



Arab Media Watch
for objective British coverage of Arab issues

Case Study:

British Media Treatment of Israeli & Palestinian Deaths

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Introduction

Is all life precious? The question might seem ridiculous, but when it comes to British press coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the answer may depend on your nationality.

Reporting of the conflict has always aroused passions, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the coverage of deaths is particularly emotive. After all, what is more important than life itself? Hence the amount and type of media attention given to this particular issue is often used by watchdogs and individuals as the ultimate barometer of a journalist's or news organisation's objectivity or bias.

Two recent events showed how stark the difference can be in the British media's view of deaths on both sides. In sustained attacks in early March, Israeli forces killed some 120 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. According to mainstream news reports and reputed human rights organisations such as Israel's B'Tselem, Amnesty International and Oxfam, more than half were civilians, half of whom were children.

Israel's attacks were carried out "with reckless disregard for civilian life," said Amnesty, which called on the state to "put an immediate end to such disproportionate and reckless attacks" that "wreak such death and destruction among Palestinian civilians."

B'Tselem raised "grave concern that the Israeli army used excessive and disproportionate force, and failed to distinguish between uninvolved civilians and Palestinians who took part in the fighting. Such attacks may constitute a breach of the laws of war."

Days later, a Palestinian killed eight students in a Jewish seminary in Jerusalem. The words used by some in the national British press to describe the two events could not have been more different, according to research undertaken by Arab Media Watch using Lexis Nexis (excluding the Financial Times and Daily Express).

Journalists

Thirteen journalists in 10 national British newspapers reported both events. The following five were balanced in their choice of adjectives:

<u>Newspaper</u>	<u>Journalist</u>	<u>Position</u>
The Guardian	Ian Black	Middle East editor
	Rory McCarthy	Middle East correspondent
	Toni O'Loughlin	
The Times	Richard Beeston	Foreign editor
The Independent	Donald Macintyre	Middle East correspondent

However, the following reporters chose very different words to describe the two events:

<u>Reporters</u>	<u>Descriptions</u>	
	Palestinian attack	Israeli attacks
The Independent		
Eric Silver	massacre carnage	violence
Daily Mail		
Matthew Kalman	firing indiscriminately bloodbath fanatic atrocities	operation offensive campaign
Sunday Express		
Matthew Kalman	slaughter atrocities bloodbath massacre slayings	incursion
Daily Mirror		
Mark Dowdney	massacre	offensive
Allison Martin	terrorist	offensive
The Observer		
Toni O'Loughlin	massacre	offensive incursion
The Sun		
Alex West	massacre	offensive
Daily Telegraph		
Tim Butcher	slaughter terrorist blood bath	killing assault operations attacks
The Times		
Sheera Claire Frenkel	terror terrorist	offensive violence operation strikes

Headlines / Subheadings / Leading Articles

Headlines and subheadings alone showed sufficient evidence of an imbalance in language. The Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Times, Guardian, and its sister newspaper the Observer used strong, emotive words such as "bloodbath", "atrocities", "massacre", "gun spree", "terror attack" and "terror" to describe the Palestinian attack.

In contrast, milder, measured, sanitised language was used by the same papers to describe the Israeli attacks, such as "incursion", "fighting", "attacks", "air strikes", "offensive", "raids" and "onslaught." Bear in mind that Israel's actions led to the deaths of around 15 times as many Palestinians and at least seven times as many civilians, and were strongly condemned by human rights groups.

<u>Newspaper</u>	<u>Headlines / Subheadings</u>	
	Palestinian attack	Israeli attacks
The Guardian	bloodbath atrocities	incursion fighting attacks response
The Observer	massacre	raids attacks
Daily Mail	gun spree massacre fanatic	offensive attacks
Daily Mirror	terror attack murdered	airstrikes reprisal raid
The Times	massacre terror	onslaught

The Independent was more balanced in its headlines and subheadings, describing the Palestinian attack as a "massacre," and the Israeli attacks as a "nightmare."

Those in the Guardian, Independent and Mirror described the Israeli attacks as a "response", "revenge" and "reprisal," respectively. The clear implication is that Israel was reacting to a Palestinian provocation. However, the Palestinian attack - just days after those of Israel's army - were not afforded the same 'cause-and-effect' treatment.

As the Times said in a leading article, "when these Palestinian casualties are caused by the Israeli Defence Forces, the very idea of self defence is brought into question. Over time that is disastrous for the credibility of Israel's claim to the right of self-defence." However, this did not stop the newspaper from describing Israel's attacks as a "response."

The two leading articles that commented on both events - in the Independent and Daily Telegraph - were balanced in their choice of language.

Explanations

To provide journalists with a right of reply and to enlighten readers of this study, Arab Media Watch emailed those who covered both events and used different descriptions for each, asking them for explanations as to why they did so. The exceptions were Eric Silver (the Independent) and Allison Martin (Daily Mirror), whose email addresses we could not obtain.

During a waiting period of around a month, AMW received only three responses (all from broadsheet reporters), one of which declined to offer an explanation.

The second response came from a journalist who we subsequently included in the table of those using balanced language. Although AMW found that he had used the word "atrocities" to describe the Palestinian attack, he said it was "a term I habitually avoid in coverage of the Israel-Palestinian conflict," and his original wording had been changed without his knowledge:

"...I have now discovered as a result of your enquiry that in a...story under my name...the word did appear...I have checked my original copy and the word I used was 'attack'. I am taking up this - highly irregular - change to my copy with my office in London."

AMW received no further information about the reason for the change to his copy.

"I used different language because the events were different," wrote the third respondent, explaining: "In the attack on the yeshiva the gunman was indiscriminate in those he targeted. There appeared to be no explanation for the attack other than the gunman's own state of mind about the conflict."

"In contrast, Israel was clear about who it was trying to target by invading Gaza and why. Prior to and during the invasion Israel's representatives (elected officials and appointed spokesmen) said the army was attacking militants who had launched missiles on southern Israeli towns."

However, Israel's attacks were also indiscriminate, given that more than half the Palestinian fatalities were civilians, half of whom were children.

Indeed, reputed human rights organisations such as Israel's B'Tselem, Amnesty International and Oxfam condemned the state for its "reckless disregard for civilian life," and for failing to distinguish between civilians and combatants. "Such attacks may constitute a breach of the laws of war," said B'Tselem.

Furthermore, it is somewhat unreasonable to suggest that there "appeared to be no explanation for the Palestinian attack," given that it was preceded days earlier by the killing of 120 Palestinians.

The connection was made in parts of the mainstream British press, as was the fact that such an attack against Israelis had not occurred for a considerable amount of time. That the Palestinian attacker had no representatives, officials or spokesmen does not mean that he had no motive, whatever one's opposition to his actions.

The respondent used the Concise Oxford English Dictionary to justify his use of the word "massacre" to describe the Palestinian attack and not the Israeli one. However, the definition itself contradicts his defence. The dictionary defines "massacre" as:

1. (noun) an indiscriminate and brutal slaughter of people
2. (informal) a very heavy defeat
3. (verb) deliberately and violently kill (a large number of people)
4. (informal) inflict a heavy defeat

Israel's attacks were indiscriminate and brutal, they deliberately and violently killed a large number of people (far more than the Palestinian attacker), and it can be argued that they inflicted a heavy defeat.

Conclusion

This case study provides ample evidence that Israeli and Palestinian lives and deaths are treated differently by significant sections of the mainstream British press. Israeli deaths are afforded strong, emotive adjectives, while Palestinian fatalities are reported in a much more sanitised, measured way.

Given the lack of responses from most of the journalists involved, it is difficult to definitively explain why this is the case. Indeed, their silence itself raises curiosity and concern, and it is certainly a pity that they would not shed light on an issue that forms a central part of a hotly debated and frequently reported subject.

One cannot avoid the sense that in the eyes of much of the media, Palestinian life is simply worth less than Israeli life, because the loss of it is not described in equal terms.

Some may conclude that there is an inherent bias, or even racism, involved. Others may blame it on the fact that almost none of the British correspondents covering the conflict are based in its epicentre - the occupied Palestinian territories - so they may relate more to Israelis and be better able to report their suffering. There could be other factors to consider, and explanations would almost certainly differ from journalist to journalist.

Unfortunately, the silence of most of those involved leaves things open to speculation. But whatever the reason, something is fundamentally wrong, and the media needs to reflect long and hard on this unjust, offensive imbalance. Palestinian Ambassador Afif Safieh has said that his people are seen as "children of a lesser God." Sadly, this study shows that it may be hard to disagree.