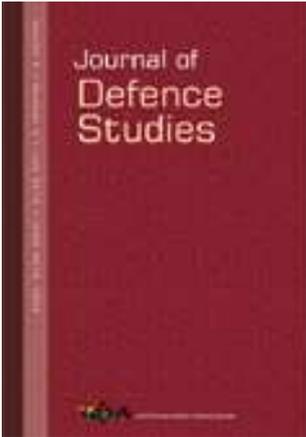


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# Perception Management in Asymmetric Warfare Lessons for Democratic Practitioners from Ukraine (2014–16) and Gaza (2014)

*Alex Waterman\**

*The perception management component of information warfare has long been recognised as an important tool of warfare, appearing in military doctrines worldwide. The challenges and opportunities of its practice in different political contexts have however rarely merited substantive attention. This article examines the development and trajectory of two cutting-edge examples of contemporary information warfare practice: Russian information warfare in Ukraine (2014–present); and information warfare conducted by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) up to and during Operation Protective Edge. It explores their strategic and political context before drawing lessons that can be learned across these differing contexts, highlighting four key recommendations. It points towards the limited possibility of information control, highlights the central relationship between information and action, affirms the crucial role of security forces in conducting information warfare and highlights that perception management goes well beyond obvious target audiences.*

The control and dissemination of information have long been recognised as important tools in shaping any politico-military environment.<sup>1</sup> As Toffler and Toffler wrote shortly after information warfare was catapulted onto television sets worldwide during the Gulf War, ‘a small bit of the right information can provide an immense strategic or tactical advantage [while] the denial of a small bit of information can have catastrophic

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effects.<sup>2</sup> Information does not and cannot exist in isolation from a political, historical and cultural context and is a relational phenomenon. Huhtinen and Rantapelkonen demonstrate this by referring to the analogy of a grey spot: viewed amid a black background, the spot seems pale, whereas if placed in a white background the spot appears dark. The formation of perceptions is thus informed by a 'field' of various components, including culture, processes of socialisation and influences of the material and physical environment.<sup>3</sup> Actors seeking to employ perception management strategies are, in essence, attempting to shape the field in which perceptions are formed by audiences by combining physical actions with supporting narratives to guide target audiences through the information environment. It is a fundamentally interactive process that does not simply create a positive or negative end state, but is constantly negotiated and renegotiated.

During conflict, the close relationship between action and perception means that actor perceptions and the wider environment play interactive roles in mutually shaping one another that may impact any of the actors involved in the process. This may take place in the traditional subject–object format; perception management may be directed by states to reduce the morale of an opponent or neutral populace, for example, as an adjunct to ongoing military campaigns.<sup>4</sup> It may also reinforce or alter the perceptions of more than one actor, including the organisation doing the perception management. During the Gulf War, for instance, the sustained reportage of the use of aurally delivered precision-guided munitions served to generate a domestic public perception in the West of an efficient, 'clean' way of war,<sup>5</sup> portraying an experience diametrically opposed to the trauma experienced by the American public, political setup and military during the Vietnam War. The successes of the campaign itself reinforced these perceptions within the military, influencing how the United States (US) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces approached interventions during the 1990s,<sup>6</sup> but were later substantially reshaped when confronted with stabilisation and counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>7</sup>

In the context of asymmetric warfare, the role of information is summed up aptly by prominent US military advisor and counter-insurgency theorist David Kilcullen as a site within which political, economic and military actions need to be coordinated, mobilising state resources to transmit a unified message that, by striking a chord with the given audience, allows for the extension and consolidation of influence

over the target population vis-à-vis an insurgent group. In Kilcullen's model, information plays a foundational role upon which the 'pillars' of economic, security and political action rest, while the management of this information consolidates and unifies the messages that such action in itself conveys.<sup>8</sup> Yet this acknowledgement, seemingly recognising the strategic centrality of information, has failed to gain traction as a central tenet of Western counter-insurgency doctrine. Indeed, information warfare in circles of thought in the West, India and elsewhere, while clearly considered important, remains an operational facet of military campaigns rather than a strategic, war-winning tool as part of an all-of-government approach. The centrality of population centrism combined with the concept of an all-of-government approach in counter-insurgency doctrines nonetheless raises questions for the boundaries between what constitute strategic and tactical-level perception management. This distinction has been increasingly blurred with the development of the electronic information environment, meaning that the actions of 'strategic corporals' can dramatically affect audience perceptions with significant strategic ramifications. These strategic implications present difficulties in conceptually prising apart a host of terminology—'perception management', 'information warfare', 'propaganda', 'strategic communication' and 'public diplomacy'—which are deployed either interchangeably or based on particular political predispositions. Democratic states, given their ideological context, are generally more averse to centrally directed information campaigns to control and influence populations, given the connotations of authoritarian regimes that these evoke.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, many insurgent groups, particularly but not exclusively those of the Maoist–Communist organisational variant, have been able to effectively synergise information and perception management operations with political and military action under a doctrine of revolutionary war. Consequently, counter-insurgents have frequently found themselves on the defensive.

Yet, since both internal counter-insurgencies and external interventions into intra-state conflict remain a familiar feature in the global security environment, further study is required of how democracies can successfully conduct information campaigns. This is a particularly pressing task in an age in which non-state armed groups are increasingly making gains in their ability to exploit a fast-changing information environment. This discussion therefore examines the utilisation of audience-centric, rather than cybernetic information warfare in two

contemporary examples: the Russian-sponsored campaign in Crimea and Ukraine since 2014; and the techniques employed by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) during Operation Protective Edge (2014) in the Gaza Strip. While Russian information warfare has received considerable attention from academics and think tank communities, themes permeating the wider 'hybrid warfare' literature dominate, particularly debates concerning the novelty of Russian methods.<sup>10</sup> Further, studies of the policy implications of Russian information warfare try to identify methods to counter such information warfare strategies, but lack concerted attempts to draw lessons from it as an empirical case study. Meanwhile, there has been little attempt to view the IDF's attempts to shape the information environment through the prism of information warfare, in spite of its experience in fighting what was coined 'Twitter war' both in 2012 and 2014.<sup>11</sup> In both, cutting-edge technologies such as social media as well as 'hard' measures designed to affect information and perceptions were harnessed to convey narratives, appeal to target audiences and, crucially, attempted to fulfil politico-strategic objectives, with varying degrees of success. This article seeks to explore the context, available resources, target audiences, techniques and impact of each on a comparative basis. By doing this, it hopes to establish common themes and lessons for how democracies might practice information warfare in the contemporary context.

#### RUSSIAN INFORMATION WARFARE DURING THE UKRAINE CRISIS

Contemporary military thinking in the Russian Federation places information warfare at the centre of how Moscow thinks about conflict.<sup>12</sup> Its development has clearly been conditioned by both Soviet and post-Soviet experiences with information warfare, as well as contemporary assessments of Moscow's capabilities vis-à-vis other global players.<sup>13</sup> The Soviet state was well-versed in utilising 'reflexive control' techniques as a tactical, strategic and diplomatic-level tool for influencing a target's decision-making capacity,<sup>14</sup> while 'lessons' learned during the post-Soviet era have served to reinforce the salience of these concepts. Russia was, for example, widely perceived to have 'lost' its information war during the First Chechen War (1994–96) after journalists who had been rejected by the Russian military were invited to embed with Chechen militant groups, depriving it of control over information, resulting in the exposure of Russian military brutality and creating negative coverage that drastically reduced both domestic and international support for

the war.<sup>15</sup> The second conflict (1999–2008) initiated by the then Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, demonstrated a clear recognition of its importance from the outset, effectively tying information dissemination to the counter-insurgency effort. It did this by separating civil and military news offices, censoring information and enforcing a non-official media blackout by threatening and even killing non-official journalists and destroying Chechen information infrastructure.<sup>16</sup> This allowed it to convey a narrative that it was fighting an extension of the global ‘War on Terror’ to international audiences, while portraying a narrative of a just war to its domestic audiences. The 2008 Georgian conflict, revealing weaknesses within the Russian military, spurred a series of reforms that would allow Russia to apply itself, in the context of its conventional warfare asymmetries with Western militaries, to reverse what it perceived as Western-backed revolutions in its sphere of influence.<sup>17</sup>

This influenced Russian perceptions of the role of social media and information dissemination during the revolutions of the Arab Spring from 2011.<sup>18</sup> It had the effect of strengthening existing lessons and embedding them within contemporary Russian writing, which has incorporated cutting-edge technologies into its strategic thinking. This was exemplified in several articles. In the *Military-Industrial Courier*, Russian Chief of General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, noted that there existed ‘wide asymmetrical possibilities for reducing the fighting potential of the enemy’.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Chekinov and Bogdanov’s *Military Thought* piece on ‘New Generation Warfare’ discussed how ‘information superiority’ might be achieved by including ‘all public institutions’, mass media, cultural and religious organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), public movements and even scholars in a ‘distributed attack’ to reduce the target society’s political will through a combination of information and disinformation before military operations began.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, these elements of what became known as the ‘Gerasimov doctrine’ demonstrated remarkable similarities to the practical application of Russian informational capacities in its campaigns to annex Crimea and support militias in eastern Ukraine since 2014. At this stage, it is important to identify the resources available to the Russian state and the domestic political context that allowed for its mobilisation. Russia is able to harness an expansive information network, leveraging high-level diplomatic channels, official government and military statements, domestic and international broadcast media and even social media commentators in a synchronised manner. A NATO StratCom report

highlights that several Putin associates exercise widespread financial control over major print and broadcast media networks; administration leaders meet leading broadcasters on a weekly basis; and key foreign policy documentation recognises the importance of political commentators to provide a synchronised message for dissemination both at home and abroad.<sup>21</sup> This unity of effort across military, political and cultural platforms gave the Russian state the ability to implement a coherent information warfare approach in Crimea and Ukraine. While Russia's exact strategic objectives can only remain the subject of speculation, it is clear that the information warfare followed the theoretical principles outlined by thinkers such as Chekinov and Bogdanov. Clearly, the Russian strategy sought to utilise information as part of a process of achieving politico-strategic objectives prior to the deployment of military forces through a combination of disruptive activities and creating a conducive climate for the development of asymmetric capabilities.<sup>22</sup>

It sought to create this climate by meticulously identifying and targeting three key political audiences, namely, domestic Russians, ethnic Russians residing within Ukraine and international audiences, targeting each by conveying a series of narratives designed to target each. While semi-authoritarian in nature, Russian public opinion is fundamentally important to its leaders, and the memory of failures in Afghanistan, in Chechnya, and indeed the collapse of the Soviet Union itself, clearly demonstrated this. Since Putin's ascent to power, a strong information apparatus has gradually been built that has tapped into nationalist sentiments in the country. It has consistently linked policy objectives to narratives of a national revival in the face of Western threats, therefore utilising perception management techniques to exploit an already conducive political and historical context. Indeed, Putin's opinion ratings have remained high throughout the Ukraine intervention; in a spring 2015 Pew research survey, 83 per cent of Russian respondents approved of Putin's policy in Ukraine.<sup>23</sup>

Obtaining the support of the ethnic Russian population within Ukraine, while sowing dissension and confusion among pro-Maidan supporters, was also a key objective of the information campaign. For this, a phase of political preparation not dissimilar to a Maoist-style pre-insurgency preparation phase took place in the months preceding the appearance of the 'little green men'. Networks were established, political sympathisers located and potential allies in the media identified by a combination of military, political and social intelligence-gathering

processes. With these alliances established in addition to the already-strong influence of Russian-language media organisations in eastern Ukraine, the Russian state was well placed to utilise the destabilising effects upon political order caused by the 2014 Ukraine Revolution by tapping into political and linguistic divides within the country. A combination of factual and fictional reports carried accusations of fascist sentiments against the Maidan movement and amplified pro-Russian political undercurrents, invoking historical sentiments of World War II to galvanise ethnic Ukrainian and domestic Russian support.<sup>24</sup> This was combined with ‘hard’ measures to establish a monopoly of information, such as electronic and even violent attacks on Crimean broadcast stations such as *Black Sea Television* and, during the deployment phase, seizing broadcast stations and using them to broadcast Russian media stations.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, state-controlled international broadcasters such as *Russia Today*, already well-established as an ‘alternative’ broadcaster in the West, enabled the Russian state to convey its desired position to an international audience through a combination of plausible deniability and by deriding the post-revolution Ukrainian government. This was aided by the use of dozens of ‘proxy’ websites with disguised or ambiguous links to the Russian state, increasing the volume of sources from which Russian narratives were disseminated.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, social media ‘trolling’ was utilised as hundreds were recruited to comment on social media platforms of international media outlets, tapping into the fundamentally ‘social’ dynamics of these platforms to further distort the information environment and strengthen pro-Russian narratives, providing a cost-effective method of further disrupting the information environment.<sup>27</sup>

The strategy essentially involved directing a flood of information at target audiences, deliberately incorporating a blend of information and disinformation, focusing on the sheer volume of information in a ‘firehose’ strategy.<sup>28</sup> As a recent RAND report suggests, this tapped into psychology research, which demonstrates that media recipients are more likely to consider information from multiple sources as credible.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, it utilised this sheer volume to fulfil its objective of blurring and distorting the early information environment, amplifying the space for pro-Russian political groups and creating a conducive environment for the swift deployment and annexation of Crimea by 18 March 2014. As it became recognised by the Ukrainian authorities that Russian information warfare presented a ‘national security threat’ in the wider Ukraine, all Russian broadcast networks in Ukraine were banned on 11

March,<sup>30</sup> though by this point the political foundations had been laid both for Russia's bloodless annexation of Crimea and Russian politico-military consolidation in the Donbass region of Ukraine from April.

While this points to considerable success in the employment of information to distort, disrupt and begin to reshape political order in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, it did nonetheless provoke information warfare countermeasures from both the Ukrainian government and the West in exposing Russian information and disinformation campaigns,<sup>31</sup> as well as inciting alienation and polarisation among Ukrainian political forces opposed to Russian policy.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the extent to which foreign broadcasters such as *Russia Today* were able to decisively influence public opinion in the West is unclear,<sup>33</sup> though appetite for a response to the Russian campaign in Ukraine remained indecisive in NATO member states.<sup>34</sup> This suggests that Russian information warfare has had a primarily disruptive rather than transformative effect on external populations, though it has been able to consolidate its influence over Russian-speaking populations within Ukraine, and in doing so achieve a central tenet of its hybrid warfare strategy. The ethnic Russians targeted in eastern Ukraine already shared sympathetic attitudes, a common history, language and cultural background with the state conducting the information warfare, providing a conducive environment for perception management to take place. This was not the case in western Ukraine, Western Europe or the US, where historical and political conditions combined with hostile perception management have generated long-standing scepticism of Russian policies and actions, potentially reflecting why Russia opted for a disruptive, volume-based approach to these audiences.

### **Lessons for Information Warfare and Perception Management**

Clearly, the Russian example in Ukraine occurred in a unique political context that limits the extent to which lessons can be drawn for democracies seeking to utilise information warfare techniques in internal security and interventions. For example, a democratic regime such as the US is unable to exert control over elements of the print and electronic media in the same way that the Russian government has been able to. That being said, the strategic-level focus on information clearly led to a unity of effort among key government departments, demonstrating the need for a comprehensive, all-of-government approach in conducting information warfare campaigns. While the democratic political context

precludes a strongly controlled press as part of an information campaign, the Russian example clearly illustrates the importance of bringing political, administrative, developmental, diplomatic, military and law enforcement information dissemination together around a coherent political message.

Furthermore, actively employing disinformation offers a dilemma to democratic states seeking to win over local, national and international political audiences either in internal counter-insurgency or external interventions. While Russia's attempt to flood the information space with a combination of narratives, facts and falsities served the purpose of distortion in the early phases of the campaign, confusing potential opposition audiences such as those in NATO member states and within Ukraine itself while reinforcing existing pro-Russian sentiments, it ultimately served to accentuate and exploit existing political boundaries, limiting the Russian state's ability to make politico-strategic gains beyond the Donbass region. Any intervention conducted by any state, be it internal or external in nature, essentially constitutes an intervention into a political order consisting of competing political forces, many of which may be overtly or covertly hostile to the intervening power. Such pre-existing supportive or hostile attitudes, beliefs and values are crucial and may either enhance or significantly limit the penetrative capacity of perception management techniques. Disinformation campaigns that, by aiming to distort and distract, seek to unbalance and destabilise political order admittedly create space for allied political forces to gain ground and disrupt hostile efforts to do so, but also present a significant risk of backlash and further polarisation among elements of the population hostile to the intervention. This points towards the importance of utilising factual information as part of an inclusive political narrative that seeks to strengthen and legitimise a consensus-based democratic political order built on the foundations of actions supporting this order.

#### ISRAELI INFORMATION WARFARE DURING OPERATION PROTECTIVE EDGE

Information warfare in the Israeli context offers a particularly intense information environment to examine. The long-standing territorial and political contestations between Israel, the Arab states and the Palestinian territories, compounded over 60 years of intermittent conflicts of varying intensity and scale, have created widespread political polarisation. As an

extension of this, there has been a long-running battle for the hearts and minds of the international community. The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), for example, had established roots in European and broader international public opinion by the 1980s,<sup>35</sup> which had developed into a cluster of sustained support bases, activist movements and lobby groups independent of the PLO by the 2000s.<sup>36</sup> This support has become particularly pronounced in university campus and political activism; many university unions across Britain, for instance, offer societies in solidarity with the Palestinian cause, with pressure groups frequently seeking to 'no-platform' or block pro-Israel narratives from being disseminated, while most universities have a substantial support base for wider Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaigns.<sup>37</sup>

In mainstream politics, albeit only symbolic, the recognition of a Palestinian state by the United Nations in 2012, supported by 17 European countries and joined by unilateral recognition by Britain and Sweden in 2014, is reflective of changing public opinion in Europe.<sup>38</sup> Such support is, nonetheless, conditioned by various contextual indicators. YouGov poll, for instance, demonstrated that support for Palestine or Israel was conditioned by pre-existing party political affiliations, with support for the Palestinian narrative more pronounced in left-wing political institutions such as the British Labour Party in comparison to its Conservative Party rival.<sup>39</sup> Opinion in the US has traditionally leaned towards support for the Israeli position, though it is similarly conditioned by demographic and political stratifications. A 2014 Gallup poll, for example, highlighted that Republican Party supporters were more likely to view Israeli actions in Gaza as justified compared to their Democratic counterparts, while it revealed particularly strong support for Israel among older, white males and also varied depending on educational backgrounds.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the issue has intersected with identity politics. Palestinian and Arab political leaders have been keen to link support for the movement with appeals to a global Muslim community.<sup>41</sup> The idea of Israel as the homeland for the Jewish community, emerging from the historical trauma of the Holocaust, meanwhile strengthens narratives of sympathy or support for a historically oppressed minority community, leading supporters to charge that critiques of Israel are underpinned by anti-Semitic undertones.<sup>42</sup> That the 'Palestine question' has, in recent decades, effectively intersected with the domestic politics of states in the West and wider notions of identity politics, along with the changing contours of public opinion in these countries, points

towards the sheer intensity and scale of this global contest in perception management.

This intensified particularly during and after the Second Intifada (2000–05), with the increasing utilisation of electronic media such as the Internet worldwide, in an informational *intifada* by both Palestinian militant organisations and pro-Palestinian activist groups.<sup>43</sup> Organisations such as ‘The Electronic Intifada’, which features a number of internationally based contributions, have since taken the lead in bringing military interventions in the Palestinian territories to international audiences via diaspora communities and activist networks.<sup>44</sup> This has included the employment of techniques such as reporting and commentating on events, establishing social media trends, organising activist networks and pressuring political and media organisations while tying these methods to a broader narrative; namely, that Israel continuously violates the rights of Palestinian citizens through practices of military and political occupation, as well as employing overwhelming military force, therefore acting illegally and illegitimately. These themes have been able to resonate with existing values and attitudes within the public opinions of liberal democracies, enhancing existing support bases and contributing towards large-scale protests, campus activism and political lobbying. These methods seek to pressure governments towards isolating Israel diplomatically, targeting its military assistance from the US and economic relations with blocs such as the European Union (EU).<sup>45</sup> Unlike the Russian example, which sought to win the hearts and minds of ethnic Ukrainians and domestic Russians at the local level while employing disruption tactics at the international level to buy time and consolidate influence, Israel’s experimentation in information warfare must be viewed within this backdrop of a global, strategically important battle for hearts and minds. To further complicate matters, domestically it needs to strike a balance between being seen to protect its citizens and dealing with competing domestic political pressures favouring different approaches to the prosecution of the conflict.

In spite of this, Israel’s approach to information warfare has generally lagged behind the pace and scope of that conducted by pro-Palestinian groups and activists during military operations in the Palestinian territories. This is not to say, however, that Israel has not recognised its importance; the concept of *hasbara*, or explaining and justifying Israel’s actions to the world, remained a part of the duties of the Government Press Office (GPO) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for decades,

though the term has since been replaced by 'public diplomacy'. Although not explicitly couched in the terminology of information warfare, this demonstrates the high-level importance attached to it in Israeli strategic-level thinking. The question of Israel's image in the eyes of the world and the question of who actually spoke for Israel, whether trade unions, cultural organisations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, GPO, IDF or flirtations with a wider Ministry of Information, and the success of its attempts to shape its image, have been central policy issues since independence and have been well documented.<sup>46</sup>

Comparatively, its capacities for information dissemination as a state are vastly lower than in the case of the Russian Federation. As a liberal democracy, it lacks the same degree of influence and control over the print and electronic media exerted by Putin in Russia. This means that the Israeli state cannot harness the media and achieve the same degree of message synchronisation that the Russian state has been able to. Nor is this desirable; like other liberal democracies, it generally considers propaganda and disinformation campaigns distasteful, particularly so given their association with the aggressive, centrally directed propaganda of the Nazi regime responsible for the Holocaust.<sup>47</sup> This, to an extent, hinders opportunities to exploit Israel's status as a liberal democracy in the context of perception management, which can in itself serve an important purpose in promoting Israel's positions vis-à-vis claims of its status as an 'apartheid state' by political forces in opposition to it. Lastly, the wider national effort consists of a multiplicity of organisations that has hampered institutional coordination and synchronisation.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, the Israeli state clearly has significant normative and capability differences to the Russian state in how it can employ information warfare.

The mushrooming of the information environment with the growth of live war journalism, 24-hour television, Internet journalism and news, and recently social media as a tool of information, has presented the IDF in particular with significant challenges. Previously able to influence the parameters of the information space by providing limited access to the battlefield, it has increasingly lost this control over the information environment. Indeed, its active perception management techniques remained underdeveloped at the implementation level until after the 2006 Lebanon War. A traditional reliance on the military approach dominated strategy, meaning limited resources were made available to information warfare units within the military that would enable it to link its operations to the broader public diplomacy narrative.<sup>49</sup> The IDF,

however, clearly recognised its importance; the international sympathies gained by Palestinian activists during the First Intifada (1987–95) appeared to have prompted an internal learning curve. Schleifer notes that as early as 1994, the IDF perception of media engagement ‘was described as a battle plan. The mass communication means were the tools, the messages were ammunition and the targets were pre-defined groups.’<sup>50</sup> The Second Lebanon War (2006) nonetheless saw a haphazard degree of control over the dissemination of information; the IDF media engagement was characterised by sporadic interviews with officers without prior authority, resulting in high-profile leaks. This compounded the need for the development of a coherent media management strategy and consequently led to the centralisation of information dissemination towards a dedicated spokesperson team. This paved the way for centrally directed information operations that, while not centralised on the same institutional scale as the Russian Federation, allowed for a coherent institutional approach to information.<sup>51</sup>

The years between Operation Cast Lead (2009), which saw the foundations of this new approach being laid with the establishment of a YouTube channel, Twitter account and blog,<sup>52</sup> and Operation Protective Edge (2014) saw the development of this centralised IDF media presence driven by ‘New’ and later ‘Interactive’ media units.<sup>53</sup> These consisted of ‘commanders’ and ‘soldiers’ whose military operations were to compose and disseminate posts to the social media and blogging information environment. This was utilised during Operation Pillar of Defense (2012), demonstrating an increasing awareness of the interactive nature of the information environment by utilising infographics and live updates.<sup>54</sup> The messages contained data that would have previously been disseminated to journalists, such as reported arrests, confirmations of air strikes and other up-to-date developments. These were instead sent directly to commentators, allowing it to engage with multiple key audiences, such as journalists themselves, international observers and indeed, bloggers sympathetic to Israel and potential adversaries at once.<sup>55</sup> In one example, the IDF warned journalists to refrain from interviewing or reporting in close proximity to Hamas lest they be used as human shields,<sup>56</sup> showing its employment in not only condemning the legitimacy of Hamas operations but also applying pressure to the Hamas information campaign, building in a ‘hard’ edge to the approach that had the side effect of attracting widespread international attention.<sup>57</sup>

The IDF information operations during Operation Protective Edge of summer 2014 reflected the growing recognition within the IDF of the importance of the information environment and its linkages to the operational, diplomatic and legal spheres.<sup>58</sup> It did this by targeting a host of audiences with tailored, yet coherent, messages deployed across multiple social media platforms. This was done by, for example, disseminating up to 20 'Tweets' per day,<sup>59</sup> as well as uploading short, sharp battlefield infographics, videos and interviews. These sought to engage the information environment in a number of ways.

First, the IDF exploited its access to real-time battlefield information by almost immediately delivering updates of rocket attacks, air strikes, raids and clashes as they occurred, making it essential to follow its online presence for opinion formers such as journalists covering the conflict. By establishing itself as a credible source of information, this also allowed it to 'bypass' the traditional media and provide its supporters worldwide with 'ammunition' to use in blogging and further dissemination. This indirectly influenced the information environment, as it provided information straight from the battlefield and disseminated this in a format that could be moulded by supporters for redistribution within their own social and political contexts, thus acting as a force multiplier that allowed information to cross multiple 'fields' in a tactic not altogether dissimilar to that of Russia's information 'flooding'.<sup>60</sup>

Second, social media teams sought to win international audiences by producing dramatic edited images of Western cities facing rocket attacks, and even interactive charts in which the user could place their home city within the range of Hamas rocket capabilities, seeking to relate Israel's predicament to Western audiences.<sup>61</sup> Fourth, it sought to directly engage Hamas and the information superiority it had traditionally enjoyed by using battlefield photographs to reveal the group's attempts to force civilian casualties.<sup>62</sup> For example, revealing Hamas' use of civilian infrastructure to launch rockets demonstrated the operational aims and predicament of Israeli forces to an international audience. Finally, it linked this predicament with the measures taken by the IDF to avoid civilian casualties, providing bulletins on the use of tactics such as leaflet drops, personalised phone calls, 'roof-knocking' shells and the use of Arabic platforms to warn civilians of impending strikes.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, in an attempt to reduce the information space for Hamas to exploit, 'hard' measures were employed, such as targeted air strikes against broadcast

facilities, like against Hamas' Al Aqsa TV facilities on 29 July 2014.<sup>64</sup> The GPO warnings to reporters regarding their safety in the Gaza Strip along with IDF personnel providing journalists extensive tours of tunnels used to infiltrate from Gaza into Israel demonstrated an increasing synchronisation across government platforms while combining these measures to actively engage in perception management.<sup>65</sup>

That being said, while the IDF attempted to limit civilian casualties, the use of standoff weaponry such as air strikes in densely populated areas brought with it a high death toll, with over 1,462 civilians killed during the 50-day conflict out of a total of 2,104 Palestinian fatalities.<sup>66</sup> With the presence of high-profile international and non-governmental organisations as well as media and journalists on the ground, the humanitarian implications of the conflict were quickly brought home to television screens and social media accounts worldwide, leading to widespread protests and increased diplomatic pressures on Israel, although domestic political support within Israel itself remained high.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, it is difficult to gauge whether Israeli perception management techniques during the conflict actually affected support for Israel or simply transplanted existing global political cleavages onto a new informational platform. This is reflective of the consensus within existing works on perception management that information can only work in conjunction with and as part of political, social, military or cultural action, and cannot produce transformative effects in of itself.<sup>68</sup> This is particularly apparent in the global backdrop of the IDF's efforts, in which it engages with a multitude of audiences with varying values, beliefs and attitudes that may simply not be 'winnable'. This appears to have been recognised by Israeli practitioners, who sought to use real-time information updates in a bid to provide 'ammunition' to existing Web-based support sources such as blogs and sympathetic online campaigns.<sup>69</sup> By doing this, they sought to strengthen and supplement existing attitudes and values within already-supportive political communities.

This raises pertinent questions for analyses of perception management more broadly across the operational and strategic levels, since the boundaries between the two have become increasingly blurred. In spite of launching a clearly proactive perception management campaign spearheaded by its military, the Gaza conflict therefore demonstrated that battlefield realities were not always able to contribute to the information campaign's broader efforts to win international 'hearts and minds'.

### **Lessons for Information Warfare and Perception Management**

The IDF, in particular, was able to increase its presence in the information environment substantially by exploiting 'new media'. This, combined with a centralised media engagement strategy, allowed it to clearly and coherently articulate Israeli narratives to an international audience. This suggests that while democracies are ideologically reluctant to mobilise aggressive, all-of-government information campaigns, military or security organisations can play a crucial role in perception management operations. As hierarchical bodies that are traditionally restrictive in relation to disclosing information, information dissemination from within the military as part of perception management can offer a means with which to shape the information environment without losing control over potentially sensitive information.

The Israeli experience, like the Russian experience, demonstrated that information warfare is not something that cannot be 'won', but can only be engaged with; the existence of a decades-old, sophisticated pro-Palestinian narrative that has effectively tapped into the attitudes, sentiments and political cleavages in democracies in Europe especially demonstrates that the informational battlespace is no vacuum and may consist of highly competent opponents with significant advantages in its perception management arsenal. In this instance, the pro-Palestinian political movement has a particularly strong, if diffused, global information apparatus, since it has been able to bring the 'Palestine question' well into the domestic mainstream politics of many influential Western states. Because of this, especially tight synchronisation is required between the message underpinning the perception management strategy and the actions that are crucial to perception management. In this case, the high numbers of IDF statements demonstrating Israeli examples of restraint could not always fully reflect the military reality on the ground, given the IDF's necessity to minimise casualties by employing standoff weaponry against Hamas positions in densely populated urban areas, resulting in heavy civilian casualties. Clearly, this is reflective of the nature of asymmetric warfare, in which non-state opponents seek to leverage political advantages in a bid to compensate for military inferiority vis-à-vis the opponent, a tactic which the IDF sought to expose. Therefore, if militant groups are able to create and exploit a gap between the actions-based and information-based elements of perception management strategies, they may surely threaten to undermine genuine policy efforts

to win ‘hearts and minds’ on the ground, while gaining political capital in their own asymmetric perception management approach.

#### CONCLUSION: LESSONS FOR INFORMATION WAR IN THE DEMOCRATIC CONTEXT

The contemporary Russian and Israeli cases of information warfare occurred within their own unique political contexts. This, to an extent, limits what we can draw from each individual case study. That being said, themes can be highlighted that resonate with both theoretical understandings of perception management and other empirical examples. The contemporary nature of the Russian and Israeli cases allows for the testing of existing understandings and the drawing of generalisable conclusions that may be applicable to other contemporary cases of asymmetric conflict. Some of these commonalities and lessons are discussed below.

#### **No One Actor Can Monopolise Information Control**

Both Russian and Israeli information warfare campaigns utilised a range of cutting-edge techniques in bids to achieve their political objectives. Both of these campaigns, however, met considerable degrees of resistance, as Ukrainian and Western commentators began to expose Russian disinformation and as reporters and commentators based in the Gaza Strip began to convey their particular version of events. Both cases had built into them a ‘hard’ edge that involved direct attacks on the informational infrastructure of the enemy, such as communications facilities. In both, such measures served a temporary purpose, allowing the conflict players to gain the tactical upper hand by attacking enemy information infrastructure. However, these methods were not and cannot be taken in isolation; the development and diffusion of information technology through electronic means of communications to the level of individuals means that such kinetic measures cannot in themselves establish control over the information environment.

Furthermore, perception management inherently intersects with pre-existing political, historical and cultural contexts to produce effects. Simply disseminating narratives through a coherent media campaign cannot shape the information space and perception management must be engaged with on the physical plane. The IDF’s use of Arabic platforms to warn civilians of air strikes, for example, is unlikely to have had a

transformative impact upon the politically and historically conditioned values and attitudes of those within the local population who were already stringently opposed to the Israeli policy in Gaza. On the other hand, the propagation of Russian narratives to ethnic Russian audiences in eastern Ukraine resonated effectively. Neither have full control over attitudes, values and political trends in key target audiences in the West, and although they can tap into these attitudes, values and trends, they cannot fully exert control over the formation of perceptions.

### **Synchronise Information with Action**

This bears relevance for counter-insurgents and insurgents alike. The implication of the impossibility of information monopolisation is that tight synchronisation is required between the two arms of perception management: action and information. Failing to do so creates a risk that hostile perception management campaigns can exploit the gaps between action and information that may potentially unravel the perception management approach. In the Israeli case, efforts to minimise civilian casualties were evident and well connected to the information warfare campaign with clear linkages between action and information strategies, but as these efforts failed to prevent large civilian casualties given the nature of the conflict, the effectiveness of its global perception management was overall unclear.

For counter-insurgents, this raises a particular urgency to ensure that combat troops are fully integrated within the broader government narrative. Instances of excess, abuse and miscalculation can create significant opportunities for opposing perception management campaigns to 'reveal' a gap between stated policy and actual action, thereby strengthening its own narratives to the detriment of the counter-insurgents. This reinforces the well-known vulnerability of counter-insurgents not only to mishaps but also to deliberate asymmetric strategies of provocation. This has long been recognised by militant groups worldwide as they have sought to provoke states into excessive responses, creating opportunities for asymmetric actors to situate counter-insurgent excesses within their own perception management strategies.<sup>70</sup>

Since action and information are crucially interlinked, it is vital for states to closely tie chosen conflict management or resolution strategies to the narratives that seek to build the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of its political target audiences.

### **Security Forces Can Play a Crucial Role in Perception Management**

While the Russian example illustrates the efficiency of an information campaign possessing clear, centralised political direction that permeates major state institutions and elements of the civil society, for democracies this may present difficulties relating to issues of private ownership, generally looser forms of regulation, ideological desires for free press and distaste towards centrally directed propaganda. Israel has clearly recognised the need for strengthening pro-Israel opinion abroad with the use of *hasbara* and its public diplomacy operations within the GPO and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but has generally fallen short of tight coordination between these mechanisms. The IDF's learning experience since the First Intifada, in particular, however suggests that particular arms of the state can develop and implement centralised, coherent and sustained information campaigns.

In the counter-insurgency context, the role of security forces is especially crucial since they may often operate as the only visible representatives of the state, particularly in insurgent-controlled areas. Areas in which insurgencies have built up influence present considerable challenges for perception management, since insurgencies have often emerged in these areas as a consequence of political irresponsibility and/or socio-economic inequity that have generated substantial grievances against the incumbent state. Consequently, a combination of actions-based perception management techniques, such as goodwill initiatives and regular meetings with local authority figures, need to be combined with actionable, long-term changes to the physical environment in these areas, such as the provision of security and the creation of conducive conditions for development. This, therefore, means that changing the 'field' through which actors' perceptions are socialised is the central aim for counter-insurgents. This long-term game in perception management is reflected by the fact that counter-insurgencies, on average, take roughly 14 years to 'win'.<sup>71</sup>

### **Information Warfare is a Multi-audience Phenomenon**

Both examples demonstrate that information warfare campaigns impact differently upon different political audiences. The Israeli domestic public, for example, had a very different, more acute stake in the prosecution of the conflict in comparison to international audiences, which observed the conflict from afar. Russia's information campaign in Ukraine, meanwhile, allowed it to politically consolidate among ethnic Russians within Crimea

and Ukraine, but beyond the initial disruption stages, it did not produce long-term division within the West and, in fact, bolstered public opinion against Russia and strengthened national mandates to commit to NATO deployments. If we are to apply this to the context of counter-insurgency, we can identify the various target audiences as the array of constituent societal forces and actors that make up political order in a conflict-affected region. For example, this may constitute members of different socio-political communities that may require a degree of balancing of perception management efforts. This was the case for American forces operating in Iraq facing the predicament of managing perceptions among Shia and Sunni communities. The American withdrawal then destabilised the political equilibrium, generating a perception among Sunnis of unequal treatment by a Shia-dominated Baghdad, and that was later exploited by Daesh militants. Indeed, different political forces may well pressure a government to employ information strategies that appeal to certain domestic political constituencies, but alienates groups the state is seeking to win over.

Furthermore, political forces external to the immediate insurgency environment, such as public opinion in other areas of the country or the intervening nation's domestic public, can have a significant impact upon the trajectory of counter-insurgency operations, especially if they are conducted in the context of international intervention. This was clear with respect to the US and coalition campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, since domestic political support eroded considerably over time and prevented longer-term consolidation of successes such as the 2007 surge in Iraq. Russia's failure in the First Chechen War and success in the second in sustaining domestic public support further highlights the importance of domestic perception management for internal counter-insurgencies, since public support was crucial to allow for prosecution of the counter-insurgency campaign. There, therefore, exists a need to maintain the 'hearts and minds' of populations beyond those within the immediate insurgency environment itself, pointing towards the multi-pronged nature of perception management strategies that requires multiple engagements with multiple audiences.

Perception management in the contemporary world is therefore a fundamentally complex political process of communication to a wide array of audiences, in an environment conditioned by historical, social, political and cultural conditions, over which the belligerent does not and cannot exercise full control. This is especially the case in the

global information era, in which the audiences are often global and are conditioned by their own perceptual 'fields' that the perception manager may not be able to influence in the intended manner.<sup>72</sup> Perception management constitutes a combination and synchronisation between information and action, meaning mismatches between information and policy can render the politico-informational space vulnerable for opponents to exploit and fuel rivalling perception management strategies. Further, the complex nature of the politics of conflict means that states have to balance their perception management campaigns and need to consistently gauge the perceptions of an array of audiences both within and external to the geographical site of conflict.

The sheer difficulty of measuring the strategic ramifications of perception management undoubtedly raises problems for rigorous analysis, but means that important studies of perception management conducted by area, region or country specialists offer a great deal for furthering and deepening the understanding of the issue. In the Indian context, an analysis of perception management strategies across the different arms of government, including its security agencies, in a counter-insurgency context would bear particular relevance. India has had to balance competing political priorities and insurgencies in various parts of the country, which means that multiple games of perception management are in effect. Indian scholars could substantially contribute to the wider empirical and theoretical literature on perception management by exploring how the Indian state navigates not only multiple political audiences but also multiple insurgencies simultaneously. Given the immense diversity of attitudes, values, worldviews and ways of life within the country, studies of how the state intersects with these to engage in perception management will have important ramifications for weighing up its effectiveness over the long term.

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