(Misin)formed by war: These are the narratives that have shaped the Israel-Hamas conflict

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Source: Smoke rises following Israeli strikes in Gaza, October 9, 2023.
REUTERS/Saleh Salem

Published October 7, 2024

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1. Introduction

1.1 One year later

The Hamas incursion into Israel on October 7, 2023, kicked off a new phase in the decades-long conflict in the Gaza Strip, resulting in a humanitarian crisis with no end in sight. Escalating into an exchange of fire that has involved other actors, among them Iran, the unrest in the region reached its current peak when Israel launched a ground invasion into neighboring Lebanon on October 1, 2024.

Since the beginning, the rapidly unfolding events of the conflict fueled a fire of misinformation, conspiracies, and antisemitic and Islamophobic content that has raged online as millions of internet users flocked to their screens to monitor updates in real time.

"Misinformation narratives can have a long-lasting impact, persisting even after being debunked. They erode trust, deepen polarization, and make it difficult for audiences to navigate facts," Alessandro Accorsi, Senior Analyst at the International Crisis Group, told Logically Facts. Deepening social divisions can also induce fear and increase hatred or discrimination, such as the rise in antisemitic and Islamophobic narratives.

From day one of the conflict, Logically Facts has tracked and debunked misinformation claims spreading online. We collected and analyzed hundreds of narratives, identifying common misinformation themes as well as various techniques used to misinform the public.
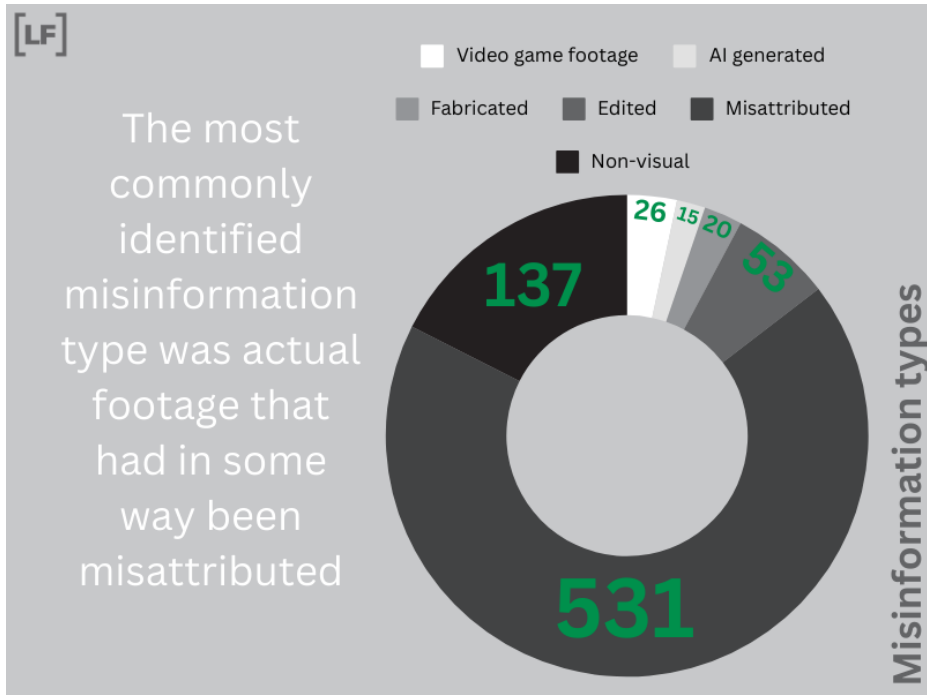
This is what we found.

1.2 A visual war

Over the past year, we identified 782 unique misinformation narratives on social media platforms related to the conflict in Gaza and the surrounding region. Our analysis shows that video was overwhelmingly the chosen medium for those narratives we identified.

Of the close to 800 narratives, 470 relied on video to make false or misleading claims, while 208 relied on images.
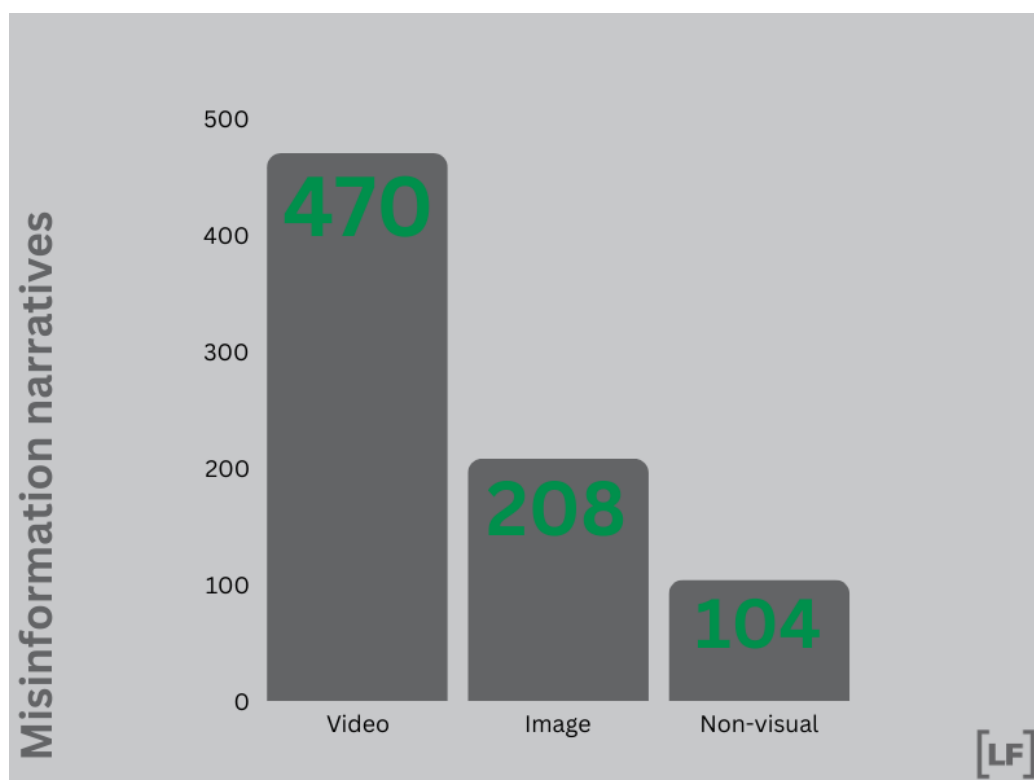
In many cases, the videos showed authentic footage of war or protests but presented them in a false or misleading way. In other cases, videos had been edited or manipulated to mislead or create a false impression. 26 of the identified narratives relied on footage from video games, such as Arma 3, presented as actual footage from the conflict zone.

The most commonly identified misinformation type was actual footage that had in some way been misattributed

Misinformation types

Legend: Video game footage, AI generated, Fabricated, Edited, Misattributed, Non-visual

26 15 20 53 137 531

Videos and images that didn't use video game footage and weren't edited, generated by AI tools, or fabricated in some other way were collected in a "misattributed" category. This category contained 531 narratives in total. Of these, 150 used what we termed "operational" visuals — images of fighting, bombings, military mobilizations, or acts of war that originated from a different time or place or concerned a different occasion from what was claimed.

Of the **531** narratives that misattributed actual footage **150** used visuals that related to operational events while **381** related to other things

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2.Methodology

And now, a disclaimer. While our collected data is comprehensive, our analysis makes no claim to be exhaustive. The collected narratives are the result of fact-checkers monitoring social media platforms and the output of fact-checking organizations across the globe with varying intensity over the course of the conflict.

We looked at large social media platforms like TikTok, X, Facebook, Instagram, and — to a lesser extent — YouTube and Threads. Due in part to the nature of these platforms, the data collected overwhelmingly features visual misinformation — images and videos. All content was collected in English.

Our data was collected by monitoring multiple platforms using specific keywords and hashtags and following accounts that consistently shared misinformation about the conflict. We selected our set of keywords and hashtags by focusing on key actors (such as Israel, Palestine, and Hamas), specific locations (like Gaza, Rafah, and the Red Sea), terms commonly associated with the conflict (like "Pallywood"), and by monitoring trending topics on online platforms at the time.

The vast majority of the data was obtained during the first eight months of the conflict — up until the Rafah incursion in May 2024. Rising misinformation ahead of an intense election season — both European and U.K., along with increasing U.S. content — shifted our editorial focus.

We continue to monitor events and have covered the latest tensions between Israel, Lebanon, and Iran, but we have not parsed this data to the same level due to its recency.

After reviewing our data set, we categorized the misinformation by narrative themes and techniques.

How we analysed the data

Monitoring

Data collection

Analysis

Two researchers independently went through one half of the data set each to identify and code for one or more misinformation theme(s) and type(s) for each narrative.

The coding was data-driven, meaning the themes and types weren't picked beforehand, but was based on the researchers' assessment of each narrative.

After going through the narratives, the researchers reconvened to agree on a number of themes and types that could encompass all the narratives. These themes and types were formulated in a coding manual.

Researchers coded the data all over again based on the categories in the coding manual.

The narratives of each category were quantified in order to present the data.

Data presentation

Through the analysis, we identified seven misinformation themes and six misinformation techniques, some of which were subcategorized for additional insight.

The prominent themes we identified from the data were: operational events, international support, human devastation, discrediting, civil unrest, staging, and U.S.-Israel relations.
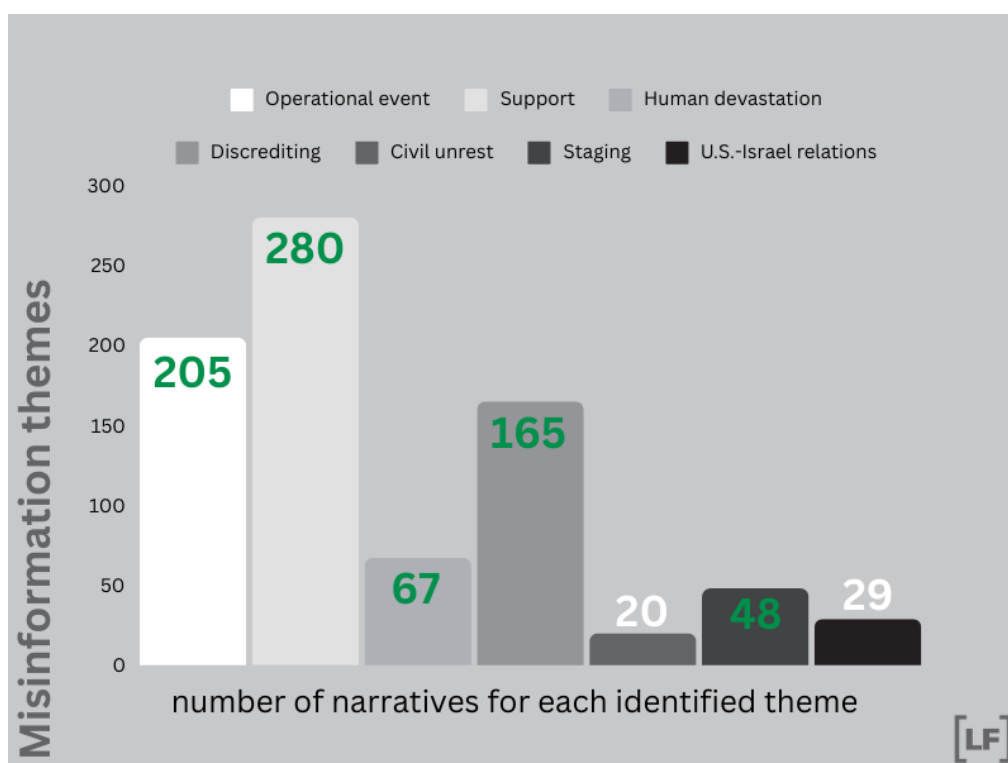
The narratives were disseminated by six different techniques across online platforms. These are misattributed footage (operational and non-operational), fabricated or AI-generated video/images, video game footage, edited and digitally altered videos and pictures, and non-visual claims made primarily through text and speech.
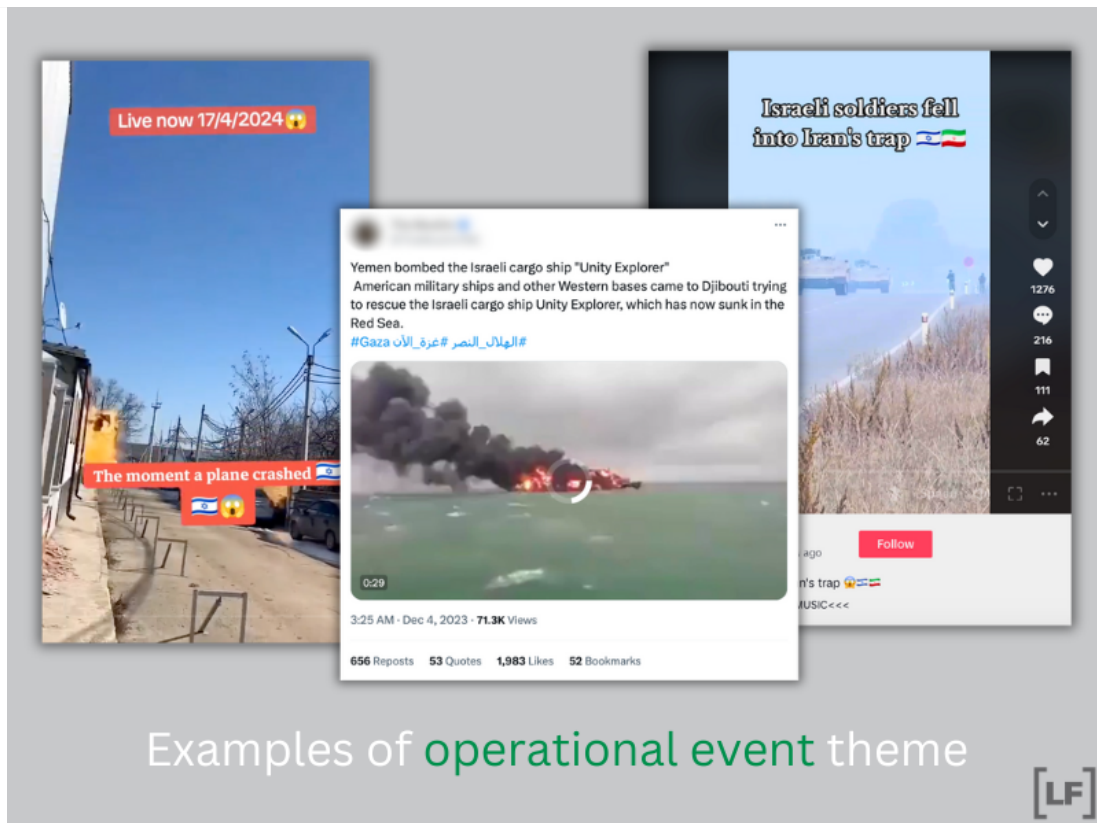
3. Themes

3.1 Operational events

This theme involves 205 of the collected misinformation narratives. These are narratives that supposedly relate to military operations in the war, to acts of war, or narratives implicating other actors in conflict, such as the Houthi rebels at the Red Sea.

For example, immediately after Hamas' attack at the Nova music festival on October 7, 2023, footage of Hamas parachuters descending to launch the surprise attack on Israel spread across social media. However, a quick reverse image search revealed that the footage was captured in Egypt and predated the attack.

Throughout the conflict, most misinformation related to operational footage derived from unrelated stock footage, old and unrelated images, and videos shared as recent across social media platforms. Most of the content was captured from ongoing conflicts or natural catastrophes. For example, footage of explosions and an aerial assault by Russia on Kyiv, Ukraine, and combat fighting in Syria was widely shared as breaking news events from Israeli strikes in Gaza. Similarly, content from past fighting between Israel and Hamas was re-circulated as new footage.

Examples of **operational event** theme

As the conflict evolved, the techniques for sharing misinformation remained unchanged, but the narratives changed to include real-life events. In December 2023, the spotlight was drawn to another regional battleground in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, where Yemen's Houthi rebels targeted international navy vessels and cargo ships. Accordingly, even more misattributed footage of naval battles, exploding boats, and cargo ships surfaced during fighting between the Israeli and Houthi forces. Most of such footage was from old accidents at sea, such as a ship catching fire off the coast of Sri Lanka in 2021 and an explosion in 2015 in China, which was shared as a "U.S.-U.K. retaliatory attack amid clashes in the Red Sea."

In addition to claiming to show real events, online users utilized fabricated and fake content to depict the ongoing battles. A more common way to depict false escalation was to use video game footage supposedly showing authentic aerial battles or combat fighting. For example, when Iran attacked Israel on April 13, online users shared Arma 3 footage of tank collisions and Iran mobilizing troops against Israel. Similar content was shared in regards to the Lebanese and Israeli forces, while at the time, no ground offensive or land battles had occurred.

3.2 Human devastation

This theme refers to narratives that supposedly show the civilian and humanitarian consequences of war, such as worsened living conditions, loss, injury, starvation, and fleeing from conflict zones. We found 67 narratives depicting human devastation.

Most of the narratives were displayed through misattributed old and recent videos and images showing other conflicts (such as Syria and Afghanistan), natural catastrophes, or captured during previous iterations of the Gaza conflict.

Many narratives took a family-oriented spin and empathized with civilians under fire. After Israel commenced its incursion in Rafah in May, TikTok and X users shared images supposedly showing a family having dinner in a tent in Rafah before it was bombed. However, the picture was captured in 2020 in Idlib, Syria.

Some narratives in this category aimed to humanize one side of the conflict. Users on X, TikTok and Facebook widely shared a 2020 clip from Syria of a Palestinian father teaching his daughter to laugh whenever she hears an Israeli airstrike during the early days of the conflict. Social media platforms also witnessed a surge of content supposedly showing orphaned or homeless Gazan children after Israeli airstrikes. We found that multiple posts not from Gaza were repurposed from charity organizations' social media accounts aiding children from Afghanistan and other Muslim countries.

Examples of **human devastation** theme
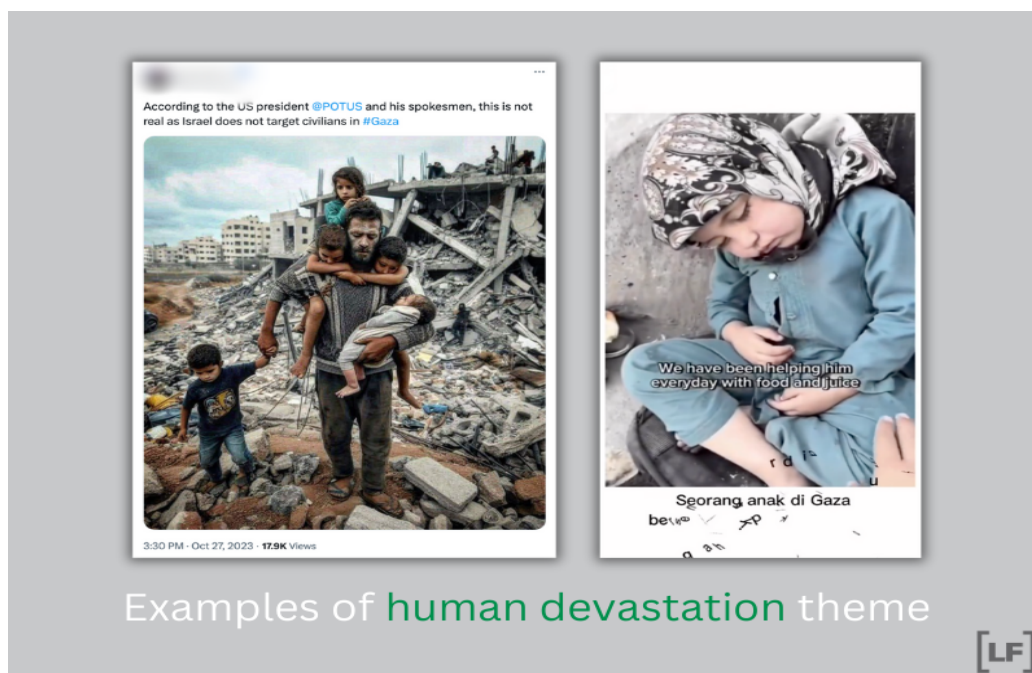
We also discovered multiple AI-generated images on TikTok, X, and Facebook displaying the devastation of Gazan families during the conflict. For example, an AI-generated image of two young boys sleeping in mud and rubble inside a dirty tent circulated widely on TikTok. The photo was shared with hashtags such as #gazatoday #gazakids or captions like "We will never forget, free Palestine."

3.3 Support

This theme encompasses all narratives of external entities showing support for either side of the conflict. It is divided into five sub-themes: military support, diplomatic support, civil support, celebrity support, and business support. We identified 280 narratives under this theme.
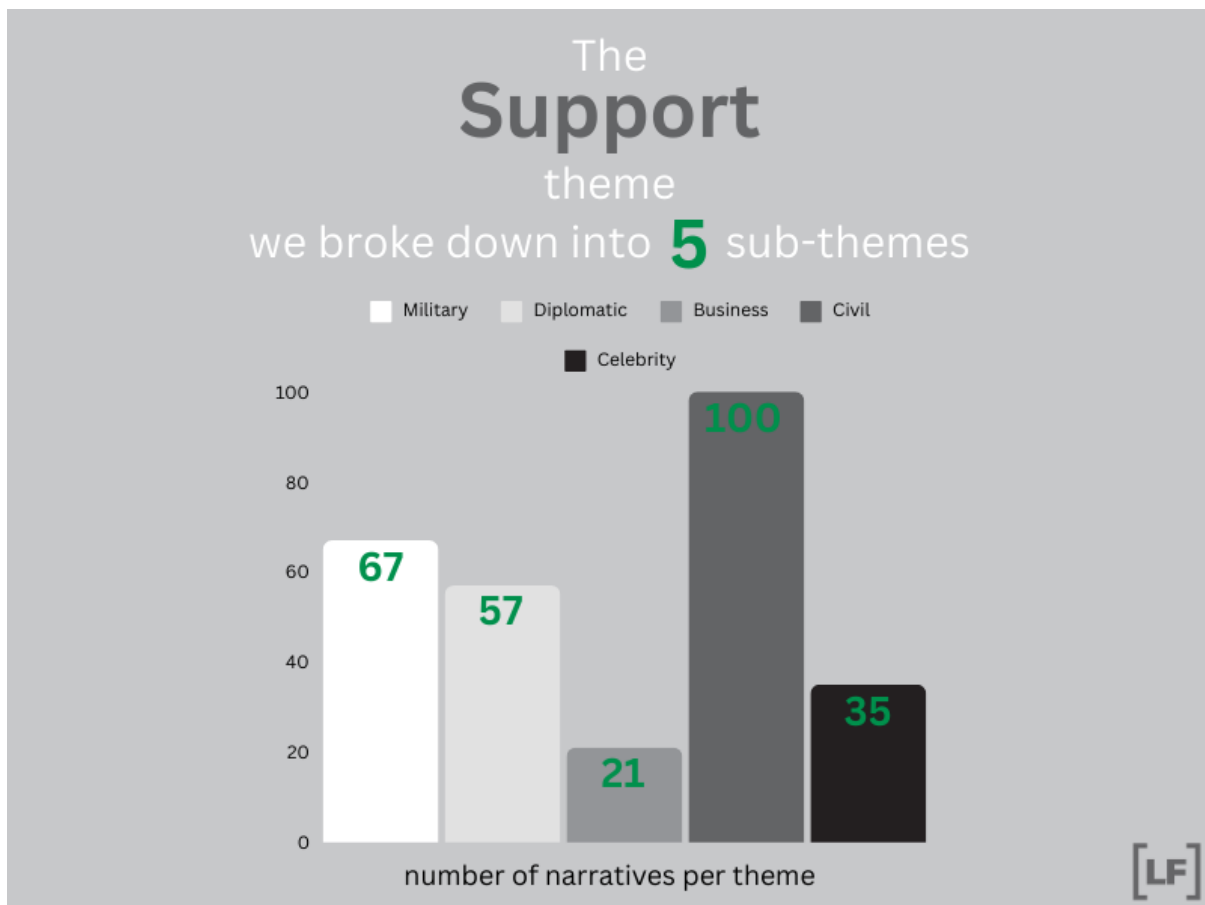
3.3.1 Military support

The conflict exposed rifts in global geopolitics by widening divisions between Israel and its usual Western allies, notably the U.S. and Europe, and countries in the Global South.

The theme "military support" refers to narratives of foreign actors militarily supporting either side. We found 67 claims under this theme. Beyond footage supposedly from the conflict zone, online users made false claims and attributions about the involvement of external powers, namely the U.S. and Russia. Such claims created a false perception of an escalation into a worldwide conflict and were used to showcase the external countries' military weakness or military supremacy.

Examples of military support theme

At the onset of the conflict, online users also shared unproven speculations of a set-up or a "false flag" operation or an "inside job" conducted by Israel in collaboration with the U.S., for example, to justify a war with Iran or embolden extremists to divide the local communities in Gaza. Content related to military support was also primarily misattributed footage from

unrelated military exercises, and video game footage was shared as authentic content.

For example, footage on TikTok and X supposedly showing the U.S. Marines landing in Israel to take part in the war was captured when a U.S. infantry division arrived in Romania for a NATO exercise back in 2022. Arma 3 footage was shared as Russian fighter planes shooting down Israeli aircraft in support of Palestine, although there were no credible reports the country had sent airplanes to Gaza for combat purposes.

Some online users shared fabricated news pieces and unsubstantiated claims to show the escalation of the conflict beyond its regional scope. The "fabricated" category refers to faked content presented as authentic news or from an official authority to mislead audiences.

For example, screenshots of a fabricated Wall Street Journal piece claiming that an "American-made MK-34" bombed the al-Ahli al-Arabi Hospital in Gaza in October 2023 circulated online. The Wall Street Journal had not published such a report, nor did the Washington Post report on an increase in weapons supply from Ukraine to Hamas amid the Israel-Hamas conflict.

3.3.2 Diplomatic support

Some months into the conflict, an old video of the Russian president's speech at Russia's Victory Day parade was shared as Putin announced Russia "will openly help Palestine." However, Palestine was not even mentioned in the speech.

The theme "diplomatic support" concerns 57 misinformation narratives claiming foreign state actors supporting either side diplomatically. Narratives in this theme include displays of solidarity by hoisting national symbols, cutting diplomatic ties, or announcing increased non-military support, such as humanitarian aid for either side of the conflict. In terms of techniques, misattributed footage was again a prominent way to spread misinformation claims.

Examples of **diplomatic support** theme
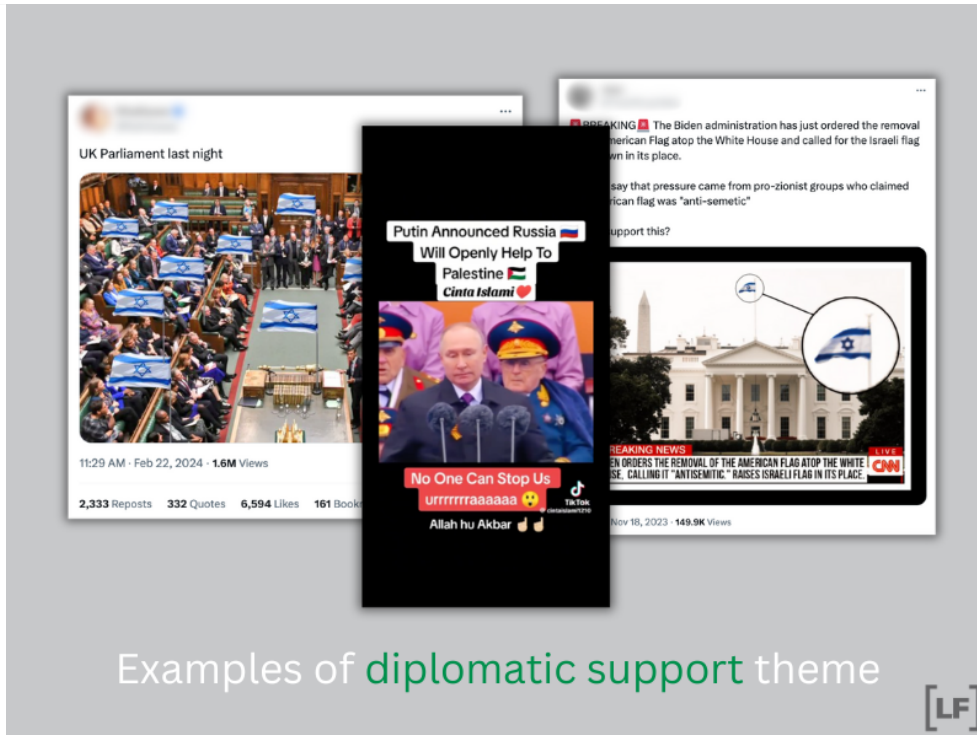
However, edited, digitally altered, and fabricated content was more commonly used than military-related narratives. These included digitally edited footage supposedly showing the Israeli flag on buildings or landmarks. Claims under the theme often used visual content to either applaud or criticize a country for supporting either side of the conflict. For instance, a fabricated CNN story of the U.S. flag being ordered to be replaced at the White House with the Israeli flag. CNN never reported on such an order by President Biden. Similar X users shared a digitally altered image showing Israeli flags in a U.K. Parliament session to claim the country's deep level of solidarity with Israel.

Misinformation in this category was not limited to national expressions of political support but included claims about severing diplomatic ties and tensions in international forums, such as the U.N., and international courts, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC). We identified false and misleading claims of states, such as Brazil and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), cutting diplomatic relations with Israel due to solidarity with Palestine. Examples of the latter included old and unrelated videos shared as Israel being "summoned" for violations of Human Rights in the U.N. or the Israeli Ambassador to the U.N. being removed from the U.N. General Assembly over the Israel-Hamas conflict.

3.3.3 Support of civil society, business and celebrities

The three other sub-themes concern identified civil responses to the conflict. These are civil society support, celebrity support, and business support. These narratives display support worldwide for either side of the conflict, excluding military and diplomatic support. Altogether, we found 100 narratives making claims of civil society support; 35 involved celebrities, and 21 showed company names showing support.

The onset of the conflict mobilized societies worldwide, both online and on the streets, to show solidarity with the conflict parties.

While much of the expressed solidarity is authentic, footage of old and unrelated demonstrations and other mass gatherings circulated widely online. For example, social media users shared footage of football fans throwing toys on a football pitch, supposedly in support of Palestinian children. However, the video predated the ongoing conflict and showed spectators in Istanbul showing solidarity for children affected by Türkiye's February earthquakes.

In other instances, demonstrations were correctly attributed to time and location, but the demonstration agenda was wrongly linked to the ongoing conflict. For example, a large anti-government protest in Warsaw, Poland, or anti-far-right protests in Germany were falsely shared as pro-Palestinian protests. Moreover, in some online posts, chants from pro-Palestinian protests were miscaptioned to share inflammatory content, which affirmed harmful antisemitic sentiment circulating online.
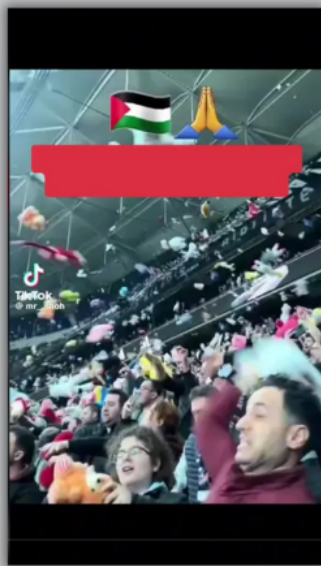
Examples of **civil support** theme

The use of false quotes, edited images, and videos was specifically prominent when it came to misinformation related to celebrities showing support for either side of the conflict. Examples of such edited content included an altered photo of football player Lionel Messi supposedly holding an Israeli flag in support of the country or Greta Thunberg holding an antisemitic book in solidarity with Palestine. In the actual images, Messi had an "Icons.com" company placard and Thunberg a book called "The Climate Book."

As with celebrity endorsements, digitally edited content from media outlets was repurposed to showcase solidarity for the conflict parties. For example, edited covers of the Time Magazine titled "Killer of the Year" cover with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and "Israel is not a nation but a criminal terrorist organization" circulated widely online.

The narratives we identified around "business support" often involved boycott calls against companies claimed to be affiliated with Israel. For example, online users pushed for boycotts of products with the "729" prefix, believing them to be Israeli-made, although not all products with the prefix have Israeli origins. We noticed that some companies, such as Starbucks, Zara, Pepsi, and McDonald's, were repeatedly targeted by these companies.

While some of the narratives were shared without visual cues, others contained misattributed content used to mislead that a company supports Israel. For example, a piece of artwork was erroneously shared as clothing company Zara was wrongly accused of launching a new "Israel Defence Forces" collection for the Spring/Summer of 2024. Similarly, a custom pair of sneakers was shared with the false claim that Nike had launched an Israel-themed sneaker.

3.4 Discrediting
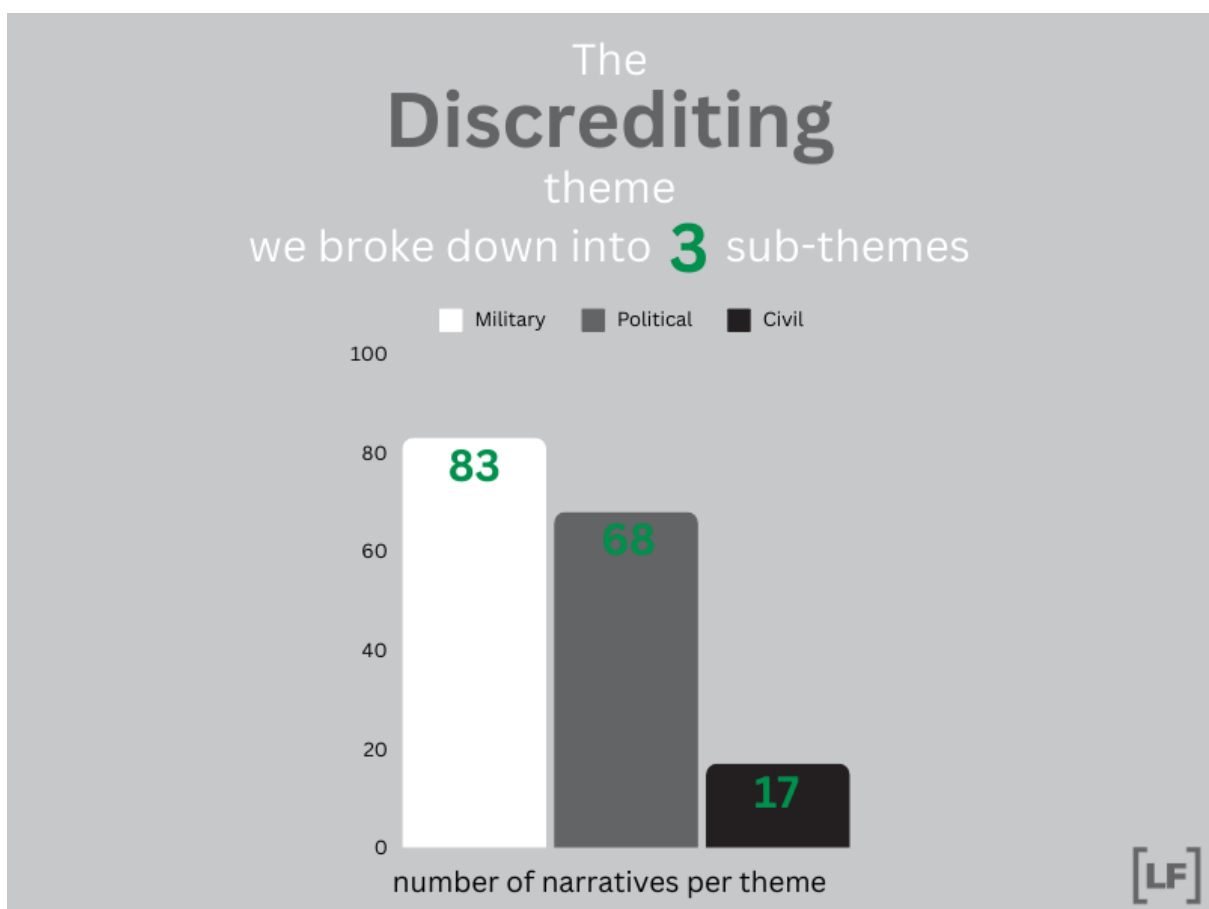
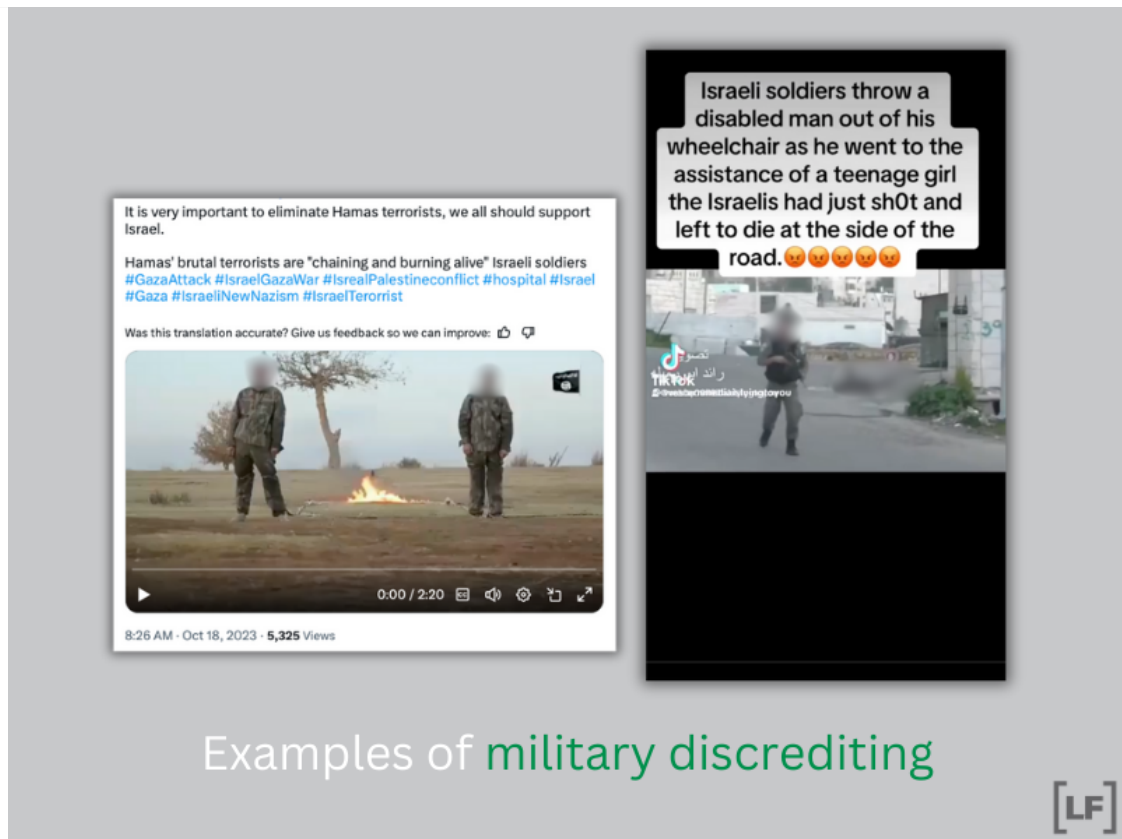We identified 165 narratives that we termed discrediting within the conflict — claims such as this one about Netanyahu, falsely stating that half a million Israelis were protesting over the invasion. In reality, the protest took place more than half a year before the invasion and concerned judicial reform plans. Our analysis identified discrediting on three levels: political, military, and civil.

Of the analyzed narratives, 68 were discrediting on the political level. These were narratives like the one regarding the protests against Netanyahu, narratives that sought to delegitimize politicians or political decisions on either side of the conflict.

Another example showed an imprisoned Netanyahu in a prison jumpsuit admitting to being a war criminal and taking responsibility for the "killing of thousands of innocent people." The video was digitally generated, and the words weren't really Netanyahu's. This category also included anti-Palestine and anti-Israel narratives, narratives that sought to delegitimize either state as such. In one example, a flag with the star of David was shared with false claims that this is what the flag of Palestine looked like in 1939.

Examples of **political discrediting**
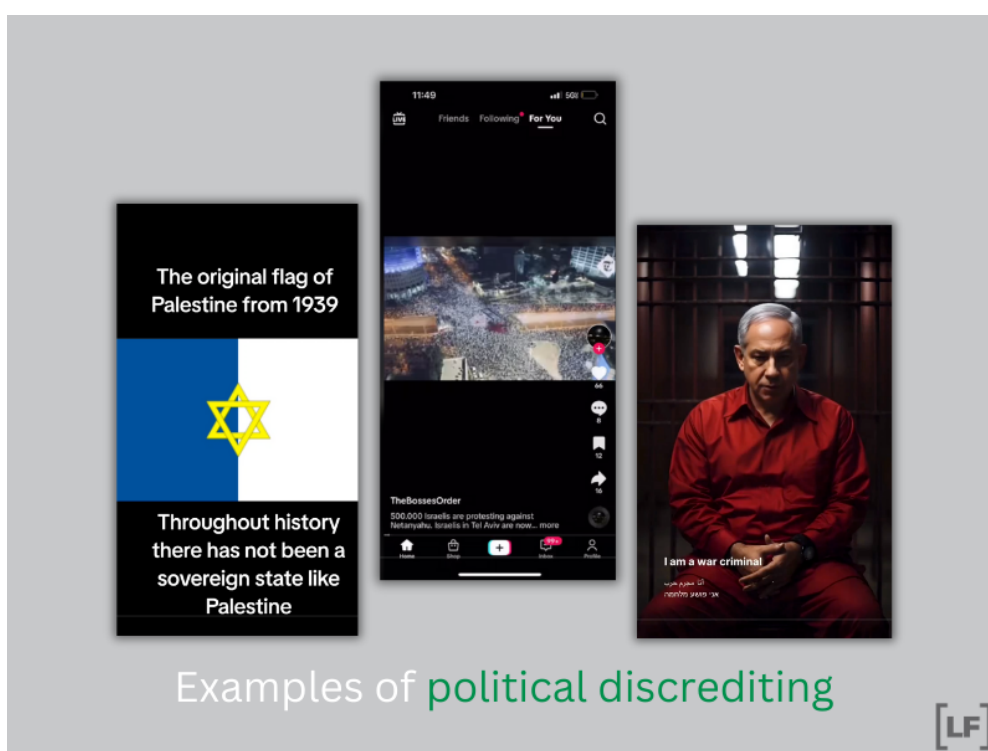
83 of the identified narratives were discrediting either side's military. One video, shared with the claim that it showed Israeli soldiers throwing a disabled man out of his wheelchair as he went to help a girl that the soldiers had just shot, is from February 2016, and doesn't directly relate to the current war. Another old and unrelated video of two Turkish soldiers being burned alive under ISIS captivity was shared as Hamas torturing Israeli war prisoners.

It is very important to eliminate Hamas terrorists, we all should support Israel.

Hamas' brutal terrorists are "chaining and burning alive" Israeli soldiers #GazaAttack #IsraelGazaWar #IsrealPalestineconflict #hospital #Israel #Gaza #IsraeliNewNazism #IsraelTerorrist

Was this translation accurate? Give us feedback so we can improve: 👍 👎

0:00 / 2:20

8:26 AM · Oct 18, 2023 · **5,325** Views

Israeli soldiers throw a disabled man out of his wheelchair as he went to the assistance of a teenage girl the Israelis had just sh0t and left to die at the side of the road.😡😡😡😡😡

Examples of **military discrediting**

[LF]

Discrediting on the civil level were similar to the other two, but sought to dehumanize either Palestinians or Israelis, for example by showing Israeli civilians committing heinous acts towards Palestinians or vice versa. We identified 17 narratives discrediting on the civil level.

3.5 Civil unrest

Our analysis identified 20 narratives relating to civil unrest. These are narratives of instability and internal turmoil in either Israel or Palestine, narratives of division that enhance or seek to cause political, cultural, and civil unrest. Most of these narratives regarded Israeli affairs.

One example showed long queues at Israel's Ben Gurion Airport with claims that it showed ultra-Orthodox Jews leaving the country to avoid conscription. Another showed violent clashes between orthodox Jews and the police claiming to be the aftermath of a protest against Palestinians killed in Gaza. A third showed a car running into a crowd of Israeli protesters. All three had been misattributed or were shared in a misleading way.

Examples of **civil unrest** theme

3.6 Staging

This theme involves narratives that question the authenticity of the events or the human toll of the conflict. We identified 48 narratives in total, but the theme is divided into three categories: Israelis or Palestinians faking injury (Pallywood) and the media faking or exaggerating the conflict.

"Right now in Gaza. They are faking their death," reads the text overlay of a video of nine people carrying a stretcher with a body covered under a white sheet. A siren sounds and the people put the stretcher down to run away. The video is an example of the Pallywood narratives, a denial and mocking of civilian harm where Palestinians were claimed to fake injuries, devastation and death through use of crisis actors, dolls and the like. This type of narrative was the most prominent in the staging category.

The category also included narratives of Israelis faking grief for hostages and media faking or exaggerating events relating to the war. One video, showing a reporter, live on air, ducking for cover behind a white truck, was described as "propaganda media" and shared alongside hashtags of #fakenews and #fakesituation, even though longer versions of the clip

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make it clear that an alarm sounded and other people can be seen taking cover in the background.


Examples of **staging** theme
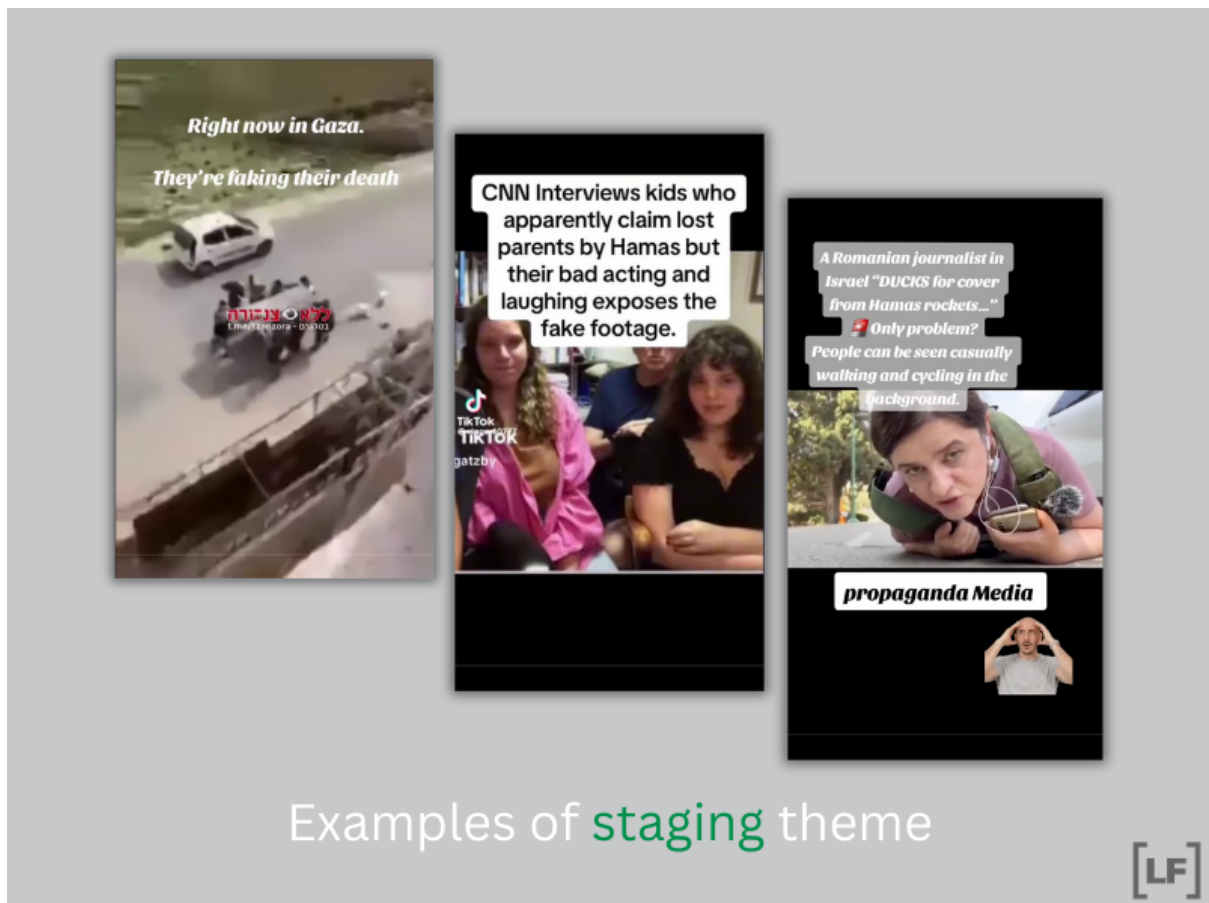
A video was circulated with an excerpt of a CNN interview of three young people whose parents were killed during the Hamas incursion on October 7. At one point in the video, three are seen laughing which was utilised to enhance a narrative of them being crisis actors and of the report being a fake. In reality, the three siblings Rotem, Shakked and Shir did indeed lose their parents during the October 7 attack.

3.7 U.S.-Israel relations

We identified 29 narratives having to do with the relationship between the United States and Israel. In many instances, these narratives emphasized a strong tie between the two states, both politically, diplomatically, and militarily.

The U.S.-Israel relationship was identified as a particular point of interest as it illustrated a possible spill-over effect of how conflict-related misinformation may have real-life impact even beyond the conflict region. For example, the U.S.' continued support for Israel increasingly built a wedge between the country's leadership and civil society, showcased, for instance, in the large-scale student protests across U.S. universities in spring 2024 and support for President Biden decreasing ahead of the November 2024 presidential election.

During the monitoring period, we also observed a re-emergence of old misinformation, harmful narratives concerning the power of American Jews in the U.S., and conspiracy theories falsely claiming Israel was behind the 9/11 attack.

Examples of U.S.-Israel relations theme
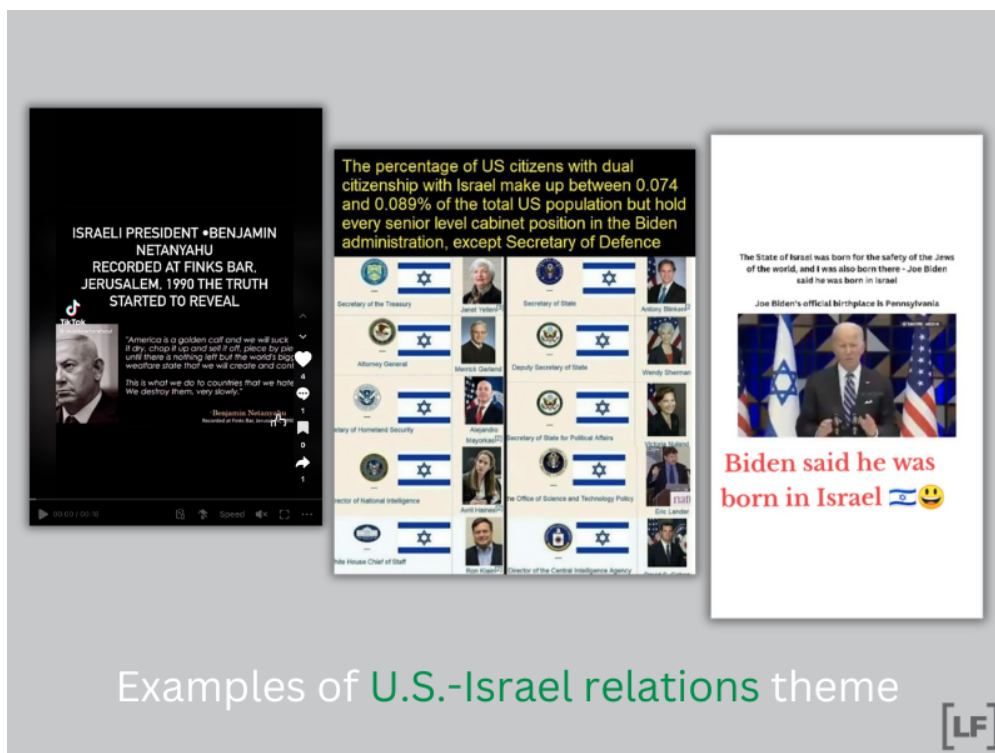
In one example, social media users circulated video of a speech that U.S. president Joe Biden gave in Tel Aviv on October 18 claiming that Biden said he was born in Israel. In reality, Biden was talking about the origin of the state of Israel as a safe place for Jewish people, saying, "That's why it was born." In a similar vein, posts circulated with the claim that all senior-level cabinet positions in the Biden administration were held by people of American-Israeli dual nationality.

In other cases, the U.S.-Israel relations narratives accentuated fissures and division in the relationship. In one example it was claimed without evidence that Netanyahu had once called the U.S. a "golden calf" to be "sucked dry."

In March 2024, U.S. President Joe Biden announced his plan to build the humanitarian pier off the coast of Gaza. Since its inception, the pier has sparked multiple conspiracies on TikTok about the use and intent of the construction, including the pier being a military base, gas drilling facility, or the U.S. humanitarian pier in Gaza was planned to be built from Palestinian casualties and rubble of bombed houses to destroy evidence and bodies.

4. Platform accountability in countering online misinformation

Platform algorithms and policies impact online users' perception of crisis events. TikTok and Facebook issued early statements announcing increased measures, including the creation of expert centers, hiring staff fluent in Arabic and Hebrew, partnering with fact-checkers, and enforcing community guidelines against violence, hate speech, and misinformation.

Despite these efforts, misinformation was easily accessible on social media platforms as they continue to struggle with managing the volume of harmful content while simultaneously balancing freedom of expression and business interests.

"X's algorithm and pay-for-play model have consistently encouraged the spread of misleading or false information. X has made some adjustments, for example by stopping monetization for blue tick accounts of content that received community notes, but the platform remains problematic," Accorsi told Logically Facts.

Platform algorithms are imperfect, lacking the nuance and context for accurate judgment. They often rely on automated systems to flag harmful words or phrases, yet we found that slight alterations in the spelling of the keywords can easily circumvent these mechanisms. Veracity only declines when algorithms deal with photos, videos, live streams, and non-English content.

"Meta has been accused of shadow-banning pro-Palestinian content on Instagram and Facebook, while not adequately moderating inciteful language and misinformation in Hebrew. TikTok has been accused of harboring pro-Palestinian biases," Accorsi continued.

Though TikTok has stated that the company has removed millions of videos and suspended thousands of livestreams in Israel and Palestine during the conflict, the platform's policy of a swift removal of existing content did not preemptively stop new content to emerge on the platform – as seen from the analysis, misinformation was still easily detectable on the platform throughout the first year of the conflict.

When asked for comment, TikTok shared a recently updated press release on "protecting the TikTok community during the Israel-Hamas war." According to the press release, over the past year, TikTok has removed more than 4.7 million videos in the conflict region and more than 100

million pieces of content globally for violating the platform's community guidelines. Removed videos include content promoting Hamas, hate speech, and misinformation.

TikTok also said they have expanded their hate speech and hateful behavior policies and that the platform does not allow inaccurate, misleading, or false content that may cause significant harm to individuals or society, regardless of intent.

Logically Facts also reached out to Meta and X but has not received a response.

Logically Facts is partners with the Third Party Fact-Checking Program of Meta and Bytedance (TikTok).

5. Concluding remarks

The first year of the Israel-Hamas conflict in the online environment may be portrayed as a visual war. Of the six overarching techniques we identified, the use of videos and images was by far the prominent means to disseminate misinformation. It was not only the sheer scope and speed of information but also the scale of visuals of destruction and devastation that affected judgment to distinguish truth from falsehood.

Most individual narratives involved operational events, but thematically they expanded to involve external actors and societies and harm and discredit the civilian populations in the midst of war.

"Since October 7, nearly every fact related to the war in Gaza has become contested, leading to a surge in misinformation," Accorsi remarked to Logically Facts.

It is in times of conflict and crisis that people are most vulnerable to misinformation. Misinformation can be almost immediate, but solid information takes time and research to bring to light and verify. Being aware of the techniques used to mislead and the prevalent misinformation themes can help people make better decisions in navigating fact and fiction in the frantic information environments online.

About Logically Facts

Logically Facts is an Ireland registered company and an independent subsidiary of the UK based TheLogically.

Our mission is to reduce the individual, institutional, and societal damage caused by misleading and deceptive online discourse through our fact-checking efforts.

Logically Facts helps mitigate the risks posed by mis/disinformation to public health, public safety, election integrity, and national security by enabling platforms to operate in markets safely, responsibly and compliantly.

Logically Facts is part of Meta's Third Party Fact-Checking Program as well as TikTok's, and we are verified signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network since 2020.

Visit **logicallyfacts.com** to see more information.