

Hamas Leader Yahya Sinwar's Death Can Bring the Middle East Closer to Peace

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The long-elusive terrorist was known for brutality to Israelis and Gazans alike, and his passing opens the door to diplomatic, economic, and political progress.

Just as the elimination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah a month ago catalyzed new opportunities for Mideast peace, the death of long-elusive Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar Thursday turbocharges the transformation of the Middle East towards a more secure and prosperous future.

To appreciate the possibilities, it is vital to understand the significance of Sinwar as a leader. There should be no doubt that the elimination of Sinwar is an opportunity, not a tragedy. Sinwar was no ordinary terrorist. He was renowned for his brutality towards Gazans and Israelis alike. An early Hamas member, Sinwar became known as the “Butcher of Khan Younis” in the 1980s among fellow Gazans for his singular savagery punishing Palestinians accused of collaborating with Israel. After Israel arrested Sinwar in 1988, he spent two decades in Israeli prisons learning to read and speak Hebrew fluently, studying Israeli history and society, and mastering how the Israeli political and military systems functioned.

Even in prison, Sinwar remained a leader of Hamas, which violently seized control over the Gaza Strip in 2007 by ejecting the democratically elected Palestinian Authority, often throwing PA and Fatah officials off roofs. And after Sinwar was freed in a prisoner exchange and returned to Gaza in 2011, his reputation for bloodthirstiness only intensified, including murdering a top Hamas commander for homosexuality despite pleas for leniency by fellow Hamas leaders.

Nobody should be mourning Sinwar's passing, least of all any Palestinians. He treated Gazans as if they were all willing to be martyrs—only he never asked them if they wanted to be martyrs. Indeed, the deaths of over 40,000 Gazans since last year should be laid at the feet of Sinwar, who seemed to have no apparent strategy for winning the war he single-handedly started, other than foolishly hoping Iran would bail him out (it didn't) or believing that small protests among far-left contingents on U.S. college campuses would pressure Israel into ending its campaign.

Most important of all, the elimination of Sinwar paired with the degradation of Hamas—with the destruction of 23 of Hamas's 24 battalions along with a significant portion of its military infrastructure (arms depots, weapon labs and production facilities, and tunnels), including 90% of Hamas's rockets—reinvigorates long dormant possibilities for peace and brings closer the opportunities for regional peace and prosperity. They may seem impossible and distant today, but Sinwar's death creates a moment to pursue.

None of this will happen overnight. It is hard to believe that Israel would end all military campaigns immediately, as some optimistic accounts have suggested, especially given the fact that Hamas still holds many Israeli hostages. But Israel has an interest in making sure that its remarkable military and intelligence achievements are translated into political outcomes. And Israel is in a position to declare that, because of its military achievements, it is ready to end the war in Gaza, provided the hostages are released. Hamas may not immediately respond, but Israel can reframe the issue, reminding the world about the hostages and that it is Hamas that continues to subject Gazans to destruction. Moreover, so long as Hamas and Hezbollah are not ready to end the fighting, Israel can continue to destroy their war-making capabilities and reduce the chance that they can ever pose an existential threat to Israel's survival again. Israel has already dramatically weakened Iran's so-called Axis of Resistance. That serves America's interests in the region, as does its elimination of as many terrorists on the U.S. list of most wanted terrorists over the last few months.

The opportunities for viable political, diplomatic, and economic roadmaps to long-term peace and prosperity in the region are closer to actualization than ever before, but the key participants, and especially Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, must muster the political willpower to seize these opportunities. He cannot let nationalists in his coalition define what is possible.

The long-range political, diplomatic, and economic opportunities are tantalizing, starting with the political stabilization and economic development of a de-militarized Gaza. Gaza is finally ready to free itself of the despotic rule of Hamas, which creates for Gazans the real possibility of having a future of hope, and not of endless war and despair.

With the exception of some far-right voices, few in Israel want to be stuck in Gaza forever, responsible for 3 million Palestinians and facing likely insurgencies. The Arab states could play a transitional role in administration and providing security as a bridge towards a yet-to-emerge viable Palestinian alternative. The Palestinian Authority is too weak and too corrupt to play that role today, and significant reforms are required if it ever hopes to govern credibly a Palestinian state.

But not to be overlooked is the potential for economic development as well, as the raw economic promise of Gaza is undeniable. In 2018, one of us, Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, assisted Jared Kushner in the Peace to Prosperity Conference in Bahrain, which outlined the Abraham Accords and a global investment fund to lift the Palestinian and neighboring

Arab state economies, and fund a \$5 billion transportation corridor to connect the West bank and Gaza. We saw first-hand how leading Arab businessmen were eager to capitalize on Gaza's many natural advantages and the entrepreneurial dynamism of its people.

The potential for the long-range political and economic stabilization of Gaza—as well as a potential Hezbollah-free Lebanon on Israel's northern border—is strengthened by the extraordinary diplomatic realignment of the Middle East and increasing alignment with Israel against a shared common adversary: Iran, which is more weak today, deprived of its proxy groups and revealed as increasingly toothless. This realignment was the central thesis of Kushner's Abraham Accords, and the Biden Administration has continued building this nascent coalition with a potential U.S.-Saudi defense treaty and associated Saudi normalization with Israel. But treaty or no treaty, the direction of travel is already clear, as Israel, the Arab Gulf nations and its allies become increasingly dynamic magnets for business investment, entrepreneurial talent, and modernization while Iran and its allies fall far behind.

In 2018, Sinwar declared to the citizens of Gaza, "We'll take down the border [with Israel] and tear out their hearts from their bodies." Borders with Israel are indeed coming down all across the Mideast, but not in the way Sinwar intended.

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