Yahya Ayyash, "The Engineer": Life and 1996 Assassination



> “They can uproot my body from Palestine, but I want to plant in the people something they cannot uproot.”

(Yahya Ayyash) [1]

Yahya Ayyash (1966–1996), known as “The Engineer,” was a commander in the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades from the village of Rafat in Salfit governorate and an electrical engineering graduate of Birzeit University. He made the resistance’s explosives from simple materials, and the

Israeli occupation hunted him for about five years until the Shin Bet assassinated him in Beit Lahia, northern Gaza, on 5 January 1996, detonating a booby-trapped mobile phone while he was talking to his father. [2] [1] [3]

This article is part of the series “Leaders of the Palestinian Revolution Who Were Assassinated,” alongside the articles on Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, Salah Shehadeh and Saleh al-Arouri.

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Who was Yahya Ayyash?

Yahya Ayyash was one of the most prominent commanders of Hamas’s military wing in the 1990s and became a symbol of the First Intifada generation and of resistance to the occupation with scarce means [2] [1]. Israel’s security services made him their top target and reached him only after years, through a collaborator and a booby-trapped phone [2] [3].

Yahya Ayyash at a glance

Item	Details
Name	Yahya Abdullatif Sati Ayyash, “The Engineer” [2]
Born	6 March 1966, Rafat village, west of Salfit [2] [1]
Education	BSc in electrical engineering, Birzeit University (March 1993) [2]
Family	His wife Hayam and sons al-Baraa and Yahya [2]
Affiliation	The Islamic Bloc (1984), then the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades [2] [1]
Pursuit	About five years; survived three assassination attempts [2]
Assassinated	5 January 1996, Beit Lahia, by a booby-trapped phone detonated by the Shin Bet [2] [3]

Timeline

Date	Event
6 March 1966	Born in Rafat [2]
October 1984	Joins the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University [2]
1987–1993	First Intifada; becomes a leader in Rafat and joins the Qassam Brigades [2] [1]
9 September 1991	Marries his cousin Hayam [2]
March 1993	Graduates in electrical engineering from Birzeit [2]
1993	Moves secretly to the Gaza Strip [2] [1]
25 February 1994	The Ibrahimi Mosque massacre in Hebron
April 1994	The Afula and bus-stop operations, attributed to him as a response to the Ibrahimi Mosque massacre [2]
5 January 1996	Assassinated with a booby-trapped phone in Beit Lahia [2] [3]
2019	Israeli officials disclose details of the operation [3] [2]
May 2021	Qassam fires the “Ayyash 250” rocket [1]

Son of Rafat, student at Birzeit

Yahya Abdullatif Sati Ayyash was born on 6 March 1966 in the village of Rafat, west of Salfit in the northern West Bank, the eldest of three brothers: Yahya, Mar'i and Younis. His father served in the Jordanian army from 1955 to 1963, then worked in farming and stone carving [2].

He studied at the Rafat school, then at the al-Zawiya and Badya secondary school, earning 92.8% in the science stream, and memorised the Quran [2]. He enrolled at Birzeit University to study electrical engineering, choosing to stay near his parents rather than study in Jordan [1]. Because of intifada strikes and the occupation's closure of the university, his studies stretched over some eight years until he graduated in March 1993 [2].

In October 1984 he joined the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit, and during the First Intifada he became one of its leaders in Rafat [2]. On 9 September 1991 he married his cousin Hayam; their son al-Baraa was born in 1993, followed by a second son named Yahya after his father [2].

"The Engineer"

Ayyash joined the Qassam Brigades during the First Intifada; Al Jazeera Net dates this to 1992 [2] [1]. Because the resistance lacked weapons, he began making explosives from available raw materials such as agricultural fertiliser, sulphur, charcoal and pharmacy chemicals, earning the nickname "The Engineer" [2] [1].

After the Ibrahimi Mosque massacre in Hebron on 25 February 1994, in which an Israeli settler killed 29 Palestinian worshippers, sources attribute to Ayyash the planning of two operations in April 1994, at the Afula central bus station and at another bus stop, which the Qassam Brigades presented as a response to the massacre [2]. Other operations in 1994 and 1995 were also attributed to him [2] [1].

The years of pursuit

Ayyash became the occupation's most wanted man, pursued for about five years in which three attempts on his life failed [2]. In 1993 he moved secretly from the West Bank to the Gaza Strip; his son al-Baraa says he was smuggled hidden in the box of a food truck [1]. In Gaza he went on training Qassam members to make explosives [2].

Sources quote Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin as saying he feared Ayyash was "sitting among us in the Knesset," and a former Israeli intelligence chief as calling the failure to reach him the biggest operational failure since the state's founding [2].

The assassination of Yahya Ayyash: the booby-trapped phone

On the morning of Friday 5 January 1996, as Yahya Ayyash spoke with his father on a mobile phone in Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip, Israel's Shin Bet remotely detonated a charge planted inside the phone, killing him instantly [2] [3].

According to Avi Dichter, former Shin Bet head and then commander of its southern district, speaking in a 2019 radio interview, preparation took eight months. The Shin Bet first considered booby-trapping a fax machine but dropped the idea and chose a mobile phone: a collaborator close to one of Ayyash's aides handed over a harmless phone so he would get used to it, then swapped it for a booby-trapped one. Having found that Ayyash called his family every Friday, Israel tried to detonate it via an aircraft on an earlier Friday and failed because of a fault, so it retrieved the phone, repaired it and returned it [3]. Al Jazeera Net adds that the charge was detonated after his voice was identified [1].

Israeli military censors allowed details of the operation to be published in late 2019, and Israel's Channel 13 aired a recording of his last call [2]. The collaborator who delivered the phone was Kamal Hammad, the uncle of Ayyash's university

colleague Usama Hammad; Usama was cleared, and Kamal was sentenced to death in absentia [2].

Ayyash's assassination came months after the signing of the Oslo II agreement, confirming that the occupation had not abandoned its policy of extrajudicial assassination of leaders, the same policy that later struck Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi and Salah Shehadeh.

Funeral and reactions

Tens of thousands took part in Yahya Ayyash's funeral; strikes shut down Jerusalem and Ramallah, his portraits went up in the streets, and clashes broke out with occupation forces [1].

Legacy

Yahya Ayyash's name has stayed alive in Palestinian memory as the engineer who faced a vastly superior military machine with simple tools. The Qassam Brigades named their "Ayyash 250" rocket, with a range of 250 kilometres, after him; it was used in the "Sword of Jerusalem" battle in May 2021 [2] [1].

Images and video

Frequently asked questions about Yahya Ayyash

Who was Yahya Ayyash?

A Qassam Brigades commander from the village of Rafat, an electrical engineer who graduated from Birzeit University, known as "The Engineer."

When was Yahya Ayyash born?

On 6 March 1966 in Rafat, west of Salfit.

Why was Yahya Ayyash called “The Engineer”?

Because he studied electrical engineering and made the resistance’s explosives from simple raw materials.

When was Yahya Ayyash killed?

On Friday 5 January 1996.

How was Yahya Ayyash assassinated?

Israel’s Shin Bet detonated a charge planted in a mobile phone delivered to him through a collaborator, while he was talking to his father in Beit Lahia.

Who was the collaborator in Ayyash’s assassination?

Kamal Hammad, who was sentenced to death in absentia.

What is the “Ayyash 250” rocket?

A Qassam Brigades rocket with a 250-kilometre range, named after him and used in May 2021.

Sources and references

Arabic-language sources are listed with translated titles.

1. Sameh Odeh, “Yahya Ayyash: Engineer of the Resistance and Nightmare of the Occupation,” Al Jazeera Net, 3 November 2023.
2. “Yahya Ayyash: Engineer of the Martyrdom Operations Against Israel,” Al Jazeera Encyclopedia (updated 2 May 2024).
3. “New Details Revealed for the First Time on the Assassination of Yahya Ayyash,” Arabi21, 3 January 2019.