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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Enemy as Victim: Israeli Media Coverage of Mass Crimes Against Palestinians in Gaza

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Abstract: This article examines how mainstream Israeli media cover military actions in Gaza that international legal bodies have classified as war crimes and crimes against humanity. Focusing on three widely read online outlets—Mako (center), Israel Hayom (right-wing), and Channel 7 (far-right)—it combines quantitative content analysis with qualitative discourse analysis to explore how reporting balances the framing of these actions as legitimate state violence against an “enemy” with the destabilizing implications of acknowledging them as crimes and portraying Palestinians as victims. Drawing on Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model, settler-colonial theory, and scholarship on nationalism, the study situates Israeli journalism within structural constraints shaped by military censorship, ethnonationalism, and the alignment of media agendas with state and military objectives, particularly during what is perceived as wartime. The analysis shows that mainstream outlets routinely omit, justify, or reframe Israeli military actions in ways that preserve Israeli moral legitimacy while denying Palestinians legitimate victim status. Even when international criticism or alternative accounts are reported, they are often delegitimized, reframed as politically motivated, or used to reinforce a defensive national posture. In this framework, recognition of Palestinian suffering is treated as a threat to national cohesion, while Israeli victimhood remains central and unquestioned. By exposing the mechanisms through which the media uphold the symbolic and political boundaries of the Jewish ethnonational and colonial state, the article demonstrates how such journalism contributes to the radicalization of public discourse, the further normalization of dehumanizing rhetoric, and the undermining of journalism’s democratic role.

KEYWORDS: Israeli media, Mass crimes, Gaza, Victimhood, Settler colonialism

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1. Introduction

« Nothing should be given [to the Palestinians of Gaza], not even a spoonful of water, a war is a war »¹ ;

« I think the [Israeli] army could have started the attack in Gaza in a more massive way, with 100,000 deaths »²;

« The images from the Gaza Strip remind us—there are no innocent people in Gaza »³;

« A newborn Gaza baby is of course a human, [...] but Gaza is a cage, and the people there, in the end, behave like human animals »⁴.

These are just a few of the statements Israeli journalists made on the country's most-watched TV channels since the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, and the start of the war in Gaza. The routine portrayal of Palestinians in Gaza as “human animals” or as collectively “non-innocent” has become a normalized feature of Israeli news coverage since then, facing little to no pushback. While previous research has documented the biased treatment of the Palestinian issue in Israeli media—often reducing Palestinians, whether citizens of the state or not, to security threats or depicting them through stereotypes (Tsfati, 2007; Jamal and Messalha, 2012; First and Inbar-Lankeri, 2013)—the widespread adoption of such dehumanizing rhetoric, including open incitement to war crimes by journalists, signals a clear radicalization of national media discourse.

This phenomenon goes beyond mere rhetoric. In March 2024, the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), a research center affiliated with Tel Aviv University, published a study based on group interviews with mainstream Israeli journalists. The study described the Israeli media's approach as an “alignment with the war effort.”⁵ It found that since October 7, Israeli journalists have largely adopted a conformist stance toward government policies—largely as a result of self-imposed commitments to national interests rather than censorship imposed by the state or the army. Many journalists saw their role as that of “agents of unity,” responsible for rallying public opinion, maintaining national morale, and offering steadfast support for Israeli security forces operating in Gaza. Within this framework, journalists openly admitted to deliberately avoiding coverage of the army's actions “behind the fence” in Gaza, prioritizing the dissemination of military spokespersons' messages, and reinforcing solidarity with Israeli soldiers and commanders. This behavior aligns with broader global patterns, where media often side with state agendas during times of war, prioritizing national interests and echoing the government's narrative.

While mainstream Israeli media largely align with state narratives and military objectives, certain international responses stand in sharp contrast. As Israel's operations in Gaza intensified global awareness increased, despite Israel's ban on foreign journalists, a recurring practice of the state. Protests against Israeli military actions spread worldwide, from university campuses in the United States to the streets of North African cities, while international legal actions against Israel advanced in parallel. On January 26, 2024, the International

¹ Dany Kusmharo, *Channel 12*, 31 October 2023.

² Tzvi Yehezkeili, *Channel 13*, 19 December 2023.

³ Almog Boker, *Channel 13*, 19 January 2025.

⁴ Tamir Morag, *Channel 14*, 20 February 2025.

⁵ Attila Somfalvi, David Siman Tov, and Ofir Dayan, *The Israeli Media Mobilized for War: Interim Conclusions on the Conduct of Israeli Media and Journalists After October 7, 2023*, Research Paper, INSS, March 2024, https://www.inss.org.il/he/strategic_assessment/press/

Court of Justice (ICJ) issued a ruling warning of risk of genocide in response to South Africa's case against Israel under the Genocide Convention⁶. In May 2024, the International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor requested arrest warrants for several Israeli and Hamas leaders⁷, which were approved by the judges of the ICC Pre-Trial Chamber I in November 2024⁸.

The stark divergence between Israeli media coverage, reports from Palestinian journalists and official sources in Gaza, and critical international voices raises urgent questions about the role of national media in war reporting—particularly when it involves the suffering of those labeled as the “enemy,” and especially when the violence against them has been legally classified by international courts as war crimes and crimes against humanity⁹. For Israeli media to report directly on such mass crimes would mean acknowledging Palestinians as victims, thereby unsettling their alignment with the state's military agenda and challenging the dominant nationalist narrative.

This article examines how Israeli media report on military operations in Gaza that have been classified by international courts as war crimes and crimes against humanity. It explores how journalists navigate the tension between portraying these actions as legitimate state violence against an “enemy” and the risk that acknowledging their criminal nature would confer victim status on that enemy. Rather than analyzing representations of Palestinians directly, the study offers a different perspective by focusing on how major online media outlets—many of which explicitly see themselves as part of the national war effort—report on the Israeli army's actions. It investigates how these platforms depict, downplay, or omit state violence, and how such reporting contributes to sustaining a narrative of Israeli moral legitimacy. Ultimately, the article sheds light on the ways in which media align with national objectives during wartime and how this alignment may inhibit critical engagement with the legal and ethical dimensions of military conduct.

This study combines both qualitative and quantitative analysis to examine how Israeli media report on the actions of the Israeli army in Gaza. The research focuses on three widely read online media outlets in Israel, each representing distinct political affiliations. These include *Mako*, the digital platform of *Channel 12*—Israel's most-watched television channel—generally associated with the political center; *Israel Hayom*, the online version of Israel's most widely circulated newspaper, known for its alignment with the right-wing Likud party; and *Channel 7*, a media outlet linked to the radical right, particularly the settler movement. By analyzing how these outlets present Israeli military actions in Gaza to the public, the study identifies recurring patterns in their framing and evaluates the extent to which they acknowledge, justify, or obscure the mass crimes committed. The central hypothesis is that Israeli media will actively avoid portraying Palestinians—the designated “enemy”—as victims of Israeli violence. This may occur through omission, selective reporting, or discursive strategies that justify or reframe the events to align with national narratives.

⁶ International Court of Justice (ICJ), Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel), Order, 26 January 2024.

⁷ The arrest warrants for the three Hamas leaders have since been withdrawn because they were killed by the Israeli army. Under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, individuals who are deceased cannot be prosecuted.

⁸ International Criminal Court (ICC), “Situation in the State of Palestine: ICC Pre-Trial Chamber I rejects the State of Israel's challenges to jurisdiction and issues warrants of arrest for Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant”, Press Release, 21 November 2024. Online : <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-state-palestine-icc-pre-trial-chamber-i-rejects-state-israels-challenges>

⁹ The ICC has identified reasonable grounds to believe that Israeli actions in Gaza since October 2023 constitute potential war crimes and crimes against humanity, including starvation as a method of warfare, targeting civilians, and causing large-scale civilian suffering. The court also considers Prime Minister Netanyahu and Former Defense Minister Gallant potentially criminally responsible for intentionally directing attacks against Gaza's civilian population.

2. Israeli Medias, the Palestinians and the “right” victim

The media are widely regarded as a vital pillar of any functioning democracy (Kellner, 2004; Curran, 2011; Plattner, 2012). They are expected to offer citizens an informed understanding of political affairs (Dahl, 1998) and to hold government officials accountable. Political scientists Wunsch and Blanchard (2023: 283) highlight that, while elections serve as a vertical safeguard of democracy and the judiciary and legislature provide horizontal checks, freedom of expression and press freedom form a “diagonal guarantee.” This guarantee, they explain, emphasizes the competitive nature of a regime and the capacity of citizens to challenge their leaders and decisions.

Despite the media’s crucial role in fostering democratic discourse, scholars have highlighted several non-democratic and anti-democratic trends that undermine this function. These include media consolidation and corporate control, which restrict democratic dialogue and perpetuate existing power structures (McChesney, 2000); the proliferation of misinformation and fake news, which distort public opinion and disrupt democratic processes (Frakas and Schou, 2019); and the media’s promotion of nationalism, which marginalizes certain groups and erodes democratic inclusivity (Selvarajah et al., 2023). These issues raise critical questions about the media’s role, particularly in the current global context of democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016 ; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Little and Meng, 2024), and about the media’s effectiveness—regardless of a country’s press freedom—when it comes to challenging elite political and economic discourses.

Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky’s propaganda model (1988) offers insight into how media coverage is influenced by structural biases that uphold dominant political and economic interests. Unlike totalitarian regimes, where the press is tightly controlled, democratic societies theoretically allow debate and press freedom. However, this debate is often constrained within boundaries that reflect elite consensus, a consensus so deeply embedded that it is frequently internalized and shapes media discourse without the need for overt censorship. In times of war, these dynamics are amplified, as journalists engage in self-censorship, avoiding narratives that challenge state policies and prioritizing official military messages. The portrayal of the “enemy” is framed to align with state discourse, justifying military actions, minimizing their consequences, and obscuring the human cost.

While Herman and Chomsky’s model has been criticized for its determinism and limited applicability beyond the U.S. context (Corner, 2003), other researchers have underscored the close ties between national media and state elites, highlighting the media’s frequent alignment with dominant political narratives. Bourdieu (1996), for example, demonstrated how journalistic fields are shaped by power relations and economic dependencies that tend to reinforce the symbolic order of the state. Similarly, Hallin (1986) challenged the common belief that American media actively opposed U.S. policy from the outset of the Vietnam War, contributing to its failure. Instead, he showed that media coverage operated within a “sphere of legitimate controversy,” largely defined by political elites, and initially supported the war effort. This structural alignment does not rely on formal censorship; rather, it emerges from a shared habitus, overlapping interests, and institutional constraints that encourage conformity to national narratives.

In the Israeli context, this tendency toward alignment is even more pronounced, largely due to the contested nature of Israel’s definition as a democracy. Scholars such as Yiftachel (2006) argue that Israel functions not as a democracy but as an ethnocracy—a political system in which one ethnic group dominates the state, its institutions, and resources, often at the expense of others. Although Israel retains formal democratic structures such as elections and courts, real power is concentrated in the hands of the dominant group, with state policies designed to preserve its identity, interests, and demographic superiority. Beyond the internal regime structure, the situation in the territories under Israeli control—including the occupied Palestinian territories—is increasingly described as a settler-colonial context (Khalidi, 2020). Settler colonialism, as defined by Veracini (2013),

involves the establishment of new political orders by settlers who come to stay, aiming not merely to exploit indigenous labor but to assert permanent control. This process depends on the domination of indigenous populations—in this case, the Palestinians. As Ayyash (2024) argues, Israeli nationalism is rooted in a settler-colonial sovereignty that produces a rigid and hierarchical division between Jews and non-Jews.

Press freedom in Israel, as well as the centrality of nationalist Jewish narratives in the media, should be understood within the broader context of contested democracy and settler colonialism. While media are nominally protected by a 1953 Supreme Court ruling—in the absence of a formal constitution—this protection is significantly constrained by structural mechanisms that enable state control over the flow of information. Most notably, both Israeli and foreign media are subject to military censorship, a system that dates to the British Mandate's emergency regulations of 1945 and remains largely unchanged (Negbi and Weinberg, 2020). Between 2011 and 2023, military authorities partially censored between 900 and 3,000 articles and fully censored between 200 and 600¹⁰. The highest levels of censorship occurred during the Gaza wars, especially in 2014 and since October 7, 2023. Second, these freedoms do not extend to Palestinian media and journalists in the Occupied Territories, where democratic freedoms and individual rights are not upheld. Palestinian journalists face severe repression, particularly since the Gaza war began in October 2023, with 170 journalists targeted and killed by Israel by March 2025¹¹.

These factors help explain the limitations of media coverage on wars and the broader Palestinian situation under Israeli control. These limitations are further reinforced by two interconnected dynamics that align with the propaganda model: the Israeli media's role in consolidating a Jewish ethno-national consensus, and its portrayal of Palestinians as the "other," framed as a threat to national security and identity—namely, as the "enemy." Drawing on Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as an "imagined community" with defined external boundaries (1983), the media do not merely reflect these boundaries or the identification of the "other"; they actively construct and shape them. In doing so, they influence not only how the nation is imagined but also how its boundaries—both symbolic and material—are delineated (Peterson, 2019).

In Israel, the concept of "nation" is defined ethnically (Sand, 2008), referring exclusively to the Jewish people, rather than an inclusive "Israeli" identity that encompasses both Jewish and non-Jewish citizens—a vision that does not exist (Dieckhoff, 2008). As a result, while the media shape national imagination through symbols and imagery, this imagination is closely tied to Jewish identity, reinforcing an exclusionary national vision that marginalizes non-Jewish citizens. Although press freedom is theoretically upheld, Israeli media largely conform to the state's consensus, reflecting its self-definition as a Jewish state—an identity solidified by the 2018 Nation-State Law. This law enshrined Israel's status as the nation-state of the Jewish people, prioritizing Jewish identity, settlement, and symbols, while omitting references to equality or minority rights (Perelman, 2024). This dynamic not only shapes collective identity but also plays a critical role in constructing stereotypes of the "other" (First, 1997: 271)—This dynamic not only shapes collective identity but also plays a central role in constructing stereotypes of the "other" (First, 1997: 271)—namely Palestinians, who make up around 50% of the total population living between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, an area under de facto Israeli control, and about 17% of Israel's own citizens.

Palestinians—whether as a minority within Israel's recognized borders or as a colonized population throughout the entire territory under Israeli control—are largely absent from Israeli media, and when they do appear, they are typically portrayed through negative and distorted representations (First and Inbar-Lankeri,

¹⁰ Matar, Hagai. "A New Record: Military Censorship Prevented the Publication of 613 Articles in 2023," *Local Call*, May 15, 2024, <https://urlr.me/CDJm8>.

¹¹ Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), "Journalist Casualties in the Israel-Gaza War", *CPJ*, March 4, 2024, <https://cpj.org/2025/02/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/>.

2013). This pattern reflects broader trends observed in other national contexts, where minority groups receive limited media visibility and are often portrayed through stereotypes that shift the blame for their marginalization onto them (van Dijk, 1988; Bjornstrom, 2010; Bleich et al., 2018). In the Israeli context, however, Palestinians are framed not merely as marginalized minorities or cultural “others,” but as existential “enemies” of the state. This framing becomes particularly salient during periods of war or heightened violence, when media representations intensify and reinforce dominant national ideologies. These portrayals serve to justify state policies and to center the legitimate victimhood of Israeli citizens, while systematically denying that status to Palestinians. As Lowenstein-Barkai (2021) argues, this narrative is constructed through a combination of stereotyping, dehumanization, and moral differentiation, depicting Palestinians as irrational, inherently violent, and fundamentally opposed to Israeli and Jewish national values.

In this context, the portrayal of Palestinians as violent and irrational “enemies” starkly contrasts with how they are depicted by international legal institutions, critics of Israel, and Palestinians themselves—as victims of state-sanctioned violence. Ideally, a free and independent press would reflect these divergent perspectives and contribute to a more informed public debate. However, within the colonial situation and especially in times of war Israeli media overwhelmingly represent Palestinians as security threats, while reserving the status of legitimate victimhood for Israeli citizens. This dynamic can be understood as part of a wider process of appropriating victimhood by dominant actors within a colonial and asymmetrical power structure. The repositioning of the aggressor as the principal victim has been examined in critical scholarship, most notably in Saïd’s *Blaming the Victims* (1988), where he shows how Israeli narratives have long drawn on the figure of the Jew as a perpetual victim to legitimize the subjugation of Palestinians. More broadly, in settler-colonial contexts, claims to victim status often function as a political and discursive resource—mobilized to assert moral legitimacy, deflect criticism, and suppress recognition of the colonized population’s suffering.

This pattern has been particularly evident in the war that followed the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023. That attack, which included acts classified by the ICC as both war crimes and crimes against humanity, reinforced the dominant narrative of Israelis as the “right” or legitimate victims. However, the subsequent Israeli military campaign in Gaza—also condemned by international legal bodies for involving war crimes and crimes against humanity—complicates this binary framing. Furthermore, three months into the conflict, the ICJ referred to a ‘plausible risk of genocide’ in Gaza (Order of 26 January 2024, South Africa v. Israel), and since then, several international organizations and legal experts have characterized the situation as genocide. To examine how this binary framing of enmity and victimhood persists in Israeli media despite such international assessments, the following section outlines the study’s methodology and data.

3. Methodology and Data Collection

The article combines quantitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis to examine the portrayal of Israeli military actions in Gaza across major online media outlets, selected for their role as primary sources of information in Israel. A survey by the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI) in April 2024 revealed that 63% of Israelis rely on online media for news¹², followed by social media at 59.5% and television at 58%, with newspapers at only 16%. From a methodological perspective, online media archives are more accessible than those of printed newspapers, which are often available only in specific locations across the country. However, automated analysis of Israeli online media proved difficult, as many outlets block automated scraping, excluding major sites like *Ynet* and *Walla*. The media outlets chosen for this analysis were selected based on the feasibility

¹² Tehila Shwartz Altshuler and Ina Orly Spoznikoff, *Main Findings of the Communication Usage Survey, Trust in Media, and Media Literacy*, Israeli Democracy Institute, April 2024.

of data collection and their association with political factions distinct from the others. Including a diverse range of media sources ensures a comprehensive understanding of how different political perspectives shape the presentation and coverage of mass crimes committed by Israel.

The article analyzes coverage from three major Israeli online media outlets, each representing distinct political and ideological orientations. *Mako*, launched in 2008 and owned by the *Keshet Media Group*, is a prominent digital platform offering a mix of news, entertainment, and lifestyle content. Closely affiliated with *Channel 12*—Israel’s most-watched television network—*Mako* benefits from the added visibility of news content also published on the platform *N12*. Politically associated with the center-left, *Mako* ranks as the fifth most visited website in Israel and the third most visited among news platforms. *Israel Hayom*, established in 2007 by American billionaire Sheldon Adelson, is the country’s most widely read newspaper. Distributed for free, it maintains a right-wing editorial line that has consistently aligned with the positions of Benjamin Netanyahu and the Likud party. Its online edition is the sixth most visited news site in Israel, confirming its reach and influence. *Channel 7*, founded in 1988 by members of the Religious Zionist movement, began as a pirate radio station before evolving into a major online news outlet. It reflects a far-right, religious Zionist perspective, closely tied to the settler movement, and promotes content grounded in Jewish religious values. While it covers a broad range of issues, its editorial stance clearly prioritizes religious and nationalist narratives.

Israeli media from the political left were not included, as this analysis focuses on how mainstream outlets report on state and military actions while operating within institutional constraints without actively challenging them, in line with the logic of the propaganda model. Left-leaning media are marginal in Israel, with only *Haaretz* ranking among the top ten most-visited news websites. Unlike mainstream outlets, platforms such as *Haaretz* and *Local Call* adopt a critical stance toward official state and military narratives. Through investigative reporting and analytical commentary, they document the names and images of Palestinian casualties, report on the humanitarian impact of military operations in Gaza, employ the language of international law to characterize these actions, and scrutinize the legal and ethical implications of Israeli government policies and discourse—a shift that began in *Haaretz* several months after October 2023. This critical stance has led to frequent state-led attacks, including a government decision in November 2024 to bar *Haaretz* from receiving state funding after its editor-in-chief’s critical remarks and ongoing reporting on Israeli military actions in Gaza—actions the government has framed as “supporting the enemies of the state in the midst of a war.”¹³ Given the research’s focus on mainstream media’s participation in the “war effort” and the portrayal of Palestinians as “victims,” left-leaning media, which directly challenge these narratives, fall outside the scope of this study.

The dataset for this article was constructed by selecting news articles—excluding opinion pieces—that mentioned both “Gaza” and either “Palestinian” or “Gazan” between January 1 and April 1, 2024. This three-month window was crucial for understanding how Israeli media covered Gaza and its Palestinian inhabitants during the conflict. The timeframe was chosen for several reasons: it provides a concise yet sufficient period for identifying media trends, allows for the examination of narratives without the immediacy bias of the ongoing crisis, and encompasses key events that shaped public perceptions of both Palestinians and Israeli military actions. Among these events were South Africa’s presentation of a genocide case against Israel to the ICJ on January 11, followed by the ICJ’s call for provisional measures to prevent genocide on January 26. On February 29, a deadly stampede during aid distribution resulted in at least 104 Palestinian deaths, involving the Israeli army, while the Gaza Health Ministry reported 30,000 fatalities. Finally, on April 1, seven World Central Kitchen workers were killed by the Israeli army while transporting a shipment of food, despite carrying

¹³ 37th Government Decision No. 2463, “Government Declaration on Severing All Advertising Ties with Haaretz,” November 24, 2024.

out their work in close coordination with it, including by providing their exact route. This period also witnessed intensifying international debates over the legitimacy of Israeli military actions, driven in particular by the rising number of civilian casualties and the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

The search specifically focused on terms like “Gaza” paired with “Palestinian” or “Gazan” to avoid broader topics like Israeli military general operations in the area, ensuring a focus on how the Palestinian situation in Gaza was represented. These terms were searched in Hebrew, using the singular forms (פלסטיני, *falastini*; עזתי, *a’azati*), which also captured plural forms and adjectives, such as “Palestinian population” (האוכלוסייה הפלסטינית, *ha’okhlusiya ha’falastinit*). For the two right-wing media outlets, an alternative spelling of “Palestinian” (פלשתיני) was included. This variation, associated with right-wing discourse, frames Palestinians as historical inhabitants of Palestine rather than as a distinct national group, contrasting with the modern, self-identified term "*falastini*" (פלסטיני), which affirms Palestinian national identity (Halabi, 2008).

The dataset consists of 594 articles : 248 from *Mako*, 158 from *Israel Hayom*, and 188 from *Channel 7*. The analysis explores how Israeli military actions—classified under international law as war crimes or crimes against humanity—are represented, if addressed at all. These actions, outlined in the arrest warrant for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Galant, include “deliberately starving civilians as a method of warfare, intentionally targeting the civilian population, and committing crimes against humanity such as murder, persecution, and other inhumane acts.”¹⁴

The articles are categorized into four reporting patterns: (1) actions, classified under international law as war crimes or crimes against humanity, not reported; (2) actions reported with explicit justification or explanations aimed at legitimizing them; (3) actions reported indirectly, often through citations or references to external statements; and (4) actions reported directly, without intermediary framing. Each article may fall into one or more of these categories, except for Category 1—by definition, if an action is not reported, it is not included in the analysis of the other categories.

4. Findings

Based on the methodology outlined above and the qualitative analysis of the 594 articles comprising the dataset, the main results, categorized by type and media outlet, are presented in Table 1 below:

Table n.1

	Not reported	Reported with justification	Reported indirectly	Reported directly
Channel 7	153	16	24	0
Israel Hayom	92	36	33	2
Mako	115	51	62	15
Total	361	103	119	17

The quantitative analysis clearly identifies a common trend across the three media outlets: a tendency to downplay military actions that would portray Palestinians as victims and Israeli soldiers as perpetrators of mass crimes. However, the qualitative discourse analysis reveals more nuanced distinctions in how these

¹⁴ International Criminal Court, "Warrant of Arrest for Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Galant," 21 November 2024.

outlets either indirectly acknowledge such actions or frame them in ways that justifies or neutralizes their impact. These variations, alongside shared patterns, will be examined in the following analysis to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how each outlet frames Israeli military operations in Gaza.

Avoiding Discussion of Crimes, Emphasizing Israeli Victims

Most of the articles retrieved from the three media outlets using the search terms “Palestinian,” “Gazan,” and “Gaza” did not mention Israeli military actions targeting Palestinians. While it cannot be definitively stated that such articles never addressed these events, it is reasonable to assume that reports on Israeli military actions would typically include these keywords, as they denote both the location and the affected population. Instead, the majority of articles that included “Gaza” and “Palestinian” or “Gaza” and “Gazan” primarily focus on Hamas and its ideology and actions; organizations operating in Gaza—especially UNRWA, which provides aid to Palestinian refugees; political negotiations between Israel and Hamas; potential future plans for Gaza; international proposals for conflict resolution; military successes, particularly the “elimination of “terrorists”; or coverage of the October 7 attacks, which international courts have classified as war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by Hamas.

Of the 361 articles that did not report Israeli military actions targeting the Palestinian population, 107 focus on Israeli suffering and portray Israelis as victims. While most of these articles do not explicitly connect the lack of coverage on Israeli military actions with the emphasis on Israeli victimhood, some do indirectly address this. For instance, a *Channel 7* article from March 14, 2024, features an interview with the sister of a Jewish-Israeli civilian woman taken hostage by Hamas. The sister had recently returned from a UN visit, where she “reminded”¹⁵—as the journalist put it—the world of the hostage situation in Gaza, implying that it had been forgotten¹⁶. In her statements, she subtly suggests that the global focus on Palestinians’ fate is overshadowing the hostage issue. The journalist then asks about the UN’s response to reports of sexual violence during the October 7, 2023, attacks, and its impact on the global awareness of the hostage situation. While UN members were “shocked” by the reports, the journalist notes that there was also an attempt to compare these acts with those of the Israeli army in Gaza, as well as Palestinians’ claims of “harassment” by Israeli soldiers. This comparison, the hostage’s sister says, “disappointed” her. This passage exemplifies how Israeli media coverage tends to prioritize Israeli victimhood, framing the recognition of Palestinian suffering as a competing narrative that undermines the visibility of Israeli pain. It also points to a broader pattern of minimizing or discrediting allegations against the Israeli military, thereby marginalizing Palestinian victimhood.

A recurring theme across all three media outlets, in the category where crimes are not reported, is the emphasis on threats posed by Gaza to Israeli citizens. This coverage highlights Hamas and other armed groups but also extends to UNRWA and Palestinian journalists. Considering the Israeli state’s campaign against UNRWA, which led to the Israeli parliament’s decision to ban the organization on October 28, 2024, several media outlets published analyses and investigations linking UNRWA to the events of October 7th, 2023, as well as its connections to Hamas. These reports also explored alternative means to replace UNRWA’s services through private initiatives or other channels. Established in 1949 following the creation of Israel, UNRWA provides essential services to Palestinian refugees, particularly in healthcare and education, while also

¹⁵ The words placed in quotation marks are those used by the journalist, suggesting a certain distance or, at times, a subtle critique of the terms themselves.

¹⁶ Yoni Kapminski, “The sister of Romy, who is held hostage by Hamas: ‘I have no way to protect her from evil, I am trying to focus on actions for her’”, *Channel 7*, 14 March 2024, <https://www.inn.co.il/news/632038>

maintaining their refugee status, which is tied to the mass displacement during the 1948 Nakba—“catastrophe” in Arabic—a cornerstone of their claim to the right of return (Feldman, 2012).

Channel 7 leads the corpus with the highest number of articles criticizing UNRWA, featuring interviews with experts who label the organization as a “terrorist group”¹⁷ or describe it as “more radical and inciting to violence than any mosque or imam.”¹⁸ *Mako* published numerous articles discussing the presumed involvement of UNRWA in the October 7th attack, alongside in-depth analyses, such as one critiquing UNRWA’s educational materials in Gaza schools. These materials are described as “anti-Semitic, inciting violence, and fostering demonization against Israel.”¹⁹ Additionally, the article claims that over 100 Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants involved in terrorist attacks, responsible for killing Israeli civilians, are graduates of UNRWA’s educational system, which serves more than half of Gaza’s children.

Israel Hayom also features articles highlighting the involvement of UNRWA members in the October 7th attack, while criticizing the military for withholding information that, according to the newspaper, would demonstrate the organization’s ties to terrorism. One article, published on February 5, 2024, specifically addresses the European Union’s funding of the organization under the headline, “The Price of Israeli Silence: The European Union to Expand Its Funding to UNRWA.”²⁰ Notably, this article directly challenges the Israeli state—specifically the security establishment—not by demanding more transparency regarding military actions in Gaza, their consequences, or their legality, but rather by reinforcing a narrative in which not only armed groups in Gaza but also humanitarian organizations like UNRWA are framed as harmful. This portrayal is central to the newspaper’s argument, questioning the organization’s role and international support.

By largely ignoring the mass crimes committed by Israel in Gaza, the three media outlets often construct a narrative that positions Israelis as the sole victims of the conflict. This is achieved either by disregarding Palestinian suffering or by emphasizing threats to Israel while neglecting the ongoing plight of Palestinians. This selective focus on Israeli victimhood goes beyond omission, actively shaping public discourse and legitimizing military actions. In contrast to the previous category, some reports do address the army’s actions, their consequences, and their severity. However, these reports do not present the actions neutrally; instead, they justify them, framing such military conduct as both morally and strategically necessary, as demonstrated in the following section.

“This is the Price of Terrorism”: Justifying Military Actions Targeting Civilians

Articles in category 2 report on military actions targeting Palestinians and immediately offer justifications for these actions. These justifications are often integrated within the same sentence, shortly after describing the events, or even appear in the headline itself. The goal is to frame these actions as necessary or morally justified, thus minimizing any negative perception of their severity. When comparing the frequency of such articles across different media outlets, *Israel Hayom* and *Mako* present similar percentages—22.78% and 20.57%, respectively—while *Channel 7* reports a significantly lower percentage of 8.51%. This discrepancy may be

¹⁷ Yedidya Shalman, “Noga Arbel, a researcher in political strategy, to Channel 7: ‘We must say clearly - UNRWA is a terrorist organization,’” *Channel 7*, January 12, 2024, <https://www.inn.co.il/news/625921>.

¹⁸ Shimon Cohen, “Dr. Einat Wilf: ‘UNRWA is more radical and inciteful than any mosque and imam,’” *Channel 7*, January 29, 2024, <https://www.inn.co.il/news/627364>.

¹⁹ Sapir Lipkin, “A Look Inside Textbooks in the United Arab Emirates – This Is How Gaza Should Be Taught ‘the Day After,’” *Mako*, January 30, 2024.

²⁰ Ariel Kahana, “The Price of Israeli Silence: The European Union to Expand Its Funding to UNRWA,” *Israel Hayom*, February 5, 2024, <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/geopolitics/article/15217317>

linked to *Channel 7*'s editorial stance, which aligns with an extreme right-wing perspective. For this outlet, Israeli military actions are inherently justified, and there is little perceived need for explicit justification. From this standpoint, the legitimacy of Israeli military operations is viewed as self-evident and does not require further explanation, positioning these actions as a natural and unquestionable response within the broader conflict. Despite this difference, a recurring justification across all three media outlets is the attribution of responsibility to Hamas and other armed groups. These actors are frequently blamed for the mass killings of Palestinian civilians in Gaza—carried out by the Israeli army—and for worsening the humanitarian crisis, including widespread starvation, even though the entry of humanitarian aid is controlled by the Israeli state.

When *Mako*, for example, reported on February 15, 2024, an Israeli military incursion into one of the largest hospitals in Gaza, located in Khan Younis, the title and subtitle immediately present three justifications for the operation: intelligence suggesting Hamas terrorist activity, the potential presence of hostages' bodies, and the involvement of individuals suspected of participating in the October 7 attack—who are promptly labeled as "terrorists" by the media²¹, even though they are only suspects. These points are briefly highlighted in the opening lines of the article. Additionally, the article notes that the Israeli army spokesperson claimed "efforts were made prior to the operation to evacuate patients from the hospital in order to minimize harm to Palestinian civilians"²². This framing leaves little room for doubt, portraying the military action as inevitable, justified, and necessary. The mention of evacuations, including patients who were likely in critical need of care, further adds a humanitarian aspect, strengthening the operation's legitimacy.

On April 1, 2024, the media covered another Israeli military operation in Gaza, this time targeting Al-Shifa Hospital, the largest medical facility and a vital healthcare center in the region. The article frames the hospital primarily as both "a Gazan symbol" and "Hamas terror headquarters."²³ While it acknowledges Palestinian criticism of the Israeli military's actions and displays images of the hospital in ruins, the journalist dismisses accusations of Israeli responsibility for the fire damage. Instead, the article asserts that Hamas is to blame, stating: "Some were quick to blame the IDF for the fire damage clearly visible in the images from the area—however, the ones responsible are none other than the Hamas terrorist organization."²⁴ This framing serves to justify the military operation while deflecting responsibility from the Israeli military, suggesting that Hamas's presence within the hospital rendered it a legitimate target.

A significant portion of the articles across the three media outlets that justify Israeli military actions in Gaza focuses on the entry of humanitarian aid, particularly food and water. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) had warned as early as December 2023 of heavy risk of famine by May 2024 if hostilities persisted and access to essential supplies remained restricted²⁵. By February 2024, the entire Gaza population was already facing severe food insecurity²⁶. However, in the media coverage analyzed, discussions of the famine largely centered on events following the entry of humanitarian aid trucks. The articles frequently attributed shortages to looting by Hamas and other groups, while downplaying or entirely disregarding Israel's restrictions on aid entry and its central role in exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

²¹ Nir Dvori and Sapir Lipkin, "Operation at a Hospital in Khan Younis: 'Hostage Bodies Were Held There,'" *Mako*, February 15, 2024, http://mako.co.il/news-military/2024_q1/Article-ef16824d53cad81027.htm.

²² *Id.*

²³ Sapir Lipkin, "With the IDF's Withdrawal, Gaza Residents Witness the Scale of Destruction at Al-Shifa: 'Indescribable,'" *Mako*, April 1, 2024, https://www.mako.co.il/news-military/2024_q2/Article-d66798e4f689e81026.htm

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ IPC, "Gaza Strip: Acute Food Insecurity Situation for 15 February - 15 March 2024 and Projection for 16 March - 15 July 2024", *IPC*, March 2024, <https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1156872/?iso3=PSE>

²⁶ *Id.*

One key event covered in this context is what international media referred to as the “flour massacre” of February 29. On that day, hundreds of Palestinians gathered near an aid convoy in Gaza, desperately seeking food amid severe shortages. Over 100 people were killed and many others injured, either by Israeli army gunfire or by being crushed in the ensuing chaos. While international media reported testimonies from Palestinians on the scene, stating that the deaths and injuries were directly caused by Israeli fire and the resulting panic, the articles from the three media outlets analyzed here offer a different narrative. They attempt to justify the high number of casualties and downplay the army’s responsibility, often shifting the blame to other factors or minimizing the extent of the army’s involvement in the incident.

Mako, for instance, presents the army’s position in its secondary title: “Some members of the crowd approached the soldiers in a way that endangered the forces, prompting them to open fire. [...] According to the IDF, fewer than 10 were injured by Israeli forces' gunfire, while most injuries were caused by crowding and trampling.”²⁷ *Israel Hayom* follows a similar approach, with its main title emphasizing the army's stance, quoting a commander at the scene: “The incident in the northern Gaza Strip: ‘There was no IDF gunfire near the supply trucks.’”²⁸ The article further echoes the same narrative, aligning with *Mako's* reporting. *Channel 7*, however, does not directly report the event but instead references it indirectly, particularly in connection with the Colombian president’s criticism of Netanyahu and the army’s responsibility in the “flour massacre.” In the secondary title, *Channel 7* attributes the incident to the crowd’s supposed intent to “steal” from the truck²⁹.

At times, justifications for Israeli military actions take a more general form, not tied to a specific event. One such example is the argument that all actions in Gaza are a direct response to the October 7th attack, as presented in an article by *Israel Hayom* on March 14th. The piece included before-and-after images of Gaza—now largely destroyed—along with a detailed account of the scale of the destruction. The headline, “The Price of Terrorism,”³⁰ implies that the extensive devastation, often described by scholars as *urbicide*—the deliberate destruction of a city, its infrastructure, and its population (Coward, 2009; Golańska, 2022; Khalila, 2024)—is an inevitable and justified consequence of the Hamas attack.

Another form of global justification in Israeli media is the widespread notion that there are no “innocent” or “non-involved” civilians in Gaza. This idea implies that all residents of Gaza are complicit in Hamas's actions. A clear example of this narrative can be found in an article published by *Israel Hayom* on January 27th, titled “Non-involved? Residents of Gaza continue to express support for Hamas.”³¹ This article stands out as one of the few addressing the critical situation of Palestinian civilians in Gaza during the period under analysis, including the high risk of disease and the dire conditions of those sleeping in tents. However, the title, along with a brief passage stating, “Residents express support for Hamas and speak in praise of the terrorist

²⁷ N12, “A Palestinian crowd gathered around aid trucks, soldiers opened fire. Palestinians: More than 100 killed”, *Mako*, February 29, 2024, https://www.mako.co.il/news-military/2024_q1/Article-fa829f534b4fd81027.htm.

²⁸ Ariel Kahana, “The incident in the northern Gaza Strip: ‘There was no IDF gunfire near the supply trucks,’” *Israel Hayom*, February 29, 2024, <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/defense/article/15346376>.

²⁹ Tziki Brandwein, “Colombian President Attacks Again: ‘Netanyahu Killed 100 Palestinians – Reminds of the Holocaust,’” *Channel 7*, February 29, 2024, <https://www.inn.co.il/news/630722>.

³⁰ David Baron, “The Price of Terror: This is What the Destruction in Gaza Looks Like from an American Air Force Plane,” *Israel Hayom*, 14 march, 2024, <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/defense/article/15427340>.

³¹ Dana Ben Shimon, “Non-involved ? Gaza Residents Continue to Express Support for Hamas: ‘All Praise to the Resistance,’” *Israel Hayom*, January 27, 2024, <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/geopolitics/palestinians/article/15170942>.

organization,"³² is used to justify the harsh situation faced by Palestinian civilians by implying their active support for Hamas and their "non-innocent" status.

The Israeli army's actions are consistently justified and legitimized in the media—either by uncritically presenting the army's stance or offering broad justifications. Simultaneously, the media works to counter international criticism of the state. When reporting on critiques of the army's actions and their consequences, which often indirectly touch on the scale of these crimes, the media tends to downplay their severity or dismiss these criticisms as unfounded. This is done either by offering additional justifications or by actively delegitimizing the critics, as will be explored in the next section.

Indirect Reporting of Military Actions as Crimes and Criticism of Their Acknowledgment

As shown, the Israeli media typically avoids framing military actions in a way that would classify them as war crimes or crimes against humanity—and, in some cases, omits coverage of such actions altogether. Of the articles in the dataset only 17 address military actions in this context, with 15 coming from the center-aligned outlet *Mako*, which covers the impact of the war on civilians, occasionally including testimonies. A notable pattern emerges. While the media refrain from labeling these actions as crimes, they frequently publish articles citing individuals or entities—often foreign—who criticize Israel's military operations in Gaza, describing them as crimes and portraying Palestinians, sometimes exclusively, as victims. This coverage might be expected to challenge the efforts to downplay the severity and illegality of Israel's actions. However, paradoxically, these criticisms are used to reinforce Israel's legitimacy. By presenting these critiques in a hostile light, the media not only justifies Israel's actions but also attacks the credibility of the critics, thereby strengthening Israel's position.

Israeli distrust of external criticism is rooted in a broader worldview shaped by centuries of Jewish persecution and reinforced by biblical prophecy, which portrays the people of Israel as "a nation that shall dwell alone and shall not be counted among the nations."³³ This passage, frequently referenced in Israeli political discourse, highlights the perceived uniqueness of the Jewish people. Due to this distinct status, Israel often regards its existence as separate from that of other nations—and at times, approaches them with suspicion. This perspective significantly influences Israel's self-image within the international community: while it seeks legitimacy, understanding, and empathy from the world, it simultaneously minimizes the world's ability to fully comprehend Israel's fragile security situation, its culture, and its concerns³⁴.

Criticism from foreign actors—especially when it concerns Palestinians or is framed around Israeli "security"—is often received through a defensive lens. Such critiques are commonly portrayed as driven by racism or antisemitism, rather than grounded in factual or reasoned political analysis. In the articles under review, terms like "genocide," "ethnic cleansing," and "intentional starvation" appear almost exclusively in quotation marks. This typographical choice signals skepticism and functions to discredit the accusations, presenting them as external and exaggerated claims rather than substantiated realities. It reflects a broader rhetorical strategy rooted in a process of victimization, where Israel is cast not as a perpetrator of violence but as a state unjustly and singularly targeted by a hostile international community. By distancing themselves from the language of critics, these outlets reinforce a sense of siege, framing grave allegations not as matters for serious consideration but as politically motivated attacks aimed at delegitimizing the state. In this narrative, international criticism becomes a form of symbolic aggression, further solidifying a defensive and exceptionalist self-image.

³² *Id.*

³³ Numbers 23:9.

³⁴ Adler, Emanuel. 2013. *Israel in the World: Legitimacy and Exceptionalism*. New York: Routledge, p. 1.

Mako is the media outlet that most prominently presents this perspective, with 25% of its articles on Palestinians in Gaza falling into this category. In comparison, *Israel Hayom* features 20.89%, and *Channel 7* has 12.77%. *Mako* dedicates a significant portion of its articles, not only in the political sections but also in the cultural, sports, and other areas, to statements from a broad spectrum of critics of Israel's actions in Gaza. These critics range from representatives of European states and political leaders in Latin America to well-known Hollywood stars, lesser-known Eurovision singers, and football players from around the world.

An example is an article published on March 29 that focuses on statements made by Joe Rogan, a well-known and controversial American media personality and podcaster. The article reports that, during his popular podcast, Rogan “highlighted footage from Al Jazeera showing an Israeli drone strike that allegedly killed four Palestinian youths in Khan Younis.”³⁵ It then quotes him at length, including his remark: “[Israel] is saying genocide is fine as long as we do it. You survived the Holocaust, and now you're willing to do this?”³⁶ Immediately in the following paragraphs, the focus shifts to Rogan’s credibility as a critic. The article states, “Rogan is a controversial host known for stirring media storms with his statements on various public issues. About a year ago, he was accused of antisemitism.”³⁷ This framing subtly reframes Rogan’s criticism, portraying it less as a concern for Palestinians in Gaza and more as an expression of antisemitism, fueled by hostility toward Jews rather than genuine political critique.

The same pattern emerges not only with individuals but also with larger entities, such as countries—most notably, South Africa. On December 29, 2023, South Africa filed a case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), accusing it of genocide in its military operations in Gaza³⁸. The claim is based on alleged violations of the 1948 Genocide Convention, to which both South Africa and Israel are signatories³⁹. During the period analyzed, a significant number of articles were published discussing the details of South Africa’s allegations and the court process. These articles indirectly highlight Israel's actions in Gaza, which are framed as violations of international law and potential war crimes and crimes against humanity. However, there were also numerous articles published during the same period aimed at delegitimizing South Africa’s position, portraying it as biased and, most notably, as collaborating with Hamas.

This narrative was particularly evident in an article published by *Israel Hayom* on January 25, just one day before the ICJ's ruling on South Africa's case. Titled "How South Africa is Involved in Funding Hamas,"⁴⁰ the article alleged financial ties between South African organizations and Hamas. It described a network of South African entities reportedly channeling money to the Al-Quds Foundation—a group banned in Israel but not in the United States—described by the article as a foundation that “raises funds for the terrorist organization under the guise of charity.”⁴¹ These claims about the South African organizations, initially reported by the Israeli journal *The Jerusalem Post*, were not widely covered by international media. Regardless of whether these allegations were verified, their strategic use in Israeli media served to undermine South Africa's

³⁵ Amir Attias, “Joe Rogan Accused Israel of Genocide: ‘You Survived the Holocaust, and This Is What You’re Doing Now?’” *Mako*, March 29, 2024, https://www.mako.co.il/news-entertainment/2024_q1/Article-36d515fe8f58e81027.htm.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ International Court of Justice (ICJ), “Application instituting proceedings and request for the indication of provisional measures”, (South Africa v. Israel), 29 December 2023.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, §1, p.6.

⁴⁰ Israel Hayom, "How South Africa Is Involved in Funding Hamas: Shell Companies and Major Banks.", *Israel Hayom*, 25 January, 2024, <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/world-news/other/article/15161811>.

⁴¹ *Id.*

credibility, reframing its legal action against Israel as an expression of inherent anti-Israel bias rather than a stance rooted in concern for Palestinian rights.

By focusing on alleged financial links between certain South African civil society organizations and Hamas, the media shifted attention away from the substance of the ICJ case, reinforcing the idea that South Africa's motivations were political or even racist, rather than legal or driven by concern for the Palestinians in Gaza. This rhetoric suggests that global criticism of Israel stems from deep-rooted animosity rather than from genuine solidarity with Palestinians, whose victimhood is often disregarded. Consequently, it fosters the perception that Israel is the victim of international hostility, overshadowing the voices and suffering of Palestinians.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of articles from three Israeli media outlets, representing distinct political factions, over three months of intense conflict—marked by Palestinian suffering in Gaza, escalating military operations, international condemnation—reveals specific differences and an important similarity. The key quantitative differences emerge in the categories of justification and indirect reporting, not between the center-affiliated *Mako* and the right-leaning *Israel Hayom*, but primarily in *Channel 7*, which is aligned with the far right. The latter publishes significantly fewer articles in both categories, as it sees no need to justify Israeli military actions, treating their legitimacy as unquestionable. Likewise, it largely avoids indirect reporting through coverage of international criticism, dismissing such critiques and their framing of Israel's actions as irrelevant or futile.

From a qualitative perspective, significant differences emerge when examining how *Mako* allocates substantial attention to international criticism of Israel, even from voices without substantial political, cultural, or economic influence. As a center-aligned media outlet, *Mako* stands apart from more right-wing, nationalist outlets, which typically exhibit a deep mistrust of the international community, often downplaying or ignoring critiques of Israel. *Mako*, however, engages with these criticisms, paradoxically amplifying them while using them to reinforce the legitimacy of the state's actions. This suggests a discursive strategy that positions the outlet as open to external scrutiny, while ultimately functioning to legitimize state policies and reaffirm the hegemonic national narrative through a more moderate and ostensibly pluralistic register.

Despite their political differences, all three outlets consistently avoid framing Israeli actions as potential crimes. Only 18 out of 592 articles address the impact on Palestinians without offering justification or downplaying the harm. They converge around a common strategy of “supporting the war effort,” as highlighted in the INSS research previously discussed, by avoiding portrayals of Palestinians as victims and rarely questioning the military's conduct. This selective reporting does more than omit information—it actively shapes and legitimizes a national narrative in which Israelis are positioned as the sole victims, while Palestinians are cast exclusively as “enemies” or “aggressors,” posing a threat to the Jewish state. This narrative denies Palestinians any humanizing representation as victims, reflecting a broader ideological pattern typical of settler colonial contexts.

This outlet's outright dismissal of international criticism and its portrayal of Israeli military actions as beyond reproach reflect a broader trend of increasingly polarized media coverage. Throughout the war, Israeli media—regardless of political affiliation—have framed the narrative in a way that stifles critical reflection and leaves little room for nuanced discussion of the government's actions. This radicalization, alongside the disregard for mass crimes, and even the encouragement of such acts, as discussed in the introduction, raises important questions about the role of Israeli journalism. With media outlets positioning themselves as unwavering supporters of the state, it is necessary to examine how such coverage shapes public perception of the war and facilitates the government and military's capacity to act with minimal opposition from society, alongside the

media's active role in sustaining the symbolic and political boundaries of the Jewish ethnonational and colonial order.

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