

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

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This study provides a descriptive narrative of how the Israel-Hamas conflict was portrayed and discussed 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-Indian government narratives, likely for political advantage in electoral contexts. This article explores the consequences of designing digital platforms that balance privacy with the need to curb harmful content: 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 platform responsibilities and design strategies in the face of evolving digital manipulation tactics.

Keywords: Israel-Hamas conflict, encrypted social networks, WhatsApp, digital manipulation, misinformation

This research examines the significant and unexpected impact of the Israel-Hamas conflict¹ on social media discourse in India, highlighting how a distant conflict can influence local narratives in a nation not directly involved. We focus 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, as content remains unmoderated and encrypted, allowing narratives to proliferate unchecked (Banaji et al., 2019; Varanasi et al., 2022).

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Date submitted: 2024-11-14

¹ In writing about a highly polarized and politically sensitive issue, we have chosen to be as descriptively neutral and analytically consistent as possible. We use "Israel-Hamas conflict" to reflect the discursive language employed in the material we analyzed, as well as the framing observed in digital narratives. We acknowledge that no term is ideologically neutral, and in many cases, neutrality itself can obscure structures of violence and power. However, as researchers, we aim to document and analyze these discourses without reinforcing any particular political stance.

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The importance of this issue lies in its potential to influence social and political perspectives in India, which is especially significant given the country's considerable Muslim minority (Jaffrelot & Kalaiyarasan, 2022). 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 (Sullivan de Estrada, 2023).

Studying the circulation of misinformation on WhatsApp at scale poses unique methodological challenges. The platform's end-to-end encryption, while vital for user privacy, limits the effectiveness of conventional content moderation and algorithmic filtering techniques commonly employed on public platforms. As a result, misinformation can circulate in closed networks without systematic checks or counters. While prior research has made significant strides in examining how misinformation operates within encrypted environments (Banaji et al., 2019; Medeiros & Singh, 2020), they also highlight the methodological and epistemological constraints of such research. Much of the broader literature on political discourse and misinformation has focused on open platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), where data are more readily accessible. This article contributes to the growing body of work on misinformation in closed messaging platforms by developing an approach that is sensitive to the structural affordances and limitations of WhatsApp, rather than treating it as a variant of public social media.

Our analysis builds on data collected by Garimella and Chauchard (2025), comprising more than 1,000 WhatsApp groups obtained through a data donation program in India. Using this rich data set, we obtained 824 viral pieces of content spreading on WhatsApp following the October 7, 2023 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 Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP, the right-wing party in power since 2014) electoral goals.² 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 fertile ground for spreading misinformation, significantly affecting its complex social structure. This issue extends beyond Indian borders, given the global reach of nationalist narratives by Indian influencers, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of these effects in our interconnected world.

Our study contributes to a growing body of interdisciplinary work at the intersection of communication, political conflict, and technology design. By examining how encrypted platforms like WhatsApp are used to disseminate divisive narratives targeting India's Muslim minority—the third-largest Muslim population in the world—this article highlights how global conflicts can be strategically reframed to

² The October 7 attack and its aftermath took place in the period leading up to the April 2024 National elections in India and should be viewed in that context.

destabilize domestic communal relations. Building on prior work that documents user-driven moderation efforts in encrypted spaces (Banaji et al., 2019; Varanasi et al., 2022), we argue that platform design must contend with both misinformation and the weaponization of affect and ideology. This calls for rethinking platform responsibility in politically volatile contexts, balancing the imperatives of privacy with the urgent need to curb hate-driven manipulation in closed network environments.

Communication Infrastructures and Political Narratives

Encrypted Infrastructures and Platform Affordances

Although WhatsApp is technically a messaging app, in practice, it functions as a social media platform in many parts of the world, particularly in the Global South. Unlike traditional messaging apps designed primarily for one-to-one communication, WhatsApp enables the creation and maintenance of large group chats—some with hundreds of participants—as well as the widespread circulation of multimedia content via broadcast lists and viral forwards (Banaji et al., 2019; Garimella & Eckles, 2020). These features replicate the core dynamics of social media: persistent content sharing, community formation, and networked public discourse. For millions of users, especially in India, WhatsApp is not simply a tool for interpersonal messaging, but a space for consuming news, engaging in political debate, and participating in ideological communities.

WhatsApp architecture, particularly its end-to-end encryption, constructs a communication environment that is both secure and opaque. Messages are only accessible to the sender and the recipient, effectively excluding platforms, governments, and researchers from content-level scrutiny. This foundational design protects user privacy, but it also creates what scholars have termed “dark social” spaces—private, virally connected networks with little oversight (Gillespie, 2018). As a result, such platforms present critical blind spots for moderating misinformation, hate speech, and coordinated propaganda campaigns (Medeiros & Singh, 2020; Nizaruddin, 2021).

Unlike platforms like X, which facilitate virality through broadcast affordances—retweets, trending topics, and influencer amplification—WhatsApp is characterized by a peer-to-peer model of circulation. There are no “verified accounts” or algorithmic recommendation systems that create hierarchies of content visibility. Instead, virality stems from repeated sharing within trusted interpersonal or community networks, which research shows can intensify resonance and reduce skepticism (Trauthig et al., 2024). This intimacy and informality of sharing imbue content with emotional credibility, especially when it aligns with existing biases (Gursky et al., 2022; Trauthig & Woolley, 2023).

These architectural affordances have made WhatsApp an especially potent tool for grassroots political mobilization in India. Nizaruddin (2021) and Varanasi et al. (2022) document how the BJP and affiliated groups leverage WhatsApp’s decentralized model to circulate political messaging within caste, religious, and regional networks. This mode of “organic dissemination” bypasses public scrutiny while mimicking authenticity and spontaneity. The result is a communicative infrastructure where narratives are seeded top-down, but appear to spread bottom-up—what we might call “astroturf virality.”

Thus, encrypted platforms like WhatsApp represent a unique challenge for both researchers and policy makers. Their privatized architectures, while ostensibly democratic and privacy-preserving, have enabled what Gillespie (2018) describes as a “lawless” digital space governed by opaque content flows. These platforms are not merely neutral conduits of communication; they are infrastructures of circulation (Larkin, 2008) that structure what stories can be told, who tells them, and how widely they are believed.

Transnational Conflicts in Local Media Ecologies

While WhatsApp’s infrastructure fosters localized narrative spread, the content itself often transcends borders. Conflicts such as the Israel-Hamas war are not only observed, but actively remediated within Indian digital spaces, where they are interwoven with domestic political ideologies and identity anxieties. In this study, we show how a foreign war becomes a local political tool, exploited to reinforce pro-government narratives, vilify religious minorities, and heighten communal tensions.

This phenomenon aligns with what Kraidy (2005) describes as “hybridity”—the cultural logic by which global messages are absorbed and rearticulated in local idioms. Couldry and Hepp (2017) further characterize this process as the “mediated construction of reality,” where media infrastructures scaffold how global events become meaningful within specific sociopolitical contexts. With India, the symbolic war between Israel and Hamas is reframed into a proxy narrative about Hindus and Muslims, national loyalty and betrayal, and legitimate versus illegitimate violence.

Studies in conflict and security research further highlight how groups like Hamas use media as strategic tools to engage in psychological and political warfare. Margolin (2022), for instance, explores how Hamas shifts between governance and militancy, leveraging visual propaganda and digital communication to sustain legitimacy, galvanize support, and reframe losses as symbolic victories. These communicative strategies are not confined to Gaza; they reverberate across diasporic and international media ecosystems, where other political actors—such as Hindu nationalist groups in India—repurpose them for local ideological battles. Thus, Hamas’s sophisticated media operations provide both inspiration and tactical models for distant political communities seeking to advance communal polarization.

Empirical studies of digital conflict narratives reinforce this theoretical framing. Seo (2014) found that both Israel and Hamas deployed emotional and thematic frames on Twitter to sway international opinion, with Israeli actors leaning on analytical and unity-based narratives and Hamas emphasizing human suffering and resistance. During the 2014 Gaza conflict, Zhang (2017) noted the adaptability of Hamas’s propaganda in response to evolving global sentiment. Zeitzoff (2017) further argues that social media reshapes the very nature of conflict—not just in how it is perceived, but in how it is waged and legitimized. This dynamic is the inverse of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, where a local Nigerian crisis went global (Olson, 2016). In our case, a distant war is instead “localized” to advance domestic electoral strategies and communal antagonisms.

Ultimately, the Israel-Hamas conflict becomes a canvas upon which Indian political actors project their ideological anxieties and ambitions. This highlights the need to treat social media not only as a site of content but also as a site of ideological labor—a space where global events are metabolized into local power

structures. By doing so, this article bridges scholarship in communication, political sociology, and conflict studies, offering a granular account of how global security narratives are strategically realigned within domestic populist campaigns.

Affect, Framing, and Narrative Spread

Central to the virality and effectiveness of WhatsApp narratives is their emotional charge. These are not dispassionate news reports, but affectively saturated frames designed to provoke outrage, fear, pride, and loyalty. As Papacharissi (2015) argues, contemporary networked publics are shaped less by rational deliberation and more by what she calls “affective publics”—collectives that mobilize around shared feelings and sentiments. These publics are not incidental to political communication; they are its very engine.

In the Indian context, the ideological proximity between Hindutva³ and Zionist⁴ discourses has created fertile ground for emotionally resonant content. Therwath (2012) and Sen (2015) show how both movements center on nationalist exceptionalism and Islamophobia, often drawing on each other’s strategies and mythologies. This civilizational framing is not abstract: It appears explicitly in WhatsApp forwards comparing Hamas to Indian Muslims, celebrating Israeli military actions, and glorifying a shared cultural-military ethos between Israel and Hindu nationalism.

In sum, the circulation of narratives on WhatsApp during the Israel-Hamas conflict cannot be understood through content alone. It requires attention to the affective structures that make such content “stick,” the ideological histories that make it intelligible, and the encrypted infrastructures that make it unstoppable.

Our Contribution

Together, these three strands—encrypted infrastructures, transnational narrative adaptation, and affective framing—highlight the layered complexity of contemporary political communication in the Global South. While prior research has examined misinformation on social media, this article advances the literature by demonstrating how encrypted, semiprivate platforms like WhatsApp operate not merely as channels of information, but as infrastructures of ideological labor. The convergence of technical opacity, affective virality, and geopolitical recontextualization creates a potent environment for manipulating public opinion across borders, languages, and cultural domains.

This article contributes to ongoing debates in communication scholarship about the interplay between media technologies, political discourse, and global-local flows. By foregrounding WhatsApp’s role

³ Hindutva is a political and cultural ideology that seeks to define Indian culture in terms of Hindu values.

⁴ Zionism is a political and nationalist movement that emerged in the late 19th century with the goal of establishing a Jewish homeland. Since the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, Zionism has evolved to encompass support for the maintenance and development of Israel as a Jewish state. While for many it represents Jewish self-determination and survival, critics often associate certain forms of Zionism with colonialism, displacement of Palestinians, and unequal policies within the region.

in translating the Israel-Hamas conflict into communal narratives within India, we show how transnational conflicts are not only observed, but actively reauthored to serve domestic political objectives. In doing so, this study extends theories of mediatization, affective publics, and platform governance to the underexamined context of encrypted messaging in the Global South.

Moreover, we suggest that understanding misinformation and hate speech on encrypted platforms requires a shift in focus—from fact-checking discrete messages to examining the relational and infrastructural dynamics that shape narrative virality. Our findings urge communication scholars to treat private messaging platforms not as peripheral or intractable, but as central terrains in the study of digital propaganda, political mobilization, and transnational media ecologies.

Data Set

The data set used in this research was shared by Garimella and Chauchard (2025) and was collected through data donations on WhatsApp from 379 users in rural India, corresponding to 1,094 WhatsApp groups. Garimella and Chauchard's (2025) 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 that discussed issues around political and religious identity, caste, region, etc. Please refer to the original article (Garimella & Chauchard, 2025) for more details on the data set, including the sample composition, anonymization procedures, and the ethical protocols followed to obtain it.

To find messages relevant to the Israel-Hamas conflict, a comprehensive search was done within the data set 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 about the conflict. The data set spanned more than three months, starting on October 7, 2023. Figure 1A (Appendix)⁵ shows the timeline of the content in our data set.

Annotation

A journalist with deep expertise in the Indian media landscape, particularly in fact-checking and misinformation, conducted the annotation. Fluent in Hindi and embedded in the region's cultural and political context, the annotator was well-positioned to interpret nuanced or symbolic messaging within WhatsApp groups. While this expertise added valuable depth, we acknowledge that positionality may shape interpretation. Given prior research showing disproportionate misinformation from the ruling party and its affiliates (Nizaruddin, 2021), we remain transparent about the potential for bias in the coding process.

We also made a deliberate decision to rely on a single expert annotator, rather than using a team of crowd workers or multiple coders. This choice was driven by both practical and epistemological considerations. The complexity of the content—often steeped in cultural nuance, political dog whistles,

⁵ The appendix is available at <https://bit.ly/ijoc-submission-appendix>.

religious references, and coded language—requires a deep familiarity with the discursive ecosystem of Indian WhatsApp groups. Training nonexperts to reliably annotate such content would not only have been resource-intensive but also risked compromising the validity of the labels because of gaps in contextual understanding. In this sense, we prioritized expertise and contextual knowledge over inter-coder agreement metrics, recognizing that this trade-off offers a richer, if interpretive, account of the data set.

To facilitate the annotation process, special software was developed specifically for this project. This software was designed not only to search and retrieve content relevant to our study but also to present it 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 data were coded 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 seven major themes for the content in our data set (shown in Figure 2). We also annotated the groups in which the content was shared. The categories of groups we found are shown in Figure 2A (Appendix). The code book and justifications for the coding categories are presented in the Appendix. The raw coded data from this study are available at <https://bit.ly/israel-whatsapp-data>.

Narratives

We uncovered a sustained campaign on WhatsApp that involved multiple narratives, suggesting a strategic, top-down push to shape public opinion. The persistent use of fear speech (Saha et al., 2023), which played on the anxieties of Hindu recipients, characterized this campaign. 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 toward pro-Israel sentiments (more than 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 only spontaneous expressions of individual opinions but also part of a coordinated effort to steer public perception in a particular direction. 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 the Discussion section.

The narrative evolution on WhatsApp during the conflict followed a clear pattern of escalation. Initially, messages focused on shock and sympathy for Israel, reflecting global reactions to the October 7 attacks. However, by the second week, messaging shifted toward India's internal politics—featuring increased anti-Muslim rhetoric, linking Hamas to Indian Muslims, and targeting opposition parties. This

transition indicates a strategic use of the conflict to reinforce Hindutva ideology and advance domestic political goals. Quantitative analysis of our data set confirms this narrative shift. Figure 1 shows that in the first week (October 7–14), “News on Israel” comprised 15% of the messages, reflecting a strong focus on external developments. By the second week (October 15–22), that category dropped to just 8%, while categories like “Hatred against Muslims,” “Propaganda to influence Hindus,” and “Propaganda against the opposition” saw marked increases.

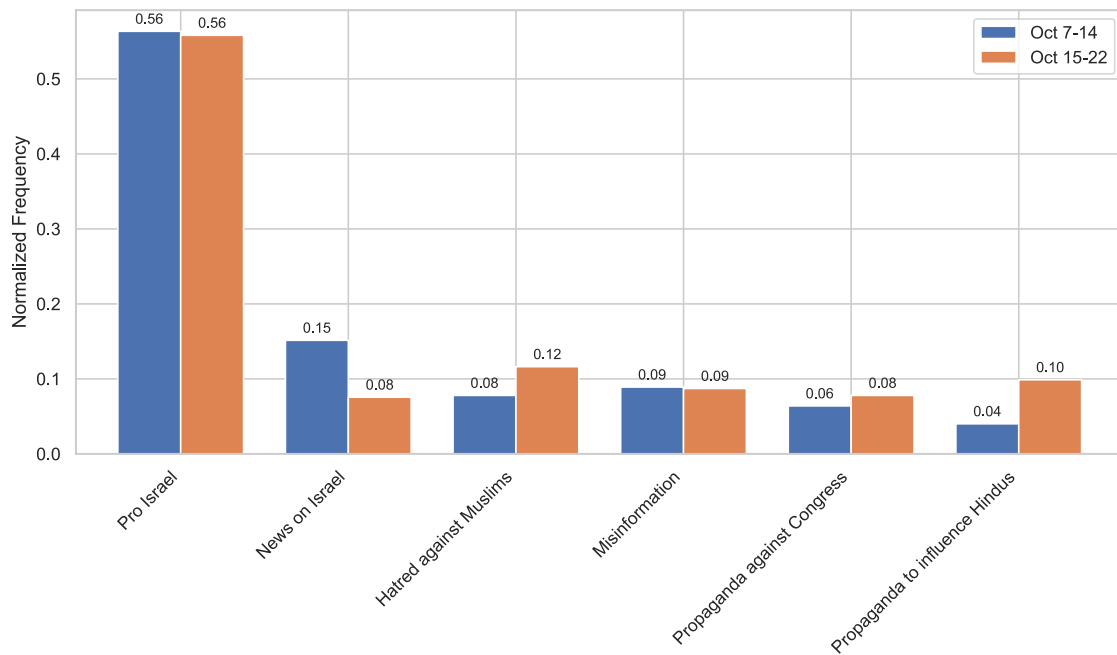


Figure 1. Categories of information in the first and second weeks of the conflict. We can clearly see how the narrative shifted after week 1.

Source. Authors’ analysis of the data set.

Next, we offer a detailed analysis of the prevalent narratives along with examples of messages from our data set. Figure 2 shows a summary of the top categories in our data set.

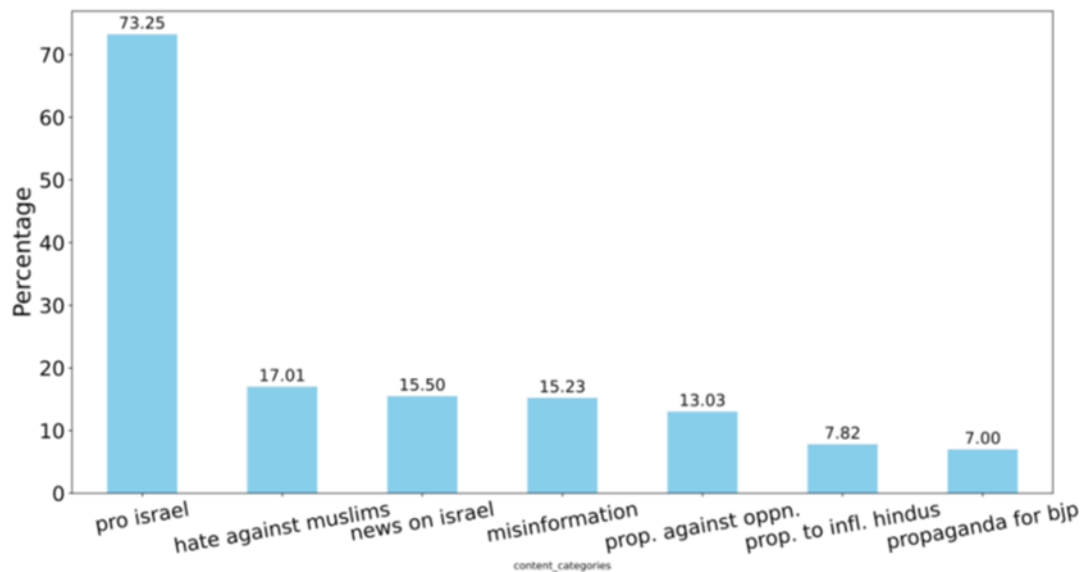


Figure 2. Categories of content in our data set. The numbers do not add up to 100 because the categories could be overlapping (e.g., pro-Israel content could contain misinformation).

Source. Authors' analysis of the data set.

Pro-Israel

Historically pro-Palestine, India has shifted toward Israel since Modi came to power in 2014, driven by shared concerns over Islamic extremism and an ideological convergence between Zionism and Hindutva (Blarel, 2021). The content disseminated on WhatsApp has played a crucial role in shaping this supportive stance, as can be seen from Figure 2, with more than 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 popular TV personality Sudhir Chaudhary 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 were not substantiated by any evidence. These narratives received more than 10 million views on X, possibly with a bigger reach on WhatsApp (Aditya Raj Kaul, 2023).⁶ Such emotive content effectively stirs strong pro-Israel feelings among those previously less familiar with the nuances of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

⁶ Tweet by a prominent television personality with more than 10 million views on X. Content viral on WhatsApp has to be forwarded at least five hops from the source. Five hops could potentially mean that millions of people were exposed to the content, though the exact number varies based on the structure of the network.

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. (personal communication in a Pro Israel group, October 27, 2023)⁷

This wave of support for Israel has also intertwined with domestic political ideologies, particularly 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. 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" (personal communication in a Hindutva group, October 28, 2023).

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 is 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)" (personal communication in a BJP group, November 11, 2023); "This is the status of these naked pigs of Hamas 🔥 Israel, you keep feeding, we are with you 🇮🇸🇮🇸" (personal communication in a regional group, January 9, 2024); "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" (personal communication in a Hindutva group, January 4, 2024); "BREAKING Fearing Israeli army I.D.F in the battlefield, Hamas's impotent terrorists ran away peeing in their pants 🇮🇸🇮🇸🇮🇸" (personal communication in a regional group, November 16, 2023); "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 🇮🇸🇮🇸" (personal communication in a regional group, October 14, 2023).

Muslims in India as a Threat

The narrative framing Muslims as a threat permeates a significant portion of the messages analyzed, underscoring 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

⁷ To protect the privacy of our participants, all quotes from the data set are cited as "personal communication" with the date of the message. We have omitted user names, but indicate the type of group where relevant to the context.

Hindus. These messages often stereotype Muslims as barbaric, prone to terrorism, and 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... 🤡 🐍 🐍 🐍 🤡" (personal communication in a Hindutva group, October 9, 2023).

The narrative extends to portray all Muslims as inherently untrustworthy and dangerous, trying to instil fear among Hindus (Saha et al., 2023). This is exemplified by 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.⁸ Such messages often include spurious claims designed to incite fear and justify preemptive aggression. The news article (OpIndia Staff, 2023) about a hate crime against a Palestinian child was purposely distorted 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. The Modi government should send these people to Palestine" (personal communication in a Hindutva group, October 13, 2023); "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? 🤡 🤡 🤡" (personal communication in a Pro-Israel group, October 25, 2023).

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" (personal communication in a Hindutva group, October 13, 2023).

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 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 Muslims during Hindu 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!" (personal communication in a Hindutva group, October 13, 2023).

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

⁸ ex-Muslim refers to Muslims who have converted to Hinduism. There is a trope within the right-wing in India that most Indians were once Hindus who were converted to Islam by Muslim "invaders."

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). (personal communication in a Hindutva group, October 31, 2023)

Propaganda Targeted Toward Hindus

Alongside anti-Muslim hate, we observed a campaign fueling Hindu fears with alarmist rhetoric. Narratives suggest that Prime Minister Modi losing power would lead to a Hindu genocide, validating these fears by citing broad conspiracies and drawing parallels to the violence 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*'' (personal communication in a caste group, October 15, 2023).

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. (personal communication in a regional group, October 11, 2023)

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 🤬*'' (personal communication in a Caste group, October 10, 2023); ``*There is 1 Gaza Strip in Israel and 300 in #India*'' (personal communication in a regional group, October 18, 2023).

This propaganda strengthens Hindu solidarity by portraying the BJP as the sole protector and the opposition as a threat. By linking rivals to external enemies, it exploits the Israel-Palestine crisis to discredit the opposition, instill fear of alternative leadership, and bolster the government's position.

Dehumanizing Palestinian Suffering

The narrative aimed at dehumanizing Palestinian suffering has manifested powerfully in various memes and messages circulated on WhatsApp, showing 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 because of the number of Palestinians being killed, suggesting that the virgins promised in certain Islamic beliefs⁹ 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*” (personal communication in a regional group, October 9, 2023); “*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) (personal communication in a Hindutva group, October 10, 2023).

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 Hindu 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. 🤖 😏*” (personal communication in a Hindutva group, November 12, 2023).

The narratives paint 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 Indian public to Palestinian suffering while 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 😡😡👉*” (personal communication in a regional group, October 12, 2023); “*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*” (personal communication in a Hindutva group, October 13, 2023).

Attacking the Opposition

Opposition support for Palestine is aggressively vilified and falsely equated with endorsing Hamas to paint parties as terror sympathizers. This rhetoric employs dehumanizing slurs like “Jihadi pigs” and “cancer” to incite hostility. By framing diplomatic support as an endorsement of the October 7 attacks, these narratives aim to undermine the opposition's credibility through binary, extremist framing: “*Even Hamas is not feeling that much pain due to Israel's attack....as much as the children of those terrorists growing up

⁹ These narratives invoke a distorted reference to hadiths that mention spiritual rewards—such as virgins—for male martyrs, though such beliefs are not universally accepted and are not found in the Qur'an.

in India are feeling. !! 😞 😞 😞” (personal communication in a regional group, October 12, 2023); “*Who stand with Palestine today. Tomorrow they will stand with Pakistan. #staystrong #Israel*” (personal communication in a Hindutva group, October 9, 2023); “*Has there been any statement from any opposition leader or his henchmen on the attack on Israel by Hamas?*” (personal communication in a regional group, October 8, 2023).

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 also 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*” (personal communication in a regional group, October 8, 2023); “*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 Palestinian civilians) (personal communication in a Hindutva group, October 10, 2023).

Misinformation

A 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 (Boom Live Team, 2025), highlighting the pervasive nature of misinformation related to this topic. Their report indicates that a staggering 92.6% of the misinformation was sensationalist in nature, and 13% involved the use of AI-generated content, deepfakes, or video game footage (Jacob, 2023). Moreover, the research found that 65% of the X¹⁰ accounts spreading these fact-checked claims were verified, with more than 40% of these accounts being based in India (Chowdhury, 2023).

We observe a similar trend: Misinformation comprises 15% of our WhatsApp data set, playing a key role in shaping political narratives. This content is predominantly pro-Israel and targets the Indian National Congress by falsely linking it to Hamas. For example, viral claims distorted the party’s stance to suggest an endorsement of terrorism, aiming to polarize opinions and delegitimize the opposition: “*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*” (personal communication in a caste group, October 18, 2023).

¹⁰ Previously known as Twitter. Twitter was rebranded as X in July 2023.

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 fabricated claims such as Hamas militants committing barbaric acts. 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 users' ability to discern real events from fabricated ones (see Figure 3 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 X 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 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). (personal communication in a Hindutva group, October 12, 2023)

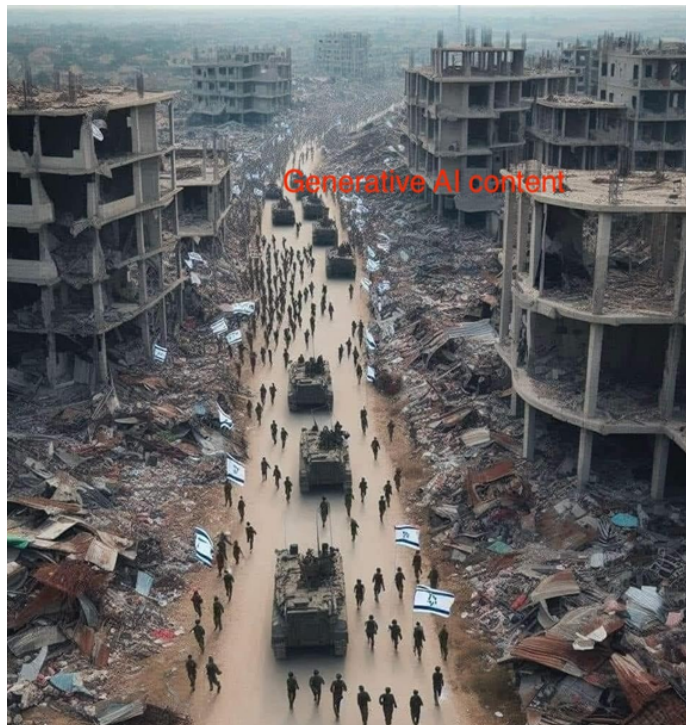


Figure 3. Generative AI content showing an Israeli victory parade in Gaza. The label in red text was added by the authors (personal communication in a Hindutva group, November 30, 2023).

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?

We concluded that documenting these communications is crucial. While our academic focus is on conflict dynamics, it would be irresponsible to ignore the accompanying humanitarian crisis. The rationalization and celebration of violence in digital discourse reflect a moral erosion that must be witnessed. We analyze these rhetorical strategies to understand how atrocities are normalized, hoping to inform ethical media practices and conflict prevention.

We also examine the relevance of Indian villagers' opinions on a distant conflict. This inquiry highlights the global reach of digital narratives and their cross-cultural influence. This section explains why studying WhatsApp in India is relevant to the Gaza conflict, offering insights to help develop effective strategies for cross-border peace.

We focus on four areas that make this study particularly important and have broader consequences.

Role of Encryption

WhatsApp's end-to-end encryption, while essential for user privacy, poses major challenges for moderating content. It enables misinformation to circulate repeatedly and virally, often stripped of context and reframed to support various narratives (Banaji et al., 2019; Kamara et al., 2022; Nizaruddin, 2021). Encrypted platforms like WhatsApp shield this content from oversight, allowing easily debunked claims and graphic materials to spread unchecked—fueling fear, polarization, and, at times, real-world violence.

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.¹¹

Political actors have become increasingly adept at exploiting these closed networks to craft and distribute strategic narratives. The combination of technical opacity and viral affordances makes encrypted messaging apps fertile ground for agenda-driven propaganda. This raises urgent questions about how to balance the right to privacy with the need to curb harmful misinformation in encrypted digital ecosystems.

¹¹ Compared with other platforms like Facebook or X where repeatedly sharing violent content could get an account banned.

Importance of Misinformation

Misinformation, while only a fraction of the narratives disseminated in our data set, plays a crucial role 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 particularly susceptible to the spread of misinformation because users tend to trust and believe 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).

Demonizing Muslims

The use of WhatsApp for disseminating 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 worsening 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 Muslim population in the world with 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).

Impact on the Conflict

The digital response to the Israel-Hamas conflict from India—driven largely by the BJP-aligned ecosystem of influencers, content creators, and state-friendly media—has far-reaching consequences that extend well beyond national borders. What began as domestic political signaling has evolved into a powerful force that shapes global perceptions, weaponizes affect, and strategically positions India as a key ideological and geopolitical ally to Israel in the global information war.

India's right-wing digital infrastructure, honed over a decade of electoral propaganda and anti-minority mobilization, has proven adept at realigning its messaging to support international allies. In the aftermath of the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack, Indian influencers rapidly generated and spread pro-Israel narratives, framing the conflict through tropes of "Islamic terrorism" and Hindu solidarity. Hashtags like #IndiaStandsWithIsrael trended globally on X, triggering public gratitude from Israeli state institutions (Middle East Eye, 2024; Times of India, 2023). This was not an organic groundswell, but a coordinated campaign by state-aligned influencers and bot networks that reflects what Sevencan (2023) describes as "one of the most formidable purveyors of propaganda in the world."

These narratives serve dual purposes. Domestically, they bolster the BJP's nationalist agenda and deepen communal polarization by framing Muslims as aligned with global terrorism. Internationally, they amplify Israel's narrative of moral clarity and victimhood in the global public sphere. Israeli institutions have actively embraced this support—reciprocating with praise, diplomatic engagement, and even orchestrated influencer visits to conflict zones. NGOs like Sharaka and think tanks have turned Indian influencers into ideological allies who repackage Israeli talking points for South Asian and diasporic audiences in multiple languages, including Hindi, Urdu, and Arabic (News Arena India, 2025).

India's massive Internet user base—more than 700 million strong—and its prominence in English-speaking digital spaces give it unmatched influence in the Global South. Unlike Western media, Indian right-wing accounts often reach South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Muslim diaspora populations in ways that circumvent traditional media gatekeeping (India Today OSINT Team, 2024). Israeli disinformation and messaging campaigns have come to rely on this Indian amplification, as seen in cases where pro-Israel accounts reshare Indian political content or cite Indian social media trends in lobbying Western lawmakers (Hourany, 2023).

What emerges is a portrait of India as a "disinformation superpower"—not in the sense of state deception alone, but through a decentralized, multilingual, digitally agile network of nationalist actors operating across encrypted and public platforms. Their efforts do not simply mimic Western disinformation tactics—they reshape them, embedding transnational conflicts like Israel-Hamas into local identity politics and exporting these reframed narratives back into global circuits.

Conclusion

The discussion surrounding the Israel-Hamas conflict on platforms like WhatsApp in India unveils a deeply woven tapestry of political manoeuvring and public engagement. This article sheds light on a sustained effort by the BJP, the political party in power, 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 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. First, it highlights how international conflicts can be localized through social media platforms, influencing public opinion and potentially swaying electoral dynamics. Second, 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.

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