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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 35 Americans) and took around 240 persons hostage (including some Americans)—more than 100 of whom were released in November. The attack's scope and lethality was unprecedented for Hamas. The ensuing conflict, which has reportedly killed more than 18,000 Palestinians in Gaza, has reshaped Middle Eastern dynamics, with implications for U.S. policy and Congress. A Hamas spokesperson has said the group is committed to repeating October 7-style attacks against Israel.

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 (anti-Jewish) rhetoric. Observers differ on the extent of Hamas's pragmatism. The group publicly released a 2017 document stating 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. **Ismail Haniyeh**, a former PA prime minister based in Qatar, is chairman of the politburo. **Yahya Sinwar**, Hamas's leader in Gaza since 2017,

reportedly masterminded the October 7 assault in Israel. He returned to Gaza from Israel in 2011 as part of a hostage-prisoner swap, after 22 years in prison for the abduction and murder of two Israeli soldiers and the killing of four Palestinians. **Muhammad Deif** and **Marwan Issa** apparently lead Hamas's military wing, the Izz al Din al Qassam Brigades, with a reported 25,000-40,000 fighters as of October 7. Israel claims it has since killed about 7,000 fighters, and that Sinwar, Deif, and Issa are priority targets.

Timeline of Key Events

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 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 steadily advanced in sophistication from the rudimentary guerrilla and suicide attacks it initially employed. The group uses a range of domestically produced and smuggled weaponry: rockets and mortars, drones, anti-tank guided missiles, man-portable air defense systems, and a variety of small arms. 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 constructed an extensive system of tunnels within Gaza that it uses to

protect and transport personnel and weapons—significantly increasing targeting difficulties for Israeli forces.

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 they have not found evidence that Iran helped directly plan the October 7 attacks, but argue that Iran’s longtime support for Hamas makes it “broadly complicit.” An *Economist* article has 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 financiers, companies, and charities in other regional countries, including Algeria, Sudan, Qatar, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.

Political Ambition, Control of Gaza, and Popularity

Hamas apparently seeks to play a leading role in the Palestinian national movement. In 2006, it won a surprise victory over Fatah in PA legislative elections, giving it nominal control over several key PA government ministries as it vied with PA President Mahmoud Abbas (who also heads Fatah) for power. A Middle East “Quartet” (the United States, European Union, Russia, and U.N. Secretary-General) urged Hamas to recognize Israel, renounce violence, and accept previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements. Hamas refused. After a Saudi-brokered PA unity government collapsed in 2007, Hamas forcibly seized Gaza, and has since presided over worsening economic and humanitarian conditions there as the de facto authoritarian ruler. Since taking power, Hamas and other groups like Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) have 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 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 is the preferred faction of at least 20% of Palestinians (in the West Bank and Gaza, or WBG) in most polls. However, in an Arab Barometer survey just prior to October 7, a majority of Gazans expressed little or no trust in the Hamas-led government, and Palestinians (in WBG) voiced more overall support for Fatah than for Hamas. WBG polls from late 2023 suggested that the conflict had boosted Palestinian approval for Hamas, but one analyst said such views could change when conflict subsides. In the wake of past conflicts, Hamas’s domestic popularity has spiked, before falling again to pre-conflict levels soon thereafter.

Armed Conflict with Israel

Hamas has pointed to purported Israeli military and political provocations to justify escalations of violence. During the four rounds of major conflict before October 2023, Hamas and other militants launched rockets indiscriminately toward Israel, 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 any rebuilding efforts and/or how those efforts could proceed without bolstering Hamas.

President Biden has surmised that one objective of Hamas’s October 7 assault may have been to disrupt Israel’s improvement of relations with Saudi Arabia. Hamas might have sought to reemphasize the importance of Arab popular support for the Palestinian cause to Arab states engaging in or considering closer relations with Israel. Hamas leaders and various observers have suggested other possible objectives for the attack, such as bolstering Hamas’s domestic popularity amid active speculation over who might succeed PA President Abbas, securing prisoner releases, and capitalizing on Israeli domestic discord.

It is unclear how the October assault and Israel’s reaction to it may affect Hamas’s future in Gaza or elsewhere, and whether it can realize its basic goals. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has declared Israel’s intent to “destroy the military and governmental capabilities of Hamas.” Domestic and international pressures could influence the nature and extent of Israel’s military operations and post-conflict security plans in Gaza, and efforts to stifle support for Hamas or the ideas and practices it represents.

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. 117-328).

The Biden Administration publicly supports Israel’s efforts to end Hamas rule in Gaza, while seeking greater protection and humanitarian assistance for civilians. U.S. and Israeli officials also seek the release of hostages. Debate continues about how to achieve these goals. 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 November 2023, the House passed the Hamas International Financing Prevention Act (H.R. 340), which would require the executive branch to impose sanctions on foreign actors that provide certain types of support to Hamas, PIJ, or affiliates, subject to a presidential waiver for national security reasons. Some other bills (including S. 489 and H.R. 5996) would condition funding to Gaza on certifications that Hamas and other FTOs would not benefit.

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