



Witnessing undone: silence, noise and the enabling of genocide in Gaza

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Abstract

This article examines the converging roles of legacy news media and official political speech in enabling genocide to take place in Gaza. Drawing on BBC coverage as an example, I explain how dominant Western media relied on a cacophony of silence and noise to amplify state narratives. This repertoire is characterized by selective omission of context from coverage, the policing of words, mainly the word genocide, and the inflation of a “war on terror” narrative and its merger with colonial language about the savage enemy. The effects of this strategic politics of silence and noise are in enabling impunity in committing war crimes, undoing of witnessing as a 20th-century framework with its rhetorical claims towards a universal “never again” modality, and taking a sharper authoritarian turn in Western media’s reporting conventions.

Keywords: war, genocide, conflict reporting, Gaza, BBC, journalists’ safety, racism

Introduction

This article argues that dominant Western political communication and media coverage of Israel’s genocide of Palestinians in Gaza has been characterized by a strategic politics of silence and noise. By circumventing the build-up of pressure against the Israeli state, this speaking over and silencing has material consequences in enabling the destruction of Gaza and the deaths of more than 70,000 Palestinians (Christou, 2025)—in addition to 1,101 in the West Bank (Hume, 2025) as of December 2025. I reflect on what this coverage implies about journalism standards in the UK and within Western media systems, where journalistic professionalism ranks high in three central criteria—autonomy of journalism, consensus on ethics and standards of practice, and ideology of public service (Hallin & Mancini, 2017).

As a primary case, I focus on the BBC because of the wide gap between its Gaza coverage and its mandate as a public broadcaster that claims to uphold the values of impartiality, truth and public service. Here, my intention is not to suggest that other media systems, for example in the Arab world, fare well. On the contrary, it is to make the larger point that an analysis of Middle East coverage in Western legacy media since 2023 reveals a convergence trend towards increased authoritarianism in the ways journalistic norms and values of truth telling have been compromised.

I identify examples of Israeli and Western state positions that dehumanize Palestinians and analyze how they seep into media coverage to demonstrate the proximity of dominant narratives and frames in media and official political speech. I draw on the Centre for Media Monitoring content analysis of 35,000+ pieces of BBC content from October 2023 to 2024 (Centre for Media Monitoring, 2024). The report concludes that the BBC treated Palestinian deaths as less newsworthy, dedicated more coverage to, and deployed systematic

language in favor of, Israel, including in the strategic use of emotive terms and passive voice to mask Israel’s responsibility for war crimes. This represents an intensification of long existing dynamics—that the BBC’s “intimate relationship with elite power” prevents it from fulfilling its mandate as a public broadcaster (Freedman, 2019) and that Israeli perspectives predominate TV news in the UK for reasons including political and work pressures (Philo & Berry, 2011).

Building on this body of research, this article’s contribution is in explaining how discursive patterns deployed in dominant Western political communications, and legacy media claiming impartiality, enable war crimes through a strategic alignment of silence and noise. I first point to the silencing of context about the history of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination that reveals the structural basis of the violence and dispossession targeting the Palestinian people. I move to discussing how that context is overpowered by the “war on terror” as noise as that lexicon merges with racialized language about “savage” Palestinians. Here I highlight how the “war on terror” frame traveled from Western to Arab political lexicons and back—indicating the complicity of Arab regimes in making the terrorism story so legible and usable in justifying state violence and repression. I then focus on the policing of the word “genocide” and the silence and noise tactics that circumscribe its use in relation to Gaza.

In addition to green-lighting genocide, the effects of these tactics of disinformation and censorship on what can be said and seen undoes witnessing as a self-proclaimed understanding of Western audiences as moral spectators. Witnessing, long framed as a moral obligation to acknowledge and respond to atrocity, has been turned in dominant media and political speech into a performance of impartiality that privileges lethal power over truth, establishes a hierarchy in human life, and indicates a sharper authoritarian turn in Western media systems.

The truth about context

It is at times of war and bloodshed that journalism is most needed to tell the truth and provide context to help audiences understand a news story. To achieve that, the starting point must be admission that the curation of context and application of impartiality are political decisions that determine who and what is amplified or silenced. In constructing a news story, it is easy to establish false balance under the guise of impartiality (Harb, 2024). BBC guidelines define impartiality as “not favouring one side over another and reflecting all relevant sides (...) It means not taking sides” (BBC Editorial Policy, n.d.). But impartiality can be at odds with other journalistic values like truth or public service—for instance the risks of false balance have been recognized at the BBC when covering stories of climate change and racism (Harb, 2024). Editorial decisions about the hierarchy of journalistic values are crucial in war coverage. Whether on Ukraine or Palestine, the public should expect information that impartially tells truth about power differentials within a war and how it emerged, rather than an impartiality that constructs opponents as two equal sides of a news story. When it comes to BBC Gaza coverage, Palestinians are neither afforded equal space for their context, nor a truthful account of the structure of power at hand.

According to the Centre for Media Monitoring (2024, p.11), at least 40% of the BBC’s online coverage in the year 2023–2024 referenced the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023. “Yet only 0.5% of articles referenced any historical or contemporary context.” That day, Hamas fighters crossed the Green Line into Israel. They killed and kidnapped Israelis including families in their homes and youths at a music festival. The death toll of the attack stands at 1,200 Israelis, both civilians and soldiers. As the war progressed, and little information prior to October 7 was given, the waves of killing and maiming that Palestinians faced prior to that day, as well as the structural conditions of Israel’s occupation of Palestine, got silenced and written out. As a leaked email by BBC correspondent Rami Ruhayem points out, Israel effectively declared “a war on context” and media coverage followed. This was made explicit in the Israeli reaction to a statement by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, who said on 24 October that the Hamas attack “did not happen in a vacuum.” Israel swiftly retaliated by calling for his resignation and denying visas to UN officials (Jadaliyya, 2024).

The silencing of context, namely the structure of colonial dispossession in Palestine and the accumulated violence Palestinians have endured over generations, indicates an intention to prevent meaningful understanding of the news being reported. Context here is not only referring to what can be considered distant history, such as references to the Nakba—the Arabic word for disaster that refers to the 1948 ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians when Israel was founded. Context is also the fact that at least 60% of Gaza’s population are descendants of Palestinian refugees who were forced out of their homes in adjacent lands in what is now Israel (Reuters, 2022)—with its apartheid political system (Amnesty International, 2022) and expansionist policies whose landgrabs and settlements in Palestine and Syria are illegal under international law. It is that Gaza has been occupied since 1967 and then besieged since 2005; and that major wars and military operations have taken place in 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2021 and 2022, in addition to the

2018 “great march of return” when Palestinian protestors demanded the end of the Israeli blockade and the right of return for refugees (Reuters, 2022). As Puar (2017) argues, these military operations have established debilitation as a deliberate biopolitical tactic by the Israeli state—supplementing a right to kill with a right to maim. So, what the above implies is that Israeli bombardment is not a state of exception but simply how life has been made to be in Gaza—one of the most densely populated strips of land on Earth.

The policing of words

The policing of words is another way of silencing and of circumventing witnessing. And here the war on the word “genocide” is a prime example. In October 2023, hundreds of legal and other scholars warned that genocide may occur in Gaza (Europe solidaire sans frontieres, 2023). In May 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that the occurrence of genocide is plausible. In July 2025, the International Association of Genocide Scholars issued a resolution that Israel’s actions in Gaza fulfil the criteria of genocide (Van den, 2025) and prominent Israeli rights groups also called the war a genocide (Al-Jazeera English, 2025a, 2025b). In September 2025, the United Nations (UN) Independent International Commission of Inquiry stated that Israel has committed genocide against Palestinians in Gaza (United Nations, 2025). For Palestinians, it had been a genocide all along.

As Erakat (2025) explains, the controversy around the use of the term “genocide” is not simply legal but political. The term captures the scale of the violence and the Israeli state’s intent to exterminate the means to life for the Palestinian people in Gaza. Many insist on its use not to reduce politics to linguistics but to bear witness, to reject dehumanization, and to demand accountability. Holding on to a word is a weapon of the weak for those with little power to influence events beyond protest and solidarity. But even that form of resistance is deemed unacceptable to the Western leaders who are responsible for and/or complicit in enabling Israeli violence.

Israeli and Western leaders responded to the term genocide with attempts either to co-opt and stretch the term to deem it meaningless (noise) or to censor and police its use (silence). The former has been more the Israeli and American approach, and the latter the European. For instance, Israeli leaders routinely blur the line between Palestinians at large and Hamas and describe Israel’s war effort as targeting Nazi genocidal actors—also falsely extending historical responsibility for the Holocaust to Palestinians. For its part, the Trump White House has opted for accusing South Africa, the country that spearheaded the case against Israel in the ICJ, of conducting genocide against White farmers in the country. Like an elastic band stretched to breaking point, this is a clear attempt to deactivate the word by overextending its meaning.

If Israeli and American leaders exhibited the tactic of making noise to render the word meaningless, European leaders opted for denial and silencing. Asked in parliament whether Israel’s actions constitute genocide, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer responded in November 2024 that he was “well aware of the definition of genocide, and that is why I have never described this as, and referred to it as, genocide” (Rhiannon, 2024). In May 2025, French President Emmanuel Macron declared that “it’s not a president’s place to say, ‘this is a genocide,’ but that of historians” (AFP, 2025). For their

part, BBC news presenters routinely interrupted guests who uttered the word “genocide” to reiterate the Israeli position. This was done in over 100 documented instances in the year 2023–2024 (Centre for Media Monitoring, 2024).

When it comes to other wars, European political leaders and media are more deliberate with their word choice. For example, in relation to the Russian war on Ukraine, European Union president, Ursula von der Leyen, described Moscow’s attacks against civilian infrastructure as “war crimes” and emphasized the importance of clarity in stating “these are acts of pure terror.” In contrast, support for Israel continued uninterrupted at the time when former Israeli defense secretary Yoav Gallant made the infamous statement in October 2023: “I have ordered a complete siege on the Gaza Strip. There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed (...) We are fighting human animals, and we are acting accordingly” (Middle East Eye, 2023). At the time, the BBC did not focus its reporting on such brazenly racist language that reflects genocidal intent—Gallant’s “human animals” quote was mentioned in 12 out of 3873 BBC articles (Centre for Media Monitoring, 2024). When British Prime Minister Starmer was asked whether cutting off electricity is a war crime in a viral interview with LBC radio, he responded that Israel had that right (Mcshane, 2023).

The “war on terror”

As the crime of genocide was downplayed, noise in relation to the war on terror was amplified. The “war on terror” repertoire echoes the silencing effect of the post-9/11 “politics of anti-knowledge” rendering all attempts to contextualize suspect if not criminal (Stampnitzky, 2013). Terrorism discourse has been allowed to balloon to the extent Israeli war communications portray all Palestinians in Gaza as terrorists, prospective terrorists or retrospective terrorists. Agamben (1998) explains that states have the capacity to strip people of bare or naked life to produce bodies that are killable with impunity. Das (2006) elaborates that impunity in killing is achieved “when one withholds recognition from the other, not simply on the grounds that she is not part of one’s own community but that she is not part of life itself.” Israeli media war operations seek to achieve that impunity in relying on an open-ended and ever-expanding “war on terror” discourse as a confrontation between good and evil.

This is echoed by BBC coverage, which while does not directly use the label terrorist, constructs a discursive chain to anchor Gaza stories within a terrorism framing, such as in continuously reminding viewers that Hamas is designated a terrorist group and the reported casualty numbers come from the Hamas-run health ministry. It bears mentioning that those figures were accepted by the Israeli military in January 2026 (Reuters, 2026). Furthermore, in early coverage of the Gaza war, BBC news anchors repeatedly started interviews with Palestinians with the question “do you condemn Hamas?,” which stands as a reminder to the viewer that the interviewee is suspect by virtue of her identity (According to the Centre for Media Monitoring, BBC interviewers pressed Palestinian voices to condemn Hamas in 38 instances in 2023–24 but interviewed Israelis were not asked to condemn the killing of Palestinians).

Here it is important to take a historic approach to understand the roots and characteristics of terrorism discourse. Terrorism has long been construed as extra-historical—

existing outside of history and politics. As Stampnitzky (2017) explains, the concept of terrorism began to take shape in its contemporary form in the 1970s. Before then, acts of political violence, including hijackings, assassinations, and other acts now considered terrorism, were instead most often understood through a discourse of insurgency. Rather than as a tactic that any group might adopt, terrorism developed to be understood as rooted in identity (Stampnitzky, 2017). A person or a group becomes a terrorist by virtue of who they are, not what they want. In fact, any discussion of terrorists as political actors is deemed complicit with terrorist violence and is increasingly outlawed. To invoke the word “terrorism” within the conventional bounds of liberal discourse, as Somayajula (2023) writes, “is to bring the debate to a screeching halt (...) There is no spectrum of acceptable opinions, no room for reasonable disagreement when it comes to terrorism. There are only two sides—those who are with the terrorists, and those who are against them.”

This discourse has a history that precedes the 21st-century “war on terror” initiated by George W. Bush to an earlier war on terror, launched by Israel in the 1970s. One key moment in advancing this approach was the 1979 Jerusalem Conference on terrorism, sponsored by the Jonathan Institute, an Israeli think tank funded by future prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Aitlhadj et al., 2024). The conference sought to change the narrative of the Palestinian Israeli conflict to a civilizational confrontation between good and evil, the “Judeo-Christian” and the Islamic—a binary that both erases the long history of Christian persecution of Jews and of Islamic-Jewish prosperity and coexistence from Andalusia to the Ottoman Empire. It is no wonder that the framing of “Palestinian terrorism” is so pervasive and that a quarter of global groups described as terrorists by the US State Department are Palestinian (Pappé, 2009).

In the decade following 9/11, Arab governments expressed concern about this racialization. They lobbied at the UN for an international definition of terrorism. With the Arab Israeli conflict in mind, they argued that an expansive use of the term terrorism risks denying the right of peoples to fight for liberation and self-determination (Arab League letter to the Security Council, 2004). However, facing unprecedented protests in 2011, Arab regimes found the “war on terror” narrative exceedingly convenient and began adopting and adapting that lexicon to silence and kill dissidents and protestors. Even non-state actors, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, itself designated a terrorist organization in Western countries, relied on terrorism discourse in its militant intervention in support of the Al-Assad regime in Syria. Its former leader Hasan Nasrallah stressed that his fight in Syria was in self-defense against takfiri terrorists. The proliferation of talk of terrorism in Israel, the West and the Arab world then is part of the story of how it became so common and legible to portray the whole Palestinian population in Gaza as either terrorists, prospective terrorists or retrospective terrorists.

Terrorism discourse is characterized by heightened and legally enforceable certainty. Its absoluteness masks the malleability of its application. In fact, the way the terrorism label is applied and enforced is an outcome of *realpolitik* rather than *idealpolitik* considerations. What happened in Syria is the latest example from a long history of similar dynamics. The former leader of Al-Qaidah-affiliated Al-Nusra Front, Ahmad Al-Sharaa, had been designated as the head of a terrorist group and had a U.S. bounty on his life. However, after he

deposed former president Bashar Al-Assad in December 2024, the US changed its policy and dropped terrorism charges. When U.S. President Donald Trump first met Al-Sharaa in Riyadh in March 2025, he described him as a “young attractive guy”—a “tough guy (...) with a very strong past” (Miller, 2025). The point is that a terrorism designation remains absolute until it is revoked with a stroke of the pen.

The civilized victim and the savage animal

The Israeli state’s noisemaking and framing of the war was seeped in a renewed colonial language that drew boundaries between Israelis as the good, the civilized and Palestinians as the evil, savage and animalistic. Israeli President Isaac Herzog said that all Palestinians were unequivocally responsible for the Hamas attack on October 7. “It is an entire nation out there that is responsible. It is not true this rhetoric about civilians not being aware, not involved” (Blumenthal, 2023). On December 5, he described the military campaign as “a war that is intended, really, truly, to save western civilization (...) [from] an empire of evil” (Middle East Monitor, 2023). Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister of Israel, 2023) described the war as between “the children of light and the children of darkness” while quoting passages from the Torah. Indeed, the way Israel has conducted this war is in line with these statements, such that all Palestinians were deemed the enemy responsible for the Hamas attacks: either already terrorists, prospective terrorists (including children) or retrospective terrorists—the temporal ordering here is such that if one is killed, they must have been a terrorist. The act of killing is what defines terrorism.

There is no space for any moral considerations because the enemy is deemed a beast, since the terrorist label merged with one of the oldest of colonial designations—the animal/savage. As Kattan and Fuhrmann (2024) state, in the logic of Israeli and Western portrayal, Hamas is not an armed group but exclusively a terrorist, “while the alleged support of the population for Hamas simultaneously precludes Palestinians from being civilians.” Neither combatants nor civilians, Israeli rhetoric confines Palestinians to “irreducible identities—terrorists, human animals, religious extremists—deemed to transcend existing legal categories, thus rendering all Palestinians ‘legitimate targets’ and therefore outside the remit of international humanitarian law (Kattan & Fuhrmann, 2024).

Israeli officials unapologetically called Palestinians animals as they touted war crimes against them. For instance, in his justification for cutting off fuel to Gaza, former Israeli UN ambassador, Dan Gillerman, repeated the Israeli defense secretary’s phrase on BBC Newsnight program saying that the collective punishment (a war crime) is because “those animals cut (Israeli) mother’s stomach, took the baby out killed it and then killed the mother.” Without challenging those specific allegations, BBC Newsnight posted this clip on its X account further amplifying and normalizing Gillerman’s dehumanizing language (BBC Newsnight, 2023).

In tandem with the animalizing of Palestinians, Israelis become the exclusive victims. This formula echoes the ways 21st-century victimhood has become a site of struggle for competing claims to pain. It is not about reflecting the “systemic conditions of violence behind the claims but rather the balance of power within these struggles,” as

Chouliaraki (2024) put it. Gordon (2025) elaborates on the weaponization of claims of victimhood in the context of war reporting and communications. Analyzing the publication the Jewish Chronicle and its support for the Israeli state, he argues that the avowal of Jewish vulnerability and victimhood comes with a pronounced disavowal of Palestinian vulnerability and victimhood. The Jewish Chronicle downplays antisemitic actions and speech acts by the far-right, as it operationalizes antisemitism “to disavow the war crimes, crimes against humanity and even genocide” (Gordon, 2025). As one frequent contributor to the paper put it, “if you support the Palestinian cause in any form, you’re facilitating Jew-hate” (Gordon, 2025). In this formula, the very existence of Palestinians is deemed antisemitic and therefore the implication is that the elimination of Palestinians is not only justified but a moral necessity.

From a Palestinian perspective, El-Kurd (2025) stresses that there is no point for Palestinians to appeal to Western media and political establishments for recognition and “humanization” when it is that very system of appeal that is dehumanizing. Those processes of dehumanization include the weight given to discursive transgressions, depending on the speaker’s identity, and in what is deemed as insensitive or offensive speech in the first place. For instance, in reporting the killing of Palestinian English literature professor Refaat Al-Areer, the BBC initially ran with the headline “Palestinians mourn controversial writer.” The selective context that the article highlighted is that Al-Areer “had declined to leave northern Gaza following the start of Israeli operations in the area” and that he had caused widespread offence by calling the October 7 attack as “legitimate and moral” (BBC, 2023). In addition to the insinuation that he was killed because he chose not to evacuate, the article applies impartiality as a balance between the act of killing him (and his family and neighbors as part of a genocide) and his discursive transgressions, as if the latter could justify the former. The act of silencing by way of killing is reported by making noise.

Changing words and killing journalists

Genocide is not only about killing but also “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction,” as per the UN definition. This entails the systematic annihilation of institutions that sustain life and community, including hospitals, universities and media. At the beginning of the war, Israeli officials were defensive about accusations of targeting of hospitals and journalists, for instance in insisting that the blast at the Al-Ahli hospital in October 2023 was due to a missile launched by a Palestinian group. As the war progressed, they shifted tactics through making noise and changing words. Rather than simply denying killing journalists or bombing hospitals, journalists became “terrorists with media vests on,” as one Israeli spokesperson suggested (Nissenbaum, 2025), and hospitals became referred to as terrorist “command centers” (Al-Jazeera English, 2025a, 2025b). These noisy tactics, which were echoed by Western media, allowed for silencing Palestinian journalists by way of their systematic elimination, as more than 270 journalists and 700 of their family members, were exterminated (Gjevari, 2025). In this section, I focus on how the normalization of war crimes against journalists relied on a process of escalation of noise emanating from the Israeli state and its Western allies.

In my work on the Syrian war, I discussed how wars and revolutions blur the lines between activism and journalism as locals feel they are “forced to report” in defense of their communities. Their “affective proximity” to the story requires them to risk their lives and exert strenuous emotional and physical labor to practice journalism and have their voices circulate internationally (Al-Ghazzi, 2023). They become “flesh witnesses,” as Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi (2022) argue. As Syrian reporters put their bodies on the line to report, their content is met with racialized skepticism by global media networks consumed by concerns about authenticity in relation to new technology, rather than about morality and the sanctity of life of Syrians (as they do with most reporters in the Global South).

Global North reporters were banned by Syria and by Israel in these respective wars, and so in both wars the world relied on Syrians and Palestinians for reporting and footage. Unlike in Syria, Palestinian media workers in Gaza are mostly professional journalists working for Al-Jazeera and other global news networks. If in Syria, it was mostly activists who were “forced to report” out of a sense of civic duty, in Gaza, Palestinian journalists showed up to do their professional job under unimaginably difficult circumstances. They have been going on camera everyday relaying news as their homes were bombed, colleagues, family members and communities were killed and their neighborhoods and cities erased.

While racist dispositions have long devalued the journalistic practice of Global South reporters, racism became overt in relation to Gaza. Israel’s license to kill Palestinian journalists became explicit as they were accused of not being journalists at all. Their “unrecognizability” (Butler, 2016) is not because of their lack of training, rather because of who they were: Palestinians. And according to Israeli war communications and operations, as I have suggested, all Palestinians in Gaza became accused of terrorism. For instance, in the case of journalist Anas Al-Sharif, who was killed in a strike with four other journalists near the gate of a hospital in August 2025, the Israeli military said it killed him because he “served as the head of a terrorist cell in Hamas” as per the BBC article (Comerford, 2025). The article continued that “the BBC understands Sharif did some work with a Hamas media team in Gaza before the current war” (Comerford, 2025).

In an interview about the killing of Al-Jazeera journalists, one BBC news anchor asked her guest: “Obviously international organisations like the BBC cannot go in and so Al-Jazeera is using local people. Are they truly able to work independently?” (Al-Jazeera English, 2025a, 2025b). Here, the presenter insinuates that being local is an impediment to good journalism. The racism in this line of questioning is in how Palestinians are not seen as professional equals: journalists who happen to be Palestinian. Their Palestinianness is also an all-encompassing label that makes them inferior, suspect and a threat. The “local” label is made to stick to Palestinians—one wonders are British journalists covering political conflict in the UK “local” and therefore incapable of professionalism? Furthermore, the “international” designation is reserved to “organisations like the BBC” and not to Al-Jazeera, regardless of its multi-lingual reach and global scope of its reporting and audiences.

Palestinian journalists expressed bitterness and betrayal by Western news organizations and journalists’ politics of silence and noise. “The double standards, silence and professional bias hurt us exactly like the Israeli missiles did,” said

Al-Jazeera’s Gaza bureau chief, Wael al-Dahdouh (Al-Jazeera English, 2025a, 2025b). The Israeli army killed his wife, 15-year-old son, 7-year-old daughter, and 18-month-old grandchild, three weeks after October 7. His other son, Hamza, an Al-Jazeera cameraperson, was killed in a separate strike later. In the face of unfathomable loss, and “the heaviest price,” Al-Dahdouh added, “when we returned in front of the camera, we returned with complete professionalism, focus and balance.” Instead of recognition of the immense dedication and professionalism of Palestinian reporters, they were smeared and undermined in Western reporting and left to face what became “the profession of death” as Al-Dahdouh put it. For him, the truth was “subject to extermination and the eyes that witness the truth are subject to extermination.”

The undoing of witnessing

This article has focused on how a mediated politics of silence and noise has enabled genocide to take place in Gaza. But, as many have argued, Gaza is also a world-changing event that sets a perilous precedent. In his essay “The Destruction of Palestine is Breaking the World,” Bayoumi (2025) notes how Israel’s war has chipped away “from the rules governing our freedom of speech to the very laws of armed conflict.” He adds: “It seems no exaggeration to say that the foundation of the international order of the last 77 years is threatened by this change in the obligations governing our legal and political responsibilities to each other.” One of the myths that can no longer hold is the very idea of witnessing as a post-WWII “never again” modality upheld by Western media and political establishments that atrocity and genocide are morally reprehensible. Instead, there is a more explicit return to the colonial modality and lexicon that denies the humanity of others.

In relation to Gaza, we saw a top-down push to reconfigure Western audiences and distance them from a self-perception that they constitute a moral public with a universal outlook. This pressure was exerted in tandem with the undermining of the idea of a “world-based order” centered on Western led institutions of international governance, whether in the political, legal or moral spheres—the pillars of Western power in the postcolonial era. The idea of witnessing as a responsibility to acknowledge, if not stop, atrocity has long been rhetorically constructed as one of the necessary moral components of this order. To bear witness, as Zelizer (1998) argues, implies not just the mere authentication of horror but the mediated act of giving testimony to reassure publics that responsibility is acknowledged. For Chouliaraki (2013), witnessing has been reconfigured via social media as it has become more self-indulgent than about the alleviation of the suffering of distant others.

While this same critique can be directed at broadcast media, with Gaza, even that form of self-indulgent witnessing has been silenced and met with censor. The BBC withdrawal of two documentaries about Gaza comes to mind because they were to be aired two years into the course of the war—so they would have not changed the framing of the coverage but perhaps given audiences the chance to witness in hindsight. The first, “Gaza: How To Survive A War Zone,” is narrated from the perspective of Palestinian children “living through devastation” as the BBC put it (Youngs, 2025). The BBC ended up pulling it off air because one of the children, 13-year-old Abdullah, is the son of the deputy agriculture

minister—a Hamas official. The UK culture secretary Lisa Nandy intervened and expressed concern about how “people” who were featured in the program were sourced. The noise of discourse on this conflated between concerns about transparency with those about morality of witnessing a child’s survival story. As the concern for transparency was amplified, moral considerations were silenced with the insinuation that Abdullah’s perspective on survival in Gaza is no longer valid because he is now tainted with terrorism on account of his father’s position as deputy agriculture minister. It is noticeable that Abdullah has also been “unchilded,” to use Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s (Bishara et al., 2024) terminology, as Nandy places him in the adult category of “people.”

The BBC also blocked the broadcast of a second documentary it had previously commissioned, “Gaza: Doctors Under Attack.” The documentary discusses Israeli war crimes on medics and hospitals in Gaza. The reasons the BBC gave for withdrawing the documentary are impartiality concerns, but it is unclear what exactly those are. The BBC website’s article says that one of the documentary’s directors said Israel had “become a rogue state that’s committing war crimes and ethnic cleansing and mass murdering Palestinians” and that Israel denies accusations of war crimes and genocide in Gaza (McIntosh, 2025). But no direct explanation was given. In terms of the BBC’s journalistic values, this is another example of how the application of impartiality can obstruct truth. In reaction, more than 400 media figures signed a letter to BBC management blaming board and editorial standards committee member Robbie Gibb, for the decision not to air the documentary—pointing to the conflict of interest as he had led a consortium that rescued pro-Israel Jewish Chronicle from insolvency in 2020 (Conlan, 2025).

The producer of the documentary, Ben De Pear (2025), expressed his frustration with the BBC. In August 2025, when Israel attacked Nasser hospital in a double strike that killed medical workers, civil defense personnel and journalists, he posted on X that these war crimes would not happen so repeatedly without impunity. That impunity can only happen when governments and broadcasters, like the BBC, censor news content that exposes the extent of these crimes, he said. These are two important instances of the strategic application of impartiality to obscure truth and morality—and undo witnessing. The politics of silencing and noise at play projects a worldview and ideology that there is a hierarchy in human value and that some lives are grievable, and others are disposable.

Conclusion

Taking the BBC as a prime example, and through an analysis of discursive patterns of dehumanization, this article has explained how dominant Western media narratives echo state communications and contribute to Israeli impunity in committing war crimes. I analyzed the politics of silence and noise as a relationship of power shaped through media coverage and political speech including in the selective erasure of context to the policing of the term genocide, to the escalation of terrorism discourse as it merged with a colonial lexicon about the annihilation of savage animals.

In their Middle East reporting, many media organizations such as the BBC have strayed away from journalistic conventions of truth telling and public service in the name of impartiality. Legacy media’s active participation in the suppression

of Palestinian voice and the amplification of dehumanizing rhetoric at a time of genocide has profound material and ideological consequences: the prolonging of killing, suffering and dispossession in Palestine, an authoritarian turn in media conventions, and, as Cammaerts (2025a, 2025b) argues, an erosion of civil liberties within the UK and the West more generally—as well as the undoing of witnessing itself.

The demise of the “never again” modality has been one of the effects of the politics of noise and silence. The post-WWII idea of bearing witness has collapsed under the weight of selective grief and strategic silence. Put differently, the impunity that the Israeli state has built for itself as it conducts war as genocide, and as it accumulates war crimes, is not simply its own achievement. It is a structure built by Western political establishments and media organizations (Forde & Freedman, 2025). At a time of increased global insecurity, and as war is conducted across geographies, this undoing of witnessing unfolds at humanity’s collective peril. In Gaza, language has been under assault when hospitals became rebranded as terrorist command centers, and journalists as terrorists in disguise. These rhetorical shifts are not mere semantics. They are licenses to kill, maim and destroy. As Buttu suggests, the noise of disinformation is designed to confuse, erode sympathy, extend support for the war, and invert blame—making Palestinians responsible for the genocide perpetrated against them (Al-Jazeera English, 2023). This inversion is the final act of silencing: not only denying genocide against Palestinians but assigning them guilt for their own annihilation.

Data availability

Data was obtained from publicly available sources.

Funding

This research did not receive any external funding.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Communication, Culture and Critique, 2026, 19, 67–73

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcag010>

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