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**THE PALESTINIAN - ISRAELI NARRATIVE AFTER OCTOBER 7, 2023:
PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

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Introduction

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is one of the most enduring geopolitical struggles of the modern era, shaped by complex historical events, collective memories and competing narratives. The war that erupted in October 2023 was a pivotal moment in the long-standing conflict. It did not only intensify divisions, but exposed the fragility of the region, socio-politically and humanitarially. Among the many crossroads of the conflict, Gaza has emerged as a symbol of resilience and represented the broader conflict that shaped the global perception of the region. The war that erupted in October 2023, has drawn groundbreaking international attention, not only to Gaza and Israel but also to the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The devastating humanitarian toll and destruction have brought significant ramifications for the global understanding of resistance, justice and human rights. After more than 45,000 casualties in Gaza, including 15,000 children, the displacement of hundreds of thousands and the starvation of 1.8 million¹, a year and two months later, a ceasefire is yet to be reached.

Beyond the physical battlefield, Public Diplomacy, mainstream Western media and Social Media served as crucial arenas for framing narratives into influencing public opinion. This dissertation explores the intersection of narratives, media and public diplomacy in the context of the war on Gaza, focusing on how each of these actors played a significant role in shaping the global understanding of the conflict.

Chapter one on “*General Background of the Palestinian Struggle*”, provides a brief account of the historical evolution of the Palestinian struggle, tracing its origins from the late 19th century to the present day. Divided into four phases, it

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/10/1155836>

begins with the emergence of Zionism, the Balfour Declaration, the UN Partition Plan, the Nakba of 1948, the Naksa of 1967, the First and Second Intifada and finally, the chapter concludes with an analysis of the 2023 “Al Aqsa Flood” operation, that symbolizes a significant paradigm shift in Palestinian resistance and cause.

Chapter two on “*Collective Memory and Narrative*” examines how memory shapes identity and narratives in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Collective memory, which operates at individual, generational, and societal levels, influences conflict perceptions. Israeli narratives historically avoid responsibility for the 1948 Nakba, while Palestinian memory, rooted in oral histories and intergenerational trauma, preserves identity and fuels resistance. This chapter highlights how both sides use collective memory to construct national narratives, justify actions, and shape future aspirations, emphasizing its central role in conflict dynamics.

Chapter three on “*Israeli and Palestinian Public Diplomacy*” highlights the evolution of public diplomacy in Israel and Palestine as a tool for influencing foreign audiences, with the particular shift from traditional state-to-state communication to engaging directly with citizens through digital platforms. Israel’s public diplomacy, rooted in the Hasbara framework, combines official governmental efforts with indirect and civil channels, leveraging media campaigns and strategic messaging to justify its actions and maintain international support. On the other hand, Palestinian public diplomacy, led by bodies like PICA and the PIPD, focuses on building solidarity and sharing the human dimensions of the Palestinian narrative through grassroots initiatives and social media.

Chapter four on “*Shaping the Narrative after October 7: The Role of Social Media*” explores the information war during the Israel-Palestine conflict and the profound influence of digital platforms. It examines how Hamas and Israel used social media as a tool in psychological warfare, to disseminate messages, organize actions, and shape global perceptions. The Israeli narrative initially framed itself

around victimhood, moral superiority, and military legitimacy to gain global support, but later on it faced various challenges. This chapter also highlights the rise of Palestinian voices through citizen journalism, as activists documented atrocities and their usage of different strategies to avoid algorithmic censorship during the war. I will later observe social media's role as a battlefield for public opinion, by both state-controlled propaganda and grassroots efforts, underscoring its power in modern conflicts to shape empathy, influence perceptions, and rally international support.

By analyzing the media coverage of the war across Western mainstream and social media landscapes, this dissertation aims to shed light on the dynamics, biases, and implications of media narratives in shaping the perception of geopolitical conflicts. It will critically examine which of the narratives have been successfully shaped by state and non-state actors, mainly public diplomacy and social media, while highlighting the opportunities and challenges presented, providing a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the Gaza conflict.

1. General Background of the Palestinian Struggle

Origins of the narratives on both sides can be traced back to the late 19th to early 20th centuries. Until the first decade of the 20th century, a significant number of Jews residing in Palestine lived in relative harmony, sharing cultural similarities, with their Muslim and Christian urban neighbors. Jewish communities, predominantly ultra-Orthodox and non-Zionist, were mostly *Mizrahi* or *Sephardic*, tracing their lineage back to Jews expelled from Spain. They were urban dwellers from Middle Eastern or Mediterranean origins, with many speaking Arabic or Turkish as a second or even third language. Despite clear religious differences, they were not considered outsiders, Europeans, or settlers, but were viewed as indigenous Jews integrated into the Muslim and Christian society. (Khalidi, 2020)

However, the 1880's marked the growing European anti-Semitism leading to the pressure on Jews to either assimilate or risk persecution, in response, the revival of the Jewish nationality led to the emergence of Zionism. Zionism as a nationalist, political ideology and a revival movement, prompted by European anti-Semitism, has secularized and nationalized Judaism, associating the revival of its nationality with the colonization of Palestine and as continuation of the ancient attachment of the Jews and of the Jewish religion to the historical region of Palestine²

In the following decades, influential figures such as Austrian journalist Theodor Herzl advocated for the creation of a Jewish state as a political solution for Jews facing European persecution. Herzl and other Zionist leaders, though initially ambivalent, found clarity in direction after Herzl's death in 1904. Under the leadership of Chaim Weizmann, the Zionist movement became more focused on

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zionism>

increasing Jewish migration to Palestine, particularly with financial backing from wealthy families, notably the Rothschilds³.

1.1. First phase: 1917 - 1948

As the Jewish population grew, the coexistence between Jewish, Muslim, and Christian Palestinians began to give way to competition and conflict. In 1917, **the** British government issued the Balfour Declaration⁴, signaling support for “a national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine. At this time, Palestine was still under Ottoman rule, yet British Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour pledged support over a territory not yet under British control. The Balfour Declaration encouraged Jewish immigration to Palestine, giving Zionism international legitimacy and a clear path forward. This move laid the groundwork for the Zionist movement’s vision, with the understanding that creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine would likely involve the displacement of the indigenous Palestinian population (Terry, 2017).

The issuance of the Balfour Declaration marked the onset of modern Palestinian history, with Great Britain formally endorsing the Zionist movement. It was the first historical link between political Zionism and Western imperialism, represented through the Balfour Declaration. Stemming from the ideology of the right of European powers to rule and exploit other lands, that is a western political ideology; Zionist leaders saw no contradiction between their plan of self-determination of the people living in Palestine and the project of an autonomous Jewish state. The main element central to the Zionist project was colonization, in which it depended on imperial power (Stork, 1972).

³ *Part I (1917-1947) - question of Palestine* (no date) *United Nations*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/unispal/history2/origins-and-evolution-of-the-palestine-problem/part-i-1917-1947/>

⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Balfour-Declaration>

Although Zionism had roots prior to 1917, its practical implementation began with the Balfour Declaration in November of that year. The Zionist movement's selection of Palestine was driven by the centuries-long persecution of Jews in Europe, predating even the Holocaust. The choice was influenced by the deep religious ties between Jewish people and Palestine. Besides its sympathy to Zionism, Britain hoped it would protect its strategic interests in the Middle East. Palestine held strategic significance serving as a safeguard for Egypt's borders (given Britain's presence in Egypt) due to concerns over potential attacks, and most importantly, it considered Israel as a potentially valuable pro-Western regional power (Spyre, 2004)

This was crucial in the period before 1917, with Egypt being pivotal for the Suez Canal. Additionally, Britain recognized Palestine as a vital link between the Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea, with Haifa emerging as Britain's most significant port. The establishment of a Zionist colony was intended to secure this area. Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary who proposed the 1905 Alien Exclusion Act to restrict Jewish immigration⁵, offered Palestine as a solution (Stork, 1972). Additionally, Christian Zionist support among British Protestants contributed to this decision, viewing the Jewish return to Palestine as a religious mission, though the British government's motives were primarily strategic.

After the Balfour Declaration, Palestinians began to organize politically against the Zionist movement and British rule. Efforts included petitions to the Paris Peace Conference⁶, to the British, and to the League of Nations. Their most notable one was Palestine Arab congresses⁷ held from 1919 until 1928, held by a network of Muslim-Christian societies, rejecting the Balfour Declaration, demands focusing on the independence of Palestine as an Arab state, and ending the unlimited Jewish

⁵ <https://www5.open.ac.uk/research-projects/making-britain/content/aliens-act#:~:text=About%3AJewish%20and%20Eastern%20European%20immigrants>.

⁶ <https://www.cliohistory.org/thomas-lawrence/paris>

⁷ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-palestine-arab-congress>

immigration and land expropriation. However, Britain refused to acknowledge Palestinian representation or authority, insisting on adherence to the Declaration. In 1922, the League of Nations formally assigned Britain the Mandate⁸ for Palestine. The mandate's 28 articles made no reference to Palestinians as a people with national or political rights, instead privileging the Zionist movement's goal of establishing a Jewish national home in Palestine (Khalidi, 2020).

In their first 50 years, Zionist leaders pursued this through a careful diplomatic strategy, working with the Great Powers of the 19th century and later adapting to the League of Nations and the United Nations in the 20th century. The Zionist movement took a pragmatic view of international law, seeing it as reflecting the will of powerful nations. As a result, they focused on securing formal legal recognition of Jewish national rights through international agreements, which eventually led to the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine and the United Nations partition resolution (Strawson, 2010).

Different approaches were used by Zionists and Arabs as a response to the Plan. Zionists made every effort to influence the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) through intense lobbying, as the Arabs refrained from taking part in the Partition plan (Ben-Dor, 2007). However, on 29th of November 1947, Resolution 181⁹ was approved. The resolution proposed the establishment of three entities, a Jewish state, an Arab state and an international zone around Jerusalem, all linked by an economic union (Strawson, 2010).

The four-part document attached to the resolution has provided the termination of the mandate, the British military's gradual withdrawal and the delineation of the boundaries between Jerusalem and the two states. (IMEU Institute for Middle East Understanding, 2013). While the plan was celebrated by Jews and

⁸ <https://ecf.org.il/issues/issue/232>

⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/United-Nations-Resolution-181>

Zionist leaders, it has been fully rejected by the Arab League, the regional inter-Arab Organizations, the Arab Higher Committee¹⁰ and the Arab leaders, boycotting negotiations with the UN to defend the right of the Palestinians as true owners of the land. Seven Arab countries tried to prevent the partition plan of Palestine but failed (Manna', 2013).

Almost immediately after the Partition Resolution was adopted on 29 November 1947, renewed violence erupted between Arabs and Jews, leading to the large-scale ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian in early December. Violence erupted between Arabs and Jews, triggering the large-scale displacement of Palestinians by early December 1947. Later in March 1948, Zionist leadership under David Ben-Gurion approved Plan Dalet, a strategy for the mass expulsion of Palestinians along with committing numerous massacres by Jewish commanders (Masalha, 2012).

This systematic expulsion of Palestinians reached its peak in May 1948, with the forced expulsion of more than 200 Palestinian towns by Zionist forces, leaving between 250,000 and 350,000 Palestinians as refugees. Eventually, on May 14, Ben-Gurion declared the establishment of the independent state of Israel¹¹. The following day, the British mandate, who had previously done nothing to prevent the expulsion and the atrocities against the Palestinian people, withdrew their last soldiers (Khalidi, 1988).

1.2. Second phase: 1948-1967

The landmark historical turn in narratives was the forced eviction of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, which began on 14 May 1948 and coincided with the British announcement of termination of their mandate and the declaration of the state

¹⁰ <https://israeled.org/arab-committee-rejects-u-n-partition-plan/>

¹¹ <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-189917/>

of Israel. This led to what is called the ‘Nakba’¹² or the Catastrophe; the violent displacement of 750,000 Palestinians from their homeland by Zionist militias and the establishment of a colonial-settler state that declared 80% of Mandatory Palestine. The year 1948 witnessed not only the founding of a state on nearly 80 percent of Mandatory Palestine but also the obliteration and de-Arabization of historic Palestine and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. As Manna confirms, it is impossible to understand the contemporary history of Palestine without fully comprehending how the Nakba changed the lives of Palestinians (Manna’, 2013)

The Nakba created one of the largest and longest standing refugee populations in the world. About 90% of the Palestinians were driven out — many by psychological warfare and/or military pressure and a large number at gunpoint. A 2010 survey by BADIL¹³, the Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, estimated the number of refugees and displaced Palestinians to be at least 7.1 million. This includes 6.6 million refugees and 427,000 internally displaced persons. The survey also indicated that refugees constitute 67% of the total Palestinian population, residing in camps throughout the occupied territories and neighboring Arab countries, with many dependent on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency UNRWA¹⁴ for survival (IMEU, 2013).

The 1948 war provided an opportunity for the creation of a larger Jewish state across most of historic Palestine, establishing a demographic and strategic rationale for the expulsion of Palestinians. The period saw numerous atrocities, including mass killings and forced displacements, later confirmed by both Israeli “new history” research and Palestinian oral testimonies. Israeli historian Ilan Pappé identifies at least 31 confirmed massacres, including Deir Yassin, Tantura, Lydda,

¹² <https://www.un.org/unispal/about-the-nakba/>

¹³ <https://www.badil.org>

¹⁴ <https://www.unrwa.org>

and Saliha, which played a significant role in terrorizing the Palestinian population and facilitating mass expulsions.

“Palestinian sources, combining Israeli military archives with oral histories, list thirty-one confirmed massacres — beginning with the massacre in Tirat Haifa on 11 December 1947 and ending with Khirbat Illin in the Hebron area on 19 January 1949 — and there may have been at least another six. We still do not have a systematic Nakba memorial archive that would allow one to trace the names of all those who died in the massacres.” (Pappé, 2006: 258).

The legacy of the Nakba continues to affect Palestinian refugees and their descendants, many of whom have been prevented from returning to their homes and remain displaced within Israel or neighboring countries and have been denied return ever since. Mostly residing in camps within the occupied territories and neighboring Arab countries, including 1.9 million in Jordan, 1.1 million in Gaza, 427,000 in Syria (before the civil war), and 425,000 in Lebanon. (IMEU Institute for middle east understanding, 2013)

According to Manna’, the Nakba was not a one-time event, but its implications intensified with time and have gathered new meanings that stemmed from tragic experiences. It changed the geography, demography and the identity of Palestinians. Palestinians lost their unity and became homeless in the world based on the nation state system, displaced all over neighboring Arab countries, where Arabs did not perceive the issue of refugees as a socio-economic problem but rather a political one. Palestinian refugees after 1948 had a strong belief of returning to Palestine, neither them nor Arabs were interested in their full integration in the host country. However, with the passage of time, this shaped their identity only as victims who were subjected to brutal injustice (Manna’, 2013).

1.3. Third phase: 1967-2023

In 1967, the Naksa brought further trauma, reawakening memories of the Nakba. In a swift six-day war, Israel defeated the combined forces of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, seizing control of Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza, and territories from neighboring Arab states. Over a third of Palestinians found themselves under Israeli occupation. As Nassar affirms, the 1967 war brought about a reawakening among Palestinians, disillusioned with the Arab nations' inability to secure the right of "Return". For the first time, Israel occupied lands from neighboring Arab states, shifting these states' priorities to the liberation of lost lands. The UN Security Council's Resolution 242¹⁵, addressing the war and the resolution of the conflict, advocated an exchange of occupied lands for peace but did not mention the Palestinian people except as refugees. This denial was exemplified by Golda Meir's infamous 1969 statement, where she claimed, "They did not exist"¹⁶ in reference to Palestinians. Concurrently, Israel actively suppressed Palestinian expression in the West Bank and Gaza, pushing Palestinians worldwide to assert their identity more strongly (IMEU Institute for Middle East Understanding, 2013).

After 1967, Palestinian identity centered on a nostalgic connection to their homeland, characterized by its emphasis on the lost homeland and the dream of "Return". After the war, Palestinian nationalism started to replace the traditional Arab nationalism that had dominated the political culture (Nassar, 1997). Since 1948, three main Palestinian movements with different ideologies emerged in succession; the Movement of Arab Nationalists (MAN), Fatah and Hamas. Each reflected different phases in the Palestinian Nationalism. MAN represented the Arab Nationalist phase before 1967, during pan-Arabism and its domination in the 1950's

¹⁵ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/90717?ln=en&v=pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/golda-meir-quotes-on-israel-and-judaism>

and early 60's in Arab politics. At that time, it was the leading Palestinian movement, established by George Habash, a graduate of the American University of Beirut, along with other Arab activists. The movement viewed the Palestinian cause as a part of a broader Arab struggle and sought unity through modernization and secularization of the Arabs to challenge Israel (Baumgarten, 2005).

However, the 1967 war brought the Arab nationalists to a close with significant repercussions on MAN. MAN continued to exist but through its successor organizations the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine PFLP and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine DFLP. That was when Fatah, a movement established on the expression of a more specific Palestinian Nationalism, became a more prominent mass movement after 1967, after it democratically took over the Palestinian Liberation Organization PLO¹⁷.

Under its leader Yasser Arafat, it emphasized the armed struggle and self-determination, unifying Palestinians under a national identity separate from pan-Arabism. By the early 70's, Fatah scaled back its objectives, slowly moving towards a democratic strategy, political negotiations and the recognition of Israel. Despite the support it gained through its armed struggle strategy, after its renunciation of it, the population was not easily mobilized behind it and its change of strategies. Fatah's dominance of the Palestinian national movement stemmed from its leadership of the PLO and its history as a resistance organization. However, after becoming the ruling party of the established Palestinian Authority PA, its focus shifted towards managing its bureaucratic and security structures, especially with the political negotiations with Israel, the results of which were increasingly unpopular in the face of constant Israeli backtracking, contributing to the rise of political Islam as a rival movement. After the PLO's recognition of the two-state solution, a new movement arose that

¹⁷ The PLO was founded at the initiative of the Arab states in 1964 and was initially under their control.

was to challenge it. Hamas, the Movement of Islamic Resistance, was formed after the first Intifada in 1987 (Hilal, 2010).

The First Palestinian Intifada (uprising) of 1987 signified a mass, civilian-based and an unarmed resistance fueled by cumulative grievances against the ongoing Israeli occupation. It encompassed every Palestinian city, town, village, and refugee camp. Thousands of people from all segments of Palestinian society—men, women, children, adults, academics, merchants, and workers—participated in the uprising. In his work “Intifada and Independence”, Edward Said describes the Israeli occupation’s impact on Palestinian life, detailing how regulations, humiliation, and violence became routine. With schools closed, oppressive labor conditions, banned books, and dehumanizing administrative measures, daily Palestinian life was tightly controlled. The movement sparked after an Israeli vehicle accident that killed four Palestinians, with rumors of intent igniting widespread anger. This civilian resistance redefined Palestinian-Israeli relations and altered global perceptions of the conflict (Said, 1989).

With limited access to arms, Palestinians developed their own methods of resistance. They avoided using weapons and engaged in various forms of civil disobedience such as demonstrations, general strikes, tax refusal, boycotts of Israeli products, political graffiti, and establishing neighborhood schools when regular schools were closed by the military as a collective punishment for the Uprising. Some responses involved stone-throwing, tire-burning, and barricading streets, though the Intifada remained largely unarmed (Issac, (2017).

In the early 1990’s, it was the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of unipolarity, the Intifada was still going, in addition to the changes that affected the Arab regional system after the Second Gulf War, and the resulting complications in the Arab system and its failure to maintain its regional role towards crucial issues, most notably the Palestinian issue, which has fallen on

the scale of Arab and international priorities. The Oslo Accords marked a significant juncture, influenced by internal, regional, and global changes.

In light of these circumstances, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)¹⁸ that was formed in 1964, opened a channel of negotiations with Israel in Oslo, through which the Oslo Agreement was signed on September 13, 1993¹⁹. This dialogue led to the exchange of "Letters of Mutual Recognition,"²⁰ with the PLO acknowledging Israel's right to exist in peace and security, and Israel recognizing the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people. The Oslo Accords proposed a five-year period of autonomous arrangements, with negotiations for a permanent solution to begin no later than the third year. The parties also agreed to start with Gaza and Jericho before the election of the Palestinian Authority (Aljazeera, 2023). Later on, September 28, 1995, Rabin, Peres, and Arafat signed the Oslo II Accords²¹ (formally the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip). This agreement expanded Palestinian self-rule beyond Gaza and Jericho and included more detailed provisions than Oslo I.

The Oslo II Accords outlined several key measures: elections for a chair and council to govern the Palestinian Authority, with participation from Palestinians in Jerusalem; redeployment of Israeli security forces from Jenin, Nablus, Tulkarm, Qalqilya, Ramallah, Bethlehem, and 440 villages before the elections; specific redeployment in Hebron; division of the West Bank and Gaza Strip into three areas—Area A with Palestinian administration and security, Area B with Palestinian administration and joint Israeli-Palestinian security, and Area C with Israeli administration and security. (Said, 1993)

¹⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Palestine-Liberation-Organization>

¹⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/13/what-were-oslo-accords-israel-palestinians>

²⁰ <https://israeled.org/resources/documents/israel-plo-mutual-recognition-letters/>

²¹ <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-185434/>

This agreement sparked widespread Arab and international controversy, and among various groups of the Palestinian people, about the feasibility of this agreement and the extent of its response to the aspirations of the Palestinian people, to regain its rights and the establishment of its independent state.

It had negative and positive effects on the Palestinian issue, but most of these effects were negative compared to their results on Israel, and their repercussions were disastrous and devastating, as Palestinians found that rather than ending the military occupation of the territories, as Palestinians initially hoped, the Oslo process quickly became a tool for reinforcing it (Freedman, 1998).

While some Palestinians were cautiously optimistic about the signing of the Oslo Accords, many perceived it as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. Among the dissenters was Palestinian scholar Edward Said. He critiqued the agreement as a “degrading spectacle” and a “surrender” for Palestinians, predicting it would allow Israel to consolidate occupation under a guise of peace. Instead of addressing Palestinian suffering or offering true sovereignty, Oslo accords reinforced Israel’s control and led to a sense of betrayal among Palestinians.

He highlighted how the PLO appeared to have ended the intifada, which symbolized the Palestinian right to resist, despite Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The Oslo Accords prioritized Israel’s security, neglecting Palestinian security from Israeli incursions. The document offered little indication that Israel will cease its violence against Palestinians or compensate those affected by its policies over the past 45 years (Said, 1993). As this reality became increasingly evident, particularly with the dramatic rise in illegal Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) following the Accords, the “peace process” came to be seen as a distraction and a guise for perpetuating the occupation. It enabled the continued impoverishment of Palestinians and deepened their “subservience to Israel” (Allen, 2013).

Furthermore, the Oslo Accord changed the entire Middle East radically. In 1974, the Arab League recognized the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Therefore, the PLO's recognition of Israel left no compelling reason for the Arab states to reject it. It legitimized the normalization of relations between the Arab world and Israel (Shlaim, 1994).

By 1993, there were over 200 settlements, mainly on strategic points throughout the West Bank and Gaza. An independent road system that links the settlements to Israel, creating a significant disruption between major Palestinian population centers. The land taken by these settlements and designated for expropriation was estimated to be over 55 percent of the Occupied Territories²². Jerusalem, annexed by Israel, comprised about 25 percent of this land. In Gaza, settlements constituted at least 30 percent of the Strip. Additionally, Israel used about 80 percent of the West Bank's water for its settlements and itself (Said, 1993).

The accords faced strong opposition from political Islam and several secular PLO factions, most notably the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). With a growing base of support and a high level of discipline and organization, political Islam—particularly Hamas—found in opposition to Oslo a compelling cause for mobilization. Indeed, after the peace talks, Hamas conceded suicide bombings with a significant amount of despair also contributed significantly to the eruption of the Second Intifada “Al-Aqsa Intifada” (Hilal, 2010). The Second Intifada in 2002, ignited by the entrance of the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's entry into the holy compound of Jerusalem, lasted from September 2000 to February 2005, as it led to the deaths of more than 5,000 Palestinians, further entrenching the cycle of violence and intensifying the complexities of the conflict.

²²<https://peacenow.org.il/en/30-years-after-oslo-the-data-that-shows-how-the-settlements-proliferated-following-the-oslo-accords>

Palestinian resistance in the Second Intifada was an armed struggle for a main reason. Following the Oslo Accords, Israel made a shift in control over the Palestinians from direct to indirect, causing a huge difficulty for Palestinians to resist the occupation. Up until the first Intifada, Israel had direct control over the lives of Palestinians. It controlled civic life, education, taxation and the management of daily affairs, which made it easier for Palestinians to resist without armed struggle, which was the case in the First Intifada. It allowed the Palestinians to use their refusal of paying taxes and complying with the instructions of officials in charge of education as a way of resistance against the occupation. However, resistance became more difficult after the Oslo Accords, due to the indirect control of Palestinian through many ways such as settlements, land grabs and checkpoints. It left the Palestinians with two choices, either to surrender to the occupation, or resist through the armed struggle that goes beyond what is legal under the International Law (Zreik, 2024).

Over the past 20 years, Israel has been launching brutal military offensives in Gaza resulting in a significant number Palestinian casualties, mostly civilians, while persisting with its oppressive military occupation in the West Bank. After Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005²³ it maintained control over Gaza's airspace and coastal waters. In 2006, after Hamas won the parliamentary elections in Gaza, Israel imposed a blockade on the region, which was condemned by human rights organizations as a war crime²⁴. The blockade has only intensified over time. Israel's military operations in Gaza in 2008-2009²⁵ led to the deaths of over 1,400 Palestinians, mostly women and children, and subsequent peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority failed due to ongoing Israeli settlement activities in the

²³ <https://www.newarab.com/opinion/gaza-18-yrs-increased-oppression-israel-withdrawal>

²⁴ <https://imeu.org/article/262>

²⁵ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/mde150212009eng.pdf>

West Bank. Further military offensives occurred in 2012²⁶ and 2014²⁷, with the 2014 offensive resulting in over 2,000 Palestinian deaths and 67 Israeli soldiers. Meanwhile, in the West Bank, violence escalated after the killing of the Dawabsheh²⁸ family in 2015, with Israel responding with lethal force against Palestinians (Filiu, 2014). Despite numerous international calls for action, including a 2016 UN resolution²⁹ demanding an end to Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Israel continued its settlement expansion contributing to a cycle of violence and increasing casualties over the past two decades.

1.4. Fourth phase: 2023-present

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian resistance in Gaza, led by Hamas, initiated a military operation called "Al Aqsa Flood" against Israeli settlements and military bases near the Gaza border. This attack resulted in the deaths of 1,200 Israelis in the Kibbutzim close to the border and the capture of 200 Israelis by Hamas. In retaliation, Israel launched an extensive military campaign in Gaza, leading to at least 43,391 Palestinians killed and 102,347 injured between 7 October 2023 and 29 October 2024 according to OCHA³⁰, predominantly affecting women and children.

Operation al-Aqsa Flood marked a critical shift in the Palestinian struggle, marking the most significant change in Palestinian resistance since the First Intifada in 1987. By mid-70's, after that the leadership of the Palestinian resistance realized that the only path to progress depended only on their initiatives, they launched the uprising or the First Intifada, causing the first significant paradigm shift in the Palestinian resistance history. Moreover, the establishment of Hamas after the first

²⁶ <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-188596/>

²⁷ <https://www.unrwa.org/2014-gaza-conflict#:~:text=During%20the%2050%20days%20of,one%20child%2C%20were%20also%20killed.>

²⁸ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/18/jewish-settler-convicted-in-arson-attack-that-killed-palestinians>

²⁹ <https://press.un.org/en/2016/sc12657.doc.htm>

³⁰ <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/humanitarian-situation-update-235-gaza-strip>

Intifada introduced not only a new methodology but also an ideological shift. Hamas' approach to resistance, political strategies, and opposition to Israeli occupation allowed it to grow into a dominant force in Palestinian political life, shaping the discourse and methods of the broader resistance movement (Mercan, 2023).

“Al Aqsa Flood” operation was launched after years of determined combat experiences of Izz adDin al-Qassam Brigades, shifting their strategy from a defensive model of resistance against the Israeli attacks to an offensive strategy. Their operation on October 7 marked another paradigm shift similar to the shift after the First Intifada, particularly with their ability to establish a joint operation that consisted of more than 12 different resistance groups to fight against Israel³¹.

The initial hours following the October 7 operation sent shockwaves across Israel. After years of building competence and effectiveness of the Israeli intelligence units, the fact that a well-planned operation by the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, in coordination with other Palestinian resistance groups, was not detected by the intelligence services constituted a significant psychological damage. This psychological damage meant a psychological gain for the Palestinian resistance. The aggression on Gaza in the following period by Israel came from the irrationality of fear and defeat that was felt profoundly. In this regard, this operation has represented two critical breakthroughs. First, is the critical transformation in character and strategy of the resistance after the First Intifada and second, is the capabilities it showed in terms of what the Palestinian resistance can do despite having limited means (Mercan, 2023).

In order to critique or form an opinion about October 7, one must recognize the complications of the longstanding history of the Palestinian struggle and its

³¹ Sameh Odeh, “Al-Qassam Is not Alone: Learn about the Most Prominent Resistance Factions in Palestine,” *Al Jazeera*, retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.net/midan/reality/politics/2023/11/27/ليست-القسام-وحدها-تعرف-على-أبرز>

narrative. Zreik argues that the fragmentation of the Palestinian struggle is a threat to its narrative. Tracing it back is difficult, as its complications reflect the fragmentations of the Palestinian identity. He affirms that the cause is fragmented into many historical periods that created the geographical fragmentation, which further fragmented their political representation. One can begin tracing it back to 1948, when the Jewish presence in Palestine was articulated in national terms, in which they became nationalist-settlers backed by colonial powers, and despite the many crucial roads that came along from both parts, one remained trajectory, one in which Zionism took over Palestine to give it as a home for the Jews, meanwhile turning Palestinians homeless, under occupation and as second-class citizens (Zreik, 2024a).

These crucial crossroads during the last 75 years are what created the Palestinian geographical fragmentation. A Palestinian group that lives inside Israel as second-class citizens, without equality and with their lands confiscated. Then those in the West Bank that, following the Oslo Accords, are divided in three, a group in Area A who are supposedly under the control of the PA, Area B that is under Israeli control and Area C, under the full control of Israel. It comes with the different regimes of movement, control, regulations etc. While another group of Palestinians living in East Jerusalem who do not have Israeli citizenship, with a constant threat of losing their right to live in Jerusalem, despite Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem. In addition, the Palestinian refugees in neighboring countries and finally Palestinians in Gaza. This fragmentation, according to Zreik, is what makes the Palestinian cause problematic, especially for Palestinians when they try to argue their case. Their struggle is fragmented into a series of smaller and smaller issues that, without looking at the historical framework, they seem unrelated, and their situation would simply resemble demands of an immigrant group who are struggling for improvement of their social-economic status and inclusion. This limitation

makes it harder to tell the bigger story, and this is due to the Palestinian's fragmentation of time and space (Zreik, 2024a).

Heyd continues on Zreik's work and asserts the fragmentation of Palestinian's representation; they don't speak in one official voice. There is no unified official voice representing the Palestinian people. The Palestinian Authority (PA) is recognized by Israel and much of the international community as their official representative. However, Hamas does not acknowledge the PA's authority. With Hamas holding significant power, there is no single authority capable of facilitating political progress toward a settlement (Heyd, 2024). Zreik also acknowledges this divided representation and argues that while Hamas does not represent the Palestinian people as a whole, it can be viewed as representing their aspirations for liberation from occupation and the achievement of independence (Zreik, 2024a).

In the last few years in Gaza, the situation has gone more dire. Israeli historian Ilan Pappé points to three key factors: First, Gaza itself is a direct result of the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948. Prior to that, Gaza was a cosmopolitan town; after the expulsion of Palestinians, it became a vast refugee camp. Since 1994, under the Oslo Accords, Gaza has been effectively transformed into the largest open-air prison in the world, surrounded by a high-security fence, with severe restrictions on movement, access, and basic necessities (Pappé, 2006).

Second, almost half of Gaza's population is under the age of 18³², meaning they have only ever known a life in a besieged strip, living through four major wars and near-constant bombardment. Third, the deep psychological scars a of brutal occupation and ethnic cleansing, with countless documented human rights violations, help explain the rage many Palestinians feel toward Israel and its military actions (Pappé, 2006). Research conducted by Save the Children³³ found the mental wellbeing of

³² <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/19/1206479861/israel-gaza-hamas-children-population-war-palestinians>

³³ <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/after-15-years-blockade-four-out-five-children-gaza-say-they-are-living-depression-grief-and>

children, young people and caregivers has dramatically deteriorated since. A similar study in 2018³⁴, with the number of children reporting emotional distress increasing to 80% from 55%. The report, titled “Trapped”³⁵ found a huge increase in children who reported feeling fearful 84%, nervous 80%, sad or depressed 77% and grieving 78%. It also found that more than half of Gaza’s children have contemplated suicide and three out of five are self-harming.

Israel's reaction to October 7 mirrors the Nakba of 1948, only on a larger scale. Throughout history, Israeli policies have prioritized territorial expansion and the displacement of Palestinians. To this day, Israel has killed over 30,000 Palestinians in Gaza, with the majority being women and children. More than 250³⁶ humanitarian organizations have condemned Israel's actions as war crimes, urging an end to arms transfers to Israel. Yet Israel continues to use explosive weapons in densely populated areas, resulting in catastrophic humanitarian consequences for Gaza’s civilian population (Amnesty International, 2024).

Even after getting informed on the history of Palestinian struggle, the argument of whether Israel has the right to defend itself or not is still a question hard to answer. In Zreik’s paper “Past, Present and Future: A Reply to Heyd and Benbaji, he writes that the Zionist settlement project in Palestine has long provoked Palestinian resistance, escalating radicalism within the Zionist movement and the use of force justified as self-defense. While some Zionists may have genuinely felt threatened, the act of settling Palestine, backed by imperial powers to create a Jewish homeland, was itself a provocation and an aggression against Palestinian future. He further argues that ignoring this foundational aggression allowed the Zionist narrative to portray Palestinians as the aggressors, despite their displacement from

³⁴ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Trapped-and-Scarred-Final-1-1.pdf/>

³⁵ https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/gaza_blockade_mental_health_palestinian_children_2022.pdf/

³⁶ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/01/more-than-250-humanitarian-and-human-rights-organisations-call-to-stop-arms-transfers-to-israel-palestinian-armed-groups/>

their own land. This logic continues till after 1967, with the Israeli occupation normalized and Palestinian resistance framed as disrupting a supposed peace. For Palestinians, however, life under occupation is far from normal, as they witness ongoing land theft (Zreik, 2024b).

While the Palestinians have the right to self-defense and to resist the Israeli occupation and its settlement expansion, it is clear that self-defense in international law does not include the right to attack and kill unarmed civilians indiscriminately. However, things get complicated when we consider Israel's reaction to it. In order for Israel to legitimately argue for its right to defend itself, the least it can do is to offer a solution to the Palestinians based on their recognized rights to liberation and self-determination, beginning with the withdrawal from the West bank, therefore abiding with the international law and international legality but this is obviously not the case. *“Nevertheless, there are some basic analogies that while not fully relevant, do remain not fully irrelevant. Israel has been violating Palestinian rights for the last seven decades, including denying the right of self-determination, and has continued unabated its program of settlements, land confiscation, deportation, house demolitions, etc. This in and of itself constitutes an ongoing attack on the Palestinian people as a people and as individuals, which thus, entitles them to act in self-defense; and there is no self-defense against self-defense. Furthermore, Israel ‘chose’ to be in a situation of self-defense, and it could have taken measures that would have allowed it to avoid being in such a situation”* (Zreik, p.208, 2024a).

2. Collective Memory and Narrative

In recent years, memory has been notably studied given its importance in paradigm shifting in history and humanities, further understanding how it pervades media, political debate and everyday discourses (Muller p.13). As Ian Hacking puts it, memory “has become a powerful tool in quests for understanding, justice and knowledge” (Hacking, 1998, as cited in Muller, 2002).

Due to memory’s significant role in conflicts, shaping group identity and influencing narratives, in the book *Memory, Power and Post-War Europe*, Thomas Berger differentiates the multiple levels of memory that can be found in a community; the individual, the generational and the collective.

On the *individual* level, memories consist of personal recollections of past events, whether these events were accurately remembered or even occurred at all. On the *generational* level, memories are shared by large numbers of people from the same age group, such as the collective memory of the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers in New York for many Americans alive at the time. These shared societal memories help define a political generation, providing a sense of identity and common reference points. However, they can also create deep divisions in social, political, and economic values between different generations within a society (Berger, 2002).

Collective memory, in contrast, Berger believes that it is not tied to the direct experiences of individuals or specific groups, but rather to the shared memories of society as a whole, often constructed and symbolic. Collective memory is communicated through official histories taught in schools, historical accounts written by scholars, or portrayed by novelists and filmmakers, as well as through the speeches of political leaders. It is also embodied in national symbols like flags and anthems, and passed down through oral traditions within families, workplaces, and religious institutions. (Berger, 2002)

Despite not being synonymous, history and memory are not contradictory or entirely separate from each other. Instead, they interact closely and mutually constitute one another. Like memory, the discipline of history draws on perceptions of past events and is often influenced by current processes, which serve as triggers for historical analogies and interpretations. These, in turn, may shape the ongoing reproduction of "collective memory." (Sela and Kadish, 2016, p.2-3)

While the professional academic study of history ideally embodies a critical approach to the past, making it universal, memory; individual and collective, reflects the spirit and reality of its time. It is shaped by internal and external factors such as changing ideological emphases, international politics and discourses, and social and group needs.

Furthermore, these elements influence the formation of collective identity through the inclusion and exclusion of individuals and groups, as well as the self-justification and delegitimization of the "other," often drawing on deep-seated fears from both past and present. As Edward Said puts it in his book *Orientalism*: "... *the development and maintenance of every culture requires the existence of another, different and competing alter ego. The construction of identity... involves the construction of opposites and 'others' whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of their differences from 'us.'*" (Said, 1978, p.331-332.)

Given the importance of collective memory in political conflicts contributing to the collective identity of people, Thomas Berger affirms the circular relationship between collective memory and collective identity. Sela and Kadish (2016) assert how leaders invest significant efforts in shaping, instilling, and preserving this memory, ensuring its exclusivity. In conflicts between ethnic and national groups, collective identity shapes public discourse and defines its boundaries by promoting specific collective images and behaviors regarding "self" and "other," based on the

group's historical experiences. In the context of Palestine and Israel, leaders on both sides invest in constructing and maintaining narratives that solidify their respective identities and justify their actions, but on different levels. These efforts often ensure that their version of history remains exclusive and unquestioned within their communities.

Subsequently, these elements of collective identity are later translated into a collective narrative, encompassing stories, myths, perceptions, and attitudes regarded as historical truths. These narratives take various forms, including textbooks, political discourse, media, memorial events, rituals of commemoration, and monuments. These forms help make national consciousness tangible for members of both Israeli and Palestinian societies.

National narratives serve as a conscious anchor that constructs and legitimizes the fundamental assumptions of national existence and conduct, shaping internal relations among national individuals as well as their external relations and attitudes toward "others." (Sela and Kadish, 2016)

2.1. Israeli Collective Memory and Narrative

As aforementioned, Berger argues that collective memory is the result of continuous intellectual and political negotiations, rather than a singular, unified and collective mental act. And because collective memory is not a fixed entity but an evolving process, it is particularly vulnerable to the influence of politicians, journalists, and historians. The concept of 'High politics', such as presidential speeches and other symbolic actions by national figures, explained by Berger, play a significant role in shaping collective or national memory. (Berger, 2002)

A concerning aspect of it is that political leaders can manipulate collective memory to construct narratives of victimhood, which can, in turn, become a justification for aggressive actions.

Rafi Nets-Zehngut describes how the Zionist narrative of the Nakba in 1948 and the conflict was promoted among Israelis up until the late 1970s. The use of 'High Politics' as described previously by Berger, was achieved through various methods by the state of Israel. Nets-Zehngut continues to describe the ways used, which include the distribution of booklets and textbooks of the Zionist narrative by the Nation Center and the use of history and civics textbooks that were either approved by the Ministry of Education or used within the educational system without formal approval. Additionally, the narrative was spread through publications by the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) Education Corps, which distributed materials to soldiers, and through television series, which aired in Israel and covered key events of Zionism from 1896 to 1948 (Nets-Zehngut, p.107, 2014). The dissemination of this narrative was not only a state-led effort but was also supported by societal channels, including research by Israeli scholars, memoirs of Jewish veterans from the 1948 war, and essays in daily newspapers. Together, these state and societal efforts reinforced the dominance of the Zionist narrative.

The Zionist narrative mainly consists of taking no responsibility for the Nakba of 1948 and the expulsion of Palestinians, holding the Arabs and Palestinians accountable for what happened to them. (Nets-Zehngut, 2014). Israel's silence about its role in the exodus of over half of the Palestinian population from the territories it controlled, is viewed as a necessary strategy for nation-building and protecting the state's international reputation. This dominant Israeli narrative of avoiding the acknowledgment of the expulsion of Palestinians during 1948, placed the blame for the Arab mass exodus on Palestinians for rejecting the UN Partition Resolution and starting the war in late 1947. It also claimed that Palestinian Arabs left their homes

voluntarily, encouraged by Arab states to return with victorious Arabic armies post-Mandate. Thus, the narrative suggested that Palestinians brought the tragedy of mass displacement and refugee suffering upon themselves. (Sela and Kadish, 2016)

The well-known scholar of the modern Arab world, Malcolm Kerr, in his book *“America’s Middle East Policy: Kissinger, Carter and the Future”*, highlights two key elements that form the conventional wisdom surrounding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict:

1. The belief that Palestinian national claims are "artificially and mischievously inspired" and can therefore be disregarded.
2. The perception that the core issue in the Arab-Israeli conflict is an irrational Arab refusal to accept Israel’s existence, rather than, as Arabs argue, a legitimate grievance rooted in the displacement of Palestinians (Kerr, 1980).

As Dajani and Barakat affirm in their work (Dajani, Barakat, 2013), the Israeli belief that Palestinians have no rational basis for their hostility towards Israel and lack a legitimate national claim to the land of Palestine is central to the complications and misunderstandings surrounding this conflict. This assumption, that the Palestinian stance is "mischievously inspired," has shaped the framework through which the conflict is viewed. This perspective sets the limits for how the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is understood, focusing solely on the Israeli narrative. As a result, it rarely acknowledges or validates the existence or legitimacy of the Palestinian perspective.

Nevertheless, in the beginning of the 70’s, the Zionist narrative that dominated the Israeli narrative, started being significantly internally challenged by Israeli societal institutions. One of the first historians that challenged the Zionist narrative that Rafi Nets-Zehngut mentions in his work, was the scholar Yeoshua Porat, who published a book challenging the claim that in the 1936-1939, the Palestinian

uprising was directed against the Jews only. According to his book, the uprising was mainly against the British (Masalha, 1999).

By mid to late 1980's, groundbreaking studies by Israeli historians were published igniting both a major internal debate within Israel and attracting global interest.

The early history of the Israeli state and the origins of the Palestinian refugee problem were reexamined by Israeli revisionist "new" historians. Historians such as Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, Avi Shlaim, and Simha Flapan. Drawing on Hebrew archival sources, these works revealed significant findings that critically examine the actions of the Israeli state's founders, challenging many long-standing myths about Israel's birth (Masalha, 1999). After their books were published by leading British publishers, the authors began asserting that they were the first to write the true history of Israel's establishment. They further claimed that all previous accounts on the topic were merely Zionist propaganda, designed to portray the founding myth of the state in a favorable light, either for internal audiences or to justify it to the outside world (Shapira and Wiskind-Elper, 1995).

A major Israeli historian that has continuously challenged the Zionist narrative is Ilan Pappé. In his book "The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine" (2006), he introduced the concept of cultural 'Memoricide', highlighting the systematic efforts by post-1948 Israel to de-Arabize Palestinian lands. These efforts involved renaming Palestinian terrain, altering the ecology, and erasing cultural and religious sites, effectively overwriting Palestinian history with that of the new Israeli state. Pappé describes this as a metaphorical palimpsest, where multiple historical layers are reduced to a single one (Pappé, 2006, p.225–234).

The methods used by Israel during its establishment were described in detail in Ilan Pappé's book "The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine". Pappé's claims that these methods did not only dispossess Palestinians of their land but also attempted to

deprive their history, their narrative and silence their voices. Zionist colonization in Palestine, despite its unique nationalist ideology, mirrored previous European colonial projects in its efforts to take land and subjugate the indigenous population. The founding myths of Israel facilitated the conceptual and physical removal of Palestinians, using euphemisms like 'transfer' and 'present absentees.' (Pappe, 2006).

Shapira and Wiskind-Elper view the controversy created by the new Israeli historians highlighting a generational divide. Most of the “revisionist” scholars emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, born after 1948, while those they critique participated in the War of Independence, often serving in the Israeli military’s history branch, which gave them privileged access to restricted materials. These earlier scholars practiced self-censorship on sensitive topics like the expulsion of Arabs from Ramle-Lod and the broader Palestinian issue. Their works were seen as preliminary, as much archival material remained classified. The new historians challenge not only historical accounts but also the established public myths surrounding the War of Independence, focusing on collective memory rather than just historiography (Shapira and Wiskind-Elper, 1995).

According to Shapira and Wiskind-Elper, Israeli historian Benny Morris’s publications have significantly raised Israeli awareness of the catastrophe experienced by Palestinians during the 1948 war. While some of the basic facts were already known, the detailed and careful documentation of village after village and incident after incident carried great importance. The detailed accounts of Jews killing Arabs fostered a sensitivity among Israelis, challenging the notion that the 1948 war was simply a battle between the righteous and the wicked. This helped pave the way for a more nuanced and balanced understanding of the events. (Shapira and Wiskind-Elper, 1995)

2.2. Palestinian Collective Memory and Narrative

In Sonia Samir's research on the Palestinian Collective Memory in 2008, she believes that oral history and collective memory have become particularly important to the Palestinian people. She further affirms the vital role collective memory has played in preserving their identity and culture, for over seventy-five years of exile from their homeland, providing younger generations in exile with a sense of connection to their homeland, serving as the foundation of resistance against efforts to erase their identity (Namir, 2008).

Her research has shown that for Palestinians, collective memory is the only link to the past of their lost homeland. It is passed down to younger generations in as much detail as possible to protect them from feelings of alienation and insecurity, ensuring they inherit a sense of belonging to their land. This memory keeps the homeland alive for future generations, who are entrusted with the responsibility of its eventual liberation (Namir, 2008).

As a stateless people, Palestinians have compensated for the absence of official institutions to document and preserve their history by nurturing collective memory. During Namir's research that took place in refugee camps in Palestine, she saw that Palestinians re-established a social structure that closely resembled the villages they were expelled from in 1948 and the society they were in before. As much as conditions permitted, families and villagers sought to stay together in the same camps to ensure the continuity of village traditions and social structures. This enabled them to preserve many of their customs, such as clothing, folk tales, proverbs, songs, dances, and cuisine. Above all, they prioritized inter-village marriages to safeguard the continuity of their village communities from one generation to the next (Namir, 2008).

Since 1948, Palestinians have endured prolonged military occupation, facing repeated traumatic events such as frequent arrests, land seizures, invasions, home evictions, and demolitions carried out by the Israeli army. It is no surprise that generations of Palestinians are connected by trauma. Karl Mannheim's theory of generations suggests that a generation is not merely defined by age but by a "concrete bond" formed among individuals who share a similar social and historical context. He argues that a generation emerges from a "similarity of location," meaning individuals experience certain events in a shared context and interpret them in ways that lead to a collective consciousness. This bond doesn't rely on direct interaction or membership in a group like a family or tribe, but instead, it stems from shared social realities and experiences.

When applied to the Palestinian experience, Mannheim's theory helps explain how Palestinians, despite being scattered across different locations due to displacement, have developed a strong generational consciousness. Different generations of Palestinians share experience of exile, occupation, and loss of homeland creating a "concrete bond" among them. Palestinians in diaspora, even not having experienced the Nakba, are victims of displacement from Palestine as a result of the fate of their parents and they themselves were born already in exile.

This bond isn't based on physical proximity or direct knowledge of one another but arises from their social realities and collective experiences of displacement and struggle, leading to a unified sense of identity and purpose. The generational transmission of memory, stories of their homeland, and resistance against erasure can be seen as manifestations of this "similarly stratified consciousness" that Mannheim describes. Thus, even young Palestinians born in exile can feel connected to their history and to one another, bound by a shared narrative of displacement and resistance. (Mannheim, 1952)

Some might argue that considering the high number of Palestinians in diaspora, their collective memory can differ from Palestinians in Palestine and can be significantly less connected to their Palestinian identity. However, In Kristine Sheets' research on memory and identity in the Palestinian Diaspora, she further expands her research on memory, acknowledging its emotional impact. She argues that the field of memory studies has been deeply engaged with the transmission of traumatic memories and their impact on the formation of identity (Hirsch, 2002). Particularly, the concept of post memory, that was first coined by Hirsch in her work "Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory", describes the connection that descendants of mass atrocity survivors have with the personal, collective, and cultural trauma experienced by previous generations (Hirsch, 1992).

The concept was originally applied to descendants of Holocaust survivors; however, the concept of post memory has since broadened to include children of individuals who have experienced any form of collective trauma. This generation serves as custodians of these memories, with a familial sense of "ownership and protectiveness." (Hirsch, 2008). Kristine Sheets proposes that this definition should also encompass the grandchildren of survivors. She further proposed that these grandchildren likewise inherit the traumatic memories of earlier generations, though often in ways distinct from the direct offspring of survivors. For them, the pain of their ancestors is still deeply felt (Blachnicka-Ciacek, 2016).

Palestinians after the Nakba of 1948, were left with a significant impact on their collective consciousness. This era, defined by a profound sense of betrayal and helplessness, continues to evoke strong emotions among Palestinians, cutting across generations. The stories from this time have become deeply embedded as both personal and collective experiences, forming a crucial cultural and historical touchstone for Palestinians globally (Sheets, 2023).

To conclude, through Sheets' research on "Memory and Identity in the Palestinian Diaspora", she believes that across various studies, one consistent finding emerges: second-generation exiles, regardless of where they were born, often feel a weaker connection to Palestinian culture, memory, and identity, prompting a desire to deepen their understanding of this part of themselves (Sheets, 2023). Although they lack direct memories of Palestine or the experience of expulsion, these inherited experiences remain central to their sense of identity. Throughout their childhood and young adulthood, their connection to Palestine and their Palestinian identity is shaped through "acts of memory," which create symbolic links to the homeland (Schulz, 2005) (Khalidi, 1992). This connection is reinforced by an emotional bond and strong relationship with their parents, driven by a sense of responsibility to make up for the way of life their parents or grandparents lost through expulsion, even if they did not experience it first-hand.

As George Orwell wrote in his book 1948, "Whoever controls the past controls the future; whoever controls the present controls the past". Past narratives shape future narratives. Which explains the power of historical narratives shaping both current realities and future aspirations. For Palestinians, the narrative of the Nakba in 1948 and the brutal ongoing occupation of Israel influences future visions, including the right of return to their homeland and self-determination. These narratives evolve as new generations reinterpret their history and confront present challenges. Additionally, Palestinians have multiple narratives within their society, due to the geographical fragmentation, those living under occupation, in the state of Israel and those in exile. This diversity of narratives adds complexity to understanding the narrative, as each perspective shapes different visions for the future. Thus, understanding how past narratives influence current and future aspirations, is key to understanding the ongoing Palestinian struggle for justice and statehood.

3. Israeli and Palestinian Public Diplomacy

The term Public Diplomacy was introduced in the mid-1960s by former U.S. diplomat Edmund Gullion, part of it was done to separate the interaction with foreign publics that is a two-way process from propaganda, a one-way process. Cull illustrates how the term gained its attraction in the United States, specifically for three key points: First, to provide a positive alternative to terms such as ‘psychological warfare’ and ‘propaganda’. Second, to elevate the status of the United States Information Agency (USIA)³⁷, granting them a diplomatic role. And finally, to advocate for a more centralized approach to managing public diplomacy. While the term became more prominent in the U.S., it only gained wider international use after the Cold War, as the rise of real-time news, the Internet, and the political changes in Eastern Europe highlighted the growing importance of shaping international opinion and information (Cull, 2009).

By the late 20th century, Public Diplomacy was broadly understood as the transparent way in which a sovereign nation engages with foreign publics to inform and influence them, with the goal of advancing national interests and foreign policy objectives. Traditionally, it was viewed as a key component of state-to-state diplomacy, often conducted privately, between leaders and diplomats of different countries. It generally aims to enhance the image or reputation of the "sending" country in order to influence the broader policy environment of the "receiving" country. Public diplomacy understood influence in three main ways. First, it was based on the assumption that certain influential groups within society should be targeted by public diplomacy actors, such as MFAs, embassies, or international broadcasters. Second, public diplomacy efforts aimed to shape the opinions, beliefs,

³⁷ <https://www.federalregister.gov/agencies/united-states-information-agency>

and behaviors of these elites. Third, it was expected that these elites would, in turn, influence their governments' policies. Nevertheless, at the start of the twenty-first century, there was a conceptual shift among scholars and practitioners toward what is known as the "new" public diplomacy. This shift was driven by the 9/11 attacks, the emergence of a global media environment, and the rise of the digital society (Manor, p.12, 2019).

James Pamment (2013) stated that two-way communication was the very essence of the “new” public diplomacy that was dialogical, collaborative, and inclusive as it no longer focused on elites, but rather on foreign citizens. Moreover, the “new” public diplomacy represented a clear break from twentieth-century broadcast models while taking advantage of new digital technologies such as social media sites (Manor, p.13, 2019).

Ilan Manor challenges multiple terms that are used to define the “new” public diplomacy that uses digital technologies, such as “Digital Public Diplomacy”, in which he believes that Digital technologies are used as tools for conducting diplomacy, rather than being a form of diplomatic practice in themselves. Moreover, MFAs do not adopt digital tools all at once; instead, they integrate digital technologies into diplomatic institutions gradually, through a process of trial and error. (Manor, p.13, 2019)

Manor also addresses the concept of Digital Public Diplomacy being equated to complete “soft power”. He highlights the two opposing ends of public diplomacy. On one side, there's soft power—focused on engagement, building relationships, and using incentives alongside pressure. On the opposite end is propaganda, involving manipulation, psychological warfare, a precarious balance between truth and falsehood, and the use of conspiracy theories. The digitalization of public diplomacy hasn't followed a straightforward path. It isn't just about diplomats presenting events differently but rather about the fragmentation of reality itself, where distinguishing

what is real from what is not becomes increasingly difficult. This fragmentation challenges diplomats and individuals alike in making sense of world events, a core function of public diplomacy that is becoming more complex. Thus, the digitalization of public diplomacy is a problem and a solution. (Manor, p.7, 2019)

3.1. Israeli Public Diplomacy

Unlike in Europe, where specific institutions handle public diplomacy, Israel does not have a single dedicated body for such activities. Instead, major public institutions and the central administrative apparatus are responsible for carrying out public diplomacy efforts and coordinating these activities together. Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Directorate of Public Diplomacy collaborates with specialized units in the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry for Diaspora Affairs, and the spokesperson of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) (Ecaterina, 2024).

Another distinctive aspect of Israeli public diplomacy is that, in addition to official institutions, there is also *Hasbara* that operates in parallel with them. The presence of the unofficial *Hasbara* results from the assumption that governments are poor agents of persuasion. Thus, the success of *hasbara* policies depends on an ability to communicate with bodies and institutions that the target country will trust. This element was similarly well internalized by the Israeli apparatus and it has established organizations in various countries throughout the world whose purpose is to deliver *hasbara* messages through "indirect channels" without officially identifying themselves as such. This process reflects a deep recognition of the limits of "official" messaging" (Molad, p.29, 2012)

Origins of the concept of *Hasbara*, Israel's public diplomacy, goes back to the 1980s when Israel began training new leaders for its public diplomacy campaigns, merging its propaganda efforts with the rising trends of public diplomacy

and political marketing. These efforts trace back to the early days of the Zionist movement. In 1899, Theodor Herzl, the movement's first leader, urged participants at the Zionist Congress to engage in promotional propaganda for their cause. At that time, "propaganda" had a neutral connotation. It gained significant attention during World War II, being widely used by the Nazis and later positively adopted by the Soviets during the Cold War. Over time, the term took on a negative meaning in the West, becoming associated with deceptive and manipulative communications (Kouts, 2016).

The *Hasbara* strategy, rooted in Israel's historical approach to public diplomacy and propaganda, was further advanced by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who emphasized the need to better explain the "morality" of Israel's actions to the world rather than change its policies. Over the years, Israel's *Hasbara* machinery has grown into a vast operation involving multiple government agencies and programs, all aimed at legitimizing Israel's actions and delegitimizing its opponents through strategic communication and narrative control. *Hasbara* seeks to strengthen the country's image among international public opinion, to increase its influence on a target audience and, through it, on governments in democratic societies, and to expand the base cooperation in the international arena. (Ecaterina, 2024).

According to Aouragh, decades of the Israeli propaganda of *Hasbara* have shaped the global narrative around Palestine and Israel. This discourse is effective largely due to Israel's strong connections with powerful nations like the U.S. and Great Britain (Aouragh, 2016). Pro-Israel lobbies, funded by transnational corporations, have become a global force, aligning with neoliberal and neoconservative agendas. Their success is not due to exceptionally skilled Jewish lobbies, but because their goals align with key material interests (Aked, Mills, Griffin, Miller, 2013).

Nonetheless, in recent decades, Israel has observed a decline in its international reputation, beginning with the Second Intifada. Eytan Gilboa has stated that Israel has faced 'poisonous' and 'anti-Semitic' media coverage across Europe and the Arab (Gilboa, 2006). Since then, criticism of Israeli public diplomacy has grown, even within Israel itself (Aouragh, p. 277, 2016).

According to Avner Golov, *“Israeli public diplomacy — Hasbara as it is commonly called — is a special case because it does not have to deal with the typical needs of small countries, neither in the field nor within the population. (...)”* Israel is always singled out; undergoes frequent crises; draws wires; casts a giant shadow far beyond its size; always has to fight for its positions; has many messages and few images, even though it needs different images; is replete with problematic aspects (such as the occupation and human rights); has difficulty presenting attractive traits and needs constant legitimization” (Golov, 2018, p.3)

As Gilboa believes, Israeli officials have repeatedly "failed to prevent the deterioration of Israel's image and reputation worldwide" facing intense criticism of their policies from both domestic and international Israelis, and their strong support for the Palestinians. Organizations like B'Tselem and local branches of Amnesty International and Doctors Without Borders are examples of these critical voices (Gilboa, p.737, 2006)

In response, Israel began adopting a more assertive and confrontational approach to diplomacy. In 2002, Israel's State Comptroller called for a thorough examination of its public diplomacy efforts and especially the *Hasbara* system. These criticisms were amplified following the negative fallout from the Gaza war in 2008-2009. *Hasbara* has tried to involve conflicting practices and strategies that are designed to improve Israel's reputation and to mobilize international public support after its long criticism.

In response, a strategy Hasbara has adopted in 2009 was the recruitment of multilingual Israelis as hasbara ambassadors. Various state agencies, such as the Jewish Agency and the Immigrant Absorption Ministry, contributed by providing data on Jewish immigrants and recruiting volunteers for media campaigns. Even the ‘*El Al*’ Israel Airline initiated a program where Ambassadors use their free time between flights out of their layover to interact with local residents, sharing personal experiences of life in Israel and highlighting the country’s achievements in science and culture.³⁸

A report by The Israel Project, “The 2009 Global Language Dictionary report”³⁹ further offered guidance on how to better utilize hasbara volunteers. The report outlines strategies behind Israel’s carefully organized media efforts and confirms its shift toward a softer, more positive discourse. It provides examples of language to promote the pro-Israel narrative, such as reframing the Palestinian ‘right of return’ (established by UN General Assembly Resolution 194)⁴⁰ as an unreasonable ‘demand’ hindering peace. This political reframing is intended to emphasize the complexity of the conflict. The report also warns against declarative statements (*every, totally, always and never*) because ‘westerners think in shades of gray.’ (Aouragh, 2016)

After October 7, The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, along with other institutions responsible for producing Israeli propaganda—*Hasbara*—was quick to flood social media with their messaging. While the use of propaganda to justify wars is not new, the intensity and financial investment in this particular campaign were unprecedented. Israel placed paid advertisements featuring graphic and emotionally charged imagery from October 7 across various platforms, including X and

³⁸ <https://www.standwithus.com/post/just-the-simple-truth-el-al-relaunches-program-to-have-flight-personnel-share-israel-s-story-with>

³⁹ Report link: <https://www.transcend.org/tms/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/sf-israel-projects-2009-global-language-dictionary.pdf>

⁴⁰ <https://www.unrwa.org/content/resolution-194>

YouTube, primarily targeting audiences in Europe, particularly the UK, and the United States⁴¹. The ads depicted Hamas as an "evil terrorist group," likening it to ISIS, and included disturbing scenes designed to sway public opinion, that shows graphic content equating Hamas to ISIS⁴². Not only YouTube and X ads, but also children gaming applications, in which over a black screen, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent messages such as "We will make sure that those who harm us pay a heavy price"⁴³ Paid targeted advertising has become a weapon of war for governments in order to spread more propaganda and justify the collective punishment of Palestinians.

The Israeli government also revived strategies used in previous conflicts to control the narrative and set the media agenda, particularly online. As part of this effort, the Israeli Army Spokesperson's Office produced a 47-minute film titled "Bearing Witness to the October 7th Massacre," which documented the violence of the Hamas attack⁴⁴. It was first premiered on October 23, 2023, to a group of journalists, followed by a screening for members of the Knesset. In the weeks that followed, additional screenings took place in several cities worldwide, including Philadelphia, New York, and London. According to the Rolling Stones the film was also shown at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, where it was viewed by politicians, journalists, celebrities, business leaders, and others, while protesters outside the museum demonstrated chanting against the film, considering it as propaganda and pro - genocidal. Demonstrators carries signs that read: "pro-Zionism =/ Anti-Zionism", "The museum of Tolerance is showing a pro-genocide film" and "Free Palestine"⁴⁵.

⁴¹ <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/targeted-ads-millions-spent-on-israels-bid-for-western-influence-15557233>

⁴² <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/targeted-ads-millions-spent-on-israels-bid-for-western-influence-15557233>

⁴³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/graphic-pro-israel-ads-make-their-way-into-childrens-video-games-2023-10-30/>

⁴⁴ <https://variety.com/vip/bearing-witness-october-7th-massacre-israel-idf-hamas-gaza-footage-1235791123/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-features/gal-gadot-bearing-witness-screening-los-angeles-hamas-massacre-october-7-israel-1234873701/>

The success of *Hasbara* policies relies on how to effectively communicate through bodies and institutions trusted by the public in target countries. The Israeli government has understood this well and has established organizations in various countries to deliver *Hasbara* messages through "indirect channels," without formally identifying themselves as part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This Approach demonstrates a clear recognition of the limitations of "official" messaging.

Part of the indirect channels were civil Hasbara. Unlike previous wars with Hamas, civil Hasbara initiatives have emerged after October 7, with thousands of Israeli civilian organizations, influencers and normal civilians who were focused on spreading the Israeli narrative and story on social media. The initiative included volunteer groups and technology and publicity companies that converted part of their work for Hasbara. Methods used by civil Hasbara focused on spreading content on social media with the intention of encouraging people in organizing and attending pro-Israel protests. Through Hi-technology companies, they created technical tools to translate, collect and manage content on social media (Siman-Tov, Noy-Freifeld, Somfalvi, & Keinan, 2023).

The main goal of these organizations was to move from Hasbara to Influence. According to Siman-Tov, without Influence and the ability to tell a story that resonates with people, Israel will struggle with public opinion. The agenda needed to be set from reactive to proactive, these efforts include finding shared values with the West and stressing the dangers Palestinians inflict on them.

Siman-Tov also believes that civil Hasbara are more authentic and credible than state Hasbara, since they generate directly from citizens, conveying what the state couldn't. Some civil organizations that work on behalf of Hasbara operate either independently, without any links to the official governmental Hasbara, or receive assistance from governmental ministries. However, despite the severity of the situation in the first months of the war, a month later, there was a rapid decline in

participation in civil *Hasbara*, this was mainly because the impact of it was strong only on the national Israeli society (Siman-Tov, Michlin-Shapir, & Fridman, 2023).

Given Israel's state of war for a long time, and the necessary responses by the IDF to defend the population and property, it was almost inevitable for this institution to become involved in public diplomacy activities (Magen, Lapid, 2018). For that reason, the Israeli military has played a major role as an actor in communication through its public diplomacy activities. It actively uses social media, particularly X⁴⁶, to share information about their operations against Hamas. The IDF's X account posts content about live updates about their operations in Gaza, sharing soldier testimonies, and responses to critiques. The IDF spokesman Daniel Hagari usually is the one reporting about the latest major updates in English⁴⁷.

The IDF's social media presence reflects a strategy of open and accessible communication to maintain the legitimacy of Israel's military actions internationally. However, they still face limits like censorship to protect sensitive information, though this has been reduced to maintain public trust. Social media has become a crucial tool and a battlefield for Israeli public diplomacy, helping to counter anti-Israel campaigns and manage potential image crises in real time through a global network of social media users. (Ecatarina, 2024)

The surprise attack on Israel on October 7 and the subsequent war have presented new challenges for Israeli public diplomacy and *Hasbara*. Immediately after October 7, Israel had to communicate to the global public about the details of the attack carried by Hamas, consequently justifying its military actions and the extensive damage it caused in Gaza, from destructing homes and infrastructures, displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, starvation and most

⁴⁶ X posts: <https://x.com/idf/status/1844752156164829639?s=61>, <https://x.com/idf/status/1843962840337834381?s=61>

⁴⁷ <https://x.com/idf/status/1843962840337834381?s=61>

importantly the deaths of more than 50,000 Palestinians in Gaza. This has been a great challenge due to the increased global empathy for the Palestinians.

An issue that was difficult to address, was both historical and current statements by Israeli politicians that permit widespread harm to civilians in Gaza, which many governments and organizations have labeled as genocidal. Such statements include:

- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's description of the conflict as *"a war between the sons of light and the sons of darkness"* and his reference to wiping out *"the memory of Amalek"*⁴⁸;

- Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir's statement on X about civilians in Gaza: *"when we say we want to destroy Hamas, we also mean those who celebrated, supported, and distributed sweets—they are all terrorists and must also be destroyed"*;⁴⁹

- Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu's comments regarding the potential dropping of an atomic bomb on Gaza, wrote on X; *"One of the options is to drop an atomic bomb on Gaza. I pray & hope for their [hostages] return, but there is also a price in war,"*⁵⁰

- President Isaac Herzog's assertion that *"the entire nation there is responsible,"* dismissing the idea of uninvolved civilians;⁵¹

- Defense Minister Yoav Gallant's declaration: *"I have ordered a complete siege on the Gaza Strip. There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed,"* *"We are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly"*⁵²

Another challenge Israel's public diplomacy has faced and is still facing is the abducted Israelis in Gaza, those who have been released but also those who are still

⁴⁸ <https://x.com/mtracey/status/1718360354764238929?s=61>

⁴⁹ <https://x.com/yehudashaul/status/1739641277983908158?s=61>

⁵⁰ <https://zionism.observer/storage/documentation//screenshot//qq92lMCpFdVoN4t1X1a5EfMJKmAlWdWclGAh10n0.png>

⁵¹ <https://x.com/sprinterfamily/status/1713064886027063584?s=61>

⁵² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbPdR3E4hCk>

held. There's been huge debates and conflicts inside of the Israeli government for a hostage deal⁵³. For months, Netanyahu's own defense minister and security chiefs have repeatedly expressed—both in numerous private security meetings and occasionally in public—that they believe the prime minister could have been more flexible in his attempts to negotiate an agreement with Hamas. Some have also credibly claimed that Netanyahu's decisions were influenced by his political interests, particularly due to warnings from his far-right partners that they would collapse his government if he pursued what they viewed as a risky deal (Horovits, 2024).

Netanyahu has long infuriated hostages' families for not agreeing on any more hostage deals with Hamas, creating a great separation between the Israeli society. Since October 7, Israel has witnessed massive anti-government protests against Netanyahu's policies and decisions in handling the war, criticizing him for not making deals with Hamas to bring the hostages back and calling for his resignation⁵⁴.

Since the beginning of the war on Gaza, polls in Israel reflected the Israelis' decline of support to the conservative parties that make up Netanyahu's ruling coalition. In May 2024 a poll was conducted showing that only 35% of the population think Netanyahu is fit to be their prime minister (Perliger, 2024).

This is mainly because many Israelis hold Netanyahu's government accountable for the events of October 7. They believe Netanyahu is largely to blame for Israel's failure to address Hamas' growing military capabilities over the past decade, including the construction of underground tunnels in Gaza. A January poll by Israel's Channel 13 found that 55% of Israelis say Netanyahu's decisions are

⁵³ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/amid-massive-protests-across-israel-netanyahu-rejects-calls-to-reach-cease-fire-deal>

⁵⁴ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/march-of-rage-protesters-in-tel-aviv-elsewhere-urge-implementation-of-hostage-deal/>

*More on genocidal declarations by Israeli Politicians: <https://law4palestine.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/1-Database-of-Israeli-Incitement-to-Genocide-15th-January-2024-DECISION-MAKERS.pdf>

driven primarily by personal interests, while 33% believe he prioritizes what is best for the country⁵⁵.

Additionally, there are other significant issues that date back before October 7. Netanyahu has attempted to weaken the independence of the judiciary, enacting legislation in 2023 that reduced the courts' ability to review government actions and laws, which led to widespread protests in Israel.⁵⁶

Israel's public diplomacy during the war faced different challenges in influencing and shaping global perception and narrative. It's been complicated for Israel's democracy to justify its military actions as a response to the 7th of October attack, facing the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Gaza. While it seeks to focus on its right to 'self-defense', images, videos and reports of civilian casualties and destruction in Gaza showing the devastating and brutal military attacks, have fueled international criticism and protests. This has led to a complex diplomatic landscape where Israel is being diplomatically cut since October 7. At least eleven countries, including Jordan, Bahrain, Turkey, Bolivia, Colombia, Honduras, Chile, Belize, Brazil, South Africa and Chad, have recalled their ambassadors to Israel or severed ties altogether.⁵⁷

3.2. Palestinian Public Diplomacy

The Palestinian National Authority (PA) serves as the current governing body of Palestine and oversees the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the primary objective of Palestine's public diplomacy programs is to build solidarity with Palestine through several means. The Palestinian government primarily pursues this objective via the

⁵⁵ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/poll-gives-national-unity-commanding-lead-over-likud-with-a-center-bloc-of-69-mks/>

⁵⁶ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-is-unpopular-at-home-but-not-for-the-reasons-us-lawmakers-are-turning-on-him/>

⁵⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/31/bolivia-israel-amas-gaza-war-crime>

Palestinian International Cooperation Agency (PICA)⁵⁸, which is its only official government instrument for public diplomacy (Ayoub, 2023).

PICA was established in 2016, promoting the vision of ‘a resilient world united by solidarity through development’ (PICA, 2021). It seeks to influence the attitudes of international audiences in foreign countries, a strategy commonly employed by governments to strengthen their public diplomacy efforts (Tuch, 1990). In practice, the agency aims to build solidarity by mobilizing skilled Palestinian professionals across various sectors to provide development and technical assistance to both developing countries in the Global South and developed nations in the North and West. Importantly, PICA relies on strategic partnerships and agreements with Palestinian institutions to ensure ongoing mobilization. It also works to expand its network of partnerships with international organizations, public diplomacy agencies (PICA, 2021).

In addition to PICA’s programs, there’s the Department of Bilateral Affairs within the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Responsible for maintaining relations between Palestine and its foreign counterparts and handling traditional diplomatic tasks, such as drafting official letters. It also engages in informal public diplomacy activities aimed at fostering better understanding between Palestinians and other nations (PICA, 2021).

For example, a series of social media pages titled "Palestine in [a country]" have been used to share messages that emphasize common viewpoints between the two countries. For example, the "Palestine in the UK" Facebook page⁵⁹, which is the official page for the Palestinian mission in the UK, is used to connect with both the British and Palestinian communities. It hosts cultural events, such as musicals and Dabkeh performances, to promote and share Palestinian identity with the global

⁵⁸ <http://pica.pna.ps>:

⁵⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/palestinianmissionuk>

community. However, even if these pages gained many new followers during 2024, these pages still have limited followers (61,000 followers) and low engagement rates. Even the pages with a larger audience tend to have few reactions or comments. In comparison, Facebook pages managed by the Israeli government see higher engagement. For instance, the "Israel in India" Facebook page has nearly 121,000 followers⁶⁰.

However, even if the delegations and missions mobilized by PICA emphasize solidarity and support, it does not thoroughly reflect Palestinian identity, culture or narratives. Therefore, it is not sufficient to rely on PICA as the only governmental tool for public diplomacy for the establishment of an integrated strategy implementing educational, cultural and sports programs.

There is only one non-governmental organization in Palestine that specializes in public diplomacy: the Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy (PIPD). Aiming to share the Palestinian narrative with the world, PIPD highlights various aspects of life in Palestine. The content shared on its website and social media platforms includes videos of Palestinian women athletes, images of Palestinian cultural heritage, and stories and testimonials from those affected by the Israeli occupation. Unlike government initiatives, the organization's programs primarily rely on the Web and social media as their main platforms⁶¹ (PIPD, 2019).

For example, the PIPD has ran a crowd-sourced online campaign called #MyPalestine, which primarily targets audiences on Facebook⁶² and Instagram⁶³. The campaign encouraged people to share photos that capture the essence of Palestine—its landscapes, culture, and people⁶⁴. PIPD then reposts these images and has announced plans to reward selected photographers by featuring their work in

⁶⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/IsraelinIndia/>

⁶¹ <https://www.thepipd.com>

⁶² <https://www.facebook.com/ThePIPD/>

⁶³ <https://www.instagram.com/thepipd/?hl=en>

⁶⁴ <https://thisweekinpalestine.com/mypalestine-photo-exhibit/>

galleries worldwide. Another initiative by PIPD is the Model United Nations program, which aims to develop college students' skills, enhance their understanding of international issues, and prepare them to be effective representatives for Palestine (PIPD, 2019). In summary, PIPD seeks to showcase the human and cultural dimensions of Palestine by sharing diverse stories from various perspectives.

The PIPD's Instagram page is very active, in which it spreads its campaigns, videos and news. The page has almost 65,000 followers, and has been very active with a good engagement rate, unlike the official governmental sites such as the Palestine Ministry of Foreign Affairs that has less than 7000 followers on Instagram with a very low engagement rate⁶⁵.

A significant figure that has been vocal and an influencer since October 7 is the Head of the Palestinian Mission to the United Kingdom, Ambassador Husam Zomlot. With more than 350,000 followers on X⁶⁶, Zomlot has been stressing over the importance of the British government to adhere to its legal obligations regarding arms exports to Israel and to recognize the State of Palestine. His statements were important in representing the Palestinian people who were believers in diplomatic processes to achieve peace in Palestine.

During many interviews of different news channels and in front of hundreds and thousands of pro-Palestinian protesters in London, Husam constantly emphasized on the importance for the UK and the US to enforce the international system and to give it relevance. For the UN and member states to look into sanctions against Israel, suspension of Israel's membership in the UN, and finally the suspension of arms supply to Israel. Zomlot believes that it might be the unpopular opinion of most Palestinians to work for peace processes and diplomatic talks with Israel, because negotiations with Israel simply never worked. As he said in an

⁶⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/palestine.mofa/profilecard/?igsh=d3hlcHNhcmxkeGp5>

⁶⁶ <https://x.com/hzomlot?s=21>

interview with BBC, “Peace process has become Israel’s Trojan Horse to quadruple their colonial settlements, to suffocate the West Bank out of life and to do what they're doing in Gaza now.”⁶⁷

Zomlot has risen in popularity during the war due to his eloquent speaking style and effective communication as a representative of the Palestinian government in the United Kingdom. Despite often facing racist questions in interviews, he consistently manages to present the Palestinian diplomacy’s stance on various topics in a compelling and logical manner. For a certain percentage of Palestinians who believed in diplomatic relations and negotiation processes with Israel for achieving peace in Palestine, Zomlot represents them carefully emphasizing on the importance of recognizing Palestine as an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital.

In conclusion, it is important to note that public diplomacy in Palestine has certainly become more vibrant and effective since October 7, especially within the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The ministry engaged in numerous diplomatic discussions and meetings, showing its will to cooperate diplomatically with other countries, hosting a considerable number of foreign ministers from around the world⁶⁸.

With increased global support, there were many protests, meetings involving Palestinian ambassadors and ministers, and events at universities and organizations with active participation from many Palestinian diplomats. There has been extensive communication between embassies and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as within diplomatic channels.

⁶⁷ https://youtu.be/r_3h_8ILWbA?si=YvKDAy0SdllzMSRY

⁶⁸ <https://www.mofa.pna.ps/en-us/mediaoffice/ministernews/ps2205>, <https://www.mofa.pna.ps/en-us/mediaoffice/ministernews/ps23055>, <https://www.mofa.pna.ps/en-us/mediaoffice/ministernews/ps150520249>, <https://www.mofa.pna.ps/en-us/mediaoffice/ministernews/ps2305>

4. Shaping the Narrative after October 7: The Role of Social Media

4.1. Information battle between Israel and Hamas

Hamas and Israel heavily used social media platforms to communicate, propagate their messages and organize their actions. In particular, Telegram played a crucial role in offering both an efficient and secure channel to share real-time updates, issue public statements and broadcast videos. The first day of the war showed how social media became a weapon of war in modern warfare, providing both a powerful tool for communication and for psychological war.

On October 7, Hamas used its Telegram channel to announce the beginning of the attack on Israeli forces and settlements in the northern Gaza Strip. Minutes later, Hamas posted on their press channel followed by a brief video clip of the attack. On the other hand, when news broke globally about the attack, Israel immediately sparked a significant campaign that unfolded in different phases during the first two months of the conflict. Initially, the campaign aimed to shape the narrative surrounding and only on the events of October 7 and build international support for Israel. The second phase shifted focus on Israel's justification of intense airstrikes on Gaza. In the third phase, the propaganda efforts turned toward justifying the forced displacement of tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians in Gaza and promoting Israel's vision of victory.

4.2. Initial Israeli narrative of October 7:

During the successful Israel propaganda in the early weeks of the 2023 Gaza war, Israel and its supporters focused on several key propaganda narratives that have deep roots in Israel's history. Tweissi summarized these narratives in the following points:

- Israel as the "Victim": Israeli propaganda has long emphasized Jewish victimhood, positioning Israel as the sole injured party in conflicts. This narrative aims to garner global sympathy and support, especially following the October 7 attack, which Israel used to reinforce its image as a victim.
- Demonizing the Palestinians and Hamas: Other than portraying itself as a victim, Israel's propaganda depicts Palestinians, particularly Hamas, as barbaric terrorists. This narrative intensified after October 7th, portraying Palestinians as inherently evil, thus justifying the collective punishment in Gaza and extreme measures against them. Israeli officials and propaganda apparatus have constantly sought to dehumanize Palestinians, for example the comment of the Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Galant: "We are fighting human animals"⁶⁹
- The language of dehumanization has historically served as a starting point for justifying genocide ⁷⁰
- Israel's "Moral and Human Superiority": This narrative claim that Israel, as a victim, is morally and humanly superior. It emphasizes the humanity of Israeli victims, contrasting them with the demonized Palestinian "others," and suggests that Israel's actions, even in war, are conducted with the utmost professionalism and care.
- The "Legitimacy" of Israel's Operation: Israel argues that its military actions are legitimate acts of self-defense. This narrative is used to justify its operations in Gaza, portraying them as necessary responses to external threats and in accordance with international law.

⁶⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbPdR3E4hCk>

⁷⁰ <https://law4palestine.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/1-Database-of-Israeli-Incitement-to-Genocide-15th-January-2024-DECISION-MAKERS.pdf>

Israel employed techniques to convey these narratives, such as using fragmentation and decontextualization, framing its operation as a war solely against Hamas. This tactic involved presenting the conflict as a sudden response to the October 7th attack, without acknowledging its deeper roots (Tweissi, 2024).

Moreover, through intense and concentrated media campaigns, Israel amplified specific narratives, particularly in the first three weeks of the war. This approach shaped global perceptions, even as evidence of Israeli violations and Palestinian suffering surfaced. It diverted media attention away from its war crimes and focusing on a different narrative. Finally, it incited moral panic by spreading shocking images and videos, portraying Palestinian fighters as brutal terrorists. This tactic heightened emotional responses and global outrage, influencing public opinion in Israel's favor.

To rally global support, since the beginning, Israel tried to employ every available media and communication tool. It launched extensive public relations campaigns, saturated social media with emotionally charged content, and sustained communication efforts through major international media outlets. It also embedded journalists with its military forces and organized tours of its ground incursions in northern Gaza. A public diplomacy campaign further supported these propaganda efforts, featuring solidarity visits from world leaders, diplomats, and influential cultural figures to express their backing for Israel. These visitors were often taken to the towns and kibbutzim within the "Gaza envelope," which had been heavily impacted by the Palestinian attack (Tweissi, 2024).

4.3. Israeli Narrative change/IOF

During the first three weeks of the war, the Israeli narrative was internationally dominant. However, the significant shift in narrative began on

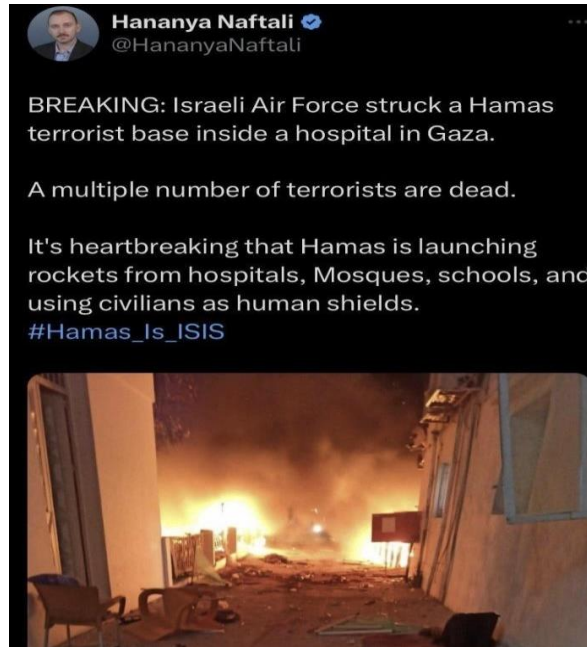
October 17, 2023, following the bombing of Al-Ahli Arab Hospital. This event triggered a challenge to the initial Israeli narrative and claims. By the end of the fourth week, international support for Israel began to decline, as reflected in UN voting patterns⁷¹, public opinion in the US and Europe started to shift.

As revelations emerged disproving many early stories about the October 7 attack—such as claims of child beheadings and rape—this new narrative gained momentum, especially in liberal Western media. And later on, even Israeli media began to question the official narrative. Such major corrections that followed were the claims about beheaded and burned Israeli children on October 7, after it was revealed by different investigations that it was false⁷².

The Al-Ahli Hospital bombing has killed at least 500 Palestinians and injured more than 350. The bombing marked a turning point. Initial posts on X by Hananya Naftali, a digital aide to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, aroused great suspicion. “Israeli Air Force struck a Hamas terrorist base inside a hospital in Gaza,” he wrote, but the post was almost immediately deleted.

⁷¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/10/1142517>

⁷² https://www.lemonde.fr/en/les-decodeurs/article/2024/04/03/40-beheaded-babies-the-itinerary-of-a-rumor-at-the-heart-of-the-information-battle-between-israel-and-hamas_6667274_8.html



Source: X: <https://x.com/marionawfal/status/1714360668818739260?s=61>

Right after an international outrage on the bombing, Israel changed its narrative claiming that the attack was caused by a Palestinian rocket. This claim was disputed by investigations from Le Monde⁷³, which suggested that the missile came from Israel and The New York Times⁷⁴ calling the Israeli narrative in question. Claims and allegations speculated for a long time, both sides denying its responsibility for it. However, Al Ahli Hospital was not the first nor the last hospital bombed by Israel, on May 30, 2024, The World Health Organization declared only about 12 of Gaza's 36 hospitals are still able to function, although a total of 29 have suffered damage during the conflict. 84% of health facilities are damaged or destroyed⁷⁵.

⁷³ https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/11/03/explosion-at-al-ahli-hospital-in-gaza-new-findings-from-our-investigation_6224647_4.html

⁷⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/24/world/middleeast/gaza-hospital-israel-hamas-video.html>

⁷⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2024/06/01/g-s1-1780/gaza-israel-infrastructure-water-schools-hospitals#:~:text=Current,>

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(as%20of%20May&text=The%20World%20Health%20Organization%20says%20only%20about%2012%20of%20Gaza's, facilities%20are%20damaged%20or%20destroyed.)

On December 11 2023, Libération⁷⁶ published a comprehensive investigation debunking many reported atrocities and exposing how false narratives had been promoted by various parties, including volunteer rescuers, Israeli officials, and American leaders.

The investigation by Libération revealed discrepancies between widely circulated reports on Israeli casualties and official figures, showing fewer child victims and overall deaths than initially claimed. For instance, while Israel initially reported over 1,400 deaths on October 14, this number was revised to 1,200 by November 10⁷⁷. Reports also indicated that some Israeli casualties were actually caused by Israeli forces⁷⁸.

The short truce starting November 24 highlighted shifting media narratives. The truce had an exchange deal of captives, 50 Israeli women and children in Gaza, in exchange of 150 women and children in Israeli prisons. During this period, Hamas presented high-quality videos of detainee handovers, contrasting its treatment of prisoners with Israeli actions⁷⁹. The footage was released by Hamas and later circulated through various news channels, particularly on social media platforms. The release of the videos by Hamas was seen by some as a strategic move to get more international sympathy and to contrast its treatment of prisoners with Israel's treatment of Palestinians prisoners. Some critics argued that the video was used as a propaganda tool aimed at legitimizing Hamas's actions.

Despite the back-and-forth of propaganda and psychological tactics between the opposing sides. Overall, the circulation of the video highlighting the release of hostages by Hamas on November 24, 2023, played a significant role in shaping public perception and discourse about the war. This shift caused global media to

⁷⁶ <https://www.liberationnews.org/debunking-israels-lies-about-the-bombing-of-al-ahli-arab-hospital-in-gaza/>

⁷⁷ <https://www.npr.org/2023/11/11/1212458974/israel-revises-death-toll-hamas-attacks-oct-7>

⁷⁸ <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/rkjqoobip>

⁷⁹ <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/11/25/israel-hamas-hostage-release-chance-tsr-vpx.cnn>

reassess the situation, with increased criticism of Israel's conduct and a focus on the broader historical context of the conflict.

Hamas introduced a new version of its narrative that seemed more humane. This can be seen also through the high-quality videos showing the handover of detainees, utilizing drone footage and ground shots with effective lighting and advanced production techniques. The scenes included masked 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. On August 23, Noa Argamani, an Israeli hostage made a statement in the media saying “Israeli media took what I said out of context, Al Qassam members didn’t beat me. They neither beat me nor cut my hair. My injury was the result of a wall falling on top of me due to an Israeli strike.” (Noa Argamani’s social media account)



A still picture from Hamas’ video posted in social media of an Israeli captive released from Gaza, November 24 - source: x.com

The struggle for victimhood has been central to the media battle between both sides. However, the harrowing images of Gaza's devastation and Israel's atrocities committed, have significantly shifted global perceptions, particularly as the United States continued to block any progress for a ceasefire at the UN Security Council.

This broader propaganda war was reflected in the online struggle on social media, with pro-Palestinian hashtags gaining substantial traction on social media platforms. Only until November 2023, a study by the Washington Post found that there has been a double in the number of pro-Palestine hashtags on TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, against a major decline in pro-Israel hashtags. It showed that the hashtag #Freepalestine was used on more than 11 million posts, 36 times more than #Standwithisrael on Facebook, and 26 times more on Instagram. (Harwell, 2023)

Another research done by Laura Edelson⁸⁰ in the Northeastern University to understand how pro-Palestinian posts on social media outnumber pro-Israeli posts and follow a very different pattern. The pattern of pro-Palestinian social media posts consists of extended social movement, while the pro-Israel posts reflect what follows a major news event (Northeastern Global News, 2024).

Edelson, gained access to TikTok's Research API, and was able to analyze over 280,000 TikTok posts in the US related to the Israel-Palestine war, categorized by hashtags such as #IStandWithIsrael, #SavePalestine, #Gaza, and #Israel. The data spanned the periods from October 7, 2023, to January 29, 2024. Of the posts, 170,430 were pro-Palestinian, 8,843 pro-Israeli, and 101,706 were neutral or general⁸¹.

The pro-Palestinian posts received 236 million views, pro-Israeli posts 14 million views, and neutral content had 492 million views. In the weeks immediately

⁸⁰ <https://news.northeastern.edu/2024/05/10/israel-hamas-tiktok-research/>

⁸¹ Ibid.

following the attack on October 7, neutral content dominated both in number of posts and views, a pattern Edelson attributes to TikTok's "majoritarian" approach—amplifying the most popular and trendy content⁸².

Pro-Israeli posts peaked in the first week, following the general trend of news events, while pro-Palestinian content surged in the second week and continued to grow. Neutral posts, with higher production quality, were more frequently boosted by TikTok's algorithms, which prioritize content likely to appeal to the broadest audience⁸³. Israel's propaganda efforts responded by framing the growing prominence of the pro-Palestinian narrative on social media as an increase in anti-Semitism. They accused those supporting the narrative of spreading anti-Semitic content, denying atrocities, and promoting hate speech, particularly on platforms like TikTok.

Furthermore, Israel imposed strict military censorship from the first day of its war, restricting information about security matters and ongoing operations. This censorship prevented leaks about government meetings and secret deliberations and controlled the portrayal of the military operation by limiting the media's access to images and videos of losses. While some journalists were allowed to embed with Israeli forces under strict censorship, foreign journalists were barred from independently entering Gaza⁸⁴. As the conflict continued, domestic criticism of the censorship grew, with major newspapers like Haaretz attempting to bypass restrictions, leading to government backlash. Military censorship was not only limited to audio-visual and print media, but also extended to online platforms, with companies like Meta and X to control content, to delete and prohibit and censor content that harms Israel in any way. The war has highlighted the significant

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ <https://www.politico.eu/article/anatomy-scroll-inside-tiktok-ai-powered-algorithm-israel-palestine-war/>

⁸⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/08/26/joint-statement-requesting-eu-action-israels-unprecedented-killing-journalists-and>

weaknesses in Israel's information management and the limitations of its censorship efforts. (Tweissi, 202, p.137)

In advance, social media has worked on taking down content of Palestinians threatening to close accounts and being shadow banned. Many user accounts were shut down for their support for Palestine, their content being removed, or what has been done repeatedly, the shadow banning, with the content being demoted or down ranked, and the engagement with the content gets significantly reduced in comparison to other content that is not related to Palestine⁸⁵.

After Hamas's attacks on October 7th, the Israeli military had a very strong presence on social media platforms, such as on TikTok with over 500,000 followers⁸⁶ and 2.3 million followers on Twitter (X)⁸⁷. Israeli officials openly discussed the destruction of Gaza such as the statement of the Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant saying, "We are fighting against animals"⁸⁸, stating there were no innocents there and referring to Palestinians as animals unworthy of existence. Their rhetoric appeared to incite genocidal violence, a message that was evident on the battlefield. Numerous videos have surfaced showing Israeli soldiers committing war crimes, looting homes, destroying property, and humiliating Palestinian captives, all while celebrating their actions⁸⁹. The posting of such content on social media reflects the impunity these soldiers believe they possess. Although Palestinians have witnessed similar atrocities dating back to 1948, never before have the images and videos been so widespread, explicit, and barbaric.

Videos⁹⁰ that were widely shared by Israeli soldiers on social media depict them looting property, mocking the destruction they cause, and torturing and

⁸⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metas-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and>.

⁸⁶ <https://www.tiktok.com/@idf? t=8qeQUrvbtKB& r=1>

⁸⁷ https://x.com/idf?s=21&t=XxJngKqDZpxQ_ViHwqxhWQ

⁸⁸ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/israel-paints-palestinians-as-animals-to-legitimize-war-crimes-israeli-scholar/3030278>

⁸⁹ https://www.instagram.com/reel/C2K3p1Uvht-/?utm_source=ig_embed&utm_campaign=loading

<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/12/15/middleeast/israeli-soldiers-burningfood-gaza-intl/index.html>

⁹⁰ <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSj1ykHH9/>, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/06/world/middleeast/israel-idf-soldiers-war-social-media-video.html>, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRptiehg_Io&ab_channel=AllazeeraEnglish

humiliating detained Palestinians. The images of arrests, torture, and the dehumanization of Palestinians underscore the violent nature of the settler-colonial regime. The soldiers, lacking specific intelligence about Hamas members, are indiscriminately taking and torturing people⁹¹ in hopes of extracting information through interrogation. The fact that prisoners are stripped to their underwear is an example of cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment, which is illegal and amounts to torture⁹². No Israeli soldier has faced sanctions from the international community or from countries with the power to impose them (Aljazeera English, 2024) (B'Tselem, 2024).

There is an overwhelming sense of confidence among IDF soldiers that they can act with impunity, flaunting their actions to the world. Sexually and physically brutalizing detainees⁹³, humiliating men, women, and children, destroying homes for their own amusement⁹⁴. B'Tselem released a report titled “Welcome to Hell,”⁹⁵ which was based on interviews with 55 Palestinians from Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel who had been held by Israel since October 7. The report detailed allegations of abuse and torture, raising serious concerns about the treatment of detainees.

“The reality described in the prisoners’ testimonies can only be explained as the outcome of the ongoing dehumanization of the Palestinian collective in Israeli public perception” (B'Tselem, p. 6, 2024)

⁹¹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/horrific-testimonies-israeli-army-tortures-palestinians-gaza-physically-and-psychologically-enar>

⁹² <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBT3mHoM4Zt/?igsh=YmIzeHFhd2FuY3Mx>
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-69020237>

⁹³ <https://news.sky.com/story/video-appears-to-show-idf-soldiers-sexually-abusing-palestinian-detainee-13193857>

⁹⁴ <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/12/15/middleeast/israeli-soldiers-burningfood-gaza-intl/index.html>

⁹⁵ https://www.btselem.org/sites/default/files/publications/202408_welcome_to_hell_eng.pdf

4.4 Palestinian narrative on social media

A dominant figure within the Hamas group that has influenced the Palestinian narrative since October 7 is Abu Ubaida. Abu Ubaida, the anonymous military spokesman of Hamas, that is barely presented on western media, has developed a huge following base among Arab speakers. Possessing essential communication skills for influence, for being the spokesperson for the strongest political and military faction in Gaza, which grants him a priority in being followed. Abu Ubaida has built his image and impactful presence without a known real name, with his face hidden behind a key factor in attracting attention as a global symbol of Palestine, the red Keffiyeh and military uniform, with the Palestinian flag on his left arm⁹⁶.

The mystery surrounding his personality and attire adds a certain charisma necessary for influence. He blends flexibility and firmness in his speech through the tone of his voice, hand gestures, and the way he moves his fingers. He narrates the details of events and military and political information, according to priorities, without being lengthy or overly emotional.

Abu Ubaida is fully aware that he is up against a massive Israeli and Western propaganda machine. For that he performs his media and communication role to the fullest, while also managing an important military and political aspect. He consistently provides necessary, and essential new information—information that Israel is often compelled to acknowledge later. Israel has constantly monitored him since the beginning of the war on Gaza, translating his speeches, and working on to unveil his face.

He starts with specific details and expands to the general, following a clear methodology, and addresses the entire world. As a result, the information he

⁹⁶ https://english.aawsat.com/features/4643556-abu-ubaidaal-mulatham-symbol-gaza-battle?_wrapper_format=html&page=2

provides about the battlefield and front lines becomes the most prominent, even picked up by Israeli media. This has led him to become a benchmark and a resonant voice for millions of followers in the Arab world and the broader Islamic world, more so than any other military spokesperson⁹⁷.

To understand Abu Ubaida's significant influence in the Arab world especially in Palestine, qualitative descriptive research has been constructed that analyzes Abu Ubaidah's speech in the context of the war situation, further explaining why and how his speech influenced the narrative. The study focuses on two main theoretical frameworks: Geoffrey Leech's politeness maxims and Dell Hymes' speech events, discussing how speeches can influence the perception and actions of the broader community toward the conflict (Sai, U. M. R., Arsyad, H., Haidar, A., & Al Farisi, M. Z. 2024).

Geoffrey Leech, who introduced six maxims in politeness in language, namely tact maxim, generosity maxim, approbation maxim, modesty maxim, agreement maxim, and sympathy maxim, which function to convey information and manage social relations (Susandi et al., 2024). The second theoretical framework is Dell Hymes' speech event theory, "which analyzes the setting, participants, and outcomes of a speech, and provides a framework for studying the speech in order to gain a deeper insight into its context and impact" (Tanimu & Nwaobasi, 2024)

The research was based on one of Abu Ubaid's speeches⁹⁸, this analysis finds that during his speech, a number of politeness maxims can be recognized in Abu Ubaida's speech such as *approbation*, *modesty* and *sympathy*. Abu Ubaida used the *Maxim of sympathy* in his speech which demonstrated respect, recognition and

⁹⁷<https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2024/7/7/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%BA%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%88%D9%87%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%B5%D9%86%D9%81%D8%AA> (Translated from Arabic)
⁹⁸https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lWmOED0eSfl&ab_channel=AllazeeraArabic%D9%82%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A9%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9

empathy for Allah, the fighters and Palestinian people. The analysis highlights how speech functions as a powerful tool for fostering solidarity and morale, using polite and respectful language even in tense situations. Demonstrating that politeness principles can still be applied to maintain respectful communication, even in high-stakes contexts. (Sai, U. M. R., Arsyad, H., Haidar, A., & Al Farisi, M. Z. 2024).

Moreover, the *Maxim of modesty*, which is represented in the form of recognition and great appreciation for the courage of the Palestinian fighters, as well as showing a humble attitude that there is no power greater than God's help. Finally, with the *Maxim of approbation* it is represented in phrases such as the Most Gracious, Most Merciful, and the Greatness of Allah. Moreover, in the form of heroic, grand, brave, and patient. And finally, through the recognition of the courage and resilience of the Al-Qassam Brigades war situations (Sai, U. M. R., Arsyad, H., Haidar, A., & Al Farisi, M. Z. 2024).

Furthermore, Abu Ubaida's speech events theory, as applied to the war, involves three key components: setting and scene, participants, and goals. The *setting and scene* refer to the speech's location and timing amidst heavy attacks in Gaza, aimed at offering moral support and symbolizing resistance. The *participants* include Abu Ubaida, the al-Qassam Brigades fighters, the Palestinian community, the enemy, and the international audience. The *goals* of the speech include inspiring and mobilizing supporters, showcasing the strength of the Palestinian resistance, and delivering a message to Israel, reinforcing commitment to the Palestinian cause and boosting the morale of their supporters (Sai, U. M. R., Arsyad, H., Haidar, A., & Al Farisi, M. Z. 2024). The research provides insights into pragmatics and linguistics, particularly in the context of political speech and conflict. It expands the scope of studies on politeness and speech events in political and military communication, contributing to a deeper understanding of their role in shaping public perception and influence.

Based on this research, it shows how speech conveys messages and is an instrument used to mobilize, strengthen collective identity, and strengthen positions and morals in the struggle they are waging. Thus, Abu Ubaida's speeches are a manifestation of communication and a reflection of the Palestinian people's aspirations, strength, and resilience in facing their challenges. His speeches reflect the aspirations, strength, and resilience of the people of Gaza, representing and embodying their determination and unity as they confront the challenges they face.

His personality, presence, and the nature of the conflict have made him more than just a military spokesperson. People follow him not only to get information about the progress of battles, but the majority see him as the voice of the struggle and a cause, a voice that counters Israeli narratives. Since October 7, videos of him have been shared on telegram and other platforms making their way to Arab news outlets.

To many Arabs, Hamas presents hope for liberation, a legitimate national movement. It's evident that throughout this war, Hamas has shown that it is adapting like all other organizations to the modern age of digital journalism in the world, something no one has ever expected or witnessed before to be done by any political faction in Palestine. Hamas has worked on its branding as a Resistance movement against the Israeli occupation. Abu Ubaida's speeches were aimed at audiences that identify with the concept of resistance, mostly Arabs and Muslims, especially in the neighboring countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria⁹⁹.

An important aspect that has given Hamas the popularity it gained among Palestinians in the last couple of years is due to many reasons. Right before October 7 2023, many Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories lost hope on their

⁹⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.net/midan/reality/politics/2023/11/20/%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%82-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B2%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B1>

official political representative, as they voiced their dissatisfaction with both Hamas and Fateh, seeing widespread corruption on both sides, and were desperate for either an end to the occupation or the achievement of statehood¹⁰⁰. The despair experienced by Palestinians was not an inevitable outcome but rather a consequence of a strategy of colonization across the entire territory (Ghanim, 2024).

Hamas struggled to meet the needs of the population without compromising its political ideology. Despite attempts to address these needs, no significant improvements were achieved, but instead, socioeconomic conditions worsened, ruining Hamas's reputation in a similar manner to that of the Palestinian Authority (PA). However, military resistance remained the only symbolic political capital that set Hamas apart from the PA¹⁰¹. Since 2006, when Hamas took control of Gaza, it has had to balance its responsibilities as a governing authority with its commitment to military resistance, positioning itself as an alternative to the perceived failures of other political parties and the Palestinian Authority (Ghanim, 2024).

At the same time, the Israeli occupation kept getting more brutal by time and Palestinians had grown exhausted from the world and of their empty promises and condemnations of Israeli atrocities, that led to no real change on the ground. The EU's approach was equally disappointing; instead of taking constructive steps to halt Israel's ongoing colonization and end the occupation¹⁰², it chose to pressure the weaker Palestinian Authority (PA), demanding further concessions, revisions to the school curriculum and textbooks¹⁰³, and imposing new conditions for financial aid¹⁰⁴. Meanwhile, the declining support from Arab countries for the Palestinian cause, the endorsement of the Abraham Accords by the UAE, Bahrain, and

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/16/missing-in-action-where-has-palestinian-authority-been-since-october-7>

¹⁰¹ <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/who-governs-palestinians>

¹⁰² <https://eumep.org/publications/eu-textbook-hypocrisy/>

¹⁰³ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2022-000650_EN.html

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.ins.org/european-parliament-moves-to-suspend-pa-funding-over-antisemitic-textbooks/>

Morocco¹⁰⁵, and the improvement of relations with Sudan and Saudi Arabia contributed to a dangerous Israeli illusion of peace.

In the context of cross-colonial expansion, and international and regional neglect and failure, Palestinian despair has deepened to very high degrees, with no hope remaining for ending the occupation. This has eventually led to a crisis that erupted into extreme violence. The violence, marked by its self-destructive nature, aimed to shift the situation. The conflict and Israel's genocidal tactics stemmed from a colonial mindset, where if things could not be achieved through hard power and force, it could be done with even greater intensity of oppression.

4.5. Palestinian Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism operates on the principle that media content shared with the public does not rely on official sources or institutions. Instead, it is created and reproduced by individuals, allowing a broader range of voices and perspectives than traditional news organizations typically provide. Goode describes citizen journalism as “the gathering, writing, editing, production, and distribution of news and information by people not trained as professional journalists, often to provide an alternative to the mainstream news agenda” (Goode, 2009)

According to Monshipouri “Social media and the internet [act as] an engine of discourse with democratizing powers.” (Monshipouri, 2014). The popular Arab uprisings in 2011 fueled by ICT's, in which protesters demanded a more representative democracy, proved the sufficiency of social media as a tool for change, to effectively organize and disseminate ideas. The question of whether social media has served the Palestinian citizen journalism or not is still up for debate, however, it is fair enough to say that it did both.

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Abraham-Accords>

In Gaza, Palestinian activists, journalists, and civilians have leveraged social media to challenge Israeli narratives and present their own views on the conflict, and have become a crucial source of information documenting the effects of the war on civilians. These perspectives often emphasize the severe effects of Israeli military actions on Palestinian civilians, alleged human rights abuses, and the continuing occupation of Palestinian territories. Social media has been used as an instrument in sharing images and firsthand accounts from Gaza, thereby contesting mainstream media portrayals and rallying international support for the Palestinian cause.

Citizen journalism has emerged in Gaza since October 7 for several reasons, one of which is the exceptionally high risks that journalists in Gaza face as they try to cover the conflict during the Israeli ground assault. They are struggling with devastating Israeli airstrikes, disrupted communications, supply shortages, and widespread power outages. As a result, documenting the situation has become increasingly difficult¹⁰⁶

As of October 22, 2024, CPJ (Committee to Protect Journalists) has collected the following numbers of Palestinian and Lebanese journalists who were affected by the war on Gaza¹⁰⁷:

1. 128 journalists and media workers were confirmed killed: 123 Palestinian, two Israeli, and three Lebanese.
2. 40 journalists were reported injured.
3. 2 journalists were reported missing.
4. 69 journalists were reported arrested.
5. Multiple assaults, threats, cyberattacks, censorship, and killings of family members.

¹⁰⁶ <https://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/2024/01/03/conduct-in-conflict-engagement-with-citizen-journalists-in-war-zones/>.

¹⁰⁷ <https://cpj.org/2024/10/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/#definition-journalist>

Furthermore, it has determined that at least five journalists were directly targeted by Israeli forces in killings which CPJ classifies as murders: Issam Abdallah, Hamza Al Dahdouh, Mustafa Thuraya, Ismail Al Ghoul, and Rami Al Refee. As it is still researching the details for confirmation in at least 10 other cases that indicate possible targeting, and nearly 350 additional cases of potential killings, arrests, and injuries¹⁰⁸.

A significant change in this war is the shift of the journalist's role from simply reporting events and bearing witness to becoming the target of those events; the occupation has utilized every tactic of oppression, intimidation, and violence against them. Even the families of journalists have not been spared; in attempts to instill fear, the occupation has retaliated by harming or killing their loved ones. (Zakkout, 2024)

This shift comes as Palestinian journalists have become the voice of Gaza to the world, the only ones conveying the true impact of the conflict on civilians—an impact the occupation seeks to distort. With foreign and Arab journalists barred from entering Gaza, the voice of the Palestinian journalist stands alone, cutting through the occupation's globally-promoted narrative.

However, Palestinian journalists often face algorithmic censorship on social media platforms which adds another layer of difficulty to their coverage, creating another battle. Despite these obstacles, journalists and Palestinian activists have managed to find ways to navigate the restrictions. Such as phonetically expressing English terms in Arabic to convey messages, although this may fall short when visuals are required. Another tactic is inserting spaces or characters between letters, or changing letters with symbols to bypass algorithmic bias. For example, writing

¹⁰⁸ <https://cpi.org/2024/10/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/#definition-journalist>

the words substituting letters with symbols G@z@ (Gaza) and |\$ra€l (Israel). Another attempt was using substitute terms and emojis, like the watermelon symbol (which represents the Palestinian flag), to avoid detection, but these strategies have not fully overcome algorithmic biases.

As a result, many journalists had no other choice but to either stop using these platforms or adapt to the content guidelines. Some have managed to review their social media posts, while others have struggled with platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram, leading some to the abandonment of these platforms. The censorship imposed, combined with algorithmic challenges, has driven journalists to seek alternative methods and adjust the content they share with their audience, including followers and online contacts, in what feels like a digital blockade.

The war on Gaza has highlighted the complex relationship between social media, narratives, and perceptions in global conflicts. The power to shape narratives and sway public opinion has become a crucial aspect of social media, particularly in international disputes. The rise of social media has allowed people in the United States and Europe, who have constantly been victims of Israeli propaganda, to have more diverse perspectives in the last few years. The direct news from social media accounts of Gazan journalists and citizens documenting the war helped to enhance empathy by providing a more personal and immediate connection to the situation.

Social media, as a new form of media, has significantly shaped how conflicts and crises are perceived worldwide. Unlike traditional media outlets, which are managed by professional journalists and editors, social media platforms empower ordinary people to create and share content, providing real-time, first-hand accounts of events as they occur. This democratization of information has heightened awareness and visibility of conflicts that might otherwise be overlooked or underreported by mainstream media. Additionally, social media amplifies diverse

perspectives, enabling marginalized communities and activists to challenge dominant narratives and advocate for social justice and human rights causes (Ghosh, 2024).

Motaz Azaiza¹⁰⁹, Plestia Aqad¹¹⁰, Bisan Owda¹¹¹ and Hind Khoudary¹¹², are some of the names of Gazan journalists and reporters who have had a great influence on the narrative battle¹¹³. The use of social media allowed them to report live and share real-time updates, personal stories, and videos depicting the impact of airstrikes and civilian casualties on the ground. These firsthand accounts shed light on the human toll of the conflict, drawing international attention and sparking discussions on the need for a ceasefire and humanitarian aid.

Most importantly, through them, social media has humanized the Palestinians and Gazans throughout the war, something that the western mainstream media never managed to narrate. Sharing personal stories, images and videos that show the lived experiences of civilians affected by injustice, violence and continuous displacement.

Motaz Azaiza, the Nobel Prize nominee, born in Gaza in 1999, is an acclaimed Palestinian photojournalist whose work has gained international recognition, amassing millions of followers on social media. As an active photojournalist during the recent phase of the Gaza conflict, Motaz has captured powerful images that highlight the struggles faced by Palestinians.

Azaiza has become a symbol of hope and resilience for many, both in Palestine and globally. His work not only documents the hardships experienced by Palestinians during Gaza's years-long blockade but also during the ongoing war.

¹⁰⁹ https://www.instagram.com/motaz_azaiza/profilecard/?igsh=bmFlcnFsaik4a2tu

¹¹⁰ <https://www.instagram.com/plestia.alaqad/profilecard/?igsh=Z2lkZTl3NHpvYW4y>

¹¹¹ https://www.instagram.com/wizard_bisan1/profilecard/?igsh=NjE2dGR4Y2pscnVs

¹¹² <https://www.instagram.com/hindkhoudary/profilecard/?igsh=MWNmc2xyOGlvZWY0Yw==>

¹¹³ https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/09/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-war-instagram.html?utm_source=dash%252520hudson&utm_medium=instagram&utm_campaign=likeshopme&utm_content=ig-nytimes



Motaz Azaiza on GQ magazine - Source: <https://www.gqmiddleeast.com/men-of-the-year/motaz-azaiza-man-of-the-year>

Motaz's influence extends beyond borders, earning him numerous accolades, including the GQ Magazine Middle East Man of the Year Award. In 2023, one of his photos was featured in TIME's Top 10 Photos¹¹⁴. Additionally, he received the Communicator Award at the TRT World Citizen Awards 2023¹¹⁵. and was honored as the 2023 Impact Awards Winner at the Lucie Awards¹¹⁶.

¹¹⁴ <https://time.com/6964147/motaz-azaiza/>

¹¹⁵ <https://worldcitizen.trtworld.com/trt-world-citizen-awards-2023/#:~:text=Motaz%20Azaiza%2C%20a%20Palestinian%20photojournalist,million%20followers%20on%20social%20media>

¹¹⁶ <https://www.festivaldelgiornalismo.com/speaker/motaz-azaiza#:~:text=Motaz%20was%20also%20recognised%20at%20by%20his%20people%20in%20Gaza.>



A young girl stuck under her house rubble after it was bombed by Israeli airstrikes, Al Nusairat refugee camp, October 30, 2023 - Motaz Azaiza

Azaiza's work in Gaza before October 7 focused on daily life in the Gaza Strip. His specialty was capturing portraits of people and social situations, aiming to offer a different perspective of Gaza than what the world is accustomed to—one that includes beach picnics, shopping at the market, and children playing. He pursued this mission for several years, consistently working as a photographer with local media and humanitarian agencies, most recently with UNRWA, the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees.

Then came October 7, 2023. The Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip, which after five months has led to a provisional toll of over 30,000 Palestinians killed, about 40 percent of whom were children. More than half of the buildings have been destroyed, 85 percent of the population displaced, and 100 percent of Gazans are now facing food insecurity. The population of Gaza was accustomed to bombings and Israeli fire, which regularly strikes with devastating force each year. Azaiza

himself was hit by an Israeli bullet years ago. But this time, it was different for everyone, including him.

When the Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip began, Azaiza had around 25,000 followers on Instagram. Today, he has nearly 18 million¹¹⁷, and this is because from the first day of bombings, he began documenting what was happening as a war reporter, effectively taking the place of international media that were unable to enter due to Israel's restrictions.



Plestia AlAqad - Source: Plestia AlAqad's Instagram @plestia.alaqad

Plestia AlAqad, the 22-year-old, is another Gazan citizen journalist who started reporting since the 7th of October, providing an unfiltered view of the bombings, destruction, forced displacement, and the daily struggle for survival in the region¹¹⁸. However, she also captured the humanity of Gaza and its people. On her Instagram account, where she posts as @plestia.alaqad and has over four million followers, she shares images of herself playing with children, finding hope in

¹¹⁷ https://www.instagram.com/motaz_azaiza/profilecard/?igsh=bmFlcnFsaik4a2tu

¹¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/12/gaza-citizen-journalists-war-footage-israel>

befriending a turtle, and reminding her followers of what Gaza was like before the invasion. (The New Arab Staff, 2024)

Before the war, she interned and worked with several news media organizations, including Press House Palestine, which offers training and support to journalists; its director, Bilal Jadallah, who was killed in November by an Israeli airstrike. In November 2023, AlAqad managed to evacuate Gaza after family members in Australia helped her obtain an emergency visa. Her decision to leave was the same as Motaz Azaiza, due to the constant threat on their lives and their families.

Motaz and Plestia were one of the lucky journalists who were able to leave Gaza. Others who remained, such as Besan Owda and Hind Khoudary, until now (November 2024) are still reporting from Gaza.



Source: Bisan Owda's Instagram @wizard_bisan1

Bisan Owda, a Palestinian journalist in Gaza a Nobel Prize winner¹¹⁹, famous for her phrase “Hello it’s Bisan from Gaza, and I’m still alive” is a prominent journalist and a storyteller, she has played a crucial role in sharing news from Gaza

¹¹⁹ <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1656180>

with the world through her distinctive and powerful skills in storytelling. Her narratives have drawn the attention of global audiences and media organizations alike. Her work has been widely cited by international media, and she has collaborated with notable institutions like the European Union and the United Nations¹²⁰. Since October 7, 2023, Bisan has risen to prominence on the global stage. Throughout 11 months of war and devastation, she gained almost 5 million followers on Instagram, and continues to share the stories of ordinary Palestinians in Gaza, who have faced immense suffering, death, and destruction. (The New Arab Staff, 2024)



Source: Hind Khoudary's Instagram @hindkhoudary

Hind Khoudary, a 29-year-old Palestinian journalist from the Gaza Strip, has gained widespread recognition for her work documenting life under siege and during war in Gaza. Her career spans various publications, including The New Arab, Middle East Eye, Anadolu Agency, and +972 Magazine, with previous contributions to RT¹²¹. Her presence on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram has

¹²⁰ <https://www.newarab.com/news/gaza-voices-who-bisan-hind-khoudary-motaz-and-plestia>

¹²¹ <https://www.newarab.com/news/gaza-voices-who-bisan-hind-khoudary-motaz-and-plestia>

drawn attention, and her posts have been cited by outlets such as The New York Times, NPR, and Utusan Malaysia.

Khoudary has been very committed to human rights that led her to work with Amnesty International in 2019. She worked on covering the Great March of Return protests in 2018, documenting events and raising human rights concerns. Khoudary continues to bring attention to the lives and experiences of Palestinians in Gaza since October 7. (The New Arab Staff, 2024)

Motaz, Plestia, Bisan and Hind had a huge influence on rewriting the Israeli Palestinian narrative during the war on Gaza. Even if their accounts on social media usually either get shadow banned, censored or even disabled, they are still able to convey their messages to the world through, each in his/her own way of reporting. They gained a huge international support on Instagram, mostly because the new generation get their news from social media and not from mainstream media, and what these journalists reported and posted were pictures and videos of civilians mostly women and children who were targeted by the Israeli military, making it very hard for the Israeli propaganda to win over. Their followers were watching a genocide unfolding in front of their eyes. And thanks to them and to a lot of citizen journalists in Gaza, they created a huge community of support on social media, not only exposing the Israeli occupation and its brutal military operations in Gaza, but through also their personal life narration, they were able to humanize the Palestinian people, breaking the mainstream dehumanized perception and projection of Palestinians. This form of citizen journalism has bypassed traditional media gatekeepers, offering raw, unfiltered views of the conflict.

Many people around the world have developed a deep sense of empathy for them due to the ongoing crises they endure. This has evoked a range of emotions, including increased compassion and sorrow, alongside anger, frustration, helplessness, and despair as they witness the genocide and its many casualties.

4.6. Social Media Censorship

The impact of social media on conflict perception has become a subject of increasing interest and concern, particularly in the context of geopolitical situations such as the war on Gaza. Social media can work as a tool to engage supporters and pressure international actors changing the dynamics of the conflict itself, not just simply being a tool for propaganda. TikTok, X, Facebook, and Instagram have enabled instant sharing of information, usually in real time. Amplifying marginalized voices of different communities, activists and citizens, sharing their experiences and perspectives, bringing attention to voices that are usually ignored and misrepresented by mainstream media (Zeitsoff, 2018).

TikTok and Instagram specifically were the most used instruments to raise awareness on the Palestinian cause. Organizing campaigns and mobilizing international support, we have seen throughout the 12 months of genocide, many social media users, influencers and even celebrities, not only advocating for Palestine, but also launching campaigns for supporting Gazans under humanitarian crisis. Some of the celebrities who advocated for Palestine on social media especially calling for a Ceasefire, are Nicola Coughlan, Bella Hadid, The Weeknd, Billie Eilish, Ramy Yousef, Kehlani, Pedro Pascal, Macklemore, Angelina Joli, Hunter Schafer, Lena Heady, Mark Ruffalo and so many more¹²². All of these celebrities have millions of followers on social media, their support and them being vocal about it, has definitely played a huge part in raising awareness for the Palestinian cause, and especially about the reality of the conflict before October 7. Of course, most of them faced backlashes and even threats by Zionists, some even lost work opportunities, and unsurprisingly they were shadow banned¹²³.

¹²² <https://www.buzzfeed.com/morgansloss1/celebrities-speak-out-palestine>

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2023/dec/02/hollywood-divide-israel-gaza-conflict-susan-sarandon-cynthia-nixon>

¹²³ <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2023/dec/02/hollywood-divide-israel-gaza-conflict-susan-sarandon-cynthia-nixon>

A study by Human Rights Watch¹²⁴ has studied the systemic censorship of Palestine content on Facebook and Instagram. Between October and November only, they documented over 1050 takedown and other suppression of content on Instagram and Facebook that had been posted by Palestinians and supporters, including content about human rights abuse.

Human Rights Watch identified six recurring patterns of undue censorship, each occurring at least 100 times. These patterns include:

- 1) removal of posts, stories, and comments;
- 2) suspension or permanent disabling of accounts;
- 3) temporary restrictions on engaging with content—such as liking, commenting, sharing, or reposting stories—for periods ranging from 24 hours to three months;
- 4) limitations on the ability to follow or tag other accounts;
- 5) restrictions on the use of certain features, like Instagram/Facebook Live, monetization, and account recommendations to non-followers; and
- 6) “shadow banning,” where an individual’s posts, stories, or account visibility is significantly reduced without notification due to decreased content distribution or searchability.

In late October 2023, Meta issued a public apology following a controversial incident in which the term “terrorist” was inadvertently added to the biographies of some Instagram users identifying as Palestinian. The company explained that the issue stemmed from a temporary glitch affecting Arabic translations in certain products and expressed sincere regret for the error. However, critics remain skeptical, questioning whether it was merely “a bug.”¹²⁵

Additionally, dozens of users reported being unable to repost, like, or comment on Human Rights Watch’s post seeking evidence of online censorship,

¹²⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metass-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and>

¹²⁵ <https://au.news.yahoo.com/meta-moderation-bias-problem-not-234315095.html>

which was flagged as “spam.” Instagram users who commented with an email address to submit evidence of censorship to Human Rights Watch had their comments removed for violating Instagram's Community Guidelines. (Human Rights Watch, 2023)

Meta’s censorship of Palestinian voices and content related to Palestine is not a recent development¹²⁶. However, in recent years, this censorship has become more pronounced, revealing a clear pattern of systematic censorship, algorithmic bias, and discriminatory content moderation.

During the 2021 Gaza War, platforms like Facebook and Instagram were accused of censorship for allegedly blocking content related to the conflict and suspending Palestinian accounts¹²⁷ (Culliford, 2021). This war resulted in the deaths of 256 Palestinians, including 66 children, sparking claims that social media companies were suppressing information about the Palestinian cause. In the 2023 conflict, there was widespread outrage over what many perceived as biased censorships of pro-Palestinian content on platforms like Instagram and Facebook¹²⁸. Meta, the parent company of these platforms, denied these allegations, suggesting that any issues were due to system glitches caused by the high volume of posts related to the conflict. However, investigations into Meta's censorship during Israel's 2021 assault on Gaza indicated otherwise. Recent incidents have highlighted ongoing issues with Meta's algorithmic moderation. For example, WhatsApp, also owned by Meta, generated images of children with guns when "Palestine" was mentioned, and Instagram's automatic translation misclassified Palestinian profiles as "terrorists" (Paul, 2023). Prominent Palestinian activists have reported recent restrictions on their accounts and content.

¹²⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/may/26/pro-palestine-censorship-facebook-instagram>

¹²⁷ <https://theintercept.com/2022/09/21/facebook-censorship-palestine-israel-algorithm/>

¹²⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/nov/21/techscape-israel-gaza-war-social-media-content-censorship>
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/oct/18/instagram-palestine-posts-censorship-accusations>

While social media offers opportunities for transparency, it can do otherwise when it censors certain content it can limit the visibility of certain perspectives, restrict access to critical information, or silence voices that challenge dominant narratives, impacting the global understanding of the conflict. However, through social media, Palestinians in the last decade managed to re-unify their voices, whether living in Palestine or in diaspora, strengthening their collective identity.

4.7. Western Media

It is not controversial to suggest that global media outlets have their own news agendas when covering international affairs, and reporting on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is no exception. Across different countries, there are great contradictions in the narratives surrounding the history and ongoing aspects of this long-term conflict. Academic research examining numerous Western media outlets has consistently revealed a clear imbalance in their coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Many studies have highlighted issues with how various media outlets report on the conflict, including the use of passive language, wordplay, and the choice of specific terminology to downplay the atrocities committed against Palestinians by Israeli soldiers.

Research has demonstrated a clear Orientalist bias in mainstream U.S. reporting on Palestine¹²⁹. In *The Israel Lobby*, Mearsheimer and Walt (2007: 169) state, "The American media's coverage of Israel tends to be strongly biased in Israel's favor." Khalidi (2021), in *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine*, discusses how U.S. media (particularly The New York Times) often frames stories with an anti-Palestinian bias. Bazian (2015) further analyzes this bias, highlighting its connection to Islamophobic campaigns in mainstream U.S. media.

¹²⁹ <https://theintercept.com/2024/01/09/newspapers-israel-palestine-bias-new-york-times/>

Several scholars have identified specific patterns of anti-Palestinian bias. In *Blaming the Victims*, Said (2001) and Chomsky (2001) argue that news coverage of Palestinian violence is shaped by Orientalist stereotypes rather than an accurate portrayal of humanitarian violations. Chomsky (2001: 109) observes that "As in the rule of properly sanitized history, Palestinians carry out terrorism, Israelis then retaliate, perhaps too harshly. In the real world, the truth is often rather different." He explains that Israeli acts of terrorism are seldom criticized in the mainstream media and are sometimes even praised, while Palestinians are often blamed for initiating violence without evidence or context (pp. 134–136). Similarly, Zelizer et al. (2002: 295) found that The New York Times frequently depicted Israelis as victims and Palestinians as aggressors in its headlines. Ackerman (2001) also noted a "systematic absence of context in U.S. reporting" on events in Palestine, which obscures Israeli violence,

Since October 7th, many Western mainstream news outlets have seen their credibility take a hit, accused by audiences of succumbing to Israeli propaganda. An analysis by *The Intercept*¹³⁰ about major media coverage found that The New York Times, The Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times consistently displayed bias against Palestinians in their reporting on Israel's war on Gaza. These influential print media outlets, which significantly shape U.S. perspectives on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, largely overlooked the severe impact of Israel's siege and bombing campaign on children and journalists in the Gaza Strip.

The coverage in these major U.S. newspapers disproportionately focused on Israeli deaths, used emotive language to describe the killing of Israelis while not doing the same for Palestinians, and provided skewed reporting on antisemitic acts in the U.S., while largely ignoring anti-Muslim racism following the events of

¹³⁰ <https://theintercept.com/2024/01/09/newspapers-israel-palestine-bias-new-york-times/>

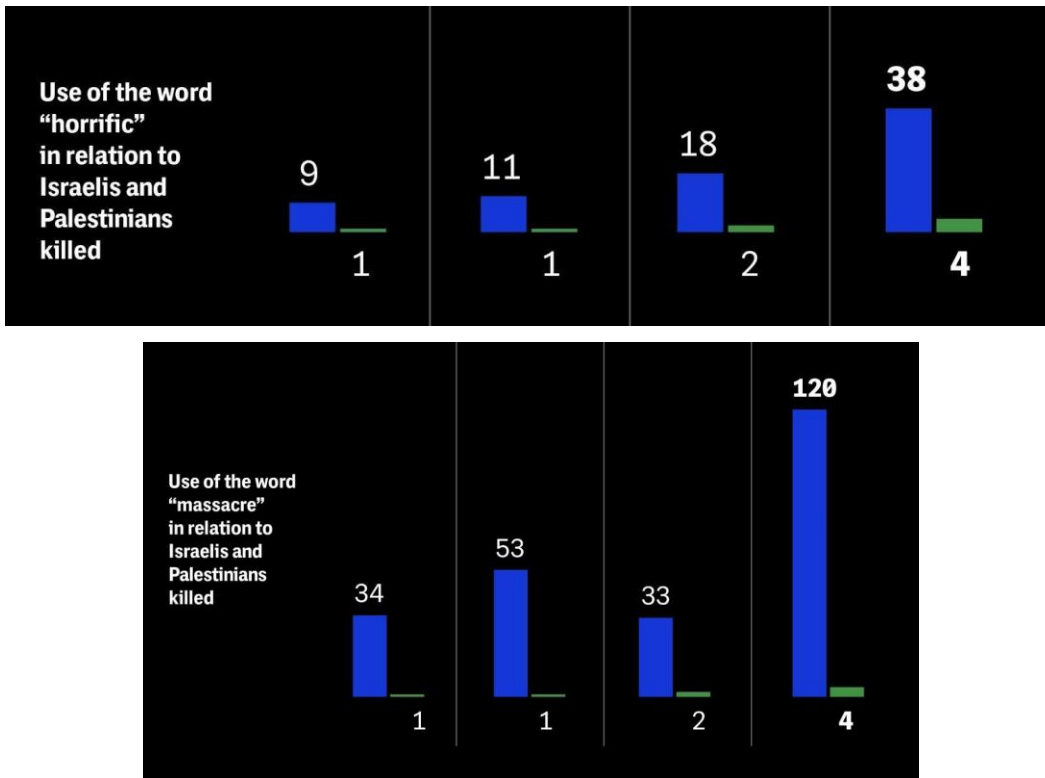
October 7. Pro-Palestinian activists have accused these publications of having a pro-Israel bias, a claim echoed by protests at The New York Times' Manhattan headquarters and supported by the findings of this analysis.

In one of the Intercept studies, it shows how highly emotive terms such as “slaughter,” “massacre,” and “horrific” were used almost exclusively to describe the killing of Israelis by Palestinians, rather than the reverse¹³¹.

The term “slaughter” was applied by editors and reporters to describe the killing of Israelis versus Palestinians at a ratio of 60 to 1, while “massacre” was used 125 times to describe the killing of Israelis compared to just 2 times for Palestinians. The word “horrific” was used 36 times for the killing of Israelis and only 4 times for Palestinians. (Johnson & Ali, 2024)



¹³¹ <https://theintercept.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/gaza-media-chart-2-rev-1.png?w=2400>



Source: <https://theintercept.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/gaza-media-chart-2-rev-1.png?w=2400>

The New York Times during the genocide has proved their pro-Israeli anti-Palestinian bias¹³². The biggest power that The New York Times has is that it sets the agenda, as most newspapers do not have foreign bureaus and so they depend on The New York Times' foreign coverage. It is no wonder that The New York Times is a highly influential newspaper for many Americans—from ordinary citizens to government officials—and the tone of U.S. news coverage on Palestine can have serious, even life-or-death implications, given the significant role of the U.S. in the region. The newspaper serves as a case study of how Orientalist bias deeply permeates U.S. news coverage and has a more extensive impact than many might expect. (Johnson & Ali, 2024)

¹³² <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cyl9HR7O4ap/?hl=en>

One of its journalistic stories, The New York Times published December accusing Hamas of weaponizing rape and sexual violence on Israeli women and men, without supporting it with enough evidence¹³³. The Electronic Intifada, Mondoweiss¹³⁴ and The Grey Zone are alternative news outlets that debunked The New York Times' story, they found that testimonies were either anonymous or of dubious credibility. One of the reporters on the story¹³⁵ is a filmmaker that has never written a story before October 7, Anat Schwartz, and as her Wikipedia page says, she had also worked for Israeli Intelligence. Her social media posts were included in the case against Israel by South Africa in the ICJ, as she was advocating for turning Gaza into a slaughterhouse.

On the other hand, six weeks later, UN experts highlighted credible allegations that Israelis had raped or sexually assaulted Palestinians in Israeli prisons, in which evidently, The New York Times and other mainstream media have failed to cover the story.

Another major western media outlet is BBC, which has been accused of being biased and anti-Palestinian, using misleading language in its headlines.

A study¹³⁶ conducted by data scientists Jan Lietava and Dana Najjar have found BBC usage of words like “killed” linked to Israeli deaths, and “died” linked to Palestinian deaths. Najjar and Lietava said their study had analyzed 672 BBC articles and 4404 individual posts from 29 live feeds. They said this represented more than 90% of the BBC's online news output on Israel and Palestine from October 7 and December 2, 2023 (Elliards, 2024).

Examples included:

¹³³ <https://mondoweiss.net/2023/12/despite-lack-of-evidence-allegations-of-hamas-mass-rape-are-fueling-israeli-genocide-in-gaza/>

¹³⁴ <https://mondoweiss.net/2024/01/family-of-key-case-in-new-york-times-october-7-sexual-violence-report-renounces-story-says-reporters-manipulated-them/>

¹³⁵ <https://theintercept.com/2024/02/28/new-york-times-anat-schwartz-october-7/>

¹³⁶ <https://github.com/liet-git/bbc-bias?tab=readme-ov-file#readme>

- "About 700 people have been killed in Israel since Hamas launched its attack on Saturday, with a further 500 having died in Gaza in retaliatory air strikes."
- "Some 1200 people have been killed in Israel, while more than 1000 have died in retaliatory air strikes on Gaza."
- "More than 700 people have been killed in Israel since Saturday and over 500 people have died in Gaza."

In November 2023, BBC journalists accused the corporation of not accurately portraying the Israel-Palestine conflict, putting more effort into humanizing Israeli victims than Palestinian ones, and leaving out important historical context in its coverage. In a 2,300-word letter to Al Jazeera, eight UK-based journalists from the BBC also criticized the organization for having a “double standard in how civilians are seen,” noting that it is “unflinching” in its coverage of alleged Russian war crimes in Ukraine (Safdar, 2023).

The mainstream Western media’s coverage of Gaza has faced criticism for its breach of the ideals of accurate, fair, and unbiased reporting that are essential in journalistic ethics. Biased reporting toward the Israeli narrative is evident from Western media outlets such as CNN and The New York Times framing the conflict in one perspective, in terms of Israel’s right to self-defense, while downplaying the Palestinian day-to-day suffer (Perez Castro, 2024). This bias is reflected in reporting mainly to specific sources and narratives, as they frequently rely on official Israeli statements and journalism, limiting diversity of perspectives and excluding the Palestinian narrative, often portraying them as violent and extreme (Fahmy et al., 2024). Furthermore, the misrepresentation of the asymmetry of power with the lack of historical and political context reports by simplifying the complex conflict in words such as “Israel-Hamas war”, denying the structural inequality faced by Palestinians (Khamis, 2023).

Moreover, the dehumanization of Palestinian victims is another major failing, with media reports and coverage frequently focusing on casualties only in numbers and statistics rather than delving into personal stories of loss and resilience, while focusing on Israel experiences in a much deeper and relatable emotions (Zghoul, 2022; Buheji, 2024).

Another bias that has a strong influence on shaping audience perception are visual and linguistic biases. With selective imagery and language that reinforces stereotypes and shapes public opinion, Western outlets often use images of destruction in Gaza without showing the human faces behind the devastation. In contrast, Israeli civilians are frequently depicted in moments of vulnerability, evoking greater empathy (Melhemallaham, 2024; Kozman, 2023). As well as using language and terms such as “terrorists” and “militants” are routinely used to describe Palestinians, while Israeli forces are framed as “defenders” or “soldiers,” reinforcing stereotypes and biases (Sheets, 2024). Consequently, Western media coverage plays a huge role in shaping public perceptions and understanding geopolitical issues, as it is very essential to address biases and strive for balanced and neutral coverage based on truth. Without such changes, Western media risks perpetuating a one-sided narrative that ignores the complexities and human costs of conflicts.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to study the different state and non-state actors who contributed to the shaping of the Palestinian-Israeli cause after October 7, 2023. It offers that the most influential non-state actors are social media and grassroots activists on these platforms. While the conflict has long been dominated by contested narratives supported by mainstream media and governmental institutions for years, since the emergence of social media; marginalized voices have been amplified. Palestinian citizen journalists and activists have provided raw, unfiltered accounts of the devastation caused by Israel, humanizing the experiences of Palestinians, in which their high number of followers on social media, engagement and shares of their content, represents a portion of their level of influence.

The thesis studied the concept of collective memory and the pivotal role it played in shaping the narratives surrounding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, particularly after the events of October 7. These narratives, rooted in deep histories and collective identities, have long been contested and used by both sides to justify actions and their perspectives. For Palestinians, collective memory serves as a foundation of their identity and resistance, preserving their connection to their homeland through generational storytelling, oral histories, and acts of remembrance, despite decades of displacement and trauma. After October 7, the conflict's narrative shifted dramatically as grassroots activism and social media amplified Palestinian voices, challenging the historically dominant Israeli narrative.

The shift in the narrative can be witnessed and marked by widespread global movements and protests in solidarity with Palestinians, with a growing public awareness of the power asymmetries and systemic injustices in the conflict. Despite algorithmic censorship and suppression of pro-Palestinian content, the mobilization

of grassroots activism online has countered Israeli narratives, which have historically been supported by state-sponsored propaganda. The unprecedented global response, both online and on the streets, reflects the transformative role of social media in reshaping perceptions, challenging dominant narratives, and inspiring solidarity with the Palestinian cause on a scale never before seen.

State actors have also influenced the Palestinian-Israeli narrative. The Israeli government used *Hasbara* (public diplomacy) to amplify their narrative of legitimacy for military actions and victimhood, through mainstream media and public relations campaigns. The Palestinian government primarily pursued its objectives via the Palestinian International Cooperation Agency (PICA), which is its only official government instrument for public diplomacy. While PICA has become more vibrant after October 7, yet their reach and engagement remain limited. Non-governmental organizations such as PIPD, complement PICA's efforts by leveraging social media, often with greater engagement. Despite these efforts, the limited reach of governmental campaigns limits their ability to counter Israeli narratives.

Non-state actors such as Western media, in particular The New York Times and BBC, often demonstrated a biased portrayal of the narrative through disproportionately humanizing Israeli victims while de-emphasizing the suffering of Palestinians. Analysis revealed an overwhelming use of emotive terms such as “massacre,” “slaughter,” and “horrific” to describe Israeli deaths, while these terms were scarcely used for Palestinians. Furthermore, it has been proved the utilization of visual and linguistic biases further reinforce stereotypes, often presenting Israelis as vulnerable and Palestinians as aggressors. This selective framing turns a blind eye on historical and structural contexts, misrepresenting the asymmetry of power and the scale of Palestinian suffering. Despite global protests and social media exposing

these biases and witnessing the Arab and global South media representing the Palestinian perspective more prominently, mainstream Western outlets continue to heavily influence public perception on the conflict in presenting a one-sided narrative that marginalizes the Palestinian narrative and encourages Israeli propaganda. The profound influence of these media outlets underscores their pivotal role in shaping international perceptions of conflicts.

Simultaneously, grassroots efforts by Palestinian citizen journalists and activists through social media platforms were studied in this dissertation. Instagram, TikTok, and Telegram, provided unfiltered documentation of the devastating impact of the genocide, countering the Israeli narrative and gaining significant global empathy, despite Meta's efforts to silence pro-Palestine content through shadow banning and systematic censorship. Figures like Motaz Azaiza, Bisan Owdeh and Plestia AlAqad became pivotal actors in reshaping perceptions and reporting real-time, humanizing Palestinian suffering that is often obscured by mainstream media. Despite challenges of censorship, the grassroots mobilization of pro-Palestinian content on social media led to a global surge in empathy and criticism of Israeli policies, marking a significant shift in the narrative battle. Efforts were also put through social media celebrities, activists, and influential figures, including Bella Hadid, Mark Ruffalo, and Pedro Pascal, using their social media platforms to advocate for Palestine, reaching millions of followers worldwide. Their support helped counter dominant Israeli narratives and increased awareness of the crisis in Gaza.

This thesis has documented some of the influential actors during 2023/2024 that helped shape the Israeli-Palestinian narrative after October 7. Findings suggest that social media and grassroots activists operating on social media platforms were the most influential, and this can be seen on the physical ground and in the digital

space. While the conflict has long been dominated by contested narratives supported by mainstream media and governmental institutions, social media has emerged as a powerful counterforce, amplifying marginalized voices and challenging deeply entrenched propaganda. Palestinian citizen journalists and activists have provided raw, unfiltered accounts of the devastation caused by Israeli military actions, humanizing the experiences of Palestinians often misrepresented by traditional media outlets.

This shift in the narrative can be seen by the widespread global movements and protests in solidarity with Palestinians, signaling a growing public awareness of the power asymmetries and systemic injustices in the conflict. Despite systemic challenges like algorithmic censorship and suppression of pro-Palestinian content, the mobilization of grassroots activism online has effectively countered Israeli narratives. The unprecedented global response, both online and on the streets, reflects the transformative role of social media in reshaping perceptions, challenging dominant narratives, and inspiring solidarity with the Palestinian cause on a scale never before seen.

In conclusion, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains one of the most deeply rooted contested narratives in modern history, influenced and shaped by a complex interplay of politics, media, state propaganda, grassroots activism, and global public opinion. While traditional power structures have long defined the dominant discourse, the events following October 7 marked a pivotal moment in the narrative. The rise of social media and citizen journalism has not only exposed the inadequacies and biases of mainstream media but has also democratized the storytelling process, amplified voices and fostered a global movement of solidarity.

As we move forward, one critical question remains: will these grassroots efforts and global awakenings pave the way for a more justice and humanistic approach to the struggle, influencing governments policies and making change on the ground? or will systems of propaganda and bias continue to neglect and overshadow the truth? This moment of heightened awareness presents an opportunity to rethink narratives, demand accountability, and prioritize humanity as central pillars in the call for justice.

Epilogue

Completing this thesis and navigating the journey of writing it has been profoundly challenging, as it unfolded during the most fragile and uncertain periods of my life and the future of my homeland. The genocide against my people throughout the last year, has not only shaped the subject of my research, but also my mental and emotional state in the process. Taking the decision to focus on a topic that is so intimately tied with the reality of suffering was not easy. On one hand, it gave me a sense of purpose to channel my academic interests into contributing to such a personal issue that profoundly affects me and my dear ones. It made me confront questions and narratives that extend beyond academia, challenging me to critically read about what doesn't necessarily align with my personal beliefs. On the other hand, it brought me an overwhelmingly heavy emotional weight, that made efforts to balance the demands of a scholarly work with my personal pain of witnessing the extermination of my people, extremely unbearable.

While my research highlights the pivotal role of social media in shaping the Palestinian-Israeli narrative, I believe true influence lies in empathy-driven human action. Virtual activism alone loses its power without social activism.

I must acknowledge that during moments of losing hope in a better future, in which the light at the end of the tunnel seemed inexistant, huge global protests for Palestine served as a powerful reminder that the light, though dim, was never fully extinguished. Much like student movements against the Vietnam war, where global students pressured governments to reconsider their actions, current protests in solidarity with Palestine highlight the role of students as stimuli for change.

Unfortunately, for decades, the Palestinian struggle has been treated as a taboo subject and an uncomfortable one. As addressed in Chapter 4 of my thesis, advocacy for Palestinian justice has been systematically silenced and distorted in Western

media, academia and politics, dismissing the narrative as illegitimate. The censorship culture and fear to talk about Palestine made it difficult for the other narrative to emerge. For that reason, beyond showing solidarity, student movements for Palestine provided a platform for Palestinians to share their narrative, without censorship, addressing the realities of occupation, colonization and resistance, when the international community failed to do so.

In one of Edward Said's works¹³⁷, he highlighted an important aspect in the Palestinian cause that resonated with me in the process of research. Palestinians live a curious destiny, always having leaders of other Arab and Western countries, speaking for them, formulating and negotiating their norms of conduct and their goals solely focusing on political settlements, while missing the human dimension of their struggle. One of the reasons I chose this topic for my thesis is because I believe that the events that unfolded on October 7 cannot be understood solely through a political lens. They are also the result of the culmination of decades of overshadowing the details of the Palestinian struggle and the Palestinian narrative.

The significant role that student movements played was in how they fought against the neglect of the struggle, giving Palestinians a platform to tell their narrative, the details of their daily life struggle under occupation, their loss of home and their side of narrative about their history. As Antonio Gramsci says:

“The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.”

-Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks (1929-1935)

The consciousness of one's history is crucial for liberation. Said affirms that historical realities of the Palestinians, although significantly embedded in their

¹³⁷ Said, Edward W.. (1992). *The Question of Palestine* (1). New York: Vintage Books.

collective identity, have been neglected for a long time by dominant global narratives. Asserting that history awareness is a way of resistance against colonial narratives that are imposed by Zionism.

I hope my thesis has successfully documented some of the “infinite traces” neglected by dominant global narratives, emphasizing the understanding that the Palestinian political struggle is not separate from the humanitarian crises but is deeply intertwined with it. Finally, I hope it responds positively to Gramsci’s plea for historical awareness as well as Said’s call of advocacy for reclaiming the narrative.

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