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The Other Front of Israel's War: Disinformation Operations By Hamas and Its Supporters

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On October 17, after facing allegations by Palestinian officials for a blast at Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza City that killed hundreds, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) produced satellite footage and recordings that confirmed the blast was in fact the result of an attack by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). After releasing a statement calling for the review of the evidence, President Biden acknowledged that indeed Israel was not behind it, but rather that "the other team" was. Nonetheless, over the previous day, the main news outlets of record ran the narrative that implicated Israel in the explosion.

The event highlights the pervasive and persistent volume of disinformation pushed by Hamas and its supporters about Israel since Hamas launched its initial attack on October 7. This disinformation, as evident in the Al-Ahli hospital incident, focus on shaping a narrative about Israel's tactics (especially allegations of harming civilians) – all while Hamas actively placed Gazan citizens in harm's way (including ordering them to disregard Israel's warnings and actively obstructing their escape), thereby continuing to violate the Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC). Disinformation has long been a critical element of Hamas's strategy, as JINSA documented in its assessments of the 2014 and 2021 conflicts with Israel.

In addition to Hamas-aligned and Hamas-supportive outlets pushing these themes, independent sympathetic social media users have augmented these efforts by flooding social media with footage from other conflicts and other contexts (including films and sports celebrations), framing these as evidence of Israel's actions.

Israel has adapted to Hamas's exploitation of the information environment by regularly publishing drone footage of Hamas's actions, holding daily briefings on social media and Q&A sessions with the press, and publishing its instructions to Gazan civilians on social media.
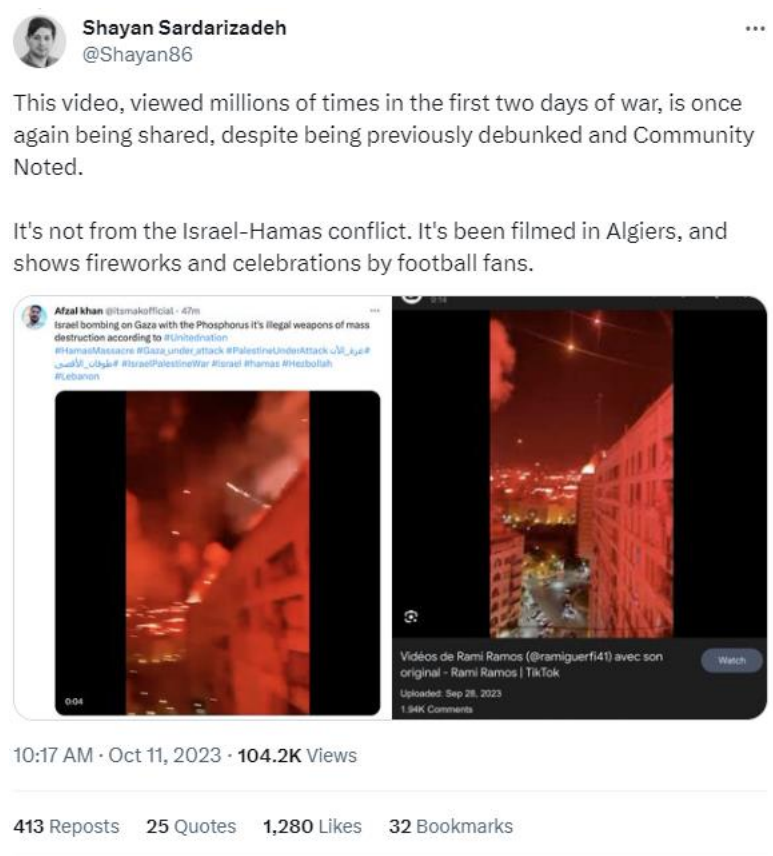
What Happened?

- In an interview with Al Jazeera on October 12, Deputy Chairman of Hamas's Political Bureau Saleh al-Arouri claimed that any civilians killed were the casualties of clashes between the IDF and Hamas, and that Hamas "only capture[d] soldiers, but ordinary residents of Gaza tagged along with Hamas, and they were the ones who captured civilians and brought them back to Gaza."

- Hamas and PIJ labeled Israel's warning messages for civilians to evacuate as a form of "psychological warfare," and in communications via Telegram have called on Gaza residents not to evacuate.

- On October 17 Hamas released the first video footage of one of the hostages. The video purportedly shows that the group provides her with medical care.

- One Hamas-aligned Twitter handle, "Quds News Network" (@QudsNen) posted on October 14 a video of an explosion of vehicles on the highway along with the following description: "Israeli airstrike hits civilian vehicles fleeing to southern #Gaza strip." Upon review of the video, it is clear the explosion is due to a bomb either in the vehicle or on the side of the road, with no evidence of an air strike.
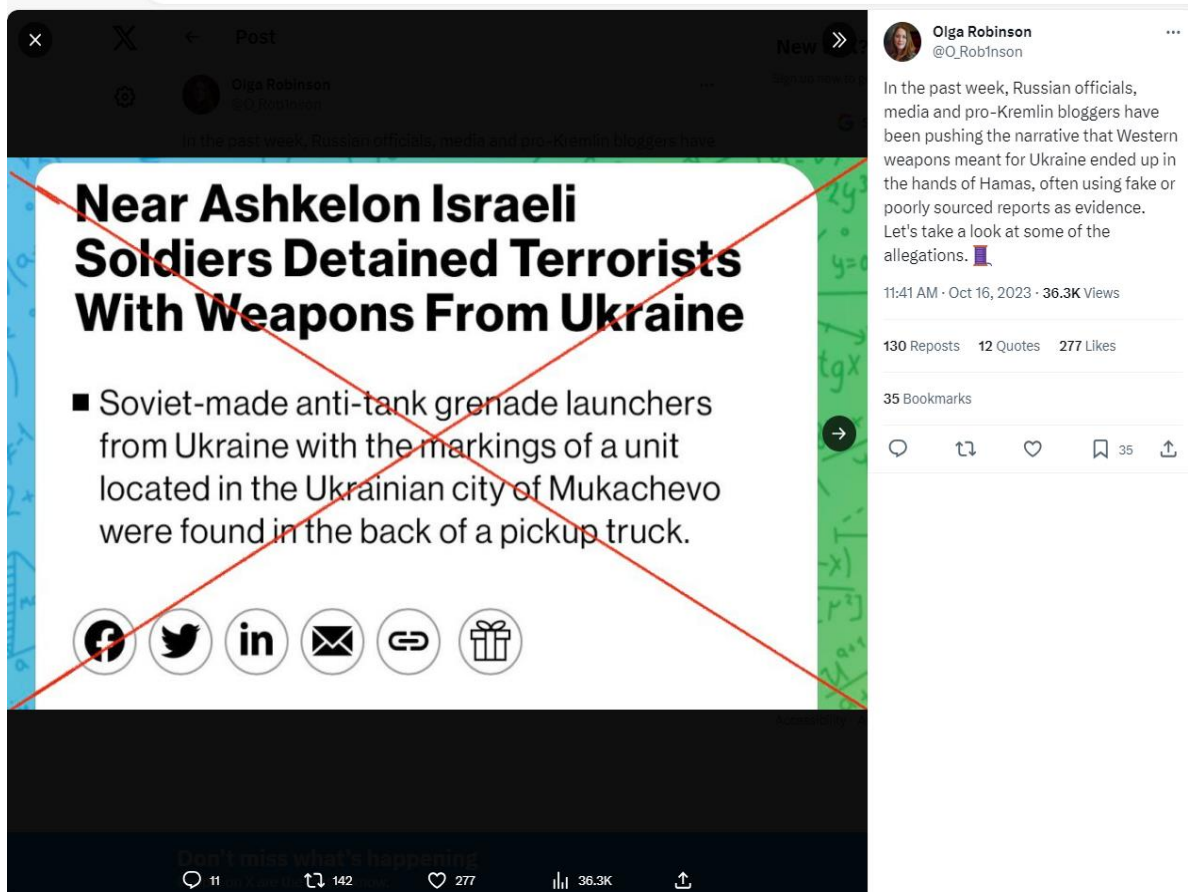
Why Is It Important?

- Hamas's use of disinformation during the current war with Israel builds on tactics the group employed in 2014 and 2021, as JINSA documented. Today, and likely with the assistance of the Iranian regime, the group exploits vulnerabilities in social media and communication channels, including by doctoring or repurposing videos and flooding social media with thousands of fake pro-Hamas bots. Hamas uses psychological and information warfare to supplement its kinetic warfare with the goal of weakening Israel both militarily and in the court of public opinion, while subverting its international legitimacy and damaging Israeli morale and confidence.

  » JINSA's observation in 2021 applies to the current war between Israel and Hamas, namely that "Hamas serially violated LOAC by directing attacks against Israeli civilians, launching indiscriminate attacks against Israel, and exposing Gazan civilians to avoidable risk to either intentionally complicate Israeli military operations or exploit civilian casualties in order to make false claims of Israeli war crimes."

  » JINSA observed in its assessment of the 2014 conflict that "Hamas supported false claims against the IDF by distorting stories and images to serve the organization's narrative, and by manipulating stories in the international media."

- As reported in *the Atlantic*, Hamas acknowledged to *New York Times* reporters that they have deliberately turned to social media because of lax content moderation to "terrorize civilians."

- Hamas's disinformation campaigns and the tactics – including fabricating a U.S. government document – have the intent of shaping the international public narrative regarding that demonizes Israel and its supporters, as well as portrays Israel's defensive war as violating the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC). Hamas's efforts are further amplified by the spread of unrelated rumors and misinformation online as well as by accounts that are paid ("verified") accounts.

  » According to *TIME*, in data it received confidentially from NewsGuard, which tracks misinformation, "at least 14 false claims related to the war garnered 22 million views across X, TikTok, and Instagram within three days of the Hamas attack."

  » *Axios* reports that a fabricated document claiming that President Biden authorized $8 billion to Israel "racked up hundreds of thousands of impressions, many from users criticizing 'Zionist-funded politicians' who are ignoring domestic problems at home."

- Beyond Hamas's deliberate disinformation campaigns, social media has been filled with images and videos allegedly documenting Israel's response that were later proven to be from entirely unrelated events. A number of these disinformation efforts have been debunked by reporters and activists.

- » On October 10, *NPR* [reported](#) that unrelated videos, including video game clips, flooded social media in the days after the Hamas attack. Among these were fake accounts claiming to be news outlets.
  - – Among these clips were videos purporting to show Hamas shooting down Israeli helicopters, but were actually taken from the video game *Arma 3.*
- One Erem Şentürk (@EremSenturk) posted an image claiming Israel used chemical weapons against children. Another user, Amjad Othman, [verified](#) that the image was in fact of a Kurdish child in Syria who was bombed by Turkish airstrikes in 2019.
- BBC correspondent Shayan Sardarizadeh, who covers disinformation and has debunked dozens of pieces of misinformation relating to the Israel-Hamas war, [said](#) that the "volume of misinformation on Twitter was beyond anything I've ever seen." As one example, one post was "viewed millions of times in the first two days of the war" purported to be a scene of the war which, in fact, [turned](#) out to be fireworks and celebrations by football fans in Algiers.

- An image of an individual in a pool image of an individual in a pool of blood was alternatively cited by social media users alleging the cases was Israel's response to the Hamas attack. The *Associated Press* [verified](#) it was a rehearsal of a scene of a 2022 Palestinian film
- Russian officials and affiliated social media accounts have deployed disinformation to connect Israel with Ukraine, claiming that weapons intended for NATO have gone to Israel, according to the research of BBC reporter Olga Robinson.

Olga Robinson
@O_Rob1nson

In the past week, Russian officials, media and pro-Kremlin bloggers have been pushing the narrative that Western weapons meant for Ukraine ended up in the hands of Hamas, often using fake or poorly sourced reports as evidence. Let's take a look at some of the allegations. 🧵

11:41 AM · Oct 16, 2023 · 36.3K Views

130 Reposts   12 Quotes   277 Likes

35 Bookmarks

The image text reads:

Near Ashkelon Israeli Soldiers Detained Terrorists With Weapons From Ukraine

■ Soviet-made anti-tank grenade launchers from Ukraine with the markings of a unit located in the Ukrainian city of Mukachevo were found in the back of a pickup truck.

- Watchdog researchers found that misinformation in this conflict is more difficult to track compared to previous ones because of laxed social media regulations, particularly on X (formerly Twitter).
  - » Achiya Schatz of FakeReporter, an Israeli organization that tracks misinformation, said to *NPR* that "Once we saw the events happening, the war started, there was a void of information. No one knew nothing. And [into] this vacuum of information entered all kinds of interest groups, fear, confusion and conspiracies."

Israel and Its Allies Respond

- Israel and its allies have sought to address Hamas's disinformation operations, including by countering it with transparency and by alerting social media companies.
- Every day of the conflict IDF spokesperson Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus has been posting updates on X about the war, has hosted a "Twitter Spaces" Q&A session about it, and has appeared on media outlets to clarify the course of Israel's operations.
- The Israeli government has likened Hamas to ISIS, citing the brutal tactics of both and noting that they will "defeat [Hamas] precisely as the enlightened world defeated ISIS."
- During the course of the conflict, the IDF has publicized how it is helping Gazans flee.
  - » The IDF published on X a map of the escape routes from Gaza.

- » It has also reportedly called Gaza residents to encourage them to evacuate, and [posted](#) the fact of these calls on social media.

- » The IDF has also published a [video](#) explaining to Gazans that it is Hamas, not the people of Gaza, who are the enemy.

- On October 10, the European Union sent a [letter](#) to Elon Musk, the owner of X, calling for transparency into what he is doing to block disinformation about the war on his platform. The letter concluded by threatening the EU could open an investigation and could impose penalties for evidence of non-compliance.

- On October 13, Meta [reported](#) that it "removed or marked as disturbing more than 795,000 pieces of content in Hebrew or Arabic," and that it was taking steps to remove "praise and substantive support for Hamas from its platforms," citing the EU letter.

- On October 14, Meta [suspended](#) Hamas-affiliated "Quds News Network."