



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Should states use social media to warn civilians in armed conflict?

Lahmann, H.C.

Citation

Lahmann, H. C. (2025). Should states use social media to warn civilians in armed conflict? *Ethics & International Affairs*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4212125>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4212125>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE • 02/3/2025 • ONLINE ESSAY

Should States Use Social Media to Warn Civilians in Armed Conflict?



Damage following an Israeli airstrike on El-Remal in Gaza City. Photo credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Henning Lahmann

The cardinal principle of the modern laws of war is the duty to distinguish between civilians and combatants when attacking the enemy. One of the principal means to achieve this—especially in situations of urban combat in which civilians and adversarial fighters are intermingled—is the obligation to warn the civilian population ahead of military operations. In addition to more traditional ways to achieve this, warring parties increasingly resort to social media to communicate such warnings. The Israeli military has been at the forefront of this development. Detailing three different scenarios, this brief essay shows that although online communication channels could potentially be a valuable tool to reach civilians in conflict zones, and thus save civilian lives, there is an inherent tension between such humanitarian use

of social media and the simultaneous pursuit of military objectives that negatively affect the reliability and trustworthiness of the medium.

On a Friday night in May 2021, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) communicated via Twitter, as X was known then, that “air and ground troops are currently attacking in the Gaza Strip.”¹ Through its English-language spokesperson, it simultaneously confirmed this information directly to international correspondents,² who duly reported these developments—at that time a major and entirely unexpected escalation of yet another wave of violence between Israel and Hamas—to a global audience through their media outlets. At 2:00 in the morning, however, the IDF “corrected” its initial statement, clarifying that while ground troops were indeed involved in military operations against Hamas targets within Gaza, no Israeli soldiers had entered the Strip.

What at first glance seemed like an innocuous communication mishap—perhaps understandable in the “fog of war”—was quickly revealed as an intricate scheme to deceive Hamas. Shortly after the end of the fighting, Israeli media reported that the false information about a ground incursion was supposed to trick Hamas fighters into seeking shelter in the vast tunnel networks beneath Gaza City where they could be attacked with airstrikes, turning the tunnels into “death traps.”³ Whether or not the ploy was successful, from the perspective of the laws of armed conflict—or international humanitarian law (IHL)—such deceptive tactics are not per se unlawful. As Article 37.2 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (AP I) clarifies,⁴ “ruses of war,” including “mock operations and misinformation,” are explicitly not prohibited.

The cardinal principle of the modern laws of war is the duty to distinguish between civilians and combatants when attacking the enemy.



But let us spin the story a little further by focusing on other, albeit in this case speculative, possible effects of such deceptive communication tactics. Under the modern laws of war, armed forces must take “constant care...to spare the civilian population, civilians and civilian objects” (Article 57 AP I). What, then, if Palestinian civilians in Gaza City had taken the information about the launching of ground operations that the IDF relayed through social media as a reason to leave neighborhoods closer to the border and to seek shelter in areas that subsequently came under bombardment, thus putting themselves in harm’s way? This question is even more significant in light of the obligation to give “effective advance warning” of attacks so non-combatants in the vicinity of operations have time to remove themselves from the battlefield. But how can an armed force communicate such a warning if the entire military tactic relies on spreading a lie about the precise character of the planned attack through public channels?

As military lawyers will be quick to point out, the obligation to issue warnings to civilians is subject to an important caveat: they are not mandatory whenever “circumstances do not permit,” which includes the element of surprise necessary for an operation’s success. However, scholars have emphasized that given the overarching objective of IHL—preserving a modicum of humanity in war—this exception should be interpreted narrowly especially in situations where there is proximity between protected civilians and legitimate military targets, as is inevitably the case in Gaza.⁵ Even more crucially, there is an inherent tension between the obligation to warn and the generally permissible use of public communication channels to deceive the enemy, which was already recognized in the authoritative commentary to Additional Protocol I from 1987.⁶ In the decades since, this tension has only increased thanks to today’s ubiquity of digital communication technologies, and in particular online platforms, as the media used both for the issuing of warnings to civilians and as the primary site for a global information war fought over current conflicts, which was nowhere more evident and consequential than in the context of Israel’s military operations in Gaza in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on October 7, 2023.

The Age of Digital Wartime Disinformation

Times of war have always triggered a flood of propaganda and other forms of manipulative and misleading information. However, the advent of digital communication technologies, including the internet and smartphones, engendered a whole new dimension of the phenomenon. For civilians living in areas of active armed conflict, this development has led to often grave humanitarian consequences. Apart from online platforms abused as sites of incitement and intercommunal hatred, one specific predicament concerns conflict-related communications by a belligerent party to civilians for the purpose of warning them of impending military operations. To be *effective*, as required by IHL, such warnings must generally, first, be timely so civilians have sufficient time to seek protection; second, issued to the right target audience, thus to the people who will most likely be affected by the planned attack or at least to the local authorities who are in a position to ensure the safety of the civilian population; and, third, make sufficiently clear what the attacking forces expect the potentially affected civilians to do to protect themselves, for example to shelter in place or instead to evacuate the area of combat.⁷

During its operations in Gaza and Lebanon, the IDF has consistently claimed that it is adhering to the laws of armed conflict and that it is doing everything to spare the civilian populations in both theaters. Warning civilians ahead of airstrikes or other operations has been a cornerstone of these purported efforts. In addition to the dropping of leaflets, so-called “roof-knocking” of buildings by means of non-explosive ordnance, or even direct text messages or phone calls to potentially affected persons in the direct vicinity of an impending attack, the IDF’s Civilian Harm Mitigation Unit issued advance warnings via social media and other digital communications channels.⁸ Given that leaflets—although the longest-standing and perhaps still most common practice of issuing advance warnings—and roof-knocking have in the past been criticized as not always sufficient,⁹ and in light of the prevalence of smartphones and internet access, using online platforms seems like a reasonable way to improve the effectiveness of

warnings. However, under present conditions the online information environment cannot be considered a suitable medium for that purpose.

There is an inherent tension between the obligation to warn and the generally permissible use of public communication channels to deceive the enemy, which was already recognized in the authoritative commentary to Additional Protocol I from 1987.



The Unreliability of the IDF's Warnings in Gaza

In a high-stress situation like intense military operations, any communication channel used must be reliable and trustworthy for the recipients of critical, life-saving information. In Gaza, that was evidently not the case. For one, Israel repeatedly, and for extended periods, rendered the digital communication infrastructures physically unstable by deliberately cutting the cables that connect the Gazan part of the internet to the global networks via Israel or by attacking the electrical grid these infrastructures depend on, often just ahead of ground operations with the aim of preventing Hamas operatives from coordinating.¹⁰ Obviously, such a tactic necessarily foils any attempts to warn civilians through these channels. The problem is not limited to this conflict. Russia, too, has frequently conducted deliberate attacks against such essential infrastructures in Ukraine, though it should be added that there is no indication that Russian forces even attempt to warn Ukrainian civilians of impending strikes.¹¹ Perhaps even more consequentially, and likewise with larger structural implications beyond the context of Gaza, the digital communication environment has also proven to be *substantially* untrustworthy due to an onslaught of conflict-related mis- and disinformation.¹² Over the course of the IDF's operations, information provided via social media—for example regarding safe escape routes or so-called safe zones—repeatedly turned out to be incorrect, confusing, or in other ways highly unreliable.¹³ But even disregarding such inaccuracies directly related to warnings, it simply cannot be expected of civilians under duress to be able to cut through the constant noise of competing narratives that attempt to frame what is going on in order to find the pieces of information that might be essential to avoid harm.

Humanitarian information distributed through digital media can also not be effective if it is reasonably suspected to be in pursuit of other, nefarious ends. For example, Israeli officials and members of the IDF further undermined the trustworthiness of warnings via social media by frequently using the same channels to advocate for a forced displacement of Palestinians and the reestablishment of Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip.¹⁴ Even if we assume that the

systematic and permanent displacement is not official Israeli government policy, when such ideas are repeatedly distributed through online platforms that also call on civilians to leave their homes immediately and to move to other areas, it is only understandable that any humanitarian intent is called into question and that civilians suspect that a return home will not be possible, thus dissuading those affected from leaving in the first place.¹⁵ A similar issue occurred in Ukraine, when Russia's announcement of "humanitarian corridors" out of zones of active combat would have left civilians no choice but to end up in Russia or Belarus.¹⁶

In a high-stress situation like intense military operations, any communication channel used must be reliable and trustworthy for the recipients of critical, life-saving information.



Finally, as demonstrated by the scenario at the outset, online communication channels used for warning civilians cannot be trusted if they are also used for the purpose of deceiving the enemy. Even if permissible in principle, the tactical disinformation will be received by non-combatants on the ground at risk of being affected by the subsequent operation, causing them to act in unpredictable ways in contravention of the obligations to take constant care of the civilian population. More generally, such use undermines the perceived reliability of online media when it comes to warnings and other critical information. Again, this points to a larger issue not limited to Gaza. We have seen similar cases in Ukraine, where the Russian armed forces repeatedly spread news about impending offensives that never materialized. While these ruses were ostensibly directed at the Ukrainian military, they had the inevitable result of subverting civilians' capacity to make informed decisions, with frequently lethal consequences.¹⁷

The Critical Importance of Trustworthy Communication Channels in Armed Conflict

The three scenarios outlined above are only some of the ways in which the digital information ecosystem has been compromised in recent and ongoing conflicts. Other incidents have further undermined trust in electronic means of communication more generally, such as, most strikingly, the weaponization of pagers and walkie talkies in Lebanon in September of last year.¹⁸ At the same time, given their wide availability, convenience, and speed, online communication platforms could *in principle* serve as highly suitable channels for the dissemination of humanitarian information in wartime. For advance warnings as required by IHL to be even potentially effective, however, they must not only reach the right target audience reliably, but the recipients must also be in a position to trust the information that is essential to save their lives. In the current digital communication environment in Gaza and other combat zones, that cannot be guaranteed. Israel and other parties to recent and current

armed conflicts openly consider the online media ecosystem part of their (narrative) battlefield. As long as that is the case, then warnings issued through these channels are inherently compromised from a humanitarian perspective and cannot be relied upon to discharge the actor's obligations under the laws of armed conflict. To start addressing the conundrum, states that do seek to utilize social media to issue warnings to civilians should, at a minimum, establish channels exclusively dedicated to such messaging and take steps to enforce internal communications discipline to suppress any statements from officials that could undermine trust in critical warnings.

—Henning Lahmann

Henning Lahmann is assistant professor at eLaw – the Center for Law and Digital Technologies at Leiden University Law School, the Netherlands. His research focuses on the intersection of international law and digital tech.

[1 x.com/IDF/status/1392953390443991040](https://twitter.com/IDF/status/1392953390443991040). ↩

[2 x.com/felschwartz/status/1392994317686513665](https://twitter.com/felschwartz/status/1392994317686513665). ↩

[3](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/14/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-disinformation.html) David M. Halbfinger, “A Press Corps Deceived, and the Gaza Invasion That Wasn’t,” *New York Times*, May 14, 2021,

www.nytimes.com/2021/05/14/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-disinformation.html. ↩

[4](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v2/rule65) Although Israel has not ratified AP I, the rule has customary status, binding all states; see International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Customary IHL Database, Rule 65: Perfidy; the IDF’s 2006 “Manual on the Rules of Warfare” also explicitly forbids acts of perfidy, see **ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v2/rule65**. ↩

[5](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-06-27-Sieges-Protecting-Civilians_0.pdf) Emanuela-Chiara Gillard, “Sieges, the Law and Protecting Civilians,” Chatham House Briefing, 2019, p. 7,

www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-06-27-Sieges-Protecting-Civilians_0.pdf. ↩

[6](#) Yves Sandoz et al., *Commentary on the Additional Protocols of June 1977 to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949*, 1987, Article 57, at para. 2225. ↩

[7](https://www.lieber.westpoint.edu/warnings-precautionary-measure-gaza) Jon Griffiths, “Warnings as a Precautionary Measure: Gaza,” *Articles of War*, June 23, 2021, **[lieber.westpoint.edu/warnings-precautionary-measure-gaza](https://www.lieber.westpoint.edu/warnings-precautionary-measure-gaza)**. ↩

[8](https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/11/14/hopeless-starving-and-besieged/israels-forced-displacement-palestinians-gaza) See Human Rights Watch, “Hopeless, Starving, and Besieged,” November 2024, p. 33, **www.hrw.org/report/2024/11/14/hopeless-starving-and-besieged/israels-forced-displacement-palestinians-gaza**. ↩

9 France 24, “‘Roof knocking’: Israel Warning System Under Scrutiny in Gaza Conflict,” May 20, 2021, www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210520-roof-knocking-israel-warning-system-under-scrutiny-in-gaza-conflict. ↩

10 Al Jazeera, “Telecommunications, Internet Down in Gaza as Israeli Strikes Intensify,” December 4, 2023, www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/4/telecommunications-internet-down-in-gaza-as-israeli-strikes-intensify. ↩

11 Amnesty International, “Russia/Ukraine: Latest Massive Missile Strike on Critical Infrastructure Is a War Crime,” November 29, 2024, www.amnesty.org.au/russia-ukraine-latest-massive-missile-strike-on-critical-infrastructure-is-a-war-crime. ↩

12 Robert Dover, “Gaza Is Now the Frontline of a Global Information War,” *The Conversation*, February 7, 2024, theconversation.com/gaza-is-now-the-frontline-of-a-global-information-war-221356. ↩

13 Stephanie Hegarty and Ahmed Nour, “Gaza Evacuation Warnings from IDF Contain Many Errors, BBC Finds,” *BBC World Service*, April 5, 2024, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68687749. Of course, non-digital means of warning are prone to error or sudden change of military tactics as well, which could be witnessed during operations against ISIS in Syria See Samuel Oakford, “Civilians Face Conflicting Instructions as Coalition and SDF Assault Raqqa,” *Air Wars*, June 9, 2017, airwars.org/news/civilians-face-conflicting-instructions-as-coalition-and-sdf-move-to-take-raqqa. ↩

14 Human Rights Watch, “Hopeless, Starving, and Besieged,” p. 131. ↩

15 Bethan McKernan and William Christou, “Palestinians Will Not Be Allowed to Return to Homes in Northern Gaza, Says IDF,” *The Guardian*, November 6, 2024, www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/06/palestinians-will-not-be-allowed-to-return-to-homes-in-northern-gaza-says-idf. ↩

16 Al Jazeera, “Ukraine Blasts Russian Plan for ‘Humanitarian Corridors’”, March 7, 2022, www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/7/ukraine-blasts-russia-plan-corridor. ↩

17 Center for Civilians in Conflict, “When Words Become Weapons: The Unprecedented Risks to Civilians from the Spread of Disinformation in Ukraine,” October 2023, p. 22, civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CIVIC_Disinformation_Report.pdf. ↩

18 Article 19, “Lebanon: Urgent Call for an Investigation into Attacks on Communication Devices,” September 24, 2024,

www.article19.org/resources/lebanon-urgent-call-for-an-investigation-into-attacks-on-communication-devices. ↩