

Hamas Media Campaign: "Al Aqsa Flood"

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Edited by: Alexander Pack

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SPECIAL REPORT

Hamas Media Campaign: "Al Aqsa Flood"

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Summary

On 07 OCTOBER 2023, Hamas, the Palestinian terrorist group based in the Gaza Strip, began a devastating and coordinated attack that shook Israel. Beginning at approximately 0630 (UTC+03), Hamas launched a massive rocket barrage targeting civilian areas while simultaneously Hamas terrorist operatives initiated infiltration operations, breaching the communities surrounding the Gaza Strip. This brutal assault led to violent confrontations with Israeli residents, law enforcement, and the Israel Defense Forces. In response the terrorists infiltration, murder and hostage taking of civilians, the State of Israel launched Operation Swords of Iron.

This report is part of a series of special reports by the ICT analyzing the actions, strategies, and goals of the terrorist organizations involved. This preliminary analysis reviews the sophisticated media campaign deployed by Hamas prior to, and throughout this ongoing conflict.

Keywords: Hamas; Palestinian Islamic Jihad; Swords of Iron

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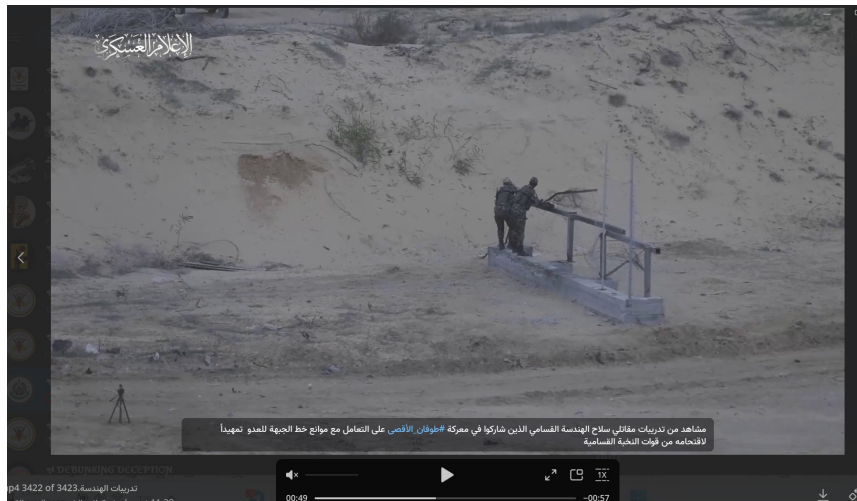
Since the beginning of the conflict on 07 October 2023, the Hamas terrorist organization has executed a well-planned media campaign alongside their military operations. Hamas's media strategy has evolved through a series of phases as the conflict has continued to unfold. This is an initial analysis of the ongoing campaign.

The Evolving Narratives of Hamas

Phase 1: Pre-Operation Misinformation

During the first phase, prior to the initial attack by the terrorists, Hamas' primary messaging strategy aimed to distract or misinform Israel in order to support the surprise attack. While using distraction tactics against the State of Israel, Hamas capitalized on the opportunity to enhance its military and operational capabilities. During this time, they also produced various media to highlight what they perceived as Israel's intelligence failure to identify the planned surprise attack. It appears that their goal was to produce this content in advance and strategically release it in the days following the attack to discredit the Israeli security services and military while also highlighting the strength of

the Hamas terrorist organization. An example of this content is a formal video released through Hamas' communication channels that features terrorist operatives of Hamas training for the attack at the Israel-Gaza security fence. This video, one of many released by Hamas, was published on the third day of the current war. This video and others produced in this first phase of the campaign were meant to create a perception of Israeli vulnerabilities against the terror organization.



Video presenting Hamas has been training to cross the security fence to Israel.

Phase 2: Terrorist Success & Violent Content

The second phase of the attack was closely linked to the initial attack by Hamas terrorist operatives. This phase of the campaign attempted to highlight the operational successes achieved by the terrorists by showcasing extremely violent videos highlighting their inhumane treatment of civilians and military personnel. This strategy of highlighting the extreme violence executed by the Hamas terrorists was most clearly explained by Hamas' spokesperson in an official statement through the organizations communication channels on 09 October 2023: "We will not go into the details of the battles on the ground. Our successive statements and communications since the beginning of the battle are the live images that our mujahideen transmitted and are transmitting from the field, as they bear witness and speak for themselves."¹

¹ Hamas Telegram Post, 9 October 2023.



Screenshots taken from produced videos released by Hamas on 07 October 2023 highlighting their operational achievements in attacking IDF objectives.

In the days following the initial attack by the Hamas terrorist operatives, the terror organization continued utilizing various media channels to showcase Israel's operational failures and to repeatedly threaten further operations. One example of this phase of their media strategy comes from a post that Hamas shared on 08 October 2023. In the post, the organization stated that "a surveillance camera observes the failure of the Iron Dome to intercept the latest Qassam rocket attack on the occupied city of Ashkelon, and the direct injuries to a number of houses."²

² Telegram



Screenshot from Hamas' official Telegram channel - "A surveillance camera observes the failure of the Iron Dome to intercept the latest Qassam rocket attack on the occupied city of Ashkelon, and the direct injuries to a number of houses."

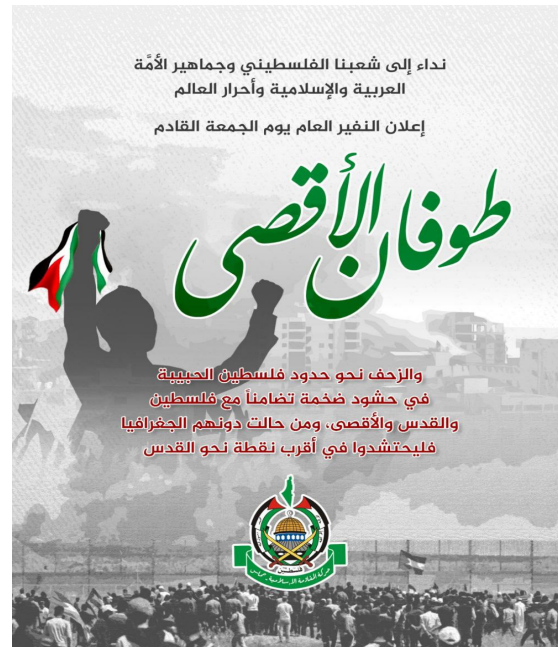


Official post from Hamas threatening the city of Ashkelon with a rocket attack on 10 October 2023 at 17:00.

Another aspect of Hamas' strategy during this second phase, was focused on attempts to incite actions in other arenas, such as calling on Israeli Arabs to mobilize them to initiate an internal front; the Palestinians in the West Bank to promote a potential intifada or addressing the northern front, by calling for the support of either Hezbollah or Palestinians in Lebanon. The primary narratives used during this phase of the conflict aimed to gain support by portraying the operation and Hamas terrorists as defenders of Islam and its symbols, with a particular focus on Al-Aqsa. As such, Hamas official statement on their Telegram channel on 07 October 2023 claimed that the "Al-Qassam brigade are carrying out an operation to protect the people, the land and the holy places...The priority of this operation is to protect Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa and stop the occupation plans aimed at Judaizing them."³ In addition to these types of general narrative posts, Hamas has also issued direct calls for support. On 07 October 2023,

³ Translated from Arabic post on Hamas' Official Telegram Channel, 07 October 2023.

Mohammed Eldayef, Chief of Staff of the Al-Qassam Brigades, called for direct support of their terrorist operation: “brothers in the Islamic resistance in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, this is the day when your resistance merges with the resistance of your people in Palestine. The time has come for the Arab resistance to unite.”⁴



Post from Hamas' official Telegram channel calling for support in their terrorist operation.

Another example of Hamas' attempts to inspire other actors to support their terrorist operations, and that highlights the potential for escalation, was their “Friday of the Al-Aqsa Flood” call. In a post shared on their official Telegram channel, Hamas published a flyer stating: “Next Friday, ‘Friday of the Al-Aqsa Flood.’ In order to support Jerusalem, Al-Aqsa, and the struggling Gaza, march towards the borders of beloved Palestine in huge crowds to declare our solidarity with Palestine, Jerusalem, and Al-Aqsa. Those who are prevented by geography should gather at the nearest point towards Jerusalem.”⁵

Phase 3: Shifting from Offense to Victimization

The most recent phase of Hamas' narrative strategy appears to be in direct response to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) defensive operation, Operation “Swords of Iron,” which has involved neutralizing the continued terrorists that breached Israel and targeting specific Hamas military objectives in the Gaza Strip to reduce their operational capacity to execute further attacks. This third phase has seen Hamas attempt to change its narratives, transitioning from emphasizing the strength of Hamas as an “offender against the Jews” and the “Al-Aqsa defender” to a narrative of victimization. This shift is a strategic choice meant to manipulate the outside community and regain international

4 Translated from Arabic post on Hamas' Official Telegram Channel, 07 October 2023.

5 Translated from Arabic post on Hamas' Official Telegram Channel.

support. Given that the international community largely seems to be supporting Israel in response to the inhumane brutality exhibited by the Hamas terrorist organization during their attack on Israel, Hamas is attempting to reframe its media narratives in order to evoke sympathy and gain support for their cause, a common tactic utilized by the organization in the past.

Hamas' Dissemination Strategy

As in the past, Hamas' social media networks have played, and will continue to serve a pivotal role in disseminating content and narratives related to their terror attacks on 07 October and the following operations. Leveraging its substantial presence on various social media platforms, Hamas employs different actors and supporters to spread its propaganda, including (1) formal accounts, (2) unofficial accounts and supporters, (3) pro-Palestinian groups and channels.

Formal accounts directly affiliated with Hamas, including its leaders, and individual actors, are very active. These formally linked channels and actors regularly produce high-quality graphics, posters, images, and videos to forward the terror organization's narrative goals. In addition to these produced materials, these channels also regularly release official statements from the terror organization's leadership.

The second group that is critical to the dissemination of the terror organization's narratives are unofficial accounts managed by online supporters of Hamas. While these accounts typically amplify the formal content released by the organization or its leadership, they may also generate their own materials based on the situation, events, and official statements. Additionally, Hamas partners with various groups, including Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Hezbollah, Ansarallah, Shia militias, and pro-Islamic hacking groups, who participate in disseminating and amplifying their messages.

The final group that intentionally or unintentionally supports the dissemination of the terrorist organization's narratives and propaganda are pro-Palestinian groups, individuals, and influencers. These individuals and groups are supporters of the Palestinian people who promote content related to their cause. The material shared by this group of actors is then further echoed through the broader pro-Palestinian online audience through selected tags and trending hashtags—such as on Twitter. In many cases, this group may be unintentionally sharing disinformation produced by official or unofficial accounts supporting Hamas that utilize photos and videos from other conflicts—such as those in Syria or in previous operations against Israel. These actors may not be aware that they are sharing such disinformation, but in doing so, help to inadvertently promote the terror organizations preferred narratives.

This multifaceted dissemination strategy is being expertly utilized by the Hamas terrorist organization to amplify its propaganda and narratives during this conflict.

Conclusion

We are only at the beginning of what appears to be a long period of conflict with Hamas, PIJ, and other terrorist actors such as Hezbollah. This preliminary analysis is meant to highlight how Hamas not only prepared and executed a terrorist operational campaign but also a sophisticated media one while also showcasing its main narratives and online dissemination strategies.

Since the beginning of the operation, Hamas has demonstrated a high level of adaptability in its media strategy, aligning it with the evolving dynamics of the conflict. The connection between the terror organization's operational capability and its media producers allows Hamas to convey its message and maintain a constant presence on various media platforms in real-time or very shortly after. The transition from presenting itself as strong offenders online to victims is a strategic move to regain international support.

Additionally, its ability to leverage different circles, including official and unofficial accounts on social media, reflects a sophisticated approach to using these platforms. This approach is not only similar to that of Hezbollah but also to Global Jihad. In fact, the horrific and inhumane videos and pictures from 07 October strikingly resemble another global terror organization—the Islamic State. Both groups use unimaginable brutality to portray their actions as successful outcomes and unhesitatingly publish them online without any moral considerations. In their view, both organizations present themselves as “defenders” of Islam and, therefore, believe that any means are acceptable to accomplish their goals. While Hamas was long believed to represent the Palestinian people, this operation has revealed their true intentions to the world.

Currently, the conflict is still ongoing and evolving. We will conduct a more comprehensive analysis as information becomes available, allowing us to produce a more complete assessment.