

How the BBC hollows out the ‘news’

Media Distortion on Palestinian Resistance

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A major problem anybody confronts when trying to sort fact from fiction in the news—aside from any confusion that occurs in trying to figure out if anything the mainstream media ‘reports’ is ‘news’ or merely opinion posing as fact—is the sheer volume and consistency of the coverage, which ultimately depends on specific words and phrases that come pre-loaded with meaning through their repetitive use over years of news coverage.

These so-called code words carry immense significance for the reader or listener, not only because of their context but also because over time, we have been trained to respond to them in very specific ways. We draw conclusions based on how we receive them, conclusions that depend on the reader’s critical abilities—the ability to contextualise facts for example. If we are not made aware of the history behind the stories, then such emotive words carry a weight out of all proportion to their grammatical meaning.

Thus in the instance of the BBC’s presentation of (entirely legitimate) Palestinian resistance to occupation, it becomes “armed confrontation”, a phrase which is not only inaccurate but provocative as it implies that it is the Palestinians who are instigating the violence in trying to obtain their legitimate rights to a national home. The ‘confrontation’ is entirely one-sided consisting only of Palestinian “armed confrontation”. Israel has been completely removed from the equation.

It might appear that I’m nitpicking my choice of words from BBC coverage of the Palestine-Israel situation to suit my argument, but as I hope to show with the following examples, which represent only a few days of BBC news coverage, the message being delivered is quite clear; Palestinians are the aggressors; they are unreasonable, fanatical even; their only objective is the destruction of Israel. In only one story do we get a hint of how the Palestinians view the situation

Every Palestinian accepts that constructing a state while under occupation and sometimes direct attack from Israel was impossible.
news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4642554.stm

But the rest of the story omits any reference to the significance of this fact. In fact, it stands this reality on its head

But the popularity of Hamas in the opinion polls shows clearly that Palestinian voters also believe that Fatah’s leaders could have done more, despite all the difficulties. For them, the occupation is not an excuse.

So it's not really occupation that makes it impossible to construct a Palestinian state but "corruption" and the fact that Fatah "could have done more". There is no doubt that Fatah could have done more as there is no doubt that corruption is a serious problem, but for example, omitted from this story is the deliberate destruction by the Israeli occupation forces of the entire security infrastructure of the PNA (Palestinian National Authority) which included bombing police stations, destruction of the civil administrative apparatus which made governance all but impossible. This crucial aspect is completely missing from the BBC's 'news' and hence any real understanding of the situation is all but impossible.

The incessant repetition of the phrase "destruction of Israel" removes the history of Israel's creation through its destruction of the Palestinian state and the Palestinian right to restore its legitimate claim to its land. How it achieves this end is entirely determined by Israel, which captured Palestine by force in 1948 and has maintained its grip through sheer force of arms.

The BBC has one story on the background in which we read

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled or were displaced from their homes during the Israeli-Arab wars in 1948 and 1967.

The Palestinians have long asserted that the refugees have a moral and legal right to return to what was once Palestine – including land which is now Israel. [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3629923.stm](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-3629923)

Note the use of the word "displaced" to describe the forcible removal of Palestinians from their homes and their country. Elsewhere, such as in the former Yugoslavia or Sudan such actions are termed 'ethnic cleansing' but the BBC has sanitised its coverage of the history of the creation of Israel.

The piece continues

Some of the refugees still retain old deeds and keys to homes now occupied by Israelis.

But for Israel, granting the right of return would be tantamount to surrendering the country's identity.

What are we to make of these statements and how does it compare to the BBC's coverage of the ethnic cleansing that took place in for example, Kosovo, where BBC stories on the subject have titles such as "Kosovo clashes 'ethnic cleansing'", but search in vain for a BBC story that describes the forced removals of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians as "ethnic cleansing", a concept embedded in the term "surrendering the country's national identity".

The BBC, in its coverage of the Palestinian elections currently being held, when dealing with Hamas, presages all of its reporting with two consistent messages: first it reminds the listener/viewer that the US and the EU have branded Hamas as a "terrorist organisation" and secondly, when dealing with Hamas' decision to contest the elections, it asks whether this means they are "going to lay down their arms [or] renounce violence?" and it always inserts the statement that Hamas' avowed aim is the "destruction of Israel".

Hamas' participation in the elections has caused serious concern in Israel, the US and Europe, where it is banned as a terrorist organisation.

Hamas does not recognise Israel and has launched hundreds of attacks against its citizens. [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4645560.stm](https://www.bbc.com/news/middle-east-4645560)

But no mention of the hundreds of attacks by Israel that have resulted in the deaths of thousands of Palestinians. The BBC reports Palestinian resistance to the illegal occupation of its land (the word illegal is not used anywhere in any of the stories I've selected) chooses to describe Hamas' position as "anti-Israel", when the reality is of a people at war with an occupying force (another term missing from these two stories).

The Hamas election platform is clear: pro-religion, anti-corruption, anti-Israel. [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4640334.stm](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-4640334)

The story continues

None carries a gun. Hamas has taken a clear decision - its young gunmen will do the fighting. Its older, educated class will run for office.

One voter approaches a Hamas candidate.

"You should negotiate with Israel," the man says.

"Why?" the Hamas candidate replies. "We need to win our rights by force."

Note the use of the term "gunmen" and the selection of a single comment on negotiations removes the fact that Israel refuses to talk to Hamas having outlawed it as a "terrorist organization". So the reader is left with the impression that Hamas refuses to talk to the Israeli government (not true as it omits any reference to the demands of Hamas that Israel recognise for example, the right of return) and that Palestinians believe that negotiations are the only way forward.

It should be apparent that the core of the situation, background, context, everything that enables even the coverage the BBC chooses to use, has been gutted, the end-product conveying the impression to the reader that Hamas is at heart, only concerned with the destruction of Israel and the use of violence.

Even the fact that Hamas has decided to contest the elections for the first time, is set in a highly dubious context by the BBC with its echoes of the way Sinn Fein and the IRA were treated.

"How can you be a democratic party on the one hand and an armed militia on the other hand. Surely it doesn't mix?" I ask Dr Aziz Salem Dwaik, who is one of the Hamas candidates in Hebron.

Again, the term "armed militia" is highly loaded, most Palestinians view Hamas as an army of resistance, whereas "armed militia" carries connotations of a marginalised group, separate from the Palestinian people. The same piece goes on

“Will you negotiate with Israel if Hamas gets power in the election?”

“This is a choice that we will take into consideration whenever we feel that the Israelis are accepting our rights and admitting that we have rights in Jerusalem, we have rights all over the area where the Israelis built settlements and built the Israeli annexation and confiscation wall.”

The reporter, just in case we haven't gotten the message says

He [Dr Aziz Salem Dwaik] doesn't take the opportunity to repeat the call for Israel's destruction, enshrined in the movement's 1988 charter.

One is tempted to say that the reporter sounds disappointed that Dr Dwaik didn't “take the opportunity” to reinforce the BBC's message that Hamas is only interested in violence and the destruction of Israel. The BBC also neglects to mention that it is Israel that won't negotiate not only with Hamas but also with the PLO, unless the PLO disarms Hamas.

And, as the latest information on the election results become available with what looks like a Hamas victory, the BBC continues in the same vein in its distorted coverage

Hamas is also now a major power and it will enter parliament still committed to its armed confrontation with Israel, our correspondent adds. [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4649606.stm](https://www.bbc.com/news/middle-east-4649606)

Resistance to occupation is again presented as “armed confrontation” and in yet another story the same view of Hamas as only interested in violence and the destruction of Israel carries the same message as virtually every other story on the BBC's website

Its founding charter still calls for the destruction of the Jewish state, though that is not in its manifesto.

Many of its election posters glorify the suicide bombers it has sent to kill Israeli civilians and it says it will not be laying down its guns. [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4642554.stm](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-4642554)

The BBC's position is clear; all mention of Israel's illegal occupation, the overwhelming military power of Israel and the destruction it has wrought on the occupied territories is entirely absent. Anyone not versed with the history and context of the situation can reach only one conclusion through the BBC's coverage, namely that Israel is the innocent victim of 'extremists' and 'terrorists' and of people who refuse to negotiate.

Some secular Palestinians - and Christians - are nervous about its Islamist agenda. Israelis will have to decide whether they want to talk to the Palestinian Authority if it includes an organisation that has killed hundreds of its civilians.

Conversely, the Palestinians—who have had thousands of their citizens killed by the occupying Israeli army and not mentioned in the piece or in any of the other articles I've quoted from—are asked over and over again by the BBC reporters whether they will negotiate with Israel.

But he [Hamas official Mushir al-Masri] said Hamas would not hold peace talks with Israel.

“Negotiations with Israel is not on our agenda,” he said.

“Recognising Israel is not on the agenda either now.”

The likelihood of a resounding victory for Hamas – which is committed to the destruction of Israel – sent shockwaves through the Jewish state. news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4649606.stm

The situation is hollowed out, leaving just two issues with which the public has to try and make sense of the situation: recognition of Israel and the renunciation of violence. Having achieved this objective, it is then possible to determine the agenda for any possible public discourse on for example, Britain’s role in the situation. The BBC’s ‘news’ thus faithfully presents the state’s line in a way that avoids the more obvious (read crude) propaganda methods of the past. This is obvious if we see the congruence between the BBC’s and the state’s utterances

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“You cannot have one foot in politics and the other in terror,” she [Condoleeza Rice] said.

European officials echoed the call.

“The onus is now on Hamas to choose between democracy or violence. You cannot have both,” UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw told the BBC. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4650788.stm

Having pre-determined the situation, any meaningful discourse is impossible. Is it any wonder then, why it is so difficult for people to understand and hence support the Palestinians’ legitimate right?

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