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Ismail Haniyeh

Portrait of the Hamas candidate for Palestinian prime minister



Ismail Haniyeh

* On February 21, 2006, Abu Mazen, the Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman, instructed Ismail Haniyeh, who led the Hamas faction to a sweeping victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections,¹ to form, for the first time in the PA's history, a Hamas-led government. The following is a portrait of Ismail Haniyeh, probably the PA's next Prime Minister.²

¹ Hamas won 74 of the 132 seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council, while Fatah won 45.

² This bulletin was based on an article by Jonathan D. Halevi on the News First Class Website with Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center additions. Jonathan D. Halevi is a senior researcher for the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, headed by Dr. Dory Gold.

Ismail Haniyeh: Biography

✳ **Ismail ‘Abd al-Salaam Ahmad Haniyeh** (nicknamed Abu al-‘Abd) was born in 1963 in the Shati refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. His family (like Ahmad Yassin’s) came from the village of Jura, near Ashkelon. He attended the UNRWA elementary school in the camp, and Al-Azhariah high school in Gaza. He received his BA from the Department of Arabic at the Islamic University in Gaza.

✳ As a student he was active in campus Islamic organizations, many of whose members became Hamas supporters came when the movement was formed. Between 1983-1984 he was active in the Islamic University student council and headed it during the 1985-1986 school year. He became very close to Hamas founder **Ahmad Yassin**, who at that time headed the **Islamic Assembly**³ (*Al-Mujama’ al-Islami*), the organization from which Hamas later developed.

✳ Because of terrorist activities initiated by Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh was arrested a number of times by the Israeli security forces. The first time was in December 1987, at the beginning of the first round of the Palestinian-Israeli violent confrontation (the “first intifada”); he was in jail for 18 days. A few weeks later, on January 15, 1988, he was held in administrative detention for six months. On May 18, 1989, he was detained for the third time and imprisoned for three years. In May 1992 he was released and in December of the same year deported to Marj Zuhour in Lebanon with other Hamas activists. He returned to Gaza a year later.

✳ Ismail Haniyeh began his “academic career” as the secretary to the Board of Trustees of the Islamic University in Gaza. He was later made dean and became a member of the Board of Trustees, head of the university’s academic administration

³ The Islamic Assembly (*Al-Mujama al-Islami*) was founded in 1976 in the Shati refugee camp in Gaza, and operated 10 branches throughout the Gaza Strip. Its stated goals are aid to needy families, including the families of dead and wounded terrorists, operating kindergartens, sports clubs and out-patient clinics, and supporting those harmed by the confrontation. Societies of that sort form Hamas’ social infrastructure (the *da’wah*), which also supports its terrorist-operative wing.

and a member of the Board of Directors. Such activity was compatible with **Hamas' worldview, which regards students as an important target audience** for the battle for hearts and minds and for recruiting new members.



Ismail Haniyeh built his career at the Islamic University in Gaza, an important center of Hamas activity

* Haniyeh's high rank within Hamas was assured by **his closeness to Ahmad Yassin**. In 1977, when Yassin was released from prison, Haniyeh became the director of his office, a position he held until Yassin was killed in a targeted killing in March 2004. As Yassin's confidant, Haniyeh was appointed a member of Hamas's high committee for a dialogue with other Palestinian organizations and the PA, and as Hamas' representative to the high Palestinian monitoring committee for directing the previous round of the violent confrontation (the first intifada).



Ismail Haniyeh and Ahmad Yassin, Hamas founder. Haniyeh's closeness to Yassin led him to the highest echelons of Hamas.

* **Among his other activities, during the 1990s he dealt with Hamas' organizational aspects.** Thus, and because of his closeness to Ahmad Yassin, **he climbed the Hamas ladder until he became part of its political leadership.** He was left unharmed by an Israeli Air Force attack on a Gaza Strip building where the Hamas leadership (including Ahmad Yassin) was staying at the time (September 6, 2003).

* The elimination of Hamas leaders Ahmad Yassin (March 22, 2004) and 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Rantisi (April 17, 2004) in targeted killings paved Haniyeh's way to a central position in the Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip (after Mahmoud al-Zahar, who is considered senior to him in the Hamas hierarchy). In the January 2006 elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council Haniyeh headed the Hamas slate of candidates (whose slogan was "Change and Reform") and led it to a sweeping victory over Fatah. After the elections, Abu Mazen imposed the task of forming the new government on Haniyeh's shoulders.

Ideology and ways of implementing it

* As opposed to Ahmad Yassin and 'Abd al-Rantisi, Ismail Haniyeh is not regarded as a spiritual authority, he is not a charismatic figure and he does not enjoy an unshakable position as leader in the Gaza Strip. Nevertheless, he is influential in the movement as a representative of the middle generation. He is regarded as pragmatic, representing a strategy seeking to advance the Islamic revolution by stages, integrating terrorist-operative and political activity, and playing the part of the wide-eyed innocent to the non-Arab/Muslim world. In that way he arouses less antagonism than Mahmoud al-Zahar (and that was probably the reason he was chosen to head the Hamas slate), although ideologically there is no significant difference between them.

* Ismail Haniyeh faithfully represents Hamas' fundamental worldview (as expressed in its charter) **which considers the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as religious rather than nationalist and territorial, which cannot be resolved on a basis of mutual recognition.** Haniyeh (and other Hamas spokesmen) describes Israel

as the western world's "spearhead" in the Middle East and as an intruder in the Arab/Muslim world. **The final solution is, in his opinion, the "liberation of all Palestine, from the [Mediterranean] sea to the [Jordan] river" and the establishment of an Islamic Palestinian state ruled by Islamic law.** He calls for the return of Palestinian refugees to their previous places of residence in Israel, which he calls "a sacred right."

✳ Haniyeh does not accept Israel's right to exist and opposes drawing the borders of the Palestinian state according to the 1967 green line. He is willing to recognize it only as a "cease fire line" for a period of 10-15 years, calling it a "long-term *hudna*," after which it will be possible to renew the battle to destroy the State of Israel.⁴ That perception of *hudna* is compatible with Haniyeh's interpretation of Ahmad Yassin's "prophecy," which "foresaw" the final collapse of Israel in 2027. The problem of the Jewish people should be solved, according to both Haniyeh and Yassin, beyond the borders of "Palestine" by allowing for the presence of a Jewish minority in Palestine which would accept living under Islamic rule, with everything that entailed (inferior status, head tax, etc.)

✳ Haniyeh regards Hamas' "achievements" in the ongoing violent Israeli-Palestinian confrontation as **breathing fighting spirit** into the Palestinian population (the spirit of jihad). He regards the **suicide bombing attacks** (most of which were carried out by Hamas until the "lull in the fighting" which began in March 2005) as the best way of dealing with Israel. He has praised the "suicide bomber culture" which took root in Palestinian society, saying "[one of] of the signs of victory [over the Israelis] is the Palestinian mother who prepares her son to be a warrior and then receives the news of his death for the sake of Allah with cries of happiness." He is not prepared to give up Hamas' weapons used for terrorist activities (which he calls "weapons of resistance") as long as Israel "occupies historical Palestinian land," that is, until the destruction of the State of Israel.

⁴ In Islam *hudna* means a cease fire for the purpose of reorganizing Muslim forces for a renewal of the battle against the infidels, waged under better conditions for the Muslims.

✳ After Hamas' victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections Ismail Haniyeh took part in a **campaign stressing messages pleasant to the western ear**. For example, on February 25 in a telephone interview with The Washington Post, he reiterated the idea of a long-term cease fire (*hudna*) in return for Israel's retreat to the 1967 borders (while evading the question of whether Hamas would recognize Israel's right to exist). He paid lip service to the idea of peace, saying "We are not lovers of blood," but added that peace is good only if it ensures the Palestinian their "rights" (without specifying what those rights were).

✳ When asked whether Hamas would remain committed to the Oslo Agreement Haniyeh answered that Hamas would "review all agreements and abide by those that are in the interest of the Palestinian people." He did not relate to Hamas' use of terrorism but **on the same day**, in an interview with the Hamas radio station, he made it clear that Hamas would continue the "resistance" (i.e., the use of violence and terrorism against Israel) and would remain loyal to "the blood of the martyrs" (Al-Aqsa Radio, February 25, 2006).

The internal Palestinian arena

✳ Within the **internal Palestinian arena** Haniyeh is considered a sympathetic figure who represents a new spirit in Palestinian politics. Outwardly he supports reform and democracy, political pluralism, the principle of the separation of authorities and the independence of the courts. However, **beneath the surface, everything he says is rooted in Hamas' radical Islamic ideology, which regards democratic elections as a tool to grab power and institute a radical Islamic régime which will nullify real democracy**.

With that in mind, Haniyeh supported a fatwa published by Hamas before the elections stating that the movement's participation in the elections was permissible according to Islamic law. This was on the condition that Hamas viewed itself as committed to Islamic law as the highest source of authority and would work to put it into practice in the Palestinian Authority.