

# Hamas Counter-Propaganda Strategy in the Israel-Palestine Conflict Between 2014 and 2023

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## ABSTRACT

There is no sign yet that the Israeli-Palestinian war will end completely. In recent years, the two sides—Israel and Hamas—have been aggressively attacking each other. One of their war strategies is to use propaganda or manipulate public opinion to gain support from various parties. This research aims to find out what Israeli propaganda looks like and how Hamas's counter-propaganda strategy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has changed from 2014 to 2023. In addition, this study will look at the impact of the counter-propaganda strategy. The research used a qualitative approach, with data collected through library research. The results showed that there were six Hamas counter-propaganda strategies throughout the 2014-2023 conflict, namely 1) resistance through alternative media; 2) dissemination of video documentation on the battlefield; 3) dissemination of official statements; 4) emphasis on the impact of war; 5) counterpropaganda through prisoners of war; and 6) claiming war victory. Hamas' six counter-propaganda strategies have been very effective. Hamas was able to gain international support, such as with the emergence of protests against Israel and the condemnation caused by various countries against Israel. This strategy reflects Hamas' total victory in international politics. Hamas also managed to gain the support of local communities and regional actors, such as Iran, Qatar, Turkey, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, either for political support or even financial support and weapons. Finally, the impact of this effectiveness can also be seen in the social and psychological conditions of Israeli society due to this counter-propaganda.

## KEYWORDS

Hamas,  
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## Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become one of the drivers of instability in the Middle East region. In the 2023 Global Peace Index report by the Institute for Economics and Peace, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region became the world's most conflict-prone region. The report states that Israel is one of the countries most frequently involved in conflicts in the region (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023). The conflict between Israel and

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Palestine has triggered ongoing conflicts and made the region never feel the stability and peaceful situation of the region.

Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories is carried out through various military operations. Not only through hard power but also through soft power, such as propaganda. Propaganda is an attempt to influence public opinion throughout society (Bernays, 2021). In the context of warfare, propaganda has become a highly effective psychological weapon (psycho-warfare) to influence the enemy's mindset. Harold D. Lasswell, an American thinker who wrote the book *Propaganda Technique in World War I*, explained that propaganda consists of several elements: "Who says what, to whom, through what channel, and what with effect?" (Sapienza et al., 2017). Lasswell's model is essential for analysing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Hamas, a movement formed in 1987, has been part of the Palestinian resistance (Hussein, 2021). This movement has also been involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since its establishment. In 2014-2023, three major conflicts occurred between Hamas and Israel: 2014, 2021, and 2023. Israeli propaganda in those years became very detrimental to the Hamas movement. For example, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's accusations in 2014, 2021, and 2023 that "Hamas is just like ISIS" and propaganda that Hamas uses civilians in Gaza as human shields (AP News, 2023; Israel Foreign Ministry, 2021; Prime Minister of Israel, 2014), severely undermined Hamas's image internationally. It is on this basis that Hamas carries out counter-propaganda.

Several studies discuss propaganda in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For example, research conducted by Shemer and Flamer (2023), Margolin (2022), Weimann and Saks (2024), and Shemer (2024). However, many of these studies focus only on Hamas propaganda, using a one-way communication model. Meanwhile, research related to two-way counter-propaganda between Israel and Hamas is still very minimal. The lack of research related to this matter makes this research necessary.

The existence of specific time limits in several previous studies, such as the 2007 to 2014 conflict and the latest post-2014 conflict, remains limited, underscoring the importance of this research. This research is expected to fill the void.

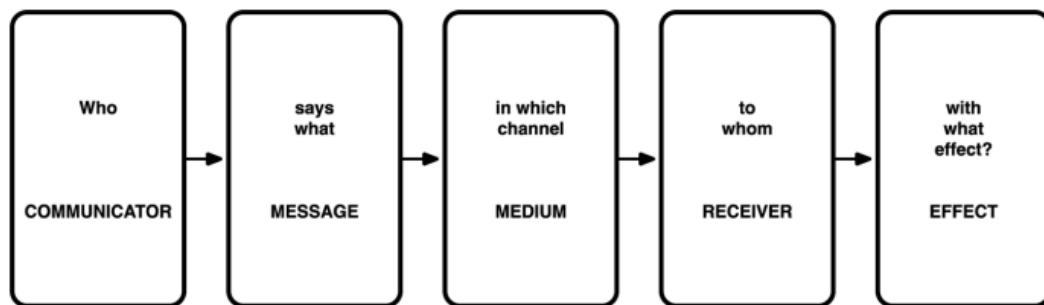
There are three important questions to be addressed in this research, namely: 1) How is Israel's propaganda strategy during the Palestinian conflict? 2) How is Hamas' counter-propaganda strategy? 3) What is the impact of Hamas' counter-propaganda strategy?

Therefore, this article is divided into 4 sections: a background section that describes the main problem or research gap; a conceptual framework section that outlines this research's use of Harold D. Lasswell's propaganda communication theory; and a methodology section, namely a literature review. The main point lies in the discussion. The research question and the discussion in this article consist of 3 parts: Israel's propaganda strategy, Hamas' counter-propaganda strategy, and the impact of implementing the counter-propaganda strategy.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Two concepts used in this research are the Propaganda theory proposed by Harold D. Lasswell and the concept of asymmetrical warfare. According to Lasswell (1927), propaganda is an effort to control collective public attitudes by manipulating essential symbols. For him, propaganda is solely about controlling public opinion. Propaganda must act as a policy

maker and shape public opinion without appearing to do so (Lasswell, 1927). Lasswell introduced several essential elements of propaganda, better known as "Who, says what, to whom, through what channel, and what with effect?" 1). Who refers to the actor carrying the propaganda message; 2) says what relates to the content of the propaganda message itself. What the propagandist wants to convey and the message's purpose; 3) Through what channel or what media is used to convey propaganda messages; 4) To Whom, namely the target audience or recipients of propaganda messages; and 5). With what effect, namely the expected reaction from the propaganda (Sapienza et al., 2017).



**Figure 1.** Lasswell's propaganda theory (Sapienza et al., 2017)

Laswell's model has also been applied in a series of studies on war, from World War I to the Cold War, to analyse how propaganda was carried out.

Asymmetric warfare is a form of conflict in which opposing forces possess different capabilities and strategies, resulting in an unequal balance of power (Plant, 2008). It involves unconventional tactics used by a weaker or less technologically advanced group to exploit the weaknesses of a stronger opponent. In asymmetric warfare, one side usually has a distinct advantage over the other, leading the weaker side to use unconventional tactics and strategies to defeat the stronger enemy (Buhlmann, 2009). The involvement of Hamas and Israel as the main actors in this conflict makes the concept of asymmetric warfare more appropriate if used in this study.

## Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with descriptive data analysis. The data used in this research are secondary. This type of data is obtained from indirect sources, for example, from other people or documents (Sugiyono, 2018). This type of data allows researchers to collect data from a second party through previous research, books, or published documents. The data collected is based on the years of the conflict, namely, 2014, 2021, and 2023. For the 2023 conflict, the data obtained was from October 2023 to June 2024.

Data collection in this research was obtained using library research techniques. The data obtained from secondary sources through data collection techniques is then analysed in several stages. In this research, the data analysis steps follow the approach proposed by Lasswell's theory. Data analysis techniques include data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing.

The data obtained will be classified first, then analysed according to the elements of Lasswell's theory. Analysis of Lasswell's theory begins by identifying the actors behind Israel's and Hamas's propaganda activities. Communicators can be individuals, organisations, media, or institutions responsible for delivering messages. Next, the analysis examines the content of the propaganda message. Here, the message can be studied in terms of its themes, main ideas, or intentions.

After that, the third element is the communication channel used. The next stage in the analysis is to understand who the audience is that is receiving the message. Here, the focus is on audience characteristics. Finally, Lasswell's theory examines the effects of propaganda. This effect refers to the impact of the message on the audience, whether in terms of changes in understanding, attitude, or behaviour.

## **Results and Discussion: Israeli Propaganda in 2014-2023**

### ***Israeli Propaganda in 2014***

Israel's propaganda in 2014-2023 cannot be separated from the influence of social media. The propaganda instruments were previously dominated by print media, such as newspapers and magazines, as well as other media, namely television and radio, but the conflict in 2014 introduced new instruments, namely social media. The Israel Defense Force (IDF) in 2014 announced its invasion via Twitter while also providing content on other platforms such as YouTube, Flickr, Pinterest, and Facebook. This change in the pattern of fighting has led to a new term, "digital militarism" (Kuntsman & Stein, 2015).

On 12 July 2014, a Facebook page called StandWithUs posted a video showing footage from an Israeli drone (StandWithUs, 2014). In the video clip, you can hear a pilot's voice who refuses to attack the target because he sees children in the vicinity. The narration says, "There are people approaching our target. There seem to be people, possibly children, in the target area. We will not attack this target now. Let us move." The caption on the upload then says, "Notice how the IDF pilot cancelled the attack on Gaza because of the risk to civilians, something Hamas would never do" (StandWithUs, 2014). The video clip seems to illustrate how Israel still pays attention to every target it attacks, especially children, in contrast to Hamas, which is considered to like attacking Israeli civilians.

On 18 July 2014, a Twitter tweet from the Israeli Prime Minister's Office also openly accused Hamas of using a school established by the United Nations refugee aid agency for Palestine (UNRWA) as a Hamas headquarters and weapons depot (Prime Minister of Israel, 2014). Hamas seems to deliberately use public facilities to hide its rockets to attack public facilities in Israel. Israel very often conveys this kind of accusation to blame Hamas for every confrontation and its various impacts. It is also the justification for Israel to attack public facilities in Palestine.

Israeli propaganda in 2014 was widely spread through social media posts of funny memes, photos, and hashtags (Elran & Milo, 2016; Shuttleworth, 2014). Every post in favour of Israel was given the hashtag #IsraelUnderFire to show support for Israel. This propaganda effort is even very forced. Some posts have been identified as using manipulated fake photos (Shuttleworth, 2014).

### ***Israeli Propaganda 2021***

In the 2021 conflict, Israeli propaganda is still dominated by social media as its main channel for delivering messages. The emergence of a new platform, namely TikTok, encourages Israel to influence public opinion more broadly. According to a BBC report on 15 May 2021, the IDF account has 70,000 followers on TikTok. Through the platform, the IDF uploads videos of its troops in action on the battlefield (BBC, 2021). What Israel is doing on TikTok is propaganda that combines military apparatus and weapons with entertainment apparatus and weapons (Al Jazeera, 2021). The Israeli military wants to create an attractive social media narrative with popular language and relevant content. In other words, they want to humanise their image to win over the international public's hearts and minds.

Israeli propaganda during the 2021 conflict is attractively packaged in short TikTok videos. The use of hashtags is also increasingly popular on this platform. If users search for "Israel" on TikTok, then dozens of hashtags, such as "loveisrael", will appear. During the 2021 conflict, posts with the hashtag "Israel" have collectively been viewed more than seven billion times, while videos with the title "love Israel" have been viewed more than 30 million times (Al Jazeera, 2021). The Israeli military in the 2021 Gaza conflict uploaded at least two videos on TikTok every day. These posts discuss military operations and feature videos of rockets and other military activities (Al Jazeera, 2021).

The proliferation of fake news also characterises Israel's propaganda. Sheera Frenkel, a cyberjournalist for The New York Times, reported on 18 May 2021 that the Israeli government deliberately disseminated misinformation when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict began in 2021. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's spokesman, Ofir Gendelman, posted a 28-second video on Twitter. In the video, several rockets were launched into Israel, which were later claimed to have come from settlements in Gaza, Palestine. However, Frenkel's (2021) fact-checking found that the video did not originate from Gaza settlements and was not recorded that year. Frenkel revealed that the video was taken in Syria or Libya in 2018. The video post shows how Israel seeks to deliberately discredit Hamas, which is often perceived as deliberately launching rockets from public areas.

### ***Israeli Propaganda in 2023***

The main actor of Israeli propaganda in the 2023 conflict is the IDF spokesman, Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari. He often delivers regular briefings to the international media and was appointed in January 2023 to replace the previous spokesman, Brig. Gen. Ran Kochav. Apart from Hagari, Israel's propaganda activities are also inseparable from the central role of the government through the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Israel lobby organisation AIPAC, pro-Israel Western media, and even from non-governmental organisations.

A few days after the conflict began, the Israeli government cut off the electricity supply to Gaza and attacked telecommunication networks (Carroll & Farah, 2023; Dwoskin, 2023). With this step, Israel can quickly spread various information without any counter-narrative from the Gaza region.

One of the propaganda themes this year was the rise of misinformation. There are more than 19,000 cases of hate speech and incitement to violence against Palestinians in Hebrew since the conflict began (Dwoskin, 2023). One such story was the allegation that Hamas beheaded 40 babies in Kfar Azza, in a kibbutz on Israel's southern border with Gaza, in the 7 October attack. This fake news was later refuted by the French newspaper *Le Monde* six months later. The newspaper called the allegation a gross and unsubstantiated accusation deliberately aimed at discrediting Hamas (*Le Monde*, 2024). According to *Le Monde*, the narrative originated with ZAKA, an ultra-Orthodox NGO responsible for recovering bodies. They allegedly misidentified the age of the bodies of victims of Hamas attacks due to their lack of medical training.

The accusation is a narrative that has been repeated since the conflict broke out in October 2023. The false story is a key component of the propaganda war waged by the media and political class of Israel and other countries. They seek to portray Hamas as the equivalent of ISIS (*The Electronic Intifada*, 2023).

In the 2024 conflict, Israel also used AI for the first time to produce its propaganda content. According to a *Haaretz* report (2024), Israel purchased a technological system capable of conducting mass online influence campaigns. The system can automatically create content tailored to specific audiences. The technology was purchased as part of a broader effort by Israeli entities, both civilian and military, to address the so-called "failure of Israeli public diplomacy" following the 7 October Hamas massacre and subsequent war (*Weimann & Saks*, 2024).

## **Actors and Strategies of Hamas Counter-propaganda Against the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in 2014-2023**

### ***The Main Actors Behind Hamas's Counter-propaganda***

Hamas' propaganda activities are run through a specialised bureau, the media and publications section (*Al-A'alam*). This section is responsible for producing and distributing leaflets, staffing the press office, and handling propaganda issues (*Levitt*, 2006). From the bureau, there is a special section that provides briefings to the press, namely the spokesperson. Through this spokesperson, all Israeli narratives are countered based on Hamas's point of view.

During the 2014 Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the spokespersons for Hamas political parties were Sami Abu Zuhri and Fawzi Barhoum. Both are members of the Hamas political party. They also became spokespersons and often appeared in the media to provide official statements.

From Hamas' military wing, the *Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades*, Abu Obaidah is known as a spokesman. He was first recognised in 2002 as one of al-Qassam's field officers. He speaks to almost all media outlets and attends press conferences, but never shows his face. His trademark is wearing full military attire, including a red head covering called a "Kafiyah." He was officially appointed as Al-Qassam spokesperson in 2005 after the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza (*Al-Awsat*, 2023).

When the conflict erupted in 2014, Abu Obaidah often appeared on Al-Aqsa TV to give regular testimonies. During the 2021 and 2023 conflicts, Abu Obaidah was still often seen on screen. His assertive stature made him even a symbol of resistance for the Palestinian people (Al-Awsat, 2023). His assertive and clear Arabic delivery style made him even more recognisable. His videos are spread everywhere and broadcast by various television stations and YouTube channels. However, with the rise of social media today, civilians can now become propaganda actors in the conflict. That is why Israel is destroying telecommunications networks as part of its 2023 war plan.

### ***Hamas Counter-propaganda Strategy***

***Resistance through alternative media.*** In the period 2014-2023, Hamas actively used social media. However, Hamas was not always able to survive. The terrorist label attached to Hamas meant that some of the group's official accounts had to be blocked. The lack of information space during the conflict allows Hamas to have its information delivery media. Therefore, in April 2014, Hamas established a satellite television called Al Ra'i. The head of the Gaza government media office, Ihab al-Ghusein, announced the plan on 16 February. For Palestinians, the satellite television channel is a means of delivering media messages that best suit Palestinian goals and the national agenda (Al-Monitor, 2014). The media is published in electronic and print form under the same name.

In addition to Al Ra'i television station, Hamas continues to use Al-Aqsa television station, which has been on air since 2006 after Hamas won the general elections. This station is one of the leading media outlets Palestinians watch during every conflict, especially during the 2014-2023 conflict (PCPSR, 2014, 2021, 2024). This media is then continuously used to disseminate Hamas information.

In addition to Al-Aqsa TV and Al-Rai, another station, Al-Quds TV, also regularly aired shows during the 2014 conflict. The narrative aired is pro-Hamas because this television is also affiliated with the group. Al-Quds TV was founded in 2008 and initially had 350 members. The station is based in Lebanon and Gaza. In July 2018, the Israeli government labelled Al-Quds TV as a terrorist organisation and called it part of Hamas propaganda (The Times of Israel, 2019). Unfortunately, the station was officially closed in 2019 due to financial reasons. Al-Quds TV experienced a financial crisis for three consecutive years and was finally closed (Anadolu Agency, 2019).

Apart from relying on this media, Hamas also intensively spreads its counter-propaganda messages through Telegram. Telegram is a messaging application created by Pavel and Nikolai Durov from Russia in 2013. One interesting thing about this application is its anti-censorship policy (Matthias, 2024). The military wing of Hamas used Telegram in the 2021 conflict. The channel was suspended several times for violating the developer's rules but was reinstated (The Times of Israel, 2021).

A significant spike was evident in the 2023 conflict. When the conflict broke out, the Telegram channel of Hamas' military wing, the al-Qassam Brigades, had around 200,000 followers and continued to grow by a factor of three. Before the 7 October 2023 attack, posts on the channel were only viewed about 25,000 times on average. After the attack, that

number increased 10-fold to 300,000 (CNN, 2023). This increase shows that Telegram has become one of the main instruments Hamas uses to launch its counter-propaganda operations.

***Dissemination of video documentation on the battlefield.*** In war, combatants try to make their existence subjectively evident. One way to do this is to display documentation from the war using First Person View (FPV) cameras. Hamas utilised this in the 2014-2023 conflict. Since the 2014 conflict, Hamas has used this technique. In a video uploaded on Al Aqsa TV broadcast and re-uploaded by Al Arabiya on 30 July 2014, Hamas forces displayed footage of its FPV camera. The body-mounted camera showed several troops emerging from under a tunnel on the border between Israel and Gaza. They carried long-barreled weapons identified as Kalashnikovs and several rocket launchers and then attacked an Israeli army post next to the barrier wall separating Gaza and Israel. After the attack, they returned to the tunnel (Al Arabiya, 2014). This video appears to be directed against the Israeli military and civilians. Such deliberately filmed videos are used to show how powerful Hamas can suddenly appear and defeat Israel. The effect of such a stunt is to cause panic and heighten vigilance among Israeli civilians and the military.

It also directly demonstrates Hamas' guerrilla tactics against Israel. Sexton (2024) argues that the conflict is part of an asymmetric war. The broadcast shows who is much stronger and weaker, although the reality is inversely proportional, where Israel is superior to Hamas. Through Lasswell's approach, the success of Hamas shown in the FPV video makes the propaganda targets, namely Israeli citizens and military who watch it, assume that Hamas is much stronger and heroic because it managed to defeat its enemy.

In 2023, Hamas also uploaded a 45-second video showing how Hamas cares for children. The video was uploaded six days after the attack on Israeli territory and appears to be a refutation of the pro-Israel narrative that Hamas is sadistic "like ISIS" (Kirkpatrick & Rasgon, 2023). Instead of slaughtering children as propagated by Western media, Hamas showed more concern for them.

In this case, visual media play an important role in shaping public perceptions of a person's or organisation's self-image. Hamas' video display in 2023 was much better than in previous conflicts. For example, video uploads of attacks on Israeli tanks are often shown as interesting and dramatic as possible. Hamas often shows how its troops blow up Israeli tanks from a distance using rocket launchers with a neater editing pattern. This display makes information easier for the audience to understand.

***Dissemination of official statements.*** The dissemination of official statements is the most effective counter-propaganda measure. This is because propaganda's success depends on the source's credibility (Bernays, 2021). The source of official statements is often an organisation's spokesperson. In this case, Hamas also has its spokesperson.

For this reason, Hamas has repeatedly dismissed such unfounded claims and accusations. For example, on 28 July 2014, in a Haaretz newspaper interview, Hamas leader Khaled Meshal said, "We are not fighting the Jews because they are Jews. We are not fighting any other race. We are fighting the occupier" (Haaretz, 2014). Meshal's statement confirms

how Hamas has behaved all along. The origin of the conflict, as alleged by Israel against Hamas, cannot be justified because Israel is also the main trigger of the prolonged conflict. It is Hamas that has responded to Israel's aggressive actions in Palestine so far.

Another Hamas statement during the 2014 conflict was posted on its Twitter account. On 8 July 2014, Hamas wrote, "The Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades (Hamas' military wing) will do whatever it takes to protect Palestinians" (MEMRI TV, 2014). This tweet states that Hamas's struggle is solely based on the collective interests of Palestinians who need security in their homeland from various forms of Israeli occupation.

In the 2021 conflict, Hamas, through spokesman Abu Obaidah, also reiterated the movement's position in the conflict against Israeli occupation. Abu Obaidah emphasised that Hamas would not limit itself in response to Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip (Anadolu Agency, 2021). The statement was aimed directly at Israel to counter the narrative uttered by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu earlier on Monday, 10 August 2021, in which he blamed Hamas for the outbreak of the conflict between the two parties. Netanyahu said that he would respond to Hamas' actions where "Hamas and Islamic Jihad will pay a very high price for their aggressive actions" (Reuters, 2021).

In the 2023 conflict, mutual propaganda through official statements has become increasingly widespread. Through several of its Telegram accounts, including @HamasBrigadeAlqassam, Hamas posts official statements from Abu Obaidah almost daily. The statement was then reposted across several media outlets.

In one of Abu Obaidah's speeches marking 200 days of the Israel-Hamas war on 23 April 2024, he called on various parties in the Middle East region to join forces against Israel. Abu Obaidah used the region's unstable conditions to garner support from various parties at the time (Reuters, 2024). At the same time, through his statement, he also demanded a ceasefire in Gaza. Abu Obaida's call was a reflection of the views of Hamas' military wing in Gaza. The speech also influenced public opinion, especially in the Middle East region.

***Emphasising the impact of the war.*** Israel often portrays Hamas as the instigator of the conflict. In contrast, Hamas tries to show that Israel is to blame for the conflict. Hamas has done this by exposing all the effects of Israel's military operations in Gaza. Hamas allows various television stations, one of which is Al Jazeera, to cover directly from inside Gaza by focusing on the suffering of residents due to the conflict. Al Jazeera is the most-watched television station in these conflicts (PCPSR, 2014, 2021, 2024). It is followed by Al Aqsa TV and several other Arab media outlets, such as Palestine Today, Al-Arabiya, and the Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese Al Mayadeen (PCPSR, 2024).

Journalists have contributed significantly to revealing the facts that occurred on the ground. The contribution of journalists in showing the impact of war indirectly brings a message to the international community that Israel is a cruel and murderous nation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran, 2023). The media presented dramatic, highly emotional images and videos. The dead, the injured children, the funeral processions of the dead, and the massive infrastructural damage are the ingredients of every conflict.

On 23 July 2024, an Al Jazeera broadcast also revealed how Israel has been lying about self-defence, which is the main point of its defence in every conflict, especially in the 2023

conflict. The broadcast titled "How Israel uses 'hasbara' to shift narratives in its favour" revealed that Israel deliberately falsified information for propaganda purposes (Al Jazeera, 2024a). This broadcast is also a counter-propaganda narrative that is very profitable for Hamas.

The revelation through the media that Israel was committing various atrocities in Gaza often led Israel to accuse news stations such as Al Jazeera of being "mouthpieces" for Hamas (The Jerusalem Post, 2014). This culminated in May 2024 when Israel decided to stop Al Jazeera's services and confiscate its equipment (AP News, 2024b). Not only that, but Israel also directly arrested journalists who reported the conflict from inside Gaza (Zeveloff, 2024). Israel's arbitrary actions are intended to secure control of public opinion in the Gaza region. Israel sees that journalists in Gaza are trying to incite and could threaten Israel's national security.

**Counter-propaganda through prisoners of war.** A significant counter-propaganda prisoner-of-war action occurred in 2023 when Israel's repeated accusations against Hamas emerged (The Electronic Intifada, 2023). This was seen in the prisoner exchange that took place in October 2023. When the prisoner exchange took place, Hamas seemed to have carefully planned the ceremonial release of the hostages. In several videos uploaded by Hamas, the released hostages did not appear to be under any pressure at all. The 23 October 2023 hostage release showed two Israeli hostages, Yocheved Lifshitz (85) and Nurit Cooper (79), holding the hands of Hamas members. In a video broadcast on Hamas's Telegram channel, the two women said "greetings" before parting (Kompas, 2023). In a press conference, the hostages revealed how Hamas treated them.

*"When we arrived, they said they believed in the Qur'an and would not harm us. They treated us in the same conditions as they did in the tunnel. They cared for our needs. They were very polite and ensured our hygiene. What we ate was the same as what they ate." (Yocheved Lifshitz in TRT World, 2023).*

Another video in December 2023 shows a similar scene when Hamas released a hostage identified as Maya. She waved to the Hamas members who escorted her to the Red Cross, saying, "Goodbye, shukran (thank you)" (Times Now, 2023). Other hostage-release videos do the same thing as Maya. As if they were old friends, the hostages and Hamas members bid each other farewell while smiling and waving at their release.

These hostage release videos by Hamas have led to interpretations among viewers. However, the message of the counter-propaganda is clear. Hamas is trying to emphasise its humanitarian values to regain the international community's support. These hostage release videos can directly change the public perception of what Israel has narrated so far, that Hamas is a cruel and sadistic group, which adheres to the Qur'an by not harming women, children, and the elderly.

**Claiming war victory.** When the 2014 ceasefire between Israel and Hamas was established, Hamas immediately claimed victory in the war. Standing on the ruins of a building in Gaza,

Abu Obaidah then made a speech stating, "Gaza won the victory because it did what the main force (Israel) failed to do. Gaza forced the enemy to retreat. We must know that there is no voice louder than the voice of resistance" (DW, 2014). But at the same time, Israel also claimed victory in the war. The same thing happened in the 2021 conflict. When the ceasefire was agreed on Friday, May 21, 2021, both sides immediately claimed victory.

If calculated roughly, the total death toll in the 2014 conflict was 2,251 people on the Palestinian side and 71 people on the Israeli side (UNRWA, n.d.). Meanwhile, in the 2021 conflict, the death toll on the Palestinian side amounted to 256, and 13 people on the Israeli side (OCHA, 2021). In terms of infrastructure losses, the damage on the Palestinian side was much more significant than on the Israeli side. Israel has bombed Gaza in almost every conflict (Al Jazeera, 2022; Shelterproject, 2016).

From this data, there is a significant difference between the damage on the Palestinian and Israeli sides. Then how can Hamas claim victory over the war when conditions on the ground are like this? In terms of material losses and casualties, Hamas lost the war. Therefore, the victory claim is essentially a unilateral claim by Hamas, a non-state actor, to avoid defeat in the asymmetrical war. Hamas has been militarily defeated since the beginning, but to generate support from within and outside, the psychological tactic was carried out.

In his essay "Reassessing Victory in Warfare," Robert Mandel argues that no specific parameters can determine victory on the battlefield (Mandel, 2007). The only thing that can explain Hamas' claim of victory in the war is subjective victory. According to Mandel, victory is often subjective because it cannot only be judged by objective achievements such as territorial control or the destruction of opposing forces. Instead, victory is a subjective element that parties involved in a conflict can manipulate to gain support from the other side (Mandel, 2007).

Thus, Hamas' victory claims in the 2014 and 2021 conflicts emphasise aspects of symbolism and politics. This condition occurs when a group maintains a state of destruction, claiming victory even when militarily unfavourable (Mandel, 2007). Hamas' claim of victory is nothing but a form of counter-propaganda for the actual defeat of Israel. In asymmetric warfare, this tactic is used by non-state actors to match the power of state actors. This effort is still carried out through propaganda, even though, in reality, it is not achieved. In Lasswell's analysis, it is clear that Hamas's victory propaganda serves to influence domestic and international public perception, strengthen legitimacy, and garner support from allies and the global community. Therefore, Hamas won politically.

### **The Impact of Hamas Counter-propaganda in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

The existence of a series of Hamas counter-propaganda activities in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2014, 2021, and 2023 also had a significant impact. Here are some of the impacts it has caused.

#### ***Influencing International Public Opinion***

In 2014, international pressure on Israel continued. In various countries around the world, calls for a ceasefire were voiced. From London to Paris and from Tehran to Cape Town,

demonstrators gathered to denounce Israel's operations and call for an end to the occupation of Palestinian territories in Gaza and the West Bank (Al Jazeera, 2014). In the 2021 conflict, similar conditions are also quite clear. Pressure continues to be put on Israel as a result of its attack on the Gaza Strip. Protests in several major cities worldwide, such as New York, Washington, DC, London, and Istanbul, are inevitable (Newman, 2021).

In the 2023 Israel-Palestine conflict, a much larger phenomenon occurred. Protests spread to many major campuses in the United States, including Yale and Harvard, in April 2024. Student protests against the Israeli-Palestinian war emerged after being inspired by demonstrators at Columbia University (AP News, 2024a). It did not take long for this wave of protest to spread to European campuses in May 2024 (Al Jazeera, 2024b).

Israel's attack on Gaza in 2023 also led to an upward trend in the number of global antisemitic incidents. The January 2023 and January 2024 annual reports on the fight against antisemitism published by the Diaspora Ministry, the World Zionist Organisation, and the Jewish Agency show that between October and December, the number of antisemitic incidents worldwide increased six times more, or 235 per cent, than the figures for January to September 2023. Geographically, the incidents were spread across the globe. The US topped the list with 43 per cent of reported incidents, followed by Europe with 35 per cent (The Jerusalem Post, 2024). The wave of protests and the increasing trend of global antisemitism incidents are evidence of the strong information warfare used by Hamas today.

### ***Mobilising Local and Regional Support***

Hamas' military activities supported by counter-propaganda have earned the Gaza-based resistance movement the full support of Palestinians in almost every conflict. In the 2014 conflict, the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) survey conducted on August 26-30, 2014, revealed that support for Hamas after the conflict continued to increase. As many as 79 per cent of Palestinians surveyed in Gaza and the West Bank said that Hamas had won the war against Israel, while only 3 per cent said Israel had won (PCPSR, 2014).

Not much different from the conditions in the 2014 conflict, when the 2021 conflict raged, Hamas also received a positive response from the Palestinians. Internally, Palestinians believe that Hamas is more fit to lead than its rival, Fatah, led by Mahmoud Abbas. 53 per cent of Palestinians believe Hamas should represent and lead Palestine, while only 14 per cent support Fatah (PCPSR, 2021).

In the 2023 conflict, five months after the 7 October attack, 71 per cent of Palestinians overall thought Hamas' decision to launch the attack was correct. This figure increased from 57 per cent in a survey conducted in December 2023 (PCPSR, 2024). Hamas' popularity is very high. Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank believe Hamas will be the winner in the war. In addition, despite the atrocities Hamas was seen committing on 7 October, 91 per cent of Palestinians believe that Hamas did not commit any crimes in the 2023 war (PCPSR, 2024). Despite watching videos of Hamas atrocities online, 81 per cent of Palestinians still believe that Hamas did not commit atrocities in the war. The data released by PCPSR shows how Hamas dominates in controlling local support among Palestinians themselves. Hamas' struggle against Israeli occupation is almost fully supported from within.

However, not only locally but also support for Hamas in the conflicts in 2014, 2021, and 2023 received strong support from the region. In 2014, Iran, Qatar, and Turkey were countries that had full support for Hamas. All three provided financial and political support (Gidda, 2014), especially for Iran, which provided direct weapons support (Israel Foreign Ministry, 2014). During the 2021 conflict, Qatar and Turkey still provided political and financial support (Ehl, 2021). Qatar's reason for maintaining relations is to ensure that its regional relations continue to run well. Not much different from Turkey, both seek to maintain relations because Islamist groups are proliferating, and they will inevitably play a role in the region (Kampeas, 2014).

In the 2023 conflict, Hamas managed to drag its closest allies, known as the axis of resistance, into the fight against Israel. In the Red Sea, the Houthis from Yemen declared war on Israel. They attacked and hijacked Israeli ships. The group repeatedly stated that its actions, which began in November 2023, were a form of solidarity with the Hamas struggle in Gaza (Junyent, 2023). On the other hand, Lebanese Hezbollah has also intensified attacks against Israel in the South Lebanon border region. Both Hezbollah and Israel attacked each other using rockets and artillery. Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, said his party would not stop attacking Israel until the conflict in Gaza stopped (Joffre, 2024). Support for Hamas is also evident among the Lebanese public. According to a survey, 79 per cent of Lebanese citizens expressed a positive opinion of Hamas (Cleveland, 2024).

### ***Social and Psychological Impact***

Hamas' counter-propaganda activities have a major impact on public opinion in the region, especially within Israel itself. On the one hand, the information provided by Israel is believed to be true by Israelis, but on the other hand, Hamas also provides its counter-narrative. This situation led to the polarisation of public opinion during the conflict. As noted by McCoy et al. (2018), polarisation of public opinion refers to the division of two opposing groups over views on social, economic, and political issues. This polarisation deepens differences and has the potential to exacerbate conflict between groups.

One such difference of opinion is how Israeli citizens view the conflict over the occupation of the Palestinian territories. Gideon Levy is one of them. This Israeli citizen, through the Haaretz newspaper, has long voiced the importance of greater Israeli empathy for Palestinian suffering. He turned the famous Hebrew phrase "Hatovim La tayyis," meaning "the best goes to the air force," into "Haraim La tayyis," meaning "the worst goes to the air force" (Fraser, 2014). In the 2023 conflict, a group of young Israelis declared their refusal to join the Israeli military. Most of them argued that Israel has been oppressing the Palestinian people (Anadolu Agency, 2023). The polarisation of public opinion in this regard has led to confusion and tension among civilians. The conflicting narratives of Israel and Hamas confuse the public about the truth of information due to the misinformation circulating.

In addition to the polarisation of public opinion, another impact caused by Hamas counter-propaganda activities is an increase in pressure on the Israeli government. In the 2023 conflict, the use of hostages as an instrument of Hamas propaganda led hostage families in Israel to urge the government to complete negotiations with Hamas immediately. This condition caused panic and a sense of hopelessness because the Israeli government was

never given certainty regarding the process of returning their families (Guerin, 2024). This Hamas tactic has drastically decreased Israeli citizens' trust in the government. Data from a poll in October 2023 showed that Israeli citizens' trust in the government was at its lowest point in the last 20 years, at 18 per cent (Lynn, 2023).

The latter impact is felt psychologically by both sides. Both Israeli and Palestinian civilians feel the impact of war, including propaganda activities, psychologically. The horrific nature of the conflict on social media has had a significant negative impact on the mental health and well-being of many people, especially teenagers and young adults (Yeung, 2024).

With these various impacts, Hamas has successfully carried out its counter-propaganda. This success can be seen from the achievement of Laswell's effect indicator, namely the change in attitude or behaviour due to the counter-propaganda message or content. This success is also evident in its scope of influence, which extends beyond the local and regional contexts to the international level.

## Conclusion

As part of asymmetric warfare, counter-propaganda is highly effective. This can be seen in its international, local, and regional impacts, as well as its social and psychological effects on civilians. The counter-propaganda strategy carried out by Hamas in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2013 to 2023 was highly influential because it shaped public opinion more broadly. Hamas also managed to gain much support, not only locally but also regionally and internationally. This influence can be seen in the positive image of Hamas among its supporters and the increasing condemnation of Israel's actions in the conflict.

Overall, this research confirms that propaganda and counter-propaganda are important strategic tools in asymmetric conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian war. Hamas has successfully utilised media and narratives to maintain support and legitimacy among Palestinians and the international community by making counter-propaganda campaigns one of the key elements in their resistance against Israel.

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