

# INTERNATIONALE POLITIK SPECIAL

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## Limitations of Reporting

Texts by the Sylke Tempel Fellows 2025





Dear Reader,

In this special edition, we present the texts of the Sylke Tempel Fellowship 2025. Once again, this program has brought together journalists and media professionals from Germany and Israel who write about foreign and social policy issues with passionate curiosity. This IP Special was made possible and supported by the German-Israeli Future Forum Foundation, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and the organization Women in International Security Germany (WIIS), among others.

The topic: „Limitations of Reporting – Media in Times of War and Polarization“. The war in the Middle East, which began with the terrorist attacks by Hamas on October 7, 2023, immediately sparked a battle over the interpretation and assessment of events on the ground. The manner of reporting itself became a topic of discussion, and in a highly emotional debate, boundaries of all kinds came into focus: geographical boundaries, boundaries of access and opportunities, as well as violations of journalistic standards and ethical principles. These are all issues that the IP keeps a close eye on, even beyond the region and this war; the same applies to the fight against all forms of antisemitism, a high standard of debate, quality journalism and freedom of the press.

The six works by the eight fellows are divided into three sections. The first section deals with „distortions“, their mechanisms and consequences. The second section is entitled „access“: the portrayal of the conflict, enablers and distortions in reporting. And the third section, „narratives“, looks at the organization of the hostage families.

Many thanks to all those involved – and we hope you enjoy reading it.

**Martin Bialecki**  
Editor-in-chief

# Limitations of Reporting

On the Sylke Tempel Fellowship 2025

**By Tamara Or, Chair of the German-Israeli Future Forum Foundation, and  
Annika Finken, Director of the Sylke Tempel Fellowship Program**

On October 7, 2023, it was not Israeli media outlets but Hamas that reported on the largest massacre in the history of the State of Israel. In real-time broadcasts, the terrorists documented their crimes on their victims' social media channels, through which families and friends learned of the murder and abduction of their loved ones. October 7 was a Sabbath and a Jewish holiday, so newsrooms were largely empty. Information flowed far too slowly and far too sparsely. Faced with the immense suffering of relatives who had received emergency calls from their loved ones on their cell phones and the lack of access to reliable information, people rushed to any source they could find. They found what they were looking for in the *Telegram* chats of a terrorist organization that succeeded in traumatizing an entire country with its gruesome images and videos.

As a result, major newsrooms began their television broadcasts with a tally of the days Israel had been at war with several terrorist organizations, the number of hostages Hamas continued to hold in brutal conditions, and the names of soldiers killed in Gaza whose families had given permission for their names to be released.

Even though political pressure on Israel's free press is increasing significantly, Israel has a professional and diverse media landscape. How can it be explained that Israeli media—in contrast to international news—hardly report on the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza? What role do journalis-

tic approaches, interests, and responsibilities play in reporting? How selective are the portrayals in the German and international media landscape? To what extent does reporting in different media formats contribute to the polarization of our societies?

Together with our cooperation partners, we have selected eight fellows from Germany and Israel as part of the Sylke Tempel Fellowship Program, who will examine the reporting on the Middle East conflict since October 7 in six texts. The fellowship program commemorates the outstanding journalist Sylke Tempel (1963–2017), a member of the Future Forum's Board of Trustees and editor-in-chief of IP. We want to pass on her passion for foreign policy and journalism to a young generation of media professionals.

In addition to workshops held in Berlin and online, the joint research trip to Israel in September 2025 was a particular highlight of the year. In a week full of discussions and encounters, we discussed the relationship between media and democracy in Israel, reflected on the reporting on the war in the Gaza Strip, and considered different social reactions to the terrorist attacks of October 7 and the ensuing war.

We are very grateful that our fellows in this year asked difficult questions and approached these challenging topics with curiosity and impressive analytical insight. The results of their research can be found in this issue.



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# ***“The Space for Discourse Has Become Narrower”***

How did October 7, 2023 change the culture of debate in Germany? A conversation about the limits of what can be said and why freedom of expression must endure more than many would like.

## **Interview with Meron Mendel**

**IP:** *Mr. Mendel, in your book “Talking about Israel,” you advocate for open and respectful dialogue. When you look at the debates following October 7, 2023, what has changed in the German discourse?*

**Meron Mendel:** The basic thesis of my book is that the debate about Israel and Palestine in Germany is almost completely disconnected from the realities on the ground. These are self-centered debates in which different groups derive their need for group identity, identification, and meaning from the conflict there. It is self-referential and takes place in these groups’ own bubbles. Any connection to the actual situation on the ground, such as facts that do not fit into the groups’ own worldview, is ignored so that their hermetic narratives are not disturbed.

This analysis applies to almost all groups that have taken a position on this issue. This has been going on since October 7, but has intensified. The

force, the energy, the self-righteousness that goes with it has not doubled, I would say it has increased tenfold.

***Are we talking about different cultures of public discourse in Germany?***

Definitely. They are also strongly influenced by their milieu. There is the political elite, as we saw immediately after October 7: the wave of solidarity at state level, which led to the Israeli flag being taken down in some town halls only after the hostages had been freed. So there was clear support for the Israeli side, even though it became increasingly difficult as the humanitarian situation in Gaza worsened.

On the other hand, we see migrant communities and parts of the German left-wing scene where strong group formation is constituted through identification with the Palestinians. On October 7, these sections of the German public reflexively relativ-

ized and even justified the massacre. Well-known examples include the distribution of sweets in some cities, most notably in Berlin-Neukölln. I heard about this not only anonymously, but also from people with whom I have had close contact. What was posted on social media on October 7 was hardly commendable. The justifications began on the same day, “These are not pretty pictures, but this is what anti-colonial resistance looks like.” This rhetoric dominated the feed.

The more time passed, the more voices supporting Israel moved away from their initial human rights argument, ultimately ignored it altogether so as not to have to acknowledge Israel’s war crimes. On the other hand, those who ignored human rights on October 7 and praised the massacre of civilians suddenly discovered human rights for themselves in early 2024 and pinned their hopes on the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice to bring Israel to justice.

This shows how the internal logic of these milieus works. They selectively resort to instruments; these can be human rights, or demands for empathy.

One can also observe selective empathy: those who demanded compassion for Israeli civilians on October 7 refused to show it to the people of Gaza in the months that followed. And those who looked away when children, women, and elderly people were murdered in Israel suddenly showed great compassion when the bombing of Gaza began.

***After October 7, there has been a lot of talk about the limits of what can be said. This involves concepts such as solidarity, antisemitism, and racism. In your opinion, where are both the legitimate and the problematic boundaries in this debate?***



**Prof. Dr. Meron Mendel**

is director of the Anne Frank Educational Center in Frankfurt am Main and professor of social work and diversity at Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences. Born in Israel, the educator and publicist conducts research on political education, remembrance culture, and the prevention of antisemitism. He was awarded the Federal Cross of Merit in 2024 for his work. In his book “Talking about Israel: A German Debate” (2023), he advocates for open, respectful, and fact-based dialogue.

It depends on the situation. We had different debates with different degrees of intensity. What you’re allowed to post on your *Instagram* or *TikTok* account, covered by freedom of expression, is one thing. What society wants to honor with awards, or opinions presented on panels and talk shows, is another. Therefore, we cannot draw a clear line, saying, “If you say this word, you’re out.” We have to discuss each case individually.

A general diagnosis: After October 7, we saw hysterical tendencies in the debate

### *“German national interests cannot be understood in isolation from Israeli peace efforts”*

regarding Palestinian or pro-Palestinian voices. This can still be observed today, albeit to a lesser extent.

#### ***For example?***

Take, for example, the postponement of the award ceremony for Palestinian author Adania Shibli at the Frankfurt Book Fair shortly after October 7—an absurd decision because it was not about a Hamas supporter but it followed the logic of collective guilt: Palestinians should not be honored in Germany because Palestinians collectively bear the guilt of Hamas.

We saw this at the 2024 Berlinale, when the film “No Other Land” about the unbearable conditions in the West Bank was shown and awarded a prize. The two filmmakers—one Israeli and one Palestinian—spoke, and this was openly interpreted as antisemitism, without any evidence to support this. Added to this was the bizarre statement by the then Minister of State for Culture, Claudia Roth, that she had only applauded the Israeli prize winner, not the Palestinian one.

And then there was the debate on October 7, 2025, when the cancellation of a concert by rapper Chefket by the “Haus der Kulturen der Welt” attracted attention—another example of hasty distancing instead of open discussion.

This culture of boycott also exists on the other side. Take, for example, the University of Leipzig’s decision to disinvite historian Benny Morris. I can’t say exactly

where we currently draw the line, but we are definitely being too cautious. Out of premature obedience to state actors and fear of online backlash, confrontations are avoided, appointments are canceled, and people are distanced.

My main problem is therefore not that the boundaries of what can be said have shifted, meaning that we are experiencing more racism or antisemitism, but that the space for discourse has narrowed overall. The real boundary is not what can be said, but the willingness to tolerate dissent and allow controversial voices to be heard.

#### ***Should anti-Israel or truly radical voices also be given space in the debate—or does that harm democratic discourse?***

Back to the nuances: Anti-Israel voices—and I’m not talking about criticism of Israel’s policies, but about anti-Zionism, about “From the river to the sea,” i.e., only Palestine, no Israel—are protected by freedom of expression. Attempts have been made to ban them, but these have rightly failed in the administrative courts. The question is whether these voices should be given prominence. We have to look at the overall context. These voices exist not only on the pro-Palestinian side, but also in the Israeli government, on the pro-Israel side: the same “from the river to the sea” ideology, only with Israel instead of Palestine.

There was a lot of excitement about rapper Chefket’s performance because he wore a T-shirt that only showed Palestine.

When Bundestag President Julia Klöckner did the same, only with the Israeli flag, so that all Palestinian territories disappeared, there was no excitement or even cancellations of events with Ms. Klöckner.

We would be well advised to apply the same standards. Both Chefket and Ms. Klöckner are entitled to express such views; that is part of freedom of expression. At the same time, it would be good if reasonable members of the public frowned upon this: you are allowed to say it, but if we in Germany want to contribute constructively to conflict resolution, we must reject radical positions equally—the annihilation of the State of Israel as well as the annihilation of the Palestinians.

***“Israel’s security is Germany’s raison d’état”—a much-quoted phrase that is interpreted in many different ways. What does that mean for you in concrete terms in times of war and massive human rights violations on both sides? How would you interpret this phrase?***

Angela Merkel deliberately phrased this sentence vaguely when she spoke before the Knesset in 2008. She said that Israel’s security is part of Germany’s *raison d’état*. One could interpret this to mean that there are other parts that were not explicitly mentioned in the speech.

One should consider the context: in 2008, Ehud Olmert was Prime Minister of Israel. There was the threat posed by Iran’s nuclear program, and Olmert entered into serious negotiations with the Palestinian Authority with the declared goal of implementing a two-state solution. He encountered resistance abroad and in Israel. At that time, Merkel said to Olmert: You can go down this path, Germany is behind you. Three sentences earlier, she explicitly referred to the two-state solution. In this respect, reasons of state cannot be under-

stood in isolation from Israel’s efforts to achieve a peaceful solution with the Palestinians and Germany’s support for this.

Since 2008, the vectors have shifted. If this *raison d’état* is now being used to support a government that has decided against peaceful solutions, then the term is being stripped of its meaning.

***And what does the statement mean today?***

If one wants to remain true to Merkel’s intention, in the specific situation since October 7—actually since December 2022, when the current government came to power in Israel, the firewall in Israel fell, and right-wing extremists became the dominant force in the cabinet—this would mean: German *raison d’état* applies to the Israeli opposition, which is taking to the streets in Israel demanding an end to the war, protection of the liberal elements of Israeli democracy, the independence of the judiciary, and so on. These are the values that went hand in hand with *raison d’état* at the time, and we should not forget this original intention.

***How can one criticize the Israeli government without resorting to antisemitic patterns or raising accusations of double standards? How can that be done?***

That is perhaps the most frequently asked and, at the same time, simplest question. Why is it still not clear? Because there is a strong tendency to exploit the situation. Even before October 7, the Israeli government, Netanyahu, deliberately blurred the lines. Criticism, even sharp opposition to Israel’s policies and military actions, was increasingly labeled as antisemitic in order to immunize itself against criticism.

We must be clear: any criticism of decisions made by the Israeli government—as with any other government—is permissi-



ble. Every operation carried out by the Israeli army—as with any other army—should be viewed critically. Whether criticism is justified or not is another question. Even false criticism does not automatically make it antisemitic. Arguments must be found and false criticism refuted, but false criticism is not antisemitism. It becomes antisemitic when not only is the Palestinians’ demand for their own state raised—which is justified under international law—but when there is also an underlying sentiment that the State of Israel should disappear.

It is interesting to note that those who disregard international law in this matter are otherwise strong advocates of it. Israel is legitimized by the United Nations decision of 1947. And the 1967 borders were enshrined in Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. If the aim is not only to end the occupation but to wipe out the state itself, then in 95 percent of cases this is motivated by antisemitic prejudice. I cannot find another explanation for why an exception is being made here. No such demands are being made in any other conflict region. No one is demanding that Putin remove Russia from the map; what is being demanded is an end to the occupation of Ukrainian regions. The same applies to other conflicts.

### ***Are there any other issues?***

Of course. Jews around the world are quickly blamed for the actions of the State of Israel and its armed forces. It was not surprising that antisemitic incidents in Germany increased sixfold after October 7. They have since declined somewhat, but to date there are still about three times as many antisemitic crimes as there were before October 7. This means that every Jew is held responsible for Netanyahu’s decisions, even though the vast majority of

Jews worldwide do not even have the right to vote in Israel. We would also consider it wrong to attack mosques in protest against Erdoğan’s policies. Similarly, it is wrong to attack Jews in order to express criticism of the State of Israel.

### ***Finally, returning to the role of the media, what would you like to see journalists do to restore understanding and trust?***

German media outlets are heavily criticized. If you listen to both echo chambers, you hear one side saying that German media outlets are the extended arm of state policy and that Israeli propaganda is being passed on unfiltered. The other side says the exact opposite: that they are spreading Hamas propaganda, simply accepting casualty figures from Gaza, spreading “hunger campaigns,” and that it’s all just “Pallywood” and AI-generated images.

### ***Neither would be good...***

I don’t want to give the German media a blanket acquittal. But at a time when reputable media outlets are under severe pressure, as we saw during the coronavirus pandemic, everything is being called into question.

It is imagined that the media represent foreign interests in the service of the state. This is very dangerous because it erodes trust in reputable media. People are more likely to believe their own feed on *TikTok* or *Instagram* than what they read and see in *Der Spiegel* or on the news. Then it is no longer about facts or their meaning, but about completely different realities. If one person says it is daytime outside and another says it is night, what is there to discuss if you cannot agree on basic facts?

At this point, I would like to speak up for reputable media outlets, and I defini-

*“The real boundary lies not in what can be said, but in the willingness to tolerate contradiction“*

tely do not mean the tabloid press. Where journalists are not contractually obliged to take sides, but rather rely on their professional expertise, I know how difficult the conditions are for German correspondents in Israel and the West Bank. There is a lot of self-criticism in many editorial offices; I have been in meetings at major German newspapers and have seen how heated the debates can get. That is a sign of professionalism and integrity.

In Germany, we still have a very diverse, reputable, and professionally strong media landscape, especially from an international perspective, even if mistakes are made in individual cases. It is

important to recognize this so that the logic of echo chambers does not dominate the debate. We should support the work of reputable media outlets.

Not everything has gone smoothly. There have also been reports that annoyed me, where work was unprofessional and people fell into one propaganda trap or another. But if you take a broader view, you can give reputable German media outlets good marks for their reporting on this war and the conflict.

The interview was conducted by Martin Bialecki, with assistance from Elias Noeske

Translated from German by Katherine Brown

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# Distortions

What really happened on October 7, 2023, was the subject of massive and targeted lies and allegations on the very day of the terrorist attack on Israel. Few events have polarized public opinion worldwide as much as the war in Gaza. Texts about the struggle for truth, about propaganda, and disinformation.

# A Half-Truth Is a Whole Lie

## Disinformation in the war between Hamas and Israel has poisoned global discourse. The main drivers: social media and traditional news outlets.

By Nicholas Potter

The war between Hamas and Israel in the Gaza Strip was also a war of images, narratives and numbers. Before the global court of public opinion, supporters on both sides seek moral legitimacy. This is particularly evident on social media, where the line between misinformation and disinformation is becoming increasingly blurred—sometimes even deliberately so: the former is namely unintentional, whereas the latter involves deliberate manipulation through the targeted dissemination of falsehoods. Ideological bias motivates many to spread unconfirmed or fictitious claims in order to advance their political goals. Inaccurate reporting is willfully amplified by channels and accounts with a political agenda. And often, antisemitic conspiracy narratives lurk just below the surface.

The dangers are immense: fake photos and false statistics can trigger a wave of outrage on the internet, emotionalizing and radicalizing social media users to the point where they take uncompromising positions in heated conflicts. At the same time, claims of disinformation are

used by both sides to discredit the very real facts on the ground in Gaza. “The real goal of spreading disinformation is to get you to a point where you no longer believe or trust anything,” explains Tal Hagin, an independent disinformation researcher who previously worked with the Israeli fact-checking platform *FakeReporter*, in an interview. “The goal is for you to believe that there is no truth or objective reality.” In the war between Hamas and Israel, this has increasingly been the case.

Traditional news and social media play a key role in this. “There is a flood of information flowing through the entire media ecosystem that originates on social media,” says Peter Lerner, a retired lieutenant colonel who served as a spokesman for the Israeli armed forces to foreign media during the first year and a half of the war, in an interview. “And then people are desperately trying to figure out what actually happened, whether something is real or not.” Social media is notoriously impatient, Lerner says. “We used to talk about the golden hour to respond to a claim or an unfold-



**Nicholas Potter** is a journalist and editor at the Berlin daily newspaper *taz*.



ing incident. Now we only have minutes to be relevant.”

The following analysis examines selected cases of misinformation and disinformation in the war between Hamas and Israel. It shows the fine line between sloppy reporting and deliberate manipulation in a rapidly evolving war zone to which Israel has denied access to international journalists and where Hamas continues to exert considerable control over the flow of information.

### False Flags

Conspiracy narratives have been rampant since the first day of the war. 7 October 2023 itself, when the Palestinian terrorist organization carried out an attack that killed approximately 1,200 people in Israel, mostly civilians, and abducted another 250 to Gaza, is being dismissed as a “false flag” operation by a growing number of “truthers” on social media platforms such as *Telegram*, *TikTok* and *Reddit*. Supporters of this conspiracy theory claim that Israel was behind the massacre in order to commit genocide in Gaza. While these claims resonate with antisemitic, Holocaust-denying right-wing extremists, they are also increasingly being spread by people who identify themselves as politically left-wing.

One example is Roger Waters. A month after the attack, the former Pink Floyd member speculated in an interview that the Hamas-led attack could be a “false flag operation,” comparing it to 11 September 2001 by saying it was impossible to know

what “actually happened.” In another interview in July 2024, Waters falsely claimed that the Israeli government had deliberately allowed the attack to happen.

Waters is by no means alone. Three weeks after the attack, the radical left-wing disinformation website *The Grayzone* published an article in which the author claimed that Israel was responsible for many, if not most, of the Israeli casualties on October 7. Similar claims were published on the first anniversary of the attack by the anti-Israel blog *Electronic Intifada* in an article entitled “How Israel killed hundreds of its own citizens on October 7.”

Another example is the August 2025 claim by Mohammed Hamad, a doctor from Gaza, that Israel was waging a “biological war” with carcinogenic mycotoxins allegedly found in beans and legumes delivered as part of humanitarian aid. As “evidence,” Hamad uploaded a photo of mouldy peanut kernels, which, according to a reverse image search, was taken in Mozambique in 2008. Hamad’s post was viewed nearly 700,000 times on *X* and picked up by the Hamas-affiliated *Quds News Network*.

Similar, unconfirmed allegations from June 2025, originating from the Hamas-led government media office in Gaza, accused Israel of mixing the opioid oxycodone into sacks of flour entering the coastal strip in order to “destroy Palestinian society from within.” These claims were disseminated by *Anadolu* and *TRT*, two Turkish state news agencies. “I doubt the Western media will report on this!” wrote one user on *Facebook*. Another said, alluding to Hitler, “The man with the mustache was 100 per cent right about them.”

Highly graphic images often play an important role in shaping public perception of the war in Gaza, flooding social media timelines. “We are closer to the

*Real or AI-generated:  
The battle over the  
authenticity of images is  
being fought online*

battlefield than ever before,” explains Tal Hagin. “Images play a very big role in spreading disinformation today, and they can appeal to our emotions in ways that words cannot—this facilitates the spread of disinformation.”

Many harrowing images from Gaza showing suffering, hunger and death are authentic. Some, however, are not. AI-generated images are often presented as real. Photos from other conflicts or situations are falsely attributed to Gaza. At the same time, real photos are dismissed as AI. The result is an online battle over the authenticity of images. “We live in a post-truth era of AI and deepfakes, and social media algorithms undermine the truth in every way,” says Oren Persico, an Israeli journal-

ist and media analyst at the website *The Seventh Eye*. “Trust in the news media has fallen sharply,” Persico explains in an interview, “and media organizations have become increasingly agenda-driven.”

One example of misinformation is a photo of Mariam Dawwas, a severely emaciated nine-year-old girl in Gaza who weighs only ten kilograms, taken in August 2025 by *AFP* photographer Omar al-Qattaa. According to the *AFP* photo database, the girl had “no known illness.” International media outlets published this photo as a symbol of the hunger crisis in Gaza. However, British blogger David Collier was able to view the girl’s medical records: she did in fact suffer from a pre-existing but undisclosed digestive dis-

*What does a picture show, what can one believe? This photo shows aid supplies dropped near Rafah on August 7, 2025—but it could also be interpreted in a completely different, misleading way.*



order called “intestinal malabsorption,” which explained her extreme emaciation. At the same time, Grok — the AI integrated into X — falsely and repeatedly claimed that a photo of Mariam Dawwas was actually taken seven years ago in Yemen.

This is by no means an isolated case. A photo of Mohammed Zakaria al-Mutawaq, who was only one and a half years old, was published by numerous international media outlets in July 2025. *Die ZEIT* published the photo, which shows his skeletal body, with the headline “This is what hunger looks like,” without mentioning that he suffers from several pre-existing conditions that impair his muscle development, including cerebral palsy. Numerous media outlets, including *Die ZEIT* and *The New York Times*, later amended their reporting due to widespread criticism of this lack of context. The tabloid *Bild*, on the other hand, continued to question the images from Gaza in an August 2025 article entitled “This Gaza photographer stages Hamas propaganda.” *Bild* claimed that a photo showing photographer Anas Zayed Fteiha photographing people in Gaza waiting with cooking pots at a food distribution point proved that such scenes were fake—a selective interpretation that oscillates between misinformation and disinformation. The article was picked up by Israeli government social media accounts, one of which described it as “Pallywood” serving to “manipulate world public opinion.” *FakeReporter* and *Der Spiegel* refuted *Bild* by proving that Fteiha had indeed taken photos in an active field kitchen.

### Trust Is Being Undermined

The result is threefold: First, by omitting important contextual information such as pre-existing medical conditions, the very real and widespread hunger crisis in Gaza is cast into doubt among social

*Incorrect data, quantities, and locations: figures from Gaza can be just as emotive as images*

media users. Second, heated discussions about the aforementioned illnesses distract from the fact that malnutrition significantly exacerbates such illnesses. And third, trust in traditional media is undermined, as some social media users feel they can no longer believe the images coming out of Gaza.

Some photos circulating on social media are not even from Gaza. In February 2024, the official X account of the State of Israel published a breakdown of humanitarian aid that allegedly reached the Gaza Strip after widespread criticism that not enough was being done. The now-deleted post featured a photo purportedly showing a tent camp with aid supplies in Gaza. An image search revealed that the photo was not from Gaza, but from a video of a refugee camp in Moldova for people who fled the war in Ukraine in 2022. Persico speaks of an Israeli “campaign” that is “essential to maintaining the belief that the Israeli army is not committing war crimes in Gaza and to maintaining public support for the war.”

### Suffering as Statistics

Figures from Gaza can be just as emotive as images. On 18 September 2025, a self-proclaimed “activist against digital disinformation” from Madrid with over 180,000 followers shared a video by Francesca Albanese on X in which the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the Palestinian territories spoke of possibly 680,000 deaths in

Gaza, including allegedly 380,000 children under the age of five, adding that “it would be difficult to prove or disprove this figure.” The activist used this claim as evidence that Israel is committing “genocide.”

It is impossible for this claim to be true. UNRWA estimates that there are only 320,000 children under the age of five in Gaza. The Hamas-run Ministry of Health, which does not distinguish between combatants and civilians, puts the total number of deaths since the start of the war in all age groups at 65,000 as of September 2025, including 18,400 under the age of 18. This case borders on disinformation, as a UN special rapporteur responsible for Gaza should know all this. Albanese did not respond to a request for comment.

In May 2025, a senior UN humanitarian representative made an even more dramatic statement on *BBC Radio 4*: 14,000 babies in Gaza would die within the next 48 hours if they did not receive immediate assistance. This was widely reported in the international media and shared on social media before the *BBC* asked the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for clarification, which phrased it slightly differently, namely that 14,000 “severe cases of acute malnutrition” were expected over the course of a year. The subsequent correction by the *BBC* had little impact. The *Sunday Times*’ chief foreign correspondent wrote on X in a post that was viewed over 215,000 times and had

not been deleted or amended even months later: “How could the world allow this to happen?” Humza Yousaf, the former First Minister of Scotland, wrote in a post that was viewed over 400,000 times and had also not been deleted: “Act... Do something. The lives of 14,000 babies depend on it.” One user wrote: “We must do everything in our power to stop Israel from committing such atrocities.” This claim can still be found on the *BBC* website today.

Another example: In June 2025, the official account of the Palestinian Mission to the United Nations wrote on X: “A Harvard-affiliated study concludes that Israel has ‘disappeared’ nearly 400,000 Palestinians in Gaza, half of them children,” linking to an article in the Lebanese online magazine *The Cradle*. The article has since been deleted, but the Palestinian UN mission’s post on X, which has been viewed more than 46,000 times, has not. The claim, which quickly went viral, is not based on a Harvard study, but on a preprint uploaded to Harvard’s Dataverse, an archive, which makes no mention of some 400,000 Palestinians allegedly disappearing. The Palestinian UN mission did not respond to a request for comment.

A false flag attack on October 7, flour laced with opioids, a staged famine and 14,000 babies in immediate danger of death—dramatized narratives, figures and images create a sense of urgency among social media users that is both highly emotional and encourages them to take drastic action. However, these cases also demonstrate the interplay between misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy myths: it is often difficult to prove malicious intent to manipulate, as many social media users genuinely believe the statements in question to be true due to their ideological convictions, while others with a clear agenda deliberately reinforce them.

*Dramatized narratives, statements, and images create a sense of urgency among social media users, which is highly emotional*

### **Emotional Radicalization**

Tom Khaled Würdemann, a historian at the Centre for Jewish Studies in Heidelberg and a specialist in the Palestinian national movement, sees this emotionalized radicalization on both sides of the conflict, but says that it has become very systematic in the pro-Palestinian camp, fueled by influencers and media activists who have monetized the attention economy of online activism through fake news.

“When you look at the images and the terrible news coming out of Gaza, you

don’t need disinformation to radicalize many people,” explains Würdemann. “But disinformation amplifies this feeling even more, and in the face of an enemy perceived as demonic in the form of Israel, this leads to a situation where it is no longer possible to imagine a peaceful end to this conflict, because justice for monsters like the Israeli Jews must mean that they disappear—which is very similar to how many on the Israeli right view the destruction of Gaza as not only necessary but morally good.” **IP**



# Beyond Propaganda: War in a Post-Truth World

In addition to the physical front, there was a second battle in Gaza: the battle for truth. An analysis of the structures and effects of propaganda—and how to counter it.

By Roman Beliaevski and Guilherme Correia da Silva

**K**eept filming. We need videos!” During the attacks on October 7, 2023, Hamas fighters carried smartphones and bodycams to document the murders of Israelis, the kidnappings, the arson attacks. They had explicit orders to film, says cyberterrorism expert Gabriel Weimann. When it comes to media, Hamas is “one of the most experienced and sophisticated terrorist organisations in the world,” he adds.

Since its founding under Sheikh Yassin, Hamas has made use of the media apparatus. In the late 1990s, its leadership adapted to cyberspace and has been using it as a propaganda and psychological weapon ever since.

The attacks on October 7 were carefully planned. At that time, Hamas had an estimated 1,500 personnel focused on propaganda. According to the IDF, Hamas fighters activated dozens of Israeli SIM cards the night before to strengthen their internet connection.

While terrorists killed over 1,200 people and kidnapped more than 200, videos of the attacks were sent back to command

centres in Gaza in real time. “Keep filming, send us more films.” The footage was quickly edited and posted on *Telegram* and other social media platforms—platforms that, as Weimann notes, “nobody regulates.”

This unprotected gateway made it possible to shock Israel with unfiltered images and quickly reach the Palestinian public as well as a wider international audience. The videos portrayed Hamas as a force capable of striking Israel, capitalizing on centuries-old disputes over territory and self-governance. Yet, this marked only the first phase of Hamas’ propaganda campaign.

The second phase, according to Weimann, involved the use of hostage videos as a strategic “asset” in negotiations with Israel, replicating a tactic used in 2011 to secure the release of more than a thousand Palestinian prisoners in exchange for Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

What followed was, as Weimann describes, a “theatre of terror,” designed to convey a message of both “domination” and “humanitarianism.”



**Roman Beliaevski** studies political science at the master’s level, specializing in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

In early 2025, hostages were paraded in Gaza and presented with certificates and other “souvenirs” of their captivity. On 20 February, in Khan Yunis, Hamas staged a “ceremony” with four black coffins, claiming they contained the remains of four hostages, including Shiri Bibas and her two young sons—Hamas members, recognisable by their characteristic green headbands, stood guard with automatic weapons while music played in the background and children looked on. Later, the group organised video calls before the release of the last living hostages. In one of these conversations, a masked terrorist ordered: “Use this in the news!”

Following the attacks on October 7, a broader battle for control of the narrative took place. Blogger Ella Kenan reports that within minutes, false claims were circulating on social media, including statements that Israel had stormed Gaza, followed soon after by allegations of genocide. “The narrative framing of Israel as committing genocide emerged even as Israelis were still fighting for their lives,” she tells us. “Two of my friends were reported dead. Hospitals were looking for blood donations, so I went there. Meanwhile, others were already shaping the narrative.” Kenan decided to fight back and tell a different story on social media. The day after October 7, Kenan came up with the slogan “Hamas is ISIS”. Her goal, she tells us, was to convey to a Western audience the scale of the fundamental threat Israel faces by using a familiar portrayal

of another terrorist organisation. Within days, the phrase went viral.

There was debate about the exactness of the comparison; but whether it was precise or not, “the important thing is that people are talking about it,” says Kenan. The comparison was echoed by political leaders around the world, including US President Joe Biden. More significantly, Kenan believes that this phrase prompted Hamas to retract its threat to broadcast the executions of hostages live, as ISIS had once done. At the same time, Hamas released some of the hostages. “They brought them to the border to show how humane they were,” says Kenan – the group itself cited “humanitarian reasons” for releasing two women on 20 October 2023, adding that it wanted to prove President Biden wrong.

## Against the Poisoning of Knowledge

As part of her counter-propaganda efforts, Kenan founded an organisation to combat what she calls “knowledge poisoning” by exposing disinformation and what she sees as manipulation of information in cyberspace, including Wikipedia. “What’s unique about this era,” she says, “is that there are fewer anchors of truth, i.e. agreed-upon facts on which to base a conversation.” Kenan perceives this war front, the battle for truth, as a challenge for democratic societies worldwide, not just Israel. “As Jews, we are usually the first victims, the canary in the coal mine, but we will not be the last.”

The war in Gaza has polarised the world like perhaps no other. Influencers, politicians and NGOs engaged in emotional debates about what was lawful or unlawful, just or unjust, liberal or illiberal. In the media, on the streets, at universities, barricades were erected cementing the division between a pro-Israeli and a pro-Palestinian camp. Communications scientist

*The accusation of genocide  
was still being made on  
October 7, 2023—directed  
at Israel*



**Guilherme Correia da Silva**

is a journalist and editor. He is currently deputy head of the “Portuguese for Africa” department at *Deutsche Welle*.

Marcus Bösch notes that, on social media, all sides made use of nearly everything, “from AI tools to trends and memes.” Various streams of information poured into the flood of public debate. Propaganda, false information and disinformation mixed with the truth, blurring the line between fact and fiction. This is how information warfare works in a post-factual world.

## **Extreme Polarization**

Faced with such confusion, many were unsure what to believe. According to Bösch, the parties to the conflict also had “little interest in communicating objectifiable facts”; their goal was rather to convince others of their own narrative.

There were constant inflammatory statements from members of Prime Minister Netanyahu’s cabinet from the very first day of the war: they called for the “complete destruction” of the Gaza Strip or urged that “only explosives” and “not a single gram” of aid be sent. Such statements overlapped with the images of destruction and suffering that filled television and mobile phone screens and fuelled international condemnation.

“It created the impression that the country is ruled by reckless politicians who take no responsibility and are only seeking a few clicks on social media to please their base,” says Peter Lerner, former spokesman for the Israeli armed forces for foreign media. While this had no impact on actual policy, it damaged Israel’s international reputation, he adds. The fact that various agencies are responsible for the country’s crisis communications only

complicated matters: “The biggest problem Israel faced on October 7 was not a lack of communications professionals, but fragmentation and the lack of a unified message.”

Personally, he faced a different challenge in this war: “When I communicated on behalf of the IDF in 2014, I never felt that the media fundamentally questioned my statements. But this time it was different.” He also recalls the first question journalists asked chief spokesman Daniel Hagari after the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital in October 2023: “Why should we believe you?”

Early reports claimed that an Israeli missile had caused the explosion, killing over 500 people. Several media outlets quickly spread the story. The IDF later rejected the accusation and stated that the rocket had been fired by Islamic Jihad. However, significantly fewer people were still following these developments, observed Pascal Siggelkow from *ARD-Faktenfinder*. He cites this case as a warning about the dangers of a fast-paced news cycle. The pursuit of speed can get in the way of journalistic diligence.

“It is important to sometimes say clearly that we simply do not know,” Siggelkow emphasises. He says that it was difficult to independently verify information during the Gaza war, partly because only a few media representatives were allowed into Gaza. Credible sources also became scarce: even well-known organisations, including UN bodies, were accused of bias.

Siggelkow points to another example: the reports in early 2025 about the killing of 15 aid workers in Gaza. The IDF initially stated that the individuals had been shot because their medical convoy had approached suspiciously. However, video footage contradicted the IDF’s version of events. The IDF later admitted to “profes-

*Research indicates that the  
Gaza War has finally  
sealed the post-truth era*



*On October 18, 2023, there was a devastating explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital. Israel was quickly blamed. This was soon proven to be untrue – but the accusation stuck nonetheless.*

sional errors” in this incident, but denied any intent to kill and accused some of the victims of possible links to Hamas.

It was amid this chaos of conflicting information that Hamas launched the final internationally focused phase of its propaganda campaign. Weimann notes that “Hamas photographers and editors took pictures of the destruction in Gaza. Some are distorted, others are false.” However, propaganda is most effective when it contains a grain of truth, he adds. The devastation and deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza were obvious: “Palestinians were victims, sometimes in brutal ways. There are many innocent victims.”

As a result, Germany changed its course towards Israel. In May 2025, Chancellor Friedrich Merz said that Israel’s military actions were incomprehensible. In August, Germany suspended new exports

of military equipment that could be used in Gaza due to the planned intensification of military operations. In a position paper, the CDU, Merz’s party, warned that an escalation could exacerbate social tensions in Europe, which must be avoided in the context of Germany’s commitment to the State of Israel.

Lea Reisner, spokesperson for international relations for the Left Party, called for a complete halt to deliveries: “The federal government has no guarantee that the weapons will not be used in Israel for crimes against international law or human rights violations.” Reisner actively participates in pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Germany and has used the term “genocide” on social media and in the Bundestag to describe Israel’s actions in the Gaza Strip. “I use this word, my party does not,” she explains in an interview. “Israel has



a right to self-defence, but the number of civilians killed is absolutely unjustifiable.” The Left Party does not seem to make any discernible distinction between offensive and defensive equipment when it comes to arms exports to Israel.

For CDU politician Roderich Kiesewetter, suspending new arms deliveries to Israel was a serious mistake. He sees solidarity with Israel as a cornerstone of Christian democracy and accuses Chancellor Merz of jeopardising the legacy of Konrad Adenauer and Angela Merkel.

### **Morality and Strategy**

Beyond solidarity with Israel after October 7, cooperation is both a historical moral obligation and a matter of strategic importance, he believes: “If we want to continue to have partners who help us support our intelligence services, and if we want to remain at the cutting edge of cyber defence and other modern technologies, we would be foolish to give in to emotional sentiments.”

Kiesewetter tells us that he has been labelled a “warmonger” within his own party in the past, including when he advocated for stronger military support for Ukraine during the elections in eastern Germany. He believes there is a widespread “fear” of taking a clearer stance.

Nevertheless, the CDU politician emphasises the importance of cooperation with Israel, especially since a “coalition” of autocratic states is waging conventional and cognitive warfare to undermine the

rules-based order. He points to international efforts to discredit the country as a democratic law state. However, friendship with Israel also means confronting the crimes of extremist settlers in the West Bank, Kiesewetter adds.

### **Three Findings**

In October 2025, Israeli opposition leader Yair Lapid warned that critics on the streets and in universities had been deceived: “Propaganda experts, funded by terror money, manipulated you.” There was no genocide, he said; Hamas had concealed its terror with liberal rhetoric.

The group was well prepared for the information war and recognised the systemic weaknesses of its opponent. Communications expert Weimann argues that lessons should be learned from this. A clear political vision and a complex “arsenal” of offensive and defensive measures would be essential to combat propaganda in future battles. Weimann advocates that states should invest in technological solutions to combat the spread of hate speech and in tools to strengthen psychological resilience. He adds that citizens must be “vaccinated” against manipulation through early warnings and education.

At the political level, however, the biggest challenge in a crisis is recognising it in the first place, according to former IDF spokesman Peter Lerner: “You need tools to assess where you are failing to get your message across and to be able to realign your course.” He warns against placing too little emphasis on emotions and too much on “legal speak,” which does not reach public opinion.

### **Ukraine as a Role Model?**

Propaganda is “a bad idea” because it is a one-sided process that “closes off the possibility of dialogue,” says historian

*“Sometimes it is important to say that you don’t know exactly which information is correct”*



and communications expert Nicholas J. Cull. He calls for a shift in how states, including Israel, deal with their international image. Deeds—not just words – are key to a country’s long-term reputation security, by listening to foreign criticism and implementing fundamental political changes. Even before this war, Israel had a tarnished reputation abroad, Cull notes. “People see the country as a place of con-

flict, and in a way that’s unfair. But that’s exactly what Israel must come back from.”

The historian points to Ukraine as an example of how a country with a well-cultivated reputation can weather a crisis by mobilising the help of its allies rather than driving them away. This shows that reputation no longer plays a secondary role in security: it means security, especially in a post-factual world. **IP**







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# Accesses

Perception and representation are a broad field in a digital era of highly accelerated communication. A look at the media landscape in Israel, the role of fixers and producers in the Gaza Strip, and the special role of *TikTok* in a war that has also been a war of images.

# Oppression and Censorship: Israel Sees the Polarization of Its Media as a Threat

by Milan Czerny

A visitor to the newly opened National Library of Israel in Jerusalem is greeted by front pages in Hebrew, Yiddish, French, Russian, and Arabic, reflecting pivotal moments in Israel's history, its wars, and showcasing the diversity of the press in Israel and Palestine. If not for headlines like "The people hope for the recovery of J.V. Stalin," published by the Communist Party newspaper *Kol Ha'am* a day after Stalin had already died, many of the front pages from 1948 and the subsequent years of war appear at first eerily relevant in current days.

"Additional conquests for the Israeli army," and "the ceasefire has been rejected," headlined *Davar*, the newspaper of the Labor movement, in 1948, in the days following the independence of the state of Israel, in what feels reminiscent to two years of war in Israel.

Two years after the Hamas-led October 7, 2023 attack against Israel, and the deadly Israeli military offensive against Gaza, mark a symbolic moment to reflect on how the war in Gaza and in the region has been unfolding on screens and newspapers in Israel. While unity certainly prevailed in the Israeli media and society in the days and weeks after Hamas' attack, the cracks and polarization, which pre-existed the war, have only increased as the months of fighting have accumulated.

Two main issues broadly polarize Israeli media: the first one is, unsurprisingly, the attitude to the war in Gaza, and the second one, characteristic of countries led by

divisive strong-men, is Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Yet, the stance of a media outlet on one of these two issues does not necessarily determine its position on the other.

Mainstream Israeli media channels, such as *Channel 12* and *Ynet*, which are perhaps the most popular in the country, have kept up their critical coverage of Prime Minister Netanyahu after October 7, 2023, questioning the leadership's responsibility in failing to see Hamas' preparations for the offensive. Their relative silence, compared to internal media, on the suffering of Gazans has, however, remained a near-constant two years into the war.

The heavy reliance on information provided by the IDF, the general lack of empathy commonly experienced by societies at wars regarding the other side, as well as the frequent existence of strong ties between journalists and their families and friends serving in the Israeli military, help explain, in part, why many of the Israeli mainstream media outlets have avoided difficult questions, such as the toll of the war on civilians in Gaza. Self-censorship has largely engulfed many mainstream Israeli journalists, seeking to lift the national morale by reporting on advancements of military offensives, and opting for footage of destroyed buildings, rather than of dying Gazan civilians.

Some journalists even took a step further, even calling for annihilation of all residents of the Gaza Strip on Channel 14, a pro-Netanyahu channel, or even directly taking part in military actions. A year ago, in October 2024, Dany Cushman, the Israeli equivalent of CNN's Anderson Cooper and popular anchor on *Channel 12*, pushed a button on air to detonate explosives in a building in southern Lebanon.

"How Israeli Media Became a Wartime Government Propaganda Arm," asked about a year ago Ido David Cohen, media correspondent for *Ha'aretz*, the main Israeli outlet breaking this bubble of self-censorship, in light of the attitude adopted by *Channel 12* to the war. "Journalists and media researchers fear that Israeli broadcasting is returning to bad habits as part of an effort to lift morale and maintain



solidarity with soldiers risking their lives in Gaza – and, in doing so, is failing to show the reality in Gaza,” wrote the journalist.

*Ha’aretz*, as well as a couple of smaller independent media, such as *972+*, or *Hamakom*, have emerged as rare voices, offering a different perspective for an Israeli audience on the different events in the region since October 7, 2023. Investigations on potential crimes committed by IDF soldiers in Gaza by *Ha’aretz*, on the use of AI by *972+*, or on the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) in Shomrim, have received important coverage internationally, and have been at the forefront of more critical coverage of the war in Gaza.

Yet, some of these media outlets, including *Ha’aretz* and *972+*, are often more popular abroad than inside Israel, due to their critical stance, and, perhaps, the lack of willingness from parts of Israeli society to confront with more uncomfortable facts on the ground. This raises the important question of how Israeli journalists can be heard within their country, while continuing to produce critical coverage.

The more critical stance adopted by *Ha’aretz* and others also comes with increasing threats, and pressure from the government. In a sign of the deep polarization of the Israeli media landscape, the glass of *Ha’aretz*’s Tel Aviv office was shattered in June 2024, and the Israeli government has imposed sanctions on the outlet, mandating any government-funded body to refrain from placing advertisements in the paper. Journalists speaking about suffering in Gaza and who have been very critical of the Israeli offensive there have at times faced personal attacks or threats online.

This stance toward critical media has also expanded even to more mainstream outlets, including to Israel’s public broad-

caster *Kan*. The government has tried to interfere with the governance, funding and ownership of *Kan*, which many believe to be linked to the public broadcaster’s critical coverage of the Israeli government and of the prime minister.

The military censor, a body usually in the shadows, has also expanded its reach in the war. Little known outside of Israel, the censor, which has existed since 1948, and the creation of the State of Israel, requires Israeli outlets to send their articles dealing with national security to the censor for approval prior to publication.

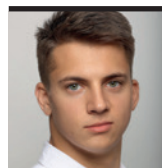
As the realm of issues dealing with national security has naturally expanded amidst the war, the number of articles censored has increased in ways which have, at times, eroded press freedom. This includes censorship against articles dealing with leaks of data following cyber-attacks by Israel’s foes, a crucial material for investigative journalists, but also related to the purchase by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s son of an apartment in the United Kingdom under a different name.

Various forms of censorship and repression have been also detrimental to the international coverage of the war, with the continuous ban on entry of international journalists inside Gaza to report freely there, the killing of Palestinian journalists by the Israeli army, as well as ban on *Al Jazeera* operations in Israel, a popular channel in the Arab world but also among Israeli-Arabs.

These types of restrictions have played a part in the rise in popularity of other forms of coverage of the war, most notably on *Telegram*, the messaging platform, which has emerged as a highly popular source of hyper-accelerated, unfiltered news for young Israelis. While bypassing state censorship, the rise in popularity of the messaging platform is also accompanied with risks of unchecked disinformation, including by nation states, seeking to exploit the faultlines of the polarized Israeli society.

While such risks tied to the growing reliance on social media for news are not unique to Israel, they can be especially dangerous in the emotionally charged context of a country at war.

IP



**Milan Czerny**

is an investigative journalist at *Shomrim*, Israel’s only independent, non-profit investigative news organization. His reporting on the wars in Gaza and Ukraine has been published by AP, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Ha’aretz*, and others.

# In the Shadow of the Headlines They organize access, translate, build trust: fixers in Gaza and Israel—the invisible helpers without whom international reporting would not be possible.

By Yasmin Ismail

The screen remains black for two months. Contact with Emad Abu Shawiesh is repeatedly lost, appointments are canceled. At the beginning of September 2025, a connection is finally established. It is 11 p.m. in the Gaza Strip. Abu Shawiesh, 39, a gaunt man with tired eyes, appears in the black video window. He apologizes for the late hour, “I can only charge my phone with the power bank after sunset—it doesn’t always work.”

Since the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, the power supply to Gaza has been more or less completely interrupted—many have been living with generators and solar panels ever since, including Abu Shawiesh. His most important tool is his smartphone. He films, takes photos, arranges contacts, and talks to editorial offices. Abu Shawiesh is a journalist; also a fixer, one of those helpers without whom reporting from war zones would be virtually impossible. Not all foreign correspondents work with fixers. At the same time, they are indispensable where borders, languages, and dangers block the way.

Without them, foreign reporting remains untrustworthy—and they themselves invisible. Their contribution is crucial, yet they receive little recognition. Anyone who wants to understand how worldviews are formed must look to those who make them possible.

Fixers work in the shadow of reporters: they translate, organize, research, advise on security issues, and mediate between cultures. Their decisions—which location they recommend, which voice they pass on, which word they choose—shape the framework of international reporting.

American media scholar Lindsay Palmer has devoted an entire book to the profession, ‘The Fixers’ (Oxford University Press, 2019). She describes how heavily international reporting depends on these helpers and how little attention is paid to them.

Palmer outlines five areas of responsibility: fixers come up with stories, organize routes, negotiate contacts, translate language and culture—and protect reporters in the field. These five areas form the central theme of this essay; stories about trust, responsibility, and



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how the image of the world is created in the first place.

### Access as Risk

With the outbreak of war on October 7, Israel closed its borders to the Gaza Strip. Since then, no foreign journalists have been allowed to enter independently. For fixers like Mohamad Abu Saif, this changed everything. Instead of guiding correspondents through Gaza, the fixers now hold the microphone themselves and send their recordings to editorial offices outside the country.

Mohamad Abu Saif, 33, has been working as a freelance fixer from Gaza for the *ARD* correspondent office in Tel Aviv since 2021 and has been reporting for the broadcaster since the first day of the war. Every day, he sends updates, suggests topics, and films with his cell phone.

Abu Saif knows what is possible and what is not. “You can’t give me orders. You have to ask me, Mohamad, can you do that? Because I’m the one working on the ground, not you.” On October 7, he stayed at home. He made a conscious decision not to drive to the destroyed border fences that Hamas fighters used to enter Israel. “I could have earned a lot of money,” he says. “But if I chase after money, I’ll be dead.”

The business of fixers is also booming in Israel. The south is a restricted military zone. Journalists from all over the world are traveling there. Noam Shalev has been running a production company in Tel Aviv for over 25 years. He employs three fixers in Israel and two in the West Bank. He also works with freelance fixers in Gaza. “We never made much news,” he says. “That changed on October 7.” Within three months, Shalev’s team suddenly found themselves looking after 20 TV crews instead of five.

Two days after the war began, one of his colleagues, who now works freelance and wishes to remain anonymous, took a Japanese television crew to the destroyed kibbutzim. He obtained special permission for them and expected them to follow his instructions. “There were still Hamas fighters there,” he says. “And then the crew suddenly wanted to head toward the border fence. I said, ‘No way!’” Decisions like this—in Gaza as well as in southern Israel—require more than caution; they involve more responsibility too.

Abu Saif from Gaza decides whether a story will be published or not. The fixer from Israel determines how far a team is allowed to go. Both control what is visible. Fixers help decide which stories are made public at all. What begins as a journalistic idea often arises from their assessment. What is achievable, what is too dangerous? In this phase, the framework for reporting takes shape; before a camera starts rolling, before a word is written.

In times of war, access is not a formality, but a risk. Those who make it possible shape the way the world is seen. But access alone is not enough. In a war where mistrust has become the currency, it is not only where you go that counts, but who you meet. Fixers act with trust. They don’t just open doors, they provide access to people.

The Israeli fixer remembers a scene that still haunts him to this day. Shortly after the war began, he arranged an interview for a television crew with a survivor from a destroyed kibbutz. Later, they drove there together and stood in front of the man’s house. The reporter called the man—the fixer had provided the number—and asked, “How do you feel now?” There was silence on the other end.

The fixer called the man later and apologized—and regrets his actions to this

day. Not because it cost him a story, but because he betrayed trust. Fixers live on trust—and lose it faster than a story can be printed.

Fixers in Gaza know that their work is being monitored and that criticism can have consequences. Like war reporters, they check, compare, and call sources multiple times. This creates a picture that is as reliable as possible.

Ameera Harouda, 42, knows this well. She has been working since 2005 as one of the first female fixers in Gaza, and since 2023 from exile in Qatar. From there, she coordinates international requests and trains young female fixers. “They have to learn to recognize the important lines of a story,” she says. “Never just one source, always several. Check everything.”

But facts only tell half the story. “When you enter a house and the family is sitting on the floor, sit down with them,” she says. “If they invite you to eat, don’t say no.” For Harouda, closeness is not a danger, but a prerequisite. “When you film a mother who has lost her child, feel her pain. Only then will you know what questions you can ask.”

### **The Power of Translation**

Nevertheless, trust has its limits. Words do not always convey what is intended. Between languages and the realities of war, the fixers’ third task begins: translation.

Christian Vooren, a reporter for *Die Zeit*, tells of a fixer in Ramallah shortly after October 7. The man refused to translate the Hamas attack as a “terrorist attack.” “That was difficult,” says Vooren. “But you have to trust that we’re still doing our job properly.” He has critical passages checked by Arabic-speaking colleagues. “I double-check a lot of things and stay away from the temptation to allow someone to translate something too nicely for me,” he

says. Fixers also translate in the opposite direction, from the language of the editorial office into the reality of Gaza. It’s not always about words, but about whether a question can be answered in the first place.

Before Ameera Harouda forwards questions from international editorial offices to her fixers in Gaza, she reviews them. Some are too harsh, too direct. “I rephrase them so they don’t come across as hurtful,” she says. In this way, she protects the people she reports on and, at the same time, the credibility of her reporting.

In war, translation is not a technical act, but interpretation. Fixers act as co-authors of the history they translate. Especially in a war where every word seems suspicious, translation becomes a political act. Those who translate intervene. Fixers not only translate, they protect.

Noam Shalev remembers the war between Israel and Iran. In June, a foreign TV crew travelled with his fixer from the Lebanese border to Tel Aviv. “I knew that attacks would come at half past seven,” says Shalev. So he told them where they could stay safe. Finally, they lay down in a hollow next to the road, cameras pointed upwards, as the rockets flew overhead. “They got the best pictures—and remained unharmed.” “Access,” says Shalev, “means responsibility: getting reporters to where the story is happening—and bringing them back safely.”

Emad Abu Shawiesh knows this feeling. Seventy-five relatives live in his house

*Translation in war is  
not a technical act, but one  
of interpretation. Those  
who translate intervene.  
Fixers act as co-authors*





*When war is part of everyday life, logistics become the invisible side of journalistic work. The picture shows a reporter in a destroyed building in Gaza City in August 2025.*

in Gaza, crammed together on three floors. During the video interview, he sits on the roof and whispers. “I don’t want anyone to see or hear me,” he says. His father asks him to spend the night at the hospital—for the sake of his four children. “He’s afraid because journalists have been targeted,” says Abu Shawiesh. For fixers, safety is no longer a given, but a daily negotiation.

German journalists also know how closely safety and trust are intertwined. Thore Schröder, a correspondent for *Der Spiegel*, has been working with a fixer from Gaza since the beginning of the war. They never meet in person, but write to each other almost every day. “Sometimes contact breaks down,” he says. “Then you don’t know if she just has no reception—or if something has happened.” A kind of friendship develops from professional collaboration. “You worry. And yet you try to maintain distance, to draw boundaries

between the personal and the professional, which is not always easy.”

Those who accompany reporters bear responsibility for their safety and often for their survival. This is also part of the truth about fixers: they ensure what remains visible. Once war becomes part of everyday life, the invisible side of journalistic work becomes apparent: logistics. Those who report in exceptional circumstances not only organize access to the story, but also its very creation.

Mohamad Abu Saif now lives in Munich and works for *Bayerischer Rundfunk*. In February 2024, with the help of ARD, he managed to leave Gaza via Cairo—a process that took months. During the attacks, the broadcaster organized a vehicle and accommodation—Abu Saif slept in the car. On the first day of the war, the evacuation of his neighborhood, Rimal, in Gaza City began. “They were responsible for me—

generous, but also clear: you work, we protect you.”

Money is also part of logistics. Fixers in Gaza work on a freelance basis and earn between \$150 and \$700 per day, depending on the assignment and the medium. Prices are higher for television productions than for text research. At Noam Shalev’s production company in Tel Aviv, a day with a fixer costs around \$500.

Transferring money to Gaza is complicated. “We had to open an account in the UK to transfer the fee to the Bank of Palestine. But even that didn’t work out in the end, so we are now trying to send the fees to them via family members abroad,” says Schröder from *Der Spiegel*. Security concerns prevent direct transfers.

### Logistics mean Responsibility

Logistics mean more than just organization. They are an expression of responsibility—for safety, payment, and the survival of journalistic work. Fixers hold the structures together on which reporting depend in times of chaos. Journalism is not only created through words, but also through roads, electricity, fuel—through everything that makes it possible in the first place. The field of work for fixers is complex—and war makes it even more complicated. Without them, foreign journalism in crisis areas would be virtually impossible. To view them merely as support staff is an oversimplification.

All the fixers I spoke to had studied film, journalism, or communications. They see themselves as professionals, not assistants. Many are comfortable with the term “fixer,” but “local producers” sounds more

*Fixers are more than just assistants. Without them, foreign journalism in crisis areas would be virtually impossible*

appropriate to their level of responsibility, they are more than just a link in a chain of command.

Fixer contacts usually arise through recommendations or previous collaborations. Schröder and Vooren say that a fixer does not have to be a journalist; trust, reliability, and networks are what matter. “If a fixer thinks he’s the boss, it gets difficult,” says Schröder. “At the end of the day, I’m the editor, I’m responsible for the product. That’s not to say that consultations on an equal footing aren’t useful—they definitely are.” Vooren pays attention to attitude and distance. “I want to know how someone thinks politically—not whether they’re left or right, but whether they are activists. How much can someone step back from their own involvement?”

Fixers don’t completely change reporting, but they do shape it. They provide the building blocks for a picture of the world. Abu Shawiesh sits on the roof of his house, drones buzzing above him. Sometimes he is startled when one comes close. His solar panels are still providing enough power. As long as he has light, he continues to work. Perhaps that is the simplest description of their work: fixers keep the lights on so that others can see.

Translated from German by Katherine Brown

IP

# War in the Feed

There are more pro-Palestinian videos on TikTok than pro-Israeli ones. And there are many reasons for this. A look into a world of diverse references, double messages and multiple levels.

By Isolde Ruhdorfer

Anyone interested in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should also know Gandalf and Frodo.

A creator with the handle @tineliest used a green screen to project herself in front of a photo of the two characters from „Lord of the Rings“. „We too are living in catastrophic times and have a tendency to look away instead of doing something,“ says the creator, „whether it’s about things like the climate crisis, the shift to the right or the genocide in Gaza.“ According to her, the Lord of the Rings can be taken as an opportunity to get involved in real life. There is no classification of the term „genocide“.

One of the many parallel battles to the war on the battlefield is taking place on *TikTok*. The platform’s enormous reach makes it politically influential. Around one and a half billion people worldwide use *TikTok*. That’s half as many users as Facebook has. In Germany, just under a quarter of the population uses *TikTok*, as the company announced in 2023. The figures are likely to be even higher now. Even those who do not use *TikTok* should

be aware of what is happening there. This is because the videos on this app, sometimes only seconds long, can spread rapidly and be viewed hundreds of thousands or millions of times.

Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine is considered one of the first „*TikTok* wars“; the tanks are rolling not only on the front lines, but also on screens around the world. The Hamas attack on Israel and, above all, the war in Gaza are also the subject of billions of videos. Israel prevailed on the battlefield—but lost on *TikTok*.

There are many reasons for this, as a look at the research shows. *TikTok* videos are multi-layered, with allusions and insider knowledge. If you want to understand the videos about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, you have to understand the platform’s logic. The deeper you delve into the world of hashtags and memes, the more often you come across truly interesting content: content that cannot be clearly assigned to either side.

„My BookTok account is slowly becoming a Palestine account,“ says the creator with the handle @tineliest. Wearing a car-



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*Hamas' attack on Israel and the ensuing war in Gaza are the subject of millions upon millions of videos on TikTok. According to counts, there are significantly more pro-Palestinian videos than pro-Israel ones.*

digan, she is presumably sitting at home, holding up the book she recommends to the camera: „On Palestine“ by Noam Chomsky and Ilan Pappé. The creator, named Christine, posts a video almost every day, most of which are about books. She sometimes discusses novels, but mostly non-fiction books that deal with racism, classism or colonialism—or the Gaza war. She has around 20,000 followers and a total of half a million likes.

Accounts like this are the reason why, shortly after October 7 2023, accusations were made that *TikTok* was biased and amplified anti-Israeli and antisemitic content. While Israel was still counting the dead from the Hamas massacre, videos were spreading on *TikTok* suggesting, for example, that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had deliberately allowed the attack to happen so that he could then attack Gaza.

Criticism quickly arose regarding the imbalance in the number of hashtags: #standwithisrael had approximately 60,000 posts, while #freepalestine had six million. Politicians, such as Republican Congressman Mike Gallagher in an article for *The Free Press*, blamed *TikTok* for young Americans holding „a morally bankrupt view of the world.“ There was also upheaval among *TikTok* employees over the Hamas attack and the Gaza war. One Israeli employee left the company as a result, according to *The New York Times*.

*TikTok* responded to the allegations back in November 2023. „*TikTok* does not ‚favour‘ one side of a debate over the other,“ the company wrote in a statement. According to *TikTok*, one reason for the imbalance in hashtags is that there are millions of users in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. They accounted for a large proportion of views, which is why there is



more content with the hashtag #freepalestine. Research shows that international opinion on Israel tends to be negative. The Pew Research Centre surveyed people in 24 countries in early 2025: in 20 of them, at least half of adults have a negative opinion of Israel.

A study by Northeastern University in Boston provides more accurate data on the imbalance of content on *TikTok*. Laura Edelson, assistant professor at the Khoury College of Computer Sciences, examined nearly 300,000 posts from the United States about the Gaza war between October 2023 and January 2024.

According to her findings, there were significantly more pro-Palestinian posts than pro-Israeli ones, which in turn had significantly more views. But does that mean *TikTok* deliberately amplifies certain posts? Edelson wanted to find out and therefore compared whether the number of posts and their views were proportional. Edelson's research suggests that content on both sides was amplified. Sometimes pro-Palestinian content, sometimes pro-Israeli content, so that it balances out overall. This contradicts the widespread perception that *TikTok* systematically favours one side.

Although numerous studies have examined *TikTok* content, including with a focus on the Middle East conflict, there is no comparable study from the German-speaking world that examines whether *TikTok* systematically amplifies

certain content. This is probably due to the fact that Bytedance, the company that owns *TikTok*, keeps the exact workings of *TikTok*'s algorithm secret.

### References and Double Messages

Counting videos and hashtags is one thing—but it is much more complicated to watch the videos and analyse their content. This is what Lilly Boxman-Shabtai, assistant professor in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, does. She examines how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is reflected on *TikTok*.

Boxman-Shabtai emphasises that she cannot yet scientifically prove every one of her statements. Nevertheless, years of research and countless hours of video material have enabled her to recognise patterns when she watches videos on *TikTok* today. „I think the pro-Palestinian side uses intertextuality very cleverly,“ she says. Intertextuality means that one text refers to another, quoting, mentioning or parodying it. Memes are an example of intertextuality: images, fragments of sentences or sounds that are reused many times and are therefore understood by everyone.

The appeal of *TikTok* consists largely of these memes. Anyone opening the app for the first time won't understand the inside jokes—and therefore won't understand the political message either. And pro-Palestinian content, according to Boxman-Shabtai, speaks the language of the platform better in this respect.

Boxman-Shabtai gives an example: a video shows pro-Palestinian demonstrations around the world. The camera zooms in on a particular sign that reads: „We can't breathe since 1948“. This is an intertextual reference to George Floyd, who died in the United States in 2020 when a police officer knelt on his neck,

*The hashtag  
#standwithIsrael has  
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has six million*

even though Floyd repeatedly said, „I can't breathe.“ The phrase became the slogan of the Black Lives Matter movement. „This is a very effective way to connect the two movements,“ says Boxman-Shabtai.

A video by creator „tineliest“ also shows how this intertextuality can work. Videos on *TikTok* can be accompanied by specific „sounds,“ i.e., songs or the soundtrack of an older video. In a video titled „Quick round: Book recommendations Palestine,“ the creator holds up various covers to the camera, with the song „Hind's Hall“ by Macklemore playing in the background. The title „Hind's Hall“ alludes to a building occupied by students, who in turn named it after a Palestinian girl who died in Gaza. Macklemore released the song in 2024, expressing solidarity with the pro-Palestinian campus protests.

*To understand TikTok,  
you have to look very  
closely and consider all  
levels of a video*

Anyone watching these videos on *TikTok* sees a few seconds of video footage, hears a few notes of music, reads a line on a poster. But so much happens in those few seconds that it takes many sentences to explain what's behind it.

Why are pro-Palestinian creators now better at using intertextuality? It may be because of who exactly the people creating this content are. „The most popular Israeli content is usually content created by Israelis themselves,“ says Boxman-Shabtai. „On the pro-Palestinian side, it's usually global influencers or people who don't live in Gaza who rephrase or repost content from Gaza.“ One could also interpret this

as meaning that pro-Palestinian creators are used to communicating across different countries. They therefore have to find ways to express themselves in such a way that millions of people around the world can understand them within seconds.

### **And if It Doesn't Fit Either Side?**

„Yesterday, I responded to the accusation that I was spreading Israeli propaganda, and today I have to respond to the accusation that I am spreading anti-Israeli propaganda,“ says a creator who calls himself @der\_verrueckte\_mutmacher in a video from early April. He asks ironically, „So which is it now?“

„Der verrückte Mutmacher“ (The Crazy Encourager), whose real name is Stefan Mutmacher, is a German creator who posts videos on *TikTok* almost daily. They deal with federal politics, right-wing extremism—and very often the Middle East. He has more than 70,000 followers and more than four million likes. In the weeks following October 7 2023, he expresses his views in several videos, which—atypical for *TikTok*—are often several minutes long. Also atypical for *TikTok* and the Middle East conflict, his videos cannot always be clearly assigned to one „side“.

Videos like his are what Boxman-Shabtai finds particularly interesting. Normally, she says, the videos are quite clear, either clearly pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli. But sometimes there are differences of opinion in the interpretation of the videos. „And that's what interests me the most.“

The composition of Boxman-Shabtai's team plays an important role here. Her team consists of two Jewish Israelis, one Palestinian from East Jerusalem and one from the West Bank. This team reviews and categorises videos for Boxman-Shabtai. In quantitative research, it is usually important that different people interpret a par-

ticular piece of content in the same way. However, Boxman-Shabtai says she has become increasingly interested in cases where a piece of content can be interpreted in very different ways by different people. „That’s why I approached this project with this team of women who have really different experiences and perceptions.“

One example of a video that can be interpreted in very different ways is one in which an Argentine teenager talks about the actions of the terrorist organisation Hamas on October 7. Some members of Boxman-Shabtai’s team interpret this as criticism. „Others will say, ‚No, she’s just stating the facts; it’s a terrorist organisation,‘“ she says. The same applies to the term „Israeli occupation,“ according to Boxman-Shabtai. „Is that a statement of fact or is it a critical view?“

### **It’s All a Matter of Interpretation**

In addition to the different perspectives that make a video open to different interpretations, *TikTok* also adds „multimodality.“ A post on *TikTok* consists of a video, a sound that can be added afterwards, and a caption, i.e. a short text in the descrip-

tion. These elements can contradict each other or change each other’s meaning. Boxman-Shabtai gives an example: The caption contains a very general statement, such as „We want everyone to be safe.“ The video shows a man crying in the ruins of a house. „Is this criticism or not?“ asks Boxman-Shabtai. „How do you interpret the visual element in comparison to the textual, verbal element?“

Basically, everything that applies to *TikTok* also applies to *Instagram*; there are many parallels between the two platforms. But no other platform is as fast-paced as *TikTok*: many trends and memes originate on *TikTok* and only end up on *Instagram* weeks or months later. *TikTok* is also considered a platform where it is particularly likely to go viral, regardless of the number of followers or previous posts.

So if you want to understand *TikTok*, you have to look closely and consider the different levels of a video. You need a lot of contextual knowledge to be able to understand references to George Floyd or a song by Macklemore, for example. Sometimes it even means you have to know the characters from „Lord of the Rings“. **IP**

# Strategic cover-up? Channel 12 is Israel's most-watched TV station. Did it keep the horrors in the Gaza Strip out of its reports because balance did not fit the agenda?

By David Issacharoff and Vera Weidenbach

I worked at *Channel 12*", Matan Meron shouts into a megaphone at a protest outside his former workplace. "I was a monitor on the foreign desk during the Gaza war." He is surrounded by a few dozen protesters. "And I stopped because I could no longer bear the concealment and the direct policy on Israel's most watched news channel not to show the public what was happening inside the Gaza Strip."

The protesters held pictures of starving children and banners demanding the Israeli government strike a deal to release hostages from Hamas captivity and end the war.

Meron's voice grows louder: "They refused to show the Israeli public footage taken by news wires *Reuters* and *Associated Press* journalists inside Gaza. They justified it by saying, 'It's not our job,' or 'It would create demoralization.' What kind of reasoning is that?"

"Shame!", scream the protesters, as Meron continues: "How can you not to show the public what is being done in its name? We are here to demand that the news channels do their job as journalists!

Stop concealing! Stop the self-censorship! Stop the denial!"

While the protest outside of the TV studios in early August 2025 was modestly attended, a video of Meron's speech went viral on social media. This was in the beginning of August. Two months later, on a late summer day in Jerusalem, Meron sits in the backyard of the National Library of Israel. After resigning from his job at *Channel 12*, the 31-year-old went to become a campaigner at the joint Israeli-Palestinian NGO *Zazim*. A petition by them, accusing Israel's media of "covering up what's happening a few kilometers away in Gaza," gained over 5,000 signatures. Some journalists only agreed to sign conditioning that their names being made public. "They said they agreed with us but were afraid to lose their job if they speak out", Meron says.

Over two years after the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the Israeli offensive that followed in Gaza, the role of Israel's mainstream media, given its influence on the public and its opinions, must be examined: What do journalists and



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editors know, and what do they choose to cover? How does loyalty to the state and support of Israel's war effort mix with journalistic ethics? Did it even lead to fostering incitement to war crimes?

While foreign journalists have virtually no access to report from Gaza due to Israeli restrictions, most prominent news agencies have reporters on the ground. Meron, describes his job at *Channel 12* as monitoring the footage the channel would receive every day from the agencies and make it available for the journalists' news pieces. Every evening, he would update the number of daily death toll in the journalists' group chat. "They would not be mentioned on air," he says.

"As a viewer of *Channel 12*, you will think that Israel's war is totally justified", Meron says. He recounts a familiar pattern, when Israel's was accused, for example, of facilitating a hunger crisis in Gaza or killing Palestinian children and women in strikes: "They would frame it only as 'international media reports' on Israel's conduct," and would not scrutinize these claims.

*Channel 12* is Israel's most popular TV Channel, with its news broadcast enjoying viewership unmatched by other channels. During the first ten days of the war, for example, *Channel 12* News reached an average weekly share of 29.8% in ratings, far ahead of any competitor.

"It is not only the most popular but also the most influential channel", Ayala Panievsky says and explains: "The elite and the decision makers, everyone is watching this channel for what is coming next." Panievsky is a scholar studying media, populism and democratic backsliding as is based in the University of London. For the Molad Institute, a prominent liberal Israeli think tank, she co-authored a report, released in October 2025, that empirically

confirms Meron's testimonies at the *Channel 12* news desk.

For the report, Panievsky and her colleague Ido Benbaji analyzed *Channel 12*'s coverage of Gaza during the first six months following October 7, 2023, titled 'Eyes Wide Shut.' They randomly sampled fifty evening broadcasts and examined 721 items—reports, interviews, and panel discussions—of which 522 dealt directly with the war. Their findings showed that despite the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza being broadcast constantly by international media, "it was almost entirely absent from Israeli coverage," with "only 3 percent of war-related items addressing the civilian situation in Gaza."

### "Eyes Wide Shut"

"We've seen a total erasure of Palestinian voices from Gaza", Panievsky says. She describes the footage from Gaza that was broadcasted on *Channel 12* News as "Either Israeli soldiers in their tanks, saying 'hi' to their families or Israeli bombing, fighting, destroyed buildings and evacuated cities". What was missing were stories from Palestinian civilians. "The human suffering is not there", Panievsky concludes.

The evaluation by Molad shows, that if casualties were mentioned—in about half of the war-related items—only four referred to Palestinian civilians, while 66 mentioned the killing of Hamas or other militant operatives. Out of hundreds of news items, only four mentioned Palestinian casualties uninvolved in terrorism. During that period, some 31,000 people were reportedly killed in Gaza, including about 22,000 women and children. Only two items included visual documentation of Palestinian civilian casualties.

During that period, only 16 items made any verbal reference to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza—including disease out-



**Vera Weidenbach** is a freelance journalist and author.

breaks, water shortages, power cuts, and food scarcity. Just nine mentioned suffering or hunger, two noted strikes on hospitals, and six referred to harm to women and children.

Later in the war, a nuanced example of *Channel 12*'s framing of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is offered in the research by the Jewish-Arab NGO Sikkuy-Aufoq, *The Seventh Eye*, and Ifat Media Research who shared their findings. The analysis covered three days of coverage in May 2025—after Israel's 78-day siege of the enclave. The research found that *Channel 12* ran 58 items on the resumption of humanitarian aid to Gaza between May 25–27, 2025—compared to an average of 33 by 17 other Israeli outlets.

Yet its reports ran under the headline “Chaos,” showing Gazans breaching fences, storming aid depots, Hamas gunfire, and footage of young men “looting” supplies. The channel also aired a rare late night segment, doing a video interview featuring Sami Obeid, a Gaza-based journalist known for his condemnation of Hamas and support for Gaza's annexation by Israel.

“In previous wars and violent conflicts too, journalists and the media were reluctant to cover the casualties on the other side,” she says, a common phenomenon in media coverage of the US and the UK of civilian dying in Iraq or in Afghanistan, or in Vietnam a few decades before.

### Intentional Absence

However, comparing the Israeli news coverage from the past two years to Israel's previous war is different this time: “Before this war in Gaza, erasure of Palestinian voices was not total. You could hear certain voices coming from the other side and see some kind of questioning or criticism and certain discourse about human rights.

*Out of hundreds of news items, only four mentioned Palestinian casualties involved in terrorism*

Today, these issues entirely evaporated.”

Panievsky charges today's mainstream Israeli news coverage of Gaza as “a very serious ethical problem and professional deficiency,” because journalists “know what is going on in Gaza.” “They are literally hiding facts from people that are very important for their lives,” she adds.

While *Channel 12* was not available to comment on queries sent, a leaked *WhatsApp* conversation the channel's most senior editors and journalists, reported by *Ynet news*, reveals just how aware the journalists are of the issue of Gaza coverage—or the lack thereof.

### A Telling Dialogue

In the conversation, several journalists criticized the editorial policy, while senior editor Ron Yaron and star political commentator Amit Segal defended it. The CEO of the news company, Avi Weiss—who has served as editor-in-chief since 2007—intervened, instructing all not to discuss the issue further.

The conversation took place after a protest outside of *Channel 12* organized by the Arab-Jewish group Standing Together accusing the channel of “ignoring Gaza's horrors” in last July.

Ron Yaron, the head editor of the Friday night broadcast, said, “With all due respect to our journalistic duty—when you hear the stories of the survivors from captivity, it's hard to connect to the message of this protest,” referring to Palestinian suffering in Gaza. To that, journalist Ilan

Lukatch countered: “Our journalistic duty is to report everything that’s important and newsworthy, whether or not Arbel Yehoud [a released hostage] relates to it.” Correspondent Michal Peylan responded: “I strongly agree with Lukatch. I get a lot of criticism about the lack of reporting on this, and I think it’s justified. Even if the survivors of captivity and the hostage families I’m close with don’t empathize with what’s happening there—even if we don’t feel it ourselves—that can’t be the measure.”

Miki Levi, an editor on the news desk, added: “I’m not one to judge, but are we supposed to report only on what we ‘relate’ to? Isn’t that the very definition of ‘mobilized journalism’?”—meaning media that is loyal only to one side. To that, Gal Brosh, a news desk coordinator, replied: “If that’s the definition of ‘mobilized journalism,’ I can live with it.”

Amit Segal, perhaps Israel’s most prominent political commentator, who has shown right-wing leanings in recent years, replied: “Exactly.”

After that, Avi Weiss, CEO of the news channel, quickly moved to end the discussion: “Watch the broadcasts of recent months instead of buying into the criticism. And I suggest we end the discussion here. Thank you.”

But Arab-Israeli reporter Mohammed Majadli then addressed Yaron directly: “Ron, my dear, I’d be happy to arrange for you to speak with my cousin Zainab in Gaza (she’s 17). Maybe you’ll connect a little to the suffering of people who have never supported Hamas and wake up every morning chasing a sack of flour for a year and a half now. Wishing everyone only good news.”

To that, Amit Segal replied: “Just like in Berlin, Dresden, and Tehran,” seemingly justifying collective punishment in those

instances and prompting Avi Weiss to exercise his authority in the final message: “Thanks, everyone!!!”

“To understand the coverage during the war, it is necessary to know that the eroding of journalistic principles began long before October 7,” Panievsky says. Over the past two decades, especially during Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s rule, the Israeli media was targeted in many ways, she notes.

Only one part of this was through official regulations or legal interventions by the government, with the foremost example is the threats to shut down the Israeli public broadcaster Kan, usually dedicated to a more balanced coverage. “They passed several regulations to make it harder for independent news outlets to survive financially”, Panievsky says.

But far more powerful to her, is a different tool: incitement and intimidation. She refers to a years-long right-wing public campaign in Israel, “to smear any journalist” who criticizes the prime minister, his government of the Israeli right. She notes it is like media bashing by US President Donald Trump or campaigns by Germany’s right-wing groups and right-wing AfD-party under the label “Lügenpresse”.

### *In Israel the eroding of journalistic principles began long before October 7*

But while in Germany and most European countries such campaign come from far-right margins of society, Panievsky points out, that in Israel, it is run by the Netanyahu government its leader and as such much more influential. Her research found that Israeli journalists developed certain tactics to avoid falling victim to it.

“To stop the media bashing and to maintain the public’s trust and attention, journalists are constantly trying to signal to the audience that they are not these radical leftists that Netanyahu says they are”, she describes. And as a result, they leaned further to the right.

### Strategic Bias?

Panievsky labels the journalists’ response to the governments pressure, to avoid any accusation of being leftist, as a self-imposed “strategic bias” on their reporting. In practice, on live TV, it led to an overwhelming number of pro-Netanyahu speakers on the panels of mainstream channels and the virtual disappearance of Palestinian voices as well as Palestinian citizens of Israel, although this group constitutes over 20 percent of Israel’s population.

Is the issue of covering Gaza only limited to downplaying it on screen—or rather, inciting for Israel to commit war crimes on live television, by dehumanizing Palestinians?

In late January 2025, prominent *Channel 12* reporter Almog Boker said during a live broadcast, on the day of the release of Arbel Yehoud and Gadi Mozes from captivity in Gaza—as footage came in showing them surrounded by a Palestinian mob—that “There are no innocent people in Gaza.”

Michael Sfard, perhaps Israel’s most prominent human rights lawyer, says people outside Israel might not understand the gravity of this statement.

Sfard, whose name is synonymous with the legal fight against Israel’s West Bank occupation, explains in an interview in his office in Tel Aviv that in post-October 7 Israeli discourse, saying such a thing clearly implies those people are legitimate targets—effectively a call to kill them.

Imagine, Sfard says, if a Palestinian citizen of Israel said, “All Israelis are le-

gitimate targets because they serve in the IDF reserves.” They would be imprisoned immediately under harsh security conditions, he stresses.

While he is not a media analyst or journalist, he describes himself as “a very addicted consumer” of Israeli mainstream news.

Sfard has filed a petition to Israel’s High Court against the right-wing and pro-Netanyahu *Channel 14*, alleging that it has openly, as an editorial line, incited to a genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. The channel can be described as Israel’s *Fox News* on steroids with its most popular show “The Patriots”, featuring a panel of journalists and right-wing activists. On air since 2021, the channel rapidly gained viewers on the right and is today the second most watched channel in Israel, after 12, as is subsidized by the government.

Combining his legal expertise with his observations of the media, Sfard distinguishes between law and ethics. He cites previous international cases in which media outlets stood trial, including the Nazi *Der Stürmer* after World War II and the Holocaust, and *Radio Rwanda* during the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi.

### Against Ethics and Responsibility

International norms—and Israeli law, he says—prohibit incitement to genocide, violence, and racism, and these prohibitions

*International norms and Israeli law prohibit incitement to genocide, violence, and racism, and these prohibitions apply especially to the media*



apply especially to the media. But in the case of *Channel 12*, he believes it is mostly a breach of ethics and responsibility. He cites examples of guests like former IDF General Giora Eiland, who has repeatedly called to “creating a humanitarian crisis in Gaza” is a method of warfare.

Sfard argues that “an editor must intervene,” even while the most controversial figures deserve a platform, “editors cannot allow unchallenged incitement to war crimes and dehumanization,” and that in the case of *Channel 12*, the responsibility lies both with the person inciting and the editors who allow it.

Sfard broadly outlines two main types of journalists: those who knowingly fail their duty but justify it—with arguments about rebuilding national morale and strength after such a traumatic blow like October 7—together with those who fear

that showing Palestinian suffering caused by Israel will hurt their ratings, drive away advertisers, or anger their owners.

Then, he says, there are others whose first loyalty is to Israel—whose identity is patriotic—and whose second loyalty, to journalism, comes after. All of these, he says, violate their profession’s *raison d’être*.

“Let’s talk about investigative journalism,” Sfard continues. “Since October 7, all major Israeli investigations have focused solely on October 7 itself. When the government alleges, for example, that UNRWA was a Hamas stronghold or that hunger and starvation in Gaza are just a Hamas PR campaign, the media does not examine it critically.”

“Maybe it’s true, maybe not,” Sfard says. “But by watching mainstream Israeli news, no one would ever know.” **IP**







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# Narratives

“Bring them home”: This chapter focuses on the public and key players, particularly the remarkable journey of the Hostages and Missing Families Forum, which has grown from a quiet initiative by a few citizens in Israel to become a real force to be reckoned with.

It also features an interview on press freedom and media ethics, resources, and news selection.

# “Emotional Polarization Was Never so Great”

In wartime, independent reporting comes under pressure from many sides. A conversation about bias and censorship, about border violations and developing a culture of error—long with the media literacy of young people.

### Interview with Katharina Weiss

**IP:** *Ms. Weiß, following Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, we saw a rare polarization in the reporting on the Middle East conflict. How does Reporters Without Borders define press freedom in times of crisis, and where do you see the limits of this press freedom?*

**Katharina Weiss:** Freedom of the press protects the right to research, verify, and publish information. This is especially important in times of war and crisis. It includes access to places and participants, but also source protection, editorial freedom, diversity of voices, and protection from intimidation and violence. Freedom of the press is not entirely unlimited. Limits exist where criminal laws apply, for example incitement to violence, personal rights, or the norms of international law, such as the prohibition of war propaganda or incitement to genocide. Criticism of governments and armies is not considered a violation of limits; it is the core

mission of the press. And that applies in every area. For years, if not decades, we have observed that freedom of the press is being violated and restricted in the areas just mentioned.

***Do you see any factors that threaten independent reporting on the Gaza war?***

One major issue is the ban on international journalists entering Gaza. This issue caused quite a stir right from the start. After all, there is a valid argument that diversity of independent voices can only be achieved if the international community can form their own picture of the realities on the ground alongside local perspectives. That is one thing. Then, of course, the killing of so many Palestinian journalists is a very serious restriction of press freedom. We, too, have repeatedly called for access since the end of 2023, when it became clear that the Israeli army was not allowing anyone



into Gaza except for sporadic and strictly regulated “embeds”. They were also often not allowing anyone out, especially when it came to bringing injured colleagues to safety elsewhere.

There are other challenges to press freedom: our Middle East correspondents have reported visa restrictions, a lack of safe corridors, and targeted campaigns against journalists. These have been ongoing throughout this conflict. And we are also seeing campaigns against journalists here in Germany. We have heard specifically from affected journalists at *Ha'aretz*: time and again, colleagues are the target of threats, hate campaigns, or political attacks.

***Gaza was completely sealed off for a long time, and there is no longer any communications infrastructure. How can the media still report from Gaza?***

There were fewer and fewer experienced Palestinian journalists or correspondents working for major news agencies such as *AP* or *Reuters* who had also worked for German media outlets as stringers or fixers for many years. It was all about access to electricity and the internet in order to upload reports and similar material. There were still aid organizations that communicated of their own accord to some extent, but this cannot be compared to reporting from Ukraine, for example. Other challenges specific to the Gaza Strip: The work was made extremely difficult by the Israeli attacks, accompanied by humanitarian disasters such as hunger, multiple displacements in some cases, dealing with relatives who had been killed, and much more. Reporters Without Borders, together with partner organizations, tried to help with computers, telephones, batteries, and solar power banks, where available and affordable locally. Unlike in Ukraine, it was



**Katharina Weiß** is spokesperson for the German branch of Reporters Without Borders (RSF). The non-governmental organization campaigns worldwide for press freedom and against censorship. RSF has nine European country branches and five country offices in North America and Asia.

not permitted to supply protective equipment; there was concern that helmets could be misused for military purposes. We also tried to improve the working environment on the ground by setting up tents; for example, there were special tents for female journalists. But compared to other areas where Reporters Without Borders is active, our hands were very much tied.

*„It becomes problematic when editorial selection and language structurally privilege one party to the conflict“*

***There are accusations that the German media is too one-sided, that its reporting is pro-Israel. Others say there are clear antisemitic tendencies. How do you assess this?***

Both are serious accusations. We are witnessing a topic that is highly emotionally polarizing. In this ongoing horror, this has been perhaps the most significant issue for German journalists in recent years. Now, RSF does not engage in media criticism. Personally, many colleagues who have been working on this topic for years or are currently working on it have described to me a structural imbalance, with excesses on both sides.

It is interesting to note that we were told how Israeli government sources have often dominated the news, from local media to public broadcasters, from freelance correspondents to people involved in the Berlin cultural scene. Palestinian voices, UN or NGO voices were much less prominent. Media scientist Fabian Goldmann evaluated nearly 5,000 headlines between October 7, 2023, and January 19, 2025. He looked primarily at large, established German media outlets and found that 43 percent of their articles were based on Israeli sources and only 5 percent on Palestinian sources. NGO voices, i.e., not only Reporters Without Borders, but also Human Rights Watch, Medico International, and Doctors Without Borders, were barely visible, accounting for only 1.1 percent. As a private

individual, I also followed the imbalance often described in this way.

***In journalism, attitude and opinion are becoming increasingly prevalent, with commentary and reporting no longer clearly separated. Is there a line between legitimate opinion journalism and problematic partisanship?***

Reporters Without Borders must always consider: When does a media outlet fall outside our mandate, for example because it is purely propagandistic? In general, one can say that if media outlets reinforce unverified war narratives, normalize dehumanizing language, or systematically render opponents invisible, then that would be an indication of this.

Opinion journalism is, of course, legitimate. It is part of the spectrum of journalism when it is fact-based, clearly separates news from commentary, when it is clear that an opinion is being presented, and when interests or connections are disclosed. It becomes problematic when editorial selection and language structurally privilege one party in a conflict, which is very often the case in the context of media in autocratic countries, such as Russia or Turkey.

***Looking ahead, how can the media industry regain public trust when it comes to balanced reporting? There is a tendency to dismiss the media as worth-***

### ***less and untrustworthy. How can this be changed?***

This is a very important question. Alongside COVID-19 (what did media professionals do at the time, how did the situation develop, where is the follow-up coverage?), the Middle East conflict is the second most common topic I am confronted with. Whether at the university in Esslingen or at the pensioners' association in Chemnitz. It is clear that these two topics have sown mistrust of media professionals among different target groups, but nevertheless across a wide spectrum.

### ***Why is that?***

I believe that various factors are at play here. On the one hand, journalists have lost credibility by bowing to algorithms and clickbait. On the other hand, modern technologies have also multiplied the opportunities for defamation against

journalists and their information. This means that no matter how carefully we work, some things are almost impossible to combat.

That's why I see a very, very big responsibility in society, for example in establishing media literacy training for everyone from the youngest to the oldest. We observe that media literacy is most difficult among the very young and our parents' generation. They are the ones who are easiest to capture or lure away.

And when we look at how we hold media companies accountable, it's clear that transparency, sources, methods, and corrections are key. Personally, I also think a culture of error is very important. No one should feel embarrassed about admitting a mistake, and we shouldn't subject people to a shitstorm when they admit mistakes. I think that's a vicious cycle. If we weren't always afraid that admitting a mistake

*Coverage of the Middle East conflict has sown mistrust of media professionals; actual mistakes and empty accusations went hand in hand. The picture shows an everyday scene from Gaza in November 2025.*



would be held against us forever, perhaps many of us would say in some cases: Yes, I was wrong there, or I looked at this in a way that was perhaps insufficient.

***Does this also apply in the context of antisemitic tendencies?***

A better culture of dealing with mistakes would be very appropriate here, without immediately triggering a huge shitstorm. We also need a visible diversity of sources! Which is something we are noticing in the current Middle East conflict. And within media companies, internal review of mistakes. After our research on repression surrounding Middle East reporting within German editorial offices, which was published in early 2025, we heard from some large German media companies, especially in print, that they had actually initiated internal reviews. We are naturally pleased about this. And it is the right approach to first look at editorial processes. How can these mistakes be prevented? How can all voices be heard? I know that this is very difficult because we have to be both up-to-date and efficient at the same time.

***When we look at a debate as polarized as the one on the Middle East conflict, what role does Reporters Without Borders play? Is it a neutral observer or more of an active advocate for standards?***

That's also a very good question. Of course, NGOs such as Reporters Without Borders are always watchdogs, i.e. observers. But we do something with these observations! Reporters Without Borders documents violations of press freedom and alerts the public when journalists are in danger. That is the core principle that we hold dear.

Perhaps we need to reframe the question. We don't just teach at the university, we also go to embassies when necessary. We make political demands, saying, you have imprisoned or killed this many media workers, release the prisoners. Or we demand trials for such killings, fighting against impunity, for example. We are also very active in the context of emergency aid and try to help our colleagues.

When it comes to political positioning, however, there is always a struggle, as there is for journalists, to remain as neutral as possible.

Interview by Martin Bialecki.

Translated from German by Katherine Brown

IP



# A Force Against the Silence

Israel's hostage families have transformed private grief into a democratically effective force: the story of a citizens' movement that has gained worldwide recognition.

By Adi Tal

Since Israel's founding, one moral consensus has guided the nation: do everything possible to bring its sons back home. But in the 1970s, everything changed. Israel's enemies were no longer states but non-state militant groups that learned to exploit Israel's greatest vulnerability—the sanctity of human life.

Thus began the era of the asymmetrical exchanges: thousands of Palestinian prisoners traded for just a handful of Israeli soldiers. In 1985, Israel released 1,150 Palestinian prisoners in the Jibril Deal in return for three soldiers. In 2011, after a public campaign led by his father Noam, kidnapped soldier Gilad Shalit was freed in exchange for 1,027 Palestinians.

Hamas learned a crucial lesson: Israel's deep reverence for life could be used as leverage. The moral principle that had once saved lives was now beginning to endanger them. It was a dark foreshadowing of what would unfold on October 7, 2023.

That morning, thousands of Hamas fighters crossed the border by land, air, and sea, murdering more than 1,200 people and abducting 251 civilians and

soldiers. Entire communities near Gaza were wiped out. Overnight, Israel's sense of security—and the old social contract between the state and its citizens—collapsed.

## The Birth of a Civil Movement

The first hours were chaotic. Families searched for their loved ones in hospitals, desperate to know who was alive, who was missing. Within 24 hours, out of the shock and the grief, the Hostages and Missing Families Forum was born.

I joined as a volunteer in its foreign-media team during its earliest, most uncertain days.

Within a week, I realized that this was a bigger phenomenon than what could be understood. I watched families transform private despair into collective purpose. “The forum rose from nothing within a week,” recalls Gali Morag, head of the foreign-media team. “Each family alone couldn't have done it. Together, they created an unstoppable force.”

Hundreds of volunteers poured in, driven by frustration and helplessness but also by a need to act. “For two weeks, I couldn't



**Adi Tal** holds a Bachelor of Law and a Master's degree in Law and Technology. Since October 7, 2023, she has been involved with the Hostages and Missing Families Forum.

speak,” remembers Yael Eder, whose son Tamir was abducted. “I thought I had no right to fight for him while there were children in captivity. But then I realized—if I fight for Tamir, I fight for all of them. That gave me strength.”

Ophir Weinberg, cousin of Itay Svirsky—kidnapped on October 7 after both his parents were murdered—describes it as a race against despair: “Every second, you think—if there’s anything I can do, I’ll do it. You just act, shoot in every direction, hoping something will help.”

### From Silence to Voice

At first, the forum obeyed government instructions: no interviews, no criticism, silence—anything to avoid “raising the hostages’ price.” Their faces filled the squares and walls, candles flickered, and the message was simple: bring them home now. “In those early days, our job was to create empathy,” Morag explains. “To connect Israelis and the world to the story of each hostage. Later, some freed captives said they had seen those rallies while in captivity—and that gave them hope.”

Within weeks, the forum evolved into an organized association with democratic procedures—regular assemblies, weekly votes, defined strategy. “It gave us strength and a sense of belonging” says Eder. “We were 255 families, and we knew we weren’t alone.”

Internationally, Germany emerged as an unexpected moral ally. While many Israeli officials kept their distance, German diplomats responded with warmth and consistency. For families with German citizenship, a special envoy was appointed; Ambassador Steffen Seibert opened his doors every week, offering the empathy they often felt was missing from Israeli authorities. When Arbel Yehud’s father, Yechiel, learned in June 2024 that his son

*Hostages who were later released reported that the rallies gave them strength*

had been murdered, Seibert was the only official to attend the funeral—a gesture of loyalty and dignity that resonated deeply. Week after week, the German ambassador’s office hosted families—sometimes for briefings, sometimes simply to listen. That continuity built trust at a moment when many Israelis felt abandoned by their own leaders.

### From Grief to Power

By November 2023, a civil movement was roaring. A march from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem drew hundreds of thousands, and the streets burned with urgency. During the march, families learned that negotiations had begun; four days later, the first hostages returned home. “It was tangible,” Morag recalls. “Public pressure was working.”

In late November, under a Qatari-brokered cease-fire, Israel and Hamas agreed to release 100 women and children in exchange for 300 Palestinian prisoners. The country rejoiced. Freed captives later said they had seen their faces projected onto Tel Aviv’s walls—and drew strength from it.

But soon, fighting resumed. Hope gave way to exhaustion. Many families realized that the government’s strategic goal—to destroy Hamas—no longer aligned with their moral duty to save lives. Silence turned to speech. Families who had been told not to speak now raised their voices—not for politics, but for the living.

Then came the tragedy of December 2023: three hostages—Alon Shamriz, Yotam Haim, and Samer Talalka—were mistakenly killed by Israeli soldiers in Gaza. The “operational error” confirmed the

families' worst fears: uncoordinated military pressure could kill their loved ones. "That day everything changed," Weinberg recalls. "A relative said, 'I'm going to block the highway. Who's with me?' We all went. We stayed till 3 a.m."

Public empathy remained high, but frustration grew. Solidarity alone, they realized, would not move governments. The majority of Israelis still supported continuing the war, while hostage deals remained controversial. The moral tension ignited protests and forced a national reckoning: how do you balance the destruction of Hamas against the duty to save the captives?

In December 2023, Yehiel Yehud met for the first time with Germany's Foreign Minister—a meeting that marked the beginning of an ongoing dialogue. A month later, in January, he met with the then Minister of Justice. Between December and mid-May, Yehiel participated in seven delegations, each deepening the connection between the families and German society. One of the meetings that mattered most to me was with Germany's National Security Advisor, Jens Plötner—the man leading negotiations with Qatar on behalf of German citizens. The answers I could never get from Israeli security officials, I received from him. The connection with him was deeply important to me.

From the very beginning, in December 2023, I felt a genuine openness and willingness to help from the German government and media—and, perhaps most strikingly, from ordinary people in the streets of Germany, even more so than in Israel.

### Crisis and Division

By the end of 2023, the national consensus had fractured. Externally, the forum remained united under the slogan "Bring Them All Home." Internally, different

voices emerged: one group pressed for an immediate deal; a smaller "Tikvah Forum" demanded intensified military pressure; another faction openly accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of deliberately stalling negotiations.

What appeared from the outside as fragmentation was, in truth, democratic evolution. "Even when the families split, a common foundation was still maintained. The choice of some families to create separate groups," says Morag, "came from the forum's democratic nature. Every week, families met, voted, and re-evaluated strategy. Those who disagreed didn't really split—they just chose a different path toward the same goal. Even Tikvah received logistical support and funding from us."

The first visit, initiated at the invitation of Israel's ambassador to Germany, Ron Prosor, aimed to bring the families' voices to the German public. During that visit, Yehiel met with Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, alongside Naama Weinberg, cousin of the abducted Itay Svirsky. From that moment on, through a series of six or seven additional meetings until May 2024, he continued engaging with German officials, parliamentarians, and journalists across various initiatives—including the establishment of "Hostages Square" in Berlin.

In February, Yehiel joined a delegation march through the streets of Berlin, where 3,000 Germans, Jews, and supporters walked together to the Reichstag. The march culminated in a public rally alongside Ambassador Prosor—a powerful moment of shared humanity and moral solidarity that resonated far beyond the square.

On March 30, 2024, the struggle reached a breaking point. At a massive rally in Tel Aviv, families declared from the stage: "Benjamin Netanyahu is the obstacle pre-

venting a deal.” It was an unprecedented act of civil defiance. The crowd erupted in applause. The movement had crossed a line—from plea to protest.

Some families feared the politicization would undermine unity. Others insisted confrontation was necessary. Yet the shift soon yielded results: polls in April and May 2024 showed that a majority of Israelis—including many right-wing voters—now supported a deal to free all hostages, even if it meant ending the war. According to *Channel 12*, 74 percent of Israelis backed such an agreement, including 60 percent of coalition supporters. What began as a moral cry had become a political force.

### From Grief to Diplomacy

Throughout 2024, the forum matured into a sophisticated civil movement. It organized mass demonstrations, nationwide “disruption days,” and direct meetings with lawmakers under one rallying call: Bring Them Home Now. The struggle for the hostages’ release was no longer led by the state—but by its citizens. Private grief had become civic authority.

When released hostages began to tell their harrowing stories—of underground cells, hunger, and abuse—families decided that silence was now a danger. They took their stories to the world. One moment crystallized this shift: Einav Zangauker, mother of Matan Zangauker abducted from the Nova Festival, stood inside a metal cage to symbolize the captives’ suffering. The image circled the globe, transforming

*Public legitimacy became  
a lever for trans-  
forming moral urgency into  
political pressure*

a humanitarian cause into a political protest. The crowds chanted: “Netanyahu is blocking the deal.”

September 2024 marked a painful turning point: the murder of six hostages in Hamas tunnels. That night, crowds poured into the streets. There was no longer any doubt—the only way to save the hostages was through a deal, not military action. It was said that IDF forces had approached the hostages, and therefore they were executed.

### The International Front

The election of Donald Trump in late 2024 marked a global turning point. Even before taking office, he declared that freeing the Israeli hostages would be his “top national priority.” Forum representatives met members of his campaign team in the U.S., laying the groundwork for future diplomacy. “Those meetings gave us enormous leverage once he was elected,” one forum member recalled.

In February 2025, a month after his inauguration, a Qatar-brokered partial deal was reached under U.S. mediation. The forum praised the “visible change in America’s approach,” noting that “President Trump put the hostages at the top of his agenda from day one.”

The January 2025 agreement set a phased release: Israeli hostages in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian security prisoners, alongside a six-week ceasefire and a gradual IDF withdrawal from central Gaza. Thirty hostages returned alive, and eight bodies—seven murdered in captivity and one killed on October 7—were recovered. In total, about 3,500 Palestinians were freed, including roughly 1,300 security prisoners—hundreds convicted of lethal attacks.

Meanwhile, the forum expanded globally. Families spoke in parliaments and





*At a certain point, the fight for the release of the hostages was no longer being led by the state, but by its citizens. The picture shows a demonstration by the Hostages and Missing Families Forum.*

universities, appeared on international media, and met heads of state. Israeli-American relatives became unofficial ambassadors, translating private pain into diplomatic language.

By September 2025, 48 hostages remained. Trump presented a 20-point peace plan calling for a total cease-fire, a phased Israeli withdrawal, and the release of all hostages—alive and dead—within 72 hours.

### **The Final Deal**

In October 2025, nearly two years after the October 7 attack, the final deal was signed between Israel and Hamas, mediated by Qatar and Turkey under U.S. sponsorship. It secured the release of the 20 remaining hostages and the return of the victims'

bodies, in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian security prisoners—including convicted murderers—alongside an official end to fighting, a phased Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, and expanded humanitarian aid.

The groundwork for this agreement was laid through months of direct communication between the families' forum and the White House—a rare instance of grassroots diplomacy shaping international policy.

By then, the movement had achieved what once seemed impossible: turning personal grief into political momentum, and moral urgency into diplomatic leverage.

### **Redefining the Moral Core**

The forum redefined the moral center of the conflict. Through clear messaging and

powerful symbolism, it transformed compassion into strategy. Diplomats later admitted that the families' persistence kept negotiations alive.

By the second anniversary of the October 7 attack, the forum had evolved from a spontaneous volunteer group into a recognized civic institution. Presidents and prime ministers met their representatives. What began as an emotional plea became an independent moral authority that no one could ignore.

### **Solidarity as Statecraft**

In hindsight, the forum achieved more than the return of hostages. It rewrote Israel's civic script in wartime. Within months, it transformed from a circle of mourning into a dual-front movement—of internal solidarity and external diplomacy. It proved that moral language can serve as a strategic tool—consistent, symbolic, grounded in names and faces.

*In two years, the forum for families has gone from being a circle of grief to a moral institution*

It shattered the state's monopoly over the concern for life. While politicians spoke of deterrence, the families spoke of protection—of the duty that precedes strategy.

Ultimately, this is the story of ordinary citizens who built an extraordinary civic force. Through moral clarity and relentless determination, they shaped public opinion, influenced governments, and brought the hostages home. In doing so, they expanded the boundaries of democracy—and proved that even when a nation falls silent, its citizens can speak loudly enough for the world to listen. **IP**



**Dr. Sylke Tempel (1963–2017)**

was editor-in-chief of IP from 2008 until she died in a tragic accident in Berlin on October 5, 2017. In addition to the fellowship, whose works from the 2025 volume are collected in this issue, an essay prize is awarded annually in her name to honor the life and work of this outstanding journalist, author, publicist and mentor. She is missed.

# The Sylke Tempel Fellows 2025

As part of the Sylke Tempel Fellowship Program, the German-Israeli Future Forum Foundation awards research grants to young experts working on relevant foreign and social policy issues in Israel and Germany. The program is aimed in particular at media professionals, including journalists and publicists at the beginning of their careers. The results of the work are discussed in closed workshops with other experts, presented publicly at conferences, and published.



**Roman Beliavski** is studying for a master's degree in political science, specializing in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. He has been involved in projects on regional security and foreign policy at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) and the German Marshall Fund (GMF) and is actively committed to promoting intercultural dialogue.



**Guilherme Correia da Silva** is a journalist and editor with extensive experience in international reporting. He is currently deputy head of the "Portuguese for Africa" department at *Deutsche Welle* and also reports as Germany and Europe correspondent for the Portuguese radio station *Rádio Renascença*.





**Yasmin Ismail** has been working as an editor since 2021 and produces reports for various TV stations, which she realizes in Germany and internationally, including in Israel, Turkey, Mexico, and Hong Kong. During her studies with a focus on media management, she gained practical experience at *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the German TV station ZDF.



**Nicholas Potter** is a journalist and editor at *taz*. In 2024/2025, he was an Ernst Cramer & Teddy Kollek Fellow in the international journalism program at the *Jerusalem Post*. His work has also been published in the *Guardian*, *Tagesspiegel*, and *Ha'aretz*. He is co-editor and co-author of the book *Judenhass Underground (Underground Hatred of Jews)*.



**Adi Tal** holds a Bachelor of Law and a Master's degree in Law and Technology. Her thesis deals with the interface between data protection law and artificial intelligence. Since October 7, 2023, she has been involved in the foreign media team at the Hostages and Missing Families Forum.



**David Issacharoff** is an editor and writer for the English edition of *Ha'aretz*. He studied political science and history at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Humboldt University in Berlin. In 2024, he was an Ernst Cramer & Teddy Kollek Fellow at *Der Spiegel* as part of the international journalism program.



**Isolde Ruhdorfer** works as a journalist for the online magazine *Krautreporter* in Berlin, covering foreign policy issues. She studied regional sciences in Eastern and Central Europe and economics in Cologne and Nizhny Novgorod. At the same time, she attended the Cologne School of Journalism. She is a fellow of the International Journalists' Program (IJP).



**Vera Weidenbach** is a freelance journalist and author. She has worked as a political correspondent for *Table.Briefings* in Berlin and *Ha'aretz* in Tel Aviv. Her book "The Untold Story: How Women Created the Modern World and Why We Don't Know It" was published by Rowohlt in 2022.

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