



“The Struggle Has a Dimension Not Previously Understood”: Retrospective on the Novel by the Orchestrator of the October 7 Massacre

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This article proposes a retrospective reading of the novel, *The thorn and the carnation* by Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip in the years 2017-2024 and one of the planners of the October 7, 2023, massacre. The book, which was written in 2004 while Sinwar was imprisoned in Israel, gives an early glimpse of the roots of his teachings that sanctify violent jihad, sacrifice of life, hatred of Jews and rejection of any peace arrangement with Israel. Notwithstanding the importance of understanding the Hamas ideology, the novel has attracted almost no research interest so far. This article examines both the links between the novel and the October 7 attack, and the diverse—and sometimes conflicting—ways in which the book was received within the Arab-Islamic world and beyond, against the background of the Swords of Iron war and the elimination of Sinwar. The analysis shows that *The thorn and the carnation* is not only a literary creation but also a living, breathing ideological manifesto, that continues to shape political, religious and cultural awareness among large audiences across the globe. As a case study, it shows that literary texts have the potential to serve as a valuable tool for research and intelligence organizations to identify the enemy’s motives, to deepen their familiarity with its world view and even to predict its intentions. At the same time, when such texts penetrate the heart of popular public discourse, they can lay the foundations for radicalization and encourage terror.

Key Words: Hamas, Sinwar, Gaza, Israel, Swords of Iron, October 7, Antisemitism

Introduction

In April 2022 the Hamas television channel broadcast a series for Ramadan called *The Fists of the Freedom Fighters* (*Qabdat al-Ahrar*),

showing armed Hamas fighters invading Israel, capturing IDF bases and taking soldiers prisoner. The leader of Hamas in Gaza at that time, Yahya

Sinwar, heaped praise on the series and gave prizes to its producers, stating that the fighters of the movement’s military arm were destined to make the fictional plot a reality (Walla, 2023).

Some eighteen months later, on October 7, 2023, Hamas translated the script into an operative plan of action. Israel failed to interpret the early clues provided by Hamas in its military training, the statements of its leaders, its public conferences, and of course in its television programs (MEMRI, 2021). Israel’s long-standing policy of containment of the consolidation of Hamas rule in the Gaza Strip ended with a strategic surprise culminating in the worst tragedy in its history. To Israel’s lack of sensitivity before the massacre can be added its scant familiarity with *The thorn and the carnation (al-Shawk wal-Qaranful)*, an autobiographical novel published by Sinwar in late 2004. The book gives refined expression to the overtly murderous ambitions of the person who became Hamas’ leader and the driving force behind the October 7 massacre, while he was still a relatively unknown Hamas operative serving a life sentence in an Israeli prison for the murder of Palestinians suspected of collaborating with Israel. Surprisingly, even after the massacre, awareness in Israel of Sinwar’s “literary project” and the contents of his novel remain very limited, while in the Arab world and elsewhere the book’s recognition reverberated widely and it quickly became a best-seller.

This article is divided into four parts: historical background, focusing on the interaction between Hamas ideology and the policy it adopted from its inception up to the October 7 massacre; a retrospective reading of Sinwar’s novel in view of the Swords of Iron war; an examination of the antisemitic motifs in the book; and an analysis of the public discourse in the Arab world and elsewhere around this book, against the background of war, and particularly following Sinwar’s death.

The article is based on a qualitative interpretative approach, which combines textual analysis of the book with an examination

of the sociopolitical context in which it was written and the author’s religious-ideological background. The novel was read retrospectively in light of events that occurred almost two decades after its publication, noting the links between the ideas and the images it contains, and the October 7 attack and its goals. As such we examine the features of the plot, the characters and the symbols, and expose the principles and ambitions that drove Sinwar the author—and eventually the leader—and how he translated them into policy.

In April 2022 the Hamas television channel broadcast a series for Ramadan called *The Fists of the Freedom Fighters (Qabdat al-Ahrar)*, showing armed Hamas fighters invading Israel, capturing IDF bases and taking soldiers prisoner. The leader of Hamas in Gaza at that time, Yahya Sinwar, heaped praise on the series and gave prizes to its producers, stating that the fighters of the movement’s military arm were destined to make the fictional plot a reality

The research also analyses dozens of references to the book since October 7, 2023, in the press, on news websites and in social media, in Arabic and other languages. The purpose of this methodology is to examine the dynamic between the original text and its revived reception among various audiences in the wake of the war. It is read as a popular cultural manifesto—albeit controversial—which has shaped political and religious awareness and provides an ethical structure and symbols. It also encourages acts of violence and even personal martyrdom among Hamas activists and their sympathizers in the Gaza Strip and elsewhere.

The analysis is based on the assumption that literary narratives are not only a reflection of reality but also an important tool for shaping collective consciousness, moral perceptions and religious beliefs. Narratives are conceptual frameworks within which political players—individuals and movements—define their

identity, give meaning to their actions, and position themselves within the political arena, with the aim of influencing the world view of their target audiences (Somers, 1994).

Background: Hamas and Sinwar—From the First Intifada to October 7

Sinwar's novel, although it did not receive due attention before or after October 7, is a unique attempt by a Hamas leader to give literary expression to the radical and violent nature of his movement.

Hamas—The Islamic Resistance Movement in Palestine—was founded towards the end of 1987 in the Gaza Strip, following the outbreak of the First Intifada. It was led by Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, a charismatic Palestinian theologian who was influenced by the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, suffered disability from a young age and used a wheelchair. Hamas was established as a branch of the Brotherhood in Palestine and sought to offer a religious alternative to the PLO, with an emphasis on the centrality of Islam in the struggle to liberate Palestine and destroy Israel (Shavit & Winter, 2016, pp. 36-39).

According to the strategic vision of Hamas, as expressed in the movement's charter of August 1988, Palestine is *waqf* (endowment) land that belongs to the Muslims until Judgment Day. The charter calls for the liberation of all of Palestine from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River, and the destruction of any sovereign Jewish existence in the Land of Israel. According to clause 15 of the charter, the way to do this is by armed jihad—violent struggle against “the enemies who are stealing parts of Muslim land” that is perceived by Hamas as sacred, which is “the personal duty of every Muslim.”

The permanent peace treaties with Israel are presented in the charter (clause 11) as a betrayal of Islamic religious commandments. They cannot countenance any Arab country or leader surrendering even an inch of the land.

The charter is also an antisemitic document that looks forward to a world without Jews

at the end of days (clause 7). The Jews as a collective are presented as the enemies of Muslims (clause 32) and described as “Nazis.” In the spirit of *The protocols of the elders of Zion*, the charter accuses Jews of promoting conspiracies against humanity in general and against Muslims in particular, attributing to them the responsibility for two world wars as well as the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate (Intelligence & Terror Information Center, the Intelligence Heritage Center, 2006, clause 20).

Over the years, Hamas leaders converted these ideas into a murderous political program. When the PLO leader Yasser Arafat entered into negotiations with Israel and in 1993 signed an interim peace agreement (the Oslo Accords) including mutual recognition and acceptance—at least by declaration—of the two-state concept, Hamas was determined to sabotage the negotiations by force and at any price. It waged a violent campaign against Israel, including suicide attacks, kidnappings, shootings and stabbings, costing the lives of hundreds of Israeli men, women and children. Hamas justified the murder of Israeli citizens by arguing that Israel is a militaristic society and therefore every Israeli individual is a potential or actual soldier, whom it is permissible to kill (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2022).

In January 2006, after implementation of the Israeli disengagement plan from Gaza, democratic elections were held for the Palestinian National Council, which were won by Hamas. A year and a half later, the movement took over the Gaza Strip by force and became its ruler. Since then, the Palestinian territories in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have been split between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, respectively. Repeated attempts at Palestinian reconciliation have failed.

In 2006, the Middle East Quartet—an international body whose purpose is to supervise settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and which consists of the UN, the United States, the European Union and Russia, defined

three conditions for Hamas to be accepted as a legitimate political player in the international arena: recognition of Israel, renunciation of violence, and acceptance of the interim accords signed by Israel and the PLO. The movement rejected these conditions, saying that it would not abandon its basic principles and would respect the wishes of its Palestinian voters (New York Times, Weissman, 2006).

Over the following years Hamas successfully established its rule in Gaza, but from 2013 to 2017 it suffered strategic obstacles due to a crisis of relations with Egypt. The removal of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt was a heavy blow for its daughter movement—Hamas. Not only that, the new government in Cairo led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi accused Hamas of supporting the Salafi-Jihadi terror activities that were raging in the Sinai Peninsula and claiming thousands of Egyptian victims, tightened the closure of the Rafiah border crossing, and stepped up efforts to expose and destroy hundreds of smuggling tunnels used by the movement.

In July 2015, after the assassination of the Egyptian Prosecutor General by Salafi-Jihadi operatives who were trained in Gaza, Egypt threatened to pursue sanctions against Hamas, including defining it as a terror organization, if it failed to mend its ways. These threats were accompanied by a campaign of delegitimization against the movement, which was described in the Egyptian media as the military arm of the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas found itself increasingly isolated in the regional and international arena, and suffered growing financial distress and damage to its standing among the Palestinian public (Winter & Lupo, 2018).

Against the background of these constraints, Hamas began to reconsider its policies and declarations in the hope of easing the growing external and internal pressures, by reaching agreements with Egypt and Fatah, and even drawing up a kind of renewed and updated charter. After internal disagreements, the

organization decided to leave the 1988 charter in place, while publishing a new political platform under a different name, a platform that could be updated according to changing circumstances.

Thus in May 2017 Hamas released its *Document of principles*, which did not replace the 1988 Charter but differed from it in four aspects: It featured less use of religious-Islamic concepts such as jihad, and more secular-national terms such as armed resistance; it denied links to its parent movement—the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which was removed from power by the Egyptian army in 2013 and made illegal; it renounced antisemitic rhetoric by clarifying that “the struggle against the Zionist enterprise is not a religious struggle against Jews”; and expressed a willingness to set up a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital based on the June 1967 armistice lines, but without recognizing Israel, the Oslo Accords or any permanent solution requiring division of the land.

This document was insufficient as a platform for reconciliation with the Fatah government in the West Bank, but it paved the way for tactical understandings between Hamas and the Egyptian regime. As for relations with Israel, there was nothing new in Hamas’ willingness to set up a Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank to begin with, as an interim phase. In fact, since the end of the 1980s, all the leaders of the movement—from Yasin to Sinwar—had proposed a *hudna* (temporary truce) of a number of years in return for a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, but had never retreated from their uncompromising adherence to the final target of liberating all of Palestine “from the river to the sea,” their refusal to recognize Israel, and the rejection of any permanent peace treaty with the Jewish state (Sher et al., 2017).

In their years of ruling the Gaza Strip, Hamas alternated between violent and non-violent resistance to Israel, depending on how it perceived its needs and changing circumstances—a situation that led to periodic

rounds of fighting between the two sides. At the same time, the movement's hope for the physical destruction of Israel remained its long-term strategic vision, but not an immediate operational objective. The change in perception emerged after Operation Guardian of the Walls (May 2021), when the Hamas leadership, headed by Sinwar, began to see the destruction of the Jewish state as an achievable goal, not just a utopian dream. This concept—which apparently lay behind the October 7 attacks—was based on feelings of strength shared by Hamas and its allies in the Axis of Resistance, and on their assessment that Israel was suffering from growing internal weakness.

In June 2022 Sinwar wrote to the head of the Hamas political bureau Ismail Haniyeh, in a document which was found by the IDF during the war, setting out a practical action plan to bring about the collapse of Israel. The plan was named “The Second Warning” (*Wa’d al-Akhira*)—echoing the Quranic prophecy, frequently mentioned in Islamic discourse, discussing the eradication of the Jews and the destruction of their state (Sura 17, verses 4-7). In the letter—which reflected the process of turning the dream of the Hamas leadership into a defined plan of action—Sinwar described a coordinated regional effort by members of the Axis of Resistance in a large-scale campaign:

We'll all go in—we and the party [Hezbollah] and the opposition force and the Al-Quds axis in the region (excluding Iran)—with all our strength in a surprise attack from all fronts with all force available, to bring down the occupying state and bring about its end [...] [This clash] will change the whole area, its regimes and its political reality in general and lead to a huge Islamic revolution in the region. Our brothers in the military [arm] believe that if the party has a third of what has been spoken of in terms of military capabilities and it joins in with all

its force—together with reasonable participation on the part of Yemen, Iraq and Syria (from the axis forces, not the states), the participation of guerrilla [forces] across the border from Jordan, our solid participation, and igniting the West Bank and the interior [Israeli Arabs]—we can, if Allah wishes and with his help, achieve our longed-for objective. This is the preferred scenario, and we must reach agreement on this. The crowning titles of the campaign must be Al-Aqsa and Jerusalem, since they are the “nuclear warhead” of the whole region. The timing will certainly be linked to one of the Jewish festivals when there is an increase in their incursions into the Al-Aqsa [compound], their attacks and their Talmudic prayers. Obviously Passover—which in one way or another overlaps with Ramadan—is the most suitable, but other Jewish festivals could also be used to light the fuse (Rost, 2025).

As shown by other documents seized by the IDF during the war, Sinwar carefully chose the timing of the October 7 attack. He did not inform Hezbollah and Iran in advance, for fear of a leak that would destroy the element of surprise, but afterwards he called on the forces of the Axis of Resistance to come to his aid. As he explained, the motives for activating the war plan were Israeli violations of the status quo at the Al-Aqsa compound, which were perceived as desecration of the holy site and an opening to the rebuilding of the Temple on its ruins and to the Judaization of Jerusalem; plus the fear that Israel itself would initiate separate surprise attacks on elements of the Axis of Resistance (Caspit, 2025).

Another important objective for Sinwar was to block the normalization agreement taking shape between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Such an agreement would have granted Israel recognition by the Arab Kingdom where Islam

was born, drawing other Arab and Muslim states into the circle of peace, and finally destroying the Hamas hope of uniting the Islamic nation into a joint battle to liberate Palestine and destroy the Jewish state. At a meeting of Hamas’ political bureau on October 2, 2023, Sinwar declared that in order to thwart the negative strategic direction of the region, “there is no alternative to unconventional action by the movement and the Axis of Resistance forces” (Reuters, 2023; Ynet, 2025).

Sinwar’s biography is intertwined with formative episodes in the history of Hamas, both during the initial period of founding the movement, and during the challenging period of establishing its rule in the Gaza Strip after his release from prison. He was born in 1962 in Khan Yunis to a family of refugees from Majdal (Ashkelon), and in the early 1980s studied Arabic language and literature at the Islamic University in Gaza. He was arrested by Israel in 1982 and 1985 for student activities and sentenced to short periods of imprisonment (Howeidy, 2024).

When Hamas was established, Sinwar was put in charge of its internal security mechanism, Al-Majd, whose function was to locate and eliminate anyone cooperating with Israel. This mechanism eventually became the military arm of the movement. He was arrested in 1988 and convicted in 1989 of the murder of four Palestinians he accused of allegedly collaborating with the occupation. Sinwar was imprisoned, and according to his prison guards, he aroused both esteem and dread in other Palestinian prisoners (Funy, 2023).

During his incarceration, Sinwar learned Hebrew and translated a few non-fiction books from Hebrew to Arabic, including *Shin Bet among the tears* (Published by Yedioth Ahronoth, 2004). He also wrote two non-fiction books dealing with Hamas. The highlight of his writing was the novel, *The thorn and the carnation*, which was smuggled out of Eshel prison in Beer Sheba at the end of 2004 with the help of other prisoners, and published without identifying the publisher.

After his release in the Shalit deal in 2011, Sinwar advanced through the Hamas ranks, filling a number of important roles on his way to the leadership: He was elected leader of Hamas in Gaza for two consecutive terms (in 2017 and 2021). After the elimination of Haniyeh in Teheran in July 2024, Sinwar was appointed to replace him as head of the movement’s political bureau—a position he held until he himself was killed by IDF forces on October 16, 2024, when he was found hiding in a building in the Tal Al-Sultan neighborhood of Rafah.

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The thorn and the carnation is fiction, but there are clear similarities between the lives of its protagonists and that of the author. The connection between the novel’s plot and reality rests on the book’s chronology, which skips between a number of real events in the conflict with Israel in the period 1967-2004—wars, treaties, intifadas and terror attacks. In the foreword, Sinwar reveals his sources of inspiration as a writer and his desire to reach a global audience:

This is not my personal story, nor the story of a particular person, although all its events are real. Each event, or each set of events, pertains to this or that Palestinian. The only fiction in this work is its transformation into a novel revolving around specific characters, to fulfill the form and requirements of a novelistic work. Apart from that, everything written here is real, whether I experienced it myself or whether I heard about it from others, family members or neighbors who experienced it themselves over decades in the

beloved land of Palestine. I hereby dedicate [the novel] to those whose hearts are devoted to the Land of Isra and Mi'raj [Muhammad's night journey to Jerusalem] from the ocean to the Gulf, indeed, from ocean to ocean (Al-Sinwar, 2004, p.2).

To summarize, the book tells the story of a Palestinian family who are uprooted from their home in 1948, migrate to the Gaza Strip, and from 1967 onwards have to deal with the reality of life in the Al-Shati refugee camp under Israeli occupation. The matriarch single-handedly raises her three biological children and two nephews under one roof, without their fathers who were forcibly separated from their children as a result of the Six Day War. The sons grow up to affiliate with various Palestinian factions and differ on how Palestinians should confront the Israeli occupation (Hugi, 2024).

Three of the boys are the novel's leading characters: Ahmad, who is the narrator, is a science student whose heart leans towards Hamas under the influence of his cousin Ibrahim, who serves as his role model. Ibrahim, the hero of the novel—who symbolically bears the name of Sinwar's real father and son—is active in the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza, from which Hamas eventually emerges. Ibrahim is studying at the Islamic University in Gaza and working to inculcate others with the movement's ethos of "resistance." By contrast, Mahmud, Ahmad's older brother, is a Fatah activist who disagrees with Hamas ideology, sees the PLO and the Palestinian Authority as the legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people, and supports the Oslo Accords as the way to achieve a political settlement with Israel (Fahmi et al., 2024; Zibaei & Ali Naithal Al-Gharabi, 2024).

From *The Thorn and the Carnation* to "The Al-Aqsa Flood"

Sinwar is considered the brains behind the October 7 massacre, and it is hard for contemporary readers of *The thorn and the*

carnation to miss the heavy hints to the brutal attack against Israel that he conceived and executed some two decades later.

The seeds of the disaster appear throughout the novel, where literary expressions often echo the operational agenda that materialized on the day the order was given: the perception of the war with the Jewish state as a religious war; the sacrifice of one's life through jihad against Israel as a sacred value and a supreme goal, in spite of its heavy price; the desire to kill as many Israelis as possible, without differentiating between soldiers and civilians, and sometimes without differentiating between Israeli Jews and Israelis of other religions; admiration for hostage-taking as a tactic intended to elicit negotiations for the release of Palestinian prisoners; and the ambition to destroy any peace and normalization agreements between Israel and its Arab neighbors by means of violent terror, while rejecting the political line of the Palestinian Authority.

The name given by Sinwar to the October 7 attack was "Al-Aqsa Flood" (*Tufan al-Aqsa*) although it was mainly directed against communities in the western Negev. By linking Jerusalem to the attack, Hamas sought to give the campaign a religious-Islamic character (and not only national-territorial), and to express the supreme strategic objective of the movement: uniting all fronts of the struggle against Israel and recruiting the Arab-Islamic collective to liberate the land of Palestine, with the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem—Islam's third most holy site—at its heart, by means of uncompromising religious war.

This approach is revealed in its full intensity in Sinwar's novel. The narrator Ahmad shares with his readers a seminal event he experienced while a high school pupil in Gaza on his first visit to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in the late 1970s, when it was still possible to enter Israel from the Gaza Strip almost without hindrance. The visit was organized by the Islamic Bloc, which later became the Hamas student movement, and the guide was his cousin Ibrahim. On the

way to Jerusalem the pupils' bus stopped near Latrun, where Ibrahim—with tears in his eyes—picked up a handful of dirt, which he claimed was tainted with the pure blood of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, who according to tradition, fought on this spot in the year 637, during their journey to conquer the land under the command of Abu Ubayda b. al-Jarrah. He expressed a wish to water the ground with the blood of the successors of those early Muslims, the Palestinians of today, until its liberation (pp. 130-131).

The high point of the visit came, of course, when the pupils entered the Al-Aqsa compound. They prayed in the mosque, listened to the Friday sermon, visited the Dome of the Rock and heard the story of the Prophet's night journey to the city. While they absorbed the sanctity of the place, they noticed an insufferable injustice: soldiers of the Israeli occupation were stationed at the entrance and deciding whether to allow or deny the entry of worshippers. At that moment he was filled with anger that the nation of Islam that stood behind the Palestinians, with all its wealth and military power, was not doing enough to liberate the mosque from the "gangs" that had taken control. It was then, says Ahmad, that he realized that "the conflict has a dimension not previously understood; it wasn't just about land and a people displaced but a battle of faith and religion" (p. 132).

As expressed by the novel's heroes, anger at the abuse of Al-Aqsa and Palestine must be translated into violent action—jihad to defend the holy site and liberate the land, with willingness to sacrifice one's life according to the path trodden by the heroes of Islam from the time of Prophet Mohammed, through the military commander Salah Al-Din Al-Ayyubi who conquered the land of Palestine and liberated Jerusalem from the Crusaders in the twelfth century, down to the present day (pp. 142-143).

Sometimes the ideal of sacrifice takes on specific faces and names, when a friend or relative of Ahmad and Ibrahim loses his life in the struggle against Israel. In one of the

cases described in the novel, the pain at the death of a friend named Yasser is mixed with joy that God granted him a martyr's death (shahada), and the weeping in the mourners' tent mingles with shouts of joy from his family who distribute sweets and large colored pictures of the deceased. In another case, the wife of the novel's hero Ibrahim is described as "one who never stops smiling" when she receives the news that her husband has been killed by an Israeli airstrike (pp. 250-251, 334).

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For Sinwar, the lives of Palestinians—and even more so, Israelis—have no value, only their sacrifice has. In fact, the slaughter of October 7 is dwarfed by the fantasies he puts into the mouths of his novel's heroes. He describes the tense expectations that prevailed in the Gaza Strip during the First Gulf War—hopes that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein would send missiles with chemical warheads and wipe out half the population of Israel (which at that time numbered five million). Therefore, when the sirens first pierced the air, the Palestinians came out with cries of encouragement for the Iraqi leader: "In spirit, in blood, we will redeem you O Saddam... Ya Saddam Ya Habib, strike-strike Tel Aviv." But how great was their frustration when they learned that the rockets sent towards Israel had only conventional warheads. As the narrator puts it, "We felt as if we were drenched in icy water" (pp. 228-229).

After the dashed hopes of the slaughter of millions of Israeli citizens with chemical weapons, the heroes of Sinwar's novel had to

be satisfied with more modest acts of murder, but the goal remained the same: to make the occupiers “curse the day they came to our land and conquered our holy places” (p. 262).

Another issue on which it is possible to draw a straight line from the novel to the October 7 attack is the great interest shown by Sinwar, who wrote the book in jail before being freed in the Shalit deal, in hostage-taking as a bargaining tool for the release of Palestinian prisoners and as a personal and collective obligation

The narrator praises a series of attacks involving shootings, explosive devices and suicides aimed at civilians (including women and children) from the start of the Oslo process to the Second Intifada. These include the attack on the Dan number 5 bus on Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv, which was carried out in October 1994 and led to the death of 22 people, with 104 injured, using an explosive belt made by a senior member of the Hamas military wing, the so-called “engineer” Yahya Ayyash; the attack at Beit Lid Junction in January 1995, in which 22 were killed and 66 injured; the attack at the Tel Aviv Dolphinarium in June 2001, in which 21 were killed and 120 injured, mostly youngsters who were attending a party at a dance club (many years before the slaughter of hundreds of party goers at the Nova Festival on October 7, 2023); the attack on the Sbarro restaurant in Jerusalem, in which 16 were killed and 140 injured; and the first launches of mortars, shells and home-made Qassam rockets at villages in the Gaza Strip and in the western Negev (pp. 295-296, 298, 326, 328, 331).

The Palestinian attacks deep inside Israeli territory, including in the cities of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Netanya and Ashdod, are presented in the book as proof of the Palestinians’ ability to cause serious damage to the enemy, in spite of its strong army and the huge gap in the balance of power between the sides. According to the narrator, the attacks were very

successful: They aroused panic in the hearts of the conquerors; incited tensions in Israeli society over continuation of the peace process; caused Israeli streets to become deserted; and kept stores and cafes closed and empty. At that time only a handful of Israelis dared to use public transport. Sandbags were placed in urban shopping centers, which took on the appearance of military bases due to the use of checkpoint barriers and the deployment of thousands of soldiers and police officers (pp. 330-331).

An observer of the devastation of Gaza since October 7 will certainly wonder whether Sinwar would have carried out the slaughter if he knew in advance the scale of the death and destruction it would cause in the Gaza Strip as a whole, and that he himself would be asked to sacrifice his life. Based on the novel he wrote, it is very likely that his reply would be positive.

The book’s heroes justify the heavy price in lives and property paid by the Palestinians for their terror attacks during the Second Intifada, and some of them sacrifice their own lives in the name of faith and jihad. Moreover, their sacrifice is made knowing that the IDF arsenal includes fighter jets and tanks, against which the Palestinians have no defense. In one chapter of the book, Ibrahim dismisses the calls to Hamas to lay down its arms and allow the Palestinian people to live without war. He jokes that after Israel has struck Hamas operatives from the air, invaded Palestinian cities and left them in ruins, it has no choice but to rebuild them so that it will have something to destroy in future clashes with the movement (pp. 327, 330-331).

Another issue on which it is possible to draw a straight line from the novel to the October 7 attack is the great interest shown by Sinwar, who wrote the book in jail before being freed in the Shalit deal, in hostage-taking as a bargaining tool for the release of Palestinian prisoners and as a personal and collective obligation. The Jibril deal in 1985—in which 1,151 Palestinians were released in exchange for three IDF prisoners in

Lebanon—is described in his book as a moment of joy in the Palestinian territories, as well as invigorating the national struggle with the release of these “experienced” members of the various Palestinian factions (p. 159).

The book describes in detail two other operations for which Hamas was responsible: The kidnapping of Border Police Officer Nissim Toledano in 1992, which was intended to bring about the release of Sheikh Yasin and ended with the murder of the hostage and the exile of 415 Hamas operatives to Lebanon, and the kidnapping of the soldier Nachshon Wachsman in 1994, which was intended to bring about the release of 500 Palestinian prisoners, headed by Sheikh Yasin, and ended with a failed IDF operation to release him (pp. 245-246, 293-295).

Just as Hamas worked in 2023 to derail the efforts to achieve normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, so in the 1990s they focused on bringing down the Oslo Accords. The novel deals extensively with the rift between those Arabs and Palestinians who chose the political path and the strict Hamas adherence to an uncompromising armed struggle and resistance to every permanent peace arrangement with the Jewish state. The roots of this rift go back to the peace initiative of Egyptian President Anwar Al-Sadat. According to Sinwar’s book, Sadat’s speech in the Knesset in November 1977 was profoundly shocking to the Palestinian people. In an act of protest, Palestinian terrorists assassinated the Egyptian journalist Yussuf Al-Siba’i who was a close associate of Sadat and a member of his entourage on his visit to Israel (p. 111).

Once the Oslo Accords were signed, the inter-Arab dispute became an internal Palestinian one. Many of the conversations between the novel’s heroes present the strident disagreement between on the one hand, the PLO, and later the Palestinian Authority, who sought peace treaties with Israel for pragmatic considerations, and on the other hand, Hamas who firmly opposed political compromise, preferring to create a situation of sovereignty that was not anchored

in any binding permanent arrangements beyond a temporary truce, i.e. *hudna*. For example, in response to the willingness of PLO supporters to set up a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Hamas supporters expressed their opposition to recognizing the right of the Jewish state to control 75 percent of historic Palestine, since “Israel is an abusive state that was founded on our land and should cease to exist” (p. 267).

In addition, the book’s heroes reject outright the argument that the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian entity requires accepting the existence of Israel. In a discussion between PLO supporter Mahmud and Hamas supporter Ibrahim, the latter insists that it is possible to establish a Palestinian state without recognizing Israel’s territorial rights on any part of the land.

A few years before implementation of the 2005 Israeli disengagement from Gaza and the Hamas takeover of the Strip, Ibrahim predicts that the killing of hundreds of Israelis by the Palestinian resistance will spur Israel to withdraw unilaterally from Gaza and the West Bank, and pave the way for a Palestinian state in liberated parts of the country without the need for recognition of the Jewish state. When Mahmud insists on asking him to explain the difference between withdrawal conditional on recognition of Israel and withdrawal without such a condition, Ibrahim replies that if Israel leaves the land without an agreement, under pressure from the resistance, Palestinians will not be bound by any commitments towards it, and the door to continuation of the struggle to destroy it will remain open until the circumstances are right (pp. 267-268).

As the book shows, the disagreement between supporters of the PLO and of Hamas is not only ideological but also political. Hamas refuses to recognize the PLO and the Palestinian Authority as the sole representatives of the Palestinian people, likewise the agreements signed by the PLO with Israel, and the powers granted to the PA by virtue of agreements over territories for which it is responsible. The

technical justification for this position expressed by Hamas supporters in the book is that the factions of the Palestinian opposition do not see themselves bound by agreements that they did not sign, particularly since the PLO did not consult them before signing and did not have them approved by a referendum (p. 289).

As described in the novel, these justifications are added to the Hamas rejection in principle of the conditions of the Oslo Accords, including: ending violent resistance, entering into relations of cooperation, coordination and security ties with Israel, and worst of all—recognition of the right of the “Zionist entity” to govern most of the territory of Mandate Palestine under broad international guarantees.

In one chapter of the book, Ibrahim is summoned for questioning at the Palestinian Security Office. The official explains the new reality of one legitimate Palestinian Authority, which has signed agreements with Israel under international guarantees, and warns him that he will be arrested if he does not obey its laws. In response, Ibrahim accuses him of collaborating with the Israeli plot to split the Palestinians into two groups, one committed to agreements and the other to continued opposition. At the same time he stresses that Palestinian national aspirations will not be fully achieved by negotiations but only by force of arms, since as everyone will eventually realize, “our enemies only understand the language of the gun and fire” (pp. 290-291, 297-298).

The book is therefore a further reflection of the struggle between Hamas and the PLO for Palestinian public opinion, where each side proposes its own path in the fight for national liberation. For example, in one of the arguments between the book’s protagonists, PLO supporter Mahmud accuses Hamas of carrying out attacks in order to acquire for itself—instead of via the Oslo Accords—Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian territories. Mahmud’s reply is that there is no point in waiting for Israel to withdraw in the framework of a political process, since in any case Israel is destined to “flee under the

pressure of the resistance” from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (pp. 297, 301-302).

Antisemitic Motifs in the Novel

The thorn and the carnation is a largely political essay, a song of praise to the path of violent resistance against Israel more than an antisemitic manifesto whose purpose is to preach hatred of the Jews as such. And yet it is precisely for this reason that the antisemitism springing from the pages of the book is so organic. It reflects almost inadvertently the assimilation of hostile attitudes towards Jews into Hamas discourse and ideology, and apparently also among a large proportion of the Palestinians who support the movement.

The antisemitic motifs expressed by the novel’s characters include references to Jews as the eternal enemies of Muslims, attributing despised characteristics to Jews, and wishing for the killing of Jews and even their annihilation.

The most widespread antisemitic motif in Islamist discourse is the concept of Jews throughout history as the enemies of the Muslims, thus linking Muhammad’s struggle against the Jews of the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century CE with the struggle of Hamas against the Jews of the present. A popular myth among Islamists—one that is mentioned repeatedly in Sinwar’s book and became a symbol of humiliation of the Jews—is the Battle of Khaybar in 628, in which the Muslims defeated the Jews of the city and forced them to surrender half their possessions to avoid being converted to Islam. This battle is also mentioned in the note found in the pocket of the commander of the Hamas military wing on October 7, in which he calls the Jews “a disease for which there is no cure” and urges his soldiers to cut off their heads “in the name of the God of Khaybar” (Shuval, 2023).

Similarly, in some parts of the novel the call “Khaybar Khaybar O Jews, the army of Muhammad will return!” is repeated in various contexts: Gaza youths rejoicing after damaging the tires of IDF jeeps (p. 204); non-Palestinian

Arab and Muslim demonstrators marching in support of the intifada in the capital cities of their countries (p. 326); and a young man called Muhammad who sets out on a suicide mission in Gush Etzion. Like the Nukhba forces, who called their relatives in Gaza to boast in real time about their atrocities on October 7 in the Gaza perimeter communities, Muhammad calls his mother to exchange his final words with her, and leaves his telephone open so that she will be able to hear the heroic moments that end his life:

He cried "Allah is the greatest, Khaybar is out", throwing his grenades one after another, and then broke through the door of the main hall shooting [...] Shots were exchanged with the security forces that rushed to the place. Muhammad fell and repeated "I bear witness that there is no God but Allah and I bear witness that Muhammad is his messenger." Then his mother let out a cry, wailing "Praise be to God who has honored me with his martyrdom" (pp. 332-333).

The perception of the evil and unchanging character of the Jews is used in the book as an explanation for the mutual abhorrence, which is destined to exist between Palestinians and Israelis, with selective reliance on Islamic sources. For example, the massacre at the Cave of the Patriarchs carried out by Baruch Goldstein in 1994, in which 29 Muslim worshippers were killed, is described as representative of the Jewish collective and not as an individual act of terror that was widely condemned in Israel. According to the novel, the slaughter occurred after the Imam read a verse from the Quran condemning the Jews and their violent and offensive conduct going back to the days of the First and Second Temples: "We declared to the Children of Israel in the Scripture, 'Twice you will spread corruption in the land and become highly arrogant'" (17:4). At that moment, Sinwar

writes in the novel, a "tall [settler] with a wild and dirty beard" crept into the hall and shot the worshippers (p. 286).

The opposition to the Oslo Accords expressed in the book is also justified by the treacherous nature of Jews. For example, in a discussion between the novel's heroes, Hamas supporter Hassan asks PLO supporter Mahmud, "Since when have [the Jews] honored agreements and contracts?" He cites a Quranic verse that refers, according to widespread interpretation, to the Jews' violation of their covenant with Muhammad and the aid they gave to infidels: "How is that whenever they make a covenant or a pledge, some of them throw it away? In fact, most of them do not believe" (2:100) (p. 301).

Mahmud, for his part, is unwilling to accept Hassan's approach and accuses him of irrationality, which confuses what is written in the Quran about the Jews of ancient times and Jewish Israelis of today. Hassan replies that the PLO members will very soon realize that the Jews have cunningly deceived them, just as "they killed the innocent and fought against Allah and his messenger" in the early days of Islam:

This is what Allah told us about them. We know them, their minds and the way they act. They recognize neither covenants nor treaties [...] Don't you know that history repeats itself, and that Jews remain Jews? You will see, Mahmud, you will soon see, and I will remind you [of this] if we are still alive (p. 308).

The terms "Jews" and "Israelis" are used interchangeably in the book, but the hatred of Jews is not limited to their role as the representatives of the "conquering and oppressive Zionist entity," which is constantly infringing the national rights of the Palestinians; it derives in fact from their religious identity. For example, the book mentions an attack in Gaza on an IDF vehicle, which it later emerged was

carrying Druze soldiers. Although the Druze are described in the book as violent and immoral, as people who were cruel to young Palestinian women and dishonored them, nevertheless Hamas members express disappointment and sorrow on realizing they have attacked Druze. “Ah, if only they had been Jews!” sighs Ibrahim, watching on television the weeping wives, mothers and sisters of the Druze victims (p. 276).

The perception of Jews past and present as the enemies of the Muslims—and as possessing permanent immoral features that make it impossible to live in peace with them—naturally leads to the desire for their deaths and even total extermination. Towards the end of the story and just before Israel takes his life, Ibrahim recalls “the promise of the stones and the trees”—an Islamic tradition also mentioned in the Hamas Charter (clause 7), which foretells the killing of Jews on the Judgement Day:

The Prophet of Allah said: The hour will not come until the Muslims fight the Jews, and the Muslims will kill them, until the Jews hide behind stones and trees, and the stones and trees will say: ‘O Muslim, O servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him,’ except for the Gharqad tree, for it is the tree of the Jews” (p. 333).

This tradition, ultimately, was Sinwar’s personal wish and mission when he planned “The Al-Aqsa Flood,” and the commandment he left for his readers.

Arab and International Discourse around *The Thorn and the Carnation* Following the Massacre

Works of art sometimes only arouse broad public attention after the death of their creator. Such is the case with Sinwar’s novel, which received wide recognition in the Arab world and beyond following the slaughter of October 7, 2023, and particularly after he was killed a year

later. On publication of the dramatic account of his death, *The thorn and the carnation* began to arouse interest on Arab social media, where many users were surprised to discover that the head of the Hamas Policy Bureau had dabbled in writing and was the author of a literary novel (Baraka, 2024).

The book was quickly marketed to Hamas sympathizers as Sinwar’s last will and testament, and even as a prophetic text in which the author expressed his wish for the martyrdom that he achieved some two decades later. Many Arabic writers pointed to the similarity between the last moments of Sinwar and of Ahmad, the novel’s narrator, who was also killed fighting Israel, and whose last words were: “I imagined myself storming their positions, butchering them like sheep, then becoming a martyr. Before my eyes stood Allah’s messenger in Paradise, calling to me, ‘welcome, welcome!’” (p. 332, Mamduh, 2024a; Imad, 2024; Sharqawi, 2024).

The novel—which was first published semi-clandestinely in 2004—was printed in a revised Arabic edition by several publishers, and copies were quickly snapped up (Bawabat Tunis, 2024). Within a few months it was declared the best-selling book at book fairs in Amman in Jordan, Al-Sulaymaniyah in Iraq, and Idlib in Syria, and also enjoyed success in bookstores and fairs in Kuwait, Algeria, Morocco and Egypt (El-Khabar, 2024; Al-Kuwayti, 2025). The book was also translated into English, French, Italian, Turkish, Kurdish, Russian, Chinese and Persian, and distributed through bookstores worldwide. In Iran no less than seven editions of the Persian translation sold out in less than two weeks (Al-Vefagh, 2024).

Hamas noted the success of the novel, and handed out hundreds of copies in Lebanon to politicians, cultural figures and pro-Palestinian activists (Palestinian Information Center, 2024). However, in the Palestinian arena itself, interest in the novel was relatively limited, apparently for two reasons. Firstly, in the areas under its control in the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority was not keen to encourage the popularity of

a book that undermined its legitimacy and glorified its political rivals. As for the Gaza Strip, we can assume that the conditions prevailing after October 7, 2023 were not conducive to distributing and reading books.

In addition to hard-back sales of the novel in Arabic, there were hundreds of thousands of free downloads from online sites. Its dizzying success can be seen in the fact that by June 2025 the *Goodreads* website contained over 300 reviews of it from readers in various countries, all of which without exception appeared after the October 7 massacre, and the majority after the death of Sinwar. The average rating for the book was 4.59 stars (70 percent of readers gave it five stars, 20 percent gave it four stars, and less than 2 percent gave it only one or two stars). Most of the reviews were written in Arabic, but about 15 percent were in other languages, including English, Persian, French, Turkish and Malay (*Goodreads*, n.d.).

There were also numerous reviews of the book in the press, on Internet sites and in Arabic literary journals, and they can be divided into three types based on the ideology and interests of their writers. The first type are the reviews written by supporters of the axis of Islamist resistance, which includes Hamas. They were prominent on platforms and media identified with Qatar and Turkey—Hamas’ patrons and its leaders’ hosts—and with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iran. These writers stressed the ideological approach presented in the book, whereby the conflict with Israel is religious, and not only national, and praised the ethos of jihad and martyrdom preached by the author.

For example, in December 2024 the Al-Aqsa Conference, a Qatari initiative intended to increase public awareness of the Palestinian issue and which was indirectly subordinate to the Qatari Ministry of Youth & Sport, organized a discussion of the book. Participants praised the novel’s heroes for their “sacrifice of life, property and children for the sake of Al-Aqsa and not only for the homeland,” since “Al-Aqsa is a matter of faith that is not limited to the

borders of the homeland, which were created by its enemies” (Al-Aqsa Conference, 2024).

An article on the Qatari *Al-Jazeera* channel website by Sulayman Saleh, formerly a member of the Egyptian parliament for the Muslim Brotherhood, describes Sinwar as “a man of vision and purpose.” According to the writer, his book carries a message that is directed not only at the Palestinian people but at the whole Islamic nation, and its purpose is to increase awareness of the Palestinian problem. Not only that, he admired Sinwar for writing the book in literary Arabic and not in spoken Palestinian Arabic, so that his message would reach Arabic readers everywhere, and also because he—as a member of an Islamic movement like Hamas—saw the integration of literary-Quranic language as an anchor of his religious identity (Saleh, 2023).

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Similarly, the *Palestine Online* website that is affiliated with Hamas states that Sinwar changed from the author of a fictional novel to a “flesh and blood hero,” an example of realizing one’s dream in a way that exceeded the imagination he displayed in his book (Al-Battah, 2024). An article in the Turkish daily *Yeni Şafak*—known for its support of the Erdogan government’s pro-Islamist line—presents Sinwar’s life story as a source of inspiration for “Palestinians and those living in the heart of the Islamic world.” The columnist, Seljuk Turkilmaz, wrote that “for us, reading and reflecting on [Sinwar’s] book is a duty.” He portrayed Sinwar as a “great warrior” who secured his place in history by sacrificing his life defending Muslim lands (Turk Press, 2024).

The translator of the book into Persian, Asmaa Khajazadeh, spoke in an interview about her great interest in works dealing with the resistance front and her fierce hatred for “the

Zionist entity.” She said that when Sinwar was killed, a new hero entered the “resistance hall of fame.” Moreover, Sinwar the martyr—who will be inscribed in history as someone who fought to the last moment—will remain immortal and will be more dangerous to the Zionist enemy than the living Sinwar (Al-Vefagh, 2024).

Other reviews with an Islamist tinge found in the novel the perfect complement to violent resistance. On the Qatari website *Al-Arabi Al-Jadid*, Yussuf Sharqawi, a Palestinian commentator living in Syria, claimed that Sinwar’s literary project was closely linked to his resistance project, and it was not by chance that he waited two decades to reenact with his own body the final scene from the novel (Sharqawi, 2024). An article on the Arabic Post website, whose offices are in Turkey, states that Sinwar imbued the heroes of his book with the values of “asceticism, sacrifice and redemption,” creating “an internal impulse for resistance.” Therefore we can learn from his book how Hamas in Gaza trained “a young generation able to oppose the occupation,” while nurturing “the motivation for resistance through years of education and preparation” (Arabic Post, 2024).

Other Islamist writers referred to autobiographical elements in Sinwar’s novel and eulogized him as a “martyr, jihad warrior, symbol of courage and a pure person, whose name will be engraved in the memory of enemies before friends” (Al-Shammari, 2024). The Lebanese writer Ali Naeem, who himself was awarded the Qasem Suleimani Prize for Resistance-Supporting Literature in 2024, pointed out on the *Al-mayadeen* website, which is identified with Hezbollah, that the book written by the Hamas leader sheds light on “another side of the diverse and multifaceted personality of the great commander Yahya Sinwar: He was a writer and scholar with every fiber of his being, but equally devoted to his people’s plight until his last breath” (Naeem, 2024).

The second type of Arab response to Sinwar’s book also treats him positively, but out of solidarity with the voice he gave to the

human suffering of the Palestinians and the denial of Palestinian national rights, rather than with the Islamist ideology of Hamas and the Axis of Resistance, as presented in the book. Reactions of this kind appeared mainly in media close to the regime in Egypt, which sees itself as committed to the Palestinian cause, in parallel to its internal struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood and its suspicious and ambivalent attitude to Hamas.

For example, the Egyptian writer Ammar Ali Hassan wrote in the establishment daily *Al-Masry Al-Youm* that Sinwar’s book is very good at describing the hard lives of the Palestinians under Israeli occupation. In his words, the novel teaches about “the Palestinians’ rituals of mourning and rejoicing, their attitude to aid organizations, their schools, their children’s games, the architecture of their simply furnished homes, and what they eat and drink, and also about the suffering and fear of mothers when their sons are arrested, imprisoned, wounded or beaten to death” (Hassan, 2024). Similarly, an article on the pro-Palestinian Arab website *Al-Hasad* says that the book describes the suffering of the Palestinians in refugee camps, where they experience “lack of food, poverty, hunger, fear and repression” (Al-Rajab, 2024).

Other articles in the Egyptian press use selective quotes from Sinwar’s novel to reinforce the image of Egypt and its army demonstrating solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza, but they ignore other parts of the book that criticize the peace treaty that Egypt signed with Israel. For example, an article in *Al-Shorouk* notes that Sinwar’s book praises the Egyptian soldiers who were in the Strip until 1967 for showing kindness to the Palestinian children and giving them sweets every day (Imad, 2024). In the same way, an article in *El-Watan* states that the novel includes “strong praise for the Egyptians, their compassion and their tenderness” and recognizes “the importance of Egypt and its central role in providing support for the Palestinian cause over the years, even before 1948” (Mamduh, 2024b).

Finally, the third and least common type of response to Sinwar’s novel contains strong criticism of the book and its author, reflecting the political and ideological tensions between Hamas and its Arab and Palestinian opponents. Although censure of Hamas and its leaders is not as widespread in the Arab world as the discourse supporting them, it is clear that it has increased both in traditional media and on social networks, as the war continues and the damage it has caused becomes more evident. A handful of writers found in the book reinforcement for their views on the futility of the Hamas path of violent resistance, on the tragedy into which the movement dragged Gaza residents in the wake of the October 7 attack, and its constant efforts to turn the conflict with Israel from a national to a religious struggle, while thwarting any chance for political compromise.

Particularly scathing criticism can be found in a series of articles by Hussam Khadra, a Palestinian journalist living in Cairo. On the *Amad* website, run from Egypt by the Palestinian politician Hassan Asfour, a Gaza native known for his opposition to Hamas, Khadra mocked Sinwar because his book called the aggressive behavior of IDF soldiers towards the residents of Gaza in 1967 “defeat” while he later called the bloody war that broke out after October 7 “victory” (Khadra, 2024a). He also pointed out that Sinwar was mistaken in his book when he estimated that Israel would not dare to enter the crowded refugee camps in the Gaza Strip and destroy them, and the price of this mistake was heavy: Two million Gaza residents were forcibly dragged into a children’s game called “Jews and Arabs” that he fondly remembers in the book, in which kids in the refugee camp were divided into two groups that fought each other with wooden sticks (Khadra, 2024b).

Referring to Sinwar’s obsession with pursuing internal “traitors”—collaborators with Israel—Khadra accuses him of a mental disturbance that ultimately takes its toll on the residents of Gaza:

The author mentions stories of treachery three times, and he formulates them in a way that provides a window into the soul of a man suffering from an antisocial behavior disorder. The symptoms of this disorder include hostility, violence, lack of empathy for others, lack of remorse for harming others, and taking unnecessary risks, taking dangerous actions with no thought for personal or group safety—the Gazans saw all this with their own eyes throughout the war that crushed the Gaza Strip (Khadra, 2024c).

Criticism in a similar vein was made by the Egyptian publicist Sami El-Behiri on the Saudi website Elaph. He said that reading the book gave him a number of insights into Hamas, including: that the movement was responsible for attacks against Israeli citizens, leading to the murder of Yitzhak Rabin and the rise of the extreme right in Israel; that it turned the Palestinian problem from a territorial dispute to a religious struggle between Judaism and Islam, using Muhammad’s war on the Jews of Khaybar 1,400 years ago as a metaphor for the conflict with Israel and comparing Hamas fighters to his army; and that it is an extreme party that will not accept any Palestinian partner in its government, as shown by Sinwar’s complete disregard in the novel for Yasser Arafat, the leaders of Fatah and their dramatic return from exile, while the leaders of Hamas such as Ahmad Yasin and Yahya Ayyash and the attacks carried out by the movement are addressed extensively (El-Behiri, 2025).

On the Emirati news website *Al-Ain*, it is argued that the novel reads more like a propaganda document than a work of literature. Moreover, the carnations that Hamas planted in the Gaza Strip turned to thorns in the wake of the “Al-Aqsa Flood,” and they are “burning Gaza and threatening to ignite a regional war in which everyone loses” (Al-Ain News, 2024).

The interest aroused by the novel does not stop at the borders of the Arabic-Islamic world, and its distribution in the West aroused a series of controversies. In early 2024 Amazon offered an English translation of *The thorn and the carnation*. The appearance of a book by an arch-terrorist for sale on one of the world's largest online commercial platforms led to protests by Jewish and pro-Israel organizations, and the book was withdrawn after a few days (JNS, 2024). Protesters argued that its contents incited violence, were soaked in Jew hatred, and encouraged terror. Not only that, they expressed a concern that profits from its sale would eventually reach the terrorist organization Hamas (UKLFI, 2024).

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In early 2025 there was further uproar when the management of La Sapienza University in Rome cancelled a symposium organized by pro-Palestinian students to mark the release of the Italian edition of the book. The President of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, Naomi Di Snai, condemned this “dangerous initiative” that could encourage “organized terror” (AFP, 2025). At the same time, the translation that first appeared in December 2024 continued to be sold in Italy through leading online bookstores. In a promotional item on La Luce website, which is linked to the book's publisher, it is described as “a rare glimpse into Palestinian society fighting for its honor and identity,” and its publication is described as “an expression of

the publisher's courage and its commitment to freedom of expression” (La Luce, 2024).

Notwithstanding the protests, editions of the book in English and other languages continued to be sold on international websites such as eBay and in bookstores in Switzerland, Germany and the United States. Connolly Books in Dublin, which was established in 1932 and describes itself as “Ireland's oldest radical bookshop,” referred to distribution of the book as an ethical mission beyond any commercial consideration. The store's Internet site was generous in its praise for the author, who was portrayed as “martyred while bravely fighting against Israeli genocide in Gaza.” Potential readers were invited to “traverse the corridors of his mind, where the seeds for the heroic ‘al-Aqsa Flood’ operation initiated on October 7, 2023, were sown” (Connolly Books, n.d.).

Identification with an Islamist terrorist movement like Hamas is not reserved for radical social movements in Ireland; it is seen in others who have made a connection—if only implicit—between the anticolonial struggles of their country and what they interpret as “legitimate resistance” to Israel. A month before Sinwar was killed, Susan Barday, a lawyer concerned with human rights in the Middle East, wrote in the South African weekly *Mail & Guardian* that the novel gives “an intimate and heart-wrenching perspective on Palestinian resistance.” She says that the author—at that time still alive—demonstrates leadership “through the escalating violence and genocide” (Barday, 2024).

Although most reactions to the novel were supportive, both in the Arab-Islamic world and in the international arena, it is clear that it aroused interest mainly among people who already supported Hamas. In this sense it was not just a means of propaganda but also a tool to establish Sinwar's legacy among his followers.

Conclusion

In an interview published in *Ha'aretz* in September 2006, shortly after the Second Lebanon War, the poet Haim Gouri talked of an

insight he heard from the Egyptian intellectual Dr. Hussein Fawzi during his first visit to Egypt in December 1977. In a conversation about the Israel-Egypt wars, Fawzi talked of the humiliation felt by Egyptian men after the Six Day War, when their wives and children scorned them. He said, “If Israeli intelligence had read Egyptian poetry written after 1967, they would have known that October 1973 was unavoidable.” Gouri’s conclusion was clear: “Every good intelligence officer should read poetry, while we didn’t read it and still don’t read it” (Lev-Ari, 2006).

The analysis of *The thorn and the carnation* and the controversy it aroused clarifies once again the power of a work of art: How it can reflect deep cultural, religious and political trends; act to distill radical world views into a literary text that can then become assimilated into the popular discourse in both East and West; and how it can grant those ideas legitimacy and even encourage violence.

The book gives a glimpse into Sinwar’s internal world and reveals the correspondence between his literary ideas and his murderous actions. Glorifying jihad, the desire for mass killing of Israelis and the blatant antisemitism, all chime with the Hamas concept realized in the October 7 slaughter. Sinwar’s efforts to thwart any normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia also fit in with his characters’ aversion to any political settlement of the conflict, and his adherence to the vision of destroying Israel and liberating Palestine from the river to the sea at any price.

When examining the continuity between the novel’s messages and the actions of Hamas on the ground, one concludes that the seeds of the attack were sown not only in Sinwar’s operational planning but even before then—in his literary work. Thus, to the series of failures by decision-makers, intelligence agencies and the research community in Israel before October 7, one must add the insufficient attention paid to literary texts, which could have served as stark warnings.

That a novel written by a murderous antisemitic psychopath is being sold today in the capitals of Arab countries and even in the West, with no interference or penalty—and even attracting glory and praise—must serve as another warning sign.

Not only does the novel serve as a mirror to the past, but also as a spotlight to the future—it helps us to understand the structural limitations on every attempt to reach an agreement with Sinwar’s successors. Even after the orchestrator of the October 7 massacre was removed from the scene, the struggle against the ideology of Hamas and its supporters is far from over. The real defeat will not be achieved on the battlefield alone: Guns can be confiscated and leaders eliminated—but the ideological roots of *The thorn and the carnation* must be uprooted, no less than the operational branches that have sprung from them.

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