



## **Statement on the Western Media Narrative Regarding Israel's Genocide in Gaza**

*Released on 14 April 2024*

The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention condemns the misleading framing in the western media's coverage of Israel's bombardment and genocide of the Palestinian people. Since this latest cycle of attacks on Gaza began in October 2023, the narrative most prominent in western media has been that Israel is exercising its right to self-defense. There has been little analysis of what the right to self-defense allows and little challenge of Israel's justifications for the IDF's indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas or its responsibility for humanitarian crises, including famine and water shortages throughout the enclave. Although this spin is beginning to shift with the recent apparent targeted killing of international humanitarian workers employed by World Central Kitchen, the Lemkin Institute views the cause for this shift to be indicative of the broader failure of Western journalism to provide an accurate picture of what is happening in Israel-Palestine.

Since October 7, major news outlets have framed Israel's campaign solely as a reaction to the attacks carried out by Hamas last year, failing to contextualize Israel's actions within its complex history of settler colonization and military occupation as well as the consistent and widespread dehumanization, criminalization, and dispossession of Palestinians by the Israeli state and society. The western press should focus more accurately on Israel's indiscriminate bombing of residential and civilian infrastructure and its efforts to block aid and withhold basic necessities, including lifesaving medical supplies, without justifications and framings that appear aimed at mollifying the Israeli authorities.

The danger of repeatedly framing the Israeli campaign as a legitimate self-defense response to the attacks carried out by Hamas on 7 October is two-fold: (1) it serves to misinform the reader that the root cause of Israel's violence is Hamas, and (2) it diverts attention away from the tens of thousands of victims of the ongoing genocide.

While the events of 7 October cannot be ignored when understanding what has prompted Israel's actions, very rarely do western outlets present the current bombardment as what it is: the latest development in decades of physical and structural violence against Palestinians that is tied to a greater effort to claim more Palestinian land for Jewish settlement. Even in the age of social media, the traditional press does much to shape public opinion, and it is therefore crucial that reporting does not fail to touch on the many bombardments of Gaza that take place year in and year out, the brutal blockade of Gaza for over 15 years, and the roots of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. Indeed, the western media narrative aids in legitimizing Israel's campaign in Gaza, framing the genocide as a 'conflict' or 'war' in which two equal sides are fighting – one with criminal terrorist intentions and the other with the noble goal of self-defense.

For example, the BBC article from 13 February 2024, 'What is Hamas and why is it fighting with Israel in Gaza?', opens with an explanation of how the "war" began: when Israel suffered "the deadliest" attack in its history "from Gaza." The article occludes the underlying root causes of the assault on 7 October. It instead solely positions Israel as a victim, which only serves to justify its ongoing persecution, abuse, and occupation of Palestinian civilians. The reader is constantly reminded of who is to blame for the current state of affairs – an organization operating out of Gaza and apparently embedded in every single structure in the territory – with little to no reference as to how the situation transpired, its historical context, or the ongoing Israeli war crimes and human rights violations.

The western media rhetoric goes beyond avoiding the historical context and extends as far as shifting responsibility away from the state of Israel for the atrocities it is committing against the Palestinian people. On 14 October 2023, Reuters published an article stating that one of their journalists had been killed by "missile fire from the direction of Israel" but falls short of naming who might have fired missiles from that direction. A subsequent investigation by the UN has shown the Reuters team was deliberately targeted by an Israeli tank, an explicit violation of international law.

This form of voiding the IDF of any culpability is not a one-off. Indeed, while western media outlets will often report on the devastation that Gazans are suffering, the rarity with which such reports identify Israel as the perpetrator, is shocking. While much of the readership will be aware that Israel is orchestrating these attacks, this passive-voice reporting steers public attention away from the responsible parties towards appeals for aid and charity. Such appeals, of course, are not inherently undesirable from a genocide-prevention standpoint; however, by refusing to label Israel as the aggressor, the coverage does not portray the systematic destruction and persecution carried out by the IDF, and in doing so, obscures the genocidal intent behind its actions.

Framing of this sort reduces the degree to which states will be held accountable for their actions. It also ensures that the public will remain ignorant of the relevant international law, Israel's violations of which have been documented by many reputable agencies.

The disorienting effect of describing Palestinian victimization without identifying their persecutor is amplified by the media's aforementioned insistence on reiterating the centrality of 7 October in this 'conflict.' Floods of articles and headlines impart the message that innocent Palestinians are starving and dying from a conflict that, it must be emphasized, began with *Hamas'* unprecedented levels of violence against Israelis six months ago and is, therefore, the sole responsibility of Hamas. This message of ultimate culpability with little to no mention of the nation responsible for said starvation and death, has saturated the minds of the western world for half a year and diverts attention away from the condemnation of genocidaires and those who fund and supply them. It further amplifies IDF messaging at the expense of Palestinians' legitimate grievances and international law.

Palestinians are often reported to "have died," "been displaced," or "suffered from" food and water shortages. They are rarely reported to have been killed, forcibly removed, or starved to death by Israel. Western outlets have tended to present the plight of the Palestinian citizenry within this framework: passive suffering that must be dealt with via the provision of aid and humanitarian assistance, with little consistent mention of what governments can or should do to end their suffering by compelling the termination of Israel's campaign.

For example, the most recent coverage of Gaza has focussed extensively on US projects to drop aid into the enclave and build a pier for delivery by sea. These BBC articles from March 2024 provide overviews of the air and sea aid programs headed by the US but do little to inform readers on Israel erecting barriers to humanitarian aid in the first place. While the BBC explains the difficulties in dropping aid from the sky, it fails to mention the key challenge that aid groups are facing: Israel's blockade of land entry points into Gaza. Pier proposals find themselves on the docket because of Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip, which is rarely cited as the prominent barrier for aid organizations to overcome. Reporting on airdrops and the floating pier is essential; nevertheless, coverage is incomplete if it fails to stress that such measures are required because Israel refuses to let aid in through conventional routes.

In a similar vein, a March 2024 article from The Washington Post refers to how "disruptions at border crossings" have mired the attempts of aid convoys, but does not condemn Israel for causing said "disruptions" – a choice of words that does little to shed light on the systematic, intentional actions of Israel to inflict further suffering on the Palestinian people. An NBC article from the same week states that Israel has been "accused of opening fire on a crowd of Palestinians" while failing to mention that airdrops are needed solely due to Israeli obstructions of aid. The article uses passive voice concerning Israeli crimes, while consistently refusing to address (or outright ignoring) claims made against Israel by Palestinians that investigations have corroborated.

In December 2023, CNN reporter Clarissa Ward became the first journalist to gain access to Gaza "since war began" and documented the ongoing operations in a field hospital in Rafah. The

report does well in capturing the terrible conditions Palestinians had been enduring for sixty days at the time of filming, but again suffers from the same shortcoming: framing the active persecution of Palestinians as a *passive* condition of suffering, for which the panacea is the provision of aid and improving medical infrastructure. Ward interviews doctors who describe how overcrowded the hospital is and the necessity to improvise surgical solutions due to limited resources, but the report does not go beyond this to emphasize that Israel has blocked the delivery of medical supplies and bombed hospitals to the extent that they are no longer usable.

Rather chillingly, a closing remark of the report is that “Gaza will go down as one of the great horrors of modern warfare.” Despite Ward’s honorable and fact-based depiction of the suffering of the Palestinian people, the final takeaway reverts to the concept of war, again tacitly legitimizing the efforts of Israel in the ‘all-or-nothing’ paradigm it has chosen as it attempts to thwart Hamas.

Western journalists simply framing Israel’s bombardment of Gaza as a systematic, targeted persecution of Palestinians, however, will not be enough. Within their coverage, they must explicitly point to the use of language by senior Israeli officials that signals the genocidal intent of their actions. Both [Le Monde](#) and [CNN](#) reported on Israel’s Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant, describing Hamas as “animals” in October 2023, as he announced the “complete siege” on Gaza, cutting off electricity, food, water, and gas to the enclave. It is vital that these words are reported to readers across the world; however, equally important is that the significance of a state’s Defence Minister using such language is not lost on the readership. While Hamas must be condemned, reducing them to the level of animals for abuses that IDF soldiers are also committing — and at much higher levels — serves as a pre-emptive justification for the onslaught against all Gazans that followed. The use of dehumanizing language is itself often a genocidal call for elimination, giving the IDF license to carry out an indiscriminate campaign of relentlessly bombing houses, hospitals, schools, universities, and mosques. The use of genocidal language by state leaders must be explained in western reporting with the contextualization that dehumanizing language often is a call for genocide. Otherwise, reporting risks skewing the reader’s interpretation of dehumanizing language as legitimate in this instance, as legal, or as mere colorful rhetoric from a single speaker. This framing of genocidal language again portrays Israel’s actions as proportionate, legitimate, and just.

The shortcomings of western press reporting on Israel are clear, and the Lemkin Institute in response calls upon media outlets to strive to present the Israeli campaign in its full historical context, most recently characterized by the relentless persecution and dehumanization of Palestinians that displays clear genocidal intent. Western readers must not misunderstand the IDF’s actions to be a proportionate retaliation to the attacks carried out by Hamas on 7 October. The [international law](#) on this is clear and news outlets have more than a handful of legal authorities to refer to when framing articles in more accurate and fair ways.

Instead, it is imperative that media reporting reflect the systematic decimation of Palestinians that is taking place under the guise of Israeli national security. Journalists cannot neglect the importance of their role in elucidating the IDF's actions in Gaza. It is crucial that they comprehensively refute the notion that Israel is engaging in a 'war' in which they have shown regard for either civilian life or the prospect of peace.

Where heads of state have fallen short, the media must continually strive to keep genocidaires in check, providing accurate and reliable reporting that refuses to take an 'impartial' stance on crimes against humanity. For two years, western coverage has drawn parallels between Putin's campaign in Ukraine and that of Hitler across Europe in the 1930s, an analogy used to anchor the reader's understanding of Putin's actions in relation to the Holocaust, which undoubtedly shapes readers' opinions. Such analogies denoting the risks of appeasement in the face of genocide are not utilized when reporting on Israel; as a result, the media continues to find itself complicit in failing to address the reality of Israel's crimes. The western reader has been misled by the media over the course of the siege, with shockingly few Westerners aware of its true scale.

The Lemkin Institute urges the media to abandon rhetoric actively shielding Israel from crimes against the people of Palestine and to go further than reporting on the atrocities as necessary evils by recognizing the binding nature of international law. In particular, news outlets must devote significant attention to stressing the dangers of senior ministers dehumanizing their enemies lest they be complicit in normalizing mass atrocity around the world. We call on the western media to review editorial guidelines to ensure that their reporting shows an appreciation for the binding nature of international law.