May 28, 2024 / The Hamas org chart

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): The calls for a ceasefire may be quieting on college campuses, but they’re getting louder around the world.

SCORING IN – An Egg-Shaped Room.. Various Dissonant Clusters Version-01

*<CLIP> CANADIAN FOREIGN MINISTER MELANIE JOLY: The level of human suffering is catastrophic and that’s why, Mr. Speaker, we need an immediate ceasefire.*

SEAN: The International Court of Justice called on Israel to immediately halt its offensive in Rafah. That came a few days after Spain, Norway, and Ireland recognized an independent Palestinian state. And a few days *before* an Israeli airstrike in Rafah Sunday killed dozens of Palestinian refugees.

*<CLIP> PBS NEWSHOUR: Civilians burnt alive and children decapitated.*

SEAN: Israel says the strike was a “tragic mishap” but that it killed two Hamas officials. But the top Hamas leadership remains intact. And therein lies the paradox: Israel wants to take out top leadership all while negotiating with said leadership remains essential to a ceasefire.

On *Today, Explained*, we’re gonna finally talk about who’s running Hamas.

[THEME]

SEAN: Tom O’Connor writes about national security and foreign policy for *Newsweek*. He joined us to talk about the three guys at the top of the Hamas org chart. Yahya Sinwar and Mahammad Deif, who are believed to be in Gaza. And Ismail Haniyeh who is known to be in Doha, Qatar. We started with Sinwar.

TOM: The last we've seen of him is a video that was released a few months ago, I believe, by the Israelis

*<CLIP> THE ECONOMIST: IDF SPOKESMAN: We are releasing footage of the mass murderer and mastermind behind the Hamas massacre of October 7th, Yayah Sinwar.*

TOM: Purported to be him. It looks like him. And with some family members, going through a tunnel.

*IDF SPOKESMAN: This video is one of many that we have obtained since October 7th.*

TOM: All three of them, including Haniyeh, are really from this same generation of of children born, into refugee families, in Gaza that escape from other parts of what was before the mandate of Palestine, before the ‘48 war. They grow up in the 80s at a time where Gaza is under Israeli military occupation, they get arrested by Israel. They get out and they rise up the ranks in the group.

SCORING IN – KPM KPM Harmonic Machine, APM

TOM: So, to start really with Sinwar, he's also known as Abu Ibrahim in Arabic, born in Khan Yunis. He goes to the Islamic University of Gaza, like all these three guys do essentially. And pretty early on in the 80s, he's arrested the first time, and we have to remember, the 80s is a very tense time, in the Gaza Strip – the first Intifada, which is a mass uprising, violence everywhere.

*<CLIP> WHO’S LAND DOCUMENTARY, 1982: Narrator: It’s absolutely clear that the commitment is not only to regain the Palestinian homeland for the PLO but to do it by armed force.*

TOM: And this is really when Hamas forms and it gets its support base from these disaffected, Palestinian activists, who become increasingly, conservative and religiously focused in their sort of their activities. So, Sinwar is arrested once, I think the first time is in 1982. He has a few run-ins with the police and basically the Israeli security forces at the time. But he really gets this reputation when he comes out, as this really brutal enforcer. And he's known for not only killing Israelis, but he's also accused of killing Palestinians that are accused of collaborating with Israel so…

SEAN: Hm.

TOM: … he's arrested once again in the late 80s. And this time he stays in prison for a long time, and he doesn't really emerge again, actually, till about 2011.

*<CLIP> EURONEWS: Israel has begun transferring Palestinian prisoners ahead of their planned release in an exchange deal for the captive Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit.*

TOM: There’s this big exchange, about a thousand Palestinians, Sinwar being one of them.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA ENGLISH: SINWAR: <<speaking Arabic>> I’m still a soldier and I will continue with my nephews on the battlefield. I have been absent for 25 years and there are many things I have to learn.*

TOM: Hamas is running the show in Gaza. He's basically part of what, what has become now Hamas's internal security forces. He's doing these interrogations, and he's also doing something else that's very important. He's building ties with this axis of resistance that includes Hezbollah, includes Iran and some of the other groups in the region, really tied together by the IRGC. And that's important because Hamas and Iran have had kind of a complicated relationship over time. The Sunni-Shia divide has informed the relationship, the Syrian civil war, but this relationship starts to blossom a bit. And then in 2017, he was promoted to the chief of affairs in Gaza. He's really seen, obviously, as the key figure in terms of organizing, in terms of leading Hamas, in the Gaza Strip itself.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: And also potentially underground somewhere is Mohammed Deif.

TOM: Yeah. So Mohammed Deif is a far more elusive figure than Sinwar. Now Sinwar, he was public, he was out there, you know, he went to events, he went to rallies. He dared, you know, Israel on occasions to, to assassinate him. Muhammad Deif has pretty much lived in the shadows for much of his life. You know, he's the product of a refugee family that, that uh lived in Gaza. He went to university in the 80s. He … funny enough, he actually had an extracurricular activity. He actually took on theater.

SEAN: Huh!

TOM: Not what you'd expect maybe from your top, Islamist militant commando. But he's held by the Israelis for, I think, about, a year and a half or so. And when he emerges, he really quickly becomes essentially one of the founding forces within the emerging Al-Qassam brigade, which really starts to take root in the 1980s. His claim to fame really is just, excelling in bomb making skills and strategy, and ambushes. And he's really seen as one of the key figures, behind the scenes when it came to these, these mass attacks. Going into even after the First Intifada, there was a second intifada in the 2000s. And in 2002, the head of the Al Qasem brigade, Salah Shehade is killed and Mohammad Deif essentially takes his place. So, Mohammed Deif, as far as his background itself, less is known about him. The name actually, Mohammed Deif is not his real name. It's a nickname, that refers to the term ‘deif’ means ‘guest’ in Arabic, and it refers to the fact that he never stays in the same place, for too long. And he's really been a major target, for Israeli assassination attempts and airstrikes. He's escaped a number of attempts on his life, but he's also, as far as we know, he's lost an eye, he's lost, he's lost other limbs, we know that he's been severely injured. That's part of the reason, perhaps, why we don't see a lot of him. I think there's really only maybe 2 or 3 photos ever released of him, actually. But he's also lost family members in some of these attacks, too, we know. So he is a, you know, a dedicated commando leader, and he's almost, like a, to some, a Che Guevara kind of figure.

SEAN: Hm.

TOM: He's become so iconic in ways that even just his silhouette, which is usually how he presents himself, like he did on October 7th when he gave this super galvanizing speech, but this silhouette is being raised at, at rallies and stuff like that, so certainly a very influential figure.

SEAN: Okay. So that covers the leadership we think is inside Gaza. What about leadership outside of, of Gaza? What about Haniyeh?

TOM: Yeah. So Haniyeh, really, today serves as the, the top leadership of all Hamas, as the chief of the Politburo. He's in Doha, based there. He travels. He, he's part of the public face of Hamas. He's pivotal to their international relations and their efforts to have more international legitimacy, to forge relations with other countries, other powers.

*<CLIP> CNA: According to reports, Ismail Haniyeh will be meeting with Egypt’s spy chief to discuss stopping the aggression in the besieged enclave and an agreement for the release of prisoners…*

TOM: And he is seen as more, always been seen as more of a political figure, for Hamas. He was actually, former prime minister of the Palestinian National Authority at this brief time where there was a unity government. Haniyeh is no longer considered, of course, Prime Minister. But he, he assumes control over Gaza. And then he, of course, then goes on to become the head of all Hamas. So that's really his position right now. He's again, super important to the, the formal leadership, leadership structure of the group. He is not necessarily, you know, calling every single shot in Gaza itself. Hamas is really has structured itself in a way to function quite autonomously, from even the, the battalion level.

SEAN: How important, how essential are these three guys to Hamas? How much would it change Hamas's strategy, presence if they were found or killed or arrested?

TOM: Yeah. So, you know, there's no doubt that there's both symbolic and tactical, you know, value in taking out, top Hamas leaders, you know. But if we look at their history of Hamas, they've lost just about every top leader they've had, you know, over the years and they have new people. You know, I mentioned, you know, Mohammad Deif, he came in because Salah Shehadeh was killed. So, it's not to say that these guys have and the group itself, let's say, doesn't have this organizational experience, in filling these ranks. And, and that's something, again, that they, that they say, you know. I've talked to senior Hamas officials have said that, you know, we feel it when they when they kill our leaders, you know, they do. Because, you know, these people, not only are they, you know, not only do they have this influence and this public image, they also have contacts, you know, they know people. You know, there's there's a reason that they rose up the ranks in the group itself. But they have people in waiting. They have replacements, and they have replacements for the replacements. We've heard that a lot. So, you know, I think that and is something, you know, Israeli officials tell us is that, ‘Yes. You know, we want, we want to get these guys, you know, they're on our target list and we've seen them, you know, do these, assassination operations for some of these guys who are abroad, like Arouri, for example.’ But, they, they're not setting the deaths or the capture of these top officials as a prerequisite for claiming victory.

SCORING IN, BIB BIB Half Asleep, APM

TOM: Until there's, I think, a fundamental, you know, solution to address the conditions that allow these guys to, you know, gain power and rise up the ranks and form different groups, even if it's another group after Hamas, I think it’s still a long way from saying anything like ‘Mission Accomplished.’

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Tom O’Connor. Newsweek dot com. More on how these top Hamas leaders have evaded Israeli forces when we’re back on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

MAIRAV ZONSZEIN (INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP): My name is Mairav Zonszein, and I'm the senior Israel analyst with the International Crisis Group.

SEAN: Could you just tell us why Israel has failed to destroy top Hamas leadership?

MAIRAV: When you kind of get down to the nitty gritty of how the IDF, the Israel Defense Forces, defines the war goals, they specifically talk about taking away the governing and military capabilities of Hamas, so even though we heard a lot of very incendiary rhetoric – destroying Hamas, destroying Gaza – all these things, when you actually break it down, they want to remove Hamas as a as a power in the Gaza Strip.

SCORING IN, Moaning in the air ducts, BMC

*<CLIP> THE ECONOMIST: IDF SPOKESMAN: Hamas will be dismantled and Hamas leaders wherever they’re hiding should know they’re on borrowed time. We will continue doing everything in our power to fulfill our mission: Free our hostages from Hamas, and free Gaza from Hamas.*

MAIRAV: And they haven't been able to do that, largely. And I think there's two main reasons for that. One is that it's very difficult to take apart a non-state, kind of terror group that has taken root inside a very small, urban, densely populated area when they've been there for almost 20 years. And when, you know, a lot of what they do is figuring out how to defend and offend in search of resisting Israeli occupation oppression, and also because they're not a state actor, they have to use all kinds of means to do that, including building a tunnel network.

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS: You’ve got reinforced concrete, they have electrical wires, plumbing overhead, I’m about 5’8 and you can see this goes way above my head, so it’s about 10 feet tall…*

MAIRAV: So that plus the fact that Hamas had taken many, many hostages, and to this day there are over 100 hostages, still in Gaza. It seems pretty likely that the Israeli military has had a difficult time getting to Hamas leadership and key players because they probably are surrounded by hostages. And as much destruction and devastation and killing that we've seen, I think there would have been probably even more if those hostages weren't there, and they wouldn't have to worry about that collateral damage.

MUSIC BUMP

MAIRAV: The other is, besides the kind of military difficulty and the urban warfare difficulty, before October 7th, then the criticism since October 7th of the Netanyahu government and Netanyahu specifically, was that he had a very clear policy of keeping Hamas in power and also of trying to contain Hamas, in a way, because Hamas is a very good excuse for Israel to continue on its path of settlement, expansion and occupation and, and rejection of a Palestinian state, rejection of Palestinian self-determination, because we're talking about, you know, a terror group that, many, many in the world don't think is legitimate.

<CLIP> PBS NEWS HOUR HOST: *Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pushed back today against criticism of his Gaza strategy from within his own government. Israel's defense minister accused Netanyahu of indecision and leading Israel down a, quote, dangerous course.*

GALLANT: *Indecision is, in essence, a decision. This leads to a dangerous course, which promotes the idea of Israeli military and civilian governance in Gaza. This is a negative and dangerous option for the State of Israel strategically, militarily and from a security standpoint. We must make tough decisions for the future of our country, favoring national priorities above all other possible considerations, even with the possibility of personal or political costs.*

MAIRAV: So he kind of kept Hamas there for a long time, and in some ways, maybe still has an interest in keeping Hamas in at play somewhat, even though that is, of course, counter intuitive or productive to what Israel wants, what Israel is saying it wants. But as long as Hamas is there, Israel doesn't have to get into any kind of peace process, any kind of serious political negotiation. It doesn't have to take the Palestinian demands for a state, for liberation, for rights as seriously, let’s say. Even if we assume that Netanyahu is committed to getting rid of Hamas, he has an interest in staying in power now. And the best way to stay in power is to keep the war going on and on and on.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Has it worked at all? Have they got any of Hamas's top leadership?

MAIRAV: They've gotten to some of the senior commanders in charge of certain aspects of the military wing of Hamas.

*<CLIP> DAILY MAIL: US NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER JAKE SULLIVAN: They’ve broken a significant number of Hamas battalions, killed thousands of Hamas fighters including senior commanders, Hamas’ number 3 Marwan Issa was killed in an Israeli operation last week, the rest of the top leaders are in hiding likely deep in the tunnel network…*

MAIRAV: You know, they've had, like, these tactical achievements throughout the war. We took, we took out this guy, we took out that guy. He was responsible for this. But nobody in the inner circle that makes the decisions. Nobody, I think in the immediate, like five people with Sinwar. And they really are very much interested in getting to those people, not just because they're the people making the decisions, but because of this feeling of revenge that they need to take these people out in order to have at least a symbolic victory.

SEAN: It sounds like you're saying that it's not really plausible to just fully eradicate Hamas. Is that what you're saying?

MAIRAV: Yeah, there's a few reasons for that. I mean, first of all, you know, you have the strongest military in the Middle East fighting for eight months now, almost, and I think something like some of the US military intelligence numbers and reports that have come out talk about maybe 30% of Hamas militants. Also, we don't know exactly how they categorize what a Hamas militant is, but even if we take higher numbers that Israel gives, let's say half of the casualties, which is over 35,000, let's say half of those are Hamas militants, it's still not, you know, a number that can really take apart an organization necessarily. Now, maybe it's enough to, to, you know, not allow Hamas to operate as a military anymore and not allow it, not enable it to, to attack Israeli border communities anymore. That's possible. And I think, again, like the war goals and the rhetoric were way, way higher than they could have made good on. They promise things that they just couldn't deliver on. And so if they had also made the war goals a bit more realistic at the beginning than the achievements that they've had until now, may have looked different.

SEAN: How does the United States feel about Israel's strategy with Hamas at this point?

MAIRAV: I mean, in some ways, Biden, you know, has been talking lately a little bit out of, you know, two parts of his mouth. Like, I mean, the U.S. has fully supported Israel diplomatically, politically, economically, militarily throughout this war.

*<CLIP> US PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: So in this moment, we must be crystal clear. We stand with Israel. We stand with Israel. And we will make sure Israel has what it needs to defend itself and take care of its citizens*.

MAIRAV: It also purportedly, you know, supports Israel's war goals of getting the hostages back and destroying Hamas like it's it's full on agrees with Israel's decision to go out to this war. But how it's waged its war is where, you know, certain former generals and certain Biden administration people have said, like, you could do it in a different way.

*<CLIP> US SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LLOYD AUSTIN: I don’t think those two things are, are incompatible. You know, I think you can conduct military operations effectively and also account for civilians in the battlespace. There are ways to do this where you can account for both. You can protect the people and also accomplish your objectives.*

MAIRAV: And I think that, you know, as this war has gone on and as I think the US to some extent in Israel as well, we're probably surprised that they didn't make more inroads. And as the election year in the US started, they started to lose patience and started to realize on the humanitarian issues specifically, that they really need to kind of at least provide the appearances of making things better. This pier that they just built. You know, it's not necessarily going to be effective. As much as, you know, a cease fire would be for humanitarian aid, but effectively, the US has come out and said, like, you need to have a better plan for not only once you have taken Hamas out in a certain area, you have to kind of stay there and figure out who's going to take over. And that's the part that, the US and pretty much all of Netanyahu's war cabinet has come out criticizing him about they basically have said, even where you have been able to take out Hamas, you have nothing to fill that vacuum. There's no alternative. You've rejected any kind of plan. You've rejected the Palestinian Authority in some level. And even if those plans are not very realistic, Israel at this point isn't even paying lip service to them. So I think the US is very frustrated with the fact that there's no exit strategy, no end game, no political postwar vision for Gaza. And that's, you know, obviously very problematic.

SEAN: It just sounds like a strategic failure on top of strategic failure on Israel's part. Is it all but certain that Hamas will still be standing come the end of this war?

MAIRAV: Some people in Israel, even, you know, putting aside Netanyahu, are really committed to removing Hamas from power, even if it takes years, even if Israel has to be in rolling operations and some form of occupation for many years and legitimately, Israelis, you know, who lived along the border, there won't, won't be able to feel safe staying there. You know, you have a real security issue and and an internal domestic crisis that Israel has lost. Israelis have lost total confidence in the ability of the state to protect them. And that's a real issue that, the political and the military echelon need to deal with. So if they're, you know, so they're committed to removing Hamas at some level. But there's also, you know, a reality to deal with. And I think some military intelligence officials have already understood that Hamas will remain in some on some level there. So the question is, how do you leverage that or how do you maneuver that in a way that that works? And, you know, I don't, you know, know the answer to that. But even if the Hamas current regime as it stands, is somehow surrenders or exiled or removed at the end of this, there's still going to be, you know, Hamas, people and Hamas approaches and ideology. And it's also a dynamic thing. It's constantly changing. You know, the Palestinian issue was pushed under the rug. U.S. presidents have denied that is an issue. Israeli prime ministers and, you know, consecutive governments and the society have just kind of decided that it's not an issue they need to deal with. And that hubris and that impunity led us in many ways to October 7th, so, you know, that's something that Israelis are going to have to reckon with now. And that's something that, you know, the world is reacting very strongly to, I think, years of of occupation with no price to pay. And unfortunately, the price now is very, very high.

SCORING IN – Uptown Scuffler

SEAN: Mairav Zonszein [may-RAHV ZUN-shine]. International Crisis Group.

The show was produced by Victoria Chamberlin, edited by Amina Al-Sadi, fact checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir.

I’m Sean Rameswaram. It’s *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]