

Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Role of Media in Shaping International Responses to the Israel-Gaza Conflict

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In response to the recent attack by Hamas on 7th October, 2023, Israel responded with an unprecedented scale of constant bombardment across the Gaza Strip. While the Israeli government is tagging it as a war against Hamas, most of its bombardments have been targeted towards innocent civilians sheltering in residential buildings, schools, mosques, hospitals and even refugee camps. This kind of barbaric reaction is being referred to as nothing but a genocide by most of the world, while the Palestinians are also calling it the *New Nakba*. Graphic images of Palestinian people, both injured and killed due to the horrific bombardments keep on flooding the media while people around the world are gathering and calling for a ceasefire. When such is the case, the Israeli military is trying to rein back the proliferation of the scale of violence that Gaza is witnessing now by cutting of Gaza's electricity and internet, threatening the journalists who are covering the genocide and even killing them and their family members. The United States has also supported Israel in doing so as American media outlets have either refrained from covering all the events of the genocide or they have spread propaganda in favor of Israel to mislead the mass people. However, this time, the Palestinian journalists have been able to show the world every atrocity that is taking place in Gaza and this has made a huge impact on the mass people and led a worldwide uprising for the Palestinian cause. This has pushed the world leaders to be very careful while issuing any official statement on this matter and also be vocal about the intensity of this asymmetric war. This commentary will focus on how media has played a key role in influencing public opinion

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and foreign policy and thereby helping to shape the international responses to the Israel-Gaza conflict.

Outright Biased Stance of the Western Media:

The Western media houses have been constantly taking a pro-Israel stance and neglecting to show the large scale of atrocities which is being committed by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). In fact, it is a shame that there is not a single journalist from the Western media outlets present in the Gaza Strip to cover the genocide that is happening. The enclave has also been going through an irregular communication blackout, making it difficult for the Palestinian journalists to cover and share what is going on in the Strip. Nida Ibrahim, reporting for Al Jazeera from the West Bank said that very minimal news has been coming out of Gaza due to these blackouts. This stunt by the IDF has raised fears across the international community that Israel might be using this as an opportunity to commit war crimes and breach more international laws.² However, the US media outlets refrained from reporting these events and rather chose to support Israel's right to self-defense. The Western media houses have also been carefully picking tricky words while describing the war from both Israel and Palestine's perspective. For example, while describing the casualties of the Israelis on the October 7 attacks led by Hamas, many Western media outlets have used the word 'killed.' However, while referring to the Palestinian casualties, they used the word 'dead.'³ On a different report by Reuters a few hours into the crisis, the Israeli casualties were described as "sea of bodies" while the Palestinians were described as "scores of dead."⁴ It is essential to understand that despite horrific crimes committed by both sides, this is not an equal-wage conflict. The Palestinian cause for justice has not been adequately covered by international law. The careful choice of word used in international reporting reveals the one-sided, ahistorical story that Western elite media outlets are seeking to highlight.

² Al Jazeera, "Gaza's communications blackout raises concerns of Israeli war crimes," 28 Oct 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/28/gaza-under-communications-blackout-amid-warnings-of-cover-for-war-crimes>.

³ Yasemin Giritli İnceoğlu, "'Dead' Versus 'Killed': A Closer Look at the Media Bias in Reporting Israel-Palestine Conflict," The Wire, 1 Nov 2023, <https://thewire.in/media/dead-versus-killed-a-closer-look-at-the-media-bias-in-reporting-israel-palestine-conflict>.

⁴ Lawrence Pintak, "Covering the Gaza conflict: Western media and the imperfect search for balance," Dawn, 19 Oct 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1781797>.

To add to this, the big blanket allegation by some Western leaders that everybody who advocates for Palestinian justice is likewise anti-Semitic and supports terrorism makes matters worse. Does this imply that someone who laments the deaths in southern Israel is in favor of the harsh, dehumanizing methods used by the occupation? Though they are the exception, there may be a small number of extremists who advocate violence. We are fighting over outliers instead of tackling the attack's underlying source. With the rise of group politics and biased media, political tendencies become more apparent and Islamophobia and anti-Semitism become more accepted to varied degrees. This is how using religion to divide and inspire people into group and identity-based politics simplifies complicated politics and a biased media only makes this situation uglier.⁵ The way in which the Western media is presenting the war on Gaza, it seems as if the Palestinian people murdered by Israel's relentless carpet bombing is nothing but a number and a "collateral damage" of Israel's so-called war on Hamas. If the Western governments were truly committed to report the truth, first and foremost they should have questioned Israel about why, despite its top-notch intelligence capabilities, Shin Bet and Mossad failed to foresee the October 7 attacks and why its powerful military continues to be unable to rescue the Israeli hostages held by Hamas. Experts claim that it is abundantly clear that the crucial historical background of the suffering Palestinians have endured over the past 75 years is being omitted while Western media organizations "dehumanize Palestinians" and "legitimize Israeli violations of international law" while Israel attacks Gaza. The Western media has carefully avoided the word 'victim' while referring to the Palestinian casualties but the same media has been generous in tagging the Israelis as victims. Such double-standards reflect an inclination of the Western media organizations to portray the Arabs as 'less than humans' while justifying the mindless massacres committed by the apartheid regime.⁶

Furthermore, the Western media organizations have sent their correspondents to Israel to cover the sorrows and woes of the family members of the hostages and those who were killed in the October 7 attacks by Hamas. However, Israel has not allowed these reporters to enter Gaza, which means

⁵ The Daily Star, "Western media's ahistorical reporting around Palestine-Israel," 12 Oct 2023, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/western-medias-ahistorical-reporting-around-palestine-israel-3441506>

⁶ Mat Nashed, "Western coverage of Israel's war on Gaza – bias or unprofessionalism?", Al Jazeera, 29 Oct 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/29/western-coverage-of-israels-war-on-gaza-bias-or-unprofessionalism#:~:text=Rather%20than%20cover%20the%20human,Gaza%20as%20%E2%80%9Chuman%20shields%E2%80%9D.>

that these reporters are systematically telling a one-sided story. They are delivering the Israeli narrative to the world and also living the Israeli narrative of this war. Very recently, the IDF has announced that reporters from international media organizations can enter Gaza but they must be accompanied by Israeli troops. This means that there will be a lot of gatekeeping to what ground realities these journalists get to witness. In fact, the IDF has further added that whatever news is covered by these reporters, they must be run by the IDF for a review before publishing it to the world. This is perhaps the last nail in the coffin of free journalism. On the other hand, if the Israeli media is examined, it is hard to differentiate whether what the newspaper headlines are saying is public opinion or a stoked version of their opinion. Moreover, there is a widespread presence of propaganda from the Israeli right-wing political figures. For example, in the beginning of this war, Israel claimed that Hamas had beheaded babies and toddlers and the news was proliferated to the extent that even President Joe Biden mentioned it while condemning Hamas. Later on, the Israeli government announced that it could not confirm its earlier claims.⁷ The American media has gone so far in showing its support for Israel that some of its cable news hosts have applauded IDF's massacres in the Gaza Strip. Moreover, three Muslim-American journalists were removed from the anchor chair at MSNBC when the channel's ratings dropped significantly after their criticism of the Israel-Hamas conflict was aired.⁸ This is the extent to which the American media is willing to go to formulate the truth which aligns with its interests and therefore share it with the public in the hope of shaping their opinions in the same way, and hence, also gain a control over the international responses to the conflict. However, this time, the Western media as a whole failed to do so. The handful of Palestinians who managed to report from Gaza used their social media handles to show the world what the apartheid regime has been doing in Gaza and millions of people across the world turned to these accounts to seek the truth.

Resorting to Social Media as an Alternative:

From the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war, a number of Palestinian journalists have been covering the events as they unfold. While some of them are Al-Jazeera correspondents reporting from the Strip, most of them are independent journalists. These reporters have been capturing the brutalities of the war through graphic photographs and videos and sharing them through their

⁷ Lawrence Pintak, "Covering the Gaza conflict: Western media and the imperfect search for balance," Dawn.

⁸ Alexandra Steigrad, "MSNBC denies report it sidelined Muslim anchors in Israel-Hamas coverage as ratings slump," New York Post, 18 Oct 2023, <https://nypost.com/2023/10/16/msnbc-denies-report-it-sidelined-muslim-anchors/>.

Facebook, Twitter or Instagram accounts even though doing so has been tremendously challenging as Israel cut off the electricity and internet services across Gaza. Although these are not mainstream options to get information, these platforms are gradually becoming more accepted as traditional media is often seen to be spreading propaganda and disinformation. Millions of people across the world have seen the intensity of the violence faced by unarmed civilians in Gaza. Painful images and videos of dead bodies buried under the rubble, seriously injured civilians lying in the hospital floors covered in blood, hundreds of dead children lying in the streets, ice-cream vans being used as ad-hoc freezers to store dead bodies as morgues run out of space – these are just some of the realities of life faced by the Gazans for over a month now. These visuals shook people to the core and at the same time helped them to decipher the lies that their respective governments have been feeding them for decades. In the recent past, Britain witnessed its largest protest in a very long time which chanted slogans such as “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” and “Ceasefire Now.” In fact, the Jewish community across many countries have raised their voices against the apartheid regime chanting “Not in our names.” All of these were a consequence of fact-based news, rather than disinformation which is very prevalent during any war.



Source: BBC



Source: The Telegraph

Nonetheless, it must be mentioned here that while Israel cut off Gaza's electricity and Internet services in order to curb down the amount of information coming out of the Strip, the online platforms have also been controlled by shadow banning accounts which have been sharing any news on Gaza. Plestia Alaqad, a Palestinian independent journalist who has been reporting from Gaza found that her account was hacked.



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Source: Al Jazeera

Other than this, nearly forty journalists have been killed by the IDF while they were reporting the atrocities.⁹ Apart from this, Youmna ElSayed, an Al Jazeera correspondent based in Gaza received a threat from the Israeli Army which warned her family to leave their house as the neighborhood will be bombarded soon.¹⁰ The targeted killing of Al Jazeera’s Arab correspondent Wael Dahdouh’s family is another example of how cold blooded the IDF is when it comes to sending a message to reporters in general who are covering the war.¹¹ Furthermore, the killing of Palestinian journalist Mohammed Abu Hatab and his family is another instance of a threat to free journalism.¹²

ISRAEL-PALESTINE WAR

Journalists killed so far

As of October 23, at least 23 journalists are among an estimated 6,000 dead on both sides since the Israel-Gaza war began on October 7.



Source: Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

⁹ Wagner and Sommer, “Hundreds of journalists sign letter protesting coverage of Israel,” The Washington Post, 9 November 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/media/2023/11/09/open-letter-journalists-israel-gaza/>.

¹⁰ Al Jazeera, “Al Jazeera reporter’s family receives Israeli threat to leave Gaza home,” 30 Oct 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/30/al-jazeera-reporters-family-receives-israeli-threat-to-leave-gaza-home>.

¹¹ Al Jazeera, “To kill a family: The loss of Wael Dahdouh’s family to an Israeli bomb,” 1 Nov 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/1/to-kill-a-family-the-loss-of-wael-dahdouhs-family-to-israeli-bombs>.

¹² Al Jazeera, “Israel air raid kills Palestinian journalist and family in Gaza,” 3 Nov 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/3/israeli-air-raid-kills-palestinian-journalist-10-family-members-in-gaza>.

The unfortunate loss of these journalists has left their colleagues who are still in the warzone disappointed and scared. However, it is safe to say that their work has reached millions of people and helped in organizing protests and rallies against the international community to put an end to this nightmare. The mass uprising in front of the White House is undoubtedly a big dent on the Biden administration as it failed to revert Israel from carrying out a genocide despite being its biggest ally. In fact, these protests and rallies have forced the United States to break its unwavering support for Israel and announce in the international media that it did not give a green light to the Israeli raid of Gaza's largest hospital Al-Shifa.¹³ These public pushes also helped the entry of aid trucks into the Strip, albeit not as many as it needed. Therefore, it can be concluded that while mainstream media has failed to deliver the public with concrete news, it has also failed to spread propaganda, at least in a much lower scale than before. On the contrary, social media has become a great tool for delivering accurate news, although a risk of disinformation still prevails. All in all, in the case of the Israel-Hamas war, social media has made quite an impact in shaping public opinion based on truth, which in turn has been able to put a dent on the foreign policy of the United States and other Western countries, if not reshape them entirely.

¹³ Al Jazeera, "US 'did not give OK' for Israeli raid of al-Shifa hospital in Gaza," 15 Nov 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/15/us-did-not-give-ok-for-israeli-raid-of-al-shifa-hospital-in-gaza>.