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HOW CNN PORTRAYS ISRAEL AS THE VICTIM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE OCTOBER 7TH, 2023

ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN HOSTILITIES

BY

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Abstract

This paper argues that CNN's coverage of Israel and Palestine is influenced by Orientalism and that the distinctions Orientalism makes between 'West' and 'non-West' are a key reason how the network discusses and scrutinizes the conflict. This paper claims that CNN harbors an entrenched Orientalist view of the Arab world, and that Orientalism, in the context of hegemonic discourse, drives CNN's perspective in defining Arabs (and Muslims). This paper shows how and through which terminology the Orientalist discourse materializes in CNN's programs and commentaries, which are often marked by the use of binary terms, collectivisms and generalities, and a one-sided relationship between the "us" versus "them". Consequently, and in stark contrast to its vision statement, "To Inform, Engage and Empower the World", this paper claims that CNN lacks objectivity and impartiality. With this in mind, the paper critically assesses the network's coverage in the context of the latest round of hostilities between Israelis and Palestinians, which began on October 7, 2023. This paper draws from article and publication reviews and an analysis of programming content to argue that the deep-rooted journalistic double standards vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which have plagued media in the United States (US) for decades, are very much the norm at CNN.

Keywords: *Palestine; Israel; Hamas; Gaza; Zionism; Orientalism; CNN; Western Media*

1. Introduction

America's news media have a tremendous influence on people's perception of world events. They play a pivotal role in swaying public opinion, sometimes with disastrous consequences. The power that media wields is by no means trivial. A good example of this was the media frenzy leading up to the 2003 US-led war in Iraq. The media's pro-war narrative may not have been the direct cause of the ill-conceived and ill-fated invasion of Iraq, but there is no denying that it ratcheted up the rhetoric that made the case for war easier for George W. Bush's administration (Carpenter, 2018). Prominent journalists like Judith Miller and Tom Friedman were vocal in their support for the war; Miller's columns in the New York Times were especially egregious (Carpenter, 2018). Citing unverifiable sources, she claimed Iraq had allied itself with al-Qaeda and was involved in the 9/11 attacks (Carpenter, 2018). She also wrote that Saddam Hussein was actively pursuing weapons of mass destruction, including chemical and biological agents (Carpenter, 2018). None of this, of course, was true. The ensuing invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians, destroyed Iraq's infrastructure, and plunged the country into a vicious sectarian civil war, the ramifications of which are being felt in Iraq and the surrounding region to this day.

Iraq, like many other cases, proved how destructive the power of media bias and disinformation can be. The current round of hostilities between Palestinians and Israelis in Gaza, which began on October 7, 2023, has reignited this debate. For more than fifty-seven years, Palestinians in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza have been subject to repressive military rule and collective punishment by successive Israeli governments. During much of this time, well-respected media outlets in the US have been accused of sanitizing Israel's actions while

demonizing the Palestinian liberation movement and the Zionist state's Arab enemies. One reason for this, as Edward Said observed, is because "Israel's status in the European and American public life and discourse has always been special, just as the position of Jews in the West has always been special" and, consequently, its supporters make "anomalous norms, exceptional arguments, eccentric claims...all of them forcibly conveying the notion that Israel does not entirely belong to the world of normal politics" (Said, 1985). That is to say, somehow, Israel is above question or reproach. European Jews did experience centuries of prejudice and persecution, but they also assimilated and contributed extensively to European cultural, social, and intellectual development. This, Said goes on to note, helped Israel (and Zionism) gain its political status in the West because it successfully "merged with a variety of currents...whose power and attractiveness for supporters of Israel" overlooked even the most gross violations of human rights such as the ongoing occupation (Said, 1985). So much so, that to many supporters of Israel, Arab Palestinians who bore the brunt of Israel's creation were "neither relevant nor necessarily even real" (Said, 1985).

The irrelevance of Palestinians in the West is also a manifestation of a deep-rooted Orientalist mindset that has dominated Western discourse vis-à-vis the East. For Palestinians, it has meant being confined to a rigid and tiresome set of ideas, beliefs, and clichés that are consistently repeated by Western media. The fact that most Palestinians are Muslim does not help their cause. As Said points out, to Westerners, the media is a "cultural apparatus" through which they understand Islam (Said, 1981). The media presents a set of binary oppositions: the West represents humaneness, rationality and modernism, while Islam is cruel, irrational and inferior (Said, 1981). By presenting Palestinians within the Islamic collective, the media denies them the

opportunity to represent themselves as a distinct people. This homogenization of Palestinian Muslims works as an ‘ideological cover’ that adds to the biases and ignorance about the “other” (Said, 1981).

The latest conflagration in Gaza has refocused attention on the glaring pro-Israeli bias by major Western news publications and networks like NYT and CNN. In a recent article, Britain’s Guardian claimed that CNN employees were pressured by management to tow the Israeli line, leading to “a regurgitation of Israeli propaganda and the censoring of Palestinian perspectives in the network’s coverage of the war in Gaza” (McGreal, 2024). If this sounds all too familiar, that is because it is. When violence between Palestinians and Israelis erupted in 2021 in Gaza, CNN was accused of “once again flubbing the coverage” (Pekary, 2021). The network barely mentioned the reasons for the escalation, one of them being the impending evictions of Palestinian families in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem. In a CNN program dedicated exclusively to the situation, “every guest was located in Israel; the network didn’t feature a single person in a Palestinian territory or neighborhood. There were no questions about the recent Palestinian evictions or actions by Israeli police that instigated Hamas retaliation” (Pekary, 2021).

According to a recent survey conducted by Ryan Grim, people who get their news from cable television “are more supportive of Israel’s war effort, less likely to think Israel is committing war crimes, and less interested in the war in general” (Grim, 2024). In contrast, people who listen to podcasts and get their news from YouTube or other social media are usually pro-Palestinian and recognize that Israel is perpetrating a war crime. They also think that the events unfolding in Gaza are important. Moreover, news outlets like Al Jazeera and the rise of social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels has challenged established news organizations. According to Pew

Research, approximately one third of Americans below the age of thirty get their news from TikTok (Matsa, 2023). These alternate news sources often contradict mainstream media coverage, and undoubtedly raise valid questions, especially among the younger generation of Americans, on what is really happening in conflict zones like Gaza. As one writer put it, “Many people obtain their news from TikTok, a trend that news outlets do not appreciate. This is because the public is using TikTok as their primary news source rather than relying on journalists. TikTok is especially popular because it exposes what some individuals perceive as biases within well-known media outlets” (DeRoo, 2023).

This paper will show that much of CNN’s coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has its foundations in Orientalism, which overwhelmingly informs its representation of this complicated issue. Unlike before, the October 7 war is unique in that CNN’s contradictions and disingenuities were laid bare in real time as alternate versions and viewpoints of events that challenged the networks’ coverage were offered by non-Western and alternative news outlets, social media platforms and popular podcasts. As a result, this paper will show that CNN often acted as a platform for Israeli misinformation and propaganda, allocated disproportionate airtime favoring the Israeli viewpoint, while overlooking the conflict’s history (i.e., “it all started on October 7”). It will show that CNN also downplayed Palestinian grievances and the root causes of the problem (i.e., the 1948 exodus and ongoing occupation of Palestinian people and territory) while simultaneously amplifying Israeli victimization. Moreover, the network justified Israel’s disproportionate use of military force in densely populated areas as a legitimate way to fight “terrorism”, i.e., Hamas, thereby continuing to perpetuate the longstanding Israeli claim that it is a victim of Palestinian terror. CNN also labeled critics of Israeli policies, including thousands of

university students involved in the campus protests across the US, as antisemitic in order to stifle legitimate discourse and criticism.

2. Theoretical Framework

In his seminal 1978 book, *Orientalism*, Said observed that “the absolute demarcation between East and West” took foothold centuries ago as Europe began eyeing the vast riches and potential of “the East”. Steeped in arrogance wrought by their industrial and military dominance, the West defined the East patronizingly, as something “seen-in-the-West”, based on an uneven relationship between “a strong and a weak partner” (Said, 1978). The Orient was the “other”, associated with unreasonableness, decadence, immaturity and dissimilarity, whereas Europe was “rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (Said, 1978). Such a negative oversimplification of entire cultures was a way to dehumanize and, consequently, justify centuries of global domination; it was tightly intermeshed with the idea of the Western hegemon that was able to project force and supremacy.

For Said, Orientalism was an intrinsic part of hegemonic discourse, especially in the Middle East, where “essentialist assumptions of Western superiority over Eastern cultures serve the ruling world powers and are manifested throughout all forms of discourse including literature, research and conversation both due to, and in order to, perpetuate the power of these dominant groups” (Moxon, 2019). As the West continued to dominate globally in the early part of the twentieth century, wielding an inordinate amount of power over much of the world, its intellectuals still perceived the East in Orientalist terms, and the ontological and epistemological distinctions continued to be pervasive and exploited (Nayak, et al, 2009). The orientalist mindset permeated contemporary political theories like those put forward by Samuel Huntington, who proposed that

future conflict would be between cultures rather than ideologies. The “clash of civilizations”, Huntington noted, “would dominate global politics”. His views on Islam (“Islam has bloody borders”) “resonated with many US intellectuals and policymakers”, further cementing the view that the chasm between the West and East was unbridgeable (Nayak, et al, 2009). Orientalism, through the scholarship of Huntington as well as others like Bernard Lewis (who saw the Islamic world as rigid and monolithic), gave continued relevance to the “otherness” of the East, especially the Arab and Muslim world. Although Lewis and Said fiercely clashed over Orientalism, there can be no denying that even today, the West’s historically jaundiced views, including those that are voiced in its media, shape its opinions of the East.

The rise of the US to preeminence after the Second World War saw the emergence of American exceptionalism and an American variant of Orientalism (“American Orientalism”) which “assumes and relies upon an ontological distinction between the United States and Others” and “employs authoritative claims and representations about others' bodies, habits, beliefs, feelings and political sensibilities, thereby justifying interventions, sanctions and other actions within, across, and outside” (Nayak, et al, 2006) (Weldes, et al, 1999) (Persaud, 2002). Orientalism, and inferences drawn from it, played a prominent role in US politics, especially after 9/11, when, among other things, Huntington’s fears about Islam and the Arabs resurfaced in discussions involving America’s role internationally. The 9/11 Commission Report was, in fact, heavily criticized for its depiction of the Arab and Muslim “other”, and who can forget President Bush’s Orientalism-laced faux pax, “*they* hate us for our freedom” (Agathangelou, 2005)? Bush’s post-9/11 US foreign policy was described as “aggressively Orientalist and as a blunt resurgence of

American Exceptionalism” and his speeches frequently addressed Iraq and the greater Muslim world in the binary language of “us” versus “them” (Nayak, et al, 2006).

Little has changed in the two decades since America’s war in Iraq: the US remains deeply embroiled in the Middle East and in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in particular, and Arabs and Muslims continue to be depicted by a jaded Orientalist viewpoint. In light of this, it is important to examine CNN’s coverage of October 7 in the framework of Orientalism, Orientalism’s relation to (Western) hegemony (broadly defined in international relations as “the capacity for coercion and/or a great degree of influence or control over the structures of the international system and...international behavior”) and its deep influence on US media, which undoubtedly manifests in the media’s portrayal and interpretation of world events (Antoniades, 2018). It can be argued, therefore, that contemporary US media coverage of Palestine is tainted by the same narrow and preconceived Orientalist notions of the “other” world.

3. Research Methodology

A mixed research methodology was employed for this study, using a combination of a narrative overview and a quantitative review of popular CNN programs.

3.1 Narrative Overview

Articles and publications were reviewed for the narrative overview (also known as unsystematic narrative review) approach, which examines and synthesizes works already published. A narrative overview was found to be most useful for this exercise since it allows the researcher to combine relevant information from numerous sources into a readable and easily followable

format. This, in turn, offers a wider perspective of the research topic, including a comprehensive view of its history and development (Green, et al, 2006).

Publications in English or translated versions available for articles in languages other than English that met the following criteria were included for study (this is not an exhaustive list and the variables were kept very broad and generic in order to increase sensitivity in finding articles):

- a. History of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israeli and Palestinian politics, US Middle East foreign policy, Hamas and the Occupied Territories (i.e., the West Bank and Gaza)
- b. Any US media and CNN coverage of the Middle East / Israel-Palestine, the October 7 conflict, antisemitism, and the anti-Israeli college protests
- c. CNN-specific articles covering Gaza, Palestinians and Israel, including transcripts of specific shows hosted by popular personalities like Jake Tapper, Fareed Zakaria, Anderson Cooper and Dana Bash
- d. Articles related to Orientalism and its history and influence on Western perceptions, the media, CNN and the Middle East

Publications and articles were excluded if they were (1) not published in English (or if translated versions were unavailable) and (2) abstract-only or protocol publications.

Information was sourced from Google and Google Scholar as well as following databases: Jstor and ResearchGate. A search was conducted to select articles meeting the predefined inclusion criteria; searches were performed over a period of three months starting April, 2024. Retrieved articles and publications were reviewed to see if it met the inclusion criteria by evaluating the title or title and abstract and / or actual content. Article reviews were subsequently performed

to ascertain whether eligibility criteria were met. Similarly, text analyses were done to exclude any publication that was ambiguous or otherwise did not meet set criteria, and common ideas were highlighted and connected using keywords.

3.2 Quantitative Review and Analysis of CNN Programs

A sample of seventy randomly chosen episodes of popular CNN programs were selected for review. They were hosted by Jake Tapper, Fareed Zakaria, Wolf Blitzer and Christiane Amanpour, all veteran journalists with several years of experience covering international affairs and the Middle East. The programs aired between from October 9th, 2023 to March 31st, 2024; the program dates were randomly selected by a randomizer. For those programs that were archived, a review of the transcript was performed. A detailed explanation of the results is provided in Section 6.

4. Orientalism, the Middle East and CNN

To the West, the Orient, which includes the Middle East, Turkey and the Indian subcontinent, was fundamentally flawed, and thought to be “in need of corrective study.” Said observed that Orientalism was the primary instrument for interacting with the Orient, i.e., “dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 1977). Orientalism, therefore, served three purposes: (1) it aided political (i.e., colonial) aims, (2) it helped crystallize the European self-image and (3) it developed a false and misleading narrative of the East, especially about Islam and the Arabs.

Over the years, Western media has been challenged for its Orientalist-driven dichotomies, i.e., “the distinctions between ‘West’ and ‘non-West’ as the principal starting point for analysis” (Ranji, 2021). Given that Orientalist hegemony steered Western discourse for centuries, its influence naturally continued in the twentieth century, i.e., reductive Orientalist stereotypes remained entrenched in the media, as did rhetoric that was divisive and polemic. Unfortunately, contemporary media continues to utilize “binary terminology, collective terms and generalities”, and assumes the superiority of Western scholarship and research in its relationship with the Orient (Ranji, 2021). As Said observed, “this superiority has been achieved by the constant repetition of entrenched presuppositions and idioms” (Said, 1979). It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that in the hands of a powerful medium like media, this constant repetition, subliminal or overt, has invariably had an immense impact on public perceptions of world events.

During the twilight years of colonialism in Asia and Africa, as European powers desperately struggled to hold on to their interests, media became a powerful tool to mold public opinion both, at home as well as among the indigenous colonial subjects. For example, in Algeria, the French initially used media to propagate disinformation about how Muslim Algerians could never be considered French (never mind that many Algerians did not want to be French). French colonialists viewed Islam as incompatible with French and European values, and fostered an atmosphere of antagonism and distrust in the colony (Lorcin, 2014). It was only later, as the Algerian independence movement gained momentum, that French authorities, cognizant they were losing control of the country, redirected the media’s efforts to portray Algerians as French in order to convince the public that Algeria should continue to be ruled by France (Lorcin, 2014). In the case of Algeria, the media initially employed long-established Orientalists tropes of

Muslims, exploiting cultural differences between Europe and the Islamic world to help the French authorities reinforce, separate and dominate.

Algeria is but one of many examples of how Orientalism embedded itself in Western journalism, and sixty-plus years since, it continues to play a key role in the “othering” of the non-Western world. As recently as 2022, when Qatar hosted the FIFA World Cup, “British and American mainstream media...focused on exploring politically relevant hot topics in many of their reports” instead of just covering the games (Li, et al, 2023). Consequently, what was to be the much-anticipated capstone tournament of the world’s most popular sport instead became a “politically charged” spectacle (Li, et al, 2023). In report after report, journalists from various media outlets (including CNN) raised questions about Qatar’s labor laws as well as its attitude towards homosexuality. As the games began, words like “‘ban’, ‘silence’, ‘illegal’ and ‘accusation’ appeared frequently in Western media coverage and discussion” (Li, et al, 2023).

What we witnessed in Qatar was a regurgitation of the same tedious Orientalist concepts based on Western centrism and essentialism. The emphasis was not on Qatar’s progress from a tiny, inconsequential nation (carved out in 1971 by the region’s colonial masters, the British) to a modern state with one of the highest standards of living in the world, but on the usual negatives employed by the West to describe the Islamic world: undemocratic, authoritarian, regressive and repressive.

The question, therefore, is: does Orientalism influence CNN’s coverage? The network has been criticized in the past for its Orientalist slant, especially in relation to the Middle East where “there is a rich reservoir of Arab stereotypes...drawing on myths and beliefs of the past” (Rolstrup, 1996). This was evident during the First Gulf War, where CNN was the “favorite conduit of US

information warfare specialists” (Cherkaoui, 2010). Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was portrayed as the archetypal villain, seamlessly fitting the “evil” billing in the good versus evil binary. Hussein was the typical Arab despot who was an existential threat not only to his neighbors, but to the civilized world (“We will fight them over there so we do not have to face them in the United States of America” – George Bush, 2007, 89th Annual Convention of the American Legion). In the case of Iraq, little effort was made to differentiate the country, its people, rich heritage and multicultural society from its leader. The “demonization campaign was so potent that in January 1991, public opinion polls revealed that many Americans considered...Hussein an evil that had to be uprooted by all means” (Hoynes, 1992). The demonization of Arab leaders is a time-tested, formulaic US media staple and CNN is as guilty of employing it as any other major network. Prior to Hussein, we witnessed it with Arafat and Hafez Al Assad, to name a few, and post-Hussein, it continued with other leaders who were overthrown (or were almost overthrown) by Western-engineered civil wars, coups or uprisings including Qaddafi in Libya, Bashir in Sudan and Assad (Hafez’s son) in Syria.

Aside from the demonization of Hussein, CNN positioned Iraq as the “other” in relation to American (i.e., Western) values and identity, and from the onset, the war was characterized as a fight between good and evil (Cherkaoui, 2010). The network aired interviews with US soldiers who, on several occasions, used profanities, including racial epithets, to describe Iraqis (Cherkaoui, 2010). While Iraqis were being dehumanized, CNN programs simultaneously personalized the stories of US soldiers leaving for war, often depicting heart-wrenching scenes of families wishing their loved one goodbye to emphasize American humanness and sacrifice (Cherkaoui, 2010).

Another example of Orientalism that “prominently featured in CNN’s coverage was the binary contrast between American and Oriental women. Despite the fact that women constituted a scant six percent of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, the image conveyed was that of progressive, even post-feminist, democratic American women, in contrast to their veiled and oppressed Oriental counterparts” (Husting, 1999). The comparison was completely inaccurate and misleading since Iraq under Hussein and his secular Baathist government was one of the most liberal countries in the region when it came to women’s right – women had access to education and employment, they were able to vote and could own property and took an active part in civil service (Cherkaoui, 2010). Ironically, the status of women eroded greatly after the war; the draconian sanctions imposed on Iraq by the US and its coalition allies crippled the country’s healthcare, economy and society, which in turn affected women disproportionately harder.

There are parallels between CNN’s coverage of Iraq and its coverage of the Gaza war. Similar overly simplistic Orientalist undertones and binaries prevail: both conflicts were portrayed as a struggle between Western versus Eastern values and an existential confrontation to uphold Western democratic ideals against Eastern tyranny. In the Gaza war, it is undeniable that Israel represents an extension of Western culture and heritage in the Middle East, a “Judeo-Christian” bastion surrounded by a wall of Arabs, a tiny nation fighting to defend itself from relentless Hamas (i.e., Islamic) terror. The most benign phrases like “Arab nations” (or “Arab states”) and other generalizations like “Arab masses” and “Arab culture” “are employed to refer to an undifferentiated entity as if there is only one ‘Muslim’ or ‘Arab’ community...this terminology forms an ‘essentialist thinking about the non-existent singular, homogeneous “Muslim society”’ ‘with no distinct social locations and groupings, and certainly no class, gender, ethnic or regional

differences” (Ranji, 2021) (Khiabany, 2003). Such generalizations are constantly used by CNN to frame the Gaza war, even by seasoned and respected journalists like Zakaria (“Fareed: There's a silver lining in Arab states' response to the Israel-Hamas war”).

Much like its coverage in Iraq, where CNN focused on the human stories of American service personnel deployed in the Gulf, the network’s reports on the Gaza war spent “tremendous time and effort...committed to sharing with their audiences the powerful emotions of the families of Israeli detainees...There were repeated interviews, photo collages, video testimonies and countless emotive stories about the ordeals of the Israeli detainees” (Khouri, 2023). In contrast, the coverage of the “other” victims, i.e., Palestinian families, was minimal (Khouri, 2023). Whereas Israeli hostages and their kin were routinely shown “as real people, with names, ages and powerful human emotions, gripped by fear and hope, doing everything possible to save their family members detained in Gaza”, Palestinians were mostly denied the same exposure (Khouri, 2023). Their stories, it seemed, did not merit equal mention. Young Israelis referred to as “children”, whereas jailed Palestinian youth of similar age were often called “minors”. Similarly, female Israelis detained by Hamas were referred to as “daughters”, “grandmothers” or “mothers”, whereas female Palestinians held by Israel were just referred to as “females” or “women”, i.e., they were not shown as somebody with families and loved ones who cared for them (Khouri, 2023).

An apathetic media attitude towards Palestinians has been all too obvious since October 7. The “othering”, minimization and dismissal of Arabs permeated the most basic aspects of journalism, including common words and language used to describe Israelis and Palestinians. Israeli deaths were given far greater coverage than Palestinian ones, thereby minimizing the devastation and

carnage in Gaza over the last few months. In publications like NYT, “the words “Israeli” or “Israel” appear more than “Palestinian” or variations thereof, even as Palestinian deaths far outpaced Israeli deaths. For every two Palestinian deaths, Palestinians are mentioned once. For every Israeli death, Israelis are mentioned 8 times — or a rate 16 times more per death than of Palestinians” (Johnson et. al, 2024). This is even though Palestinians have been killed at a rate that is twenty-five times that of Israelis.

5. Brief Background of the Recent History Leading up to October 7, 2023

It is necessary to understand the Gaza war in the overall context of the recent history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The war comes at a critical time for both, Palestinians and Israelis, with peace talks in disarray and no solution in sight for one of the world’s longest and most intractable conflicts. The current round of violence is the result of the confluence of several key factors, including (a) Hamas’ rule in Gaza (since 2007) and a considerably weakened Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank, (b) the Israeli blockade of Gaza, which started with Hamas’ rule, and repeated military operations by the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) since 2007, (c) the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020 and Israel’s impending rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, and (d) the increasingly hardline Israeli policies in the Occupied Territories following Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s return to power in 2022. These points are discussed briefly in the following sections.

5.1 Hamas Rule in Gaza and an Ineffective PA in the West Bank

A central friction point in the current conflict is Hamas, the Islamist political party that rules Gaza. Hamas (an acronym for Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya, i.e., Islamic Resistance Movement)

was founded in 1987 as an offshoot of the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, a pan-Islamist movement out of Egypt that hoped to create an ideal Islamic society “out of a conviction that developing the proper structures will bring about a truly moral (but not totalitarian)” social order (Zuhur, 2008).

Although its leadership reiterated acceptance of a two-state solution in early 2024, Hamas has historically been opposed to the idea (a view, ironically, that Netanyahu holds). Unlike its Egyptian and Jordanian counterparts in the Muslim Brotherhood, the group formed a wing dedicated to militancy against the Israeli occupation, since it believed that armed resistance was necessary to liberate Palestinian land (Zuhur, 2008). The call to militancy is enshrined in Hamas’ original 1988 charter as well as in its revised 2017 charter; it was emboldened after the First Intifada in 1987 (Zuhur, 2008) (Hroub, 2017). It gained further support after the signing of the Oslo Accords, which Hamas and a number of other secular Palestinian factions like the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) and the DFLP (Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine) opposed (Zuhur, 2008).

Hamas’ creation was politically and financially supported by the Israelis, who wanted a rival to Yasser Arafat’s Fatah, the main faction within the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), in order to divide Palestinian political leadership and “thwart the implementation of the two-state solution for resolving the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By aiding the rise of an Islamist group whose charter rejected recognizing the Israeli state, Israel sought to undermine the idea of a two-state solution, including curbing Western support for an independent Palestinian homeland” (Chellaney, 2023). For years, Netanyahu approved the flow of hundreds of millions of dollars from the Qatari government to support Hamas (“Netanyahu...not only tolerated those

payments, he had encouraged them”) (Mazetti, et al, 2023). Israel’s tacit backing of Hamas effectively exploited the political and ideological wedge between Hamas and the PA, which consists of the old guard Fatah leadership and considers itself the true representative of the Palestinian people (Mazetti, et al, 2023).

The specter of an Islamist Palestine, as opposed to a secular one espoused by the PLO, means that Hamas has few supporters even amongst Arab regimes across the Middle East. In the oil-rich Gulf states (except Qatar) and in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood and its ideological affiliates like Hamas are disliked. Qatar, along with Turkey and Iran, supports the movement. Qatar sees itself “as a regional diplomat – and views diplomacy as a way to protect itself in a turbulent neighborhood” (Mohammad, 2024). The other Gulf states, on the other hand, view Hamas as a threat. They fear that the group’s popularity could give rise to homegrown Islamist movements, and consider the organization as an obstruction to a permanent solution to the Arab-Israeli problem because of its opposition to a two-state solution. Lastly, these countries are wary of Hamas’ ties to Iran (and its proxy non-state actors like the Hezbollah), whom they consider to be a mortal enemy, especially given Iran’s role in propping-up Bashar Al Assad in Syria and its vast influence in Shia-dominated, post Saddam Hussein Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen, who till recently were embroiled in an inconclusive war with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

With Hamas labeled a terrorist organization, shunned by the West and many Arab governments, and with Gaza placed under a continuous military blockade since 2007, Israel has focused on weakening the PA’s control of the West Bank. For years Israel’s “various governments...took an approach that divided power between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank – bringing Palestinian

Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to his knees while making moves that propped up... Hamas” (Schneider, 2023). Israel’s strategy was to effectively prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state: the combination of an Islamist Hamas and a weak and ineffective PA made the realization of an independent Palestine practically unfeasible. With a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seemingly unattainable, confrontations between an increasingly besieged and subjugated Palestinian populace and Israel’s occupying forces were bound to escalate.

5.2 Israeli Blockade and Military Operations

Since 2007, when Hamas won the local elections and took control of Gaza, the territory has been under a crippling land, sea and air blockade that has effectively sealed it from the outside world and severely limited what comes in and out of the Israeli-controlled border crossings. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “the blockade has raised concern about collective punishment and other possible violations under international humanitarian and human rights law” (OCHA, 2022). There are roughly two million people squeezed into a tiny parcel of land, making Gaza the most densely populated area in the world. Unemployment is among the highest in the world and over 60% of households require food assistance; almost a third find it hard to pay for children’s schooling and supplies, and about 80% of Gaza’s piped water is undrinkable (OCHA, 2022). A number of international institutions think the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip is illegal under international law and many observers agree that Israel continues to be the de facto occupying power even after withdrawing its forces from the territory (Finkelstein, 2018).

In addition to the humanitarian crisis caused by the blockade, Israeli policy since the early 2000s has been to periodically “mow the lawn”, a metaphor used to describe the routine operations

carried out by the IDF to target Hamas militants in Gaza. These operations have faced criticism from human rights groups for their excessive force and the number of civilian casualties. The phrase, “mow the lawn”, itself is callous, suggesting that Gaza is akin to grass that needs to be regularly trimmed. Needless to say, when mowing the grass, “one would cut down everything on their path. This would mean that in the process of trying to eliminate their enemies, killing children and women would simply be considered “accidents”” (Issaoui, 2022).

In his book, *Gaza: An Inquest into Its Martyrdom*, Norman Finkelstein notes that Israel’s record of human rights violations in Gaza, “could by now fill a medium-sized library; they have generally upheld exacting standards of accuracy, and they record a ghastly tale of suffering and misery, on the one hand, and criminal excess and heartlessness, on the other” (Finkelstein, 2018). Finkelstein notes that repeated Israeli military actions are meant to “remind the natives who is in charge”, and contrary to Israeli claims, the withdrawal and subsequent blockade had nothing to do with Israel’s security. Gaza, Finkelstein notes, is under “continuous punishment” with the sole intention of stomping out any and all Palestinian resistance. In fact, the report published by the Goldstone Commission established by the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHCR) in April, 2009, after Operation Cast Lead, stated that an overarching purpose of Israel’s military campaign had been to “punish, humiliate and terrorize” civilians. The withdrawal was really a redeployment of Israeli forces from within Gaza to just outside its borders, and by 2023, Gaza had been under an unprecedented lockdown for an incredible 17 years. As, Sharon’s adviser and Israeli demographer, Arnon Soffer, once noted, “When 2.5 million people live in a closed-off Gaza, it’s going to be a human catastrophe. Those people will become even bigger animals than

they are today...So, if we want to remain alive, we will have to kill and kill and kill. All day, every day” (Makdisi, 2023).

5.3 *The Abraham Accords*

The signing of the 2020 Abraham Accords (Accords) between Israel and four Arab states, the UAE, Sudan, Bahrain and Morocco, was met with considerable consternation by Palestinians who overwhelmingly felt the agreement bypassed the root cause of the Arab-Israeli conflict. By doing so, Palestinians feared that their aspirations for an independent Palestine would be circumvented. By one estimate, 64% of Palestinians polled opposed the pact, while only 10% viewed it favorably (Malvisi, 2023). Moreover, Palestinians also feared that recognition of Israel by major Arab states like the UAE would only embolden Israeli repression in the Occupied Territories since the Accords proved that the Palestinian cause no longer hindered Israel from being formally recognized and from forming alliances in the region.

Although Arab governments justified the Accords to their constituents by claiming that relations with Israel would allow them to more effectively champion the Palestinian cause, in retrospect, the Accords did “embolden successive Israeli governments to further ignore Palestinian rights” (Whitson, 2023). In turned out, Palestinians apprehensions were not unfounded. In the first year after the agreement was signed, settler violence increased exponentially in the West Bank under Yair Lapid’s Labor government (Rosenberg, 2021). Since 2022, with a new government led by Netanyahu in place, Israeli ministers have demanded the total annexation of the West Bank, and settler vigilantism rose to unprecedented levels (Whitson, 2023).

Adding to Palestinian concerns was President Joe Biden's initiative to build on the Accords by brokering an agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, which is home to Islam's two most holy cities, Mecca and Medina, is the largest economy in the Gulf, the world's largest oil exporter and a powerful player on the international stage. A peace agreement between the House of Saud, the country's ruling family, and Israel would be a substantial step towards normalization of relations between Israel and the Muslim world at large. Saudi Arabia, where Islam was founded, has immense significance in the Islamic world, making it the gateway for Israel to establish ties with other key Muslim countries like Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia. If this were to happen, it is reasonable to assume that the Palestinian issue would permanently remain on the proverbial backburner.

Although the Saudis have insisted on Israel agreeing to a roadmap to a Palestinian state as a precondition to normalization, the actual formation of the state is not necessary for an agreement to be signed, and if the Abraham Accords (or the Oslo Accords before it) are any indicator, chances are the Palestinians will not get their state any time soon. According to observers, one reason for Hamas' attack on October 7 could have been to derail Saudi-Israeli normalization and embarrass those Arab states who have diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv. With the ongoing war in Gaza, "normalization is off the table, perhaps for good, and the region is focusing on Israel" (Byman, 2023).

5.4 Israel's Political Shift to the Extreme Right

The October 7 attack generated considerable media focus on Hamas, its Islamist ideology, history of militancy and its rejection of Israel. Extremism, however, is not just a Palestinian problem. What was given relatively less media exposure were the drastic changes over the last two years

in Israel's political landscape, i.e., the inclusion of Jewish far-right, extremist parties in the government. On December 29, 2022, Israelis voted into power arguably the most hardline rightwing government in the country's history. The new Likud-led government is a coalition that includes ultranationalist religious parties whose political ideologies alarm even many mainstream Israelis. It was hardly shocking, therefore, when Netanyahu, in a brazen move just six months following the election, approved the construction of 13,000 illegal new housing units in the Occupied West Bank, the highest number in any given year. He also released guidelines that gave Jews "exclusive and inalienable rights to all parts of the land of Israel" (i.e., including the West Bank) (Chotiner, 2023).

In order to understand how extreme the current Israeli cabinet is, let us consider two of its rightwing members who have gained prominence (and notoriety): Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich. Ben-Gvir is the powerful Minister for Security, whose portfolio includes oversight of the police. He is the leader of Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power), a far-right Kahanist party, named after Meir Kahane, a Brooklyn-born rabbi who emigrated to Israel and was elected to the Knesset. Kahane advocated for the expulsion of Arabs citizens of Israel and establishing a theocratic state, and his party, Kach, was eventually banned under Israel's anti-terrorism laws following the Ibrahimi Mosque massacre of 1984 in Hebron, when twenty-nine Muslim worshipers were shot and killed by Baruch Goldstein. Goldstein, who was an ardent admirer of Kahane, was a member of the Jewish Defense League (JDL), a militant organization also founded by Kahane. The JDL was responsible for a string of violent attacks in the US including the murder of Palestinian-American activist, Alex Odeh, who was killed by a bomb in California. Following his death at the hands of enraged survivors in the mosque, members of Kach praised Goldstein as a "hero". Interestingly,

Goldstein's photograph hung in Ben-Gvir's home till he was compelled to remove it on the insistence of former Prime Minister Naftali Bennet (Times of Israel, 2020).

Ben-Gvir's fellow cabinet minister, Smotrich, serves as the Minister of Finance. He is the leader of the Religious Zionist Party, also an ultranationalist party with an anti-Arab and homophobic agenda. Smotrich was once described by the former head of the Shin Bet, Yitzhak Ilan, as a "Jewish terrorist" who planned to bomb cars on major roads in protest of Sharon's withdrawal from Gaza (Sharon, 2022). He is staunchly opposed to Palestinian statehood and believes more settlements should be built on occupied Palestinian land, a promise he will probably make good on now that he is in charge of Area C, which comprises of roughly 61% of the West Bank and is administered by Israeli authorities. Smotrich has "full authority over land purchases, land surveys and the registration of land" and has a large budget at his disposal to construct new settlements along with the power to demolish Palestinian homes and property (Sharon, 2022).

While the inclusion of several prominent religious ultranationalists like Ben-Gvir and Smotrich in the cabinet is of great concern, it is not entirely unexpected. This is, after all, Netanyahu's sixth term as Prime Minister, and his latest government is a result of "a culmination of Israeli politics drifting farther and farther to the right, and decades longer of policies that amount to de facto annexation of the occupied West Bank" (Guyer, 2023). What is different this time around, however, is that these policies have been officially adopted by the government and reflect realities on the ground (Guyer, 2023).

6. Analyzing CNN's Coverage of the October 7, 2023 Conflict

The article reviews focused on how Orientalism's "othering" (in this case, the othering of Palestinians) influenced CNN's news coverage by placing greater importance on the "us" (Israelis) while simultaneously negating or marginalizing the experiences of the "other" (Palestinians) by discounting their concerns and allowing for the reinforcing of negative stereotypes to justify Israeli actions. Keeping this in mind, the article reviews crystalized four key factors that drove CNN's coverage of the Gaza war: (1) the showcasing of Israeli and pro-Israeli talking points, (2) the downplaying of Palestinian or pro-Palestinian opinions and grievances, (3) a focus on Hamas terrorism as the cause of the conflict and the justification for Israel's excessively punitive military retaliation and (4) the use of the antisemitism label to deflect legitimate criticism of Israel.

6.1 *A Platform for Pro-Israeli Propaganda*

The Guardian article referred to earlier in this report noted that CNN instituted "strict guidelines on coverage" including "tight restrictions on quoting Hamas and reporting other Palestinian perspectives while Israeli government statements are taken at face value. In addition, every story on the conflict must be cleared by the Jerusalem bureau before broadcast or publication." (McGreal, 2024) This meant that each and every report was to be vetted by Israel's military censor before being aired. Time and again, the network circulated Israeli propaganda without any fact checks, including the stories of Hamas beheading babies (which President Biden repeated in his speeches). Then came the infamous story about Hamas command and control centers under Al-Shifa Hospital, a fabrication that the Israeli military used to target the hospital resulting in the deaths of numerous civilians. CNN management ordered staff to discount the number of casualties reported by Palestinian authorities because the hospital was run by Hamas

and, therefore, by default, any reports of casualties were deemed unreliable. The company's senior director of news standards, David Lindsay, prevented reporting of most Hamas statements, calling them "inflammatory rhetoric and propaganda" (McGreal, 2024). While it is true that, in the case of Al-Shifa Hospital, CNN did subsequently air segments which challenged Israeli claims, many stories seemed to go on air without being verified.

To be fair, all foreign news organizations operating in Israel have to observe rules established by the IDF censor, who stipulates what subjects are not to be covered and which reports can and cannot be released. In Gaza's case, the censor restricted eight areas including security cabinet meetings and any hostage-related information. However, "CNN's practice of routing coverage through the Jerusalem bureau policy...stands in contrast to other major news outlets, which in the past have run sensitive stories through desks outside of Israel to avoid the pressure of the censor" (Boguslaw, 2024).

One of the first notable instances of CNN's bias and failure in meeting professional journalistic standards occurred during popular host Jake Tapper's show ("The Lead by Jake Tapper") on November 18, 2023. The episode aired an unsubstantiated report that Israeli women were raped on October 7, a claim that went viral with publications like the Washington Post running with the revelation, and the Israeli government and pro-Israeli groups quickly capitalizing on the story (Mondoweiss, 2023). Upon further examination of the report, however, it was revealed that many of the witnesses "were lacking in credibility" or "had ties to Israeli government officials or departments" (Mondoweiss, 2023). Tapper started the show by interviewing an Israeli "human rights expert", Cochav Elkayam-Levy, whose task it was to document the evidence of alleged sexual violence committed by Hamas. It was subsequently revealed that Elkayam-Levy worked in

a previous capacity as an advisor to the Israeli government where, according to one report, “she provided the legal justification for Israeli officials committing human rights violations against Palestinians” including authoring a legal manual on force feeding Palestinian prisoners who “protested their administrative detentions through hunger strikes” (Middle East Monitor, 2023). She also disseminated other false stories including circulating photographs of dead female Kurdish fighters, claiming they were Israeli women killed on October 7 (Middle East Monitor, 2023). In a scathing expose, the Israeli newspaper, Yedioth Ahronoth, accused Elkayem-Levy of fraud, stating that she “spearheaded spreading misinformation to international media outlets” which was subsequently rejected (MEM, 2024).

On another occasion, in the October 16, 2023 episode of Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees, the host, Anderson Cooper, interviewed former Israeli Mossad officer, Rami Igra, who stated that most civilians in Gaza were potential combatants since they voted for Hamas (McGreal, 2024). Igra went on to note that in spite of all civilians being militants, Israel had decided not to target them, a patent lie given the high number of civilian casualties (by October 16, Reuters reported that 2,750 Palestinians had been killed and almost 10,000 had been wounded) (Reuters, 2023). The interviewed aired on November 19, 2023, by which time over 13,000 Gazans had already been killed by the IDF. Cooper did not question, counter or refute any of Igra’s statements on the show (McGreal, 2024).

Arguably, the most appalling instances of poor journalism immediately following the October 7 attack was when CNN’s Sara Sidner reported on a live broadcast that, based on confirmation from the Israeli prime minister’s office, Hamas had beheaded Jewish babies in the Kfar Aza kibbutz in Southern Israel. Sidner stated that the news was “devastating”, noting that “for the families

listening, for the people of Israel, for anyone that is a parent, who loves children, I don't know how they get through this". All this was aired without verifying whether the claim was true. When doubts were raised about the veracity of these claims and after Netanyahu's office later put out another statement that it could not confirm the story, Sidner issued an apology on the social media platform, X (formerly Twitter), stating that she "needed to be more careful with my words" (India Tomorrow, 2024). Nevertheless, accounts of beheaded babies continued to reverberate and were exploited by those sympathetic to Israel.

It is difficult (and perhaps too early) to ascertain the impact these and other misleading (and oft times, patently false) news reports have had on the public's psyche, but if history is any indicator, they can be extremely convincing and, consequently, extremely damaging. Once again, lessons should be drawn from America's recent role in the Middle East and how media coverage hastened the nation to war. On October 10, 1990, in the lead-up to the First Gulf War in January the following year, Americans intently watched a young Kuwaiti girl named Nayirah testify in front of the US Congressional Human Right Caucus that she witnessed, among other horrors, Iraqi soldiers remove babies from hundreds of incubators in a Kuwaiti hospital and left them to die on the floor (Haider, 2021). The incubators, she said, were shipped back to Iraq. The US public relations firm, Hill and Knowlton, retained by the exiled Kuwaiti government, recorded the entire hearing and sent it to MediaLink, a company that worked with numerous US television stations. The hearing was broadcast across the US and around the world. It is estimated that between 35 to 53 million Americans saw Nayirah's shocking testimony that day (Haider, 2021).

Nayirah's testimony was incredibly effective and impactful. In its aftermath, seven US senators used it to justify going to war, and President George Bush "repeated the story at least ten times

in the following weeks” (Haider, 2021). Nayirah’s eyewitness account undoubtedly swayed American public opinion in favor of a war (Freeman, Meretoja, 2023). This was critical for Bush who, during the first two months following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, struggled to convince the US public that a war with Iraq was necessary. For one, starting a conflict “for oil did not resonate with Americans, who...remained wary of a large-scale war in the Persian Gulf” (Darda, 2017). Many Americans did not even know where Kuwait was. But Nayirah’s testimony changed all that. When the hearing drew to a close, Senator John Porter, who co-chaired the Congressional caucus, remarked that he had not heard such “a record of inhumanity, brutality, and sadism [comparable with] the ones that the witnesses have given us today” (Darda, 2017). He went on to say that he did not “know how the people of the civilized countries of this world can fail to do everything within their power to remove this scourge from the face of our Earth”, in reference to Hussein (Darda, 2017). On January 16, 1991, thirty-one nations, led by the US, declared war (Operation Desert Storm) on Iraq and the rest, as the saying goes, is history.

In the months after a ceasefire was declared, NYT published an article revealing that Nayirah, who turned out to be the Kuwaiti Ambassador’s (to the US) daughter, was never in Kuwait during the ill-fated Iraqi invasion and that her speech was entirely false (MacArthur, 1992). The “great lie of the Gulf War”, as one writer calls Nayirah’s testimony, is a reminder of the dangers of callous media coverage and irresponsible journalism. Ignoring its profound lesson in the case of the Gaza war means falling prey, yet again, to unsubstantiated stories, (e.g., Hamas beheading babies), disinformation and deceit.

6.2 *Downplaying the Other Victims, the Palestinians*

Victimhood has been a central theme for both Israelis and Palestinians. The Israelis draw from the long and painful experience of European Jewry, the tragic events of the 1930s and 1940s, culminating in the horrors of the Holocaust, and the wars that followed the creation of Israel in 1948. That mindset continues to the present day although most major Arab nations have signed peace treaties with the Jewish state, and the PA has recognized Israel's right to exist within its 1967 borders. Palestinian "terrorism" is no longer as viable a threat as it once was during the height of the Black September movement of the seventies. The suicide bombings that caused widespread panic and havoc in the eighties and nineties in Israeli cities have effectively stopped. Moreover, the handing over of administrative control of large swathes of the West Bank to the PA, which is responsible for security in these areas, ensured there would be no repeat of the First and Second Intifada.

Since 2022, on the other hand, there has been a marked increase in the daily violence perpetrated by Israeli settlers on Palestinians, in the destruction and confiscation of Palestinian homes and orchards and in the arrest and killing of hundreds of Palestinians by Israeli security forces in the West Bank (the United Nations Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs noted that at least 503 Palestinians, including 81 children, were killed in 2023 prior to October 7). The conditions in Gaza, described earlier, were already far worse than those in the West Bank. Add to all of this the extremely provocative actions and incendiary statements by Israeli government officials with regards to the site of Al Aqsa Mosque (Al Aqsa) and the Dome of Rock: on three separate occasions in 2023, Ben-Gvir led hundreds of ultranationalist Jews to Al Aqsa, in order to "prove our sovereignty" – actions that were perceived as extremely provocative by Palestinians

and much of the Islamic world. A volatile combination of all these factors meant that all the ingredients necessary for a catastrophe were in place.

Why is this important? Because CNN would have its viewers believe everything started on October 7, and the decades of history preceding that tragic day are irrelevant or insignificant. This is not something new in US news networks. As in past conflicts, for most cable news providers, “the focus becomes the latest violence, the number of rocket attacks, and the ensuing death toll...and half-true storylines” rather than the need to delve into deeper perspectives that educate and enrich the viewer experience (Pekary, 2021). With its eyes on the ratings, CNN, like many of its competitors, assumes that Americans pay scant attention to international events, which, as in the case of the Middle East, are a complex intermix of religion, regional politics and powerplays and a shortsighted US foreign policy. Explaining all of this requires time and effort, and networks, including CNN, risk losing viewers’ attention. On the other hand, sure sellers are “images of violence and destruction. It’s easier to spend time discussing what is happening at that moment...rather than what precipitated it” (Pekary, 2021).

Without doubt, Hamas’ actions on October 7 are terrorism, and they have been condemned as such. The recent International Criminal Court (ICC) indicted three of the group’s leaders, Yahwah Sinwar, Mohammed Al-Masri and Ismail Haniyeh, on a variety of criminal charges including extermination as a crime against humanity, the taking of hostages and torture (ICC, 2024). But to adopt a position that the events of October 7 happened in a vacuum, which is the message that was conveyed by CNN, is to simply ignore history. It is also a position that reenforces the one-sided argument that Israel is the only victim in this protracted and terrible conflict.

Regarding Palestinian victimhood, Finkelstein writes, it “is fashionable nowadays to speak of a victim’s agency. But one must be realistic about the constraints imposed on such agency by objective circumstance” (Finkelstein, 2018). Finkelstein notes that even great men like Frederick Douglass and Nelson Mandela had little power to influence decisions when they were in bondage. In spite of his achievements, Douglass constantly struggled to own his narrative. He was denied access to racially segregated facilities and, upon his death, his NYT obituary noted that “Douglass’s ‘white blood’ accounted for his ‘superior intelligence’” (Kennedy, 2018). The point here is - those with little agency have limited or no control over their story. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that on October 7, CNN’s lead story screamed, “Israel is at war”, and a parade of guests on the network were quickly comparing the attack to, among other things, Pearl Harbor and 9/11, with scarcely a mention of the tumultuous and violent year that preceded that fateful day (Berlinger, 2023).

CNN’s minimizing of their plight clearly demonstrated the Palestinian’s lack of agency. Take for example its coverage of the genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) by South Africa. By the end of December, 2023, when South Africa moved the court, almost 28,000 civilians had died in Gaza according to the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor (Euro-Med Monitor, 2023). Although the ICJ ruled that it was “plausible” that Gaza’s civilians needed protection under the genocide convention and that Israel should “take all measures within its power to prevent and punish the direct and public incitement to commit genocide in relation to the members of the Palestinian group in the Gaza Strip”, CNN’s Fareed Zakaria, in his weekly program “GPS”, denied what was happening in Gaza was a genocide. Referring to the antisemitic European superstition that Jews sacrificed children during the Passover holiday, Frida

Ghitis, a regular CNN contributor, in an opinion piece published on May 7, 2024, went further and audaciously noted that “South Africa formalized the newest incarnation of the blood libel when it brought a case to the International Court of Justice accusing Israel of genocide” (Ghitis, 2024). The network did not provide adequate live coverage of the ICJ hearings, a landmark event since it was the first time Israel was ever brought to a court of such international repute on charges of genocide.

6.3 Hamas: Israel’s Justification for the Disproportionate Use of Military Force

CNN labels Hamas a terrorist group, reflecting the official position of Israel, the US and a few other Western governments, although this view is not shared universally, not even by some Western news agencies like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which calls Hamas a resistance movement. In fact, many academics like Mearsheimer also see Hamas as a resistance movement that operates within Greater Israel (Sayers, 2023). Whether Hamas is a terrorist group or not, the label has effectively disqualified it from having its views aired on CNN, and hardly any Hamas officials have been interviewed by the network since the start of the conflict. In contrast, Israeli government representatives have been a staple on CNN shows, which, as a result, tend to overwhelmingly echo the Israeli viewpoint.

CNN’s position vis-à-vis Hamas lends credibility to Israel’s claim that since it is targeting “terrorists” dispersed among a dense civilian population, innocents will be inevitably be killed or wounded, a somber but unavoidable reality of war. Unfortunately, media outlets like CNN have perpetuated the “Israel’s war on terror” myth. Consider CNN’s webpage dedicated to the war. Updated daily, it is titled, “Israel – Hamas War” (as opposed to, “Israel – Palestine War”), suggesting, once again, that Israel’s battle is against terrorism and the evil and insidious ideology

that Hamas represents. The webpage's underlying message is quite evident: the war is against Hamas, and therefore, the resulting death and carnage, although unfortunate, are an acceptable cost of fighting terror. If this was not enough, on one of his shows, Tapper even insinuated that Hamas was responsible for all Palestinian civilian deaths, noting that if the group had not carried out the October 7 attack, the devastation visited upon Gaza's civilians would not have happened. Never mind the disproportionality of Israel's response or the occupation or the blockade. None of that apparently mattered. In a bid to drive home his point, Tapper then aired a clip of Hilary Clinton in which she states, "'People who are calling for a ceasefire now do not understand Hamas. That is not possible. It would be such a gift to Hamas.'

6.4 Playing the Antisemitism Card to Stifle Legitimate Criticism of Israel

In 2018, Temple University Professor Marc Lamont was fired as a CNN contributor following comments he made at the United Nations vis-à-vis Palestinian rights. The speech was denounced as antisemitic by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and Lamont was summarily dismissed twenty-four hours later as CNN succumbed to pressure from conservative politicians and pro-Israel groups (Greenwald, 2018). Realizing that a two-state solution was essentially impossible due to Israel's expansive settlement policies, in his speech, Lamont accused the Israeli government of practicing "settler colonialism" and voiced support for a one-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians and, in that context, hoped there would be a free Palestine from the river to the sea that allowed freedom and equal rights for all Palestinians, be they in the West Bank, Gaza or Israel proper. While his choice of words may have been poor, many, including Congresswomen Rashida Tlaib and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and fellow journalist Mehdi Hasan,

questioned if Lamont deserved such a harsh and immediate reprisal from his employer and whether the accusations of antisemitism levelled against him were valid.

A simple and straightforward definition of antisemitism is, “hostility to Jews as Jews” (Bindman, 2019). As Jews migrated to Palestine and with the establishment of Israel, the term began to be used interchangeably to define opposition to Zionism and Israeli policies towards the indigenous Arab population. Over the years, the “fundamental right to freedom of expression is threatened by the misuse...of antisemitism and claimed examples of antisemitic conduct that encourage confusion between antisemitism and criticism of the policies and practices of the Israeli government and its institutions” (Bindman, 2019). In Lamont’s case, CNN’s kneejerk reaction was symptomatic of the growing influence of pro-Israeli outrage mobs that seek to shut down any form of discourse, opposition and counter opinion with regards to Israel. One way of achieving this is by weaponizing antisemitism to silence dissent. CNN is not the only guilty party in this regard. Following October 7, MSNBC shows hosted by anchors Ali Velshi, Mehdi Hasan and Ayman Mohieddine, coincidentally all Muslim, were taken off the air. Although the network denied it, it is thought (by observers like Greenwald) these journalists were sidelined because of their objective reporting on Gaza. In Hasan’s case, his criticism and “skepticism of Israel, and the Biden administration’s support for Israeli policies, was apparently too much for the network, which cancelled his show in early December”, 2023 (Robinson, 2024). Like Lamont, Hasan was also accused of being anti-Israel and antisemitic by his detractors.

Post-October 7, the antisemitic label has been used at will by the Israeli government and pro-Israeli groups against anyone who disagrees with Israeli policies in Gaza. CNN aired stories on the rise of antisemitism, often in association with the Hamas attack, as if to suggest October 7 was

rooted in an insatiable Arab and Muslim hatred of Jews. In one article, CNN writer Stephen Collinson noted that the “ Hamas attacks – a pogrom against Jews that killed 1,400, mostly civilians – have initiated a sequence of events that have left Jewish people around the world feeling threatened” (Collinson, 2023). The use of the word “pogrom” is interesting as it draws parallels with atrocities committed against Jews in Eastern Europe and Nazi Germany. It plants an indelible image in the reader’s mind that Hamas is a continuation of the same hate that cost so many Jewish lives almost a century ago. Collinson, however, failed to point out that many Israelis who died on October 7 were in fact killed by Israeli forces in what is called “the Hannibal directive”, an IDF doctrine that proposes the use of firepower without any constraints to prevent the taking of captives by the enemy. Mearsheimer pointedly noted that, “a good number of Israelis were killed not by Hamas. They were killed by the IDF” (Mearsheimer, 2024).

Accusations of antisemitism also loomed large against the student protests that erupted on campuses across the US in response to the rising civilian death toll in Gaza. Much to Israel’s chagrin, these demonstrations and sit-ins brought the war to the forefront and made it mainstream. The last thing Israel and its supporters needed was a popular and widespread grassroots youth movement in the US that opposed its policies, a movement that demanded major universities disengage and divest from the Zionist state. Predictably, Netanyahu condemned the protests, calling them “horrific” and antisemitic, and labeled students as violent mobs that “are calling for the annihilation of Israel” (Guardian, 2024). Israeli President Isaac Herzog stated that colleges were “contaminated by hate and antisemitism fueled by arrogance and ignorance” (L’Orient Today, 2024). CNN’s response was also predictable. On her program, “Inside Politics”, anchor Dana Bash likened students to Nazis and noted that the protests were

reminiscent of Germany in the 1930s (North, 2024). Notwithstanding that many Jewish students opposed to the war actively participated in the sit-ins and encampments, Dana tweeted, “Destruction, violence and hate overtake college campuses across the country with Jewish students feeling unsafe in their own schools.” On his show, “The Situation Room”, veteran journalist Wolf Blitzer hosted Ted Deutch, CEO of American Jewish Committee, who called the students terror-supporters, an unsubstantiated charge that Blitzer did not refute or even challenge.

Coincidentally, CNN’s (and other media houses as well) coverage of the college protests came at a time when TikTok, the popular Chinese-owned application, was banned by Congress. One reason cited for the ban was TikTok’s supposedly antisemitic, anti-Israeli content. In fact, US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, admitted that TikTok, along with other social media platforms, was responsible for “disrupting Israel’s narrative of war in Gaza” (Marcus, 2024). Claims of TikTok fueling antisemitism, which is conflated with the legitimate disparagement of Israeli policies, was merely a ruse to prevent a huge audience from obtaining their news from alternate sources rather than established media outlets and publications (Greenwald, 2024).

7. CNN Programs Quantitative Review: Analysis of Results

The analysis of four popular CNN shows noted earlier revealed the following key common themes related to the Gaza war that were regularly discussed by the program hosts. These are:

- a. Humanization of Israeli victims in comparison to Palestinian victims
- b. Violence perpetuated by Israelis versus Palestinians
- c. Israeli sexual assault versus Palestinian sexual assault

d. IDF / Israeli representatives versus Hamas / Palestinian representatives

A high-level summary of the analysis is provided in the table below:

Topic Discussed	Host – Zakaria* / # of Episodes - 10	Host - Tapper /# of Episodes - 20	Host - Blitzer / # of Episodes - 20	Host - Amanpour / # of Episodes - 20
A. The number of Israeli vs. Palestinian Casualties	Zakaria focused on both sides and their death toll, however as the Palestinian death toll increased over the months, his focus reins in more on Gaza and what the Gazan Ministry of Health puts out in their numbers.	Tapper focuses on deaths from both sides of Israel and Palestine, however, majority of the time he brings in Israeli family members to talk about their dead relatives.	Blitzer mentions the bombings on both sides; however, he kept emphasizing the Israeli death count over the Palestinian one, and gave Israeli deaths far more airtime.	Israeli and Palestinian deaths and injuries were discussed, and as the Palestinian death toll increased, Amanpour made note of them. She, however, while she interviewed several Israelis, she did not have any Palestinians guests on her show.
B. Violence perpetrated by Israel and Palestinians	Zakaria focused on the violence from both sides. While more emphasis was placed on the Israeli assault on Gaza, major events such as Jabalia refugee camp bombing were not specifically	Tapper covered the violence on both sides initially, although he rarely made note of large-scale massacres of Palestinian civilians. Instead, he mainly focused on getting US	Blitzer covered the violence in Gaza. He mentioned the enormous amount of munitions used, equivalent to the tonnage dropped during the Vietnam War. Blitzer did question the IDF spokesperson	Amanpour discussed the violence on several occasions, as well as the harsh conditions in with the lack of electricity, food, and water. She interviewed former Palestinian politician, Hanan

	mentioned.	citizens out of Gaza.	about the Jabalia refugee camp bombing, although he did not have a Palestinian representative to counter IDF claims.	Ashrawi, about the Jabalia refugee camp massacre.
C. Israeli Sexual Assault vs. Palestinian Sexual Assault	No mention of sexual assault by either party.	Tapper covered the sexual violence committed by Hamas and interviewed Israeli hostages. He, however, did interview a single Palestinian woman who accused the IDF of sexual assault (e.g., at the Al Shifa Hospital).	No mention of sexual assault by either party.	Amanpour discussed sexual violence against Israelis, but did not mention or discuss Palestinian victims of sexual abuse except when she interviewed John Paul, who resigned from the US State Department in protest of America’s handling of the Gaza war. Paul was the only interviewee who discussed the sexual violence committed by the IDF forces, even though Amanpour tried to focus only on Israeli victims of sexual abuse.

<p>D. IDF / Israeli Representatives vs. Hamas / Palestinian Representatives</p>	<p>While he did interview several IDF officers, Zakaria did not interview any Hamas members. He did, however, interview a number of Palestinians and gave them ample opportunity to voice their perspective. This made it a somewhat equal playing field for both, Israelis and Palestinians.</p>	<p>Tapper interviewed IDF and Israeli government personnel in majority (12 out of 20) of the episodes. Apart from Oct 9th, when he interviewed a Palestinian-American to discuss Israel's military assault, there were no other Palestinian guests on the random shows selected.</p>	<p>Several IDF spokespersons were interviewed, however no Hamas representatives or Palestinian representatives appeared on Blitzer's show on the selected dates.</p>	<p>Several IDF spokespersons were interviewed, compared to a few Palestinian guests. Amanpour had several high-ranking Israeli officials on her shows, but comparatively far fewer Palestinian intellectuals or representatives from the PA.</p>
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*- Zakaria's show airs once a week

In summary, the analysis confirmed that CNN's coverage was skewed towards the Israeli viewpoint, with a majority of guests interviewed representing the IDF and the Israeli government. Palestinian grievances were given limited airtime, and the number of Palestinian interviewees was comparatively smaller. There were no interviews with Hamas officials or representatives. More detailed observations of the shows during the initial days of the conflict (October 8 and 9, 2023) are provided in the Appendix.

8. Conclusion

A study conducted in 2011 by the influential Glasgow Media Group (GMG; also called Glasgow University Media Group), documented the differences “in the language used by journalists for Israelis and Palestinians”, noting that the “...news says almost nothing about the history or origins of the conflict”, and that the gaps in people’s knowledge of the conflict paralleled the gaps in the media’s coverage (GMG, 2011). This still holds true today: media bias is once again glaringly evident in the coverage of this latest Israeli-Palestinian war. Moreover, the Orientalist mindset still pervades US media, and through it, offers a narrow and tunneled-vision view of the world that paints it in black and white, overly simplistic terms. This is evident in the way complex world events are covered and interpreted, compared and contrasted in outdated binary references, making it “almost impossible to communicate without them, while it is often unclear what these terms refer to” (Ranji, 2021). The Singaporean academic Kishore Mahbubani very astutely observed that mainstream American media was parochial. In a Q&A session at Harvard’s Kennedy School, he stated that he was surprised how frightening it was to note “the insularity of the American discourse”, where he found the US journalistic tradition to be “incestuous” and “self-referential”, often reinforcing each other’s perspectives to such an extent that it creates an atmosphere of misunderstanding of the world outside America’s borders (Mahapatra, 2023). That is truly frightening, and CNN’s coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the latest round of violence in Gaza is reflective of this intellectual malaise. It is lazy and shallow and susceptible to pedestrian biases and manipulations. If there is a silver lining, however, it is that many younger Americans are starting to recognize this, and hopefully will set a course for change to usher in a more honest, open and robust exchange of information and ideas.

9. Appendix

October 9th, 2024: Jake Tapper

- Coverage of Hamas bombing Ashkelon, Israel. No coverage, however, of Israel's bombing of Gaza.
- Discussion of death toll in Israel (900 at the time), no mention of Palestinian deaths although numbers on casualties were coming in
- Videos of Israel bombing Gaza
- Sexual assault allegations against Hamas

October 10th, 2024: Jake Tapper

- IDF official spoke to CNN and discussed the "slaughter" of Israeli civilians in Kfar Aza, Israel
- News of beheadings, referring to the Holocaust for comparison
- Praise of the US government (Biden Administration) for supporting Israel
- Amnesty International reports: "On 10 October, an Israeli air strike on a family home killed 12 members of the Hijazi family and four of their neighbors, in Gaza City's al-Sahaba Street." (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/10/damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-as-israeli-attacks-wipe-out-entire-families-in-gaza/>)
- Tapper does report on the rising death toll in Gaza and how it is rapidly increasing. He does not make too many comments, but airs a segment where he interviewed an IDF spokesman regarding where Palestinians should go as the IDF bombs Gaza. He does not acknowledge the stories of Palestinians dying, only emphasizes Israelis deaths.
- Tapper did a full segment about an Israeli father's reaction to his son's final moments as he fought Hamas; his took up most of the latter part of the show.
- Reuters also reported the death toll in Gaza on October 10th, which had risen to 830 with 4,250 injured. Reuters described this as: "Israeli air strikes hammered Gaza on Tuesday, razing entire districts and filling morgues with dead Palestinians as Israel took revenge for the Hamas assaults that have triggered some of the worst blood-letting in 75 years of

conflict.” (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/hamas-threatens-kill-captives-if-israel-strikes-civilians-2023-10-09/>). Tapper mentions this.

- Tapper’s headlines highlight Israel’s struggle, along with IDF commentary on Hamas was “butchering” of women, children, and the elderly
- Most of Tapper’s interviewees are IDF personnel (Major General Itai Veruv) and Israeli citizens (Izhar Shay) giving their testimony of the tragedy they faced on October 7. There are a few Palestinian residents within Gaza who are being interviewed, but do not get as much time on the air. There is also mention of the Israeli captives and Hamas, bringing the attention back to the hostages at the very end.
- Tapper interviews Haneen Okal, a Palestinian-American who was stuck in Gaza with her children and husband. Explosions can be heard in the background as she is being interviewed about how the US embassy is not returning her calls to help her and her family can get out. She tells Tapper that there are bombs dropping continuously for the last 24 hours.
- Tapper tells Haneen: “there needs to be a way for you to get out. You’re not Hamas, you’re an innocent person and you have three kids. You need to be able to get out.” However, one wonders if this is only because she is a Palestinian-American - there seemed to be such an emphasis on telling her that she had to be able to get out.
- Tapper asks Haneen if she could go anywhere, since according to the IDF spokesperson they were able to go to the beach in order to be safe. However, Haneen noted there was nowhere to go because Israeli bombardment was incessant.
- The remainder of the segment was about the Israeli hostages

October 8th, 2024: Fareed Zakaria

- The episode came on earlier in the day. The 10:00 AM - 11:00 AM PDT program went straight into breaking news about the bombing of Gaza. A large part of the program, however, discussed the Israeli hostage situation.

- Fareed's 7 AM - 8 AM PDT session discussed the attack on Israel and the 900 deaths, alongside the rising death toll in Gaza. Fareed is the only one on the shows reviewed who mentions the Palestinian death toll.
- Discussion of Gaza's bombing, describing Netanyahu's retaliation as the "mighty vengeance" he promised.
- Tzipi Livni (Foreign Minister and Justice Minister, Israel) and Mustafa Barghouti (Palestinian National Institute, Minister for the Palestinian Government, Palestine) were interviewed
- Mustafa speaks of the history of Israel and Palestine and the occupation

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