Political Manipulation of the Israel-Hamas Conflict on WhatsAppp in India

Kiran Garimella[1], Bharat Nayak[2]

[1]Rutgers University
[2]Independent Journalist
kiran.garimella@rutgers.edu, bharatnayak34@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the unexpected impact of the Israel-Hamas conflict on social media discourse on WhatsApp in India. Even though India is not a direct stakeholder in the conflict, we uncover a substantial, orchestrated campaign disseminating extreme hate speech and misinformation. Our analysis reveals a deliberate use of the conflict to propagate anti-Muslim rhetoric, bolstering pro-Israel and pro-BJP narratives, likely for political advantage in electoral contexts. The paper delves into the consequences of such practices, highlighting the unique challenges posed by encrypted messaging platforms: their lack of moderation and susceptibility to exploitation by politically motivated actors. We discuss the adeptness of political entities in manipulating narratives, underscoring the far-reaching effects of local narratives in a globally connected environment, and prompting a reevaluation of the role and responsibility of encrypted social platforms in political discourse.

1 Introduction

The central problem this research addresses is the unexpected and significant impact of the Israel-Hamas conflict on social media discourse within India, a nation not directly involved in the conflict. Our focus is on WhatsApp, a widely used encrypted messaging platform, where we have identified a substantial, orchestrated campaign spreading hate speech and misinformation. This phenomenon is particularly alarming given the platform's nature, where content remains unmoderated and encrypted, allowing narratives to proliferate unchecked.

The importance of this issue lies in its potential to influence social and political perspectives in India, especially significant given the country's considerable Muslim minority. This situation becomes even more critical considering the global influence of these narratives. India's position as a major player on the world stage, combined with its significant English-speaking population, means that the content generated has far-reaching implications beyond its borders.

Addressing this problem is challenging due to the very nature of WhatsApp. Its encryption ensures user privacy but also makes monitoring and moderating content difficult. Traditional approaches to tackling misinformation on social media, which rely on content moderation and algorithmic filtering, are ineffective in encrypted environments. This limitation means that misinformation, once introduced into the network, can be repeatedly shared and remain unchallenged, perpetuating false narratives.

Previous attempts to understand social media's role in shaping political and social narratives have primarily focused on open, public platforms like Facebook and Twitter. However, these methods are not directly transferable to WhatsApp, where data accessibility is severely limited due to encryption. This research gap signifies why the problem has not been comprehensively addressed before and highlights the necessity of our approach, which adapts to the unique challenges posed by encrypted messaging platforms.

Our analysis builds on data collected by (Garimella and Chauchard 2024), consisting of over 1,000 WhatsApp groups obtained through a data donation program in India. Using this rich dataset, we obtained 824 viral pieces of content spreading on WhatsApp following the October 7 attack by Hamas on Israel. We used a mixed-methods approach to code the narratives present in the WhatsApp conversations. We identified various themes: pro-Israel narratives portraying Israel and India as allies, narratives depicting Muslims in India as internal threats, content that dehumanizes Palestinian suffering, and narratives attacking opposition parties for supporting Palestine. Additionally, we observe propaganda that leverages these narratives to support the BJP's electoral goals. A key component of our research is the analysis of the implications of these narratives on the social fabric of India and their potential global influence.

This study explores the challenge of misinformation on WhatsApp, where encryption both protects privacy and hinders content moderation. In India, this creates a fertile ground for the spread of misinformation, significantly affecting its complex social structure. This issue is not confined locally due to the potential global spread of narratives by Indian influencers, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of these effects in our interconnected world.

The research underscores the significant consequences of spreading divisive content against India's Muslim minority, the third-largest globally, which could destabilize communal harmony. It calls for a reevaluation of the roles and responsibilities of encrypted messaging platforms in political discourse, stressing the need for innovative strategies to

mitigate harmful narratives in such encrypted environments. This is crucial in addressing the dual imperatives of maintaining privacy and controlling misinformation in today's digital landscape.

2 Background and Related Work

2.1 Background

WhatsApp's architecture, featuring end-to-end encryption, presents unique challenges and opportunities within the context of information dissemination during conflicts. This encryption ensures user privacy and security by making messages decipherable only by the communicating users, with no possibility for the platform itself to access the content. This feature, while crucial for protecting user privacy, complicates efforts to monitor and moderate misinformation, allowing narratives to spread rapidly and without oversight.

The use of WhatsApp to propagate political content in India is extensive, particularly within the BJP's support base (Garimella and Eckles 2020). Unlike Twitter, where misinformation can be spread through mechanisms like retweets and quotes by verified accounts and influencers, WhatsApp lacks such broadcast features. The platform does not support influencers in the traditional sense, as all content spread is inherently peer-to-peer. This means that most information dissemination on WhatsApp is organic, driven by users sharing messages within their personal and community networks (Trauthig, Martin, and Woolley 2024). This method of spread makes WhatsApp a potent tool for grassroots-level narrative building and mobilization (Trauthig and Woolley 2023).

Significant research has been conducted on the role of verified accounts and those with numerous followers in spreading misinformation on platforms like Twitter. However, the dynamics on WhatsApp are fundamentally different. The absence of a broadcasting mechanism means that the spread of misinformation, while still extensive, relies on a more decentralized and organic model. This model poses unique challenges for tracking and mitigating the spread of false or hateful information, as it taps into personal and localized networks, making the narratives more resonant and harder to counteract effectively (Gursky et al. 2022).

2.2 Related work

Israel-Hamas conflict over the years. In the evolving landscape of contemporary conflict, the role of social media has become increasingly central, not just as a battlefield for arms but as a crucial arena for narrative control. The importance of this digital battleground has been documented extensively across various conflicts, revealing how different actors leverage social media to shape perceptions and appeal to both local and international audiences.

Seo et al. (Seo 2014) found that Israel and Hamas utilized distinct thematic and emotional frames to influence public perception through social media. Israeli posts predominantly employed an analytical propaganda frame focusing on themes of resistance and unity, whereas Hamas posts were more likely to use an emotional frame, emphasizing civilian casualties and resistance efforts. This strate-

gic use of imagery and messaging underlines the deliberate approaches both parties employ to sway international sentiment and gain support.

During the 2014 Gaza Conflict, (Zhang 2017) delved deeper into the evolution of Hamas's political marketing, tracing how the group's themes changed over time in response to shifting local and international attitudes. This study underscores the dynamic nature of propaganda efforts in wartime, adapting continuously to the changing landscape of public opinion and international diplomacy.

(Zeitzoff 2017) further expands on the transformative impact of social media on conflicts. They argue that social media not only reduces communication costs and increases the speed of information dissemination but also changes the strategic interaction among conflict parties. These changes necessitate a new approach from scholars and policymakers, who must consider how the rapid spread of information influences the course of the conflict itself.

Further exploring the international dimensions, (Zeitzoff, Kelly, and Lotan 2015) study how foreign policy networks are engaged through social media platforms, demonstrating how online behaviors can reflect offline political and policy cleavages. They highlights significant similarities in the salience of issues across social media and offline networks.

Lastly, the case of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, as studied by (Carter Olson 2016), illustrates the power of social media to elevate local issues to a global stage. This campaign showed how online communities could mobilize international support for domestic causes, emphasizing the dual role of social media as both an organizational tool and a platform for raising awareness.

Malicious narratives by well resourced actors. The strategic dissemination of propaganda and misinformation by well-resourced actors on a global scale has increasingly become a pivotal element of international relations and domestic politics. These actors, ranging from governmental organizations to individual influencers, utilize sophisticated methods to influence public opinion and political outcomes across borders. The effectiveness of such campaigns has been underscored by several studies, each highlighting different aspects of this complex phenomenon.

A notable example is the Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, as examined by (Jensen 2018). This study assessed Russia's strategic use of misinformation, identifying a significant shift from spreading false informational content to exploiting identity politics. The research highlighted that the Internet Research Agency (IRA), linked to Russia, focused its efforts on shaping perceptions of then-candidate Donald Trump and his opponents, leveraging identity rather than informational claims to stir divisions and influence voter behavior. This approach underlines a broader strategy of targeting the identity and emotional responses of audiences to create divisions and influence political outcomes, rather than merely distorting informational truth.

Similarly, in the Philippines, the use of social media platforms like Facebook has been instrumental in political propaganda, particularly supporting President Duterte. (Karunungan 2022) provides insights into how Duterte's support-

ers employ rhetorical devices and engage in trolling opposition figures and spreading hate speech against media and female politicians. This coordinated action on social media platforms demonstrates how local narratives can be amplified to achieve significant political effects, reinforcing support for the administration while silencing or discrediting opposition voices.

In China, the strategy employed by the government to control public discourse and opinion is characterized by the so-called "50 Cent Army." According to (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017), this group primarily avoids engaging in direct arguments with government skeptics or discussing controversial issues. Instead, their primary role is to distract the public and shift the narrative by propagating positive messages about China, its Communist Party, and its revolutionary history. This approach of distraction rather than direct confrontation highlights a sophisticated method of narrative control that focuses on reinforcing government-sanctioned views and altering the subject of public discourse.

These cases across different countries and contexts illustrate the significant role of well-resourced actors in utilizing social media and other digital platforms to spread propaganda and misinformation. Whether through focusing on identity politics, employing rhetorical tactics to support specific political figures, or strategically diverting public attention, these actors demonstrate the powerful impact of well-orchestrated misinformation campaigns. This global phenomenon not only shapes international perceptions but also has profound implications for democracy, governance, and public trust in media and political institutions.

Misinformation and Hate Speech. The exploration of misinformation and hate speech has intensified considerably in recent years, reflecting growing concerns about their impact on society. Significant scholarly attention has focused on these areas, particularly over the last decade, as demonstrated by studies like those of Paz, Montero-Díaz, and Moreno-Delgado (2020); Siegel (2020) that delve into the mechanics and implications of online hate speech, and works such as Roozenbeek et al. (2020); Persily, Tucker, and Tucker (2020) that provide a comprehensive overview of misinformation dynamics.

Despite this increasing body of research, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the global south, as highlighted by Badrinathan and Chauchard (2023). This gap is even more pronounced when considering platforms like WhatsApp, which, despite their global reach and profound social implications, have not been extensively studied. The research by Chauchard and Garimella (2022) suggests that the overall prevalence of misinformation or hate speech on WhatsApp is relatively low. However, the nuances of how misinformation spreads through WhatsApp, particularly in diverse settings like rural and urban India, are crucial for understanding the broader impacts of these phenomena.

3   Dataset

The dataset utilized in this research was shared by Garimella et al. (Garimella and Chauchard 2024) and was collected through data donations on WhatsApp from 379 users in India, corresponding to 1,094 WhatsApp groups. Garimella et al.'s sampling method aimed to gather a convenience sample, capturing diverse demographics to ensure a representative cross-section of the population. The median size of the groups was 104, indicating that most of them were large groups which discussed issues around political and religious identity, caste, region, etc. The primary focus of the data collection was to maintain privacy and confidentiality; therefore, no personally identifying information such as phone numbers was stored, aligning with ethical research practices. See (Garimella and Chauchard 2024) for more details on the dataset, the anonymization and the ethics protocols followed to obtain the dataset.

To find messages relevant to the Israel-Hamas conflict, a comprehensive search within the dataset for specific keywords related to the conflict, including 'Israel,' 'Hamas,' 'Palestine,' 'Gaza,' 'Hezbollah,' 'Netanyahu,' and their Hindi counterparts. This method allowed for a focused examination of relevant communications circulating within WhatsApp pertaining to the conflict. Recognizing the prevalence of non-textual content in communications –over 60% of the dataset– techniques such as OCR over images and video frames, and transcribing audio from the videos using Whisper (Radford et al. 2023) were employed to extract and search content from images and videos. For videos, frames were captured every 10 seconds and processed using the OCR software Tesseract. This meticulous process resulted in the identification of 824 pieces of content related to the conflict and were viral on WhatsApp,[1] with a significant majority (80%) of the content being in Hindi. Among these, 226 were videos (28%), 282 were images (34%), and the remainder were text messages. The predominance of non-textual content presents challenges for automatic processing, thereby necessitating the adoption of a mixed methods approach.

3.1   Annotation

The annotation was meticulously carried out by a journalist with extensive experience in the field of fact-checking. Fluent in Hindi and possessing a deep understanding of the cultural context within which these WhatsApp groups operate, the journalist was well-equipped to identify and interpret the nuanced content circulating on the platform. To facilitate the annotation process, special software was developed specifically for this project. This software was designed to not only search and retrieve content relevant to our study but also to display this content within its original context. Given the conversational nature of WhatsApp, viewing messages in their full context was essential for understanding the implications and intent behind the content, which might otherwise be missed or misinterpreted if viewed in isolation.

Throughout the annotation process, the journalist worked closely with the research team. Any ambiguities or uncertainties that arose during the annotation were discussed collaboratively, ensuring a comprehensive and informed approach to data interpretation. The coding of the data was

---

[1]Viral content refers to material that has been forwarded multiple times on WhatsApp, specifically content that was forwarded five hops from the source.

conducted using an inductive approach. Initially, categories were developed based on emerging themes and patterns observed in the data. As the analysis progressed, these categories were continually refined and merged, allowing for a dynamic and responsive coding scheme that accurately reflected the complex and evolving nature of the content. Each piece of content could belong to multiple categories. We ended up with 7 major themes for the content in our dataset (shown in Figure 2). We also annotated the groups in which the content was shared. The categories of groups we found is shown in Figure 3. The code book and the raw coded data from this study will be made publicly available upon the publication of our findings.

3.2 Initial Analysis

We first start by describing our dataset of 824 messages. Figure 1 shows the time of sharing. We can clearly see a drastic increase in messages immediately starting after October 7, 2023 being shared along with the sustained nature of it for over 3 months.
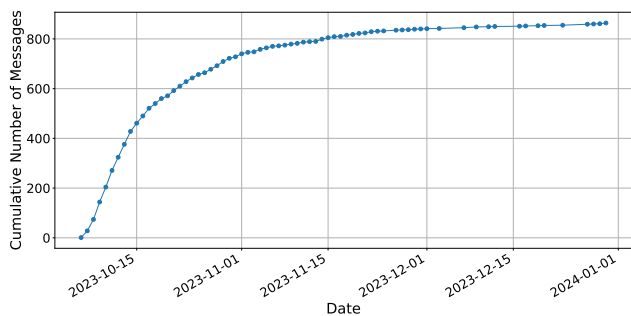

Figure 1: Timeline of messages relating to the Israel-Hamas conflict being shared on WhatsApp.
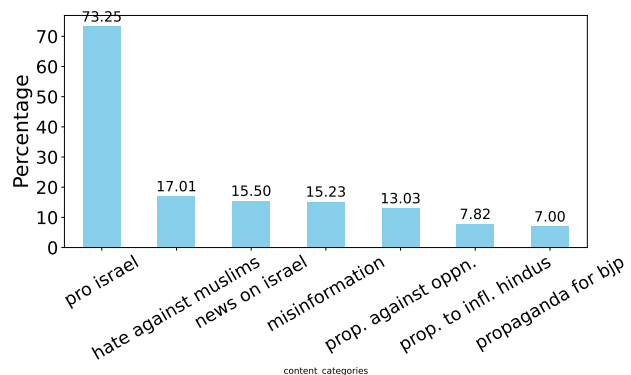

Figure 2: Categories of content. The numbers do not add up to 100 because the categories can be overlapping.

Figure 3 shows the groups in which the content was shared. Interestingly, a significant chunk of the messages were shared in regional and Hindutva related groups. Only 4% of the messages were shared as news, reporting the incidents happening in Gaza.
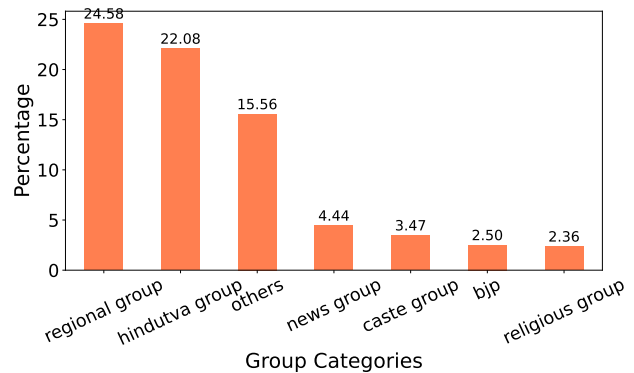

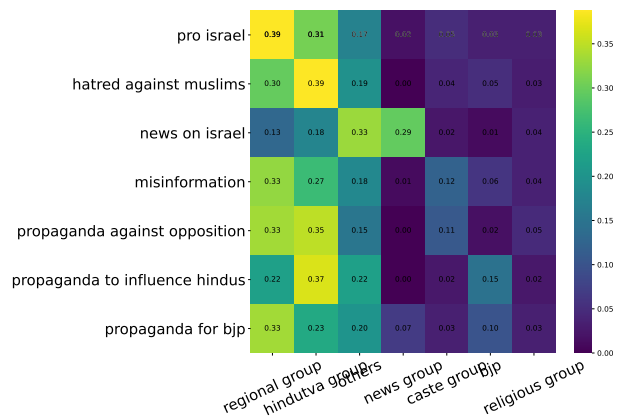Figure 3: groups in which the content was shared

Figure 4: Heatmap of content categories and groups the content is shared in.

Figure 4 presents a 2x2 matrix of content and group categories, revealing several noteworthy trends in the dissemination of content within WhatsApp groups. Notably, approximately 40% of pro-Israel content is distributed within regional groups that lack a specific political affiliation. In contrast, a significant portion of anti-Muslim content is prevalent in Hindutva groups, which, while not officially affiliated with the BJP, support its ideology, suggesting a substantial influence exerted by the BJP. Furthermore, even though groups explicitly affiliated with the BJP might not be highly active, they still disseminate a considerable amount of content (around 20%) aimed at influencing Hindu narratives.

4 Narratives

We uncovered a sustained campaign on WhatsApp that involved multiple narratives, suggesting a strategic, top-down push to shape public opinion. This campaign was characterized by the persistent use of fear speech (Saha et al. 2023), which played on the anxieties of Hindu recipients. The messaging tactics employed were sophisticated, using fear as a lever to galvanize support and manipulate public sentiment. A striking aspect of the data was the overwhelming skew towards pro-Israel sentiments (over 70% of the messages), with less than 1% of the content expressing pro-Palestine

viewpoints. This distribution highlights a significant bias in the narratives being propagated, indicating that the messages were not just spontaneous expressions of individual opinions but part of a coordinated effort to steer public perception in a particular direction.

We could clearly observe evolution of narratives over time reveals a telling pattern. Initially, there was a universal shock response to the outbreak of the conflict, similar to reactions seen globally. However, this quickly transitioned into narratives of support for Israel, increasing in negativity, with narratives evolving into aggressive expressions of hate. This progression underscores a deliberate intensification and manipulation of sentiments, where initial support morphed into vehement anti-Muslim rhetoric and broader communal antagonism. A recurring theme observed in the later stages of the evolution is the integration of domestic issues with the conflict, suggesting a strategic, top-down effort to promote support for the BJP agenda.

Below, we offer a detailed analysis of the prevalent narratives along with some examples of messages from our dataset. **Please note that the following text may include references to violence and dehumanizing language**. In some instances, the original Hindi text has been translated and paraphrased to mitigate explicit content and reduce the depiction of violence. We discuss the rationale behind documenting and presenting such violent text in Section 5.

4.1 Pro Israel

In recent years, the shift in India's stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict has been notable, particularly with the rise in pro-Israel narratives circulating on WhatsApp. Historically, India had maintained a predominantly pro-Palestine position through its 75 years of existence. However, this stance began to change under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government since 2014. The transformation in public sentiment, particularly among Hindutva supporters, can be attributed to a broader regional political and cultural alignment that perceives Israel as an ally against Islamic extremism. This shift became especially apparent in 2021 during the military escalations in Gaza, where hashtags like #ISupportIsrael and #IndiaWithIsrael gained traction among Indian social media users.

The content disseminated on WhatsApp has played a crucial role in shaping this narrative, as can be seen from Figure 2, with over 70% of the messages belonging to this category. Messages and videos often draw parallels between India and Israel, framing both nations as victims in a broader conflict against Islamic countries. Influential media figures such as Sudhir Chaudhari and various right-wing YouTube influencers have been pivotal in this dissemination. Their narratives frequently capitalize on sensational events to bolster pro-Israel sentiment. Many narratives spread by popular, mainstream journalists focus on graphic and heinous acts allegedly committed by Hamas but was not substantiated by any evidence. These narratives received over 10 million views on Twitter, with possibly a bigger reach on WhatsApp.[2] Such emotive content, effectively stirring strong pro-

---

[2]Tweet by a prominent television personality with over 10 mil-

Israel feelings among those previously less familiar with the nuances of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

> "Hamas has proved that every terrorist in the world is worse than cannibalistic monsters. Israel will give them the right treatment. India should strongly stand by Israel and support them. If they are not treated soon, they will become an issue for us too."

This wave of support for Israel has also intertwined with domestic political ideologies, particularly regarding secularism and national identity. Viral messages on WhatsApp have criticized secularism, claiming that it has hindered India's decision-making, similar to criticisms faced by Israel. Comparisons are often drawn between historical and contemporary political actions of both nations, such as the speed of controversial demolitions. The rhetoric goes further, linking controversial domestic policies of Modi about the Indian military to Israel's military strategies and the successes they've had, effectiveness of israel in the war. including glorifying how indiscriminate they are in achieving their targets. advocating for a robust military posture both externally and internally. Such discussions not only promote a strong pro-Israel viewpoint but also align it with a nationalist agenda, suggesting that true national strength, akin to Israel's, requires uncompromising positions against perceived internal threats.

> "How it took us 500 years to demolish the disputed Babri Masjid but for Israel, it took just 10 days to demolish 50 such structures. The reason it took so much time is because we are a secular country."

Moreover, the narrative extends into cultural parallels between Hindu and Jewish communities, emphasizing shared values and mutual support in geopolitical contexts. This narrative serves to reinforce the alliance not just on a political or military front but as a deeper civilizational linkage. It's evident that WhatsApp has become a significant battleground for shaping public opinion on this issue, leveraging both nationalistic sentiments and international geopolitical perspectives to foster a strong pro-Israel alignment within India.

> "*We waited 500 years to demolish a structure.!* *Israel leveled the ground by demolishing more than 1,000 structures in just 32 days...*" ('structure' referring to Mosques).
> "This is the status of these naked pigs of Hamas 🔥 Israel, you keep feeding, we are with you 🚩🚩"

---

lions views on Twitter: https://archive.is/THT5s Content viral on WhatsApp has to be forwarded at least five hops from the source. Five hops could potentially mean that millions on people were exposed to the content, though the exact number varies based on the structure of the network.

> "We will go to Ayodhya Dham only
> after eliminating the traitors,
> traitors present inside India
> and Somalia, Houthi, Palestine,
> Hamas, Al Qaeda, Jaish-e-Mohammed,
> Lashkar-e-Taiba. 🙏🪔🚩🚩 Jai Jai
> Shri Ram"

> "BREAKING Fearing Israeli army
> I.D.F in the battlefield, Hamas's
> impotent terrorists ran away peeing
> in their pants ✡✡✡"

> "Someone tell the ICC people.
> Please postpone the (Cricket) World
> Cup a bit. At the moment Israel's
> shots are more entertaining ‼️ 😁
> 😁 Stand With Israel 🇮🇳 ✡"

4.2 Muslims in India as a threat

The narrative framing Muslims as a significant threat permeates a significant portion of the messages analyzed, which underscores a stark and confrontational portrayal. Approximately 17% of the messages specifically target Muslims, constructing a narrative that their presence poses a direct existential threat to Hindus. These messages often stereotype Muslims as barbaric, prone to terrorism, and as aggressors against women and children, suggesting that extreme measures, including violence, might be necessary for self-preservation.

> "Of course, many Jihadi thinking
> Muslim fundamentalists or should
> we say, hidden snakes amongst
> ourselves, have come out of their
> holes and started hissing after
> Israel's retaliatory attack... 🤨 🐍
> 🔥🐍🤨 "

The narrative extends to portray all Muslims as inherently untrustworthy and dangerous, trying to instill fear among Hindus (Saha et al. 2023). This is exemplified in the sharing of videos and messages featuring ex-Muslims who criticize Islamic support for Palestine, painting it as part of a broader, innately violent Muslim culture. Such messages often include spurious claims designed to incite fear and justify preemptive aggression, as seen in a shared news article about a hate crime against a Palestinian child, which was twisted to suggest a broader societal endorsement of violence against Muslims.

> "The way our Muslims are supporting
> Hamas today, it is proving that
> Muslims never belong to anyone
> except their own community in
> India. Modi government should send
> these people to Palestine."

> "Muslims understand that because
> they are Muslims, they are
> supporting Hamas. But why are these

> Hindus roaming around with Hamas as
> their brother-in-law? 🤔🤔🤔"

The narratives also exploit genuine fears and grievances, as seen in messages that react to real-world events with escalated rhetoric, suggesting that Muslims, by virtue of their faith, endorse violence, as evidenced by the unverified and sensational claims of Hamas committing atrocities.

> "These are not just terrorists,
> they are also monsters; Israeli
> children were burnt to death by
> Hamas. Remember, this could happen
> to you."

The overarching message is alarmingly clear: Muslims are portrayed not just as outsiders, but as an insidious internal threat, likening the situation in India to Israel's geopolitical position surrounded by hostile territories. This narrative suggests that just as Israel is besieged by external enemies, India is infiltrated by internal ones, equating the local Muslim population with a fifth column within the nation. This is accompanied by warnings that the support for Palestine among Indian Muslims could indicate potential treason in the event of a conflict with Pakistan, drawing parallels between local support for Palestine and potential support for India's long-standing rival. More importantly, there are calls for action, including avoiding buying from Muslim during festivals.

> "While shopping during the upcoming
> festivals, keep in mind that
> the shopkeeper should not be a
> supporter of Hamas and shop only
> from Sanatanis!"

These messages exploit historical tensions and current events to reinforce fear and division, painting a grim picture of a society on the brink of religious and cultural warfare, where Hindus must be vigilant against a portrayed existential threat from their Muslim compatriots. This narrative not only sows division but also potentially incites violence, indicating a disturbing trend in the use of social media platforms like WhatsApp to amplify and spread hate-based ideologies.

> "There is Gaza Strip in every city
> of India and there is a group like
> Hamas...."

> "*Israel is capable, it will deal
> with it...* *You tell me, Hindus,
> how will you survive because the
> people here have also read the same
> book...*" . ('book' being a reference to the
> Quran).

4.3 Propaganda targeted towards Hindus

In conjunction with hate against Muslims, we observed a persistent campaign to leverage and fuel fears among the Hindu population in India. These messages employ alarmist language and scenarios suggesting dire consequences for Hindus if there are political shifts in India. For instance, a particularly potent narrative claims that the removal of Prime

Minister Modi from power would lead to the genocide of Hindus, citing a broader conspiracy involving various international and domestic political forces against Hindus and used to validate fears of a looming threat mirroring the violence observed in Israel.

```
"An attack like Israel can happen
in India any time. 😲 *As soon as
Modi ji steps down, Hindus will be
massacred: From the pen of American
journalist Janet Levy."
```
```
"We were concerned about Palestine
and supported them. We are not
even aware of being second class
citizens in our own like our
temples being destroyed"
```
\- a message showing the destruction of a Hindu temple which was revived under Modi.

Another recurring theme in these messages is the potential for attacks similar to those in Israel, with explicit warnings that the same could happen in India if there is a change in government. These messages starkly frame the political discourse in terms of physical survival, using the fear of violence to influence political opinions and electoral outcomes.

```
"10 Hindu 🕉 Students beheaded by
Islamic Terrorists Hamas in Israel
👹"
```
```
"There is 1 Gaza Strip in Israel
and 300 in #India."
```

This type of propaganda serves multiple purposes: it strengthens in-group solidarity among Hindus under the BJP, portrays the party as the sole protector of Hindu interests, and paints opposition parties and their supporters as threats to Hindu safety and well-being. By continually associating the opposition with external threats and historical antagonists, these messages seek not only to discredit political rivals but also to instill a deep-seated fear of any alternative political leadership, effectively using the crisis in Israel-Palestine to bolster nationalist sentiments and the current government's position.

4.4 Dehumanizing Palestinian suffering

The narrative aimed at dehumanizing Palestinian suffering has manifested powerfully in various memes and messages circulated on WhatsApp, underscoring a deep disregard for the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The tone and content of these messages reveal an attempt to trivialize and mock the deaths and suffering of Palestinians, often by invoking religious imagery in a derogatory manner.

One prevalent trope features memes and jokes on the supposed backlog in heaven due to the number of Palestinians being killed, suggesting that the virgins promised in Islamic belief are overwhelmed – implying that Israeli actions are doing a service by hastening Palestinians to their spiritual rewards. Another similar meme sarcastically praises the precision of Israeli bombings for leaving staircases intact, supposedly to facilitate Palestinians' quicker ascent to heaven, further trivializing the destruction of life and property.

```
"Don't know why But when Hamas and
Palestine are defeated Then one
experiences divine joy. The mind
becomes happy. #Israel"
```
```
"Considering the way Israel is
attacking Hamas, I am worried as
to how so many 'Virgins' will be
managed."
```
(referring to a hateful trope of 72 virgins in heaven).

These narratives extend to outright mockery of religious practices and dire situations. Messages celebrating the destruction of mosques and comparing Israeli military actions to the festival of Holi or Diwali not only dehumanize Palestinian suffering but also culturally appropriate and distort Indian festivals, associating them with violence and conquest. The grim depiction of Gaza as a place ready for a historical film set, devoid of modern amenities and reduced to ruins, further strips away the gravity of the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

```
"😁 What is real Diwali? Ask the
people of Israel. They are burning
more bombs in 1 hour than we would
have burnt in 50 years. That too
without pollution. Happy Diwali to
the people of Israel. 😁 😁"
```

The narratives paints all Palestinians with a broad brush, accusing them of inherent barbarism and justifying extreme measures against them. The overarching theme in these messages is clear: the celebration of Palestinian deaths as a righteous punishment for their Muslim identity, with a disturbing disregard for the innocent, including women and children in hospitals. These narratives, deeply infused with bigotry and misinformation, contribute to a dehumanized view of the Palestinian people, effectively desensitizing the public to their suffering and framing the conflict in dangerously simplistic religious and cultural terms.

```
"The scoundrels have started the
victim card, the pigs have started
harassing women and girls like Gaza
Strip. And the most motherly... the
women of their house are the ones
who throw the stones first 😡😡👊"
```
```
"Now there is no country named
Palestine. If there is then show
its map. Therefore, stop repeatedly
using words like Palestine,
Palestinian people, and use the
word terrorist Hamas."
```

4.5 Attacking the Opposition

The portrayal of opposition parties in India in relation to the Israel-Hamas conflict has been particularly sharp and contentious. Support for Palestine among opposition parties in India is often harshly criticized and linked to support for Hamas. These narratives aggressively vilify these parties, suggesting that any empathy for Palestine is tantamount to

endorsing the actions of Hamas, thereby painting these political entities as sympathizers of terrorism.

This rhetoric extends to personal attacks and historical analogies. For instance, opposition leaders are derogatorily labeled as "Jihadi pigs" and accused of spreading "like cancer," dehumanizing terms that are designed to incite fear and hostility. Furthermore, the narrative draws a parallel between the Congress party's stance on Palestine and an implicit endorsement of the events of October 7, thus attempting to equate diplomatic or humanitarian support for Palestine with support for acts of violence. This tactic seeks to undermine the credibility of the opposition by framing their foreign policy perspectives within a binary and extremist viewpoint.

```
"Even Hamas is not feeling
that much pain due to Israel's
attack....as much as the children
of those terrorists growing up in
India are feeling. ‼️ ☹️ ☹️ ☹️"
"*Who stand with Palestine today*
*Tomorrow they will stand with
Pakistan.* *#staystrong #Israel*"
"Has there been any statement
from any opposition leader or his
henchmen on the attack on Israel by
Hamas?"
```

Many of these messages often include sarcastic comments about unrelated issues, such as environmental concerns during Hindu festivals like Diwali, suggesting a hypocritical stance by opposition parties who are portrayed as overly focused on international conflicts like those between Russia and Ukraine or Israel and Palestine, while allegedly neglecting local cultural practices.

Overall, these narratives serve to polarize public opinion, framing the opposition as not only anti-national but as direct threats to national security, akin to external enemies. This strategy not only stifles meaningful discourse on international issues but also deepens internal divisions, leveraging the emotive power of social media to reinforce a divisive political agenda.

```
"*The real face of the students of
AMU was exposed-* *AMU students,
famous for raising anti-national
slogans, raised slogans in support
of the terrorist organization Hamas
whereas India has already talked
about standing with Israel on this
issue.*"
"This is the youth of the country
who is justifying the terrorism of
Hamas. *We are sitting on a pile of
gunpowder*" (Referring to a protest by students
in support of Palestine civilians).
```

4.6 Misinformation

An common thread across all the above narratives is the extensive use of misinformation during the conflict. A comprehensive effort by Indian fact-checker Boom resulted in close to 100 fact checks,[3] highlighting the pervasive nature of misinformation related to this topic. Their report indicates that a staggering 92.6% of the misinformation were sensationalist in nature, and 13% involved the use of AI-generated content, deepfakes, or video game footage[4]. Moreover, the research found that 65% of the Twitter accounts spreading these fact-checked claims were verified, with over 40% of these accounts being based in India (Chowdhury 2023).

We observe a similar trend on our WhatsApp dataset too, playing a significant role in shaping public perception and political narratives making up around 15% of the narratives in our dataset. This misinformation predominantly supports pro-Israel sentiments and often targets the Indian opposition party, Congress, by inaccurately linking it to Hamas and its actions. For instance, one widely spread false claim suggested that Congress openly supported Hamas at a press conference, distorting the party's actual stance on Palestine to suggest an endorsement of terrorism. Such messages are crafted to polarize opinions and consolidate support by portraying the opposition as allies of widely condemned actions.

```
"In Israel, Hamas Jihadis beheaded
10 Hindus and in India, the entire
I.N.D.I.Alliance gang including
the Congress Party has declared
support for the deadly murderer
rapist terrorist Hamas."
```

Misinformation techniques include the use of shocking content, such as videos and images taken out of context or from unrelated events in other countries like Sudan or Syria. This content is then presented as evidence of current events in the Israel-Hamas conflict, with claims such as Hamas militants committing barbaric acts, which are completely fabricated. The shock value of such content ensures its rapid dissemination, reinforcing fear and outrage. Moreover, the use of advanced misinformation tactics, including AI-generated content and deepfakes, further complicates the ability of users to discern real events from fabricated ones (see Figure 5 for an example).

This strategic spread of misinformation not only misleads the public but also stokes communal tensions, exploits political divisions, and manipulates public discourse on sensitive international issues. The pervasive nature of such misinformation on platforms like WhatsApp, where content moderation is more challenging than on public platforms like Twitter or Facebook, underscores the critical need for vigilant media literacy and robust fact-checking mechanisms to counteract these influences.

```
"Thousands of people stood in long
queues at the military recruitment
center in Israel to join the army.
People want to join army even
without salary. This is the spirit
```

[3]https://www.boomlive.in/tags/israel-hamas-conflict/

[4]https://www.boomlive.in/boom-research/october-was-rife-with-misinformation-about-the-israel-gaza-war-boom-monthly-report-23531
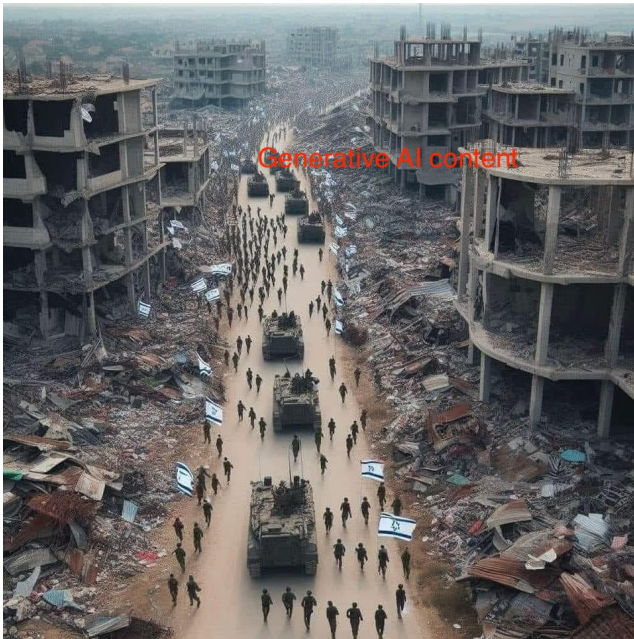
Figure 5: Generative AI content showing israeli victory parade in Gaza

```
of patriotism. The most important
thing in India is old pension. zero
work"
```
(referring to an old image taken out of context claiming to be a line to join the army).

5 Discussion

In this section, we reflect on the motivations and considerations underlying our research into the narratives circulating within WhatsApp groups during the Israel-Hamas conflict. A critical question we confronted was the ethical implications of reproducing the distressing content shared in these groups. Could the act of documenting these narratives serve to inadvertently amplify them?

After careful deliberation, we concluded that the documentation of these communications is crucial. This conflict has resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of lives, including significant civilian and journalist casualties (CPJ 2024), making it imperative that we understand how narratives shared through social media platforms like WhatsApp might influence or reflect broader societal attitudes and actions. The digital dissemination of information and narratives surrounding the conflict plays a critical role in legitimizing these losses, framing the human cost in ways that can either provoke further violence or contribute to peacebuilding efforts. As scholars, it is our responsibility to provide a thorough analysis of these narratives, offering insights that could lead to better strategies for conflict resolution and prevention in the future. Moreover, these discussions are not isolated to obscure WhatsApp groups but are echoed on global platforms like Twitter (Vats 2023), indicating a wider spread and potential influence of these harmful narratives.

Another pivotal question we addressed is the relevance of examining the opinions expressed by villagers in India re-garding a conflict thousands of miles away. This inquiry is crucial because it sheds light on the global reach of digital narratives and their ability to influence public opinion across different cultures and communities. The rest of this section tries to address this concern on why studying WhatsApp, in India is important and relevant to the conflict in Gaza. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing more effective communication strategies that promote peace and understanding across borders.

We focus on four areas which make this study particularly important and have broader consequences:

5.1 Role of encryption

The encryption feature of WhatsApp, while pivotal for ensuring user privacy and security, simultaneously poses significant challenges in content moderation. This distinctive attribute of the platform enables misinformation to circulate repeatedly and virally with minimal oversight. The lack of content moderation allows the same misleading or false information to be shared over and over, often stripped of context and reframed to fit various narratives. This characteristic is not unique to WhatsApp; it is common among several popular encrypted messaging apps, which complicates the global fight against misinformation (Kamara et al. 2022).

Misinformation on encrypted platforms is not only persistent but also typically reshared out of its original context, making it prone to misinterpretation. Despite often being easily debunkable, these narratives gain traction and spread quickly across user networks, shielded by encryption from any form of external review. Furthermore, violent and graphic videos are shared within these closed networks, exacerbating tensions and fear without any immediate repercussions for the distributors.[5] This unchecked sharing can lead to real-world violence and societal divisions, emphasizing the critical need for effective strategies to manage misinformation while respecting user privacy.

The situation also highlights the sophistication with which political entities can exploit these platforms. In environments devoid of moderation, political parties have become increasingly skilled at crafting and disseminating narratives that bolster their agendas. The adeptness of these parties in manipulating information on encrypted messaging apps underscores a significant challenge: balancing the privacy benefits of encryption with the need to curb the spread of harmful misinformation. This dilemma poses fundamental questions about the responsibilities of tech companies and the potential mechanisms for mitigating abuse while protecting user rights in encrypted digital spaces.

5.2 Importance of Misinformation

Misinformation, while only a fraction of the narratives disseminated in our dataset, plays a crucial role as a tool in shaping public perception and influencing political landscapes. The strategic use of misinformation is not about the volume of false content, but rather its potency and the psychological impact it can have on its audience. WhatsApp is

---

[5]Compared to other platforms like Facebook or Twitter where repeatedly sharing violent content could get an account banned.

particularly susceptible to the spread of misinformation because users tend to trust and believe the content they receive, predominantly from friends and family. This perceived reliability makes the platform a significant vector for the dissemination of unverified information, which is a crucial concern (Gursky et al. 2022).

5.3 Demonizing Muslims

The utilization of WhatsApp for the dissemination of narratives that demonize Muslims aligns with broader political strategies but raises significant ethical and societal concerns. There is a deliberate effort to link the actions attributed to Hamas with the broader Muslim community in India, suggesting that similar violent acts could be perpetrated by Indian Muslims. This strategy not only stokes fear and suspicion but also serves to align public sentiment with the BJP's political agenda, which has been criticized for its handling of communal relations.

The continuous stream of such content, especially narratives originating from conflict zones and tailored to incite fear, suggests a systematic approach to influencing public perception. The content often includes dubious claims, such as the use of child actors by Hamas, which are particularly designed to provoke emotional reactions. The persistence of these narratives and their widespread propagation on platforms like WhatsApp are perplexing, especially considering their reception among rural Indian populations who might not otherwise be engaged with Middle Eastern geopolitics.

The real-life implications of such targeted misinformation are profound. India's Muslim community, which is the third-largest in the world at approximately 200 million people, already faces widespread Islamophobic sentiment (Maizland 2024). The relentless association of this community with global terrorism and militant groups like Hamas exacerbates existing prejudices and can lead to discrimination, social ostracism, and even violence. Muslims in India find themselves in a precarious position, often feeling compelled to disassociate from and condemn terrorist attacks globally, despite having no connection to these events (Vats 2023).

5.4 Global Impact

The narratives surrounding the Israel-Hamas conflict that are propagated by the BJP and its supporters have implications that reach far beyond India's borders, affecting global perceptions and discourse. The ability of these narratives to boost domestic support for the war, often undermining genuine political or humanitarian causes for strategic gain, demonstrates the power of targeted misinformation campaigns.

India's substantial population and its significant number of internet users, especially those who are English-speaking, position it uniquely as a powerhouse in the global digital landscape. The mobilization of Indian influencers —or disinfluencers— to spread disinformation can have a profound impact. This is particularly notable on platforms like Twitter, where Indian users' engagement with and propagation of content can significantly influence global opinions (Vats 2023). Content that may be old or out of context is often revived and shared, feeding into cycles of misinformation that are sometimes picked up and amplified by international propaganda mechanisms, including those from Israel.

Right-leaning Indian accounts are actively shaping the narrative around the Israel-Hamas conflict for South Asian audiences. This demographic, which is not traditionally targeted by Western media, is now being exposed to a predominantly pro-Israel viewpoint, heavily influenced by the political agenda of Indian right-wing groups. This targeted influence campaign illustrates how localized political agendas can have ripple effects, shaping perceptions in regions and among populations that might otherwise not be engaged with the issues at hand.

The global influence exerted by such narratives underscores the potential for significant actors, equipped with robust digital infrastructures, to amplify and spread specific content widely. This supercharged dissemination infrastructure highlights the sophisticated ways in which misinformation can be strategically used, not just for local political gain but also to influence global discourse and international relations. The phenomenon exemplifies the critical need for global cooperation in combating misinformation and underscores the importance of maintaining a vigilant and informed global citizenry in the face of increasingly complex information warfare.

6 Conclusion

The discussion surrounding the Israel-Hamas conflict on platforms like WhatsApp in India unveils a deeply woven tapestry of political maneuvering and public engagement. This paper sheds light on a sustained effort by a political party to harness this international issue for domestic electoral gains, presenting a complex scenario where the party, while not directly involved in the conflict, capitalizes on the situation to fortify its position within the Indian electorate.

The analysis reveals that the dissemination of specific narratives related to the Israel-Hamas conflict is not confined to political groups but pervades regional and caste-based groups, indicating a grassroots level traction for these narratives. This organic spread, even if initially seeded by political entities, suggests a bottom-up support that transcends the mere top-down dissemination approach often associated with political propaganda. This phenomenon underscores the nuanced ways in which political narratives can embed themselves within the fabric of everyday communication among diverse demographic groups.

The question of why rural Indian users would engage with the Israel-Hamas conflict might initially seem perplexing. However, the implications of such engagement are profound. Firstly, it highlights how international conflicts can be localized through social media platforms, influencing public opinion and potentially swaying electoral dynamics. Secondly, it raises concerns about the reach and impact of misinformation and the capacity of localized narratives to shape political landscapes far from their origins.

Although it is challenging to conclusively prove coordination or a deliberate top-down push behind these narratives, the visible participation of pro-BJP accounts and the pattern of message dissemination suggest a strategic alignment of these narratives with the party's broader political objectives.

This scenario is indicative of a new era of digital politics where global events are repurposed for local political agendas, leveraging the viral mechanics of social media to amplify selected narratives.

7   Acknowledgements

References

Badrinathan, S., and Chauchard, S. 2023. Researching and countering misinformation in the global south. *Current Opinion in Psychology* 101733.

Carter Olson, C. 2016. # bringbackourgirls: Digital communities supporting real-world change and influencing mainstream media agendas. *Feminist media studies* 16(5).

Chauchard, S., and Garimella, K. 2022. What circulates on partisan whatsapp in india? insights from an unusual dataset. *Journal of Quantitative Description* 2.

Chowdhury, A. 2023. Pallywood, Deepfakes, X Breed Disinfo On Israel-Palestine: BOOM Study — boomlive.in. https://www.boomlive.in/boom-research/israel-palestine-gaza-hamas-war-conflict-disinformation-fake-news-x-twitter-verified-23939. [Accessed 15 February 2024].

CPJ. 2024. Journalist casualties in the Israel-Gaza war - Committee to Protect Journalists — cpj.org. https://cpj.org/2024/05/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/. [Accessed 15 May 2024].

Garimella, K., and Chauchard, S. 2024. Whatsapp explorer: A data donation tool to facilitate research on whatsapp. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2404.01328*.

Garimella, K., and Eckles, D. 2020. Images and misinformation in political groups: Evidence from whatsapp in india. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*.

Gursky, J.; Riedl, M. J.; Joseff, K.; and Woolley, S. 2022. Chat apps and cascade logic: A multi-platform perspective on india, mexico, and the united states. *Social Media+ Society* 8(2):20563051221094773.

Jensen, M. 2018. Russian trolls and fake news: Information or identity logics? *Journal of International Affairs* 71(1.5):115–124.

Kamara, S.; Knodel, M.; Llansó, E.; Nojeim, G.; Qin, L.; Thakur, D.; and Vogus, C. 2022. Outside looking in: Approaches to content moderation in end-to-end encrypted systems. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2202.04617*.

Karunungan, R. 2022. *The role of Facebook influencers in shaping the narrative of the Duterte era*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Loughborough University.

King, G.; Pan, J.; and Roberts, M. E. 2017. How the chinese government fabricates social media posts for strategic distraction, not engaged argument. *American political science review* 111(3):484–501.

Maizland, L. 2024. India's muslims: An increasingly marginalized population. *Council on Foreign Relations* 20:21.

Paz, M. A.; Montero-Díaz, J.; and Moreno-Delgado, A. 2020. Hate speech: A systematized review. *Sage Open* 10(4):2158244020973022.

Persily, N.; Tucker, J. A.; and Tucker, J. A. 2020. Social media and democracy: The state of the field, prospects for reform.

Radford, A.; Kim, J. W.; Xu, T.; Brockman, G.; McLeavey, C.; and Sutskever, I. 2023. Robust speech recognition via large-scale weak supervision. In *International Conference on Machine Learning*, 28492–28518. PMLR.

Roozenbeek, J.; Schneider, C. R.; Dryhurst, S.; Kerr, J.; Freeman, A. L.; Recchia, G.; Van Der Bles, A. M.; and Van Der Linden, S. 2020. Susceptibility to misinformation about covid-19 around the world. *Royal Society open science* 7(10):201199.

Saha, P.; Garimella, K.; Kalyan, N. K.; Pandey, S. K.; Meher, P. M.; Mathew, B.; and Mukherjee, A. 2023. On the rise of fear speech in online social media. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120(11):e2212270120.

Seo, H. 2014. Visual propaganda in the age of social media: An empirical analysis of twitter images during the 2012 israeli–hamas conflict. *Visual Communication Quarterly* 21(3):150–161.

Siegel, A. A. 2020. Online hate speech. *Social media and democracy: The state of the field, prospects for reform.*

Trauthig, I. K., and Woolley, S. C. 2023. "on whatsapp i say what i want": Messaging apps, diaspora communities, and networked counterpublics in the united states. *New Media & Society* 14614448231203695.

Trauthig, I. K.; Martin, Z. C.; and Woolley, S. C. 2024. Messaging apps: A rising tool for informational autocrats. *Political Research Quarterly* 77(1):17–29.

Vats, V. 2023. India's Hindu Extremists Are Trolling the Israel Conflict — theatlantic.com. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/10/india-hindu-extremist-disinformation-israel-hamas/675771/. [Accessed 14 May 2024].

Zeitzoff, T.; Kelly, J.; and Lotan, G. 2015. Using social media to measure foreign policy dynamics: An empirical analysis of the iranian–israeli confrontation (2012–13). *Journal of Peace Research* 52(3):368–383.

Zeitzoff, T. 2017. How social media is changing conflict. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61(9):1970–1991.

Zhang, J. 2017. The politics of representation on social media: The case of hamas during the 2014 israel-gaza conflict. *Arab Media and Society* 24:1–13.