PODCAST

Israel's Disinformation Apparatus with Tariq Kenney-Shawa

By: Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, Tariq Kenney-Shawa · March, 2024

The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 0:00

Both journalists and open source intelligence analysts have essentially abandoned their objectivity and critical analysis to effectively act as spokespeople for the Israeli military. And in doing so, they've not only betrayed public trust, but they're also playing a really important role in justifying Israeli war crimes in Gaza right now, and ultimately helping Israel get away with actual genocide.

Yara Hawari 0:29

From Al Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network, I am Yara Hawari, and this is Rethinking Palestine.

Throughout the ongoing genocide in Gaza, which has so far claimed the lives of over 35,000 people, many of whom are children, we have seen how information and disinformation is an incredibly powerful weapon that can be utilized to dehumanize, to justify horrific violence, and to also delegitimize Palestinian voices and experiences.

Indeed, following Hamas's operation on October 7th, hysteria paved the way for

horrific fabrications and mass dehumanization of Palestinians in Gaza. Journalists across the board failed to uphold even the most basic tenets of journalistic practice and fact checking, instead regurgitating Israeli official narratives and language purposely designed to justify the mass violence that was to follow.

Other actors emerged online, claiming to challenge and debunk false narratives. The online space has now become so saturated with information that many have found it hard to discern between reality and Israeli propaganda. Joining us to discuss this some more is Tariq Kenny-Shawa, Al Shabaka's very own U. S. Policy Fellow.

Tariq, thank you for joining us on this episode of Rethinking Palestine.

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 1:45

Hi Yara, thanks for having me on today.

Yara Hawari 1:48

So, Tariq, you've recently written in an Al Shabaka policy brief on Israel's disinformation war amidst the ongoing genocide, which can be found on our website in English and Arabic.

But perhaps you can start off by explaining to us the information warfare tactics that the Israeli regime has been using to influence public perception of the genocide.

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 2:07

So let's just say that there's a lot to talk about when it comes to Israel's disinformation warfare tactic. It's really hard to know where to start sometimes, but I think it's always useful to begin by contextualizing the current moment.

There's no doubt that the last five months or so have really seen an

unprecedented flood of disinformation and propaganda. That's not just from Israelis. We're in a time right now where disinformation is really shaping up to be one of the most important issues of our time with extremely rapid evolution of AI and all the photo and video and audio manipulation that comes with it. Now combine all of that with the wider decline in trust in traditional media and the monetization of engagement on social media Platforms like twitter that we've seen under Elon Musk, all of this together has created a really fertile soil for disinformation to thrive.

So now we also need to recognize the pivotal role that disinformation and propaganda have played in sustaining Israel as a settler colonial state since day one. And since its establishment in 1948, Israel's leaders have recognized one, the fact that they would need backing from, from the world's most powerful settler colonial project.

And two, the fact that cultivating the support would really require pretty much constant PR campaign aimed at painting Israel as a perpetual victim surrounded by enemies and constant need of basically unwavering support. So Israelis, you know, they even have a word for this, this process, they call it Hasbara, which essentially translates to "explaining" in Hebrew.

And what does that look like in practice? We're all familiar with the Zionist narratives that have become pretty infamous. I'm sure listeners will recognize the narrative of Palestine as a land without a people for a people without a land, for example, or Israel as David versus Goliath and the claim that the Zionists made the desert bloom and so on.

I could go on for hours with these, but what these narratives have achieved over time is that Israel has successfully cultivated support from the West through this process of dehumanization and delegitimizing Palestinians as a means of justifying what is the daily violence of settler colonialism. So fast forward to today,

what we've seen over the past couple of months is basically a continuation of the strategy, but an overdrive.

Israel recognized that the only way to get away with carrying out genocide in Gaza is by effectively controlling the information environment and deploying narratives that ultimately delegitimize Palestinians and justify their murder, their wholesale murder. And there are several tactics Israelis have used to these ends, but you know, for ease of explanation, we can kind of divide Israel's disinformation strategy into three overarching prongs.

The first being exaggerating the actions of Hamas and other Palestinian resistance groups, painting civilian targets as military targets, and discrediting and delegitimizing Palestinian voices and narratives to create, artificially create, a fog of war to deter international intervention. And all of these are ultimately designed to justify genocide.

So what does that look like in practice? We'll go through one, two and three. So when it comes to the actions of Hamas on October 7th, we've seen Israeli officials make horrific false claims. One example being the false claim that Hamas beheaded 40 babies. And of course, you know, claims like these have been rapidly debunked, but not before they spread like wildfire and not before the repeated at levels as high up as, for example, the president of the United States. And it's clear what Israel is trying to achieve here. They want to paint Hamas and in turn paint Palestinians as a whole as brutal and violent, essentially deserving of whatever Israel does next. Once that foundation is laid, once those ideas are planted in people's minds, they really become a point of reference, regardless of their veracity, regardless of whether they're debunked, and they always are debunked.

So that leads us to the next prong, the next tactic, which argues that Palestinian civilians, those who have never taken part in any form of armed resistance, are legitimate military targets. And this is the claim that Hamas uses. civilian

infrastructure for military purposes or uses civilians as human shields and that justifies somehow the killing of civilians.

And a great example of this that we saw over the last couple months is the case of Al Shifa hospital, which has really come to represent a microcosm of Israel's unprecedented assault on Gaza's entire healthcare system. In this case, Israel spent months building a really specific case around Al Shifa, claiming that Hamas had built a massive command center under the hospital with tunnels that led directly into the hospital rooms, that Hamas was holding hostages there.

And that they were ultimately prepared to defend it to the last fighter. And these were claims made not just by Israel and Israeli officials and Israeli intelligence. These were claims that were repeated with confidence by U. S. intelligence by White House spokespeople like John Kirby, even by by President Biden himself, and this is really important because these weren't sweeping claims.

These weren't broad, sweeping or ridiculous claims. These were very specific claims down to specific details that really seemed quite convincing, at least in terms of the confidence that the Israelis seem to have. And I'll be honest with you, there were many points in this where I truly bought into it.

And because of that, the confidence in their assertions. And we all know Israel eventually raided Al Shifa. Surprise, surprise, no command center, no hostages, no resistance. Sure, there was a tunnel that ran underneath the corner of the hospital compound, but there were no connections to the hospital buildings.

None of the very specific claims that Israel made to justify an attack on a hospital, which is a brazen war crime, a total violation of every norm that basically, the entire world has bought into. None of these Israeli claims to justify this came to light. So what's important about this is that despite the total collapse of the israeli narrative surrounding Al Shifa Is that it represented a blueprint that israel used to then claim that all hospitals, all healthcare facilities, all healthcare providers in

Gaza were legitimate targets. And we've seen the results. You know, basically every hospital in Gaza has either been taken out entirely or damaged by Israeli attacks. And this brings us to, to the next thing, which is using disinformation to dehumanize Palestinians and delegitimize them entirely.

So that the international community simply just doesn't trust Palestinian claims outright. And so, for example, the past five months have seen an explosion in these racist, quote, unquote, Pollywood smears, which accused Palestinians of essentially acting out fake atrocities to blame on Israelis. And we've seen Israeli officials take to social media to claim that dead Palestinian babies are actually dolls or that Palestinians are faking their injuries from Israeli airstrikes to garner international sympathy.

In one case in particular, a spokesperson for Netanyahu attempted to actually pass off footage from a Lebanese short film as evidence that Palestinians were faking injuries from Israeli attacks. And, you know, that post, and really all of these disinformation posts, remain up for days or weeks or indefinitely, despite the fact that they're fake.

community notes on Twitter, despite debunks, and despite the fact that they are actively and regularly refuted. So to kind of conclude, you know, all of this sounds ludicrous, right? It's really mind blowing because how could claims that are so easily refutable be so dangerous?

But that's you know, that's the whole point. Because in an age in which over, I think it's over 50 percent of U.S. adults get their news from social media and an even higher number don't read past headlines. Israeli disinformation can become ingrained, you know, long before it's debunked. And at the end of the day, sometimes all it really takes is a headline.

And so this is, a long, long winded answer. So last thing I'll say to this question is, it's really critical to recognize that these efforts aren't just led by extremists on the

fringe. They are primarily led by the Israeli state itself. And this is truly the biggest, most concerted state sponsored disinformation strategy that I've ever seen.

Because you really have a lot of these really popular narratives and these disinformation claims that really gain a lot of attention being pushed by official Israeli accounts, like ranging from President Herzog himself to Israeli embassy accounts all around the world. So the fact that this state sponsored disinformation campaign really would not be as successful as it has been if it weren't for the fact that journalists and the international media ecosystem has been so eager to reproduce it and act essentially as Israeli spokespeople by uncritically reproducing and parroting this Israeli disinformation.

Yara Hawari 10:59

If you're enjoying this podcast, please visit our website, al-shabaka.org where you will find more Palestinian policy analysis and where you can join our mailing list and donate to support our work.

And I think you really put your finger on it when you said that there's been this eagerness by the Western media, and sort of mainstream spaces to lap up these narratives.

And that's really one of the things that has struck me as quite phenomenal. That even, you know, when the Israeli regime is caught out in their lies. Even when things are so obviously staged, like what happened at Al Shifa hospital when they put on display all these so called weapons that they found, it was so obviously staged that even mainstream media journalists were aghast by it.

Even then, they are still held in such high regard, or their narratives and their discourse is still held in such high regard, and Palestinians continue to be framed as illegitimate sources of information. And I think this speaks to deep seated racism towards Palestinians and Arabs more broadly. But another thing that

strikes me, and that I was thinking about while you were talking, is how adaptable the Zionist discourse has been, how successful it has been at adapting to the situation it's found itself in over the decades.

You know, the Zionist discourse and the information machine is so adaptable and so smart at maneuvering the situation that it's in, and yet I think we finally begun to see crack in that machine. Could you speak to that a little bit?

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 12:35

I think when you say cracks in that machine, I think that's an interesting way to put it because I think until this day, there's still so much state sponsored and state led resources that are going into this Hasbara process, right?

But I think in many ways, What's been a blessing and a curse at the same time is the digital age is social media, right? Because simultaneously, if you look back at the history of Israeli Hasbara, the seventies and eighties, it was much easier for them to kind of deny outright. And if Palestinians claim that Israel committed a war crime, if Palestinians claim that an unarmed teenager was shot, all they needed to really do was deny the claim.

And it was a lot easier because there wasn't social media to kind of back up Palestinian claims. But nowadays, with the advent of social media and the fact that so many people are online, it's added another dimension to it. So on one side of the process, it's a benefit because it makes it so much easier for Palestinians to share their narratives without facing that immediate censorship, but on the other side, it adds a whole new dimension because of the fact that leading social media companies like Facebook, Twitter, they continue to actively censor Palestinian voices. They actively, for example, in 2021, there was a study that found that Arabic was censored multitudes more than Hebrew was censored when it comes to posts.

And so it continues to kind of be a blessing and the curse at the same time. Social media has really provided more of an opening for sharing the Palestinian narrative, but at the same time, it's really provided new avenues for Israel to censor and platform its disinformation narratives.

Perhaps this segues nicely into talking about OSINT, which is something that you focus on in the piece and has really emerged as a prominent source of news in recent years. Why is this the case? Firstly, perhaps you can tell us what is OSINT and then why is this the case? Why has it become this prominent source and what are the pros and cons of OSINT?

Open source intelligence, OSINT has become extremely important over the past couple years and it can be, again, another blessing and a curse. So to kind of start this off with a brief background on what open source intelligence or OSINT is. OSINT really just refers to the collection and analysis of open source, publicly available information that can range from, can really include anything from satellite imagery to posts and videos on social media.

And it's really exploded in popularity over recent years because of the accessibility. What we're kind of just talking about and because it has really made investigations, that were historically limited to state agencies and state intelligence operations far more accessible to the wider public.

So what really makes OSINT particularly valuable, in my opinion, is the critical role that it can play in human rights investigations. And there are tons of examples of this in practice. One example is when OSINT analysts helped prove that Israeli soldiers were actually behind the killing of Shirin Abu Akhla, and they did that through a long term kind of Independent investigative process of analyzing footage from the scene, analyzing satellite imagery, doing their own digital forensics to actually determine the locations of the soldiers at the time of the shooting, and even the direction that the bullets were fired.

A more recent example is when OSINT analysts have really given us critical insight into Israel's use of 2000 pound bombs. And they do this by analyzing satellite imagery to visualize and locate craters that were found in really densely populated civilian areas. And the value of this is that these are conclusions and analysis that would not be available to the general public because before the advent of OSINT, those types of investigations are really kind of gatekept by Israel or the powers that be, right?

The powers that have access to these areas, and what OSINT does is it kind of cracks through that. So in many cases, OSINT analysts have really built significant followings online because so many people see them as really trusted sources for accurate information and analysis. And this is especially at a time we have to keep in mind when trust in traditional news media and trust in governments is in broad decline for understandable reasons.

So while this makes them extremely valuable, it also makes them particularly dangerous, right? When they kind of askew their objectivity to repeat and parrot Israeli military narratives and ultimately cover up Israeli war crimes. And that's what we've been seeing a lot of, not just over the past couple months, but for several years now.

And why is that important? Because both journalists and open source intelligence analysts have essentially abandoned their objectivity and critical analysis to effectively act as spokespeople for the Israeli military. And in doing so, they've not only kind of betrayed, public trust in their objectivity and transparency, but they're also playing a really important role in justifying Israeli war crimes in Gaza right now, and ultimately helping Israel get away with actual genocide.

Yara Hawari 18:02

Perhaps you can tell us a bit more about that, how OSINT analysts are actually becoming active enablers of Israeli war crimes.

There's lots of examples, but to give one prominent example is a Twitter account by the name of OSINT Defender, who is a self described, I think it's an open source intelligence monitor focused on Europe and conflicts across the world.

And this account really gained prominence during covering the war in Ukraine. And interestingly, recent investigations found that OSINT Defender's identity is Simon Anderson, a member of the U.S. military and current resident in the U.S. state of Georgia, which adds another dimension to it. Because a lot of these OSINT accounts are anonymous, right?

So a lot of the times we don't know what biases are kind of going into their reporting no matter how good it is. So, you know, focusing on OSINT Defender, he's shared debunked Israeli military claims of this alleged Hamas command center under Shifa Hospital. He's described hundreds of Palestinian civilians rounded up and tortured by Israeli forces as quote unquote, Hamas terrorists, despite the fact that the Israeli military later itself admitted that those rounded up were indeed civilians. And he never retracted the original posts. he's also fueled those racist Pollywood tropes that we discussed earlier and also claimed that the group of journalists killed by an Israeli tank shell in Southern Lebanon, were filming during quote unquote, current exchanges of fire, when in reality, there was no active combat going on at the time they were killed by the Israeli tank. And the issue here is that in none of these cases has OSINT Defender publicly retracted or corrected the false claims, even when they're publicly debunked. So you have a person with, I think it's now he has almost a million, or if not more than a million followers on Twitter, this huge footprint, this huge role as an influencing voice trusted yet spreading blatant disinformation and refusing to correct the record, even when he's debunked. So while experienced analysts and journalists, you know, they might be able to identify this as disinformation. They might be able to see that what he's doing is essentially engagement farming that accounts like

OSINT Defender are known for.

The same can't be said about the general public, right? And because their understanding of Israel's assault on Gaza continues to be shaped by analysts like OSINT Defender, who claim to be objective, who are in reality acting as an extended arm of the Israeli propaganda machine. And there are countless examples of this.

I'd say more legitimate accounts like Aleph or Aurora Intel are kind of considered to be a little bit more legit and a little bit more professional, but they also exhibit many of the same biases, and they, for example, never question Israeli military narratives or correct Israeli disinformation, even when it's publicly debunked.

They routinely fact check other accounts for sharing disinformation, but they give Israeli accounts a pass for the same verification process. I'll give you one example is when pro Israel accounts were really quick to share Israel's fabricated radar mock up that claimed a misfired rocket on November 10th, they were nowhere to be seen when there was a subsequent New York times investigation that actually debunked that.

So in short, we have to kind of look at the bigger pictures, is these are trusted and well followed analyst accounts that are in many cases, they're not blatantly sharing egregious disinformation, obvious disinformation, but at the same time they're essentially shielding the Israeli military from accountability by refusing to hold it to the same verification standards that they hold other accounts to and that they build their followings on.

So the average Joe or the average Twitter user who uses their expertise and their analysis, they're kind of walking off with the belief that the Israeli army is infallible and they're kind of walking off with this base understanding of the Israeli narrative. And that's because they're not getting the bigger picture from these accounts.

And that is really important just in the day and age that we're living, where people are justifiably losing trust in traditional media and in traditional journalism.

Yara Hawari 22:28

What's been clear from what you've said and really over the last few months is that the ongoing genocide in Gaza really presents us with this microcosm of a broader global challenge of how to navigate and counter state sponsored disinformation. And I guess it can feel quite overwhelming for a lot of people considering the resources and the structural bias in favor of the Israeli regime.

What are some of the tactics that you recommend for challenging this?

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 22:58

You said it yourself. I feel like it does feel like it can be overwhelming sometimes. And I think a lot of people get discouraged and shut down when talking about disinformation, especially in the age of AI, where it seems so all encompassing, right?

And it seems so inevitable. But there are definitely several steps that can be taken to counter the trend. And I think, first off civil society organizations, non governmental organizations should really do their best to try to enhance media literacy and offer training opportunities that are designed essentially to educate the general public on how to identify misinformation or disinformation and propaganda.

And while this applies to all forms of media training and basic OSINT collection methods is extremely important and accessible because it would essentially arm audiences with the tools that they need to verify the news that they're reading in real time. This could range from trainings on how to conduct reverse image searches, how to do very basic geolocation when they're viewing footage that's shared online and how to just simply cross check information across various

trusted news sources. So this is doable.

This is accessible and a lot of groups are doing this. For example, independent fact checking organizations like Al Haq and Forensic Architecture have been doing a lot of work in this regard. And I think that kind of presents an opportunity for investment in a way. This can really apply to a lot broader than Palestine.

I mean, this is a global issue when it comes to disinformation. And it's something that genuinely every person on this earth has, has an interest in addressing. And then, you know, there's the criticism that we've been having about media organizations and journalists. What they could do is simply adhere to widely recognized journalistic and editorial standards when they're doing their fact checking and then when they're doing their journalism reporting.

You know, especially during these conflicts that are characterized by genocide and war crimes and that have known to produce a lot of disinformation. And I shouldn't have to say this, but I think claims made by militaries or armed groups, any armed group should be treated with heightened scrutiny because of the interests they have and their own perspectives. So this kind of recommendation is extremely basic.

It's kind of journalists should go back to the basics of being a journalist and do their jobs. Essentially. I think another thing to consider is that international law itself is also not prepared to address, I guess, the evolving nature of state sponsored disinformation in the digital age. We're still very much behind and so just kind of thinking about ongoing investigations right now when it comes to what's going on in Palestine, for example, the genocide investigation at the ICJ.

There are steps that, for example, the UN and other multilateral organizations could take to establish task forces to monitor and document, for example, instances of Israeli state sponsored disinformation that are designed to dehumanize Palestinians and to justify the genocide. This information can actually

be used as evidence of Israel's genocidal intent in, in these ongoing and future investigations.

And then, last but not least, social media companies really need to do a lot more to take action on their role in facilitating the spread of disinformation. The issues that are seen at platforms like Twitter or X versus Facebook, they're very different, right? I mean, Twitter has more of an issue with fact checking mechanisms and, meta has more of an issue with direct censorship, but implementing robust fact checking mechanisms, enhancing transparency and content moderation efforts, collaborating with independent fact checkers , and strengthening community standards.

These are all very basic and bare minimum steps that social media companies need to be taking not only to address the spread of disinformation when it comes to Palestine, but to address this issue on a global scale, because as I said before, this is not just Palestine, this is a global issue that's going to be plaguing us for decades to come.

Yara Hawari 27:03

Thank you, Tariq, for leaving us with those recommendations and points on how to challenge the information warfare amidst the ongoing genocide in Gaza. And thank you for joining me on this episode of Rethinking Palestine.

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 27:17

Thank you for having me, Yara.

Yara Hawari 27:16

Rethinking Palestine is brought to you by Al Shabaka, the Palestinian policy network. Al Shabaka is the only global independent Palestinian think tank whose mission is to produce critical policy analysis and collectively imagine a new

policymaking paradigm for Palestine and Palestinians worldwide. For more information or to donate to support our work, visit al-shabaka.org and importantly, don't forget to subscribe to Rethinking Palestine wherever you listen to podcasts.