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Media's Role in Legitimising Genocide in Gaza

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UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese argues that Israel's targeting of journalists, its control of information, and Western media and platforms echoing Israeli narratives together legitimise genocide in Gaza.

Israel's genocidal war against the Palestinians in Gaza is the deadliest for journalists. Francesca Albanese, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories, in her latest report, "Truth Under the Rubble: Media in the Time of Genocide", examines Israel's killings of Palestinian journalists, restrictions imposed on the media, and the role of international media in legitimising Israel's genocidal actions.

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The report is based on an analysis of three mutually reinforcing actions. The first is the systematic targeting of Palestinian media, its workers, and telecommunications infrastructure. The second is Israel's effective control of information through censorship, access restrictions, and media advertising campaigns that normalise and promote genocidal acts and their denial. The third is the role of influential international media and digital platforms that reproduce Israeli narratives, block Palestinian voices, ignore criticism of Israel's actions, and reframe the debate to legitimise the acts of genocide.

In the occupied Palestinian territories, Israel has historically silenced Palestinian media, targeted media workers, and imposed restrictions on their movement and access to technology and equipment. Since October 2023, Israel's reprisals against Palestinian journalists increased significantly with the killing of 300 journalists and wounding of more than 400. Israeli forces killed around 70 journalists as reprisal for their work as journalists.

On 16 April 2025, Palestinian photojournalist Fatma Hassouna and five family members were killed one day after her documentary on life during the genocide was selected for screening at the Cannes Film Festival. The report quotes an Israeli soldier, "Whoever writes an article or works on a laptop is like someone carrying a Kalashnikov and attacking us".

Attacks against journalists are preceded by smear campaigns branding them as terrorists or Hamas supporters. Israel made unsubstantiated claims that Anas Al-Sharif, a prominent journalist with millions of online followers, was a Hamas supporter and asked him to stop reporting. On 10 August 2025, he was killed along with his five colleagues in a drone attack.

Israel systematically destroyed media and telecommunications infrastructure. On 7 October 2023, Israel bombed the Palestinian tower that housed seven media organisations, and by October 2025, 150 media offices and institutions had been destroyed. Only 30% of mobile towers remain operational due to the destruction of Gaza's telecom infrastructure. Even before October 2023, Israel had controlled the Palestinian territories' electromagnetic spectrum, allowing only outdated 2G network technology.

Israel controlled social media postings by issuing takedown orders and by investing heavily in promoting content supporting its narratives. Israel dismissed widespread famine reports in Gaza. It signed contracts worth $50 million with Google and X to place multilingual advertisements to counter the famine claims.

Israeli media have played a major role in dehumanising Palestinians and justifying mass atrocities, including genocide. Israeli media have asserted that "there are no innocents" and that Gaza is inhabited by "two and a half million terrorists". The extreme views aired on television include Channel 14 presenter Shimon Riklin calling for Gaza to be "wiped off the face of the earth" and Channel 12 presenter advocating for the institutionalisation of sexual violence against Palestinian detainees.

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The Israeli media delegitimises the UN and, in particular, its Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) by alleging that it is allied with Hamas. Israeli media justifies the extermination of the Gaza population and manifests genocidal intent to destroy the group as such.

The Special Rapporteur has examined a selection of Western media organisations for their coverage of the Israeli war against Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. According to the Rapporteur, the coverage of genocide has exposed the long-standing ideological biases of Western traditional media and digital platforms, with serious implications for the human rights of the Palestinian people.

The rapporteur states that content analysis of the Western media shows that they rely heavily on Israeli sources. Israeli officials and pressure groups have privileged access to decision-makers, including at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The BBC's editorial guidelines include the Israeli government's preferred usage of West Bank and Gaza as disputed territories and omit mentioning them as occupied territories. Similarly, the New York Times guidelines instruct journalists to use Palestine only sparingly and avoid using "genocide", "ethnic cleansing", and "occupied territory".

The Western media's editorial approach marginalises historical context and root causes of the present conflict. Decades of occupation and brutalities, including the 19-year blockade of Gaza, are not mentioned or minimised. Instead, 7 October 2023 is fixed as the origin of hostilities. The Cable News Network (CNN) directs its journalists to "remind our audiences" that Hamas attacks on civilians are the cause of the conflict. The Gaza war is presented as Israel's "right to self-defence".

Some CNN and BBC journalists have raised concerns to their management about highlighting unverified and false Israeli narratives. They warned that such reporting would amount to "journalistic malpractice". Unverified narratives include Hamas beheading babies on 7 October; Hamas command centres situated beneath hospitals; and Palestinian journalists killed by Israel on the ground they were terrorists. Media outlets reporting unverified Israeli claims that Hamas has systematically infiltrated the UNRWA led to donors suspending funds, severely impacting the provision of humanitarian assistance to the population in Gaza.

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The Special Rapporteur uses the term "humanitarian camouflage" to describe Israel's genocidal acts under the pretext of civilian protection. Israel portrays herding the Palestinians into so-called "safe zones" and mass displacement as humanitarian acts. The Western media often repeated the Israeli narrative despite mounting evidence that it had nothing to do with civilian protection. The New York Times initially repeated Israel's narrative. It eventually reported that Israel used 2,000- pound bombs in designated "safe zones".

Western media reiterated Israel's narrative that civilian deaths are due to Hamas using civilians as "human shields". The German broadcaster ARD's editorial guidance presents civilian casualties arising primarily from Hamas' alleged use of "human shields". The New York Times used the term "human shields" 176 times and the BBC 81 times.

The Western media underreported the UN findings and ICJ proceedings on the question of genocide. The rapporteur's analysis showed that in more than 100 instances, BBC presenters dismissed the claims that Israel was committing genocide. Western media downplayed or ignored Israel's responsibility for the suffering of Palestinians. In the famous case of the killing of Hind Rajab by Israeli forces, the BBC continues to present it with the headline "Hind Rajab, 6, Found Dead in Gaza Days after Phone Calls for Help".

The rapporteur observes that Western media highlighted Israeli suffering in detail, while Palestinian suffering is portrayed in abstract terms. The Palestinian children accounted for approximately 99.7% of child fatalities but appeared in just over half of CNN reports. On sexual violence, across two sample periods, the New York Times mentioned it four times in relation to Palestinians while mentioning it 76 times regarding sexual violence against Israelis.

Media used the term "barbaric" predominantly to describe Palestinian violence. The German broadcaster ZDF used the term in reference to Israeli victims in 90.7% of cases, but never to describe attacks on Palestinians.

The killing of Palestinian journalists and the ban on foreign media led to reliance on social media for documenting the genocide in Gaza. A handful of private platforms became the primary channels of information for UN experts, international journalists, and human rights organisations. Consequently, Meta, X, and Alphabet Inc. (Google) determined which narratives are amplified and which are buried. The Rapporteur, based on a review of evidence, concluded that there were "recurring patterns of discriminatory moderation,

censorship and amplification of Israeli Government narratives".

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Based on leaked documents, the rapporteur states that Meta, since late 2023, has removed, banned, or suppressed approximately 38.8 million posts across Facebook and Instagram. On Israeli takedown requests, TikTok and Meta reported compliance rates of 99% and 94%, respectively.

The rapporteur is critical of these social media platforms for not demonstrating due diligence in presenting Israeli soldiers' dehumanising rhetoric and incitement to violence against Palestinians. An Instagram page with the title "Hamas Hunting Club" featured images of blindfolded and bound prisoners. YouTube permitted a song describing Palestinians as rodents.

According to the rapporteur, Google had reportedly concluded that advertisements denying famine did not violate its policies. These platforms have profited from Israeli advertising campaigns there by complicit in genocide and its denial.

The Rapporteur has concluded that since 2023, Israel has made independent reporting nearly impossible. It is part of the broader campaigns against the Palestinian people. "The scale and intensity of this assault reveal a deliberate effort not only to conceal mass atrocities, but also to erode the very possibility of documenting them".

D.J. Ravindran was the Director of Human Rights in Peace Keeping Operations in Libya, Sudan, and Timor Leste (East Timor) and has worked in post-conflict situations, including Cambodia and Uganda. He is a former member of the UN Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination.

The views expressed are made in a personal capacity.