

# Framing the Gaza Conflict: Media Bias, Violence, and the Battle of Narratives

**Tarek Cherkaoui, TRT World Research Centre.**

A coordinated multi-pronged attack by Hamas began against Israel on 7 October 2023—the bloodiest in many years. The assault consisted of barrages of rockets and infiltrations in southern Israel by militants who took numerous hostages (including civilians) and seized many military vehicles and equipment from the Israeli military. This attack was used as justification by Israel to bombard Gaza continuously for 14 months until the time of writing.

The events of 7 October 2023, involving Hamas, have been widely characterised as including acts of terrorism and actions that may constitute war crimes, though the full context and legal implications remain subject to ongoing investigation and debate. However, the Israeli response—destroying one of the most densely populated areas on Earth—was disproportionate and indiscriminate, with many describing it as one of the most severe instances of ethnic cleansing.

From a coverage point of view, the Israel-Palestine conflict is one of the most contested in the arena of public opinion. Western media have a long track record of supporting Israel and accepting its narrative. The only exception this time was wide reportage of the fact that the International Criminal Court (ICC) had issued, on 21 November 2024, warrants of arrest for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and ex-Minister of Defence Yoav Gallant for crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Despite these developments, Western news media have continued framing the War on Gaza in ways that obscure culpability. Here, the parallels between the Iraq War and the current war in Gaza are stark. Just as Western mainstream media justified the U.S. invasion of Iraq under the guise of self-defence and the search for weapons of mass destruction, it now whitewashes Israeli actions as defence against terrorism. The net result is a dehumanising depiction of Palestinians.

Media reporting on the Israel-Gaza conflict often dehumanises Palestinian deaths by using passive language. Palestinians are not “killed” but rather “die” or are described as “lifeless bodies.” Israeli deaths are straightforwardly reported and humanised, often accompanied by interviews with grieving relatives. Studies reveal that major outlets such as The New York Times and The Washington Post mention Israeli deaths far more often, despite Palestinian casualties significantly outnumbering Israeli ones. Emotional terms like “massacre” or “slaughter” are reserved almost exclusively for Israeli deaths, whereas Palestinian deaths, including children, are described in ways that obscure culpability (Youmans, 2024). These editorial choices reflect deeper structural biases in U.S. media (and Western media overall), which entail deference to official narratives and corporate interests. In fact, American journalists have protested the lack of balance in

covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In November 2023, more than 750 signed an open letter accusing U.S. newsrooms of bias against Palestinians in their coverage of the ongoing conflict in Gaza (Wagner and Sommer, 2023).

What makes the current moment exceptional are two factors: Firstly, this is the first large-scale killing and ethnic cleansing in history to be live-streamed around the clock, which means there has never been a better-documented conflict in history:

Daily, images, videos and voice notes proliferate faster than they can be witnessed or heard or known. We have numbers, data visualisations, graphs and charts of death tolls and aid trucks and calorie counts.... And, of course, [we have] human rights violation reports, health analyses, compendiums of laws. We have transcripts of government officials calling for Gaza to be flattened, levelled, made uninhabitable. (Elshaik et. al., 2023)

Secondly, social media has fundamentally altered the way wars are reported. Unlike previous conflicts, we now witness a constant, unfiltered stream of images and stories from Gaza, forcing undeniable realities into the public eye. Yet, even as these horrors unfold live-streamed, most Western officials and media (except for Norway, Ireland, Spain and Malta) continue to deny the atrocities taking place. This juxtaposition of real-time witnessing and systematic denial makes this moment both emblematic of long-standing biases and uniquely shocking.

## **On media bias**

Media bias refers to the selective reporting of information and the selective coverage of events in ways that undermine the standards of high-quality journalism. Bias typically operates on two levels: individual and systemic. The former often stems from journalists or media executives favouring their own ethnic, racial, religious, political, or class interests. This aspect is problematic but still not as far-reaching as systemic bias. The latter often becomes so deeply internalised that individuals may even convey stereotypes or narratives without being fully cognisant of such behaviour. Other forms of institutional bias, like racism, operate in similar ways, and many find themselves unconsciously reinforcing these tendencies.

Systemic bias is more the work of government and dominant business interests, which try to dictate how stories are represented and framed. On foreign policy matters, this influence usually aligns fully with the official perspectives adopted by the state. Many authors have indicated that mainstream media serve as public interpreters of events on behalf of power centres and constitute a symbolic arena for the (unequal) ideological struggle between the dominant discourse and its challengers (Wolfsfeld, 1997).

Framing analysis is about how information is presented and how this affects the audience's interpretations of an event. This process involves selecting, emphasising, and arranging various news elements to shape the audience's perceptions. Robert Entman contends that frames define the problem at hand. They diagnose its causes, issue a judgmental stance, and suggest a solution (Entman 1993: 52).

Among the most potent frames are those acting on the meta-level, also referred to as "master frames" (Snow and Benford, 1988). Meta-frames dwell on the most accepted narratives, myths, and folk tales within cultures and nations. Myths, in particular, function as a form of image-making that influences the contours of perception and imagination. French philosopher Roland Barthes argued that myths can "transform the reality of the world into an image of the world, History into Nature"

(Barthes, 1972). Social institutions such as the family, schools, and the media play a crucial role in processing these myths and values into commonly accepted, routine ways of thinking, which thus shape individual experiences. This, in turn, reproduces dominant perspectives and meta-frames.

Within political sociology, scholars view framing primarily as a tool for collective action rather than individual perception. Frames are primarily about organising attitudes, views, and ideas in ways that impact group behaviour and collective action more than individual sense-making. As such, the essence of framing is to “mobilise potential supporters, attract bystander backing, and demobilise opponents” (Snow and Benford, 1988: 198). Rather than focusing on the isolated perceptions of individuals, frames target the broader societal or group-level perspectives that drive unified strategies and actions. Consequently, frames play a major role in motivating or de-motivating collective behaviour because they function as “social images” that may capture the shared understanding and vision of a group (Gamson, 1992: 6-8).

Within the political sociology paradigm, frames can be analysed in three distinct ways. First, they should be viewed in terms of their moral stance towards the subject matter, in regard to justice or injustice for example. This shapes how people perceive an issue, determining whether they view it as right or wrong, fair or unfair. Second, frames must be understood through their conception of collective action—specifically, what they encourage people to do in response to a problem. This involves understanding how a frame not only defines the problem but also prescribes the solution or action to be taken. Frames might, for example, advocate protests, policy changes, or shifts in public attitudes to guide how a group organises and responds to an issue. Third, frames need to be analysed according to their identity component, or how they construct the distinction between “us” and “them.” This component is essential because frames often define collective identity by highlighting shared values, experiences, or struggles, while simultaneously differentiating a group from others who may have different interests or values. By emphasising this divide, frames create solidarity within a group and antagonism towards an opposing group, thus shaping social dynamics and collective mobilisation strategies (Perri, 2005: 95).

## Coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict

Several studies have examined Western news coverage of the Israel–Palestine conflict, with the majority suggesting a strong pro-Israel, anti-Palestinian bias in the framing. These studies often point to the lack of historical context that favours Israel, the dominance of Israeli sources, and the framing of Palestinians as aggressors. In particular, decontextualisation ignores key issues, such as Israel’s illegal occupation of the West Bank, the 17-year blockade of Gaza, and multiple violations of ceasefire agreements.

In their 2007 book *Israel-Palestine on Record: How The New York Times Misreports Conflict in the Middle East*, authors Richard Falk and Howard Friel stated that *The New York Times* often omitted mention of the Israeli occupation, their violations of international law, and negative human rights reports about the country. The media tended to represent Israeli actions as self-defence while giving more prominence to Palestinian aggression. They also found a systematic bias towards the Israeli rather than the Palestinian version of events and highlighted the tendency to humanise Israeli but not Palestinian victims.

Greg Philo and Mike Berry, building on the foundational research of the Glasgow University Media Group, released in 2011 an updated edition of their seminal work *Bad News from Israel*, which expanded on their earlier 2004 findings. Their research revealed consistent biases in media coverage

of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly in the representation of casualties and the framing of motives. In the 2004 study, Philo and Berry offered a meticulous and critical analysis of BBC1 and ITV's coverage of the conflict during key periods of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (e.g., the Second Intifada). Through content and audience studies, the authors revealed that a consistent pro-Israeli slant dominated airtime. Palestinian deaths were underreported, and emotionally charged language was reserved almost exclusively for Israeli casualties. Moreover, the decontextualisation of news coverage further distorted public understanding, leaving viewers unaware of the realities of Israeli occupation and Palestinian displacement. Structural factors, such as reliance on Israeli sources, professional spin, and pressure from pro-Israeli lobbies, contributed to this bias. Israeli philosopher Moshé Machover described this work as "a must-read for anyone interested in the Middle East," as it illustrated "how public political ignorance and confusion, packaged as "news" and "information," is spread and fostered" (Machover, 2005: 304).

The 2011 updated edition incorporated an analysis of the 2008-2009 Israeli attack on Gaza, further exposing the disparities in reporting. Israeli casualties were humanised, while Palestinian deaths were often depersonalised and reported without adequate context. Philo and Berry also highlighted Israel's sophisticated public relations strategies, which had effectively shaped Western media narratives, leaving little room for Palestinian perspectives. These findings underscore the structural biases in media coverage, which perpetuate a one-sided narrative that marginalises Palestinian suffering and legitimises Israeli actions.

Wilhelm Kempf (2014) examined German press coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict, using the Anti-Semitism and the Criticism of Israel (ASCI) survey alongside content analysis and experimental studies. Kempf found that the German press portrayed Israel as powerful and uncompromising, often emphasising Israel's military actions as defensive in nature. He also contended that the German press downplayed unfavourable situations for Israel.

Amer (2017) used critical discourse analysis to examine the 2008–2009 Gaza War coverage by prominent U.S. and U.K. newspapers (*The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*). He concluded that Israel was portrayed as a partner for peace. In contrast, Palestinian views were largely excluded or framed as barriers to peace. Their conditions for a given ceasefire—such as lifting the Israeli blockade—were absent from the narrative. This selective framing effectively justified Israeli actions as self-defence while marginalising the Palestinian viewpoint.

Abid et al. (2024) investigated how the Israel-Palestine conflict was framed in media coverage between 7 October and 7 November 2023 by four news outlets: BBC, France24, Voice of America (VOA), and Al Jazeera. Using framing theory and narrative analysis, a qualitative content analysis of these media platforms' language, imagery, and narratives was undertaken. The findings revealed significant differences in how these outlets presented the conflict. According to the authors, BBC, France24, and VOA framed the conflict more favourably for the Israeli side. Palestinians were often portrayed as "terrorists" or "Islamic militants," while Israeli actions were presented as justifiable counter-terrorism measures. Conversely, according to this research, Al Jazeera provided more balanced coverage, offering a perspective that considered both Israeli and Palestinian viewpoints.

## Meta-frames

Israeli officials, spokespersons, and military representatives are in friendly territory in the United States. Israeli representatives are afforded levels of respect and deference that even American politicians may not receive. They get "softball" questions and unquestioned airtime that seldom

includes scepticism or critical engagement. This dynamic subtly reinforces the perception that Israel is an extension of the U.S. in the region, and that, therefore, the former's military interventions are above reproach.

The representation of this conflict via Western news media, which mostly adopted the Israeli frames *in toto*, has been globally challenged by news outlets representing the Global South, such as Al Jazeera and TRT World. Western media organisations relied on meta-frames, which emphasised the Israeli side's "victimhood" and "innocence." In contrast, the alternative discourse relied on meta-frames such as "Nakba" and "resistance."

## Pro-Israel Meta-frames

Pro-Israel meta-frames primarily consist of deploying the "victimhood" and "innocence" narratives [1]. The overlap between victimhood and innocence lies in their mutual use as discursive strategies to construct identities—victim and innocent. Although the notions of "victimhood" and "innocence" intersect, there are some major differences. The former refers to the perception and portrayal of oneself or one's group as wronged or harmed by others. The discourse of victimhood is used strategically to justify actions and policies, as well as to garner international sympathy and support. Conversely, "innocence" is the portrayal of oneself or one's group as blameless or free from wrongdoing. In the Israeli context, innocence is an assertion of moral purity and the denial of responsibility for the conflict or its consequences. Academic Uygur Baspehlivan argues that these discourses help justify aggression, disguise violence, and promote strategic goals by framing the conflict in terms that absolve one's own side of blame while highlighting the other's culpability (Baspehlivan, 2017).

### *The victimhood frame*

The "victimhood frame" is a psychological and rhetorical device often used by groups to garner empathy and support as victims of injustice or aggression while framing their opponents as the perpetrators of irrational or unjustified actions. This framing is particularly potent because it elicits a highly empathetic response from external audiences, fostering a sense of moral righteousness and justifying the group's behaviour. In the case of Israel, the victimhood frame has been central to the national narrative since its inception in order to secure both domestic and international support for state authority and to legitimise its actions.

Israeli politicians, from former Prime Minister Golda Meir to Menachem Begin, have consistently invoked this frame, drawing parallels between the contemporary Jewish experience and historical persecution. Meir famously referred to the Jewish collective psyche as having a "Masada complex," a "pogrom complex," and a "Hitler complex," highlighting the deep fear of annihilation that has shaped Israeli identity. Similarly, Menachem Begin compared Palestinians to Nazis, as an existential threat to Israel's survival. This frame was foregrounded at times of international criticism, such as after the 1967 occupation of Palestinian, Egyptian, Jordanian, and Syrian territories, when Israel claimed that critics were expressing anti-Semitism. When the United Nations passed Resolution 3379 in 1975, equating Zionism with racism, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin responded thus: "The whole world is against us—when was it not so?" This encapsulated the victimhood narrative, whereby Israel is a perpetual target of global hostility.

However, this victimhood frame has internal discrepancies. While it bolsters a group's sense of moral superiority and justifies its actions, empathy for the out-group is automatically suppressed.

Acknowledging Palestinian suffering would imply an admission of guilt or complicity, particularly in the context of Israel's military actions over time. As a result, despite the asymmetrical power dynamics between Israel and the Palestinians, many Israeli Jews perceive Palestinians in terms of fear and anxiety. They are seen not just as adversaries but as a direct threat to Israel's legitimacy and survival. This dynamic further diminishes the capacity for empathetic concern towards Gaza residents or Palestinians in general. That would bring to light uncomfortable truths about Israel's actions and delegitimise the entrenched narrative of Jewish victimhood.

### *The innocence frame*

The "innocence frame" is a potent meta-frame that portrays Israel's actions as driven by necessity rather than aggression. It asserts that Israel's wars with its Arab neighbours, including the 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the two Palestinian intifadas, were "wars of no choice." This meta-frame constructs the country as an innocent victim, perpetually defending itself such that military actions seem justifiable and inevitable.

Why is this narrative so effective? First, it shapes perceptions of the other's intentions, painting Israel's adversaries, particularly the Palestinians, as unprovoked aggressors, often motivated by hatred and anti-Semitism. Second, it creates a paradox of innocence: if an aggressor acknowledges past wrongs and expresses regret, this person is seen as less likely to repeat aggressive actions. However, if an aggressor always claims innocence and maintains a stance of perpetual victimhood, they may act aggressively again without consequences. Third, the innocence narrative places blame squarely on the Palestinians, who are often portrayed as the instigators of conflict, regardless of the context.

This frame has been deployed since Israel was established in 1948. It painted the creation of Israel as a national renewal movement that caused little harm and brought prosperity to the Arabs. According to this depiction, Israel extended repeated offers of peace to the Arab world. Palestinians were largely responsible for their displacement, having fled based on the advice of their leaders. In the 2000s, after the Camp David II talks collapsed, this frame resurfaced with renewed vigour. It asserted that Israel had offered generous peace terms, which the Palestinians rejected. Instead, they had launched a war, further solidifying the claim that Israel's peace efforts were always genuine and thwarted by an intransigent enemy.

The innocence frame continues to fuel Israeli hardline policies today, reinforcing the belief that "they only want to destroy us." It sustains the idea that peace is impossible, portraying a one-sided view of the conflict whereby Israel is blameless, and the Palestinians are the aggressors. Ultimately, the persistence of this narrative undermines efforts towards reconciliation and a just resolution to the conflict.

## **Pro-Palestinian meta-frames**

### *The Nakba frame*

The Nakba frame represents the Palestinian narrative of victimhood, rooted in the traumatic events of 1948 when nearly 800,000 Palestinians were forcibly displaced from their lands following the establishment of Israel. This deeply resonant frame is remembered by approximately 13 million Palestinian Arabs today as they reminisce on the near-total destruction of Palestinian society and the loss of their homeland.

The Nakba, meaning “catastrophe” in Arabic, is framed as a deliberate act of ethnic cleansing on a massive scale aimed at replacing Palestinians with another group. This frame centres on Palestinians’ daily hardships, tragedies, and profound loss of land, rights, and freedom alongside the foundational violence of the Nakba (a process which displaced entire communities with the intent of ensuring their permanent dispossession).

The Nakba frame comprised of three major aspects: fragmenting Palestinian society; maintaining the Nakba as a continuum; and disabling Palestinian resurgence and self-determination (Eghbariah, 2024). Fragmentation began with forced exile and continues as Palestinians were divided between those who remained on their land and those who became refugees. This means that Palestinians are dispersed across different regions, each with distinct legal statuses. The Nakba frame, therefore, is not just a single moment of displacement but an enduring structure of fragmentation and oppression.

The systemic oppression and domination that emerged after Nakba proper (1948) constitute a “Nakba regime,” in the words of Eghbariah (2024). It operates similarly to the now-dismantled South African apartheid system. Palestinians are forced to remain in a permanent state of dispossession; political, social, and economic rights are denied. That the Nakba frame also disables Palestinian self-determination is countered by the ongoing struggle for Palestinian identity, sovereignty, and justice.

### *The resistance frame [2]*

The “Resistance Frame” is built around the narrative of Palestinian Fedayeen, who are portrayed as active defenders of their land and culture. While the Nakba narrative is passive, the resistance frame is active, often manifesting through acts of defiance against oppressors. This frame positions Palestinians as fighters opposing invaders, taking pride in their role as protectors of their indigenous land. It is adopted by those who either engage in or support politically motivated acts of violence to achieve independence and sovereignty.

In this view, Zionism is framed as a foreign colonial enterprise that can only be challenged through sustained resistance. The resistance narrative emphasises opposition to foreign domination, portraying such acts as heroic and essential for the survival and liberation of the Palestinian people. Those who advocate or engage in political violence within this framework often seek to gain legitimacy in the public sphere. They avoid terms like “terrorist” and instead adopt more positive terms such as “guerrilla,” “liberation army,” or “freedom fighter.”

There are political figures and media institutions that explain or acknowledge this perspective without necessarily endorsing the methods employed. Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA), for example, belongs to this category, deploying the resistance frame against what is perceived as an unjust and ongoing occupation. However, Al Jazeera English (AJE), whose coverage will be briefly reviewed for the purpose of this commentary, does not use this frame entirely but rather an evolved version that focuses more on the resilience of the civilian population in the face of adversity.

## **Clashing frames**

This commentary provides an analysis of news coverage from a selection of dates (7 October 2023, 13 October 2023, 28 October 2023, 3 November 2023, and 24 November 2023) from both U.S. and Middle Eastern media perspectives, specifically focusing on CNN and AJE. CNN was chosen for its status as a leading global television news network. At the same time, AJE was selected for its position as a prominent Middle Eastern-based global channel, representing the Global South and exerting significant international influence.

*CNN*

On 7 October 2023, CNN's coverage of global conflicts was not solely focused on the Israel-Palestine situation. The network also reported on the ongoing war in Ukraine, with attention given to a Russian missile strike on the city of Kharkiv, as well as developments in Syria, where government forces attacked rebel-held areas. Additionally, CNN covered the International Court of Justice's decision to hear Armenia's case against Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and addressed issues surrounding illegal immigration to Spanish islands. The Israel-Palestine conflict, however, received about a third of the coverage, with CNN's sole correspondent based in Israeli territory.

On 13 October 2023, CNN coverage covered evacuation orders in Gaza, noting that Hamas had advised residents to remain in place. President Biden's efforts to secure the release of hostages were highlighted, along with an in-depth interview with a family member of an Israeli hostage. The report also focused on Israeli military raids in Gaza and speculated about potential future actions by Israel, including the possibility of a ground invasion. Overall, CNN referred to Israeli violence a dozen times, with three of those instances framed as actions related to self-defence. In contrast, Palestinian violence was mentioned eight times, with the majority of these instances portrayed as acts of aggression. Palestinian violence was consistently framed as being driven by hostility.

On 28 October 2023, CNN's broadcast discussed the Israel-Palestine conflict, reporting that the war had entered a new phase following an escalation of Israeli ground operations in Gaza. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu emphasised that the objective of this phase was to dismantle Hamas and secure the release of hostages held by the group. Israeli ground forces had moved into Gaza after a nighttime entry. CNN reported on the civilians in Gaza who endured one of the heaviest airstrikes of the conflict, with many seeking refuge in hospitals to escape the bombardment. However, the primary emphasis was on the families of more than 200 Israeli hostages in Gaza, who were increasingly concerned as Israel intensified its operations in the region.

On 3 November 2023, CNN focused more on domestic reactions to the Israel-Hamas conflict. While the network did not directly address the Israel-Palestine issue, it reported on protests taking place at American universities in response to the war.

The CNN broadcast of 24 November 2023 centred on the release of hostages, especially the American hostages. Emphasis was also given to various personal Israeli accounts of the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack. Additionally, Anderson Cooper presented a brief documentary on the hostages taken, focusing on the experiences of survivors and their families. Cooper also reported as the correspondent from a kibbutz near Tel Aviv.

In this coverage, CNN framed Israel's actions through the Innocence Frame, portraying its military operations as a necessary act of self-defence against aggression. This narrative positioned Israel as a victim, responding to threats, while the violence committed by Palestinians emphasised their role as aggressors. Once the Israeli onslaught on Gaza began, terms such as "infiltrators" and "rockets launched" were used to describe Palestinian actions. Thus, Palestinians, in general, were positioned as the instigators of violence.

*Al Jazeera English (AJE)*

On 7 October 2023, AJE reported that a barrage of rockets had been fired at Israel and that infiltrations from Gaza were occurring. Also mentioned were rising tensions between Jewish Orthodox settlers and Palestinians in the West Bank. The first reflex was for AJE to provide information about events



and explain the underlying reasons. Hamas, individually, were described as “fighters” and Israeli soldiers as “army.” Given the imbalance of power between Israel and the Palestinians, this framing not only presents the Palestinians as the underdog in this conflict, but it also aligns with the broader historical narrative of Palestinian defiance.

Further reports on 13 October 2023 highlighted Israeli airstrikes on journalists, including Al Jazeera staffers, and civilian casualties from Israeli attacks on evacuation routes. This coverage reflects the Nakba Frame—emphasis is given to the continuation of systemic oppression and the fragility of Palestinian lives under Israeli actions. The Nakba Frame portrays the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza as a continuation of the historical dispossession and fragmentation of Palestinian society.

AJE not only reported on the events of the Israel-Hamas conflict but also quantified the impact of unfolding events. On 28 October 2023, one of its headlines read: “Israel-Hamas war updates: ‘Long and difficult’ fight as Israel pummels Gaza.” This frame highlighted the suffering of Palestinians, emphasising the severity of the situation. The word “pummel” implies an overwhelming and forceful action, positioning Israel as the aggressor in the conflict. The Nakba Frame is also implied here, as the ongoing violence is seen as a continuation of the trauma Palestinians have endured since 1948, when they were displaced and dispossessed.

AJE’s broadcast on 3 November 2023, detailing Israeli airstrikes on hospitals and mass protests, further emphasised the Nakba Frame by focusing on Palestinian victimhood and the Israeli military’s disregard for civilian life. The Resistance Frame also emerges as Palestinians, in their fight for self-determination, are seen as victims of Israeli aggression. Their resistance is seen as vital to their identity and struggle for justice. These frames, together, illustrate that while Palestinians are portrayed as victims of an ongoing Nakba, they are simultaneously positioned as active resisters fighting for their rightful sovereignty against an invader.

Finally, AJE’s broadcast on 24 November 2023 showed Israelis and Palestinians awaiting the release of captives. This highlighted the ongoing struggle interspersed by attempts at de-escalation. Such also reflects the long and tumultuous struggle for Palestinian self-determination and the hefty human price paid for it.

A headline from 29 November 2023, “More than 3365 Palestinians were arrested since October 7, prisoner society says,” uses statistical data to enhance the credibility of the report, presenting Palestinians as victims of aggressive Israeli actions. The focus on arrests, which likely categorised the detainees as administrative prisoners without due legal process and without any time limit for their imprisonment, further reminds the audience that Israel is an aggressor.

Another headline, “Palestinian released from Israeli prison recounts abuse and humiliation,” dated 29 November 2023, highlights personal testimonies of abuse, further emphasising the injustices faced by Palestinians. AJE’s linguistic choices and coverage reflect a narrative that consistently frames Palestinians as victims and Israel as the aggressor. These framing techniques highlight both the historical and ongoing injustices Palestinians face, contributing to a broader understanding of their struggle for justice, sovereignty, and self-determination.

AJE used a varied network of correspondents and field reporters, often reporting directly from Palestinian territories or Lebanon, with at least six correspondents on location at any given time. The channel dedicated an average of 90 per cent of its coverage to the war in Gaza. AJE’s correspondents were often stationed close to the locations of major events, providing fresh and immediate updates while maintaining a sense of clear and present danger. This climate was reflected in the

correspondents' higher-pitched voices and improvisational tones, conveying the tension and urgency of the situation.

## Discussion

Media coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict highlights how different news outlets have framed the situation, with significant implications for global perceptions of the conflict. Through the lens of framing theory, CNN's portrayal of the conflict largely aligns with the Innocence Frame; Israel's military actions are depicted as defensive and justifiable. Meanwhile, the Israeli Victimhood Frame positions Palestinians as the aggressors. This approach limits empathy for Palestinians by framing their actions as a direct threat to Israel's security, while the historical context of the occupation is obscured.

October 7 should not be considered the starting point of the Israel-Palestine conflict, nor should it be the sole justification for the actions that followed. Subsequent media coverage of unfolding events showed the Israeli military inflicting one of the most brutal civilian punishments ever on the inhabitants of Gaza. There is no doubt that the events of 7 October 2023 violated international humanitarian law, and that taking civilians as hostages is a violation of the law. These hostages must be freed. However, the Israeli response cannot be justified. Gaza was already described in 2021 by the UN Secretary-General as "hell on earth." After being bombed to the smithereens over the past 18 months, there are no words to describe the dire humanitarian catastrophe there.

Any meaningful discussion of this conflict must acknowledge the decades-long occupation, dispossession, and systemic violence that Palestinians have endured. The failure to address any broader contexts aligns with the research of Shanto Iyengar, who argued that news media often frame events episodically, by focusing on isolated incidents rather than connecting them to their contextual background. Thus, media coverage of individual terrorist acts is largely episodic, underscoring specific incidents without linking them to essential political and historical dynamics. Further, Iyengar accused the media of systematically deflecting any criticisms of those in power by framing the news as a "context of no context" (Iyengar, 1991: 2, 14).

Decontextualisation and sanitisation are among the key shortcomings in Western coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict. In April 2024, *The Intercept* revealed the existence of a *New York Times* memo that outlined editorial instructions regarding Israel's war on Gaza. Reporters were advised to avoid certain terms such as "refugee camp," "Palestine," and "occupation." When "refugee camp" is mentioned, it is described as "a place where displaced people went" or "a former UN school," thereby obfuscating how these locations were created (Scahill and Grim, 2024). Avoiding terms like "occupation" occludes the root cause of the conflict and deflects attention away from the experienced realities of systemic oppression.

Assal Rad, a scholar specialising in Modern Middle Eastern history, gained social media prominence for her witty comments on the biased Gaza coverage of several prominent Western news outlets. On 2 April 2024, when *The New York Times* ran an article titled "Founder of World Central Kitchen says several workers killed in Gaza airstrike," Rad rephrased the headline to make it more direct, presenting it as "Israel kills World Central Kitchen workers in Gaza airstrike" (Ghanem, 2024).

In a comparable situation, when CNN's headline on 14 March 2024 stated, "At least 20 people killed, dozens wounded in shelling while waiting for food aid, Gaza health ministry says," Rad amended it to: "At least 20 people killed by Israel, dozens wounded in shelling while waiting for food aid as Israel continues to attack starving Palestinians in Gaza" (Ghanem, 2024).

The pattern of using passive voice to obfuscate agency reveals systemic bias. When Israeli actions align with a favourable narrative, such as airstrikes targeting “bad actors,” the active voice is used. But when thousands of civilians are harmed, responsibility disappears into vague phrases like “strikes on areas where displaced Gazans camped.” Leaked memos, like the one instructing journalists to avoid terms like “refugee camp” or “occupation,” confirm that these choices are systematic. Another observation is that sanitisation of the war is a major objective and a desired outcome. Instead of providing a realistic representation, which would prove that Israel has infringed on the rules of war *ad nauseam*, Western mainstream media preferred to offer a clean version in which the Jewish state preserves all its “innocence”.

It should be noted that CNN faced backlash from its employees regarding editorial policies because of its one-sided coverage of Gaza. CNN staffers contend that directives from management and the process for approving stories have led to reporting skewed towards Israel while marginalising Palestinian viewpoints. One CNN employee described the network’s reporting as indicative of an entrenched bias towards Israel, denouncing it as “journalistic malpractice” (McGreal, 2024).

This purported breach of ethical journalistic practices and codes was evident not only in corporate media such as CNN, Western public service media such as the BBC are also culpable. British journalist Owen Jones has recently released a thorough investigation of the BBC’s coverage of Israel’s ongoing assault on Gaza. Based on interviews with 13 current and former BBC staffers, his study shows how senior figures inside the network’s news division changed coverage to favour the Israeli narrative while methodically overlooking the concerns expressed by numerous journalists. Jones’ research relied on three broad arguments: a comprehensive review of internal complaints from journalists within the BBC; quantitative research into the framing of the year-long siege on Gaza by the BBC; and an in-depth investigation into the backgrounds of those involved in the coverage of the siege, focusing in detail on one editor, Raffi Berg (Jones, 2024).

Staff members have criticised their institution for its coverage of the Gaza conflict, accusing the news network of being biased towards the Israelis. This internal dissent signals concerns about how the broadcaster portrays Palestinian experiences and Israeli actions (very often relaying the latter’s claims without sufficient scrutiny). Notably, there have been allegations that online editor Raffi Berg uses his position to attune coverage to the Israeli narrative, generally obfuscating or lessening their liability for atrocities. This perpetuates the myth of Israel’s innocence. Despite internal protests and public criticisms, including a letter from over 100 BBC staff asking for more impartiality (The Independent, 2024), the senior management has largely dismissed these concerns (Jones, 2024).

The quantitative research of Owen Jones and his team involved a review of over 2,900 BBC stories from the year following 7 October 2023. A vast gap is revealed in the reporting of Palestinian and Israeli deaths. While some 1,410 Israelis have been killed since October 7, the Palestinian death toll is estimated at 45,000, though this is likely an undercount. Despite this large difference in human toll, the BBC used humanising language in regard to Israelis more than for Palestinians. Although death tolls among Palestinians were so much higher, the BBC referred to such deaths only marginally more than it did for Israelis. One exception was on 1 April 2024, when Israeli drones killed seven aid workers employed by the NGO World Central Kitchen, six of whom were Westerners. The other victim, Saifeddin Abu Taha, was largely referred to as “the Palestinian driver” in coverage (Jones, 2024).

Conversely, respectable media outlets from the Global South used different lenses for their coverage, primarily the humanitarian frame. AJE utilises the Nakba Frame and a mild version of the Resistance Frame to provide a more nuanced portrayal of the Palestinian experience. Their historical

victimhood and resilience were emphasised. It should be noted that AJE did not directly apply the classic Resistance Frame; rather, it focused on the civilian population's resilience in the face of heavy bombardments and ethnic cleansing strategies. This frame enabled viewers to understand what the civilians were going through in terms of human rights and humanitarian needs. AJE also gave space to voices from the frontlines, including NGO workers such as doctors and humanitarian aid staff. This kind of coverage effectively helped to build a humanitarian frame that stressed the human dimension of the conflict.

Identifying contrasting frames brings to light how very complex the Israel-Palestine conflict is, wherein media portrayals are strongly associated with corporate interests, political-military alliances, and ideological divides. Therefore, there is an urgent need for critical assessments of the media representation of the Middle East and for advancing a discourse that is fair and contextual.

In an age of pervasive digital media and real-time documentation, the need to study how the media shapes public consciousness remains more critical than ever. Revelations of selective framing, coupled with the rising global awareness of Palestinian suffering, suggest the need to reevaluate the dominant narratives in international news discourses urgently.

## Author Bio

Dr. Tarek Cherkaoui is the director of the TRT World Research Centre. He is an expert in the field of strategic communications analysis and is the author of *The News Media at War: The Clash of Western and Arab Networks in the Middle East* (I.B. Tauris, 2017). Cherkaoui holds a PhD in media and communication from the Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand, and his broader research themes include international relations, strategic communications, public diplomacy, and media-military relations—specifically within a Middle Eastern context.

## Endnotes

- [1] It must be noted that Israeli news frames are not monolithic and exhibit significant variation across different political forces, factions, and power centres. This diversity is evident in the way different media outlets frame the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other regional issues. For instance, *Haaretz*, *Israel Hayom*, and *Ynet* each present distinct narratives that reflect their editorial stances and target audiences. *Haaretz* is known for its more liberal and critical approach, often challenging government policies, while *Israel Hayom* tends to support right-wing perspectives, aligning closely with government narratives (Tenenboim-Weinblatt et al., 2016). The dominant frames under the current Netanyahu government are increasingly characterised by hardline perspectives. Media outlets such as *the Times of Israel* and *Israel Hayom* have been noted for framing narratives that consolidate unilateral Zionist standpoints and normalise military policies. These outlets often employ strategic omissions and emotive reporting to justify disproportionate force and to delegitimise Palestinian perspectives, thereby reinforcing hardline Zionist policy goals (Barari and Yacoub, 2024). This trend is indicative of a broader shift towards more nationalistic and security-focused frames in Israeli media, which align with the current political climate and government policies.
- [2] It must be noted that the resistance discourse on the Palestinian side has undergone significant transformations over time, particularly marked by the

transition from the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) peak era to the current dominance of Hamas in Gaza. Previously, the resistance discourse was characterised by anti-colonial, Pan-Arab, and collective self-determination themes. This period was marked by an inclusive approach that united various factions, including Christians, Islamists, and secularists, in a common cause against Israeli occupation. Before the Oslo Accords (1993, 1995), the PLO's inclusive resistance frame posed a substantial challenge to the legitimacy of dominant Israeli narratives by presenting a united front that transcended religious and ideological divides. With the rise of Hamas, particularly after its electoral victory in 2006, the resistance discourse shifted towards a more pro-Islam and anti-Zionist framework (Baoni, 2018). In the next two decades, Hamas sent a series of overtures and signals, indicating a willingness to accommodate Israel's existence, incorporate political elements into its resistance strategy, and broaden its appeal by adopting more moderate stances. However, these efforts have not resulted in a significant breakthrough in relations with regional and international actors (Almadani, 2017). Hamas' image has been undermined by questionable choices and actions, which have affected its international legitimacy and support.

## References

- Abid A, Khan M and Riaz M (2024) Examining the framing of the Israel-Palestine conflict: a textual analysis of international media news coverage. *Migration Letters* 21(S11): 1212–1223. Available at: <https://migrationletters.com/index.php/ml/article/view/10899>
- Almadani A (2017) The new Hamas document: an analytical reading of its development and application. *Masyarakat, Kebudayaan dan Politik* 30(4): 406-417.
- Amer M (2017) Critical discourse analysis of war reporting in the international press: the case of the Gaza war of 2008–2009. *Palgrave Communications* 3, Article 13. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-017-0015-2>
- Baoni T (2018) *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance*. Stanford University Press.
- Barari H and Yacoub R (2024) Unmasking media bias and religious Zionism's impeding political influence on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *American Journal of Arts and Human Science* 3(3): 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.54536/ajahs.v3i3.2461>
- Barthes R (1972). *Mythologies*. Paladin.
- Baspehlivan U (2017) The Nakba, the Holocaust and collective victimhood. *E-International Relations*, 9 January. <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/09/the-nakba-the-holocaust-and-collective-victimhood/>
- Eghbariah R (2024, June 3) Toward Nakba as a legal concept. *Columbia Law Review*. Available at: <https://columbialawreview.org/content/toward-nakba-as-a-legal-concept/> (accessed 2 December 2024).
- Elshaikh E, Martinez J and Shaer S (2023) We can know no innocent futures. *Allegra Lab*, 21 December. <https://allegralaboratory.net/we-can-know-no-innocent-futures/>
- Entman RM (1993) Framing: toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43(4): 51-58.
- Falk R and Friel H (2007) *Israel-Palestine on Record: How The New York Times Misreports Conflict in the Middle East*. Verso Books.

- Gamson WA (1992) *Talking Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ghanem N (2024) Scholar takes aim at biased Gaza coverage in the West with headline corrections. *TRT World*, 12 April. <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/scholar-exposes-western-medias-gaza-slant-through-fixed-headlines-17744864>
- Hassan W (2022) On teaching the Arab-Israeli conflict: a conversation with Professor Avi Shlaim. *The Oxford Middle East Review*, 24 January. <https://omerjournal.com/2022/01/24/on-teaching-the-arab-israeli-conflict-a-conversation-with-professor-avi-shlaim/>
- The Independent. (2024, November 1). Broadcaster bias is failing to hold Israel to account. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letters/bbc-bias-israel-gaza-tim-davie-b2639654.html>
- Iyengar S (1991) *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. University of Chicago Press.
- Jones O (2024). The BBC's civil war over Gaza. *Drop Site News*, 19 December. <https://www.dropsitenews.com/p/bbc-civil-war-gaza-israel-biased-coverage>
- Kempf W (2014) Media construction of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the case of the German press and the German public. Keynote Lecture at *The Annual Conference of the Israeli Communication Association*, Natanya, Israel. <https://kops.uni-konstanz.de/entities/publication/ed09dc13-a4b9-4511-a55a-50861fa9ece1>
- Machover M (2005) Book review: bad news from Israel. *Race & Class* 47(1): 304.
- McGreal C (2024) CNN staff say network's pro-Israel slant amounts to 'journalistic malpractice.' *The Guardian*, 5 February. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2024/feb/04/cnn-staff-pro-israel-bias>
- Perri 6 (2005) What's in a frame? social organization, risk perception and the sociology of knowledge. *Journal of Risk Research* 8(2): 91-118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1366987032000081213>
- Philo G and Berry M (2011) *More Bad News From Israel*. Pluto Press.
- Scahill J and Grim R (2024) Leaked NYT Gaza memo tells journalists to avoid words 'Genocide,' 'Ethnic cleansing,' and 'Occupied territory.' *The Intercept*, 15 April. <https://theintercept.com/2024/04/15/nyt-israel-gaza-genocide-palestine-coverage/>
- Snow DA and Benford RD (2000) Framing processes and social movements: an overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 611-639.
- Tenenboim-Weinblatt K, Hanitzsch T and Nagar R (2016) Reclassifying conflict narratives in the Israeli news media. *Journal of Peace Research* 53(2): 151-165. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343315609091>
- Youmans W (2024, March 20) Accounting for the biases in U.S. media coverage of Gaza. *DAWN*, 20 March. <https://dawnmena.org/accounting-for-the-biases-in-u-s-media-coverage-of-gaza/>
- Wagner L and Sommer W (2023) Hundreds of journalists sign letter protesting coverage of Israel. *Washington Post*, 13 November. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/media/2023/11/09/open-letter-journalists-israel-gaza/>
- Wolfsfeld G (1997) *Media and Political Conflict News From the Middle East*. Cambridge University Press.