

Hamas: A Comprehensive Overview

Historical Origins and Founding Context

Hamas (an Arabic acronym for “Islamic Resistance Movement” meaning “zeal”) emerged in December 1987 at the start of the First Intifada. It was formed by Palestinian members of the Muslim Brotherhood and elements of the PLO’s religious factions britannica.com . In its founding charter of 1988, Hamas declared that “Palestine is an Islamic homeland that can never be surrendered to non-Muslims” and that waging jihad (holy struggle) to recover Palestine from Israel was a religious duty britannica.com . Hamas’s early attacks on Israeli military and civilian targets soon distinguished it from the secular PLO. These attacks led Israel to arrest several Hamas leaders in 1989, including Sheikh Ahmed Yassin (later recognized as the movement’s founder)

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Initially a grassroots Islamist organization, Hamas rapidly built a support base in Gaza. It drew on the Brotherhood’s social networks (charities, schools, mosques) established since the 1970s. Over time, Hamas grew into a national movement dedicated to Palestinian nationalism under Islamic guidance.

Ideological and Religious Foundations (Links to the Muslim Brotherhood)

Hamas is explicitly an Islamist and Palestinian-nationalist movement that sprang from the Palestinian branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood sgp.fas.org britannica.com . Its ideology blends Sunni Islamism with Palestinian liberation. The 1988 Charter (its founding manifesto) invoked militant Islamic themes and rejected any legitimacy for Israel, calling Palestinians to “wage holy war” to liberate the land britannica.com wilsoncenter.org . In practice, Hamas pursued a strategy of *jihad* (struggle) against Israel, including the use of suicide bombings and rocket fire as early as the 1990s and 2000s wilsoncenter.org ecfr.eu .

Over time, Hamas has moderated some language. In a 2017 policy document it acknowledged the possibility of a Palestinian state on the pre-1967 (West Bank/Gaza) lines as a “temporary formula” for consensus, though it still “rejected the legitimacy of the Israeli occupation” and did not formally recognize Israel [britannica.com](#) [wilsoncenter.org](#) . Nevertheless, Islamist ideology remains central: Hamas’s leadership often frames the conflict in religious terms (“liberation from the river to the sea”, “defense of al-Aqsa mosque”, etc.), and it retains organizational ties to the Muslim Brotherhood tradition.

Political Structure and Leadership

Hamas is structured with both political and military wings. Its highest decision-making body is a 15-member *political bureau* (politburo) together with a broader consultative *Shura* council. Historically, the politburo has been based outside Gaza. For example, it was formed in Amman (Jordan) in the 1990s with Khaled Meshaal as leader in 1996, relocated to Damascus in 2001, and moved to Doha, Qatar in 2012 [britannica.com](#) . (Hamas leaders left Doha in late 2024 amid the Gaza war.) A local leadership structure governs Gaza (and separately the West Bank) under Hamas’s authority. From 2007 until late 2024 the Gaza Strip’s Hamas chief was Yahya Sinwar, who was widely viewed as the de facto head of Hamas’s military wing in Gaza [aljazeera.com](#) . (Sinwar was reportedly killed in an Israeli strike in October 2024 [time.com](#) .) Ismail Haniyeh became head of the politburo after the 2006 elections and served until he was killed by an airstrike in early 2025 [time.com](#) .

Other notable leaders have included founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Mousa Abu Marzouk (exiled deputy leader). In recent years Israel has decimated the top leadership: military commander Mohammed Deif was reportedly killed in mid-2024 and was the principal target, and both Sinwar and Haniyeh have been killed by IDF strikes [time.com](#) . As a result, Hamas’s current command is in flux.

Internally, Hamas maintains control in Gaza through parallel political and administrative organs. After winning the 2006 Palestinian elections, it formed a short-lived Palestinian Authority government (Ismail Haniyeh as prime minister) [wilsoncenter.org](#) . When fighting broke out with rival Fatah in 2007, Hamas seized full control of Gaza, leaving the Fatah-led PA in charge of the West Bank [britannica.com](#) . Since then, Hamas has effectively governed Gaza’s civil services – including education, health and security – operating ministries and welfare networks under siege conditions.

Military Wing: Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades and Notable Operations

Hamas's armed wing is the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades (IQB), formally established in 1991 ^{ecfr.eu}. It became Gaza's largest militia, growing from improvised infantry and rockets into a better-equipped force. The Qassams have claimed responsibility for hundreds of attacks on Israeli targets: during the 1990s–2000s they carried out numerous suicide bombings and rocket barrages into southern Israel ^{ecfr.eu}. They also orchestrated the 2006 cross-border raid that abducted Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit (released in 2011 in exchange for Palestinian prisoners), and in recent years acquired advanced rockets, drones and tunnel networks ^{ecfr.eu}.

Notable Qassam operations include:

- **First Intifada (1987–1993):** Hamas's nascent militias attacked Israeli soldiers and collaborators, building its reputation.
- **Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000–2005):** The Qassams pioneered suicide bombings against Israeli cities (e.g. 2001 Sederot bombing) and fired thousands of short-range rockets from Gaza.
- **Gaza Wars:** In each major Gaza war (see below) the Brigades spearheaded Gaza's resistance with rocket fire, anti-tank missiles and ambush attacks.
- **Oct. 7, 2023 Assault:** In the October 2023 surprise offensive, over 1,000 Qassam fighters stormed across the Gaza fence into southern Israel under heavy rocket cover ^{ecfr.eu}. They attacked military bases, towns and even a civilian music festival, killing ~1,189 Israelis (mostly civilians) and abducting some 251 people ^{ecfr.eu} (see War section). This was the largest Hamas operation ever.

The Qassam Brigades are designated a terrorist organization by Israel, the EU, Australia, New Zealand, Egypt, and the UK ^{en.wikipedia.org}, and Hamas's armed wing is banned in most Western countries.

Role in Palestinian Politics (Elections and Gaza Governance)

Hamas has been a major political force. Its first and only national election campaign was in

January 2006, when it unexpectedly won a majority of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council wilsoncenter.org. Ismail Haniyeh became PA Prime Minister as a result. This victory was widely attributed to Hamas's extensive social welfare network and image of integrity: one report noted *"Hamas's victory is a testament to its long track record on the streets"*, citing its hundreds of clinics, food banks, and other services often seen as less corrupt and more effective than the PA's latimes.com latimes.com.

However, the 2006–07 Fatah-Hamas power struggle ended with a violent split: by June 2007 Hamas expelled Fatah forces from Gaza. Since then Gaza and the West Bank have been governed separately – Hamas running Gaza's security forces and ministries, and the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority based in Ramallah controlling the West Bank britannica.com. Gaza's Hamas administration has operated under heavy blockade and warfare. It has maintained schools, health services and infrastructure (often through former PA systems and NGO networks) but has also been accused of repressing political opposition. Gaza's economy and civil services have suffered severe shortages: for example, after Egypt closed most Gaza tunnels in 2013 and Israel tightened border restrictions, Hamas struggled to pay public salaries and relied on unpopular new taxes britannica.com.

Hamas and Fatah have periodically attempted reconciliation. In 2011 they signed a unity pact in Cairo and agreed (in principle) to a temporary joint government britannica.com, but disputes over control scuttled those deals. A short-lived unity PA cabinet was formed in 2014–15 with third-party ministers, yet Hamas largely retained de facto control of Gaza britannica.com. As of 2025, no new Palestinian elections have been held (PA elections were postponed indefinitely), and Hamas remains the ruling power in Gaza, while Fatah's Palestinian Authority remains internationally recognized as the representative of the Palestinian territories.

Relations with Other Factions and External Allies

Hamas's relations with Fatah (and other Palestinian factions) have been tense. Both movements claim to represent Palestinian nationalism, but they differ on ideology and strategy. After the 2007 split, the two factions have been rivals: Fatah (and PA President Mahmoud Abbas) generally exclude Hamas from official power, while Hamas rejects Abbas's leadership. They have cooperated only under external pressure (e.g. the 2011 Cairo Accord)

and otherwise remain politically divided britannica.com . In Gaza, Hamas has sometimes clashed with smaller groups like Palestinian Islamic Jihad, but it leads a loose alliance of Islamist factions on most major issues.

Regionally, Hamas has forged alliances with several outside actors hostile to Israel. Its closest sponsor is **Iran**, which provides arms, funding and training. At times, Iran has given Hamas upwards of \$100 million per year cf.org . Hamas is also part of Iran's so-called "Axis of Resistance" (with Iran-backed Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Lebanon's Hezbollah and others) against Israel cf.org . In practice, this means Hamas has coordinated with Hezbollah's leaders via Iran, and since Oct 2023 Hezbollah has opened a northern front (rockets from Lebanon). **Hezbollah**, a Shia militia in Lebanon, is an ideological ally via Iran (Hamas and Hezbollah have different religions and histories but share the anti-Israel cause).

Other external patrons include **Qatar**, which since 2012 hosts the Hamas politburo and provides financial support (including Gaza reconstruction funds) cf.org ; and **Turkey**, which offers diplomatic backing and humanitarian aid. Historically, Hamas had been allied with Syria (the politburo was in Damascus from 2001–2012), but it broke with Bashar al-Assad's regime over the 2011 Syrian civil war britannica.com , moving its leadership to Qatar and shrinking Iranian support. (Iran and Hamas mended ties by 2015.) Hamas does not have formal relations with most Arab governments: for example, Saudi Arabia and Egypt officially distance themselves from Hamas, though they have mediated ceasefires. In short, Hamas's external support network consists mainly of Iran, Gulf states like Qatar, and sympathies from Turkey, but it is shunned by the U.S. and much of the West.

International Designation and Diplomatic Responses

Hamas is officially designated a terrorist organization by many Western and allied governments. The United States labeled Hamas a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 1997 britannica.com ; the European Union did so in 2003 (it was briefly delisted in 2018 but reinstated in 2021) britannica.com . Other countries on the U.S./EU lists include Canada, Israel, Japan, Australia and others sgp.fas.org . (Some states, like the UK, long distinguished Hamas's political and military wings, but in recent years they too have fully proscribed it.) As one expert summary notes, "*dozens of countries, including the United States, have designated Hamas a terrorist organization*" cf.org . Israel, which calls Hamas its principal enemy, has explicitly outlawed it and continues military campaigns against it.

Diplomatically, this designation means Hamas has no formal embassy or state-to-state channels. Western governments cut contact with Hamas except through indirect channels (e.g. U.S. officials talk to Hamas in the context of hostage negotiations mediated by Qatar). In contrast, some regional actors have engaged with Hamas: Qatar's government regularly hosts ceasefire talks with Hamas leaders (often liaising with Egypt), and Turkey has publicly defended Hamas as a "legitimate" resistance movement. In international forums, Hamas is generally represented by the Palestine Liberation Organization (dominated by Fatah), not by itself.

Because Hamas is isolated diplomatically, international responses to its actions have usually come in the form of sanctions or public statements. The UN and human rights groups routinely condemn Hamas rocket attacks on civilians and report on Gaza's humanitarian situation. Conversely, many Muslim-majority countries and activists condemn Israeli military actions against Gaza. The upshot is a polarized diplomatic environment: many Western governments work with Israel to counter Hamas (e.g. arming Israel, imposing sanctions on Hamas networks), while Hamas relies on its patrons (Iran, Qatar, Turkey) for political cover and on diplomacy by proxy.

Humanitarian Impact and Role in Civil Society in Gaza

As Gaza's de facto government since 2007, Hamas has tried to provide social services but also contributes to humanitarian crises. The territory has been under Israeli/Egyptian blockade almost continuously since 2007 [britannica.com](#), and recurrent wars have devastated infrastructure. On the one hand, Hamas maintains a wide social welfare network: hundreds of clinics, food banks, schools and summer camps operated by charities linked to Hamas have long been active in Gaza [latimes.com](#). Supporters argue these programs "reduce the suffering of the Palestinian people" and were a key reason for Hamas's popularity [latimes.com](#). For example, one analysis noted that many Gazans view Hamas-run services as higher-quality and less corrupt than those of the Fatah-led PA [latimes.com](#).

On the other hand, Hamas's rule has strained Gaza's civilians. Israeli and Egyptian blockades have restricted fuel, electricity and goods, leading to chronic shortages and unemployment. Aid agencies report that a large majority of Gazans rely on international aid. During conflicts, the dense urban environment of Gaza and Hamas's practice of embedding military assets among civilians have produced heavy civilian casualties. For instance, Israeli bombardments (which hit some hospitals and schools) and a blockade have left 80–90% of Gazans

foodinsecure in recent years. Critically injured civilians often cannot be evacuated due to border closures, heightening the humanitarian toll.

Moreover, human rights organizations have criticized Hamas for repressing dissent in Gaza. Hamas security forces have arrested or intimidated journalists, political opponents and human-rights activists. They routinely enforce conservative social norms (e.g. dress codes) and have been accused of torture and extrajudicial killings of alleged collaborators. These actions have created an atmosphere of fear for some Gaza residents.

In sum, Hamas plays a central role in Gaza's civil society: it funds charities, runs schools and hospitals, and has mobilized many residents under its banner latimes.com latimes.com. But its governance exists under blockade and war, leading to severe humanitarian hardship.

Major Conflicts and Wars Involving Hamas (with Israel)

Since its founding, Hamas has been at the center of repeated wars in Gaza. Its 'Izz al-Dīn alQassām Brigades have fought five major campaigns against Israel and numerous smaller skirmishes. Key conflicts include:

- **2008–09 Gaza War ("Cast Lead")** – A three-week Israeli offensive launched after Palestinian rocket fire. It left ~**1,166–1,417 Palestinians killed** (the majority civilians) and 13 Israelis dead en.wikipedia.org. Over 46,000 Gazan homes were destroyed. Hamas's rocket barrages into southern Israel (and their tunnels) were Israel's stated justification.
- **Nov. 2012 Gaza War ("Operation Pillar of Defense")** – An eight-day exchange of fire started by Israel targeting Hamas's top military commander. About **174 Palestinians were killed** (over half civilians) and **6 Israelis killed** (4 civilians, 2 soldiers) en.wikipedia.org en.wikipedia.org. The two sides agreed to an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire.
- **July–Aug. 2014 Gaza War ("Protective Edge")** – A 50-day war triggered by Hamas rocket fire and cross-border tunnels. Israeli strikes killed roughly **2,200 Palestinians** (about 70% civilians), and 72 Israelis (67 of them soldiers) en.wikipedia.org. Tens of thousands of buildings in Gaza were damaged or destroyed. Hamas rocket fire – including longerrange missiles – caused several Israeli civilian deaths.
- **May 2021 Gaza Conflict ("Guardian of the Walls")** – A two-week war set off by clashes in Jerusalem. Heavy rocket fire by Hamas and corresponding Israeli airstrikes killed **≈260 Palestinians** and **13 Israelis** (including three foreign nationals) brandeis.edu.

(Hundreds more were injured on both sides.) This conflict also ignited communal violence inside Israel.

- **Oct. 2023 – 2025 Gaza War** – The largest-ever Hamas-Israel war. On Oct 7, 2023 Hamas launched a surprise cross-border assault (by land, sea and air) on southern Israel, killing **1,200+ Israelis** (mostly civilians) and abducting ~240 hostages [britannica.com](#) . Israel then conducted a massive military campaign in Gaza. By early May 2025, **over 52,000 Gazans** (about two-thirds of them civilians) had been killed and much of Gaza's infrastructure destroyed [britannica.com](#) . Roughly 1,700 Israelis (including soldiers and civilians) died in this round. The war featured intense rocket barrages by Hamas into cities like Tel Aviv and heavy Israeli air and ground assaults on Gaza.

Each of these wars saw repeated calls by the international community for ceasefire, and each has left deep scars in Gaza and Israel.

Recent Developments and Geopolitical Implications (up to 2025)

The October 2023 attack and ensuing war dramatically altered Hamas's position. The unprecedented scale of violence reinvigorated some Arab public support for Palestinian resistance, but internationally Hamas is under intense pressure. Israeli forces in 2024–25 systematically targeted its leadership: *Mohammed Deif* (longtime military chief) and *Yahya Sinwar* (Gaza chief) were killed, and on Jan. 2025 a strike killed Hamas's political leader *Ismail Haniyeh* [time.com](#) . These losses have raised questions about Hamas's command and future direction.

On the diplomatic front, there have been intense negotiations over hostages and ceasefires. In mid-2025 the U.S. unveiled a proposal for a 60-day ceasefire: Israel would halt operations and release 28 hostages, while Hamas would free 1,236 Palestinian prisoners [reuters.com](#) . Israel accepted this plan, but Hamas officials quickly rejected parts of it. Hamas publicly stated that the proposals "fail to meet any of the just and legitimate demands of our people," insisting that any truce must include a full Israeli withdrawal and an end to the war [reuters.com](#)[reuters.com](#) . By June 2025, partial swaps and brief truces had occurred (exchanging some hostages for prisoners), but a durable settlement remained elusive.

Regionally, the Gaza war has heightened tensions. Iran and Hezbollah have signaled solidarity with Hamas; for instance, Iran openly celebrated Hamas's October assault. Israel and Western countries (notably the U.S.) have boosted military aid to counter perceived threats from Hamas and its allies. Some Arab states have quietly increased humanitarian aid to Gaza. Egypt and Qatar continue to mediate between Israel and Hamas, seeking prisoner deals and pauses in fighting. The conflict has also had wider effects: it has fueled anti-Israel protests globally and influenced politics (e.g. it weakened calls for normalizing ties with Israel among some Arab publics).

In summary, by 2025 Hamas finds itself under great strain. Its military capabilities have been degraded by war, and its leadership has been targeted. Yet it still remains the governing authority in Gaza with significant popular backing there. The Gaza war has underscored Hamas's role as a major actor in Middle East geopolitics – it can inflict great harm on Israel, thereby compelling global attention and a complex web of diplomacy. The long-term consequences (for Palestinian statehood prospects, regional alliances, and Gaza's reconstruction) continue to evolve with each new development.

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