



Israel and Hamas: Killing of Hamas Leader Yahya Sinwar

October 18, 2024

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [announced](#) on October 17 that Israel’s military killed top Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar. [Hamas](#) is a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization supported by Iran. Sinwar, who [helped mastermind](#) the October 7, 2023 Hamas-led assault on Israel, was [reportedly killed](#) in a firefight in Rafah on October 16. He had been Hamas’s overall political leader since August 2024, and had led Hamas in Gaza since 2017.

With much of Hamas’s top leadership killed, [which Hamas figures](#) (either within or outside of Gaza) might [succeed Sinwar](#) could have repercussions for the [hostages remaining in Gaza](#) and the continuation or end of conflict. Netanyahu [stated](#) that “our mission is not yet completed” and that Israel would not kill those who release hostages and stop fighting. President Joe Biden [said](#) Sinwar’s death presents an opportunity for “a political settlement that provides a better future for Israelis and Palestinians alike.” National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [added](#) that with the removal of Sinwar, who was widely known for his [hardline views among Hamas leaders](#), one “massive obstacle” to a cease-fire is gone. Several Members of Congress [publicly stated](#) that they regard Sinwar’s death as a positive step for the region.

Developments related to Sinwar’s death may have broader significance for the region and U.S. policy. Many of the other Iran-backed groups engaged in ongoing conflict with Israel—particularly [Lebanese Hezbollah](#) and the [Houthis in Yemen](#)—have linked prospects for de-escalation to the end of Israeli military operations in Gaza in some form. Such developments may also affect the tenor of direct Israel-Iran conflict, which both governments appeared willing to escalate prior to Netanyahu’s October 17 announcement.

Impact on Ongoing Regional Conflicts

In Gaza. If Sinwar’s elimination does not empower similarly intransigent successors, his death could help prepare the way for a temporary or more lasting end to Israel-Hamas conflict. President Biden has [repeatedly](#) called for [a cease-fire deal](#) that would bring hostages home, bolster Israel’s security, ease suffering in Gaza, and help de-escalate broader regional conflict.

Various factors could contribute to Hamas’s hardening or softening of its positions on a possible cease-fire, including: the hostages’ status; the group’s post-Sinwar decision-making process; its strength on the

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ground and in Palestinian domestic politics; and military or political actions by Israel, the United States, Iran and its other allies, and Arab governments.

Israel could pursue a potential cease-fire or undertake military action in Gaza aimed at further degrading or confusing Hamas. Rather than opting for a negotiated truce, Israel may seek to unilaterally suspend or limit its operations, try to rescue hostages, or both. In reviewing alternatives, Israeli leaders might evaluate:

- Hamas's leadership structure, capabilities, cohesion, and resilience.
- Israel's and Hamas's relative interest in specific issues, such as control of Gaza's border with Egypt or the release of Palestinian prisoners.
- The practical and political feasibility of replacing Hamas's putative governance and security roles in Gaza via Israeli, Palestinian, and/or international efforts.
- Costs and benefits of continued regional conflict, including the extent to which the United States may or may not support it.
- Domestic political pressure connected with the hostages' continued captivity, external threats and international criticism against Israel, and the human and economic costs of conflict since October 2023.

Israeli officials may reassess the relative priority they assign to military and diplomatic options to achieve their [stated war objectives](#), which include an end to Hamas's political and military control over Gaza, along with the return of hostages and displaced northern Israelis to their homes. National Security Advisor Sullivan [said](#) earlier in October that U.S. backing for Israel has helped it demonstrate "remarkable capacity" through "impressive operations," and "The challenge going forward is to turn tactical wins in battle into a strategy that secures Israel's people and its future." Officials from Arab Gulf states have indicated that their support for [durable outcomes in Gaza](#) and [possible improved relations with Israel](#) could depend on the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Elsewhere in the region. Whether or not conflict in Gaza persists or halts could, in turn, [affect the many other fronts](#) on which Israel is battling Iran and its allies. While announcing Sinwar's death, Prime Minister Netanyahu [said](#) to the "peoples of the region" that "We have a great opportunity to thwart the axis of evil and to create a different future." Any such ambition may be partly due to the heavy toll Israeli military operations have exacted on [Hamas](#) and [Hezbollah](#) since July 2024, and Iran's apparent inability thus far to inflict fatalities on Israel from direct attacks in [April](#) and [October](#).

At a moment that likely holds great strategic consequence for the region, Israel and Iran may each face dilemmas regarding decisions on escalation or de-escalation. Efforts by either to deter or weaken the other could elicit [damaging countermoves](#), while restraint could be perceived by some as [eroding credibility](#) or [forgoing opportunities](#).

Issues for Congress

In assessing potential legislative options and conducting oversight, Congress may consider the following.

U.S. Direct Military Support for Israel and Other Regional Partners

When contemplating the [movement and use of military assets and personnel](#) to and within the region, and associated authorizations or appropriations, U.S. officials and lawmakers might debate potential impacts on stated U.S. interests, which include, for example, potential regional de-escalation and the protection of U.S. forces, U.S. citizens, and global energy commerce.

U.S. Security Assistance for Israel and Humanitarian Assistance in Gaza

When weighing the timing, nature, and volume of arms shipments to Israel, Congress and the Biden Administration may consider the nature of Israeli operations, their impact on civilians, the extent to which they may or may not advance U.S. interests and the Israeli government's stated objectives, and Israel's [defense capacity](#) and current stockpiles.

On October 13, 2024, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin jointly sent a [letter](#), which the State Department [described](#) as a “private diplomatic communication,” to Israel's defense and strategic affairs ministers. The letter (further discussed in [another CRS Insight](#)) states that “Israel must, starting now and within 30 days,” act on several “concrete measures” vis-a-vis Gaza, such as enabling a surge of humanitarian aid into Gaza; and also says that “(f)ailure to demonstrate a sustained commitment to implementing and maintaining these measures may have implications for U.S. policy” under existing law.

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