COMMENTARY | POLITICS

The Gaza Genocide in Western Media: Culprits of Complicity

By: Yara Hawari · April, 2024

This commentary is based on a presentation delivered by Al-Shabaka Co-Director Yara Hawari at the 2024 Annual Palestine Forum, hosted by the Institute for Palestine Studies and the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha, Qatar, in February, 2024.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the genocide in Gaza, Israeli regime bombardments and forces have killed at least 103 Palestinian journalists and media workers. Many of these individuals were killed as they were actively working to share the ongoing atrocities with the world; others were targeted in their homes, their families murdered alongside them. Despite the deliberate attacks and surrounding catastrophic conditions, hundreds of journalists and media workers have continued their coverage and reporting. It is thanks to them that those of us outside Gaza can witness the reality on the ground and are able to challenge the narratives of mainstream Western media, which by and large provide cover to the Israeli regime.[1]

Indeed, mainstream media coverage of the genocide throughout the West has highlighted not only deep biases in favor of the Israeli regime, but also the ease in which Palestinians are dehumanized. Former UN human rights official Craig Mokhiber has noted that intent is often the hardest thing to prove in a genocide. In the case of Israel's assault on Gaza, however, the opposite has been true:

Palestinian dehumanization is a key and clear tactic being deployed. To justify such intense and cruel violence on a people, they must first be unpeopled.

The Systematic Dehumanization of Palestinians

Since the beginning of the genocide, there have been numerous official statements, interviews, and social media posts by Israeli ministers and politicians that demonstrate the widespread dehumanization of Palestinians. Many of these instances were used as part of South Africa's case against the Israeli regime at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as examples of genocidal intent. The following are only a few such cases:

- In the days after October 7, 2023, Israeli President Issac Herzog said it was not only militants but "an entire nation" that was responsible for the violence, and that Israel would fight "until we break their backbone."

- On October 9, 2023, Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant referred to Palestinians as "human animals," and said that Israeli forces were "acting accordingly." He later told Israeli troops at the border "we will eliminate everything."
- On October 16, 2023, in a formal address to the Israeli Knesset, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that the situation was "a struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness, between humanity and the law of the jungle." This quote was also posted on the prime minister's official X account but later deleted.

For these Israeli politicians, Palestinians are positioned at best as creatures to be slaughtered, and at worst as sources of inherent wickedness. This rhetoric

is deeply rooted in white supremacy and colonial dominance. Indeed, similar language has historically been used in South Africa by the white minority in reference to the black majority, by the British in reference to Indians, and, more broadly, by settlers the world over in reference to indigenous peoples.

Importantly, such language does not strictly belong to fringe right-wing politicians. Rather, much of the discourse is shared and repeated by large swathes of the Israeli population, including Israeli soldiers on the ground in Gaza. The embrace of Palestinian dehumanization by Israeli soldiers in particular has resulted in the notably gruesome phenomenon of snuff videos, which have been widely circulated on social media platforms. In these videos, soldiers can be seen—often gleefully—committing war crimes against Palestinians and referring to them as "subhuman." In one video, an Israeli soldier, dressed in a dinosaur costume, loads artillery shells into a tank and dances as the shells are fired in the direction of Gaza. In another, a soldier is filmed dedicating an explosion to their two-year-old daughter for her birthday; seconds later, a Palestinian residential building behind them is blown up. Other videos show Israeli soldiers setting alight Palestinian food supplies during a starvation campaign and mocking Palestinian civilians who have been stripped, rounded-up, and blindfolded.

There has been shock and outrage over these videos on social media platforms by Palestinians and their allies, with many noting that they should be used as further evidence in the case against the Israeli regime before the ICJ. Even those who support the Israeli regime seem to be alarmed by the brazenness with which Israeli soldiers are sharing these videos. British broadcaster Piers Morgan, for example, asked, "Why do Israeli soldiers keep filming themselves doing this kind of crass, insensitive thing? Why don't their commanders stop them? Makes them look callous when so many children in Gaza are being killed." For Morgan, it seems, the

problem is not the soldiers' actions but their dissemination.

While some have questioned how Israeli soldiers could stoop to such levels of cruelty, we must recall that dehumanization paves the way for said behavior with ease. When Palestinians are seen as less than human, these acts become far more palatable—both for the soldiers themselves as well as their intended audience. Likewise, those less familiar with the context might find it strange that these soldiers are implicating themselves in such horrific crimes without hesitation. Yet it is decades of impunity—not only for the Israeli regime, but also for Israeli individuals guilty of war crimes—that has led us to this point, where a genocide is being visually documented by the perpetrators.

Western Media Complicity

Palestinian dehumanization by Israeli politicians and soldiers alike has largely gone unchallenged by Western mainstream media; rather, it has been widely regurgitated. A recent and explicit example of this is a *New York Times* column by Thomas Friedman, titled "Understanding the Middle East Through the Animal Kingdom." In his opinion piece, Friedman likens whole populations in the region to various insects, while equating the US to a lion. He ends the column by stating, "sometimes I contemplate the Middle East by watching CNN. Other times, I prefer Animal Planet."

Aside from simple repetition of Israeli regime talking points, Western media readily adopts a number of additional elements involved in Palestinian dehumanization. Perhaps the most obvious among them is the use of the War on Terrorism framework—namely, situating the context as a fight between good and evil, or between West and East. This discourse demonizes and devalues brown bodies as a homogenous mass of uncivilized, violent hordes, waiting to invade Western civilization. The most obvious use of this framework is in the reporting of the

October 7 Hamas operation. Indeed, shortly after the operation, various editorials ran with phrases such as "murderous rampage" and "bloodthirsty attack." International journalists and outlets lapped up comparisons with ISIS and gruesome stories emanating from Israeli security forces—stories that would later be debunked, even by Israeli media.

Descriptors such as *murderous*, *bloodthirsty*, *barbaric*, and *uncivilized* are clearly reserved for Hamas and other Palestinian groups alone; nowhere can those same terms be found applied to Israeli regime forces, despite their slaughter of over 30,000 Palestinians in the course of less than six months. Such selective dehumanization has become standard practice at leading media outlets. This is exemplified by a letter from a team of BBC journalists, who accuse their employer of applying a "double standard in how civilians are seen" and of positioning Hamas "as the only instigator and perpetrator of violence in the region."

The adoption of the War on Terrorism framework also involves incessant reference to Hamas—a movement designated as a terrorist organization by most Western governments—when reporting on public infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, and factories. Thus, anything that is government-operated becomes a Hamas-affiliated—and therefore "legitimate"—target. It is an effective tactic. Indeed, if you reduce an entire society to one that is terrorist-run, the war crimes against the population within it become easy to justify. This is particularly the case with the hospitals in Gaza, which are often labeled by the Western media as "Hamas-run." Of course, such rhetoric is reserved solely for Gaza; Israeli public hospitals and schools are never referred to as "Likud-run."

Unchilding Palestinian Children

Another dehumanizing tactic that has been particularly insidious is that of "unchilding" Palestinian children. A concept developed by Professor Nadera

Shelhoub Kevorkian, *unchilding* involves the transformation and construction of "colonized children as dangerous, racialized others, enabling their eviction from the realm of childhood itself." In other words, Palestinian children are classified as adults to justify violence committed against them.

This is something we have long seen in the Western mainstream media's treatment of Palestinian children, but has perhaps intensified or become more blatant since October, 2023. For decades, Palestinian children have been referred to as potential militants or potential terrorists as a way to justify their systematic killing and imprisonment across Palestinian land. But the scale of unchilding in this ongoing genocide has been unprecedented and parallels the unprecedented scale of children killed, amounting to more than all child fatalities in over four years of global conflict combined.

Here are a few examples of "unchilding" in the mainstream media:

- In November, 2023, a *Guardian* article stated that "Israeli women and children" would be exchanged for Palestinian prisoners who are "women and people aged 18 and younger." In this case, Israeli children were afforded their protected status as children, while Palestinian children were denied that same status. In response to this particular report, Bisan, a storyteller and journalist in Gaza, asked, "are our children less children than theirs?"
- Similarly, during the exchange of hostages and Palestinian political prisoners, it was commonplace to see Palestinian children referred to as "teenagers" and "minors." While these terms may technically be accurate, their use is a deliberate tactic intended to strip Palestinian children of their childness, making their lives and suffering less grievable.
- In January, 2024, a Sky news broadcaster reported that, "accidentally, a stray bullet found its way into the van ahead, and that killed a three or

four-year-old young lady." This "young lady" was in fact a Palestinian child named Ruqaya Ahmad Odeh Jahalin. She was shot in the back by Israeli regime forces on January 7, 2024, while sitting in the backseat of a shared taxi near an Israeli military checkpoint in the occupied West Bank.

Journalistic Malpractice

A final indication of Western media bias in the context of Palestine is the disregard for journalistic rigor and perpetuation of Israeli disinformation. This was most clearly seen in the aftermath of October 7, where journalists from major mainstream platforms, such as CNN, France24, and *The Independent*, widely reported on a story of Hamas fighters beheading 40 babies in the Kfar Aza settlement. Despite being quickly debunked—including by Israeli officials—many journalists failed to retract their original reporting, at best issuing clarifications that the allegations could not be confirmed.

The widespread reporting of such a detrimental story without photographic evidence or other means to independently verify the claims speaks to the ongoing tendency for Western media to peddle Israeli disinformation without scrutiny. As Tariq Kenney-Shawa points out, "much of the proclivity to exceptionalize Israeli war crimes is due to the failure of journalists to critically analyze Israeli narratives against the backdrop of Israel's history of disinformation."

The failure of journalists to apply rigorous fact checking was also apparent in the reporting of the bombing of Al-Ahli Hospital. News outlets were quick to adopt the Israeli regime's version of events, which erroneously claimed that the hospital was hit by a misfired Palestinian militant rocket. A series of fabricated evidence released by the Israeli regime was also not scrutinized until much later. Independent organizations, including Forensic Architecture, conducted their own

investigations, and came to the same conclusions that Palestinians had been contending all along: that the Israeli regime was lying. Since the bombing of Al-Ahli Hospital, dozens of medical facilities have been attacked and rendered inoperable by Israeli regime forces. The Western media has by and large failed to report on this as a systematic strategy to devastate Palestinian health care in Gaza.

In February, 2024, a *Guardian* report highlighted this pattern of institutional bias, as demonstrated at CNN, where anonymous staffers argued that the news channel's reporting on Palestine amounts to "journalistic malpractice." The report reveals that not only are journalists obliged to give prominence to the stories of Israeli officials, they likewise face significant restrictions on reporting Palestinian perspectives and quoting Hamas representatives. One CNN employee detailed, "It's OK for us to be embedded with the [Israeli military], producing reports censored by the army, but we cannot talk to the organization that won a majority of the votes in Gaza whether we like it or not. CNN viewers are being prevented from hearing from a central player in this story."

The Guardian reports that the CNN senior director of news standards and practices issued a directive in early November, 2023, that effectively banned the reporting of most Hamas statements, characterizing them as "inflammatory rhetoric and propaganda." Indeed, the absence of first-hand statements from Hamas in Western media platforms is glaring; they are not invited for interviews and their reports and statements are not analyzed. Such a directive results in a one-sided depiction of the context, entirely ignoring one of the key actors involved.

It must be understood that the consequences of the Western media's complicity in Palestinian dehumanization and spread of Israeli propaganda are not simply relegated to the epistemological realm. Rather, these biases have serious material implications for Palestinians in Gaza and beyond. It is thus not an exaggeration to say that the Western media is complicit in the ongoing genocide that is being

committed. Importantly, these harmful outlets stand in direct contrast to the brave Palestinian journalists in Gaza, who continue to risk their lives to cover the ongoing genocide and share the reality on ground with the rest of the world.

1. *To read this piece in French, please click here. Al-Shabaka is grateful for the efforts by human rights advocates to translate its pieces, but is not responsible for any change in meaning.*

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