

MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

p.1

Brief

Jacob Zenn

p.3

Majed al-Zeer: Hamas's Alleged Frontman in Europe

Adam Rousselle

p.5

Jewel Ali: The Founder of Imam Mahmud Kafela in Bangladesh

Iftekharul Bashar

p.9

Saleh al-Arouri: A Postmortem of One of Hamas's Key al-Qassam Commanders in Lebanon

Rami Jameel

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Keith Woods: The Rise of an Irish Far-Right Ideologue

Jacob Zenn

Executive Summary

- Podcaster Colin Robertson and others in the far-right are hailing Keith Woods as the "rising star" of 2023, with some calling it the "Year of Keith Woods" due to his growing popularity and influence.
- Woods has over 150,000 followers on Twitter/X after rejoining when Elon Musk took over, and was retweeted by Musk and UFC star Conor McGregor, giving him significant mainstream exposure.

Since the rise of the transatlantic alt-right in 2015, Scottish far-right podcaster Colin Robertson, known as "Millennial Woes," has hosted an end-of-year interview series of leading far-right online personalities. In

December 2023, the final live chat for Robertson's interview of Keith Woods proclaimed, "Some say it's Gaza, Twitter, Ukraine, or Covid, but I think Keith Woods himself is our 'Black Swan' event ... What an amazing journey for that young man. I truly hope one day when peace prevails, Keith Woods is recognized for bringing people a sense that the fight against ['anti-white' and multicultural] tyranny can be won" ([@Odysee/@millennialwoes](https://twitter.com/Odysee), December 11, 2023).

Although the chat was only one piece of anecdotal evidence, it reflected a broader recognition that Woods is now the most significant "rising star" in the current far-right. This is true despite the fact that Keith Woods is relatively little-known compared to long-time far-right ideologues like Jared Taylor, David Duke, or Richard Spencer. Further demonstrating Woods's increasing popularity was another interview by Robertson of French-Canadian far-right podcaster, JF Garipey, who described 2023 as the "Year of Keith Woods" ([@Odysee/@millennialwoes](https://twitter.com/Odysee), December 23, 2023). This was reminiscent of how three years earlier, various far-right online commentators, and especially the Nick Fuentes-led Groyper Movement, claimed that 2020 was the "YOBA," or "Year of

Baked Alaska.” This referred to Anthime “Baked Alaska” Gionet who goaded, filmed, and played an animating role in the “Stop the Steal” protests and ensuing January 6, 2021 riot by Donald Trump supporters at the US Capitol ([CBS News](#), January 10, 2023).

Perhaps the most surprising commentary on Woods was from the Greg Johnson-run white nationalist webzine counter-currents.com. It also lauded Woods as the 2023 “Activist of the Year” for his influencing “the mainstream” from the “dissident right” perspective ([counter-currents.com](#), December 28, 2023). In contrast, less than three years earlier the same webzine had criticized Woods for aligning with the “insane” Richard Spencer, who had shifted to the left to the extent that he supported then-Democratic Party candidate Joe Biden ([counter-currents.com](#), April 23, 2020).

Woods, however, is a much different character than “Baked Alaska” or even Richard Spencer, with the latter two often acting as ideological chameleons—with “Baked Alaska” playing a role akin to court jester. Woods presents himself as a baritone-voiced intellectual. Woods’s real name is Keith O’Brien, and he is a graduate of National University of Ireland, Galway ([X/@EyesOnTheRight](#), November 9, 2023). He seems to have embraced the British National Party shortly after graduating from university around 2016. Following this, he was then noticed by British Patriotic Alternative leader and podcaster, Mark Collett, who hosted him on his Patriotic Weekly Review podcast in 2019 ([Bitchute/@MarkCollett](#), July 17, 2019). With this exposure, Woods joined Richard Spencer’s podcast at the time, called the “McSpencer Group.” Woods joined alongside the Finland-based, “race and IQ”-focused British citizen Edward Dutton, which placed him further into the far-right spotlight ([YouTube/AngelDust](#), September 23, 2020).

In April 2020, just as Woods was reaching the highest profile far-right online social

media circles, he shut down his Twitter account in anticipation of his being banned. This had already occurred with most other leading white identitarians, including Richard Spencer, Ed Dutton, Greg Johnson, David Duke, Jared Taylor, and Nick Fuentes. Although Woods continued hosting and appearing on podcasts after 2022, it was not until Elon Musk bought Twitter, renamed it X, and allowed previously banned white identitarians back on the platform that Woods relaunched his own account in April 2023 ([X/@KeithWoodsYT](#), December 28, 2023). Since then, Woods’s followership has skyrocketed to well over 150,000 followers.

Most notably, Woods was re-tweeted by Musk himself after Woods started a “#BantheADL” (Anti-Defamation League) hashtag that went viral in September 2023 ([Times of Israel](#), September 24, 2023). Not to be outdone, Irish Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) star Conor McGregor also retweeted Woods in November 2023. This occurred after Woods mocked a journalist who had “smeared” him for having a “far-right” stance on immigration, but later had his bicycle stolen while reporting on a stabbing spree ([X/@ScotsWarrior17](#), November 24, 2023). The stabbing spree involved a naturalized Algerian immigrant who attacked schoolchildren in Dublin, which caused locals to riot—with Woods becoming the one of the movement’s most vocal supporters online ([Irish Times](#), November 30, 2023).

Woods’s commentary on the stabbing spree has helped him build an increasingly large following, as has his strongly anti-Jewish messaging since the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023. However, the channeling of his followers’ grievances during the riots in Dublin and violent conflicts in the Middle East reveals the grey area where Woods’s “advocacy” work overlaps with militant politics ([Telegram/@AFVault](#), December 17, 2023). In turbulent times like today, it means Woods’s ideology has the ability to

spark other forms of violent unrest in the West.

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Majed al-Zeer: Hamas's Alleged Frontman in Europe

Adam Rousselle

Executive Summary

- German authorities claim that Berlin-based British citizen Majed al-Zeer plays a key role in Hamas's operations in Europe, citing his relations with Hamas figures and support for the group, though the extent remains unclear.
- Al-Zeer's involvement as director of the allegedly Hamas-connected Palestinian Return Centre (PRC) has sparked controversy.
- Due in part to the murky evidence of direct Hamas links, al-Zeer and the PRC have secured legal victories against previous accusations, demonstrating resilience against pressure to prove Hamas affiliation.

German authorities claim that Majed al-Zeer is a 61-year-old British citizen and German resident who plays a central role in Hamas's European operations ([Ynet News](#), December 17, 2023). Although evidence suggests that al-Zeer has associated with Hamas figures in the past, the extent of these relations remains unknown. Nevertheless, German and other governments' reports about his activities

suggest he may be a key Hamas frontman in Europe.

Association with Hamas Figures

A prominent Palestinian activist in Europe who moved from London to Berlin in 2014, al-Zeer portrayed the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel as an act of self-defense on social media. Years earlier, al-Zeer also stated that "Berlin bears a great burden in the struggle for Palestine" at the unofficial founding ceremony of a suspected Hamas support organization ([Spiegel](#), December 15, 2023). His support for Hamas extends beyond rhetoric, however.

Al-Zeer has also been photographed with senior Hamas leaders, including the group's current Political Bureau head, Ismael Haniyeh ([Ynet](#), December 17, 2023). Although recent arrests in Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands suggest that Hamas is operating in Europe, al-Zeer has not been among those arrested to date. This is despite the presence of police officers outside his door on November 27, 2023. The officers did not enter the premises—possibly due to their inability to obtain a warrant—but reportedly searched for evidence of al-Zeer's Hamas links ([Spiegel](#), December 15, 2023).

PRC Center Legal Controversy

A key point of controversy surrounding al-Zeer stems from his involvement as director of the London-based Palestinian Return Centre (PRC). **[1]** The registered non-governmental organization (NGO) was founded in 1996 to advocate for Palestinian refugees "in accordance with the historical, political, and legal basis of the right to return [to Palestine]" ([Companies House](#), December 23, 2023; [PRC](#), December 23, 2023). Israel, however, has accused the PRC of being associated with Hamas and promoting "anti-Israel propaganda." The Israeli government labeled senior PRC members, including al-Zeer and Zaher Birawi, as terrorists in 2010 ([Jerusalem](#)

[Post](#), July 13, 2023). Israel-based think tank The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (MAITIC) claims that the PRC's alleged Hamas ties, "anti-Israel propaganda activities," and advocacy for the right of millions of Palestinians to right to return to places that were "abandoned in 1948" makes it an important part of an "international campaign to delegitimize Israel" ([MAITIC](#), August 8, 2011). Although one British advocacy group has called for the banning of the organization based on its alleged Hamas ties, the PRC denies any such affiliation. PRC attorneys also claim that it "strongly renounces all acts of terror, whether by Hamas or anywhere else, including the attacks of October 7" ([Telegraph](#), November 18, 2023).

Despite the PRC's refutation of its ties with Hamas, there is evidence to suggest some level of association. For example, Ismail Haniyeh was a keynote speaker at a 2009 PRC-organized conference in Milan. Moreover, officials from the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Palestinian Authority (PA), and Fatah called for a boycott of the PRC-organized 20th annual Palestinians in Europe Conference, which was held in Malmo, Sweden in 2023. They claimed it was an attempt by Hamas to challenge the PLO's "status as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people" ([MEMRI](#), May 25, 2023). When the PRC was granted consultative status at the United Nations in 2015, Hamas also claimed in a press release that its then-deputy chief Ismael Haniyeh had called al-Zeer to congratulate him. A PRC spokesman later denied that the conversation had taken place ([Reuters](#), June 3, 2015).

Legal Cases

Through his role at the PRC, al-Zeer has been involved in several high-profile legal cases. When the Israeli government protested the appointment of the PRC to its official UN role and accused it of having ties to Hamas, the PRC denied this claim and announced it was considering legal action

in the form of a defamation case against the Israeli government. Although no such case has been brought forth to date, the PRC and al-Zeer have proven capable of launching successful legal suits in the years since then.

In 2019, for example, al-Zeer was categorized as a terrorist by World-Check, a company used by financial institutions to assess the risk posed by individuals and organizations. Subsequently, al-Zeer brought a case against the company before the high court in London for his inclusion on its list. He was awarded \$13,000 in damages plus legal fees ([Al Jazeera](#), January 22, 2019). In 2019, al-Zeer and the PRC successfully sued British publications *Mail on Sunday* and *Mail Online* over an article that alleged the group was "known to blame Jews for the Holocaust." The publisher was later forced to pay damages and costs to the PRC and al-Zeer ([Carter-Ruck](#), December 23, 2023).

Conclusion

Although evidence suggests some affiliation between Majed al-Zeer and Hamas, publicly available information at this time remains murky. While the details compiled by German security officials on al-Zeer have not been fully disclosed to the public, it is likely that al-Zeer would have been arrested in the latest probe into Hamas activities, had they acquired a large array of evidence. Moreover, al-Zeer and the PRC's ability to secure legal victories in British courts demonstrates their resilience in the face of substantial pressure.

For this reason, authorities will likely face major challenges proving al-Zeer's Hamas membership in a court of law, due to the fact that such ties remain obscure—likely purposely. With significant resources for legal defense at their disposal, it is unlikely that any case brought against al-Zeer or the PRC will end quietly. Beyond this, legal action could be seen as persecutory in nature by the Muslim community in Europe, which will present further

challenges moving forward. If al-Zeer is a frontman for Hamas and the PRC an organization through which he fulfils this role, they have indeed been successful thus far.

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Notes:

[1] There is also a similarly named Palestinian Refugee Centre Ltd. registered in the United Kingdom. This organization appears to be less well known (lacking both official UN sanction and a website), but from 2009-2013 was listed as The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd. Moreover, al-Zeer and other senior directors of the officially recognized Palestinian Return Centre are listed as directors at this second organization, with a period from 2009-2011 where al-Zeer was registered as an active director at both. Given these issues, it may be the case that the listing of the two companies as separate legal entities was due to a bureaucratic mix-up, but this cannot be said for certain.

Jewel Ali: The Founder of Imam Mahmuder Kafela in Bangladesh

Iftekharul Bashar

Executive Summary

- The charismatic leader of a new Bangladeshi terrorist group called Imam Mahmuder Kafela (IMK), Jewel Ali, was recently arrested. Despite his arrest, Ali's ability to fundraise, organize, and promote his ideology on social media combine with the persistent popularity of his message to represent a continued threat to the Bangladeshi public.
- Over 40 members were arrested with him, including women and families, who were training for an "end-of-times" jihad against India.
- Law enforcement arrested many members of IMK in August 2023, seizing explosives, detonators, cash, and training materials, disrupting the group's plans for attacks on state officials.

Jewel Ali, **[1]** who is also known by the aliases Habibullah Mahmud, Jewel Mahmud, Abdul Ahad Mendi, and Sohel, serves as the emir (leader) of Imam Mahmuder Kafela (IMK). This is a new and relatively obscure terrorist group in Bangladesh. Since August 2023, law enforcement has apprehended at least 40 members of IMK, including Jewel Ali himself, although Ali had previously been arrested in 2019 and 2020, during which time he was a member of another former terrorist group named Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). JMB

followed the ideology of al-Qaeda ([Bangladesh Post](#), November 21, 2020).

Subsequent investigations brought to light IMK's recruitment efforts, which encompassed a broad spectrum of individuals, including youths (mostly teenagers), women, and families ([Samakal](#), August 16). These recruits were trained in remote areas of Bangladesh, with the goal of preparing for what they believed was "Ghazwatul Hind," or a jihadist eschatological battle against Hindu India, which overlaps with the narratives put forth by al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) ([The Daily Star](#), August 13, 2023). After the completion of training, the organization was planning surprise attacks on state officials and law enforcement personnel in Bangladesh ([Dhaka Post](#), August 13, 2023).

Although IMK's attacks have been thwarted, the group still has a residual capacity for terror, as well as significant finances. The emergence of IMK under the leadership of Jewel Ali underscores the diversified tactics of al-Qaeda-oriented groups in Bangladesh and their successful use of apocalyptic end-of-times narratives. Indeed, despite some of his bizarre claims, Ali appears to be a persistent and charismatic militant leader with significant organizational skill despite his relatively young age. He therefore poses a unique threat that cannot be underestimated. More broadly, Ali's case highlights the ongoing challenges of radicalization in Bangladesh and the allure of such narratives within the extremist landscape.

Path to Jihadist Leadership

The 28-year old Jewel Ali was born in Gaopara village of the Bagatipara Sub-District within the Natore District of northern Bangladesh. The salafi-jihadist JMB was active in Natore in the early to mid-2000s. Ali came from a poor family and his father, Abdul Kader, died in Ali's childhood. His mother was a housewife, and Ali was the younger of two brothers, who were also farmers ([Jamuna TV](#),

October 15, 2023). The financial constraints of his upbringing significantly limited Ali's educational opportunities. Beyond this, Ali faces physical challenges to the extent that he is unable to walk unassisted. While some might assume that this would limit the efficacy of Ali's leadership in a jihadist group, Ali's ability to overcome poverty and other adversity has been demonstrated throughout his career ([Bhorer Kagoj](#), August 16, 2023). **[2]**

Ali's formal education came to an end before he completed primary school, and he subsequently attended the local Gaopara Hafezia Fuqania madrassa for several years. This is where he came across some of the Islamic concepts that he later adopted. It is highly likely that Ali witnessed the emergence of the JMB in his home district of Natore during his formative years as a primary school student. **[3]** At one point, he also served as an imam at a local mosque in the Rampara area of Natore. However, his involvement was marred by an incident in 2013, when Ali was dismissed for harassing a girl, which led to his incarceration. Following his release, he joined the Gausul Azam Jame Masjid in Singra, Natore ([Jamuna TV](#), October 15, 2023). Not much information is available on this period, although Ali eventually joined the JMB formally.

On September 11, 2019, Ali was arrested in Uttara area of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, due to his association with the JMB. After his release, Ali went back to the JMB and eventually rose to the position of a regional leader. Ali was then arrested again, this time with three other JMB members on November 20, 2020 in Shah Makhdum area of Rajshahi, a northern district of Bangladesh. Law enforcement agencies recovered 154 banned books, six leaflets, one pistol, five round of bullets, one magazine, two motor bikes, and one first aid kit ([Bangladesh Post](#), November 21, 2020). This arrest led to Ali's imprisonment in the Rajshahi Central Jail. Upon his release, Ali married the sister of a

JMB member, Ruhul Amin, in Sathia, Pabna District, further solidifying his connections within that group ([Benar News](#), September 29, 2016). [4]

Formation of Imam Mahmuder Kafela (IMK)

IMK was conceptualized while Ali was in prison. During this time, he reportedly received advice from incarcerated senior leaders of various terrorist groups that he should establish a camp in Bangladesh's hilly areas. Remarkably, even from behind bars, Ali managed to communicate with his followers by sending them short, handwritten messages, which he asserted were divine revelations, or "ilhams."

After his release from prison, Ali focused on organizing a new group, which he called "kafela," or "caravan." However, he also set up Talimul Islam Academy madrassa in Ataikula, Pabna District, which is where his wife's family lived. Ali started delivering public speeches in the madrassa and used them to fundraise—and possibly as a cover for his more militant activities. Even with his limited formal education, Ali possesses a remarkable degree of charisma ([Jamuna TV](#), October 15, 2023).

Social media, such as Facebook and YouTube, became the key platform to share his ideas and attract new recruits. However, in addition to social media platforms, Ali wrote several books in Bengali under a pseudonym "Habibullah Mahmud," which were edited by someone named "Jihadul Islam." These books reflected his salafi-jihadist views and were distributed both in print and as a PDF online. Ali's on-the-ground preaching was also a key recruitment method, with the core recruitment narrative being a claim that between 2023 and 2026 there will be a global famine and everyone except IMK followers will die ([Jugantor](#), October 20, 2023). He claimed also that he himself would be the Imam Mahmud, who is the forerunner of the Mahdi (an eschatological figure who Muslims believe will usher in an era of justice and true belief just prior to

the end of time). His recruits were told that the preliminary stage of jihad is *hijrah* (migration) and that they would have to go to a certain place for training. Those who participate in jihad in this way would be rewarded in the hereafter, Ali declared ([BBC Bangla](#), August 15, 2023).

Ali attracted individuals from all walks of life, including farmers, laborers, drivers, students, and even doctors. IMK also recruited from various districts of Bangladesh including Natore, Pabna, Gaibandha, Jamalpur, Sirajganj, Tangail, Narayanganj, Jessore, and Cox's Bazar. The youngest arrested member of the group was a 17-year-old high school student, and IMK recruited both men and women. Some of the recruits brought their families—at least 11 children were found in the training camp when it was discovered ([The Daily Star](#), August 16, 2023).

Resources and Counter-Terrorism Reaction

Ali received financial support from his followers, both within and outside Bangladesh, and donations from inside the country predominantly were made in cash or by using popular money transfer services like bKash. Some of Ali's followers were so committed that they sold land, jewelry, and other properties to join his group. Donations from overseas, particularly from some members of the Bangladeshi diaspora in the Gulf countries, were channeled through informal means like Hundi remittance instruments ([Kalerkantho](#), August 18, 2023).

On August 12, 2023, the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police arrested 10 members of IMK, who were involved in both recruitment and training activities. The arrests took place in the hilly area of Kulaura in Maulvibazar District (Sylhet Division) and led to the seizure of three kilograms of explosives, 50 detonators, gold jewelry, training materials, combat boots, boxing bags, jihadi literature, and the equivalent of \$3,250 in cash. Three

children were also found among the arrestees ([Dhaka Tribune](#), August 12, 2023).

On August 14, 2023, an additional 17 individuals suspected to be IMK operatives were arrested in Karmadha Union in the Kulaura Sub-District of Maulvibazar District ([Prothom Alo English](#), August 14). Then, on August 15, the CTTC unit's Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team, along with the bomb disposal unit, discovered five kilograms of explosives, 95 detonators, and 14 rounds of bullets in a raid on an IMK hideout in the hilly area of Kulaura in Maulvibazar District ([The Business Standard](#), August 15, 2023). Overall, these arrests and seizures appear to have had a significant impact on the IMK's operations, disrupting the group's plans and potentially reducing the threat it posed.

Conclusion

Jewel Ali has emerged as a new threat in Bangladesh's jihadist landscape. His association with the JMB and his creation of IMK reflects his commitment to jihadist ideology. Moreover, his ability to recruit diverse individuals, his successful fundraising, and IMK's developed operational capabilities are deeply concerning to Bangladeshi authorities.

Despite the arrest of Ali and many of his associates, many members of IMK are still at large, and the group's propaganda materials are still easily available on social media. IMK's eschatological narratives, including the emphasis on an impending "Ghazwatul Hind," will continue to attract followers both within Bangladesh as well as among the Bangladeshi diaspora. Ali's case underscores the challenges of radicalization and jihadism in Bangladesh and beyond.

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Notes:

[1] In his national ID card, his name is spelled as "Md. Jewel Ali."

[2] Author's remote interview with Bangladeshi security personnel, October 11, 2023.

[3] The JMB strongly encourages marriages within the membership and their families. This is part of the JMB strategy to ensure secrecy and group cohesion and to gain new members, especially women.

Saleh al-Arouri: A Postmortem of One of Hamas's Key al-Qassam Commanders in Lebanon

Rami Jameel

Executive Summary

- Hamas deputy leader and head of the West Bank al-Qassam Brigades Saleh al-Arouri was killed in a January 2024 Israeli drone strike while meeting with Hezbollah. He is the senior most Hamas leader killed by Israel since the start of the war.
- Al-Arouri was a founding member of Hamas in the late 1980s. He subsequently spent 15 years in Israeli prisons for establishing Hamas's military wing in the West Bank. Following this, he was exiled, during which time he became a top Hamas political and military leader.
- An official Hamas turn toward moderation in 2017 caused some to assume that al-Arouri and a number of other radicals who took power at the time were more pragmatic than past leaders. The rising clique would be the same group that would eventually plan and execute the surprise attack on Israel on October 7, 2023.

Saleh al-Arouri was killed in a drone strike in Lebanon on January 2. His death was a major blow to Hamas and its military wing, the al-Qassam Brigades. At the time, al-Arouri was at the stronghold of Lebanese Hezbollah in south Beirut for a meeting

with Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah, which was reportedly scheduled for the following day ([Sky News Arabia](#), January 2).

Al-Arouri was a prominent figure in the more radical wing of Hamas's leadership, which planned and launched the surprise attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, starting the Israel-Hamas war. This wing also includes Hamas's leader in Gaza, Yahya al-Sinwar, and its military wing commander, Mohammed al-Dhaif ([Syria TV](#), November 9, 2023). As deputy chairman of Hamas's political bureau and as a leader of the group in the West Bank, al-Arouri has performed a number of crucially important leadership roles for Hamas. Crucially, he has been the most senior Hamas leader killed by Israel since the start of the war.

Al-Arouri's death will critically test Hamas's ability to communicate effectively with key regional allies. This is because al-Arouri was in charge of Hamas's relations with Iran and Hezbollah ([amwaj.media](#), January 2). Those alliances have been extremely important for Hamas in the past, and they will grow even more important as the pressure on the group intensifies in the future.

In the West Bank and Beyond

Al-Arouri was born in the village of al-Aroura near Ramallah in the West Bank in 1966. He joined the Muslim Brotherhood in 1985—two years before the founding of Hamas—and studied Islamic theology. Al-Arouri became a cleric, earning the revered title of "sheikh" at a young age.

When the first Palestinian intifada broke out in December 1987, the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood reorganized the movement and introduced Hamas as a new political front which could serve as a Palestinian resistance movement with an Islamist conviction. Al-Arouri was a founding member of Hamas and its military wing, al-Qassam.

While most of Hamas and al-Qassam's leaders have come from and lived in Gaza, al-Aroui played a major role in establishing al-Qassam's branch in the West Bank. Al-Aroui had been arrested several times between 1990 and 1992 by the Israeli authorities for his role in Hamas's military activities. When al-Aroui's work culminated in 1992 and al-Qassam became operational in the West Bank, he was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to 15 years in prison for his role in the formation and activities of al-Qassam there. While he was in prison, al-Aroui advanced within the ranks of Hamas. During this time, the West Bank branch of al-Qassam which he had established commenced its well-known campaign of suicide attacks inside Israel. Hamas's strategy was to destroy the peace process launched after the 1993 Oslo accords between the Palestinian Authority, dominated by Israel and Hamas's rival Fatah ([Sky News Arabia](#), January 3).

Israel released al-Aroui after he served his 15 years in prison in 2007, only to arrest him a few months later. He was finally released in 2010. Realizing his operational influence, Israel then expelled al-Aroui to Syria. In 2012, al-Aroui relocated to Turkey, later moving to Lebanon. In this way, he could become closer to Hezbollah while also remaining near the Palestinian territories. Between his release in 2012 and his death in the 2024 Israeli air strike, al-Aroui had many essential roles in the leadership of Hamas and al-Qassam. These included being a military commander, a political leader, and a chief negotiator. In 2021, when he was reelected as deputy chairman of Hamas's political bureau, al-Aroui was also elected as Hamas's leader of the West Bank, complementing his position at the helm of the al-Qassam in the West Bank ([Al Jazeera](#), January 6).

Hamas Leadership and Change

Al-Aroui assumed his senior position in the leadership of Hamas in 2017. He was made deputy head of the political bureau in that year, which was a turning point in Hamas's

history ([Ammon News](#), October 5, 2017). Hamas was founded by the Palestinian Islamist organization of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s. In its founding document, Hamas embraced a hardline ideology that committed the group to launching jihad against Israel and the Jews. [1]

However, in 2017 a new manifesto was adopted to replace the old one, which was perceived to be more moderate and realistic, as well as less radical. This happened to coincide with the ascendancy of al-Aroui and other radical figures to top leadership positions, causing those individuals to be perceived as becoming more pragmatic. This view would prove to be fatally misguided ([Youm7](#), May 1, 2017).

The year 2017 was a turning point in the history of Hamas, but not towards moderation. Leaders of Hamas's military wing became the actual leaders of the entire movement. Al-Sinwar, for example, became the leader of Hamas in its stronghold, the Gaza strip, where the group controlled the government. His predecessor, Ismael Haniya—a Gaza native like al-Sinwar—became the chairman of the political bureau outside Gaza. As a result, Haniya moved to Qatar. Al-Aroui, meanwhile, became deputy chairman of the political bureau outside Gaza, while maintaining his role as leader of al-Qassam in the West Bank ([Al Jazeera](#), May 10, 2017).

Al-Sinwar and Al-Aroui as Hamas Heads

The "Sinwar-Aroui" wing of Hamas has become dominant in the group's decision-making since 2017. Al-Sinwar focused on rebuilding relations with Egypt, which were damaged after the Egyptian seized control of the government in 2013 from the Muslim Brotherhood. The latter shares its roots and ideology with Hamas ([i24News](#), June 18, 2017).

Al-Arouri, on the other hand, took up the more difficult mission of reviving relations with Hamas's main backer, Iran, and Iran's proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah. Those relations had soured because Hamas, a Sunni group, sympathized with the mostly Sunni uprising against the Alawite Shia-dominated regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Al-Assad had been supported by Shia Iran and Hezbollah. Al-Arouri, who himself had to leave Syria when Hamas severed its relations with Damascus in 2012, admitted later that Hamas should have prioritized its well-established relations with Syria and its backer, Iran. Al-Arouri further argued that Hamas should not have taken sides in the Syrian conflict. Al-Arouri did not only offer words, but undertook serious efforts to revive relations with Iran's "Axis of Resistance," which includes Hezbollah ([Saida Online](#), January 10).

Recreating al-Qassam

The degree of al-Qassam's development since 2017, especially in the areas of training, strategic leadership, and (more critically) weaponry, shows how successful al-Arouri was in his mission. Support from Iran and Hezbollah was key in making al-Qassam the fighting power that it has become. Not only did al-Arouri play a key role in overseeing the flow of support to al-Qassam, but he performed this task in a way that did not attract too much attention—which would have provoked counter-measures—from Israel. The general Israeli assessment was that al-Sinwar's government would be focused on governance in Gaza and avoid major military escalations with Israel. The 2021 war where Hamas showed unprecedented missile capabilities and the group's surprise attack on October 7, 2023 both demonstrate the degree of combat development that al-Qassam acquired in recent years. This was unquestionably due to the work of men like al-Sinwar, al-Dhaif, and al-Arouri ([The New Arab](#) [United Kingdom], January 5).

Al-Arouri was not entirely off the Israelis' radar, however. The 2014 Gaza war began when Israel retaliated to an attack al-Arouri was accused of plotting, which involved the kidnapping and killing of three Israeli teenagers. In 2015, he was also sanctioned by the US Department of the Treasury for his role in leading al-Qassam in the West Bank and his involvement in coordinating financial support for Hamas. Three years later, the US State Department offered a \$5 million reward for information leading to al-Arouri's identification or location ([Rewards for Justice](#), November 13, 2018).

Conclusion

The rise of the al-Sinwar wing in the Hamas leadership did not mean that there was a rift with the leaders who were based outside of Gaza, and especially in Qatar. However, al-Sinwar's wing started the October 7 operation and has been running Hamas's war effort ever since. The al-Sinwar wing is the military wing, and that wing has now lost al-Arouri, who is a founding member of al-Qassam. Al-Arouri's flexibility of movement, the mandate that he enjoyed from the Gaza-based leadership, and his contacts and established relations with foreign supporters—especially Iran and Hezbollah—means that he will not be easily replaced.

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Notes:

[1] Find the full Hamas founding document as issued in August 1988 via this link from The Institute For Palestinian Studies: https://oldwebsite.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/Charter_of_the_islamic.pdf