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The BBC and Israel's War on Context: Part 2

Media Page Editors

Jadaliyya has obtained access to leaked internal emails from the BBC, the British Broadcasting Corporation, revealing the depth of staff grievances at its coverage of the genocide in Palestine, and accusing the BBC of complicity. In an email dated 1 May 2024, Beirut-based BBC correspondent Rami Ruhayem wrote to the Director General of the BBC, Tim Davie, as well as several departments of BBC News staff, detailing the BBC's editorial failings, which he considered 'evidence of a collapse in the application of basic standards and norms of journalism that seems aligned with Israel's propaganda strategy.' Ruhayem indicated that BBC management had failed to respond to 'a mass of evidence-based critique of coverage' from members of staff. In conclusion, he wrote, 'instead of putting together mechanisms for a thorough examination of output, and for inclusive, respectful, and professional discussions guided by [BBC] standards and values, it appears management has opted to oversee a continuation of the editorial direction the BBC has taken since October.'

The first email ([read here](#)) was leaked to the right-wing UK press, appearing quoted one day later, on 2 May, in the broadsheets [The Times](#) ('BBC correspondent questions 'facts' of October 7 attacks on Israel') and [The Telegraph](#) ('BBC may be 'complicit in Israeli war propaganda' claims Beirut

correspondent'), as well as tabloid The Daily Mail ('BBC correspondent says the broadcaster has a pro-Israel bias and should be questioning the 'facts' of October 7 – sparking fury among Jewish colleagues').

Jadaliyya has obtained this email, as well as its attachments, which Ruhayem had written earlier, and which are shared here in full. In the first attachment, Ruhayem examines interviews with Israeli guests on the BBC News Channel between 10 and 25 October 2023, analysing this coverage in light of what he calls 'Israel's war on context'.

In the second attachment, featured in this second installment, Ruhayem examines BBC content relating to the events of October 7. He writes, 'This paper is not about what happened on that day and the days that followed; rather, it is an inquiry into whether – and to what extent – the BBC applied, misapplied or simply cast aside journalistic standards in treating various claims about what happened on that day.' Again he concludes: 'I've found a sustained collapse in some of the most basic standards and values, one which seems to complement Israel's propaganda purposes and strategy.'

The May email follows earlier communication by Ruhayem in October 2023, also addressed to Tim Davie and BBC staff. That email was subsequently quoted by the right-wing UK press, in the broadsheet The Times, and the Zionist publication The Jewish Chronicle. Jadaliyya published that email in full in 'Turmoil at the BBC: Gravest Possible Concerns at its Gaza Coverage'.

Attachment 2: More Feedback, 25 February 2024

In the previous piece (sent on the 8th of February), I examined how a body of relevant context that would've cast doubt on Israeli messaging – especially what Israel's west-facing propagandists claim are Israel's war aims – was consistently ignored in BBC coverage. In this piece I look into some of the content relating to the events of October 7. This paper is not about what happened on that day and the days that followed; rather, it is an inquiry into whether - and to what extent - the BBC applied, misapplied or simply cast aside journalistic standards in treating various claims about what happened on that day.

I've found a sustained collapse in some of the most basic standards[1] and values, one which seems to complement Israel's propaganda purposes and strategy.

Early Signs

From the start, it was evident that unverified claims of the most atrocious acts by Hamas fighters against Israelis were being circulated and repeated at the highest levels.[2] Even though it was not

possible to rule them out, especially at an early stage, a set of basic measures should've been initiated; one of them would've been to make sure presenters inquire about evidence when such claims are made on air and clarify that the BBC had not verified them. Another would've been to direct the relevant teams to investigate and constantly update audiences –and everyone working on the story within the BBC – as to what it is we know took place, what it is we know did not, and what we remain uncertain about.

There were also reasons for extra caution. Among these were early signs of what appeared to be an attack by Israel on basic journalistic norms. Responding to questions from The Intercept about the claim that Hamas had beheaded babies, an Israeli spokesperson said 'we cannot confirm it officially, but you can assume it happened and believe the report.' In other words, Israel expected journalists to believe all the worst claims about Hamas, regardless of whether they're backed by evidence.[3]

The Pregnant Woman and the Foetus

Among the most bloodcurdling accusations to have been made against Palestinian attackers on October 7 is one about a pregnant woman and her foetus. I have heard versions of it repeated at least four times on the BBC.

... just yesterday I heard one of the women that was pregnant there, this terrorist put his hand in, took out her foetus killed it while the umbilical cord was still attached to her...

The presenter let the claim pass without making any inquiries. Days later:

'...they pulled a baby out of a pregnant mom and then beheaded the baby, beheaded the mom.

This, too, passed without any inquiry by the presenter. Days later:

The Guest:... we now know that there was a pregnant woman who had her belly cut open, the baby was removed from her stomach and beheaded in front of her. There's videos of this.

BBC Presenter: Which is unverified, we haven't seen these videos.

The Guest: You haven't seen it. I know many people who have seen it. these videos are in existence, there's countless others...

In relative terms, this much-needed interjection is a credit to the individual presenter. But it is also a de facto confession - on the part of the BBC - that the BBC had allowed this claim to be made – at least twice up until that point - without question, although it had not verified it. It would have been

reasonable for audiences exposed to the previous two interviews - especially those who trust the BBC - to assume the BBC believes this event to have taken place.

Why - one might ask - were defenders of Israel going for such claims instead of all the documented instances of brutality against Israelis on October 7 by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups and individuals? Why not simply talk about horrific things they know are true and verified, instead of claims that could - in theory and in the absence of evidence - expose them to charges of fabrication?

To anyone in doubt, an answer might be found in the next rendition of the story. The subject under discussion was the humanitarian situation in Gaza. More specifically, premature Palestinian babies were on the verge of dying:

BBC Presenter: let the fuel through, is that so hard?

Israeli guest: It's very hard because we're dealing with murderers and liars, and people who've done the most outrageous atrocities we've seen since the Holocaust. We're talking here about babies who could not maybe survive in the incubators. Israeli babies didn't even make it to incubators because those animals cut the mother's stomach, took the baby out, killed it and then killed the mother. So when you're dealing with these people it's very difficult to send in fuel which you know at the end of the day will actually make Hamas use it for rockets

The claim once again passed without challenge or inquiry. The purpose of the repetition was made clearer; it was to drill in the idea that any action Israel sees fit to take is justified. By seeking to place Hamas on the most extreme end of the spectrum of evil, propagandists for Israel seemed to believe they'd be able to defend whatever Israel chose to do - and set the stage for more. The seeming suspension of basic standards of scrutiny on the BBC most likely encouraged that strategy.

Other claims

In almost every interview, Israeli officials, politicians, and other guests were making and repeating claims of the most horrific nature, often strung together in a series:

...I'm talking about Hamas terrorists going street by street ... Shooting down babies. Raping girls. Burning people alive. Beheading people...it's important we don't start the story from the middle... we've seen pictures of babies being shot from point blank...

...last week, young girls were raped repeatedly and brutally until their body parts were torn apart. Babies were set on fire. Babies were shot in the head.

...Who does that? I'll tell you who does that. People who have no problem butchering babies in their bedroom.

A few basic questions could've shed some light on these claims, and helped other teams put together a comprehensive picture of verified atrocities to inform audiences. But in all of the examples above and more, no such questions were asked, and the allegations passed with no comment, clarification, or interjection of any sort.

Once again, the BBC was implying to its audiences that it had verified all these claims, although in these cases, it wasn't clear what - exactly - it had supposedly verified. Was it that children, including babies, had been killed? Or that they'd been killed by Hamas? Was it that Hamas fighters had walked into a bedroom, and 'butchered' a baby? Or 'babies'? Or set them on fire? Had the BBC seen the pictures one of the guests mentioned - of 'babies shot from point blank'? If not, why not ask to see them and verify them? If such things had been verified by the BBC, why weren't they in a BBC piece online?

It is left to audiences to imagine the worst, and to believe that the worst had been verified by the BBC. The effect over time, is the merging of what propagandists for Israel say and what the BBC says about the events of October 7, as one Israeli spokesperson appears to have understood:

...bloodthirsty terrorists who rape and burn people alive, it's been reported on the BBC, I don't need to restate all the things that Hamas did on that terrible Saturday morning.

The Screening

Israel has held several screenings for journalists to show evidence of some of the actions of Hamas fighters. BBC Verify [4] carried a piece about one of them, with description of some of the violence inflicted on Israelis on October 7. But the piece neither confirms nor denies - nor mentions in any way - the stream of allegations which were allowed to be hammered into the heads of BBC viewers without challenge. Does the video shown include evidence in support of these allegations? Have the Israeli officials present at the screening spoken about these allegations? No questions, no answers, no verification.

The BBC also interviewed a journalist who attended one of the screenings. He too had almost nothing to say about these claims, and the BBC presenter did not ask about them. Instead, the presenter chose to ask about 'the deniers' out there:

BBC Presenter: ...perhaps we can talk about the reasons for that briefing yesterday ... it's also very much to address the deniers that are out there, you go on to social media and you can see it just tweet after tweet.

Journalist: Yeah ... the scope and reach of disinformation, misinformation, straight out lying, is huge and they were forced to do this because the level of denial was so great, and you know there was a lot particularly, a lot of denial around the issue of the murdered babies. Now I'm not going to go into details, but we were shown an image of one of them and it was horrific... there's still lots of people saying it's all lies...

Does the image he saw 'around the issue of the murdered babies' substantiate, in part or in full, the claims made above? Were the journalists told what the Israeli authorities know about how the baby was killed? Were any details/photos provided about all the other babies Israel says were killed, given that the claims made and repeated on the BBC were all in the plural? At least some of these questions can be answered without going into the terrible details around that image, and they're questions that would help any BBC team working on building an accurate, comprehensive and evidence-based picture of the events of October 7.

They're also questions that were not asked. Once again, the audience is led to believe all the claims and to imagine worse. In addition, we now have what amounts to a collective smear against people who doubt the Israeli version; all of it, any of it. Who are these 'deniers' –lumped together by the presenter and the guest? Doubtless, social media is flooded with people who do not believe many of the claims. There are many articles [5] – based on testimony [6] and evidence - that reinforce their doubts [7] about several key aspects of the official Israeli narrative of what happened. [8] These are not blanket cries that 'it's all lies'. These are journalists, on different sides of the divide, who've presented evidence to back up their doubts.

Maybe they all got it wrong? Maybe they misinterpreted the evidence? The BBC has an impressive array of resources that can be marshalled to investigate, lay out the available evidence, and critically examine various interpretations of it.[9] But more than four months on, there appears to be no trace of such things on BBC News Online, including something as simple as a call for an investigation by families of Israelis killed during the attacks.[10]

Conclusions

There has been a sustained collapse in the application of some of the most basic editorial standards on BBC outlets when it comes covering the events of October 7, one that appears aligned with Israel's propaganda strategy. Claims and testimony that encourage the most extreme portrayals of Israel's enemies are allowed to be repeated without challenge – regardless of whether or not they're backed by evidence. Claims and testimony that raise the possibility of Israeli disinformation around the events of October 7 are ignored – despite the evidence.

Such coverage is likely to have aided Israel's efforts to ensure political support in the West for its actions, and to intimidate those opposed to them and portray them as supporters of the most hideous

atrocities. An important subject for future examination is the extent to which incitement and hate speech against Palestinians have been permitted on BBC outlets. Another is the subject of consistency in how much attention – and what kind of attention – is given to the victims of atrocities, [xi] before and after October 7. But for the purposes of this paper, the most pressing question is this: why does the BBC seem to have steered away from the growing body of evidence that casts doubt on the official Israeli version of the events of October 7?

Disclaimers:

None of the above is meant to suggest anything about the intentions of individuals in the BBC, whether presenters, producers, editors, or anyone involved directly or indirectly in the programs in which these interviews were aired, or in the pieces written, or not written, on BBC News Online.

Further details about the interviews are available upon the request of management.

The volume of BBC output is too large for a single paper to offer a comprehensive assessment. More light can (and should) be shed by further studies.

[1] ... the BBC editorial guidelines underpin everything we do.

These guidelines are the blueprint for our journalism – ensuring we forensically check and verify facts, double and triple source information, and track down first-hand eyewitnesses.

And that as we pursue the truth, we do so with impartiality and with accuracy. This is our promise.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/articles/2022/deborah-turness-bbc-news-trust-is-earned/>

[2] CNN (Updated 3:25 PM EDT, Thu October 12, 2023), [President Joe Biden's graphic description of horrors in Israel was intended](#) to “underscore the utter depravity” of the Hamas attack on civilians, the White House says, even if he hadn't personally viewed or confirmed the imagery he described.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/12/politics/joe-biden-photos-children-hamas-israel/index.html>

[3] October 11 2023, THE ISRAEL DEFENSE FORCES could not confirm a horrific claim that Hamas beheaded babies during a weekend assault, a spokesperson for the military told The Intercept on Tuesday. The claim went viral, becoming a headline-grabbing aspect of a massacre that left more than 1,000 Israelis dead.

“Women, children, toddlers, and elderly were brutally butchered in an ISIS way of action and we are we are [sic] aware of the heinous acts Hamas is capable of,” the spokesperson wrote in response to questions from The Intercept about the viral reports. “We cannot confirm it officially, but you can assume it happened and believe the report,” she reiterated in a follow-up phone call.

<https://theintercept.com/2023/10/11/israel-hamas-disinformation/>

[4] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67198270>

[5] <https://mondoweiss.net/2023/10/a-growing-number-of-reports-indicate-israeli-forces-responsible-for-israeli-civilian-and-military-deaths-following-october-7-attack/>

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/israel-palestine-war-media-ignoring-evidence-actions-7-october>

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/families-of-13-people-killed-in-october-7-kibbutz-beeri-firefight-demand-probe/#:~:text=The%20families%20of%2013%20Israeli,inclusing%20tank%20fire%2C%20at%20the>

[6]

Aryeh Golan: When they tried to eliminate the abductors, Hamas?

Yasmin Porat: They eliminated everyone, including the hostages. Because there was very, very heavy crossfire. I was freed at approximately 5:30. The fighting apparently ended at 8:30. After insane crossfire, two tank shells were shot into the house. It's a small kibbutz house, nothing big. You saw it on the news.

Aryeh Golan: Yes

Yasmin Porat: Not a large place. And at that moment everyone was killed. There was quiet, except for one survivor that came out of the garden, Hadas.

Aryeh Golan: How were they all killed?

Yasmin Porat: From the crossfire.

Aryeh Golan: Crossfire, so it could also be from our forces?

Yasmin Porat: Undoubtedly.

Aryeh Golan: Really?

Yasmin Porat: That's what I believe.

<https://electronicintifada.net/content/israeli-forces-shot-their-own-civilians-kibbutz-survivor-says/38861>

[7] https://www.liberation.fr/checknews/israel-7-octobre-un-massacre-et-des-mystifications-20231211_A7QBBETYDRDERFAQINGA66ZAR4/

<https://www.newarab.com/news/israeli-helicopter-fired-nova-festival-goers-oct-7>

[8] <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-01-31/ty-article-magazine/.premium/death-and-donations-did-the-volunteer-group-handling-the-october-7-dead-exploit-its-role/0000018d-5a73-d997-adff-df7bdb670000>

<https://mondoweiss.net/2023/12/zaka-is-not-a-trustworthy-source-for-allegations-of-sexual-violence-on-october-7/?>

[utm_content=buffer1232d&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=buffer](https://mondoweiss.net/2023/12/zaka-is-not-a-trustworthy-source-for-allegations-of-sexual-violence-on-october-7/?utm_content=buffer1232d&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=buffer)

[9] <https://theintercept.com/2024/02/07/gaza-israel-netanyahu-propaganda-lies-palestinians/>

[10] The families of 13 Israeli civilians killed amid an intense firefight between Hamas and Israeli troops in Kibbutz Be'eri on October 7 are seeking a military investigation of the soldiers' actions that day, due to the likelihood that at least some of the civilians were killed by army fire, including tank fire, at the house where they were being held hostage by terrorists.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/families-of-13-people-killed-in-october-7-kibbutz-beeri-firefight-demand->

[probe/#:~:text=The%20families%20of%2013%20Israeli,inclusing%20tank%20fire%2C%20at%20the](https://www.timesofisrael.com/families-of-13-people-killed-in-october-7-kibbutz-beeri-firefight-demand-probe/#:~:text=The%20families%20of%2013%20Israeli,inclusing%20tank%20fire%2C%20at%20the)

[11] <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/too-dangerous-play-west-bank-children-shot-dead-israeli-soldiers>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1226264/>