**And Darkness Was Upon the Face of the Deep: Taken Captive, Body and Soul**

**Sexual Assault on October 7: Narrative, Influencing Factors, Meanings, and Implications at the Collective and Individual Levels**

**Abstract: Organization of the Article and its Unique Contribution**

The brutal and premeditated sexual assault carried out by Hamas on October 7th was part of the terrorist organization’s military strategy that sought to humiliate the Israeli nation through an act of conquest that dehumanized, debased, and desecrated their victims, body and soul. The first part of this article presents a literature review addressing the organization’s doctrine and narrative, as understood through the lens of psychological and cultural elements, along with widespread beliefs that are presented as religious obligations. These related to and influenced the ideology and strategy behind the sexual assault. The article reviews some Islamic perceptions regarding sexual assault and their meanings on personal, social, and national levels. The second part of the article attempts to explain the world’s silence regarding the brutal attack, through techniques of neutralization. It analyzes the distinctive characteristics of this attack and their traumatic consequences for the survivors and for Israeli society. This article focuses on the Hamas terrorists’ motivations for the sexual assault they committed on October 7. It does not purport to identify any external factors or to analyze other motives, if any exist, in the context of the international arena. The article draws on evidence and testimonies to examine the meanings, complexities, and challenges of this assault at the individual level and the collective-national level. It integrates disciplines from various fields: sociocultural analysis, psychology, criminology, Middle Eastern studies, and religious studies.

*Keywords*: Hamas, systematic sexual crimes, war crimes, victims, dehumanization, humiliation, collective victimization, collective trauma

**Introduction**

On the morning of Saturday, October 7, 2023, the terrorist organization Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, launched a massive and brutal surprise attack against Israel, following which Israel declared the “Swords of Iron” war. This extreme and unprecedented terrorist attack was carried out in a nationalist context. During (and after) the incident, acts of exceptional cruelty were carried out in a short time and on a large scale. The terrorists intentionally recorded and broadcast, in real time, many of their atrocities during this bloody attack.

The harm to civilians in this massacre was not inadvertent; it was premeditated. Hamas performed brutal crimes and acts of terrorism against soldiers and civilians regardless of gender or age (even children and infants). These crimes, prohibited by international law, included executions, murder, beheadings, amputations, burning and desecrating corpses, kidnapping and transporting the hostages to the Gaza Strip, and more. Additionally, Hamas carried out sexual assault on a horrific scale against women, men, girls, and boys. This included touching victims’ genitals, stripping and debasing their bodies, sexual penetration with objects, raping living people and corpses, gang rape, and shooting, stabbing, cutting, or amputating genitals and sexual organs. These acts were performed ostentatiously, with a sense of euphoria and rejoicing, while proclaiming the *takbir* (*Allāhu ʾakbar*), bragging about the horrific acts, documenting them, and disseminating the recordings.

The current article focuses on this sexual assault, which was planned and used as one of the tactics and “weapons” for the purpose of sowing terror, national humiliation, control, and conquest. The sexual attack was one of the goals of the war: humiliation and desecration, body and soul.

**Sexual Terrorism as an International Concept**

Rape, sexual violence, and “sexual terrorism” have been elements of war throughout history and around the world (Paulussen, 2021). Recently, rape and sexual assault have come to the forefront because they are openly, deliberately, and systematically used by radical Islamist terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or Daesh), al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram, whose ideologies support these tactics (Paulussen, 2021; Revkin & Wood, 2020). The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) recognized this in Resolution 2331, passed on December 20, 2016, which, “…expresses concern that acts of sexual and gender-based violence are known to be part of the strategic objectives and ideology of certain terrorist groups” (UNSC, 2016).

The UN’s *Handbook on Gender Dimensions of Criminal Justice Responses to Terrorism* stated that, according to the UN Secretary-General, “Sexual violence is not incidental, but integrally linked with the strategic objectives, ideology and funding of extremist groups,” that it is “used to achieve tactical objectives,” and that “the use of sexual violence entrenches an ideology based on suppressing women’s rights and controlling their sexuality and reproduction. In some contexts, women and girls are seen as ‘wages of war,’ or as a form of compensation or salary to armed elements” (Garms et al., 2019, p. 128).

Until recently, the UN referred only to sexual and gender-based acts of terrorism (used to achieve tactical, strategic, and ideological goals) against women. However, in Resolution 2106 the United Nations Security Council (UNSC, 2013) acknowledged that conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) also affects men, children of both genders, and people with other sexual identities.

Studies have presented evidence of a widespread perception that CRSV against men diminishes and/or destroys the victims’ masculinity, although this view has been critiqued. Some researchers have asserted that the primary motive for CRSV against males is to “neuter” victims or cause them to be perceived as feminine or homosexual, especially in societies where heteronormativity is widespread. Spiritualistic motives have also been noted, according to which the attacker “draws” masculine power from the victim (Njoku & Dery, 2021). Thus, beyond the significant consequences of the act itself, CRSV affects male victims’ status in their communities, reinforces their subordinate role, and denies their heterosexual masculinity.

International law defines sexual assault committed during warfare as a war crime and a crime against humanity. War crimes are crimes committed during an armed conflict that violate international humanitarian law (conventional or customary law) and entail individual criminal responsibility under international law. Sexual war crimes include “…committing rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, … enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity” that violate the Geneva Conventions. Sexual assault is among the “…serious violations of the laws and customs applicable in international armed conflict, within the established framework of international law” (UN, 2015). These may involve acts against combatants as well those not actively taking part in combat, including members of armed forces who have laid down their weapons.

The crimes committed by Hamas during the attack on October 7 involved the deliberate killing of civilians, mental and physical violence, torture, rape, inhumane treatment, malicious infliction of great suffering and bodily harm, taking hostages, using civilians as human shields, and looting (Baruch, 2023; Scheffer, 2023). As noted by the UN:

Crimes against humanity have not yet been codified in a dedicated treaty of international law, unlike genocide and war crimes, although there are efforts to do so. Despite this, the prohibition of crimes against humanity, similar to the prohibition of genocide, has been considered a peremptory norm of international law, from which no derogation is permitted and which is applicable to all States. (UN, 2015)

War crimes can be defined as crimes against humanity if it can be proven that they were committed on a large scale, in a systematic manner, and as part of a widespread policy (explicit or implicit) of a governmental authority. Sexual crimes against humanity, as defined in the *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* (ICC, 1998, p. 3) include: “…committing rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity.”

Because Hamas’ actions were planned, large scale, and systematically directed against a civilian population, they constitute crimes against humanity under the definition established by the ICC (reflecting customary law and binding international law). Crimes against humanity include murder, extermination (mass murder), severe deprivation of physical liberty, abduction, inhumane treatment, torture, rape, sexual violence, and enslavement (Baruch, 2023; Dannenbaum, 2023; UN, 2015).

According to the *Rome Statute*, Hamas’ actions can be considered genocide, which is defined as:

Acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, as such: a. killing members of the group; b. causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; c. deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; d. imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; e. forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. (UN, 2015)

**Constructing the Doctrine of the Warrior Culture and the Holy War**

Violence by terrorist organizations can only be understood by examining their ideologies and policies which, to varying extents, advocate violence against specific groups and determine the conditions under it occurs (Revkin & Wood, 2021; Sella, 2019). Ideologies that have developed in the Middle East in general, and in the Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas in particular, were formed and influenced by various sociopsychological, religious, cultural, and social factors.

**Sociopsychological factors.** Sociopsychological barriers and social beliefs may yield a biased and one-sided view of a conflict, its ethos, and collective memory of it. This can be used to justify the goals of the conflict and portray the enemy in negative, delegitimizing, and dehumanizing terms (Halperin et al., 2010). Some social psychologists who have studied irrational behavior among the parties involved in conflicts have noted the significant role played by prejudices, negative images, and stereotypes regarding their opponents (Maoz, 2010; Weinreb, 2023).

Middle Eastern studies scholar and commentator on Arab affairs Reuven Berko (2019) asserted that, “Every Palestinian who is exposed to incitement in some mosque, on social media, or in speeches by Palestinian leaders, knows that the enemy’s blood can be shed.” While cultural laws of honor and revenge uphold the prohibition against killing Muslims and violating this endangers not only the attackers but also their families, such violence can be committed against “Jews and Christians, who are defined as weak and out of bounds of the Arab code of vengeance” (Berko, 2019).

Another explanation for the development of merciless and aggressive behavior pertains to narratives of victimhood, which have four main characteristics. The first is the demand to be recognized as a victim, based on a sense of previous suffering and injustices. Victimhood becomes a core concept when dealing with complex or threatening situations. The second is the act of displacement of the victim’s anger into acts of aggression and vengeance towards people who are not threatening them. The third is the transformation of personal suffering into domination, control, power, and advantage. The fourth is the suspension of empathy or concern for the Other and the feeling of having an “exemption” that grants the right to ignore the needs of others (Berman, 2017).

According to a trend specific to sexual violence, and not necessarily relevant to general violence committed during a conflict, armed actors from societies that uphold unequal gender norms are more likely to commit sexual violence. This is especially true when the attacker is from a society with greater gender inequality as compared to the society to which the victim belongs (Guarnieri & Tur-Prats, 2023). For example, Daesh enslaved thousands of Yazidis and issued written statements justifying this on ideological grounds, but they did not enslave Sunni Muslims.

Throughout Muslim history and in its ideology and religious-legal foundations, massacres and acts of cruelty were not only common but under certain conditions constituted a religious obligation (Herrara, 2023). According to Muslim law, the behavior of the Prophet Muhammad was faultless, worthy of imitation, and the embodiment of virtue. Since the religious laws are perceived as having divine, rather than earthly or human origins, they are considered to be universal rules of justice.

Every Muslim learns about Muhammad’s actions in the communities and settlements they conquered towards “infidels” (which includes Jews, as they are still perceived and defined). Long after Muhammad’s time, his behaviors continue to be imitated. These include systematic and gruesome murder and execution of all males (boys, men, and old men), handcuffing, beheading, mutilating, and amputating the limbs of living people. Women and children were given to the Muslim conquerors, who were allowed to “marry” them, exploit them sexually, sell them as slaves, or take them as hostages and demand ransom for them.

Such murders and massacres have been primarily carried out against Jews, who were accused of being the first to “rebel” against the laws obliging them to be subject to the authority of the Muslims (*al-dhimma)*. For this reason, the Prophet Muhammad and Islam dehumanized the Jews. The first massacre carried out under Muhammad was against a group of Jews who refused to recognize him as a prophet. This event was recorded in Ibn Ishaq’s *Life of the Prophet*, one of the core books of Muslim law, which is still studied throughout the Muslim world. Muhammad’s response to the Jews’ humiliating refusal is still discussed by Islamic commentators to this day (Herrara, 2023; Herrara & Kressel, 2009).

Harsh, derogatory, and grotesque descriptions of the Jews draw on passages from the Koran and medieval traditions, as well as modern concepts. They have ancient and deep-rooted religious significance, conveying a view of the Jews as demonic, inhuman, and not created in God’s image. Jews have been referred to as “monkeys and pigs” cursed by Allah, a despicable group of aggressive and cruel prophet-killers, bloodsuckers, warmongers, barbarians, a “cancer,” a threat to the entire Islamic world, enemies of God and humanity, hypocrites, liars, descendants of treaty-breakers, traitors, and fascists who spread corruption, poison the water, and kill babies, women, and the elderly. It is predicted that the Earth will vomit them out and Allah will weary of them and bring about their complete eradication and destruction on Judgment Day. They are enemies of Islam, condemned burn in the fires of hell (in this world as well as the next), and their fate will be absolute elimination (Alon, 2010; Bartal, 2021; Herrera & Kressel, 2009; Litvak, 2005).

These ideas provide the “substrate” in which are rooted the narratives of the Islamic world, Palestinian society, Gaza residents, and Hamas members in particular. They provide a solid foundation on which Hamas has built layers of antisemitism and dehumanization of Jews and Israelis. As Litvak (2005) asserted, this is a key component and pillar of Hamas ideology. Any conflict requires justification of the self and demonization of rivals and enemies. In Hamas ideology, the Jews are the “enemies of God and humanity.”

Middle Eastern studies professor Uzi Rabi said that this ideology is manifest in religious extremism, which is equally implicated in the process of dehumanization. As psychiatrist Oren Tana noted, the process of dehumanization causes people to stop seeing “the other as a human being and more as an animal” and thus to condone cruelty towards them (Gefen, 2023). Additionally, years-long indoctrination is achieved in the educational system through a full curriculum that teaches a binary way of thinking.

**Symbolism, Ceremony, and Ritual.** Many of the atrocities committed during the terrorist attack of October 7, 2023, directly reflected events recorded in the history and canon of Islam, including actions of the Prophet Muhammad, such as beheading, mutilating, disemboweling, and immolating non-Muslim captives. Many of these actions have been widely carried out in Muslim societies and are justified by Sharia law.

According to Perlmutter (2006), an expert on symbolic and ritual crimes, people use such actions for ritual defilement in the same way that their warrior ancestors performed them and for the same reasons; namely to “align” themselves with the actions of the Prophet and lend authenticity to their claim that they are acting righteously and upholding the pure doctrine of Islam. According to the Islamic belief system, the Prophet was divinely inspired and thus immune to error or misunderstanding. For this reason, it is believed that he should be imitated and the “deeds of the fathers are signs for the sons.”

During Israel’s military campaign in the Gaza Strip, written instructions to Hamas members and a religious justification for the attack were written in a note found on the body of a Hamas terrorist: “You must sharpen the blades of your swords and be pure in your intentions before Allah. Know that the enemy of yours is a disease that has no cure, other than beheading and extracting their hearts and livers. Go attack them!” (Shoval, 2023; Zitun, 2023a).

According to Perlmutter (2006), such atrocities are viewed as “sacred violence” and can only be understood through religious and ritual concepts such as sacrifice, blood rituals, and desecration. Among other things, they establish status and serve as rites of passage and initiation. In a warrior culture, they show loyalty, respect, courage, and proof of absolute commitment. The fact that these chilling acts terrorize the enemy is secondary. Ritual violence offers legitimacy, solid moral ground, and community support. Publicly humiliating “enemy combatants” diminishes their success, nullifies their power, and damages their morale.

Members of a warrior culture often think in terms of holiness, and every act of violence is upheld by theology and approved of by the community. The only way for young Muslims to restore their honor, save face, protect their territory, and survive is to retaliate with vengeance. The widespread and shocking destruction correspond directly to the Muslim concept of sacred retribution.

In this context, it is worth emphasizing that the motto of the Muslim Brotherhood (of which Hamas is the Palestinian branch) quotes a Koranic verse (Chapter 8, verse 60): “Prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy.” In other words, Hamas has enshrined terrorism as a tool to achieve its goals.

While a Western psychological approach classifies murder and destruction as pathological acts of violence, their justification must be understood through a cultural and anthropological lens that considers symbols as they are expressed in religious ceremonies, customs, and practices, among other things. The specific acts of mutilation carried out in this case were not arbitrary. Intentionally stepping on victims’ heads is seen as a particularly offensive act, alluding to a Muslim tradition that the soles of shoes are impure. Burning bodies are not typical acts of mob violence but represented a response to the strict prohibition against cremation in Islamic burial customs. Dragging the bodies, stabbing them, and leaving them exposed to the elements intentionally violated rites of purification and honorable funeral and burial ceremonies. Enacting these societal taboos was a deliberate distortion of sacred rituals and a projection of personal fears and cultural beliefs onto the enemy’s body.

**Attitudes towards “Non-combatants” in Islamic Thought**. Landau-Tasseron (2006) asserted that the term “non-combatants” as it is used in the Western doctrine of a “just war” is not applicable in Islamic law. Although Islamic law forbids harming non-combatants, this immunity only applies to those included in the category of “a soul that Allah has forbidden to kill.” The category of “protected blood” only applies to Muslims or to infidels who have made an explicit (permanent or temporary) legal agreement with Muslims (Landau-Tasseron, 2006; Polka, 2023).

Traditional sources cite the types of people that Muslims are prohibited from harming, including women, children, old men, and religious clergy. However, the prohibition against harming innocent non-combatants does not apply during a war. There is agreement among scholars of Islamic law that killing non-combatants and combatants alike is permitted in times of war. Some Muslims have cautioned against killing women and children, apparently because of a prohibition against harming them, which is attributed to the Prophet Muhammad.

Polka (2023) cited a ruling from Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the most important Muslim judges and an unquestionable spiritual authority (who was a religious-legal authoritative source for Hamas and continues to be so even after his death), according to which Israel is a completely military society and therefore all its citizens are considered to be soldiers serving in the armed forces. According to al-Karachawi, every Israeli, male or female, who has passed the age of childhood is drafted into the military or is considered a “combat supporter.” In the 1990s, Hamas had already been granted religious-legal approval for killing Jews in Israel (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center [ITIC], 2011; Litvak, 2012; Polka, 2022).

This ideology is embedded in Palestinian educational frameworks in Gaza, both in the official and written content of the educational materials and in messages imparted by educators, some of whom are employed by the UN or other international entities (Georg Eckert Institute, 2021; Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education [IMPACT-se], 2023; Israel, 2023; UN Watch, 2024; UN General Assembly, 2021; UN Watch & IMPACT-se, 2023; US Department of State, 2018). These ideas are published in written materials (Webman, 1998) and interwoven into the speeches and statements of the organization’s leaders and the sermons of religious leaders in the Arab world at large and in the Gaza Strip in particular. They are disseminated on social media networks and cited in Islamic legal rulings (*fatwa* فتوى) (ITIC, 2018; Middle East Media Research Institute [MEMRI], 2023a).

Despite this, many individuals in Muslim society have spoken out against the prevalent idea that the Islamic religion and legal system condone acts of cruelty and inhumanity against Jews, women, children, and the elderly, such as those perpetrated by Hamas. Some have stated that these actions violate the values and morals of Islam and humanity and have expressed shock and harsh criticism of Hamas (MEMRI, 2023b, 2023c). Those voicing such opinions tend to emphasize a pragmatic approach that takes into account the circumstances and the tension between two conceptual worlds: traditional and modern. This viewpoint has arisen in the context of the declining value attributed to Islamic law as the center of public life in the Muslim world (Reiter, 2011).

Various explanations have been offered for these contradictory messages in the Islamic world. There may be ambivalence regarding extremism because of what Piscatori (1986) called the “built-in pluralism” in Islam. Or, as Tseitlin and Abu Ras (2024) more recently explained it, the conflicting viewpoints show that Muslim individuals have freedom of choice and therefore responsibility “in everything related to fulfilling the divine order on Earth.” The differing views may indicate disputes regarding the authenticity of authorities that promote anti-Jewish feelings among Muslims, which some have claimed do not represent Islamic values or the meaning of being a Muslim, and directly contradict the principles of a liberal society. They cite verses from the Koran and other Islamic texts and traditions about kindness, compassion, reconciliation, respect, and tolerance towards other religions and avoiding aggression (Dajani, 2017). Some have emphasized the need to promote balance, moderation, or the “middle way” (*wasatia*) or place religious freedom above religious identity.

**The Hamas Attack**

Sagi Polka, an expert on Middle Eastern studies and Islam, analyzed the October 7, 2023, attack by looking at Hamas’ concept of war, particularly as it pertains to killing innocent non-combatant civilians. He supported his interpretation with quotes from recorded statements made by senior Hamas officials on the day of the attack and placed them in the context of Islamic tradition (Polka, 2023).

Many of the hate-filled descriptions and curses mentioned above were included in instructions for Hamas terrorists to attack Israelis, male and female soldiers as well as civilians – men and women, the elderly, and children including infants and even fetuses in their mother’s wombs (Beer, 2023; i24News English, 2023; Kan Darom, 2023; Knesset, 2023a). A note found on the body of a Hamas terrorist, presumably sent to others as well, called for a merciless massacre of Jews. It cited well-known quotes and emotionally charged expressions that are code words for calls to action: kill and be killed; the honor of jihad; sharpen your swords; the enemy of yours is a disease that has no cure, other than beheading and extracting their hearts and livers; do the deeds of Sa’d [bin Mu’ad] (referring to an attack against a group of Jews in which the men were killed and the women and children taken captive); and God of Khyber. Khyber was a desert oasis where the Jewish population was killed by Muslims, and which is referred to in the Daesh slogan: *Khyber Khyber ya Yahud Jaysh Muhammad Say’ud*, which may be translated as Khyber Khyber O Jews! Muhammad’s army will return [to destroy you] (Dvori, 2023; IDF, 2023; Ynet, 2023a; Zitun, 2023a, 2023b).

On October 7, Muhammad al-Deif, commander of the Hamas Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, broadcast a declaration of war. He quoted a Koranic verse (54:45) that refers to the Battle of Badr in 624 AD, during which the Prophet Muhammad led a small number of Muslims to victory against multitudes of idol-worshippers. Al-Deif wanted to convey the message that on this day, as in the past, the Jews would be defeated and would surrender.

A year previously, on December 14, 2022, Hamas leader Yahya al-Sinwar gave a speech commemorating the founding of Hamas. He said that the organization’s goal of widespread struggle against Israel was the fulfillment of that the divine promise of the “sacred mosque” (*wad al-A’khara*) in the Koranic verse (17:7), regarding the Jews would be fulfilled. By this al-Sinwar meant that the Jews would be humiliated, and the Muslims would enter Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and destroy every sign of the Jewish occupation. Al-Sanwar announced that his organization was engaged in “preparatory jihad” (*edad*), and instructed them to gather whatever forces they could to strike fear into the enemy’s heart.

Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas’ political branch, also advocated humiliating and terrorizing their enemies and called on the al-Qassam Brigades “who drew the stigmata of humiliation, defeat, and collapse on the face of the enemy.” (This recorded speech was issued the day after the attack, then was deleted shortly afterwards). According to Polka, fulfilling the divine promise to punish the Jews is at core of Hamas fighters’ identity.

**Social Values, Traditions, and Behaviors Towards Women in the Arab World in Collective Social Memory: The Story of Honor and Humiliation**

*The* *Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World,* published by the United Nations Development Programme gave an overview of factors affecting the status of women in the Arab world. It noted public norms, perceptions, behavioral patterns, culture, religious heritage, and Arab intellectual thought (UNDP, 2007). It highlighted the importance of interpretations, perceptions, customs, and traditions concerning family and social arrangements. Particularly in the Arab world, traditional social values and practices permeate the culture and tend to be emphasized over explicit religious principles and scriptural teachings. Over time, popular culture, arts, and the media, themselves based on a religious and intellectual heritage, have changed perceptions and behavior regarding women (Abo Alola, 2015).

A study that examined various hypotheses pertaining to the roots of the sadistic crimes that characterize terrorism found that cultural aspects have greater weight than religious ones (Ben Touhami Meftah, 2018) – although apologetics cannot be ruled out in this approach. In seeking to explain data indicating that most terrorist crimes are perpetrated by Muslims or Arabs, the study noted cultural traditions and a mythology of heroes and revenge. The study concluded that changes in Islamic societies in the Middle Eastern have been superficial and the foundational structures of these societies continue to be dictated by local culture (Ben Touhami Meftah, 2018).

Many scholars and experts on Arab society and culture and Islam from around the Muslim world and Israel have noted that the primary influences on the status of Arab women and attitudes towards them are culture, religion, and a hierarchical family structure in which youth are subordinate to their elders and females are subordinate to males (Ghanim, 2005; Haddad Bolus, 2013; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1999).

**Attitudes Towards Women and Sexuality in Islam**

Women’s chastity, modesty, and sexuality is a highly sensitive issue in the Arab world (including Palestinian society). It is translated into a social norm of honor and the value of family honor and affects the family’s reputation, which is considered its most valuable asset (Mernissi, 1996; Stewart, 2006). The attitudes, religious laws, and social norms that pertain to women serve as criteria for assessing social prestige in religious Muslim communities.

Discovering and disclosing that a family member, male or female, has been sexually abused implies that the family is unable to protect their most important “property.” This casts a shadow over the family, stigmatizes them, and may lead to social rejection and ostracism (Haddad Bolus, 2013). Therefore, strict control over Muslim women confers prestige in the Muslim community. A direct derivative of this is that humiliating women from other religious groups proves their inferiority (Sella, 2019).

Sexual harassment and rape have come to be seen as legitimate tactics in the religious and nationalist worldview of Islamic groups that are waging struggles against other nationalities. According to Sella (2019), such behavior is not only characteristic of communities that are enmeshed in a conflict but is also typical of Islamic communities in Europe and Israel, in which there is an epidemic of sexual harassment up to the level of fatal assaults (Abdelmonem et al., 2016; De Hart, 2017; European Parliament, 2015; Hirsi Ali, 2021; Schulman, 2009).

Many experts and scholars on Islam and Middle Eastern culture have shown that rape and sexual violence are related to the concepts honor and shame, which, as mentioned, are fundamental to Arab-Muslim society in general and Palestinian society in specific. Mordechai Kedar (2014) pointed out the connection between the value of family honor, the “culture of shame” (*thaqafat elaib*), and sexual violence and rape in war. According to Kedar, sexual violence, including against men, has become an intrinsic aspect of war and other conflicts throughout the Arab world, used as a weapon to inflict psychological damage on victims and their families. The goal is to psychologically subdue them, instill fear, and paralyze their military operations (Paulussen, 2021). Thus, although rape is prohibited by law in Arab countries, many people act according to the social codes in their immediate social environment and follow its rules of what is allowed and forbidden.

Therefore, humiliation through rape is used a weapon in war in the Middle East and is widely viewed as the most effective way to injure the enemy. Grosbard (2007), a clinical psychologist and researcher who has studied Arab culture in depth, said that if honor is the primary goal, its opposite, shame, is perceived as worse than death. According to Berko (2019), Islamic tradition, dating back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad, views captured women as the spoils of war (*Ahnimat Harev*) and permits their use as sex slaves.

Some of the Israeli women who had been held hostage by Hamas and were released testified that they and other hostages were paraded before cheering crowds in Gaza. As one said: “My captors saw me as booty” (Hilaie, 2023; Peylan, 2023; Sela, 2023; Stahl et al., 2023; Ynet, 2023b; 60 Minutes, 2023).

**Images of Sexuality, Gender, and Patriarchy in the Palestinian Narrative**

For generations, the Palestinians have experienced a national humiliation. In their narrative of defeat, Palestinian men failed to hold onto the motherland, a symbolic female body being held captive by others. In Palestinian literature and art, the land is often portrayed as a woman, either a virgin or a mother (Sherwell, 2003).

Feminist studies have found that “…constructions of national identity are gendered; that meanings of ‘nation’ are ‘permeated with notions of masculinity and femininity,’ and that idealized images and real bodies of women serve as national boundaries” and “reproduce the nation biologically, culturally, and symbolically” (Amireh, 2003, p. 748).

In discourse in the Arab world, and specifically the Palestinian national narrative, “rape” is often used as a metaphor for Israel’s assault against Palestinian national aspirations and occupation of the land. Like other nationalist struggles that draw on patriarchal and gendered images, this reflects unequal power relations between men and women. Rape is a common and particularly effective metaphor used to ignite nationalist feelings in general and in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular (Marcus, 2015; Yoeli, 2022).

Palestinian sociologist Ghanim referred to how the image of rape is used as a metaphor for the forceful and unjust takeover of the homeland, anchored in symbols of sexual coercion, such as “raping her soul and having sex with her against her will” (Ghanim, 2016). She asserted that sexually charged language is used in Islamic discourse to express the symbolic meaning of the conquest of the land. Thus, the phrase “the rape of Palestine” indicates an unlawful taking of the land in an act that is symbolized as sexual coercion.

According to Ghanim, sexual images are a common motif used in constructing national identity around the world and are not unique to Palestinian religious or national discourse. In Palestinian poetry, the nation is often compared to a beloved woman who has been taken into captivity. Interwoven images of rape of the motherland, disgraced family honor, and patriarchal sexual motifs in the national discourse have transformed the national liberation project into a male liberation project in which the motherland is portrayed as an abused and passive woman.

Over time, use of sexual imagery has waned in the secular national discourse, but it is still widespread in religious national discourse, in which such imagery is linked to the values of the male-dominant culture, based on a clearly dichotomous worldview of justice-injustice, right-wrong, and male superiority-female inferiority.

Shalhoub-Kevorkian (1999) found that the sociocultural complexity of women’s sexuality in the Arab world has been intensified in the Palestinians’ specific political situation. This population has lived (or perceives themselves as living) under military occupation for decades and they have developed a political legacy characterized by suffering, deportation, dispersion, and political trauma. They have developed fears and anxieties, including narratives concerning sexual abuse of women and girls by the Israelis.

This is supported by past events. During the first intifada (الانتفاضة الفلسطينية الأولى), a widespread, violent Palestinian uprising that began on December 9, 1987, slogans, chants, and media reports described the Palestinian people as a woman defending herself against her rapist or a man overcoming impotence and reclaiming his lost masculinity. More recently, media outlets have referred to the Gaza Strip as being raped by Israel, such as in reports on the destruction and devastation following the conflicts known as Operation Cast Lead (2009) and Operation Protective Edge (2014). The headline “The Rape of Gaza” was used by both *The Nation* (Carey, 2009) and *Al Jazeera* (Eid, 2014) in reporting on Israeli operations undertaken following terrorist attacks (Yoeli, 2022). The choice of such headlines is conscious. The image is chosen to indicate the power relations between Israel and the Palestinians and to illustrate (or exaggerate) the force of the Israeli assault on Gaza, even when there were never any actual cases of rape (Yuali, 2022).

Anthropologist Ari Engelberg (2021) found that placing women at the center of attention in patriarchal societies is not coincidental, because historically they have been viewed as the either maintaining the family’s honor or bringing shame and dishonor if the “enemy” harms them. His studies pointed out a direct territorial parallel with Foucault’s (1976) claim that the act of sexual penetration defines power and class relations in patriarchal societies. In the patriarchal narrative of family honor, there is an assumption that a woman who has sexual relations with a man who is not her husband dishonors herself, her family, and even, as Wikan (2008) suggested, her entire nation.

Nitzan’s (2006) research found a connection between rape during war and other aspects related to the impact on the individual and the group and theories about disgust and contamination (since the victim often feels contaminated by the assault). She interpreted the act of rape during war as an intentional insult to the men who are expected to protect their relatives (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1999) and therefore are branded as weak. Thus, she asserted that rape has implications far beyond the sexual act; the woman’s body becomes a symbolic and literal battlefield on which the war between men is waged (McKinnon, 2005; Tahon-Ashkenazi, 2023). The tortured, penetrated woman’s body, passed from one man to another, symbolizes the ongoing struggle between groups of men for control over territory and resources. Nitzan cited the ruling of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, which found that because victims had been attacked based solely on their group affiliation, the victim was in fact the entire group, not just the individuals. Because, as noted, rape has powerful connotations, rape in a military context is perceived as the rape of an entire nation or community. When soldiers invading a territory commit rape, the conquered women’s bodies symbolize the conquered territory (as in the portrayal of the “occupied territories” in the Palestinian narrative). Therefore, passing abducted women from one man to another (as witnessed in Hamas’ actions on October 7) has significance regarding the “dishonor and humiliation of a conquered community.” In this context, rape has been justified by groups such as Daesh as permissible behavior towards non-believers who refuse to convert to Islam (Ahram, 2015; Paulussen, 2021).

**Sexual Assault in Ideological and Nationalist Rhetoric**

The massacre and sexual assault of October 7, the likes of which Israel had never experienced, took place on the morning of Shabbat and a holiday. It was launched against military posts along the border with Gaza, in civilian communities and settlements, in private homes, in public parks, and the area of a large nature party attended by thousands of young people.

The analysis of Hamas’ sadistic sexual assault presented in this article differs from previously offered analyses and viewpoints. The assault will be shown to have been part of a strategy whose goal was to humiliate the Israeli nation through an act of conquest that dehumanized, debased, and desecrated their victims, body and soul.

Accordingly, it does not refer to:

1. Assault for sexual purposes, because some victims had been stripped of their clothing and their bodies burned, but with no sign that they had been sexually assaulted.
2. Gender-based crime, as it is often termed by women’s organizations (#Metoo, 2023; UN Women, 2023a, 2023b) because there were reports and evidence of sexual crimes against men and boys as well (AP & TOI Staff, 2023; Carmeli, 2023; Cohen, M., 2024a, 2024b; Gettleman et al., 2023a, 2023b; Knesset, 2023a, 2023b; McKernan, 2024; Parry, 2023b; Times of Israel, 2023; Yanko, 2024).

During this sexual assault, the objectification and humiliation of the victims’ bodies were weapons used as part of the battlefield strategy. There was no differentiation between victims based on gender, religion, nationality, or age. Many terrorists carried out the assault, on a large and horrific scale, in a short time, in several places simultaneously, and with similar patterns. This indicates that it was methodically planned and premeditated as one of the goals of the military campaign.

Support for this approach can be found in the opinions of experts on military operations and forensics. It also is supported by the testimonies and interrogations of the terrorists themselves, which revealed that they had orders to do this (“to dirty” their victims) and were given implicit permission for this crime under the guise of religious ideology (Australian Jewish News, 2023; Bohbot, 2023; Fox-Shuvli, 2023; Grinzaig, 2023; Ilani, 2023; Makover-Balikov, 2024; Saxena, 2023). The terrorist organization’s ideological and national goals were not fundamentally related to giving the terrorists enjoyment or satisfaction of their sexual needs, but stemmed from a desire to get revenge, restore honor, subjugate the powerful, break their spirit, tear the social fabric, conquer, and exert control. This was done by documenting and showcasing actions in photographs and video, especially during the early stages of the attack (MacKinnon, 1987; Tahon-Ashkenazi, 2023).

The extremism displayed in the sexual crimes was comparable to the extremism in other war crimes, as documented in the photographs and videos of the attacks and in the forensic findings and investigations: “There were wholesale executions at point blank range, including of children,” according to Dr. Chen Kogel, director of the Israel National Institute of Forensic Medicine (Limor, 2023).

Previous studies have examined “image-based sexual abuse” which involves photographing or filming and distributing intimate sexual images without permission (Hall et al., 2023; Huber, 2023; McGlynn & Rackley, 2017; Paradiso et al., 2023). However, image-based sexual abuse has not previously been studied in the context of war crimes or terrorism, which damage not only the individual victims, but have a cultural impact on the collective and society as a whole. This helps to explain the emotions experienced by Israelis when videos of the killings and sexual crimes were distributed. According to one, literally, “the attack left us with our pants down.”

Following Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s (1999) assertation that the Palestinians do not view rape as a sexual crime but as way to restore their honor, it is possible to derive the opposite perspective that victims bring shame and dishonor to their society, to the point of disrupting the social equilibrium and stability. Thus, the sexual assault against individual Israelis was seen as harming the Israeli collective and its honor. Further, the idea cannot be dismissed that spreading their sperm to impregnate their victims is consistent with such motives or ways of thinking.

Desecrating the victims, body and soul, through this sexual assault, was one of Hamas’ military tactics used to realize its actual and symbolic goals: bringing destruction, fear, humiliation, shame, contamination, degradation to Israeli men and women and thus damage the morale and dignity of Israeli society at large (National Post, 2023; Rubin & Warrick, 2023). Sexual gratification was seen as a secondary perquisite and benefit for the terrorists.

**The Lost Truth**

Gathering evidence on and after October 7 was like trying to do so on a battlefield, given the nature of this large-scale terrorist attack and mass murder that claimed so many lives in such a short time. It differed from most crime scenes, especially those of sexual crimes, in which sterile conditions can be maintained to allow for strictly isolating the perimeter of the scene and maintaining the chain and sequence of events while collecting and documenting forensic evidence to be used in the investigation and prosecution.

The process of gathering and documenting evidence and proof of sexual crimes during this incident in Israel has been criticized. There were “omissions,” due to difficulties in identifying bodies, and missteps in burying some of them. Several days after the massacre, the scenes had been significantly altered by the rescue operations. Evidence had been destroyed or was not properly preserved for legal purposes or to inform the rest of the world of what had happened (Bergman & Giladi, 2023; Gettleman et al., 2023a, 2023b; McKernan, 2024). Emergency forces were deployed across dozens of scenes simultaneously and worked under direct enemy fire and incessant shelling and even at night. Civilian and volunteer rescue forces were called into action because the police and other officials who usually undertake investigations were involved in the combat.

Objectively speaking, the scene of a massacre is always characterized by chaos, panic, uncertainty, shock, and lack of coordination between the various entities. In this case, there were large numbers of bodies, some of which were difficult to identify because they had been severely mutilated, burned, had limbs amputated, or explosive devices placed inside them. Later, it was discovered that in some cases, the remains of several bodies had been misidentified as one person and buried together, due to the condition of the corpses, the crowded conditions, disorganized recording methods, non-standard work practices, incompatibility between computer systems, and lack of use of advanced identification methods such as CT scans (Hakmon, 2023; Sever, 2023a).

Given the chaotic and dangerous situation, identifying the bodies was prioritized over collecting forensic evidence. Those responsible for removing bodies could not be delayed or take the time to carry out an orderly investigation, as would usually be required for sexual crimes. Their response had three main goals. The first was rapid identification of the bodies to understand the scope of the situation and to provide information to the families, given the large number of missing persons and questions regarding who had been killed, injured, or taken hostage. The second goal was protecting the bodies from being desecrated. The third was to bury them as quickly as possible (Bergman & Giladi, 2023).

Even months after the incident, there have only been a few published testimonies by survivors, of either gender, who suffered sexual assault on October 7. Some of those who contacted assistance centers wanted to maintain their privacy (Crissy, 2023; Glazer, 2023; Gettleman et al., 2023a, 2023b; Isaac, 2023; Yasur Beit-Or, 2024). Further, it was not possible to collect first-hand testimonies because so many victims had been killed (during or after the sexual assault) or were kidnapped and are still being held by the terrorists.

Therefore, much of the evidence has come from secondary sources, independently collected and documented by the various entities whose role it was to remove the dead and injured from the scene: rescue forces, the police, ZAKA (the acronym for the Hebrew name for Disaster Victim Identification), Lahav 433 (the unit in the Israel Police responsible for fighting major domestic and international crime), the Institute of Forensic Medicine, the Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency), and medical personnel who performed autopsies (Eichner, 2023a; Ifergan, 2023; Knesset, 2023a, 2023b).

Other evidence of sexual assaults has come from hundreds of surviving eyewitnesses who were present where the atrocities took place, and from civilians and soldiers who served as rescue forces (Baron, 2023, Kan 11, 2023). Additional legal evidence is still being collected from videos recorded by drones, closed-circuit cameras, cameras in vehicles, and traffic cameras in the affected areas. In addition, videos were recorded on the cellphones and bodycams of the terrorists themselves, during and after the assault, some of which they apparently sent to the victims’ family members or posted on social networks (Bayder, 2023). Also, captured terrorists who participated in the massacre gave testimonies and confessions to Israeli intelligence officials (Blumental, 2023; Saxena, 2023).

The evidence indicates widespread sadistic, humiliating, and brutal sexual crimes (Gettleman et al., 2023a, 2023b; Grinzaig, 2023; Guardian, 2024; Jewers, 2023; Knesset, 2023a, 2023b; McKernan, 2024;). The victims ranged from young children to the elderly of both genders (McKernan, 2024). There were gang rapes. Victims were raped in front of family members or spouses. Corpses were raped and sexually assaulted. Victims’ bodies were penetrated with foreign objects and pierced with nails, including in the genitals and groin and the abdomen of pregnant women, injuring the fetus (Beer, 2023; Gettleman et al., 2023a, 2023b; i24 News English, 2023; Kottasová, 2023; Knesset, 2023a, 2023b; McKernan, 2024; Rubin & Warrick, 2023; Saber, 2023a). Victims’ genitals were shot or mutilated to the point that it was not possible to identify their sex. Some were beheaded during the assault; others were shot in the back. In one video, a survivor testified that the terrorists had cut off a victim’s breasts and played with them while joyfully shouting “*Allāhu ʾakbar*” (Eichner, 2023b; Jewers, 2023). Videos show young women, naked from the waist down and bleeding from behind, and bodies sprawled on the ground or piled in the attackers’ vehicles to be abducted to Gaza (Australian, 2023; El Mundo, 2023; Pari, 2023a; Williamson, 2023).

To date, over 1,400 testimonies of sexual assault have been collected and dozens of witnesses have been interviewed, including members of the American press. A comprehensive investigative report was published in the *New York Times* at the end of December 2023, which cross-referenced data from testimonies, films, recordings, GPS locations, and interviews with witnesses, medical personnel, soldiers, and rape counselors (Gettleman et al., 2023a, 2023b).

Additionally, there is accumulating evidence from direct testimonies and secondary reports from freed hostages regarding mutilation of bodies and sexual assaults of men and women taken hostage by Hamas (Aharish, 2024; Ciechanover, 2024; Crissy, 2023; Gettleman et al., 2023a; Hilaie, 2024a, 2024b; Pari, 2023b; Rubin, 2024; Simchayoff, 2024; Yanko, 2024; Zivot, 2023). Similar evidence was received from terrorists affiliated with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad organization who participated in the massacre on October 7 and who were captured in Gaza (Grinzaig, 2023; Zaig, 2023).

In Israel, shortly after the attack, the Civil Commission of October 7 Crimes by Hamas Against Women and Children was established, which is investigating acts of rape and sexual assault committed by the terrorists (Saber, 2023b). This Commission was founded by Cochav Elkayam-Levy of the Institute of International Relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a lawyer and researcher of international law, gender, and human rights. Other members of the Commission include law professor Yifat Bitton and fifteen jurists, activists, criminologists, and researchers from various fields. The Commission is collecting evidence and documentary materials from the day of the massacre and compiling a database of evidence of crimes against women and children. It works in parallel with the investigation unit of Lahav 433, the Israel Women’s Network, and assistance centers (Heller, 2024). In the short term, the Commission may provide information to victims and their families. In the long term, the intention is to establish an archive at Ben-Gurion University that will document the atrocities (Glazer, 2023). Commission members have already begun to make contact and hold meetings with senior officials around the world and in Israel (Carmel, 2023; Sever, 2023a, 2023b; White House, 2023).

**Techniques of Neutralization on the International Scene**

The sexual assault and atrocities perpetrated by Hamas terrorists that targeted civilians fall under the international legal definitions of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and even genocide (Baruch, 2023; Baruch & Caner, 2023; Cohen, A., 2023; UN, 2015). The ongoing silence, denial, justifications, and lack of public condemnation from professional and legal entities and officials, the academic community, and opinion leaders, even in the face of the accumulating documented evidence presented to them, reflects active avoidance of recognizing the sexual assault.

Those who have remained silent include representatives of women’s associations at the United Nations, among them Pramila Patten, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, the international #MeToo movement established to support women’s rights in cases of sexual abuse, assistance centers around the world, the heads of universities and colleges that carry the banner for human rights, and more. All these entities and organizations were expected to express solidarity with victims, on the day of this brutal sexual attack and afterwards (Clancy, 2024; UN Web TV, 2023a).

Moreover, despite the accumulated evidence, international women’s organizations and associations who have recently promoted the idea that it is a social obligation to not publicly cast doubt on or question victims’ stories, nevertheless raised doubts and mistrust, through formal and informal public channels, regarding this case of sexual assault and demanded proof that it occurred (Ginat, 2023; Maltz, 2023; Mehlman Petrzela, 2023). Others, such as the Queen of Jordan (in an interview with CNN), the director of the sexual assault center of the University of Alberta (who signed a pro-Palestinian letter), Knesset Member Iman Khatib-Yassin, international public opinion leaders such as actresses Angelina Jolie, Susan Sarandon, and others, and social media personalities with large followings, such as Gigi Gorgeous Getty and Bella Hadid, have posted pro-Palestinian or anti-Israeli messages justifying the massacre and sexual crimes by Hamas and implied that they were a legitimate response to Israel’s “occupation regime” (Arkin & Dasrath, 2023; CNN, 2023; Knesset, 2023c; New York Post, 2023; Noor Haq & Calzonetti, 2023; Richa, 2023).

In the international academic arena, leading universities such as Harvard, MIT, and University of Pennsylvania have not actively condemned expressions of hatred or acts of racism and incitement towards the Jewish people at large. This includes world-renowned researchers such as Prof. Judith Butler, an important philosopher and theoretician in the field of gender studies, who have spoken out against or criticized the policies and reactions of the State of Israel, while ignoring the terrorists’ actions, in the name of academic liberalism and a desire to portray themselves as moral (Butler, 2023; Guardian, 2023; Wolfson, 2023). There have been large and vocal pro-Palestinian demonstrations and actions, which have been met with silence or weak responses from the authorities, under the guise of democracy and academic freedom of speech (C-Span, 2023a, 2023b).

Additionally, pro-Palestinian groups around the world have expressed sympathy, or at least understanding, for Hamas’ terrorism and massacre, claiming that it “did not happen in a vacuum,” in the words of the UN Secretary-General (NDTV, 2023; UN Secretary-General, 2023). Others expressed a lenient attitude towards Hamas yet strongly condemned Israel’s military action as “disproportionate” and falling under the definition of war crimes or genocide. Such reactions were heard from citizens and leaders of democratic countries across Europe, the USA and several South American countries that severed diplomatic ties with Israel or made gestures of diplomatic protest (Boric Font, 2023; Chiappa, 2023; Ramos, 2023; Rueda & Suarez, 2023; Reuters, 2023; Speck et al., 2023).

Furthermore, in January 2024, three months after the attack, South Africa brought a case against State of Israel at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, claiming that during the military campaign in Gaza, Israel was committing war crimes against civilians. This was done without evidence upholding the accusation, while the same international forum has completely ignored war crimes, massacre, and sexual terrorism committed by Hamas on October 7 (UN Web TV, 2023b).

This anti-Israel rhetoric from entities around the world and their silence regarding rising racism and antisemitism is destructive. For the victims, the silence of the organizations that represent victims of sexual crimes, such as assistance centers, women’s associations, and the #MeToo movement, means they have been abandoned by the very organizations that were established for the purpose of protecting and preserving human rights in general, and opposing crime against women and children, in particular. This lack of empathy and trust, in place of the expected support, shocked Israeli society and left them with a deep sense of betrayal and isolation.

A possible explanation for this lies in the difficulty of changing the narrative regarding the identity of the victim and victimizer.

Pro-Palestinian entities perceive the Jewish people, and certainly the Israeli public, as privileged White colonialist victimizers, while viewing the Palestinian people, in contrast, as victims and a disempowered minority. In the name of sanctifying the victim, it is difficult for many global public opinion-makers to condemn Hamas as a terrorist organization that has committed particularly inhumane and cruel acts. Recognizing their actions as war crimes would create cognitive dissonance and the need to change a deeply held narrative that has been a long-held “sacred paradigm.”

Therefore, the terrorist attack has received public sympathy, including from organizations that fight for human rights, because they believe that Israel “deserved what they got” for victimizing the Palestinian people, and therefore should be held responsible for the massacre and attack. As a result, the established narrative of who is the victim and who is the victimizer, who is good and who is bad, remains unchanged, requires no revision, allowing for a false legitimatization of actions that should be inconceivable to any humane and moral mind.

Mechanisms such as rationalization, minimization, and denial are being used. Matza and Sykes (1957) called these “techniques of neutralization” intended to justify actions and soothe the guilty conscience of the perpetrators or, as in the current case, the conscience of those who support the perpetrators (Cramer, 2000; Di Giuseppe & Perry, 2021). These techniques enable people around the world to maintain their preexisting images and narratives of good and evil, by treating the criminal and deviant acts as appropriate, moral, and in accordance with accepted social values, and thus removing moral responsibility for their inherent evil. Thus, they have resorted to various neutralization techniques such as denying the existence of the victim, denying the injury, condemning the condemners, and appealing to higher values. Another neutralization technique is blaming the victim, which transfers responsibility and blame for the harm to the victim (Harber et al., 2015; Moriarty, 2008). However, using these techniques does not end deviance and crime, but rather the opposite; it enables continuation of criminal behavior (Matza & Sykes, 1957).

To counter this trend, Israel has launched an information campaign and disseminated videos and testimonies of the massacre, including the sexual assault. Initially, this was done in a supervised and targeted manner, after which the information reached the general public through social media and social networks. This is intended to increase awareness and reduce manifestations of antisemitism and attempting to bring about a change in global public opinion (Frankel, 2023; Poris, 2023).

The support or passive reactions towards this sexual assault is analogous to the personal experiences of many victims of sexual abuse during non-war times, who struggle for recognition, from society and the legal system, of the very existence of the crime. Neutralization techniques are widespread social reactions to cases of sexual abuse, as well part of a legal strategy used by the defense during the criminal procedures to transfer guilt to the victim. Thus, an individual who has been sexually assaulted often feels betrayed and isolated in the face of the severe harm experienced and others’ reactions to it. Similarly, Israeli society experienced painful emotions in the face of the widespread reactions to the massacre and sexual assault.

**Taken Hostage, Body and Soul**

As noted, the sexual assault on October 7, 2023, was carried out in a systematic, brutal, public, and ostentatious manner with the goal of inflicting humiliation, shame, and conquest of the Israeli nation through the desecration of individual victims, body and soul. The sexual crimes involved extreme brutal physical violence such as cutting and amputation of genitals, rape until the victim’s pelvis was broken, and gang rape (Gettleman et al., 2023a, 2023b; Jewers, 2023; Knesset, 2023b). The vast majority of the attacks ended with the brutal murder of the victims and then, to add to the humiliation and dishonor, corpses were burned, beheaded, raped, had their pants pulled down and were penetrated with a gun and shot, and more (Haddad, 2023; Schifrin et al., 2023). All this was done with euphoria, enthusiasm, shouts of joy, and religious chants by the terrorists.

The sexual assault took place in public, in front of witnesses including spouses and family members. It was photographed, filmed, and in some cases shared with the relatives of the victims or uploaded to social networks in real time, as part of the humiliation. Evidence such as photographs and clothing with blood stains in the genital area indicate, with a high degree of certainty, that the hostages were also sexually assaulted. The fear of unwanted pregnancies from rape in captivity led to the development of a program dedicated to connecting the medical and psychological caregivers who will treat returning hostages, some of whom may be pregnant, and even in advanced stages of pregnancy from sexual assault by Hamas terrorists during captivity (Cohen, M., 2024a, 2024b). Given the unprecedented nature of this incident, there is no opportunity to learn from other similar situations. Accordingly, it is necessary to describe the distinctive and complex characteristics of sexual assault survivors in general.

**Multiple Levels of Trauma**

Sexual assault is recognized in the research literature as an unexpected traumatic event, which poses a threat to the individuals’ mental or physical wellbeing and disrupts their basic life perspective (source). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1991), the higher the level of threat, and the lower availability and compatibility of resources such as personal resilience, sense of coherence, and social support, the stronger the post-traumatic response to the event will be. Research has shown that one of the most severe and traumatic consequences of invasive sexual assault is victims’ feeling of being dehumanized, that the attacker saw them not as a person but as an object to satisfy his own desires, while completely ignoring the victims’ basic needs (Moor 2017; Moor et al., 2013).

In the current case, there is evidence that the hostages were forced to wear inappropriate clothes or dolls’ clothes (Cohen, M., 2024a, 2024b; Hilaie, 2024c). The desecration, humiliation, disdain, humiliation, objectification, and indifference to their suffering or pain leaves victims feeling bereft of human dignity at the deepest level (Kamir, 2004). Thus, victims of sexual abuse, especially when it is frightening or threatening, often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which includes intrusive thoughts, hyperarousal, and avoidance (Herman, 1992). Sexual assault that involved severe physical and mental pain is among the experiences that bring the most serious traumatic effects. Moreover, in the current case, the assault took place in the midst of a chaotic battle scene, which also evoked extreme feelings of lack of control and helplessness.

These characteristics created multiple levels of trauma, further exacerbated among victims who were taken hostage after the sexual assault, placing them in a situation with a high risk of repeated sexual assaults during captivity, and the threat of pregnancy from rape (Cohen, M., 2023). The ongoing sense lack of control and helplessness intensifies the trauma and its consequences. In such cases, victims may develop complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), a psychological disorder that is a response to a prolonged and repeated experience of interpersonal trauma in a context where the victim has no chance of preventing the abuse or escaping the situation (Herman, 1992). Released hostages described such a situation (for themselves and on behalf of those still in captivity), of constant and continuous fear of sexual harm; there is evidence that this did in fact occur in some cases (Hilaie, 2024c; Stahl et al., 2023; 60 Minutes, 2023).

**Personal Trauma Subsumed into Collective Trauma**

Victims’ personal trauma may be overshadowed by the collective trauma following the October 7 massacre, so that it is not being given sufficient space and attention in the victims’ world. While in routine times, sexual abuse is a major event in victims’ lives, in this case, the intimate, individual, and personal experiences of sexual abuse were assimilated into and swallowed up by the national disaster. Their personal trauma may be perceived as an aspect of the attack and another “tool” the terrorists used to achieve their nationalist goal. The terrorists treated every victim as an object to potentially achieve their goal of conquering and desecrating the Israeli nation, body and soul. The victims themselves may minimize their personal sexual assault in comparison to the national disaster.

This perception is rooted in an awareness of the heavy toll of human life on that day, and that unsuccessful efforts to save people including vulnerable populations such as the elderly, people with special needs, children, and infants, who also experienced brutal abuse and atrocities before and after being killed. Israeli society was overwhelmed with trauma, mourning, and unbearably difficult feelings of helplessness, lack of control, existential insecurity, loss of trust, deep humiliation, and anger. The lack of recognition and trust from international women’s organizations and the UN regarding the sexual assault intensified the pain. Israel was operating under and emergency government. People felt great anxiety and uncertainty about the hostages and the military operations, including failed ones, to find and rescue them. There was chaos regarding the identification of those who had been killed. Residents from the settlements around Gaza and the northern border region were being evacuated for an unknown length of time. Professional entities such as the medical services, welfare services, and therapists were overburdened with the need to help and support survivors. Reservists throughout the country were being called up to defend their homeland. Much of the country was under continuous and intense rocket and missile fire from Gaza.

**Personal Sacrifice in the Service of the Collective**

Collective trauma is a response to a traumatic event that affects an entire society or community. The tragedy is represented in the collective memory. Like all forms of memory, this includes a reconstruction of events and ongoing reconstruction of the trauma in an attempt to understand it. Over time, collective trauma becomes a focus of group identity and the way in which group members understand their environment (Hirschberger, 2018).

Dealing with this collective trauma became a social and political priority of the State of Israel and the Jewish people. The attitude towards the massacre and sexual assault converged with the urgent need for an information campaign that would mobilize sympathy and empathy, provoke international condemnation of the acts of terrorism, support efforts to bring the hostages home, and combat racism and antisemitism around the world. In addition, there was a need to gather testimonies and evidence that could be used in legal criminal procedures, and for historical records of the incident. In such a reality, preoccupation with the collective trauma has inevitably obscured personal trauma, which is not being given sufficient attention. This can be seen in how the scene of the assault was treated as a war zone in a way that disrupted the collection of forensic evidence regarding specific victims.

There was image-based abuse through the widespread dissemination of images of physical, psychological, and intimate injuries, both as part of the planned actions of those who carried out the attack, and in media coverage of the incident. On social media networks, photographs and videos were disseminated of living and dead victims and hostages taken to Gaza who were said to have been sexually assaulted. A widely distributed video showed many of the sexual attacks and atrocities. The *New York Times* published an investigative report that identified a victim of a brutal rape who was then murdered, with a link to a video of the incident (“the woman in the black dress”) that went viral around the world, without her family’s knowledge (Turjeman, 2003). There has been preoccupation on social networks and in the media with videos from the attack, uploaded by the terrorists or by witnesses to the horrific scenes, in which half-naked women or those bleeding from the genital area can be seen.

Another area in which personal trauma has been blurred into the common domain emerged from interviews with returned hostages. One young woman who returned from captivity described, in a candid and painful interview, how a terrorist touched her upper body. The interviewer described this as “sharing a secret” although it was done publicly and said that “the silence between the words and in the eyes say everything, and we as viewers must also understand what is not said in words” (Gal, 2023; Veroslavski, 2023).

Thus, the personal experiences of the victims of sexual crime have become public, which intensified the emotional damage, and the sense of loss of dignity, privacy, and sexual autonomy.

In this context, a difficult debate has emerged, reflecting the problematic nature of collective versus private attitudes towards survivors of sexual assault. In a meeting with the Israel Ministry of Health and Israeli women’s associations, the Israel Police requested data about survivors who went to hospitals and welfare departments for assistance. Their goal was to create a database of direct evidence to be used by the criminal system (Efrati, 2023). However, representatives of the medical and therapeutic system and aid associations opposed this because victims are dealing with severe trauma and must be given the necessary time to recover. This may even come at the expense of the national interest of collecting data for the criminal procedure that will allow the terrorist incident to be recognized as a war crime and a crime against humanity.

**An Open Case**

The lack of legal and social recognition of the abuse experienced by victims is a direct result of the lack of a criminal procedure. When sexual assault is committed outside a war context, victims can file a complaint and request the state bring perpetrators to trial and punish them for their actions. The criminal procedure, which includes the prosecutor’s office filing an indictment, holding a trial, making a verdict, and the court issuing a sentence for punishment if it determines that the offender is guilty, show official recognition by the state and society that a crime was committed and was harm done. This allows the victim to begin the process of recovery and rehabilitation and to regain a sense of control and trust in the systems, as noted by law professor and founder of the Israeli Association for Victimology, Dana Pugach (2024). The restorative justice approach, based on the perpetrator confessing and being held responsible for criminal actions, allows victims to regain a sense of control and close the circle through discourse and active involvement in the process (Hadar & Gal, 2023; Koss & Achilles, 2008).

However, victims of the sexual assault on October 7 cannot initiate criminal proceedings for the crimes that were committed against them, due to the paucity of forensic evidence from the field and the inability to make a legal link between the existing evidence and individual cases. In addition, in many cases, the offender was killed or is not present.

In the absence of formal or social recognition of the sexual assault, there is no opportunity to “close the circle,” which is of utmost importance for the recovery process and psychological coping of the survivors and the victims’ families, who are secondary victims. It is anticipated that eventually sufficient evidence will be collected to initiate legal criminal proceedings in an international court, whose purpose will be to recognize the sexual assaults as war crimes and crimes against humanity. However, even then, victims’ testimonies will be made against the terrorist organization, not against the individuals who directly harmed them.

Moreover, criminal proceedings brought by victims usually take place in a country or region where the victim feels a sense of belonging and security. In contrast, in an international court, the victims may have to give testimony in a foreign country, the case often lasts a long time, and it has international visibility and significance. These factors may increase the psychological damage and re-traumatization to victims as they must reconstruct the assault and face cross-examination and doubts raised by the defense.

Every trauma leaves a record in the brain stem (Van Der Kolk, 1994; Yehuda, 2002). Thus, people who have experienced trauma, especially those who suffer from PTSD, may become anxious and overwhelmed when encountering internal or external stimuli associated with the stimuli that were registered in their brain at the time of the traumatic event. A doctor’s examination for treatment, a police investigation for the purpose of gathering evidence, or giving legal testimony, regardless of the degree of consideration with which they are conducted, may cause re-traumatization of the event.

**Through the Dark Mountains: Reflections and Challenges**

**Barriers to Appealing for Assistance**

Sexual assault in general is characterized by underreporting, among other reasons due to the sense of guilt and shame that the victim often feels (Peleg‐Koriat & Klar-Chalamish, 2023). There are multiple barriers to the victims of this case of sexual assault during war to come forward with their stories so they can receive emotional support and treatment. Therefore, it is important to develop proactive mechanisms to assist in locating survivors and encouraging them to apply for assistance as early as possible, since treatment is critical for processing the trauma, developing ways of dealing with the emotional distress in the short term, and reducing the risk of the development of pathologies. Without treatment, there is a high risk that survivors and their families will develop C-PTSD, which has long-lasting and serious mental and emotional consequences, including the risk of addictions, depression, dissociative identity disorder, and even suicide (Brewin, 2020; Kizilhan, 2018; Somer & Somer, 1997; World Health Organisation, 2018).

According to reports, aid centers in Israel have helped only a few of the victims who managed to survive the inferno. Some have turned to them for information but have not yet expressed their willingness to receive treatment. It is likely that there are many more survivors who, at this point, do not wish to seek professional help. It is expected that it may take several years before some survivors are able to discuss the traumatic sexual assault (Isaac, 2023 citing an interview with Yifat Bitton). There are multiple reasons for this.

**Barriers Related to the Victim**. Many victims disconnect, distance, and isolate themselves from people in their surroundings because they do not think that anyone will understand their pain and will be able to help or comfort them. They may feel defiled, polluted, damaged, experience a sense of disgust with the body, ongoing pain and suffering, and even a loss of meaning in life.

The intentional and documented humiliation and dehumanization involved in these crimes may have created powerful feelings of shame and humiliation for victims, which could be a significant barrier for the survivors to seek help. When attacks are brutal, involve multiple attackers, and are aimed at older men or women, as in the present case, the element of shame increases, and so do the barriers to seeking help.

Another barrier may be survivors’ guilt because they are still alive while hundreds of others were murdered. This subjective perception may cause victims to minimize the sexual assault and its psychological consequences. Some survivors remain in a dissociative state regarding the sexual assault. This defense mechanism helps survivors continue to function despite the complex traumatic experience. However, survivors may be disconnected from any memory of the event. Dissociative mechanisms are described in the literature as defenses against severe trauma. They can manifest in a variety of forms such as loss of sense of time or place, disconnection from the physical body and a sense of observing oneself from the outside, creating an imaginary world and objects for reference, false thoughts, auditory hallucinations, multiple identities, forgetfulness and amnesia, disassociation, and more (Putnam, 1993).

Chronic dissociation may develop into dissociative identity disorder, a severe psychopathology that manifests as separate personality identities existing side by side. This may lead to depression, extreme mood swings, behavior changes, anxiety attacks, eating disorders, depersonalization disorder, and even suicidal tendencies (Kizilhan, 2018; Somer & Somer, 1997). In some cases, delayed PTSD develops as a result of the dissociation mechanisms that serve as defense against trauma. This may arise in full force in response to a subsequent threatening event or loss.

**Barriers Related to External Influences**. Recorded testimonies and evidence, such as a photographs or videos recorded at the time of the attack that have been viewed repeatedly on the internet and media channels can intensify feelings of humiliation and shame, leave survivors exposed, and make them feel unable to regain control over their lives. This recreates and even exacerbates the trauma.

Another barrier is silence, mistrust, and lack of condemnation of the sexual assault from public opinion leaders, in particular those from women’s organizations around the world. Those who were expected to believe them without question, have instead created additional and complex emotional barriers for the survivors to deal with, given the delegitimization, lack of recognition, and public distrust regarding the sexual abuse they experienced.

The media and public have become preoccupied with the sexual crimes for various reasons such as increasing international publicity, gathering evidence and testimonies for criminal proceedings, and leveraging pressure to return the hostages. However, this may create a barrier for the survivors due to their fear of being identified. It is essential for them to be able to remain anonymous and to protect their privacy. Some may feel reluctance or lack of emotional strength to serve as witnesses in an international court, as this would essentially require them to be a tool in service of the national and international collective and thus may be yet another situation in which they feel objectified.

Therefore, it is essential to maintain the privacy of sexual assault victims to the greatest extent possible. The request by the Israel Police and Ministry of Health to receive information from hospitals about sexual assault survivors infringed on the victims’ autonomy and privacy. This could harm their rehabilitation process and lead to further withdrawal and deterioration of their emotional and mental state, since recovery requires rebuilding the sense of control that they lost during the attack. It could also discourage other victims from reaching out for help, due to fear of exposure.

Therefore, there is a need to minimize the voyeuristic, invasive, and lurid public discourse, which involves sharing testimonies, photographs, graphic descriptions, and penetrating investigations on social media. This intrudes on survivors’ privacy, and must be limited, even at the expense of gathering testimonies and legal evidence. It must be recognized that the ordeal that the victims and their families have endured is intimate and personal, while the public attitude towards it is collective.

**Harm Circles**

**Secondary Trauma.** The families of victims who were killed and who suffered sexual assault are at a high risk of developing secondary trauma. This phenomenon occurs among people in a trauma victim’s immediate social environment, especially among family members. It can manifest as recurrent avoidance, sensory numbness, and burnout (Figley, 1995a, 1995b). The emotions of secondary trauma victims are similar, though not identical, to those of the primary trauma victim. Figley (1995a, 1995b) described secondary traumatic stress disorder, in which people close to the direct victim suffer due to a process of empathy and identification. Family members feel pain, rage, helplessness, humiliation, worry, anxiety about subsequent harm, and guilt.

In the current case, family members might have to support a woman who is pregnant as a result of rape, and this hardship could make it difficult for them to respond to the victim’s needs. This could impair victims’ support system, deepen their sense of guilt, and worsen the consequences of the trauma. While trauma victims may suffer from PTSD, secondary trauma victims may suffer from secondary traumatic stress (STS) (Baird & Jenkins, 2003).

Another harm circle involves eyewitnesses, who also need emotional support and assistance to avoid developing pathologies. Witnesses may also be in a dissociative state regarding sexual crimes, memories of which may surface later. Yet another circle that needs to be approached proactively includes soldiers and members of rescue organizations, forensic medical teams, and ZAKA, who are at high risk of re-traumatization given the difficult scenes they encountered repeatedly in the field.

The media and public discourse about the sexual assault that occurred as part of this war and about the ongoing sexual abuse of the hostages, may cause recurring trauma among people who have experienced sexual abuse in the past. They may experience functional and emotional regression and a resurgence of traumatic symptoms. Exposure to the current sexual assault may cause an obsessive preoccupation with the subject and flashbacks of their own abuse. They may identify with the sense of chaos and lack of control, the sense that life is meaningless, the unconscious preoccupation with socio-criminal behavior, the blaming of the victims, the threatened and actual sexual abuse of the hostages, and more (Sperber, 2023).

**Methods of Treatment**

Israeli professionals working in the field must be prepared to provide psychological assistance to people in all these various circles, both in terms of detection and treatment. Since an incident like this has never before been encountered, professionals must develop methods for dealing with it “on the fly.” Cooperative work among government entities and professional civil entities such as aid centers, Elem (Youth in Distress), the Haruv Institute, and others, will allow responses from professionals who have significant practical and research experience on various aspects of detection and treatment.

It will be necessary to provide comprehensive care and the most appropriate responses and treatment methods, like intensive care units in hospital. For example, dedicated emergency hotlines, treatment for unwanted pregnancies, and more. Due to evidence of ongoing sexual abuse of hostages – men, women, and children – during captivity, examinations of must be carried out sensitively and professionally. Investigators and intelligence personnel must receive dedicated training to help them adapt investigations and examinations of people who have undergone complex sexual trauma. In the long term, it will be necessary to provide psychotherapists with targeted training in treating sexual trauma. Such training should enable them to work with victims on issues such as processing traumatic memories, emotional disclosure, and reclaiming a sense of self and personhood. They must be able to maintain beneficial and respectful therapeutic relationships in order to become a healing force in the process of recovery from feelings of humiliation and loss of sense of self. This will allow the victims’ personal narratives to be fully validated in a way that will restore their sense of self-efficacy and value, and to develop positive thoughts and self-perceptions. This should be done without judgment or interpretation, to help victims regain a sense of empowerment and control.

There will also be an urgent need to provide support for caregivers. It will be necessary for professionals to offer each other mutual support, to process their experiences of providing treatment, to alleviate the distress they feel as caregivers, and to share their emotions among a group of colleagues and peers. Such dialogue has a positive effect on returning to normalcy, increasing the sense of professional cohesion, alleviating isolation, and assisting in emotional processing.

As a general rule, especially in light of the missteps, errors, disruptions, insights, and lessons learned, there is a need to establish structured procedures and protocols for the various entities and at the systemic level. These must be included in the training and certification of all parties involved in situations such as these. They must be tested in practice and updated in accordance with the lessons learned during investigations, in related research, and in accordance with professional and technological developments over time.

Additionally, given the high level of distress in Israel, which overwhelmed psychiatric services even before October 7, a track dedicated to this topic should be founded in Israeli medical schools, with conditions that enable them to be integrated by Israeli students who study abroad. Thus, these students will become a significant workforce available to the public in the future.

The state should allocate adequate and ongoing resources to fund these various supports and enable these critical measures to be undertaken.

**Formal Recognition**

There is a need for state actions offering formal recognition of these victims of sexual crimes and/or their families as “casualties of hostile actions by enemy forces.” For example, special legislation should be passed that would provide resources, supervision, and treatments (like those provided for Holocaust survivors), national insurance, tax breaks, and recognition by the Israel Ministry of Defense and National Insurance Institute as casualties of hostilities. This should be done even while evidence and testimonies of sexual crimes are still being collected. Formal recognition should be based on trust and does not need to be evidence-based (in contrast to PTSD victims, who must undergo investigations and a cumbersome bureaucratic procedure). This recognition is essential, both for receiving actual assistance in the complex recovery process and to help the survivors of this sexual assault begin a therapeutic recovery process.

**Formal Recognition through a Criminal Procedure**. As noted, much objective forensic evidence of these brutal sexual crimes was lost or damaged at the scene or even buried. Bodies of those who were murdered were not accurately identified and recorded, the massacre scenes were contaminated, forensic-level findings and evidence of the sexual assault were not collected, and evidence of the atrocities and crimes against humanity were not adequately preserved (Bergman & Giladi, 2023; Gettleman et al., 2023a, 2023b).

At the same time, there is a need to imitate a criminal court case that will recognize the atrocities as war crimes and crimes against humanity. International recognition of Hamas as a terrorist organization that has committed war crimes and crimes against humanity that are among the most horrendous the world has ever known is important for multiple reasons. On the individual level, it is necessary to give the many victims a sense of justice. On the national level, it is necessary to ensure that this kind of attack does not happen again. On the social level, it is needed to help start a collective recovery process that will allow for the “rebirth” of an entire people. Again, it should be emphasized that despite the need for a comprehensive investigation, when balancing between the needs of the investigation and the victims’ need for rehabilitation and recovery, the priority clearly must be that of the victims’ wellbeing.

**Remembrance and Commemoration**. The massacre on October 7, including the horrific sexual assault, was the greatest disaster that the State of Israel has experienced since its founding. To make the victims’ voices heard, to remember and not to forget, the evidence and testimonies must be documented and presented to the world, in a controlled and approved manner. There is an obligation to engage in collecting, sorting, preserving, and historical documentation of videos and other evidence and findings from the various scenes of the attack, with communication and coordination between the various entities.

**Changing the Narrative to Reduce Racism around the World**

It is our responsibility to maintain international awareness of this event, even during normal times (whenever they return) and to change the narrative in public opinion. This should be viewed as a way to deal with manifestations around the world of racism, antisemitism, and hatred towards the Jewish people. This is needed in the face of the silence, lack of condemnation, and denial from leaders, organizations, and academic institutions around the world towards, among other things, the sexual crimes. This attack was a serious violation of human rights, and could cause ripples of destruction across society and even to humanity as a whole. In particular, this struggle must be sharply brought to the attention of women’s organizations, due to their representative status, and in order to preserve recent global achievements at the public-social level and at the legal level. In this context, these organizations must be loyal to their values and ethics of gender equality, regardless of their political views. Universal morality should be an absolute value to light the way for all countries of the world, and not only a choice group, favored according to a political narrative.

Emotional reactions can be long-lasting in rehabilitation on the individual level. We must believe in the coping powers of the individual, in the skills and abilities that enable resilience. With care, empathy, a sense of inclusion, family, and social support, and the power of the community to rehabilitate and support each other, there is hope that a life beyond pain and survival will be possible. Although the memory of this traumatic event will never be forgotten, there may be a possibility that victims will be able to recover from the trauma and even achieve a satisfying and full life.

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