Sinwar replacing Haniyeh may help advance hostage negotiations and end the war

written by Prof. Kobi Michael | 07.08.2024

Hamas officially announced Tuesday night that Yahya Sinwar has been appointed head of the organization's political bureau, replacing Ismail Haniyeh. This makes him Hamas's de facto new sole leader.

This comes as a surprise. Sinwar's name was not mentioned as a possible candidate in the speculation and predictions regarding Haniyeh's successor. At first glance, this is a puzzling choice, as it is unclear how Sinwar will manage to lead and run the organization while he is hidden in a tunnel or another hideout in the Gaza Strip as he is being pursued and trying to save his life.

The leadership of Hamas have known tensions and rivalries for years, even during Khaled Mashaal's tenure as head of the political bureau, and especially towards the end of his term.

The rivalry only intensified after Sinwar's release in 2011 as part of the Shalit deal, particularly with the establishment of his status as Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip and his official election in 2017. The rivalry was fundamentally between the external leadership, even when Ismail Haniyeh from the Shati refugee camp in Gaza headed it, and the organization's leadership in Gaza.

Gaza is seen as the organization's center of gravity, and its leadership, certainly when it comes to Yahya Sinwar, considered itself more significant and important in the decision-making processes, especially regarding the events in the Gaza Strip.

Tensions have only worsened since October 7 and the beginning of hostage negotiations. The Gaza leadership, led by Sinwar, set the tone and made the decisions, not the external leadership. Sinwar, who focuses on Egypt as the main mediator, has not hidden his disdain for Haniyeh, who, in turn, placed his hopes on Qatar.

Therefore, Egypt has a significantly greater influence on the person who, until yesterday, was just the organization's leader in Gaza, while Qatar's influence on him is much smaller.

The internal rivalry in Hamas also manifests in the relations between the leadership in the West Bank and the leadership in Gaza.

The struggle between the approaches is also evident regarding the organization's cooperation with Iran, which Haniyeh encouraged. Conversely, Sinwar merely viewed it pragmatically and instrumentally (similar to Iran's attitude towards Hamas).

Khaled Mashaal became a persona non grata for Iran and Syria due to what they perceived as his ultimate betrayal during the Syrian civil war. This also led to his expulsion from the country in 2012. Therefore, at this time, Mashaal could not again lead the political bureau.

Nevertheless, Sinwar's appointment to the position surprised many. He indeed intended to run in the 2025 elections for the head of the political bureau, but his election during the war, while he is pursued and hidden, raises many questions.

Under such conditions, it is difficult to assess how he will manage to function as the organization's leader, represent it externally, and fulfill the required tasks.

There is a possibility that Sinwar's selection was intended to advance the hostage deal negotiations and lead to ending the war in Gaza.

It is possible that the Egyptians, the only ones in contact with Sinwar, helped promote the move through dialogue with the Hamas leadership.

If Ismail Haniyeh indeed represented a tougher stance in the deal negotiations compared to Sinwar's more pragmatic line, an obstacle has been removed.

Now, with Sinwar's election to the position, he may want to fulfill his role as the organization's leader and ensure his election in the 2025 elections, which he can only do once the hostage deal is completed – leading to the end of the war and the guarantees he demands that Hamas leaders will not be assassinated.

Now, serving simultaneously as the head of the political bureau and the leader in Gaza, Sinwar's ability to advance a deal may even increase.

If this is indeed the plan, Sinwar could strengthen his position as the organization's leader and Hamas's position as an alternative to Fatah, aiming to take over the Palestinian Authority and the PLO.

This would be due to the steadfastness and what will surely be presented as the ultimate victory, as Israel fails to eliminate the organization's rule in the Strip, and he returns to his sovereign role in Gaza.

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