



ANALYTICS &
PROJECTIONS

Military Diplomacy: How Militaries Leverage Social Media for Strategic Objectives

Team G5iO

September 2022

Copyright © 2022 G5iO.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the address below.

G5 Internet Observatory

team@g5io.org

Office 505, 5th Floor, Evacuee Trust Complex, Sir Agha Khan Road,
F-5/1, Islamabad, Pakistan

www.g5io.org

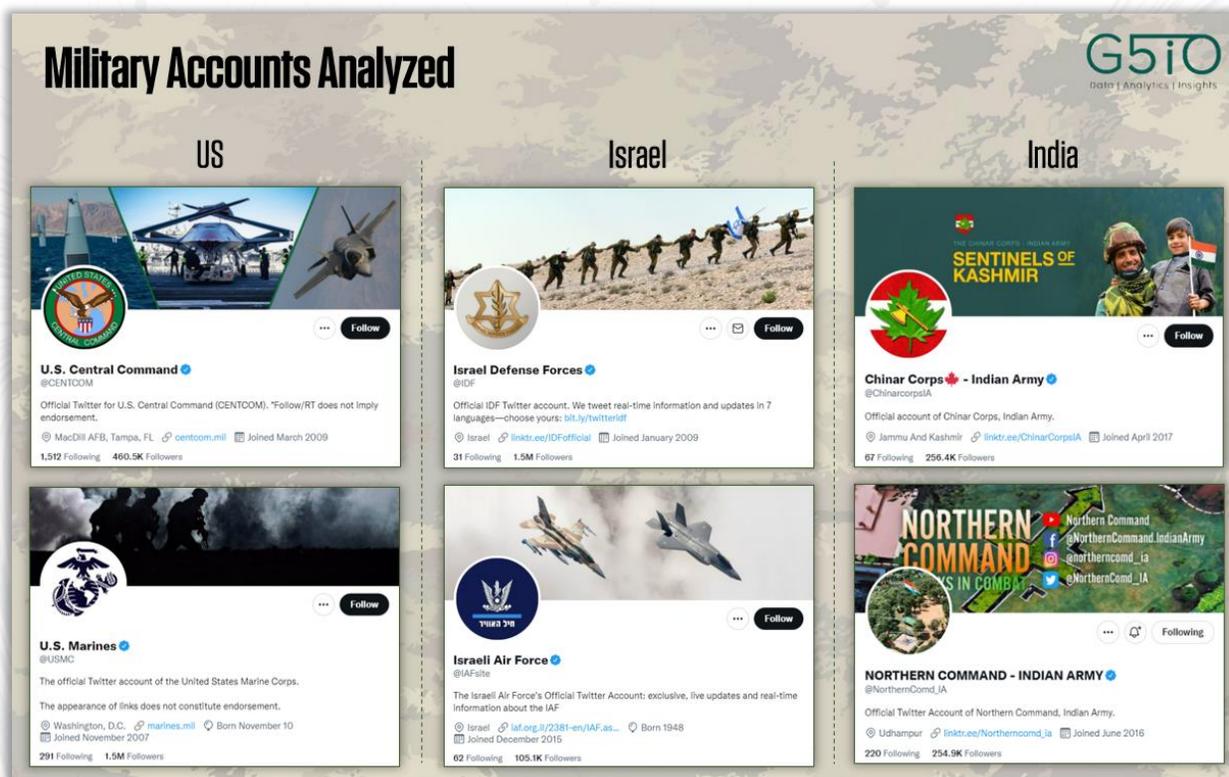
Military Diplomacy: How Militaries Leverage Social Media for Strategic Objectives

Overview:

The rise of digital platforms such as Twitter have transformed the way governments and various state organizations engage in public diplomacy and outreach. Exploring these themes, G5iO has in the past taken a detailed look at how [world leaders](#) and [governments](#) use Twitter for digital diplomacy in pursuit of their foreign policy goals. In this study, we instead looked at some of the most active military accounts on Twitter to see how these organizations leverage the social media space for a more ‘soft power’ approach towards public diplomacy, recruitment, and community outreach— and that too while lending a general sense of legitimization and credibility to their kinetic operations and activities.

Methodology:

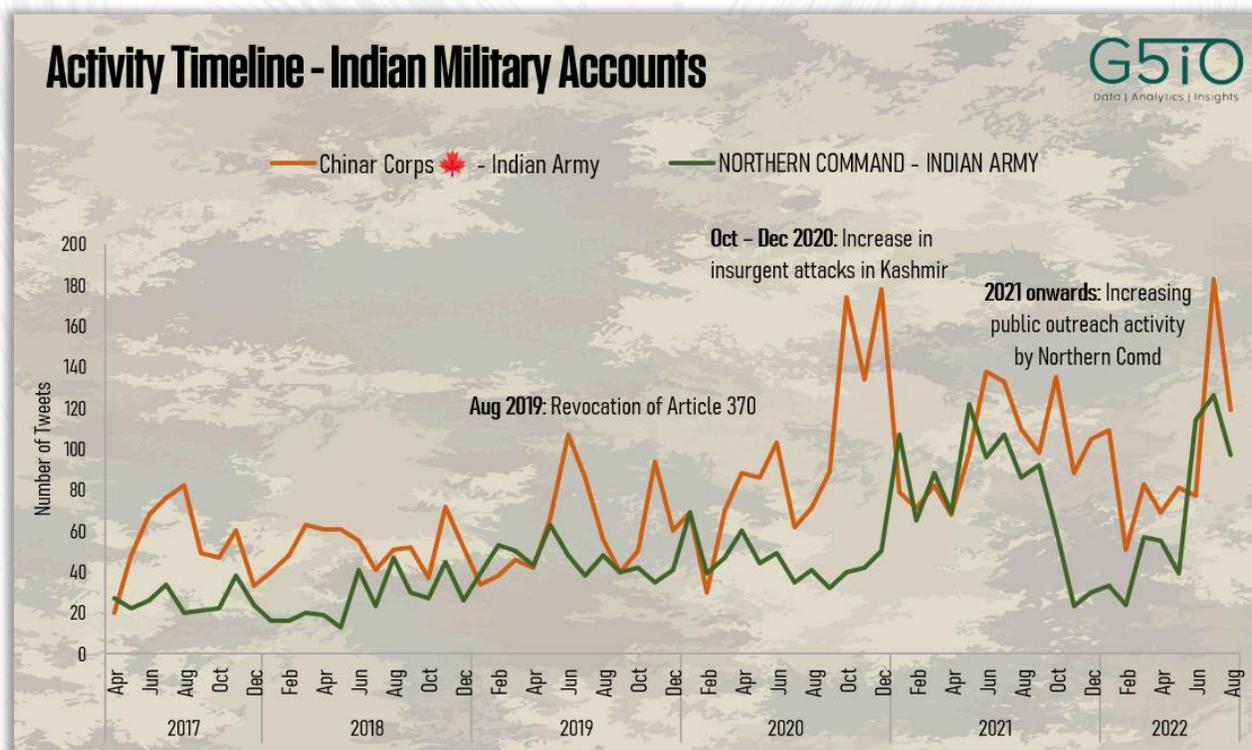
Our criteria for analysis comprised the world's largest and most active militaries with a strong social media presence, particularly on Twitter. Based on this, we chose the U.S., Indian and Israeli militaries, each of which has a well-established presence online (unlike the Chinese and Russian militaries which have restricted access to Twitter). Out of these, we scraped the timelines of two accounts from each country representing two tiers of command from our sample. These comprised the @NorthernComd_IA & @ChinarcorpsIA accounts from India, the @IDF & @IAFsite accounts from Israel and the @CENTCOM & @USMC accounts from the United States. While each of these militaries maintain several accounts, the above-selected represent some of the most active formations that have been regularly engaged in kinetic operations over the last five years.



Our final dataset thus comprised ~25,318 tweets from April 2017 to August 2022. Looking at these via a discursive lens we then compared the varying issues and types of messaging each of these militaries used for public outreach and diplomacy, including recruitment drives, updates on their ongoing military operations, and relief and rescue operations in their respective theatres of operations.

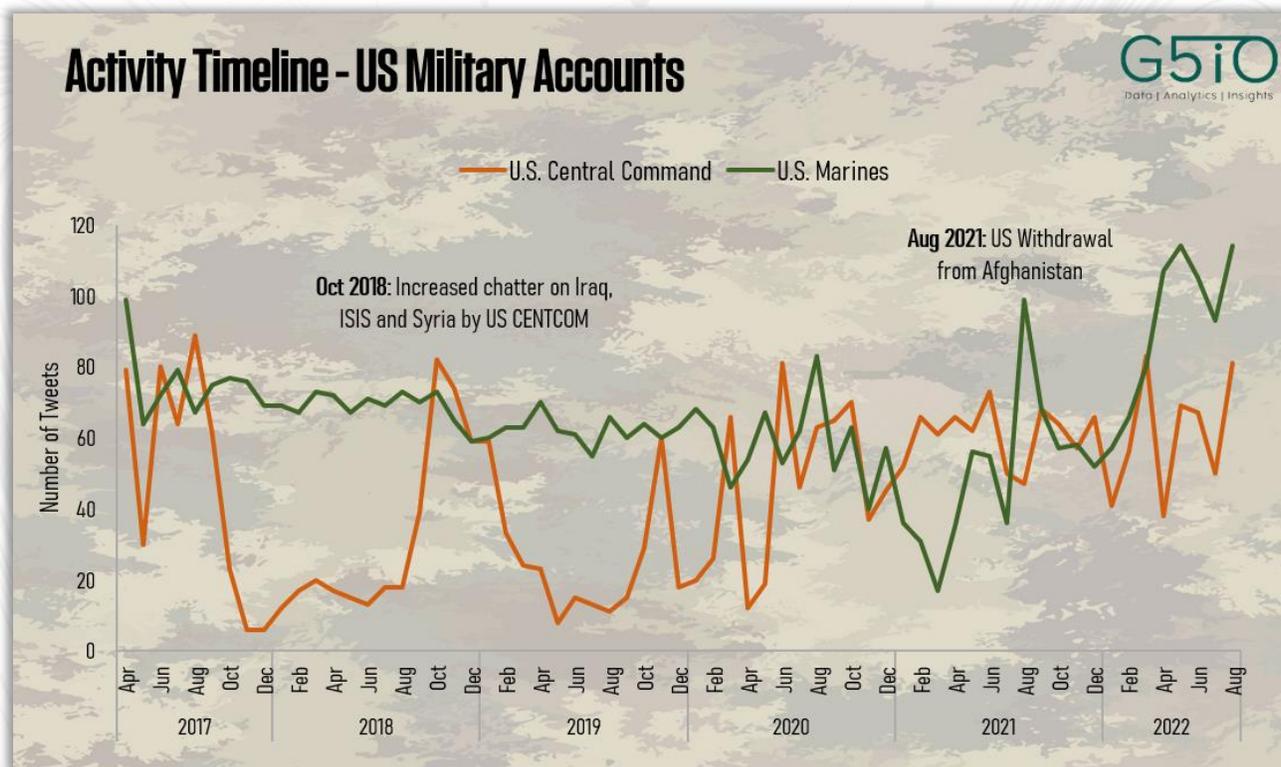
Timeline Activity

The following graph shows that the twitter activity linked to Indian military accounts peaked during some of their most active operations in occupied Jammu and Kashmir. It shows how the overall messaging surrounding these operations increased dramatically since the revocation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution. This holds particularly true for the Chinar Corps' official account whose twitter activity increased in sync with their counter insurgency operations against so-called "militants" and "terror organizations." In contrast, the Northern Command's official twitter account while focusing less on operations and more on the projection of soft power also recently increased its Twitter activity related to highlighting its development and public outreach efforts specifically in the IIOJK region.



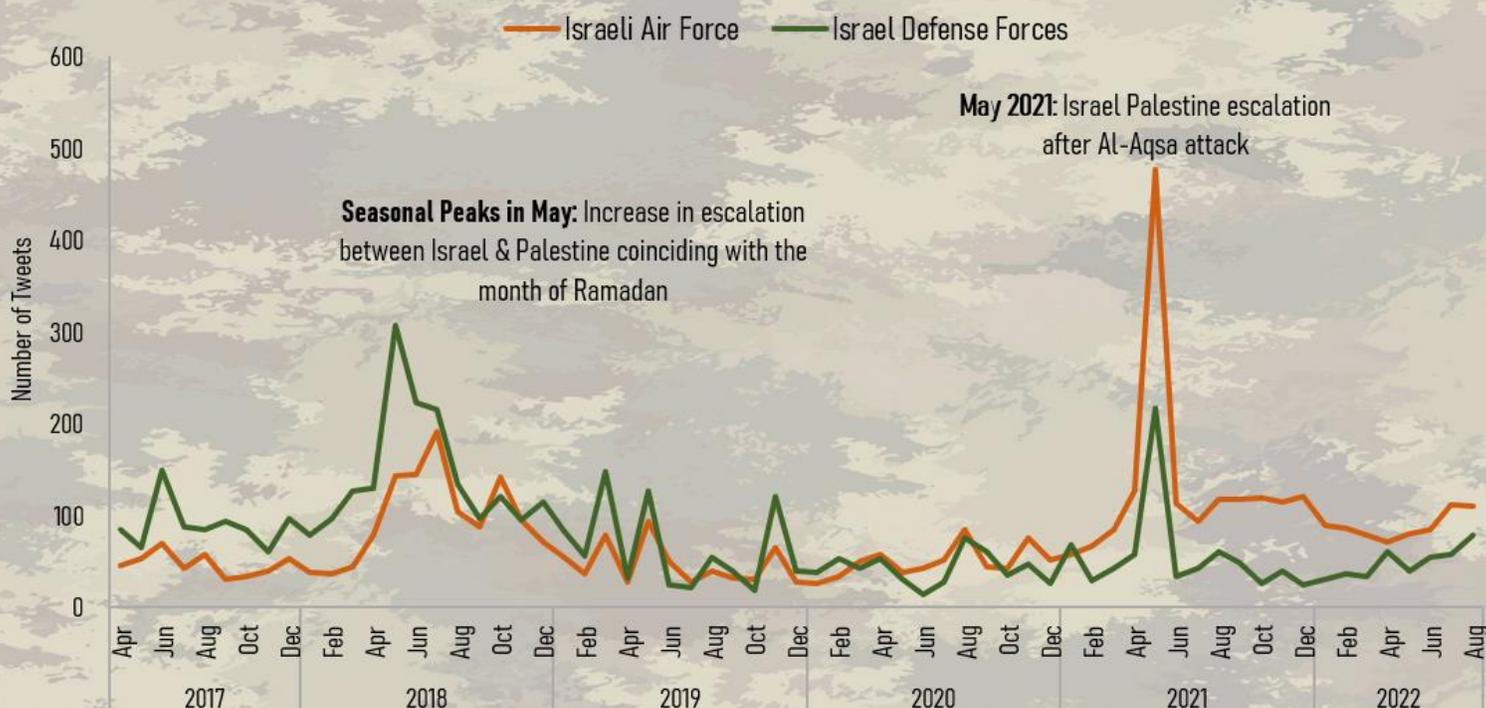
In contrast, accounts linked with the US military exhibit a consistent activity rate with peaks indicating key strategic and regional focal events. These include the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and U.S. operations against ISIS in both Syria and Iraq. In terms of their overall theme, the US Marine Corps' Twitter account routinely tweeted about their ground

operations, training exercises, and war preparedness for public outreach and recruitment purposes whereas, the US CENTCOM account posted more frequently around key strategic events presenting a more holistic view of US military policy and diplomacy.



Twitter accounts linked with the Israeli military however display a more cyclical pattern. This holds particularly during Ramadan for instance when its operations against Hamas intensified between April and June almost every year, for the last 5 years. The following graph shows how in [May 2021](#) for instance, activity from these accounts rose to an all-time high coinciding with high-intensity clashes and airstrikes in Gaza. The seasonality of narratives in these accounts' discourse also shows that this activity is not only in response to specific events but also proactively engages digital audiences with their respective narratives based on a fixed, pre-established context centered around the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

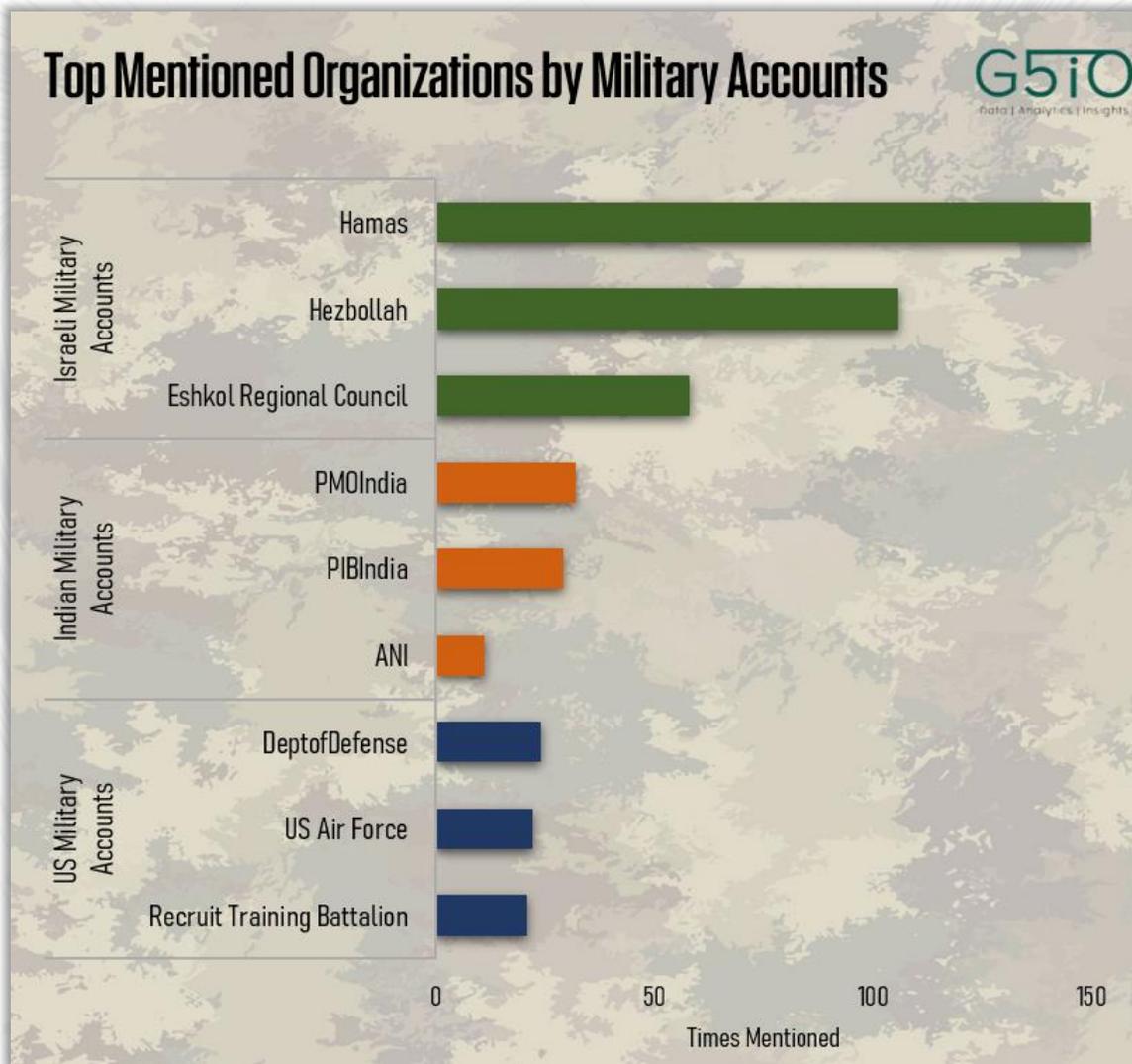
Activity Timeline - Israeli Military Accounts

G5iO
Data | Analytics | Insights

Discourse Analysis

Drilling down in the actual content of their tweets, the following word clouds show that narratives from the U.S were specifically attuned towards their overseas interests, military exercises, and operations abroad. The overall emphasis being on power projection and reinforcing U.S. military superiority with a key focus on "capabilities," "force," and providing "security" missions. Israeli military accounts in contrast focused more on kinetic operations exhibiting a more specific objective to dominate the discourse around the Israel-Palestine conflict. The focus being on showing how the IDF was combating the "terrorist" activities of "Hezbollah" and Hamas" and "the response" of Israeli forces to these "attacks." Similarly, the Indian Military's public diplomacy vis-à-vis IOJK indicated two distinct narratives. The first

by the Indian military linked accounts exhibited the openly top-down nature of how the country's strategic narratives, which fuelled by its media, flowed directly in sync with the country's top leadership i.e., the office of the Indian Prime Minister.



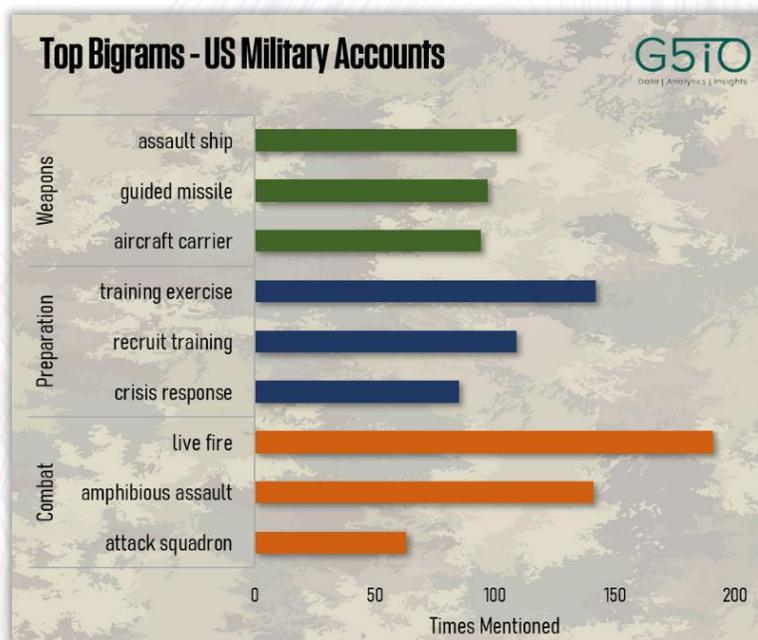
Top Mentioned Countries

Looking at the most mentioned locations by U.S military accounts, we saw that there was a significant emphasis on the Middle Eastern region, specifically on Iraq and Syria. Israeli accounts in contrast were explicitly focused on the critical conflict areas where the IDF operated, namely the Gaza strip. Other than that, it was Iran, Lebanon, Syria, and the U.S. that were featured as the most mentioned countries by the Israeli military accounts. Coming to the top mentioned places by the Indian military linked accounts, Pakistan was the only other country mentioned in the top list of locations which otherwise included mostly conflict ridden areas of IOJK such as Pulwama, Kupwara, Leh, and Ladakh.



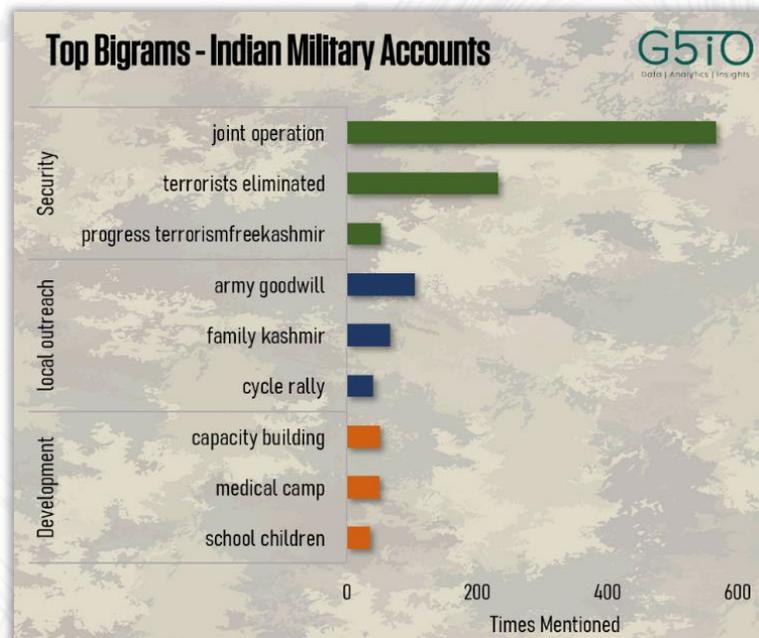
Top Used Hashtags and Bigrams

Similarly, top Hashtags from the U.S correlate with their strategic focus on terrorist organizations like #ISIS operating in #Iraq and #Syria along with posts related to maritime drills and #COVID19. Based on the most frequently used bigrams by these accounts we also saw a greater focus on the projection of weapons superiority and combat maneuvers such as ‘assault ships’, ‘aircraft carriers’, ‘war preparations’ and training activities related to ‘amphibious assaults’, ‘live firing’, etc.

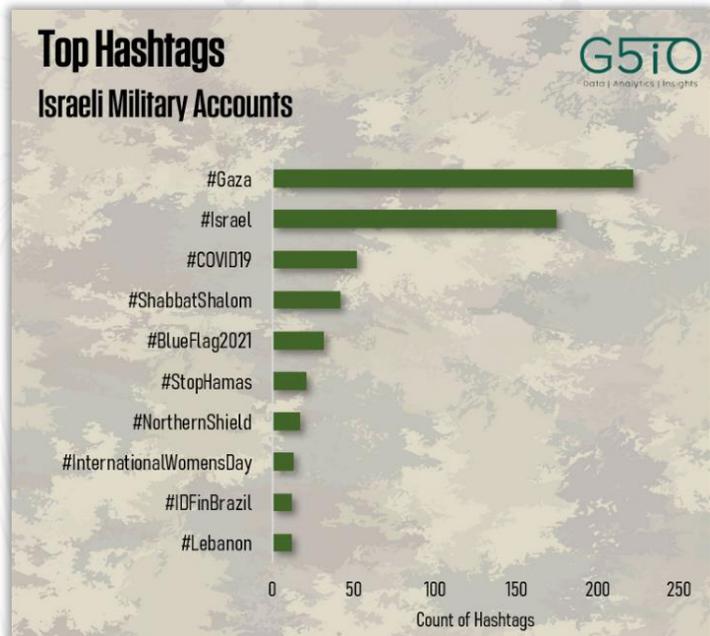


In contrast, the most hashtags used by the Indian Northern Command and Chinar Corps’ twitter accounts were focused exclusively on the insurgency in Kashmir and its surrounding districts. These also included campaigns aimed at amplifying individuals and high-ranking military personnel within these formations. Overall, these accounts can be seen pushing parallel narratives related to both national security and socio-economic development with an increasing focus on advocacy local outreach related activities particularly in the Occupied Jammu and Kashmir regions. For instance, security-related tweets focused on ‘joint

operations(s)' and the number of 'terrorists eliminated'. Whereas development related narratives exhibited an increasing emphasis on 'capacity building', activities for 'school children', and 'medical camps'.

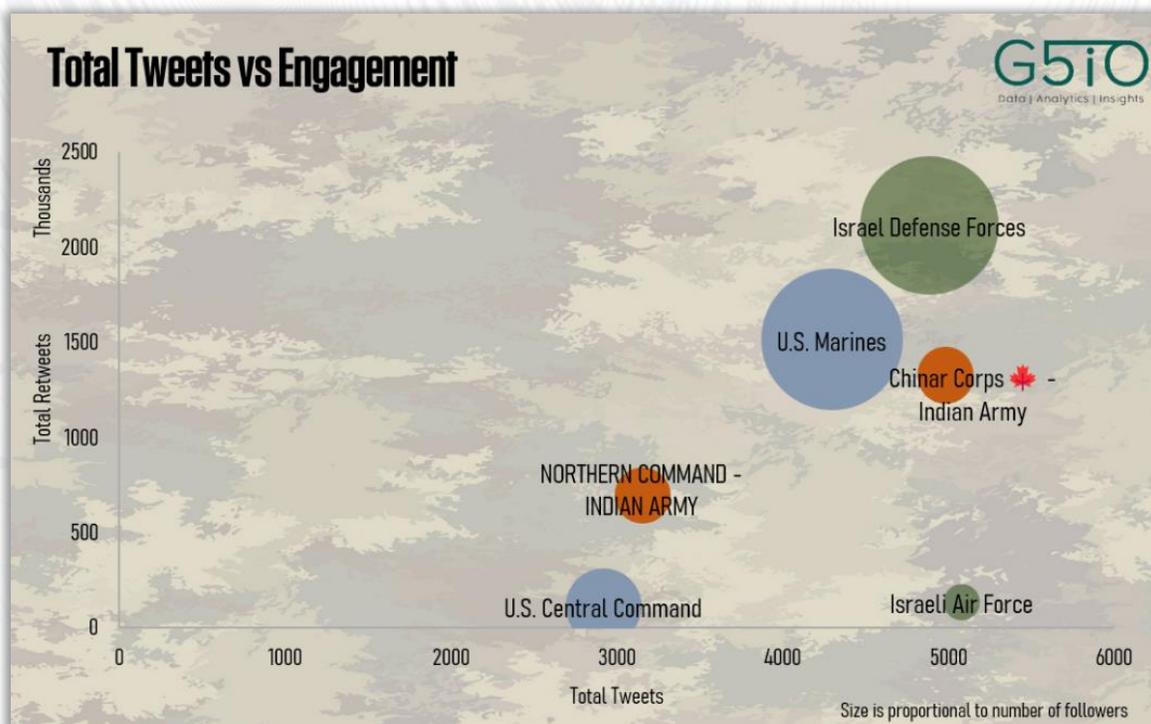


In Israel's case, hashtags used by the IDF and IAF focused a lot more on building social media campaigns around its active operations in #Gaza in order to #StopHamas. These were further interspersed with campaigns highlighting #COVID19 and other operations and exercises such as the #BlueFlag2021 and #NorthernShield. These themes were further reinforced by their most frequently used bigrams which revolved around highlighting Israeli weapons capabilities such as the 'iron dome' and 'IAF Aircraft' that were being used in defence of 'Israeli Civilians and territory' against the 'rockets fired' by 'Hamas' and the '(Palestinian) Islamic Jihad'. In essence, laying out a precise narrative encompassing the 'othering' of the enemy, the threat it posed and the rationale behind employing technological and weapons superiority in Defense of Israeli civilians and territory from that same enemy.



Gauging Message Efficacy: Activity vs Engagement

Building on the unique styles and narratives employed by each of the above militaries, it is also important to gauge just how successful each of the accounts have been in generating



some form of engagement over their respective discourses. The following scatter plot attempts to do this by comparing the number of retweets and shares generated by each account in relation to their overall activity and following online.

Based on this comparison we see that the IDF's twitter account had the highest levels of engagement, activity, and followers, topping both the USMC, and Chinar Corps. Although the IDF and its counterpart the IAF had similar levels of activity, the IDF's twitter account received a much higher level of online engagement. Thus, indicating the central role it plays in steering online discourses related to the Israel – Palestine conflict both in terms of the sheer volume of posts as well the precision with which it tied its online narratives with its on-ground objectives. The same can be seen in the comparison between the Indian Northern Command and the US CENTCOM accounts which despite having similar activity levels, led to the Northern Command account generating a lot more engagement – and that too despite having less followers than the US CENTCOM account. Similarly, the Chinar Corp's Twitter account was also at par with USMC account in terms of the level of engagement despite having significantly lesser followers. Hence, it seems that having a large number of followers does not necessarily translate into greater engagement (in terms of retweets). Rather it's how effectively each of these accounts have lent a highly relatable and authentic context to leveraging their strategic objectives that led to these narratives being further shared and promoted across the social media space. This is shown in more detail in the following section.

Most Retweeted Tweets from Each Account:

Having extensively shown the different approaches taken by each of the above militaries in leveraging their overall objectives on social media, it was also interesting to see what kind of content received the highest level of engagement. The screenshots below show the most viral tweets from our sampled data set each of which distinctly encapsulates the overall narrative focus, as well as the kind of content that resonates the most with each of these

accounts' audiences. For instance, whereas the US military's messaging remains centred on highlighting its soldiers, their values and their sacrifices, the Israeli focus in contrast is centred on the defensive nature of its activities against an immensely hostile enemy. The Indian approach which applies a mix of both the US and Israeli approaches can be seen as glorifying its own soldiers and operations in the context of its past operations against an established enemy. Taken together, all these accounts aim to project a narrative that establishes and reinforces the very *raison d'être* for these militaries' operations and activities albeit to varying audiences. Thus, spanning both domestic and international audiences, as well as both friendly and hostile ones.

Most Retweeted Tweets of Military Accounts

G5iO
data | Analytics | Insights

U.S. Marines @USMC

Flag-draped transfer cases line the inside of a C-17 Globemaster II Aug. 29, 2021, prior to a dignified transfer at Dover Air Force Base, Delaware. The fallen service members died while supporting non-combat operations in Kabul.

Gone, but never forgotten.



3:30 AM · Aug 30, 2021 · Sprinklr Publishing

22.4K Retweets 2,295 Quote Tweets 125.8K Likes

NORTHERN COMMAND - INDIAN ARMY @NorthernComd_IA

#IndianArmy #21yearsofKargil
The Saga of #DhruvaWarriors and The Lions of #BiharRegiment.
"Born to fight.They are not the bats. They are the Batman."
"After every #Monday, there will be a #Tuesday. Bajrang Bali Ki Jai"
@adgpi
@MajorAkhill
#NationFirst



9:15 PM · Jun 20, 2020 · Twitter for Android

6,357 Retweets 1,133 Quote Tweets 17.3K Likes

Israel Defense Forces @IDF

If you won't listen to us, listen to them:



Hamans In Their Own Words

3:40 AM · May 18, 2021 · Twitter Media Studio

12.2K Retweets 2,438 Quote Tweets 24.9K Likes

Conclusion:

- The narratives disseminated through these accounts while being closely intertwined with the strategic goals of each specific country, offer unique insights into their desired perception management objectives beyond their kinetic operations
- The tilt towards the projection of either soft or hard power narratives depends entirely on the intended audiences and prevailing priorities of each military organization at a particular point in time
- Overall, messaging related to active conflicts and securitized narratives generate the most engagement and traction - as even soft power approaches to recruitment, development and public outreach are usually framed within the same securitized contexts

Authors



Abu Bakar Naeem is a Data Insight Specialist. His work stems from unveiling patterns of polarization and bias across a diverse range of online discourses.



Akbar Shaheryar Khan is an Insights Specialist specializing in fostering research, analysis and insights from open-source data on the South Asian region.



M Waqas Jan is a Senior Analyst with an interest in discursive approaches to South Asian peace, conflict, and security studies.



Noman Khan is a Data Scientist who is consistently innovating approaches to statistical analytics within a variety of data environments.



Asra Malik is a Senior Analyst with an interest in mapping and understanding digital behaviour, trends and evolving norms online.