

## Credibility vs. Speed: Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Information War

### Description

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The Gaza conflict underscores a central fact of modern war. The Decisive contest is often fought in the information environment, where attention, emotion, and perceived legitimacy shape what governments can do and what publics will tolerate. US doctrine increasingly treats information as a foundational element of military activity and calls on the Joint Force to operationalize informational power to shape perceptions and behavior ([JCOIE](#); [DoD OIE Strategy \(2023\)](#)). Operations in the information environment are defined as integrated actions intended to affect drivers of behavior by informing audiences and influencing relevant actors ([CRS OIE primer](#)).

That environment was especially contested in Gaza because the war unfolded under intense global visibility and constant online scrutiny. Every strike, casualty report, and humanitarian convoy could trigger immediate diplomatic pressure and rapid amplification on social platforms. In practice, Israel and Hamas ran parallel campaigns to shape interpretation, mobilize supporters, deter adversaries, and limit external intervention. Their competition highlights three mechanisms that often decide influence outcomes in high-visibility war. The first is who sets the initial narrative, the second is who maintains credibility when facts are disputed, and the third is who can hold attention as audiences grow fatigued ([DFRLab analysis](#)).

### Two Influence Logics

#### Credibility signaling (Israel)

Israel generally pursued a credibility-first approach. It relied on frequent briefings, legal and military-necessity framing, and periodic releases of supporting material meant to strengthen attribution and signal restraint ([IDF Media Releases](#)). This approach also aligns with U.S. guidance that treats

operations in the information environment as an operational tool that should support broader objectives ([DoD OIE Strategy \(2023\)](#)). It also reflects a practical constraint. Even with intelligence and professional public affairs capacity, state actors often move more slowly when releasing supporting material because they must protect operational security and sensitive sources.

#### Attention capture ( Hamas )

Hamas often pursued an attention-capture approach. It relied on emotionally intense content, frequent messaging, and symbolic framing that cast the conflict as existential resistance. The approach fits the incentives of networked platforms, which reward speed and virality, especially when content triggers fear, anger, empathy, or moral outrage. Early in the war, analysts documented how false, recycled, and unverifiable material circulated alongside authentic footage across platforms, deepening polarization and complicating real-time verification ([DFRLab analysis](#)). More broadly, research on networked mobilization shows that digital systems can scale quickly and generate cohesion without the slow institution-building that often supports long-term legitimacy ([Twitter and Tear Gas](#)).

These two logics are not moral categories. State and nonstate actors alike combine credibility claims with emotional appeals, selectively frame reality, and exploit uncertainty. The difference is mainly operational. Israel emphasized verifiability and coalition reassurance, while Hamas emphasized speed and emotional momentum. The result was not a single winner, but shifting advantages and vulnerabilities across different audiences over time.

## Why Early Frames Matter

Influence contests are often decided early because people interpret new information through cognitive shortcuts. In a crisis, audiences lean more on intuitive, emotionally responsive processing than on deliberative analysis. That helps explain why vivid narratives often outrun later corrections. Kahneman's distinction between fast, intuitive judgment and slower, analytical reasoning is a durable way to describe this pattern ([Thinking, Fast and Slow](#)). Cialdini's work on persuasion likewise shows how social proof, authority cues, and limited reliable information can shape belief formation in moments of uncertainty ([Influence](#)).

In Gaza, early frames mattered because global audiences encountered the war in fragments. They saw short video clips, screenshots of official statements, casualty numbers, and commentary from influencers, journalists, and open-source investigators. Once an early interpretation took hold, it shaped diplomatic rhetoric, protest mobilization, and expectations about proportionality. Even when later evidence complicated the picture, many audiences still treated the first interpretation as the

baseline.

## Case Example: The al-Ahli Hospital Blast and Conflicting Attribution

The explosion at al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza City on October 17, 2023, became a defining example of how first narratives can harden before facts stabilize. Within hours, competing claims about responsibility spread globally, including confident assertions made before investigators had access to the scene and physical evidence. Later assessments diverged. An [Associated Press visual investigation](#) judged the most likely scenario to be a rocket launched from within Gaza that malfunctioned and landed near the hospital, while also noting the limits of definitive forensic proof. [Human Rights Watch](#) reported that the available evidence pointed to an apparent rocket-propelled munition striking the hospital grounds, similar to weapons used by Palestinian armed groups, and said more investigation was needed to determine who launched it. Other open-source analysts also challenged elements of widely circulated Israeli claims and offered alternative interpretations, showing how disputed evidence can become part of the information fight ([Forensic Architecture's analysis](#)).

Regardless of where one lands on attribution, the influence lesson is consistent. The information environment rewards speed, but the costs of getting it wrong can be strategic. The incident triggered immediate diplomatic pressure and public mobilization, and later clarifications struggled to fully displace early beliefs, a pattern noted in evidence-based guidance on countering disinformation ([Countering Disinformation Effectively](#)). For both Israel and Hamas, the episode shows a recurring constraint. Credibility depends not only on accuracy, but also on whether audiences believe an actor can provide timely, verifiable support. In high-visibility war, the advantage often goes to whoever shapes the first narrative quickly and backs it with verifiable material before uncertainty hardens into common knowledge ([DoD OIE Strategy \(2023\)](#)).

## Platforms and Verification

A second factor shaping influence was platform governance. The Gaza war produced a flood of content, including authentic footage, staged material, miscaptioned clips, and outright fabrications. The volume quickly outpaced what journalists, NGOs, and ordinary users could verify in real time. A [TIME report](#) in the early weeks described how misleading claims spread widely across social media, especially on X, where changes to verification and moderation made credibility harder to judge. Regulators treated this mix of disinformation and violent content as a platform risk issue, not just an information problem. In December 2023, the European Commission opened formal Digital Services Act proceedings against X, focusing on obligations such as risk management, transparency, and data access ([European Commission press release](#)).

These developments matter because social platforms are not neutral channels. Recommendation feeds, moderation rules, and credibility signals shape what people see first and what stays in circulation. Actors who understand those incentives can keep attention through repetition, emotionally charged content, and influencer amplification, even when claims are disputed. By contrast, actors who rely on slower, evidence-heavy releases often arrive after the first narrative has already spread. Put differently, the Gaza information fight was not only Israel and Hamas competing with each other. It was also shaped by platform design and by outside validators who helped determine what counted as credible.

## Validators and Proof

A defining feature of the Gaza information space was the role of third-party validators. Open-source investigators, humanitarian organizations, foreign intelligence services, and platform-native communities all contributed to rapid, ad hoc verification. They did more than comment after the fact. Their judgments influenced what others treated as credible, and their threads often traveled farther than official statements, especially when they included visuals, geolocation, or clear timelines.

Both Israel and Hamas tried to benefit from this ecosystem, sometimes indirectly. Israel's releases often appeared packaged for journalists and open-source researchers to reuse, while Hamas-aligned channels pushed material designed for activist amplification and sympathetic media pickup. The result was a layered contest over proof. Claims generated counterclaims, followed by disputes over whether videos, audio clips, or documents were authentic. In many episodes, what became "accepted" depended less on who spoke first and more on which credible validator produced a usable assessment soonest.

## Credibility Without Reach, Reach Without Credibility

Israel's credibility-first approach landed best with institutional audiences. Governments and major newsrooms often rely on official statements, stable timelines, and evidence they can cross-check. Online, that same discipline did not always translate into reach. Formal briefings and legal framing tend to move more slowly than emotionally charged content, and supporting material often appears after a narrative has already taken hold ([TIME report](#)). That created a hard tradeoff. Actors faced pressure to provide timely, verifiable support without compromising classified information or operational security ([DoD OIE Strategy \(2023\)](#)).

Hamas often gained early traction online by moving fast and using emotionally powerful imagery, especially in the opening phase when attention was highest. But reach did not automatically translate

into lasting legitimacy. As fact-checking and open-source review progressed, some claims lost momentum, and many audiences began to tune out under a constant stream of graphic content ([DFRLab analysis](#)). Emotional intensity can rally supporters, but it can also harden opponents and limit coalition-building beyond already sympathetic communities. Over time, this style of messaging tends to lose force unless it is reinforced by material that can withstand scrutiny.

It is worth resisting a simple binary. Israel has also used emotionally powerful imagery, especially in the days after October 7, 2023, to convey threat and justify military action. Hamas and allied channels sometimes adopted a more official tone, issuing statements and casualty figures to project credibility. In practice, both sides mixed emotional appeal with credibility signaling. The broader point is straightforward. Influence works best when speed is matched with proof and when messaging aligns with what audiences can see.

## **Fatigue, Misinformation, and Endurance**

The third mechanism was endurance. The Gaza conflict brought sustained exposure to distressing content and constant arguments over facts. Over time, many audiences became tired and more selective about what they noticed and what they believed. In that environment, influence depends less on answering every claim and more on choosing which narratives actually change behavior, such as diplomatic positioning, humanitarian access, escalation thresholds, or partner cohesion. Evidence-based guidance on countering disinformation makes a similar point. Effective responses are targeted and proportionate rather than maximalist ([Countering Disinformation Effectively](#)).

Fatigue is not only emotional. It is also cognitive and practical. When people face a nonstop stream of allegations, many fall back on identity cues, trusting sources that match prior beliefs and dismissing those that do not. Over time, credibility becomes harder to recover. Actors who lose trust early often see later evidence waved away as propaganda, while actors known for timely transparency are more likely to get the benefit of the doubt when events are unclear. The lesson is uncomfortable but practical. Credibility is an operational asset that can be protected, rebuilt, or squandered.

## **Practical Takeaways**

The Gaza case points to three practical takeaways. First, influence cannot be added after the first headlines. It has to be planned alongside operations, because the first hour or two after a major incident often sets the narrative baseline that shapes everything that follows ([DoD OIE Strategy \(2023\)](#)). Second, messaging and behavior must reinforce each other. Emotional content can grab attention, but legitimacy erodes quickly when actions repeatedly contradict the story being told. Third, influence

must be tailored to distinct audiences. Operations in the information environment are designed to affect behavior by informing audiences and influencing relevant actors, and the information environment is shaped by social, cultural, linguistic, and psychological factors ([CRS OIE primer](#)). In practice, that means adjusting tone and proof to domestic, regional, and Western audiences, each of which responds to different cues and has different tolerances for uncertainty, violence, and ambiguity.

These lessons also reflect how the digital infrastructure of modern life shapes influence. Commercial platforms and cloud services have become strategic terrain, and control of digital presence can multiply political leverage. RAND frames this competition as part of a broader strategic rivalry ([Digital Infrastructure and Digital Presence](#)). NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence likewise documents how state and nonstate actors use social media to support hybrid objectives ([Social Media as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare](#)).

## Recommendations

- **Prepare for the first hours.** Have a short incident playbook that acknowledges uncertainty, outlines a rapid evidence-review process, and sets clear rules for what to release and when.
- **Track speed and effects, not vanity metrics.** Track how quickly you set the first narrative, how quickly you can support key claims with verifiable material, and how long false claims persist.
- **Write for different audiences without contradicting yourself.** Produce separate products for institutional audiences (sourced, restrained, verifiable) and networked publics (short, visual, shareable), while keeping core claims consistent.
- **Engage selectively.** Move fast when a narrative is likely to change real behavior, such as diplomacy, humanitarian access, escalation risks, or partner cohesion. Avoid amplifying fringe claims that grow mainly through attention.
- **Treat platforms like terrain.** Know which platforms shape which audiences, cultivate credible outside validators, and anticipate how policy changes can alter reach.
- **Plan for fatigue.** Vary formats, avoid relying on graphic escalation, and prioritize updates tied to decisions and observable actions rather than constant commentary.
- **Protect credibility.** Be clear about what you know and what you do not. Correct errors quickly and avoid absolute claims when evidence is incomplete.

## Conclusion

The influence contest in Gaza shows that legitimacy is not something to manage after the fighting. It shapes what states and armed groups can do in real time, including the diplomatic space available to them and the constraints they face. Israel and Hamas each showed a different strength. Credibility and

evidence can steady institutional support, while speed and emotional resonance can shape early perception online. Neither approach is sufficient on its own. In future high-visibility conflicts, the advantage will go to actors that plan influence alongside operations, move quickly without outrunning the facts, and keep messaging aligned with what audiences can observe.

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