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Propaganda vs. truth: Israeli propaganda and Palestinian demonisation

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Propaganda vs. Truth: Israeli Propaganda and Palestinian Demonisation

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TAMARA TAMIMI AND DANIELA SUÁREZ VARGAS, FEB 13 2024

Since the latest escalation from 'normal' levels of violence in Palestine/Israel on October 7, 2023, Palestinian public and political figures have found their airtime on Western mainstream media significantly increased. While important, Palestinian, and pro-Palestinian speakers were often immediately forced into self-defence. One particularly familiar face is the Palestinian Ambassador to the UK, Husam Zumlot, who was persistently and relentlessly required by presenters and anchors in mainstream media, such as CNN, BBC, Sky News, and Sky News Australia/Talk TV, to condemn the Hamas attack on Israel and even to apologise for it. In doing this, the mainstream media decontextualised the events by framing the parameters of the conversation to commence on October 7th. As will be demonstrated below, this decontextualisation, combined with the language used to describe Palestinians and the atrocities they have been subjected to, resulted in the dehumanisation and demonisation of Palestinians.

This is how the 'narrative battle' is being waged against Palestinians, and how propaganda has been instrumentalised as a weapon of war. This piece analyses how the vilification, dehumanisation, and demonisation of the enemy, particularly through the use of language, and the politicisation of victimhood, have been used as two mutually reinforcing components of Israeli propaganda. As a weapon of war, Israeli propaganda has been used to construct international public opinion on Palestine/Israel, both historically and within the latest events, to enable creeping Israeli settler colonialism, and legitimate the perpetration of mass atrocities, including but not limited to genocide, (as demonstrated by Center for Constitutional Rights, Raz Segal, Yoav Litvin, Craig Mokhiber, and nearly 900 scholars).

Language and Victimhood Construction: Deadly Weapons in Israel's Propaganda to Vilify, Demonise, and Dehumanise Palestinians

A powerful propaganda tool utilised in times of war is language and narrative, which play a pivotal role in defining who becomes labelled as 'enemies' and who becomes perceived as 'victims' of violence. Thus, language becomes a powerful weapon in the demonisation and dehumanisation of 'the enemy', noting that both mutually reinforce one another. In these cases, the framing of the enemy goes beyond that of the mere adversary, and instead is consistently associated with a risk or threat to the hegemonic values, traditions, representations, and norms of a given society (Bhatia 2005) through their portrayal as malevolent, diabolical, monstrous, and perilous entities (Spector 1998). Some terms used to demonstrate the lack of humanity and the lack of belonging of 'the enemy' to 'civilised society' include 'terrorists', 'savages', 'barbarians', 'criminals', 'rogues', 'outlaws', 'inferiors', 'irrational', and 'untrustworthy' (Rieber & Kelly 1991; Spector 1998). These narrative devices have consistently been used in the portrayal of Palestinians. For example, Defence Minister Yoav Gallant has termed Palestinians in Gaza 'human animals'; Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem Arieh King, utilised the term 'subhuman'; Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dubbed Palestinian children 'children of darkness' and compared them to Israel's 'children of light'; while Israeli President proclaimed that there are 'no innocent civilians in Gaza'. As explained above, this is part of a wider pattern where labels of demonisation are used to turn 'the enemy' into monsters, situate them as morally and intellectually inferior, and, as discussed below, justify the use of disproportionate levels of violence against them. Biko Agozino explains how this process took place with Indigenous people, who were described as having 'warrior genes' and therefore having crime ingrained in their DNA (Agozino 2023).

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Narratives of war also construct who is perceived as the 'victim' of violence. Parties to the conflict often use victimhood as a political tool to exonerate 'us'- the 'good ones' - of all blame for the violence and shift it entirely onto 'them'- the 'enemy' (Álvarez Berastegi & Hearty 2019). The 'victim' is usually constructed in such a way that the observer perceives them as an object and not the source of harm. This approach resembles a reductionist representation of 'victim' and 'enemy', where actors in war contexts are characterised as one or the other, but in no case can they be both (Hearty 2018; Lawther 2023).

This false dichotomy of exclusive categorisation as either a 'victim' or a 'perpetrator' overlooks the complexity of the reality of war, where the categories are often intertwined (Bouris 2007). Specifically, it is well documented that Palestinians are victims of Zionist and Israeli colonisation, ethnic cleansing, dispossession, apartheid, and genocide. Furthermore, Palestinians have predominantly engaged in long-term non-violent resistance, including popular resistance, civil disobedience, boycott movements, internationalising the Palestinian cause, and engaging in bilateral negotiations. While all of these strategies were sabotaged, the Israeli public has elected increasingly far-right governments that have made it clear in the past and recently that Palestinians are not deserving of their own sovereign state, and that Israel will continue its occupation and settler colonisation of Palestine. Examples of this are abundant. From the current government, the best embodiment is seen in the three 'options' provided to Palestinians by the Israeli Finance Minister, who enjoys wide authority in the administration of occupied Palestinian territory: leaving Palestine, which amounts to unlawful transfer and displacement; being killed by Israelis, which amounts to murder and extermination; or remaining and becoming Israel's servants, which amounts to apartheid, persecution, and modern slavery. All of these options amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity, and/or genocide. Yet, despite the compromises and non-violent strategies of resistance by Palestinians and the continuous election of radical Israeli governments, Palestinians are not only not afforded the right to self-defence, but also are vilified and demonised by mainstream media, when they resort to armed struggle – a right enshrined under international law.

Through the use of the 'enemy' narrative, Palestinians are turned into a 'monster', blamed for their own victimisation, and cease to be considered human (Jankowitz 2018b). By extension, the 'malevolent' nature of the 'enemy' creates an obligation to fight, defeat and, eventually, destroy them (Barker, 2007; Smeulers 2011). Thus, the main objective of the vilification of the enemy is to provide a conducive environment to invoke the right to 'self-defence' by the 'victim' and justify the use of extreme violence to deliver on the military, political, social, and cultural elimination of the 'enemy' (Federman 2018). In the logic of these narratives, the destruction of the 'enemy' puts a stop to the danger posed by such groups and deters hostilities (Tadros 2018). This approach exonerates the 'victim' from the harm they will inflict since it is beyond their control and is caused by the irrational action of the perpetrator (Christie 2018; Holstein & Miller 1990). This is directly seen in the disproportionate level of violence in Gaza in terms of death toll, injuries, and internal displacement.

Further, in relation to the politics of victimhood, when the 'victim' does not prove their 'innocence' in armed violence, they are seen as less deserving of victim status (McEvoy & McConnachie 2012). In other words, if the 'victim' resists the harm perpetrated or fights back against it, this may imply the loss of their 'innocence' and, thus, being blamed for their own suffering. This is aligned with the construction of the 'ideal victim' as having three main characteristics; weakness, innocence, and dependency (Christie 2018; Cuppini 2023). In practice, this occurs by making solidarity contingent upon Palestinians being 'docile' victims who do not respond with violence when their aggressors continuously brutalise them through land confiscation, home demolitions, forced displacement, and extrajudicial killings, to name a few. However, history has demonstrated that even when Palestinians use only nonviolent resistance, the responses of Western states are limited to 'condemning', 'deploring', and expressing 'grave concern' towards Israel's actions, but never any kind of meaningful intervention or sanction.

In bringing together these multiple and complex themes, victimhood often becomes a political statement that situates victims' experiences of suffering in a hierarchy (Madlingozi 2008). Victim hierarchy occurs when certain victims "enjoy a higher status in the crime discourse, and their experiences of victimisation are taken more seriously than others" (Carrabine et al. 2014). Those victims who are perceived as 'problematic' or 'less innocent' are at the bottom of this hierarchy. Their experiences of victimisation tend to be taken less seriously (Jankowitz 2018a), which, by extension, facilitates the justification and normalisation of their suffering (Moffett 2015; 2016).

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As demonstrated above, the Israeli government has made a concerted effort to ensure that Palestinian victims can be found at the bottom of the victim hierarchy (if they are considered 'victims' at all). Western mainstream media has proven itself to be complicit with this strategy. The construction of Palestinians as the 'problematic' victim has provided a conducive environment to negate and, by extension, normalise the structural violence of protracted colonial occupation and violence that the occupying power exercises. This explains the lack of regular coverage of Israeli occupation and settler colonialism in Palestine prior to October 7. The media has also followed a unified pattern in their engagement with the recent events by framing the conversation to begin on October 7 without adequate contextualisation. This facilitates the demonisation and vilification of Palestinians by labelling them as the aggressors (ignoring the decades of structural violence that led to October 7th's violent resistance), and by extension enables Israel to contend that it is invoking a right to 'self-defence'. The dehumanisation of Palestinians through decontextualised framing of events is exacerbated by the vilification narratives that are exploited to minimise the suffering of 'the enemy' (Kradfleich & Smeulers, 2023; Álvarez Berastegi & Hearty 2019). This can be seen in the language used to describe Israelis and Palestinians. For example, Palestinian children are referred to as 'people under 18', where Israeli children are referred to as children; Palestinian civilian casualties are called 'collateral damage', compared to 'civilian casualties' for Israelis; and the killing of Palestinian women and children is justified through invoking the concept of 'human shields', which is not used for Israelis. Further, Israeli captives are described as 'hostages' where Palestinian captives are 'prisoners'; 'attacks' are used to describe events where Israelis are the victims, and 'explosions' are used to refer to Israel's carpet bombing of Gaza; and the active 'killed' is used for Israelis (including soldiers), while the passive 'die' is used for Palestinians. One study focusing exclusively on BBC coverage from October 7 through December 2 revealed stark differences. For example, the word 'died' was used 82 times for Israelis vs 201 for Palestinians. Furthermore, the words 'murder(ed)' and 'massacre(ed)' were used 101 and 23 times, respectively, in reference to Israelis while only once for each in reference to Palestinians. Similarly, 'slaughter(ed)' was used 20 times in reference to Israelis and not one time in reference to Palestinians.

Beyond the use of language and narrative, Israel's successful use of propaganda to demonise and dehumanise Palestinians can be seen through a range of diverse examples of fake news. One prominent example emerged immediately following the Hamas attack on October 7, whereby Israeli and Western media claimed that the attackers beheaded babies, in an effort to paint Palestinians as 'monsters'; claims which have been debunked. Another contentious issue directly linked to the demonisation of Palestinians relates to the bombing of Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital in Gaza. While officials in Tel Aviv initially acknowledged responsibility (Middle East Monitor 2023), Israel quickly retracted its statement, and firstly blamed Hamas and later Islamic Jihad (CNN 2023). Mainstream media were quick to adopt these statements without robust and sufficient evidence. These patterns have continued; resulting in questioning the number of Palestinian casualties in Gaza (Time 2023), and claiming that Palestinian babies killed in Gaza were in fact dolls- a claim that was later rescinded (Business Insider 2023, BBC 2023).

The Conditioning of Public Opinion to Accept Mass Atrocities

The use of dehumanising language, tactics that minimise the suffering of the 'problematic' victim, and the spread of fake news carries severe implications as it conditions the international public opinion to accept mass atrocities, including genocide (Matulewska & Gwiazdowicz 2022). These patterns have been seen throughout recent history. For example, the conditioning of human minds to accept the killing of 1 million in Iraq was achieved by exploiting the narrative of 'war on terror' and claiming that the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq represented an existential threat to civilisation and modernity. Similarly, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda recognised the impact of language and narratives propagated by the media in incitement to commit genocide of at least 800,000 Tutsis, who were cast as outsiders and interlopers from an inferior ethnicity, demonised as having inherently evil qualities, and described using degrading language, such as 'cockroaches'. The most famous example remains the Holocaust, where targeted groups, particularly Jews, were described as 'vile', 'vermin', and 'parasites'; and compared to animals such as 'rats', 'lice', 'cockroaches', 'foxes', and 'vultures' (Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2024; El Pais 2022).

Relatedly, and within the context of the construction of victimhood, Israel has exploited the atrocities committed against Jews in the Holocaust to construct an image of itself as the eternal victim, coining the slogan 'never again'. Occasionally, it ties the Holocaust to historical episodes of persecution, such as at the hands of Pharaoh, the

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Romans, and Babylon. More frequently, though, it extrapolates the Holocaust and its existential threat to construct a hegemonic portrayal of its 'enemy', which at the beginning was represented by Arab States and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation and following the 'peace process' is represented by Iran and its proxies, Hamas, and Hezbollah. The portrayal of the 'other' side as an 'enemy', whether Arabs, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, or others, Israel has maintained an image of the eternal victim, which enabled it to commit mass atrocities with impunity and without accountability.

Exploitation of Atrocities and Propaganda to Advance Settler Colonialism

The derogatory language and narratives constructing victimhood used in the recent events seek to advance Israeli settler colonialism and inflict a second *Nakba* on Palestinians, as declared by Israeli Cabinet Minister Avi Dichter. To this end, Israel and Western media are portraying the assault on Gaza as a war of self-defence intended to destroy a radical fanatical group, despite arguments that self-defence does not apply to attacks emanating from occupied territory, as captured by the International Court of Justice and reiterated by several states, such as Jordan and Pakistan. By extension of the self-defence framing and the derogatory language used, Israeli and Western media are working to condition both domestic and international public opinion to accept large numbers of Palestinian casualties and mass destruction. This is part of a wider pattern where Israel (and the Zionist movement before that) exploit recent events to justify committing atrocities. For example, Israel has historically used the Holocaust and European antisemitism to justify the creation of the state of Israel through the colonisation of Palestine, the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, and the imposition of an apartheid regime (Pappe 2006; Said 1992; Khalidi 2020).

More recently, four issues collectively demonstrate that Israel is exploiting the events of October 7 to advance settler colonialism; the mass killing of civilians, the imposition of a blockade and targeting of civilian infrastructure, the manner in which internal displacement is taking place, and the events taking place in the West Bank. According to the United Nations, between October 7, 2023 and February 12, 2024, Israel's assault on Gaza led to the killing of at least 28,340 Palestinians, 70% of whom are women and children, in addition to the injury of 67,984 Palestinians.

In addition to mass murder, Israel has imposed a blockade on electricity, water, fuel, food, and medicine and has been targeting civilian infrastructure. According to the World Food Programme, the 2.2 million Palestinians in Gaza live in "crisis or worse levels of acute food insecurity" and 576,600 face catastrophic hunger and starvation. The cutting off of water risks the spread of infectious diseases, including waterborne illnesses like cholera and typhoid. Under the pretence of being military objectives, Israel has been targeting the healthcare system with the view of compromising its functionality; such that, as of December 26, 2023, 310 health workers have been killed, 102 ambulances have been damaged, 76 health facilities have been rendered out of service, and no functional hospitals are left in North Gaza. Also, according to the UN, 75% of the Strip's hospitals have shut down due to a lack of fuel. While seven hospitals have reopened in the north, they are only partly operational, with severe shortages of staff, equipment, medication, fuel for running the facilities, and food and water for patients and teams. Targeting the healthcare system, which exacerbates the risks associated with the spread of illnesses, also prevents injured Palestinians from receiving treatment. This, coupled with starvation, which is being instrumentalised as a weapon of war, exponentially increases the number of civilian casualties, surpassing current figures from the aerial bombardment and ground invasion. To put this into perspective, before October 7, 63% of the population was food insecure when an average of 500 trucks were entering Gaza per day; since the escalation in violence, which rapidly increased vulnerability and food insecurity, an average of 60 trucks per day have entered (Visualizing Palestine 2023). Accordingly, the blockade imposed on Gaza clearly amounts to a key act of genocide: "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction".

Moreover, the carpet bombing has internally displaced 75% of the total population in Gaza, who are being pushed closer to the border with Egypt, while other sources estimate displacement at 85% of the population. The clearest indication of Israel's intention to ethnically cleanse Palestinians from Gaza are the earlier plans leaked that make aid to Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, and Yemen contingent on accepting Palestinian refugees from Gaza. Complementing these plans, are the leaks by the Prime Minister that Israel will push for the "voluntary migration" of Palestinians from Gaza, and the confirmation by Member of Parliament Dani Danon that countries in Africa and South America offered to accept Palestinian refugees from Gaza in exchange for payment.

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Augmenting the displacement of Palestinians are the plans to resettle Gaza with Israeli settlers. From the beginning of the war, and well before the destruction and damage of over 60% of the housing stock by November 24, 2023 (UN 2023), Israeli real estate company, Harey Zahav (which specialises in building settlements in the West Bank), began running advertisements for Israeli settlements in Gaza, advertising the availability of beach villas. The Israeli Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich, who is also in charge of settlement expansion in the West Bank, declared on the army radio the re-colonisation of Gaza by Israelis, who would “make the desert bloom” – a traditional colonial narrative that insinuates the inferiority of the Indigenous population.

Figures emerging from the West Bank (including Jerusalem), where Hamas is not the ruling party, further corroborate Israel’s exploitation of October 7 to advance settler colonialism. According to the United Nations, 372 Palestinians have been killed since October 7, of whom 94 are children. To put the gravity of this figure into perspective, in 2023, the year considered deadliest for Palestinians since 2005 (when the UN started recording the data), a total of 507 Palestinians were killed; of these, 62.3% were killed after October 7. Furthermore, a total of 2,595 Palestinians were displaced, including 1,203 children, due to settler violence, destruction of property in military incursions, punitive demolitions, and denial of building permits, which are almost impossible to obtain from the Israeli military body governing the West Bank. Significantly, Jordanian officials have rejected the displacement of Palestinians from the West Bank; the Jordanian Foreign Minister has considered it a red line and tantamount to a declaration of war, signifying that forcible displacement plans are intended beyond Gaza and include the West Bank.

Continued Impunity, Lack of Accountability, and yet a Gleam of Hope

Everything described above has taken place with complete impunity and a lack of accountability for international law violations and the perpetration of international crimes. This impunity is evidenced by the US’s use of their veto power in the UN Security Council to block several resolutions demanding a ceasefire in Gaza, and the extremely limited action by the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court when compared to his swift response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This is part of a wider pattern whereby, between 1972 and 18 December 2023, the US used its veto power 45 times to protect Israel from criticism, censorship, and sanctions (Global Affairs 2023). Similarly, while an ICC investigation of the situation in Palestine commenced in January 2015, the opening of the investigation took six years and remains paralysed to this moment without the identification of any defendants or the making of the slightest progress. In contrast, the investigation in Ukraine was opened in a matter of a few weeks, with arrest warrants issued against President Vladimir Putin and Commissioner for Children’s Rights Maria Belova only a year later.

This impunity and lack of accountability have enabled Israel to persist in its occupation and settler colonisation of Palestine. Over time, the lack of accountability for Israeli crimes has led to the normalisation of Palestinian suffering and the structural violence of the occupation. By extension, Palestinian voices have been marginalised and excluded from Western mainstream media, which demonstrates the normalisation of the Israeli occupation, its violence, and Palestinian suffering, as elaborated earlier.

Notwithstanding, the complicity of Western countries has amplified south-south solidarity. At the level of the International Criminal Court, at first, South Africa, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Comoros, and Djibouti referred Israel and were later followed by Chile and Mexico. Furthermore, South Africa has filed a case against Israel in the International Court of Justice that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza, which the court found plausible.

Furthermore, despite their propaganda machine and Western state and media complicity, Israeli approaches have failed in conditioning the international public opinion to accept the mass atrocities it is committing against Palestinians, including but not limited to genocide. People around the world have taken to the streets demanding that their governments call for a ceasefire. These protests are still going strong four months into the assault. Further hope is provided by the advances made by the boycott movement, which has inflicted serious material and reputational damages on companies complicit in Israeli war crimes and genocide, including Starbucks, McDonald’s, Burger King, Puma, and Zara, to name a few. While the atrocities committed in Gaza and the wider assault on Palestinians are devastating, public mobilisation and south-south solidarity still provide a beacon of hope for justice and accountability. This is a call to action. For justice and accountability to happen, people must keep talking about

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Palestine and Palestinians, even after the last bullet is shot and the last rocket is fired, because the ceasefire will not bring about an end to Israeli occupation, settler colonialism, and apartheid. Unless the root causes of Israeli oppression are addressed, this vicious cycle of violence will continue.

About the author:

Tamara Tamimi (she/her) is a PhD researcher in Law at Queen's University Belfast and scholar of the ESRC NINE Consortium (UK). Tamara holds an MA in Human Rights Law from SOAS, University of London. Tamara's research activity focuses on settler colonialism, transformative justice, forcible displacement, gender equality, and aid effectiveness of overseas development assistance. Tamara has also published extensively in peer reviewed journals and edited collections, including *Development in Practice*, *Al-Shabaka- Palestinian Policy Network*, University of Gottingen, and *Confluences Méditerranée*. Relevant to the topic of this article, Tamara has shared her views through two podcasts: QUB's LawPod and *Activist Lawyer*.

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