

Israel's Struggle with the Information Dimension and Influence Operations during the Gaza War

"The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth"

Dr. Omer Dostri

In the contemporary strategic environment, military operations are significantly impacted by several major trends, including the virtual battles unfolding on social media. Information stands as the fastest revolutionizing industry today, marked by the expanding breadth and depth of information available across all communication platforms.¹ Information now flows through populations at unprecedented speeds, facilitated by the proliferation of interoperable digital devices. However, studies indicate that a considerable portion of this data is false, undermining its reliability.²

The widespread adoption of mobile technology, particularly in developing nations, has greatly enhanced the access to and the sharing of information worldwide. In nearly every corner of the globe, individuals and entities are interconnected in various ways, and the convergence of information technology with human

values, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions presents new challenges and vulnerabilities for the United States, Israel, and other Western democratic states.³ Social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok have emerged as primary news sources for many worldwide. Recent polling reveals that roughly half the U.S. population relies on social media feeds for current event updates.⁴ This wealth of information, and a significant amount of misinformation, complicates an individual's ability to discern the truth.

The emergence of social media dominance over public discourse as a conduit for communications coupled as information can be exploited by adversaries for operational purposes in addition to propaganda and disinformation. Numerous hostile state and nonstate actors increasingly exploit the information domain, capitalizing on the freedom of expression and liberal



A 16 October 2023 CNN report displays the headline, “Misinformation Spreading Amid Fighting in Middle East.” CNN reported, “As the Israel-Hamas war reaches the end of its first week, millions have turned to platforms including TikTok and Instagram in hopes of comprehending the brutal conflict in real time. ... That same demand for an intimate view of the war has created ample openings for disinformation peddlers, conspiracy theorists and propaganda artists—malign influences that regulators and researchers now warn pose a dangerous threat to public debates about the war. One recent TikTok video, seen by more than 300,000 users and reviewed by CNN, promoted conspiracy theories about the origins of the Hamas attacks, including false claims that they were orchestrated by the media.” (Screenshot from CNN)

values prevalent in democratic nations to conduct extensive information operations.⁵ The goal of these operations is to influence local and global public opinion, decision-makers, and military and security personnel.

For instance, influence operations often aim to exert pressure on the local government by shaping public sentiment in alignment with the malevolent interests of the actors orchestrating the information campaigns, thereby eroding the social cohesion of affected countries.⁶ Moreover, these operations are designed to have a broad global impact, intending to tarnish the reputation and to demonize and delegitimize other actors while undermining their international influence.

Given the subjective nature of reality interpretation by different actors, each seeks to establish its interpretation as the dominant truth in public opinion. Narrative creation and framing are pivotal components of information warfare, emphasizing the importance of understanding the culture, society, and regime of the nations and societies involved. This entails knowledge of their history, ideology, social divisions, values, norms, and more, which are essential

for effective engagement in shaping media and political agendas.⁷

Since 7 October 2023, Israel has faced extensive information and propaganda attacks accompanied by organized global campaigns from government and nongovernmental organizations. These efforts seek to challenge Israel’s right to defend itself against terrorist attacks, portraying Hamas and Palestinians as true victims and Israel as the aggressor, often accusing Israel of committing war crimes against Palestine.

Actors like Iran, Russia, and China leverage their official and semiofficial media, along with the world’s largest digital platforms, to bolster Hamas and undermine Israel. Although motivated by distinct reasons, these countries mutually reinforce their efforts within the context of their global media campaigns. Viewing themselves as participants

Dr. Omer Dostri is a military strategy and national security expert, and a researcher at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security and at the Israel Defense and Security Forum.



A demonstrator takes photos 11 February 2024 near the headquarters of UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia in Beirut during a protest to demand a ceasefire and support Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Her phone is covered with a picture of Abu Obeida, the spokesman for Hamas's Al-Qassam Brigades. In the current operational environment, cell phones with photo capability enable anybody in the world to bypass the filter of journalism's traditional editorial review, which gave some assurance that the images and facts transmitted were accurately reported and put into context. The massive influx of unfiltered information originating from the Gaza conflict has dramatically complicated understanding of events as conflicting narratives are transmitted worldwide. (Photo by Bilal Hussein, Associated Press)

in a global power competition against the United States, they acknowledge that any weakening of Israel, a key U.S. ally in the Middle East, also diminishes the strength of the United States.⁸ The United Nations (UN), including Secretary-General António Guterres, have almost uniformly adopted the talking points of Israel's adversaries, including the propaganda that Hamas has been spreading since 7 October.

One perilous outcome of this situation is the emergence of the "tent intifada" phenomenon on various campuses across the Western world, most notably in the United States. These highly violent occurrences involve students seizing university grounds and erecting protest tents ostensibly denouncing "Israel's crimes against the residents of Gaza," accompanied by overtly antisemitic and anti-Israel actions and rhetoric displayed on signs and posters.⁹ Remarkably, these protests

are devoid of factual basis; instead, they are fueled by a concoction of fake news, disinformation, misinformation, and outright propaganda disseminated by Hamas, Russia, China and Iran.¹⁰

Influence Operations: Definitions and Theoretical Background

Influence operations (IO), as defined in a RAND report, is the "coordinated, integrated, and synchronized application of national diplomatic, informational, military, economic, and other capabilities in peacetime, crisis, conflict, and post-conflict to foster attitudes, behaviors, or decisions by foreign target audiences that further U.S. interests and objectives."¹¹ According to the U.S. Department of Defense, information operations is the "integrated employment during military operations of information-related capabilities [IRCs] in concert



Pro-Palestinian signs and flags are laid out at the second campus encampment at Columbia University on 21 April 2024, several days after the New York Police Department arrested students and removed the first encampment. (Photo by Abbad Diraneyya via Wikimedia Commons)

with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision-making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own.”¹² IRCs, as defined by the U.S. Department of Defense, are “a capability that is a tool, technique, or activity employed within a dimension(s) of the information environment that can be used to achieve a specific end(s).”¹³ “[Information operations] integrate[] the application of force and the employment of information with the goal of affecting the perception and will of adversaries.”¹⁴ This integration and synchronization of IRCs enable “desired effects in and through the [information environment] at specified times and locations.”¹⁵

Per the RAND report, IO consists of “nonkinetic, communications-related, and informational activities” aimed at affecting the “cognitive, psychological, motivational, ideational, ideological, and moral characteristics of the target audience.”¹⁶ This also includes public affairs, information operations and most of its disciplines (especially psychological operations), strategic communications activities, and the more public relations-oriented parts of civil-military operations like civil affairs.¹⁷

IO has become an umbrella term that includes military (e.g., public affairs, military support to diplomacy, and parts of civil-military operations) and civilian (e.g., public and covert efforts) activities.¹⁸ More importantly, IO also includes nondefense informational activities like diplomatic (including public)

activities and those influence activities by the intelligence community.¹⁹

Although IO is primarily centered around communication, its effectiveness relies heavily on synchronization, coordination, and integration. This ensures that communication efforts align seamlessly with tangible actions and incentives, operating in harmony within broader, cohesive strategies. These actions often carry more weight than words. IO frequently concentrates on elucidating and capitalizing on tangible deeds by framing them positively to foster trust with an audience. Additionally, it counters adversary assertions by presenting information supported by evidence on the ground, which is endorsed by local opinion leaders known for their credibility and trustworthiness. Successful IO necessitates a high level of “sophistication, coordination, and synchronization to ensure coherence across various lines of operation,” along with a keen awareness of the importance of preserving “U.S. credibility with foreign audiences.”²⁰

Examining Social Media Related to the Outbreak of Most Recent Conflict

The purpose of this study is to analyze the IO conducted against Israel since the onset of the Gaza War, which was triggered by a massacre perpetrated by Hamas, a Palestinian terrorist group, on 7 October 2023. This attack resulted in the murder of more than 1,400



Noa Argamani, a twenty-five-year-old Israeli woman, pleads with her abductors not to kill her after she was kidnapped on 7 October 2023 while attending a music festival near Kibbutz Re'im in Israel. In an effort to sow terror among Israelis and encourage incitement of other violent acts against Israeli civilians inside Israel, Hamas filmed and released video excerpts showing their calculated and well-orchestrated assault and kidnapping of unarmed Israelis attending the festival. (Screenshot courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Israelis, many thousands injured, and 236 Israeli citizens and some foreigners, including Americans, kidnapped.²¹

The study will delve into the various definitions of IO already discussed and its characteristics to examine the actors involved in these operations and explore their interests and goals. Additionally, this research will scrutinize the actions taken by these actors during the Gaza War and address Israel's IO efforts to counter false accusations and gain international legitimacy for its operations in Gaza, which is aimed at achieving two primary objectives: destroying the military and governmental capabilities of Hamas and securing the release of all hostages.

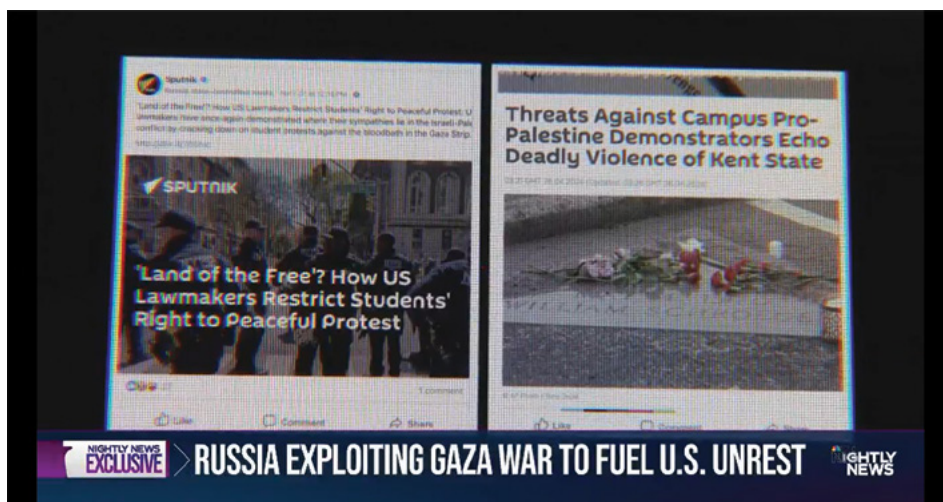
Understanding the Interest and Motivations of Adversarial IO Targeting Israel

Amid the conflict in Gaza, Israel is contending

with a diverse array of state and nonstate actors in the information domain, particularly regarding perception and influence. Primary adversaries engaged in IO against Israel include Russia, China, and Iran. Israel has also struggled with the amount of unproportional pressure against it from the UN, though it is not considered to be an adversary actor.

Russia. Russia's primary objective in its involvement against Israel is an effort to divert the attention of the Western nations, led by the United States, from the conflict in Ukraine. In pursuit of this goal, Russia accuses

the United States and Israel of triggering the Gaza War, employing explicitly anti-Israeli (and even antisemitic) language and narratives.²² For context, it is crucial to highlight the strengthening ties between Russia and Iran since the onset of the war in Ukraine, where Iran is supplying advanced weapons (e.g., unmanned aerial vehicles) to Russia.²³ To maintain this military and



In a 30 April 2024 news feature titled "Russia Is Trying to Exploit America's Divisions over the War in Gaza," NBC News reported that Russian efforts included "artificial intelligence, fake social media accounts, a long-standing tactic used by Moscow, as well as a spike in propaganda from Russian state media." (Screenshot from NBC News)

Disclaimer: *Military Review* does not endorse the views offered by the author but does assert that the article presents a point of view that will be useful for *Military Review* audiences as they attempt to understand the complex dynamics of the current (2024) situation specifically in Gaza and Israel as well as those of the other unfolding events in the Middle East in general. This article was selected for publication primarily because it highlights within a high-visibility microcosm of current regional conflict the dramatic evolving effects of social media that the United States and its military must anticipate in modern warfare as rapid interpersonal and mass communications impact the political, social, and operational environment of any future conflict in which it will become engaged. It was also selected in part because the analysis and views presented by the author likely mirror the insider views of Israel's wartime leadership regarding the nature of the information dimension of the conflict.

security alliance between the two nations, Moscow supports a sympathetic policy toward its allies, including Hamas.

Russia perceives itself as a global power and seeks to restore its status as a significant international actor. Consequently, the country is working toward the promotion of a ceasefire in Gaza by depicting Israel as an aggressive entity hindering its peace plan. Additionally, Russia harbors concerns about potential uprisings and unrest among its Muslim citizens in provinces and republics with significant Muslim populations, as exemplified by the incident in the Republic of Dagestan targeting a local Jewish community on 30 October 2023.²⁴

To accomplish its IO objectives, Russia is employing various media outlets, predominantly state-controlled, to propagate messages aligned with its official policy and national interests. Notable examples include news platforms such as RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik, which, in some instances, even broadcast in the local language of the target country. Additionally, Russia utilizes IO to counter messages conflicting with its interests, aiming to undermine individuals or institutions deemed detrimental to its image and objectives. These efforts encompass publishing articles containing content hostile to entities such as NATO, the United States, the European Union, and, more recently, Israel over the past two years. Furthermore, Russia extensively utilizes Russian and Western social media platforms, with an emphasis on Telegram accounts hosted by Russian influencers who consistently disseminate messages aligned with the Kremlin's agenda.

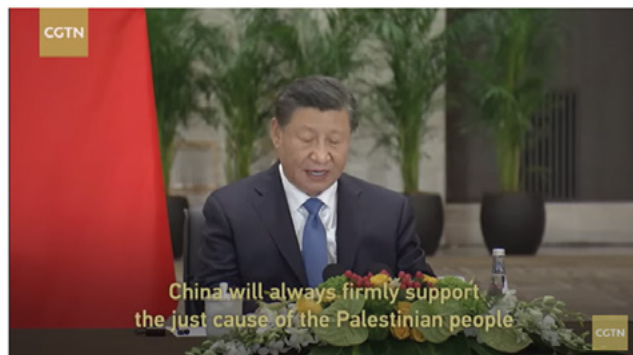
China. Viewing itself as a rival global power to the United States in the quest for world hegemony, China shapes its foreign policy to alter the global order

and rebalance power dynamics internationally. Given Israel's status as a significant ally of the United States, China adjusts its relationship with Israel by fostering warm ties with Iran and Palestinian groups. These efforts are aimed to counterbalance the U.S.-Israel alliance, particularly as Iran and Palestine are not aligned with the U.S.-led liberal Western camp.

With a strategic eye to the future, China places significant importance on maintaining its status as the leader of a developing world within the international arena. The country aspires to advocate for nations or populations oppressed by the broader coalition of U.S. allies and partners, portraying itself as a fair mediator for dispute settlement and resolution. Additionally, the conflict in Gaza has provided Beijing with an opportunity to counter ongoing allegations concerning its human rights practices, particularly accusations of abuses against Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang.

Furthermore, in China, there is apprehension regarding the internal Muslim population, totaling approximately eighteen to twenty million Muslims, with around 90 percent of the Uyghur minority concentrated in the Xinjiang Province.²⁵ Any potential alignment of China with Israel, particularly amid the ongoing Gaza conflict, poses a risk of triggering uprisings and discontent among this Muslim population. This runs counter to China's interest in maintaining internal stability, which is crucial for the sustained preservation of the communist regime in the country.

Consequently, China engages in IO against Israel to advance its anti-Western and anti-American agendas, aligning its commitment to fostering relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds. China's disinformation strategy is orchestrated by various government entities, including the People's Liberation Army, the State



China's President Xi Jinping (left) and Mahmoud Abbas, president of Palestine and the Palestinian National Authority, attend a December 2022 meeting in China to discuss future mutual cooperation. China has a long history of providing unqualified support for Palestinian claims. (Screenshot from the Institute for National Security Studies via YouTube)

Council and its Taiwan Affairs Office, the Cyberspace Administration of China, and the CCP's United Front Work Department.²⁶ Each agency has distinct roles, such as disseminating false news and emphasizing narratives favored by China on Western social networking platforms like Facebook, X, and YouTube, and on Chinese platforms like Weibo. Additionally, they leverage the popularity of Chinese-origin social networking platforms such as TikTok in the Western world, sometimes employing Chinese celebrities. Its state media like the Communist Party newspaper *People's Daily*, the national broadcaster CCTV, and the Global Times website also play pivotal roles in amplifying its national messages on the international stage.²⁷

Iran. Identified by the United States as the world's leading sponsor of international terrorism, not surprisingly, the Islamic Republic of Iran openly declares itself as an adversary of the State of Israel, advocating for its physical annihilation. This stance is an integral part of Iran's foreign policy, driven by several objectives: safeguarding the survival of the Ayatollah regime and the dominance of the Islamic Republic, enhancing its regional influence in the Middle East, and securing a significant political and economic standing on the global stage.²⁸

Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Tehran's foreign policy has been defined by the ambition to reshape the Middle East according to the ideology of the Shia-state Ayatollah regime. Iran aims to propagate the concept of an Islamic regime, oppose Israel, safeguard and advance the influence of Shia populations in competition against Sunni Islamic influence, and assert regional hegemony by diminishing the influence of the United States in the Middle East.

Consequently, Iran perceives Israel and the United States as two countries posing a threat to its broad interests. Due to Iran's military disadvantage, as compared to Israel and the United States, Tehran heavily invests in asymmetric warfare, employing tactics such as information warfare to influence the international community's consciousness and neutral countries.

The utilization of IO enables Iran to present and elucidate revolutionary Shiite ideas and Iranian endeavors in a favorable light, positioning Iran as a formidable regional power and enhancing its ideological standing on the global stage. Simultaneously, it casts a negative light on the State of Israel and its actions in the region and worldwide, serving as a conduit for conveying threatening and deterrent messages directed at Israel and the United States. Such IO enables Iran to rally supporters and activists worldwide. In pursuit of these objectives, Iran formally established a "soft war" headquarters within its armed forces on 3 December 2012.²⁹

The United Nations. Though not considered an adversary actor by Israel formally, the UN, since its inception, has consistently demonstrated an undeniable discriminatory policy in its pattern of actions that reflects a bias against the State of Israel.³⁰ This has been reflected in numerous ways. Many in Israel attribute this pattern of clear bias to the pronounced majority and influence of the Arab and Islamic bloc within the organization. An antagonistic and overt policy against Israel is evident in various aspects, including resolutions in the UN plenary and appointments and decisions made in different UN committees. Moreover, within the UN, three entities admit to having been established for the sole purpose of focusing on undermining Israel's

policy and politics with the aim of delegitimizing the Jewish state. These entities advance a one-sided political agenda that appears to run counter to its established and announced purposes and principles.³¹

The first organization is the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. This UN General Assembly (UNGA) office stands as the sole committee focusing on a single people.³² Among its primary activities is “to promote the Palestinian narrative of victimhood and UN bias against Israel.”³³ Likewise, the Division for Palestinian Rights functions as the UN’s secretariat for the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, providing Palestinians delegates (effectively the Palestinian Liberation Organization) an entire UN department dedicated to the achievement of its goals, an unprecedented UN-sponsored organizational innovation unparalleled for any other ethnic/national entity.³⁴ Lastly, the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories remains the only committee within the UN’s human rights structure devoted to advancing the interests of a single affinity/national identity group.³⁵

Among the populations worldwide affected by conflict and displacement, only the Palestinians have an exclusive UN agency designated to aid their “refugees”—those displaced during the 1948 war launched by the Arab states against Israel upon its declaration of independence. This agency is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

UNRWA is restricted to one refugee release purpose in contrast to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which serves as the UN refugee agency for the global refugee population. Additionally, in practice, it has rejected a mandate to resettle Palestinian refugees, thereby preventing their removal from refugee rosters. Instead, a primary policy objective appears aimed at perpetuating the refugee status of its 5.9 million constituents.³⁶

While, on the surface, UNRWA operates as an internationally funded welfare agency providing education, health care, and financial assistance to millions of Palestinians; in practice, it functions as a political advocacy tool.³⁷ Its primary objective is to advance what is referred to as the “Palestinian right of return,”

which aligns with the announced overarching goal of eliminating Israel as a Jewish state.³⁸

Notably, some employees of the UN-sponsored and -funded UNRWA in Gaza have openly aligned themselves with, endorsed, and even engaged in terrorist actions on behalf of Hamas, including publicly supporting the October attack against Israel.³⁹ Hamas and other terrorist organizations in Gaza routinely utilize UNRWA’s equipment, facilities, institutions, and resources, particularly within the context of the Gaza-Israel conflict. These are exploited for terrorist activities against Israel Defense Forces (IDF), resulting in harm to Gaza’s residents.⁴⁰

Also indicative of prevailing UN sentiment among its members toward Israel, the number of condemnations directed at Israel during UNGA sessions has widely surpassed those aimed at the rest of the world combined each year. In 2022, for instance, there was a single resolution each criticizing Iran, Syria, North Korea, Myanmar, and the United States for its embargo on Cuba. Additionally, due to the conflict in Ukraine, there were six resolutions on Russia in 2023. The combined total for these nations was thirteen.⁴¹

In stark contrast, the UNGA has passed fifteen condemnatory resolutions exclusively targeting Israel.⁴² Not a single UNGA resolution was introduced on the human rights situation in China, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, Cuba, Türkiye, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Pakistan, Qatar, Vietnam, Algeria, or any of the other 175 countries, many of which have widely reported human rights abuses like those in Central Africa.⁴³

IO against Israel

Russia. Several groups using messaging services like Telegram—predominantly composed of Russian speakers—have disseminated images and assertions mirroring those of the terrorist organization. These claims range from alleging that Israel is conducting mass killings of Gaza citizens to equating Israel with the Islamic State.⁴⁴ Cartoons circulated on Facebook depict Israel as a force attempting to seize control of Gaza, reinforcing the message that Israel is the aggressor.⁴⁵ This information aims not only to shape global public opinion but also to influence Russian public perception and draw parallels between Israel and Ukraine. In one example, a photo circulated on a Russian blogger’s Telegram account, supportive of

the Kremlin, showing the Israeli flag blended with the colors of the Ukrainian flag.⁴⁶

The Spanish branch of RT echoed the Iranian president's statement about the bombing of Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza, attributing it to Israel.⁴⁷ This contradicted information from the Israeli military, intelligence experts, unbiased analysts, and reliable international media, which indicated that the explosion resulted from a projectile fired within Gaza. Another Russian influencer, also aligning with Kremlin views, quoted a "military expert" suggesting that the United States supplied the bomb that hit the hospital, garnering tens of thousands of views.⁴⁸

Pro-Kremlin Telegram accounts that previously focused on Ukraine shifted on 7 October to disseminating materials about Israel, including an Arabic channel linked to Russia's Wagner Group.⁴⁹ President Vladimir Putin, meeting with Hamas leaders after the war's onset, characterized the conflicts in Ukraine and Israel as battles against American global control. Additionally, he claimed that Western intelligence services orchestrated violent riots against Jews in Dagestan on 29 October 2023.⁵⁰

Following Hamas's attack on 7 October, Russian Facebook accounts significantly increased their activity. Data from the Alliance for Securing Democracy revealed that these accounts posted about forty-four thousand times compared to the fourteen thousand posts that occurred in the seven weeks leading up to the conflict.⁵¹ In total, Russian-backed Facebook content was collectively "shared almost 400,000 times, marking a four-fold increase" compared to the pre-conflict period.⁵² Many Kremlin-backed accounts, particularly those associated with RT and Sputnik, wielded a substantial digital reach.⁵³ Despite sanctions imposed by the European Union on their broadcast and social media operations, these entities amass millions of followers in Europe, Latin America, and Africa.⁵⁴

The French newspaper *Libération* introduced an additional and troubling dimension to this narrative. The publication exposed Russia's purported involvement in the tagging of Jewish homes in Paris with numerous Star of David graffiti.⁵⁵ The evidence suggesting Russian influence is compelling: "a pro-Russian botnet named RR circulated images of the vandalized homes even before the French public became aware of the incidents."⁵⁶ The ultimate aim appears to be the promotion

of discord and unrest, intending to fracture societies and incite internal turmoil.⁵⁷ Russia-1, a state-run television channel, used a provocative title in a recent article: "Israel is a cancer in the heart of the Middle East." Within an hour, the title was altered, but the initial sentiment could not be forgotten.⁵⁸

Adding to the complexity, Telegram groups have been disseminating a series of disturbing assertions. One claim suggests that "Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, Gilad Erdan, donned a yellow Star of David patch on his lapel, suggesting parallels between the current situation in Palestinian territories and the historical persecution of Jews."⁵⁹ Another group spread the accusation that Israel was "deliberately targeting mosques, contrasting this with Israel's outcry when synagogues are damaged, thereby implying a hypocrisy in respecting religious symbols."⁶⁰

Furthermore, these groups circulated a video featuring Vladimir Poghosyan, a former advisor to the Armenian chief of staff. In this video, Poghosyan made a series of alarming statements, including openly endorsing harm against Jews, denying the Holocaust, and expressing a desire to fight alongside the Palestinians.⁶¹

China. In the weeks following the Hamas attacks, substantial support for the Palestinian side surged on the Chinese internet, accompanied by strong antisemitic sentiments.⁶² Many in China adopted the narrative that "Hamas, designated a terrorist organization by the United States and other countries, is involved in a legitimate national liberation struggle."⁶³

Numerous videos on China's Bilibili digital platform portray Hamas in a positive light, depicting the group as heroic and proficient in battle.⁶⁴ These videos draw parallels between "Hamas's attacks on the Israeli army to the Chinese Communist Party's counterattack against the Japanese during World War II."⁶⁵

Over the past two months, Chinese netizens have expressed support for Hamas, sharing cartoons featuring its fighters on social media platforms like Bilibili. Some individuals posted images of themselves dressed as Hamas fighters. In a cartoon, three smiling cats dressed as Hamas fighters are shown sitting in a tunnel, each eating a can of beans with an automatic weapon nearby. In late November, a viral Hamas cartoon video on Bilibili showcased a cartoon cat representing a Hamas fighter, attacking "an enemy tank with a rocket launcher."⁶⁶ These cartoon Hamas cats were also reposted on Weibo.



President Xi Jinping and the People's Republic of China have leveraged the Israel-Gaza conflict to coordinate global animosity aimed at the United States and to deflect global media attention away from failing Chinese economic and domestic policies and from China's aggressive actions against Taiwan and other nations including the Philippines, Vietnam, and India. (AI-generated image by Michael Lopez, *Military Review*)

The support for Hamas on the Chinese internet can be attributed to official state propaganda. Some Bilibili vloggers who support Hamas acknowledge that their perspectives are influenced by Beijing's official position on the Israel-Hamas conflict.⁶⁷ The official Chinese narrative is to "back Palestine, criticize Israel, and downplay the terrorist acts of Hamas."⁶⁸ Consequently, young people, particularly "those with a nationalist wolf-warrior complex, naturally admire and worship Hamas as a symbol of national liberation and resistance to colonization."⁶⁹

Significant government-aligned nationalist accounts often dominate discussions on Chinese online platforms, each competing for attention by making sensational claims. The absence of condemnation of Hamas by Chinese officials contributes to its support. Rather than "Israel-Hamas," Chinese authorities use the term "Palestine-Israel" conflict.⁷⁰ State media coverage tends

to be biased, frequently highlighting Israeli airstrikes on Gaza and the resulting devastation.⁷¹ Widely shared anti-Israel posts on Weibo often originate from prominent nationalist influencers with a tendency to be hostile toward the West. A well-known account with some 6.6 million followers "accused Israel of failing to side with China when it was sanctioned by the US, and asked why China would support Israel now."⁷² While many criticize Israel's actions, some "shared antisemitic conspiracies and hateful comments."⁷³ A popular nationalist account with over two million followers posted memes featuring Adolf Hitler, and other accounts have also praised him as being "responsible for the deaths of millions of Jews during World War II."⁷⁴ Additionally, other popular accounts have criticized Israel's longstanding relationship with the United States.⁷⁵

A significant portion of the online discourse revolves around the devastation caused by the conflict.



Some commentaries employ antisemitic tropes to advance points aligning with Beijing's geopolitical interests, particularly in challenging the U.S.'s global dominance.⁷⁶ In an article dated 14 October, retired People's Liberation Army Maj. Gen. Luo Yuan said that "Israel functioned as a 'pawn' strategically placed in the Middle East to execute American interests in the region."⁷⁷ On 11 October, an influencer with 2.5 million followers claimed "Jewish people financed Tepco, the Japanese company responsible for discharging wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear power plant—a highly contentious issue in China."⁷⁸

Following the attacks by Hamas on southern Israel, Chinese officials have consistently called for

Directly controlled by the Chinese Communist Party's Central Propaganda Department, China Central Television has orchestrated a narrative through images that consciously depict Hamas leaders and terrorists as sympathetic "David against Goliath" figures fighting heroically against great odds. (Screenshots from YouTube)

an immediate ceasefire and expressed support for Palestinian statehood. Chinese state media has accused Washington of displaying pro-Israel bias and interfering in Middle Eastern affairs.⁷⁹

While issuing general denouncements of violence against civilians, China has refrained from directly condemning Hamas for its 7 October attacks. In a speech to fellow BRICS leaders on 21 November 2023, President Xi Jinping urged Israel to halt its blockade and "collective punishment" on the people of Gaza.⁸⁰ He reiterated China's advocacy for an independent Palestinian state, emphasizing that the current situation arises from the prolonged neglect of the Palestinian people's rights to statehood, survival, and return.⁸¹

During a meeting with officials from Arab and Muslim majority nations on 20 November, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that "Israel should halt the collective punishment of the people of Gaza."⁸² Additionally, a Beijing representative



A correspondent for China Central Television reports on an Israeli bombing in Gaza in 2023. (Screenshot courtesy of the China Central Television via Phil Cunningham)

expressed concern regarding the Israeli military's involvement at Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza, which was reportedly used for operations by Hamas. The representative urged Israel to cease military operations against civilian facilities.⁸³

Iran. Iranian state-affiliated accounts glorified the Hamas attack as a strategic blow against Israel and capitalized on Israel's attack on Hamas, stating that "the resulting humanitarian crisis and civilian casualties, particularly emphasizing that the US is allied with Israel and therefore shares responsibility for Palestinian suffering and Israeli war crimes."⁸⁴ Iran has primarily been promoting comments from media accounts representing the Iranian regime.⁸⁵

Iran centers the narrative that Iran and its supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei are leading a "pan-Islamic resistance' against neo-colonial, Western powers and Israel."⁸⁶ Khamenei and other Iranian officials "share an identical narrative critiquing Western complicity and highlighting Palestinian suffering."⁸⁷

The Hamas attack has been cast as an inevitable response to Israeli injustices. Iranian state-affiliated accounts have shared graphic images and videos of dead and injured civilians, in particular

children. These visuals have been used to emphasize Israel's "wrongdoing and encourage support for the Palestinian cause, which is conflated with Iran's pan-Islamic resistance narrative."⁸⁸

The accounts often use language that depicts 'the enemy' as entirely evil, highlights their killing of civilian women and children, and excuses or even glorifies war crimes against Israeli civilians. State-affiliated accounts have also shared unverified content or disinformation in recent months, such as a video purportedly taken by CNN of the Hamas attack, to which a user added fake audio to make it appear staged.⁸⁹

According to a December 2023 report by the Israel National Cyber Directorate, Israel has been subjected to information and cyber attacks from fifteen main groups associated with Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran.⁹⁰ These groups are utilizing "psychological warfare through social media networks as a means to amplify the impact of the attacks."⁹¹ This includes conducting IO on social networks, providing "support through various channels," creating "impersonation profiles," and "disseminating false information to manipulate public opinion."⁹² Additionally, some groups share intelligence, methods, and tools with each other.⁹³



Palestinian women mourn victims killed in the Israel-Hamas conflict in Khan Younis, a city in the southern Gaza Strip, on 15 November 2023. Israel had been carrying out attacks on Gaza and imposed a siege on the enclave to retaliate against Hamas attacks on southern Israel. (Photo by Yasser Qudih, Xinhua)

On 15 January 2024, the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet) revealed various social media influence efforts by Iranian elements impersonating Israelis. It was aimed to include influencing Israeli discourse, gathering intelligence, and using deceptive tactics involving Israeli citizens to deepen social and political divisions.⁹⁴ Some of these influence networks uncovered by Shin Bet were established immediately after attack on 7 October or in the subsequent weeks. Others that were operational before the attack shifted their focus to issues relating to the conflict, such as advocating for the return of hostages or promoting calls to return to Gush Katif (Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip unilaterally dismantled in 2005).⁹⁵

In addition to the stated objectives described in the Shin Bet announcement (e.g., gathering intelligence through surveys, influencing internal discourse, and harassing political parties or the families of hostages), there was also Iranian incitement against Israeli-Arab citizens.⁹⁶ This includes publishing personal details and pictures with target symbols on their faces. The network encouraged incidents of violence in various Israeli hospitals

while spreading false information about the presence of “Hamas terrorists” in those hospitals. The purpose was to deepen the Jewish-Arab divide and potentially incite actual physical friction and violence, especially at a critical time when senior Israeli officials warned against a potential event referred to as “Guardian of the Walls II.”⁹⁷ (Guardian of the Walls was a military operation in Gaza on 2021, in which Israel confronted terrorism from Gaza and domestic from Israeli Arabs alike.)

As reported by Microsoft Threat Intelligence on 18 January 2024, Iran-associated threat actors are employing an advanced social engineering campaign.⁹⁸ This ongoing campaign, first identified in November 2023, specifically targets prominent researchers engaged in the Israel-Hamas conflict, aiming to influence intelligence and policies relevant to the Islamic Republic of Iran. For instance, Mint Sandstorm (also known as APT35 and Charming Kitten), a threat actor with connections to Iranian military intelligence, utilizes customized phishing lures to entice targets into downloading malicious files, with the intention of pilfering sensitive data.⁹⁹



Motorists drive past a giant billboard erected in Valiasr Square in the center of Tehran, Iran, on 25 October 2023. The billboard depicts Muslim peoples walking with their national flags toward the Dome of the Rock shrine in Jerusalem. (Photo by Atta Kenare, Agence France-Presse)

The United Nations. Since the Hamas attack on Israel, the UN has primarily focused on Israel's military actions in Gaza, particularly in relation to the quantity and quality of the UN reference of the Hamas massacre that resulted in over 1,400 casualties and the abduction of Israeli citizens. Even the statement by the spokesman for the UN secretary-general, indirectly implied that Israel does not have the right to defend itself. The statement emphasized the need for "all diplomatic efforts to avoid a wider conflagration," highlighting that "violence cannot provide a solution to the conflict, and that only through negotiation leading to a two-state solution can peace be achieved."¹⁰⁰

The research division of the Israeli Diaspora Ministry compiled statements from the organization's leaders and staff, indicating a substantial adoption of the Palestinian narrative by the UN.

- **17 October 2023.** Catherine Russell, UNICEF's director general, criticized Israel for the "attack on Al-Ahli Hospital" and called for the protection of

all citizens in Gaza, even though the attack resulted from a failed rocket launch by the Islamic jihad.¹⁰¹ Russell also claimed that hundreds were killed in the attack, though these numbers were subsequently disproven.

- **13 October 2023.** Martin Griffiths, the UN under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs, criticized Israel for establishing a humanitarian corridor in northern Gaza to facilitate the evacuation of residents from battle zones to ensure their safety. He expressed concerns about the evacuation order, stating, "The noose around the civilian population in Gaza is tightening. How are 1.1 million people supposed to move through a densely populated war zone in less than 24 hours? I shudder to think what the humanitarian consequences of the evacuation order would be."¹⁰² However, Griffiths did not address the situation of the kidnapped individuals or the presence of Hamas within the hospital grounds in Gaza.¹⁰³



A "Tears of War" poster with an image of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu published by Iran to take advantage of the tensions and differing opinions in Israel's civil society. Most likely AI-generated, the text reads "Impeachment now." His collar translates to "#without Bibi we will win." (Image from Asharq Al-Awsat)

- ♦ **10 October 2023.** Lynn Hastings, the UN resident and humanitarian coordinator in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, did not express empathy for the hundreds murdered in Israel but raised concerns for Gazans (including thousands of terrorists, since Hastings made no distinction between terrorists and the civilian population). For instance, three days after the attack, Hastings issued a statement on the "hostilities between Palestinian armed groups in the Gaza Strip and Israel."¹⁰⁴ While a brief paragraph addressed the murder of Israelis, the majority of the statement focused on the suffering in Gaza.¹⁰⁵
- ♦ **24 October 2023.** UN Secretary-General António Guterres strongly criticized Israel's actions in Gaza in his speech to the UN Security Council. He asserted that the massacres carried out by Hamas "did not happen in a vacuum" and connected them to the "suffocating occupation endured by the Palestinian people for 56 years."¹⁰⁶
- ♦ **6 November 2023.** Guterres declared that "Gaza is transforming into a graveyard for children, with hundreds of girls and boys reportedly being killed or injured every day."¹⁰⁷ A month later, on 6 December 2023, Guterres took an unusual step by invoking Article 99 of the UN Charter in a letter to the members of the Security Council. This article grants the secretary-general authority to bring issues to the Security Council that he deems a threat to world peace.¹⁰⁸ This marked the first instance of Guterres using this authority since assuming office in 2017. Notably, he refrained from exercising this authority during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the clause had not been invoked since 1989.
- ♦ **21 January 2024.** Guterres condemned Israel for the deaths of Palestinian civilians in Gaza, asserting that it was unacceptable to oppose statehood for the Palestinian people. Expressing concern about the humanitarian situation in Gaza, he said, "People are dying not only from bombs and bullets but from a lack of food and clean water, hospitals without power and medicine, and grueling



UN Secretary-General António Guterres asserts during a Security Council meeting that the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on southern Israel “did not happen in a vacuum” but stemmed from long-term unrequited aspirations for the establishment of a Palestinian state. Israel officials expressed outrage at his remarks, stating that his comments were ill-timed and amounted to a justification for terrorism. (Photo courtesy of the United Nations)

journeys to ever-smaller slivers of land to escape the fighting.”¹⁰⁹ On 23 January 2024, Guterres emphasized that “the entire population of Gaza is enduring destruction at a scale and speed without parallel in recent history.”¹¹⁰

- ♦ **12 December 2023.** “The United Nations voted for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war, with more than three-quarters of the 193-member General Assembly” supporting the move.¹¹¹ However, attempts “by the United States to amend the text to include a rejection and condemnation of ‘the heinous terrorist attacks by Hamas [...] and the taking of hostages’ and Austria’s bid to add that the Israelis hostages “were being held by Hamas both failed to garner the two-thirds majority needed to pass.”¹¹²

The political bias against Israel in the UN, while omitting the context of the massacre committed by Hamas in Israel, was also expressed in the legal institutions of the UN. South Africa initiated

legal proceedings against Israel at the International Court of Justice on 29 December 2023, alleging that Israel violated its obligations under the Genocide Convention.¹¹³ This move aligns with South Africa’s historical stance on Israel and Palestine, and its domestic and foreign policy priorities.

The South African submission calls for various actions, including an emergency order for Israel to “immediately suspend its military operations in and against Gaza.”¹¹⁴ However, Israeli officials assert that the war is against Hamas, not the people of Gaza. In addition, the IDF took extensive measures to mitigate harm to civilians, including providing advance warnings, urging evacuations through safe routes, establishing humanitarian corridors, and aborting operations that could cause excessive civilian harm.¹¹⁵

John Kirby, White House National Security Council spokesman, condemned South Africa’s submission on 3 January 2024 as “meritless, counterproductive, and completely without any basis in fact whatsoever.”¹¹⁶



Eli Cohen, Israel's former foreign affairs minister, addresses the UN Security Council during a meeting on 24 October 2023 about the ongoing situation in the Middle East, including discussion of the status of Palestinians. (Photo courtesy of the United Nations)

Similarly, Matthew Miller, U.S. State Department spokesman, when asked to refer to the International Court of Justice allegations, stated, “Those are allegations that should not be made lightly [...]. We are not seeing any acts that constitute genocide [...]. That is a determination by the State Department.”¹¹⁷

Israel's Counter IO

Since 7 October, Israel has been compelled to confront widespread campaigns of disinformation, misinformation, fake news, and IO orchestrated by hostile entities in the digital media landscape. To counter this threat, Israel has established several government ministries and agencies, including the IDF spokesperson, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Diaspora, the Public Diplomacy Directorate within the Prime Minister's Office, the Prime Minister's Office itself, and the Office of the President of the State.

These governmental entities employ various strategies and platforms to counter IO against Israel. Their approach includes

- ◆ leveraging digital media,
- ◆ maintaining ongoing communication with international media outlets,
- ◆ establishing connections and briefings with influencers and public figures globally,
- ◆ providing briefings to government officials and representatives in various countries and international organizations,
- ◆ issuing prompt and well-substantiated responses to false reports,
- ◆ submitting requests to social media platforms for the removal of inflammatory and false content,
- ◆ disseminating proactive materials to counteract the tarnishing of Israel's image worldwide, and
- ◆ other measures.

After 7 October, the IDF's international communications office doubled in size to more than two hundred people with recruited reservists and media experts who communicate in fourteen languages. Other units like the National Public Diplomacy Directorate have also brought in new spokespeople.¹¹⁸



An Israel Defense Forces press briefing to the global media details the atrocities by Hamas in the 7 October 2023 attack that killed more than 1,400 Israeli civilians and the taking of more than a hundred hostages. (Photo courtesy of the Israel Prime Minister's Office Government Press Office)

Through social media, pro-Israel rallies, and private meetings with business leaders, politicians, and journalists, Israeli officials have highlighted the attack as an “indelible tragedy in Jewish history.”¹¹⁹ As such, Israel organized a screening of “a 43-minute video of the Hamas atrocities, much of it filmed on the terrorists’ own cameras,” for the many delegations that came to Israel and also screened it in many countries for members of the public, government, cultural and sports figures, and influencers.¹²⁰ In addition, the IDF has taken reporters and supporters like Elon Musk, Jerry Seinfeld, and a convoy of TikTok influencers to visit the kibbutzim that became killing fields, with the hope of “reminding the world of the scale and depravity of the October 7 attack.”¹²¹

Israel’s Foreign Ministry paid for more than \$1.5 million (as of November 2023) in “online ads on platforms ranging from YouTube to the popular online game Angry Birds,” containing footage of the attack.¹²² However, according to a data from U.S. digital marketing company Semrush, the Israeli government had invested \$8.5 million.¹²³

To counter the negative portrayal attempted by adversaries and the UN, particularly concerning allegations of war crimes committed by the Israeli army against Gazans, official government and military social media channels have shared videos, advertisements, and graphics showcasing the IDF’s humanitarian efforts, including “the distribution of Arabic leaflets, phone calls, and text messages warning civilians to evacuate specific area.”¹²⁴

Developers from Tel Aviv’s top tech companies met with government officials and international communications consultants for a Hasbara [Public Diplomacy] Hackathon to develop digital tools to test whether IDF messaging is resonating with online audiences, and if the foreign public “response is positive or negative.”¹²⁵

Israel also used covert IO. According to Time correspondents Eric Cortellessa and Vera Bergengruen, Since the start of the war, Israel has deployed its psyops operation known as the “Influence Unit”—a small but secretive office run out of



Satellite footage released by the Israel Defense Forces shows that an explosion at a hospital in Gaza on 17 October 2023, which resulted in a large number of civilian casualties, was the result of a misfired Palestinian Islamic Jihad rocket. Israeli forces were widely and erroneously blamed for the blast by the global media that exploited the incident for disinformation purposes. (Photo courtesy of the Israel Defense Forces)

the IDF that plants stories in the press to shape the perception of the war and send signals to the enemy. ... In some cases, the unit's tactics can undermine the Israeli government's [Public Diplomacy] effort. On December 10, it released photographs of Palestinian men, whom the IDF claimed were Hamas terrorists, stripped in their underwear and surrendering to Israeli military forces. It was designed ... to show Israel winning on the battlefield and to demoralize Hamas members with images of their own men giving up.¹²⁶

Israel has disclosed intelligence materials to military and government officials worldwide to present the unprecedented challenges it faces in its war on terrorism in Gaza. For example, on 26 January 2024, the IDF's intelligence chief, Aharon Haliva, met with the U.S. Ambassador Jacob Lew and David Satterfield, the Special Envoy for Middle East Humanitarian Issues, to present findings about twelve members of UNRWA who had participated in the attack. Israeli officials said

UNRWA sites were being used as terrorist installations.¹²⁷ Hours later, on 27 January, the Biden administration announced it was suspending its UNRWA funding, pending an investigation. Several other countries, including Britain, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, France, and Finland, have also suspended their UNRWA funding following Israel's accusations.¹²⁸

The State of Israel is also actively engaged in the legal sphere to counter IO. The Office of the State Attorney has operated a cyber team dedicated to removing terrorist and antisemitic content from social networks since 7 October. Since its establishment, more than twenty-one thousand removal requests have been submitted for such content, accounts, pages, or groups.¹²⁹ Approximately 92 percent of the content reported on Meta Group platforms (Facebook and Instagram), TikTok, and YouTube was successfully removed.¹³⁰ The teams also collaborated with major technology companies to eliminate specific hashtags on social networks that may incite terrorism, leading to the removal of thousands of posts. Additionally,

contents promoting terrorism or praising terrorist organizations were removed from TikTok. Special efforts were made to address content related to hostages, urging the removal of Hamas videos depicting the hostages in a demeaning manner that embodies psychological terror or poses a risk to the individuals abducted.¹³¹

Conclusion

The IDF and Israeli government have encountered significant information and propaganda attacks, along with global campaigns opposing their actions, since 7 October 2023. Iran, Russia, and China utilize official and semiofficial media, and digital platforms to support Hamas and undermine Israel, employing tactics such as disinformation, misinformation, fake news, and IO in the digital media landscape. These efforts aim to weaken Israel, a key U.S. ally in the Middle East, and diminish U.S. influence. Unfortunately, the UN and some of its agencies have played a significant role in IO that also appear aimed at undermining Israel.

In response, Israel has implemented various strategies and platforms to counter this IO. These strategies include leveraging digital media, maintaining communication with international media outlets, engaging with influencers and public figures globally, providing briefings to government officials and representatives, issuing prompt and well-substantiated responses to false reports, requesting the removal of inflammatory and false content from social media platforms, and disseminating proactive materials to counteract negative portrayals of Israel's image worldwide.

Israel's goal is to gain American and international legitimacy for the continuation of the Gaza War until the destruction of Hamas's military and governmental capabilities is achieved. Additionally, Israel aims to demonstrate itself as the righteous side in its fight against Islamic-radical Palestinian terrorism, justifying its actions as self-defense. Media and digital activity are crucial components of Israel's efforts to defend itself against threats and counter disinformation, fake news, and smear campaigns. ■

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