

Intervention

Vanishing Acts: How the Israeli Media Manages Gaza

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As postcolonial scholars observed over three decades ago—well before Patrick Wolfe’s now canonical intervention—“the logic of elimination” depends on a range of symbolic acts and representational practices. So, too, in wartime Israel. The mainstream legacy media functions as the symbolic realm par excellence. Here, a long legacy of colonial vanishing acts, taking aim at Israel’s Palestinian victims, is replayed daily on the front pages of newspapers and in TV news studios as Israel’s genocidal campaign continues. This wartime representational calculus—on which there is widespread national agreement, save on the beleaguered and increasingly vilified left-wing margins of the national media landscape—produces a view of Gaza which bears little resemblance to that seen on many global screens. Such vanishing acts are crucial tools, an indispensable means of bolstering national morale in the face of what most Jewish Israelis deem an existential threat.

Everywhere, the eye of the military predominates. On newspaper front pages, readers encounter the streets of Gaza from the vantage of the embedded reporter—over the shoulders of soldiers, or at their backs—visuals that share media prominence with tributes to hostages and fallen soldiers.¹ So, too, on the evening television news, which remains a media standard-bearer. Images of dead and injured Palestinian civilians are infrequent at best—“[t]he deaths of thousands of Palestinian families in Gaza are ignored”, *Ha’aretz* notes.² It is nearly impossible to find “a mention of the death toll in Gaza” as it falls outside the bounds of the “Israeli mourning formula”, writes the left-wing Israeli media watchdog *The Seventh Eye*.³ When made visible, Palestinians tend to appear under the sign of the enemy: the terrorist (dead or alive), the prisoner,

or the beguiling figure of Hamas leaders still eluding capture. Palestinian journalists from Gaza, who might provide testimonials about the daily bombardment, are dismissed as (ontologically) unreliable witnesses, unable to bear witness to their own devastation.⁴ Internal critics of their state's Gaza campaign, including Jewish and Palestinian activists and left-wing members of the Israeli parliament, are not invited onto the evening television talk-shows; indeed, some are accused of treason for precisely this, or even for displays of empathy for Gaza's dead.⁵ In the process, alternative visions of post-war political futures, those that challenge the ethnonationalist ideologies of the state, are also obscured from public view.

The military censor plays a central role in this media calculus, remaining active in shaping and filtering media content. All Israeli media outlets agree to pass sensitive content through the censor, or to self-censor in advance of publication to avoid the associated penalties that come with a failure to comply.⁶ But the consensual blindspots within media coverage are not chiefly a byproduct of the censor's legal hand, as *The Intercept* noted: "People self-censor, people do not even try to report the stories they know won't get through".⁷ *Ha'aretz* put it this way: "There are no explicit instructions, but there's this kind of vibe that allows no place for stories of Gazan victims in the news broadcasts ... This is a surrender to the public mood, one that says that after such a great disaster, you shouldn't 'give the enemy an opportunity'".⁸ This "surrender" is deemed a wartime necessity, lest Israel cede a media victory to their enemy.

Military policy regarding journalist access to the Gaza Strip is also a crucial factor. As in Israeli bombardments of the last decade and a half, the military banned the entrance of Israeli and foreign journalists, arguing the grounds of security necessity: "allowing foreign journalists to move around Gaza independently could endanger troops or lead to their positions being compromised".⁹ In early November, Gaza was opened to embedded journalists, beginning with Israelis and then moving selectively to the foreign press corps, but under strict regulations governing the terms of media content, capture, and distribution.¹⁰ While the practice of embedded journalism has been harshly criticized in the international media, the mainstream Israeli press has evidenced little such concern.¹¹ The same disposition has characterized their response to the lethal Israeli attacks on Palestinian journalists in Gaza Strip—what the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) called "the deadliest period for journalists since CPJ

began gathering data in 1992”, and raising concerns about “an apparent pattern of targeting of journalists and their families by the Israeli military”.¹² The Israeli media leaned on the military to rebut such charges: “the IDF has never, and will never, deliberately target journalists”.¹³

By extension, the chief military spokesperson has become “the face of the war against Hamas in Gaza”, appearing nightly on the Israeli evening news with operational updates.¹⁴ Most viewers know him by name: “Daniel Hagari [chief military spokesman] has earned high levels of trust from Israelis for keeping them abreast of offensive in Strip, ‘filling a void’ and reassuring a public traumatized by Oct. 7 horrors”.¹⁵ Israeli journalists have been eager conscripts into the military’s *hasbara* project, often “exclusively relying on official military statements” for operational updates.¹⁶ Even at key junctures in the Israeli assault, when even the mainstream international press challenged the veracity of military messaging—for example, in the wake of Israeli attacks on both al-Ahli and al-Shifa hospitals—Israeli support for the military message remained strong.¹⁷ Most Israeli pundits read such critiques as mere indices of hate and denial: “The Arab street won’t believe anything the IDF spokesman has revealed...”.¹⁸ When critics of the military’s media strategy are given mainstream airtime, they are typically arguing for more and better *hasbara*, rather than less—arguing (for example) that military messaging was lacking in persuasiveness, poorly executed, or simply came too late.¹⁹

Histories of the Vanishing Act

Such vanishing acts may be unprecedented in degree, but not in kind. Rather, they have been evident in Israeli media coverage of its successive wars on the Gaza Strip for the last decade and a half. Consider, for example, Israel’s 2021 military bombardment of Gaza.²⁰ Then, national viewers of the evening news chiefly saw Gaza from a distance, with television broadcasters favoring footage of residential towers collapsing under the weight of the Israeli bombardment, spectacular Iron Drone interceptions in the night sky, or incoming rockets fired toward Israel. Then, like today, the mainstream media cheered on the operation, as noted by left-wing Israeli journalist Gideon Levy: “you look at Israeli media and you look at Israeli public opinion and the Israeli discourse, and you hear only one voice, a voice of cheering to the fighting, of asking for more, of asking for more blood, of supporting the IDF in an unconditioned way, no criticism and,

above all, no real information”. Then, like today, the wartime visual field was largely cleansed of Palestinian victims. As Levy said in 2021: “the Israeli average viewer, TV viewer, didn’t see nothing [*sic*] of Gaza. You see here and there those towers falling down—it’s very photogenic—but nothing about the sacrifice, nothing about the agony, nothing about the families, nothing about the suffer, the children, everything. Israelis don’t see it...”.²¹

What did change dramatically over the course of the last decade was the Gazan digital ecosystem. During Israel’s 2008–9 and 2012 aerial bombardments, most Palestinians in Gaza lacked widespread access to mobile digital technologies and reliable internet connectivity, a condition rooted in extreme economic deprivation and Israeli restrictions on electricity and broadband. During the course of these assaults, the Israeli military was able to maintain control of the wartime media message—the byproduct of both a state-imposed blockade on the entry of journalists into the Gaza Strip, and of the military’s growing presence on social media. But by 2014 and more so by 2021—during subsequent Israeli military bombardments—mobile digital technologies had become widespread within the Gazan population, and Palestinians were filming and posting the military assaults on their communities in something close to real time. By 2021, the global social media field of the wartime period was saturated with amateur Palestinian video of Gazan death and infrastructural devastation, often uploaded in the very midst of an Israeli attack.

For many Israelis, such shifts in the Palestinian media ecosystem produced a profound sense of political crisis. In 2021, Israeli television commentators and military analysts warned live audiences about the torrent of “bad images” coming out of Gaza during the Israeli assault, shot on the smartphones of Gazans under fire. Israeli military spokespersons framed the images of devastated Gazan infrastructures and injured children that were appearing on the mobile screens of populations across the globe as a public relations management problem. They warned that, despite a growing army of pro-Israeli influencers on social media, the military was failing to produce a so-called “victory photo” that might mitigate the damaging images produced by their foes.²² “In the battle of photos of pathos”, a commentator would write in the mainstream Israeli press, “we don’t stand a chance”.²³

“Losing the PR War”

The same sense of media crisis has been articulated by many Israeli and pro-Israeli pundits over the course of the last few months, as the Gazan death toll continues to rise. They note with concern that despite the military’s best efforts, their media narrative is faltering in the international community.²⁴ Many warn that Israeli messaging cannot compete with the growing social media archive of Palestinian-generated images: “Graphic images of destruction and death from Gaza, and disastrous public relations failures have resulted in the replacement of Israel’s easy-to-understand story with more customary accusations of ‘disproportionality’ and of ‘the Jewish state’s lack of regard for civilians’”.²⁵ As in Gaza campaigns of the past, Israeli pundits take to the national airwaves, or the opinion pages of newspapers, to bemoan that “Israel is losing the PR war” once again.

Some blame the military spokespersons’ unit, saying their message was bungled or came too late. Some blame inadequate global financing: “One of the many reasons that Israel is losing the PR war is that not one single donor, not one single organization, has put serious money into advertising or digital PR for Israel”.²⁶ Many agree that they are losing international hearts and minds to “The Media-Savvy Murderers of Hamas” (as per the title of an op-ed by the military’s chief spokesperson), with their social media cunning.²⁷ And the international viewing public, they warn, is taking the viral bait: “Ordinary Gazans pushed out, onto these media networks, images of a war and the world drank it up...”.²⁸ This recurrent storyline installs a proxy narrative, replacing Israeli genocidal violence with a story of injurious enemy media. The violence of the Israeli state is replaced by the (ostensible) violence of the enemy’s images. And in this reformulation, the Jewish state is installed as chief victim. For Israel, amidst the growing global groundswell of protest and condemnation, as global media consumers watch Israel bomb and starve Gaza on their mobile screens, the stakes in this vanishing act are considerable.

Endnotes

¹ For regular coverage of the Israeli media, including images of the front pages of daily newspapers, see *The Seventh Eye* (in Hebrew): <https://www.the7eye.org.il/507489> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

² Ido David Cohen (2023) How Israeli media became a wartime government propaganda arm. *Haaretz* 25 December <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-25/ty-article-magazine/.premium/how-israeli-media-became-a-wartime-government-propaganda-arm/0000018c-a0d3-d957-a98f-aed3ea560000> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

Also see Sebastian Ben Daniel (John Brown) (2024) How Israeli journalists carry out PR for the army. *+972 Magazine* 19 February <https://www.972mag.com/israeli-journalists-pr-army-october-7/> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

³ Itamar Benzaquen (2024) סקירת עיתונות: כמה שווה ישראלי מת, כמה שווה פלסטיני. *The Seventh Eye* 1 March <https://www.the7eye.org.il/512110> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

⁴ I discuss the concept of Palestinians as “impossible witnesses” in more detail in Rebecca L. Stein (2012) Impossible witness: Israeli visibility, Palestinian testimony, and the Gaza war. *Journal for Cultural Research* 16(2/3):135-153

⁵ Ghousoon Bisharat, Oren Ziv and Baker Zoubi (2023) “This is political persecution”: Israel cracks down on internal critics of its Gaza war. *+972 Magazine* 17 October <https://www.972mag.com/israel-gaza-war-political-persecution/> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

Ido David Cohen and Ran Shimoni (2023) Far-right Israelis threaten, attack left-wing journalist who dedicated a prayer to Gaza victims. *Haaretz* 15 October <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-10-15/ty-article/.premium/far-right-israelis-threaten-attack-journalist-who-dedicated-a-prayer-to-gaza-victims/0000018b-3434-d450-a3af-7d3ccb9d0000> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

⁶ For discussion of “censorship offenses”, see Elad Mann (2023) הקמפיין של נתניהו הגיע לצנזורה. *Shakuf* 6 December <https://shakuf.co.il/46310> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

⁷ Ken Klippenstein and Daniel Boguslaw (2023) Israeli military censor bans reporting on these 8 subjects. *The Intercept* 23 December <https://theintercept.com/2023/12/23/israel-military-idf-media-censor/> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

⁸ Ido David Cohen (2023) op. cit.

⁹ *The Times of Israel* (2024) High Court says Israel can keep barring foreign reporters from Gaza. 10 January <https://www.timesofisrael.com/high-court-says-israel-can-keep-barring-foreign-reporters-from-gaza/> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

¹⁰ Lazar Berman (2023) In first, reporters embed with Israeli ground forces in Gaza. *The Times of Israel* 4 November https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/in-first-reporters-embed-with-israeli-ground-forces-in-gaza/ (last accessed 18 March 2024).

Elad Mann (2023) חשיפה: מסמכי ההתחייבות שעליהם נדרשים עיתונאים לחתום לפני הכניסה לעזה העין. *The Seventh Eye* 13 November <https://www.the7eye.org.il/502786> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

Ken Klippenstein and Daniel Boguslaw (2023) op. cit.

¹¹ Harriet Sherwood (2023) “Hugely frustrating”: International media seek to overcome Gaza ban. *The Guardian* 12 December <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/12/hugely-frustrating-international-media-seek-to-overcome-gaza-ban> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

¹² CPJ (2023) Israel-Gaza war takes record toll on journalists. *Committee to Protect Journalists* 21 December <https://cpj.org/2023/12/israel-gaza-war-takes-record-toll-on-journalists/> (last accessed 19 March 2024).

CPJ (2024) Journalist casualties in the Israel-Gaza war. *Committee to Protect Journalists* 19 March <https://cpj.org/2024/03/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

As of 28 February, 88 journalists and media workers had been killed. The CPJ report that “More than three quarters of the 99 journalists and media workers killed worldwide in 2023 died in the Israel-Gaza war, the majority of them Palestinians killed in Israeli attacks on Gaza”. See Kathy Jones (2024) Israel-Gaza War brings 2023 journalist killings to devastating high. *Committee to Protect Journalists* 15 February <https://cpj.org/reports/2024/02/israel-gaza-war-brings-2023-journalist-killings-to-devastating-high/> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

¹³ *The Jerusalem Post* (2024) IDF: “Journalists” killed were terrorists, engaged in threatening activities. 7 January <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-781190> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

¹⁴ Chen Maanit (2023) Israel's army spokesperson has become the face of the war against Hamas in Gaza. *Haaretz* 26 October <https://www.haaretz.com/haaretz-explains/2023-10-26/ty-article/.premium/israels-army-spokesperson-has-become-the-face-of-the-war-against-hamas-in-gaza/0000018b-6b87-d14c-adfb-ef9f280f0000> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

¹⁵ Sophie Makris (2023) From shadows to limelight: Special forces vet becomes face of IDF war effort in Gaza. *The Times of Israel* 19 November <https://www.timesofisrael.com/from-shadows-to-limelight-special-forces-vet-becomes-face-of-idf-war-effort-in-gaza/> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

¹⁶ Ido David Cohen (2023) op. cit.

Also see Eyal Lurie-Pardes (2024) Journalism out, hasbara in: How Israeli TV news joined the Gaza war effort. *+972 Magazine* 6 March <https://www.972mag.com/israeli-tv-hasbara-media-gaza/> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

¹⁷ Jeet Heer (2023) Israel's ludicrous propaganda wins over the only audience that counts. *The Nation* 17 November <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/israel-gaza-propaganda-biden/> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

¹⁸ I discuss this in more detail in Rebecca L. Stein (2023) How to unsee Gaza: Israeli media, state violence, Palestinian testimony. In Nadia Yaqub (ed) *Gaza on Screen* (pp172-186). Durham: Duke University Press.

¹⁹ Chaim Levinson (2023) Israelis need the army spokesman's lies to keep believing we're winning. *Haaretz* 21 December <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-21/ty-article/.premium/israelis-need-the-army-spokesmans-lies-to-keep-believing-were-winning/0000018c-8cdb-da31-adff-8edb0f430000> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

Moshe Klughaft (2021) Our Hamas is your ISIS: How Israel's hasbara needs to change. *The Jerusalem Post* 20 May <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/our-hamas-is-your-isis-how-israels-hasbara-needs-to-change-opinion-668689> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

²⁰ David Horovitz (2023) Haters won't be swayed, but Hamas lies about Gaza hospital blast are being exposed. *The Times of Israel* 18 October <https://www.timesofisrael.com/haters-wont-be-swayed-but-hamas-lies-about-gaza-hospital-blast-are-being-exposed/> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

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- ²² Ben Caspit (2021) No victory picture for Israel in Gaza. *Al-Monitor* 18 May <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/no-victory-picture-israel-gaza> (last accessed 18 March 2024).
- ²³ Moshe Klughaft (2021) op. cit.
- ²⁴ For discussion of the longer history of this political narrative, see Rebecca L. Stein (2021) *Screen Shots: State Violence on Camera in Israel and Palestine*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- ²⁵ Jonathan D. Sarna (2023) Why Israel is fast losing the public relations war. *The Times of Israel* 1 November <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/why-israel-is-fast-losing-the-public-relations-war/> (last accessed 18 March 2024).
- ²⁶ Ronn Torossian (2023) Israel is losing the PR war; we need to spend money to get our message out there. *The Algemeiner* 26 October <https://www.algemeiner.com/2023/10/26/israel-is-losing-the-pr-war-we-need-to-spend-money-to-get-our-message-out-there/> (last accessed 18 March 2024).
- ²⁷ Daniel Hagari (2024) The media-savvy murderers of Hamas. *The Wall Street Journal* 25 February <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-media-savvy-murderers-hamas-livestream-atrocities-oct-7-exploit-gaza-civilians-1efe5a63> (last accessed 18 March 2024).
- ²⁸ Aamanda Borschel-Dan and Haviv Rettig Gur (2024) What matters now to Haviv Rettig Gur: Campus antisemitism makes new Zionists. *The Times of Israel* 8 March <https://www.timesofisrael.com/what-matters-now-to-haviv-rettig-gur-campus-antisemitism-makes-new-zionists/> (last accessed 18 March 2024).