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POLARIZATION AND RADICALIZATION AS IDENTITY DYNAMICS IN A FLUID ENVIRONMENT. THE CASE OF THE EXPLOSION AT AL AHLI HOSPITAL IN GAZA

Abstract: *Playing with parallel mirrors is one of the most famous tricks in magic. Cropping the image seen by viewers, and playing with the lights and spots is also part of the business. But these tactics are also used extensively in informational warfare as a cynical tool of trompe-oel. Turning upside down the mirror means projecting on your adversary the wrongs and legal breaches that one actor is doing himself. Cropping scenes means making people ignore parts of reality and focusing on the sequences of the picture where the actor would like to channel the attention of the public, where lights are also playing their part in the make-up of the show.*

The magnitude of the distance between reality and created perception could become equal to that between a victim and an aggressor. Good sense and logic would plead for the impossibility of such a change between the perception and the reality of one's public. However, things do happen in such a way, and an obvious lie could become credible for a specific public when emotions and beliefs are taking the place of rational behavior and factual reality. We've seen that emotions and beliefs can alter the perception of reality or make alternative realities admissible. The research question is if polarization and radicalization are instruments able to create such a space where belonging to a special community and assuming a common identity becomes far more important than reality and absolute truth themselves. Complacency or active need to prove to belong to the group leads to dynamics of identity able to forge a self-trumping behavior that perceives alternative needed realities according to the beliefs of the group. Our case study is the bombardment of the Al Ahli Hospital in Gaza, on the 17th of October 2023, able to erase the perceived memory of the horrible Hamas attack on the 7th of October in southern Israel.

Keywords: *info war, radicalization, identity, perceptions, emotions, belief.*

1. INTRODUCTION

War comes after huge levels of polarization that support the convergence of views of the community heading to military fight and support for the decision-making to take weapons and fight (Chifu, 2022). When such a fight comes in a context with immense divisions and a history of military clashes as the one in the Middle East, Gaza in the first place, it allows an armed group to pass to an extensive level of violence without too much preparation due to existing context. Radicalization and politicization are there as a context, and it is far easier to get the support of the public (Chifu, Popescu, Nedea, 2012) and achieve objectives such as the revival of the Palestinian issue. All this is happening in the context of numerous Arab states' agreements with Israel through the Abraham Accords (Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2020) and a bilateral Saudi-Israel mediated understanding (Guzansky, 2020) that Hamas, and Iran, wanted disrupted.

October 7 was the moment of a horrific attack on Israel, used by Hamas to prove to its public and to the Arab world that its archenemy is weak and can be beaten, and to its Iranian backers that the money and weapons received were spent effectively. But the attack was thoroughly prepared in the informational space to move to the next phase of victimization when Israel's military war of retorsion erupted (Mahase, 2023), a gesture that was politically mandatory for a Netanyahu far-right government on the edge of being sacked. October 17 was a moment of opportunity expected and transformed into a game changer, with an extensive info war launched at the global level. The explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital was the turning point that shifted the support of the public and international community for Israel against it and covered in public opinion the image of the killings in Southern Israel.

The story of the attack was pictured by the pro-Palestinian forces as an Israeli attack (Siman-Tov, Michlin-Shapir, Fridman, 2023). Even if this story has been debunked as fake news and the analysis appeared to rule out the widespread narratives, the lack of beyond reasonable doubt proves, that hiding evidence on the ground and denying direct investigation helped perpetuate this fake that changed the war in Gaza in terms of communication. A large quantity of fakes and the continuation of the war by Israel, with immense civil casualties, helped. As is the case of

politicization of the facts (Dekel, 2023) and innocent media or communication mistakes in the first days after the explosion.

We made a full analysis coming from the social media, public perception and actions of political leaders - like canceling international meetings to cope and mitigate the conflict (White House Statement, 2023) or state-organized national riots – and complete coverage of the world media on the issue. The conclusion was a clear politicization of media outlets that was visible and concurrent with the political general option of the country involved not only in the first moments but also in time.

Even as we write this paper and proofs are widespread and easy to consult, the magic of turning the mirror –projecting an actor’s actions on the account of its enemy only through informational means – the original belief that Israel attacked Al-Ahli Hospital provoking the carnage is still the narrative for a large share of the world public. What is more interesting is that this polarization is reflected not only in the Arab or Muslim world, as we would expect, but also inside our Western democratic societies and not only via ethnic or religious divides, or ideological and political lines but across the full spectrum (*Liberation*).

2. POLARIZATION AND RADICALIZATION IN TIMES OF WAR. THE 7TH OF OCTOBER ATTACK IN SOUTHERN ISRAEL

Hamas's October 7 attacks are, without any contest, terrorist and indiscriminate attacks on peaceful civilians. They are difficult to explain outside of the ideology of Hamas as an organization that does not recognize the very existence of the Israeli state and considers the 1948 international agreement as an occupation of Palestinian territories (Hafez, 2001). Radicalization of the Palestinian population is a fact coming from the identity dynamics (Chifu, Popescu, Nedea, 2012) that forged a full community in Gaza to support Hamas ideology through active instruments for controlling the captive public (Rubinstein-Shemer, Flamer, 2023), but also a survival tactic of the local population. Also, as a part of its intelligence warfare against Israel, Hamas made the identification and targeting of collaborators with Israel a top priority (Flamer, 2023).

The Gaza Strip informational space is dominated by the acceptance of a high level of violent politics, groupthink, social complacency, and conformism of the population in a close. It comes also with the authoritarian type of rule in a surrounded fortress syndrome (Simons, Chifu, 2017). Here we could add the perspective of completely losing hope since the Palestinian issue was no longer in the forefront of interest of the traditional partners – Arab and Muslim states. Or even the irreversibility of the process of reconciliation between Israel and the Arab states that would have left the Palestinians alone or under pressure to negotiate with Israel from a weak position. That leads to a high level of polarization, convergence and rejecting any dissidence, even the nuances or differences of views in the Gaza public space.

So, Hamas was not simply driven by sanguinary hatred of Jews. Instead, some academics claimed that the war crimes were motivated by the Palestinians' disillusionment with an international system that has consistently denied them their right to self-determination (M.T. Samuel, 2023). This has been exacerbated by Israel's criminalization of the non-violent resistance and of the corner of the Palestinian Authority and Al Fatah in the same terrorist bracket as Hamas. This made it easier for Hamas to cope with the 7th of October attack on Israel after the 17th of October events. The fight for narratives was open, and people in Gaza were more inclined to embrace their favorite narratives and alternative created realities according to the beliefs of the group.

It was harder to deal in the intermediate ten days with the perception that Hamas had done a terrible attack that provoked Israel, which is going to retaliate against the whole Palestinian population of Gaza. And that has been done via playing roles and the split between the leadership of Hamas in Qatar versus the local military leadership, in a blame game involving the ownership and martyr status of the locals versus the opulence and good life of the exiled (Seurat, 2023). Once the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital could be framed as an Israeli attack, together with the civilian casualties already piling up in Gaza, it was easier to frame the whole process in the victimization key to make it completely acceptable for the local population, but also its Arab and Muslim supporters all over the world.

3. MAGIC AND TURNING BACK THE MIRRORS IN INFORMATIONAL WARFARE CASES

The biggest challenge for the informational space, especially for the media, but also for other international actors not involved in the confrontation, was making sense of informational warfare in war times. And this comes from the difficulty of having direct, independent sources because one could refer to them. It is true, on another point, that such sources could be, misled or constrained by several types of blockages in crowded, polarized environments (Sidiropoulos, Kiourt, Moussiades, 2020). Journalists as well as other independent sources could be the subject of the info-war, of the conundrum created by perceptions, emotions, and beliefs largely explained by the cognitive revolution in psychology (Campbell, 2019) that portrays the current environment where anybody with a phone could become source and multiply any event without proper factual or journalistic verification.

This is also endangered even more by the local politicization of factual reality. When this is combined with the lack of capacity to prove beyond reasonable doubt what happened, it is even more difficult to make sense of the violent facts on the ground. In this case, Hamas and pro-Palestinian groups deliberately speculated on the lack of proof, the alteration of the explosion site, including the actions of hiding the debris (Human Rights Watch, 2023). So, proof shows clearly an active reaction and contribution to distortion done on the ground by the local authorities from the first moments after the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital. The impact of the fight of narratives was also clear outside the conflict zone in Gaza by a huge degree of polarization of the public all over the world. The activities of assigning labels to the enemy – meaning also the non-accepted versions aired in public – such as antisemitism or islamophobia (Vilchis, 2023; Tobitt, 2023) also limited the involvement in the factual analysis or their dissemination.

There is a quasi-unanimous acceptance of the fact that the Gaza war is unprecedented in terms of the dissemination of deep fake content (Ram, Antebi, 2023), both on the classical media (Singer, Brooking, 2023) and on the social media (Brooking, Mashkoor, Malaret, 2023). The photo of the baby in the rubble of the alleged destroyed building done by a.i. technique was a symbol of pro-

Palestinian anti-Israeli propaganda, including in the mainstream Liberation newspaper. Wendy McMahon, CEO of CBS News, remarked that only 10 percent of the more than 1000 videos sent to the bureau's news desk relating to the Israel-Hamas war were genuine, and news organizations across the world are forced to deal with a massive amount of false and fake information. According to TIME magazine, at least 14 false claims about the war were viewed around 22 million times on social media platforms X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and Instagram in the first three days of the war alone. Deep fake technology was present to sow panic among the public (Ram, Antebi, 2023).

There was a second parallel war in the informational space and across social media platforms aiming to be the only one heard and believed. There were three levels of objectives in the fight: a) a narrative competition through a barrage of misinformation and deliberate disinformation - engaging in a "discourse competition" that manipulates the emotions of a global audience; b) operations to trivialize or co-opt an adversary's framing of events - "public opinion blackout" that involves seeding desired narratives and ensuring they go viral at critical moments; c) a concerted effort by the materially stronger side to take an adversary offline altogether - "blocking information", which refers to disrupting an adversary's digital and physical communications through blackouts or censorship and replacing them with preferred messages (Singer, Brooking, 2023). This legal warfare means 9500 takedown requests by the Israeli authorities with 94% success by the end of November (Brooking, Mashkoor, Malaret, 2023). On the other side, the involvement of Turkey and some Arab Governments led to politicization and amplification of the impact related to the 17th of October explosion.

The most important problem of Hamas was to play between three alternative identities: – an international actor that relies on cross-border support as the representative of the Palestinian people; a semi-state actor that controls Gaza and acts in providing governmental services to the local population; at the same time, a violent resistance movement using all military strategies including terrorist activities – indiscriminate killing of people, abductions, suicide bombing (Winter, 2014). Arguing between those identities was as hard as managing the side effects of the 7th of October terrorist attacks when the decision was insulated and taken only at the local level of

Hamas, which led to the isolation of the organization and lack of relevant answers to the appeal to spread of the conflict in the whole Middle East.

Hamas had three levels of action in the informational war. The pre-7th of October was aimed to support the surprise attack by distracting or misinforming Israel (Azani, Haberfeld, 2023). This has been made in parallel with assuming and creating the image of a defender of al-Aqsa in Jerusalem, operating in the West Bank and among Arab citizens of Israel, at the same time launching rockets from Lebanon. This image was partially tarnished when attempts to involve the other anti-Israeli organizations in the Middle East were ineffective. In the second phase, terrorist and violent content was spread (Brooking, Mashkoor, Malaret, 2023) to show that Israel can be beaten, that there is still opposition to the international presupposed decision to shut down Palestinian claims for a country and make businesses with Israel. The third phase was after the 17th of October and focused on victimization (Schweitzer, Siman-Tov, 2022). All these are full and vivid proofs of the capacity to turn the mirror and picture the weak actor as being strong, the victim as the aggressor, and shifting the public support from one side to the other practically with impunity and without a firm and effective possibility of counteracting.

4. AL-AHLI HOSPITAL: THE TURNING POINT IN INTERNATIONAL PERCEPTION ABOUT THE ISRAELI-HAMAS WAR IN GAZA

We did not insist on the facts and details of each forensic analysis. Different media outlets and several Governments referring to their own intelligence services converge and present the same reality, supported by several sources arguments and proofs and by numerous analysts, experts in war crimes and blasts, former militaries and specialists in different types of equipment and explosives: first, that Israel was not involved in the explosion; second that this explosion has been made by the debris of a missile with the fuel or propelled reservoir as source of the blast; and third, that the crater dimensions, the images in the aftermath scene of the explosion as well as the remains in the parking directly hit near the hospital, converge with this conclusion.

Innocent mistakes as catalysts

Confusion and innocent mistakes, due to the fog of war, the uncertainty and lack of access to the scene added to the general ambiguity related to the explosion at the Gaza Al-Ahli Hospital. The New York Times and other mainstream media attributed the first moments of the Gaza hospital explosion to an Israeli airstrike. This has been easily spread worldwide, but not the updating of their reporting which first noted that the responsibility was not confirmed and then concluded that the responsibility for the tragedy was that of a rocket launched from Gaza (Brooking, Mashkoor, Malaret, 2023). That prompted some violent protests all over the world including some in the West Bank, Morocco, Lebanon, and Jordan, where rioters attempted to storm the Israeli embassies. In contrast, thousands of paid accounts amplified and combined this with false or misleading information.

Another case was that of the BBC reporter on the ground, Rushdi Abualouf. On October 17, BBC editor Jeremy Bowen reported that the Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza was “flattened” by an Israeli airstrike. While appearing on the news channel’s “Behind the Stories” on Saturday, 24th of November, he still rejected any mistake on its handling of the information coming from Gaza, which claimed originally (Korach, 2023), on the day of the explosion, that it was an Israeli attack that leads to the tragedy (Kaloï, 2023). BBC issued a correction of its coverage on October 19: “We have reviewed our coverage (...). The program repeatedly made it clear that it had yet to verify who was behind the blast” (BBC, 2023). BBC was insisting that other sources and reports were on air at the same time, with different reports.

We could rate these as innocent mistakes, repaired in due time. However, the level of use of those articles in social media and private outlets for making the case against the truth was disturbing. BBC made the final point on the factual issue of the blast, underlying the lack of weapon fragments, the crater and damage at the scene, and video footage of a projectile rising over Gaza which was central to Israel's description of what happened. Hamas told the New York Times that the missile had disintegrated beyond recognition. It left only a small crater. The hospital had no visible structural damage. The evidence suggested the explosion was a result of a section of a failed rocket hitting the car park and its fuel and propellant (a combination of fuel and an oxidizer agent) causing a fire (Horton, Cheetham, Sardarizadeh, 2023).

Pro-Palestinian sources

We studied several Arab and pro-Palestinian sources (ten, with reports for more than eight weeks). First, there was no single interest in forensics. Second, all was put under a very propagandistic presentation. Blame games and turning the mirror to show the other's guilt were present everywhere. Politicization was present when only selected elements were presented. And no reference to October 7. This has been seen also in Russian mainstream media, Chinese official media, and Iranian official agencies. The same first approach was partially embraced by the Turkish and Indian media, which avoided making corrections on initial reports about the responsibilities and moved quickly to the evolution of the situation of civilians on the ground after October 17.

The most illustrative was the Al Jazeera situation of reporting. The original reporting was that the Israeli Army bombed the Al-Ahli Hospital (Al Jazeera, Israeli air raid on Al-Ahli Arab Hospital kills 500, 2023). Then it embraced the alternative option that it was an Iron Dome missile that was responsible directly or indirectly (Al Jazeera, Video investigation: What hit al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza?, 2023). Finally, it let floating the confusion and an alleged responsibility of the Israeli army: "There was some confusion as reports from sources close to Israeli authorities suggested that the Israeli military had bombed the hospital in an attack against Hamas, in an apparent admission that they had bombed it. The Israeli military, however, denied it (...). Some states have backed Israel up, but many remain unconvinced" (Kersten, 2023).

Reactions from the involved sides

But even if the Israeli side came with proof the next day, on October 18, and that Hamas and local authorities in Gaza did not, but offered unacceptable explanations and altered the site of the explosion, these unilateral elements of the parties involved in the war didn't change the general perception already established (Stern, 2001) across the dividing political, ideological, ethnic and religious line, but also enshrined deep inside publics all over the world. Polarization and the radical approach of both sides made it difficult for any person to clearly understand the situation and divide facts from fiction.

The proof provided by the Israeli Defence Forces included an audio clip of alleged Hamas terrorists confirming the rocket came from Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a video of what appears to be the rocket in question misfiring over Gaza, and bird eye images of the blast site that did not have characteristics consistent with an Israeli aerial strike, according to an IDF spokesman, Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari (Averre, Nicol, Allen, 2023), insisting none of its aircraft had been operating near the hospital and that the blast was inconsistent with its weaponry.

Palestinian involvement in altering the proofs and the site after the explosion was noted by a Human Rights Watch report from the 26th of November (Human Rights Watch, 2023): “Gaza authorities appear to be in possession of remnants that would help make a conclusive determination of the munition that exploded at al-Ahli hospital. A photo (...) shows employees working on the crater” (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Human Rights Watch noted that employees of the Ministry of Interior took all the shrapnel that was on the site. Ghazi Hamad, deputy minister, told the media on October 22 that “the missile has dissolved like salt in the water... It’s vaporized. Nothing is left” (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The widely invited and quoted expert Marc Garlasco, the former defense intelligence analyst and UN war crimes investigator, says there are signs of a lack of evidence at the Al-Ahli hospital site. “When I investigate a site, I do is locate and identify parts of the weapon. I’ve never seen such a lack of physical evidence. Ever. And I’ve worked three wars in Gaza”(Murphy, Polglase, Brown, 2023).

The proofs were more intuitive and logical, ruling out alternative scenarios, but the lack of details, inspection on the ground and the alteration of the site prevented the clear *beyond reasonable doubt* verdict. And despite the contradictory explanations for the detonation and Washington’s assessment that Israel was not responsible, countries across the region—including Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—squarely attributed the blast to an Israeli airstrike. Protests broke out in cities throughout the Middle East (Kaye, 2023). As tensions rose, Amman canceled a summit intended to bring the Jordanian, Egyptian, and Palestinian leaders together with U.S. President Joe Biden after he visited Israel.

5. CONCLUSION: WHEN PERCEPTION TAKES THE PLACE OF REALITY, IN A CAREFULLY ORCHESTRATED INFORMATIONAL WARFARE OPPORTUNITY OPERATION

Since it became impossible to prove beyond reasonable doubt the facts on the ground, suppositions, alternative scenarios analysis, the credibility of a media outlet or public person assuming an option, the commonly perceived truth in close radicalized or polarized groups, the impossibility to discern in a wartime environment each detail, politicization, conformity, all prevented the public from accessing the ultimate truth. Just a rational, intuitive version of it, came very late, 40 days or more from the blast itself. Each such forensic analysis faced the unavoidable reality of the major existential questions in such a case: Who is still searching for the truth? Who wants to know the truth? Who believes in the ultimate proven truth?

This confirmed why the war polarization, the radicalization and harsh splits in the public belief create an environment that rejects factual arguments and denies accepting the absolute truth. The events of the 7th of October were completely covered by the perception created through the false claims that the October 17 explosion was an attack carried out by the Israeli Army against the Al-Ahli Hospital that made some 500 innocent civilian victims.

The evolution of the war in Gaza created the grounds for enforcing these beliefs through the violence and the increase in the number of civilian victims as well as through the consecutive Israeli military intervention in the hospital. The proofs of the existence of a command-and-control center below the hospital, the entrance of some Hamas tunnels, or the cooperation between the medical employees and the military Palestinian brigades were few and inconclusive for the task of reversing the beliefs of the pro-Palestinian public. Turning the mirror and cropping the facts proved to be useful and effective as informational warfare tools in this case. Only a few media agreed to maintain in each of the articles the reference to the original 7th of October attack for moral reasons.

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