

In Gaza, new arsenals include "weaponized" social media

Gerry Shih, Reuters

(Reuters) - There have long been the [tools](#) [1] of warfare associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: warplanes, mortars, Qassam rockets. Now that list includes Twitter, [Facebook](#) [2], YouTube.

This week the worldwide audience got a vivid look at conflict in the social media era as the Israeli military unfurled an extensive campaign across several Internet channels after conducting an air strike that killed a top Hamas military commander in the Gaza Strip on Wednesday.

The air strike, which came after several days of rocket attacks launched from Gaza toward targets in Israel, was confirmed by the Israel Defense Force's Twitter account before the military held a press conference.

The public relations tug-of-war has long been understood as a central element of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Palestinian leaders like Yasser Arafat were credited with skillfully courting international media during the first Intifada to highlight the Palestinian struggle and help sway public opinion.

But the newest technologies, including Twitter and YouTube, have been embraced particularly by the Israeli government, which has perhaps waged an unprecedented social media PR campaign as the conflict escalated this week.

The Israel Defense Force (IDF) has established a presence on nearly every platform available. It launched a Tumblr account Wednesday, posting infographics touting how Israeli forces minimize collateral damage to Palestinian civilians. It prepared [Facebook](#) [2] pages in several languages, and even has a bare-bones Pinterest page with photos of troops deployed in humanitarian missions.

On Twitter, the @IDFspokesperson account issued a torrent of tweets that carried hashtags like #IsraelUnderFire and what it said were videos of rockets fired at Israel from Gaza, as well as pictures of wounded Israeli children.

"They are very conscious how things are going to be viewed, perhaps more so because they sense that they are more and more isolated in world opinion, and they are less shouldered by U.S. public opinion," said James Noyes, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution.

The IDF also posted on Twitter a picture of Ahmed Al-Jaabari, the Hamas commander who was killed, with the word "eliminated" stamped over his face.

Meanwhile, the Al-Qassam Brigades, the military group formerly led by Al-Jaabari,

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also took to Twitter to offer blow-by-blow updates of its fighters shelling Israeli military targets. It publicized deaths of Palestinian children due to Israeli attacks, and used hashtags like "#terrorism."

HIGH STAKES

At certain points, the two sides clashed head-on.

"We recommend that no Hamas operatives, whether low level or senior leaders, show their faces above ground in the days ahead," tweeted @IDFspokesperson after Al-Jaabari was killed.

Al-Qassam (@AlqassamBrigade) shot back at @IDFSpokesperson, warning in a public tweet that the group's "blessed hands will reach your leaders and soldiers wherever they are," and that "You Opened Hell Gates on Yourselves" as a result of the air strike.

The exchange raised questions for the new media companies that have vowed to stand behind free speech but perhaps have never before played host to such high-stakes discourse.

Although Twitter regulates against "direct, specific threats of violence," the two sides tweeted unchecked. The company did not respond to requests for comment.

But on Wednesday, YouTube briefly blocked a grainy IDF video that showed a missile striking Al-Jaabari's car. The footage, uploaded shortly after the air strike, had drawn hundreds of thousands of views and was flagged by some users as objectionable.

YouTube's parent Google Inc later reinstated the video and Google Chairman Eric Schmidt said there was a lot of "back and forth" among senior executives at Google, including himself and Google Chief Executive Larry Page, over whether to block the footage.

In YouTube's case, the general rule is that films that "encourage violence and depict violence are not allowed," said Schmidt, speaking at a conference sponsored by the RAND corporation and Thomson Reuters entitled "Politics Aside," in Los Angeles.

"The problem is, if we don't host it, somebody else will. How do we get all of it down?" he added.

'WEAPONIZED' SOCIAL MEDIA

Observers say the Israeli military's social media efforts are a far cry from the 2008 Gaza War, when the IDF launched a YouTube channel for the first time with videos that sought to justify sending troops into Palestinian territory.

"Operation Cast Lead marked the first time they weaponized social media," said Rebecca Stein, a professor of anthropology at Duke University who has researched

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how Israeli military officials use social media. "But back then it was very improvisational," she said.

In 2010, the government seemed to be caught off guard when activists on a humanitarian convoy bound for the Gaza Strip stirred up sympathy by tweeting and webcasting from their boats after they were boarded by Israeli troops.

That year, the Israeli foreign ministry invested more than \$15 million to better grasp how the government could use social media in a broader campaign to burnish the nation's image.

Last year, Israeli officials sent a letter to Facebook Inc asking the social network to remove a page calling for a third Palestinian uprising.

On Thursday, as Israel mobilized troops for a potential ground assault reminiscent of 2008, the PR machine that rolled out seemed nothing like the halting efforts of four years prior, Stein said.

"They've had to do a lot of learning between then and now and have invested a lot of resources and exponential manpower specifically for an event like this," Stein said. "In some sense, they've been pioneers of social media statecraft."

(Additional reporting by Tim Reid in Los Angeles; Editing by Lisa Shumaker)

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