israeli communities,

ISMAIL HANIYEH

Ismail [Haniyeh](#) was born on January 20, 1963, in Al-Shati refugee camp in Gaza. Like Sinwar, his parents were displaced from Ashkelon during the Nakba. He studied Islamic literature at the Islamic University of Gaza and was influenced by the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood. Haniyeh joined Hamas when it was founded in 1987 and was arrested by Israel in 1987, 1988, and 1989. After serving three years in an Israeli prison and then one year in Lebanon, Haniyeh returned to Gaza and became dean of the Islamic University. He maintained close ties with Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and rose through the ranks of the organization, holding positions as Hamas' representative to the Palestinian Authority, deputy head of the Political Bureau, and a key strategic planner. When Hamas won 74 out of 132 seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections of 2006, Haniyeh was appointed prime minister of the Palestinian Authority, a position he held until the split between Hamas and Fatah divided political control of Gaza and the West Bank. In February 2017, Haniyeh moved to Qatar and was succeeded as head of Hamas by Yahya Sinwar. He led the Political Bureau until he was [assassinated](#) by Israel on July 31, 2024, while he was in Tehran for the inauguration of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian.

massacring civilians attending an outdoor music festival and families in their homes. More than 1,200 people were killed, including over 800 civilians and three dozen children, with many reportedly first subjected to [sexual assault](#). At

least [240 hostages](#) were taken to Gaza, including Israeli civilians and foreign nationals. The October 7 attack came as a complete surprise to the country in general and to the Israeli security establishment in particular, which had [assessed](#), despite the apparent availability of evidence to the contrary, that Hamas was deterred from carrying out such attacks and that its leadership in Gaza had made the pragmatic decision to reach negotiated understandings with Israel.

Hamas called the campaign [Al-Aqsa Flood](#) and released a statement describing its motives as an attempt “to alleviate the blockade in the Gaza Strip, break free from Israeli occupation, restore national rights, attain independence, shape the Palestinian destiny, and establish a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.”

Analysts believe several factors influenced Hamas' decision to launch the October 7 attack:

- 1. Palestinian Political Rivalry.** Since its founding, Hamas has [maintained](#) a contentious relationship with Fatah, the leading faction within the PLO. This rivalry intensified after Hamas' [violent takeover](#) of the Gaza Strip in 2007, which left the Fatah-dominated PA controlling only the West Bank. With PA President Mahmoud Abbas long showing a willingness to [cooperate](#) with Israel and Western powers, Hamas likely [saw an opportunity](#) to assert itself as the dominant Palestinian faction and undermine its political rivals. Meanwhile, Israel, seeking to weaken the prospect of a unified Palestinian front, had for years allowed or facilitated the [transfer](#) of funds into Gaza to preserve a level of stability under Hamas' rule. By tolerating Hamas' continued governance, Israel may have hoped to exacerbate internal Palestinian divisions, effectively pitting Hamas against the PLO/Fatah/PA and reducing the chances of a consolidated Palestinian leadership capable of mounting a unified political or diplomatic challenge.

2. Bolstering Legitimacy and Resistance

Identity. Before the attack, Hamas' governance in Gaza [faced significant challenges](#), including economic hardship and declining popular support. By provoking a massive Israeli military response, some observers theorize, Hamas hoped to generate international sympathy for Palestinians, rally support within Gaza, and reinforce its identity as the vanguard of national armed resistance.

3. Disrupting Regional Normalization. The 2020 [Abraham Accords](#), which normalized relations between [Israel](#) and several Arab states ([Bahrain](#), [the United Arab Emirates](#), and [Morocco](#), with [Sudan](#) stalled in the early phase of the process) but only nodded at the idea of Palestinian statehood, represented a significant diplomatic setback for Hamas. Even more concerning were the [advanced negotiations](#) between Saudi Arabia and Israel in 2023, which threatened to further sideline the Palestinian cause. [Derailing](#) these normalization efforts likely served as a [major motivation](#) for the attack, as Hamas sought to make Israel's regional integration impossible without addressing Palestinian rights.

4. Response to Israeli Politics. Israel's [rightward political shift](#) under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition government, which included far-right parties [advocating](#) for expanded West Bank settlements, reduced Palestinian autonomy, and the [transfer](#) of the Palestinian population to Sinai or other locations, contributed to a sense of desperation among Hamas leaders. Netanyahu's [rejection](#) of Hamas' revised 2017 charter, continued approvals for [settlement expansion](#), and [call to defund](#) the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) signaled to Hamas that diplomatic paths were increasingly limited.

5. Iran's Influence. While the extent of Iran's involvement in the October 7 attack is still



Emblem of Hamas. Source: Wiki Commons.

[unclear](#), the regime's [long-time](#) material support for Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups opposing Israel is [well documented](#). Experts [identified](#) Iran-manufactured weapons used during Hamas' incursion. Moreover, the attack served Iranian interests by potentially derailing Saudi-Israeli normalization, which Tehran [viewed](#) as the ultimate threat to its quest for regional hegemony.

US GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND CONGRESSIONAL LEGISLATION

US policy toward Hamas historically has been defined by efforts to sanction and diplomatically isolate the group. Following the [suicide bombing](#) campaign in the early 1990s, the US [designated](#) Hamas as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) in 1997 and has since criminalized the provision of material support to the group. In the wake of Hamas' [victory](#) in the 2006 Palestinian legislative

elections — and [seizure](#) of the Gaza strip in 2007 — US policy focused on providing political and financial assistance to the PA to counter Hamas [until](#) 2018.

In the aftermath of the October 7 attack, President Joe Biden's administration [condemned](#) Hamas and reaffirmed US support for Israel. On October 18, 2023, the US Department of the Treasury [imposed sanctions](#) targeting members of Hamas and its financial infrastructure. Congress has passed legislation and resolutions relating to Hamas and the conflict in Gaza since October 2023. Key legislation includes the [Hamas and Other Palestinian Terrorist Groups International Financing Prevention Act](#), enacted by Congress in April 2024, which requires the executive branch to impose sanctions on foreign states or persons that provide support to Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), or related groups. In March 2025, the Senate passed a [resolution](#) which affirmed that Hamas should not be allowed to retain any political or military control over Gaza. Recent Congressional action also includes [H.R. 176](#), the "No Immigration Benefits for Hamas Terrorists Act," which was introduced to the House of Representatives in February 2025 and seeks to impose immigration-related penalties on individuals deemed affiliated with attacks on Israel.

THE FUTURE OF HAMAS IN GAZA

Although badly battered, Hamas has survived an extensive Israeli military campaign that has killed more than [68,500](#) Palestinians and wounded more than 170,000, resulted in widespread hunger and [famine](#), and severely damaged or [destroyed](#) most of Gaza's buildings and infrastructure. Before October 7, the armed wing of Hamas was [estimated](#) at 20,000-30,000 fighters, and the organization has reportedly attracted 10,000-15,000 [new recruits](#) since the war began. Israel has said it has killed [nearly 20,000](#) Hamas fighters during the recent

conflict, and a classified Israeli military database listed [8,900 named fighters](#) from Hamas and PIJ as dead or "probably dead" as of May 2025. Israeli press estimates suggest [16,000-18,000 may remain](#). Although Israel has [assassinated](#) a significant number of Hamas' pre-October 7 leadership, the group has retained some degree of political influence in Gaza. Nevertheless, the future political strength of the movement is dependent on its capacity to preserve its internal organizational structure and chain of command in the face of continued Israeli military operations.

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Externally, Hamas' support from Iran has weakened, with likely implications for the future of the organization. Tehran continued to provide tangible [assistance](#) — online fundraising [campaigns](#), monetary and weapons smuggling into Gaza facilitated by senior Hamas leaders, as well as [sham charities](#). However, the effectiveness and reliability of this backing has become increasingly uncertain, and Tehran, in turn, may be losing faith in the Palestinian militant group's usefulness to its own interests. By October 2024, Israel's defense minister [declared](#) that Hamas and Hizballah were "no longer an effective tool" for Iran. During the June 2025 12-day war between Israel and Iran, Hamas said Tehran was "[paying the price](#)" for its support, and subsequent reporting described the group as [unsure](#) of continued assistance from its main ally. Tehran backed Hamas financially and militarily with the expectation that in the event of a confrontation with Israel, Hamas would join the fight on its side as its proxy. However, Israel had already diminished the capabilities of Hamas so significantly that the group remained largely [uninvolved](#) in the conflict. Moreover, during the

12-day war, Israel killed a number of senior IRGC leaders, including [Saeed Izadi](#), who was the primary proponent of the Iran-Hamas alliance, eliminating the members who were both familiar with and personally committed to advancing Iran's ties with Hamas.

At a UN conference in New York led by France and Saudi Arabia on July 29, 2025, the 22 members of the Arab League, the European Union, and 17 other states released a [statement](#) condemning the October 7 attack, calling for Hamas to disarm and leave Gaza, and urging Israel to commit to a two-state solution, with the PA assuming administration of the enclave. In response, Hamas [announced](#) that it was unwilling to disarm until an "independent, fully sovereign Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital" had been established. Israel, on the other hand, maintained its demand that Hamas demilitarize as a prerequisite for any agreement. Repeated attempts by Egyptian, Qatari, and US diplomats to arrange a cease-fire throughout mid-2025 faltered due to the Israel-Hamas divide over sequencing.

In early September 2025, Israel carried out an airstrike in Doha, Qatar, [targeting a meeting](#) of Hamas' senior leadership who had convened to discuss a recent US proposal for a cease-fire in Gaza. The Palestinian militant group [claimed](#) the strike killed several of its members and a Qatari security officer but none of its senior officials. In the aftermath of the attack, the Qatari prime minister stated that [it would not derail](#) Doha's efforts to mediate between Israel and Hamas.

On September 30, 2025, after a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, President Donald Trump's administration issued a [20-point peace plan](#) for a cease-fire in Gaza. The plan [called for](#) the disarmament of Hamas, alongside the gradual withdrawal of Israeli forces to a buffer zone, and the establishment of an international "Board of Peace," a technocratic transitional authority — to be chaired by President Trump — to oversee the governance of Gaza. The two sides [accepted](#) the plan and a

shaky cease-fire went into effect on October 10. Violations have occurred, but as of early November 2025, all sides claim the deal is holding. Significant details regarding the implementation of the full deal remained to be determined. Meanwhile, Hamas has taken steps to violently [reassert control](#) over Gaza.

This backgrounder was researched and written by MEI summer 2025 intern Hannah Sinrich, with additional work by Research Assistant Hamad Alshamlan and input from Senior Fellow Brian Katulis.

ACCESS ADDITIONAL MEI EXPERTISE

The Middle East Institute has a number of renowned experts who are well versed on the topic of Hamas, including MEI [Senior Fellow Brian Katulis](#), [Senior Fellow Charles Lister](#), and [Associate Fellow Eran Etzion](#). Our experts are available for interviews or commentary. For assistance with reaching Mr. Katulis or any of our scholars, please send an email to media@mei.edu or call 202-785-1141 ext. 241.

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