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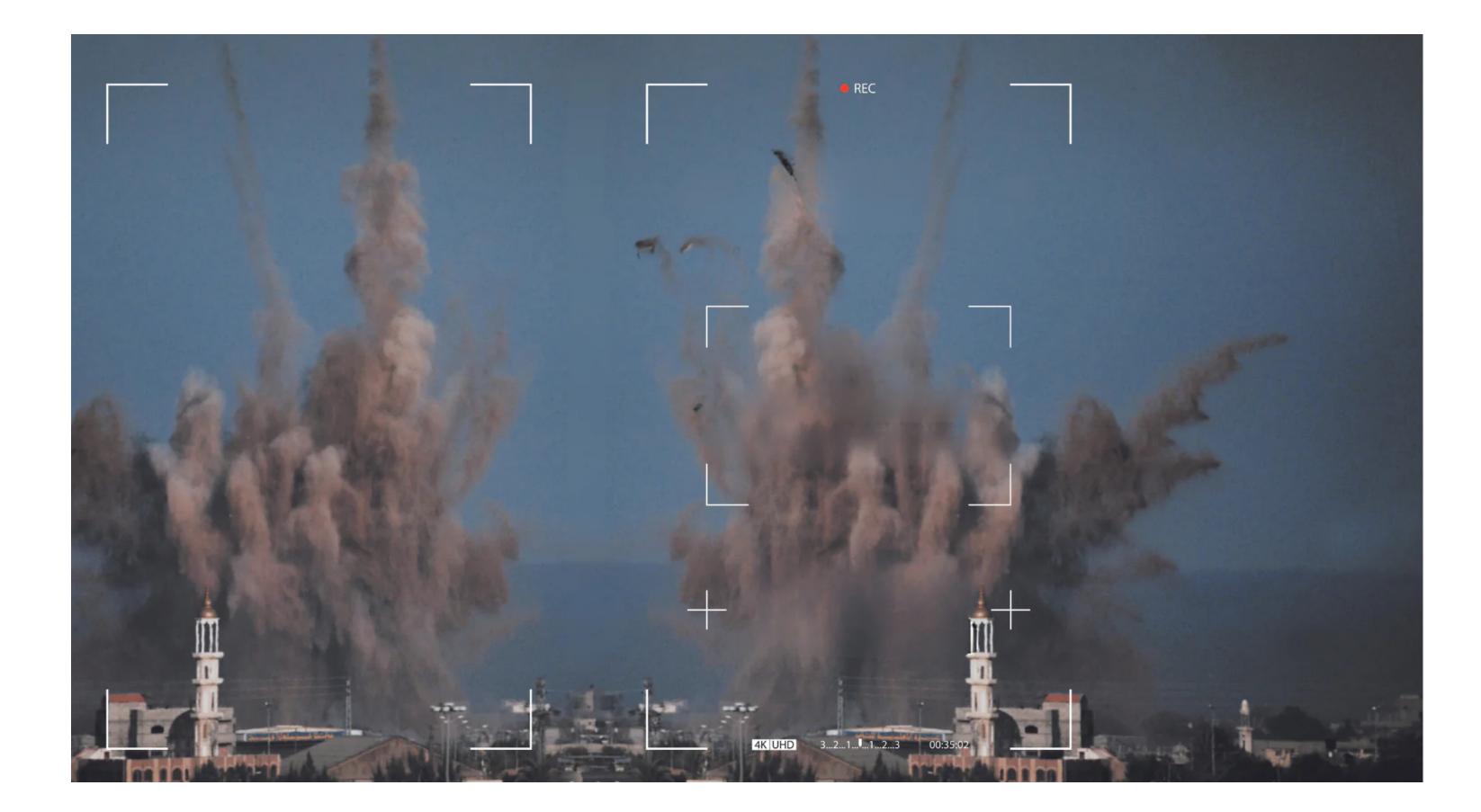
Blog post

Social media is a warzone: the IDF's strategy for war as online spectacle

If Gaza is the 'perfect laboratory' for Israeli ingenuity, then the internet is its stage.

Antony Loewenstein / 1 November 2023

The November 2012 Israeli bombardment of Gaza, called Operation Pillar of Defense, was a seven-day war that killed 174 Palestinians and 6 Israelis and injured thousands more. While the death toll in that operation was relatively low, Israel's Operation Cast Lead in 2008 and early 2009 saw the death of 1,400 Gazans. That conflict saw a revolution in how the IDF portrayed the war across its multiple social media platforms. Worried that public opinion in some Western nations was turning against Israeli military actions, the so-called instawar was a coordinated enterprise to live-tweet military operations and infographics, produced to proudly announce the killing of Hamas members or the arrest of Palestinian "terrorists." These productions sometimes had the feel of a Hollywood-style, big-budget action film.

The Israeli social media strategy aimed to involve both domestic and global supporters of its military missions. By doing so, and asking backers to post their own supporting tweets, Facebook posts, or Instagram images, the IDF created a collective mission that other nations could easily mimic by stirring up nationalist fervor online. During Operation Pillar of Defense, the IDF encouraged supporters of Israel to both proudly share when "terrorists" were killed while at the same time reminding a global audience that the Jewish state was a victim. It was a form of mass conscription to the cause through the weaponization of social media.

This was war as spectacle, and the IDF was spending big to make it happen. The IDF media budget allowed at least 70 officers and 2,000 soldiers to design, process, and disseminate official Israeli propaganda, and almost every social media platform was flooded with IDF content.

Today, the IDF Instagram page regularly features pro-gay and pro-feminist messaging alongside its hard-line militaristic iconography.13 On October 1, 2021, the IDF posted across its social media platforms a photo of its headquarters swathed in pink light with this message: "For those who are fighting, for those who have passed, and for those who have survived, the IDF HQ is lit up pink this #BreastCancerAwarenessMonth." Palestinian American activist Yousef Munayyer responded on Twitter: "An untold number of women in Gaza suffer from breast cancer and are routinely denied adequate treatment and timely lifesaving care because this military operates a brutal siege against over 2 million souls." On Instagram, however, most of the comments below the post praised the IDF.

This kind of IDF information war strategy is now routinely copied by the US military. The CIA launched a social media campaign, Humans of CIA, in 2021 that aimed to recruit from more diverse communities into its ranks. It felt deeply inspired by the IDF's woke posturing. One of the most discussed (and mocked) campaigns, considering the CIA's role in destabilizing and overthrowing governments since World War II, was the video of a Latina intelligence officer declaring: "I am a cisgender millennial, who has been diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder. I am intersectional, but my existence is not a box-checking exercise. I used to struggle with imposter syndrome, but at 36 I refuse to internalize misguided patriarchal ideas of what a woman can or should be."

Israel's social media strategy is a sophisticated attempt to link the Jewish state's operations with Western values, or at least those policies supporting a militarized response to terrorism (or resistance, depending on your perspective), hoping to engender it to global audiences. "Social media is a warzone for us here in Israel," said Lt. Col. (Ret.) Avital Leibovich, creator of the IDF social media unit and director of the American Jewish Committee in Israel, during 2014's Operation Protective Edge. It was a seven-week battle between Israel and Hamas that killed more than 2,250 Palestinians, many of them civilians, including 500 children, and 70 Israelis, most of whom were soldiers.

The unstated goal of the IDF information strategy is weaponizing Jewish trauma in the service of perpetuating occupation. Through countless posts and memes, the IDF believes that highlighting the sacrifices made by Israel in its never-ending battles with the Palestinians is a winning way. In this logic, Palestinians have no right to be angry about their plight and their trauma is nonexistent. Resisting the occupation is thus rendered illegitimate. This messaging ideology appeals to other nations, most of whom cannot match Israel in speed and sophistication, in their own wars with insurgents or domestic opponents. The tactic is always the same: a negative response to a badly received tweet or Facebook post is simply more posts and tweets, aiming to flood the internet with so much noise that the previous posts are quickly forgotten.

A comprehensive 2021 study of Operation Protective Edge's social media campaign by Marisa Tramontano, a sociologist at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, found that the IDF used a multitude of visual and written tools to justify its actions in Gaza and the West Bank. "Israel establishes itself, in part through its unmediated social media discourse, as part of the Islamophobic hegemonic coalition that positions Israel as the eastern-most front of the United States' 'global war on terrorism,'" Tramontano wrote.

There was hope at the birth of the digital revolution that being able to film and disseminate photos and videos of Israeli abuses in Palestine might help the Palestinian cause. There is no doubt that global awareness of the occupation has soared, and that this has been partly assisted by the raw, unedited vision of Palestinians interacting with settlers or the Israeli army. Yet there is also a large body of evidence that hard, visual imagery has been co-opted by the Israeli state to deny the reality of what Palestinians say they are experiencing. The Israelis claim that Palestinians are lying about their circumstances despite what we're all seeing. Being able to see Israeli atrocities against Palestinians doesn't work with people who do not view Palestinians as human beings, a racial group who deserve punishment and death. As the Israeli population has moved to the right, moral discomfort is rare.

Israel's social media warriors know that connecting its mission to Washington's post-9/11 struggles is vital to eliciting sympathy and support. "The so-called threat of Palestinian terror constitutes a key component of Israeli trauma narratives—a quotidian threat layered on top of multigenerational trauma over exile and genocide," Tramontano argued.

More concretely, Israel's actions are presented as moral and legal, and the state's current plight is explained in light of Israel's tragic past. Images of New York City burning then directly connect Israel's military operations to the American military response to the "trauma" of 9/11. Conversely, Hamas is cast as a barbarous and irrational enemy with no legitimate claims to trauma, much like narrations about al Qaeda, the self-declared Islamic State, and the like.

The IDF introduced new weapons and paraded them in front of different defense media outlets during the 2014 Gaza war. The technology was profiled, though advertised would be a more accurate term, in Israeli and international media and included bombs, tank shells, and the Elbit Hermes drone. A few weeks after the war ended, the annual Israel Unmanned Systems conference, an event hosted with the US Embassy in Tel Aviv to prospective markets in Asia, Europe, and North and South America, featured some of the weapons used in the Gaza conflict, including the Elbit drone.

The next Israeli experiment was tested in real time during the Great March of Return, when Gazans protested alongside the fence with Israel. Starting in March 2018, it gained massive global attention as Palestinians peacefully demanded an end to the siege on Gaza and the right to return to lands stolen by Israel. Between March 2018 and December 2019, 223 Palestinians were killed, most of whom were civilians, and eight thousand were shot by snipers, some left with life-changing injuries. The IDF tweeted (but then deleted) on March 31: "Yesterday we saw 30,000 people; we arrived prepared and with precise reinforcements. Nothing was carried out uncontrolled; everything was accurate and measured, and we know where every bullet landed."

— the text above is taken from [The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World](#) by Antony Loewenstein. We've made *The Palestine Laboratory* free to download [here](#), alongside a number of other ebooks. See all our Free Palestine reading [here](#).

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