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Weapons used by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), security cabinet leaks, and stories about people held captives by Hamas — these are some of the eight subjects the media are forbidden from reporting on in Israel, according to a document obtained by The Intercept.

The document, a censorship order issued by the Israeli military to the media as part of its war on Hamas, has not been previously reported. The memo, written in English, was an unusual move for the IDF's censor, which has been part of the Israel military for more than seven decades.

"I haven't ever seen instructions like this sent from the censor aside from general notices broadly telling outlets to comply, and even then it was only sent to certain people," said Michael Omer-Man, a former editor-in-chief of the Israel's +972 Magazine and today the director of research for Israel-Palestine at Democracy in the Arab World Now, or DAWN, a US advocacy group.

Titled "Operation 'Swords of Iron' Israeli Chief Censor Directive to the Media," the order is not dated, but its reference to Operation Swords of Iron — the name of Israel's current military operation in Gaza — makes clear that it was issued sometime after Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel. The order is signed by the chief censor of the Israel Defense Forces, Brig. Gen. Kobi Mandelblit. (The Israeli Military Censor did not respond to a request for comment on the memo.)

The document was provided to The Intercept by a source who himself was given a copy by the Israeli military. An identical document appears on the Israeli government's website. "In light of the current security situation and the intensive media coverage, we wish to encourage you to submit to the Censorship all materials dealing with the activities of the Israeli Defense Forces (I.D.F.) and the Israeli security forces prior to their broadcast," the order says. "Please update your staff of the content of this letter, with an emphasis on the news desk and field reporters."

The order enumerates eight topics the media are forbidden from reporting on without prior approval from the Israeli Military Censor. Some of the topics touch on hot-button political issues in Israel and internationally, such as potentially embarrassing revelations about weapons used by Hamas, discussions of security cabinet meetings, and the Israeli captives in Gaza — an issue that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been widely criticized for mishandling. The memo also bans reporting on details of military operations, Israeli



Israeli army self-propelled artillery howitzers fire rounds from a position near the Gaza Strip in on December 28, 2023 amid ongoing. ● AFP

The Unspeakable 8

Israeli military imposes media censorship amid Gaza war

intelligence, rocket attacks that hit sensitive locations in Israel, cyberattacks, and visits by senior military officials to the battlefield. Concerns about the politicization of the military censor are not merely hypothetical. Last month, the Israeli censor reportedly complained that Netanyahu was pressuring him to crack down on certain media outlets without legitimate reason. Netanyahu denied the charge.

Self-censorship and secrecy

The Israeli Military Censor is a unit located within the IDF's Military Intelligence Directorate. The unit is commanded by the chief censor, a military officer appointed by the defense minister. Since Israel's war on Hamas started, more than 6,500 new items were either completely censored or partially censored by the Israeli government, Guy Lurie, a research fellow at Jerusalem-based Israel Democracy Institute, told The Intercept.

To put the figure in context, Lurie said it was about four times more than before the war started, citing a report in the Israeli outlet Shakuf based on freedom of information requests. The number of submissions to the censor, however, are

significantly higher at this time of heightened conflict, so Lurie noted that news items are facing a normal level of censorship in light of the ratio to total submissions.

The actual number of new stories affected by the censor, however, can never be quantified. Because of a system of close relationships and a feeling for what to expect, Israeli journalists can censor themselves.

"People self-censor, people do not even try to report the stories they know won't get through," Omer-Man said. "And that is really showing right now in how little regular Israelis are seeing in the press about what is happening in Gaza to Palestinians." It is these kinds of unofficial censorship that give the censor in Israel its power, said experts.

In a 2022, a State Department report on human rights in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories took on the military censor, singling out two Arabic-language newspapers in occupied East Al-Quds. While noting that the IDF censor didn't review the papers, the State Department said, "Editors and journalists from those publications, however, reported they engaged in self-censorship due to fear of retribution by Israeli au-

thorities." At one time, the censor had an Editors Committee composed of three members: One from the press, one from the military, and a publicly elected member who served as chair. Though the Editors Committee no longer officially exists, a similar, albeit informal body still maintains some sway. Though the law that mandates the censor gives it widespread powers, the censor maintains its respectability in Israel by being politically independent and exercising restraint, especially in comparison to other countries in the region.

"If you look at the law that governs censorship, it's really draconian in terms of the formal authorities the censor has," Lurie told The Intercept. "But it's mitigated by this informal arrangement." Almost all of it happens in secret: Committee discussions are confidential, as are most communiques between media outlets and the censor.

Asked why the processes are so secretive and why even the news organizations won't speak out, one Western journalist based in Israel and Palestine, who asked for anonymity to avoid reprisals, had a blunt assessment: "Because it's embarrassing."

Foreign press and the censor

That the memo of directives for the current Israeli war on Gaza was in English suggests that it was intended for Western media. Foreign journalists working in Israel must obtain government permission, including a declaration that they will abide by the censor.

"In order to get a visa as a journalist, you have to get approval from GPO" — Government Press Office — "and therefore you have to sign a document that says you will comply with the censor," said Omer-Man. "That in itself is probably against the ethics guidelines at a bunch of papers." Nonetheless, many journalists do sign the document. While The Associated Press, for instance, didn't respond to The Intercept's query about whether it cooperates with the military censor, the news wire has in the past reported on the issue, including admitting that it holds itself to the directive.

"The Associated Press has agreed, like other organizations, to abide by the rules of the censor, which is a condition for receiving permission to operate as a media organization in Israel," the agency wrote in a 2006 story. "Reporters are expected to censor themselves and not report any

of the forbidden material." Asked if it complied with guidance from Israel's military censor and whether its compliance had changed since the onset of the war, Azhar Al-Fadl Miranda, the communications director for the Washington Post, told The Intercept in an email, "We aren't able to share insight," adding that "we don't publicly discuss our editorial decisions."

The New York Times told The Intercept, "The New York Times reports independently on the full spectrum of this complex conflict. We do not submit coverage to the Israeli military censor." (Reuters did not answer The Intercept's questions.) Foreign press that cooperates with the censor is subject to the same system: Many stories don't get passed through the censor, but certain issues merit submitting the stories.

"They know that they need to pass onto the censor reports that they want to publish on certain subjects," said Lurie. "There are subjects that the media know that they need to get the censor's approval." One of the things that makes the written, English-language censorship order unusual, however, is the order's overt reference to the Hamas war. "I've

Foreign journalists working in Israel must obtain government permission, including a declaration that they will abide by the censor.

never seen that for a specific war," Lurie said. One subject known to be sensitive in Israel is the country's covert nuclear arsenal. In 2004, BBC journalist Simon Wilson interviewed Mordechai Vanunu, a whistleblower on the nuclear program, who had just been released from prison. The Israeli censors demanded copies of the interview, but Wilson did not comply.

Wilson was then barred from reentry, and the Israel government demanded an apology. Initially, the BBC refused to furnish one, but eventually the worldwide news giant folded. "He confirms that after the Vanunu interview he was contacted by the censors and was asked to give them the tapes. He did not do so. He regrets the difficulties this caused," the BBC said in the apology. "He undertakes to obey the regulations in future and understands that any further violation will result in his visa being revoked."

The apology, like so much else of the censor's work, was to have remained secret, according to a 2005 Guardian story, but the BBC accidentally posted it on its website, before quickly removing it.

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