

Turnover: What Are the Implications of Recent and Upcoming Changes in Hamas?

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Background

Since its establishment in the 1980s, the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas, has increasingly become an important player in domestic Palestinian politics as well as in the armed struggle against Israel. As its ranks and its role have grown over the years, so too has tension with its rival Palestinian political faction Fatah. Despite opposing the Oslo Accords, Hamas decided to enter into the Palestinian political fray in 2006 when it fielded candidates for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), an Oslo-created institution, and ultimately won enough votes to form a Palestinian Authority (PA) governing coalition. What followed, along with opposition to such an outcome from the West, was an unwillingness on the part of Fatah to partner in any sort of wider coalition. This set the stage for a confrontation between Hamas, which would take over a previously western-backed authority that was now marginalized by the West, and Fatah. This confrontation came to a head in Gaza in 2007 when Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip, routing Fatah-affiliated militias.

The political divide between the factions became a geographic one as well from that point forward, with Hamas exercising political dominance and security control over the Palestinian Authority in Gaza and Fatah doing the same in the West Bank. Multiple efforts at reconciliation have failed in the decade since, making this intra-Palestinian factional division a key feature of modern Palestinian domestic politics. This divide has also shaped and been shaped by relations with foreign actors, most

importantly the United States and other western players. Over the course of this time, the Fatah faction in the West Bank has been led by Mahmoud Abbas, who is simultaneously the chairman of the PLO as well as the president of the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority. The Gaza-based PA, run by Hamas, has been led by Ismail Haniyeh, who served both as prime minister and as head of Hamas's Gaza-based political organization.

An Internal Election

For the first time in recent memory, there will be a change in the figures playing these roles. Haniyeh, who has been the Gaza-based Hamas prime minister since Hamas ran in the PLC elections, came up to the end of his second term and will most likely move on to succeed Khaled Mashal as the head of Hamas's broader politburo. Secretive elections held within the movement for a successor to Haniyeh were conducted in recent months and a new leader was chosen: Yahya al-Sinwar.

Sinwar's background likely played a significant role in his election, which was the result of a vote that included Hamas members in Israeli prisons as well as those on the outside. He is the son of Palestinian refugees, like the majority of the population of Gaza, and was born and raised in the impoverished Khan Yunis refugee camp. The values of his humble origins have reportedly been maintained throughout his life, and he is known for avoiding corruption.

In the 1980s, he was involved in the early stages of Hamas's development and played a leading role in a division called Majd, which functioned as an internal security apparatus focused on eliminating Palestinian collaborators with Israel during the first intifada. For these activities, Sinwar was regularly detained and arrested by the Israeli occupying forces and ultimately imprisoned and sentenced to four life sentences. He remained in Israeli prison for over two decades, during which time he played a leading role in the movement's organization in prison. He was released in 2011 along with over one thousand other prisoners in exchange for a captured Israeli soldier. He was among the highest ranking prisoners released in the exchange; Israel likely was well aware that after his release he would go on to play a more prominent role in Hamas.

Shortly after his release he was integrated into the leadership of the organization, but not before making strong statements about the need to get the remaining Palestinian prisoners released and lamenting the fact that so many were left behind even as he and many others were freed. The time spent in Israeli prison as well as his earlier activities in Majd gave him a certain credibility within the military wing of the organization and he began to have an expanded role in the Qassam Brigades in the aftermath of the assassination of Ahmad Jabari. Jabari had led the negotiations for the prisoner exchange that secured Sinwar's release.

Sinwar served approximately 23 years in Israeli prison. During this time, several leading

figures in the Hamas organization he knew in its earliest days were assassinated: Ahmed Yassin, Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, Salah Shehade, Ahmed Jabari, and Said Siam were all killed by Israeli strikes while Sinwar was locked away. While the organization he returned to was in essence the same, many of its leading figures were no longer there; and because he was absent during the days when power struggles ensued in the aftermath of assassinations and leadership changes, he was not tainted by internal divisions. The new Hamas leader in Gaza is also fluent in Hebrew which, coupled with the time spent in Israeli prison, has afforded him a strong understanding of Israeli society and its vulnerabilities.

Changes and Their Implications

What does the election of Sinwar mean for the direction of Hamas in Gaza? It is still too early to tell what unique mark, if any, the new leader will leave on the organization. But he is well suited to achieve particular aims should he pursue them. For years, Hamas has faced an internal challenge of division not only between those inside Gaza and those outside, notably between Khaled Mashal and the Gaza-based political establishment, but also between the political and military branches of the organization. Sinwar is perhaps uniquely suited to bring a newfound unity of command and purpose to the operation of the organization's political and military wings. This unity of command could put the organization in a stronger position to negotiate agreements, whether with other Palestinian

parties like Fatah or external ones like Iran, Egypt, and other regional and global players.

Along with putting the organization in a better position to negotiate, the unity of command can also strengthen its position to confront Israel. While all indications are that Hamas has cracked down on rogue groups launching rockets on Israel, one of the key dynamics that accelerates escalation in armed conflict—should events spiral out of control or should Israel choose to escalate—is a possibility of a return to full-blown war. Hamas does not seem interested in seeing this happen again, but under Sinwar, the organization may be in a better position to coordinate a more effective response to such a situation, should it arise.

Sinwar's election may also improve Hamas's domestic political standing among Palestinians, albeit not tremendously.

According to the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) which conducts quarterly polling on these issues, Hamas stands at around 23-25 percent support as a political party among Palestinian respondents in polls that sample Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Sinwar's election demonstrates a few political selling points Hamas will hope to project on the Palestinian public. First, an actual change in leadership—both Sinwar replacing Haniyeh and Haniyeh replacing Mashal—shows that Hamas's political institutions, however secretive, are still producing leadership turnover, which they would point out their counterparts in Fatah cannot rival. Second, the election shows the party's commitment to its members,

represented by Sinwar having risen through the ranks from the squalor of a Khan Yunis refugee camp to the top position in the party.

Third, the election of Sinwar and his release from Israeli prison is, Hamas would seek to argue, a testament to their strategy of militancy, which Fatah has relinquished in favor of negotiations. The fact is that Sinwar is free from Israeli prison and able to lead is a result of the raid that captured an Israeli soldier in 2006 and traded him for over a thousand prisoners. Indeed, Sinwar is the embodiment of that strategy's success in the eyes of Hamas. It will not be lost on some Palestinians that while Sinwar has been released because of the prisoner exchange, Marwan Barghouti, a Fatah leader of Sinwar's generation, continues to languish in Israeli captivity.

Political affiliation in Palestinian public opinion has been largely fixed over the last 15 years or so. Thus, while these may be powerful images and talking points for Hamas after Sinwar's election, they are unlikely to translate into major gains. On the other hand, they may have an impact on the margins, and with Hamas, which stands only a few points behind Fatah in regular polling, that is not something to dismiss entirely. Further, at a time of the Palestinian public's profound disappointment with leadership, the moment may be ripe for bigger shifts than we would normally anticipate. As recently as this week, Palestinians in Ramallah were protesting in the streets against the Palestinian Authority and its security collaboration with Israel after a

Palestinian activist was killed by Israeli forces in Area A, an act they think requires at least tacit PA complicity. These demonstrations, along with their repression by PA security forces, serve as a reminder of how tense the relationship between citizens and the authority can be and how quickly things could deteriorate. Such divisions could serve as political openings for Hamas.

Other Potential Changes

Along with Sinwar's election, other changes on the horizon for Hamas may have important implications for its relations with parties in and out of Palestine. Khaled Mashal, who has served as the Hamas politburo head for many years, has been based primarily in Doha. It is not clear whether Haniyeh, Mashal's all but assured replacement, will operate from outside of Gaza (as Mashal did) or from within. This decision will likely have impact on the external relations of the movement because having the location of the politburo head outside of Gaza has permitted a degree of agility for meetings with global and regional political figures – a leader operating from inside the besieged Gaza Strip would not enjoy the same flexibility.

Finally, another type of change could ultimately have the biggest impact on the direction of the organization and particularly its relations with the outside world. In recent years, Hamas spokespersons have begun to distance themselves from the document known to many in the West as the "Hamas Charter." Perhaps no document has done more to paint the organization to westerners in a negative

light. The document, which includes incoherent text with anti-Semitic stereotypes, is representative of a nascent organization and not one that has developed significantly in the 30 or so years since it was penned. Several Hamas officials, when pressed on this document, have in recent years referred to it as outdated and historical and demanded that the organization be judged on the political positions it takes at present, including the pursuit of a Palestinians state on the 1967 lines. Recently,

Hamas spokesperson Osama Hamdan revealed that Hamas was indeed formulating a new political document that would respond to the questions raised by the "Hamas Charter" and effectively replace it. If handled properly, this could be an opportunity for the mainstreaming of the organization. Even though it is certain that Israel and many of its allies will work to marginalize Hamas no matter what the organization states, some players will likely point to Hamas's evolution as grounds for opening dialogue and perhaps even relations. According to Hamdan, who spoke on this matter in late January 2017, this updated document would be released "very soon" – but it is not clear when that may be.

Despite being a key player, Washington is unlikely to react strongly to any of these moves. At this point, the current administration is still assessing how it will approach Middle East peace. All indications are that it will not be very engaged but rather will try to maintain a strong relationship with Israel while hoping to keep any Israeli-

Palestinian violence contained and limited to current levels. This may change, especially if any adjustments by Hamas allow for it to warm relations with American allies in Europe. The current American administration, however, has also de-prioritized transatlantic ties. Further, key voices inside the administration are anti-Muslim and have particularly targeted political Islam and the Muslim brotherhood. They see Hamas as part of a larger Islamist movement not because of the tactics the organization uses but rather the ideology it espouses. It is very unlikely that the

administration in Washington would begin to view Hamas differently, even if Hamas were to moderate its tactics and policies. In the longer term, however, this scenario could potentially change.

What is certain is that there are changes currently taking place in the Hamas organization, some of which can have a profound impact on the future and direction of the movement. The coming months will likely provide greater clarity as to the direction in which the movement will go under its changed leadership.

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