The War Beyond the Headlines

David Bensoussan, PhD

Western coverage of Israel has become so emotionally driven that it often deprives readers of the historical and geopolitical context needed to understand the war. This article does not seek to diminish the suffering of either side of the conflict. Its purpose is rather to restore balance to a media narrative that too often leaves essential elements of the Middle East conflict in the shadows.

The imbalance becomes apparent when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is viewed alongside the major tragedies of the modern era. Various sources estimate to many millions the death toll in Bosnia, in Croatia, in Chechnya, in Tajikistan, in Kashmir, in East Timor, in Algeria and in Lebanon during the civil war, in Iraq under Saddam Hussein's regime, in Syria under Bashar al-Assad's war against his own people and in Sudan. This list is far from exhaustive.

Yet these catastrophes received only a fraction of the media attention devoted to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Coverage understandably focuses on human suffering in Gaza. Yet it often leaves readers with little sense of the strategic decisions, historical experiences and political realities that shape Israeli actions. Furthermore, Palestinian victims dominate the headlines, while Israeli victims are frequently relegated to the background—when they are not ignored altogether.

Selective Compassion

Since the Oslo Accords, Palestinian organizations have received tens of billions of dollars in international aid. According to Israel and numerous observers, a substantial portion of these funds was diverted to military infrastructure, including an extensive network of fortified tunnels, reportedly longer than the London Underground.

Buildings operated by NGOs, as well as facilities associated with United Nations agencies, have allegedly been used to store thousands of rockets and missiles. Schools and hospitals have likewise been accused of serving as

cover for Hamas fighters. Hamas has also been accused of diverting humanitarian aid, preventing civilians from seeking refuge in the tunnel network, and continuing rocket attacks against Israeli population centres despite the foreseeable consequences for Gaza's civilian population.

A crucial dimension of the conflict—the ideological education promoted by Hamas for many years—rarely receives comparable attention in international coverage. Gaza's children raised in a culture of hatred and are regularly exposed to the glorification of violence, including staged events in which children parade wearing mock explosive belts.

In this profoundly asymmetrical conflict, Israel maintains that it has consistently issued advance notices before striking rocket-launching positions. Despite these precautions, its military operations have drawn widespread international condemnation, including accusations of genocide.

It is nevertheless worth recalling that modern warfare has invariably resulted in substantial civilian casualties. The Allied bombing of Dresden by British, American, and Canadian air forces killed, according to some estimates, nearly 100,000 people in a single night. Civilian casualties are, tragically, an enduring feature of armed conflict. The point is not to draw statistical comparisons, but to illustrate that, according to this perspective, Israel's military options leave it with an exceptionally narrow margin for maneuver.

Persistent Myths

The Gaza Strip is frequently described as an "open-air prison." The phrase is emotionally compelling, yet it omits important context. Gaza shares a border with Egypt. Israel unilaterally withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005, ending its permanent presence there.

It is seldom recalled that medical personnel from thirty-six Gaza hospitals received professional training in Israel. Prior to the attacks of October 7, 2023, nearly 18,000 Gazans crossed into Israel every day for work, and that number was expected to rise to 50,000. That growing relationship of economic cooperation came to an abrupt end on October 7.

The Broader Context

Israel is a true microcosm of humanity. Its citizens originate from successive waves of immigration from Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, Asia, and elsewhere. Many of these communities had themselves endured persecution, expulsion, and massacres, including throughout much of the Arab world. Together, they rebuilt the country and sought to create a society inspired, in the vision of its founders, by the moral ideals of the biblical prophets.

According to this interpretation, anti-Judaism and later antisemitism have gradually evolved into an obsession with Israel itself. This phenomenon has successively served a variety of political agendas: Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s, the regional ambitions of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and neo-Ottoman aspirations in Turkey. Added to these factors are, arguably, the temptation within some Western societies to displace or dilute historical guilt, as well as the singular symbolic place occupied by the Promised Land in civilizations shaped by the Bible.

The media seldom acknowledge the number of Israeli lives that, from Israel's perspective, are saved each time a Hamas terrorist is neutralized. For many Israelis, the atrocities of October 7 reopened the deepest trauma of the Holocaust. In their view, the struggle against organizations committed to Israel's destruction represents the continuation of an existential fight, comparable to the struggle against Nazism that continued long after the end of the Second World War.

The information war

Finally, Hamas has turned information warfare into a central battlefield, benefiting, according to its critics, from influential media amplifiers, most notably the Qatari television network Al Jazeera. To judge from parts of today's media coverage, Israeli military operations appear to target angelic innocent civilians. Yet, according to this analysis, the conflict cannot be understood without considering the systematic indoctrination of hatred to which many young Palestinians continue to be exposed.

The events of October 7 demonstrated with brutal clarity that such indoctrination is not merely inflammatory rhetoric but can have devastating real-world consequences.

What the cameras leave out

Millions of viewers watch images from Gaza: destroyed buildings, grieving parents and hungry children. Those images are real, and they deserve to be seen.

But images are not context.

When photographs become the primary lens through which a war is understood, they can obscure as much as they reveal. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is perhaps the clearest example of this paradox. Much of the world's reporting captures the consequences of the war while leaving readers with only a partial understanding of why the war is being fought, how Hamas has chosen to fight it and why Israelis perceive the conflict so differently.

Journalism has a moral obligation to bear witness to suffering. It has an equally important obligation to explain it. Compassion without context risks becoming advocacy. Context without compassion becomes abstraction.

Readers deserve both.

Dr. David Bensoussan is Professor of Engineering at the University of Quebec (Montréal), former president of the United Sephardic Community of Quebec, and author of numerous books and articles on history, international affairs, and the Middle East.