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How Israel Lost the 2023 Gaza Propaganda War

الدعاية في الحرب على غزّة 2023: كيف خسرت إسرائيل سرديتها؟

Abstract: This study sheds light on the Israeli propaganda narrative during the ongoing Israeli genocide in Gaza. It is based on a qualitative content analysis of the messages that shaped the narratives, methods, and techniques utilized by the Israeli propaganda discourse in a persistent attempt to shape global perceptions of war and conflict. The Israeli narrative dominated the first three weeks of the war, and the Western mainstream media fully adopted the Israeli perspective for a long time, but the first indications of a shift in the global perception of the war began on 17 October 2023, the night of the bombing of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza city. At the end of the first month of the war, a new narrative emerged, primarily visible on digital media platforms, that clearly contradicts the Israeli propaganda narrative.

Keywords: The Israeli War on Gaza; Israeli Propaganda; Media; Digital Media.

ملخص: تسلّط هذه الورقة الضوء على الرواية الدعائية الإسرائيلية، خلال الإبادة الجماعية الإسرائيلية المتواصلة في غزّة، بالاعتماد على تحليل المحتوى الكيفي للرسائل المشكلة لهذه الرواية، والأساليب التي يستخدمها خطاب الدعاية الإسرائيلي في محاولته المستمرة بناء التصور العالمي للحرب والصراع. لقد هيمنت الرواية الإسرائيلية على مدى الأسابيع الثلاثة الأولى للحرب، وتبنّت وسائل الإعلام الغربية الرئيسة المنظور الإسرائيلي كليًّا لفترة طويلة. لكن المؤشرات الأولى لتحوّل التصور العالمي للحرب بدأت، في 17 أكتوبر/ تشرين الأول 2023، بعد قصف المستشفى الأهلي العربي في مدينة غزّة. ومع نهاية الشهر الأول من الحرب، ظهرت رواية جديدة على منصات الإعلام الرقمي أساسًا، وهي في تناقض واضح مع الرواية الدعائية الإسرائيلية.

كلمات مفتاحية: الحرب الإسرائيلية على غزّة؛ الدعاية الإسرائيلية؛ الإعلام؛ الإعلام الرقمي.

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Introduction

It is often said that "Words start wars and end them". In this sense, propaganda, and psychological warfare are vital weapons in contemporary wars and are closely linked to the power and influence of the media. They have been used in the modern era to subjugate and destroy the morale of adversaries.

Such tools had already played a role in World War I, but World War II became a turning point with the trial of new methods in this field. Subsequently, rival camps in the Cold War adopted soft power tools to influence and manage public perceptions and beliefs. The US-led wars on Iraq were another arena for the development of propaganda and media warfare, to the point where the 1990-1991 Gulf War became the first war in which the victory was broadcasted live on television screens, turning it into a televised national drama.[1]

The initial phase of Israel's current war on the Gaza Strip was accompanied by an unprecedented propaganda campaign that drummed up enormous global support for Israel. But Israel gradually began to lose its grip on the narrative in most parts of the world, including the West. While most Western governments, led by the United States, continue to support Israel's military operations, public opinion in much of the world has shifted dramatically in favour of the Palestinian narrative.

This paper argues that the war launched by Israel on Gaza in October 2023 represents a new chapter in the history of propaganda and psychological warfare. It explores how and why the Israeli propaganda narrative has ceded ground to the pro-Palestinian narrative over the course of the Gaza war. The paper analyses the content of the narratives and methods that each side has used in its attempts to shape global perceptions of the war.

Hasbara in Peril

At dawn on 7 October 2023, news of a Palestinian attack on Israeli forces and settlements northern the Gaza Strip broke around the world and quickly sparked an unprecedented propaganda campaign that manifested in three phases during the first two months of the war. Initially, it sought to shape the narrative around what happened on 7 October and create a global consensus in favour of Israel. During the second phase, Israel shifted its focus to justifying its brutal campaign of airstrikes, which had killed around 20,000 Palestinians by the 75th day of the war, destroying 60% of the Gaza Strip's infrastructure in an operation that has compelled the International Court of Justice to warn of a possible genocide. In the third stage, Israel's propaganda moved toward justifying its forced displacement of Palestinians and its vision of an Israeli victory.

Israel has utilized in this propaganda every possible media and communication tool to win over global support. It has designed and deployed wartime public relations campaigns, flooding social media with harsh and emotionally charged propaganda as well as running sustained communication campaigns via major international media outlets and by embedding dozens of journalists with its troops on the front lines. It has also taken dozens of journalists in military vehicles for tours of its ground incursion in northern Gaza.

Furthermore, Israel has waged a public diplomacy campaign to bolster its direct and indirect propaganda goals, including hosting successive solidarity visits by heads of state and diplomats to express their support for the Israeli war. These politicians were followed by a stream of prominent writers, artists, and business figures. The Israeli agency handling these campaigns developed a programme for these personalities that includes visits to the towns and kibbutzim in the so-called "Gaza envelope" that bore the brunt of the Palestinian attack.

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[1] Douglas Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1992).

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the network of institutions and units responsible for producing Israeli propaganda – *hasbara* or "explaining one's actions" in Hebrew – were quick to flood social media with their messaging. Such campaigns justifying wars are not new but what was new in this Israeli campaign was its unprecedented momentum and the sums of money invested in it.

Israel bought paid advertisements exhibiting dozens of images and videos full of brutal and emotionally charged scenes that allegedly took place on 7 October. The campaign began on X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube, before moving to other platforms. In the first week of the war alone, Israel paid for 30 sponsored ads on X, mainly aimed at European, particularly British, and American viewers. YouTube has hosted more than 75 different ads by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, directed at viewers in Western countries, in multiple languages.[2]

The ads portrayed the Palestinian Islamic resistance group Hamas as an "evil terrorist group" in the same vein as ISIS. They depicted scenes of abuse, including horrific images such as a picture of a naked, lifeless woman in a pickup truck, overlaid with messages such as "The world has defeated ISIS. The world will defeat Hamas". Another series of videos combined scenes of executions committed by ISIS with scenes purportedly featuring Hamas and other Palestinian fighters.

As Israel flooded the internet with its propaganda during the first weeks of the war, it sought to impose a total communications blackout on Gaza, knocking out its communications infrastructure with air strikes. Israel also revisited the strategy it had used during the 2008-2009 and 2014 wars on Gaza to control the narrative and determine the media agenda, particularly online.[3] At the same time, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched a campaign to put up posters of Israelis believed to be in Hamas custody on city walls around the world.[4]

The Israeli Army Spokesperson's Office further produced a 47-minute propaganda film titled "Bearing Witness to the October 7th Massacre", which became an essential part of the propaganda presented to Israel's guests, including presidents, political officials, and other personalities such as businessman Elon Musk. The film, made up of video clips collected from mobile phones and from Tik Tok, documents in detail every mutilated, charred corpse with multiple bullet wounds, scenes its producers claim were gathered from the battlefield during the Hamas attack.

The film's producers claimed that the footage could largely be credited to Hamas itself, as its fighters left behind a wealth of visual and audio evidence from body cameras and cell phones. The remainder is mostly footage found on devices belonging to Israeli victims and first responders, as well as security cameras. The film was accused of containing false and doctored footage, even though the Israeli censorship agency had said it avoided using footage of rape or sexual assault, children (particularly infants) being exposed to harm or torture, or people being burned alive, in respect to the wishes of the victims' families.[5]

The film does, however, show several bloodied bodies lying in a room with dead children, along with a man who is still alive. A gunman seizes an object and holds it to the man's neck, and the screen goes black. It is clear that the film, whose producers say it relied on footage taken on 7 October, was carefully produced, implying that Israel wants to document what happened to prevent any denial of the massacre. The

2 Liv Martin, Clothilde Goujard & Haley Fuchs, "Israel Floods Social Media to Shape Opinion around the War," *Politico*, 17/10/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/4pk2rtus

3 Thomas D. Mayfield, "A Commander's Strategy for Social Media," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 60 (1st Quarter 2011), pp. 79-83.

4 Desiree Adib, "Amid Israel-Hamas Conflict, 'Information War' Plays out on Social Media, Experts Say," *ABC News*, 24/11/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/27bvru54

5 Jennifer Stefano, "Watching Video Footage of the Heinous Hamas Attacks on Oct. 7 is a Moral Obligation," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 20/11/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/26x6vwt5

strategy is reminiscent of Dwight Eisenhower's order that the horrors of the Holocaust be documented as World War II came to an end.[6]

"Bearing Witness" was first shown on 23 October 2023 to a group of journalists, and then to members of the Knesset. In the following weeks, more screenings were organized in several cities around the world, including Philadelphia, New York, and London. The film was also shown at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, where it was watched by politicians, journalists, movie stars, business figures and others, as protestors were demonstrating outside the museum against the movie.[7]

The Israeli Army Spokesperson's Office uploaded dozens of propaganda videos on its YouTube channel,[8] portraying Hamas as a brutal terrorist group and humanizing members of the Israeli army, whether hostages or those currently fighting in Gaza. The videos showed intimate scenes of the Israeli army in their homes and with their children. There is a particular focus on female soldiers, emphasizing both their strength and their humanity.

The Ministry of Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism has also organized propaganda campaigns,[9] involving dozens of professionally produced videos, some of which feature the stories of Israeli households and families allegedly attacked by Palestinian fighters on 7 October. They also include testimonies of survivors from the Nova music festival, which was being held just outside northern Gaza when the attack took place, and testimonies of Israeli girls at the party who claimed that they were forced to hide in a rubbish bin to escape being shot. Testimonies from people of multiple nationalities, including Arabs, were also provided. One video about Israeli prisoners held by Hamas features Santa Claus happily reading letters from children from around the world. Then he comes across a letter from a girl in Israel, informing him of what happened on 7 October: "Dear Santa, I am writing to you for the first time. On 7 October, evil men came to our house. They injured my mother and my little sister and kidnapped my father. I was left on my own. I hope you can help me bring my father home". Santa then bursts into tears.[10]

The idea of Hasbara emerged in the 1980s, as Israel trained new leaders for its public diplomacy campaigns, combining its propaganda efforts with the concepts of public diplomacy and political marketing that were growing in popularity at the time. Such efforts date back to the early days of the Zionist movement, when its first figurehead Theodor Herzl had urged attendees at the Zionist Congress in 1899 to engage in promotional propaganda for their project. At the time, the term "propaganda" was still largely neutral. The term gained prominence during World War II and was widely used by the Nazis, while the Soviets also referred to it in a positive sense during the Cold War. The term acquired a negative meaning from a Western perspective to refer to communications based on deception and manipulation. In this context, the Israelis invented the concept of Hasbara.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu re-established the Hasbara doctrine, arguing that Israel does not need to change itself or improve its policies, it just needs to better explain "the morality of its cause" to the world.[11] Thereby, Israel has made powerful use of the digital media environment in its contemporary Hasbara efforts, even though Hasbara by its nature involves *disrupting* access to reliable information

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[6] Sloan Oliver, "Bearing Witness to the Evil of Hamas," *The Monroe County Reporter*, 15/11/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/564wwhej

[7] Andrew Wallenstein, "After Seeing Israel's Gory Oct. 7 Hamas Attack Footage, I Say You Shouldn't – Yet," *Variety*, 16/11/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/3bky4b6r

[8] Israel Defense Forces, IDF, Spokesperson's Unit Videos, YouTube, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/yc2jmbxb

[9] "Israel is under attack," Ministry of Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism, Israel National Digital Agency, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/3mnhy8zj

[10] "Hostages and Their Families Speak," Israel National Digital Agency, 19/12/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/32yxa2e9

[11] Anshel Pfeffer, "Screening Hamas Atrocities: Why Hasbara Is Another Israeli Concept that's Failed," *Haaretz*, 26/10/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/43y6avau

through a wide range of technologies. But the strategy's fundamental goals remain to legitimize certain perceptions and delegitimize others by relying on narratives that reinforce stereotypes through imposing positive or pejorative labels on information and its sources.[12]

In recent decades, Israel's Hasbara apparatus has grown into a vast machine that incorporates a string of government agencies and domestic and foreign programmes. These include the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Israeli Army Spokesperson's Unit, the Jewish Agency, and the Ministry of Tourism,[13] as well as programmes such as fellowships and scholarships for students in communications and related disciplines. In 2009, Israeli leaders realized that the 2006 and 2008-2009 wars had inflicted significant damage on the country's reputation. In response, the Washington-based Israel Project conducted an extensive study in how Israel could reintegrate its image into the mainstream media, generating what it called its "Global Language Dictionary",[14] drawn up by Republican expert Frank Luntz, which serves as a guide for prominent Israelis and defenders of Israel.[15] A review of this dictionary reveals echoes of the current tactics being used by Israeli and US political leaders alike, who are putting the now well-evolved Hasbara machine to the test.

Propaganda Approaches

The propaganda campaign that has accompanied the 2023 war on Gaza is the largest in Israel's history. But this wave of propaganda has rapidly collapsed, despite its scale and early successes, as reflected in evidence presented by the international media. Indeed, Israel owed the success of its propaganda in the first three weeks of the war to several factors. The first was the shock inflicted by the attack on 7 October. Flooding the world with this discourse was an important driver of international support for Israel and helped create the political and moral justification for its onslaught in Gaza. The second factor was Israel's significant investment in the digital environment, forking out about $60 million in paid advertisements on social media networks in the first month of the war alone.[16] This is due to Israel's conviction of the importance of moving quickly to shape the world's first impressions of events. The third factor was Israel's investment in the global reputation of its army, portraying its operations as professional and carefully planned so as to not target civilians, and claiming that the army was capable of achieving its goals of self-defence while respecting human rights and international law.[17] However, as explained below, these three factors subsequently contributed to the decline and, ultimately, the defeat of Israel's propaganda campaign.

During the successful early weeks of the war, Israel and its supporters focused their propaganda on a set of interrelated narratives that are structurally complex, dating back far into the history of Zionist propaganda. The following are some of the most prominent narratives:

1. Israel as the "Victim"

Early Zionist and then Israeli propaganda were historically based on Jewish victimhood; e victims of anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, hatred, terrorism, and Arabs. For more than seven and a half decades, Palestinians

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[12] Chas W. Freeman, Jr, "Hasbara and the Control of Narrative as an Element of Strategy," Middle East Policy Council, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/345u4sfw

[13] "The Hasbara Apparatus: Units, Tasks and Areas of Responsibility," The Center for the Renewal of Democracy, Molad, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/4nuz7kn6

[14] Dr. Frank Luntz, *The Israel Project's 2009: Global Language Dictionary*, The Israel Project for Security, Freedom and Peace (Jerusalem/ Washington, DC: The Israel Project (TIP), 2009).

15   M. Reza Behnam, "Uncovering Israeli Propaganda: Wars to Wage with Words to Bamboozle," *CounterPunch*, 16/8/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/778b5m2v

[16] Martin, Goujard & Fuchs.

[17] "Prisoners, Propaganda, and the Battle over the Gaza War Narrative," *The Intercept*, 29/11/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/mr3mmaej

and Israelis have been fighting over this narrative of victimhood, as each sideattempts to convince the world that they are the only injured party.

Much research has established that the notion of status in contemporary international relations is not limited to physical, military, and economic power, but may also come from the ability to contribute to peace, or the ability to honour and recognize those who show compassion toward distant strangers in need, through foreign aid and humanitarian assistance, or by hosting refugees. Another source of this status in international relations[18] is being recognized as a victim: "Those who are described as victims can expect greater resources, sympathy, and support in all its forms, as recognition of this party's victimhood may restore their sense of power and their moral image".[19] As the "perfect victim" in the eyes of the West, Jews have earned sympathy that translates into new forms of unconditional support, a willingness to bear historical costs and reparations.

After the right-wing Likud Party came to power in 1977, Israel increasingly played on this sense of victimhood, with Likud prime ministers repeatedly claiming that the world is against them. Researchers have shown that Israel has promoted a self-image of victimhood to strengthen its ties with Jews around the world and to garner greater global diplomatic, financial, strategic, and political support.[20] With current Israeli politics dominated by manifestation of the right wing, the country's political and cultural communications efforts have emphasized this victimhood role. Thus, The Israeli narrative of the 7 October attack was consistent with the victimhood narrative. The attack represented a golden opportunity for Israel to win the sympathy and support of the world based on its discourse of victimhood.

2. Demonizing the Palestinians and Hamas

In contrast to the image of itself as the victim, Israel's propaganda requires that the Palestinian "other" be seen in complete contrast. Therefore, Palestinians are consistently portrayed as terrorists, barbarians, murderers, saboteurs, the enemies of human civilization, rapists of women, savages who cut the throats of children, and so on. All of this is accompanied by videos and pictures purporting to show them carrying out such horrific acts.

However, the demonization of the Palestinians and their portrayal as saboteurs and terrorists did not begin with this war. Instead, what is new is the reformulation of this propaganda since 7 October to portray them as *absolute* evil. This means that the Palestinians are evil in themselves regardless of their acts, that this evil has no beginning and no end, and that the only way to stop it is by fighting and exterminating it.[21]

Building on this central narrative, Israel's political leaders and propaganda apparatus – allied with the Western media – has consistently sought to dehumanize the Palestinians. Take for example the comment of Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Galant: "We are fighting human animals".[22] The Israeli Minister of Heritage, Amihai Eliyahu, also suggested in a radio interview that Israel could drop a nuclear bomb on Gaza.[23] This

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[18] Alex Vandermaas-Peeler, Jelena Subotic & Michael Barnett, *Constructing Victims: Suffering and Status in Modern World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[19] Nurit Shnabel & Masi Noor, "Competitive Victimhood among Jewish and Palestinian Israelis Reflects Differential Threats to Their Identities: The Perspective of the Needs-Based Model," in: K. J. Jonas & T. A. Morton (eds.), *Restoring Civil Societies: The Psychology of Intervention and Engagement Following Crisis* (New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), pp. 192-207.

[20] Michael Barnett, "Cosmopolitanism: Good for Israel? Or bad for Israel?" in: Emanuel Adler (ed.), *Israel in the World: Legitimacy and Exceptionalism* (London, UK: Routledge, 2012).

[21] Azmi Bishara, "Moral Matters in Hard Times," *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies,* 14 November 2023, accessed on 4/2/2024, at: http://tinyurl.com/zr955ttz

[22] "Nuḥārib Ḥayawānāt ʿalā Hayʾat Bashar.. Wazīr al-Difāʿ al-Isrāʾīlī Yuwajih Bi-Farḍ Ḥiṣār Shāmil ʿalā Qiṭāʿ Ghazzah," Al-Jazeera Mubashir, Youtube, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/35taj9ja

[23] "ʿAmīḥāy ʾIlīyāhū.. Man Huwa al-Wazīr al-Isrāʾīlī al-Lathī Ṣaraḥ Bi-Iḥtimāliyyat Qaṣf Ghazzah Bi-Qunbila Nawawīyyah?" *BBC Arabic*, 6/11/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/yvk5ua6h.

language of dehumanization has historically served as a starting point for justifying genocide, as was the case in Rwanda in 1994, and with the Jews themselves in the Holocaust.

Such harsh descriptions of those deemed enemies, the lowering of their status, and the demonization of their actions, serve to portray their suffering deserved, or unworthy of attention, and instead something to celebrate, because they are seen as threat to society.

Israel's demonization of Palestinians intensified on an unprecedented scale in the first month of the latest war, invoking Nazism and the Holocaust, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS. This propaganda extended to the media and institutions active in the public sphere in the US and other Western countries, leading to violence against Palestinian children and youth in the diaspora.[24]

3. Israel's "Moral and Human Superiority"

This third pillar of the Israeli propaganda narrative complements the victim vs. the evil narrative. It holds that the victim is morally and humanly superior. The construction and dissemination of the concept of shared humanity have placed increasing importance globally on the suffering of others and its alleviation, and compassion toward others is thus seen as the highest act of humanity.

In Israeli propaganda, however, the suffering of Israelis is more important, painful, and impactful on the world stage. . Israeli victims have stories, homes, and addresses. They are fathers and mothers with children gathering around dinner tables. These are innocent children who have been deprived of their future or are still waiting for their fathers. They are beautiful, superior women with stories and dreams. Israeli individuals thus supposedly reflect the image of Israel itself, in their humanity and their superiority.

Israel's propaganda is crowned with an image of Israeli superiority since Israel is the strongest military power in the region, has a special relationship with the US, has won several wars, has a regional monopoly on nuclear weapons, is an occupying power, and has moved from economic poverty to economic and technological superiority. This also implies that the conscience of the world to rest assured that the Israeli army will carry out its mission in Gaza professionally and as quickly as possible, with a constant effort to reduce the collateral damage inherent to every military conflict.

4. The "Legitimacy" of Israel's Operation

The fourth narrative asserts the legitimacy of all of Israel's acts. Acknowledging Israeli suffering, which results from its enemies' acts, allows it to portray all acts against it as crimes, and for those affected to be formally labelled as victims, making it easier to obtain attention, redress, compensation, and punishment for the perpetrators.

In this context, Israel has consistently used the argument of self-defence to justify its military actions, including forced displacement and genocide. Israeli leaders have repeated the mantra that "Israel did not choose this war, but it was imposed upon us".[25] This premeditated use of the propaganda from the outset of the war sought to confer legitimacy on Israeli actions, as the government tried to portray its actions as consistent with international humanitarian law. Israel further uses a number of key methods to convey these narratives. Below are the most prominent ones:

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[24] On 25 November 2023, three young Palestinians were shot in Vermont. Hisham Awartani, Tahseen Ali Ahmad, and Kinnan Abdalhamid were students at American universities. They were on their way to a family dinner when they were attacked because they were wearing Palestinian *kufiya* scarves. Before that, on 16 October, another Palestinian, a child, was stabbed 26 times and killed in Illinois. His mother was also injured in the hate crime, related to the war in Gaza.

[25] "Baʿda Taṣaʿud al-Intiqāḍāt Li-Ḥarbihā Bi-Ghazzah.. Hal Tuwājih Isrāʾīl ʿUzlatan Diblumāsīyyah?" *Al-Hurra*, 15/12/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/4frd72b5

a. Fragmentation and Decontextualization

There are dozens of examples of Israel using the techniques of fragmentation and decontextualization in its messaging. This even applies to its labelling of its operation as a war against Hamas in Gaza, not against Palestinian resistance as a whole. It portrays its operation as one that began out of nowhere in response to the 7 October attack, utterly ignoring the history of the conflict.

b. Media Inundation and Focus

This involves amplification and exaggeration in the form of large and focused media campaigns related to specific issues, over a short timeframe. Israel used this method intensively during the first three weeks of the war, and it undoubtedly had a direct impact in terms of controlling the narrative and building perceptions about the violence. This technique has been effective despite the proliferation of videos, photos, and reports on the killing of Palestinians in Gaza, including children, and the abuse of Palestinian women. It works despite Israel's continuous violations, such as arrests of innocent people without trial – a tactic used throughout the history of the occupation - and two decades of systematic destruction of Palestinian homes by Israel, violations largely ignored by the Western media.

c. Confusion and Counter-Agendas

This approach allows propaganda to reshape the media's agenda and priorities, shifting media outlets' interests, and, by extension, change the public opinion, particularly when Israel commits war crimes and targets civilians. Examples include its early campaign in the war to shape global perceptions of what happened on 7 October and its claims that the Hamas leadership were hiding command posts underneath Gaza's hospitals. Then, when Israel increased its bombing and the civilian casualties began to mount, it started diverting public debate away from discussions about post-Hamas defeat scenarios. Finally, as the Israeli army's ground losses increased, it leaked its plans to flood Gaza's tunnel network, a topic that dominated the media agenda in the tenth week of the war.

d. Moral Panic

Stirring up moral panic through the media, a highly focused tactic, is an extension of the use of propaganda techniques such as creating scapegoats or waging witch hunts. These strategies have been used throughout history to achieve political and religious goals, carefully manufactured by limited elite centres.[26] However, the power of moral panic has multiplied in the digital media environment. Israeli propaganda deployed this tactic intensively in the early days of the war, spreading horrific images and videos allegedly depicting a massacre by Palestinian "terrorists", appealing to the conscience and humanity of the world. While it is undeniable that there were civilian casualties in the attack, the propaganda campaign boiled over into a state of shock and moral panic.

How Did Israel Lose the Propaganda War?

There is no doubt that Israel's brutal campaign in Gaza, its direct targeting of civilians, the horrific scenes of destruction left by its bombing, and the worsening humanitarian situation as a result of the blockade have all shifted the global narrative about the war on Gaza. These dynamics have prompted audiences around the world to question the true nature of the Israeli army, and to understand the broader context of the war, and the roots of the conflict. This raised doubts about the legitimacy of Israel's campaign, placing its propaganda in a difficult situation.

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26   Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 1-3.

The Israeli narrative dominated the first three weeks of the war. The harbingers of a shift emerged at the night of 17 October 2023, when Al-Ahli Arab Hospital was bombed. At that moment, a new narrative began to emerge that contradicted the Israeli propaganda narrative, gaining momentum by the end of the fourth week of the war. Multiple polls in Europe and the United States started to show that public opinion was shifting.[27] The political positions of world powers also began to shift, and the international consensus that had been behind Israel at the beginning of the war began to fragment, as seen in voting patterns on resolutions at the UN Security Council and General Assembly.

1. New Narratives and Shifting Trends

The new narrative began to gain momentum with revelations that a series of stories about the events of 7 October had been false. This narrative began to find its way into the liberal Western press. By the eighth week of the war, it had reached Israeli media outlets, which attempted to break out of the constraints imposed by the military censor.

The new narrative proved that much of what had been printed and broadcasted about the Palestinian attack during the first weeks of the war was deliberately misleading. This included stories of children being beheaded and women being raped during the Hamas attack on the Israeli settlements around the Gaza Strip. After it was proven that one widely-shared image of a burned child had been mocked up using Artificial Intelligence, many Western media outlets – including US sources such as the *Los Angeles Times* – deleted or corrected reports about Hamas fighters raping women. Even the Israeli army dropped claims that 40 children had been beheaded,[28] after the White House also distanced itself from the claim.

The bombing of Al-Ahli Hospital represented a turning point in the battle for the global narrative on Gaza. The Israeli army immediately blamed the Palestinian Islamic Jihad movement for firing the projectile that hit the hospital. On 24 October, *The New York Times* published an investigation by several of its correspondents which cast doubt on the Israeli narrative and concluded that the missile seen in the most highly publicized videos, brandished by Israel as evidence for its claims, was most likely not the cause of the blast at the hospital.[29] Another investigation by French newspaper L*e Monde* concluded that the Israeli army's claim that a Palestinian rocket caused the hospital explosion was incorrect, and that the missile that struck the hospital was launched from Israel.[30]

On 11 December 2023, French newspaper *Libération* published an investigation bringing together a mass of evidence and testimonies in a comprehensive assessment of what happened during the Palestinian attack on Israel two months earlier. It concluded that much of what had been described as atrocities by Palestinian fighters, reported by the international media and promulgated by Western politicians, never happened. However, it added that these lies were promoted over a period of weeks by volunteer rescuers, Israeli soldiers and officials, and American political leaders.[31]

[27] See: Shibley Telhami, "Is the Israel-Gaza war changing US public attitudes?," *Commentary*, Brookings, 2 November 2023, accessed on 6/5/2024, at: https://tinyurl.com/3bn6wybh; Geneive Abdo, "How American Public Opinion on Palestine Shifted," *Essays*, The Cairo review: The American university in Cairo, Winter 2024, accessed on 6/5/2024, at: https://tinyurl.com/5eymhvet; Matthew Smite, "British attitudes to the Israel-Gaza conflict: February 2024 Update," *YouGov*, 15/2/2024, accessed on 6/5/2024, at: https://tinyurl.com/bdfxtbx8; Jeffrey M. Jone, "Americans' Views of Both Israel, Palestinian Authority Down: Eight-point decline for Palestinian Authority, 10 for Israel," *Gallup*, 4/3/2024, accessed on 6/5/2024, at: https://tinyurl.com/4rdrycr3

[28] The spokesman for the Israeli army declined to confirm these claims, telling Turkish news agency *Anadolu*: "We have seen these reports and we have no details or confirmation on this matter". See: "Israeli Army Says It Does Not Have 'Confirmation' about Allegations that 'Hamas Beheaded Babies'," *Anadolu Agency*, 11/10/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/54t73zdsTop of Form

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[29] Aric Toler et al., "A Close Look at Some Key Evidence in the Gaza Hospital Blast," *The New York Times*, 24/10/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/2vx4s2br

[30] Liselotte Mas & Thomas Eydoux, "Gaza Hospital: What Detailed Image Analysis Reveals about Deadly Blast," *Le Monde*, 19/10/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/yc8bzsb4

[31] Cédric Mathiot, Florian Gouthière & Jacques Pezet, "Israel, 7 Octobre: Un Massacre et des Mystifications," *Libération*, 11/12/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/5n6mst5x

The *Libération* investigation also showed that information widely circulated about the numbers of Israeli deaths and child victims contradicts official Israeli figures. The Israeli police had informed the social security agency of the names of 789 identified civilian bodies, while only one child was found among the civilians killed on 7 October. This may partly explain why Israel revised its death toll downwards. On 14 October, Israel had announced that "more than 1,400 people" had been killed by Hamas fighters. On 10 November however, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs published "updated estimates" indicating that the figure was 1,200.[32] Media outlets also published reports indicating that Israeli forces themselves were responsible for the killing of a number of Israeli civilians and military personnel on 7 October.[33]

The siege and storming of al-Shifa Hospital, starting in the sixth week of the war, took place amid growing global scepticism of Israel's narrative. Yet Benjamin Netanyahu's account on X published a video clip purporting to show a Hamas military facility underneath the hospital.[34] Israel was now using its propaganda discourse to justify targeting hospitals, claiming that there were Hamas military headquarters or tunnels underneath them. It tried to deploy this claim to its advantage but its claims fell apart after its forces finally stormed the facility.

The only "evidence" Israel could offer for its claims was a video animation produced from the imagination of Israeli graphic designers. Videos shot by the Israeli army from inside the hospital were no more convincing. One showed an officer taking a weapon out of an MRI machine and displaying a page that he claimed was a schedule for Hamas operations. In fact, as social media users immediately pointed out, it was a hospital staff timetable. The clip sparked a wave of ridicule that reached the Western media. A week later, the Israeli army published images of a tunnel outside the hospital, with a small meeting room at the end, and took journalists to explore it. Shortly afterwards, former Army Chief of Staff and Prime Minister Ehud Barak said in an interview with CNN that, in fact, it was Israel that had dug the tunnel 40 years ago when it was still controlling the Strip.[35]

On 24 November, a short truce began between Palestinian militants and the Israeli army, which was extended twice and lasted for a total of seven days. Dozens of Israelis held in Gaza were exchanged for hundreds of Palestinians held by Israel, and some humanitarian aid was allowed to be delivered into the Strip. The truce was accompanied by an exchange of propaganda and psychological warfare between the belligerents. It was notable that Hamas presented a new version of its own narrative to take a position that was more hard-line, on the one hand, and more humane on the other. High-quality videos that showed detainee handovers by Hamas demonstrated the power of a careful media strategy. It was clear that Hamas used drone photography, then moved to filming on the ground, with good use of lighting and advanced production techniques.

These scenes prompted a wave of questions and comparisons around the world between the way Hamas had been depicted during Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and the scenes in which Israeli civilian detainees were handed over to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The scenes included masked Al-Qassam Brigades fighters lifting elderly Israeli women and gently placing them in ICRC vehicles, and detained women and girls waving goodbye to Hamas fighters. Many female detainees also told the media that they had been treated well and shown respect by Hamas fighters. Hamas thus used the handover to

32 "Arqām Wa-Asʾilah ʿan Hujūm Ḥamās ʿalā Isrāʾīl fī 7 Tishrīn al-Awwal/ Uktūbar," *Euronews Arabic*, 15/12/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/4tj6ejvz

33 "A Growing Number of Reports Indicate Israeli Forces Responsible for Israeli Civilian and Military Deaths Following October 7 Attack," *Mondoweiss*, 22/10/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/3expc8a7

34 "Hamas-ISIS is Sick. They Turn Hospitals into Headquarters for their Terror. We just Released Intelligence Proving It," Benjamin Netanyahu, X, 27/10/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/r39nname

35 "Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak on Israel's Al-Shifa Hospital Claims," *CNN*, 20/11/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/y245ysf9

project its own morality - compared to Israel's brutal bombing of civilians - based on treating prisoners first as human beings and then as strategic assets in the battle, and not as spoils of war to be tortured in tunnels.[36]

Adding to the impact of this strategy, Hamas handed over one group of detainees in the heart of Gaza, a clear message of defiance to the Israeli army, which had claimed it was in control of the north of the Strip. The messaging of strength on both sides now took the form of a tit-for-tat battle. While Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was inspecting soldiers in northern Gaza and sending the world a message that Israel was restoring its military supremacy, returning female detainees were testifying that top Hamas figure Yahya Sinwar had visited and spoken with detainees in one of the tunnels.[37]

It is clear that the contest for the role of the victim has played a major role in the media battle between the two parties. However, the images of bloody scenes in Gaza, and the scale of Israel's killing and destruction, have been the most significant factor in shifting the global narrative. International media outlets finally began searching for a context in which to place the events and citing the history of the conflict. For example, they mentioned that in the 15 years prior to 7 October, no fewer than 6,407 Palestinians had been killed, compared to 308 Israelis, according to UN data.[38]

Criticism of Israel also began to increase in the international media. At the beginning of the third month of the war, as the United States continued to obstruct any meaningful progress at the Security Council, the image of Israel as the victim began to disappear from much media coverage and commentary. On 9 December, an editorial in *Le Monde* wrote:

Israel has lost itself in the Gaza massacre, an unprecedented and unjustified massacre. Israel has drifted to the extreme right. The failure of the United States to protect Israel from itself is a moral mistake whose devastating effects the country will not be able to avoid.[39]

The official propaganda war has been reflected in the online struggle for supremacy on social media platforms, which has witnessed a major shift over the course of the conflict on the ground. A study by the *Washington Post* found that the number of pro-Palestinian hashtags on TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook had doubled, against a decline in pro-Israel hashtags. The study found that the hashtag #freepalestine was used 39 times more than the hashtag #standwithisrael on Facebook, and 26 times more on Instagram.[40] Further, a study of TikTok posts by Australian tech entrepreneur Anthony Goldbloom, at the end of November, found that United States-based users of the platform saw pro-Palestine posts 54 times more than pro-Israel content that month, compared to 36 times a month earlier. The ratio of TikTok users in Australia was about 60:1 in favour of Palestine.[41]

Israel's propaganda apparatus reacted by portraying the dominance of the pro-Palestinian narrative on social media as a rising tide of anti-Semitism, accusing voices supporting it of promoting anti-Semitic content, denying atrocities, and promoting hate speech, specifically on TikTok.[42]

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[36] Andrew Mills, "Qatar Hostage Mediators Press Hamas on Civilian Releases - Diplomats, Sources," *Reuters*, 25/10/2023, accessed on 28/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/3r5rzf9s

[37] "Hostage recalls meeting with Hamas leader in tunnel during captivity," *Israel Hayom*, 28/11/2023, accessed on 6/5/2024, at: https://tinyurl.com/7z8t283a

[38] Leo Sands & Adela Suliman, "Why Are Israel and Hamas at War? A Basic Explainer," *The Washington Post*, 22/11/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/4prujanw

[39] "Israel Is Losing Itself in the Carnage in Gaza," *Le Monde*, 9/12/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/5n8j3zh5

[40] Drew Harwell, "TikTok Was Slammed for Its Pro-Palestinian Hashtags. But It's not Alone," *The Washington Post*, 13/11/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/5j83zrfs

[41] John Kehoe, "TikTok's Anti-Israel Bias Exposed by Aussie Tech Entrepreneur," *Financial Review*, 8/12/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/27h3stxd

[42] Jeffrey Sonnenfeld & Steven Tian, "The Israel-Hamas War Reveals the Fundamental Flaws of Social Media," *Time*, 3/12/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/mw2eu4hz

2. The Disintegration of Israel's Media Censorship

Israel imposed military censorship on information relating to security affairs and the ongoing hostilities in the very first day it declared its war. This censorship prevented the publication of leaks about Israeli government meetings or secret political deliberations. The Israeli media also avoided publishing or broadcasting pictures or videos of material or human losses incurred by the Israeli army, which provided the media with videos and pictures that fitted with the image it wanted to portray of the military operation.

Yet Israel did allow some journalists to embed with its forces at the beginning of the ground incursion, subject to direct censorship, restricted to presenting the story from one side. The military censor simultaneously prevented foreign journalists, from entering Gaza independently of the army and freely reporting on what they saw. Fareed Zakaria, an analyst at CNN, said that from the second month onwards, the Israeli army had allowed the entry of a limited number of foreign journalists on the condition that they "submit all materials and footage to the Israeli military for review prior to publication".[43]

Israel has continuously tried to maintain control over everything published about the war. As the conflict entered its second month, Israelis themselves began expressing reservations about official censorship, and even major daily newspapers started to try to bypass it, in echoes of a domestic political crisis that had been raging for months before the war. *Haaretz* published an investigation which found that on 7 October, an Israeli helicopter struck both Palestinians and Israelis in the town of Re'im near Gaza, helping explain the high Israeli death toll in operation Al-Aqsa flood, as well as undermining the Israeli narrative that Hamas fighters deliberately targeted civilians. Following this report, the Israeli Ministry of Communications took punitive measures against the newspaper, cutting its funding, and suspending government advertising contracts with it.[44]

At the start of the ninth week of the war, Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth* reported that more than 5,000 wounded soldiers had arrived at Israeli hospitals since hostilities began, and that more than 2,000 soldiers had been officially recognized as disabled by the Ministry of Defence. After the military censor intervened, the newspaper was forced to retract and delete the article, which had already sparked outcry.[45]

Israeli military censorship was not limited to traditional audio-visual and print media, but also extended to websites and social media, striking deals with companies such as Meta and X to delete or prohibit content it sees as harming Israel. Overall, the war has revealed significant structural weaknesses affecting Israel's information sector,[46] and military censorship of the media has proven to be a rudimentary tool for countering or burying information from the battlefield.

3. The Diversionary Objectives of the War

Israel announced at the start of the fighting that Operation "Iron Swords" aimed to wipe out Hamas and end its rule of the Strip by neutralizing its military capabilities, including the destruction of command centres, training facilities, rocket launch sites, the tunnel network under Gaza and military workshops, as well as assassinating the movement's leaders. It also aimed to free the Israeli and foreign hostages held by Hamas. These aims guided Israel's management of its military operations and its vision of victory.[47]

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43 Omar Suleiman, "Israel Has Lost the War of Public Opinion," *Aljazeera*, 30/11/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/yshbfzkr

44 "Ḍabṭ al-Jabhah al-Iʿlāmiyyah al-Dākhiliyyah.. al-Ḥukūmah al-Isrāʾīliyah Tuṭālib Bi-Qaṭʿ al-Tamwīl ʿan Ṣaḥīfah Tajāwazat al-Raqābah al-ʿAskarī," *Al-Arab*, 25/11/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/36futr9v

45 "Taḥta Ḍaghṭ al-Raqābah al-ʿAskariyyah.. Yedīʿūt Aḥrunūt Tatarajaʿ ʿan Nashr Aʿdād Jarḥā al-Jaysh al-Isrāʾīlī fī Ghazzah," *Euronews Arabic*, 10/12/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/yrmnt36c

46 Michael Eisenstadt, "Israel's Campaign Against Hamas in Gaza: War Aims and Operational Challenges," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 31/10/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/rbsu6chp

47 Ibid.

Israel's continued escalation and carpet bombing of Gaza, unparalleled since the allies' indiscriminate bombing of cities in World War II – Hamburg (40,000 dead), Darmstadt (12,000 dead), and Dresden (25,000 dead) – has demonstrated that it has not learned a key lesson from history: aerial bombardment of cities does not achieve its intended military goals. The war has raged on, but on the ground at the time of writing, Israel has not achieved any of its desired outcomes. Hamas continues to fire rockets and kill Israeli soldiers, while Israel has failed to free a single hostage from Gaza except through negotiations. It is clear that Israel's Western allies are becoming increasingly uncomfortable as a result of its inability to achieve a swift victory, and their political and moral dilemmas have deepened as the number of civilian casualties spirals.

Furthermore, history reveals precisely zero examples of such bombing campaigns directly leading the people on the receiving end to overthrow their governments. World War II is telling: the Allies bombing of German cities only pushed the German public toward greater cohesion on the home front. Conversely, the German bombing of Britain, which inflicted 40,000 casualties, rallied the British public around Winston Churchill. The United States has tried the same method many times, in vain. Its relentless bombing of Vietnam failed to achieve victory. During the Gulf War, US airstrikes disrupted 90% of electricity generation in Iraq. Neither these, nor similar cases, prompted the public to revolt against their rulers or to surrender.

David Patrikarakos, a war correspondent and military information warfare expert, told *ABC News* in November that the military battle with Hamas and Israel is predetermined: "Hamas can't defeat the IDF [Israel Defense Forces] and [the] IDF can't obliterate Hamas. So, you have a wider battle, let's call it an information war".[48] The flood of propaganda that has accompanied this conflict has thus turned Israel's declared goals into nothing more than political propaganda and psychological warfare to distract from the operation's true goals: revenge and the restoration of Israel's image of a militarily superior entity that always emerges victorious.

The meaning of victory then, as defined by Israeli propaganda, is revenge. Israel's conduct is guided by vengeance, operating on the basis that victory is defined by the extent to which it kills and destroys. This mentality of revenge is echoed in comments by the head of the Shin Bet internal security agency, recalling Israel's "Operation Wrath of God" in the 1970s in retaliation for the kidnapping of the Israeli sports team at the Munich Olympic, and suggesting Israel assassinate Hamas leaders at home and abroad, describing them as "Children of Death". Indeed, the history of Zionism is full of this pursuit of vengeance.

According to *Foreign Affairs*, as Israeli forces pushed deeper into southern Gaza, their actual goal was far from clear. Robert A. Pape wrote that although Israeli leaders claim they are targeting Hamas alone, the apparent lack of distinction raised real questions about what the government actually intends to do. He asked whether Israel's eagerness to destroy Gaza was a product of the same incompetence that led to the IDF's abject failure to confront the Hamas attack on 7 October.[49]

Israel's deceptive stated goals since the beginning of the war mark the culmination of its 17-year strategy of "mowing the lawn" against Palestinian militants in Gaza.[50] Its desire to annihilate its opponent now has no boundaries and seeks to target human beings and destroy their surroundings. This is Israel's

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48 Desiree Adib, "Amid Israel-Hamas Conflict, 'Information War' Plays out on Social Media, Experts Say," *ABC News*, 24/11/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/27bvru54

49 Robert A. Pape, "Israel's Failed Bombing Campaign in Gaza: Collective Punishment Won't Defeat Hamas," *Foreign Affairs*, 6/12/2023, accessed on 23/12/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/3ccpayks

50 "Mowing the Grass" is a metaphor referring to Israel's policy against the Palestinian resistance in Gaza, consisting of intermittent military operations every few years to exhaust and reduce the adversary's ability to harm Israel, and achieving temporary deterrence. These objectives are attained through incidental or large-scale operations. Proponents of the strategy had long argued that regularly "trimming" Gaza militants' capabilities, like grass, would erode their fighting capacity over time.

true strategic goal, hidden behind the aims it declares in its propaganda. The stated aims of the war have thus served as deceptive propaganda to cover for Israel's wanton killing and destruction. As its killing spree continues, Israel appears to have stopped caring about its previous claims of a high moral ground, as well as the fact that it is losing the propaganda war. Taking their place is the desire of its leaders to restore the image of a strong and superior Israel, one capable of unstoppable vengeance.

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