Not Just Dances: TikTok and Israel's National Security

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The TikTok app poses challenges for Israel in three main areas—security, privacy and Israel's public image—which present risks to Israel's security, to data security and to the private details of users, as well as a blatant anti-Israel bias. These challenges are expected to intensify due to the significant rise in the proportion of adults consuming news from social media, and to the sharp increase in the use of TikTok compared to other social networks. Due to concerns over China's exploitation of TikTok for its own purposes, many western countries have passed or are currently considering legislation to limit these risks. In order to reduce Israel's exposure to these risks, it should optimize the processes of monitoring and removing incitement and terrorist content from the app, formulate a user policy for government bodies and state employees, strengthen the dialogue with TikTok, monitor legislation on this subject in western countries, and cooperate with those countries and with other entities involved in this global effort.

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The social media revolution has changed the way in which people communicate and send messages, but it has also, to a large extent, changed the way in which they consume information. In the past, in order to keep informed on topical matters, people turned to newspapers, the radio, and later television and then to news sites on the internet; but now, according to surveys of adults in various countries, many of them use social media for this purpose. The wide use of social networks as a source of news has negative and worrying consequences; and although people perceive social media as an unreliable source of information, they continue to use it for this purpose. To illustrate this, while traditional media is perceived by 64 percent of respondents

as reliable, social media is only perceived as such by 44 percent of respondents. It is interesting that in North America and Europe, social media is perceived as less reliable (34 percent) than in the rest of the world.

Over the years, as social media developed and took root, new platforms came into use, and each of them reduced the quantity of words in posts: While it is possible to find fairly long posts on Facebook, on X (formerly Twitter) they are usually limited to 280 characters, on Instagram they are even shorter and usually consist of a picture and a few sentences, while on TikTok most posts can be defined as a video followed by one or more words and hashtags (marking key words) with hardly any further explanation. As of 2023, the social network

used the most by American adults for news was Facebook (30 percent), followed by YouTube (26 percent), Instagram (16 percent) and TikTok in fourth place (14 percent), which has a relative correlation with the proportion of adults using each of these platforms, 68, 82, 46 and 31 percent respectively. However, while the proportion of users of the first three platforms as sources of news in the years 2020 to 2023 declined (Facebook), stabilized (YouTube) or slightly increased (Instagram, 6 percent), TikTok recorded a significant rise of about 21 percent, particularly among young people (aged 18-29), of whom 32 percent consume news content on the app.

The popularity of TikTok, owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, rose quickly and it was one of the first non-American social networks to amass over one billion active users worldwide: the number of users in the United States is particularly large—113.3 million, mostly aged 11-26 (Generation Z). On Facebook, however, the age group with the highest number of users is 25-34—slightly older than the TikTok users. The age groups of Instagram users are similar to those of TikTok users (18-24 and 25-34), so that there is a larger demographic overlap between Instagram and TikTok.

While TikTok gains public popularity, among some decision makers it arouses more weighty concerns than those aroused by other social networks, which are also worrying. The main concern of decision makers in the West focuses on the issue of privacy, but I argue that this social network challenges Israel in three central areas: privacy, security and Israel's public image.

Privacy

All social media platforms raise concerns over privacy, but in the case of TikTok the concern is greater because the app is owned by the Chinese company ByteDance. As such it is subject to the laws of China, including the National Intelligence Law, that obliges all organizations to cooperate with the state's intelligence effort; the Counter Espionage Law, that bans organizations from refusing the collection of information by the authorities; and the Chinese Cyber Security Law, which requires networks to share data about their users with the state authorities in the case of suspected damage to state security, the public interest or the rights and interests of all citizens and organizations in China. Concerns about privacy arose because the app collects data that the authorities in various countries do not want to reach the authorities in China and severely compromises the users' privacy.

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In recent years, since this social media platform went live, studies by technology experts in various countries have exposed the nature of the data collected by TikTok. This includes extremely sensitive information extracted from users' devices, which can give a fairly accurate outline of their daily interactions and routine, and even reveal information they might prefer to keep private. While some of this data, including their contacts, calendar and locations, is apparently collected without their knowledge and consent, other information is collected with their permission, though perhaps without consideration, because it is well known that users do not carefully read all the terms and conditions before downloading apps. Thus it was revealed that TikTok had changed its rules about three years ago (2021) to allow it to automatically collect biometric and vocal identifiers (faceprints and voiceprints). Another cause for concern is the circumvention of rules accepted in the west and the tracking of users: By adding an encrypted layer TikTok breached Google policy and collected information from users without their knowledge, and in some cases, even collected data on American journalists in order to track leaks.

In response to criticism in the United States, the company claimed that user data is stored in the United States and insisted that the data it collects is not transferred to China. At a Congressional hearing in 2021 the CEO of TikTok repeated this claim, but recordings and documents leaked from eighty meetings in the company show that its employees have access to the user data in the United States. The recordings included 14 declarations from nine employees, testifying that engineers from China had access to data on American users between September 2021 and January 2022. The evidence shows that company employees in China accessed the data far more frequently, even after the reported date.

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Security

The age of users and the wide usage of the app create an additional challenge, particularly for countries like Israel—a western country in which young people serve in the security forces at the same age as many of them use TikTok. Many soldiers document themselves in their bases in a way that could reveal military data and locations. In 2020, with this concern in mind, the American military banned its soldiers from using TikTok, while official elements also pressured soldiers to remove the app from their personal phones. The Israeli Border Guard also banned the use of the app. In 2020 Tomer Brook, a data security and cyber expert, said that the IDF should adopt a similar approach to the Americans and Israel's own Border Police, and ban its personnel from using TikTok: "Just a year ago, a fitness app called Straba that is usually installed on smart watches managed to identify and reveal secret bases in Israel and elsewhere, and the TikTok operators have

similar capabilities." He says "China has an interest in collecting information about the IDF, which is deemed to be a highly advanced army in many aspects. This very popular app is also very dangerous."

Through its Spokespersons' Unit, the IDF maintains a TikTok account with some 435,000 followers, on which it posts light videos together with videos of combat, including those of special units. Back in 2020, cyber expert Dr. Harel Menashri warned that since the IDF had decided to be active on TikTok, it should exercise appropriate caution. Such caution would be expressed by limiting the creation and posting of videos to devices that had no contact with other devices. In other words, TikTok should not be treated like a regular app, since it is capable of collecting additional data stored on the device from which the account operates. It appears that this recommendation is not being fully implemented.

Another security risk manifests in the way anti-Israel elements use TikTok to amplify content that incites to terrorism. Such content ranges from religious and nationalistic calls to murder Jews and Israelis, to videos posted by young Palestinians who document themselves carrying out attacks. Some of them become instant heroes when their videos go viral and are widely distributed, providing inspiration for other potential attackers. Even before October 7, 2023 Hamas used TikTok to collect data about the location of bases and villages in the south and to raise money directly and indirectly—directly by initiating live broadcasts by terrorists asking for donations, and indirectly through network influencers who conduct campaigns, for example asking their followers to purchase specific filters on the app, where the money raised is transferred to terror organizations.

Israel's Public Image and Influence

Legislators and activists are concerned that connections to the Chinese government could lead to censorship of content which the company and the parent state do not wish to

have published, as happened in 2019, when content mentioning the massacre in Tiananmen Square, Tibetan independence and the Falun Gong was removed from the platform. This was not a one-time occurrence. Research by Rutgers University compared the volume of posts on TikTok and Instagram including various hashtags and discovered that while on subjects relating to popular culture (such as #TaylorSwift) there were two posts on Instagram for every post on TikTok, for subjects considered "problematic" by the Chinese, such as #Uyghur, the ratio leapt to eight posts on Instagram for every one post on TikTok. More extreme examples were observed for hashtags such as #TiananmenSquare, with a ratio of 57 to 1, and #HongKongProtest with an astonishing ratio of 174 posts on Instagram for each post on TikTok. These figures show that certain hashtags do not behave organically on this social network, raising suspicions of manipulation of content. In China itself TikTok is not available, perhaps due to fears that Chinese citizens will be exposed to content opposed to the government, posted by users in the west. In addition to political content posted by TikTok users, there are also "challenges" for users, which have been widely criticized due to the risks they involve, songs and dances, and more. Instead of the TikTok widely distributed in the rest of the world, within the borders of China a "sterile" version called Douyin is offered, with content that is largely educational or deals with personal empowerment, while content originating outside China is not available.

TikTok is a particularly hostile arena for Israel, and the young social media platform has often been accused of anti-Israel bias and even antisemitism. These accusations were supported by an experiment conducted by the Wall Street Journal. The paper opened a number of fictional accounts on the app, and within a few hours nearly all of them were the target of pushed content linked to the Iron Swords War, with the overwhelming majority being anti-Israel. After publication of this experiment, the app blocked the tool that enabled researchers to track bias on the app. The bias is expressed not only in content appearing on the app, but also in content that is absent from it—Israeli content. Creators of Israeli content claim that pro-Israel content and information that they post is blocked under the pretext of a "breach of community guidelines." One of them, Danny Buller, said that the exposure of content he posted on TikTok declined considerably after he spoke about the link between the app and communist China. At the end of January 2024, Barak Hershkowitz, the manager of TikTok Israel's public sector, resigned, claiming that he and others had complained to the management about the biased approach to violent content and anti-Israel incitement, with an emphasis on the decision not to publish posts from the Hostages and Missing Families Forum. Hershkowitz's resignation was cited in a hearing involving the TikTok CEO before the American Congress on January 31, 2024, which dealt mainly with protecting the privacy of minors on social media, something that the American legislators felt was defective.

Responses and Legislation Worldwide

Many countries are formulating responses to these threats, and they can be divided into two main groups: Those that have completely banned the use of TikTok, even if the ban is not fully implemented (Afghanistan, India, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal and Somalia, including some that have blocked all social networks), and those that allow use of the app but have passed laws to regulate its usage and limit exposure to its risks (United States, Britain, Canada, Denmark, Belgium, France, Latvia, Norway, Taiwan and the European Union). In the United States for example, laws on this matter are at various stages in the legislative process, and some have already passed. For example, a bill that makes operating the app in the country conditional upon the sale of the platform by its owner and a ban on installing the app on government devices, among others. Meanwhile the European

Commission ordered its employees to delete the app from devices belonging to the Commission and from other devices storing material relating to the Commission.

What About Israel?

As of today, there is no single address in Israel responsible for all aspects of social media that demand attention. Moreover, there is no regulator to supervise social media, including TikTok, although there have been some initiatives on this matter, including an initiative by the former Minister of Communication Yoaz Hendel, that was proposed shortly before the end of his term in office and was therefore not pursued. The Foreign Ministry is in contact with the social networks to remove blocks from the Ministry's accounts, but not from the accounts of Israeli citizens or those who echo pro-Israel content and are blocked. According to a senior Ministry official, the Ministry is in contact with other social media but not with TikTok, because the anti-Israel bias in the app is deliberate, and it is felt that the company has no intention of cooperating with Israel. This is in spite of the declaration by the CEO of TikTok Israel, who in 2021 stated that the company was continuing to work with Government Ministries and the authorities in Israel.

Officially, when the Cyber Department at the Ministry of Justice receives notification of improper publications from security agencies responsible for monitoring them, it must contact the networks with a request to remove the offending content, including incitement to commit terror, and it works at two levels— voluntary removal and forced removal. With regards to voluntary removal, the Justice Ministry contacts the social networks and asks them to remove specific content. This course of action was officially approved in Supreme Court Ruling 19/7846, which determined that the Department was acting with full authority when contacting the social networks. According to data from the Justice Ministry Cyber Department, TikTok complied with about 87 percent of its requests, and according to senior officials, TikTok is more willing than in the past to remove problematic content. Forced removal derives its authority from the Law on Powers to Prevent Offenses Through a Website, which makes it possible to restrict access to certain content through the internet providers and not through the social media themselves. About 97 percent of content subject to forcible removal is linked to terror and the encouragement of terror. Notwithstanding the lighthearted and simple image of social networks, regulating and restricting the use of TikTok in Israel has serious implications. Firstly, this is one arena in the battle for Israel's image that the country must not ignore, and it is therefore right and proper for official government entities to have active TikTok accounts where they can present the country's arguments. Secondly, as a western democracy, Israel must maintain the freedom of expression of its citizens, including on social media. Not only that, a complete ban on the use of TikTok could create tension with China— Israel's third largest trading partner (after the European Union and the United States).

Israel should adopt the approach of the western and democratic countries that manage the risks and challenges posed by TikTok in a sophisticated way, without banning it completely. As a western country, Israel must prepare for a situation where sooner or later it is under pressure to adopt policies that regulate the network's activity within its borders. But also at an ethical level, Israel must formulate and communicate a policy that protects its democratic values, starting with freedom of speech, as well as reducing the risks. Israel should ideally adopt most of the policies implemented in the West while using its discretion to take account of Israel's unique risks as specified above.

Below are a number of moderate steps that Israel should take:

1. Formulate policy for government bodies: the National Security Council (NSC) and the National Cyber Directorate (INCD) should

draw up regulations for all government ministries, including terms and rules for operating accounts on TikTok, and oversee the implementation of these regulations in all ministries. They must find a balance between the risks and the informational importance of using TikTok accounts to spread Israeli messages worldwide. If there is a decision to continue using the accounts, steps must be taken to ensure they operate in a safe environment, to prevent undesirable information leaks, for example by using specifically designated and isolated devices.

2. Formulating policy for usage by state employees: the Ministry of Justice, the NSC and the INCD must draw up policy, regulations and enforcement mechanisms binding on all state employees, including soldiers and police officers, with precise definitions of who is permitted to use a TikTok account and in what way, making a distinction between government devices and private devices. This step will require regulations and enforcement and could be complicated when referring to soldiers on mandatory service, but it would help to limit the danger of exposing sensitive information and locations to a country that does not politically support Israel and has close relations with Israel's enemies, above all Iran. A realistic and balanced policy will enable state employees in non-sensitive positions, including soldiers and police officers, to use TikTok accounts, while banning the use of the app by employees in sensitive positions, or the uploading of content from state-owned devices and from military bases and other sensitive locations. It should be noted that the IDF already has orders banning the uploading of content from sensitive locations, and other bodies should adopt similar regulations. However, these orders are not being fully enforced, so there will be a need for an enforcement tool to ensure data security.

3. Monitor legislation and policy in western countries: Globally, legislation on the subject of TikTok is new and countries are still formulating their policy on this social network. Legislation being promoted in western countries should be tracked, to ensure that Israel is not left behind in this matter. Tracking should be the responsibility of a special team appointed to manage this subject and learn from the lessons of others in order to draw up and implement a policy suitable for Israel.

4. Cooperate with other countries and bodies: As a small country Israel has limited levers of influence to use on TikTok and its activities, so there is great logic in joining with other countries to exert pressure on TikTok to remove certain content and to counter the clear bias in its content. For example, the European Union is already working in this way with TikTok, and Israel can provide it with information about problematic posts or policy. This will help them in their dialogue with TikTok, without making Israel an official partner in these associations.

5. More dialogue with TikTok: Bodies such as the Ministry of Justice, the Israel Police, the General Security Service and other civil society organizations should increase their dialogue with TikTok to ensure the removal of content that incites violence and terror. The Foreign Ministry must also work with the company to resolve problems of limited exposure, blocking of pro-Israeli content, and the promotion of anti-Israel content. This effort does not require legislation but does demand better coordination between the various bodies that come into contact with the social network.

6. Monitoring and removing content that incites and echoes terror: The removal of some content from the app itself requires legislation to expand the powers and means of the Justice Ministry Cyber Department. At present the department is not qualified to compel the networks to remove material, and can only do so via internet providers. There is also a need to optimize the Cyber

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Department's access to material monitored by the security services, or its ability to conduct independent monitoring. These steps are intended to limit the exposure of Israelis to content that supports terror and they will speed up the process of removing such content from social media, although they could also restrict freedom of speech in Israel. The adoption of these steps will not only enable Israel to act like other western countries but also improve its response to the TikTok challenge, in terms of its national security interests, freedom of expression, relations with China, the privacy of its citizens, its public diplomacy front, and more, although of course further steps will be

required to fully protect these interests. While certain steps such as the appointment of a regulator were discussed in the past, they were never implemented, but the Iron Swords War has changed perceptions of the problem. In view of the threats to privacy, security and Israel's public image that have been demonstrated in recent months, Knesset Members and Ministers as well as figures in civil society are more aware of the risks, and there is a growing consensus across the whole political spectrum that action must be taken on this subject.

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