



Palestine Action spray paints BBC HQ at Portland Place, London (14 October 2023). Photo via Steve Eason on Flickr.

## Turmoil at the BBC: "Gravest Possible Concerns" at Its Gaza Coverage

Jadaliyya Reports

*[In Israel's current genocidal war on Gaza, with almost ten thousand Palestinians dead and counting, it is no surprise that truth has also been a casualty. The violence in Palestine, perpetrated by Israel with increasing ferocity since Hamas attacks on Israeli targets on 7 October 2023, has been accompanied by an equally fierce war of narratives in Western media, powered on one side by government mouthpieces and mainstream outlets, and on the other by the transnational networks of social media, amplifying the voices and testimonies of Palestinians on the ground. The British Broadcasting Corporation, the world-leading news organization, has been in turmoil, as its coverage of events come under severe criticism from both ends of the political spectrum.*

*Most recently, the BBC has also confronted detailed and outraged criticism from its own members of staff. On 25 October 2023, the British newspaper *The Times* published an article entitled "[BBC Staff Crying at Work Over Israel-Gaza Coverage](#)" which led with accusations leveled at the BBC "by its journalists of being too lenient on Israel and 'dehumanizing' Palestinian civilians, allegedly leaving*

*staff crying in lavatories and taking time off work." The article quoted extensively from an email that was sent on 24 October by a BBC correspondent based in Beirut, Rami Ruhayem, to the Director General of the BBC, Tim Davie, voicing 'the gravest possible concerns' about BBC coverage of unfolding events in Gaza. On 27 October, the London-based weekly, The Jewish Chronicle, published excerpts of the same email in an article entitled 'BBC correspondent advocates using 'settler-colonialism' to describe Israel', and used it to portray BBC coverage as biased against the Israeli state. We have obtained the full text of that email and share it to clarify all the points it makes.]*

**24 October 2023**

**URGENT: Israel/Palestine Coverage**

Dear Tim,

I am writing to raise the gravest possible concerns about the coverage of the BBC, especially on English outlets, of the current fighting between Israel and Palestinian factions.

It appears to me that information that is highly significant and relevant is either entirely missing or not being given due prominence in coverage.

This includes expert opinion that Israel's actions could amount to genocide, evidence in support of that opinion, and historical context without which the public cannot form a basic understanding of the unfolding events.

There are also indications that the BBC is—implicitly at least—treating Israeli lives as more worthy than Palestinian lives, and reinforcing Israeli war propaganda.

What follows is a brief explanation of why I think so. I hope you consider it carefully and urgently.

## **1. Genocide**

Even before the current round of fighting, experts have noted that the siege of Gaza may amount to "a prelude to genocide" or "a slow-motion genocide." [1]

Key here is the fact that the Genocide Convention of 1948 lists, among the elements of the crime of genocide, the act of "Deliberately inflicting on the (national, ethnical, racial or religious) group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part." [2]

Also key is the fact that as early as 2014, UN officials who advise the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide have warned of 'the flagrant use of hate speech in the social media, particularly against the Palestinian population.[3]

The nature of the Israeli response to the attack by Hamas on October 7 has prompted 'over 800 scholars and practitioners of international law, conflict studies and genocide studies' to warn of 'the possibility of genocide being perpetrated by Israeli forces against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.[4]

They cited the "incessant and indiscriminate bombardment' obliterating 'huge swathes of neighborhoods and entire families," and the order, by the Israeli defense minister" of a "complete siege" of Gaza, terminology which, according to the experts, "indicates an intensification of an already illegal, potentially genocidal siege to an outright destructive assault."

They also cited the order issued for more than 1.1 million Palestinians in Gaza City and the northern Gaza Strip to flee to the south.[5] This order has also been said by Jan Egeland, Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council to 'amount to the war crime of forcible transfer' if unaccompanied by guarantees of safety or return.[6]

Furthermore, the scholars noted the statements of incitement by Israeli leaders against Palestinians. [7] They wrote of "evidence of incitement to genocide" and a "wider Israeli discourse showcasing the intent for elimination and genocide against the Palestinian people."

They also noted the "escalation of violence, arrests, expulsions, and destruction of whole Palestinian communities in the occupied West Bank and Jerusalem."

They said:

As scholars and practitioners of international law, conflict studies, and genocide studies, we are compelled to sound the alarm about the possibility of the crime of genocide being perpetrated by Israeli forces against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. We do not do so lightly, recognizing the weight of this crime, but the gravity of the current situation demands it.

I invite you to sift through our coverage, past and present, for any trace of the above; whether in explainers, or interviews, or features, or news analysis. Is it there at all, and if so, is it given the prominence it deserves?

## **2. Selective Use of Language**

Words like 'massacre', 'slaughter', and 'atrocities' are being used—prominently—in reference to actions by Hamas, but hardly, if at all, in reference to actions by Israel.

When the BBC uses such language selectively, with the standard of selection being the identity of the perpetrators/victims, the BBC is making a statement—albeit implicit. It implies that the lives of one group of people are more valuable than the lives of another.

This would be scandalous under any conditions. How much more so in light of the fact that hate speech and incitement against Palestinians have been flooding the airwaves, the internet, and social media, coming from the top (Israeli officials and their Western backers) and echoing all over the information ecosystem, in the context of what experts believe could be a prelude to genocide?

The power of emotive coverage and repetition is well understood. The selective application of emotive repetition is sure to have an impact on audiences, and it is exactly the kind of impact Israeli propagandists are aiming for as they dehumanize Palestinians and set the stage for the mass murder they have pledged—and begun—to carry out.

Does this not raise the question of the possible complicity of the BBC in incitement, dehumanization, and war propaganda? How would the BBC respond to this?

### **3. Interviewing Officials**

In light of all the above, interviews with Israeli officials and their Western backers—as well as with Israeli propagandists—cannot possibly be friendly affairs, with presenters not only refraining from presenting them with evidence of the above, but also giving them comfortable airtime as they justify it. This is happening all too often, and as far as I know, the expert opinion above and the evidence that backs it have not been presented to Israeli or Western officials on air.

The question of finding exceptions (if there are any) is not enough. Rigorous and challenging interviews should not be the exception, they should be the rule.

### **4. Disinformation Unit**

The BBC has taken upon itself in recent years the task of fighting fake news, disinformation, hate speech, and such things, a trend in Western media.

Where is the content analyzing the flood of incitement against Palestinians and tracking its impact?

As I mentioned above, as early as 2014, UN officials who advised the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide warned of 'the flagrant use of hate speech in the social media, particularly against the Palestinian population.[8]

This has escalated over the past years, and increasingly, has come from the top. Just a few months ago, the Israeli finance minister called on the state to 'erase' an entire Palestinian town.[9]

Since the October 7 attack by Hamas, there have been many statements by Israeli officials declaring the intent to murder Palestinian civilians en masse, or otherwise dehumanizing them in preparation for such actions.

The Israeli Minister of Defense said, "We are fighting human animals and we act accordingly." A high-ranking officer said, "Human animals must be treated as such. There will be no electricity and no water, there will only be destruction." An army spokesperson said "the emphasis is on damage and not on accuracy." The Israeli President held all Palestinians in Gaza responsible for the actions of Hamas. One MP said the goal should be "Nakba! A Nakba that will overshadow the Nakba of 1948."  
[10]

Irrespective of whether or not the BBC has a high-profile unit that has given considerable attention to hate speech and incitement, the above should be prominently reflected in coverage, features, explainers, and news analysis.

The presence of such a unit, however, and the kind of work it has undertaken over the past few years, implies an additional responsibility to explore what other media are doing to amplify the dehumanization effect and facilitate the Israeli government's efforts to normalize the mass murder of Palestinians.

Such a unit should be delving deep into this, and exploring the vicious cycle of incitement and its impact on political reality in Israel, and consequently on the lives of Palestinians.

Also notable is the fact that hate speech and incitement have spilled over into the West. One example is US Senator Lindsey Graham's call for Israel to "level the place." He also said the conflict is a 'religious war'.

Such rhetoric has sparked fear among Arab and Muslim communities in the US. It may well have contributed to the stabbing to death of a six-year-old Palestinian American child in a hate crime in Chicago.[11]

## 5. Historical Context

Our current coverage kicked off following the Hamas attack. Doubtless, it is major news. But that doesn't mean history started on October 7. We should incorporate into our coverage an accurate, balanced, fair, and truthful representation of the reality leading up to that moment.

I won't go into detail, but simply remind you of three terms: apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and settler-colonialism.

These are terms used by many experts and highly respected organizations to which the BBC usually defers. They are used to describe the nature of Israeli rule over Palestinians as well as the methods used by Israel to oppress generation after generation of Palestinians. They are based on extensive evidence.

To what extent is this reflected in our coverage? Without such context, can we claim to have adequately informed the public? Or are we withholding highly relevant and significant information without which the basics of the conflict cannot possibly be understood?

Just a few days ago, Francesca Albanese, the UN's Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, had this to say:

There is a grave danger that what we are witnessing may be a repeat of the 1948 Nakba, and the 1967 Naksa, yet on a larger scale....Israel has already carried out mass ethnic cleansing of Palestinians under the fog of war... Again, in the name of self-defense, Israel is seeking to justify what would amount to ethnic cleansing.[12]

Once again, I invite you to sift through our coverage, past and present, for any trace of the above; whether in explainers, or interviews, or features, or news analysis. Is it there at all, and if so, is it given the prominence it is due?

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears that the BBC is keeping a lot of highly significant and relevant information, including extensive evidence, expert opinion, and historical context, from the public. Members of the public cannot possibly form an informed opinion or a basic understanding of the unfolding events without access to such information.

It also appears the BBC could be reinforcing Israeli propaganda meant to dehumanize the Palestinians.

There is a lot more to be said, but these are the broad headlines. This is not about mistakes here and there, or even about systemic bias in favor of Israel. The question now is a question of complicity.

It is a matter of public interest to rectify this with the utmost urgency.

Best,  
Rami Ruhayem

*[This email was copied to many other BBC staff, and represents – in its specific criticisms and its direct challenge to the BBC's highest authority – a deepening of the internal rejection of BBC coverage, and a reflection of the same among its audiences. If shared widely, it has the potential to increase the pressure on the institution significantly, exposing as it does the contradictions between its claims of accuracy and rigor and its differential treatment of Palestinian and Israeli lives and deaths.]*

*The question remains how, and indeed whether, the BBC will respond, and if there will be any meaningful investigations, or change, both of BBC editorial guidelines on this issue, and of its relations with its staff.]*

[1] <https://mondoweiss.net/2018/08/israels-policies-genocidal/>

[https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13642987.2022.2065261?\\_\\_cf\\_chl\\_rt\\_tk=23Ut343mwYd9Ns3W\\_W9T10Rlt86HtDdfe75cNIEnjfU-1697885969-0-gaNycGzNDJA](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13642987.2022.2065261?__cf_chl_rt_tk=23Ut343mwYd9Ns3W_W9T10Rlt86HtDdfe75cNIEnjfU-1697885969-0-gaNycGzNDJA)

[2] <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml>

[3] “We are equally disturbed by the flagrant use of hate speech in social media, particularly against the Palestinian population,” stated the Special Advisers. According to reliable reports, individuals have disseminated messages that could be dehumanizing to the Palestinians and have called for the killing of members of this group. The Special Advisers remind all that incitement to commit atrocity crimes is prohibited under international law.

<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/media/statements/2014/English/2014-07-24-Special%20Advisers%27%20Statement%20on%20the%20situation%20in%20Israel%20and%20the%20>

[4] <https://twailr.com/public-statement-scholars-warn-of-potential-genocide-in-gaza/>

[5] Late on 12 October, the Israeli authorities issued an order for more than 1.1 million Palestinians in Gaza City and the northern Gaza Strip to leave their homes and flee to the south of Gaza within 24 hours, knowing that this would be practically impossible for many. Palestinians who did start to evacuate south reported that civilians and ambulances were targeted and hit by Israeli airstrikes on the designated “safe route”, killing at least 70 Palestinians who were fleeing to seek refuge. The ICRC stated that “the evacuation orders, coupled with the complete siege” are incompatible with international humanitarian law. Almost half a million Palestinians have already been displaced, and Israeli forces have bombed the only possible exit route that Israel does not control, the Rafah crossing to Egypt multiple times. The World Health Organisation published a warning that “[f]orcing more than 2000 patients to relocate to southern Gaza, where health facilities are already running at maximum capacity and unable to absorb a dramatic rise in the number of patients, could be tantamount to a death sentence”.

[6] [https://twitter.com/NRC\\_Egeland/status/1712739072945373386](https://twitter.com/NRC_Egeland/status/1712739072945373386)

[7] Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant declared on 9 October that “we are fighting human animals and we act accordingly”. He subsequently announced that Israel was moving to “a full-scale response” and that he had “removed every restriction” on Israeli forces, as well as stating: “Gaza

won't return to what it was before. We will eliminate everything.” On 10 October, the head of the Israeli army's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), Maj. Gen. Ghassan Alian, addressed a message directly to Gaza residents: “Human animals must be treated as such. There will be no electricity and no water, there will only be destruction. You wanted hell, you will get hell”. The same day, Israeli army spokesperson Daniel Hagari acknowledged the wanton and intentionally destructive nature of Israel's bombing campaign in Gaza: “The emphasis is on damage and not on accuracy.”

... Israel's President emphasized that the Israeli authorities view the entire Palestinian population of Gaza as responsible for the actions of militant groups, and subject accordingly to collective punishment and unrestricted use of force: “It is an entire nation out there that is responsible. It is not true this rhetoric about civilians not being aware, not involved. It's absolutely not true”. Israeli Minister of Energy and Infrastructure Israel Katz added: “All the civilian population in Gaza is ordered to leave immediately. We will win. They will not receive a drop of water or a single battery until they leave the world.”

Evidence of incitement to genocide has also been present in Israeli public discourse. This ranges from statements by elected officials—such as Knesset member Ariel Kallner's call on 7 October for “one goal: Nakba! [catastrophe for Palestinians] A Nakba that will overshadow the Nakba of 1948”—to public banners displayed in Israeli cities calling for a “victory” signified by “zero population in Gaza” and the “annihilation of Gaza”. On national television, security correspondent Alon Ben David relayed the Israeli military's plan to destroy Gaza City, Jabaliyya, Beit Lahiya, and Beit Hanun. Such statements are not new and resonate with a wider Israeli discourse showcasing the intent for elimination and genocide against the Palestinian people. Earlier in the year, for example, Israeli Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich called Palestinians “repugnant”, “disgusting” and called for “wiping out” the entire Palestinian village of Huwwara in the West Bank.

<https://twailr.com/public-statement-scholars-warn-of-potential-genocide-in-gaza/>

[8] “We are equally disturbed by the flagrant use of hate speech in the social media, particularly against the Palestinian population,” stated the Special Advisers. According to reliable reports, individuals have disseminated messages that could be dehumanising to the Palestinians and have called for the killing of members of this group. The Special Advisers remind all that incitement to commit atrocity crimes is prohibited under international law.

<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/media/statements/2014/English/2014-07-24-Special%20Advisers%27%20Statement%20on%20the%20situation%20in%20Israel%20and%20the%20>

[9] TEL AVIV — A senior Israeli official on Wednesday called for the state to “erase” the Palestinian town of Hawara, which was rampaged by Jewish settlers over the weekend.



“I think the village of Hawara needs to be erased. I think that the state of Israel needs to do it. God forbid that regular people should do it,” Israel Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich said.

His comments came after he liked a tweet that called for Hawara to be “wiped out” in the wake of a Palestinian gunman's attack that killed two brothers, Hillel Menachem Yaniv, 21, and Yagel Yaakov Yaniv, 19, who lived in the Israeli settlement of Har Bracha, around 5 miles away.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/israel-finance-minister-bezalel-smotrich-hawara-erased-west-bank-rcna72871>

[10] <https://twailr.com/public-statement-scholars-warn-of-potential-genocide-in-gaza/>

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/in-israels-call-for-mass-evacuation-palestinians-hear-echoes-of-their-original-catastrophic-exodus#:~:text=>

[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/israel-gaza-isaac-herzog\\_n\\_65295ee8e4b03ea0c004e2a8](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/israel-gaza-isaac-herzog_n_65295ee8e4b03ea0c004e2a8)

<https://www.commondreams.org/news/israel-gaza-bombing>

[https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/cogat-chief-addresses-gazans-you-wanted-hell-you-will-get-hell/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/cogat-chief-addresses-gazans-you-wanted-hell-you-will-get-hell/)

[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/israel-defense-minister-human-animals-gaza-palestine\\_n\\_6524220ae4b09f4b8d412e0a](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/israel-defense-minister-human-animals-gaza-palestine_n_6524220ae4b09f4b8d412e0a)

[11] Washington, DC—Civil rights advocates in the United States have been warning that dehumanizing rhetoric about the Israel-Hamas war could translate into attacks on Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim American communities at home. Those fears appear to have materialized in the ugliest way when a six-year-old Palestinian American child was stabbed to death in a suspected hate crime near Chicago on Saturday.

...Another senator, South Carolina's Lindsey Graham, described the conflict as a “religious war” — one in which he sided with Israel. “Do whatever the hell you have to do to defend yourself,” he said of Israel's attacks on Gaza. “Level the place.” <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/19/frustration-concern-rise-in-arab-american-communities-amid-gaza-war>

[12] “There is a grave danger that what we are witnessing may be a repeat of the 1948 Nakba, and the 1967 Naksa, yet on a larger scale. The international community must do everything to stop this from happening again,” the UN expert said. She noted that Israeli public officials have openly advocated for another Nakba, the term for the events of 1947-1949 when over 750,000 Palestinians

were expelled from their homes and lands during the hostilities that led to the establishment of the State of Israel. The Naksa, which led to Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967, displaced 350,000 Palestinians. "Israel has already carried out mass ethnic cleansing of Palestinians under the fog of war," the expert said. "Again, in the name of self-defense, Israel is seeking to justify what would amount to ethnic cleansing. "Any continued military operations by Israel have gone well beyond the limits of international law. The international community must stop these egregious violations of international law now, before tragic history is repeated. Time is of the essence. Palestinians and Israelis both deserve to live in peace, equality of rights, dignity, and freedom," Albanese said.

[https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/un-expert-warns-new-instance-mass-ethnic-cleansing-palestinians-calls#:~:text=GENEVA%20\(14%20October%202023\)%20%E2%80%93,Hamas%20and%20Israeli%2](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/un-expert-warns-new-instance-mass-ethnic-cleansing-palestinians-calls#:~:text=GENEVA%20(14%20October%202023)%20%E2%80%93,Hamas%20and%20Israeli%2)

[https://x.com/un\\_spexperts/status/1713178425777598881?s=46](https://x.com/un_spexperts/status/1713178425777598881?s=46)