

The Hamas terrorist leaders who directed the brutal October 7 attack on Israel remain [top targets](#) of the Israeli defense and intelligence communities. Understanding the background of these individuals provides a better sense of the challenge faced by the Jewish state. According to Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Galant, “Hamas terrorists have [two options](#): Be killed or surrender unconditionally.” While the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) claim to have killed or captured thousands of terrorists, seven out of these eight top Hamas leaders remain alive.

[Mohammed Deif](#)

Hamas’s military chief in Gaza, Mohammed Deif, is [considered](#) by Israel to be one of two masterminds behind the October 7 attack. Born Mohammed Diab al-Masri in 1965, he is known as Deif, or “guest” in Arabic, because he reportedly never stays long in any one place to avoid being targeted. Deif has [survived](#) at least six attempts to kill him. His wife and at least one child were killed in an Israeli airstrike during the November 2014 Israel-Hamas war. In an October 7 audio [broadcast](#), Deif announced Operation al-Aqsa Flood — referring to that day’s terrorism — and called on Palestinians to carry out attacks against Israelis using guns, knives, Molotov cocktails, and vehicles. He also urged Arabs inside Israel to “kill, burn, destroy, and shut down roads.” The United States [added](#) Deif to its list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists in 2015.

[Ismail Haniyeh](#)

Hamas’s external political leader since 2017, Ismail Haniyeh, is Hamas’s main intermediary with Arab and other foreign governments. However, he remains intimately involved in military affairs. Through relations with Iran over the years, Haniyeh has played a [major role](#) in building up Hamas’s military capabilities. As recently as April 2023, Haniyeh [traveled](#) to Beirut to meet Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and discuss a so-called joint security room where Hamas, Hezbollah, and other Iran-backed groups coordinate “resistance” to Israel. In November 2023, an Israeli [airstrike](#) targeted Haniyeh’s childhood house where, Israel said, senior Hamas leaders often meet to “direct terror attacks.” Haniyeh splits his time between Qatar and Turkey. In 2020, Turkey granted him citizenship, thereby allowing him to travel more freely on a Turkish passport. The United States [added](#) Haniyeh to its list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists in 2018.

[Yahya Sinwar](#)

Hamas’s political leader in Gaza [since 2017](#), Yahya Sinwar, is [considered](#) by Israel to be the second of two masterminds behind the October 7 attack. IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi [says](#) Sinwar “decided on” the October 7 assault, and an Israeli military spokesman [called](#) him a “dead man walking.” Sinwar rose through the Hamas ranks as a fierce advocate of violence against Israel, [helping establish](#) Hamas’s military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, and the Majd, an internal security service for the Qassam Brigades. In October 2011, Sinwar was serving multiple life terms for the killing of two Israeli soldiers when Israel released him as part of a deal to free Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, whom Hamas had held for five years. In 2015, the United States [added](#) Sinwar to its list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists.

[Saleh al-Arouri — DECEASED AS OF JANUARY 2, 2024](#)

A founding commander of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, Saleh Al-Arouri had been Hamas’s [deputy political leader](#) since October 2017. Arouri [operated](#) from locations in Qatar and Turkey but was believed to reside in Lebanon when he was killed there. Arouri was involved in the group’s military planning and reportedly [helped plan](#) the June 2014 kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers. Six weeks before the October 7 attack, Arouri [told](#) a Lebanese news outlet, “We are preparing for an all-out war and are closely discussing [this] with all relevant parties.” Arouri [coordinated](#) Hamas activity with Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran and was known to Israeli intelligence as “Iran’s man inside Hamas.” After the October 7 attack, Arouri [provided](#) one of the first insider accounts of the massacre, including how each attacker had received “detailed instructions” regarding targeting. Arouri was one of the Hamas leaders whom Israel [released](#) in 2010 to free Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. In 2015, the United States [added](#) Arouri to its list of Specially Designated Nationals for his role as a Hamas financier.

Marwan Issa (a.k.a. Abu al-Baraa)

Marwan Issa is [deputy military commander](#) of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades and a [senior aide](#) to Gaza military leader Mohammed Deif. Issa, who [helped plan](#) the October 7 attack, also serves as the brigades' [liaison](#) to Hamas's political leadership and has played a pivotal role in Hamas military preparedness and strategy. In a September 2005 [statement](#), the Brigades identified Issa as one of its senior leaders. After Israel's 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, Issa [said](#) Hamas "has decided to take the battle to settlers' homes" and set his sights on "local [weapons] manufacturing to serve the resistance by land, sea, and air." He coordinates closely with Hamas political leader Yahya Sinwar in Gaza on military operations and decision-making. In March 2023, Issa warned of an "earthquake hitting the region" and said that the "coming days will be full of events." The United States [added](#) Issa to its list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists in 2019.

Khaled Meshal

A founding member of Hamas long identified with its most radical bloc, Khaled Meshal was [named](#) external political chief in 2004. When Hamas was founded, Meshal became the leader of the group's Kuwait office and, subsequently, a [founding member and chair](#) of its politburo. In 1990, he moved to Jordan, where, in 1997, he was the target of an Israeli assassination attempt. In 1999, he and other senior Hamas leaders were expelled and relocated to Damascus. In January 2012, unhappy with Syrian restrictions on Hamas activity, Meshal relocated to Qatar, where Doha's foreign minister [called](#) him "a dear guest." In 2021, Meshal was appointed to fill a [new role](#) within Hamas, effectively its foreign minister. On October 11, 2023, Meshal [urged](#) Muslims worldwide to demonstrate in support of Palestinians and urged those in neighboring countries — Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt — to join the fight against Israel.

Mohammed Sinwar

Yahya Sinwar's younger brother, Mohammed Sinwar, [may be running](#) Hamas operations in Gaza while Yahya is in hiding. The younger Sinwar was "[100 percent](#)" part of the team that planned the October 7 attack, according to a former Mossad counter-terror chief. The younger Sinwar joined the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades in 1991 and, during one of the Palestinian Authority's (PA's) crackdowns on the group due to U.S. pressure, was briefly [imprisoned](#) by the PA. Sinwar was involved in planning several suicide bombing attacks in the mid-1990s that claimed dozens of Israeli lives. In 2005, Sinwar became the commander of Hamas's Khan Younis Brigade in southern Gaza and subsequently played a role in the kidnapping and detention of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit. Sinwar [oversees](#) Hamas's military command structure in southern Gaza and was unsuccessfully [targeted](#) by Israel during the May 2021 Gaza war, during which he [admitted](#) to coordinating with Iran and Hezbollah.

Rafa Salama

Rafa Salama [commands](#) Hamas's military brigade in Khan Younis, Gaza's [second largest](#) city. In December 2023, Israel [put](#) a \$200,000 bounty on his head. Israeli media have [reported](#) there are four battalion commanders under Salama, who himself reports to Mohammed Sinwar. In 2021, Israel said its planes [struck](#) Salama's home in Gaza. In December 2008, during Operation Cast Lead, Salama's home was also [reportedly](#) struck.