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Innovative Frontrunner or Delayed by Political Gridlock?

Israel's Attempts at Countering Disinformation

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On October 7, 2023, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad launched a terrorist attack inside Israel that resulted in over 1,200 Israelis killed, over 3,300 wounded, and over 200 people – including Israelis and foreign nationals – taken hostage (Haaretz, 2023; *The Economist*, 2023). The attack's unprecedented scale caught the Israeli government and defense forces off-guard (Harding, 2023). Subsequently, the Israeli government's excessive military response to the terror attacks resulted in thousands of Palestinians killed, displaced, and in dire need of humanitarian assistance (Pamuk, 2023). As with other contemporary military conflicts, information warfare is integrated into offensive capabilities by all actors (Mueller et al., 2023). The attacks on October 7 incorporated coordinated use of video and audio content by Hamas fighters, who subsequently uploaded their content to digital messaging channels, such as the encrypted messaging app Telegram (Frenkel & Myers, 2023; Klempner, 2023). Graphic videos and images consequently circulated on popular platforms with insufficient content moderation on X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and more (Frenkel & Myers, 2023; Klempner, 2023).

In line with this, disinformation enters the fray – deployed by official but also commercial actors. Analysts have argued that Israel was not prepared for the resulting information warfare on social media, including Hamas allegedly being aided by Iran and Russia, and to a lesser extent, China (Benjakob, 2023; Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2023; Myers & Frenkel, 2023). From denying the existence of the October 7 attacks and claiming the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) orchestrated the attacks themselves to the fake or misleading images of explosions in buildings and the hateful provocations that ignore the history of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Nechin, 2023), social media feeds have been flooded with misleading or false information around the Israel–Hamas War – and actors on both sides contributed (Nechin, 2023).

This chapter explores Israel's public and private sector capabilities to counter disinformation, focusing on the period between March and June 2023 through qualitative interviews and thematic analysis. We argue that Israel has not prioritized countering disinformation – mainly because of internal political division and

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legislative gridlock, but also due to overshadowing security concerns related to Iran, as well as unresolved internal conflicts related to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Most importantly, we argue that the fight against disinformation has been deprioritized by the ruling Likud party's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who benefits from the divides sewn and support bolstered from the spread of internal disinformation. We review Israel's mechanisms – both absent and present – to counter disinformation *before* October 7.

BACKGROUND: ISRAELI JUDICIAL REFORMS, DEMOCRACY, AND DISINFORMATION

In May 2023, in Israel, wide-scale protests ultimately forced Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to abandon judicial reforms, which would have threatened the independence of the Israeli judiciary – at least for now (Smith, Chuck, & Zelenko, 2023). Israel is a relatively young democracy, and arguably, a troubled one (Gavison, 2011). The modern state grew out of Jewish movements that came to the Middle East in search of a safe place for all Jewish people. It was established in 1948 and has regularly fought wars and displaced local populations, as well as countered internal skirmishes over the preceding decades (Jones & Murphy, 2002). Cyberspace has increased in importance since 2000 – it is not only an added dimension during warfare but also a space where Israel exploits its capabilities to preemptively act against potential threats, exemplified, for example, in the targeted killings of Iranian nuclear scientists or inserting "cyber worms" into the computer systems of Iranian nuclear facilities (Farwell & Rohozinski, 2011) – those actions are regularly criticized by international human rights lawyers (International Bar Association, 2020).

When shifting focus from external to internal threats, disinformation continues as a cyber-enabled aspect that challenges Israeli democracy. Disinformation is understood as false or misleading information that is intentionally composed and spread – however, it can lose its intention if people, who were not part of the targeted campaign originally, start spreading it themselves, and hence turn it into misinformation (Wardle, 2018). Disinformation can be especially potent in the lead-up to elections when large parts of the population are trying to figure out whom to vote for – and in extension lead their country for the next years (Bader, 2018). Israel had five national elections in three years (from 2019 to 2022) (Jewish Virtual Library, 2023). When compared to, for example, the United Kingdom (UK) – a state that aligns with Israel as both political systems do not have a formal, written constitution, but differentiates itself from Israel as Britain (or better, England), traces its democracy to the Magna Carta in the thirteenth century and hence is considered one of the world's oldest republics (Kiser & Barzel, 1991). Israel's recent political upheavals outplay the UK. While the UK has been derided for having three different prime ministers in one year by domestic and international observers (Langfitt, 2022), Israel

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has not been able to solve its cabinet quarrels internally – but instead needed to call on voters repeatedly. This is all to say that Israel can be considered a nascent democracy simply given its short time of existence but also due to the outlined political instabilities, especially since 2020. Some argue that these political instabilities (or in other words, the repeated need for irregular elections) are mainly tied to one person – Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Berg, 2023). The seventy-three-year-old is an Israeli politician who was elected to the office of prime minister for the sixth time in 2022 (Berg, 2023). While acting as prime minister, he has also been the center of a criminal trial in which he is accused of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust – charges he fiercely denies (Freidson, 2023). Over the past years, he has grown into a polarizing and divisive figure – most recently because of his decision to form a government with the most right-wing Israeli parties. This coalition is joined at the hip due to:

> Their unbridled passion to circumscribe the authority of the courts which, by their narrative, have intervened illegitimately to obstruct the democratic will of the citizenry as it would be implemented by the Knesset majority – i.e., them. Secondary villains on their most-wanted list include the state attorney, the media and the academy, although none of these institutions is a monolith. (Lipner, 2023, p. 2)

Not only do many Israelis consider themselves surrounded by enemies (alluding to the notion that bordering countries either do not accept the Israeli state formally like Syria or actively attack the country like Hezbollah from Lebanon) but Israelis are also astutely aware of internal divisions (Hermann & Anabi, 2023). The *Times of Israel* defined Netanyahu as "indefatigable and ultra-divisive" (Horovitz, 2022). In the words of one our interviewees, Ofir Barel, who researches Israeli information warfare at an independent institute and has collaborated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the past:

> [the] political discourse [is] already tense because in general Netanyahu himself is a very emotional political issue. If any one entity would like to sow chaos here during election or after or between election, [they] just need to mention Netanyahu and it will just work.

He was convinced that previous disinformation campaigns related to recent elections originated domestically and were designed to exploit existing polarizations in the Israeli society. The challenges associated with this type of disinformation ring familiar to other democracies around the world. For example, in the United States domestic disinformation cumulated in the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021, a deeply disturbing event for both US citizens and international allies of the United States from around the world (Freedman, 2022). Disinformation should not be shoehorned into a niche, disconnected phenomenon – instead, it should be understood as a cross-cutting issue of cyberspace with imminent offline repercussions. It therefore also needs various actors to work together to counter it most effectively. In other words, both the private and public actors, both within and

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between nations, should come together to maintain democracy. In the case of Israel, an ambivalent picture emerges regarding the value of public actors' interventions or even legislative actions aiming to diminish (the effects of) disinformation. This is mainly due to the divided political landscape in the country specifically and the reactive nature of legislative actions generally. However, it is questionable if private actors of the (quite capable) Israeli information technology (IT) sector are useful or even benign forces in this regard. As recent journalistic investigations uncovered, Israeli firms have been involved in developing and selling spy software (spyware), as well as offering propagandists for hire (Kirchgaessner et al., 2023).

We therefore examine specific challenges to the Israeli (dis-)information environment to distill in how far its lessons learned are useful for other democracies around the world. We address the presence – or absence – in legislative policy concerning disinformation and analyze the usability of public–private partnerships for countering disinformation and argue that democracy relies on different parts of society to function in a healthy manner; governmental actors can but should not control everything, and certainly not the information environment. Finally, we address how Israeli insights can be transferred to initiatives in other democracies (or not). The analysis relies on primary sources in Hebrew and English, such as committee hearings in the Knesset (Israel's parliament), as well as interviews with Israeli stakeholders, such as former officials or currently active private actors addressing disinformation, supplemented by secondary sources on the topic.

DISINFORMATION IN ISRAEL: AN EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL THREAT

Israel's geographic location and geopolitics in the region have shaped and continue to shape its fight against disinformation campaigns. External information threats allegedly stemming from Iran – considered Israel's main antagonist in the region – have been studied and monitored by the Israeli government and Israeli research institutes. According to Barel, Iran reportedly launched information campaigns that attempted to further divide Israeli citizens along political lines during the recent prime minister elections. However, the origins of numerous recent disinformation campaigns launched in Israel are speculated to have launched *internally*. Yet, it is important to remember that internal and external threats in Israel are difficult to disentangle, according to Lt. Col. (res.) David Siman-Tov, a Senior Researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and deputy head of the Institute for the Research of the Methodology of Intelligence (IRMI). As is oftentimes the case within information warfare, internal disinformation campaigns echo sentiments that typically derive from external actors. Even so, there are key characteristics that give away the identity of externally launched disinformation campaigns in Israel, observed interviewee *Haaretz* journalist Omer Benjakob, whose journalistic work covers technology and disinformation. Firstly, Hebrew is both a difficult language to

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master and is rarely spoken as a first language outside of Israel (BBC, 2014). Therefore, disinformation campaigns employing Hebrew draw attention to themselves by including grammatical errors, typos, or awkward phrases that a native speaker would immediately spot. Secondly, Israel is a small country – approximately the size of the state of New Jersey in the United States – and it is logistically difficult to blatantly fabricate news about events that are supposedly taking place (Nations Online, 2023). As Benjakob described it:

> [It's] very hard to lie at a big level. I can't say there are riots in a certain part of town because everyone has a cousin who lives in that part of town. [I] can't say Arabs are murdering people in droves when it's a twenty-minute drive from your house. That undermines the ability to do a lot of fake news.

Yet, disinformation campaigns targeting Arab voters do exist, even though it is more difficult to spread due to the intricacies of Hebrew and Israel's small size (Benjakob, 2021). For example, according to our interviewee Guy Lurie, an attorney and researcher at the Israel Democracy Institute, an independent and nonpartisan center for research in Israel, campaigns aiming to disenfranchise Arab voters were disseminated during Israel's recent elections. As Lurie described:

> Very targeted campaigns we saw in Israel during election … for example in 2015 there was a targeted campaign saying that Arab voters are coming in droves to election booths and delegitimizing Arab citizens … trying to charge the public atmosphere with this kind of tension that would lead supporters of the Right to [the] election booth.

Disinformation campaigns created to rally supporters from right-wing parties – such as current Prime Minister Netanyahu's Likud party – were popular during recent Israeli elections. According to Lurie, there are popular conspiracy theories claiming Netanyahu's corruption charges are instituted by a "leftist deep state." These conspiracies have been popular since 2016 when Netanyahu was charged for, as *The New York Times* described it, "a habit of performing official favors for wealthy businessmen in exchange for gifts both material and intangible" (Joseph & Kingsley, 2022). These conspiracies claim that Israel's top law and enforcement ministers charged Netanyahu with corruption because they are attempting to preserve their power and bring down a popular elected leader. As Lurie observes, this "witch hunt" conspiracy is a very powerful rhetorical tool that has sparked distrust and anger from the Israeli people toward public institutions. Furthermore, recent judicial reform protests in Israel have provided fertile ground for disinformation campaigns. Via the social media platform X (previously Twitter) but also messaging app WhatsApp, actors supporting the judicial reforms created fake accounts that encouraged protestors to engage in violence against police officers in the hope of discrediting the protest. Likewise, fake accounts on X spread malicious information against senior Likud member of the Knesset Yuli Edelstein. Edelstein, one of the

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few Likud members who have voiced opposition to the judicial reform legislation, was targeted by accounts who claimed that he was "a betrayer, a Ukrainian, born in the Soviet Union," observed Barel (Hauser-Tov, 2023).

It is unsurprising that the most popular social media platforms in Israel are beholden to the spread of the most noted disinformation since political disinformation's global presence is often studied and analyzed on social media platforms. X and Facebook have been sources of fake accounts spreading disinformation and WhatsApp has been cited as a place where group chats are infiltrated by malicious actors. Accounts created by actors who support the judicial reforms reportedly entered activist group chats on WhatsApp to sow chaos and create factions within the anti-judicial reform movement. For example, research conducted at Tel Aviv University found an instance where these actors posted provocative material in these activist groups, such as comparing Netanyahu to Hitler, that was then pointed to by the prime minister to claim that "radical left activists" were comparing him to Hitler, observed Barel. While disinformation campaigns are identified and analyzed by researchers in Israel, the question of what measures currently or should exist to stop the spread of this malicious content remains open-ended and complex.

Countering Disinformation in Israel: Lacking Coherence, Planning, and Responsiveness

There is existing, yet limited, legislature enabling the Israeli government to counter internal disinformation swiftly and effectively. Specifically, the Knesset Elections Law, otherwise known as the Propaganda Methods Law, was created in 1959 to define campaign advertising regulations during Israeli elections (Shwartz Altshuler & Lurie, 2015). Elements of the 1959 law are outdated and require updated amendments that address the powerful effects of social media and the internet during campaign seasons, though the law remains an important regulatory baseline for modern political elections (Shwartz Altshuler & Lurie, 2015). Finding and securing an opportune occasion to remediate these flaws has been a difficult task for the Israeli judiciary and legislature, as compressed and fast-changing results of five elections in three years offered few periods of enough political stability to craft and establish such improved legislation. Israel's Central Election Committee proposed recommendations to the Propaganda Methods Law in 2017 that included a principle of transparency, which required political advertisements to identify themselves as such. Under this principle of transparency, political actors or parties must identify themselves within political adverts, including ones on social media (TOI Staff, 2019). This principle was transferred into a judiciary ruling led by then Supreme Court Justice and Chairman of the Central Elections Committee Hanan Melcer (Surkes, 2019; TOI Staff, 2019). This ruling followed insistent objections from the Likud party to ban anonymous political ads online via legislation in 2019 (Surkes, 2019; TOI Staff, 2019). Even without solid legislative backing, new

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transparency processes enabled the chairperson of the Election Committee to give out injunctions during the 2019 and 2022 campaign season for campaign advertising posing as news stories on social media channels, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. However, Lurie noted that while this principle of transparency is a positive effort toward stopping the spread of political disinformation, more needs to be done:

> It's not enough. Need to include more of transparency, obligation, ability [of the Chairperson] to enforce transparency especially in light of new media, social media and its ability to disseminate information in a very quick manner . . . Need to create more robust regulatory landscape that allow enforcement of these issues.

However, as noted by Lurie and additional experts, the government's ability to curb disinformation through legislation enters the sensitive, important realm of freedom of speech debates.

> In terms of actual content of election campaigns, even if they seem to be misleading or seem to be disinformation, they [Election Committee] are very restrained and very reluctant to enter the fray in terms of freedom of speech. Even when they are intervening, evidentiary basis must be very strong.

In this regard, CEO and co-founder of tech company ActiveFence, Noam Schwartz, believes that the most effective fight against disinformation cannot be from the government because of the potential for freedom of speech violations. If the government were to aggressively fight disinformation, they would be "rightly so accused of censorship. The only way to curb disinformation is to go to where the disinformation is being distributed." Illiberal and authoritarian figures can claim political speech from opponents as disinformation to silence and deter dissent and plurality of voices, such as examples in Egypt or Russia have shown (Jack, 2022; Jumet, 2022). Researchers invested in preserving Israeli democracy strive to imagine a balance of freedom of political speech while still holding malicious parties accountable. Additionally, Schwartz contemplated what the Israeli government would look like if it did block swaths of domains from the internet because they deemed it "disinformation." "We'll have a very different regime if they do that," said Schwartz. "All of the sudden the government is not a democracy anymore. They are deciding for you." Who needs to regulate, what should be regulated, and how to regulate are complex and universal questions for any democratic government approaching legislation toward fighting disinformation. Even the plausible applications of government interference in the disinformation fight are questioned by Schwartz:

> Israel can't tell Facebook what to do. They have no teeth, the government. What will they say? 'You are not allowed to operate in this country anymore.' They can't really because Facebook's power is so much business.

Even with the creation of a more robust landscape for countering disinformation, deciding who is responsible to create and enforce legislation is unclear. "The

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problem is Israel cannot find a dedicated team to countering disinformation," said Barel. "Efforts are ad hoc, not systematic." It is also unclear what is appropriate to regulate and how to regulate it. For example, campaign advertising and campaign finance laws are entirely different domains in Israel that would both need to be addressed through robust regulatory efforts. The recent flux of governments, minister officials, and civil servants in Israel has left a noted void in both expertise about and legislative enthusiasm to counter internal disinformation.

Countering Disinformation in Israel: What About the Private Sector?

Benjakob, defeatedly, believes that the only real solutions currently on the table are stemming from social media companies who are primarily concerned with attracting eyeballs to screens for advertising dollars.

> At the legislation level it's really a game of whack-a-mole. You reach the really sad conclusion that the only mechanism we actually have against disinformation is social media platforms user guidelines, which to me is tantamount to saying we have nothing in place.

Placing the responsibility on the tech companies to counter internal disinformation in Israel is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the tech companies have the technological accessibility into their platforms and the expertise to find, identify, report, and remove harmful content online. According to Schwartz, platforms have vastly improved the identification and removal of harmful content online over Israel's past five election campaigns in three years. Online disinformation surrounding these recent, reiterative elections has served as an optimal test ground for tech companies to improve their strategies to fight disinformation. However, while technologists at platforms are improving, so are the producers of disinformation:

> The tricks that used to be common are not that common anymore . . . What actors are getting better at is creating a more believable narrative. So, they can actually create a deep conviction among the people in what they are saying is true (Noam Schwartz).

Within the past five elections, political parties across the spectrum – including the ruling right Likud party and the opposition centrist party Yesh Atid – have reportedly employed disinformation campaigns that attempted to emotionally resonate with Israeli citizens, observed Schwartz. For example, recent and ongoing judicial reform protests in the first half of 2023 are complex, deeply resonant political fights that have wide-ranging implications for the democratic institutions within Israel. As Schwartz and his team monitored the online space, he commented that:

> The Right will say, "Hey, protestors on the right you need to go to demonstrations because the anarchists on the left are ruining this country" . . . and the Left will say "the Right is trying to make Israel a dictatorship and take it back 1,000 years."

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Since the judicial reforms and the charged debates over Prime Minister Netanyahu spark an intimate, emotional touchpoint for many Israelis, much disinformation – particularly one party lying about what another party said – is propagated through social media channels that hold personal family chats, such as WhatsApp. Thus, these encrypted messaging apps that host private conversations are much more difficult to monitor by content moderators at tech companies. The extent to which these social media platforms can help fight internal disinformation is limited. On the other hand, tech companies do not exist to serve the best interest of the public. As a corporate entity, naturally tech companies aim to grow profit and appease stakeholders. "I don't think the platforms owe you anything. It's not a public service. It's not a penchant fund," commented Schwartz. While partnerships between the Israeli government and social media companies exist to help fight election season disinformation, for example, Facebook banned certain political ads that aggressively discouraged people to vote in Israel in the November 2022 election, their effectiveness and reach are short term (Jerusalem Post Staff, 2022). As previously noted, the social media companies' accessibility and expertise toward their tech is not comprehensively understood or effectively regulated by constantly fluctuating government workers. Therefore, Israel's private spaces – with advanced tech expertise and limited regulation – can flourish in ways that best serve their entrepreneurial interest, rather than prioritizing the public good. Israel's high-tech culture and expertise in cybersecurity threats also pose reasons for both pessimism and optimism in the fight against disinformation. Often coined as a "start-up nation," Israel has advanced technological skills to fight external information threats, most notably from Iran. "The capabilities of the intelligence community – with an emphasis on the cyber field – can be a reason for optimism regarding the attempts of foreign campaigns," noted Siman-Tov. While Israel may be adept at pinpointing information threats from foreign entities, this privatization of intelligence is seen as worrisome by Siman-Tov who noted, "At the same time, in front of the internal processes there are not many reasons for optimism."

According to Benjakob, the privatization of Israel's high-tech culture and expertise is noticeably increasing, specifically within the past fifteen to twenty years. Journalistic investigations in Israel within the past year have exposed privatized and professional Israeli-led disinformation operations, for example, the infamous Team Jorge's undemocratic influence and information operations were exposed by journalistic teams at Haaretz and TheMarker in 2023 (Megiddo & Benjakob, 2023). Privatized, for-hire intelligence efforts in Israel complicate the systematic fight against disinformation. Benjakob compared Israel's disinformation boutiques to a larger country like the United States:

> The way we've turned our high-tech stuff and the way we think about it and do it is a bit leaner . . . That's what's so dangerous within the Israeli space, where you have misinformation plus high-tech culture.

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However, the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) tools may prove to be more dangerous than high-tech boutique disinformation firms in Israel. Organized, coherent fights against internal disinformation in Israel have been complicated by limited jurisdiction over tech platforms, legislative gridlock, and lack of regulative fervor from the Likud government. Therefore, it is unclear whether swift, effective governmental regulation or other advocacy movements will be created to fight against AI tools spreading disinformation, for example, generative AI or robocalls. Schwartz observed the criticalness and long-term nature of the future of disinformation campaigns in Israel:

> This is a constant fight. This is an arms race. This is not a fight over regulation. It's way bigger than that. I don't think regulation is necessarily the answer. If it is the answer, it needs to move fast.

Governmental regulation and overreliance on tech companies to counter disinformation in Israel are not the only solutions. Interviewees suggested that Israel seriously partake in a movement already enacted within other democracies, such as the UK or the United States: systemic investment in information and media digital literacy (Horrigan, 2016). Promoting and investing in digital literacy, specifically media or information digital literacy, may help cultivate helpful habits in social media users, such as critically analyzing the source material (i.e., news outlet, sources) and reporting malicious activity online.

However, the responsibility of teaching digital literacy to help counter disinformation in Israel should not just be allocated toward the schools or parents. An onus on the tech platforms to help their users navigate and not believe whatever they read, hear, or see is critical. Just as efforts in the United States have recently put the onus on social media platforms to help young users' mental health, so should governments put the onus on the platforms to encourage digital literacy (Richtel, Pearson, & Levenson, 2023). Digital and media literacy research have demonstrated mixed results, as some scholars emphasize the "disconnect between accuracy judgments and sharing intentions" (Sirlin et al., 2021). However, interviewees believed in the value of using their "conscience and their brain," as interviewee Schwartz put it. For example, when news articles filled with propaganda about recent judicial reforms are shared within family group chats on WhatsApp, it is up to the individual to assess the information presented to them. Information literacy contributes to a healthy, safe online lifestyle. As Schwartz described it:

> If there's an incident [offline], there is something that will help you solve it … people don't expect that level of security and safety online. This is a bug. There is no difference between our online presence and our offline presence anymore.

CONCLUSION

While countering disinformation can promote a safer online environment, it's a very "non-sexy topic" in Israel, as Schwartz described it. Generally, the public discourse

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surrounding disinformation in Israel deprioritizes the topic. Israel considers itself surrounded by adversaries; in its seventy-five-year history, the country has at points been at war with neighbors Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria and has yet to come to a peaceful solution about Palestinian statehood, which affects discouraged Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Waxman, 2019). Priorities in Israeli society include terrorist threats and potential nuclear weapons in Iran. In comparison, a fake news account created on X, for example, is considered little threatening, according to Barel. Interviewees agreed that disinformation is indeed a danger for Israeli democracy and should be of high public concern. Yet, there were varied accounts of where the Israeli public should look to see the detriments of disinformation. Barel argued that all Israel needs to do is look at the Capitol riots of January 6, 2021, in the United States to see the consequences of Russian information warfare. Barel compares the political tensions of the United States to the political instability that has been brewing in Israel over many years. "So, if it's something we don't take care of today effectively, we may create a monster that will hurt us in, I don't know, a few years ahead in the future," observed Barel. Benjakob disagrees and instead points toward smaller, former Soviet Union countries to predict Israel's future. The way false news and disinformation manifests in Israel is more aligned with the quasi-liberal and increasingly illiberal democracies of Hungary and Poland, rather than the United States. Benjakob made the comparison:

> In the US, UK you have this implicit assumption that truth reigns supreme and that people are not lying to you . . . the rest of the world attuned to that not actually ever being true. If you talk for example to Polish people, Hungarian people, Israelis feel the same, you're kind of used to living in a world where you accept that there's kind of some level of manipulation going on . . . it's a young country and everyone was on board with the national project early on.

Whether Israel's future attempts at countering internal disinformation more similarly mirrors older, established democracies – such as the UK or the United States – or younger, evolving democracies – such as Hungary and Poland – is disputed. Yet, a commonly shared belief is that Israel's current government headed by Netanyahu is not interested in leading the charge against internal disinformation. Coordinated disinformation campaigns that disseminate conspiracies around Netanyahu's corruption charges and attacks against judicial reform protestors and Likud political opponents work in favor of Netanyahu's government. Evidence for Netanyahu's willingness to strike down legislative efforts of transparency in political advertising is evidence of this disinterest. As of this writing, it remains to be seen what action the Netanyahu government will take in response to the Israeli Supreme Court striking down key portions of its judicial reform bill in January 2024.

Furthermore, juggling emerging normalization efforts with Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia (Berman, 2023), maintaining a strategic relationship with the United States among recent criticism over judicial reforms (Pinkas, 2023), and aims to

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halt Iran's nuclear program are governmental priorities that attract media headlines. And the terrorist attack of October 7, coupled with Israel's aggressive response, will have far-reaching domestic and international political consequences that are yet to be determined. With a strong victory in the winter of 2022, the Right finally has the opportunity to set and push through its agenda in the Knesset. Barel commented on the overarching significance of Netanyahu's proposed judicial reforms:

> This is not just the case of let's elect a justice in one way or the other, not something like this. The story behind it is much, much bigger. The right-wing in Israel for years felt that it cannot implement its policy . . . After 4 elections without a clear cut result, now November election finally resulted in a clear cut resolution. The Right wing in Israel sees a historic opportunity to make changes that would service for the long term . . . When you speak in those terms . . . disinformation . . . is secondary for making this historic change.

An outlook for the future of Israeli efforts to counter internal disinformation is mixed. Expert capabilities that its high-tech culture and start-up entrepreneurial spirit brings to the table could be reason for hope – however, those same capabilities have been used for harmful purposes in the past. Persistent protests against judicial reforms speak to Israeli citizens' desire to protect their democratic institutions. Yet, the disinterest of the government to counter disinformation due to its beneficial value and the public's redirected attention to critical issues of Iran's nuclear program and relations with Palestinians deprioritizes the disinformation fight. A hopeful step toward prioritizing disinformation and preserving Israeli democracy is to remember that "Attempts of Iran and other entities make us [Israel] divided," commented Barel. "We need to remember what makes us [Israel] united." After the terrorist attacks of October 7, perceived threats and consequences of disinformation in Israel are materialized and being played out across the social media landscape. Similar to other political systems around the world, Israeli tech representatives, government actors, and citizens interested in a prospering democracy need to counter internal and external challenges – among them disinformation.

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