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War in the Post-Truth Era: Western Media Coverage of Israel's 2023 War on Gaza

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Western mainstream media received the news coming from the Middle East on 7 October 2023 with an unprecedented outpouring of emotion. As a general rule, coverage in the first days of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, carried out by Hamas, was not neutral. Rather, it conformed to the Israeli narrative repeated by Western officials. Even when compared to its long history of bias towards the Israeli narrative, the behaviour of the Western media at this time was shocking and conspicuously heedless of professional and ethical journalistic standards.

Israel was shocked by the force of the operation, which killed about 1,400 Israelis and foreign nationals and led to the capture of over 200, including many Israeli soldiers. It responded by declaring war on the Gaza Strip with intensive aerial bombardment and a complete siege. The occupation forces proceeded to cut off the entry of food, water, medicine and fuel from the residents of the Gaza Strip, who were already living under a 17-year siege. In the first 20 days, Israel martyred 7,300 Palestinians, including 3,500 children. This equates to Israel killing 6 children every hour, in an assault that has so far destroyed about half of the infrastructure in the Gaza Strip.

This paper provides a preliminary reading of the Western media's coverage of this war in the first three weeks. It shows that these media outlets behaved in a novel way that can only be understood within the framework of the "post-truth era," a concept that has gained traction in political and media literature since 2016. Described as the "Year of Lies," it was a period when lies, emotions, and ideology dominated the mainstream media, pushing it ever further from fact and reality.

I: Redefining Journalistic Standards

Coverage of this war by mainstream Western media, specifically American and British, has been characterized by the following basic features:

1. Inundation with one-sided reporting to manufacture consensus on one narrative, with no attempt at balanced sourcing. Some outlets began, in the second week, to platform Palestinian narratives, if only symbolically, while continuing to maintain their skewed perspective.
2. Reporting that does not meet basic journalistic standards, such as verification, and parrots fake news and misinformation. The reporting also muddled a basic understanding of events, obscuring what is actually going on: Is it a conflict, a war, an invasion, or an attack? Who are the parties to the war?
3. Profound bias toward the Israeli narrative, with major media outlets officially adopting this narrative.
4. Media framing portraying the situation as a two-sided conflict, reproducing traditional frames and producing new ones.
5. In constructing their news accounts, mainstream media in the West fell prey to political spin from the outset. Both US and Western European media adopted the Israeli narrative as it was fed to them by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Western officials and repeated

it without any attempt to verify or investigate the accounts, footage, or allegations presented. The initial coverage was marked by an absence of voices from the other side, or at best minimal representation, and it decontextualized the conflict, which was portrayed as an isolated provocation divorced from the reality of occupation and history. Effectively, the mainstream media became a mouthpiece for Israeli military propaganda.

This behaviour was exhibited as much by supposedly liberal media outlets as it was by conservative ones and went much further than the “embedded journalism” that defined reporting on Afghanistan and Iraq, whereby journalists are attached to military units during an armed conflict. Embedded reporters and photographers accompany troops into combat zones and relay one version of events; one perspective of war.¹ Likewise, regarding Al-Aqsa Flood and its aftermath, major news networks broadcast a series of reports in which only Israeli soldiers and officers narrated the details of what happened.²

In covering the war on Gaza, the Western media was engaged in “manufacturing consent” a process first described by Walter Lippmann, and later elaborated by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky. This media theory holds that contemporary democratic public opinion is merely an illusion. The media provides the public with the information and facts selected by politicians and centres of power, and then the elite shape public opinion through the media, manufacturing a fragile pluralism to give it the air of legitimacy. The democratic world has spent many decades refuting this thesis, but Western media coverage of the war on Gaza offers ample evidence of its soundness.³

Times of war and intensified crises expose the manufacture of consent. That truth is the first casualty of war seems like a cliché in the “post-truth era” coverage of the war on Gaza and the world of social networks and artificial intelligence.

On the first and second days of the war, the news spoke about 200 - 300 dead Israelis, while the *BBC* repeated the Israeli narrative that “they executed Israeli civilians in cold blood in their homes and then continued to drag into Gaza Israeli civilians and military personnel. I’m talking women, children, elderly, disabled.”⁴ The coverage by the *BBC* – which built its name on neutrality – in the first two days limited itself to just one statement by a Hamas leader, stating that they were “receiving support from Iran,” and continued to describe Palestinian fighters as “militants”. Likewise, *CNN* adopted the Israeli narrative, with limited space for Palestinian voices. In the first three days, *CNN* broadcast just one statement by Hamas leader Muhammad Deif. In this period, the network’s website published just two or three photos sourced from the Palestinians against ten photos or videos from the Israelis. The network continued to describe Palestinian fighters as “terrorists”, draw comparisons to Al-Qaeda and ISIS, and present a misleading narrative about Hamas attempting to use a chemical weapon in its attack.

1 Ramesh Chandra Pathak, “Embedded Journalism in 21st Century: Torsion and Distortion of War News,” *IJAR/IE*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2017).

2 “Children Found ‘Butchered’ in Israeli kibbutz, IDF Says, as Horror of Hamas’ Attacks Near Border Begins to Emerge,” *CNN*, 13/10/2023, accessed on 30/10/2023, at: <https://n9.d/ejsio>

3 Edward S. Herman & Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Toronto: Pantheon Books, 1988).

4 “Israel Faces ‘Long, Difficult War’ After Hamas Attack from Gaza,” *BBC news*, 8/10/2023, accessed on 30/10/2023, at: <https://n9.d/mupes>



In the early days of the war, mainstream media outlets succumbed to the torrent of false claims and fake news that spread on social networks. They consequently discarded the first rule that students of journalism learn: check twice before publishing. Among that flood of fake news was the now infamous claim that Hamas fighters had beheaded 40 Israeli children, a shocking front-page headline on many major newspapers in London, New York and elsewhere, and echoed by US President Joseph Biden, who even claimed to have seen images of such. These allegations quickly proved false, and many media outlets withdrew the claims online. The White House spokesman was forced to retract the claim, clarifying, “US officials and the president have not seen pictures or confirmed such reports independently”.⁵ Meanwhile, the Associated Press showed a photo of an elderly Israeli woman kidnapped to Gaza on a golf cart by Hamas militants, another woman squeezed between fighters on a motorcycle, and photos of bodies described as those of Israelis taken to Gaza and dragged through the streets.

Allegations that Palestinian fighters killed children and teenagers and kidnapped disabled and elderly people formed the focus of Western media coverage in the first week of the war, while coverage of Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip remained virtually absent from many Western media outlets. These outlets deployed a network of correspondents in Israel, with no significant on-the-ground presence in Gaza. This gave Western public opinion a concrete image of Israeli victims, while obscuring the targeting of Palestinian civilians and the resulting victims.

Some limited developments were seen in the second week of the war, when mainstream media began to open up some space for voices that strayed from the Israeli narrative, especially following the aerial bombardment of the al-Ahli Baptist Hospital on the evening of 17 October, which killed 471 Palestinians, with some commentary calling attention to Israeli crimes against humanity. Ironically, at this point media outlets immediately repeated Israeli military propaganda, which sought to pin the blame for the attack on Hamas, whom they claimed run a powerful media machine capable of manipulating global public opinion.⁶ Israeli officials made early attempts to deny bombing the Baptist Hospital and point fingers at Hamas, releasing a video that was interpreted as depicting a failed rocket launch to support army claims that the hospital explosion was the result of a failed missile launch from Islamic Jihad, not Hamas. The next day, both the US administration and the media adopted the Israeli narrative, repeated without any evidence. *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times* newspapers modified their news reports immediately after the Israeli military statement was issued. In another stroke of irony, immediately after the Israeli military statement, the *BBC* and *The Times* apologized for their early coverage in which they relied on information from Palestinian Civil Defence, only to then later rely on the Israeli narrative without properly verifying its credibility.⁷

5 “White House walks back Biden's claim he saw children beheaded by Hamas,” *Aljazeera*, 12/10/2023, accessed on 30/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/r0rek>

6 “The Battle for Public Opinion Over Israel War,” *CNN*, accessed on 30/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/lp8zq>

7 Oliver Darcy, “The New York Times Walks Back Flawed Gaza Hospital Coverage, but other Media Outlets Remain Silent. CNN Business,” *CNN*, 26/10/2023, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/r0bqh>



In another turnaround on 24 October, *The New York Times* published an investigation in which a group of its reporters indicated that the video that was used as evidence by Israel is not relevant to the hospital attack. The newspaper notes that the footage shows “a projectile streaking through the darkened skies over Gaza and exploding in the air. Seconds later, another explosion is seen on the ground.” According to the report “a detailed visual analysis by The New York Times concludes that the video clip — taken from an Al Jazeera television camera livestreaming on the night of Oct. 17 — shows something else. The missile seen in the video is most likely not what caused the explosion at the hospital. It actually detonated in the sky roughly two miles away, the Times found, and is an unrelated aspect of the fighting that unfolded over the Israeli-Gaza border that night.”⁸ Another investigation conducted by French daily *Le Monde* concluded that the occupation’s story that Palestinian rockets caused the hospital explosion was incorrect. The newspaper’s investigation team confirmed that the missile that struck the hospital was launched from Israel.⁹

II: New Framing

Media framing goes beyond direct bias in the news to the role of the media in reconstructing reality and ascribing a special meaning to events. That is, it has a long-term impact on attitudes, beliefs, and values. Framing simply refers to a media process based on selection and confirmation using multiple methods. Abundant research has been published that examines the framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by Western media, scrutinizing its choice of words, sentences, descriptions, tone of voice, and other approaches that leave a deep and far-reaching impact. Most of these studies agree that certain kinds of framing, including historical framing, have been used by the Western media in its coverage of Israel’s previous wars on Gaza, and some have pointed to new frames. This preliminary assessment of the coverage of US and UK news broadcasters in this latest war looks at the most prominent of these frames.

A. The New Frame of Terrorism

Israeli leaders described Operation Al-Aqsa Flood as a terrorist act from the outset, echoed by most Western leaders and Western mainstream media. The depiction of Palestinian fighters in the aftermath was based on a matrix of concepts, words, descriptions, and roles that fed the thesis of terrorism. This propaganda matrix developed over more than one stage. First, it described what happened as a “new Holocaust”, invoking the Western memory of Nazism and the Holocaust in Europe. Second, Israeli leaders and media developed a new image, associating Hamas and its fighters with Al-Qaeda ahead of Biden’s visit to Tel Aviv on 18 October to evoke US memories of the events of 9 / 11. This comparison sought to garner sympathy and align the US public with Israeli citizens, implying that they were

⁸ Aric Toler et al., “A Close Look at Some Key Evidence in the Gaza Hospital Blast,” *New York Times*, 24/10/2023, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/want5>

⁹ Liselotte Mas et al., “Gaza Hospital: What Detailed Image Analysis Reveals about Deadly Blast,” *Le Monde*, 19/10/2023, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/0u1qq>



united against the same enemy and the same threat. Third, as Israel intensified its bombardment of Gaza, Israeli and Western leaders' political and media discourse began to create an identification between Hamas and ISIS in order to justify the massacres and destruction, arguing that eliminating Hamas requires the same methods that were used to eliminate ISIS. This new framing of terrorism has seeped into the coverage of many Western media outlets to varying degrees. While *CNN* and *Fox News* describe the Palestinian fighters as terrorists, *The Washington Post* and the *BBC* uses the terms extremists and militants.

The media narrative presents the current war on Gaza as a war between Hamas and Israel, rather than between Israel and the occupied Palestinian people. This conflict is thus being framed as a battle between a democratic state and a terrorist group. The framing presents Hamas as a terrorist group, which does not represent the Palestinian cause or its people, and portrays Hamas as having hijacked Gaza and imposed its will on the Palestinian people.

B. The Frame of Palestinian Dehumanization

The first two weeks of the war was marked by a huge gap between Western media coverage of civilian casualties in Israel and those in Gaza. Some US and UK media even avoided covering the Israeli airstrikes for several days into the war. Israeli and US leaders instead pressed the media to portray Palestinian lives as less worthy than Israeli lives. Talk shows and opinion pieces echoed many politicians' descriptions of Palestinian fighters on 7 October, such as the reference to Palestinians as "human animals," the claim that "Israelis are waging a war to defend the values of civilization," and "eliminate monsters", and a call for "all nations must stand with humanity". They repeatedly cited the "barbaric acts committed by Hamas fighters", the "rape of women", "beheaded bodies", and "the burning of families while they were hugging each other". This narrative began on the political level and trickled down into the media. These descriptions were first used by the Israeli Prime Minister, the Army Chief of Staff, and the Foreign Minister, as well as the US President, the Secretary of State, and other representatives. While no one denies that Israeli civilians were indeed killed in the first confrontation on 7 October, many allegations have been proven untrue or inaccurate, and there are massive exaggerations.

Conversely, many Western media outlets declined to cover Israeli war crimes and Israel's systematic destruction of the Gaza Strip. Any attempt to cover the humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip or to deviate from the official line of unconditional support for Israel was met with manifold types of censorship. There have been crackdowns on protests and expressions of solidarity with Palestinians, and threats to arrest people for flying the Palestinian flag, while major tech companies have been removing and censoring pro-Palestinian posts, or content that reveals Israeli atrocities. Western media has also suppressed these voices, with some outlets asking their guests to condemn Hamas on air before being allowed to speak. This type of behaviour is unheard of for mainstream media in democratic countries, even in the most difficult conditions.



BBC broadcasts continued to discriminate even in describing human loss, reporting that Palestinians had “died” while Israelis had been “killed”. For example, when Husam Zomlot, head of the Palestinian Mission to the UK, said in an interview with the *BBC* that seven members of his family were killed by Israeli bombs, the interviewer’s response was to offer a few words of condolence, before saying: “You cannot condone the killing of civilians in Israel, can you?”¹⁰ Meaning one side continues to be categorized as the aggressor and the other the victim; only one side is humanized.

The severity terms in which Western media discourse described the deaths of Israeli children, referring to “beheading”, stands in contrast to the rote mentioning of Palestinian child deaths, regardless of their number. The cumulative effect of this daily framing is to humanize the Israeli victims and dehumanize the Palestinian victims. Historical experience indicates that this kind of dehumanization is a precursor to genocide. As the New Humanity Network said in a major editorial, “Palestinians are depicted as less deserving of our sympathy because they are seen as less than human.” Furthermore, “When Politico (and others) quote Israeli ministers saying they are fighting ‘human animals’ – mirroring the Nazis’ description of Jews as ‘rats’ ahead of the Holocaust or the Hutus’ description of Tutsis as ‘cockroaches’ ahead of the genocide in Rwanda – it contributes to a dehumanisation of people that makes them easier to kill.”¹¹

As such, people in the West “are preconditioned not to see Palestinian humanity because colonialism, white supremacy, and Islamophobia are still the dominant lens through which states, institutions, people, and media in the West view the world.”¹²

C. The Frame of Self Defence

Mainstream media coverage framed the Israeli military operations as self-defence against Palestinian “terrorism”, following the official US, UK, and Israeli assertions that Israel’s military machine operates within the rules of war and the framework of self-defence. In this context, an attempt is also made to frame Palestinian civilians as human shields exploited by the resistance.

The insistence on Israel’s “right” to defend itself even in the face of undeniable atrocities, dating back to its early establishment, reflects a Western perception that Arab civilian deaths are an acceptable price to pay for Israel’s security and prosperity. This framework provides a narrative of justification for any action undertaken by Israel, and for the genocide and forced displacement of civilians. Netanyahu expressed this in his first media appearance after the Hamas attack, saying: “To the residents of Gaza: Leave now because we will operate forcefully everywhere.” Many major US and UK media outlets continued to use the word “evacuation” instead of well-defined terms in international law such as “forced displacement” and “ethnic cleansing.”

¹⁰ “Stephen Sackur Speaks to the Head of the Palestinian Mission to the UK, Husam Zomlot,” *BBC News*, 17/10/2023, accessed on 30/10/2023, at: <https://n9.c/1hh15>

¹¹ “Media Coverage of Israel and Gaza is Rife with Deadly Double Standards,” *The New Humanitarian*, 23/10/2023, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://n9.c/bjn2qq>

¹² *Ibid.*



D. The Frame of Decontextualization

Western media coverage of the Israeli war on Gaza actively removed events from their historical context. It did not ask why the Palestinian resistance crossed the border on 7 October, or mention the reality of the occupation or the right to resist the occupier. Media coverage has neglected the suffering of the people of Gaza since the Israeli siege was imposed 17 years ago, and has failed to mention the repeated rounds of conflict since then, nor has it reported the sheer scale of Palestinian casualties, which outweigh casualties on the Israeli side by orders of magnitude. It also ignored thousands of Palestinians held in Israeli prisons, over a hundred of whom are children, and the hundreds held in “administrative detention”.

The implicit consensus around this framing helps explain the angry reaction of Israeli and Western politicians, as reported by Western media, when the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, said that the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October “did not come out of nowhere,” and that the “Palestinian people have been subjected to 56 years of suffocating occupation.” Paradoxically, the UN Israeli ambassador’s call for Guterres’ resignation received more attention and coverage in some US media than the content of his statement.

The decontextualization framing attempts to build a new reality that depicts crises and wars in the Palestinian-Israeli context as incidents that result from Palestinian transgressions. It skims over or completely obfuscates the history of the conflict, the occupation, human rights, civil rights, economic and political rights, and human dignity, and provides a more appropriate context that justifies the perceived superiority of traditional Western hegemony and racism in its colonial context.

Western media reports reflect these cultural assumptions – the one-sided demand to condemn, individualize and humanize the Israeli tragedy stands in stark contrast to the representation of the Palestinian tragedy in callous terms, laying bare the undeniable cultural roots of the media’s performance.¹³

Studies on the role of the media in the Arab-Israeli conflict indicate that it is rarely covered impartially. Research has found that the US media largely frames it in terms of US strategic interests in an extremely dangerous region, warring neighbours, Arab intransigence or Arab fanatics intent on destroying the state of Israel, and a question of mutual liberation or fair settlement for both parties. WA Gamson’s study found that the US strategic interest and the warring neighbours frame are the most common in US media coverage. In 2001, another study, which examined the impact of the events of 9 / 11 on the framing used by *The New York Times* in its editorials about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, concluded that the frame of US strategic interest remained dominant, although a new framing had emerged on the search for a solution that aligns with US strategy in the “war on terror”. In 2007, a study by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt demonstrated how US media coverage is heavily biased in favour of Israel, especially when compared to news coverage in other democracies.

¹³ Patrick Gathara, “Western Media Failures Say more about the West than Gaza,” Aljazeera, 25/10/2023, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/4c9pn>



III: War in the Post-Truth Era

Evidence from the days after the outbreak of the war indicates that Israel carried out a propaganda campaign to spread disinformation from the early hours of the attack by Hamas, successfully ensnaring numerous Western media outlets. This campaign is marked by significant exaggerations in describing the events of the attack, heavy investment in online news and social media networks, and the use of artificial intelligence and deep fake tools in more than one incident. Some Western media has, as a result, backed away from its reliance on the Israeli narrative. As the facts unfolded, the bias towards the Israeli narrative started to moderate, but most mainstream media did not ask the basic question: What was the reason for the 7 October attack?

This is what British journalist Harry Fear, director of the documentary, *Gaza: Still Alive*, argued when he said that “Western media focused on unverified information about Israeli civilians, while neglecting the suffering of Palestinian civilians, especially children who were killed over the years.”¹⁴ The mainstream media’s bias toward Israel does not accurately reflect divisions in public opinion. Important demographic groups, including youth, diaspora communities, and progressive social movements, are increasingly sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. This makes the digital media environment fragile, complex, and relatively open to everyone.

Israel has continuously violated the rules of conduct with journalists in conflict zones. Israel and its supporters have now entered a new phase of media misinformation by waging war on the media, attacking journalists and their right to life. Through this war they seek to close the lid on any opposing narratives. As of 28 October, 32 journalists had been killed by Israeli fire in Gaza, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Information. Other journalists have lost their families in targeted massacres, including Wael Al-Dahdouh, correspondent and chief of the Al Jazeera Bureau in Gaza.

Western media outlets took the unusual step of holding journalists accountable for their positions on this war. Although not the first such incident, notably *MSNBC* side-lined three prominent Muslim anchors, and *The Guardian* refused to renew the contract of veteran cartoonist Steven Bell, after it declined to publish a satirical cartoon featuring Netanyahu. Multiple journalists were harassed by *BBC Arabic*, and six Arab journalists at the network were suspended following incitement by the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting and Analysis (CAMERA), a US pro-Israeli media advocacy organization, after they published personal posts on social media in solidarity with the Palestinians.

The digital environment and shifts in the way new audiences engage with media open up news media in the post-truth era to multiple possibilities. It is a fragile environment that can change quickly. Just as this media environment in the first phase of the war generated a torrent of false news and an attempt to manufacture a global consensus in support of the Israeli narrative, other, different possibilities are achievable and more quickly than expected with the continuation of the crimes of genocide and systematic destruction committed by Israel against the Palestinian people.

¹⁴ Gulcin Kazan Doger, “British Journalist Accuses Western Media of Bias in Reporting on Israel-Palestine Conflict,” *A4*, 13/10/2023, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/0rpw2>