

Does Hamas's new course look like the old one? What Khalil al-Hayya's election means

written by Prof. Kobi Michael | 31.08.2026

In a close and dramatic internal vote coordinated by Hamas's Shura Council last month, Khalil al-Hayya was elected head of the movement's political bureau. He steps into the shoes of Yahya Sinwar, the last elected leader of the movement, which had been managed by a five-member council since Sinwar's elimination in 2024 by the IDF. However, al-Hayya defeated rival Khaled Mashaal by just a single vote (35-34).

This single-vote victory carries major political significance. It exposes a movement lacking internal consensus over the nature of its political future – whether it remains the spearhead or transforms into a legitimate political party competing within Palestinian politics.

Al-Hayya's razor-thin victory highlights the limited legitimacy of the ideological and strategic trajectory he leads. While Mashaal sought to shift the movement's center of gravity back toward its Sunni roots and political pragmatism, al-Hayya's narrow win proves that the more militant, Gaza-centric axis connected to Iran continues to hold the reins of power, albeit by a single vote.

This victory re-anchors the Gaza Strip as the indisputable center of gravity for Hamas, making it clear that despite the severe military blow it has suffered, the organization's leadership remains firmly rooted in Gaza.

Son of Shejaia

Born in the Shejaia neighborhood of eastern Gaza, al-Hayya is a quintessential representative of Hamas's founding generation.

He rose alongside the movement's early ideological architects, including Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. He took part in establishing some of the organization's security apparatuses, was arrested, imprisoned in Israel, and became one of the most dominant and influential voices in the Gaza Strip. He paid a heavy personal price, with four of his children killed by the IDF, including in the recent war.

He has served as a senior member of the Palestinian Legislative Council on behalf of Hamas, headed the movement's media office, managed the Arab and Islamic Relations portfolio, and was part of the movement's negotiation teams for ceasefires and prisoner exchanges.

Al-Hayya was among Sinwar's closest loyalists and confidants. Sharing a Gaza-

centric worldview and an uncompromising stance toward Israel, he served as Sinwar's political-diplomatic proxy outside the Strip, operating in full coordination with the military command on the ground. He left the Gaza Strip prior to the October 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack, and was privy to the plan, with the goal of activating the political arm that Sinwar would require in the aftermath.

The internal elections brought to surface competing worldviews, regional orientations, and geographical identities within the movement.

Al-Hayya school of thought

Regional orientation: Al-Hayya views the Tehran-led "Axis of Resistance" as an irreplaceable anchor for obtaining weaponry, funding, and strategic depth.

Strategic concept: The Gaza Strip as the primary battlefield and center of gravity, a rigid militant doctrine (*muqawama*, or armed resistance in Arabic) that views warfare as the primary tool for achieving the movement's goals.

Political support: Direct reliance on the military wing in Gaza and a tight connection to the leadership of Iran and Hezbollah, alongside a highly critical, adversarial, hostile stance toward the Palestinian Authority.

Mashaal school of thought

Regional orientation: The Sunni world, relying on political support, funding, and legitimacy from Qatar and Turkey.

Strategic concept: Diplomatic pragmatism, willingness to pursue political maneuvering, attempts to integrate into the legitimate Palestinian political system and the broader Arab arena, and shifting the center of gravity to the external leadership and the international stage.

Political support: Connections with governments in the Sunni Arab sphere and operatives outside the territories, alongside a more moderate stance toward the Palestinian Authority.

A clear geographical division emerged in the election: al-Hayya is a native Gazan, whereas Khaled Mashaal is from the West Bank (born in Silwad, Ramallah Governorate).

The fact that al-Hayya won – even by a single vote – underscores Hamas's internal hierarchy and shapes the complex relationship among the movement's four core components: the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Hamas abroad, and the prisoners.

Sidelining the West Bank

Al-Hayya's election cements the Gaza Strip as the "beating heart" and decisive

core of the movement. While Mashaal represented the potential for rebalancing leadership toward the West Bank and Hamas abroad, al-Hayya's victory signals to operatives in the West Bank that decision-making remains centered in Gaza.

That may deepen frustration among Hamas operatives in the West Bank, who bear the costs of arrests and counterterrorism operations while decisions continue to be driven from Gaza.

As a Gazan connected to the military wing, al-Hayya will insist on viewing the West Bank as a complementary front to Gaza. Under his leadership, Hamas will continue pursuing military escalation and additional fronts against Israel, including confrontation with Palestinian Authority security forces, rather than developing civilian infrastructure.

The absence of core West Bank leadership physically present in the territory (Mashaal resides in Qatar, while Zaher Jabarin, head of Hamas in the West Bank, operates from Turkey) diminishes its connection to traditional West Bank audiences aligned with veteran institutions.

This reinforces the perception of the organization as a Gaza-led movement pulling the West Bank into a conflict.

The election of al-Hayya, who resides outside Gaza but whose roots are Gazan, transforms the external leadership into a "service conduit" for Gaza, serving Gaza's priorities rather than acting as an independent center of power.

While Mashaal sought to make the external leadership the "head of the system," al-Hayya views it as an executive arm for managing finances in countries such as Qatar and Turkey and diplomatic contacts to ensure the survival of the military wing in Gaza and preserve the Strip as the organization's center of gravity.

Al-Hayya, who was imprisoned three times in Israeli jails, is deeply identified with and committed to the prisoners, in the spirit of his predecessor, Sinwar.

Security prisoners in Israeli jails are characterized by strong ties to both geographies. As one of Hamas's most influential ideological constituencies, they maintain strong ties across both Gaza and the West Bank. Therefore, al-Hayya's election maintains tight alignment with the prisoner movement and prioritizes their release in any deal, while maintaining the rigid line of the military wing.

Unprecedented centralization of authority: Funds, negotiations, and the "20-point plan".

The significance of al-Hayya's tenure also lies in the dramatic concentration of power. A single leader consolidates three critical power centers simultaneously: As a political leader, who is the head of Hamas's political bureau; chief negotiator, as the manager of the negotiation portfolio regarding ceasefire, hostage, and prisoner deals (unless to transfer the portfolio to another figure within Hamas); and the financial conduit, with direct and exclusive control over Hamas's bank accounts and money flows managed in Qatar and Turkey.

This triple grip on the economic, political, and organizational levers gives al-

Hayya real enforcement capacity over field commanders and the military wing in Gaza.

In the context of complex political initiatives such as the 20-Point Plan, this centralization allows him to enforce decisions, advance negotiations, or stall them at will.

However, the narrow majority he received in the election is a double-edged sword. While he possesses the operational and financial tools to enforce an agreement or derail it, his internal legitimacy means any significant concession could face fierce resistance from the Mashaal camp or more extremist elements within Hamas's field leadership. Published in The Jerusalem Post, August 14, 2026.

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