Sheikh Ahmed Yassin

Founder and 'spiritual leader' of Hamas whose influence in Palestine set him at odds with Arafat and Israel

Picture: EPA

Yassin: despite confinement to a wheelchair after a youthful headstand contest, he orchestrated Islamist interests in the intifada, always rejecting peace

SHEIKH AHMED YASSIN, who was killed by an Israeli air strike yesterday, probably aged 67, was a handicapped Palestinian refugee who founded Hamas, the Islamic movement whose combination of political violence, community services, uncompromising rhetoric and shrewd politics established it as the principal opposition group to the PLO, as well as the scourge of Israel.

His quiet charisma and strong will took him to the apex of political influence first in his home district of Gaza and later throughout the territories during the turmoil of the intifada, the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation. He achieved this despite scant education, poor health and years of imprisonment in Israeli jails.

Ahmed Yassin was born in 1936 in the village of Joura, in the province of Gaza, then under the rule of the British Mandate in Palestine. He was the eighth of nine children. His father, an illiterate farmer who married at least two women, was moderately prosperous, but died when Ahmed Yassin was five.

When the state of Israel was proclaimed in 1948, followed by war with neighbouring Arab states, Yassin and his family joined the exodus of refugees, and settled in a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip, then governed by Egypt. In Gaza the newly impoverished family eked out a living in weaving and fishing. They later moved to a crowded quarter of Gaza City, where the teenage Yassin worked in a seafront restaurant.

Yassin was a student at a school where a number of the teachers were members of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Egyptian organisation that preached the religious revival of Islamic society. The only political institutions in Gaza at this time were the Communist party and the Muslim Brotherhood, and Yassin gravitated to the latter, attending mosques where members of the Brotherhood were preaching, and participating in their discussions and lectures. He developed the ambition to be a teacher.

In 1952, aged 16, he damaged his spine on the beach in Gaza while competing with friends to see who could stand on his head for the longest period of time. The injury that resulted from this exercise of iron will paralysed his legs and fingers, and he was confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

Yassin nonetheless spent a year at Ein Shams University in Cairo, where he took a teacher training course, specialising in Arabic and English literature. On his return, he taught at a UN Relief and Works Agency school in Gaza, and began as a religious teacher, acquiring social status and a reputation as an arbiter of disputes.

While Yassin had been recuperating in hospital, the Egyptian monarchy had been overthrown by the Free Officers' coup led by Nasser. The Muslim Brotherhood supported the revolution, and for some years the organisation enjoyed official support in Gaza. But in 1954 the Muslim Brotherhood opposed the Egyptian government's Evacuation Treaty with Britain, and members of it were accused of complicity in an attempt on Nasser's life. The organisation was banned in Egypt and Gaza, forcing it to conduct its activities covertly.

Nasser's long campaign to extinguish the Muslim Brotherhood culminated in Gaza in a round-up of the organisation's leadership there in 1966. Yassin was among those arrested, even though he was not politically active, and he spent 45 days in prison.

On his release, on the eve of the 1967 Six-Day War, Yassin resumed his religious activities in the mosques of Gaza, preaching, leading discussions and establishing libraries. After the defeat of Egypt, and the Israeli occupation of Gaza, the Muslim Brotherhood was not active in the opposition to Israel. Popular sentiment in Gaza was squarely behind the Palestinian national movement, led by the PLO. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood had been severely weakened under Nasser, and was rebuilding.

In 1969 Yassin was appointed leader of the Gaza chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood, on the strength of his work among the youth of Gaza. Within a few years he had attracted a small following of young men who worshipped at the mosque where he preached and visited his home, where he would receive them lying on a mattress. A handful of these followers would later form the leadership of Hamas.

Yassin was no theologian or scholar: the title sheikh was bestowed by popular acclaim. People were impressed by his simple way of life, his accessibility and his physical endurance.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza took advantage of the Israeli view that the organisation posed no political threat; Israel's priority was to crush the PLO. In 1973 Yassin established the Islamic Centre in Gaza, al-Mujama, an organisation that came to control all Islamic institutions in Gaza, including the territory's only university. Al-Mujama provided educational, medical and welfare services in the poorest areas of Gaza, and was given official status as a charity by the Israeli authorities. If al-Mujama and the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza seemed politically inactive, this was because Yassin did not judge the time ripe for political action.

Yassin's skill as a political leader lay in seeing, and taking, opportunities. After the military defeats of the Arab forces in 1967 and 1973, disillusionment with the power of secular nationalism to change anything gradually turned many Palestinians, particularly young men, towards the Islamic alternative that Yassin and the Muslim Brotherhood had been patiently preparing. It also benefited from Israeli tolerance towards the Islamic movement, which strategists had hoped would weaken Palestinian resistance by splitting it.

Ironically, deliberate Israeli neglect of Yassin's increasingly bold political activities nurtured a movement that came to epitomise all that Israel meant by the word "terrorism". In 1983 Yassin formed two paramilitary units. One was responsible for the surveillance and punishment of drug dealers, prostitutes and collaborators with Israel. The other consisted of commando groups that carried out attacks on Israeli targets.

Yassin was later sentenced to 13 years in prison after 60 rifles were found in his house. In May 1985, an exchange of political prisoners was negotiated between Israel and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Command, and Yassin was among those released, after only 10 months in prison.

In December 1987 a traffic accident in Gaza City, in which an Israeli truck crashed into a smaller vehicle carrying Palestinian labourers, was the spark that ignited the intifada. The incident caused rioting that spread throughout the occupied territories and turned into a five-year revolt against Israel.

Immediately after the accident, the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza met at Yassin's house to discuss ways of using the event to stir up religious and nationalist sentiments. Yassin determined that a separate organisation should be formed to represent the movement's Islamist ideology within the intifada. Hamas consistently rejected peace with Israel on any terms, advocating a holy war to reclaim Palestine for a religiously revived Islamic world.

In 1989 Yassin was implicated in the killing of two Israeli soldiers and other violent acts against Israelis and Palestinian collaborators. In May of that year he was jailed and, when eventually tried, was sentenced to life imprisonment.

In 1997 he was released from jail as a result of a bizarre and obscure episode. Agents of the Israeli secret service, Mossad, launched an attempt on the life of a Hamas activist, Khalid Mashal, in the Jordanian capital, Amman.

The agents dressed as tourists in order to approach him without resistance and planned to squirt a fatal poison into his ear. When Mashal's bodyguards overcame the disguised Israelis, they then attempted to reach the Israeli embassy in the city, claiming to be Canadian tourists, as they were carrying forged Canadian passports.

In the resulting diplomatic uproar, the Netanyahu government was compelled to concoct a speedy settlement with the Hashemite Kingdom that would preserve the frosty peace that held between the two countries. The release of Sheikh Yassin (to a hero's welcome in Gaza) was one of the tokens of the settlement.

Yassin's relationship with the Palestinian Authority was strained. In 1996 Yasser Arafat jailed hundreds of Hamas activists, but after Yassin's most recent release from prison he and Arafat publicly pledged brotherhood. Despite this, Hamas remained an implacable opponent of peace with Israel, and the suicide bombings which began in 1994 have been the principal factor in derailing the peace process on which Arafat's prestige was dependent.

In September last year Yassin escaped with a minor injury when Israel dropped a 550lb bomb on a building in which he was meeting Hamas leaders. Then, in January, the Israeli deputy defence minister announced that Yassin was "marked for death". Yassin continued to insist that he played no part in planning military operations, claiming that he was the spiritual leader of Hamas.

Sheikh Yassin and his wife, Halima, had 11 children.

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