



Yahya Sinwar, Gaza City, November 2019. Photo: Abed Rahim Khatib / Shutterstock.com

PA Weakness and Israel's Policy of Containment Propel Sinwar and Hamas toward Palestinian National Leadership

Baruch Yedid

Independent Researcher

The Hamas movement improved its strategic positioning years ago, with the coup in Gaza and recognition as an entity that must be reckoned with, and particularly after Operation Guardian of the Walls, in which it presented as the “defender of Jerusalem.” Alongside the weakness of the Palestinian Authority and Israel’s reluctance to take action that would threaten Hamas’s control in the Gaza Strip, this has allowed Yahya Sinwar and the Hamas leadership to enhance their dual strategy: to connect the various fronts against Israel, with Gaza as the central axis, while leaving the Strip outside the terrorism campaign in order to continue the reconstruction efforts, improve the economic reality, and further the military buildup in advance of the next round. Israel’s apparent strategic preference is to maintain the Hamas leadership in Gaza, while trying to strengthen Abu Mazen and the PA in the West Bank. This enables quiet from the Gaza Strip, but does not bolster the PA and Abu Mazen. Consequently, Hamas and Sinwar are stronger, and the temporary calm could exact a heavy toll from Israel in longer, strategic terms.

Keywords: Hamas, Palestinian Authority, Gaza Strip, Yahya Sinwar, Abu Mazen, strategy, national security

Introduction: Sinwar Emerges as Leader of the Hamas System

When Yahya Sinwar was elected head of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, he prioritized efforts to reconstruct Gaza and improve the economic situation there without abandoning the idea of the armed resistance. As someone born in the Strip, he felt greater commitment toward the local population and identified with the magnitude of the distress following the heavy damage incurred during Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014. Sinwar maneuvered carefully, responsibly, and with political acumen when in March 2018 he took control of the civilian initiative of the Marches of Return and used them to channel the Gaza public's frustration toward Israel. In tandem, he continued to promote the idea of resistance, exact a price from Israel, in part by increasing international pressure on its attempts to thwart the Marches of Return, and at the same time refrain from military escalation that could have exacerbated the already dire humanitarian and economic situation in the Gaza Strip and exhaust Hamas further, both politically and militarily.

Sinwar finished his first term as leader of the Strip without especially impressive or significant achievements. He came to the election campaign in early 2021 under attack, having been criticized and accused by Hamas's Shura council of being too "civilian," of opting for calm and reconstruction of the Strip at the expense of the resistance, and of preferring the Egyptian axis as a main axis for external support. These criticisms had already been leveled at him early in his term in 2017, despite the pragmatic [policy paper](#) issued in May that year. His takeover of the Marches of Return initiative was in part a strategy of evasion and diversion of the criticism leveled at him and a tool for establishing his standing and renewing his popular support.

It gradually became clear that the Marches of Return, while a nuisance to Israel, caused significant damage to the Strip, especially with the steep rise in the number of injured people.

Those who were injured later joined the large protest against Hamas in 2019 and shouted "[we want to live](#)" ("*bidna na'ish*"). Sinwar ordered the neutralization of the protest and didn't hesitate to use [extensive force](#), but the events highlighted the dilemma that he faced and the tension between addressing civilian needs and maintaining the ethos of resistance. In this sense, Sinwar confronted the dilemma inherent in Hamas's [process of institutionalization](#) as the sovereign power that bears responsibility and accountability toward civilians while adopting state practices and using them institutionally, versus adhering to the organizational ideology and the ethos of armed resistance.

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Unlike most senior Hamas leaders, Sinwar has remained in the Gaza Strip to cope with the hardships and lead the military campaigns against the IDF. The others, accompanied by their families, observe the Gaza arena from abroad, living a good material life and displaying little commitment to the reality of the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip; they are free to harden and radicalize their stances when it comes to the armed resistance and prefer the Iranian axis over the Egyptian axis. Ismail Haniyeh moved his place of residence to Turkey, and he was joined by the members of his family (despite a protest on social media), and from there he manages Hamas's political bureau and flies frequently to various destinations worldwide. Khalil al-Hayya, Sinwar's deputy, also left the Strip and operates from abroad as head of the Arab and Islamic Relations portfolio. So too did Fathi Hamad, a member of Hamas's hawkish camp who moved to Turkey, Hamas senior members Salah al-Bardawil and Sami Abu Zuhri, and Taher al-Nunu, Hamas's spokesman and Haniyeh's political advisor.

Hamas's Strategic Turning Point under Sinwar

After the elections in March 2021 [that Sinwar won with great difficulty](#), given the lack of substantive achievements for which he could claim credit, Sinwar changed course when he decided to rebuild and strengthen ties with the military wing. In effect, he returned to the embrace of his former commander and mentor, Mohammed Deif, known as someone with militant views. Indeed, it is possible that it was Deif who in fact [set out the strategy](#) in the lead-up to May 2021, which peaked with Operation Sword of Jerusalem (*seif al-quds*), i.e., Operation Guardian of the Walls.

Sinwar identified Jerusalem and Ramadan as an opportunity to channel the developments toward a course of action that would expand the scope of the conflict with Israel by bringing East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Israeli Arabs into the deterrence equation. The goal was to position Hamas as the defender of Jerusalem and the element capable of challenging Israel and the IDF and proving determination and adherence to the armed struggle. This would contrast with the ineffectiveness of the Palestinian Authority, which prioritizes commitment to security cooperation with Israel and to a political process that doesn't exist. Abu Mazen's decision in April 2021 to cancel the elections that were scheduled for the following month [was seen as stealing the victory from Hamas](#). This joined the frustration in Gaza at the failure to remove the Israeli blockade from the Strip and the sluggish pace of improving the humanitarian and economic reality. Most of all, a sense of danger regarding his political future and his standing in the Hamas leadership hovered over Sinwar.

From Sinwar's perspective, the conditions were ripe for a military escalation, which was meant to change the rules of the game against Israel, embarrass the Palestinian Authority, strengthen Hamas inside and outside the Palestinian arena, and consolidate his own standing as the most important and influential

leader in the Hamas leadership—while perhaps also hinting at his integration in the Palestinian national leadership. Imbued with confidence and presuming an accommodating and limited response from Israel, and with the support and possibly at the recommendation of Mohammed Deif, Sinwar decided to launch a barrage of rockets to implement the ultimatum that [Deif himself issued](#). The tension surrounding the Damascus Gate, the Temple Mount, and the riots in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan provided the setting and the justification for the ultimatum and its implementation.

Yet the real reason for Sinwar's course of action was not Jerusalem, but rather Gaza and his political future. While Sinwar thus deviated from his focus on Gaza and from his relative indifference toward the West Bank and East Jerusalem, he identified the opportunity to change the system by upsetting the rules of the game against Israel and expanding the scope beyond the Gaza Strip, in contrast with his efforts thus far toward change within the existing system—the Gaza Strip alone.

In advance of the Flags March in Jerusalem in May 2022, Sinwar enlisted Mohammed Deif and his brother, a senior leader in Hamas's military wing, who hinted that Hamas possessed [surprising capabilities](#), praised it extensively for its performance during the conflict of the previous year, and even revealed that intelligence officers from Hezbollah and Iran sat in a joint war room in southern Lebanon—all in order to cause Israel to change, even slightly, the Flags March.

The lack of a response by Hamas to the Flags March of May 2022, which was held according to its original route despite threats from Hamas and others, indicates that neither Sinwar nor Hamas in Gaza is ready for another round in the Gaza Strip. It is still licking the wounds it sustained in Operation Guardian of the Walls, while vigorously striving to advance the reconstruction operation that has already begun, maintaining the civilian relief measures granted by Israel, and, as usual, accelerating

military buildup processes to improve its readiness and preparedness for the next round. Hamas positioned its achievement on the escalation in East Jerusalem and at the Temple Mount, riding on the wave of terrorism that began in March 2022, incitement, and an intensive cognitive campaign that helped strengthen its standing in the West Bank. [Hamas's achievement](#) in the student union elections at Birzeit University is one reflection of change and the strengthened popular support for Hamas, and is even understood as a protest against Fatah and the Palestinian Authority. The strengthening of Hamas means the weakening of Fatah and the Palestinian Authority, another desirable achievement from Hamas's perspective.

An analysis of recent events indicates that Hamas's main efforts aim at filling the shoes of the Palestinian Authority and serving as an alternative rather than a partner, with the campaign over Jerusalem being another effective platform to embarrass and weaken the Palestinian Authority. Support for this can also be found in the claim voiced by sources in the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah¹ that Operation Guardian of the Walls was not for the sake of al-Aqsa or Sheikh Jarrah but rather for Hamas's intention first and foremost to harm Abu Mazen, who "stole" the elections from Hamas.

Indeed, a senior figure in one of the PLO institutions contends that igniting the fire against the backdrop of purported sacrifices at al-Aqsa is only the fuse that Hamas lit, and not the whole story. It was not for naught that Hamas invested a supreme effort in bringing the green flags and the giant placards into the al-Aqsa compound, in order to demonstrate ownership of the holy site and take another step toward the Palestinian leadership and sway the masses. In that case, what actually changed?

The events from Operation Guardian of the Walls until today show that Hamas under Sinwar's leadership is willing to sustain tactical hits as long as they serve strategic

processes. In Sinwar's view, the balance of achievements is positive and the changes that he has succeeded in carrying out position both himself and Hamas at the forefront of the Palestinian stage as perhaps the most important and influential actor, surpassing Fatah and the Palestinian Authority. The latter evince weakness, dependence on Israel, and distance from the centers of decision making and influence, and this is also true of Hamas's senior leaders residing abroad.

Since Operation Guardian of the Walls, three prominent events in the Hamas Gaza arena signal the essence of the strategic change led by Sinwar. With the speech by Hossein Salami, the leader of the Revolutionary Guard, in a [recorded broadcast](#) to the residents of the Gaza Strip, Sinwar indicated his readiness to deepen ties with Iran, countering his previous preference toward Egypt. Second, there was direct and blatant interference by Sinwar in Israeli politics, when he spoke out [against](#) the safety net that Mansour Abbas provided to the Israeli government; and third, for the first time in many years, Hamas [took responsibility](#) for a terrorist attack, the attack in late April 2022 in Ariel. Immediately thereafter, on April 30, 2022, [in his first speech](#) after a long period in which he did not speak publicly, Sinwar, in front of the cameras, called to the Palestinians: "Our people in the Negev, in the Triangle, in the Galilee, in Haifa, in Acre, in Jaffa, and in Lod—everyone should get his rifle ready. And those who don't have a rifle should get a knife or axe ready. If they want a religious war, they will get one, because they've broken the red lines."

Sinwar, who believes he reads the political map in Israel well, went outside the borders of Gaza and sought to depict himself as the one who caused the fall of the Bennett government and the new elections in Israel. He accused the United Arab List of treason and called on MK Abbas to resign from the coalition given "the harm to the al-Aqsa mosque." The strengthening of the connection with Israel's Arab citizens, the 1948 Arabs, has from Hamas's perspective

proved to be an important and effective tool in waging the armed resistance against Israel. Sinwar [noted recently](#) he was very surprised by the enlistment from the Arabs in the cities in Israel with mixed Jewish and Arab populations following his appeal. The ability to sow chaos and panic in the streets of these cities in Israel and beyond has emerged as no less than a strategic lever. Indeed, just before the most recent Land Day, Hamas in the Gaza Strip, under Sinwar's direction, established [the Committee to Support Israeli Arabs](#), which aims to ignite the protest in the Negev, and from there to move to other places.

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a daring strategic approach or aspiration that stems from his assessment regarding the Israeli preference for an accommodating and restraining policy and concern about a large-scale campaign in the Gaza Strip. Hamas fired one rocket from Lebanon in order to signal its ability to ignite another front in the case of an attack on the Gaza Strip and thereby create new deterrence. As such, Sinwar both made southern Lebanon into the protective vest of the Gaza Strip and reinforced the [dual strategy](#), whose essence is uniting the fronts against Israel and building up its capabilities on those fronts, along with differentiating the Strip from the campaign at this time. The goal is to maintain the momentum of the reconstruction efforts; continue to enjoy, expand, and leverage a series of Israeli relief measures, including work permits for Palestinian workers from the Strip; ensure the continued flow of Qatari money into the Gaza Strip; and under the umbrella of all of

these, continue the military buildup efforts toward the next round of violence.

Sinwar's actions since May 2021 [have led to greater popular support](#) for Hamas as more faithfully representing the Palestinian national struggle,² and also seemingly to Sinwar's stronger standing in the Hamas leadership. Sinwar is seen as having succeeded in tying Israel's hands and deterring it from a military campaign in the Gaza Strip, and as having also succeeded in enlisting Iran's support for his measures. In Operation Breaking Dawn in August 2022, Israel was careful to take action only against Islamic Jihad, and keep Hamas out of the campaign. Sinwar's enhanced stature has enabled him to prevail over Hamas's external leadership, whose leaders pushed for a military escalation in the Gaza Strip, and kept Hamas outside of the most recent campaign while flexing its muscles with loud threats, an impressive and apparently successful cognitive effort, and military threats by means of a [series of test fires of new rockets](#) toward the sea.

Sinwar's leadership has enabled him to restrain Islamic Jihad and prevent it from rocket fire toward Israel—until Operation Breaking Dawn, which Israel launched in order to thwart intentions to fire anti-tank missiles toward the Gaza envelope. Hamas did not join the campaign and refused to assist Islamic Jihad, and in effect obstructed its aspiration to unite the fronts and the efforts. The restraint effort is not easy, as there are demands from the Iranian patron, including freedom of operation for Islamic Jihad. On the other hand, and with political wisdom, Sinwar loosened the restraint on Hamas's activity in the West Bank, which is directed by his friend and member of the political bureau Saleh al-Arouri, who is working hard on developing a terrorist infrastructure and Hamas infrastructure in East Jerusalem (for example, [the appointment of Khaled Sabah](#) as treasurer in Jerusalem; he has [contributed](#) to the incitement and to encouragement of the violence, and is accused of working with Hamas in Turkey to establish terror cells in Jerusalem).

Sinwar has seemingly differentiated between operational arenas, but this division of labor does not undermine Sinwar's standing as the more senior and important of the two.

Sinwar's conduct thus indicates a trend of not remaining just in the realm of Gaza; he is also looking eastward toward the West Bank and upward toward the national leadership, with Gaza the driving force of the Palestinian system. In Sinwar's perspective, Gaza is the generator for undermining the stability of the Palestinian system, through a systematic and ongoing effort to foment agitation in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, out of a hope of seeing Abu Mazen fall. Meanwhile, an effort is underway to deepen connections with Arabs in Israel in order to undermine stability within Israel's territory.

Sinwar's success in keeping the Gaza Strip outside of the latest campaign and in reshaping the balance of power with Saleh al-Arouri and Ismail Haniyeh, and vis-à-vis the group within Hamas that is identified with the Iranian axis, leads to an erosion of the differentiation between the Gaza Strip and the other arenas that Israel is trying to preserve. Sinwar is working to build up these areas, strengthen them, and operate them as a single well-oiled machine with high explosive potential under his leadership, or at least under his influence, even if not all of its elements are necessarily operated together at all times, for example the Gaza Strip in the most recent campaign. Israel, in its obvious preferred strategy toward the Gaza Strip and in the lack of a response to Sinwar's actions, due to its adherence to the effort to maintain military quiet and perhaps due to the assessment that there is no better strategic alternative, contributes to Sinwar's efforts by allowing him to implement his dual strategy, whose essence is uniting the fronts into a single, volatile, multi-front system, while "balancing" among the fronts and operating them subject to the constraints of the hour.

"Sharing the Burden": Hamas's New Strategy and Sinwar's Dilemma

Last year Hamas took a significant decision when it decided to proceed with the Iranian Shiite axis, despite the open channels that Sinwar is careful to maintain with the Egyptians, who are leading the reconstruction initiatives in the Gaza Strip and who control the Rafah crossing, which is the Gaza Strip's lifeline. The decision came after a prolonged argument between the supporters of the Iranian Shiite camp and its opponents, who expressed concern that turning to Iran would close Hamas's door to the moderate Sunni Arab countries. The argument was decided when the members of the military wing had the upper hand, and the decision was made to turn to the Iranian [Jerusalem axis](#).

The Jerusalem axis was established as a counterweight to the Abraham Accords; it gained strength after Operation Guardian of the Walls and is poised to serve as Hamas's strategic depth at the critical time, perhaps quite soon. The members of this axis are Hezbollah, Hamas operatives in the refugee camps in Lebanon, pro-Iranian organizations in Syria and Iraq, and even the Houthis in Yemen. Recently the connection between Hamas and the Jerusalem axis, which Iran sees as its strategic hinterland, has tightened. And indeed, [in his recent speech](#), Sinwar said that Hamas will breach the maritime blockade of Gaza with the help of the Jerusalem axis. Ziyad al-Nakhalah, the general secretary of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, likewise said that ["the Jerusalem axis needs to be strengthened"](#) and "we will not accept the takeover of al-Aqsa."

While turning to the Iranian axis involves important military advantages for Hamas, as its spokespeople have described, in recent years Iran has also exploited its monetary support of Hamas to make it an Iranian proxy and to operate it, including against the movement's positions and interests. This reality poses a dilemma for Sinwar, as he will have to maneuver between addressing Iranian demands and maintaining calm in the Strip. Measures by Egypt will also influence the Strip, the center

of Sinwar's power, but joining the Jerusalem axis will relieve pressure on the Strip from the north at the critical time.

The more the Jerusalem axis gains strength, the more the calm in the Strip becomes more problematic and fragile. Iran, in the assessment of Hamas sources, has no problem with breaching the calm in the Strip. Nor does Hamas's external leadership attribute the same importance to the calm as does the Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip, for example, the case with groups within Palestinian Islamic Jihad, as exemplified by the pressure placed on Sinwar to include the Gaza Strip in the first few months of the most recent terrorism campaign (March-May 2022). Militant figures in the ranks of the organization's political leadership prefer closer relations with Iran, because the closer relations with Egypt and the dependence on it have made the Rafah crossing a means of pressure in the hands of Cairo. Sinwar will now have to cope with the hawkish pro-Iranian elements within the organization's military wing and operatives on the ground, who sometimes challenge his policy toward Egypt and Israel, which is what indeed happened in Operation Breaking Dawn.

Saleh al-Aroui is a key player in the Jerusalem axis—as the person who oversees Hamas's terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank and the driving force behind the force buildup and the coordination with the Iranians. Al-Aroui is also the person who in practice controls the [construction administration](#) (a comprehensive [investigative report](#) on the issue was presented in November 2019 on the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation's program Zman Emet on Channel 11), an element that influences and drives Hamas's terrorist system, many of whose members were released in the Shalit prisoner exchange deal.

The Gaza leadership sees importance in reconstructing the Strip and is likewise continuing its military buildup efforts. Statements by senior officials show that the next campaign is planned to be a "regional

campaign," in which other parties in the Jerusalem axis will take part along various fronts alongside the organizations in Gaza (according to Zaher Jabareen in a [filmed interview](#)). For now, the axis helps Sinwar in his efforts to keep Gaza outside of the conflict, while southern Lebanon, based on the Hamas infrastructure that is under construction there in coordination with Hezbollah, is marked as a potential additional front (without Hezbollah) in the balance of deterrence against Israel. Indeed, in recent months, rockets have been fired from Lebanon toward Israel, and not for the first time. Since Operation Guardian of the Walls, Palestinian organizations in southern Lebanon have fired toward Israel five times.

A Hamas operative abroad, relying on messages from Hamas's military wing, said that the organization's strategy is still based on military pressure and attrition over time, alongside "sharing the burden" among all the Palestinian arenas struggling against Israel while keeping the Strip outside the circle of conflict. He added that the military wing believes that a limited response or a response by other Palestinian organizations in the Strip that does not strike deep into Israel will serve this strategy and will not lead Israel to a significant military response.

Rocket fire is one of the military capabilities that Hamas enhances with the assistance of the Iranians in Lebanon as part of the strategy of sharing the burden. It is also a fundamental component of the Jerusalem axis that is developing under the command of senior Iranian members of the Revolutionary Guard, who are responsible for the force buildup of Hamas and Islamic Jihad outside of "Palestine," [as defined by Arab sources](#) (and detailed in a Channel 14 investigative report). It is more convenient for Iran to operate Islamic Jihad against Israel even at the price of undermining the calm in the Strip. On the other hand, the Jerusalem axis also helps improve the coordination and relations between Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Israeli Hesitancy and PA Weakness Strengthen Sinwar

Hamas's leadership detects Israeli concerns regarding escalation in the Gaza Strip and a broad military operation in the Gaza Strip, alongside the preference for an accommodating and restraining policy. Israel's conduct and its reluctance to carry out a large military operation in Gaza are seen by Hamas as a kind of insurance policy and enable it to become more brazen and have the courage to defy Israel (even if the quiet in the Gaza Strip continues—with the exclusion of Operation Breaking Dawn, in which Hamas was not involved). According to sources in Gaza, statements were made, including by associates of Mohammad Dahlan who were in contact with Sinwar, regarding Sinwar's difficulty resisting the temptation of the Israeli government's weakness, the disintegration of Fatah and the Palestinian Authority, and the religious tension ignited by supporters in East Jerusalem. All of these, in the shadow of Sinwar's growing standing in the Hamas leadership, have led him to signal his intention to integrate within a position of national leadership and perhaps even to fill the shoes of Abu Mazen. This is the assessment of a member of one of the PLO's institutions after a series of meetings in Egypt and based on his talks with figures in the Palestinian Authority. Senior officials in the General Intelligence Service and in Fatah have also assessed in conversations with me that Sinwar in particular and Hamas in general are determined to advance to the positions of leadership. A figure in the Gaza Strip said that Hamas is aware of the complex and sensitive political situation in Israel, and the Gazan leadership feels immune to any military activity against the Gaza Strip. According to sources in Gaza, Sinwar estimates that provoking Israel will not be met with military action, and he is driven by a sense of power given the political situation in Israel.

Israeli policy is seen by many in the Gaza Strip as confusion and weakness. The Israeli confusion was demonstrated when Israel

granted relief measures to the residents of the Gaza Strip, cancelled them after the rocket was fired, and again renewed their work permits in Israel, against the background of Hamas threats. Similarly, the lack of response to rocket fire, denial of access by Jews to the Temple Mount, and the Israeli preference to take specific and relatively restrained action against the terrorist hotbeds in Jenin have signaled to Hamas that Israel is confused and weak and therefore the chance of military action in the Gaza Strip is even lower.

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Against the weakness of the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority, Yahya Sinwar aspires to become the new Palestinian leader—this assessment was sounded in the author's conversations not only with sources in the Gaza Strip but also in the Palestinian Authority, Fatah, and PLO institutions. Threats to assassinate him also serve Sinwar's political interest, especially when Israel, according to [Arab sources](#) quoted on the Makan website, is quick to convey a message to Egypt that is directed at Hamas, whereby it does not intend to eliminate the movement's senior leaders.

A figure in Gaza explains that due to the ongoing weakening of the Palestinian Authority, Sinwar faces a historic opportunity to advance to the center of the Palestinian stage, and he is well aware that many young Palestinians feel a sense of vacuum and the lack of political leadership. Hamas under Sinwar's leadership is positioning itself as an alternative to the current paralyzed leadership and as the spearhead of the armed resistance, and therefore it does not hesitate to claim sponsorship even over what in practice appear to be attacks by individuals, encourage additional terrorist attacks including deep inside Israel, threaten Israel, and incite the Palestinian public. Hamas's positioning

as an alternative to Fatah and the Palestinian Authority are strengthened when the Egyptian, Qatari, and other mediators come and go from the offices of senior Hamas leaders and have phone calls with Sinwar and other senior Hamas leaders, while Abu Mazen remains alone in the Mukataa in Ramallah.

Hamas's activity is also deeply worrisome for the Fatah leadership. According to a senior Fatah official in Ramallah, Abu Mazen is to blame for the vacuum that has been created on the Palestinian street and for the deterioration of Fatah, which *inter alia* explains the return of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades to the circle of terrorism in Jenin, Nablus, and elsewhere. Hamas is trying to fill the vacuum, and the number 1111, which refers to November 11, the date of Arafat's death, and mentioned by Sinwar in his speech as the number of rockets that will be launched toward Israel in the next barrage, tightens the connection that Sinwar seeks to create between himself and Arafat, the ultimate Palestinian national symbol. The official added that the atmosphere in the Palestinian Authority territories indicates that thousands of young people are enthusiastic about Hamas, provocation of Israel, Hamas's ability to bend Israel's policy including in East Jerusalem, the success in Operation Guardian of the Walls, and the cognitive struggle, including regarding the Flags March in May 2022. The result: Sinwar now emerges as a new Palestinian leader.

In the assessment of the senior Fatah official and based on his connection with the Hamas leadership in Gaza, Hamas has ended the stage of military force buildup in the Strip and now is turning to building its political power as a prominent and important actor, as an alternative to the PLO. This, he claims, is both Israel's fault and a result of the weakness of Abu Mazen. No one guessed that Hamas's revenge at Abu Mazen, who cancelled the elections last year, would be so painful.

In relating to the events, a senior security figure in Israel who asked to remain anonymous

said recently that the security establishment has identified Hamas's advance toward the center of the Palestinian stage, and acknowledges that this stems from the movement's understanding of the weakness of the Israeli government and the blatant weakening of the Palestinian Authority. According to him, all these elements push Sinwar toward the next stage, in which he will become a very important Palestinian leader and will increase the chance of positioning Hamas as an alternative to the PLO.

Conclusion

Yahya Sinwar, who paved his way from the trenches of Gaza in the first intifada, through Israel's military prisons, to the leadership of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, has succeeded in establishing his standing as the leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip and as a senior and influential leader in the movement's leadership. Unlike Hamas's leaders who live in comfort abroad, possess many assets in the Gaza Strip, exploit their standing and their control of the Palestinian economy in the Strip to leverage their personal profits, and thereby anger the residents of the Strip and increase the sense of alienation, Sinwar remains a Gaza leader who is faithful to the resistance—like Marwan Barghouti, whose power in the Palestinian public is likely a function of his not having joined the corrupt PA.

The narrow victory that Sinwar achieved with difficulty in the elections in early 2021 undermined his personal and political standing and highlighted his failure to reconstruct the Strip, remove the blockade, and free Palestinian prisoners. His focus on the Gaza Strip, his decision to channel the frustration and the protest against Hamas into the Marches of Return on the border fence with Israel, and his clear preference for the Egyptian axis over the Iranian axis, proved to be a strategic dead end and led to a change in his strategy. Yet in contrast with the claims made by military sources in Israel, especially after Operation Guardian of the Walls, about [a leader who is](#)

disconnected from reality and lives in his own world, Sinwar has succeeded in consolidating his position as Hamas's leader in the Gaza Strip and as an important and influential figure in the Hamas leadership overall, despite the cumulative damage caused to the Gaza Strip and its residents.

Sinwar tightened anew his relations with Hamas's military wing and its commander Mohammed Deif, and with Deif's support and perhaps even with his encouragement, exploited the opportunity that arose in April 2021, after Abu Mazen decided to cancel the elections—which Hamas was expected to win—and pave the way to a takeover of the Palestinian Authority. The cancellation of the elections in the wake of the tension in East Jerusalem and the period of Ramadan became a platform for implementing the strategic change. Hamas under Sinwar's leadership sought to embarrass the Palestinian Authority due to its ineffectiveness, to position itself as the defender of Jerusalem and the holy places, and to change its stance vis-à-vis Israel, which until then had been limited primarily to the Gaza Strip.

Sinwar, who assessed that Israel continues to refrain from a military campaign in the Gaza Strip and prefers the policy of accommodation and restraint, chose to issue an ultimatum to Israel regarding East Jerusalem. The ultimatum, stated by Mohammed Deif and accompanied by Sinwar, was implemented, and this changed the rules of the game and relations with Israel. Since then the Hamas leadership in the Strip has also had a say regarding East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Arabs in Israel.

In the campaign imposed under Sinwar's leadership on Israel, Hamas succeeded for the first time in uniting all the arenas of operation into a single system and to ignite East Jerusalem, induce Arab citizens of Israel to engage in violent riots in the cities with mixed populations, incite the West Bank, and operate a front from southern Lebanon. Following Operation Guardian of the Walls, Hamas improved its strategic positioning,

became a more realistic alternative to Fatah and the Palestinian Authority, and improved its strategy in the lead-up to the Flags March in May 2022.

Through keen implementation of the dual strategy and in dividing the burden between the Gaza Strip and the other fronts, Hamas has succeeded in escalating the security situation in East Jerusalem, riding on the wave of terrorism that started in March 2022, fomenting tension in the West Bank and the terrorist infrastructure there, with an emphasis on the Jenin sector, and at the same time keeping the Gaza Strip outside of the campaign. Israel for its part has accepted this dual strategy of uniting the fronts into one campaign, alongside differentiation of the Strip. Despite the connection that the Hamas leadership in Gaza tried to create with the terrorist campaign that began in March 2022 and was expanded during Ramadan on the Temple Mount, Israel chose not to take action against the Hamas leadership or the Hamas movement in the Gaza Strip.

Alongside its unsuccessful efforts to strengthen the Palestinian Authority and Abu Mazen, the Israeli response was seen as confusion and weakness, and the result was, inter alia, the strengthening of Hamas and of Sinwar, and his positioning as a possible or relevant leader on the national level. Sinwar has turned from a local/regional leader into a weighty force in the Palestinian system. His political life and Hamas's political struggle and effort do not lack dilemmas and complexities, for example coping with the implications of preferring the Iranian axis. However, it appears that the combination of Sinwar's political and strategic understanding regarding the Palestinian arena and the Israeli arena on the one hand, and Israel's adherence to a policy of accommodation and restraint and its concern of escalation to the point of a multi-front campaign, in a reality in which the Palestinian Authority is weak and has lost its cohesion on the other hand, have led both Hamas and Sinwar to new realms.

Sinwar is leading the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip and succeeding in differentiating the Strip from the influence of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank by strengthening the establishment and the patterns of government (for example, the decision regarding [imposing a new tax](#) on goods coming from the Palestinian Authority), which he emphasizes vis-à-vis the weakening institutional functioning of the Palestinian Authority, the shaky standing of Prime Minister Shtayyeh, who will apparently be dismissed soon, and the deepening division within the ranks of Fatah. It seems that Sinwar and Hamas are succeeding in accelerating their steps on the path leading to Palestinian national leadership, and haven't yet said the last word.

If Israel wishes to consolidate the standing of the Gaza Strip as an independent entity that is distinct from the West Bank, it should find a way to tighten and improve the coordination and the basis of understandings with Yahya Sinwar as the leader of the Strip. But if Israel identifies the strengthening of Hamas in the Gaza Strip as a threat or as a source of severe escalation in the other fronts and a risk to the stability of the Palestinian Authority as a strategic partner, then it must stop the de facto cooperation with the dual strategy that Hamas under Sinwar's leadership has devised, and find a way to weaken his standing and

his influence. The obvious Israeli preference—maintaining the Hamas leadership alongside strengthening the Palestinian Authority—due to the assessment regarding the lack of a better strategic alternative or due to the desire to refrain from a deterioration on the southern front, when eyes are looking north toward the more complicated and problematic front, might allow military quiet for a short and limited time at a high strategic price.

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Lt. Col. (res.) Baruch Yedid was an Arab affairs advisor in the West Bank Division and in COGAT, and is currently a journalist and researcher of the Palestinian arena. ironcom2000@gmail.com

Notes

- 1 When statements in the text are attributed to senior officials in Fatah, Hamas, the Palestinian Authority, or the PLO, the details of the sources have not been included due to the risk this would pose to their personal security.
- 2 A survey by Khalil Shikaki in March 2022 shows that the political advantage that Hamas scored after May 2021 in polling regarding the parliamentary elections eroded 10 months later, even though Ismail Haniyeh continues to significantly lead Abu Mazen in presidential election polling.