

## **In One Hand, a Camera, and in the Other, a Gun: State Adoption of Visual Activist Strategies for Narrative Legitimacy**

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This article examines how states adopt visual activist strategies to promote and legitimize their own narratives in today's digital environment. Specifically, it tackles the work of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Documentary-Combat squad, a new unit that trains soldiers in strategic image-making. Based on a qualitative analysis of ten interviews with former members of this squad, this article contends that the IDF uses social media as a key platform to circulate its images to maintain its sense of ontological security.

*Keywords: Israel, IDF, Documentary-Combat squad, platforms, state power, images, social media, narratives, ontological security, activist strategies*

"In one hand, a camera, and in the other, a gun" is the tagline of the newly formed Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Documentary-Combat squad. The understanding that both the camera and the gun are useful combat weapons is gaining new momentum as militaries around the world are seeking to adjust their communication strategies to account for today's digital environment. Following the 2012 Israeli operation in Gaza—another war in which Palestinians and activist groups recorded visual imagery of possible human rights violations—the IDF expanded its visual documentation from a noncombative film unit focused on public relations videos to the combat zones where front-line soldiers are now trained as camera operators as well. Some activist groups and Palestinians welcomed the IDF's initiative for its seeming advancement of transparency that could prevent future violence (e.g., Kalman, 2013). A spokesperson for the human rights group B'Tselem announced: "More documentation is a very positive thing" (as cited in Kalman, 2013, para. 8). In Israel and around the world, images are becoming centrally implicated in information politics, driving important public discussions about human rights and civil liberties (e.g., Ristovska & Price, 2018). Yet visual information has not only been long incorporated in human rights and activist projects, but it has also been weaponized as a tool of governmentality, control, and surveillance by the state and its agents (e.g., Tagg, 1988).

Because the rise of digital information and communication technologies has changed the conditions of what currently constitutes state power (e.g., Braman, 2004), addressing how and to what end visual information politics unfolds in war and conflict situations is important for broader human rights discussions. Here Price (2015) is especially instructive. He argues that the condition of being a state in the 21st century

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is predicated not only on having a monopoly over the means of violence, but also over the means of information. For him, "a state is, in part, a collection of stories connected to power" (Price, 2015, p. 41). Such stories help the state maintain its sense of ontological security: the need to sustain a consistent and reliable sense of identity, especially during crises (e.g., Silverstone, 1993; Taylor, 2020). The surge of eyewitness images online that challenges official state narratives about its violence can thus be seen as a threat to the state's ontological security. The IDF's response is just one example of how states are adopting activist strategies to promote official narratives, thus seeking to maintain preferred political qualities and interests. This development highlights why more visual documentation does not automatically lead to transparency, justice, and human rights.

By examining the work of the IDF Documentary-Combat squad, this article demonstrates how control over visual information creation and distribution is an important exercise in power that helps states produce, diffuse, and legitimize their own narratives. It is based on a qualitative analysis of semistructured interviews with 10 former members of this squad. The resulting analysis illuminates how the Israeli military has responded to contemporary threats to its sense of identity by adopting visual strategies and using social media to promote and legitimize its own narratives through images, just like human rights activists do. In other words, social media is becoming a central platform in which struggles over information power and narrative control unfold. This article argues that the IDF's emerging visual practices can be better understood as a contemporary means of state weaponization of information rather than as a vehicle for the advancement of transparency.

### **The New Information Battlefield**

Social media are not just platforms in the popular understanding of the term. Price (2015) defines platforms as any mechanism that enables various actors to deliver messages and persuade audiences. In this sense, newspapers and broadcasting are examples not just of media, but also of historic platforms, while sporting events like the 2008 Beijing Olympics can be understood as modern platforms, "a locus (often informal) where contests for attention occur" (Price, 2015, p. 193). Platforms are thus central to the strategic circulation of information, serving as sites where different narratives compete for visibility and legitimacy. For Ristovska and Price (2018), "creating and exploiting platforms is a necessary response by communicators—states, human rights advocates or others—to the complexity of modern communications flows" (p. 6). Social media are a good example of contemporary platforms where these communicators seek to shape and boost their own narratives while undermining others.

Social media have typically been perceived as democratic platforms, empowering activists and citizens to voice their concerns and to challenge dominant narratives (e.g., Papacharissi, 2017). The ability to share information using portable devices connected to the Internet (e.g., citizen journalism), the power to organize and assemble large populations (e.g., Black Lives Matter), and the capacity to expose confidential materials in the name of public interest (e.g., WikiLeaks) are examples illustrating how activists use social media to challenge state narratives. Yet social media have also been exploited for censorship and politics of doubt (e.g., Morozov, 2012). One need look no further than their increased usage for disinformation campaigns and hate speech (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

Social media simultaneously pose a threat to the state's ability to sustain its own narratives and carve a pathway to persuade desired audiences so that it can maintain its sense of ontological security, and thus its power. While worldwide Internet shutdowns are prevalent—showing how governments sometimes take the forceful route of censoring competing narratives (e.g., Ayalew, 2019)—“few institutional systems can last long if they are predominantly based on sheer repression” (Castells, 2007, p. 238). States are learning that having greater sway over information flows online is important for winning the legitimization battle over public narratives. Social media are thus becoming a crucial platform that “captures the process of finding an effective space to consolidate and diffuse a vision and to crowd out the competition of alternate statements” (Ristovska & Price, 2018, p. 7). It is not surprising, then, that states are becoming increasingly more sophisticated in harnessing social media as a platform to fulfill their own distinct political agendas and to counter activist messages.

As a rich sensory mode of information relay, images have been particularly important in state efforts to create or appropriate platforms, mobilizing societies in ways that expand or restrict freedoms (Price, 2015). After all, the visual import in politics is both longstanding and wide-ranging (e.g., Zelizer, 2006). Photography, for example, has been famously used as a tool for propaganda, justifying various government actions and military operations (e.g., Winkler, 1978). War photographers have been key in advancing patriotic narratives (e.g., Brady, 1968). Even famous photographers like Roger Fenton and Frank Hurley were recruited by governments to document battlefields (e.g., Manderson, 2017). Such examples illustrate the enduring use of visual information to advance the state's narrative authority. Social media provide a contemporary avenue, a new platform for visual information politics.

### **The IDF as a Case Study: Framework and Methodology**

Israel has long invested in its informational capacities, creating and appropriating various platforms to promote its own narratives and to consolidate a vision of itself, where the military's role is front and center. These efforts include the use of images to counter Palestinian claims. According to the former Israeli Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon (2019):

The presentation of “the occupation” as the focus of the conflict [makes it easier for the Palestinians] . . . to present Israel as “Goliath.” . . . My awareness of this imagery . . . has led me to make operational decisions that are meant to avoid creating situations from which Palestinians can produce propaganda materials like images of an Israeli tank in front of a Palestinian boy throwing a stone. (pp. 143–144)

Ya'alon considers the power of images to promote state narratives to be as important as an operational military success, echoing the longstanding centrality of public relations work to the IDF's efforts to counter Palestinian claims. The IDF has been quite successful in creating and sustaining its public image through legacy media. It is well known that the IDF has long enjoyed a routinized military–media relationship, which is not only confined to times of war, but is also associated with how the IDF has constituted its authority within Israeli culture (Livio & Cohen-Yechezkely, 2018). Since the 1950s, for example, the IDF has operated one of the most popular radio stations in the country. Its ubiquitous presence has helped support the military's social standing and its image as an inseparable and inevitable part of the Israeli existence.

Although the IDF has strategically shaped legacy media as platforms to promote its vision, it has not always been successful in legitimizing its narratives. The 1973 Yom Kippur war is one such famous case (e.g., Karni, Yovel, & Pedahzur, 1974), while the communication failure during the 2006 Lebanon war made the IDF rethink its media approaches. In 2006, Hezbollah was more efficient at leveraging digital information and communication technologies to report on events, rapidly releasing photographs to the press (Magen & Lapid, 2018). The IDF, by contrast, lacked strategies in tune with the new media environment, which posed serious anxieties for Israel's ability to maintain its preferred identity through strategic narratives.

Since then, media literacy and Internet connectivity in Gaza and the West Bank have grown exponentially, facilitating the proliferation of eyewitness images of the occupation, which challenge the IDF's official narratives of violent events on social media (e.g., De Vries, Simry, & Maoz, 2015; Kuntsman & Stein, 2015). Such eyewitness footage has become more prominent as a means of evidence globally (e.g., Ristovska, 2019). It is not surprising, then, that the 2017 military court conviction of Elor Azaria, an IDF sergeant caught on activist cameras wrongfully shooting an incapacitated Palestinian assailant, sparked positive energy among activists about the ability of online video to counter officially sanctioned narratives (Livio & Afriat, 2019). These developments drove, albeit slowly, the IDF's efforts to change media strategies, and turn social media into a platform where it can crowd out competing narratives, consolidate its own vision, and maintain its sense of ontological security.

The IDF Spokesperson's Unit now trains soldiers to operate the official Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram pages, turning the IDF into a central public diplomacy actor for Israel (Livio & Cohen-Yechezkely, 2018). These social media accounts are run in various languages, targeting different populations, including Arabic speakers in Israel who are generally less supportive or unsupportive of Israel's military actions. The IDF Documentary-Combat squad was founded in 2012 and is part of the Spokesperson's Unit. It trains soldiers on how to capture images from the battlefield, and how to distribute them for strategic purposes to desired audiences in order to better counter activist claims online.

This article examines the work of the Documentary-Combat squad to understand how, when, and to what ends the IDF leverages social media as a platform while integrating new visual practices typically associated with human rights activists. It is based on a qualitative analysis of anonymized semistructured interviews with 10 former squad members, for which I received IRB approval. To secure respondents, I used snowball sampling. As a Hebrew-speaking Israeli and former IDF member, I knew some soldiers personally, who then facilitated contacts with others. The soldiers I interviewed were males who were 21-26 years old. They had completed their military service in the IDF Documentary-Combat squad between 2013-2018. Their experiences thus speak to how the work of this squad unfolded since its founding. I conducted the interviews in Hebrew via WhatsApp voice call and transcribed and translated them into English during the 2019-2020 academic year. The interviews, lasting approximately one hour each, were based on open-ended questions about the squad's practices, training processes, work guidelines, and procedures for image production and circulation. The interviews were grouped and analyzed according to common themes. To protect their identity, the interviewees have been given pseudonyms.

As the subsequent analysis suggests, the interviewees are not critical of the squad's goals and practices. Their personal politics, however, are much more complex. One interviewee explained, "I never

felt like what I was doing [as a combat photographer] was wrong. But there were other, bigger things I had problems with, like the army in general, and having a whole population under occupation” (Omri, personal communication, October 31, 2019). The ability to separate one’s own practices and politics is very common to the Israeli society, in which conscription for all Jewish men and women is mandatory, and the act of serving in the army is considered to transcend political rifts (Livio, 2015). My ability to discuss this complex issue with the soldiers is what facilitated the rapport. I served in the IDF between 2006-2008 as a basic training commander and Hebrew instructor for new immigrants. As an 18-year-old brought up in the Israeli education system, at the time, I naively believed that I could leverage my own service to help Israeli society despite my strong disagreement with Israel’s policies and the occupation. I could not see the connection between my job and the politics of Israel and the IDF.

### **The IDF’s Visual Practices**

The Documentary-Combat squad is a special agency within the IDF Spokesperson’s Unit, where only a few carefully selected individuals—who have some background in film and/or photography, and an ability to meet challenging physical fitness criteria—get to serve. Unlike embedded journalists, who are dependent on protection from the military unit they follow, soldiers serving in this squad undergo intense combat training with an infantry unit. Additionally, they are required to pass a special IDF public relations course that teaches them the imperatives and practices of documentation in both combat and routine military situations. After training, each soldier is assigned to accompany a different combat battalion during ongoing operations. The new squad operates differently from other public relations branches within the Spokesperson’s Unit, focusing on seemingly efficient frontline image creation and circulation.

While broadcast media in Israel are platforms that the IDF can influence—and it has done so effectively over the years—social media are global spaces where different voices and narratives proliferate. The purpose of this new squad is to find effective ways to communicate the IDF’s vision and sense of self in the new digital environment where competing human rights claims continue to receive global attention. In other words, activist narratives on social media challenge Israel’s relative historical success at maintaining a coherent sense of identity. Consequently, the IDF is adopting new strategies to undermine the communication approaches of human rights activists, and to legitimize its own actions. In describing the squad’s work, one interviewee explained:

We’re an advertising company and the product we’re selling is the IDF. Today, there are more photographers at a protest than protestors without cameras. There are more cameras held up in the air than stones or bullets. This is a battle over public support. (Omri, personal communication, October 31, 2019)

His statement clearly captures how the camera is weaponized as a tool in the new information battlefield on social media. The IDF seeks to influence whose images the public ultimately perceives as meaningful.

To solidify legacy media as a successful platform, the military has directed its public relations efforts toward relatively organized state-enemy media strategies. Today, the IDF is developing strategies for social media that can account for much more diverse purposes and audiences. One interviewee mentioned: “The

war isn't against Hamas anymore. It's against civilians. Today everyone has a camera" (Guy, personal communication, November 11, 2019). For this interviewee, the IDF's strategies cannot merely focus on responding to so-called "enemy narratives;" they should also counter civilian narratives that have been gaining traction in Israel, the Occupied Territories, and internationally. In other words, Israel is not just exercising its power on the battlefield with actual violence, but also in the digital environment with strategic communication through images.

When state "power" is measured as much by the command of attention as by physical strength (Singer & Brooking, 2018), strategic communication remains a high priority. Activists and state actors turn to the storytelling power of images to seize social media strategically as a platform for attention and influence. By mapping how the squad goes about training, image production, and image distribution, the following analysis illuminates how the IDF extends its own public relations practices and adopts new strategies—including those developed by human rights activists—to legitimize its violence.

### ***Training***

There are two key aspects of the training process that incorporate informal knowledge gained through experience and formal knowledge shared through internal efforts to professionalize the IDF's public relations work writ large. The interviewees, for example, discussed the experiences in the 2006 Lebanon War as an important lesson. In the words of one former soldier:

The IDF didn't know what it was doing. They gave cameras to soldiers and were like, "Here, take pictures." [Since then], they've grown to understand it's important to justify [going to war] . . . to show that soldiers aren't dying for nothing . . . that the army is strong and capable. (Omri, personal communication, October 31, 2019)

For this soldier, a photograph of a Hamas ammunition hiding spot in a school in Gaza, or a bleeding IDF soldier, are good examples of images that justify war. The soldiers, then, are predisposed to seek out instances that appear similar to those they know are effective at shaping the IDF's preferred image.

Another interviewee reflected on the 2010 raid of the Turkish flotilla as another valuable lesson in the importance of strategic visual communication online. According to him, the Turkish flotilla was

the worst public relations event the IDF ever had because it took the IDF eleven hours to send materials. Today they know it's not enough to just say "everybody's anti-Semitic, and they'll hate us no matter what." No. There are ways to show our legitimacy. (Yair, personal communication, December 8, 2019)

During the 2006 Lebanon War and the 2010 flotilla raid, activists and civilians created images from the complicated scenes of violence and circulated them online. In the process, they successfully framed various IDF actions as human rights violations. Just before the outbreak of the Lebanon War, then-IDF Spokesperson Miri Regev claimed that online images "pose no problem whatsoever to military conduct" (as cited in Rid & Hecker, 2009, p. 82). Her claim, however, seemed outdated soon afterward. The interviewees attested to

how the IDF has learned, through trial and error, the importance of images in justifying military actions, and the role of strategic narratives in countering the flood of human rights images online.

The overarching imperatives of the squad were clear from the outset. However, during the first years of the unit's existence, more emphasis was placed on the combative aspect of their work. One former soldier explained,

My commander had no idea about public relations . . . . He was focused on successful operations and keeping his soldiers safe . . . [He didn't understand] there is more need for a photographer than just another combat soldier. (Ben, personal communication, November 10, 2019)

Five of the interviewees mentioned that they had trained under an elite combat unit specializing in guerilla warfare that did not see the relevance of visual work.

It was only during Operation Protective Edge in 2014—which was considered one of the most successful public relations events in the IDF's recent history (Magen & Lapid, 2018)—that the unit garnered notoriety. Internally, this was specifically attributed to the squad's ability to transmit images from Gaza efficiently. The images, as one interviewee recalled, illustrated the existence of more of Hamas's underground smuggling tunnels, which the IDF sought to destroy during the operation. The international community had been calling for a ceasefire, but the images helped legitimize the IDF's insistence on military action:

I photographed a huge tunnel underneath a school in Gaza. . . . The morning after, my commander was like "Bibi [Netanyahu] took your pictures to the UN and convinced them to let us stay in Gaza to get rid of more tunnels . . . . Because of you, we'll stay here for two more weeks." (Doron, personal communication, November 25, 2019)

The visual success during the 2014 operation had a major effect on the squad's future and its training, shifting the emphasis away from combat to image-making. Another interviewee added: "They never had room for me in the armored vehicle before the operation . . . . Afterward, I got a reserved seat that said *photographer* on it" (Ben, personal communication, November 10, 2019). Since then, the training became longer, indicating the Documentary-Combat squad's important role in helping the IDF promote its political agendas. The training is focused on the technical and conceptual factors involved in the production and distribution of images.

### ***Image Production and Distribution***

One main instruction that soldiers receive is to *document everything* to show *the truth*. As one interviewee explained: "I was never told not to photograph something. Even if something goes wrong—shoot. . . . The IDF will know what to do with the materials" (Johnathan, personal communication, November 12, 2019). The interviewees spoke about how the IDF's version of the truth is supposedly more holistic than the one provided by activists and civilians. Another interviewee mentioned: "There are so many cameras on the IDF from BDS, B'Tselem, and the press that the IDF really can't afford to lie. We have to show everything

even if it's not so nice to see" (Omri, personal communication, October 31, 2019). The Spokesperson's Unit thus emphasizes what it perceives as truth-claiming, instructing soldiers to document events in their entirety. This is nevertheless a strategic choice. Activists operating in the region have highlighted the importance of multiple angles from different cameras of the same incident to produce human rights narratives (e.g., Weizman, 2017). The IDF is appropriating this strategy for its own purposes. Extensive documentation gives the military options regarding which materials to select to promote Israel's version of traumatic events to its target audiences.

The soldiers see this strategy as justifiable. They believe that activist and bystander images are partial at best, claiming that the squad is there to provide the "bigger picture." This dissonance helps perpetuate strategic military narratives in Israel that are much more deceptive than straightforward propaganda because such narratives mimic discourses of justice while maintaining enough public support to continue the occupation:

Civilians in a past operation took pictures of ruins of their houses and of a little teddy bear sitting in ashes, and it's very sad, but they didn't photograph the missile launcher next to the house or the tunnel they dug underneath it. . . . They're making "Pali-wood" and the IDF is there to give the bigger picture. (Guy, personal communication, November 11, 2019)

Through this squad, the IDF is seeking to delegitimize narratives of resistance, framing them as so-called "Palestinian Hollywood." Examples like this speak to the dissonance at the heart of how the squad members see their work—they perceive image-making as a seemingly neutral effort to create a documentary record that is more truthful than that of Palestinians and human rights activists even as the interviewees say that they have complicated political beliefs about the occupation.

In addition to the interviewees' description of their commitment to neutral documentation, they were also aware that the IDF makes calculated decisions as to how to use their footage. The Spokesperson's Unit is comprised of several branches that are meant to provide different images to distinct populations:

For the Arab world, we want to create an image of an intimidating IDF. For Israelis, a strong, diverse IDF, and for international [audiences] a moral IDF, a humane IDF. We also have a technological IDF, to show that we are advanced . . . . These are things they tell us to keep in mind always, who is our audience? (Maor, personal communication, November 13, 2019)

Audience differentiation is key to human rights video activism (Ristovska, 2016). The IDF is also adopting this strategy to tailor its images appropriately for diverse audiences. Smart narrowcasting, the staple of human rights video activism (Gregory, 2019), has now been strategically appropriated by the IDF Documentary-Combat squad, too. The squad's training, for example, engages how visual content should be tailored to fit different media channels. The IDF holds a YouTube channel, an Instagram account, and a Facebook page. It is also active on various social media platforms like TikTok, Telegram, and WhatsApp, transmitting different visual content from the frontlines and home bases. The training emphasizes how to tailor visual content for different media platforms, a departure from the earlier "one size fits all" model.



When communicating with international and local publics on different platforms, the IDF thinks that the narrative must be promotional to generate military support. For one interviewee:

An artsy, black-and-white photo can go to Instagram, but not to the newspaper. We'd go wild and do more artistic stuff for Instagram. Generally, we were told that social media are more for personal stories about special soldiers and couples who met in the army and to display state-of-the-art weapons and new vehicles. The newspaper is more news, like, arrests. (Maor, personal communication, November 13, 2019)

Another interviewee added:

The materials change between different platforms and audiences. . . . Facebook in English is for our American donors so it's like, "OMG! Look at us with shiny weapons and big tanks! Love us! Give us money!" (Idan, personal communication, April 4, 2020)

Audience differentiation helps soldiers use their images strategically to enhance the IDF's narratives. When asked to give me an example of what constitutes a successful image, one interviewee mentioned a photograph of a combat soldier giving water to an old Palestinian woman during IDF attacks in Gaza. The spokesperson's unit shared the photograph to present a more humane image of its soldiers and gain sympathy for Israel from the international community. Another interviewee spoke about a photograph shared on the IDF's Hebrew Facebook page showing soldiers on an army base eating Matza (unleavened flatbread) to celebrate Passover. This type of imagery, he explained, is intended to show parents that their boys are safe and celebrating the holidays even away from home. Despite claims that the IDF's visual practices provide a "bigger picture," the images diffuse IDF's preferred narratives about itself, reaffirming decades-old claims that have justified its violence.

In addition to adjustment to image transmission across multiple platforms and audiences, the IDF is also concerned with the speed at which the images are distributed. Soldiers are trained to transmit footage using technologies that allow them to share footage in real time, just like activists do. For example, the interviewees described technologies that allow them to quickly transmit materials to the editing room. One interviewee explained that the IDF is learning how to utilize new tools to prevent past mistakes from recurring:

A friend returned from an operation and was tired. He gave me the camera, and I knew he needed me to transmit everything to the editing room immediately. . . . It was important for people to wake up to these things. (Johnathan, personal communication, November 12, 2019)

Speed is becoming crucial to the IDF's image distribution strategy. The perception is that being the first to release footage puts the IDF in a better position to control the narrative. However, the soldiers themselves do not have much control over the footage. "I'm at the bottom of the chain. I'm just the provider of the materials, the strategy is not in my hands" (Omri, personal communication, October 31, 2019). The IDF Spokesperson's Unit is a ramified body in which the individual soldier, the photographer, does not have much control. The images are handled and decided upon by different branches of the unit, thus creating a

concept of an assembly line where the squad members have no personal responsibility for how the images are eventually used. Like historical war photographers whose images were later utilized by the military, newsrooms, and other organizations (Brady, 1968), here, too, soldiers serving in the squad provide images that the Spokesperson's Unit subsequently sifts and edits. This study provides an account of frontline actors involved in the IDF's visual operation; however, to better understand the image selection, editing, and framing processes crucial to IDF's visual strategies, further investigation into the relevant Spokesperson Unit branches is still necessary.

In summation, the IDF is adopting some activist strategies to better harness the potential of social media as platforms where it can counter human rights claims about the Israeli occupation. Institutional hierarchical structures and bureaucracies initially made it harder for state actors to react quickly to events in new media contexts (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). Human rights activists seized this moment as an opportunity to put forward their own claims and expose state wrongdoings. However, the strategies of different state actors are also evolving in light of new media circumstances. New technologies that enable rapid image transmission allow the IDF to react at the same speed and flexibility as activists. Through training, an emphasis on audience differentiation for image production, and the underscoring of speed and efficiency for image distribution, the IDF is learning how to better leverage the storytelling power of images. This allows the IDF to compete with activists and other actors over media dominance, to receive continued support from Israeli and international communities, and to maintain its preferred identities through narrative power.

### **Conclusion**

Discussions around the power and limitations of images as vehicles for the advancement of justice are proliferating in light of today's media environment and state attempts to strategically use and manipulate visual information. In the United States, one solution surrounding racial injustice in policing has been a proposed call for more police body cameras (e.g., Fan, 2019). In Syria, human rights activists have turned to open-source visual investigation as a transparent methodology which can seemingly counter the joint propaganda of the Syrian and Russian governments (e.g., Weizman, 2017). In Israel, as this article has shown, the creation of the IDF Documentary-Combat squad has been similarly welcomed. A Palestinian activist told *The Guardian*, "I would like everyone to use a camera. It means we are searching for the truth" (Katib, as cited in Kalman, 2013). My interviews with former IDF soldiers who have served in the new squad, however, suggest that a more skeptical view toward the power of visual imagery is also necessary.

By incorporating visual practices into the heart of its combat operations, the IDF is becoming more sophisticated in its efforts to delegitimize competing claims and advance its own narratives. Ironically, perhaps, the IDF is doing this while adopting activist strategies, like creating great volumes of visual documentation or incorporating smart narrowcasting techniques for differentiated audiences. These implementations of visual practices are an illustration of how states continue to justify their violence amid changing definitions of what "war" is and how it is being fought. In the hands of the IDF combat soldiers, the camera is a weapon that helps Israel participate in narrative battles on social media. Hence, the unfolding weaponization of the camera calls for new ways of thinking about visual information politics and policies that consider the context in which images are created and circulated, as well as the power relations entailed in these processes. This shift is necessary to help protect human rights and civil liberties in Israel and around the world.

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