New Report: Iran's Influence In Syria Far Broader Than Commonly Understood

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Related Categories: Islamic Extremism; Iran; Middle East

Global outrage over last month's peak to the so-called Great March of Return on the Gaza-Israel border was instant and understandable. Over 50 people died and hundreds more were injured on a single day. What happened was as viscerally unpleasant as civil strife gets. It was brutal.

More violence followed. Hamas and Islamic Jihad aimed rocket barrages at civilian targets near the border. One shell even landed in the yard of a kindergarten. Israel's air force struck back. The fight went on.

Then more tragedy; more outrage . A Gazan nurse was shot while tending to the wounded. Her face, smiling and innocent, flooded social media. To make matters worse it initially appeared, and was later disproved, that the culprit was a female IDF sniper, whose image, twinned with her ostensible victim, swept across Twitter and Facebook.

As ever in modern conflict—from Syria to Iraq to even Occupy Wall Street—two battles are taking place between Israel and Hamas in Gaza: one on the ground and the other in cyber space. This latter battle centers on questions of outrage, perceived culpability, blaming (on both sides), and is played out in cycles that are determined by the mechanics and rhythms of social media. In terms of substance, this clash is between two opposing narratives. On the one hand, a clear Hamas narrative of a peaceful march in which defenseless demonstrators are mowed down by the evil Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Set against that is the narrative of the IDF: the soldiers of a democratic state protecting its citizens from hordes of terrorists armed with weapons and explosives, who are determined to break through the border.

As the battle switches to missiles and planes and back to missiles, fire kites, air strikes, etc., the way events on the ground are *portrayed* shapes both media cycles and the responses of states, which in turn constrain or encourage the tactics used by each side. The tragedy of death is perennial, but what Gaza has shown is that the war of words can matter more than bullets.

This observation may appear counterintuitive, but it emerges from several years of personal experience with, and research into, the role of social media in shaping modern battle-space. In 2010 I embedded with the U.N. peacekeepers in the Congo as they faced-off against the terror militia group the Lord's Resistance Army. In 2014 I spent almost a year in Ukraine covering its war with Russia. It was only four years later, but it felt as if I were covering a war in a different century.

I realized that in Ukraine I was covering not one but two wars: one fought on the ground with guns and tanks, and the other online with posts and shares. The experience prompted me to write a book on social media and its changing effect on war that focuses on three conflicts: Russia and Ukraine, ISIS, and Israel's 2014 war against Hamas. At the center of all these conflicts one thing stands out: the ability of social media to affect war—both on the ground and, perhaps more importantly, in the discussion and information battles around it. Social media, has, I realized, changed the ways that wars were waged, reported on, and consumed. And nowhere is this the case more than for the State of Israel.

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In April 2016, I met a young man called Vitaly in the Siberian city of Tyumen. He spoke no English but he was gregarious and fun. He was a Russian liberal. He disliked Putin. All this made the reason I had come to visit him even more strange: In 2014, during the height of fighting between Russia and Ukraine, Vitaly, a one-time journalist, had worked out of a bland building in St. Petersburg for a company called the Internet Research Agency. His masters tasked him with a simple goal: to spread as much pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian propaganda as possible—and to do it during war, a period of acute tension.

Vitaly was given a crash course in how to disseminate information (in his case outright propaganda) that gained as much traction as quickly as possible. In essence he was taught how to make material of the most sensationalist kind go viral by any and all means possible. He became a professional war troll.

I thought of Vitaly's story as the March of Return began on March 30 (Land Day), morphed into serious violence throughout mid-May, peaking on May 15 (Nakba Day), and, while diminished, continues to the present day. Throughout this period, online content, from both Palestinian and Israeli sources and sympathizers, has become near ubiquitous (albeit in fits and starts) in my various social media feeds.

To understand the role that this material plays in warfare, it is necessary to first grasp how information spreads in the digital age. Ukraine was a laboratory in which Russia honed the techniques it would use to attempt to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election, interfere in the Baltic States, and help propel the far right to gains across Europe. The secret of effective information dissemination, Vitaly was told, lay in understanding the three elements that make content go viral.

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In today's world of posts, shares, and tweets our online lives require a near constant supply of adrenaline and dopamine hits. Capturing people's attention is accordingly harder than it has ever been. You have, Vitaly was told, one to two seconds tops to make someone scrolling through his or her phone stop on your content. The user's lizard brain is where it all begins. Without the ability to make someone stop, nothing subsequent is possible.

What makes people stop scrolling through their feeds is the second element: an *image*—the more arresting the better. Subtlety doesn't play well on social media. But even if you make the user stop, they most likely won't click through to any accompanying article, which means the image has to be a way of embedding the message in their brain. For Vitaly this meant creating visual memes with simple text. "I want to start a war but none of my friends will join me," read the words accompanying a photo of Obama looking almost tearful in one meme that Vitaly posted to Vkontakte (the Russian Facebook).

In another, he posted a two-panel meme . In the first photo an angry looking Obama says, "We don't talk to terrorists!" In the second he is shown smiling with a caption: "We just sponsor them."

Vitaly's posts illustrate the "conflict" meme. It is by nature firstly sensationalist; second, deliberately devoid of all nuance. It is simple stuff, but effective.

If all three elements are deployed effectively then what follows is as predictable as it is effective. Memes are created and circulated; they go viral; people are driven into a frenzy. For Vitaly, this meant enraging his target audience of Russians and eastern Ukrainians about the—fabricated—behavior of Kiev's "fascist junta." Thus was the Kremlin's base shored up, and hatred of the "enemy" increased. Compromise of any kind was rendered near-impossible.

This pattern has been replicated almost exactly during the Gaza crisis. The general violence has been memed and tweeted and shared relentlessly throughout, and by both sides. But certain key instances stand out, of which two will be considered. The first occurred when the IDF killed over 50 Gazan rioters. A meme quickly spread . Entitled "Bloodbath in Gaza: Names of Palestinians killed in cold blood by the IDF," it was—critically—a graphic with photographs of every person killed dominating the meme and their names and ages below.

The IDF meanwhile was responding to charges of indiscriminate killing of civilians with a technique called mirroring (essentially responding in an almost identical format). In a meme entitled "The Terrorists of the Violent Riots," once again the photos were laid out for all to see—their ages and names were also given—this time with their role in terror networks made explicit.

What makes this episode so instructive is not that it ended in an Israeli PR victory (a rare enough occurrence) but *how* this happened. As Neri Zilber, a Tel Aviv-based journalist (and Tablet contributor) and adjunct fellow of the Washington Institute, observes: "You need to understand that what saved Israel was that it emerged that out of 62 people killed at least 50 were members of Hamas, and that this data point came out by a Hamas official during an interview about 48 hours later [after 15 May]. Critically, he said it due to *internal* pressure—the need to deflect public anger at Hamas sending its people out to get shot by claiming that it had sacrificed its own first. It was the best thing that happened to Israel in the two-month episode in terms of public diplomacy, and it came not from the IDF but from Hamas."

He continues: "The IDF did a really poor job of rebutting information. They were often delayed in responding and often the information they put out was insufficient to rebut certain claims, due to them being unwilling to break classified protocol."

Zilber hits on a key point in describing the new warfare. We live in an age of virtual mass enlistment, where anyone can become an actor in war with almost no barriers to entry—all you need is a smartphone to tweet and post your narratives and you have entered the online battlefield. And these narratives are almost always shaped by and derivative of those posted by more experienced users. Neophytes learn fast. Institutions like governments and indeed armies—large, bloated bureaucracies with endless chains of command and permission requests—are at a disadvantage compared to the freewheeling, hyper-empowered, connected citizen I term *Homo Digitalis*.

The second problem for Israel was that 48 hours in today's social media-powered news cycle is a lifetime. The truth did emerge and so did some recantations from reporters and other commentators. But the damage had been done. For the pro-Palestinian meme creators the formula is simple: rinse, dry, and repeat for the next hot incident.

The second incident was the killing of the Gazan nurse—purportedly by a female IDF soldier (an immigrant from the United States, no less, just to hammer home the iniquity of it). Again, the narrative thread hung on an image—a photo of the soldier, identified as Rebecca Rum, in full uniform, cradling an M16. Many memes posted Rebecca's photo alongside the highly-telegenic dead nurse, Razan Ashraf al-Najjar. It was an instant and bitter symmetry .

It must be pointed out that the IDF is still investigating the death of a nurse who seemed only to be tending to the wounded, and it may well find one of its soldiers criminally culpable. But the point here is not to assess guilt, but to demonstrate the cycles of information warfare . Al-Najjar was murdered in cold blood, went the narrative, which may well be true, but the information *hook* was that her murder was perpetuated by another young woman from a foreign country, thus capturing the worst characteristics of Israel in the Western pro-Palestinian narrative in a simple, easy-to-digest form. As it turned out the photo was taken four years earlier in Egypt and Rebecca Rum (not her real name) had been nowhere near Gaza at the time. But again, the damage had been done.

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Gaza shows us how war has evolved. The question is: Why does this evolution in war affect Israel particularly? The answer lies in two parts: one, the nature of the wars Israel fights, and two, the philosophical questions that surround conflict. In the first instance, it is fundamental to understand that the Israel of 2018 is not the Israel of 1948, 1967, or even 1973. The greatest threats to its people do not come from neighboring states. No state in the Middle East, not even Iran, has acquired the capacity to defeat Israel. The Jews will not be thrown into the sea through military force.

Instead, the gravest threat to Israel comes from insurgents such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The conflicts Israel fights are asymmetric ones in which it, as a state, faces off against a nonstate actor. Israel's victory on the battlefield is therefore predetermined. Hamas fires rockets at Israel knowing full well that the majority of them will be shot down by Israel's missile defense system Iron Dome. It sends protestors to "return" to their land knowing full well they will be stopped. It cannot defeat Israel on the ground.

But Hamas can defeat Israel online—and as such in the clichéd but powerful international court of opinion. Harvard professor Joseph Nye has asserted that 21st-century conflicts will be less about whose army wins than whose story wins . What those pro-Palestinian tweeters do with their memes and photos and videos illustrates the ways that social media can enhance the power of smaller, less militarily powerful entities whose story resonates—for whatever combination of reasons—with a global audience. Hamas cannot achieve a military victory against Israel but it can mobilize international outpourings of rage, which hamper Israel's diplomatic and economic relations with other states. The potential ramifications of this phenomenon are so serious that it can be argued that for Israel, at least, asymmetric war is not so asymmetric anymore.

This is because of the second part of the question at hand: the philosophical questions that surround conflict. Every country has to justify its use of force—failure to do so can have catastrophic effects, even if the country in question does not militarily lose a war. The United States went to war against Iraq to remove what turned out to be nonexistent WMDs. It destroyed Saddam's army without any difficulty but it failed to justify its use of force. The consequences of that decision remain with us 15 years later. Iraq is regularly used as a rhetorical and political stick with which to beat the United States. Washington's reluctance to become involved in preventing President Bashar al-Assad's butchery in Syria can be traced back to the errors of Iraq.

And the United States is the most powerful country in the world. For a small state like Israel the need to justify its military actions is far more pressing. Israel is a large weapons exporter but at the same time it receives vast aid from the United States, and imports a lot of foreign weaponry and technology. It is not a superpower. It is a small country that needs others to support its military actions. Take that support away, and it could be in serious strategic trouble.

Jerusalem has proved time and again that it will go to war if it feels it necessary, and has traditionally justified this on principles: primarily, the right—especially following the Holocaust—to defend Jewish life at almost any cost; and its status as the only democracy in the Middle East. By and large, these arguments have been effective in what might be called the discursive war—the intellectual battle that takes place behind every justification for force. Of course, the discursive war is uneven. Israel wins it in Washington and London and Berlin but loses it in the entire Arab world and most of South America. But, simply put, Paris matters more than Panama; D.C. more than Djibouti.

And so the woman in Kentucky has listened to Israel argue for force on these principles and accepted them. Now she logs on to Twitter and sees dead children, dead nurses, and soldiers firing on what appear to be civilians. She no longer cares about seemingly abstract principles; she just doesn't want to see any more corpses. Of course, corpses are as old as war itself. How many children, for example, did the United States and its allies kill in Iraq? The difference is now you can *see* them. In fact, go online and you cannot escape them.

In response, the IDF social media unit can produce images of Gazans hurling Molotov cocktails and rocks at its soldiers, of them setting kites on fire to burn nature preserves and farms, but those images cannot compete with the images of IDF soldiers firing live ammunition and dead Palestinians, even if many of them are discovered—much later in the social media news cycle—to be Hamas terrorists. During 2014's Operation Protective Edge , a foreign bureau chief told Peter Lerner, former head of the IDF's Spokesperson's Foreign and Social Media Unit, "Peter, it's the old rule: if it bleeds it leads." Israelis weren't bleeding so they weren't leading. But, as Lerner told me unequivocally "We don't want to bleed."

Israel was and is damned: If it strikes Hamas targets embedded in civilian areas or among protesters marching toward its borders, it receives international condemnation, but if Hamas succeeds in kidnapping or killing any of its soldiers or civilians, Hamas wins again, by showing that Israel has "lost" to a much weaker force—all played out on social media and in real time. It is a lose-lose situation.

Operation Protective Edge was a 51-day war—the longest in Israel's history. Israel unquestionably won the military battle. It unquestionably lost the information war. And because of this fact it is hard to see how Israel can fight a war that long again without becoming a pariah.

One might argue that this is nothing new. Since its inception Israel has been vilified by its many enemies, and since 1967, by much of the world's media, cheered on by a large portion of the global population, whose enmity toward the Jewish state is nourished by both religious and secular currents. The difference is that new information technologies are raising the possibility (even with a hugely supportive U.S. president now in power) that even its friends may struggle to support it in years to come.

Unlike Russia, Israel is a democratic state. It cannot pump out falsehoods—and it cannot manufacture gory Israeli casualties where none exist. Israel loses the global information war because it does not "bleed" enough—and as long as it maintains its military advantage, it never will.