



Iran and Hezbollah Mentor Terrorist Organizations on Propaganda: The Hamas and Islamic Jihad Case

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Summary

One of the major areas terrorist organizations operate to influence their enemy's public opinion is propaganda. This war is being waged via traditional media and social media. The last two rounds of hostilities in Gaza Operation Protective Edge (2014) and Guardian of the Walls (2021) manifested the importance of propaganda for either Israel or Hamas. The latter, developed propaganda capabilities, beef up its presence on social media platforms and promote its narrative through said platforms. In recent years it managed to build a body of knowledge and acquire a propaganda tool kit, in large part thanks to mentorship by pro-Iranian media outlets, some of which are controlled by Hezbollah (either in Lebanon or Gaza), or via online guidance by the latter. A deeper analysis of these media outlet mentors reveals an extensive network of media outlets spread over more than 30 countries and enjoys Iranian funding.

Keywords: Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Social Media, Propaganda

The Importance of Social Media to Hamas

Hamas has been vocal about the use of social media as a tool to shape public perception vs. its enemies. In December 2015 Hamas leadership held its first digital conference to commemorate its 28th anniversary. **Khaled Mashal**, member of Hamas Political Bureau, said that the Palestinians had demonstrated creative ways to fight their Israeli enemy and would be as creative on social media. **Khalil al-Lahiyyah**, member of Hamas Political Bureau, even argued that Hamas established a Palestinian cyber army comprised of 250 members active over traditional and social media.¹ After Operation Guardian of the Walls, Hamas stressed the importance of propaganda on either social or traditional media. **Ali al-Amoudi**, head of Hamas Propaganda Department, stressed in September 2021 the important contribution of the Palestinian journalists on traditional and social media to the Palestinian issue and the battle against the Zionist narrative.² **Mouhsein al-Ifranji**, a journalist and lecturer in the Islamic university in Gaza who is close to Hamas, stressed after Operation Guardian of the Walls the importance of social media: *“media people in Palestine, the Arab world and the free world have prepared professionally and armed themselves with all the capabilities, skills and awareness to defeat the [Israeli] conqueror. The next campaign will be very harsh against media poundits and their supporters, activists, writers, intellectuals, commentators and others. The criminal conqueror understood that it is hard to hide its ugly image from the world and therefore it wages a harsh war and lashes at media people and activists...be ready because every photo, every word, every tweet or hashtag are the resistance.”*³

¹ 15.12.15. <https://www.nawa.ps/ar/post/24149>

² 20.9.21. <https://alresalah.ws/post/246894/كتابة-الصحفي-الفالسطيني-تعقد-مؤتمر-ها-العام-وتنتخب-مجلسا-مركزيا-للقيا>

³ 6.6.21. <https://www.facebook.com/malefranji/posts/10158353255418008>



Al-Ifranji's post in favour of using traditional and new media against the enemy

The Islamic Radios and Televisions Union (IRTVU) and its Gaza Extension

The Irani regime tries to shape public perception and opinion in the Arab world through the use of “soft power” thinking that this would be best to promote its agenda. **The Islamic Radios and Televisions Union (IRTVU)** serves as a major channel to deploy the above “soft power.”⁴ IRTVU was formed in Tehran in June 2007 and it reports to the Iranian Islamic Culture and Guidance Bureau. Its membership includes over 210 media outlets in 35 countries on five continents. IRTVU’s secretary-general is **Sheikh Ali Karimian**, a Shiite cleric of likely Iranian descent and his deputy is **Nasser Akhdar** who serves as senior member of Hezbollah’s propaganda apparatus.⁵ **Ibrahim Farahat**, another Hezbollah member who serves as al-Manar, Hezbollah’s media outlet’s CEO, sits on IRTVU’s board.⁶

IRTVU assists media outlets of Sunni and Shiite terrorist organizations who are members of the “Resistance Axis”, through financial support, tech support, administrative support and training of employees. It also assists with setting a uniform media strategy. As such it played a major role in forming

⁴ For IRTVU Facebook page see www.facebook.com/IRTVU/

⁵ Akhdar is also in charge of the Houthi media strategy as well as serves as one of Hezbollah’s major liaisons to the Iranian regime. In 2015 he led the Houthi delegation for the peace talks in Geneva. 6.3.21. https://i.alarab.co.uk/2021-03/11991_Page_18.pdf

⁶ 29.6.21. <https://www.almanar.com.lb/8414771>

the Iraqi militias TV channels. Among those one can find “al-Ataja” (Hezbollah Brigades), al-Ahad (Asaab Ahal al-Hak), al-Nujbaa (Hezbollah al-Nujbaa) and al-Bina (Saraya al-Jihad).⁷ In Lebanon, its modus operandi is a bit different as Hezbollah is the one overseeing IRTVU operations and assists with the development of media outlets for non-Lebanese militias such as the al-Masira channel who is located in southern Beirut and operates on behalf of the Houthis in Yemen.⁸ In October 2020 the US imposed sanctions on IRTVU for trying to meddle with the US elections, inter alia via dissemination of disinformation to the American public over the internet and social media to influence their voting. Per the US, IRTVU serves as the propaganda arm of Quds Force who is an integral part of IRGC and its goal is to promote the Iranian strategy.⁹



Left: IRTVU logo; Right: Sheikh Ali Karmian



Nasser Akhdar (Hezbollah senior member and IRTVU Deputy Secretary General); Ibrahim Farahat (IRTVU board member and Hezbollah’s al-Manar CEO)

⁷ 6.3.21. https://i.alarab.co.uk/2021-03/11991_Page_18.pdf; Hamdi Malik, "Understanding Iran’s Vast Media Network in Arab Countries", *Washington Institute*, Mar 2, 2021. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/understanding-irans-vast-media-network-arab-countries>
⁸ 6.3.21. https://i.alarab.co.uk/2021-03/11991_Page_18.pdf; Hamdi Malik, "Understanding Iran’s Vast Media Network in Arab Countries", *Washington Institute*, Mar 2, 2021. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/understanding-irans-vast-media-network-arab-countries>
⁹ “Treasury Sanctions Iranian Entities for Attempted Election Interference”, *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 22.10.20 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1158>

On April 25th 2014 the Palestinian Culture Bureau in Gaza inaugurated the Palestinian branch of IRTVU under the name **The Islamic Radios and Televisions Union – Palestine Chamber**. The inauguration ceremony was attended by senior members of Palestinian terrorist organizations such as **Ismail Haniyeh**, head of Hamas’ political bureau and senior PIJ members.¹⁰ The Palestinian’s branch membership includes over 10 media outlets such as **al-Aqsa** (Hamas) and **al-Quds** (PIJ). It is worth noting that the leader of the Palestinian branch is a PIJ member by the name of **Salah al-Masri** which also serves as the head of **Palestine al-Yaum Agency**, which attests to the close and deep ties between Iran and PIJ.

The Palestinian branch mainly deals with training Palestinian propaganda activists. For example, in September 2019 it gave a course on writing and promoting messages on social media.¹¹ In August 2021 it called Palestinian activists to promote the issue of Jerusalem and al-Aqsa in the Arab and global discourse to preserve their narrative regarding Operation Guardian of the Walls. Similarly, the Palestinian branch suggested that the propaganda vis a vis target audiences in the west should be beefed up, increase focus on opening social media accounts and formulate a plan that will guarantee the support of the residents of Jerusalem.¹² In October 2021 it implored social media activists to promote discourse on the incarcerated Palestinian terrorists serving their sentences in Israeli prisons.¹³



Right to left: new and old logo of IRTVU Palestine; Salah al-Masri, PIJ member, leader of IRTVU Palestine and a PIJ liaison with Iran

¹⁰ 25.4.21. <https://paltoday.ps/ar/image/gallery/3074/الإعلان-عن-انطلاق-اتحاد-الإذاعات-والتلفزيونات-الإسلامية-بفلسطين>

¹¹ 9.9.19. <https://www.facebook.com/IRTVU/posts/482838852272056/>

¹² 20.8.21. <https://alquds-city.com/news/37350>

¹³ 16.10.21. <https://paltoday.ps/ar/post/422528/اتحاد-الإذاعات-والتلفزيونات-الإسلامية-يدعو-وسائل-الإعلام-لمناصر-ة-قضية-الأسرى>



Right to left: IRTVU inauguration ceremony, April 2014; A training course given by IRTVU Palestine on social media propaganda, September 2019

Since Operation Guardian of the Walls IRTVU Palestine conducted several online discussions on improving the Palestinian propaganda vs. Israel on social media. On June 8th, 2021 it held an online conference titled “The Role of Social Media During the Aggression in Gaza” and stressed its contribution to promoting the Palestinian narrative and challenging the IDF. Among the insights and recommendations offered in this conference:

1. Beefing up the propaganda activity of official Palestinian establishments on social media.
2. Focusing on organized activity on social media and refraining from random ones to increase the number of supporters and the scope of solidarity with the Palestinians.
3. Allocating resources to training journalists and civilians on the ways to use and disseminate messages on social media.
4. Introducing the use of social media as part of the school curriculum.
5. Focusing effort on social media vis a vis Arab Israelis.
6. Conducting research to measure the efficacy of social media activists.
7. Disseminating content via infographics, clips, photos and more.
8. Focusing on live broadcasts from the field.
9. Countering the Israeli narrative
10. Forming a special journalistic apparatus to oversee the organization of the activity according to clear criteria.
11. Running propaganda campaigns.¹⁴

¹⁴ 10.6.21. <https://saedhassunah.com/2021/0610/202123/>



An IRTVU Palestine banner on improving propaganda vs. Israel following Operation Guardian of the Walls

IRTVU strives to present a uniform propaganda front among Resistance Axis media outlets members in connection with promoting the Palestinian issue, Jerusalem and the holiness of the al-Aqsa mosque. In July 2021 they held a big conference on the subject in Sanna, Yemen. The conference was attended inter alia, by **Nasser al-Akhdar**, deputy head of IRTVU, **Houseein Rahal** the social media manager of Hezbollah, **Houthi propaganda activists**, **Saleh al-Masri**, head of IRTVU Palestine and representatives of the **Palestinian Journalistic Union (Kutlat al-Suhufi al-Filastini)**, a media outlet identified with PIJ.¹⁵ The attendees stressed the importance of sticking with joint courses of action such as using the same terminology.¹⁶

Union Center for Media Training (UCMT)

UCMT is another institute formed by IRTVU. It, too, provides professional training on propaganda for either Shiite or Sunni terrorist organizations. It was formed in Beirut and is run by Hezbollah. As its home page states, its goal is to build technical and media capabilities on social media “to be an effective and influencing tool able to change public opinion, disseminate knowledge [and shape] perception among

¹⁵ The Palestinian Journalistic Union has some 65 Gaza based journalists. In September 2021, 13 new Gazan council members have been elected for a three years’ term. Imad Zakut, a PIJ member who also heads al-Aqsa radio was elected to lead this organization; 20.9.21. <https://alresalah.ws/post/246894/كثلة-الصحفي-اللسطيني-تعتد-مؤتمر-ها-العام-وتتخب-مجلسا-مركزيا-لقتها>

¹⁶ 7.7.21. <https://www.saba.ye/ar/news3147037.htm>

the target audience.”¹⁷ So far, UCMT trained young Syrian Baath Party supporters¹⁸, Yemenite Huthi militia members¹⁹ and supporters of Palestinian terrorist organizations from Gaza.

In the first half of 2021 UCMT trained 1,975 graduates, inter alia via online courses two of which were tailored for Palestinian media members in Gaza.²⁰ UCMT continues to train propaganda activists in Gaza. In June and September 2021 it held two Zoom courses for more than 40 Palestinians from various Gaza media outlets and government offices. The Lebanese journalist **Safaa Salmani** was one of the instructors in this course.²¹ It should be noted, the course was held in cooperation with the **Governmental Communication Bureau** is led by **Salame Maarouf**, a **Hamas** member and head of the news portal **Ray**, which operates on behalf of Hamas. The graduation ceremony of the above course was attended by **Salame Maarouf and Saleh al-Masri**, a **PIJ** member (see photo).²²



UCMT Logo

¹⁷ <https://www.ucmt-lb.com/>; <https://www.facebook.com/ucmtpage>

¹⁸ 1.11.21. <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.5104114536272040&type=3>

¹⁹ 15.9.21. <https://bit.ly/3CSYvL6>

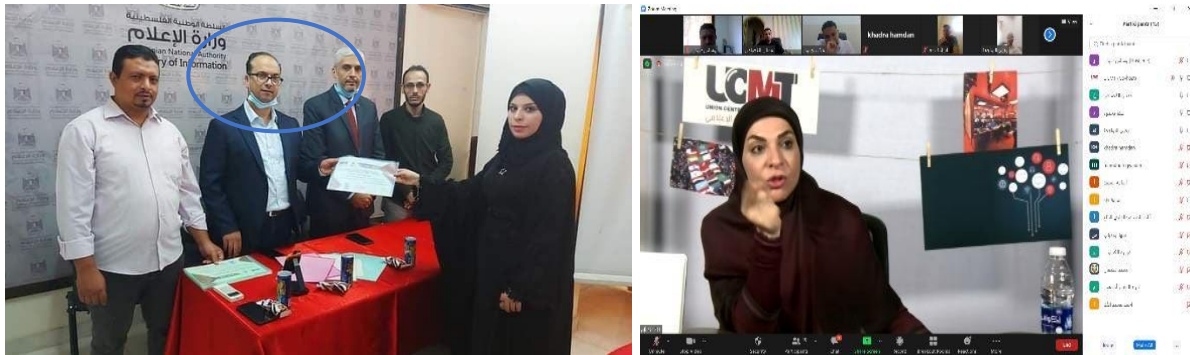
²⁰ 8.7.21. https://twitter.com/ucmt_lb/status/1413192774271344643/photo/1

²¹ 14.6.21. http://www.gmo.ps/ar/?page=news_det&id=111105;

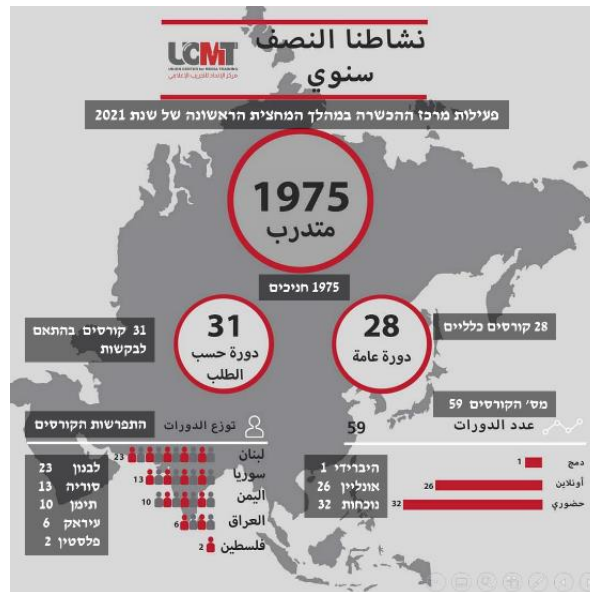
²¹ 28.9.21. http://www.gmo.ps/ar/?page=news_det&id=111179

²² 13.10.21. http://www.gmo.ps/ar/?page=news_det&id=111191#.YYJsYGBBy3A ;

²² 12.10.21. <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=ucmtpage&set=a.5040026479347513>



Right to left: the Lebanese journalist Safaa Salmani giving an online lesson to Palestinians in Gaza working in media and social media; Salame Maarouf and Saleh al-Masri at the graduation ceremony of the October 2021 online course on media and propaganda



UCMT infographic presenting its 2H/2021 activity

Hamas and Designated Propaganda Institutions

Hamas allocates a lot of resources into communication studies and providing digital education to youth and students, inter alia, under a working assumption of integrating them into its propaganda apparatus. The **University College for Applied Science** is standing out as an academic institution in Gaza that caters to the above Hamas need. The college emphasizes communications and social media studies and trains communications and propaganda graduates by providing specifically tailored courses to that end.²³ For

²³ The college was formed in 1998 to provide a body of knowledge on technology to the Palestinian society. In 2007 it was accredited to grant Bachelor and professional degrees in over 60 fields. It operates under the supervision of the Bureau of Education and High Teaching and wished to reinforce its academic ties with Arab and international organizations. <https://newucas.ucas.edu.ps/aboutcollege>

example, it announced on July 29th, 2021 in its Facebook account that it would provide a special communications course: “to the lovers of communications, heroes of social media and particularly 2021 high school students: a social media professional”, for 200 ILS.²⁴ It should be noted, Hamas’ leadership makes it a priority to maintain contacts with the students (e.g. in July 2016 **Ismail Haniyyeh** attended a graduation ceremony).²⁵



A university college banner addressing high school students and urging them to enroll into a communications and propaganda course

²⁴ 29.7.21. <https://www.facebook.com/ucasGaza/photos/4013834562073014>

²⁵ ²⁵ www.facebook.com/ucasGaza/photos/940906202699214/ التميز / الازراء - السابق فوج ح



Ismail Haniyeh attending a graduation ceremony of the University College for Applied Science

The Youth Media Center serves as another Dawah channel for Hamas.²⁶ It was formed in 2006 and focuses on educating the Palestinian public on safe internet browsing as well as promoting anti-Israeli propaganda campaigns on social media. In the last four years, it has been publishing an annual report on Palestinian social media and its characteristics such as a list of influencers, leading hashtags and more.²⁷ The center is led by **Iyad Ibrahim al-Qaraa** and collaborates with **IRTVU Palestine**²⁸ and Hamas' student union **al-Kutlah al-Islamiyyah**.²⁹ During Operation Guardian of the Walls the center's office was hit by an Israeli airstrike however its activity is still carrying on.³⁰ Much like other Palestinian media outlets in Gaza, and particularly after Operation Guardian of the Walls, the center attempts to influence the eastern Jerusalem Arabs' public opinion for political needs. On November 3rd, 2021 the center promoted an online campaign in support of the Arab residents of Sheikh Jarah who refused to accept an Israeli court's suggestion regarding homes they illegally squatted under the hashtag "save Sheikh Jarah neighborhood."³¹ The center also conducts online campaigns against Facebook in protest of removing Hamas content from the social network³² and encourages Palestinian activists to resist the normalization agreements with Israel. In

²⁶ Per the writer Maad al-Amoudi, in 2019 the center included seven activists of which three focused on social media. 21.3.21. <https://www.noonpost.com/content/27049>

²⁷ For its 2020 report see <https://shehabnews.com/uploads/documents/d61acab51bd79f28145e542a79c0558d.pdf>

²⁸ 28.7.21. <https://www.alestqjal.com/post/43218>

²⁹ 13.4.14. <http://alkotla.ps/ar/post/7956/contact/اتصل-بنا>

³⁰ 11.5.21. <https://ymcgaza.com/statement/details/4>

³¹ 3.11.21. <https://twitter.com/ymcgaza/status/1455813049525342210>

³² 24.7.21. <https://ymcgaza.com/statement/details/2>

February 2021 the center granted an award to some 50 young Palestinians (makes and females) for their propaganda activity on social media during 2020.³³



Right to left: the center’s logos; an online campaign under the hashtag “save Sheikh Jarah neighborhood”



Right to left: Iyad al-Qaraa, head of the center; a joint conference of the center with IRTVU Palestine on improving propaganda capabilities on social media

Summary

The Iranian regime and Hezbollah see fit to nurture their “soft power” via the formation, support and nurture of a wide array of media and propaganda elements of various terrorist organizations. The Palestinian terrorist organizations’ media outlets are just a small part of a network developed by IRTVU. The Iranian willingness to provide tools, knowledge, courses and teachers on propaganda, either in traditional media or social media for Hamas and PIJ attests to the Iranian wishes to form a uniform and efficient propaganda front that will challenge Israel’s. it would seem that Operation Guardian of the Walls

³³ 15.2.21. <https://bit.ly/3nUARs5>

just fed IRTVU and its proxies' determination to concentrate a special propaganda effort vis a vis the Arab Israelis.

Contending with an extensive Iranian and proxies network requires a similarly extensive network. Israel and its allies, especially UAE and KSA, must cooperate and build a tailored toolbox capable of thwarting the former's propaganda campaigns. Additional cooperation is required from the leadership of the social media giants, particularly Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to block and remove inciting websites and content in general and IRTVU and proxies in particular.