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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Return of Islamic Rhetoric: Hamas and Conflict Framing in the Gaza War 2023-2024

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ABSTRACT: The speeches of Abū 'Ubayda, the spokesperson for Hamas' military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, are one of the key aspects of the 2023–2024 war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas. Abū 'Ubayda came to be viewed as the "voice of the *umma*" and the Palestinian people, receiving extensive media coverage, including Al-Jazeera. This article analyzes his speeches as a discursive phenomenon in terms of rhetoric (performative vs. informative), structure (opening, middle, and closing), and meaning (framing the war as a religious conflict). Here, it is argued that Abū 'Ubayda's primary objective was to use the performative rhetoric of framing, asserting, and support-calling to portray the conflict as a religious war of al-Aqsa's liberation while omitting local realities and specifics on the ground. The reintroduction of religious rhetoric to the Arab-Muslim public discourse and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is likely to make positions more entrenched and uncompromising.

KEYWORDS: Islamic rhetoric, Hamas, Abū 'Ubayda, conflict framing, discourse.

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1. Introduction

Religious rhetoric can be defined as arguments, metaphors, symbols, or words that have a sacred or authoritative meaning for a given audience and are typically found in religious texts or hagiography. Religious-political groups, including militant Islamist groups, tend to use religious rhetoric during conflict or hostilities as a persuasive and/or propaganda tool; Abū 'Ubayda's rhetoric is a case of religious rhetoric employed during hostilities for both objectives (Abū Duhayr et al., 2024). Political leaders in powerful and secular countries can also use religious rhetoric, as we have seen in George W. Bush J.'s case, to appeal to voters and form his views on foreign policy (Turek, 2014). Religious rhetoric can also be used as a

psychological warfare tactic to make the opponent doubtful and afraid, or it can be used as a shocking propaganda device to draw in and enlist people, as the case of ISIS illustrates (Salazar, 2017). Additionally, it can be employed as a mobilizing technique to encourage people to keep lending their support (Dakhlallah, 2006). As militants attempt to align their political messaging with the requirements of religious authority, it can also serve as a weapon for legitimacy (Dunning, 2016).

The main political conflicts in the Muslim world during the 20th and 21st centuries have been accompanied very often by religious rhetoric. If we concentrate on the Middle East, Nasser's speeches against Israel and Western imperialism included religious rhetoric, and his mobilization of the Islamic vocabulary and appeal to Islamic solidarity and Muslim nations, despite his secular views, were crucial (Nasr, 1996). During the Gulf War (1990-1991), Saddam Hussein also used a similar religious rhetoric. Saddam's rhetoric attempted to revive Saladin, an attempt shared with Nasser (Rowell, 2009). Initially, Saddam Hussein and the Ba'th party considerably "Islamized" their rhetoric during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) as a reaction to Khomeini's Islamic rhetoric. Saddam not only used Islamic rhetoric for his wars but also to convert the Ba'th secular ideology into using Islamic discourse (Bengio, 1998: 176-191). Saddam Hussein, prior to the war of Kuwait, during his invasion of Kuwait (Long 2004), and later, continued to employ Islamic references, including affixing the phrase "Allāhu Akbar" [God is the Greatest] on the Iraqi national flag (Baram, 2002). He also used the Quranic punishing stone (*hijāra*) to name the missiles he fired at Israel (Bengio, 1998). Religious rhetoric can serve as a tactic designed to respond to opponents who are mobilizing religious arguments in support of their political position as well as a permanent strategy in alignment with one's ideological convictions. For example, Saddam's speeches, which combined Islamic and Arab symbols with a conspiracist perspective, were written in a heterogeneous way to encourage the many Iraqi factions and parties to rally around the Iraqi government (Gray, 2010). A few years later, Osama Bin Laden rose to prominence as a star of Islamic rhetoric, with thick religious references in his statements, continuing a long tradition of anti-colonial attitudes and criticism of Israel and the United States (Emig and Schumacher, 2024). Bin Laden has been shown to be like Bush in using religious rhetoric to establish a dichotomy between "us" and "them" (Cronick, 2002). During the Arab Spring, Sunni and Shi'ite rhetoric was instrumental to political mobilization in Egypt and elsewhere (Saleh and Kraetzschmar, 2015). All these discursive events have at some time gained popularity and turned into rhetorical phenomena, demonstrating the susceptibility of a considerable population in the Middle East to religious rhetoric. Yet, as mentioned, political allusions to religion are not exclusive to politicized Muslims and Islam; American presidencies or Israeli political figures often use biblical references in their political discourse. In the US case, religious rhetoric and anti-Catholicism influenced Americans' experiences at home and during the invasion of Mexico (Pinheiro, 2014). A study of American presidents' use of religious and moral rhetoric across time concludes that political context influences how presidents employ it (Shogan, 2006). Image rehabilitation has also motivated the Democratic Party's use of religious rhetoric in the US in the 2000s, to change the image held by many voters about Democrats being indifferent to religious matters (Kaylor, 2011).

2. Theoretical discussion

Islamic rhetoric is a crucial component of Arabic-Islamic political culture and communication; it stays while orators come and go. For this reason, researchers must study its structure and function to gain a better understanding of political thought and discourse in the Muslim world. It is also important to highlight that as religious rhetoric is already prevalent in the public realm, especially in the USA and the Middle East, the chance of its employment in political disputes increases. To put it another way, religious rhetoric in politics grows on its foundation in media discourse, education, and religious institutions and extends to wars and

conflicts. As demonstrated by Saddam Hussein and American evangelicals, secularization does not in and of itself stop the spread of religious rhetoric.

Palestinian leaders have also employed Islamic rhetoric in their speeches during the past century, both in nationalist movements like Fatah and Islamist movements like Hamas. However, prior to October 7, 2023, academic research on Hamas did not emphasize the element of religious rhetoric in its framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or, more specifically, did not see the radical-apocalyptic branch of the organization seizing power and starting a significant war. Instead, the literature focused on Hamas's governance, the precariousness of its Gazan semi-state, and its pursuit of legitimacy in the Palestinian, Arab, and international arenas, all of which are based on the group's actions since it seized control of Gaza in 2007 (Brenner, 2021; Alijla, 2021; Seurat, 2022).

No Palestinian leader has achieved Abū 'Ubayda's level of success when it comes to the use of Islamic rhetoric, as Magued also discusses when explaining the on-line mobilization of ordinary Egyptians in her contribution to this special issue, and this article focuses on its potent return. Abū 'Ubayda's speeches have become widely popular in the Arab world ('Abd al-'Azīz, 2024), much like Saddam Hussein's rhetorical triumph in his day; most of Abū 'Ubayda's speeches were seen by millions of people. This popularity motivated the research for this study, which aims to understand and discuss this rhetoric as structure, function and meaning. To achieve this goal, framing discourse, that is presenting opponents as completely different (Tannen, 1993; Goffman, 1974), provides the most relevant theoretical ground for this study. In particular, Wagemakers' research on framing as it relates to Islamic movements is pertinent to Abū 'Ubayda's speeches. Thus, frames enable the portrayal of individuals, groups and events through the lens of an individual's worldview (Wagemakers, 2008). Three essential framing activities have been identified for successful frame alignment: diagnosing the issue, predicting the best course of action, and issuing a call to action (Wagemakers, 2008). Few variables can also contribute to the significance of a frame for a given audience: the centrality of a frame in relation to the beliefs of an audience; the degree to which the frame is congruent with the target audience's everyday experiences (experiential commensurability); and the extent to which the frame resonates with people's cultural, religious, and national ideas (narrative fidelity) (Wagemakers, 2008, 10).

This article derives its theoretical coherence from the theory of frames (Goffman, 1974) and its development in the works of Snow and Benford. Snow argues that framing describes the signifying work or meaning construction that movement supporters (such as leaders, activists, and rank-and-file participants) and other actors (such as opponents, institutional elites, media, social control agents, and counter-movements) put in place in relation to the goals and the obstacles movements face in the pursuit of those goals. In Snow's view, frames display three core functions. First, they focus attention on specific aspects by drawing lines between what lies inside the frame and what remains outside of it. Second, frames serve as articulation mechanisms as they connect the frame's numerous punctuated pieces, allowing one set of meanings to be communicated instead of another. Third, frames have a transformative function as they rearrange the way some objects of attention are perceived or comprehended (Snow, 2013). Religious framing of a conflict helps in making distinctions between us and them. Additionally, the religious framing, which exhibits a certain coherence and depth in history and culture, articulates the political claims and grievances of a movement (in this case, Hamas) in a transformative manner, rendering the conflict apocalyptic and transcending geopolitical realism.

Moreover, Benford and Snow contend that social movements create what they refer to as collective action frames. According to them, the three main framing duties are "diagnostic framing" (identifying problems and assigning blame), "prognostic framing," and "motivational framing." They also discussed a few variable aspects of collective action frames, including problem identification and direction/locus of attribution,

flexibility and rigidity, inclusivity and exclusivity, and resonance (Benford and Snow, 2000). When combined, these ideas help explain how religious rhetoric presents conflicts. Using religious symbols and traditions to inspire the intended audience and a call for action, the battle is framed as one between believers and non-believers, with the solution typically being to eradicate or destroy the latter. In the process, movements use exclusive identification, while the appeal may strike a chord with an audience that opposes secularization and/or suffers from injustice.

Furthermore, our approach is sensitive to political sociology because it looks at discourse as mobilization, even though it concentrates more on the meaning and structure of religious rhetoric than on political action. Primarily, we consider Islamist discourse to be: 1. religious and political rhetoric that urges action 2. utterances of negotiation, action justification, promises, intimidation and propaganda that are incorporated and refer to specific acts 3. and elements of global Islamic networks, attitudes, ideologies, and political movements. In other words, we take Islamist rhetoric seriously as both a symbolic act (speech with political and social implications) and a component of a movement and mobilization. As Wuthnow (2011: 7) explains, “religious discourse is clearly a social practice, patterned by the social institutions in which it is learned and in which it is practiced, explicitly taught, and implicitly modeled so that practitioners adhere to commonly accepted rules governing the practice, internalized so that these rules often do not require conscious deliberation, and yet observable in the structure and content of discourse itself”.

Within this theoretical framework, we envisage religious rhetoric as a speaker's and an audience's transposition to a shared imaginative world, which increases the likelihood that the audience would believe the message. In our case study, it is both the audience's and Abū ‘Ubayda's world, and by bringing the audience into this rhetorical realm, little concern is given to the outside world or whether this frame is more than just fiction or dogma (Wagemakers, 2008). What matters most in these discursive frames is to challenge power relations and how rhetoric alters the balance of power (Durocher Dunne, 2003; Abū Duhayr et al., 2024).

Abū ‘Ubayda has given more than 30 speeches during the first 15-month of the conflict in Gaza. They are not available for researchers in one single source. However, most of his speeches were broadcast by Aljazeera's YouTube channel. We used the latter as our primary source, watching all the available speeches before proceeding to the sample selection. Abū ‘Ubayda typically releases one speech every two weeks, but occasionally he gives three speeches in a month or goes more than a month without releasing a single speech. Five speeches have been selected for deeper analysis. While the structure is the same in all of his speeches, the ones that were selected commemorate and discuss significant events in the ongoing conflict (the 100 days of war, the 154 days of war, the 224 days of war, the 254 days of war and a year after Operation al-Aqsa Flood began) and have garnered the most views on YouTube and other media. These were discursive events in the sense that the speech sparked media discussions, active reception, and widespread interest.

3. The phenomenon of Abū ‘Ubayda

Abū ‘Ubayda is the iconic spokesperson for the ‘Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, and one of its senior commanders. He oversaw the al-Qassam Brigades' psychological and communication efforts for several years. According to US government sources, his real name is Ḥudhayfa Samīr ‘Abdallāh al-Kaḥlūt, born in Gaza on February 11, 1985, and he has been the spokesperson of al-Qassam Brigades since 2007 (OFAC, 2024). A well-known Saudi religious scholar from Abhā claimed Abū ‘Ubayda was born and had his early education in Abhā, Saudi Arabia and that he later graduated from the Faculty of Sharia and Fundamentals of Religion at the Islamic University of Gaza (al-Ghāmidī, 2024). Some social media accounts claim instead that Abū ‘Ubayda is the popular Palestinian preacher Ṣuhayb al-Kaḥlūt (Alalam, 2024). His

pseudonym or *nom de guerre* is a reference to Abū ‘Ubayda al-Jarrāḥ, a companion of the Prophet Muḥammad and the conqueror of Jerusalem in 637. While the Muslim tradition regards Abū ‘Ubayda al-Jarrāḥ as an example of sincerity and reliability, calling him *Amīn al-umma*, some Arab media refer to Abū ‘Ubayda as *al-nāṭiq bi-ism al-umma* (the speaker in the name of the Muslim community). He seems to have earned this designation for defending loudly and eloquently the Palestinian cause and thereby “telling the truth” in his call to liberate Jerusalem and opposing Israel on behalf of the Arabs while most Arab leaders are unable to do so. His speeches have attracted sizable audiences and generated considerable influence on Arabic-Islamic political culture. His shrouded face with a *keffiyeh*, his confident voice, and his performative rhetoric, as well as the gestures he makes - particularly the use of his index finger to emphasize his points - contribute to the success of his communication (‘Abd al-Ghanī, 2024, 28). The degree of Abū ‘Ubayda’s success is discussed in Shaimaa Magued’s contribution to this special issue in her analysis of the pro-Palestinian cyberadvocacy sphere in Egypt.

One important aspect of Abū ‘Ubayda’s profile is revealed in his speeches; he has a strong background in Arabic and Islamic education, and it is likely that he has indeed earned a degree in Islamic studies because his command of Arabic rhetoric is noteworthy and the flow of his speech (without reading from a paper or a table) and trained voice reveal experience in Islamic preaching. His eloquence in mixing modern standard Arabic with classical Arabic is an art in and of itself. His ability to respect sentence rhythm and avoid reading errors – a fairly common feature among Arab politicians and activists - reveal strong training in Arabic syntax. This is also evident in his masterful recitation of the Quran, which requires specialized traditional training.

Overall, three main reasons explain the Abū ‘Ubayda phenomenon: his communicative approach, the expectations of Arab listeners and the wide broadcasting of his speeches in the Arab media. He uses a well-known style that, to his listeners, is reminiscent of the Friday *khuṭba* sermons given in mosques. These speeches have a repetitive tone that is enhanced with *saj’* (rhymed prose characterized by its end-rhyme, accent-based meter, and parallelism), a lyrical tone that combines assertive and performative discourse (*khabar wa-inshā’*) (‘Abd al-‘Azīz, 2024: 535). These elements of classical Arabic rhetoric still survive through a variety of ways, including religious rhetoric. Like the Palestinian poet Maḥmūd Darwīsh, who elevated poetry and the Palestinian issue to a heroic story with a style full of mythological symbols, Abū ‘Ubayda also reads his words in an epic fashion. The frustration Arabs feel with how their governments and the international community deal with the Palestinian issue leads many to look for a heroic voice, and the rhetorical success of Abū ‘Ubayda is comparable to that of Gamal Abdel Nasser (in the 1960s), Saddam Hussein (in the early 1990s), and Osama bin Laden (in the late 1990s and early 2000s). Finally, Al-Jazeera’s broadcasting of his speeches and the role other media—particularly social media—play in spreading them helped increasing his influence and ensuring therefore a large audience. For instance, Arab media, including al-Jazeera, published hundreds of articles explaining the meaning of the Red Heifer¹ mentioned by Abū ‘Ubayda in his speech on January 14, 2024, when he stated that Israel was ready to sacrifice the Red Heifer in anticipation of the destruction of the al-Aqsa mosque and the construction of the Third Temple. This allowed Abū ‘Ubayda to justify the al-Aqsa operation as preventing the sacrifice of the Red Heifer (Aljazeera, 2024a).

4. Discourse setting

¹ In the biblical story, the red heifer was a cow sacrificed by Temple priests as a purification rite. Given that the birth of a red heifer signifies the arrival of the Third Temple, it has a messianic significance. It is mentioned in The Book of Numbers as well as in the Quran.

Abū ‘Ubayda’s discourse setting includes the visual and contextual components around the speech, providing it with a particular meaning. Abū ‘Ubayda is shown on the right side of the screen wearing a Hamas military uniform with the organization's emblem on his right, the Palestinian flag on his left, and his title as the military spokesperson on his chest. His face is covered by a red *keffiyeh* and a black-and-white bandana on his front that reads on its upper line, "I bear witness that there is no deity but God, and I bear witness that Muḥammad is the Messenger of God " (the Muslim *shahāda*, and the first pillar of Islam); the name Brigades of al-Qassam is listed on the lower line of his bandana. The red *keffiyeh* represents the Palestinian guerrilla fighters who opposed the British mandate in the 1930s, a symbol of resistance popularized later by Yasser Arafat (Kāf, 2024). On the left side of the screen, there is the al-Aqsa mosque, a recurring image in most speeches, and at its center we can read part of a Quranic verse. The verse changes with each speech and serves as its central focus. The words "the battle of al-Aqsa flood" and the speech's date are also visible on the left.

Probably, Abū ‘Ubayda’s covered face is the most important component of this scene. In fact, Abū ‘Ubayda ‘violates’ the principles of effective communication and public speaking by presenting himself in the image of a masked, unidentified, enigmatic man with just his eyes being visible and unknown "facial expressions" such as lip movement (‘Abd al-Ghanī, 2024: 29). It is no surprise thus that observers and the public alike have taken notice of his hidden face because concealing his identity seems to contradict also his status as the voice of the *umma*. The *umma*'s previous rhetorical speakers, from Nasser to Bin Laden, did not hide their faces. However, as a member of the al-Qassam Brigades, he is likely to be a target of the Israeli security agencies and he is therefore expected to hide his face to prevent them from identifying and killing him. His covered face has earned him the label of *al-mulaththam*, the veiled one, which became controversial because Hamas’s opponents in the Arab world view it negatively, as hiding one’s face is believed to spread sedition (Alquds, 2024). This has provided his detractors with a talking point, while his supporters view his *lithām* favorably because it is thought to display the image of a mysterious knight (Aljazeera, 2024b), enhancing his reputation among his followers.

In some videos, prison walls are shown to encircle al-Aqsa mosque. This image highlights Hamas's assertion that it wants to save al-Aqsa, framing the conflict as a religious war in which a *jihād* is necessary to save this shrine from occupation and desacralization. Although most speeches include an image of al-Aqsa, sometimes the latter is absent, and the Quranic verse or the commemoration of the al-Aqsa operation is the only image displayed on the left screen. Nonetheless, the image of the al-Aqsa mosque, together with the Quranic verse, remains the most dominant visual component of Abū ‘Ubayda’s speeches. This is most likely meant to engage Muslims in the fight and appeal to them as a community. Along with *al-Masjid al-Ḥarām* in Mecca and *al-Masjid al-Nabawī* in Medina, the al-Aqsa mosque is considered one of the three sacred sites in the Muslim faith. For one, the Prophet Muḥammad’s *Isrā’* and *Mi‘rāj*, or his miraculous night journey and ascent to heaven, are connected to the al-Aqsa mosque. In addition, al-Aqsa has deep historical and religious significance as a symbol of the wars between Muslims and the Crusaders in the pre-modern times, as well as between Palestinians and Israelis in modern ones. In the Islamic imaginary, the al-Aqsa mosque is the most widely accepted representation of Palestine. Therefore, Abū ‘Ubayda plays on the emotions of Muslims who might become enraged by the Israeli attacks on al-Aqsa and decide to support Palestinians (Abū Ḍuhayr et al., 2024).

5. Structure: Abū ‘Ubayda’s word

In this section, the structure of Abū ‘Ubayda's speeches, which always consists of an opening, a middle and a closing with recurrent themes, is analyzed. In addition, the rhetorical arguments and assertions in their discursive, historical, and political settings are examined.

The Opening

Abū ‘Ubayda always begins his speeches with the Islamic phrase "In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful" which is known in the Islamic vocabulary as "*basmala*" or "*tasmiyya*" (from *bi-ismi Allāh al-rahmān al-rahīm*). He, then, recites a verse from the Quran, which is displayed on the screen to his right. He continues by invoking gratitude to God for his assistance to the *mujāhidīn*, which is known in the Muslim tradition as *ḥamdala* (praising God). These three components (the *basmala*, the Quranic verse, and the *ḥamdala*) take roughly a minute, and the time slot used for the opening remains constant in his speeches. Since these three components form the introduction of a traditional sermon or *khutba*, their use lends Abū ‘Ubayda’s speech a strong religious tone and a structure.

In Islamic law and ethics, any religious act must begin with the *basmala*. It is also the opening line of sermons and the beginning of 113 chapters in the Quran out of 114. In contemporary Arabic discourse, it also serves as a marker for identifying one as an Islamist or a traditionalist or an Islamic-minded scholar. According to the Islamic tradition, the *basmala* bestows blessings and protection from demons to anything it encounters. As such, its primary purpose in Islamic rhetoric is to guarantee that the speech will be blessed by God, assert that the sermon is sincere, and shield the speaker from evil. Regarding its discursive role in Abū ‘Ubayda's speeches, the *basmala* immediately establishes the speaker's and the speech's Islamic authority. Abū ‘Ubayda's enthusiastic pronunciation of the *basmala* also positions him for a persuasive speech in which tradition and emotions are combined to persuade the audience. In addition, it serves a ritualistic purpose by starting a speech as one might anticipate from a Muslim *mujāhid* or activist who fights “in the name of God”. This rhetorical device can be effective since the audience is already accustomed to the *basmala* from the Friday sermons and the performance of daily religious actions.

The quote from the Quran is the opening's second component. Abū ‘Ubayda chooses a verse from the Quran that corresponds to the primary point he wishes to make in his speech. The Quranic verses are selected from among the combative verses, the verses on Jews, or the verses about the Prophet’s enemies in Arabia to fit with the context of the current war with Israel. Quranic verses are authoritative arguments and mobilizing them bestows some legitimacy on one’s acts and discourse (‘Abd al-‘Azīz, 2024). Since the Quranic verses are about the eternal conflict between the faithful and the unbelievers, Abū ‘Ubayda’s quotes also frame the speech and the narrative in this context.

The Quranic passage is also required to dispel any uncertainty about the purpose of the al-Aqsa Flood operation, which is meant to protect the al-Aqsa mosque and its Islamic identity while also claiming the conflict in Palestine is a religious one assorted with ethnic and Pan Arab dimensions (Şīshī and Shāyib, 2024). Thus, the verses from the Quran have both a performative and an assertive purpose. On the one hand, Abū ‘Ubayda uses the Quranic verse to report on the ongoing conflict. For instance, he begins his speech on May 17, 2024, with the verse Q3:111, which states, " they will not harm you except for [some] annoyance. And if they fight you, they will show you their backs; then they will not be aided." (Sahih International translation 2024a). This passage is intended to highlight how little the Israeli invasion of Gaza has affected Hamas and how the Israeli army runs away from Hamas combatants (Abū ‘Ubayda, 2024a). This phrase also has a performative purpose of warning and frightening the Israeli army. Furthermore, this verse is expected to soothe his supporters with a Quranic statement about Muḥammad’s adversaries, who finally were defeated in the 7th century. Even more than the *basmala* that precedes it and the *ḥamdala* that follows it, the Quranic

quote is central to the opening; he based his speeches on Quranic verses at a rate of approximately two verses *per* speech (Kāf, 2024). It is the psychological-rhetorical main discursive weapon in the whole speech, enhanced by the enthusiastic reading of the verse and its appearance on the screen. Abū ‘Ubayda takes the audience to a Quranic universe in which the outcome of the confrontation is pre-determined in favor of the believers, and the divine word is supportive of the latter. This ‘creates’ a parallel with reality and reduces whatever power the adversary might have over Hamas and over the Palestinian cause.

The final component - the *ḥamdala* - shows gratitude to God for his support. Here, Abū ‘Ubayda broadly adheres to the *khutba*'s opening structure, which starts with *al-ḥamdulillāh* (praise to God) and finishes with *wa-ba‘d* (that said). He says, for instance, in his speech on July 7, 2024, "Glory be to God, Lord of the Worlds, Supporter of the Mujāhidīn, and Humiliator of the arrogant tyrants. May peace and blessings fall upon our *mujāhid* and martyr Prophet, his family, his companions, and all who carried his *jihād* after him" (Abū ‘Ubayda, 2024b). Since a Muslim cannot win without God, the *ḥamdala* illustrates humility and gratitude. Praising God and invoking the Prophet's name are rituals that have performative functions, namely that of appropriating the Prophetic legacy of *jihād* and martyrdom (in reference to some Muslim traditions claiming that the Prophet died as a martyr and that he was assassinated by a Jewish woman who offered him poisonous food).

The openings of Abū ‘Ubayda’s speeches are indeed traditionalist; they follow the model of Friday sermons in the Muslim world, uttered for centuries usually in a monotonous tone that hardly moves the listener. However, the emotion, conviction, and *ethos* with which Abū ‘Ubayda delivers them as a man on the battlefield, as well as the heat of war they are proclaimed in, can make these openings persuasive for an audience vulnerable to religious rhetoric and appeals to emotion. What matters is not the repetition of traditional formulas, but rather the way they are uttered, by whom, and in what context. Therefore, the contextual aspect of the speech explains why the audience, despite having heard these traditional formulas thousands of times, still finds them convincing.

The Middle

After the opening, Abū ‘Ubayda pronounces the *salām* greeting, *al-salām ‘alaykum wa-rahmat Allāh wa-barakātuh* (Peace be upon you, as well as the mercy of God and His blessings). Then, he consistently follows with a summing up of the conflict and the ongoing political events. This summary starts with declaring that, for instance, 100 days have passed since the war began (Abū ‘Ubayda, 2024c). He constantly minimizes the success of Israeli army incursions or military successes while providing a brief account of a major operation Hamas carried out. To put it another way, this discursive sequence seeks to show that the Israeli army is losing, and Hamas is winning.

In this discursive sequence, Abū ‘Ubayda also comments on Israeli political actions or statements, aiming to undermine their veracity. He usually announces the Israeli army's casualties in this opening section. For instance, he claimed in his speech on January 14, 2024, that throughout the 100 days of the Israeli war in the Gaza Strip, Hamas destroyed over 1000 Israeli military vehicles (Abū ‘Ubayda, 2024c). Despite the tragic reality of Palestinian casualties, Abū ‘Ubayda gives the viewers virtual triumphs. In addition, Abū ‘Ubayda reframes the al-Aqsa Flood operation of October 7, 2023, as a defensive conflict against the decades-long repression of the Palestinians, the occupation of their land, and the provocative Israeli actions at the al-Aqsa mosque. He also reframes the conflict as a genocide in which the Israeli army commits horrifying killings and crimes against the Palestinian people. He finally depicts the conflict as a confrontation between David and Goliath, with a vast disparity in power so great that most of the weapons used by Hamas are produced by

the organization itself in Gaza, while the Israeli army possesses the most sophisticated weapons provided by the US.

This section is also used by Abū ‘Ubayda to reinterpret the entire Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a battle between good and evil. Hamas and the Muslim *umma* stand for what is right, whereas the USA and Israel are the axis of evil. Thus, 154 days after the beginning of the war, Abū ‘Ubayda asserted that force is the only way to resolve this dispute between Palestinians and Israelis. As the United Nations is corrupt and the law of the jungle rules the world, nothing can protect the people from injustice. As a liberation movement, Hamas has fought and will continue to fight until the Israeli aggression ceases and the Palestinian people are granted their rights and sacred sites (Abū ‘Ubayda, 2024d).

Abū ‘Ubayda's primary rhetorical strategy in the middle of his speech is performative rather than informative, even when he is reporting about ongoing events. In other words, his goal is to praise and defend Hamas as liberation warriors and the Israeli army as genocidal oppressors, rather than to inform Palestinians and their supporters of the realities on the ground. To avoid being discredited, he does not provide information about the cost of the war and the casualties on the Palestinian side, portraying the conflict as an epic struggle between the few rightful ones and the many oppressors, attempting to persuade his audience emotionally without the need to fact-check about what is actually happening. The “sacred” character of the conflict is more important than specific facts.

The phrase *nu’akkid ‘alā mā yalī* (We assert the following) opens the second section of the middle of his speech, which consists of making specific assertions or re-assertions. This is a device in Arabic rhetoric called *tawkīd*, emphasizing an affirmation vis-à-vis the listener. It is again a performative rather than an informative statement since it cannot be confirmed or refuted. It demonstrates an unwavering attitude. Given that he had previously reframed the current conflict as a victory for Hamas, it makes sense that he needs to be a hardliner in this assertive segment of the speech.

The asserting device, *tawkīd* can be consolidated through the repetition of certain words. Abū ‘Ubayda uses words like “God”, “jihad”, “our people,” “our *umma*” or “the enemy” “our resistance” several times in a single speech, creating a dense vocabulary of determination and persistence. The use of such vocabulary also demonstrates a strong commitment to sticking to one's initial plan and a lack of adaptability to changing circumstances. In political conflicts that should consider the practical balance of power and geopolitical shifts, repetition and reiterating one's positions can be a liability. Repetition can also be counterproductive since, over time, the audience begins to lose interest as events and realities change. In this case, the total destruction of Gaza and the costs for Palestinians stand in sharp contrast with the assertions made that the war is being won. Without adapting it to reality, discourse becomes disconnected from an audience exposed to new information and shifting conditions by other sources.

The phrase *nu’akkid ‘alā mā yalī* (We assert the following) is consistently followed by the listing technique (*awwalan*, first, *thāniya*, second, and so on.). This tool helps Abū ‘Ubayda quickly arrange the key ideas he wishes to convey and divide them by subject. In his speech on October 7, 2024, for instance, he first praised the resistance in Lebanon and Iraq - without mentioning the names of the Shiite organizations involved to avoid sectarian reactions - for their assistance and urged them to keep up their attacks. Second, he called for the escalation of Palestinian attacks in Israel and the West Bank. Third, he addressed the issue of Israeli hostages, holding the Israeli government accountable for its inability to exchange prisoners. Fourth, he urged Arab and Islamic solidarity with the Palestinian people (Abū ‘Ubayda, 2024e).

In terms of content, Abū ‘Ubayda emphasizes three themes: 1. the just struggle of Palestinians, 2. the call for patience on the part of civilians 3. and the promise of victory. He constantly reaffirms the essence of the Palestinian struggle, which he considers to be a just struggle between believers (the Palestinians) and unbelievers (the Israelis), who are the aggressors and have broken all peace treaties. The overuse of jihadi

language and religious invocations is a form of rhetorical moral exaggeration intended to mobilize global Muslim support for this struggle. He then reminds the Palestinians and their supporters of the sacrifices they must make and the losses they must bear, calling for patience and indulgence. Finally, he concludes with a reminder of the divine promise of victory that God made to the righteous and believers in the Quran, despite the difficulties and the plotting of their enemies.

Abū ‘Ubayda demonstrated some flexibility when he promised to solve the hostage problem in exchange for a truce and the IDF's withdrawal from Gaza (Abū ‘Ubayda, 2024e). The shifting of rhetoric from defending and liberating al-Aqsa to negotiations over a truce and hostages can be a risky move. Abū ‘Ubayda was irritated with the absence of genuine official Arab support and was prudent about the so-called Isnād front's support (Iran, Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq) which reveals over time a diminished trust in the outcome of this war. One of the disadvantages of believing in a rhetorical world is that people gradually begin revisiting their initial view when they encounter the realities and costs of conflict (Abū ‘Ubayda, 2024e).

Abū ‘Ubayda also promotes the belief that the victim, despite his suffering, would finally prevail due to the sacrifices he is willing to make. Victimhood serves as a rationale for the conflict. For this reason, he elevates the Palestinian resistance to heroic acts carried out by holy warriors. His speeches are replete with verbal exaltation and glorification of Hamas fighters for their bravery in opposing Israel; they are a representation of Palestinian national pride and sacrifice (Minawi, 2024). Conversely, he portrays Israel as a dying state, led by a weak military that executes ineffective operations. However, critics of Hamas such as the chief judge, Islamic scholar, minister of Islamic affairs and key figure in the Palestinian government in Ramallah Maḥmūd al-Habbāsh argue that the number of Palestinian casualties and the complete devastation of Gaza demonstrate that, in contrast to Hamas, the Israeli army is achieving its objectives (Skynewsarabia, 2024).

A key linguistic and rhetorical element further highlighting Abū ‘Ubayda's framing strategy is group identification, that is, the way he identifies an ‘us vs. them’. In a key speech on July 7, 2024, Abū ‘Ubayda refers to his group as “our people” (*sha‘bunā*) fifteen times, while he uses the word *ummatuna* (our Islamic community) eight times only. He employs the phrase “our resistance”, (*muqāwamatunā*) and its derivatives 17 times. Thus, Abū ‘Ubayda places the group's identity (Hamas) above that of the Palestinians and the latter above that of the Islamic community. The use of “our resistance”, “our people” and “our Islamic community” in the plural collective form is an attempt to strengthen self-identification and foster solidarity as well as a quest to amplify the self. The other is defined mainly as the enemy, *al-‘aduww*, a term mentioned 21 times in this speech, followed by Nazi and Zionist, which are used twice each. The Israeli government is described as terrorist, criminal, aggressor, and obsessed with murdering and destroying (once each time). He also identifies the enemy as being the Zionist-American aggressor (once) (Abū ‘Ubayda, 2024b). This speech makes no reference to Jews or Israel directly. The adversary is always labeled in the third person to establish distance from it. When he uses terms such as Nazi, terrorist, or Zionist, he wishes to depict negatively the adversary given the unfavorable opinions of his audience towards these identification markers.

The Closing

Abū ‘Ubayda typically uses the phrase “*khitāman*” (by way of conclusion) to signal the closing of his speech. *Khitāman* is a standard Arabic word that replaces the classical Arabic phrase *khātimat al-qawl* (the conclusion); it serves the dual purpose of formally ending the speech and delivering what is perhaps its most significant point. Four components typically make up the closing of his speeches: 1. Greetings to the fighters and martyrs, reminding them that the fight is sacred and it continues in the name of al-Aqsa, Islam, and the

Palestinian people, and urging them to be patient and persistent. 2. A Quranic verse. 3. ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Qassām’s statement, "It is a jihad...victory or martyrdom." 4. and the *salām* greetings. These elements are a combination of traditionalist and non-traditionalist features of Arabic rhetoric.

In his greeting to Hamas fighters, he takes a performative stance, addressing the Palestinian people and appealing for their support and resistance as a model of perseverance and selflessness, whether they are captives or warriors. This greeting, which constantly appears in Abū ‘Ubayda’s speeches, suggests that Hamas feels the burden of the death of too many Palestinian civilians in this war. After all, Hamas is also responsible for these victims because it started the conflict on October 7, 2023. Abū ‘Ubayda reiterates that the Palestinian struggle is a challenging path to freedom, which necessitates making sacrifices. He implies that only sacrifices can lead to freedom. He appeals for the perseverance of Palestinians despite his constant statement that the Israeli army is perpetrating a genocide in Gaza. In such a situation, the concept of sacrifice can become meaningless, and perseverance may become collective suicide.

The Quranic quotation in this part of the speech closes a circle that started with a Quranic verse in the opening. Abū ‘Ubayda’s Quranic quote in the closing calls for patience, while the opening verse is typically combative. For instance, the opening verse of his speech on October 7, 2024, is Q. 14:5 (and remind them of the days of Allah) (Sahih International translation, 2024b), which is meant to exalt the wars of Hamas as being one of the victories supported by Allāh. In the closing of this speech, he quotes Q 4: 104 which states: (and do not weaken in pursuit of the enemy. If you should be suffering - so are they suffering as you are suffering, but you expect from Allah that which they expect not. And Allah is ever Knowing and Wise) (Sahih International translation, 2024c), urging thus patience since the suffering of the Israelis is like that of the Palestinians.

That said, the closing’s most powerful passage is the ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Qassām’s statement, "It is a jihad: victory or martyrdom" (*wa-innahu jihād²: naṣr aw istishhād*). The quote’s meaning, which shows that Hamas views the conflict with Israel as *jihad*, sanctifies both outcomes: victory or martyrdom. Furthermore, this statement shows that Hamas is uncompromising. The rhyme of this phrase (*jihād/istishhād*) ends with the letter *dāl*, one of the Arabic language’s strongest sounds. Its rhetorical force resides in its author, ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Qassām. The latter is the name of the Brigade to which Abū ‘Ubayda belongs and the military wing of Hamas, and (Sa’īd, 2002). ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Qassām’s phrase is also a symbol of confrontation between Islam and colonialism (Peters, 1980).

The closing is therefore more rhetorically hybrid and politically oriented than the opening; it addresses the Palestinian people as liberation warriors, mobilizes historical aspects of the Palestinian resistance (‘Izz al-Dīn al-Qassām) and includes religious rhetoric (the Quran). However, this mixed rhetoric is unyielding and readies the population for a protracted conflict and sacrifice. Death or defeat are not envisioned in this unyielding conceptualization of the Palestinian struggle. Death is presented as martyrdom, which is conceived as a life unto itself, and failure is completely ruled out. This is another aspect of the framing rhetoric, as death and defeat are presented as martyrdom, another type of victory, following the Muslim tradition, which developed early in the history of Islam a cult of the military martyr - *shahīd* - (Afsaruddin, 2013).

The *salām* greeting (*al-salām ‘alaykum wa-rahmat Allāh wa-barakātuh*, Peace be upon you, as well as the mercy of God and His blessings) is the final part of Abū ‘Ubayda’ speech. In addition to being used to close political or religious speeches (though not the *khuṭba* sermon), Muslims typically use this statement to greet

² Depending on how it is interpreted today, the notion of jihad can be polysemous and flexible, much like many other Quranic concepts (and religious terms in general). Reformists and spiritual schools of thought emphasize the significance of the spiritual struggle to act morally. Islamist groups highlight the militant element of fighting in defensive wars against enemies to liberate the country or end oppression.

one another, primarily in its shorter version, *al-salām ‘alaykum*. To emphasize the Islamic nature of the discourse and the primary audience, the *umma*, it is also intended to execute a discursive circle here, beginning with the *basmala* and concluding with the *salām* greeting. This feature, which is the most important greeting among Muslims, highlights familiarity between the speaker and the audience, since audiences are more likely to be persuaded by a message when they share discursive conventions.

The peace greeting that Abū ‘Ubayda uses to end his address may suggest that peace is a possibility, or at the very least, that he has considered it. It is impossible to infer from his usage of the *salām* greeting what kind of peace he views as appropriate or whether he merely hopes for peace among his Muslim audience. As his speeches are mostly combative, the word "*salām*" is isolated and unable to balance out the overall warlike tone. Furthermore, the word "*rahma*," which means "mercy" can also play a role in softening the discourse in favor of calling to treat people with more compassion, particularly during times of war. However, Abū ‘Ubayda did not use a rhetoric of compassion and peace to appeal to audiences in Israel and Palestine in order to end the war.

6. Discussion: Abū ‘Ubayda’s world

Three main components emerge from study of Abū ‘Ubayda’s speeches thus far: his rhetoric is performative-emotive, it is centered on Quranic-religious framing, and it is unyielding. How are these components relevant to the broader Palestinian question?

A performative-emotive rhetoric

Abū ‘Ubayda’s speeches are overwhelmingly performative rather than informative. He calls for support and perseverance in the war, praises the warriors and martyrs, accuses Jews and the Israeli government, hopes and prays, calls and warns, threatens and regrets, demands and rejects, and uses rhetorical questions, assertions, and exclamations. This performative rhetoric (*inshā’*) cannot be proved or falsified, in contrast to informative rhetoric (*khabar*). It shows that his perspective does not need history or facts. Palestinian casualties, the costs of the conflict for both sides, or the realism of a militant who employs a logical tactic or rational choices to adapt discourse to the evolving circumstances are absent. The Arabic rhetorical term *inshā’* means to create or initiate meaning, which Abū ‘Ubayda fully exploits to establish a symbolic or parallel world. Abū ‘Ubayda's rhetoric did not change over time, and little information was provided regarding the ongoing conflict, and only insignificant attention was paid to the developments that took place in the Middle East over the course of a year.

In addition, Abū ‘Ubayda displays intense emotions during his speeches. He expresses anger over the Arab nations' lack of support for Hamas, irritation over Israeli attacks on Gaza, pride in Gaza's tenacity, and sympathy for Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iranian-sponsored militias. He allows emotions to surface, which initially gives his speech a genuine tone and inspires people vulnerable to the rhetoric of emotions. However, as the number of Palestinian victims rises, the emotional tone begins to sound out of place and meant to hide the reality on the ground.

Quranic-religious framing

The Quran is heavily referenced, and Abū ‘Ubayda makes it clear that the conflict is between believers and unbelievers and that God backs Hamas and the Palestinians. It also implies that the conflict occurs outside of geopolitical considerations. In addition to the Quran, he mobilizes other religious symbols such as the al-

Aqsa mosque and Islamic history. He portrays the Muslim *umma* as one entity at war with those who want to undermine its unity. This suggests that he has little interest in speaking to Western audiences, even though the West plays a crucial role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. His speech is addressed to religious Muslims, with the intention of inciting them to intensify the war and people who support the rights of Palestinians in the East and the West might be turned off by this overloaded religious discourse. This combination of politics and religion prevents all parties involved from using a shared language to reach an agreement and find a solution.

Abū ‘Ubayda draws on these religious references to frame the conflict as a defensive and apocalyptic war with Israel (Strozier 2024). As most of the Quranic verses he mobilized in his speeches discuss the battles between the Prophet and his Meccan adversaries, these quotes allow him to depict Israel as the embodiment of evil, injustice, and disbelief, while portraying Hamas militants as martyrs and champions of justice and belief. Thus, quoting the Quran serves two rhetorical purposes. On the one hand, the Palestinians are portrayed as believers and subjects to mistreatment and persecution. On the other hand, it suggests that the Palestinian victory is a divine promise.

As a result of Abū ‘Ubayda's effective communication in reaching a large audience across the Arab world, the religious dimension of the Palestinian question may once again become a hot topic in politics in the Arab world and beyond. By re-inserting the religious rhetoric in a worldwide struggle against Western imperialism, Hamas has filled the vacuum left by anti-Western leaders like Usama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, who also utilized religious rhetoric to mobilize and appeal to Arabs and Muslims. Despite the current hostility to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states, Hamas' Islamist ideology has gained widespread acceptance as a genuine voice for the Palestinian cause. This ideology seriously challenges the Abraham Accords and the, however limited, support they had generated. The entire rhetoric portraying Israel and its allies as the eternal enemy closes any avenue for peace within this framework. The way that some Palestinians and other Arab-Muslim youth respond to the Gaza war is likely to be influenced by this rhetoric.

An unyielding rhetoric

Abū ‘Ubayda is also unyielding in his rhetoric and does not see Israel as a potential peace partner. As a result, he makes no effort to communicate with the other side in a way that would suggest that compromise is possible at some point. He sees no other way to deal with Israel except an epic and cataclysmic conflict, following an extreme Manichean perspective. He portrays the current Gaza war as one that was imposed on the Palestinians, assigning all blame to the opposing side. Additionally, he characterizes the outcome of war as either martyrdom or victory and asserts that Israel only understands violence and that Hamas plans to use it to free Palestinian territory, as though all forms of liberation can be reduced solely to fighting wars. Finally, he views the opposing viewpoint as unyielding as well. The governments of the US, Israel, and Europe are depicted as committed to displacing Palestinians and destroying the al-Aqsa mosque. All Muslims are viewed as *mujāhids*, and all Israelis and Jews are viewed as adversaries. The Hamas militants are backed by God, are supernaturally resistant, and are resolute, while the Israeli government is depicted as Nazi and barbaric.

However, as numerous scholars have shown, Hamas is capable of a great deal of pragmatism and cannot be boiled down to its armed wing (Walther, 2010; Wagemakers, 2010; Baracskey, 2015; Hannase, 2020; Schwartz and Galily, 2021). The internal dynamics of Hamas continue to determine when to resort to pragmatism and when to utilize violence. Similarly, disputes between moderate and radical voices within Hamas explain the use of religious rhetoric in its communication (Polka, 2019). The intransigent wing of

Yahyā al-Sinwār's (Aljazeera, 2024c), may have made the decision to launch the Flood operation, misjudging Iranian support, failing to recognize Iran's strategic maneuvering in the Middle East, and succumbing to the rhetoric of Islamic solidarity and the belief that a full-scale conflict would trigger an earthquake in favor of the Palestinians (New York Times, 2024). Still, Hamas faces the challenge of identifying effective strategies to close the gap between ideology and interests, moving beyond rhetoric (Leclerc, 2017). Although humanitarian assistance is essential for the survival of Palestinians in Gaza, financial or military assistance either from Arab countries or Iran can come at a huge cost, usually paid by the Palestinian civilians.

The fact that many people in the US and Israel support peace and might be open to hearing the Palestinian side is something Abū 'Ubayda discards. And for peace to occur, rhetoric should avoid an "us or them to the death" mentality and demonstrate a willingness to compromise. Communication should refer to the global values of peace, freedom, dignity, human rights, and mutual recognition for demands for Palestinian rights to be globally heard. Abū 'Ubayda's use of excessively religious and performance-emotive discourse is an obstacle for anyone in the US or Israel open to hearing the Palestinian perspective. Such unyielding rhetoric may even reinforce the militaristic option in the US and Israel, while confirming at the same time what Martin Kear discusses in his contribution to this special issue, namely the progressive restrictions of the menu of options available to Hamas to secure the claims to statehood of Palestinians.

7. Conclusion

The Islamist militant rhetoric frames conflicts in terms that demonize the adversary as ultimate evil, appealing to its audience's sense of the sacred. Thus, for Abū 'Ubayda, the current Gaza war is but another episode in the long history of Muslim imaginary struggle against enemies and disbelievers, enshrined in an Islamic rhetoric of words, sentences, and symbols in Islamic history and scripture. Due to the similarities between the past and present, animosity and rejection of the absolute enemy can be transferred to the current adversary. As a result, religious rhetoric pushes the conflict to the limit and opposes Muslims against their enemies in an apocalyptic war.

Chiefly, Abū 'Ubayda's framing rhetoric uses a performative style as well as a rich religious-Quranic symbolism. This rhetoric is as disconnected from geopolitical calculations as it can be, it fails to adjust to local conditions, and it does not consider the balance of power. Rhetoric produces its own universe, leading to an unyielding perspective of the enemy and unwillingness to recognize the suffering of civilian Palestinians. The return of religious rhetoric speaks to a local audience that is religiously inclined and sensitive to militant resistance, perceiving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a fervent and unyielding war.

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