

# Sinwar, Mashal, and Israel's Dilemma for the "Day After"

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

## The long-term political struggle against Hamas will be just as challenging for Israel as the current military campaign.

**A**s negotiators pursue a Hamas-Israel ceasefire arrangement that would facilitate the release of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners along with increased humanitarian aid, a true endgame for the war remains elusive. Israel persists in its initial post-October 7 demands to completely dismantle Hamas's rule and military capabilities alongside a return of the hostages, while Hamas is calling for a three-stage deal (45 days each) during which Israel would withdraw from the Gaza Strip and release 1,500 Palestinian prisoners—500 of whom were sentenced to life imprisonment. Hamas is likewise seeking guarantees from Arab and international actors that Israel will fulfill its commitments.

The Hamas position should not be mistaken for a united front, however. Outsiders have only imperfect knowledge about power relations inside Hamas and what the various parties might accept. That said, there is much evidence to suggest tensions between its Gaza-based leadership, under Yahya al-Sinwar, and its external political leadership, represented by Khaled Mashal in Qatar. Notably, Ismail Haniyeh—who replaced Mashal as head of the Hamas political bureau in 2017 and relocated to Doha—remains loyal to Sinwar, serving to some extent as his rubber stamp.

Before Hamas produced its latest demands, reports suggested that Sinwar opposed a full ceasefire for now, preferring temporary truces, which he viewed as opportunities to reorganize the group's military wing. The Qatar-based officials, by contrast, have already announced their readiness for a ceasefire and a transition to political talks. Husam Badran, a member of Hamas's political bureau in Doha, **told (<https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/hamas-palestinian-rivals-conduct-talks-about-governing-postwar-gaza-3058fce6>)** the *Wall Street Journal*, "We don't fight just because we want to fight...We want to establish a Palestinian state in Gaza, the West Bank, and Jerusalem."

Moreover, on January 21, Hamas's external leadership released **[a document in English and Arabic](#)**

[\(https://www.palestinechronicle.com/hamas-document-reveals-why-we-we-carried-out-al-aqsa-flood-operation-summary-pdf/\)](https://www.palestinechronicle.com/hamas-document-reveals-why-we-we-carried-out-al-aqsa-flood-operation-summary-pdf/), “Our Narrative—Operation Al-Aqsa Flood,” making the case that the October 7 attack was intended to pressure Israel to end the occupation and allow the Palestinian people to determine the future of Gaza. The document implies that Hamas would not prevent the return of the Palestinian Authority to the Strip but that any future political leadership there must gain legitimacy through elections, thus further indicating readiness to transition to a political track.

Meanwhile, Israel regards Hamas’s terms as unacceptable and a nonstarter. Nevertheless, understanding the differences between Sinwar and Mashal’s approaches can help explain the challenge faced by Israel, as well as prospects for the “day after” the war.

## Sinwar’s Maximalism

**A** ccording to Sinwar, the Hamas-led October 7 attack was supposed to initiate the “[great battle](https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3622401/hamas-leader-gaza-be-ready-great-battle)” (<https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3622401/hamas-leader-gaza-be-ready-great-battle>)” intended to eliminate Israel. At a September 2021 conference in Gaza—where senior Hamas members and other Palestinian officials discussed a post-“liberation war” Palestinian state—Sinwar [made his views plain](https://www.memri.org.il/cgi-webaxy/item?5482) (<https://www.memri.org.il/cgi-webaxy/item?5482>): “The complete liberation of Palestine from the river to the sea is the core of Hamas’s strategic vision.”

Sinwar almost certainly could not have anticipated the scale of Hamas’s initial successes, including breaching the border fence and raiding Israeli settlements without incurring a quick Israeli military response. But success did not come on all fronts. Sinwar apparently believed the Hamas-led infiltration would set off a multidimensional (sea, air, land) attack against Israel joined by West Bank Palestinians, East Jerusalem and Israeli Arabs, and allied groups such as Hezbollah along Israel’s northern border with Lebanon. This has not happened.

A second failure entails Sinwar’s underestimation of Israeli solidarity. He appears to have believed that the crisis surrounding the judicial reform proposal would translate into Israeli paralysis during wartime, including an unwillingness to support a prolonged ground incursion into Gaza.

Still, as of today, Sinwar can claim major achievements, including the perception across the Middle East and elsewhere that Hamas did serious damage to Israel and gained broad support from the regional public. In the process, he returned the Palestinian issue to the global stage, including through proceedings at the International Court of Justice. For now at least, Hamas has also delayed normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

## Victory Dead or Alive

**S** inwar is waging a battle for his physical as well as his political survival. He understands that if he lives in the short term, his future will include hiding in Gaza’s tunnels while he evades Israel’s inevitable targeted strikes.

In the broader picture, Sinwar undoubtedly recognizes the scale of destruction in Gaza and knows that with or without him, Hamas will struggle to maintain governance while Israel controls aid flows and security, augmented by the ability to strike terrorist targets. Still, at this stage, he does not appear ready for a full cessation of hostilities or to believe international guarantees would ensure his survival. Moreover, he likely senses that time is on his side through the leverage afforded by the remaining hostages. Any delay, he may also believe, will allow for efforts to further exhaust Israeli society: through Hamas-led attacks on Israeli soldiers, rocket fire and associated delays in the return of residents to the Gaza border area, deepening internal Israeli debates about the hostages, and damage to the Israeli economy.

In any case, Sinwar has displayed a low propensity for compromise and appears ready to accept death over exile abroad, an outcome that runs counter to Hamas’s principles and his own. In the short term, because he views the

hostages as his insurance policy, he will show no interest in releasing all of them—at least not quickly.

## Mashal's Long Game

**D**ating from the era of Hamas founder Ahmed Yassin, divisions have existed between the group's various power centers (e.g., external leadership vs. domestic, military vs. political). But the current rivalry between Yahya al-Sinwar and Khaled Mashal also has a personal component. To begin with, both have viewed themselves as future leaders of the entire Palestinian people. More pointedly, Mashal—who for over twenty years headed Hamas's political bureau (1996–2017)—sees Sinwar as having changed the movement's balance of power and strengthened Gaza at the expense of the outside leadership and Mashal in particular.

Whereas Sinwar and Mashal share the goal of establishing an Islamist Palestinian state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, their preferred means of doing so have always differed. Geopolitically, Mashal has tended to court the Sunni Arab states, keeping a distance from the Shia Iran-led “axis of resistance,” while Sinwar views the axis as a strategic backbone and a full partner in the war against Israel. Furthermore, Mashal diverges from Sinwar in his belief that resistance can take many forms, not just violence, as he [explained](https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/comment-le-hamas-a-organise-dans-le-plus-grand-secret-son-attaque-contre-israel-20231226) (<https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/comment-le-hamas-a-organise-dans-le-plus-grand-secret-son-attaque-contre-israel-20231226>) during the May 2023 conference of the “Beit al-Maqdis Pioneers”: “Hamas conducts resistance not only through weapons but in all forms...: internally and externally, with wisdom, determination, and tactics...”

Despite his difference in approach, one should not be deceived about Mashal's aims. He envisions the conflict leading to the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the prewar 1967 ceasefire lines, although this would not mark the end of the conflict. Meanwhile, a ceasefire lasting several years (*hudna*) would be accompanied by Palestinian control of East Jerusalem, evacuation of the West Bank settlements, and the “right of return” for Palestinian refugees. Like Sinwar, Mashal has shown no inclination to accept a two-state solution or Israel's right to exist, but the Doha-based official knows he must signal a willingness to negotiate in the current war context, especially given the destruction in Gaza and his ongoing dialogue with Qatar and Turkey. He also understands that if Hamas does not show at least the appearance of flexibility, the group might lose its bargaining power for the “day after.” Domestically, Mashal allows that entering Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) institutions, and participating in elections, could allow for Hamas's postwar survival and strengthen its position for longer-term national dominance.

Against this backdrop, Mashal—like other Hamas external leaders—is seeking to end the military campaign while steering the movement onto a political path that would facilitate its future governance in Gaza and later the West Bank. As [quoted](https://www.jns.org/mashaal-us-will-accept-hamass-legitimacy-sooner-or-later/) (<https://www.jns.org/mashaal-us-will-accept-hamass-legitimacy-sooner-or-later/>) in the French daily *Le Figaro* in late December 2023, Mashal elaborated his priorities as “ending the fighting, Israeli withdrawal from the Strip, bringing humanitarian aid to Gaza, and from there, entering discussions on any issue, indirectly, with Israel, through mediators, including matters of hostages, prisoners, and establishing a port in Gaza —...but the central question is ending the occupation.”

Hamas's external leadership may well be exploring creative postwar options for the group, including establishing a unity government with Fatah, transitioning to a “technocratic” leadership with quiet Hamas participation, or even entering the PLO under a different name while maintaining the independent operations of its military wing. For his part, Sinwar may look to Hezbollah as a model for maintaining military capabilities absent the governance role the group has effectively held in Gaza since 2006.

## Conclusion

In today's fluid reality, Israel must remain simultaneously focused on returning the remaining Gaza hostages and neutralizing the Hamas leadership and its military wing, including Yahya al-Sinwar. Yet the regional architecture being drawn up by the United States and other actors, which would include a Palestinian state, could actually render Mashal's preferred path more dangerous to Israel than that of Sinwar. Mashal's diplomatic aura must not result in the misimpression that he plans to compromise on the central issues, including recognizing Israel. Furthermore, his approach could potentially lead to Hamas control of all Palestinian institutions.

Separately, the Palestinian Authority (PA), which typically plays a zero-sum game against Hamas, is [preparing \(https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/hamas-palestinian-rivals-conduct-talks-about-governing-postwar-gaza-3058f6e6\)](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/hamas-palestinian-rivals-conduct-talks-about-governing-postwar-gaza-3058f6e6) to reach a postwar agreement with the group's external leaders. Senior PA officials such as [Jibril Rajoub \(https://epoch.org.il/general/551319/\)](https://epoch.org.il/general/551319/), a potential successor to President Mahmoud Abbas, understand that Hamas cannot be ignored as a political force. Even Abbas's rivals, like Mohammed Dahlan, have cited their daily contact with the group's officials. "I'm not a friend of Hamas...", he [said \(https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/hamas-palestinian-rivals-conduct-talks-about-governing-postwar-gaza-3058f6e6\)](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/hamas-palestinian-rivals-conduct-talks-about-governing-postwar-gaza-3058f6e6), "but do you think anyone can make peace without Hamas?"

The task of weakening Hamas thus cannot be limited to dismantling its military wing in the Gaza Strip. Beyond the challenge of dealing with the group's ideology, Israel will have to focus on other geographic areas, including the West Bank, where Hamas will use all the tools at its disposal—religious, social, and political—to become the dominant Palestinian movement and realize its vision.

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