Cycle of Incitement: The Writing is on the Telegram Wall

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SPECIAL REPORT
Cycle of Incitement: The Writing is on the Telegram Wall

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Abstract

This report delves into the alarming rise of incitement on social media platforms, particularly Telegram, amidst the ongoing conflict in Gaza. The focus is on the West Bank, where extremists, some affiliated with Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), utilize these channels for widespread incitement against Israel. The correlation between these online incitements and the tangible increase in terrorist activities is evident. The report cites recent attacks in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, linking them to these online provocations. The cycle of incitement begins with individual calls for attacks, progresses to operational guidance, the execution of the attack, and culminates in the glorification of these acts online. The report scrutinizes the content on Telegram, noting its alignment with Palestinian nationalist narratives. Various forms of media, like posters, videos, and provocative language, are used to emotionally engage and mobilize individuals. The report also highlights how these channels provide detailed operational guidance for attacks, including shooting, knife attacks, and other tactics. Moreover, the report discusses the role of Hamas and PIJ in orchestrating this online incitement. It emphasizes the sophistication of these platforms in guiding terrorist activities and underscores the need for awareness and action against such online mobilization. The study concludes by reiterating the significant impact of these incitements, which have led to real-world violence and the ongoing threat they pose to the region's stability.

Introduction

Since the onset of the conflict in Gaza, there has been a significant surge in incitement disseminated on social media, particularly Telegram channels of extremists in the West Bank. Some of these channels are affiliated with organizations such as Hamas and PIJ, while others represent more localized initiatives. Despite their diverse origins, these platforms share a commonality in their widespread incitement and call to action against Israel.

The correlation between these online posts and real-life outcomes is unmistakable, manifested in the increase in attempted and successful terrorist attacks by Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, including a rise in shooting incidents. One such

attack occurred recently on December 8th, 2023 when terrorists committed a shooting attack against a Military post near Mevo Dotan (West Bank).[1] One soldier was injured. The IDF conducted a pursuit to locate the shooters. In another attack, on November 30th, terrorists targeted Israeli citizens in a bus station in Jerusalem. The attackers, armed with automatic guns, approached a bus station, and upon exiting their vehicle, opened fire on civilians. Three Israeli civilians have been killed and five others were injured. The attackers, later identified to be linked to Hamas, were neutralized at the scene.[2] These are merely some examples of a continuous wave of attacks that occur weekly.

The following article aims to reflect and characterize online incitement in the West Bank, illustrating a cycle that begins with lone wolf incitement to attack, followed by operational guidance, the terrorist attack, and concluding with the glorification of the incident online.

Incitement: Calls to Action Against Israel

In the wake of the ongoing conflict, Telegram channels have emerged as platforms promoting narratives aligned with the Palestinian nationalistic agenda. Through posters, videos, and the provocative use of language, these posts seek to provoke emotional responses, highlighting the perceived urgency of avenging Israel's operations in the Gaza Strip. Such an example is a post on telegram featuring an image of a bus blown up, accompanied by the caption, "For the sake of our bleeding blood in Gaza, it's time for the roof of the bus to fly."

لأجل دمنا النازف في غزة
آن أوان أن يطير سقف الباص..

#قم_يا_ابن_الضفة

🔥 12   👍 2   👁 4160   16:48

For the sake of our bleeding blood in Gaza"

It's time for the roof of the bus to fly" Source: Telegram

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1   https://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/Article-1058270

2   https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/sju3ribra

In another example, a new series of animated posters disseminated across Palestinian Telegram channels highlights targets, ranging from soldiers to religious Jews, settlers, and other citizens.

Left: Soldiers in a bus station as targets; Right: Religious Jews in a bus station as targets. Source: Telegram.

Left: Soldiers in a checkpoint as targets; Right: Israeli settlements as a target. Source: Telegram.

These posts also promote various methods of Modus Operandi, including shooting, knife attacks, rock throwing, ramming, and other tactics. Over the past two months, the leading theme in most of these posts has been encouragement to carry out shooting
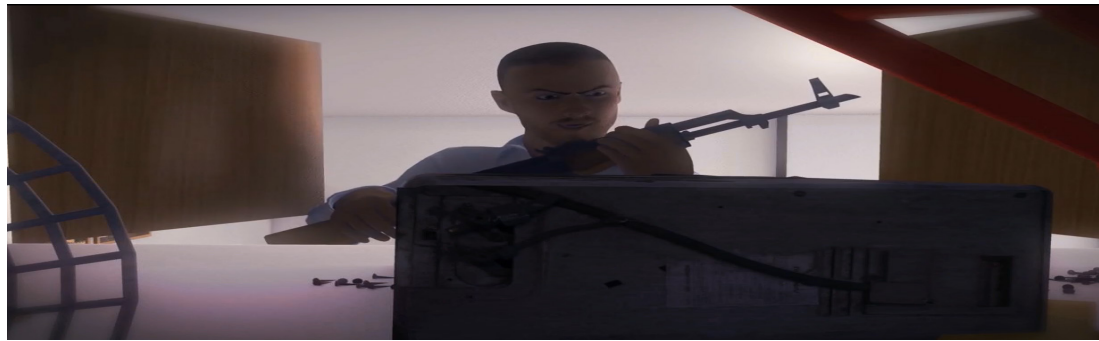
attacks. In most cases, these posts, either promote a lone wolf attack or small groups of armed men attack.

One prominent example occurred on the night the IDF entered a ground operation in Gaza. A widespread mobilization on Telegram urged Palestinians to partake in shooting attacks against soldiers at specific checkpoints in the West Bank.

Left: Animation poster encouraging a shooting attack – part of an ongoing campaign using the same animation to incite action. Right: Encouragement to attack under the title 'The Men of the West Bank… the Children of Gaza Are Waiting for More. Source: Telegram.

Another method of mobilization involves the strategic use of narrative-driven videos to convey a story or situation that leads an individual to conduct an attack. For example, one video unfolds a narrative exploring themes of anger, revenge, and honor. The storyline follows a young man who thinks about carrying out a shooting attack but ultimately decides to leave his weapon at home and continue with his day. As the plot progresses, he encounters a situation at a checkpoint involving an IDF soldier and a Palestinian woman. The perceived injustice and mistreatment deeply affect him, prompting him to return home, take his firearm, and carry out an attack. This storytelling serves as a powerful means of emotionally engaging the audience and compelling them towards a particular course of action.

Pictures taken from the video: A young man who thinks about carrying out a shooting attack. Source: Telegram.
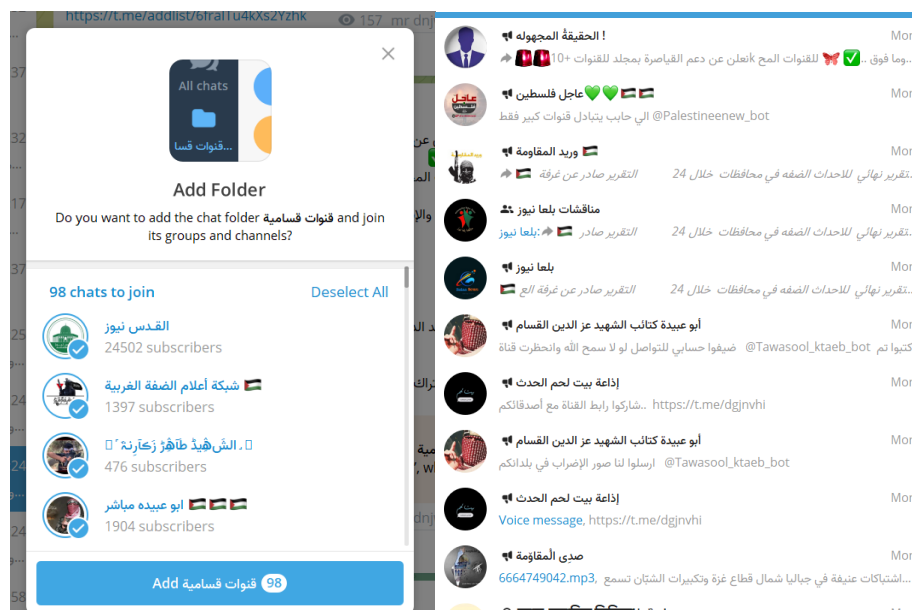
Another example of such a video aims to demonstrate the central message of unity leading to success. This is demonstrated in a video featuring a Palestinian throwing rocks at the border wall with Israel, while others join in until the collective effort successfully breaks the wall.

Pictures taken from the video: Palestinian throwing rocks at the border wall with Israel. Source: Telegram.

The posters and videos circulated across Telegram channels leverage the platform's features, making it more accessible to a larger audience. This accessibility is facilitated by Telegram's functionalities, such as the option to be added to folders containing numerous channels. In many cases, these folders are created by Hamas and their supporters, featuring extensive lists of channels affiliated with the organization.

Additionally, features such as bots are utilized to rapidly disseminate information and introduce new channels to the target audience.
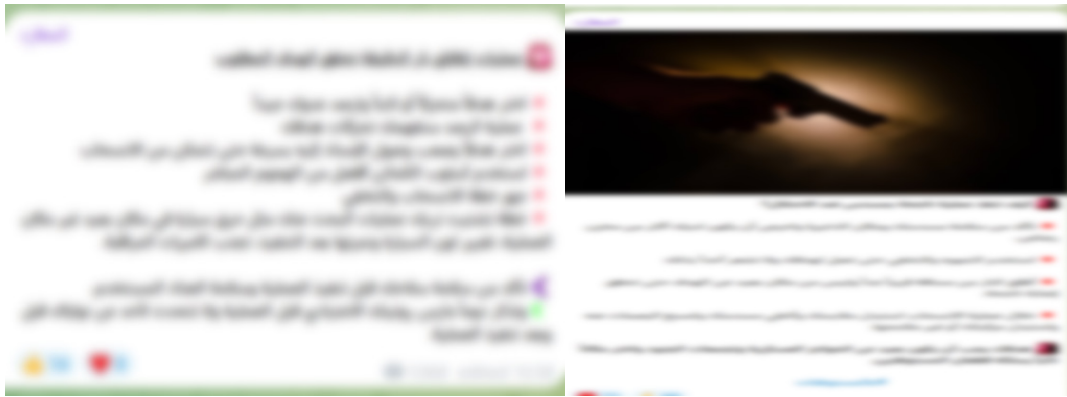

Example of folders with list of channels on Telegram. As you may see on the right- many of the groups are linked to Hamas featuring its spokesperson as the main image. Source: Telegram.

Online Operational Guidance

Alongside the broader mobilization and incitement, certain channels provide operational guidance, offering advice on how to carry out specific attacks, including shooting attacks. These channels go beyond general encouragement. They are providing detailed instructions, potentially contributing to the planning and execution of such actions. The existence of these channels underscores the concerning level of sophistication in online platforms, where individuals may access specific operational guidance for carrying out attacks.

One example is a post titled "Accurate shootings achieve the desired goal" Among the key recommendations of the post: "The monitoring process will make you understand your target's movements"…"Choose a moving or stationary target and watch your enemy well". In another post titled: How do you carry out a successful gun operation against the occupation? recommendation included: "Shoot from a distance very close and not from a place far from the target until a successful hit is achieved…"Your goal must be far from the military checkpoints and the soldiers' gatherings and choose a remote place where the herds of settlers go."

Posts with operational recommendations: Blurred to avoid dissemination of sensitive content. Source: Telegram.

Another category of operational posts revolves around evading detection. In many of these posts, it is emphasized, "Always remember to practice your usual routine before the operation and avoid discussing your intentions with anyone both before and after the operation."

Some channels take it a step further by producing videos that visually demonstrate the modus operandi, providing a practical guide on how to execute the attack. For instance, there is a video showcasing the steps involved in carrying out a shooting attack at a bus station and on a bus. In the video, armed individuals arrive in their car and open fire near the bus. This is similar to the incident that occurred on November 30th, aligning with the recommendations previously listed.

Pictures from the video: attack on a Bus. Source: Telegram.

In another series of videos, the same group attempts to illustrate how to carry out a shooting attack against civilians. The footage guides on how to conduct a roadblock and an ambush, either by firing from the side of the road or by arriving with a car.

إطلاق النار المباشر على السيارة واستهداف السائق

Pictures from the video: Attack via roadblock. Source: Telegram.

<u>Glorification</u>

The final category of posts revolves around the glorification of attacks. These posts serve to commemorate and magnify the impact of specific attacks, elevating the perpetrators to a heroic status within the online narrative.

The intention behind these types of posts is to emphasize their perceived heroic actions, the specific modus operandi employed, and the chosen targets. Above all, the aim is to underscore the ongoing nature of these incidents and to encourage others to join the resistance effort against what they perceive as Israeli occupation and aggression.

The glorification of the November 30th attack at the Jerusalem Bus station. Source: Telegram

Conclusion

Online incitement within the West Bank was noticeable even before the conflict in Gaza, and often, the content was produced even before the onset of the war. However, it has escalated rapidly since then.

The rapid dissemination of information and incitement is fueling vast mobilization, resulting in many cases of protests and, in some cases, terrorist attacks against soldiers and Israeli civilians.

While not always explicitly clear, the fingerprints of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) are notably present in online publications. Individuals are steering this course—those who create the folders, manage the bots, design the general graphics, and fund the operational videos.

The encouragement for an intifada from the West Bank closely aligns with Hamas' interests and objectives in the region, especially given the situation in Gaza. They primarily pursue this agenda by systematically employing the cycle of incitement, operational guidance, and glorification of the attackers, aiming for a general mobilization, for an intifada.

Cycle of Incitement