CSS | ISSUE BRIEF

ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT ON SOCIAL MEDIA
Conduct, Causes & Consequences

Medha Shukla

BACKGROUND OF THE CONFLICT

In 1947 the United Nations passed its first resolution on the disputed territory of Israel and Palestine. Resolution 181, also known as the Partition Plan, sought to divide the British Mandate of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. The origin of the conflict dates to 4th May 1948-49, when the first Arab Israeli war took place. Post Israel's victory in this war the territory in question was divided into three sections, namely, the State of Israel, the West Bank (of the Jordan River), and the Gaza Strip. Since then, the tension in the region has only escalated, and has involved other regional actors such as Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. The next landmark event came to be known as the Six-Day War, post which Israel gained additional territorial control from the territories of its neighbors. The prolonged nature of the conflict is a looming threat to the security of the region and has led to wide scale human rights violations. As technology advances, these confrontations are becoming worse, when measured in terms of the damage caused. This is making the Israel-Palestine conflict one of the worst spasms of violence in recent human memory.

EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS USE DURING CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT(S)

Merriam-Webster defines social media as a means of electronic communication (e.g., social networking or microblogging websites) via which users have to freedom to develop online communities. [1] Such spaces are used for the purpose of sharing information, ideas, videos, or personal messages amongst other content. Like most contemporary trends social media has both an 'upside' and a 'downside'. An upside is the ability to create a positive environment by catalyzing forces for collective action. Sharing of knowledge on common platforms can inform large masses at low costs while influencing collective behavior around issues of importance. When evaluating the pros and cons, the downside of social media outnumbers the possible positives. Online 'rage' or movements

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[1] n.d. *Merriam Webster: Social Media.* Accessed June 29, 2021. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media.

often diffuse with time, if measured on the scale of effectiveness, as collective action becomes less effective while also limiting public square participation.[2] Easy access and low cost reduce the threshold for expressing oneself resulting in increased number of voices while weaking the impact of people truly fighting for change. Public participation makes these platforms 'noisy', and the prospects of a collective, positive, strategic action are reduced.[3]

Over the past decade the bridge between social media and political communication has strengthened. Instances such as the use of social media during the 2012 US elections, its replication in the 2014 Indian elections and the most recent US Capitol riot reaffirm the significance of this relationship in contemporary politics. Political communication has three key aims to achieve via social media, namely, validation for one's/ party's ideology, propaganda, and persuasion. Social media, contrary to traditional media outlets, provides its users the authority to seek information and/or share their own content within online networks they associate themselves with. This autonomy has attracted users from all walks of life towards social media. Today one can find political leaders, insurgents, and protesters actively initiating conversations on various such platforms. Active participation of these parties has increased the role social media plays during conflicts and contentious politics. Algorithms behind the operations of these platforms monitor user activity and make content suggestions. Such practices mean a viewer will come across content that matches their behavior and interest pattern, limiting access to diverse perspectives.

Leaders have long been aware of the importance of controlling communication technology to garner support. For instance, Vladimir Lenin viewed seizing telegraph services and railways as a key to ensure the propagation of his revolution.[4] In the contemporary age protestors have made extensive use of social networking sites to mobilize low-cost participation. Participation is evaluated based on the actions of sharing a post (Facebook), "liking" content (Instagram/ Facebook) and retweeting (Twitter) instead of substantive political behavior. Some scholars identify this form of lending support by the term of "slacktivism."[5] Such practices not only mobilize support resulting in social media outrage but instead play an integral role in shaping the narrative around the conflict from a specific perspective. The 2012 Gaza Conflict is often viewed as the first of its kind "Twitter war" which followed the

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[2]William J. Brady and M.J. Crockett, "How Effective Is Online Outrage?," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 23, no. 2 (February 2019): 79–80, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2018.11.004.

[3] Victoria Spring, C Cameron, and Mina Cikara, "The Upside of Outrage a Tale of Two Literatures: Bridging Moral and Intergroup Psychology," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 22, no. 12 (December 2018): 1067-1069, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54238bf2e4b068090a9b54bb/t/5cb9eb3bf9619a1e2a25f253/1555688252481/Spring+et+al.+2018+-+TiCS.pdf.

[4] Pethybridge, Roger, "The Significance of Communications in 1917." *Europe-Asia Studies* 19, no.1 (1967): 109–14.

[5] Seay, Laura, "Does Slacktivism Work?" *The Washington Post*, March 2014.

above discussed trend.[6] In 2012 Israel announced the beginning of the conflict in the form of a tweet containing an official statement from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). While on ground the conflict ensued exchange of bombs and rockets, a parallel 'war' was being fought on social media platforms. A series of tweets targeting the opponent were released, the aim of this exchange was to shape and influence the opinions of international actors and spectators.

"The IDF has embarked on Operation Pillar of Defence." - IDF (@IDFSpokesperson) <u>November 14, 2012</u>.

"All options are on the table. If necessary, the IDF is ready to initiate a ground operation in Gaza." - IDF (@IDFSpokesperson) <u>November 14, 2012</u>.

"The IDF has embarked on an operation against Hamas, an Iranian proxy responsible for terror attacks on Israel. <u>#Iran</u> <u>#Gaza</u>." - IDF (@IDFSpokesperson) <u>November 14, 2012</u>.

"At 1 p.m. ET on Wednesday, <u>Hamas</u> was a top-trending topic on Twitter in the United States, just behind "<u>Marlins:</u>"."

The tweets were made in English language thereby enabling circulation of these texts by international journalists and general twitter audience. Israel has a resource bank that can work around social media algorithms to produce efficient results. But surprisingly, Hamas was not far behind despite lack of resources if comparing social media presence and support.

THE ROLE OF VISUALS AND HASHATGS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The popularity of social media brought with it a change in the power relations between Israel and Palestine. For the former this technological change is seen as a possible threat, Palestinian leaders

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[6] Zeitzoff, Thomas. "How social media is changing conflict." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61, no. 9 (2017): 1970-1991.

view the development as an opportunity to 'expose' the abuses caried out by Israeli security forces. While Israeli forces have also made use of cameras to capture instances of Palestinian attacks on their citizens, it is the pro-Palestinians and other human right activists to which this development who welcome this opportunity.

Since the early days of modern history visuals have played an integral role in capturing human sentiments and are thereby used as a prime tool during propaganda movements. Prior to social media becoming an integral part of human's social life means to spread visual propaganda included movies, photographs in newspapers, posters etc. Today platforms like Instagram allow for visual content to be uploaded in real time, creating a deeper stir and sparking anger online. During the 2012 violence between the two sides there was wide use of visual propaganda. The aim was to spread hate for the opponent by creating a narrative of cold-blooded murder of innocent victims. A similar trend was seen during the recent faceoff were there was a twitter divide created by supports of both sides. Even when the situation on ground seemed to be diluting, the online tension continued fueling the hate. Accounts continue to share portrayals of distressed families caught in midst of an attack to garner sympathy and support of the international community.[7]

IDF makes use of its abundant resources and has a well-planned social media strategy for conflict situations. From hourly updates, picture graphics, evocative pictures they use all tools necessary to keep their citizens and the international community 'well informed'. Tweets are made in approximately 30 languages to cover a wide spectrum of viewers. Students actively work towards countering anti-Israel sentiments in the comment sections and across. This active approach has to do with the fact that journalists are often prohibited from visiting conflict sites therefore making information provided via IDF tweets the main source of information for Israeli inhabitants. While Israel has a structured social media 'army' they are often on the losing side of the social media battle. #GAZAUNDERATTACK was trending at 4.3 M tweets whereas #ISRAELONFIRE was behind by a marginal gap during the recent violent outbreak.

THE 2012 CONFLICT

In March 2012, the Israel Defense Forces launched Operation Returning Echo targeting the Gaza strip. This was seen as one of the most violent outbreaks of the region post the war of 2008-09. The operation included an airstrike which resulted in the elimination of Zohair al-Qaisi, secretary general of the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC). As mentioned previously this period saw the two sides

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[7] Frenkel, Sheera. "Gaza and Israel: War of the hashtags." *Al Jazeera* July 22, 2014. https://www.aljazeera.com/program/inside-story/2014/7/22/gaza-and-israel-war-of-the-hashtags.

engaging in a war on two dimensions. From the myriad of tweets floated during the period, certain instances made it to the headlines. Both sides were involved in gaining public support by depicting helplessness of their inhabitants as a means of justifying actions taken on the military front. Outdated images illustrating women and children were uploaded from official twitter accounts of the Prime Minister. Many such instances were reported during this time wherein outdated pictures, claimed to have been tweeted by mistake, were reported.

Approximately 240 Twitter images were post by both sides during the two months capturing the themes of resistance, unity, and civilian casualties. While Israeli posts contained content relating to analytical propaganda the Hamas's approach was inclined more towards emotional propaganda. Upon analysis one can see that social media posts are carefully calibrated with special attention given to the human characters that are portrayed within them. Social media campaigns launched by Israel created hashtags such as #PillarOfDefense and #IsraelUnderFire.[8] These trends were carried forward by Israeli students and youth who actively work towards countering the negative Israel image created by pro-Palestine users by commenting on and re-tweeting official posts by the IDF.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

The instance discussed above illustrates that the conflict between Israel and Palestine, since the introduction of social media, has not been restricted to the traditional 'battleground'. Social media is the new battleground where the governments and activists from both ends engage in a battle of words. While social media posts influence the minds of inhabitants of the two parties these posts are designed in a way to affect foreign spectators and the diaspora. Although traditional media sources did allow for this, social media platforms have allowed information to travel in real-time and this power has been used to shape narratives and shape perspective of bystanders.

In the most recent faceoff, the two main platforms being used were TikTok and Twitter. Pro-Palestine activists believe that the tools provided by these platforms allow their cause to become more visible to the ones outside the region. A Twitter user and a non-profit organization consultant, T. Kaminsky, believes that videos shared on such networking sites are hard hitting and make the user feel more empathetic about the issue. Her profile works as a prototype in understanding the various features Twitter has and how they are used by activists to create a trend or narrative. Kaminsky operated her

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[8] Seo, Hyunjin. "Visual propaganda in the age of social media: An empirical analysis of Twitter images during the 2012 Israeli–Hamas conflict." *Visual Communication Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (2014): 150-161.

profile with the name "#SaveSheikhJarrah" as part of a movement initiated by pro-Palestine twitter accounts.[9]

Similarly, co-founder of 'IfNotNow' a Jewish activist group, Y. Lieberman, talks about her observations regarding the growing role of social media during conflict situations in her region. Formed during the 2014 conflict i.e., the Gaza war, the aim was to protest Israeli government actions through social media platforms. While activists see social media as a new opportunity to spread their message in real-time, scholar S. Hirschhorn highlights the limitations of this communication advancement. Using the example of a viral video which captured the fire in the Temple Mount she highlighted how such video without official statements gives Twitter users the power to spread 'disinformation' and finds it 'troubling.'[10] She uncovered this disparity after having a dialogue with the police forces near the Western Wall who shared a different account of the incidents chronology to what was being circulated online as popular opinion. Her message is clear that concerned people must focus their attention on the work taking place on the ground and not the Twitter battle which has stirred from it. She quite correctly concludes that "there are no stakes to be had on social media, (instead) the stakes are for people living in bomb shelters and the ones hoping to survive the night without one."

WHAT HAS CHANGED

There is a lack of on-ground correspondents in the said region leading to traditional news platforms extracting information from social media posts. Social media popularity has significantly reduced its gap with traditional media in the sphere of information projection. Palestinian leaders agree that proliferation of cameras has indeed greatly affected the conflict. An example of this was seen during an incident of 2016 where a human rights organization, B'Tselem, uploaded a video of an Israeli soldier shooting a wounded Palestinian attacker.[11] What followed was a public debate on the issue leading to the arrest of the soldier featured in the video. Instances like these have make Palestinians feel empowered. Some speculate that this a reason for supposed increased attacks on individuals carrying smartphones in war zones.[12]

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[9] Hanau, Shira, "TikTok, Twitter videos bring images of conflict home to American Jews." *Jerusalem Post.* May 13, 2021. https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/tiktok-twitter-videos-bring-images-of-conflict-home-to-american-jews-668019.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Wolfsfeld, Gadi. "The Role of the Media in Violent Conflicts in the Digital Age: Israeli and Palestinian Leaders' Perceptions." *Media, War & Conflict* 11, no. 1 (March 2018): 107–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635217727312.
[12] Siapera, E., Hunt, G., Lynn, T. (2015). #GazaUnderAttack: Twitter, Palestine and diffused war. Information, Communication & Society, 18(11). 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1070188

Adapting to this trend Israeli troops now enter the battlefield with a trained camera person to record incidents that can reinforce claims made by their officials.[13] This shift in approach has come owing to their inability of controlling information flowing through various sources on the web and social media. This has also led to certain changes in the way military invasions are planned. Israeli military has become cautious of planning operations involving large groups of civilians until it does not deem the alternatives on the ground to be worse, in which case they continue to be prepared to accept condemnation from the world e.g., 2014 civilian killings. Durations of conflicts have reduced as social media activists are a constant threat. They are the ones collecting evidence of war crimes which can lead to the backfiring of online propaganda campaigns. While on ground conflict continues to take place time and again, social media developments have brought a change in the way they are conducted and in the way justifications are provided.

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[13] Stern, Nehemia, and Uzi Ben Shalom. "Confessions and Tweets: Social media and everyday experience in the Israel Defense Forces." *Armed Forces & Society* 47, no. 2 (2021): 343-366.