

## Winning the Operational Air Campaign, But Losing the Information War: The Israeli Air Force's X Narratives

### Description

*Editor's note: This article is part of Project Air Power, which explores and advocates for the totality of air, aviation, and space power in the irregular, hybrid, and gray-zone environments. We invite you to contribute to the discussion, explore the difficult questions, and help influence the future of air and space power. Please contact us at <https://irregularwarfare.org/tag/air-power/> if you would like to propose an article, podcast, or event.*

In the week before Hamas undertook a brutal terrorist operation against Israel, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) feed on X (Twitter) understandably contented itself with the usual topics of air forces around the world. On October 3, avid followers could download attractive pictures of airplanes on [Wallpaper Wednesday](#).<sup>•</sup> Another [post](#) wished a happy Independence Day to its air force friends in Germany while [one](#) showed both female and male airmen walking on the flight line while celebrating <sup>•</sup>Mean Girls Day,<sup>•</sup> a reference to the U.S. movie of the same name. The IAF posted each tweet in English, suggesting its attempts to reach a bilingual audience at home or perhaps even more a Western audience abroad. Of the three tweets, the most popular<sup>•</sup> the IAF's well wishes to the German Air Force<sup>•</sup> received a total of almost 200,000 views. The sole post in Hebrew that day netted the lowest [views](#) at about 10,800.

### Picture

Since the attacks on October 7, the IAF has shown a different face to the world, which, in some ways, is understandable, given the circumstances, yet in other ways, remains troubling. Once well-known for the warnings it provided to civilians by the so-called tactic of <sup>•</sup>knocking on the roof,<sup>•</sup> the IAF has now [abandoned](#) that cautious [approach as official policy in the wake of Hamas's terrorist attacks, except in rare circumstances](#).

Now, it increasingly looks like the IDF has rolled back the clock to an era before collateral damage concerns muddled one of the original intents of precision weapons: more efficient destruction of targets. In one 12-second video from the IAF, they [show](#) the impact of a bomb followed by an enormous cloud of smoke, suggesting an entire building's destruction. Setting aside the tremendous ethical implications of potentially [flattening](#) one-fourth or more of Gaza, as some

journalists have [suggested](#) while citing United Nations reports, much of the IAF's X campaign serves as an example of what not to do in the age of social media weaponization. This approach has further isolated Israel from Western supporters with an almost total elimination of English-language tweets.

### **The IAF's X Campaign in Response to the Hamas Attack on October 7**

The IAF initially responded to the horrific Hamas attacks in a measured and brief way. Though posted only in Hebrew, translating the IAF's posts is as simple as allowing Google Translate to provide English text almost instantaneously, which resulted in ["The Air Force is now attacking targets of the terrorist organization Hamas in the Gaza Strip. More details to come."](#) Whatever the limitations of Google Translate might be, this article deems all results of Google Translate as "accurate" because they represent how recipients read the message rather than reflect the message the IAF intended to send. In other words, any public relations campaign must be deft and agile to ensure that the message can be conveyed clearly and not get lost in translation among key audiences who speak different languages.

Subsequent tweets that day disseminated more problematic messages, as IAF quickly amplified its response by mismatching its videos and its wording while showing the deaths of individual people. About two hours after its initial response, the IAF posted a subsequent update in [Hebrew](#) followed by one in [English](#) announcing that "dozens" of aircraft had begun counterattacking Hamas. Less than three hours later, anyone could view the [results](#) of those attacks, including direct hits on vehicles presumably filled with Hamas terrorists. Only one hour later it posted another tweet in Hebrew, this one claiming to have "attacked 17 military compounds and 4 operational headquarters." The accompanying minute-long video, however, primarily showed [individuals](#) being targeted. First, the headline's focus on buildings did not match the video's emphasis on people. Second, the viewer was expected to assume that the casualties were legitimate targets and not innocent civilians caught in the wrong place at the wrong time in one of the most densely urban populations in the world; a leap of faith that would likely not be taken in the emotionally charged information warfare ecosystem.

This is not the first time Israel has made significant [missteps](#) in the information arena. In May of 2021, the IAF bombed a building in Gaza after determining through the tactic of ["knocking on the roof"](#) that two foreign newspapers had offices there, a decision that Israel deemed legal by international law although a few advisors dissented, worrying about "PR damage." The IDF subsequently posted videos showing the building before and after being destroyed, a move that Hidai Zilberman, the IDF's spokesperson at the time, opposed. Taken together, this event led some to conclude that Israel lacked a deft touch with public affairs.

## Searching for Narratives of Precision and Proportionality

[Based on media reports](#) during the first three weeks of the campaign, the IAF was hard to distinguish as a Western air force seeking to wage precision air war. If one wanted to accept the Israelis' claim that the media was biased, however, one would only have to examine the IAF's X feed to see the likelihood of vast civilian casualties. In the days after the initial attack, the videos showed entire buildings being destroyed. On October 8, for example, the IAF tweeted a motivational [post](#) about Israeli airmen "continuing with all their might," showing men and women preparing fighter aircraft. While one might view this post as an understandable attempt to shore up morale at home, the fact that Israel tweeted this post only in English suggests it was intended for foreign audiences. Another post on that day included the first official response by an IDF spokesperson, offering the [explanation](#) that, "Our Air Force is attacking hundreds of Hamas and Islamic Jihad targets in Gaza. We follow international law, while exercising our right and responsibility to protect our civilians."

However, the posts' imagery did not reinforce suggestions of respect for the principle of proportionality. It is true that proportionality or the idea that damage to human life and property must not be "excessive" in proportion to the expected military advantage is difficult to [quantify](#). But this subjective evaluation can be placed against the IAF's own self-selected video footage. A few hours after an IDF spokesperson stressed adherence to international law, the IAF's X feed released a multiple-tweet thread explaining how the IAF had [struck](#) 150 targets in Shuja'iyya, one of Hamas's "terror nest[s]." Recorded from a significant distance away, the accompanying video merely displays a series of consecutive explosions, which undermines the IDF spokesperson's claims of adherence to international law and misses an opportunity to reinforce their message with more thoughtfully chosen footage. The next post also failed in this manner, with the translation from Hebrew to English [stating](#) that the IAF had used "[a]bout a hundred tons of ammunition." 100 tons of bombs is equivalent to 200,000 pounds of bombs. Taking the average bomb as being a 500-pound bomb, this bombload equates to 400 bombs dropped that day, raising questions as to the extent to which the IAF had up-to-date intelligence and proper time for targeting. Accompanying photos also showed entire buildings placed in "red" prior to destruction, with a small target symbol placed over each in case the viewer might have any doubt as to the buildings' fate.

Expecting Israel to achieve the same level of precision as the U.S., which has demonstrated the capability to destroy targets while preserving nearby structures, might be considered unreasonable by some, who suggest that the public's standard for precision weapons has become too high. Mike Benitez and Mike Pietrucha, for example, [argue](#) that the "unanticipated product of the precision revolution was the mistaken belief that these weapons could be used to make warfare less messy by limiting collateral damage." And, admittedly, despite its high standard for precision, the U.S. has also

failed in its precision targeting due to improperly vetted intelligence, among other targeting and tactical [errors](#).

Regardless of whether the IAF has access to enough precision weapons to employ them a majority of the time, there is something that is completely in its control: projecting consistent imagery of precise operations. Yet, a video from October 9, shared multiple times on its [feed](#), showing the [collapse](#) of several adjacent, apartment-sized buildings, indicates that the IAF does not want to promote a narrative of precision. This is further supported by another video released the same day, which, by zooming out to show a broad swath of Gaza, reveals extensive [destruction](#) of large buildings. Two additional posts on October 9—one an English-subtitled video and one in Hebrew, demonstrated a desire to reach both of its target audiences. Both [videos](#) showed the destruction of large buildings. The footage contains added wording, most of which received labels like “military headquarters” before showing attacks on what are problematically labeled as “high-rise buildings,” opening the IAF to criticism for attacking civilian instead of military targets. It is correct to point out that Hamas deliberately uses civilian infrastructure as a kind of protection for its facilities. The point, though, is that the IAF has a choice about the narratives it disseminates, and it could make smarter decisions regarding precision, especially if it wanted to retain public support across the globe.

#### Picture

Subsequent tweets, some accompanied by video, only raised further and unhelpful questions about how carefully the IAF was planning and launching attacks against Gaza. One video showed repeated strikes and highlighted a targeting crosshair and a subsequent explosion. These were intended to demonstrate precision, but other clips from the video seemed to suggest bombs had gone [astray](#). Even more troubling was the IAF’s October 12 tweet where it [self-reported](#) that it dropped [6000](#) bombs since the terrorist attack, with no emphasis on precision or effect. The IAF failed to demonstrate any actual productive [effects](#) resulting from the strikes. Moreover, anti-Israeli commentators quickly compared it to the U.S.-led coalition dropping 5000 bombs per month at the peak of its [air war against ISIS](#), and suggesting the IAF was carpet bombing Gaza. As recently as October 20, for example, the IAF [claimed](#) to have destroyed dozens of “operational headquarters.” Close followers of the IAF may perhaps be forgiven for wondering how many operational [headquarters](#) Hamas [can possibly have](#).

The same day it even tweeted an image of a fighter aircraft with bombs that appear to be [unguided](#), a story that multiple Western news organizations quickly disseminated, including [Business Insider](#). Journalists subsequently gave Israel the opportunity to set the matter straight, but it declined to [comment](#). It is one thing to struggle with an opponent regarding truth in information battles. It is another to generate one’s own self-generated soundbite that undercuts claims the IAF makes on and [off](#) X about precision difficult to believe.

## Continuity and Change in the IAF's X Narrative, October 2023-March 2024

Videos of destroyed buildings continue to dominate the IAF's X feed. IAF also shows some specific defensive actions in [response](#) to rocket attacks by Hamas and Hezbollah. The IDF's most popular Tweets combine short messages stressing defending the homeland with attractive photographs of fighter jets. A tweet of this type on October 19 received 433,000 views, with another similar one receiving about 230,000 views. Fighters are apparently more evocative than air defense weapons, with one tweet comparatively receiving about 50,000 [views](#), which aligns with a rough average for the IAF's tweets since the campaign began.

### Picture

Since the first weeks of the campaign, the IAF's approach has not changed significantly except in one important area. It continues to showcase repeated photographs of aircraft, many in settings removed from combat. It also continues to highlight its destruction of [buildings](#). However, since January, it now almost always posts exclusively in Hebrew. The rare Tweets in English focus on conveying [messages](#) of [precision](#), which is difficult to reconcile with the satellite [imagery](#) of Gaza today. Having not tweeted in English in almost six weeks now shows an increasingly self-isolated IAF that rarely bothers to connect with a broader audience.

Information is a strategic weapon and militaries must include those who decide how to convey and disseminate information in the highest planning circles. They should also provide the decision makers the tools to respond as quickly and effectively as possible with truthful, accurate, and effective information. It is also important to establish and maintain a level of [trustworthiness](#), a past shortcoming that may have undermined the credibility of Israel's self-reporting.

## Conclusion

Apart from a few tweets that sought to personalize the war by highlighting Israeli airmen and how Hamas's brutal attack has shaped the course of their lives, the dominant narrative of the IAF's X thread was to showcase [explosions](#) of entire buildings that seem to belie any attempts at proportionality or precision. The IAF's use of information has not come across as well-tuned and appears to ignore the necessity of winning global hearts and minds. Instead, by showing an air campaign that many perceive as lacking precision and proportionality, the IAF comes across as seeking revenge against the Palestinian people—exactly the wrong narrative it should be sending. In an era of strategic competition in an interconnected world, the IAF's messaging undercuts the emphasis democracies have placed on reducing collateral damage in what is an increasingly urban battlespace.

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It is understandable that the nation of Israel is hurting after Hamas's October 7 attacks, but the IAF's actions reinforced by its own clumsy narrative might eventually undermine Israel's strongest [supporters](#). The IAF failed to craft its narratives of airpower for Western audiences. As some have [argued](#), successful insurgents, and now successful counter-insurgents, seek to persuade an audience in such a way that the political message delivered is an end in itself. Israel may or may not achieve its operational goal of destroying Hamas, but it is well on the way to losing the strategic information war.

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*These views do not represent the Department of Defense, the U.S. Air Force, nor Air University.*

*Main image: An Israeli F-35I Adir assigned to 140 Squadron, Nevatim Air Base, Israel taxis out for a mission during Red Flag-Nellis 23-2 at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, March 15, 2023. Red Flag is an opportunity to build on the success of JUNIPER OAK 23-2, JUNIPER FALCON, and additional combined exercises to enhance interoperability with Israel, strengthen bilateral cooperation, and improve capabilities in ways that enhance and promote regional stability and reinforce the United States' enduring commitment to Israel's security. (U.S. Air Force photo by William R. Lewis)*

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