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Hamas: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy

Hamas (or the Islamic Resistance Movement) is a Palestinian Sunni Islamist military and sociopolitical movement, and a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization (FTO). Hamas's primary base of action and support is in the Gaza Strip, which it has controlled since 2007. It also operates in the West Bank and Lebanon, and some Hamas leaders and personnel live and/or work in various Arab countries and Turkey. Hamas reportedly receives material assistance and training from Iran and some of its allies, including the Lebanese Shia group Hezbollah (another FTO). From its inception, Hamas has overseen a social welfare network that appears to have aided its popularity among Palestinians while serving as a conduit for some funding for Hamas military operations.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas led a surprise assault against Israel that killed some 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals (including 46 Americans) and took around 251 persons hostage (including some Americans)—more than 100 of whom were released in November. The attack's scope and lethality were unprecedented for Hamas. The ensuing conflict, which has reportedly killed more than 42,000 Palestinians in Gaza, has reshaped Middle Eastern dynamics, with implications for U.S. policy and Congress.

Origins, Ideology, and Leadership

An outgrowth of the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas emerged in 1987 in Gaza during the first Palestinian *intifada* (uprising). After the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) entered into a peace process with Israel that created the Palestinian Authority (PA) to exercise limited rule in the West Bank and Gaza, Hamas established itself as an alternative to the secular Fatah movement, which leads the PLO, by violently attacking Israeli civilian and military targets. Hamas's ideology combines Palestinian nationalism with Islamic fundamentalism. Hamas's 1988 charter committed the group to the destruction of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic state in all of historic Palestine (comprising present-day Israel, the West Bank and Gaza), and included anti-Semitic rhetoric. Observers differ on the extent of Hamas's pragmatism. In 2017, the group publicly released a statement that Hamas's conflict is with the "Zionist project" rather than with Jews in general. It also expressed willingness to accept a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza if it results from "national consensus," but said Hamas would not recognize Israel's legitimacy.

Hamas's formal leadership structure consists of a 15-member politburo as the group's primary decision-making entity and a Shura Council that elects the politburo—with similar structures for the West Bank, Gaza, prisoners in Israel, and the diaspora. In July 2024, Israel may have been responsible for the killing in Iran of **Ismail Haniyeh**, who chaired Hamas's politburo while based in Qatar. Also in July, an Israeli strike in Gaza reportedly killed Hamas's military leader **Muhammad Deif**. In October 2024, Israeli

soldiers killed Haniyeh's successor **Yahya Sinwar**. Sinwar had been Hamas's leader in Gaza since 2017, reportedly masterminded the October 7 assault with Deif, and had been Hamas's key wartime decisionmaker.

With much of Hamas's top leadership killed, questions surround the movement's future. It has persisted despite the Israeli assassinations of several of its other leaders over decades, but losses Hamas has suffered since October 7 may be unprecedented. Leadership succession within Hamas (featuring figures either within or outside of Gaza) could have repercussions for the remaining hostages and for Hamas's approach to cease-fire negotiations or continued conflict. While some commentators saw Sinwar's death as an opportunity to end the fighting, others predicted continued irregular warfare from Hamas and little change in Israel's posture. Other Iran-backed groups engaged in 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.

Timeline of Key Events to 2023

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| 1987-2005 | Hamas emerges as main Palestinian "rejectionist" group (with support from Iran and private Arab sources) by engaging in violent attacks against Israelis; the United States begins subjecting Hamas to financial sanctions in 1995 and designates Hamas as an FTO in 1997. |
| 2005 | After the second intifada (2000-2005), Israel unilaterally cedes responsibility for Gaza to the PA, but Israel (with Egypt) retains control over land/sea/air access. |
| 2006 | Hamas wins a majority in Palestinian Legislative Council election and leads new PA cabinet; Israel, United States, and European Union confine interactions and funding to PA President Mahmoud Abbas. |
| 2007 | West Bank-Gaza split: Hamas forcibly seizes control of Gaza Strip; Abbas reorganizes PA cabinet to lead West Bank; Israel and Egypt impose security-related restrictions on the transit of people and goods in and out of Gaza. |
| 2008-2021 | Rounds of major Israel-Hamas conflict in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021 end with little or no change to status quo in Gaza; 2011 exchange for Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit returns more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners (including Sinwar). |
| 2023 | Hamas-led October 7 assault begins major ongoing conflict in Israel and Gaza. |

Military Capabilities and External Support

Hamas’s military capabilities and tactics have grown in sophistication from its initial rudimentary guerrilla and suicide attacks. The group has used domestically produced and smuggled weaponry, including rockets and mortars, drones, and anti-tank guided missiles. Most of its rockets—the main impetus for Israel’s Iron Dome anti-rocket system—are only capable of targeting southern Israel, but some can strike Israel’s main population centers farther north. Hamas has an extensive system of tunnels within Gaza that it uses to protect and transport personnel and weapons—significantly increasing targeting difficulties for Israeli forces. One analysis has indicated that Israel has dismantled most of Hamas’s battalions and killed thousands of its roughly 25,000-30,000 fighters. In September, Israel’s defense minister said that Hamas is no longer a military formation, but continues waging guerrilla warfare in Gaza; and a former Israeli military commander stated that no one “can challenge Hamas there after Israeli forces leave.”

According to the State Department, “Hamas has received funding, weapons, and training from Iran and raises funds in Persian Gulf countries,” and Iran provides up to \$100 million annually in combined support to Palestinian militants. U.S. officials have said that “Iranian leaders did not orchestrate nor had foreknowledge of” the October 7 attacks. In November 2023, the *Economist* estimated Hamas’s annual revenue to be more than \$1 billion, with around \$360 million in “taxes” on goods brought into Gaza, and about \$750 million from foreign sources. According to the Treasury Department and a U.S.-based expert, these sources include Iran’s government and cryptocurrency exchanges, plus private entities in other regional countries, including Algeria, Sudan, Qatar, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. Some Israeli observers have reported months into the conflict that Hamas has been taking a portion of money and goods in Gaza (including from humanitarian convoys) and delivering some services.

Political Ambition, Control of Gaza, and Popularity

Hamas apparently seeks to boost its already major influence on the Palestinian national movement. In 2006, it beat Fatah in PA legislative elections, giving it nominal control over several PA government ministries as it vied with PA President Mahmoud Abbas (who heads Fatah) for power. Hamas’s continued refusal to recognize Israel or renounce violence contributed to U.S. and other Western aid limitations on the PA. In 2007, Hamas forcibly seized Gaza. Economic and humanitarian conditions there worsened under its tenure as the de facto authoritarian ruler. Also, Hamas and other groups like Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ, an FTO) used Gaza to launch attacks on Israel, prompting tightened access restrictions from Israel and Egypt. The PA has countered Hamas’s presence in the West Bank with Israeli and U.S. support. Media reports since 2022 suggest that Hamas and PIJ, with Iranian backing, have aided increased militant action in the West Bank (where conflict between Israeli forces and settlers and Palestinians has escalated) to target Israelis and undermine the PA.

The extent of Hamas’s domestic popularity is uncertain. Hamas portrays itself as defending Palestinian national aspirations and Jerusalem’s Muslim holy sites, and was the preferred faction of at least 20% of Palestinians (in the West Bank and Gaza, or WBG) according to pre-October 7,

2023 polling. Polls from late 2023 suggested the conflict had boosted WBG approval for Hamas; 2024 polling shows some drop in popular support. Whatever the outcome of the conflict, Hamas may seek to maintain political influence either directly or by pressuring whatever governing entity may emerge.

Armed Conflict with Israel

Hamas has pointed to purported Israeli provocations to justify escalations of violence. During the four rounds of major conflict before October 2023, Hamas and other militants launched rockets toward Israeli population centers, and Israeli military strikes largely decimated Gaza’s infrastructure. After each round, economic recovery and reconstruction was minimal—perhaps partly because some international actors were unsure about the durability of reconstruction and/or wanted to avoid bolstering Hamas.

President Joe Biden surmised that one objective of Hamas’s October 7 assault may have been to disrupt Israel’s improvement of relations with Saudi Arabia. Hamas may have sought to reinforce the importance of Arab popular support for the Palestinian cause to Arab states mulling closer relations with Israel. Hamas leaders and some observers suggested other possible reasons for the attack, such as bolstering Hamas’s domestic popularity, securing prisoner releases, and exploiting Israeli domestic discord.

U.S. Policy and Options for Congress

Major questions for U.S. policymakers include: How can U.S. efforts to counter Hamas and the Iran-led “axis of resistance” bolster Israel, the PA, and other U.S. regional partners while minimizing suffering for Palestinian civilians? How should the United States engage with allies or partners—such as Qatar and Turkey—that may host or support Hamas and seek to mediate its conflicts? How can various actors assist Palestinians in Gaza and reestablish post-conflict governance there without empowering Hamas or its ideology and tactics? Since 2006, Congress and the executive branch appear to have structured certain types of U.S. economic and security assistance partly to help the PA counter Hamas. Congress also has placed conditions and restrictions on U.S. funding to any PA government that Hamas controls, joins, or “unduly influences” (for example, in P.L. 109-446 and Section 7040(f) of P.L. 118-47).

The Biden Administration publicly supports an end to Hamas rule in Gaza, return of the hostages, humanitarian access, and a cease-fire.” The Treasury Department has designated many actors for sanctions as Hamas supporters, but may have difficulty limiting fundraising activities abroad that bypass the U.S. financial system.

In April 2024, Congress enacted the Hamas and Other Palestinian Terrorist Groups International Financing Prevention Act (Division M of P.L. 118-50), which requires the executive branch to impose sanctions on foreign states or persons that provide certain types of support to Hamas, PIJ, or related groups. Humanitarian funding in FY2024 regular and supplemental appropriations is subject to “Gaza oversight” provisions aimed at preventing any diversion, misuse, or destruction of aid. A July 2024 U.S. Agency for International Development Inspector General report suggested addressing “shortcomings and vulnerabilities” in U.S. oversight mechanisms.

Jim Zanotti, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

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