ACICE
ADMM Cybersecurity and
Information Centre of Excellence

UPDATE ON

THE

INFORMATION DOMAIN

Issue 04/24 (April)

Fact Checking the Israel-Hamas Conflict

INTRODUCTION

1.   The Israel-Hamas Conflict has dominated news globally since the 7 Oct 2023 attack by Hamas on Israel. As the situation is constantly evolving, it is difficult to obtain reliable information from the frontlines. This provides opportunistic actors the chance to advance their own narratives, interests and agenda by employing misinformation and disinformation tactics to distort information from conflict zones. Fact checking becomes an important tool to ensure the integrity and accuracy of information in times of conflict.

What is Fact Checking?

2.   According to the *Arab Fact-Checkers Network*, fact checking is the process of investigating non-fiction information to check its veracity. Fact-checkers use specific methodologies and tools to analyse news or claims and rate them as true or false, by providing context, sources and background information. This could involve independent groups of fact checkers sieving through multiple sources of information to assess the reliability of information. Both independent and public-funded fact checking initiatives are useful in ensuring that information available online is accurate and reliable.

Rapid Spread of Misinformation and Disinformation in Times of Conflict

3.   The 7 Oct 2023 attack by Hamas is one of many battles in the seven decades of tensions and hostilities between Israel and Palestine. In the aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust, many Palestinians opposed the creation of Israel, igniting a fierce contestation of land and nationhood. This conflict has worsened hostility and animosity between generations of Israelis and Palestinians. In such an emotionally charged environment, rumours, distortions, unverified reports and propaganda can spread quickly. This makes it difficult for one to distinguish fact from fiction. The rapid spread of information through various channels, including social media, news outlets, private messaging platforms and government communications, makes it difficult for fact checkers to verify such information in a timely manner.

4.   Conflict situations are often accompanied by intense propaganda and information campaigns aimed at influencing public opinion and swaying perceptions of the conflict. These campaigns are sophisticated, and they may not be deceptive all the time. However, opportunistic actors may also employ the use of a combination of misleading narratives, altered images and false testimonials to deceive the public and discredit opposing forces.

How Misinformation and Disinformation are spread on social media

5.   According to the *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's* annual Digital News Report, younger online users are more likely to source for information and news from social media platforms compared to traditional media. As the Israel-Hamas Conflict is a topic of great public interest, any content related to the conflict is widely shared on social media. Opportunistic actors take advantage of this to create and share inflammatory content, usually depicting the aftermath of attacks, brutality towards women and children and acts of sabotage. The aim is to destabilise the efforts of the impacted country, delegitimise official government channels of information, in order to

put forth their own narrative and stir up unrest among religiously diverse communities.

6.   A *Reuters* article reported several examples of social media users sharing misleading or baseless claims, including miscaptioned imagery or altered documents. Figure 1 purportedly shows Jewish people fleeing as air raid sirens sounded in Jerusalem. However, the background commentary in the video (in Hebrew) describes the scene as Orthodox Jews leaving the Western Wall (a holy site in Jerusalem) after their prayers. The video appeared online at least four days before the 7 Oct 2023 attacks, thereby disproving the claim of it being related to the October clashes.

Figure 1: Screenshot of a video supposedly showing Jewish people fleeing as air raid sirens sounded in Jerusalem

Source: Reuters, 12 October 2023

7.   Opportunistic actors have also passed off video game footage as real-life scenes from conflict zones. A factchecker from *BBC Verify*, Shayan Sardarizadeh, debunked a video that was circulated on X by Hamas' supporters. The video (Figure 2) originated from a Czech video game, called Arma 3.

Figure 2: @shayan86's post on X, debunking videos posted by Hamas followers

Source: @shayan86 on X, 8 October 2023

8.   Closed messaging apps, such as Telegram, WhatsApp, Line, is another medium for disseminating unverified and false claims. As these messaging groups are not subjected to any content moderation process, they may become echo chambers if individuals blindly share information that only resonates with their ideology and beliefs, regardless of the source's reliability.

9.   *FakeReporter*, an Israeli "disinformation watchdog group formed by researchers, activists and OSINT experts", regularly uncover examples of misinformation and disinformation online. Figure 3 shows a disinformation notice, issued by *FakeReporter* in Hebrew. The notice which surfaced after the 7 Oct 2023 attack, states that an audio message was making rounds on closed messaging groups. In the message a woman is heard claiming that a person "very

powerful in the (Israeli) military system" told her to immediately prepare for a fatal damage to infrastructure and to stock up on cash, fuel and groceries." The notice from *FakeReporter* cautions readers that such media "severely damage social resilience." *FakeReporter* encouraged people to "avoid the distribution of unsubstantiated and unsigned voice messaged, especially those marked as transmitted many times". Though *FakeReporter* was able to issue an information correction notice, there was still a lag time from the time the media was first circulated to the time it was debunked.

Figure 3: @fakereporter's Information Correction Notice on Fake Voice Messages

Source: @fakereporter on X, 9 October 2023

What makes Fact Checking Difficult?

10.   Fact checking during a conflict is challenging because information from conflict zones is not always complete and accurate. The situation on the ground is in a constant flux and there is no reliable way to verify the accuracy of information in real-time as access to conflict zones is restricted.

11.   There is a lack of developed fact checking mechanisms in the Middle East due to the dangers of operating out of a conflict zone. In the case of the Israel-Hamas conflict, most of the information from Gaza is in the form of 'eyewitness' accounts, which are difficult to verify. Opportunistic actors could take advantage of the perceived reliability of 'eyewitness' accounts to create misinformation and disinformation campaigns portraying first person accounts of events. As fact checkers are not on the ground, it takes longer to debunk the false narratives spread by fake 'eyewitness' accounts.

Conclusion

12.   Fact-checking in times of conflict face numerous challenges that may compromise the completeness, accuracy and reliability of information. Despite these difficulties, the role of fact-checkers remains crucial in ensuring the integrity and accuracy of information in times of conflict.

. . . . .

CONTACT DETAILS

All reports can be retrieved from our website at www.acice-asean.org/resource/.

For any queries and/or clarifications, please contact ACICE at ACICE@defence.gov.sg.

Prepared by:
ADMM Cybersecurity and Information Centre of Excellence

REFERENCES
News Articles

1.   Associated Press - Israel-Hamas war misinformation is everywhere. Here are the facts
        [Link: https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-fact-check-
        e829d1dddcc2dad0f5f99cf62ef353ad]

2.   As Ukraine-Russia conflict rages on, people in Singapore caught in its information war
        [Link: https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/ukraine-invasion-russia-fake-news-
        information-war-online-singapore-2596036]

3.   Case Study 3: Fact Checking
        [Link: https://www.carnegieendowment.org/2024/01/31/case-study-3-fact-checking-
        pub-91481]

4.   FakeReporter's Information Correction Notice on X (formerly Twitter)
        [Link: https://twitter.com/FakeReporter/status/1711392485866414163]

5.   Fewer people trust traditional media, more turn to TikTok for news, report says
        [Link: https://www.channelnewsasia.com/business/fewer-people-trust-traditional-
        media-more-turn-tiktok-news-report-says-3559951]

6.   IN FOCUS: How fake news on Israel-Hamas stokes outrage, hatred and 'potential for
        violence' on Southeast Asian TikTok
        [Link: https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/israel-hamas-tiktok-misinformation-
        gaza-disinformation-palestinian-fake-news-falsehoods-3894006]

7.   Israel-Hamas war: Fact-checking online misinformation
        [Link: https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/fact-checking-online-
        misinformation-israel-hamas-conflict-2023-10-09/]

8.   Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023
        [Link: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-
        06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf]

9.   Shayan Sardarizadeh's Information Correction Notice on X (formerly Twitter)
        [Link : https://twitter.com/Shayan86/status/1710792161602548195]

10. <u>What went wrong with the British media coverage of Israel's war on Gaza?</u>
[Link: https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/3/6/what-went-wrong-with-the-british-media-coverage-of-the-gaza-war]

11. <u>The Arab Fact-Checkers Network (AFCN)</u>
[Link: https://arabfcn.net/en/home/]