

Hamas Actually Believed It Would Conquer Israel. In Preparation, It Divided the Country Into Cantons

Tens of thousands of Gazans have fled to Egypt since the war broke out, many of them members of the elite who are able to pay the enormous costs. I met old friends in Cairo who were still astonished at the messianic insanity that seized Hamas' leadership







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Apr 5, 2024 5:12 am IDT



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CAIRO – In Gaza, they're known as the "new Jews." They're the rich merchants of the Gaza Strip who were the first to flee for their lives after October 7, managed to save themselves and their families, and are continuing to run their businesses safely by remote. While enjoying the good life in Cairo's luxury hotels, they're selling the Strip to the highest bidders. When a kilogram of sugar costs 70 shekels (almost \$19) and a liter of gas 150 shekels, it's only natural for the 1.5 million internal refugees in Gaza to add the profiteers to their list of enemies, after Israel and Hamas. Not necessarily in that order.

Escaping the inferno costs around \$10,000 per person. It entails finding a *wakil* (Arabic for "masher") who can organize entry to Egypt via the Rafah crossing, and getting there safely, hoping that you don't run into the Israeli army on the way. Having done that, there's a chance that the gates of paradise to the Land of the Nile will open wide for you. But that doesn't yet ensure tranquility and security. Cairo is very cheap, by almost any measure, but it's still expensive in terms of the Gaza Strip. And with no income, and your home in ruins, your property lost, your savings depleted from paying for the exit permits – what future, exactly, is there to dream about? Only a successful Gaza merchant who is adept at maneuvering and surviving between Hamas and Israel will be able to live in Cairo and enjoy its delights. And the city has plenty to offer.

The last time I was in Cairo was after the removal from power of Hosni Mubarak, in 2011. The city was turbulent and frightening. The millions of angry demonstrators who flooded the streets were a third way, beyond the corruption of the Mubarak regime and the fundamentalist takeover of the Muslim Brotherhood led by Mohammed Morsi. That ended with the Egyptian army taking matters into its hands and stifling the breezes of the Arab Spring. Today, photographs of President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi are ubiquitous in Cairo, but they

are smaller and more modest than the likenesses of the ousted omnipotent president, who died a pariah.

Cairo has gone back to being a city that never stops, even during Ramadan. The appalling poverty and ostentatious wealth fuse into a bustling urban patchwork of vast shopping malls, narrow alleys, bicyclers precariously carrying sacks of food on their head as they ride, dangerously overloaded pickup trucks swaying to and fro, and packed minibuses carrying the dwellers of this dense city of 10 million through the congested streets.

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It's easy to get lost and disappear here, and that is exactly what thousands of Gazans who fled from the war are trying to do. Their hope is to stay under the radar until they can start a new life in some corner of the world that will agree to accept them. It's clear to them that they will not be able to stay in Egypt indefinitely. Egypt is hosting them, legally, until things settle down, but it's not an easy place for foreigners, certainly not for Palestinians.

I flew to Cairo to meet Gazans who fled from the war, some of them old friends from the years when I worked in the Gaza Strip – though not all of them were willing to meet with me. I began by calling S., the brother of my former late cameraman, who died of cancer a year and a half ago. S. was evasive and I couldn't understand why. After all, I had often stayed in the family home when I was covering the second intifada for Israeli television. On the day of the coup led by Hamas in the Strip in 2007, when armed militants from the Iz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades tried to apprehend my colleague, I saved his life by getting him out of Gaza to Ramallah, in the West Bank. S.'s nephew Amjad explained to me now that S.'s daughter had been killed by an Israeli bomb; besides which, he didn't want problems with the Egyptians. "It wouldn't have been easy for him to tell you," Amjad said apologetically and asked me to forgive S. I understood.

Arriving in Cairo around midday on a Friday, I made my way to the area around the Intercontinental Hotel where many of Gaza's leading merchants are staying. It's an extensive complex of structures that include luxury hotels and an immense mall – 10 floors of outlets carrying the world's top labels and brands. Many young Gazans can be seen here riding the escalators up and down, some carrying bags stuffed with purchases, others just feasting their eyes on the shop windows

and trying to digest the disparity between Gaza and Cairo, between a place where death lurks around every corner, and the place that signifies, perhaps, what Gaza could be if its leaders implemented just a fraction of the fantasies that they promised would materialize after the Oslo Accords were signed.

One of the big dreamers from the Oslo period is Sufyan Abu Zaydeh. How ironic it is that the man who dreamed that a Palestinian state would be established alongside Israel is now living in a gated neighborhood called Dreamland, which is about an hour's drive from the center of Cairo and generations from Palestine Square in Gaza City.

At Singapore Airshow, the Gaza war was a selling point for Israeli arms makers

Israel created 'kill zones' in Gaza. Anyone who crosses into them is shot

'People are cursing Sinwar': Gazans opposing Hamas are sure they're the majority


Abu Zaydeh, who's 64, was one of the first Palestinians to be released from Israeli incarceration following the White House ceremony in 1993. In short order he became something of a Palestinian media star among Israelis, analyzing on local television, in his fluent Hebrew, the complex situation that characterized the period after Oslo. Now, too, he quickly

became something of a star on Egyptian TV. Back then he provided a running commentary on a collapsing peace process; today he's doing the same for a war.

In a taxi on the way to meet him, I passed Ain Shams University, where Sheikh Ahmed Yassin was a student in the mid-1960s and where he hooked up with the Muslim Brotherhood, two decades before he founded Hamas. Along the way we also went by Al-Azhar University, the Muslim world's most important academic center, which to this day turns out the religious sages shaping modern Islam, and which drove a wedge between the moderate Muslim world and fundamentalist Islam.

Not far from there is the stadium in which President Anwar Sadat was assassinated on October 6, 1981. Indeed, the month of October shouts from every corner of Cairo. For an Israeli, that shout resonates even more powerfully. The debacle and trauma of the Yom Kippur War blend into the trauma of a new, accursed October.





Sufyan Abu Zaydeh, at home in Cairo. His house in Gaza became the Israel Defense Forces' headquarters in the Jabalya area. Credit: Shlomi Eldar

Wearing slippers, Abu Zaydeh was waiting for me on the shoulder of a side road in his neighborhood, a gated and guarded community of tall, desert-hued buildings. We hadn't met in person since 2001, the period of the second intifada, and even then the encounter had been in England, where he was a doctoral student. As I stepped out of the cab, we both burst into liberating laughter at the vagaries of fate that have brought us together in different regions of the world.

"When I was released from your [Israel's] prison in 1993, I was certain that the suffering and pain were over, that – enough – we were starting a life of quiet, peace and hope," he said with a smile. "But since then I have known only wars. All the time, wars."

Abu Zaydeh spent time studying Israeli history at Sapir College in Sderot, obtained a doctoral degree in England, and in 2005 was appointed minister of prisoner affairs in the Palestinian Authority. In 2006, he was abducted from his home by the Iz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, and afterward was persecuted by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, because he was considered loyal to Abbas' rival, Mohammed Dahlan. Abbas deprived him of his salary and seized his pension and his house

in Ramallah. In 2019, Abu Zaydeh was compelled to return to the Gaza Strip, from which he had fled after Hamas' coup. He lived in Jabalya refugee camp in a closed enclave ruled by [Yahya Sinwar's](#) gang. "And when I thought I'd already endured everything," he said, "the war broke out and I became a refugee again."

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He met with Sinwar on many occasions. Their talks, he says, dealt mainly with the economic aid, consisting of funds from the United Arab Emirates, that Dahlan – who himself went into exile in Abu Dhabi in 2011, where he became close to the ruler, Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan – sent to the inhabitants of Gaza, principally for projects in the Jabalya and Khan Yunis refugee camps. "We founded many projects and awarded study scholarships totaling millions of dollars to young people," Abu Zaydeh says. "Hamas had a vested interest in this, because in practice we made things easier for them. That's the reason they didn't harass us."

Not able to hold back, I said, "In other words, you were like [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu, who channeled Qatari money to Hamas that helped them build tunnels and establish an army? You also wanted quiet and got smacked in the face."

But unlike Netanyahu, Abu Zaydeh does not shrink from taking responsibility. He admits his mistake and explains that the Dahlan group wanted to alleviate the distress in Gaza, because they saw themselves as being responsible for their people. They too believed that Hamas was aiming to arrive at a modus vivendi with Israel, and their ambition was to have as many Gazans as possible work in Israel.

On the morning of October 7, when he saw dozens of rockets being fired from the Strip, he thought that Israel had assassinated a top figure in Hamas and that this was the response. But when he saw a military jeep go by his home, and understood that it was carrying a woman abducted from Israel, and saw how dozens of jubilant local residents surrounded – he grasped the intensity of the storm that was about to engulf all of the Gaza Strip. "I knew that Gaza was finished. Gaza was on the road to perdition."

A compulsive consumer of the Israeli media, Abu Zaydeh is well acquainted with the outlook of the public and the leadership. "I told my wife that the Israelis were going to run over us with tanks and that they would destroy everything. 'All these tall buildings that you see around you,' I told her, 'the Israelis will topple them. One after the other. They will level all of Gaza.'"

Which is indeed what happened. The buildings are gone. Abu Zaydeh's house became the Israel Defense Forces' headquarters in the Jabalya area.

On the basis of his experience, observing previous IDF operations, he expected the army to split the Strip into two parts, and that if he did not move fast to leave the north, he would not make it to the Rafah crossing and get his family out. His primary concern was for the life of his daughter and her

infant son: They had arrived from Boston for a visit a few days earlier and now were caught on the battlefield.

Only holders of Palestinian passports were being allowed to leave via Rafah, but his American-born grandson didn't have a local passport. By the time his exit was arranged, the crossing to the south had been closed. But the Abu Zaydeh family hadn't waited, having arrived at Rafah before the IDF blocked the passage from north to south.

"I had tears in my eyes," Abu Zaydeh recalls. "I knew I would never return to that place."



Sufyan Abu Zaydeh in his prison cell in 1993. He was one of the first Palestinians to be released from Israeli incarceration following the signing of the Oslo Accords. Credit: Courtesy of Kan

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He was born in Jabalya, as were his children. At the beginning of the 1980s, he was imprisoned in Israel for his membership in Fatah. After his release, he returned to the alleyways of the refugee camp, determined to be a Palestinian leader who would change the world. And when he fled to Ramallah for fear of Hamas, the home in Jabalya remained the object of his longing.

"I didn't cry only for the house," he says. "I cried for the dreams that had vanished. For the state that would not be established, for the children who would die for no reason. I had many dreams and hopes – and nothing remains of them. Everything collapsed, together with my house."

He took a few items, some clothes, photographs and keepsakes, all in one small suitcase for the family. As they entered the car, they still saw happy people around them. "I saw that they were pleased. I saw them and I told my wife that we were headed for perdition."

I asked him whether he understood the jubilant shouts of many Palestinians when they saw the captives who were brought triumphantly into Gaza.

Not for a moment did he try to defend their reaction. "You can write it in capital letters," he said. "From my point of view, it's a disgrace." He raised his voice so I would not miss his determination. "I, as a Palestinian, say to you in a loud voice: It is a disgrace. I am ashamed that they murdered and abducted people – children, women, old people. I am ashamed. That is not heroism. Absolutely not heroism."

In the first two days of the war, he recalls, he heard even Hamas figures say that the civilians should be released. "If

there was a little sense, the Israelis could have got back the women, the elderly and the children for free. I tell you this with certainty. From knowledge. But Israel thought that pressure would lead to the release of the captives. They didn't understand what Hamas is.

"But again I say, and I am not afraid to say it: To kill civilians and to abduct women, old people and children is not heroism. And I tell you this as a Palestinian who knows that there are now 32,000 killed and at least 10,000 buried under the rubble. Ten people were killed in my family alone. Nine had nothing to do with Hamas, including a cousin and a nephew. They went to look for food and a missile was fired at them."

Abu Zaydeh has never been one who feared to utter what he thinks, and from the time we first met, in 1993, I found that he could be unsparingly critical of both the Israelis and the Palestinians. He sometimes paid a price for that attitude. In 1996, after Israel assassinated Yahya Ayyash, the Hamas bombmaker nicknamed "The Engineer," Abu Zaydeh told Israeli state television that the timing was wrong – not the act itself. (During the two months that followed the killing of Ayyash, Hamas carried out four suicide bombings in Israel, killing a total of 78 people.)

"I understand the Israeli response," he says about the current, unprecedented round of violence. "I knew there would be a response. But I didn't believe there would be a response of this cruelty. To kill Ahmed Andor you destroy a whole neighborhood? Have you gone mad?"

Andor was Hamas' northern Gaza brigade commander, and the man in charge of developing the military wing's rocket arsenal. On November 16, the IDF bombed the site where he was hiding along with other ranking personnel. IDF Spokesperson Daniel Hagari said afterward, "Two powerful attacks were carried out against two underground compounds."

According to Abu Zaydeh, the IDF used tons of explosives in the attack, wiping out an entire neighborhood and killing about 250 Palestinians. It was later reported in Israel that three captives – Sgt. Ron Sherman, Cpl. Nick Beizer and civilian Elia Toledano – were killed in a nearby tunnel, apparently as a result of the attack.

"For one person whom you wanted to assassinate, you killed hundreds of people. Does that make sense to you?" Abu Zaydeh says accusingly. "Even if the goal was justified from your viewpoint, and you are fighting against Hamas, do you not have any limits? No red lines? Afterward you are amazed that

the whole would come out against you. Because from your perspective, there are no innocent people in Gaza. As you see it, compassion died and therefore you are shutting your eyes to what is happening in Gaza."



Destruction in Rafah following the operation to rescue two Israeli captives, during which more than 100 people were killed, according to Palestinian reports. Credit: IBRAHEEM ABU MUSTAFA/Reuters

True, I reply. Many Israelis lost the little compassion they still had after seeing the atrocities that Hamas perpetrated in the communities adjacent to the Gaza Strip, and the shouts of joy

in the Strip. Those who exulted are now crying, Abu Zaydeh says. "But you can't undertake an angry response and revenge that go on for six months. Shlomi, for us every day has been an October 7 – every day, for half a year already."

What riles him no less is the attitude of the Israeli media toward the events in Gaza. As an example, he cites the rescue of two Israeli captives, Fernando Merman and Luis Har, from a refugee camp in Rafah on February 11, in the course of which more than 100 people were killed, according to Palestinian reports.

"You undertook a heroic action to liberate captives who never should have been abducted," Abu Zaydeh says. "But you also killed 100 civilians, [including] women and children, in order to provide cover for the Israeli force. Is that an act of heroism by the Israelis? To liberate two captives and to kill 100 innocent people?" Abu Zaydeh pounds the table with his fist. "And that doesn't even merit a mention of one second in the Israeli media?"

I checked his allegation. With the notable exception of Jack Khoury in Haaretz, there was hardly any mention of the circumstances surrounding that rescue in the Israeli media. "So then you say that these are Hamas numbers, and they're

lying," Abu Zaydeh continues. "Well, no. They are not Hamas numbers. We see it with our eyes. Watch television. Forget Al Jazeera; every other television channel in the world showed the images from Rafah – except for you. And then you say that the Israeli army is the most moral in the world. They are so trigger-happy, Shlomi. It's wrong. You must not lose compassion."

In fact, contrary to what is going on today in Gaza, Israel was careful for many years to avoid mass attacks on civilians. If civilians were hurt, Israel was quick to explain, express remorse and learn from the event. The Israeli media took a critical stance and asked questions. The best example is the response to the decision to assassinate Salah Shehadeh, the head of Hamas' military wing, at the height of the second intifada, in July 2002. The missile that struck his home also killed another 14 civilians. The event caused a public furor in Israel, and 27 Israel Air Force pilots famously sent a letter to protest the action. The then-commander of the IAF, Maj. Gen. Dan Halutz, who defended the assassination, was asked about the event in an interview in Haaretz, and replied that in a situation of that kind, a pilot feels "a light tremor in the wing." The phrase entered the language as a synonym for a loss of compassion and morality.

I asked Abu Zaydeh whether he had ever thought that Hamas was capable of perpetrating horrors like those of October 7. "If you had asked me," he replied, "I would have answered like any Israeli intelligence officer: It's inconceivable that this is what they're planning. I would not have believed that they would not take into account what would happen to them on the day after."

He adds, "There were many statements by Hamas before October 7, and we in Fatah would laugh. For example, someone from Hamas wrote on Facebook: 'Remember, in another few months the al-Qassam men will get to Ashkelon, enter the jail and free all the prisoners.' That was the atmosphere. It was hard for us to grasp that they believed that with 3,000, 5,000 or even 10,000 armed militants they would conquer Israel. That's insane. But when you believe that God is sending you to do his bidding, there's no one to argue with. The signs were out there the whole time."

Indeed, Abu Zaydeh is well aware that for the past two years the Hamas leadership had been talking about implementing "the last promise" (alwaed al'akhir) – a divine promise regarding the end of days, when all human beings will accept Islam. Sinwar and his circle ascribed an extreme and literal meaning to the notion of "the promise," a belief that pervaded all their messages: in speeches, sermons, lectures in schools and universities. The cardinal theme was the implementation of the last promise, which included the forced conversion of all heretics to Islam, or their killing.

In a militant speech Sinwar delivered in 2021, after the IDF's Guardian of the Walls operation in Gaza, he made it clear that he was preparing for a broad war. "We stand before an open confrontation with the enemy, who is stubbornly insisting on transforming the battle into a religious war," he screamed into the microphone. "We must be ready to defend Al-Aqsa. Our whole nation needs to be ready to march in a 'raging flood' in order to uproot this occupation from our land."

But outside the hard core of the Hamas leadership, talk of an apocalyptic showdown was considered no more than a pipe

dream in Gaza, nonsensical prattle that was intended to serve the PR purposes of Sinwar and his group, in order to divert public discussion away from the distress of Gazans. The group's madness was apparent to many. In fact, anyone who watched the Hamas television channel, heard Sinwar's speeches or followed his colleagues on Twitter, could have understood that a process was underway in Gaza of preparing people for a large-scale military operation. Yet only a few realized that these were not just fantasies, but a concrete ambition that would be translated into a concrete plan.



An Israeli tank captured near the Gaza border. Those who exulted are now crying, Abu Zaydeh says. Credit: Yousef Masoud / AP

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Another friend whom I met in Cairo made it clear to me just how operative the plan was.

"We've known each other for exactly 30 years and three months," the friend said, and sat down next to me. Yes, we met in days of hope, when he was released from prison and I spent a night at home shooting a story for Israel TV. He's 60, a former high-ranking figure in Fatah, who remained in Gaza even after the Hamas takeover. He arrived in Cairo with his family exactly a month ago, still looking for a direction and at pains to keep under the radar. As such, he agreed to speak freely but under an assumed name. I'll call him "Iyad."

He's a well-known figure in Gaza. Despite the hardships there, he never aspired to leave. Not even now. But he had to save his family, he says. After being released from Israeli imprisonment during the Oslo period, he formally renounced the path of violence, and connected with many Israeli peace activists, who to this day call him "brother." In the past, his son was wounded by an IDF missile, and his Israeli friends raised money to help pay for his medical treatment within Israel. That's something he will never forget.

Over the years, in all the struggles between Hamas and Fatah, he tried to calm the situation and mediate between the sides,

efforts that earned him the confidence of the moderate leaders in Hamas. They didn't see him as one of theirs, but treated him with respect.

Iyad is well acquainted with Hamas and its leadership, and they with him. A few years ago, during a meeting with Sinwar, the latter crowed about Hamas' achievements and showed him and a few others their vast tunnels project in Gaza. "He said they had invested \$250 million in order to put Gaza under the ground," Iyad relates. "I told him he was crazy."

Already then, he says, he knew that Hamas had gone off the deep end. When they started talking about "the last promise," he too didn't think it was serious. But in 2021, his opinion changed. By then Iyad realized that this wasn't some off-the-wall idea propounded by a coterie of "wild weeds," but that the entire leadership had been taken captive by the Sinwar group's deranged idea of an all-out battle. They had an orderly plan and they believed they were fulfilling a divinely ordained mission.

"So strongly did they believe in the idea that Allah was with them, and that they were going to bring Israel down, that they started dividing Israel into cantons, for the day after the conquest."

Iyad describes an astonishing event, which demonstrates the scale of the madness in Hamas. "One day, a well-known Hamas figure calls and tells me with pride and joy that they are preparing a full list of committee heads for the cantons that will be created in Palestine. He offers me the chairmanship of the Zarnuqa committee, where my family lived before 1948."

The Arab village of Zarnuqa lay about 10 kilometers southwest of Ramle; today the Kiryat Moshe neighborhood of Rehovot stands on its land. Iyad was being informed that he would lead the group that would be in charge of rehabilitating the Ramle-Rehovot area on the day after the realization of "the last promise."

Iyad says he was flabbergasted. "You're out of your minds," he told the Hamas person, and asked him not to call him again.

Iyad's account may sound wacky, but it will not surprise those who know what went on in "The Promise of the Hereafter Conference," which was held on September 30, 2021, a few months after the end of Operation Guardian of the Walls. The event, which was held in the Commodore Hotel on the Gaza seashore, discussed in great detail the deployment ahead of the future management of the State of Palestine, following its "liberation" from Israel.

The conference was funded by Hamas and organized by the organization's Kanaan Obeid. Obeid, who is not a member of the military wing and seems to be a bland, unthreatening administrator, is considered the progenitor of the idea that prepared the hearts of the Hamas leaders and the residents of Gaza for the "Judgment Day" takeover of Israel. He is currently imprisoned in Israel, having been captured as he tried to flee to the south of the Gaza Strip.



Kanaan Obeid at "The Promise of the Hereafter" conference. "We have a registry of the numbers of Israeli apartments and institutions ... and we have no choice but to get ready to manage them," Obeid told the conference. Credit: The Muthana Press' Youtube account

In a written speech that Sinwar sent to the conference, the organization's leader hinted that the campaign for the complete conquest of "the state of the Zionists" was "closer now than ever before." He averred that "victory is nigh" and that the "full liberation of Palestine from the sea to the river" is

"the heart of Hamas' strategic vision... To this end, we are working hard and making many efforts on the ground and deep below it, in the heart of the sea, and in the heights of the heavens... We [can already] see with our eyes the [imminent] liberation and therefore we are preparing for what will come after it..."

Following a lengthy day of discussions, conclusions were reached – which were published at length on the website of MEMRI (the Middle East Media Research Institute), headed by Col. (res.) Yigal Carmon. They dealt with the question of how Hamas should prepare for the day after Israel's conquest and destruction, and with the establishment of a different state on its ruins. (All quotes from the conference were translated by the institute.)

So detailed were the plans that participants in the conference began to draw up list of all the properties in Israel and appointed representatives to deal with the assets that would be seized by Hamas. "We have a registry of the numbers of Israeli apartments and institutions, educational institutions and schools, gas stations, power stations and sewage systems, and we have no choice but to get ready to manage them," Obeid told the conference.

One issue was how to treat the Israelis. "In dealing with the Jewish settlers on Palestinian land, there must be a distinction in attitudes toward [the following]: a fighter, who must be killed; a [Jew] who is fleeing and can be left alone or be prosecuted for his crimes in the judicial arena; and a peaceful individual who gives himself up and can be [either] integrated or given time to leave." They agreed that, "This is an issue that requires deep deliberation and a display of the humanism that has always characterized Islam."

More specifically, the issue of a brain drain was discussed. "Educated Jews and experts in the areas of medicine, engineering, technology and civilian and military industry should be retained [in Palestine] for some time and should not be allowed to leave and take with them the knowledge and experience that they acquired while living in our land and enjoying its bounty, while we paid the price for all this in humiliation, poverty, sickness, deprivation, killing and arrests," the conference's concluding statement asserted.

The participants discussed the establishment of political apparatuses and decided that, "An announcement will be addressed to the United Nations declaring that the State of Palestine has succeeded the occupation state and will enjoy the rights of the occupation state." They also assumed that the new

state would inherit the border agreements with Egypt and Jordan, "as well as the economic zone delimitation agreements with Greece in the eastern Mediterranean, the passage and shipping rights in the Gulf of Aqaba, etc." Because the shekel's value was likely to be reduced to "zero," they would recommend to Palestinians that they to convert all their savings "into gold, dollars or dinars."

The conference dealt with the need to recruit personnel for popular committees that would "secure the resources of the land... They will be trained and then assigned to [different] work teams," the statement declared, adding, "Preparations for this will begin right now, first of all in the Gaza Strip."

"We are headed for the victory that Allah promised his servants," the summarizing statement asserted. "The time has

come to act."

"Everyone laughed when Kanaan organized that big show in Gaza," I was told by a leading Fatah figure from Ramallah with whom I spoke after October 7. "But I didn't laugh. I knew that the head [behind it] was the head of Sinwar."

He also added details about the conference. "They invited refugees from 1948 [survivors or their descendants] who are considered to have high status, and gave them tasks in all seriousness. Not only as committee heads, but more than that, genuinely professional roles: handling of land, education, even transportation and communications."

Because of this, the senior figure says, he was not in the least surprised by Hamas' attack last October. "I knew where it was going, once Sinwar seized power and removed all his opponents," he says. "If you're talking about a blunder, the release of Sinwar from prison in Israel [in 2011] is the forefather of your blunder. You [in Israel] talk about Hamas all the time, and don't understand that it's Sinwar. As long as he's breathing, he manages things, and he is an insane fanatic." He notes that while Sinwar was "in prison in Israel, he only became more extreme, to the point where he believes truly and sincerely that he is 'the helper of the prophet Mohammed.'"

The senior figure relates that on one occasion he met a ranking Israeli figure in a Jerusalem hotel and warned him about Sinwar's character. Israel, he said, doesn't know who it's messing with.

Everything was out in the open, but Israel didn't hear and didn't see. The Hatzav group in Unit 8200, the signals intelligence division of IDF Military Intelligence, whose personnel collected open intelligence material, was shut down in 2021. Israeli intelligence completely missed the picture that was taking shape.



Volunteers pack food that is slated to be shipped to Gaza, in Cairo this week. Egypt isn't promising security for those who fled Gaza. Credit: Shokry Hussien/Reuters

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It didn't have to be this way, Iyad relates sorrowfully. From his acquaintanceship with the people involved in Hamas, he notes that Sinwar actually lost the election for the top position that was held on March 10, 2021, half a year before the conference. Nizar Awadallah, from Hamas' political wing, won the secretly held election by a narrow margin, but Marwan Issa, the No. 2

figure in the military wing, who was killed recently, and his personnel threatened the local members of the Shura Committee, who supervised the polling places, to induce them to change the results. That was done and Sinwar was declared the leader of Hamas for the second time, having previously won an election in 2017.

Reports published around that time contain clear hints about what was to come. In Haaretz, Jack Khoury noted on March 10, 2021, that according to unofficial reports, Sinwar lost to Awadallah in the first round of voting by a few votes. Hamas denied this, claiming that the vote was indecisive and therefore a second round had been declared, which was won by Sinwar. In the second round the fix was in. Awadallah, who was forced to concede defeat, fled from Gaza while he still could.

Nor was he the only one who left. Iyad relates that after Sinwar and his aides seized power, some of the pragmatic figures in the leadership realized that they were heading for a fall and abandoned the Gaza Strip. Although Hamas is a movement that sanctifies death, its leaders turn out to want to keep on living. Ismail Haniyeh, for example, the leader of the organization's political bureau, settled in Qatar, as did his deputy, Khalil al-Haya. "They didn't know the date. But they definitely knew where things were heading," Iyad says.

Others fled from the Strip days before October 7. Dr. Razi Hamad, who was in charge of the negotiations for the release of the abducted soldier Gilad Shalit (held captive for five years, beginning in 2006), left Gaza a week before the invasion and has been in Beirut since then.

Haniyeh's eldest son took a similar course of action. Around midday on October 2, Abed Haniyeh chaired a meeting of the Palestinian sports committee, which is headed by the minister of sports, Jibril Rajoub. Suddenly he received a phone call, left the room for a few minutes and then returned, pale and confused. He immediately informed the committee – whose members were in a Zoom conference with counterparts in the West Bank – that he had to leave for the Rafah crossing straightaway, as he had just learned that his wife had to undergo fertility treatment in the United Arab Emirates. (He was lying.) He granted full power of attorney to his deputy and left the Gaza Strip hurriedly.

"When the war broke out," Iyad relates, "two of the committee members who had been at that meeting called me. 'Look at that bastard,' they said. 'If he had told us, we would have run, too.'" Another person who called him said sadly, "Wallah, if we had known that they were going to implement their insane 'promise,' we wouldn't have bought homes, wouldn't have

married, wouldn't have had children. Now they are in Qatar and we are eating shit."

This information casts doubt on the view that has prevailed since October 7, to the effect that the Qatar-based political leadership of Hamas wasn't in on the attack. Even if Haniyeh and his staff weren't part of the planning, they had advance information about the date of the attack. "Everyone knew the attack was coming," Iyad says. "But they weren't sure about the date. It was only on Monday, five days beforehand, that there was apparently a leak."



Abed Haniyeh, Ismail Haniyeh's son (center, looking back), at a soccer game in Qatar in February. Credit: Twitter page of GazaPeople1

"Tell me," I asked him, "it is possible that everything you're recounting wasn't seen or heard by Israeli intelligence?"

Iyad paused for a minute and replied, "They didn't take heed of the data. They knew about the conference at the Commodore Hotel, which was even reported in the Israeli media. But they didn't attach any importance to it. It sounded so crazy, they thought it was nothing."

On October 7, Iyad went to pick dates from the tree that grew in his backyard in Jabalya. When he grasped the scale of the invasion, and saw that abducted civilians and soldiers were being transported into the Strip, he drove his wife and relatives to his home in Sheikh Redwan, which was far from the border with Israel. He remained in the house for the time being. On Tuesday, when the din of the artillery, the tanks and the planes became unbearable, he tried to get into his car and flee, but then the ceiling of his house collapsed, with him inside. He was barely able to pull himself out.

"As soon as I reached my daughter's house, I saw that the house next door had been destroyed and had collapsed on its occupants. So I realized I had to start looking for a way to leave Gaza."

He reached Cairo a month ago, and he too is troubled by a harsh feeling of defeat and discomfort for having left the people of Gaza to fend for themselves. "I had no choice," he says. "My wife and my relatives had breakdowns. I couldn't let that happen."

Now he's in Egypt. It's not clear how and from what he will earn a living, or how he will pay for the house he's rented on the outskirts of a neighborhood in the vast metropolis of Cairo.

* * *

It's hard to estimate just how many Palestinians have been able to leave the Gaza Strip since the start of the war. Palestinians I spoke to think it's between 30,000 and 50,000. Naturally, those who managed to get out are those with status and families who had the wherewithal "to buy" an exit ticket to Egypt. But there are also young people whose parents scraped together every dollar they could to send their children out of the Gaza inferno. I met two of them by chance.

When I got to Cairo, I promised myself that I would not approach Palestinians I didn't already know. Even when I saw dozens of Gazans wandering about the mall in packs, and when I gazed from afar at Palestinian families who were strolling in Tahrir Square or along the Nile promenade, I was very tempted

to approach them, but I overcame that journalistic instinct. Who knows? What if they had lost their homes or had people in their family who were killed? How could I introduce myself to them as an Israeli journalist? I was also very meticulous about upholding the terms of my entry visa to Egypt and not to do anything to irk my hosts. I tried to walk the streets of Cairo as though I were transparent.

One day I went for a walk in Tahrir Square. The place where the great revolution of the Arab Spring was launched has changed unrecognizably in the past 13 years. These days it's neat and quiet. The Egyptians "planted" large concrete pots in which trees are now growing, so that the square will no longer be able to be accommodated large masses of people.

Thousands of people come to the historic square every evening, and it wasn't difficult for me to spot Palestinian families among them, with babies and small children. They didn't mix

with the Egyptians, but sat by the side, in the corners of the square, speaking among themselves.

I saw a group of young Egyptians who were repeatedly photographing their thumbs. I asked them, in English, what they were doing. Two inquisitive young people nearby the side listened to the conversation and laughed. They too thought it was a bizarre trend. Then we started to speak. They spoke fluent English, better than mine. We talked about Egypt. About the square, and they said enviously: If only we could have "Freedom" one day, like the Egyptians. That's when the penny dropped for me.

They were brothers – Imad and Husam. Their family is from the Rimal neighborhood of Gaza City, their father worked in the Arab Bank, but the whole neighborhood had been destroyed. Their friends and neighbors had been killed. Their parents used all their savings to send them away from the battlefields of Gaza.

Before they could finish their story, I told them that I too had something to say. I told them that I was an Israeli, a Jew, a journalist by profession. The silence didn't last long, and to my surprise they weren't alarmed by my revelation. Imad, the older of the two, said he had suspected me from the start,

because of the interest I showed in them. "What else do you want to hear?" he asked. I said I'd like to hear the whole story.

Tahrir Square, Cairo. The site where the Arab Spring revolution was launched has changed unrecognizably since 2011. Credit: Rasit Aydogan / Anadolu via AFP

They suggested that we go to the bank of the river. So, two young Palestinians and an Israeli who had already seen a lot in Gaza went for an evening stroll to talk about war.

Imad, who's 21, said that he had completed electrical engineering studies but hadn't been able to find work and had

taken odd jobs. His brother, Husam, 19, is studying computers. Now they have to rebuild their lives from the bottom up.

I asked whether their home is a "total loss." They laughed at the expression, which of course generally refers to cars. "Why are you laughing?" I asked.

They replied that they were laughing on the outside, but crying inside. I couldn't possibly know, they told me, how much crying they had accumulated over the years."

They told me about the day when their mother decided that she had to part from her two older sons. By then, they were staying with an aunt in Dir al-Balah, in the south of the Strip. "We have two sisters and a 7-year-old brother who remained in Gaza, but we couldn't get them out," Imad said. To which his brother added, "Mom said that it was her duty to get out whomever she could. Dad was against it at first – he said everyone had to stay together. But when we heard that Israel had destroyed the whole Rimal neighborhood, Dad relented."

They managed to leave three weeks ago. "Dad was silent, didn't say a word. Mom cried. I asked her why – told her we'll return and build a new house." But their mother was determined. She brought a Quran and had them swear on it that they will never

return to Gaza. "Don't come back here," she told them. "Look for somewhere else to work, to marry, to build, to live."

And what did your father say?

"Nothing. Dad was silent. Maybe he knew that he would never see us again."

Is there any chance of their getting out?

"No. Dad is looking after his mother. She's 85. And our mother is tired. Where would they go? To Egypt? What's for them here?"

Do they have food? Money? What will they do?

"What all the Gazans do. Live, die, it's fate."

And what about you two?

They referred the question back to me: "And what about you [Israelis]? How long will you go on killing us, huh?"

Their dream is to find a university that will award them a scholarship in Europe or in America. Or, as Husam said, laughing, even in the Congo – as long as there's no shelling going on.

It was 1:30 A.M. when I got back to the hotel. Two Gazan merchants were sitting in the lobby. I didn't approach them. They were busy selling Gaza to the highest bidder, and I didn't want to disturb them. Let them go about their business, and I'll tend to mine.

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