

The rest of the story: Media coverage of the war in Gaza

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For 23 days in December and January, Israel struck targets throughout the Gaza Strip by air and then on the ground using tanks; Hamas sent an almost-daily barrage of mortar shells, unguided rockets and slightly more sophisticated missiles to towns across a 25-mile range in southern Israel. In the end, approximately 1,300 Palestinians (more than half of them civilians and several hundred Hamas fighters) and 13 Israelis (three civilians and ten soldiers, four or five of the latter by “friendly fire”) were dead, and more than 4,000 Palestinians and dozens of Israelis were wounded. Prospects for renewed progress toward peace were all the more remote.

Media coverage of the war in Gaza was intense, but, not surprisingly, American and Arab media covered the same war in significantly different ways.

Coverage by most U.S. media evidenced an even-handed balancing of official and nonofficial sources. The reporting juxtaposed quotes from Israeli and Hamas political and military figures (many of the latter, in hiding or in exile, were quoted indirectly from prepared statements and television broadcasts) as well as from Israeli and Palestinian civilians.

On the third day of the war, the PBS *NewsHour* featured back-to-back interviews with the PLO representative to the UN and the Israeli ambassador to the United States; NPR's *All Things Considered* interviewed the spokes person for Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert and then an adviser to Hamas senior political leader Ismail Haniya.

Even with the balancing of sources and details of Israeli and Palestinian casualties, a significant amount of the narrative about why the conflict had erupted and what its essence was took on a uniform cast: that Israel was defending its citizens against Hamas rocket fire. On the second day of the war, NBC's *Meet the Press* opened with a lengthy interview with Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni, who said: “Our goal is not to reoccupy [the] Gaza Strip. . . . But since [the] Gaza Strip is being controlled by

Hamas, and since Hamas is using Gaza in order to target us, we need to give an answer to this.” The broadcast did not provide comment from any Palestinian source.

The Bush administration’s stance was entirely consistent with this narrative. On the second day of the war, White House spokesperson Gordon Johndroe blamed Hamas for the outbreak of the violence and called the rocket attacks “completely unacceptable. . . . Israel is going to defend its people against terrorists like Hamas.”

Within the first three days of the war, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* all ran editorials that emphasized Israel’s right to defend itself and blamed Hamas for breaking the six-month truce and provoking the war. On the second day of the war, an *ABC News* reporter told viewers that Israel’s incursion into Gaza “is all designed to try and finally put an end to daily rocket attacks against Israeli towns and cities in southern Israel.” The report quoted the Hamas health minister as saying “We desperately need medical supplies,” but it offered no Palestinian explanation of the war.

References to the siege imposed on Gaza by Israel in the 18 months before the war cropped up only sporadically in the coverage. On the second day of the war, a representative of the UN relief agency in Gaza told a CNN reporter that “your viewers must realize that for over a year and a half now, there’s been a blockade, strangulation—if you like—of Gaza.” The same day, NPR reported that Hamas needed the tunnels targeted by Israel “to try to keep Gaza’s economy from completely collapsing and for their own smuggling needs. The Israeli army says the tunnels were primarily used to transport explosives and weapons, and today, they destroyed many of them.”

In the war’s second week, CNN correspondent Ben Wedeman reported that Israel withdrew its troops and settlers from Gaza in 2005, “but continued to maintain a closure of the Gaza Strip—control not only of the borders between Gaza and Israel . . . but also ultimate say over who could pass over the border between Gaza and Egypt. Certainly Gaza, once the Israeli army and settlements were pulled out, did not become free in any sense of the word.”

Overall, however, media reports either ignored or glossed over the connection between the Hamas rocket fire that preceded the war and the ongoing Israeli occupation of Gaza, direct or otherwise. On the war’s third day, the *Los Angeles Times* reported: “Israel withdrew its troops and settlers from Gaza in 2005. Since

then Hamas and other groups have routinely launched rockets and mortar shells toward southern Israeli towns. The makeshift projectiles are wildly inaccurate and rarely cause deaths or serious injuries. But Israelis along the border are forced to live with the constant fear of attack.”

The coverage also virtually omitted the role of American policy in the state of affairs in Gaza—never mentioning that in 2007 the United States had backed Fatah fighters in a failed bid to overthrow Hamas (which came to power via democratic parliamentary elections in 2006) in Gaza. However on day four of the war, in an interview with Philip Wilcox, a former U.S. consul general in Jerusalem, NPR’s Melissa Block asked about Hamas’s seizure of Gaza and the resulting split in Palestinian political control of the West Bank and Gaza. Wilcox replied: “It has gravely affected the life of the Gazans because of a very tough closure and economic boycott imposed by the Israelis, with the support of the United States and the Quartet. And the purpose of that was to alienate the Gaza public from Hamas so that they would support Fatah in the West Bank. That policy has failed, and Hamas has become even stronger in Gaza during the last two years.”

The Gaza war was *the* story around the clock on Arab satellite news networks, which are relatively free of the governmental constraints imposed on Arab print and other broadcast media.

The dominant but not only voice is that of al-Jazeera, with an estimated 53 percent of the overall Arab news audience and about 40 million viewers worldwide. Al-Jazeera readily identifies itself as reporting for an Arab audience from Arab points of view. With regard to the Gaza war and political coverage of the Palestinians in general, al-Jazeera has been criticized in some Arab quarters as leaning too consistently toward Hamas versus Fatah.

Al-Jazeera’s Arabic-language coverage of the Gaza war consisted of three far-ranging types of reporting: live video reports from its two Palestinian journalists in Gaza (who were stationed there before the war began), reports from one correspondent in the West Bank and one inside Israel proper, and live reports from its correspondents based across the Muslim world. The coverage also featured discussions among Arab experts and thinkers in Tunis, Cairo, Lebanon, Damascus and Ramallah anchored from the network’s headquarters in Qatar.

Viewers of this coverage, which is not accessible in the U.S. except via various modes of Internet transmission (including YouTube), were exposed to three aspects

of the Gaza war that most Americans were not. First, al-Jazeera viewers continually saw unsanitized images of Palestinian death and destruction rendered by the Israeli military in Gaza, with the network pulling few punches in broadcasting the graphic casualties of war.

Second, al-Jazeera viewers saw daily live video coverage of protests of the Gaza war staged throughout the Muslim world from Morocco to Indonesia (and beyond, including in Europe and the United States). These protests were reported in varying detail by American news outlets, but without live images of seas of protesters demonstrating on four continents.

Third, al-Jazeera viewers could hear a range of Arab expert analysis of the war, much of which centered on the sharp division between the official silence of U.S.-backed Arab regimes and the vociferous antiwar protests of citizens in the Arab street.

Notwithstanding its orientation to an Arab audience and Arab points of view and its references to the Israeli military as “the enemy” and “occupation forces,” al-Jazeera offered a modicum of balance in covering the Gaza war. It broadcast interviews with Israeli political figures, including Livni, Benjamin Netanyahu and Shimon Peres (with simultaneous Arabic translation) as well as with Arabic-speaking representatives of the Israeli army.

News is sometimes described as a constructed reality that is a product of the interests of those who report it and those who consume it. Nowhere is that more evident than in the coverage of the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

Marda Dunsky was in the West Bank and Israel during the first ten days of the Gaza war.