

Reading October 7 Through Palestinian Cinema: What Hamas's *Fists of Freedom* Revealed Before the Attack

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The Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, constituted a profound strategic surprise for Israel. For many of Hamas's supporters in the Gaza Strip, however, the attack may have been only a tactical and operational surprise—not necessarily in terms of the possibility that Hamas would one day initiate a major confrontation with Israel, but rather regarding its timing, scale, methods, and initial success. This distinction stems in part from the different weight each side assigned to Hamas's underlying messages—messages that were openly communicated through public statements, propaganda, sermons, media outlets affiliated with the movement, and cultural productions such as the Ramadan 2020 television series *Fists of the free*.

Many questions remain regarding Israel's intelligence failure on the morning of Hamas's devastating terrorist assault on October 7, 2023. The massive rocket barrages that shook communities surrounding Gaza on the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah shattered, in a single moment, the central assumption that had guided Israel's security establishment: that Hamas was not interested in a large-scale military confrontation with Israel.

On the eve of the attack, Israeli intelligence assessed that Hamas sought to use the coming years to consolidate its rule in Gaza, improve the civilian and economic conditions of the population, and exploit the existing status quo to further weaken the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank.

In recordings made public in August 2025, Major General Aharon Haliva, the former head of Israeli Military Intelligence, stated that even if he had been explicitly informed during the early hours of October 7 that Hamas was preparing to invade Israel's western Negev region, he would not have believed such information and would not have altered his instructions. According to Haliva, Israeli decision-makers were fully convinced that Hamas sought continued calm and economic stability. Similar assessments had been

expressed even before the war by senior intelligence officials, who argued that Hamas understood the heavy costs it would incur if it jeopardized the economic benefits and civilian improvements that Israel had increasingly allowed into Gaza.

Israel's intelligence failure on October 7 stemmed, among other factors, from a fundamental misunderstanding of Hamas's authentic intentions and from a flawed interpretation of the movement's behavior in the years leading up to the war. One plausible explanation is that the attack represented the culmination of an exceptionally effective deception campaign designed to lull Israel's security establishment into complacency and create optimal conditions for a surprise assault.

Such a strategy required Hamas to cultivate the appearance of a pragmatic, interest-based relationship with Israel: indirect security coordination, established channels for discreet communication through interlocutors connected to Israel's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), and the maintenance of relative calm along the border.

Under this interpretation, Hamas convinced Israel that civilian and economic concessions were sufficiently important to the movement that it would avoid confrontation as long as those benefits continued and expanded. Israeli analysts increasingly viewed Hamas as a pragmatic actor that had reconciled itself, at least temporarily, to the realities of governing Gaza. The organization appeared invested in strengthening its rule and improving the welfare of Gaza's residents. The possibility that Hamas would suddenly abandon this course and launch a major military adventure, without clear warning signs, came to seem almost unimaginable.

The nature of the October 7 attack, Hamas's determined conduct throughout the ensuing war, and the movement's apparent indifference to the immense destruction inflicted upon Gaza all reinforce the possibility that civilian considerations occupied a secondary place relative to Hamas's ideological and military objectives. Indeed, even today, the severe humanitarian situation in Gaza appears to be utilized by Hamas as a tool for advancing its political, propagandistic, and ideological goals. The suffering of Gaza's population does not appear to play a decisive role in the organization's operational calculations.

Yet this raises an important question: How did Hamas manage to conceal its intentions not only from Israel, but also from Gaza's own population—including many of its ideological supporters?

In the years preceding the war, Hamas faced sharp criticism from several directions. Officials within the Palestinian Authority, members of Fatah in the West Bank, and even radical jihadist factions within Gaza accused Hamas of abandoning the path of resistance and betraying its national and religious mission. Such criticism threatened Hamas's image and credibility among its own supporters and forced the movement to justify its policies.

In practice, however, Hamas never altered its official narrative regarding Israel. It did not publicly acknowledge that it had been forced to compromise with reality. It did not adopt a more moderate position toward the Zionist state, nor did it abandon the ethos of resistance. Conciliatory messages never became a dominant theme in Hamas-

affiliated mosques, Islamist newspapers, or public statements by senior leaders. In many respects, the opposite was true.

In August 2023—just two months before the attack—Saleh al-Arouri, deputy chairman of Hamas’s political bureau, gave an interview to Al Mayadeen, a Lebanese television network closely associated with Hezbollah. In that interview, he openly declared that Hamas sought a comprehensive confrontation with Israel and was actively preparing for it.

This created an obvious contradiction. Hamas’s rhetoric remained radical and militant, while its day-to-day governance appeared increasingly pragmatic. Which version represented the movement’s true intentions? Did Hamas seek calm, as its policies suggested? Or escalation, as its public rhetoric implied? Should observers trust the restrained reality visible on the ground, the militant declarations of Hamas leaders, or the more moderate messages conveyed privately through business figures and intermediaries involved in discussions with Israeli military officials at COGAT?

Israel resolved this contradiction by embracing the assumption that Hamas’s governing and economic interests had become paramount. Even the August 2022 conflict between Israel and Palestinian Islamic Jihad during Operation Breaking Dawn failed to undermine the prevailing belief that Hamas remained committed to preserving long-term stability in exchange for continued economic expansion and civilian relief.

Hamas’s Dilemma: Explaining “Calm” Without Revealing the Plan

While Israeli analysts interpreted Hamas’s conduct as evidence of moderation and pragmatism, Hamas faced a different challenge among its own supporters.

Gazan society remains, to a significant extent, religious, traditional, and tribal. In such societies, public declarations, collective honor, and visible behavior often carry considerable weight in shaping perceptions of reality. It is difficult to sustain, over time, a situation in which a movement speaks in the language of jihad and resistance while simultaneously allowing commercial activity, labor permits for work in Israel, relative calm along the border, and even the suppression of unauthorized attacks by rival factions.

Hamas therefore found itself in a complicated position during the years preceding the war. If it was indeed pursuing a long-term strategic deception plan designed to lull Israel into complacency, then that strategy necessarily translated into policies that appeared inconsistent with Hamas’s identity as an Islamist and resistance movement.

From Israel’s perspective, these policies suggested moderation. For many Palestinians in Gaza, however, they raised troubling questions. Hamas-affiliated mosques and media outlets continued to employ militant rhetoric, yet goods crossed the border, workers entered Israel, and Hamas actively enforced periods of restraint.

Naturally, the few senior Hamas leaders who knew the details of any long-term military planning could not explain their reasoning publicly without risking exposure to Israeli intelligence. This created a dilemma: how could Hamas persuade its supporters that a

prolonged period of calm was compatible with continued commitment to armed struggle, without revealing plans for a future confrontation?

The answer may lie in an unlikely place: a television drama.

Fists of Freedom

During Ramadan of 2022, approximately eighteen months before October 7, Hamas's Al-Aqsa television channel aired a thirty-episode series entitled *Fists of Freedom* (*Qabdat al-Ahrar*).

In the Arab and Muslim world, Ramadan television dramas occupy a unique cultural position. Families gather after the evening meal to watch them together, and these series often become a central arena through which political, social, and cultural messages are communicated. They are not merely entertainment; they also serve as vehicles for shaping public consciousness.



Produced in Gaza and openly affiliated with Hamas, *Fists of Freedom* begins with the failed Israeli special forces operation in Khan Yunis in November 2018 and proceeds to depict an ongoing battle of wits between Hamas military commanders and Israeli security officials.

At the center of the story is a secret Hamas project known as “Fists of Freedom.” Throughout the series, viewers gradually learn about the project, and in the final episode its true nature is revealed: a large-scale surprise attack on southern Israel that overwhelms Israeli defenses, defeats the IDF, and captures territory inside Israel.

Viewed in hindsight, the similarities between the fictional attack and the events of October 7 are striking.

The final episode portrays massive rocket barrages directed at Israel's western Negev region; cyberattacks that allegedly disable Israeli intelligence and surveillance capabilities; extensive use of tunnels and underground infrastructure; infiltration by hundreds of Hamas fighters crossing into Israel on foot and in vehicles; attacks on military bases; the killing and kidnapping of Israeli soldiers; improvised roadblocks inside Israeli territory; and even Hamas operatives disguised as Israeli soldiers.

These similarities do not prove that the series revealed the actual October 7 operational plan. Nevertheless, they make the production highly significant as a propaganda and consciousness-shaping document that presented Hamas's domestic audience with a vision of a future war of liberation and decisive victory.

The significance of the series was further highlighted at the end of 2022 when *Fists of Freedom* received the award for Best Television Series in Palestinian cinema in Gaza.

The award was presented by Yahya Sinwar himself. In remarks accompanying the award ceremony, Sinwar praised the creators and stated that the events portrayed in the series reflected the movement's intentions and plans.

Even if understood as propaganda, the statement underscores the importance Hamas leadership attached to the series and its role in communicating messages to Gaza's population.



The Message Behind the Story

A closer examination of *Fists of Freedom* suggests that the series was not simply a fantasy of military triumph. It was also an attempt to address criticism Hamas faced from its own constituency regarding the apparent contradiction between its militant rhetoric and its pragmatic policies.

The central message of the series is clear:

The calm is temporary.

The economic arrangements are temporary.

The concessions are temporary.

The restraint is temporary.

All are part of a larger plan.

Throughout the series, Hamas is depicted as secretly building the capabilities required for a future surprise attack that will fundamentally transform the balance of power between Israelis and Palestinians.



The heroes repeatedly explain that the movement is preparing for a sophisticated military campaign involving advanced weapons, rockets, cyberwarfare, deception, and surprise. Viewers are told that Israel will be shocked, paralyzed, and ultimately defeated because it has become overconfident and dependent on technology.

In the world of the series, Hamas embodies determination, faith, sacrifice, and strategic vision. Israel, by contrast, is portrayed as hesitant, fearful of war, detached from reality, and incapable of understanding Palestinian society.

The ideological message is equally explicit: Hamas is fulfilling the will of God; the Palestinian cause remains the supreme religious and national mission; and economic

considerations and interests are temporary and inferior to the higher calling of resistance.

The series does not ignore the human cost of conflict. Palestinian mothers are shown suffering as they send their sons into battle. Yet the moral conclusion is unmistakable: faith, sacrifice, and national destiny outweigh material considerations and personal suffering.

In the final episode, the “Fists of Freedom” plan is executed. Hamas successfully invades Israel, defeats the Gaza Division, captures its headquarters at Re’im, and kills or captures all the senior Israeli commanders.

For Hamas supporters watching the series in 2022, the message could hardly have been clearer: what appeared to be calm on the surface should not be mistaken for surrender or moderation. Behind the scenes, preparations for a far greater confrontation were underway.

Heroes, Villains, and the Moral Hierarchy of Hamas

One of the most revealing aspects of *Fists of Freedom* is its portrayal of Palestinian heroes and villains. The distinction between them offers a rare glimpse into the internal moral universe Hamas sought to cultivate among its supporters.



The series’ principal hero is Amir, a commander in Hamas’s military wing. Amir is portrayed as deeply religious, disciplined, loyal to his family, devoted to his people, and unwaveringly committed to the movement. He is honest, principled, and self-sacrificing. He cares for the young fighters under his command, understands their personal struggles,

and prepares them professionally and patiently for the coming confrontation with Israel.

Outside the battlefield, Amir embodies traditional virtues. He honors his parents, observes prayer and fasting, and courts Salma—the young woman he eventually becomes engaged to—according to accepted social and religious norms.

Amir is not merely a military commander. He is presented as the ideal Palestinian citizen according to Hamas’s worldview.

The series' principal villain, by contrast, is Jaber Abu Rami, a successful Gaza businessman who trades with Israelis and secretly collaborates with Israel's Shin Bet security service. Jaber represents everything Hamas wishes its audience to reject.



He is motivated by economic interests rather than ideology. He maintains relationships with Israelis. He neglects religion. He disrespects his parents.

He abuses members of his family. His pursuit of personal gain consistently overrides loyalty to community and nation.

In many ways, Jaber functions as a symbolic representation of the entire world of economic cooperation, commercial permits, cross-border trade, and civilian accommodations that Israel viewed as instruments for creating stability.

The contrast is deliberate. While Amir sacrifices personal comfort for collective goals, Jaber pursues personal benefit. While Amir places faith and resistance above material considerations, Jaber prioritizes wealth and convenience. While Amir serves the nation, Jaber serves himself. The message to viewers is unmistakable: economic engagement with Israel is not a virtue but a moral corruption.

The symbolism becomes even more explicit in Jaber's treatment of his younger sister - Salma. Rather than supporting her desire to continue her education and marry Amir, he attempts to arrange a marriage with an older, unattractive merchant for financial reasons. His behavior reinforces his role as the embodiment of the old guard – full of selfishness, materialism, and moral decay.

The struggle between Hamas activists and Jaber is therefore not merely a conflict between individuals. It represents a broader ideological battle between two competing visions of Palestinian society. According to the series, economic accommodation with Israel may be temporarily tolerated, but it is never legitimate. At best, it is a bitter necessity until larger strategic objectives can be achieved.

Rashid and the Rejection of Humanitarian Logic

Another revealing character is Rashid, a Gazan father whose daughter suffers from cancer. When his daughter receives medical treatment at Soroka Medical Center in Beersheba and returns healthy, one might expect the story to portray the experience positively. Instead, Rashid is depicted as weak and naïve.



Israeli intelligence officers exploit his gratitude and vulnerability, eventually persuading him to cooperate in exchange for assistance with permits and medical access. What is striking is not merely that Rashid becomes compromised, but that the series refuses to acknowledge any moral value in the humanitarian assistance itself. The fact that his daughter survives because of treatment received in Israel is largely irrelevant to the narrative.

The lesson conveyed to viewers is that humanitarian gestures, medical cooperation, and civilian accommodations are not evidence of goodwill. Rather, they are instruments used by Israel to infiltrate and manipulate Palestinian society. This portrayal is particularly noteworthy because it directly challenges one of the core assumptions underlying Israeli policy toward Gaza before October 7: namely, that expanding economic opportunities and humanitarian benefits would create incentives for stability and moderation.

In the moral universe of *Fists of Freedom*, these policies are not stabilizing forces. They are temptations that threaten ideological commitment.

The Skeptical Mother-in-Law

Perhaps the most fascinating character in the series is neither a fighter nor a collaborator, but an elderly woman. She is the mother-in-law of Fikhri, the head of Hamas's cyberwarfare unit. Unlike the movement's heroes, she is openly skeptical of Hamas's promises and ambitions. She belongs to an older generation shaped by the era of the Palestinian Authority and repeatedly mocks the movement's claims.

When Fikhri returns home exhausted after long nights of secret work, she dismisses his explanations. He insists that Hamas is engaged in an enormous project that will transform the region. She laughs at him. Perhaps, she suggests sarcastically, he is simply inventing stories to conceal an affair with a younger woman. The humor masks a deeper political problem. Fikhri cannot reveal the truth.

If Hamas is indeed preparing for a future military operation, he cannot explain its nature, timing, or objectives. He must simply ask others to trust him. The resulting tension serves as an almost perfect metaphor for Hamas's predicament before October 7. How does a movement maintain public confidence when its actual strategy cannot be disclosed?

How does it ask supporters for patience when its actions seem inconsistent with its rhetoric? How does it preserve credibility while concealing the very plan that is supposed to justify its behavior? The answer offered by the series is straightforward: trust the movement, even when its actions appear contradictory. What looks like passivity is preparation. What looks like compromise is deception. What looks like moderation is merely a stage on the path toward confrontation.

A Message Intended for Hamas's Own Audience

Viewed through this lens, *Fists of Freedom* was far more than a military fantasy. It was an attempt to reconcile a contradiction that had become increasingly difficult for Hamas to explain to its own supporters.

The series effectively tells its audience:

- ✓ *Do not mistake work permits for peace.*
- ✓ *Do not mistake trade for reconciliation.*
- ✓ *Do not mistake calm for surrender.*
- ✓ *Do not mistake economic arrangements for a change of ideology.*
- ✓ Everything is temporary.
- ✓ Everything serves a larger objective.
- ✓ Everything is part of a longer struggle.

Ironically, the very assumptions that underpinned Israeli policy toward Gaza—the belief that economic incentives create moderation and that prosperity encourages stability—are portrayed by Hamas as both morally corrupt and strategically naïve. In this sense, *Fists of Freedom* does not prove the existence of a specific operational plan for October 7. But it does provide a rare and revealing window into the messages Hamas sought to communicate to its own constituency in the years leading up to the attack.

Conclusion: A Warning Hidden in Plain Sight

The possibility that Hamas conducted a strategic deception campaign against Israel prior to October 7 rests not only on the scale of Israel's surprise or on the characteristics of the war that followed. It also emerges from the striking gap between Hamas's practical behavior toward Israel and the messages it continued to communicate to its own supporters.

Israeli policymakers increasingly interpreted the relative calm in Gaza as evidence that Hamas had become guided by economic interests and pragmatic considerations. Improved living conditions, work permits, trade, and humanitarian arrangements were viewed as indicators that Hamas had concluded the costs of war outweighed its benefits.

Yet Hamas's deeper messages told a different story.

In speeches by its leaders, sermons delivered in affiliated mosques, official media outlets, propaganda campaigns, and cultural productions such as *Fists of Freedom*, the movement consistently portrayed armed struggle as its central mission and ultimate purpose. Economic considerations were presented as secondary, temporary, and subordinate to the larger goal of resistance.

This raises a broader question about how analysts should interpret Palestinian society in general—and Hamas in particular. Should greater weight be given to material interests, economic incentives, and private conversations with local actors who themselves benefit from stability and economic cooperation?

Or should equal attention be paid to public declarations, political rhetoric, religious sermons, television dramas, poetry, literature, and cultural symbols—the arenas through which collective identities, loyalties, and aspirations are often expressed and reinforced?

In many traditional societies, public speech carries significance beyond its immediate political function. Words spoken openly before a community are not merely symbolic; they help define social reality. Cultural and religious narratives play a central role in shaping perceptions of legitimacy, honor, sacrifice, and collective purpose.

Prior to the war, Israel's security establishment appears to have favored technological analysis, economic indicators, and assessments based on incentives and interests, while assigning less weight to open-source intelligence rooted in deep familiarity with Arab and Islamic culture.

Viewed in this context, *Fists of Freedom* was not a prophecy and should not be treated as proof of Hamas's operational plans for October 7. It was, however, a warning. The fact that an official Hamas television series depicted a surprise invasion of southern Israel, the collapse of Israeli defenses, the capture of military installations, and the kidnapping of soldiers—while Israeli intelligence remained convinced that Hamas was deterred and committed to preserving calm—should have triggered far more serious scrutiny.

The contradiction was visible. On one hand stood Hamas's public narrative, which continued to celebrate resistance, sacrifice, and eventual victory. On the other stood an Israeli assessment that increasingly viewed Hamas as a pragmatic governing authority focused on economic development and stability. The gap between those two realities should have raised fundamental questions. Instead, the prevailing conception proved stronger than the warning signs.

October 7 demonstrated the consequences. The lesson may extend far beyond Hamas itself. Effective intelligence requires more than technology, signals collection, economic analysis, and assessments of rational self-interest. It also requires a deep understanding of culture, ideology, religion, language, symbolism, and the stories societies tell themselves about who they are and where they believe history is leading them. Sometimes, the most important warnings are not hidden in secret communications. They are spoken openly, broadcast publicly, and repeated for years—waiting for someone to take them seriously.