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Information Warfare in the Israel– Hamas Conflict: Strategic Narratives and the Challenges for Indian Foreign Policy

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Citation: Kumar, P. & Kuldeep (2026). Information Warfare in the Israel– Hamas Conflict: Strategic Narratives and the Challenges for Indian Foreign Policy. *Exploresearch*, 03(01), 122–128. <https://doi.org/10.62823/ExRe/2026/03/01.173>

Article History:

Received: 13 February 2026

Revised: 02 March 2026

Accepted: 12 March 2026

Published: 17 March 2026

Keywords:

Information Warfare, Strategic Narratives, Israel-Hamas Conflict, Indian Foreign Policy, Media Framing, Digital Diplomacy, Constructivism.

Abstract: The conflict between Israel and Hamas that escalated dramatically in October 2023 was not only fought on the ground — it was fought just as fiercely across television screens, social media platforms, and international news cycles. Both sides deployed various information warfare strategies to shape global opinion. This paper examines how those strategic narratives were constructed and propagated, and also how they created specific foreign policy challenges for India. As a country that maintains strong diplomatic and economic ties with both Israel and Arab/Muslim-majority nations, India found itself navigating a uniquely complex informational landscape. Drawing on frameworks of strategic narrative theory and constructivist foreign policy analysis, this paper argues that India's carefully calibrated public silence on certain issues, while deliberate, was itself shaped and constrained by the competing narratives of the conflict. The paper concludes with reflections on what this episode reveals about information warfare as a tool of modern conflict and the pressures it places on non-Western middle powers.

Introduction

War has always involved storytelling. Governments, militaries, state and non-state actors have long understood that controlling the narrative about a conflict is just as important as controlling territory. The rise of the internet, social media, and 24-hour news cycles transformed how information moves during a conflict — and how quickly it can shape global opinion, influence foreign governments, and affect the material conditions of war through sanctions, aid, and diplomatic pressure.

The escalation of the Israel– Hamas conflict in October 2023, following the Hamas-led attack on Israeli communities near the Gaza border, brought this reality into sharp focus. Within hours of the attack, there was another war of narrative control; both sides and their respective supporters began flooding digital and traditional media with images, statements, and interpretive frames designed to justify their

actions, delegitimize the other side, and appeal to international audiences. The sheer speed and volume of this information — much of it unverifiable in real time — created what some scholars have called a “misinfodemic” (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), where truth and fiction became deeply entangled in the public sphere.

For most Western democracies, their foreign policy responses to this conflict, while debated domestically, largely followed predictable lines. The United States and most of the European Union aligned with Israel, emphasizing its right to self-defense, while parts of the Global South offered varying degrees of sympathy to Palestinian civilians. India’s position, however, was considerably more complicated. India has deep and growing strategic ties with Israel, built on defense cooperation, technology partnerships, and shared counterterrorism concerns. At the same time, India has a large Muslim population, a longstanding historical support for Palestinian self-determination rooted in its non-aligned movement legacy, and critical economic relationships with Arab states and Iran. The competing narratives of the conflict are directly intertwined with all of these competing interests.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to make sense of how this happened. It begins by establishing a theoretical foundation for understanding information warfare and strategic narratives. It then maps the key narrative strategies employed by Israel and Hamas respectively. Following this, it examines how these competing narratives landed in the Indian context, and how they shaped and constrained India’s diplomatic responses. In the end, the paper closes with broader reflections on the implications for India’s foreign policy in an era where information warfare is not an exceptional event, but a permanent feature of international relations.

Theoretical Framework: Information Warfare and Strategic Narratives

“Information warfare” is a broad term that has been defined in various ways by military theorists, political scientists, and scholars. At its core, it refers to the deliberate use of information, and the disruption of an adversary’s information, as instruments to advance strategic objectives (Libicki, 1995). In the context of modern conflicts, this includes propaganda campaigns, the strategic release or suppression of images, the manipulation of social media algorithms, cyberattacks on news infrastructure, and the targeted use of diplomatic statements for public consumption as much as private communication.

A more specific and analytically useful concept within this broader framework is “strategic narrative.” Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle (2013) define strategic narratives as “communicative tools through which political actors — usually elites — attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives.” In other words, a strategic narrative is not just propaganda; it is a carefully constructed story that has a beginning, a middle, and an implied future. It identifies heroes and villains, explains why things happened, and suggests what must be done next. The goal is to persuade domestic and international audiences to see a conflict through the narrator’s preferred frame.

The concept of “strategic narrative” draws significantly from constructivist International Relations theory, which holds that world politics is not simply driven by material interests but by the shared ideas, identities, and norms that actors use to interpret their environment (Wendt, 1999). From a constructivist perspective, the narratives competing actors tell about a conflict do not just reflect reality — they actively help construct it. When enough powerful actors accept a particular narrative, that narrative shapes what kinds of responses are seen as legitimate, which actions are condemned, and which are justified.

In the digital age, the competition over strategic narratives has become vastly more complex and democratic, in the sense that many more actors can now participate. State governments, armed groups, diaspora communities, civil society organizations, journalists, and ordinary social media users all compete to have their version of events heard and believed. This creates both opportunities and dangers. Smaller, less resourced actors — like Hamas — can now reach global audiences directly in ways that were impossible before social media (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001). At the same time, state actors can use sophisticated digital tools, including bot networks, paid online influencers, and algorithmically targeted advertising to amplify their preferred narratives.

The Israeli Narrative: Security, Legitimacy, and the Right to Defend

Israel entered the post-October 7 phase (**7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel**) of this conflict with a well-prepared and sophisticated communications infrastructure. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) maintained active accounts on X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Telegram, and TikTok, and had clearly invested in social media strategy as an integral part of its operational planning. Within hours of the

October 7 attacks, the IDF was publishing footage, graphics, and statements in multiple languages designed to achieve specific narrative goals.

The central Israeli strategic narrative rested on several interconnected claims. First, Israel framed the October 7 attacks as an act of terrorism comparable in moral weight to the September 11 attacks in the United States. Israeli officials and media repeatedly drew this comparison, and Prime Minister Netanyahu explicitly invoked it in early statements (Netanyahu, 2023). This framing was designed to activate the post-9/11 Western consensus that states have an unconditional right to use military force against terrorist organizations, and to preemptively delegitimize criticism of the subsequent military campaign in Gaza.

Second, Israel deployed what communication scholars call a “humanization strategy” for its own citizens. Detailed stories of the victims of October 7 — their names, ages, photographs, and family backgrounds — were disseminated through official and unofficial channels. This was particularly effective in the early weeks of the conflict, when global media attention was focused on Israeli suffering. At the same time, Israeli officials consistently referred to Gaza as a location controlled and used by Hamas, subtly framing civilian casualties in Gaza as the moral responsibility of Hamas rather than Israel (Farber, 2023).

Third, Israel leveraged its deep diplomatic relationships with Western governments to shape the institutional narrative at organizations like the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, and the International Criminal Court. When these bodies began investigating potential Israeli violations of international humanitarian law, Israel and its allies worked to contest the framing of these proceedings and delay their conclusions (Halbfinger, 2023). This is information warfare at the institutional level: fighting not just for public opinion but for the official record of what happened.

Where Israel’s narrative strategy ran into difficulties was in its ability to manage the visual record of the conflict in Gaza itself. The massive scale of civilian casualties, the destruction of hospitals, schools, and residential neighborhoods, and the testimonies of journalists, UN workers, and medical personnel created a counter-narrative that was deeply damaging to Israel’s international standing, particularly in the Global South (Al-Sayed, 2024). The information environment, it turned out, was not fully controllable even for a state with sophisticated communications capabilities.

The Hamas Narrative: Resistance, Occupation, and Global Solidarity

Hamas’s information warfare strategy operated from a very different position. As a non-state actor internationally designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, the European Union, and several other countries, Hamas could not access mainstream diplomatic channels in the way Israel could. Its strategy was therefore necessarily more focused on the information environment, particularly social media and sympathetic media outlets, to build and maintain global solidarity.

The central Hamas strategic narrative placed the October 7 attacks within a much longer historical arc of Palestinian dispossession, beginning with what Palestinians call the Nakba (Arabic for “catastrophe”) — the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. By framing the attacks as resistance against a decades-long illegal occupation rather than as terrorism, Hamas sought to activate frameworks of anti-colonial solidarity, particularly among audiences in the Global South and among younger, more progressive audiences in the West (Roy, 2023). This framing was taken up and amplified by many human rights organizations, academics, and civil society groups around the world.

Hamas also made effective use of the visual record of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. As Israeli military operations intensified and civilian casualties mounted, footage of destroyed neighborhoods, hospitals overwhelmed with wounded civilians, and grieving families was widely shared on social media — often faster than any official verification process could occur. Al Jazeera and other media outlets with Gaza correspondents played a significant role in keeping these images in global circulation (Fahmi, 2023). This visual narrative of Palestinian suffering became perhaps the most powerful element of the anti-Israeli information campaign, generating mass protests in cities around the world and putting pressure on Western governments to call for ceasefires.

Hamas’s information strategy was not without its own contradictions and vulnerabilities. The brutality of the October 7 attacks, captured on video and widely circulated, was deeply damaging to Palestinian sympathizers’ ability to defend Hamas’s actions as those of a liberation movement rather than a terrorist organization. Hamas’s leadership, based in Qatar, also faced increasing scrutiny about the

disconnect between their comfortable surroundings and the suffering of Gazans under Israeli bombardment. The organization also faced disinformation challenges, with several items of content falsely attributed to the Gaza conflict turning out to be old footage or images from other conflicts entirely (Penney, 2023).

India's Diplomatic Position: Walking a Tightrope

To understand how information warfare affected India's foreign policy, we need to first understand the structural complexity of India's relationships in this region. India and Israel have developed an extraordinarily close relationship since India normalized diplomatic ties with Israel in 1992. The two countries cooperate extensively on defense, with Israel being one of India's largest arms suppliers. They also collaborate on agriculture, water technology, cybersecurity, and counterterrorism. Prime Minister Modi's personal relationship with Netanyahu, and the broader ideological sympathy between the BJP government and the Israeli right, have further deepened this closeness (Hall, 2023).

At the same time, India's relationship with the Arab world and with Muslim-majority countries more broadly is also critically important. India has about 200 million Muslim citizens, and the conflict inevitably generated significant domestic political pressure from this community. India's diaspora community in Gulf states is enormous, and remittances from the Gulf make a major contribution to the Indian economy. India also imports significant quantities of oil from Arab states and has major trade relationships with Iran. And historically, India's claim to moral leadership in the Global South has rested partly on its support for Palestinian self-determination, a position it has held since the days of Jawaharlal Nehru and the Non-Aligned Movement (Pant & Joshi, 2023).

India's initial response to the October 7 attacks was to express solidarity with Israel, with Prime Minister Modi posting on X that India "stands with Israel." This was a notably strong statement for India, whose traditional diplomatic language tends toward careful balance. It reflected both the personal relationship between Modi and Netanyahu and the BJP government's general tilt toward Israel. However, as the humanitarian crisis in Gaza deepened over subsequent weeks, India began to moderate its public language, increasingly calling for "civilian protection" and "restraint," and eventually voting in favor of some UN resolutions calling for a ceasefire (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

This shift was not simply a principled change of position — it was a response to the changing information environment. The cascade of images and reports from Gaza, amplified by social media and organizations like the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), created enormous global pressure on governments to respond to the humanitarian catastrophe. For India, ignoring this pressure entirely would have risked damage to its relationships with Arab states, its standing in the Global South, and its domestic political stability. Information warfare, in other words, was shaping the political costs and benefits of different diplomatic positions in real time.

Information Warfare and the Domestic Dimension in India

It is a mistake to think of information warfare as purely an international phenomenon. In India, as in many democracies, the competing narratives of the Israel–Hamas conflict played out intensely in the domestic information environment, with direct implications for foreign policy.

A significant segment of Indian media, particularly television news channels with close connections to the ruling BJP, covered the conflict in a way that was broadly sympathetic to Israel. Anchors and panelists drew comparisons between Hamas and Pakistani-based militant groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, connecting the Israeli experience to India's own experience of cross-border terrorism. This framing resonated with BJP's nationalist base and served to reinforce the government's initial pro-Israel tilt (Chaturvedi, 2024). It also subtly connected India's domestic political tensions around Muslim identity politics to the Israel–Palestine conflict in ways that were politically convenient for the ruling party.

At the same time, Indian social media — particularly on platforms like Instagram and X — saw enormous circulation of pro-Palestinian content, largely driven by younger users. Much of this content was emotionally powerful: images of injured children, destroyed mosques, and grieving families from Gaza. Some of it was misleading or unverified, but its emotional impact was real. Opposition political parties, civil society groups, and Muslim community organizations used this content to criticize the government's initial pro-Israel stance and to demand a more balanced approach (Trivedi, 2023).

This domestic information battle had direct foreign policy consequences. The government found itself being watched not just by foreign capitals but by its own citizens on social media, creating what

political scientists call a “two-level game” (Putnam, 1988), in which foreign policy decisions must simultaneously satisfy both international and domestic audiences. Every official statement about the conflict was immediately analyzed, criticized, and debated online, significantly reducing the government’s freedom of maneuver. In this sense, information warfare does not just affect the battlefield and the global audience — it penetrates the domestic political space in ways that constrain what governments can do.

India’s Strategic Communication Challenges

One of the clearest lessons from this conflict for Indian foreign policy is that the country lacks a robust strategic communication capacity adequate to the demands of the current information environment. While India’s Ministry of External Affairs has a spokesperson and a media division, its ability to shape the global narrative in real time — particularly in non-English language environments — is limited compared to major powers like the United States, China, or even smaller but more media-sophisticated states like Israel.

India struggled, for example, to articulate a clear and consistent narrative about its evolving position on the conflict that could be understood and respected both internationally and domestically. The initial statement of solidarity with Israel was followed by a series of more nuanced statements that, while diplomatically sensible, were sometimes seen as confused or inconsistent by media observers. India’s abstentions and votes in UN proceedings were often not accompanied by clear public explanations of the reasoning, leaving the government’s position open to varying interpretations (Mohan, 2024).

There is also the deeper challenge that India’s foreign policy identity — its self-image as a responsible, non-aligned power that bridges the Global South and the developed world — was itself contested terrain in the information battle over this conflict. Countries, like individuals, have narratives about who they are and what they stand for. India’s historical narrative of support for Palestinian self-determination and decolonization was in tension with its contemporary narrative of strategic partnership with Israel and alignment with Western-led security frameworks. Both narratives were mobilized by different actors in the domestic and international information environment, and India struggled to synthesize them into a coherent and credible position.

Scholars of Indian foreign policy have noted that the country has historically preferred what Rajagopalan (2020) calls “strategic autonomy” — preserving freedom of action by avoiding hard commitments to any single power or ideological bloc. This approach served India well in a bipolar world during the Cold War, but it is increasingly difficult to maintain in a media environment that demands clear, consistent, and instantly communicable positions. In information warfare terms, ambiguity is a vulnerability as much as it is a strategic asset.

Disinformation, Fact-Checking, and the Epistemic Challenge

No discussion of information warfare in the Israel–Hamas conflict would be complete without addressing the role of disinformation — deliberately false or misleading content — in shaping the conflict’s information environment. Both sides, and numerous third parties, contributed to a chaotic information landscape in which verifying the truth of any given claim was extraordinarily difficult in real time. Notable examples included the controversy over the Al-Ahli hospital incident in October 2023, in which hundreds of people were reported killed. Initial reports from Palestinian health authorities were widely circulated in global media before evidence emerged that the damage was caused by a misfired rocket rather than an Israeli airstrike — though the full picture remained disputed for some time (BBC Verify, 2023). Old footage from conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and other areas was repeatedly misrepresented as showing events in Gaza. False statistics and manipulated images circulated widely before fact-checkers could respond.

For India, this epistemic chaos created a specific diplomatic problem. Indian policymakers, like their counterparts elsewhere, were forced to make statements and take positions on events whose factual basis was not always clear. Being seen to endorse a particular account that later turned out to be false could be diplomatically costly. Being seen to dismiss reports of atrocities that later turned out to be true could be even more costly. The safest diplomatic response — calling for independent verification and restraint pending investigation — was often perceived domestically as evasion.

This challenge is not unique to India, but it is particularly acute for a country with India’s complex set of interests and relationships. Roozenbeek and van der Linden (2019) have argued that the most effective long-term response to disinformation is “prebunking” — building public awareness of disinformation tactics before false information spreads. For governments, the equivalent might be

developing standing frameworks for communicating uncertainty and the limits of official knowledge during fast-moving crises, rather than being forced into premature definitive statements.

Broader Implications: What This Means for Indian Foreign Policy

The Israel– Hamas conflict and its information warfare dimensions have several important implications for how India should think about and conduct its foreign policy going forward.

First, India needs to invest significantly in its strategic communication capacity. This does not mean simply creating more social media accounts or hiring more spokespeople. It means developing a coherent, institutionalized capacity to monitor the global information environment, identify narrative threats and opportunities, and respond in a coordinated way across multiple languages and platforms. Countries like the United States, China, and the United Kingdom have invested heavily in “government communications” as a professional discipline. India’s equivalent capacity remains relatively underdeveloped for a country of its size and global ambitions.

Second, India needs to think more carefully about the relationship between its foreign policy identity narratives and its actual policy decisions. The tension between India’s historical support for Palestine and its contemporary partnership with Israel is not a problem that can be wished away or managed indefinitely through diplomatic ambiguity. As information warfare makes the costs of inconsistency higher, India may need to develop a more explicit and publicly articulated framework for how it balances these competing commitments — one that can be explained and defended in the global public sphere.

Third, India should consider deepening its collaboration with other Global South countries on norms and frameworks for information warfare in international conflicts. Countries like Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia, and Turkey face similar challenges in navigating competing narratives in international conflicts while managing complex webs of relationships. Building a common framework for responsible information practices — including commitments to fact-checking, balanced coverage, and resistance to manipulation — could strengthen India’s position as a leader of the Global South while also serving its practical diplomatic interests.

Finally, India must grapple with the domestic dimension of information warfare more directly. The way competing narratives of international conflicts play out in Indian media and social media has real foreign policy consequences, as this case has shown. Developing a more media-literate citizenry, investing in independent fact-checking organizations, and ensuring that public discourse about foreign policy is grounded in accurate information rather than viral disinformation are not just domestic governance challenges — they are foreign policy imperatives.

Conclusion

The Israel– Hamas conflict that began in October 2023 was, among many other things, a case study in how information warfare shapes the diplomatic environment in which all states must operate. Both Israel and Hamas invested heavily in strategic narratives designed to win the support of global audiences, and both achieved significant successes and suffered significant failures in this effort. The information environment they created — fast-moving, emotionally intense, and riddled with disinformation — created specific and difficult challenges for every government trying to formulate a coherent foreign policy response. For India, these challenges were particularly acute because of the unique complexity of its interests and relationships in the region. The conflict exposed both the strengths and the limitations of India’s traditional approach of strategic autonomy and careful ambiguity. It demonstrated that in the current information environment, silence and ambiguity carry costs as well as benefits. And it underscored the deep connections between the international information environment and India’s domestic political landscape.

More broadly, this case illustrates a truth that is likely to become more rather than less relevant in the coming years: foreign policy can no longer be conducted as if the information environment does not exist. Strategic narratives, disinformation, social media dynamics, and the speed of the global news cycle are not peripheral irritants to be managed by communications teams after the real foreign policy decisions have been made. The sooner India and other emerging powers fully internalize this reality, the better equipped they will be to navigate an increasingly complex and contested world.

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