

Hamas has a secret weapon no one talks about: Western stupidity

From Beirut jihadis to Tehran extremists, the erosion of thoughtful discourse has emboldened the world's most dangerous groups

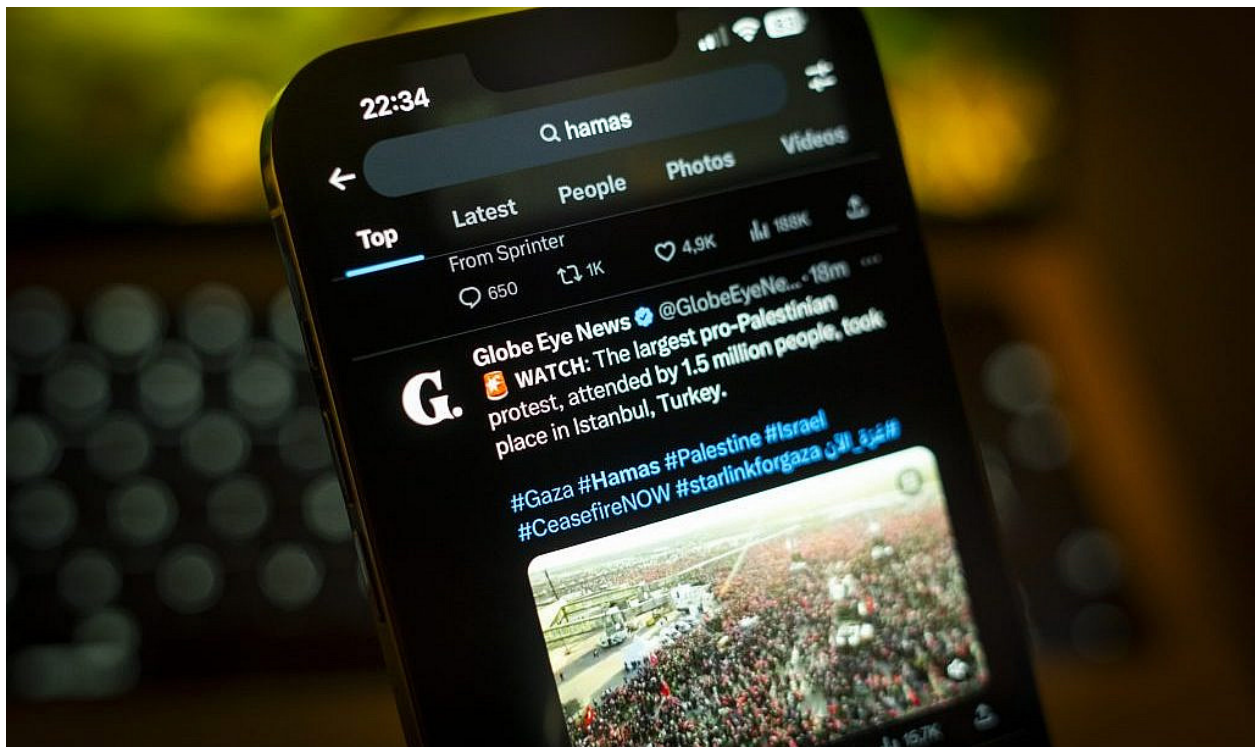


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Since the advent of social media, the world has undergone an unprecedented period of mass stupefaction. To put it bluntly – large groups of people on both the left and the right are getting dumber faster. Sadly, this trend has proven to be

tremendously beneficial for Hamas, the Palestinian terrorist group hell-bent on Israel's destruction.

In his 2022 article “Why the Past Ten Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid,” social psychologist and author Jonathan Haidt explains how online echo chambers have significantly weakened people's ability to communicate with one another – particularly those with opposing views. As Haidt notes, tribalistic enmity which has been amplified and accelerated by things like Facebook's Like and Share buttons, or X's retweet function, has not only corroded nuanced thought and conversation, it has “supercharged” confirmation bias, the most significant obstacle to “good thinking.” However, what Haidt doesn't address is how beneficial this tsunami of stupidity has been to the most nefarious people on earth – including terrorists.

From jihadis in Beirut to extremists in Tehran, the erosion of thoughtful conversation combined with an explosion of algorithmically enabled animosity has emboldened the world's most dangerous groups, particularly Hamas. Indeed, since their heinous attacks in Israel on October 7, Hamas appears to be winning the war of public opinion in the West – not through strategically designed information campaigns – but through an international army of thoughtless individuals with an aversion to critical thinking and any information that could, God forbid, potentially challenge their worldviews.

For years, we have known that the Internet has been – as Charlie Warzel recently described it – a “window” through which virtually everyone on the planet has observed many of the most heinous acts ever committed. In fact, despite my own best efforts, I've been exposed to a variety of terrible videos and gruesome content which, in many ways, has shaped my perspective on the world. From the barbaric execution of the late great Daniel Pearl (to whom I dedicated

my PhD dissertation) in Pakistan in 2002, to the sadistic murder of Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh by ISIS in 2015, to footage of Hamas's massacre in Israel, recorded violence on the Internet has become sadly familiar. However, what isn't familiar is what we have seen since October 7, which is the pairing of violent online content with seemingly endless mis- and disinformation, spread, embraced, and amplified by millions of willfully blind people using it to validate their own identities, confirm preferred beliefs, and convince themselves they're standing up for the oppressed.

This deadly and destabilizing convergence of terrorism-related content, pervasive manipulation of information on social media, and the hijacking of Jewish trauma for political and ideological gain, is legitimizing and strengthening Hamas in unprecedented ways.

For starters, it is important to note that while Hamas might be utterly barbaric – the group isn't stupid. In fact, they stated publicly in an interview with *The New York Times*, that they've been exploiting a lack of content moderation on X to post graphic and violent videos designed to terrorize Israelis – part of the psychological warfare they've unleashed on the Jewish state since October 7. This includes bodycam footage of Hamas terrorists murdering Israeli families, images of dead Israeli soldiers, burned-out homes, and injured hostages being violently dragged back into Gaza.

Unfortunately, many people who consider themselves to be “progressive activists” have taken troves of this content and repurposed it for their own agendas. In their view, the victims seen in videos, heard on recordings, and shown in images, aren't victims at all, they're settlers, colonizers, and Zionists – fair game when it comes to “armed resistance.” From this perspective, Hamas has achieved a double whammy. They've been able to traumatize Israelis and the Jewish diaspora in ways not seen since the Holocaust, while simultaneously

relying on their progressive western sympathizers to dehumanize their victims and justify their atrocities in the name of liberation.

Then there is the issue of Hamas intentionally polluting the information space with false or misleading content. From pointing the finger at Israel for the deadly Al-Ahli Arab Hospital bombing in Gaza (which Western media outlets quickly ran with), to conflating civilian deaths with fighter casualties, to suggesting Israel has fabricated what happened on October 7, Hamas has flooded the online environment with dangerous and misleading information that social media users around the world have eaten up, turned around, and parroted themselves.

For instance, one study found that in a single 24-hour period, a series of posts on X sympathetic to terrorist activities in Gaza and Israel, which also contained misleading information, received over 16 million views. In addition, the Atlantic Council found that the Telegram channel for Hamas's military wing, Al-Qassam Brigades, had "tripled in size from pre-war levels" while the account of Gaza Now, an online group linked to Hamas, has seen their average views per post increase roughly tenfold since October 7. While much of this disinformation is harmful in that it obfuscates reality and increases support and sympathy for Hamas, it also plays into a variety of antisemitic conspiracy theories, including that Jews lie, that they're untrustworthy, and that they're a scheming tribe of nefarious individuals committed to Palestinian oppression.

In addition, there are the online echo chambers fueling confirmation bias that Haidt warned us about. Since October 7, people obsessed with Israel and already set on their favored Palestinian narratives, have found an endless stream of social media content to validate their preferred beliefs, beliefs which thanks to Hamas are known to be only partially true or even entirely false. To the benefit of Hamas, these echo chambers have evolved quite dramatically over the last

several years. While Western activists once appeared at least notionally interested in improving the lives of Palestinians and having somewhat moderately reasonable conversations about things like a two-state solution and specific Israeli policies, the post-October 7 echo chambers have been dominated by blatant Jew-hatred, conspiracy theories, fabricated information, and content explicitly calling for the complete erasure of Israel.

At the heart of this thought decay are a number of trends, likely driven by social media, that are diminishing people's ability to listen to each other, to communicate, and to think. From dropping IQ scores, decreasing attention spans, and increased rates of loneliness and isolation, Hamas has been able to capitalize on the West's addiction to social media and subsequent stupefaction to mobilize public support for their genocidal cause. Ironically, the loudest Western voices incessantly echoing Hamas talking points are people the group would likely consider infidels or apostates, people the group would waste no time killing – after dealing with Israel first, of course.

All told, if we don't find ways to reform our new digital public squares on platforms like TikTok, X, and Instagram and curtail our eroding abilities to think constructively and speak thoughtfully, the West will face a precipitous social and cognitive collapse – precisely what Hamas and its backers need and want.

<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/hamas-has-a-secret-weapon-no-one-talks-about-western-stupidity/>

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