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Memo on the phenomenon of using digital technology to deliberately spread falsehoods and its consequences

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While false allegations and core distortions in the context of political and ideological campaigns have a long history in print media, as well as radio and television, the advent of digital technology and "social media", particularly through Twitter and Facebook, has greatly amplified this problem. The contents of digital technology is disseminated much quicker that in the case of classical media, and the radius of impact is far greater. (Anne Herzberg and Gerald M Steinberg, "IHL 2.0: Is There a Role for Social Media in Monitoring and Enforcement?", *Israel Law Review*, 30 October 2012). Thus, falsehoods spread with a much higher rate, and strategies to refute these allegations before they become "accepted knowledge" require much greater efforts.

In illustrating both the problems and attempted responses, Israel provides an important case study. This country has been the target of a sophisticated and coordinated campaign of delegitimization for many years. This political or "soft power" warfare is conducted on a number of different and coordinated battle-fronts, including the United Nations, powerful NGOs, mainstream media, as well as social (or digital) media platforms. The ammunition used in all of these activities is derived from gross distortions and falsehoods - some deliberate and others repeated without due diligence or fact checking.

Initially, the Israeli government lacked awareness and counter-measures for fighting this soft-power war, particularly in the digital dimension of delegimization. During this early phase (2000-2008), analysis and responses to attacks based on false allegations of war crimes and human rights violations, were led by non-governmental advocacy groups and independent research institutes. At a later stage (beginning in 2009 with the allegations of war crimes published in the discredited Goldstone report), the government became increasingly involved, with mixed results.

Many of the initial counter-strategies that were used to respond to the false allegations used techniques that focused on "old media" - print, TV and radio

platforms. Correspondents and networks which were were promoting and repeating the claims, generally based on Palestinian sources, were initially invited to view the Israeli evidence, in the expectation that this would persuade them to desist. This approach often failed, in part because the simple images of Palestinian suffering had stronger impact than complex legal arguments and historical dissertations presented by the Israeli side. Israel was also reluctant to reveal military and intelligence details which clearly showed the preparation of terror attacks to which the IDF was responding. At times, the IDF prevented access of journalists to areas of fighting, declaring them to be closed military zones. In retaliation, journalists wrote articles based on sources that were even more hostile to Israel.

A second approach was to prepare and publish detailed counter-reports on security incidents and military actions to contrast with the misleading or distorted media versions. After the 2009 Goldstone Report, the Israeli MFA, IDF and Ministry of Justice cooperated in publishing refutations of allegations of war crimes and other allegations. In the process, a careful balance was sought between refuting the false claims and avoiding publication of sensitive military information, as well as intelligence sources. But these detailed documents came months after the news cycle had ended and they received little attention.

At a later stage, Israel moved to reprimanding or revoking press credentials of selected journalists found to be publishing particularly outrageous falsehood, including at one stage, the BBC. The successes of this punitive approach were limited, both due to criticism based on alleged interference with the principle of journalistic freedom, and the failure to deal with digital media.

In contrast, the recent efforts of the Israeli authorities to counter demonizing digital or social media campaigns have generally had greater success. Israel entered the digital media theater early in the process, creating accounts and activities using bloggers, on Facebook and on Twitter for the IDF at different levels, and at the political leadership level. During rounds of fighting in Gaza (2008/9, 2012, 2014), the official social media posts were seen to have important impacts, despite early failures of judgement and inexperience, particularly in the military branches.

The 2010 "Mavi Marmara" incident marked an early test of this methodology, with some improvement in the situation. In this case, a group of activists, including some connected to a terror organization, used ships originating from Turkey in a well-publicized effort to challenge the Israeli blockade against Hamas-controlled Gaza. Israel understood that the purpose of this action was to embarrass the IDF and spread a false image of the blockade, and they prepared a digital media strategy. However, following an unanticipated military confrontation, the activists were able to disseminate their narrative immediately, while the IDF spokesperson acted more slowly in order to ensure accuracy in their reports. Nevertheless, for the first time, the Israeli version of events received parallel attention,and the major distortions were challenged.

An examination of this case highlights the importance of links between terror organizations and the use of digital media manipulation and false allegations.

In a wider framework, we see that non-state terror groups such as ISIS and Hezbollah use digital platforms to promote their agendas, and to wage psychological warfare. (See Prof Greg Rose "Terrorism Financing in Foreign Conflict Zones", *Counter-Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, Nanyang Technology University, February 2018). Effective methods for countering these digital assaults are being sought by the United States, the UK, European Union, members of NATO, and other governments, as well as Israel.

Through continued trials of different tools and strategies, the effectiveness of these efforts increased, and in many cases, successfully countered the digital media falsehoods used against Israel. A number of the official Facebook and Twitter accounts, including embassies and ministries) have thousands of followers (Prime Minister Netanyahu has more than 1.3 million), and the quick and substantive engagement regarding ongoing issues has given these platforms a high level of visibility and impact. False allegations are quickly challenged on Twitter and Facebook posts, reducing the visibility and impact of these claims.

The government also began to impose limitations on virulently hostile political advocacy NGOs which work closely with the media (see Matti Friedman,What the Media Gets Wrong About Israel, *Atlantic*) and are cited as "reliable sources". NGOs are also active in the distortion of international and human rights practices, creating the image of expertise which is highly controversial and exaggerated. (See for example "Examining the NGO Security Discourse on Urban Warfare", Anne Herzberg, Professor Gerald M. Steinberg, Josh Bacon, **Israel Yearbook on Human Rights,** Volume 46, 2016)

In response to this perceived threat, the government published a list barring officials of 20 organizations involved in demonizing and delegitimizing Israel from entering the country. Other measures designed to restrict external funds, particularly from foreign governments, from reaching allied Israeli radical organizations, have been considered but not adopted.

Another dimension concerns the role of a number of Israeli ideological and political advocacy NGOs that give credibility to the false allegations and distortions, particularly . These groups are largely funded by foreign governments and private foundations, providing a few individuals with major resources. Because they are Israeli, their "reports" are given credibility by journalists, foreign government officials, the United Nations and others. In the effort to counter these groups and their claims, government officials and political opponents have challenged their reliability. (See Gerald M. Steinberg, "Soft Powers Play Hardball: NGOs Wage War against Israel", **Israel Affairs**: Vol 12, No 4)

The successes of these legal measures are unclear, and in some ways, enabled such groups to portray themselves as innocent victims, using this status to raise funds, improve their image, and exert greater influence, particularly through the media and foreign diplomats. The Israeli government limitations were denounced as anti-democratic and "McCarthyite", further damaging the image of Israel.

At the same time, and perhaps more importantly, a number of unofficial and civil society groups, as well as research institutes, became active in exposing the false claims used in soft-power campaigns of demonization targeting Israel. These groups are more capable of confronting media and NGO bias, in large part because they are not seen as using state power and coercion. Non-political groups are not tainted by suspicions of promoting partisan domestic interests or candidates, and generally more flexible in terms of agendas and tactics than is the case with official government bodies, particularly in terms of digital platforms that are run by the military.

The applicability of the Israeli experience to Singapore in this area requires a detailed analysis and comparison of the situations. There are some clear parallels, as well as significant differences.