

Article

Hamas's Hostage Videos as a Tool of Strategic Communication

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Abstract

Terror organizations increasingly utilize the media and especially digital platforms to disseminate strategic messages, particularly during conflicts. This study examines how Hamas employed hostage videos and other related publications as a form of strategic communication during the first 20 months of the 2023–2025 war with Israel. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of 166 media outputs published on Hamas's official Telegram channel, including videos, infographics, and a few text-based posts, the study identifies five distinct genres: proof of life, revealing the hostages' fate, rage or call for help, messages to hostage families or the Israeli public, and hostage release videos. Each genre reflects a specific communicative strategy, varying in tone, target audience, emotional appeal, and timing. The findings reveal that Hamas's media operations are characterized by a high degree of intentionality, with different genres employed to advance political objectives, ranging from negotiation pressure and public mobilization to projecting legitimacy and resilience. The study contributes to the growing literature on terrorism and strategic communication, illustrating how non-state actors leverage visual media and emotional narratives to wage parallel battles over image, perception, and legitimacy.

Keywords: hostage videos; strategic communication; Hamas; media and terror; terror on Telegram



Academic Editor: Andreu Casero-Ripollés

Received: 3 August 2025

Revised: 2 October 2025

Accepted: 2 October 2025

Published: 17 October 2025

Citation: Yarchi, M. (2025). Hamas's Hostage Videos as a Tool of Strategic Communication. *Journalism and Media*, 6(4), 180. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia6040180>

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1. Introduction

In modern conflicts, warfare increasingly extends beyond the physical battlefield and into the realm of information and perception. Non-state actors, particularly terrorist organizations, have come to recognize the power of media as a force multiplier, one that can amplify their messages, shape public opinion, and exert pressure on governments and societies (Archetti, 2010; Yarchi, 2025b). In this reality, similar to other political actors, terror organizations use strategic communication to promote their interests (Rothenberger, 2015). Among the tools employed in this image-based warfare, hostage videos have emerged as a salient form of communication: emotionally charged, visually potent, and widely disseminated, these videos serve not only to instill fear but also to convey political messages, garner international attention, and manipulate public sentiment (Grebelsky-Lichtman & Cohen, 2017).

The ongoing war between Hamas and Israel, which began on 7 October 2023, offers a unique and unprecedented case study for examining this phenomenon. With over 250 hostages abducted by Hamas during the 7 October massacre, and many held for months in captivity, the organization has released a large volume of hostage-related publications, more than in any previous conflict involving hostage-taking. These publications, distributed primarily via Hamas's official Telegram channel, include videos, infographics, and a few textual messages aimed at multiple audiences.

This paper explores how Hamas has used hostage videos and related publications as a strategic communication tool throughout the first 20 months of the war. By conducting a qualitative content analysis of 166 publications, the study seeks to identify distinct genres within these media outputs and examine how Hamas tailors its messaging to achieve its political objectives. In doing so, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how terrorist organizations operate in the media space, particularly in the digital age, while using the theoretical framework of strategic communication.

2. Terrorism and the Media

“[A]n act of terrorism is in reality an act of communication. For the terrorist the message matters, not the victim. [...] In our view terrorism can best be understood as a violent communication strategy. There is a sender, the terrorist, a message generator, the victim, and a receiver, the enemy and/or the public. [...] Without communication, [...] there can be no terrorism”.

(Schmid & de Graaf, 1982, pp. 14–15)

A core objective of terrorism is to generate widespread attention. The very term “terrorism” implies the instillation of fear—an effect that relies heavily on public exposure. Consequently, gaining media coverage is central to terrorist strategies (Galily et al., 2015; Weimann & Winn, 1994). As Jenkins (1975) noted, terrorist acts are often meticulously staged to capture the attention of both electronic and global media. He emphasized that terrorism primarily targets the audience rather than the immediate victims, famously describing it as a form of “theatre”—coining the term “the theatre of terror”: terrorists’ usage of drama in an almost-theatrical production, whose aim is not the immediate casualties but exposure on the world stage of mass media (p. 4). Similarly, Nacos (2007) defines terrorism as “political violence against noncombatants/innocents that is committed with the intention to publicize the deed, to gain publicity and thereby public and government attention” (p. 26). If so, terrorists exploit the media to achieve maximum publicity in order to influence the targeted audience(s) in an attempt to achieve their political goals (Bockstette, 2008, p. 8). They craft dramatic displays of violence meant to dominate media attention and amplify ideological agendas.

In the current era, terrorism is deeply intertwined with the media environment. Terrorist groups actively pursue media exposure, recognizing that visibility can magnify their political impact. Understanding the media’s capacity to influence public opinion, many organizations have tailored their tactics to optimize media coverage (Jetter, 2017; Weimann & Winn, 1994).

Technological progress—especially the proliferation of the internet, smartphones and social media platforms—has significantly altered how information is produced, shared, and consumed, diminishing the control once held by governments and institutions (Ayalon et al., 2016; Betz, 2008; Douglas, 2007). The internet these days equips various actors, including terrorists, with tools to spread their messages broadly and effectively. In the age of social media, these groups no longer depend on traditional journalism to relay their actions; they can now communicate directly with global audiences, bypassing conventional media filters (Borelli, 2023; Weimann, 2014). This development has eroded the traditional gatekeeping role of the media and enabled the swift, unmoderated distribution of extremist narratives.

Due to its open nature and limited regulation, the internet serves as a highly effective channel for terrorist communication. Unlike traditional media, online platforms typically do not involve editorial oversight, allowing unrestricted dissemination of content. The low costs and minimal technical requirements associated with digital communication further facilitate the global reach of terrorist communication (Conway, 2006; Weimann, 2014; Weimann & Pack, 2023). Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and,

more recently, Telegram have become critical instruments in spreading extremist content to varied and widespread audiences (Stacey, 2018; Weimann, 2016). It allows Jihadists to spread their ideology using multimodal strategies, employing various methods and media to communicate their messages and legitimize their actions. They combine visual imagery, verbal messages, music (e.g., ISIS's usage of Islamic songs—nasheeds) and textual references to promote a compelling narrative (Aasha, 2018; Yarchi, 2019).

As technology continues to evolve, so too does the dynamic between terrorism and media. Terrorist groups are increasingly exploiting digital platforms to expand their influence. Thus, the media have become integral arenas within contemporary conflicts, as discussed below, and terrorists leverage media attention to their advantage.

3. The Image War—Fighting over Perceptions

Contemporary warfare extends far beyond traditional battlefields; it is increasingly contested in the domain of public perceptions. Political actors have come to understand that influencing international narratives can be as vital as securing military victories. This image war operates parallel to armed conflict, strategically using visual content and narratives to shape perceptions, justify actions, and attract global support. In today's hyper-connected world, visual media plays a pivotal role in winning public opinion during times of conflict (Archetti, 2010; Yarchi & Boxman-Shabtai, 2023).

Digital communication technologies have dissolved geographic barriers, enabling real-time global dissemination of conflict-related content. Media coverage of war often prioritizes emotionally charged, dramatic, and personalized events, which draw public attention and intensify emotional reactions (Altheide, 1997; Wolfsfeld, 2022). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in asymmetric conflicts, where non-state actors confront militarily superior states. In such scenarios, public opinion significantly influences both military decisions and diplomatic processes (Yarchi & Ayalon, 2023; Yarchi, 2016). Weaker adversaries in asymmetric conflicts frequently use media and visual imagery as strategic tools to offset their lack of military power and to rally public support (Roger, 2013). Known as the “reverse asymmetry” effect, this dynamic allows these actors to manipulate visual narratives to shift public sympathies and, in turn, the balance of power between the actors involved in the conflict while recruiting international support. Although stronger actors possess greater military capacity, their actions are often constrained by concerns over global image and legitimacy (Ayalon et al., 2016).

Western media, in particular, tends to focus on themes of victimhood, fostering emotional identification with the vulnerable. Weaker adversaries often capitalize on this by presenting themselves as victims through compelling imagery, thereby eliciting empathy and using media visibility as a tactical advantage, knowing that the narrative of compassion is prominent in Western media's coverage of conflicts (Wolfsfeld, 2022; Yarchi, 2025b).

In this era of “information space” conflicts (as described by Ayalon et al., 2016), traditional definitions of battlefield engagement no longer apply. Audiences consuming conflict content, whether via traditional or social media, can become influential participants in the image war. The decentralization of information flow empowers not only non-state actors and activists, but also ordinary individuals, to shape public understanding of conflicts in real time. Recognizing this, political entities invest heavily in crafting persuasive narratives, understanding that public sentiment can affect foreign policy and international standing (Jacobsen & Simpson, 2023; Rabasa, 2011; van Evera, 2006). As Yarchi and Ayalon (2023) note, visual content acts as a weapon, rapidly spreading across both traditional and digital media. Public opinion, in turn, shapes diplomatic positions and can influence whether a state achieves its strategic objectives (de Vreese et al., 2011; McQuail, 1994).

Ultimately, the accumulation of narratives and visual representations of conflict and political actors shapes public worldviews, attitudes, and future responses towards the involved actors (Soroka, 2003). As conflicts shift toward battles over narratives rather than just military confrontations, cultivating public empathy has become a strategic imperative. Through emotional engagement, political actors are increasingly able to influence both perceptions and long-term policy outcomes (Archetti, 2010; Rabasa, 2011; van Evera, 2006; Yarchi, 2025a).

In today's media environment, warfare is waged as much through storytelling and perception management as through physical force. The ability to frame and control narratives can shape the outcome of conflicts, influence negotiations, and shape international opinion. As digital tools continue to evolve, the struggle over legitimacy, influence, and global support will remain central to modern warfare, for states and non-state actors alike, while they use strategic communication in order to promote their preferred narrative.

4. Strategic Communication as a Tool for Political Actors During Conflicts

Strategic communication plays a crucial role in political contexts, especially during conflicts. It refers to the deliberate use of communication to influence opinion, shape perceptions, and achieve political objectives. Political actors employ it to advance their preferred narratives and gain support in the "image war" that accompanies military confrontations. Before examining its use by political actors, and particularly by terrorist organizations, we must first define the concept.

Hallahan et al. define strategic communication as the "purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission" (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 3). D. R. Holtzhausen and Zeffass (2013) expand this definition to include the organization's strategic plan and emphasize the role of communication in enabling goal achievement. They describe it as "deliberate and purposive communication enacted in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals" (p. 74). Gregory (2005) highlights that strategic communication activities can be persuasive, cooperative, or coercive. From a management perspective, Bockstette (2008) defines it as "the systematic planning and realization of information flow, communication, media development and image care in a long-term horizon . . . to contribute and achieve the desired long-term effect" (p. 9).

Strategic communication encompasses the full process: source, target audience, message, channel, and impact evaluation (Kim, 2015; Rothenberger, 2015). Its role in establishing and managing reputation has become increasingly salient, with scholars emphasizing trust-building and positive image creation (D. Holtzhausen & Zeffass, 2015; Zeffass et al., 2014). Though the concept originated in security studies (Farwell, 2012; Paul, 2011), it gained broader traction in the second decade of the twenty-first century and now serves as an umbrella term covering public relations, marketing, health communication, public diplomacy, and campaigning (D. Holtzhausen & Zeffass, 2015).

During conflicts, political actors use strategic communication to frame narratives, build coalitions, counter adversaries, and influence perceptions as part of their international relations efforts. To succeed, they have shifted from traditional information policies to integrated strategies (Bolt, 2024). Digital communication dynamics further complicate this process, requiring innovative uses of social media to maximize impact while promoting national interests, particularly in defense and security contexts (Mitrović & Vasiljević, 2021; Mitrović & Vulić, 2019).

The concept of Imagefare (Ayalon et al., 2016) underscores the centrality of image considerations in conflict, stressing that perceptions among foreign publics directly affect political actors' ability to achieve their goals. Similarly, Lipińska et al. (2023) highlight the

growing need for comprehensive communication strategies in military operations, given the decisive role of perception in contemporary conflicts.

5. Terrorism and Strategic Communication

Terrorism primarily is a communication strategy, and the concept of strategic communication can be applied to terrorist groups. They should be treated like professional organizations seeking maximum publicity, crafting terror/media events that would provide them with the exposure they are searching for (Rothenberger, 2015). Terror organizations utilize the media in general, and social media in particular, as primary tools for strategic communication, amplifying their messages globally. The strategic communication management techniques used by terrorists demonstrate a deep understanding of media dynamics and audience engagement (Bockstette, 2008; Simons, 2018; Weimann, 2016). Crelinsten (1987) claims that sending a message is a central element of a terror attack. “This communication model of terrorism [...] is a claim for attention, for recognition as a player in political life and, ultimately, for legitimacy as a valid representative of a particular political cause” (p. 419). Thus, terrorists apply strategic communication management techniques, while the Internet has especially become their asset, enabling them to compensate for a significant part of their asymmetry in military might and ensuring a favorable communication asymmetry (Bockstette, 2008; Rothenberger, 2015). They use branding and political marketing as means to increase their intangible value and assets in order to influence their operational capacities, communicating with various target audiences differently, in order to achieve their objectives (Simons, 2018).

Terrorists employ both verbal and visual messages to achieve their objectives, using long-term planning and sophisticated communication skills to influence public opinion and recruit members (Okigbo & Okafor, 2019). Visual imagery plays a pivotal role in influencing public perceptions (O’Loughlin, 2011; Roger, 2013). This influence is especially pronounced in situations like conflicts, in which narratives and framing hold strategic value (Freedman, 2013). Images have the capacity to distil the essence of a conflict, offering simplified and accessible portrayals of otherwise complex dynamics. Consequently, they become key instruments in efforts to sway international public opinion. By reducing multifaceted realities into clear and emotionally resonant visuals, images have a cognitive impact on viewers, and they significantly shape how global audiences interpret and engage with conflict scenarios (Gillespie et al., 2010; Gow & Michalski, 2008). Visuals that serve as key elements of persuasion due to their emotional effects are used by terror organizations as part of their communication strategies and assist them in promoting their messages (Rothenberger, 2015).

Thus, terrorism is not only focused on ideology but also on strategy, as can be seen in the definition of the concept, as the meaning of the word “terror” is to spread fear. While different organizations promote various ideologies, their communication strategies seem to be very much alike (Rothenberger, 2015). As presented above, the concept of the ‘theater of terror’ (Jenkins, 1975) indicates that terror organizations use strategic communication as part of their overall fighting strategies. Thus, terrorists use violence as a form of signalling, in which the violent acts serve as a communicative tool (Kydd & Walter, 2006), while technological developments can affect the usage of violence. If in the past terrorists had to produce significant events that would capture the media’s attention (such as the terror attacks of 9/11 or the Munich Olympics), in the social media era they have more control over the message as they do not only create the event, to a large extent they also create the media coverage of the event using the content they create and publish online. As suggested above, this control over the message on social media can reduce the number of casualties and level of violence if the terrorists can create messages that would be newsworthy and

receive extensive attention. A prime example is terrorists' creation and posting of hostage videos, such as Hamas's videos analyzed in the current study.

6. Hostage Videos as a Communication Tool

In recent years, we have been witnessing a growing usage of hostage videos by terror groups seeking to convey political messages, instill fear, and influence global audiences. Those Videos can influence various audiences, especially when broadcast worldwide, and often receive great exposure (Grebel'sky-Lichtman & Cohen, 2017). The first examples of the use of hostage videos as a communication tool can be found in the context of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 2000s. Terror organizations like Al-Qaeda began producing videos that featured hostages pleading for their lives, often accompanied by demands for the withdrawal of foreign troops or the release of imprisoned insurgents (Rossin et al., 2019). Those videos, although poor in their production quality, marked an important change in terrorists' communication; visual media became a central component of their strategy (Tinnes, 2010). ISIS, a very sophisticated organization in its communication strategies (Yarchi, 2019; Zelin, 2015), had used hostage videos frequently, while those videos were very professional, highly produced, and presented a clear narrative—including broader political and ideological messages (Herfroy-Mischler & Barr, 2019; Tinnes, 2015; Yarchi, 2019). In the war between Hamas and Israel, the focus of this paper, we have been witnessing an unprecedented usage of hostage videos by Hamas, due to the high number of hostages the organization had abducted on 7 October 2023 (251 people were taken hostage), and the relatively long period of time the hostages are held in captivity (in the time this paper was written 50 hostages were still held in captivity, for over 21 months).

Previous studies had presented different objectives promoted by terror organizations publishing hostage videos: 1. Psychological warfare—As many of those videos are designed to instill fear among the organizations' enemies, broadcasting the executions or the suffering of those held in captivity (Herfroy-Mischler & Barr, 2019; Weimann & Weimann-Saks, 2024). 2. Presenting Proof of Life and promoting negotiations—Hostage videos often serve as a means to establish that the hostage is alive and to initiate negotiations with governments or other parties (Rossin et al., 2019). 3. Recruitment—Hostage videos have been used as a tool for recruitment. ISIS had incorporated ideological messages and calls for action in those videos, in an attempt to attract new recruits (Tinnes, 2015). 4. International media coverage and attention—By publishing those highly newsworthy videos, terror organizations seek to draw the world's attention to their cause and sometimes pressure governments into meeting their demands (Friis, 2015; Yarchi, 2019).

Grebel'sky-Lichtman and Cohen (2017) had conducted an analysis of eleven hostage videos, published by terror organizations between 1986 and 2014. They found hostage videos to be a unique genre¹ with recurring media patterns (both visual and verbal), presenting personal and political messages.

Social media platforms have empowered terror organizations in their ability to disseminate their content, including hostage videos. High-quality production, careful editing, and strategic messaging are salient in hostage videos, reflecting terrorists' deep understanding of the power of visual communication in the digital age (Herfroy-Mischler & Barr, 2019).

7. Hamas's Media Usage

Hamas is considered to be an experienced terrorist organization in the realm of communication. Even before the Gaza War that began on 7 October 2023, Hamas was skilled and experienced in its media usage, especially in the arena of psychological warfare. The organization invests considerable resources into its media strategy and communication to diverse audiences through various media platforms, improving its capabilities over

the years. Many of Hamas's messages were focused on psychological warfare, spreading fear and promoting demoralization among Israelis (Rubinstein-Shemer & Flamer, 2024; Weimann & Weimann-Saks, 2024). A salient recurring message in Hamas's campaigns is aimed at separating the Israeli people from their leaders, presenting Israel's leadership as responsible for the situation (Weimann & Weimann-Saks, 2024). At the same time, Hamas strategically engages with Palestinian youth on social media, in an attempt to influence Palestinian public opinion and advance the organization's agenda (Halewa, 2020). In addition, throughout the various rounds of the conflict, Hamas is promoting its messages to international audiences, trying to damage Israel's image while presenting the Palestinian suffering and emphasizing their victimhood (Mozes-Sadeh & Avraham, 2014). Publishing videos as a tool to promote its messages is a widely used tactic of Hamas for many years, especially following terror attacks. The organization tends to publish videos of the attack's perpetrators claiming responsibility for the attack, a strategy that was found useful in increasing the media coverage of terror attacks (Weimann & Winn, 1994).

Hamas's media activity on 7 October was a planned campaign aimed at intimidating and terrorising the Israeli people. The terrorists documented and broadcast all the atrocities they had committed, from beheading to burning victims. If so, the 7 October massacre was a well-designed terror attack not only as a physical attack, but also in the media arena (Weimann & Weimann-Saks, 2024). The terrorists had received training and instructions regarding the creation of visual content of their attacks (filming the atrocities they are committing, using body cams), and the dissemination of those videos on social media platforms in real time—including live broadcast on their victims' social media accounts.

Since the abduction of 251 people in the 7 October 2023 attack, Hamas is using hostage videos as a salient aspect of the organization's media strategy. Much of the media activity surrounding the hostages is directed at the Israeli audience and can be seen as psychological warfare. The organization is publishing images and videos of the hostages, while staging them and controlling their messages (as described by returning hostages). Hostages release events also serve as communication tool for Hamas—creating media events, promoting various messages, including an emphasis on the good treatment the hostages had received from their captors (Weimann & Weimann-Saks, 2024).

The current study examines Hamas's usage of hostage videos during 20 months of the war between Hamas and Israel, examining how Hamas uses those videos as a strategic communication tool. In addition to the examination of various strategic communication elements (such as messages, arguments, instruments and target audiences), the analysis will try to identify repeated themes and emphasis, in an attempt to reveal various genres within Hamas hostage videos, aimed to fit the organization's needs and interests.

8. Method

In line with the study's objectives, all media products related to hostages that were published on Hamas's official Telegram account were analyzed. A total of 166 publications concerning hostages, released by Hamas during the first 20 months of the war, were examined². The focus on Telegram stems from its emergence as Hamas's primary online platform for disseminating propaganda and conducting psychological warfare (Weimann & Weimann-Saks, 2024).

To investigate Hamas's use of hostage-related communication, a qualitative content analysis was conducted. The goal was to uncover the strategic functions of these videos as tools of communication and to identify distinct genres that reflect Hamas's organizational needs and interests. Since genres serve as a framework for understanding and categorizing works based on shared characteristics, influencing both the creation and reception of artistic

expressions (Corbett, 2006), they serve as a useful tool for categorization and analysis of media products.

Hamas's hostage-related media products consist primarily of videos ($N = 97$). In addition, the organization regularly publishes infographics ($N = 59$), most of which are paired with videos—either announcing an upcoming release or reinforcing messages conveyed in an already published video. In a smaller number of cases, text-only posts ($N = 10$) were also published in connection with hostage-related content.

The analysis examined a range of characteristics to distinguish between different genres of hostage-related publications, as well as to identify recurring elements across formats. Each publication was analyzed to determine its core message, the use of repeated hashtags (which often signaled the main theme), and the representation of the hostages themselves. Key questions included: Are hostages speaking in the video? If so, what is their central message? Are they addressing their families, the Israeli government, the Prime Minister, or the broader Israeli public? Does the video disclose the hostages' fate? Are props used to enhance the message? The analysis also explored whether blame is placed on the Israeli government, its leadership, or the military, as well as references to current events. Special attention was paid to messages directed at international audiences and foreign leaders, to better understand the intended targets of Hamas's media output. In addition, the study examined visual and graphic design elements in both videos and infographics, aiming to identify distinctive stylistic features associated with different genres or messages, as well as the usage of hashtags, the languages presented in the media products, and the usage of catch phrases.

Accordingly, the following analysis presents the various genres identified in Hamas's hostage-related publications, as well as common elements that appear across types. Given the 20-months timeframe covered, the analysis also considers shifts and developments over time.

9. Findings

An in-depth analysis of Hamas's hostage videos, and other related publications ($N = 166$)—including videos, infographics and a few text-based posts—reveals five distinct genres employed by the organization. Each genre features unique characteristics (as well as some overlapping elements) and serves specific strategic functions within Hamas's broader campaign. Those are the genres that were identified: 1. Proof of life; 2. Revealing the hostages' fate; 3. Rage or Call for help; 4. Messages to the families or the Israeli public; and 5. Hostages release videos. Below is a presentation of each genre, its characteristics and usages as part of Hamas's communication strategy.

9.1. Proof of Life

Although "proof of life" is traditionally regarded as a core component of hostage-related communication of terror organizations, Hamas has used this genre relatively infrequently. Only 9% ($N = 15$) of the hostage-related publications conform to the classic proof-of-life format (67% are videos, 33% are infographics). Other genres incorporate proof-of-life elements but embed them within broader narratives serving Hamas's strategic goals.

In classic proof-of-life videos, hostages appear on camera, identify themselves, provide some personal details, and sometimes describe their abduction. They recount the harsh conditions of captivity—life in underground tunnels, scarcity of food and medicine, and lack of sunlight—and often express longing for their families and former lives. Some videos also depict the hostages acknowledging good treatment by their captors, consistent with Hamas's effort to frame itself as humane.

Hostages frequently turn to their family members, at times, to the Israeli government or Prime Minister Netanyahu directly, and sometimes to the Israeli public. They commonly criticize the Israeli government, particularly its military operation in Gaza, portraying it as the primary cause of their continued suffering. Many describe feeling abandoned and forgotten, appealing for rescue through negotiation rather than military action (emphasizing their fear of the military bombings and attacks that risk their lives). This aligns with Hamas's narrative that hostage release is only achievable through political agreement, not force. Returning hostages had shared that while being filmed in captivity, Hamas had staged the videos, and they were told what to say. If so, it is not surprising that Hamas's narrative is dominant in those videos, emphasizing the organization's strategic usage of proof-of-life videos.

These videos were mainly released during timeframes in which negotiations were on the way, particularly in April 2024 and November–December 2024. It appears that Hamas is using those videos to communicate mostly with Israelis, trying to pressure the Israeli government to agree to negotiate and reach an agreement. Dual-nationality hostages were sometimes featured (e.g., Hersh Goldberg-Polin and Keith Siegel), targeting international leaders and audiences, especially in the US, to encourage diplomatic pressure on Israel.

Similar to other genres, proof-of-life videos are typically embedded in multi-stage messaging sequences: a teaser infographic or video often precedes the main video, followed by supplementary materials that reinforce the message. Most texts appearing in the posts are in Hebrew, Arabic and English (and when the content presented in the video is in Hebrew, Arabic and English subtitles are presented), suggesting that while the main target audience is Israelis, Hamas also seeks to engage Arabic-speaking and international viewers. About 67% of these publications include the “time is running out” hashtag, and nearly 20% employ a visual countdown graphic (a ticking-clock design) introduced by Hamas early in the war, reinforcing the urgency of releasing the hostages.

9.2. *Revealing the Hostages' Fate*

The second most common genre (26% of publications, $N = 43$; 63% videos and 30% infographics) involves Hamas revealing the fate of hostages: whether they remain alive, were injured, or were killed in captivity. These publications often unfold as part of a series—an initial teaser (typically a short video or infographic) identifies the hostage(s) in question and signals that further revelations are forthcoming. The main video usually includes elements characteristic of proof of life, such as personal testimonies, before revealing the hostage's fate.

Notably, 61% of these videos report hostages' deaths, typically attributing it to Israeli military actions—with 33% explicitly blaming Israeli airstrikes. These narratives accuse the Israeli government of sacrificing hostages through its military operations and of misleading the Israeli public. A specific visual graphic used in this genre includes red font and question marks to emphasize uncertainty. The “time is running out” message is also salient, appearing as a hashtag in 65% of posts, and in 21% of them with the unique visual design. Another salient hashtag focuses on the Israeli government, claiming it is lying to the Israeli public (in 35% of the publications).

This genre became especially prominent in two periods: (1) following the first hostage deal (December 2023–March 2024), and (2) in the aftermath of the IDF's recovery of six hostage bodies from a Hamas tunnel in September 2024. While the publications are multi-lingual, the primary audience remains the Israeli public. The strategic aim is to amplify fear, despair, and domestic pressure on the Israeli leadership. However, because the emotional content can be distressing and sensitive, many of these videos were not widely disseminated by Israeli media, often at the request of hostage families, limiting their direct

impact on public discourse. Nonetheless, they remain a central component of Hamas's messaging arsenal.

9.3. *Rage or Call for Help*

The "rage" or "call for help" genre became particularly salient between March and May 2025, following the breakdown of the second ceasefire and the failure to advance the second phase of the hostage deal. This genre constitutes 13% of the analyzed content (22 publications), with over 90% in video format.

Though these videos resemble proof-of-life content structurally, featuring hostages speaking directly to the camera, the tone and emotional register are starkly different. The hostages express profound anger, despair, and abandonment. Over 60% of the videos feature hostages declaring that no one cares about them, while 65% contain explicit pleas for their immediate release.

Initially, rage videos addressed the Israeli government, but as time in captivity dragged on (500+ days), most shifted focus toward the Israeli public and the hostages' families. Hostages appeal to civilians to protest and demand their release. For example, in an April 2025 video, Omri Miran urges the public to protest outside Netanyahu's home and asks that his daughters join the protest, so he can see them on television.

These videos describe in detail the dire conditions in captivity—hunger, thirst, illness, poor ventilation—and in many cases contrast this with the "good treatment" received from Hamas. The implication is that the Israeli government, not Hamas, is ultimately to blame for their suffering.

Hamas enhances the theatricality of these videos with visual props. In one, hostage Elkana Bohbot is shown making an imaginary phone call to his family. In another, a hostage is presented with a birthday cake, celebrating his second birthday as a hostage, highlighting the passing of time in captivity. In a third, a hostage references the deteriorating health of a fellow captive who is visibly incapacitated.

The messaging strategy is clear: these are emotionally charged appeals designed to mobilize Israeli public opinion and trigger action. The "time is running out" hashtag appears in 82% of these publications, with visual branding in 64% of them. Many are distributed as part of multi-phase messages and include Arabic and English subtitles. When not blocked by hostage families' requests not to present them, these videos tend to attract significant attention in Israeli media.

9.4. *Messages to Hostage Families or the Israeli Public*

This genre, comprising 32% of the sample ($N = 53$), is the most frequently used by Hamas in its hostage communication. Unlike other genres, these messages do not feature hostages but instead come directly from Hamas. Most are infographics (50%) and are relatively low-cost to produce, as they can be created with limited resources and do not require access to hostages.

The messaging is highly focused: about 70% of the publications blame Prime Minister Netanyahu and his government for the continued captivity of hostages, while 27% also emphasize the ongoing military campaign. The dominant narrative suggests that hostages were killed due to Israeli bombings, and the government is hiding this reality. In line with the focus on blaming the Israeli government, the hashtag "lying government" appears in 45% of the publications. In addition, the "time is running out" hashtag appears in 66% (while only 11% include the graphic countdown visual).

Though these messages are typically published in Arabic and English in addition to Hebrew, their primary target remains the Israeli public, as Hamas turns directly to families of hostages and the general Israeli public in those messages. Interestingly, this genre

receives relatively little attention from Israeli media or public discourse, likely because it lacks the visual and emotional resonance of videos featuring the hostages themselves. When seen as pure propaganda, without the benefit of learning about the hostages and their well-being, these publications appear to be less attractive for Israelis.

9.5. Hostage Release Videos

This genre, 20% of the dataset ($N = 33$), covers two key periods of hostage releases: November 2023 and January–February 2025. The nature of the videos reflects the evolution of Hamas's media strategy and the differing circumstances of each deal, and yet central elements are salient in the publications of both time periods.

In 2023, the releases were filmed in public spaces in the Gaza Strip. Hostages were shown moving from Hamas vehicles to those of the Red Cross while surrounded by cheering Palestinians. The captors were depicted helping elderly hostages, high-fiving children, and offering water—projecting an image of humanity and responsibility. These videos served to bolster Hamas's image as a legitimate actor in the eyes of the international community, while also demonstrating control and power to the Palestinian population, despite the casualties the organization had suffered in the war.

By early 2025, the release videos had become far more sophisticated. Hostages were filmed in pre-release moments—being informed of their pending release, walking through tunnels into sunlight, or thanking their captors. In some cases, they delivered ideological messages aligned with Hamas's narrative (e.g., support for Palestinian land rights). These productions were highly choreographed.

The release ceremonies themselves—held in central areas of the Gaza Strip relatively untouched by the war (unlike the massive destruction around the Gaza Strip)—featured hostages receiving release certificates and gifts, on stages that were built especially for the release ceremonies. Hamas's well-equipped fighters and cheering civilians were prominently displayed, alongside formal interactions with the Red Cross. These ceremonies highlighted Hamas's continued operational capacity and public support, even after over 15 months of war.

The primary audience for these videos appears to be the Palestinian public, especially Gazans, who were directly affected by the war (with thousands of casualties, displacement of most of the civilian population, and massive destruction), as Hamas seeks to reinforce its legitimacy and resilience through power projection. At the same time, secondary messaging targets the international community by framing Hamas as a rational, organized, and humane actor. For the Israeli audience, the subtext is one of deterrence: despite Israeli military efforts, Hamas remains powerful, organized, and unbroken.

In sum, the analysis of Hamas's hostage-related publications reveals a deliberate and differentiated strategic use of five distinct genres, each serving specific communicative goals and targeting varied audiences. Proof-of-life videos are used sparingly and tactically, primarily in the early stages of negotiation windows, to apply pressure on the Israeli government and evoke empathy among the public by featuring hostages in distress, often delivering Hamas-scripted messages. In contrast, videos revealing the hostages' fate employ emotional ambiguity and delayed disclosures to foster fear, reinforce the narrative of Israeli abandonment, and portray the Israeli military as responsible for hostages' deaths. The rage or call for help genre reflects a shift in tone, using emotional intensity, personal appeals, and symbolic props to mobilize public protest within Israel after prolonged captivity. Messages directed at hostage families and the Israeli public, often composed of infographics, are easier to produce, present direct propaganda—framing the Israeli government as deceitful and guilty—and have limited impact due to their low attractiveness to Israeli audiences. Finally, hostage release videos are designed to project Hamas's power

and legitimacy: the earlier, more spontaneous releases focused on international perception, whereas the later, staged ceremonies in early 2025 showcased organizational control and public support, primarily targeting Palestinian audiences while signaling Hamas's resilience. Together, these genres illustrate Hamas's adaptive media strategy, varying in tone, form, and target audience to advance shifting political objectives throughout the war, in line with the notion of strategic communication.

10. Discussion and Conclusions

This study's goal is to explore Hamas's use of hostage videos and related publications as a strategic communication tool during the 2023–2025 war with Israel. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of 166 media products published on the organization's Telegram account, the study identified distinct genres, examined their communicative characteristics, and evaluated their alignment with Hamas's political interests and strategies. The findings highlight how Hamas has adopted an adaptive, genre-based approach to hostage-related communication, one that is carefully crafted to serve strategic goals and target different audiences.

In line with existing literature conceptualizing terrorism as a form of violent communication (Schmid & de Graaf, 1982; Weimann & Winn, 1994), the study demonstrates how Hamas constructs its hostage-related media as deliberate message events. Some would even claim that the hostage videos serve as a theatre of terror events (Jenkins, 1975). These messages are not primarily directed at the hostages, but rather at external audiences—Israeli citizens and leadership, international actors, Palestinian publics, and Hamas's own support base.

The identification of five distinct genres, proof of life, revealing the hostages' fate, rage or call for help, messages to the Israeli public and hostage families, and hostage release videos, advances previous understandings of hostage videos as a unified genre. While past research has emphasized their use for psychological warfare, negotiation, recruitment, or media attention (Herfroy-Mischler & Barr, 2019; Grebelsky-Lichtman & Cohen, 2017), the current study shows that Hamas varies the structure, emotional tone, and framing of its publications over time to fit tactical goals. For example, proof-of-life videos are deployed in key moments to advance negotiation efforts and appeal to Israeli and international compassion, while rage videos intensify pressure on the Israeli public through emotional appeals and symbolic props. Messages from Hamas, typically infographic-based and cost-effective, aim to frame the Israeli leadership as deceitful, but appear to have lower impact, likely due to their lack of new information or visual resonance. In contrast, hostage release videos serve as theatrical displays of legitimacy and resilience, reinforcing Hamas's power among Palestinians and asserting its control to external observers.

By using various messages in different circumstances, Hamas was able to trigger family members of hostages, and to a large extent, the Israeli public, mobilizing them to pressure the Israeli government to negotiate with Hamas for the release of the hostages. In generating media attention and mobilizing Israelis to go out and protest, while criticizing the government for its failures during the war, especially in relation to releasing the hostages, Hamas's strategic usage of hostage videos could be seen as a success. In terms of achieving their political goals—reaching a ceasefire and ending the war while the organization is still the ruling power in the Gaza Strip, Hamas was less successful. If so, the strategic usage of hostage videos assists Hamas in reaching some of its objectives, mostly in the realm of influencing public opinion.

This strategic variation in Hamas's messages in an attempt to fit the organization's tactical goals supports broader theoretical frameworks that emphasize the role of image and narrative in asymmetric conflicts (Ayalon et al., 2016; Roger, 2013). By shifting genres, visual

tools, and messaging tactics, Hamas engages in what has been termed “Imagefare” (Ayalon et al., 2016)—leveraging public empathy, emotional framing, and visual storytelling to gain influence and pressure both domestic and international actors. The findings also align with conceptualizations of strategic communication as goal-oriented, carefully managed messaging designed to shape perception and achieve long-term objectives (Hallahan et al., 2007; D. R. Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013; Bockstette, 2008). Hamas’s hostage publications exhibit a sophisticated usage of strategic communication: deliberate message design, audience segmentation, and timing of publication.

The study’s findings have both academic and practical contributions. In terms of academic contribution, the findings could widen the understanding of political communication scholars in various ways: First, it provides a genre-based typology of hostage-related communication, offering a more nuanced understanding of how different media formats and narrative styles function within a broader strategic logic, while focusing on political issues. Second, it situates Hamas’s communication practices within the evolving media ecosystem of modern terrorism, demonstrating how digital tools allow non-state actors to conduct sophisticated image campaigns with global reach. Third, it highlights the emotional, symbolic, and theatrical dimensions of terrorist messaging, especially the calculated use of visual tropes, victim appeals, and performative rituals to foster empathy, fear, or political pressure. In addition to the scholarly contribution, the battle over international perceptions is a salient fighting arena in today’s conflicts, and terror organizations, like Hamas, utilize communication in a sophisticated way. Practitioners and diplomats, working in the field of public diplomacy and state reputation, could use the study’s findings to better confront challenges in the Image War and better counter terror organizations’ strategic usage of media and messaging.

Nonetheless, the study also faces several limitations. It focuses exclusively on content disseminated on Hamas’s Telegram channels and does not account for how these messages were received, interpreted, or shared by various audiences. Future research could explore audience reactions, both in Israel and around the world, to better understand the effectiveness of different genres. Moreover, this study focuses on one specific conflict and actor. While the findings are rich, especially due to the unique case study used, they focus on a specific cultural context, which can limit their generalizability. In addition, while this study focuses on content analysis, future work could incorporate interviews with journalists and decision makers to deepen the understanding of the practical and emotional impact of such media campaigns.

In conclusion, Hamas’s extensive and varied use of hostage-related publications during the 2023–2025 war reflects a highly developed form of strategic communication. By tailoring genre, content, and audiences, Hamas has weaponized visual storytelling to serve its political, psychological, and military interests. In doing so, it demonstrates how modern conflicts are not only fought on physical battlegrounds but also in the domain of images, emotions, and perceptions (Yarchi & Ayalon, 2023). As strategic communication becomes an increasingly central feature of conflicts, especially for non-state actors, the need to understand and counter such messaging grows ever more urgent.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to the sensitive nature of Hamas’s hostage videos.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Genre refers to a category or type of artistic production characterized by specific conventions and forms and encompass a wide range of communicative events across different media. Genre serves as a framework for understanding and categorizing works based on shared characteristics, influencing both the creation and reception of artistic expressions (Corbett, 2006).
- ² The analysis includes all of Hamas's Telegram posts dealing with hostages that were published between 8 October 2023, and 7 June 2025. The analysis did not include any of the abduction videos published by Hamas on 7 October, alongside other atrocity videos the organization had published during the massacre.

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