The Politics of Words: Language and Bias in Coverage of Israel Palestine Conflict

When reporting global events, the use of words and chosen terminology plays a greater role than many would assume. Words have the ability and power to change view points, determine the downplay of the event, as well as suggest or imply certain biases. However, ultimately words are neutral descriptors with subtle connotations that are rather transparent. Words shape the way people perceive conflicts, humanitarian crises and political issues as a whole. This is a certain written power that writers and other political figures are aware of. For that reason, it would rather be foolish to assume that the words written and relayed are undirected or meaningless. Writers and journalists alike wield this influence with intention and precision. They recognize that words are not merely a means of information but rather potential vessels for thought and emotion, capable of provoking outrage, solidarity or empathy. Therefore, varying news channels transmit different interpretations of the same conflict. This is rather apparent through their choices of terminology and tone. This has been perceptible in the current conflict between Israel and Palestine. Activists and human rights advocates have time and again confronted and condemned news organizations for their use of passive voice and tone of language. Language and vocabulary has the ability to invoke emotional and psychological effects from within people. The implications are rather great, therefore it begs one to question the intention news outlets may have behind the need for passive tones and a vague way of description.

The Israel-Palestine conflict is a longstanding and complex struggle. The conflict is deeply rooted in various issues. It is rooted within the competing issues of religion, nationality, as well as historical claims to the holy land itself. The struggle first reached momentum during the early

20th Century when there was a wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine and the ultimate emergence of the state of Israel in 1948. The conflict has resulted in numerous territorial disputes, wars as well as years of occupation and settlements in disputed areas. From the Israeli viewpoint, this is a struggle which arose because of the struggle for security and preservation of the Jewish homeland during a time when there was uncontested regional hostility against the Jewish population. For the Palestinians, it is a struggle and fight for sovereignty and the right to return to their homeland. A homeland that they were displaced from or forced to leave behind during the period between 1948 and 1967. Over the years, the actors within this conflict have been subject to a series of violent incidents including rocket attacks, military operations along with severe civilian casualties. However, the conflict has almost always been one-sided in terms of civilian suffering and casualties. Till date there is concerning and deepening humanitarian consequences on the Palestinians living especially in Gaza. In fact, Gaza for the longest time has been labeled by Gazans as the world's largest open-air-prison. The area is called home by over a million people. People who are robbed of a future. Children with no childhood living under constant blockade. Parents who are utterly helpless and handicapped due to their unfortunate circumstances. Over the years, the international community has strived to reach a solution for this insoluble situation. However, possibilities of a two-state solution has only ever been stalled due to issues regarding borders, security, refugees and the official status of the holy land of Jerusalem itself.

In the past year, tensions between the both parties have only worsened. Since October 7th of 2023 there have been casualties and death on both sides. However, there is a disproportionate and unimaginable loss of Palestinian lives. Around 44,400 Palestinians have been killed by

Israeli attacks.[1] Although there are thousands, if not more stuck under rubbles, dead or alive. Thousands more are threatened by diseases and illnesses due to lack of sanitation, water, food and other basic human necessities. Within these deaths in Gaza, about 70% of the victims are children and the following percentage is of women.[2] These are basic facts of the war, however, in some parts of the world, the facts are rather different.

Israelis and Palestinians are experiencing the war in Gaza in completely contrasting narratives. On the other hand, the rest of the world is also witnessing this war through a different lens. Ultimately, one's viewpoint of this war stems down to the choice of media consumption. The conflict has been publicised and heavily televised in this era of social media through pro-palestinian as well as pro-israeli news channels. Additionally, many also follow the war with regards to Western media. Regardless, Western media has also time and again been accused of maintaining a consistent bias for Israelis and against Palestinians. The western media outlets hold the role of great influence in the eyes of the US perspective on the conflict. A majority of the reporting payed barely and almost no attention on the unprecedented effects of the brutal killing spree and genocide Israel has committed since October 7th 2023. A large proportion of US newspapers have time and again inordinately highlighted Israeli death in the conflict. It is not to say that Israeli casualties should not be accounted for, but the total death comparison is gravely disproportionate. In the wake of societal hate, the US and Western media continue to provide

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[1] Ikram Kouachi, "Gaza Death Toll Surpasses 44,400 amid Relentless Israeli Attacks," Aa.com.tr, 2023, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/gaza-death-toll-surpasses-44-400-amid-relentless-israeli-attacks/3410164.

[2] Al Jazeera, "Nearly 70 Percent of Deaths in Gaza Are Women and Children: UN," Al Jazeera, November 8, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/11/8/nearly-70-percent-of-deaths-in-gaza-are-women-and-children-un.

important coverage of anti-semitism but overshadow the parallel incidents of anti-muslim racism.

In fact, in moments where Palestinians are finally accounted for, they are portrayed as mere objects and puppets of Hamas. In fact, many individuals and experts have also criticized western media for the usage of inaccurate terminology. For instance, an example depicts the reference of Palestinian health ministry as “Hamas health ministry”. This term is not entirely inaccurate as the Hamas movement is greatly entrenched within the government of Gaza. However, such terminology does cause the Western world to question the accuracy of death tolls and casualty reports released from the hospitals of Gaza. This is solely because Hamas is labeled a terrorist group with vile intentions. This is a bias in favor of Israel which is ultimately causing irreversible damage to truthful narratives. In other instances, the Western sphere also normalizes the situation with the usage of vague language. Supposedly, terms similar to “war” are constantly used within their reports. Watered-down terms as such indicate the conflict to be of an equal struggle in terms of casualties, strength and weakness. A war is a situation of armed conflicts between states or different groups within a state. Palestine is not a recognised state and Hamas is hence not a group within a state, therefore, on what grounds must it be termed as a war?

Alternatively, Palestinian media or pro-Palestine media such as Al Jazeera often center their reporting on the humanitarian crisis and the humanistic consequences of the conflict. This portrays the everyday human challenges that civilians face in Gaza as well as the West Bank. There is a great emphasis on the portrayal of the loss of life, injuries, displacement, suffering and destruction of infrastructure. Language plays a pivotal role because of the word choices of

resistance, genocide, occupation as well as martyrdom. However, pro-palestinian reporting is only dwindling and limited. Therefore, many independent journalists living in Gaza have took it upon themselves to report what they witness on a daily, living through the genocide in Gaza strip. Journalists like Motaz Azaiza, Bisan, and Plestia who are mere college graduates at best have become the relied source of local press to report what is truly happening within the scene.[3] These individuals have managed to report more professionally than the wider international press itself. It is nonetheless important to recognise that these journalists in no way or form claim to be neutral observers. Each individual is a human with feelings and have been covering and living the war simultaneously. They have lost their homes as well as entire cities to ashes and rubble. They have lost family and friends forever to airstrikes. Moreover, they constantly have to be on the lookout for food, water, shelter, electricity as well as their own lives.

Israeli media, on the other hand, tends to focus on security and defense. Their entire system of campaign is structured and formulated around the destruction of Hamas. Israeli news outlets customarily highlight incidents of rocket fire made towards Israeli territories form Gaza. Therefore, they ultimately emphasize the importance of protecting Israeli citizens from threats by hostile forces. Within their reporting, terms similar to terrorist attacks, self-defense as well as counter-terrorism operations are often observed. Such linguistic choices force one to analyze the deliberate choice and omission of certain words. For instance, it could have easily been termed as counter-terrorism “attacks”. However, they refuse to do so because they would not want to be assumed as the aggressor but rather the peacemaker. This is ironic because the large number of Palestinian civilian deaths were because of the weapons and attacks meant to foster “eventual

[3] Yasmeen Serhan, “The Journalists Covering—and Living—the Gaza War,” TIME, December 7, 2023, https://time.com/6343715/israel-hamas-war-journalists-gaza/.

peace". These linguistic choices also further establish the preferred narrative that the IDF's actions and operations are majorly defensive and meant to ensure national security. Furthermore, Israeli networks such as Haaretz also implies a broader cultural narrative that explores and establishes Israel's right to exist as a Jewish homeland amid regional struggles and hostilities.

Political biases will be and always have been present. However, it begs the question: what leads to such biases? In a lot of cases, bias is almost unavoidable. News outlets are obliged to put out pieces of work that align with their viewers' political positions. Therefore, a non-regular viewer will always disagree with the content a contrasting news outlet puts out. Hence, there will always be perceived bias where there is a disagreement in a certain narrative. A pro-palestinian would never agree with Haretz and to a large extent with BBC or CNN. Therefore, Media reporting will most likely blatantly or discreetly promote partisan media and dismiss the necessity of unbiased and objective standards. In addition to audience expectations, media bias can also spawn from limitations regarding editorial priorities or political alignment. Regardless, there is still a factor of deliberate choice at play here. Lastly, in the context of western reporting, there is a clear showcase of balanced content or a need to appear diplomatic. This in itself is not the ideal standard for fair coverage. This is a sheer example of bias against the idea of neutrality. Reporting should always possess an open reflection of the realities of each side. Media should not be hesitant in the reporting of or taking a particular stance and challenging certain narratives.

However, this clear difference of reporting is rather apparent in other aspects as well. From the reporting done in news outlets, it is also present in the language used in political speeches. These messages and mediums of relaying, frame the conflict in forms and ways that resonate with or

alienate audiences. Linguistics choices are therefore apparent in news outlets, social media, and political leader viewpoints. Hence, they ultimately depicts how the world views the events that transpire between Israel and Palestine. Therefore, the paper further analyzes the language used in political speeches.

Political leaders often choose languages within their speeches which help frame the perception they wish to relay. For instance in his address to the US Congress, Benjamin Netanyahu utilizes a variety of linguistic and rhetorical strategies to provoke empathy, and underscore moral clarity. He uses emotionally strong language to invoke shared cultural values between the US and Israel as well as portray Hamas as the absolute evil of the 21st Century. First and foremost, he repeatedly emphasizes a sense of innocence and victimhood by insisting on the innocence of Israeli citizens. This showcase proves the idea that Israel as a state constantly overshadows the violence it inflicts upon the Palestinians. He goes on to mention the narrative and stories of Noa Argamami among other Israeli hostages to humanize the conflict to a certain extent. Furthermore, there are clear religious and cultural references with the inclusion of biblical quotes such as , "they shall rise like lions".[4] This comparison of the IDF soldiers as "lions of Israel" permeates them as sacred and the protectors of the Jewish survival. Therefore, ultimately knocking down all allegations the IDF faces about morality on the international stage. Moreover, Netanyahu also sees it as legitimate to characterize the originally political group Hamas as "terrorists". He further labels them as "rapists" and "murderers".[5] The usage of such absolute terms frames Hamas as the complete evil that is unredeemable in every sense. He eradicates any

[4] Benjamin Netanyahu, "We're Protecting You: Full Text of Netanyahu's Address to Congress," https://www.timesofisrael.com/were-protecting-you-full-text-of-netanyahus-address-to-congress/
[5] Benjamin Netanyahu, "We're Protecting You: Full Text of Netanyahu's Address to Congress," https://www.timesofisrael.com/were-protecting-you-full-text-of-netanyahus-address-to-congress/

form of moral ambiguity that Hamas could possibly possess. Ultimately, such rhetorics structure the war and conflict as a battle between good as in Israel and evil as in Hamas. However, given the number of deaths of Palestinian children and women, it leads one to argue that the evil in question from Netanyahu and his government's point of view is actually the Palestinians as a whole. Towards the end of the speech, he also addresses the rise in antisemitism globally. Therefore, drawing in a connection between the slander of Israelis to the historic persecution of Jews. He does this through the reference of "blood libels", suggesting that the criticism of Israel is deep seated within the historic hatred against Jews.[6]

Ultimately, Netanyahu's speech is a depiction of the severe animosity he feels towards Hamas. However, with attention to detail it can also be seen as hatred by extension towards the Palestinians. Through the usage of terms such as "dark dungeons of Gaza", a repeated characterization is established of Gaza as a whole.[7] Inherently, it is a one-dimensional depiction of Palestinians. Knowingly or unknowingly he is blatantly labeling Hamas, Paletsinians, Gaza and all Gazans alike as pure evil. Moreover in his speech he fails to acknowledge the socio-political reasons and grievances which led to the conflict, as well as failing to recognise the horrible and disproportionate human suffering endured by the Palestinians. Alternately, he frames the entirety of Gaza as the source of evil, inhumanity and terror. Hence, numbing any possibly viable voices of Palestinian aspirations or experiences.

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[6] Benjamin Netanyahu, "We're Protecting You: Full Text of Netanyahu's Address to Congress," https://www.timesofisrael.com/were-protecting-you-full-text-of-netanyahus-address-to-congress/
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Conclusively, media bias in the Palestine-Israel conflict is a complex interwoven system of rhetorical strategies, framing, and the emergence of underlying biases. However, upon close look it is something that is rather evident on all pieces or reporting and speeches. This is an important issue to explore because it plays a significant role in shaping public perception. Ultimately, biases of all sorts reinforce dominant narratives and limit the legitimacy of Palestinian voices. Hence, complicating a conflict that does not need to be complicated but rather solved.

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