

Israel-Palestine War: For UK Mainstream Media, What Israel Says Goes

The media coverage of the genocidal war on Gaza shows that it is still ingrained in the western psyche that Israel, not its Palestinian victims, has the benefit of the doubt

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Israel to cut Gaza links after war, said a [Financial Times headline](#) last weekend, with no attribution or quotation marks. As if such a cut could happen.

What [Israel](#) says goes.

This sums up much of western mainstream media coverage of Israel and [Palestine](#) over the past 22 years, and especially the BBC's. This is because, since the Second Intifada in 2001, the [realities and origins](#) of Israel's 75-year campaign to oust or subdue the Palestinians have never been properly explained.

The long displacement of the Palestinian nation and its reduction by means of expulsion, attrition, containment and violence have rarely been granted corrective context in our media.

Now, it seems the BBC and others are making desperate attempts to put this right, with background analysis and explanatory programmes, such as the series last week on BBC Radio 4, [Understand: Israel and the Palestinians](#). But it is all much too late.

Israel, after the [7 October attack](#) by Palestinian fighters, has been able to grasp the moral high ground and portray the breakout and killings as "unprovoked", with [western reporters' acceptance](#). It became, in the eyes of the West, simply a robust response to terrorism.

In [the same FT](#), HA Hellyer, from the Royal United Services Institute, a London military think-tank, is quoted repeating points by analysts such as Greg Philo and Mike Berry, in their two

books *Bad News from Israel* and *More Bad News from Israel*, and myself, in the Guardian and elsewhere, made during and after the Second Intifada.

“There are scores of international journalists in Israel who can cover every detail of every atrocity,” Hellyer said. “But there is nothing of similar depth available when it comes to the incredible civilian catastrophe unfolding in Gaza.”

This, crucially, he went on, has the effect of dehumanising Palestinian victims.

“This means... ” he said, “that westerners are more immune to Palestinian civilian suffering than to Israeli suffering.”

So, basically, Israelis are “people like us”, and Palestinians are an incoherent and anonymous mass.

BBC’s Global Reach

The BBC news teams and their producers and editors also have to fight a pervasive and often vicious campaign against them by pro-Zionist interests and a print media almost uniformly pro-Israel.

Pro-Israel groups choose to see the tragedies in Palestine and Israel through the lens of atrocities against Israelis. For various reasons, these groups are eager to do the BBC down, destroy it if possible, so that the debate about whether the BBC should call [Hamas fighters “terrorists”](#) or not has consistently been of far greater import than the unprecedented slaughter of trapped civilians in Gaza.

This way, the corporation will, it is reckoned, bend under the weight of public and political opprobrium. It often does.

The BBC is vitally important in any media reckoning because of its European and global reach and its reputation for fair and objective news and analysis.

I have been a strong and vocal critic of BBC Israel/Palestine coverage for 23 years, since the outbreak of the Second Intifada, not so much for its reporting but the way the coverage is shaped and introduced from London.

This manipulation, sometimes unknowing and cultural, but often done under great political pressure – and echoed by ITN, Sky and, to a lesser extent, Channel 4 – has broadly held that the violence in the region is an Israeli response to Palestinian attack. The reporting of this latest [calamitous turn of events](#) started that way, and Israel has largely kept the initiative. But is it beginning to change?

BBC and other mainstream TV and radio journalists have started to grill Israeli spokespeople.

Mishal Husain, on the BBC’s [Radio 4 Today programme](#) on 18 October, at 08:16, insisted to an Israeli colonel that an independent investigation would be the best way to find out who really attacked [al-Ahli Arab Hospital](#) in Gaza City on 17 October (he was outraged).

BBC outlets have featured prominently strong and reasoned Palestinian voices, such as

Mustafa Barghouti, of the Palestinian National Initiative; the Palestinian ambassador to the UK, Husam Zomlot; and [Ghada Karmi](#), the British-Palestinian academic and activist forced as a child from West Jerusalem early in the Nakba.

Nour Odeh, from Ramallah, [articulately explained](#) why she was not going to be hustled into condemning the Hamas attacks of 7 October, a favourite trope of western interviewers.

“They are already overwhelmed”

Former spokeswoman for the Palestinian Authority Nour Odeh says she fears there will be a “complete breakdown” at hospitals in Gaza following Israeli bombings. [#Newsnight](#) <https://t.co/EUeNjaVuOc> pic.twitter.com/g7TBNmh6el

— BBC Newsnight (@BBCNewsnight) [October 10, 2023](#)

Overwhelming Pressure

The bombing of the al-Ahli hospital is a prime example of what the BBC faces in terms of overwhelming Israeli and domestic Zionist pressure.

In my view, as a former BBC Middle East Correspondent who many times had to make instant live reporting judgements based on knowledge, experience and observation, the BBC reporter [Jon Donnison](#), was justified in reporting that

“the Israelis are investigating... but it is hard to see what else this could be [than an Israeli strike]... given the size of the explosion... when we have seen rockets fired out of Gaza we have never seen explosions of that scale... but it is still to be verified”.

What he said bore the weight of available evidence and was carefully caveated.

The BBC [immediately criticised Donnison](#) after Zionist and government outcry.

Had Donnison said that, against all experience, Hamas might have hit the hospital by accident, no one would have said a word. It is ingrained, still, in the western psyche that, in the final analysis, the state, in this case Israel, has the benefit of the doubt, not its victims.

Even during a broadly sensible inquest into coverage on BBC Radio 4's *The Media Show* on 18 October, the BBC's bias peeped through.

The presenter asked a journalist who had managed to film Hamas inside Gaza, in its tunnels, in the past, whether she would do the same after “the horrors of 7 October”? The implication was that only Hamas provides horror. Why did he not ask his own news team, Jeremy Bowen, for example, if after what Israel has repeatedly done in Gaza since 2007 he would still be prepared to talk to an Israeli military spokesman?

The UK government and opposition statements of unflinching support for Israel – “We want you to win,” Prime Minister Rishi Sunak told Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in Jerusalem, on camera – gave the British right-wing print media cover as they largely toed that line.

The more liberal-ish press wavered. The I ran a prominent story saying that government ministers believed the BBC was undermining diplomacy in the Middle East (the al-Ahli hospital story).

Trepidation Remains

The Guardian published Palestinian reaction and supportive analysis and comment, and, like the FT, carried moving stories about the women TV reporters who, under enormous danger, brought the stories of Gaza's stricken people to the screens of Al Jazeera and the Arabic-language, US-owned TV station Alhurra.

The BBC also reported well and vividly on the surge in settler and Israeli army killings and attacks on civilians in the West Bank, one in Qusra, near Nablus, where four Palestinians were shot dead and the subsequent funeral was attacked. Seventy-five West Bank [Palestinians were killed](#) in the week after 7 October.

But trepidation remains. The Guardian reportedly commissioned then dropped a piece by [US lawyer Dylan Saba](#) on the suppression and censorship of the Palestinian voice in the US. Saba received no explanation. The piece eventually was [published by N+1](#).

The Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, in London, asked Mandy Turner, a professor of conflict, peace and humanitarian affairs at the University of Manchester and a Palestine-Israel expert, for an article on "why 'peace' had been shattered between Palestinians and-Israelis?" (as if there was "a peace".) Unhappy with the edits that this "independent voice" had insisted on, Turner withdrew her article.

She eventually published it [elsewhere](#).

Then came the [Guardian's sacking](#) of Steve Bell, its noted cartoonist of more than 40 years' standing, for a cartoon showing Netanyahu preparing to excise surgically from his belly a portion of flesh with an outline shaped like the Gaza Strip.

When I saw it, I channelled David Levine's 1966 cartoon in the New York Review of Books of then-US President Lyndon Johnson showing off a Vietnam-shaped scar on his abdomen. This was exactly what Bell said he was inspired by.

But the Guardian saw, or chose under pressure to see, a reference to Shylock, the much put-upon Jew in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. How this might be seen as antisemitic is a long discussion for another article. Anyway, Bell lost the argument in what appears to have been a fit of Guardianesque trepidation.

Encouraging Signs

This is not a definitive moment to sum up the trends in the UK's mainstream media, but there are indications that sense is starting to prevail, at least in some quarters.

On 20 October, Philip Stephens (who was part of the BBC board of governors panel which reported very fairly on impartiality in the BBC's Israel-Palestine coverage in April 2006) asked in a [Financial Times opinion piece](#):

"When does a determination to destroy Hamas bleed into indiscriminate violence against the trapped Palestinians... unlike the buildings of Gaza, the Palestinian

aspiration to statehood cannot be bombed to dust. Israel's long-term security demands it sets off again on the path to a political solution."

In a leader, the same newspaper [raised the question](#) of "a grave violation of international law" in holding a population under siege. Other respectable voices have cited "collective punishment". All these and more are war crimes.

These are not questions that have been at the forefront of British media coverage since the effective collapse of any chance of a two-state solution 23 years ago. Nor has there been much honest reporting about the many excesses of violence and dispossession the Palestinians have endured at the hands of Israel and its western supporters since 1948.

For our media, Israel's security and its alliance with the West always trump Palestinian rights, freedom, justice and self-determination.

There might be a few encouraging signs, with the British media at last asking: how did this begin? What comes after?

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