

Inside Hamas: How It Thinks, Fights, and Governs

By Magnus Ranstorp

Hamas has evolved from a Muslim Brotherhood-rooted social-religious movement into a hybrid actor that governs, polices society, and wages organized violence. The October 7, 2023, terrorist attack marked a watershed for Israel and the world. Against that backdrop, this article maps how Hamas thinks, operates, fights, and governs—from its origins to the present—showing how a religious structure and social-welfare *dawa* network hardened into an organized war machine. Based on first-hand interviews with senior figures, including its founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, it details the ideology, organizational architecture, and decision-making that drive both the *dawa* apparatus and the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades. The analysis tracks pivotal inflection points—from the First Intifada and Marj al-Zuhr deportations through Gaza’s 2007 takeover, successive wars, and Iranian/Hezbollah backing—to October 7. It concludes by assessing Hamas’ degraded yet durable capabilities, internal factional dynamics, and implications for Gaza’s ‘day after.’

Between the 1990s and Hamas’ parliamentary victory in 2006—followed by its violent takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007—I interviewed senior leaders across the movement in Gaza, the West Bank, and its external command hubs in Amman, Beirut, and Damascus.¹ In 1998, I met Hamas’ founder and spiritual guide, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, in a modest seaside office in Gaza City. Frail and dressed in white, he sat in his wheelchair—paralyzed since a childhood accident at age 12—radiating quiet authority. At his side was a striking contrast: his energetic and impeccably groomed aide Ismail Haniyeh, then Yassin’s personal assistant and, two decades later, the head of Hamas’ Politburo.

Yassin had been sentenced to life in prison in 1989 for ordering attacks that killed Israeli soldiers and Palestinians accused of collaboration.² He was released in 1997 after a failed Mossad attempt to assassinate Hamas leader Khaled Mashal in Jordan forced Israel into a prisoner-exchange deal.³ After eight years behind bars, he returned to Gaza to a hero’s welcome.⁴ It was there, calmly and deliberately, that he described to me the ideological roots and strategic ambitions of Hamas.

Yassin’s Vision: Ideology and Armed Struggle

Yassin traced Hamas’ origins to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, whose ties to Palestine dated back to 1935 when Hassan al-Banna’s brother met Jerusalem’s Grand Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini and helped found the Central Committee to Support Palestine.⁵ He revered Sheikh Izz al-Din al-Qassam—the Syrian-born preacher

who led armed resistance against the British and Zionist settlement in the 1930s—as the uncompromising symbol of jihad after whom Hamas’ military wing was named.⁶

Yassin justified violence against what he called “the Zionist enemy” as a religious duty. Citing Hamas’ 1988 Charter, which proclaims all of Palestine an *Islamic waqf*—sacred land that can never be surrendered—he condemned the PLO for accepting U.N. Resolutions 181, 242, and 338, seeing them as a *de facto* endorsement of a two-state solution and a betrayal of the goal of liberating all of historic Palestine.⁷ “It is the duty of every Muslim to work for the liberation of Palestine,” he declared.

Yet, he also floated the idea of a *hudna*, or temporary truce. Hamas, Yassin said, might halt attacks on Israeli civilians—though not settlers—for 10 years if Israel withdrew from the West Bank and Gaza, dismantled all settlements, released Palestinian prisoners, and recognized Palestinian self-determination.⁸ He cited the Prophet Mohammad’s Treaty of Hudaibiya (628) as precedent, presenting the *hudna* not as a path to permanent peace but as a tactical pause in a longer struggle.⁹

In our conversation, he even mentioned Sheikh Bassam Jarrar’s book *The Miracle of the Number 19 in the Holy Qur’an*,¹⁰ which predicted that Israel’s downfall would begin in 2022—a prophecy that seems striking in light of the watershed Hamas attack of October 7, 2023.

From Refugee Camp to Islamist Leader

Ahmed Ismael Yassin was born in 1936 in the village of al-Joura near today’s Israeli city of Ashkelon. His father died when he was five; at 12, he experienced the Nakba of 1948, when Zionist forces destroyed some 500 Palestinian villages and drove hundreds of thousands into exile.¹¹ His family fled to the al-Shati refugee camp on the northern edge of Gaza City, where poverty and overcrowding left an indelible mark on his political and religious outlook.¹²

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In 1964, Yassin enrolled at Ain Shams University in Cairo to study English, but illness, financial hardship, and the Egyptian crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood cut short his studies.¹³ Arrested in 1965 for Brotherhood activities and briefly imprisoned, he returned to Gaza where he devoted himself to *dawa*—Islamic outreach—and to building the Brotherhood's local base. Sheikh Yassin drew his early recruits from students disillusioned by the Arab defeat of 1967 who sought solace and purpose in the Islamic movement “to return to Islam.”¹⁴

Building the Social Infrastructure

In the early 1970s, Yassin and close associates such as Ibrahim al-Yazuri, Abd al-Aziz al-Rantisi, and Mahmoud al-Zahar founded Mujama al-Islamiya, a network of charities (*zakat*), clinics, youth clubs, kindergartens, and food-distribution programs.¹⁵ All these activities centered on the mosques, building a powerful network of influence. Between 1967 and 1987, the number of mosques in the West Bank and Gaza more than doubled—from about 600 to roughly 1,350.¹⁶ Hamas also raised funds through *zakat* committees and foreign donations from Brotherhood networks in Jordan and the Gulf.¹⁷

Mosques became the center of both religious instruction and community life. Sports clubs drew youth to football, martial arts, and other social activities while subtly socializing them into Brotherhood ideology. A network of welfare programs promoted an explicitly Islamic lifestyle, emphasizing family values and women's roles, while charitable institutions promoted the religious duty of almsgiving.¹⁸

The Islamic University of Gaza, established in 1978 and administered by Mujama, soon became a bastion of Islamist activism and a training ground for preachers and future leaders.¹⁹ Students formed the al-Qutla al-Islamiyya (“Islamic Bloc”), competing with leftist and nationalist groups and imposing Islamic norms on campus.²⁰ For Gaza's poor and devout, Mujama appeared as a benefactor and guide, embedding itself in daily life and creating a loyal base of support.

From Social Movement to Armed Resistance

Initially, Israel tolerated—and at times tacitly encouraged—Islamist activism as a counterweight to the secular PLO. However, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, a series of events propelled the Brotherhood toward militancy: the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the rise of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the mobilization of the Afghan jihad, and growing Palestinian frustration with occupation and the Brotherhood's caution.²¹

Some disillusioned members split off to form Palestinian Islamic Jihad, openly embracing violence. Internal debate within the Brotherhood erupted: continue gradual social reform or adopt armed resistance?

By 1983, Yassin had already moved toward confrontation, creating two secret units: al-Majd, an internal intelligence and enforcement arm led by Yahya Sinwar and Rawhi Mushtaha, to monitor and punish suspected collaborators; and al-Mujahideen, a commando group under Salah Shihadah, tasked with attacking Israeli military targets.²² Financed by Islamist supporters in Jordan, both units smuggled significant quantities of weapons into Gaza and established the foundations of Hamas' future military wing.²³

Arrested in 1984 for forming an armed group and possessing weapons, Yassin was sentenced to 12 years but freed in a 1985

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prisoner exchange.²⁴ This contributed to the leadership's gradual decision to liberate Palestine through armed struggle alongside social change and Islamic reform.²⁵

The Birth of Hamas

When the First Intifada erupted in December 1987, Yassin and his associates transformed these underground networks into a new movement: Hamas. From a seven-man leadership circle—including Yassin—it fused the Brotherhood's religious and social infrastructure with an organized military wing.²⁶

In August 1988, Hamas issued its charter (*mithaq*), declaring that jihad would continue until all of Palestine was “liberated” and the state of Israel eliminated.²⁷ By embracing armed struggle, Hamas distinguished itself from the PLO's move toward negotiations and quickly gained political legitimacy and influence. Its military wing was named the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades in honor of the 1930s preacher and fighter who led early armed resistance against British rule and Zionist settlement.²⁸

Consolidating Organization and Power

In 1989, Israel arrested Yassin again, sentencing him to two life terms for his role in the abduction and killing of two Israeli soldiers.²⁹ During his nearly eight years in prison, Hamas expanded its social base and radicalized through an intense campaign of violence against Israel.

To coordinate its growing movement, Hamas created the Majlis al-Shura, a 40-50-member strong council representing Gaza, the West Bank, the external leadership, and Hamas prisoners in Israeli jails.³⁰ Mirrored by committees at lower levels, it maintained tight cell-based secrecy to prevent infiltration and became the arena where major political and military strategies were set.³¹ Hamas' decision-making was structured through shura councils at every tier—family, neighborhood, regional, and national—forming an interlocking web of authority that extended upward like a bureaucratic pyramid.³²

Hamas' external leadership—based at various times in Amman, Beirut, and Damascus—played a pivotal strategic role and later oversaw the creation of the Politburo in the early 1990s. Elected internally and including leaders from both the occupied territories and the diaspora, the 24-member strong Politburo remains Hamas' highest political authority, responsible for strategy, relations, and coordination of operations inside Palestine and abroad.³³

A Dual Structure: Social Network and Military Force

Hamas' durability rests on the deliberate integration of its social-political network with its clandestine military arm, each reinforcing the other.

The social and political wing embeds Islamic values in Palestinian society and cultivates loyalty to the movement. Through

mosques, schools, charities, and youth programs, it nurtures ideological commitment and glorifies what it calls ‘martyrdom,’ portraying sacrifice in the struggle against Israel as both a religious duty and a source of collective honor.³⁴ By focusing on youth—the heart of Palestinian communal life—it secures a steady flow of future supporters.³⁵

The Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades wage the armed struggle: planning and executing guerrilla operations and terror attacks against Israeli targets, procuring and smuggling weapons, and running covert missions to sustain military capacity. They also provide financial stipends and public recognition to the families of fighters killed in action, reinforcing a culture that venerates these “martyrs” as heroes.³⁶

These two pillars are deliberately intertwined: the social network provides recruits, resources, and political legitimacy, while the military wing projects power and deterrence. Together, they form a self-reinforcing system that has allowed Hamas to entrench its rule in the Palestinian territories and preserve the ability to project force beyond them.

Hamas Escalation and Israel’s Strategic Miscalculation: The Marj al-Zuhr Deportation

In the years following its founding, Hamas’ violence escalated dramatically. By 1989, the movement had intensified attacks on Israeli forces, prompting sweeping arrests. After Israeli security captured al-Majd leaders Salah Shehade and Yahya Sinwar, Hamas formed Unit 101, led by Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, with a clear mandate to kidnap Israeli soldiers.³⁷ The abduction and murder of two IDF troops, Avi Sasportas and Ilan Saadon, triggered the arrest of roughly 650 Hamas members and leaders across Gaza and the West Bank.

Israel had already identified about 50 Hamas cells, and the mass arrests initially appeared to cripple the organization.³⁸ Yet, they also forced Hamas to adapt. Its external leadership tightened decision-making, while imprisoned leaders and activists built a parallel command structure behind bars—an unintended training ground that ultimately strengthened the movement’s internal cohesion and resilience.

With Sheikh Ahmed Yassin serving a life sentence³⁹ for involvement in the kidnappings, Hamas sought new leverage. In December 1992, four operatives abducted Nissim Toledano, a 29-year-old Israeli border policeman, demanding Yassin’s release. When negotiations stalled, Toledano was murdered and his body found near Jerusalem two days later.

The killing, coming on the heels of two other fatal assaults on Israeli soldiers within eight days, provoked nationwide outrage. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin vowed that Hamas would not derail the U.S.-led Madrid peace process. Israel responded with a massive operation: 1,129 Palestinians were arrested in the West Bank and Gaza, and 415 Hamas and Islamic Jihad members were deported to Marj al-Zuhur in Israel’s security zone in southern Lebanon, barred from returning for two years.

Operational Consequences

Rather than crippling Hamas, the 1992 deportations became a catalyst for its transformation into a far more capable and internationally connected movement. Exiled to Marj al-Zuhur in southern Lebanon, 415 members of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad—including senior political and military figures from both

Gaza and the West Bank—found themselves suddenly concentrated in one place.⁴⁰ Instead of fragmenting the movement, Israel had inadvertently created a strategic incubator.

“Many of my brothers in the West Bank did not know our brothers from Gaza,” one deportee recalled to this author. “In the camp, we came to know each other personally and could plan together for the years ahead.” Day after day, cut off from their homeland but united in purpose, Hamas leaders forged tighter organizational links, drafted long-term strategies, and laid the foundations for the movement’s next phase of growth.⁴¹

The harsh winter conditions and makeshift tent city quickly drew international attention. U.N. agencies and global media highlighted the deportees’ plight, prompting strong U.N. condemnation and widespread criticism of Israel.⁴² Far from weakening Hamas, the deportation turned the exiles into symbols of Palestinian resilience, boosting the movement’s legitimacy across the Palestinian territories and galvanizing sympathy throughout the Muslim world.⁴³

Even more consequential was the deepening alliance with Hezbollah and Iran. Hezbollah provided not only food, medical aid, and shelter but also transferred its hard-won expertise in guerrilla warfare. Through Hezbollah, Hamas established direct contacts with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), gaining access to advanced training in secure communications, weapons handling, bomb-making, counter-espionage, urban warfare, and close-quarters combat.⁴⁴ These lessons later enabled Hamas to conduct suicide bombings and car-bomb attacks inside Israel, closely replicating Hezbollah’s tactics.

Tehran soon formalized its backing: In 1992, Hamas reached an agreement with Iran for an annual subsidy of roughly \$30 million,⁴⁵ opened a permanent office in Tehran, and sent Qassam Brigade operatives for further training.⁴⁶

By the time international pressure compelled Israel to begin the deportees’ phased return in 1993, what was intended as a devastating blow had instead become a strategic windfall. Hamas emerged from Marj al-Zuhur more cohesive, battle-hardened, and internationally networked, with strengthened ties to Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard that would shape its military and political trajectory for decades.

Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades Escalate Violence

In 1991, Hamas established its military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, and appointed Salah Shehade of Beit Hanoun in Gaza as its first commander.⁴⁷ A former cellmate of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and freed in a 1985 prisoner exchange, Shehade was chosen for his education, charisma, and talent for recruiting and motivating fighters.⁴⁸

He directed field commanders in both Gaza and the West Bank and set Hamas’ strategy for armed attacks. To prevent Israeli infiltration, the Brigades operated in small cells of four or five men under a single leader.⁴⁹ Recruits—often politically active university students—were carefully vetted for any link to Israel, and the number of senior posts was deliberately kept small. Israel’s intelligence network was vast—Palestinian security sources estimated more than 200,000 informers over the years—forcing Hamas to maintain extreme secrecy.⁵⁰

Initially, the Qassam Brigades targeted Israeli army posts and Jewish settlers, avoiding civilian casualties. That restraint ended on April 16, 1993, when Hamas carried out its first suicide bombing: 23-year-old Saher Tamam al-Nabulsi detonated a Volkswagen

packed with propane cylinders and grenades at the Mehola junction in the West Bank, killing himself and another Palestinian and wounding eight IDF soldiers.⁵¹

The bombmaker was Yahya Ayyash, known as *al-Muhandis*—“the Engineer”—for his electrical-engineering degree from Birzeit University and his skill in turning everyday materials into powerful explosives. His devices killed dozens of Israelis and injured many more during a wave of suicide attacks.⁵² Elusive and highly effective, Ayyash became both a folk hero among Palestinians and a prime target for Israeli intelligence.

Hamas recast suicide attacks as “martyrdom operations,” portraying the bombers as *shuhada*, martyrs who died defending Islam and earning the highest spiritual reward. This religious framing turned suicide missions into powerful propaganda: It legitimized violence, glorified self-sacrifice, and drew recruits. Families of martyrs received generous stipends, while Qassam fighters themselves were paid monthly allowances—significant in impoverished Gaza—adding material incentive to ideological appeal.⁵³ To avoid Israeli reprisals, Hamas’ political leadership publicly denied directing or even knowing of these operations, even as suicide bombings became its signature weapon for terrorizing Israel and projecting a “balance of terror.”

As Hamas escalated its campaign of violence, Israel and the PLO secretly negotiated the Oslo Accords, signed on September 13, 1993. The PLO renounced terror and recognized Israel’s right to exist, while Israel agreed to withdraw from Gaza and Jericho and grant limited self-rule to the new Palestinian Authority (PA).⁵⁴ Central to the deal was security: The PA assumed responsibility for preventing attacks on Israel, and thousands of Hamas members were soon arrested by both the PA and Israel as joint security coordination took hold.

Hamas condemned Oslo as a betrayal that legitimized Israeli occupation and ignored core Palestinian demands such as sovereignty and the refugees’ right of return.⁵⁵ Determined to derail the process and to present itself as the uncompromising Islamist alternative to Fatah, it intensified suicide bombings and other attacks on Israeli soldiers and civilians. These assaults killed scores, deepened Israeli security fears, and hardened Israeli policy—while allowing Hamas to position itself as the true standard-bearer of Palestinian resistance.

For Hamas, suicide operations became its most potent weapon of coercion and deterrence, a way to prove that Israel could be struck at will and that no peace would endure without addressing the movement’s demands.

Sabotaging the Oslo Accords

On February 25, 1994, American-born Israeli settler Baruch Goldstein stormed the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron during Ramadan prayers, killing 29 Palestinians and wounding more than 100 before worshippers beat him to death.⁵⁶ The massacre triggered days of violent clashes across the West Bank and Gaza, prompted Israel to ban the far-right Kach movement, and led to tighter Israeli control of the holy site, which was permanently divided into separate Muslim and Jewish prayer areas.

The attack also dealt a major blow to the Oslo peace process. Hamas seized on the outrage, vowing bloody revenge. Yahya Ayyash, the Qassam Brigades’ master bomb-maker, declared in a communiqué that five retaliatory operations would begin at the close of the 40-day Muslim mourning period.⁵⁷ Under his direction,

a wave of suicide bombings followed—Ayyash is generally credited with planning or supplying explosives for about nine major Hamas suicide bombings between 1994 and early 1996.

These attacks killed and injured scores of Israelis, shattered public confidence in the peace process, and fueled growing skepticism about the possibility of coexistence. Each explosion not only inflicted immediate carnage but also eroded hopes for a negotiated settlement, turning Ayyash into one of the most polarizing figures of the conflict. The escalating violence strengthened Israel’s right wing and emboldened extremists who rallied against Oslo—precisely the outcome Hamas intended and achieved.

The climate of rage and mistrust helped radicalize Jewish extremists as well. In November 1995, far-right Israeli Yigal Amir assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, effectively killing the last fragile prospects of the Oslo process.⁵⁸ In the years that followed, Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank accelerated sharply, further undermining any remaining hope of a two-state solution.

The Second Intifada

The Second Intifada, or al-Aqsa Intifada, erupted in September 2000, after years of Palestinian frustration with a peace process that delivered neither sovereignty nor relief from occupation. Seven years after Oslo, Israeli settler numbers in the West Bank had doubled—from roughly 200,000 in 1993 to nearly 400,000 by 2000—deeply undermining Palestinian faith in a two-state solution. Hopes of a breakthrough collapsed when the Camp David summit in July 2000 failed to resolve the core disputes: permanent borders, the fate of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and Israel’s insistence on stringent security guarantees.

The spark came on September 28, 2000, when Ariel Sharon, then Israel’s opposition leader, made a high-profile visit to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif escorted by 1,000 Israeli police and soldiers. For Palestinians, it was a deliberate provocation—a public display of Israeli control over one of Islam’s holiest sites. Clashes erupted almost immediately and swept across the West Bank and Gaza. Israeli forces responded with live fire and rubber bullets; within five days, at least 47 Palestinians were killed and nearly 1,900 were wounded.⁵⁹

Hamas quickly cast the uprising as a holy struggle, arguing that the conflict was fundamentally religious and that compromise with Israel was impossible. On the second day, 12-year-old Mohammed al-Durrah was killed in crossfire at Gaza’s Netzarim junction while sheltering beside his father. Footage of the dying boy became an enduring symbol of Palestinian suffering and inflamed anger across the Arab world.⁶⁰

As violence escalated, the Palestinian Authority (PA) abandoned its effort to suppress Hamas and released almost all Hamas prisoners, giving the movement space to rebuild its armed networks. What began as mass street protests evolved into a sustained campaign of armed attacks and suicide bombings. Between 2000 and 2005, Israel suffered hundreds of attacks, including 54 Hamas suicide bombings, according to the Shin Bet security service.⁶¹ Other factions—Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Fatah offshoots, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)—also carried out deadly operations. More than 500 Israelis were killed, and thousands were wounded.

Israel answered with overwhelming force. Operation Defensive

Shield in 2002 reoccupied major West Bank cities and sharply curtailed attacks, but it also crippled PA institutions and created a power vacuum that Hamas rapidly filled. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon imposed sweeping curfews and began constructing the 700-kilometer separation barrier, a wall-and-fence system that restricted Palestinian movement and effectively redrew the map of the West Bank, entrenching Israeli control over key settlement blocs.⁶²

The relentless suicide bombings and high Israeli death toll shattered Israeli faith in the Oslo process and pushed public opinion sharply to the right. Meanwhile, Yasser Arafat saw his authority and credibility collapse—dogged by charges of corruption and accused of failing to curb violence. Under U.S. and Israeli pressure, the post of Palestinian prime minister was created in 2003. Mahmoud Abbas briefly held the position but resigned after clashing with Arafat and being branded a “collaborator” for condemning terror attacks.

Arafat’s death in November 2004 brought Abbas to the presidency, but the political landscape had already undergone a significant transformation. Sharon, now Israel’s prime minister, pursued a unilateral strategy: Even as he prepared to withdraw all 21 Jewish settlements from Gaza, he moved to consolidate permanent control over major West Bank settlement blocs. Determined to prevent Hamas from claiming the Gaza pull-out as a victory, Sharon ordered the assassinations of Hamas’ spiritual leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, in March 2004 and Gaza chief Abd al-Aziz al-Rantisi a month later.⁶³

By the time Israel completed its Gaza disengagement in 2005, the Second Intifada had destroyed the Oslo vision of a negotiated two-state peace, hardened attitudes on both sides, and left Hamas politically strengthened and militarily seasoned, firmly entrenched as the dominant force in Palestinian resistance.

From Oslo Boycott to Gaza Rule: Hamas’ Rise

Hamas’ boycott of the 1996 Palestinian elections was a deliberate rejection of the 1993 Oslo Accords, which it condemned as legitimizing Israeli occupation and betraying Palestinian sovereignty. By refusing to join the new Palestinian Authority (PA), Hamas cast itself as the uncompromising alternative to Fatah, winning support from Palestinians disillusioned with corruption and failed peace efforts while expanding its own network of mosques, schools, clinics, and charities.⁶⁴

The Second Intifada (2000–2005) transformed the movement. After years of armed struggle, Hamas emerged politically emboldened and militarily strengthened, claiming that Israel’s 2005 unilateral withdrawal from Gaza proved that violence—not negotiations—forced Israeli concessions. The assassinations of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Abd al-Aziz al-Rantisi in 2004 left a leadership vacuum but also convinced Hamas it had to enter formal politics to shape the post-Intifada order.⁶⁵

Hamas first tested the waters in municipal elections, capturing 15 of 18 West Bank municipalities, even in Fatah heartlands.⁶⁶ After broad consultations—including its leaders in Gaza and the West Bank, the diaspora and Hamas prisoners—the movement decided to contest the 2006 legislative elections.⁶⁷

Running under the banner “Change and Reform,” Hamas declared the Oslo process dead and promised clean governance.⁶⁸ Its campaign hammered Fatah’s corruption and failures, contrasting Hamas’ social-service network with the PA’s ineptitude. Banners in Gaza taunted the PA: “Your choice: the Qassam rocket or the

policeman protecting Israel.”⁶⁹

The result was a landslide: Hamas won 74 of 132 seats, Fatah just 45.⁷⁰ Hopes in Washington and Ramallah that participation would moderate Hamas backfired. Israel froze tax transfers, tightened border controls, and resumed military operations, while the Quartet (United States, European Union, Russia, United Nations) demanded Hamas renounce violence, recognize Israel, and accept past accords.⁷¹ Hamas refused, triggering international isolation and crippling economic sanctions that gutted the PA’s finances.

Hamas’ rule quickly took on an Islamist character. It pushed gender segregation; pressed women to wear the hijab; shut music shops and internet cafés; banned mixed bathing, public dancing and Western-style celebrations; and created a morality police—including a female unit in full *niqab*—to enforce “Islamic modesty.” With no law against domestic violence and “honour killings” tacitly tolerated, women’s rights eroded sharply.⁷²

Efforts to form a unity government with Fatah collapsed over Hamas’ refusal to recognize Israel. Hamas formed its own cabinet with Ismail Haniyeh as prime minister and built a rival Executive Force, defying President Mahmoud Abbas.⁷³

In June 2007, a week of brutal street battles—marked by kidnappings and summary executions—ended with Hamas’ armed takeover of Gaza. Human Rights Watch documented atrocities on both sides: Hamas fighters threw a captured presidential guard officer from a 15-story building; Fatah gunmen hurled a Hamas preacher from a high-rise.⁷⁴

Abbas dissolved the unity government, declared a state of emergency, and appointed technocrat Salam Fayyad as prime minister, but Hamas refused to yield. After a three-day siege of PA compounds, it seized every key institution in Gaza and replaced PA officials with its own loyalists.⁷⁵

By mid-2007, Hamas had completed its transformation from Oslo’s fiercest opponent to Gaza’s sole ruler—proof of both the collapse of the Oslo peace framework and the enduring force of Islamist mobilization in Palestinian politics.

Operation Cast Lead

After Hamas seized Gaza in 2007, Israel and Egypt imposed a blockade that crippled the economy and deepened a humanitarian crisis. Hamas and other factions answered with regular rocket fire into southern Israel, killing civilians and spreading fear.

Israel struck back on December 27, 2008, with Operation Cast Lead, a three-week air and ground offensive to halt the rockets and smash Hamas’ military infrastructure. Israeli jets hit over 100 targets in minutes, then pounded Hamas command posts, weapons caches, and its growing tunnel network.⁷⁶ Leaflets warned civilians to flee, but the assault killed over 1,200 Palestinians, destroyed 46,000 homes, and left 100,000 people homeless. Israeli losses were far lower—three civilians killed—though 750 rockets still struck Israeli towns.⁷⁷

Hamas was ready for Cast Lead: It mined buildings, hid weapons in mosques, and built a three-tier tunnel system—smuggling tunnels taxed at 20 percent, defensive tunnels for leaders’ escape, and offensive tunnels for cross-border raids.⁷⁸ It also extended its rocket range to about 40 km, putting some 800,000 Israelis within reach.⁷⁹

By January 18, 2009, Israel claimed a tactical win: senior Hamas commanders killed, roughly 60–70 percent of Rafah’s smuggling tunnels destroyed, and a temporary ceasefire in place. Hamas, however, rebuilt quickly with covert Iranian and Hezbollah

backing—restoring its tunnel economy (1,500+ tunnels counted by 2013)⁸⁰ and upgrading its rocket arsenal.⁸¹ Cast Lead ravaged Gaza's civilians and infrastructure—over half of hospitals were damaged—yet it also underscored Hamas' resilience and resolve to wage a protracted armed campaign despite the human cost.⁸²

The Release of Yahya Sinwar and his Rise to Power

On June 25, 2006, a Hamas-led commando unit, joined by fighters from the Popular Resistance Committees and the Army of Islam, infiltrated Israel through a cross-border tunnel near the Kerem Shalom crossing. They ambushed an Israeli tank and an observation post, killing two soldiers and wounding several others before abducting 19-year-old Corporal Gilad Shalit and spiriting him back into Gaza.⁸³ Israel responded with Operation Summer Rains, striking Gaza and arresting dozens of Hamas officials, while Hamas demanded a mass prisoner release in exchange.⁸⁴

Shalit spent over five years in clandestine captivity, with only occasional proof-of-life messages, including a video in 2009.⁸⁵ After protracted Egyptian-mediated negotiations, he was freed on October 18, 2011, in a landmark deal: Israel released 1,027 Palestinian prisoners, nearly 300 of whom were serving life sentences for attacks that had killed 569 Israelis.

The release unfolded in two stages: first, 477 prisoners (including 27 women), then another 550 two months later. Among those freed were planners and perpetrators of some of Israel's deadliest terror attacks—the 2001 Dolphinarium nightclub bombing in Tel Aviv, the 2001 Sbarro pizzeria bombing in Jerusalem, and the 2002 Passover massacre at Netanya's Park Hotel. Others had taken part in the killings of IDF soldiers Avi Sasportas and Ilan Saadon (1989), policeman Nissim Toledano (1992), and soldier Nachshon Wachsman (1994).⁸⁶

While the exchange was widely celebrated for bringing Shalit home, it sparked fierce debate inside Israel. Critics argued that the deal emboldened Hamas, proved the strategic value of kidnapping Israelis, and encouraging future abductions.

Among those freed in the Shalit exchange, Yahya Sinwar—later accused of masterminding the October 7, 2023, attacks—was the most significant. Released after 22 years in prison for murdering two IDF soldiers, he had close operational ties to Hamas' military chiefs.⁸⁷ His brother Muhammad, a Qassam Brigades commander, helped plan Shalit's abduction and oversaw the swap negotiations.⁸⁸ Israeli intelligence later reported that many released prisoners soon rejoined Hamas' armed wing, resuming rocket attacks and plotting new assaults.⁸⁹

By 2012, Sinwar had become the key architect of Hamas' militarization in Gaza. He moved quickly to tighten the movement's grip on power. In April 2012, Sinwar joined Hamas' Gaza Politburo alongside Qassam Brigades chiefs Ahmed al-Jabari and Marwan Issa, a watershed moment that put the armed wing in charge of the movement's political direction.⁹⁰ Known for his ruthless discipline and mastery of Hamas' clandestine networks, Sinwar became the crucial link between its political and military command.

When Israel launched Operation Pillar of Defence on November 14, 2012, its opening strike killed Ahmed al-Jabari, Hamas' military chief.⁹¹ The assassination was meant to decapitate the movement, but it instead propelled Sinwar into the forefront of Hamas' war effort. From his command post in Gaza, Sinwar directed the entire counter-offensive, coordinating closely with Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Over eight days, the Qassam Brigades fired around 1,456 rockets, including Iranian-supplied Fajr-5 missiles able to reach

Tel Aviv—a shock to Israel and a clear signal of Sinwar's tightening strategic ties to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).⁹²

Sinwar used the aftermath to reshape Hamas from a loose insurgency into a professional fighting force. In 2013, he created al-Nukhba (“the elite”), a clandestine special-forces unit built for cross-border raids, kidnappings, and targeted killings.⁹³ He personally vetted recruits and enforced a brutal training regime—weeks spent in Gaza's tunnels with almost no food or water to harden fighters for combat conditions. The most promising cadres were dispatched to Iran's Quds Force for advanced instruction in sabotage, intelligence collection, and urban warfare, where Sinwar forged a direct relationship with General Qassem Soleimani, the architect of Tehran's regional proxy network.⁹⁴

These gains came while Hamas faced unprecedented regional isolation. In 2012, the movement broke with Syria after refusing to endorse Bashar al-Assad's bloody suppression of the Sunni uprising. Damascus expelled Hamas' leaders and closed its offices, forcing the political bureau to relocate to Qatar. The rupture chilled relations with Iran and Hezbollah, sharply reducing the flow of Iranian money and weapons just as Hamas was trying to upgrade its military capabilities.⁹⁵

Into this vacuum stepped Qatar and Turkey, eager to expand their influence. Qatar in particular became Hamas' primary financial lifeline, providing hundreds of millions of dollars for Gaza's reconstruction, public-sector salaries, and emergency relief, keeping the Hamas administration afloat despite a crippling Israeli-Egyptian blockade.⁹⁶

Hamas' troubles deepened in July 2013 when a military coup in Egypt toppled President Mohamed Morsi, the movement's key Muslim Brotherhood ally. Cairo's new rulers branded Hamas a security threat.⁹⁷ They systematically destroyed the Gaza-Egypt smuggling tunnels—the vital arteries for weapons, fuel, and commerce that had funded Hamas' military machine through heavy taxation.⁹⁸

Cut off from Damascus and squeezed by Cairo, Hamas was forced to reconfigure its alliances, leaning heavily on Qatar's cash while quietly repairing its ties with Tehran to preserve the military support it needed for its confrontation with Israel.

Emerging from this crucible, Yahya Sinwar became the pivotal architect of Hamas' evolution—the man who married Iranian backing to Hamas' home-grown militancy, fused political and military leadership, and turned the organization into a highly disciplined, Tehran-linked force capable of challenging Israel on multiple fronts.

The 2014 Gaza war, or Operation Protective Edge, lasted 50 days of Israeli airstrikes and a ground offensive against Hamas rocket fire and tunnels. Over 2,000 Palestinians and 73 Israelis were killed, and Gaza suffered heavy destruction. Hamas survived politically, claimed “resistance” success, and maintained control of Gaza, but its military capacity was weakened and Gaza faced deepened isolation and a prolonged humanitarian crisis.⁹⁹

After Hamas' setbacks in the 2012 conflict and again in the 2014 Gaza war, Sinwar and Mohammed Deif, the long-time commander of Hamas' military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, concluded that political leaders had fatally restrained the Qassam Brigades' offensives. They assured Iran that in the next war, Hamas would fight unrestrained—locking the movement into ever-closer cooperation with Tehran.¹⁰⁰

In May 2017, Hamas entered a new phase of leadership and alliances as Ismail Haniyeh became Politburo chief and Yahya

Sinwar emerged as Gaza's de facto ruler, cementing the military leadership's grip on the movement.¹⁰¹

That same year, Hamas issued its Document of General Principles and Policies, a tactical rebranding aimed at easing regional and international isolation without altering core aims. The document accepted a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders as a temporary consensus formula but still denied Israel's legitimacy, distanced the movement from the Muslim Brotherhood to placate Egypt and other Arab states, and reframed the struggle as against "the Zionist project," not Jews.¹⁰² Yet, it reaffirmed armed resistance and the ultimate goal of liberating all of historic Palestine—a tactical facelift, not an ideological shift.

The 2017 election paved the way for renewed ties with Iran. In October of that year, senior Hamas leader Saleh al-Arouri visited Tehran for high-level talks that proved decisive: Iran agreed to restore military and financial support, reviving the strategic partnership.¹⁰³

Iran's renewed backing armed and funded Hamas while giving Tehran a reliable Sunni ally on Israel's southern flank. By sharing rocket and drone designs and training engineers, Iran enabled Hamas to produce weapons locally despite the blockade, turning it from a client into a self-sufficient force with long-range rockets, armed drones, naval commandos, and a sophisticated tunnel network.¹⁰⁴

Politically, Hamas exploited the Palestinian Authority's paralysis and regional shifts—such as the Abraham Accords and waning global attention—to position itself as the chief defender of Jerusalem and the Palestinian cause. The Great March of Return (March 30, 2018–late 2019) demanded refugees' right of return and an end to Gaza's blockade; over 200 Palestinians were killed, yet the protests spotlighted Gaza's plight and strengthened Hamas' standing despite no easing of the blockade.¹⁰⁵

In July 2018, Hamas established a joint operations room that brought together 12 Palestinian factions from across the political spectrum. Its purpose was to streamline the coordination of military actions against Israel and the IDF, with particular emphasis on synchronizing rocket fire.¹⁰⁶ This framework came into sharp focus in May 2021, when an intense 11-day war broke out between Hamas and Israel. Hamas showcased a vastly expanded rocket arsenal in 2021, firing over 4,000 rockets—some reaching Tel Aviv and central Israel—and using mass salvos to try to overwhelm Israel's Iron Dome defenses.¹⁰⁷ This display of firepower reinforced Hamas' image as both the military vanguard of Palestinian resistance and the dominant political force in Gaza.

Hamas judged the war a vindication of its tunnel network as a shield against Israeli airstrikes and a covert means of movement. Afterward, it staged a tactical feint—escalating violence in the West Bank while keeping Gaza calm—to lull Israel into believing no major assault was coming. All the while, it fortified positions, mobilized resources, and secretly prepared for Operation Al-Aqsa Flood.

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023

In May 2022, Israeli intelligence obtained a 40-page Hamas blueprint titled "Jericho Wall," outlining a meticulously planned assault to overwhelm the Gaza border defenses.¹⁰⁸ The document described simultaneous breaches at 60 points; raids on *kibbutzim* and military bases; an opening rocket barrage; drones to disable security cameras and automated machine guns; the disruption of IDF communications; and a mass infiltration of thousands of

fighters arriving by motorized paragliders, motorcycles, and on foot—the very tactics Hamas carried out on October 7.¹⁰⁹

Israeli analysts, however, dismissed it as aspirational. They believed the Iron Wall barrier, completed in 2021—stretching more than 70 meters underground and fitted with sensors—made tunneling impossible. They assessed that the Qassam Brigades could mount only a limited raid, perhaps 80 fighters breaching two points, and that a full-scale, multi-site invasion by some 3,000 heavily armed attackers lay far beyond Hamas' capabilities.¹¹⁰

The decision to launch the October 7, 2023, assault was kept to a tiny inner circle around Yahya Sinwar in Gaza—among them Mohammed Sinwar, Mohammed Deif, and Marwan Issa.¹¹¹ According to the Al Jazeera documentary "What Is Hidden Is Greater," the go-ahead came just two days before the attack; it had originally been planned for March 7, 2023, but was postponed for operational reasons.¹¹² Only then were Qassam Brigades commanders informed.

Detailed maps of IDF bases, communications nodes, *kibbutzim*, and other targets were distributed to roughly 3,000 fighters, with another 1,500 Hamas members assigned to support roles inside Gaza. The assault opened with a barrage of more than 5,000 rockets, a diversion masking a coordinated ground offensive that breached the Gaza-Israel border at 119 points.¹¹³

In a simultaneous strike on at least seven Israeli military outposts, Hamas systematically blinded Israel's defenses: snipers and commercial drones armed with explosives destroyed key sensors; grenades were hurled over the fence; a volley of Zouari kamikaze drones and 140–150 hexacopters carrying cameras and precision-dropped bombs disabled surveillance towers, communications links, and the IDF's automated "see-and-shoot" system. The operation severed communications within IDF units and between the army's Gaza-area headquarters and other forces, leaving Israel's defenses paralyzed at the outset of the attack.¹¹⁴

Hamas, in coordination with other Palestinian militant groups, overran at least seven IDF posts and swept into nearby towns, *kibbutzim*, and the Supernova music festival. Mass shootings, home invasions, sexual violence, and kidnappings followed: About 1,200 people—mostly civilians—were killed and roughly 250 taken hostage. The attack's scale, coordination, and deliberate targeting of civilians marked the most lethal and brutal assault in Israel's history and since the Holocaust. The United Kingdom's 7 October Parliamentary Commission Report (the Roberts Report) draws on forensic evidence, survivor accounts, and open-source footage to chronicle the deadliest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust.¹¹⁵ It lays bare the attack's deliberate, systematic nature, dismantles false narratives, and details the extreme brutality Hamas unleashed on civilians.

Hamas Propaganda Efforts

In January 2024, Hamas published a document in English bearing the title "Our Narrative—Operation Al-Aqsa Flood." The Hamas document is a calculated propaganda effort, portraying the October 7 attack as part of a historic struggle against colonialism and Zionism. It recasts the group as a "moderate" national-religious movement that sanctions all forms of resistance, including armed struggle, and urges international investigations of alleged Israeli war crimes to increase pressure on Israel. At the same time, it hides Hamas' Muslim Brotherhood origins, its charter's call for Israel's destruction, and its rejection of the Oslo Accords, while trying to distance its political leadership abroad from the Gaza-based

military wing to soften its image internationally.

Hamas has sought to justify its October 7 attack as a multi-purpose operation. It claims the assault was meant to ignite a wider regional conflict by drawing in the “Axis of Resistance,” to sabotage the Abraham Accords and Israel’s normalization with Arab states, and to challenge the Israeli army’s image of invincibility with a strike aimed—according to Hamas—at soldiers rather than civilians. The group frames the attack as a necessary response to Israeli actions at the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the expansion of West Bank settlements, presenting it as a defense of Palestinian rights and land.¹¹⁶

Hamas’ October 7 attack failed to trigger a regional war because Iran and its allies—especially Hezbollah—chose limited, carefully calibrated responses. Hezbollah signaled solidarity with Hamas and tied down Israeli forces in the north but kept the conflict ‘below the threshold’ of all-out war. At the same time, U.S. carrier deployments and strong warnings raised the cost of escalation. The IDF’s strikes on Hezbollah’s leadership and military assets, along with IRGC Quds Force commanders in Lebanon and Syria, crippled any support efforts.

In the Hamas document, it also falsely insists it targeted only military personnel and facilities, that civilian deaths were accidental amid clashes with the IDF, and denies accusations of rape or sexual assault, conceding only that “mistakes” may have occurred in the chaos at the Gaza-Israel border. It also casts the assault as a bid to break Gaza’s blockade, secure the release of Palestinian prisoners, and re-internationalize the Palestinian cause by forcing Israel into a Gaza war to draw global attention and sympathy. Finally, Hamas portrays the operation as a pre-emptive strike, claiming it had intelligence that Israel was preparing a major ground offensive to kill Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif.

Hamas’ psychological operations against Israel have remained a central element of its strategy even as its military capabilities have been degraded.¹¹⁷ One of the clearest examples came in the staged release of Israeli hostages, when Hamas choreographed the events as a deliberate act of political theater rather than a straightforward humanitarian gesture.¹¹⁸ During these orchestrated releases, hostages were paraded in front of cameras while Hamas banners or slogans formed the backdrop.¹¹⁹ These carefully staged spectacles lifted Hamas’ own morale, kept it at the center of global attention, intensified political rifts inside Israel, and demonstrated that, even after severe battlefield losses, it could still dominate the psychological dimension of the conflict.¹²⁰

Abu Obeida served since 2004 as the masked chief spokesman of Hamas’ Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, becoming the movement’s most recognizable face of war.¹²¹ His appearances were tightly choreographed theater—succinct, razor-edged statements in a red *keffiyeh* and green Qassam headband, timed to key military actions and the fate of the Israeli hostages.¹²² Each broadcast doubled as psychological warfare against Israel, projecting menace and resolve while rallying Hamas fighters and the wider “Axis of Resistance,” bolstering morale and enforcing discipline even under intense Israeli pressure.¹²³ When the IDF killed Abu Obeida on August 30, 2025, it delivered a significant setback to Hamas’ propaganda machine and internal morale.

Hamas uses a resistance (*muqawama*)¹²⁴ narrative, which emphasizes endurance, sacrifice, and defiance, portraying Hamas as undefeated despite losses, accuses Israel of “genocide” and frames resistance as a moral duty, resonating with Gaza’s youth and displaced populations.

Degrading Hamas’ Operational Capability

Israel estimated that Hamas fielded roughly 30,000 fighters, organized primarily into five brigades of about 5,000–6,000 men each. These brigades were further divided into 24 battalions and 140 company units, each responsible for a defined geographic sector inside Gaza.¹²⁵

Each battalion maintained its own weapons, ammunition, and supplies—able to fight independently. It ran its own communications and intelligence networks, preserving command and control if higher echelons were cut off. Crucially, every battalion had dedicated tunnels for protected movement, storage, attack launch points, and evasion of Israeli surveillance and airstrikes. This decentralization made Hamas resilient and compartmentalized: Even if one brigade or battalion was hit, others kept fighting on their own logistics and internal lines, thwarting any rapid Israeli dismantling.¹²⁶

Since the October 7 attacks, Israeli military operations have substantially eroded Hamas’ conventional military and governance structures in Gaza, transforming it from a semi-organized insurgent force into a more fragmented guerrilla network. Hamas’ fighting force has suffered severe losses in personnel, leadership, and infrastructure, enduring heavy attrition that has forced it to recruit poorly trained youths for quick hit-and-run attacks. Hamas has lost an estimated 17,000–20,000 fighters and most of its senior commanders, including Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif. At the same time, it has replenished ranks with younger members.¹²⁷

Early on, Hamas fighters’ use of mobile phones was one of their greatest vulnerabilities, and the IDF has exploited it extensively with the help of artificial intelligence. Israel’s military intelligence unit 8200 collects metadata from calls, SIM cards, geolocation data, and wireless signals, using advanced spyware and large-scale surveillance to track communications.¹²⁸ Even a brief action—placing a call, sending a text, or simply switching a phone on—can be enough to expose a militant’s location.

Israel has eliminated most of Hamas’ senior leadership, including key political and military figures, through a combination of airstrikes, ground operations, intelligence-driven assassinations, and advanced surveillance. In July 2024, Ismail Haniyeh was assassinated in Tehran while in October Yahya Sinwar was killed in Rafah in southern Gaza, a crippling blow to Hamas’ strategic decision-making.

Israel had also eliminated most Hamas brigade, battalion and company commanders, leaving only Izz al-Din al-Haddad, the central-Gaza commander, as the sole survivor from Hamas’ pre-war senior military leadership.¹²⁹

Hamas’ Interim Leadership

Following the killing of Ismail Haniyeh and Yahya Sinwar, Hamas elected an interim five-man strong leadership, which includes Khalid Mishal, Khalil al-Hayya, Zaber Jabarin, Muhammed Ismail Darwich, and an additional anonymous figure. Hamas’ interim leadership now operates as a collective council, dividing key roles—Mishal for external diplomacy, al-Hayya for Gaza’s political base, Jabarin for finance and the hostage file, and Darwich for security and intelligence.¹³⁰

Hamas’ dispersed command has blunted Israeli decapitation strikes and sustained its guerrilla campaign, but it also lays bare tensions between exiled leaders and Gaza’s battlefield realities—and its reliance on Iran. That reliance is shakier as Hezbollah, Tehran’s strongest proxy, has taken heavy hits to leaders, fighters,

arsenals, and infrastructure, shrinking the deterrent shield it once offered. With Hezbollah weakened, Hamas faces a tighter strategic space: less external muscle, greater need to court Iran, and higher exposure in the next phase of the war.¹³¹

Hamas retains a core insurgency capability—guerrilla persistence, hostage diplomacy, and ideological recruitment—that ensures it is “not defeated” and can embed as a long-term threat in Gaza. Before the October 7, 2023, war, Hamas employed an estimated 40,000–50,000 civil servants in Gaza—about 35,000–40,000 in government ministries and municipal services, and roughly 18,000 in internal security and police.¹³² Additionally, it is estimated that 15,000–20,000 people were employed in Hamas-run religious, educational, and social-welfare institutions in Gaza before the war. In Gaza, there were 1,244 mosques prior to October 7, 2023.¹³³

Where Does Hamas Go from Here?

Survival hinges on ceasefire breakthroughs or external escalation, but current trends point to further degradation, transforming Hamas into a fragmented network rather than a governing political or military entity. Hostages are critical for its survival as they enable indirect influence on U.S./Israel via mediators. However, Hamas networks through religious institutions, charities, and schools still provide a basic social infrastructure and sustain popular support in parts of Gaza. Despite massive Israeli strikes, it remains embedded in Gaza’s society and is able to mobilize a core constituency.

Iran remains Hamas’ main source of funding, training, and technical expertise, but Hezbollah’s losses have weakened Tehran’s ability to provide strong military backing. Hamas also keeps political and financial lifelines through Qatar and Turkey, giving it limited diplomatic and financial breathing space.¹³⁴

Hamas is split between a pragmatist bloc around Khaled Mash’al and a hardline faction led by Khalil al-Hayya. Mash’al’s camp¹³⁵ argues Hamas can no longer govern devastated Gaza, funding will not flow, and public support is eroding; therefore, the movement should moderate, join the PLO, accept its platform rejecting armed struggle and backing a two-state framework, defer to PA control of arms, and reposition itself as a political party until elections.¹³⁶

Al-Hayya’s faction rejects this, insisting Hamas can leverage the hostage file to force an IDF withdrawal and retain exclusive control of Gaza, while counting on aid from Qatar, Turkey, NGOs, and Iran.¹³⁷ They also see the Palestinian Authority as too weak to advance Palestinian interests. Basically, Hamas’ choice is between cutting losses to survive, through moderation, or clinging to power by coercion and outside patronage.

Following factional talks in Moscow and Beijing, Hamas-Fatah diplomacy has converged on a PA/PLO-led technocratic interim arrangement for Gaza, loosely tied to PLO reform and eventual elections.¹³⁸ Hamas signals conditional openness, but the crux remains control of guns and security, leaving any deal contingent on a ceasefire, Israeli withdrawal dynamics, and the wider war. In the meantime, Hamas is conserving cadres and leverage—above all the hostage file—waiting for the balance of forces and diplomacy to break its way.

The prolonged Israel-Hamas war in Gaza has dismantled much of Hamas’ formal governance infrastructure, forcing a pivot toward ‘soft sovereignty’ through decentralized networks of mosques, charities, unions, and student groups—assets that outlast physical destruction and enable infiltration of technocratic roles in utilities, municipalities, and emerging post-war administrations. To

“Taken together, Hamas’ centers of gravity are distributed: Gaza as the contested battlefield; the external bureau as diplomatic and financial engine; the West Bank as latent political space; the diaspora as narrative scaffolding.”

survive politically, Hamas is likely to emphasize fragmentation and hybridization, preserving its brand as a resistance symbol without reclaiming outright rule in Gaza.

Ultimately, Hamas’ political survival hinges on converting social embeddedness into leverage—e.g., monopolizing security against chaos or aid distribution—while exploiting international fatigue with Israel to negotiate inclusion in a future Palestinian state, potentially as a disarmed political party integrated into a national framework. Without ideological abandonment of ‘resistance’ for full Palestine liberation, this evolution risks perpetual hybridity, neither fully governing nor dissolving.

Hamas’ shift to a polycentric cell structure—small autonomous units with short communication lines and diversified tools (IEDs, short-range rockets, ATGMs, snipers, UAVs, targeted sabotage)—marks a true guerrilla turn. It is harder to eradicate and cheaper to sustain, forcing Israel into prolonged attrition that drains manpower and political attention. The strategy is to fight for time: exploit Israeli cohesion cracks, reserve burnout, and global scrutiny, turning Gaza into a slow-grinding quagmire that erodes deterrence and political capital. Hamas’ core aim is organizational survival, absorbing severe civilian hardship to preserve capabilities—evident in rare 2025 ambushes and refusal to capitulate. By mid-2025, estimates indicate recruitment has nearly offset combat losses (tens of thousands).¹³⁹

Iran’s patronage sustains elasticity, providing cash, designs, training, and expertise, though strained by Hezbollah’s 2024–2025 losses and interdictions, pushing reliance on indigenous production. Beyond Gaza, Hamas West Bank cells face raids but offer latent depth, while potential strategic shifts—e.g., targeting Israeli interests abroad via outsourced channels—could globalize operations if annexation escalates, though historically limited to Palestine for policy reasons. Recent signs of Hamas terror cells in Germany targeting Jewish institutions and organizing weapons caches across Europe are worrisome developments.¹⁴⁰

The 2025 Trump-Netanyahu plan crystallizes these choices. It links ceasefire and hostage release to dismantlement of Hamas’ military infrastructure and exclusion from governance, while installing a technocratic interim under international oversight and tying reconstruction to compliance. If enforced tightly—with clear command over security, vetted payrolls, and credible monitoring—it can box Hamas into a politics-only lane, nudging it toward the Mash’al track of moderated participation. If enforcement is porous—poor police control, opaque hiring, weak verification—Hamas will adopt a dual-track strategy: surface-level moderation paired with clandestine coercion, ensuring it retains a veto over Gaza’s future.

It is highly unlikely that Hamas will fully accept the Trump-

Netanyahu peace plan in its current form, though it may continue to signal conditional openness in order to buy time, maintain political relevance, and shape negotiations.

Hamas is no longer just Gaza. Its external leadership in Doha and Istanbul functions as a political shock absorber—negotiating, fundraising, and shaping narratives while Gaza-based cadres absorb losses. In the West Bank, it wields influence through mosques, unions, and especially student blocs, preserving latent political depth even as clandestine cells face Israeli and PA crackdowns. Beyond the region, diaspora networks sustain fundraising, lobbying, and message amplification that keep Hamas visible despite battlefield setbacks.

Taken together, Hamas' centers of gravity are distributed: Gaza as the contested battlefield; the external bureau as diplomatic and financial engine; the West Bank as latent political space; the diaspora as narrative scaffolding. This redundancy preserves the brand under extreme pressure—but the divergent environments also widen the rift between pragmatists and hardliners.

For Hamas, survival rests on avoiding total defeat. Absent

intrusive inspections and strict dual-use controls, even the IDF expects Hamas to persist as a terror organization. A ceasefire might force disarmament or fold forces into a national framework, but any enforcement gaps will lead Hamas to maneuver and patiently rebuild over years. With strict enforcement, Hamas' armed capacity fades; without it, the movement entrenches as an insurgency that retains power while wielding enough force to block or shape Gaza's future.

Although barred from formal politics, Hamas is probing shared-rule deals with the PA. It is unlikely to retake Gaza as a ruler; far likelier is a hybrid formation—a religious-political brand without office paired with an underground militia—anchored in social networks and sustained by external patrons, with enough leverage to remain a veto player. This trajectory aligns with Sheikh Ahmed Yassin's founding vision of steadfast resistance anchored in Islamic social mobilization, and it signals no ideological shift. Hamas remains committed to its ultimate goal of 'resistance' culminating in the full liberation of Palestine. **CTC**

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