

Between Helplessness and Hostility Analyzing CNN's Racialized Framing of Palestinians in Crisis

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Abstract

This essay critically examines CNN's portrayal of Palestinians during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, focusing on how Orientalist and racialized narratives shape public perceptions of Palestinian identity. The analysis argues that CNN's coverage perpetuates stereotypes by framing Palestinians as either passive victims or violent aggressors, depending on the context. This dual framing obscures the political and historical complexities of the genocide, reducing Palestinians to dehumanized subjects within a broader narrative that privileges Western power and perspectives. Specific linguistic choices, such as references to Gaza's population density and restricted mobility, normalize suffering and present the crisis as an inherent consequence of cultural or regional factors rather than systemic oppression. Additionally, the essay critiques the use of humanitarian language, which reinforces perceptions of Palestinians as dependent on international aid while simultaneously undermining their agency and self-determination. These portrayals align with dominant ideological narratives that justify foreign intervention, perpetuate power imbalances, and frame the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in ways that uphold existing global hierarchies. By deconstructing these framing strategies, the essay highlights the role of even the 'liberal' media in reinforcing Orientalist ideologies and calls for reimagining of journalistic practices to promote justice, equity, and agency. This analysis contributes to the ongoing critique of media representations of marginalized groups and underscores the need for narratives that challenge stereotypes and promote a deeper understanding of the conflict's root causes.

Keywords

Framing analysis, media representation, Orientalism, news coverage, Palestine, CNN



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Media narratives do more than report—they actively shape perceptions and reinforce underlying political agendas, especially in the portrayal of conflict zones where identity often intersects with violence, resistance, and suffering. One such area is the ongoing Palestinian genocide, where racial and cultural representations are deeply entangled with political agendas and historical biases. The CNN article, “Nowhere to go’: Ordinary Palestinians live in fear as Israel retaliates against Hamas,” illustrates the complex depiction of Palestinians as a racialized and contested identity within this prolonged conflict. This analysis employs a framing analysis to uncover how CNN’s language, structure, and tone shape the public’s perception of the Palestinian identity and the broader conflict. Framing analysis is a media studies method that examines how certain elements of a story, such as word choice, sourcing, visual imagery, and narrative emphasis, are selectively highlighted to influence audience interpretation. In this paper, the focus lies specifically on linguistic cues, rhetorical contrasts (such as “victim” vs. “aggressor”), and the use of humanitarian or decontextualized language that reinforces Orientalist and racialized narratives. By analyzing these frames, the paper reveals how CNN’s coverage subtly aligns with dominant ideological discourses that distort the reality of Palestinian resistance and suffering.

Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, refers to the Western tradition of depicting Eastern societies, particularly Arab, Muslim, and Asian cultures, as exotic, irrational, violent, and inferior in order to justify colonial dominance. This body of thought positions the “Orient” as fundamentally different from and subordinate to the West. Within this framework, Palestinians are framed as a racialized “Other,” consistently depicted through tropes of savagery, backwardness, and perpetual violence. In Ibrahim Dahman’s CNN article, the phrase “No strangers to war with Israel, many Gazans are sheltering in their homes, with the vast majority lacking access to bunkers” reflects this ideological framing. It suggests that war is a normalized, almost expected part of Palestinian life, framing conflict not as a political emergency, but as a cultural condition. This portrayal aligns with Said’s theory, which argues that non-Western subjects are often constructed as inherently unstable and bound to cycles of violence, thereby legitimizing Western dominance (Said, 1979). Media scholar Pavel Doboš (2019) similarly notes that coverage of distant suffering often renders non-Western populations as permanently tragic, reducing them to passive subjects of pity rather

than political actors. Crucially, these framings are not just cultural generalizations; they are racialized constructions. Framing Eastern or Muslim groups as inherently violent ties into a broader history of racial thinking that casts these populations as fundamentally irrational, dangerous, and inferior to the supposedly civilized and rational West. This racial logic supports and sustains systems of global inequality by marking certain lives as more disposable or less grievable. By portraying Gazans as accustomed to war, the article strips away the immediacy of their suffering and flattens Palestinian identity into a static, decontextualized stereotype. The result is a narrative that reinforces the Orientalist myth of the Middle East as an inherently chaotic and incomprehensible region, desensitizing Western audiences to the political roots and real-time urgency of the violence.

Building on this racialized portrayal of Palestinians as inherently violent or tragic, the article also reinforces the notion of Palestinian identity as static and subordinate through its focus on spatial confinement and restriction. The article's description of Gaza as "densely populated" and facing "severe restrictions" perpetuates this image of Palestinians as confined and victimized, reinforcing the assumption of a static identity. Such depictions align with Said's argument that Orientalist portrayals consistently diminish the agency and diversity of Eastern groups, rendering them as passive subjects within a Western ideological frame. By framing Palestinians within these static tropes, the CNN article not only sustains racial stereotypes but contributes to an overarching narrative that justifies foreign intervention and political control. In limiting Palestinian identity to either victimhood or barbarism, the article implicitly aligns with the Orientalist view of the East as a cultural and moral "Other," suggesting that Palestinians require control or intervention to overcome their perceived backwardness. It must be noted that while Gaza is indeed densely populated and faces severe restrictions, the issue isn't the factuality of these descriptors, but rather how they're used in a way that shapes readers' perceptions of Palestinians. Media can selectively emphasize certain facts to support an ideological narrative, often subtly portraying the situation as natural or preordained, rather than a consequence of specific political actions or power imbalances. For instance, by continually focusing on Gaza's population density and restrictions without delving into why these conditions exist or the systems enforcing them, the article risks framing these realities as inherent to Palestinian life rather than as outcomes of specific policies and historical forces.

The political implications of this normalization are profound. While Simon Cottle's work examines media's handling of global risks and crises, he emphasizes that media representations are increasingly influenced by underlying narratives that shape public perception, especially in high-stakes conflicts. Cottle argues that media coverage does more than inform; it often channels certain moral imperatives that subtly direct public sentiment and engagement (Cottle, 2014, p. 14). In this case, framing Palestinians as recurrently embroiled in conflict could serve to distance Western audiences emotionally, presenting Gazan suffering as an inherent part of their existence rather than a product of specific political circumstances. Western media often frames "disasters" through ideological lenses that portray Eastern lives as fixed in cycles of misfortune and conflict (Cottle, 2014, p.13). This persistent framing encourages audiences to view conflict in Gaza as less of a human crisis and more of an "inevitable" condition, shaping public perception in ways that align with broader political agendas. This rhetorical approach risks numbing Western readers to the urgent humanitarian crises faced by Palestinians, ultimately sustaining a racialized view of Middle Eastern identities as perpetually embroiled in violence. In doing so, the media inadvertently supports political narratives that overlook or justify the lack of intervention, implicitly relegating Palestinian suffering to the margins of international concern.

Additionally, media framing of Middle Eastern conflicts frequently simplifies narratives by emphasizing binary roles like "victims" and "aggressors," which makes distant conflicts more digestible to Western readers. Such representations, as Matt Evans contends, limit public understanding by presenting conflicts as fixed and repetitive, fostering a sense of disengagement and moral detachment among audiences. By using language such as "Ordinary Palestinians" vs " Hamas," the article's title subtly reinforces Orientalist perceptions, framing them as either passive sufferers or habitual aggressors—both of which obscure the actual humanitarian impact of the violence in Gaza. Chomsky's perspective on media as a tool for state propaganda is relevant here. He argues that the media often aligns with dominant political narratives, which, in this case, reinforces Western and Israeli state perspectives by portraying Palestinian resistance primarily through a "terrorist" lens. This serves the purpose of justifying certain policies and military actions, ensuring public opinion remains supportive or at least compliant with these measures.

In addition, by framing the Israeli military offensive in Gaza as a “war,” the CNN article implies a false equivalency between the Israeli and Palestinian forces, obscuring the stark power imbalance that defines this conflict. This language not only minimizes the severity of Palestinian suffering but also contributes to a narrative that normalizes disproportionate violence. As Matt Evans argues, media coverage of Middle Eastern conflicts frequently relies on terms that imply parity between opposing sides, regardless of their actual military capacities or resources (Evans, 2010, p. 223). This language misrepresents the situation by placing Palestinians, who have limited access to resources, shelter, and defense, on the same footing as one of the most advanced and well-funded militaries in the world. The term “war” masks the one-sided nature of the violence, subtly suggesting that Palestinians are capable participants in a balanced battle, rather than a predominantly civilian population facing an overwhelming military force.

This narrative strategy further aligns with Said’s concept of Orientalism, which explains how the Western portrayal of Eastern conflicts often emphasizes irrational hostility and violence, presenting Eastern groups as combative and culturally predisposed to conflict. By referring to the Israeli-Palestinian violence as a “war,” the media subtly racializes Palestinians as inherently militant and aggressive, which reinforces stereotypes that distance them from Western audiences. Said explains that the Orientalist narrative positions non-Western populations as part of a “culture of violence,” thus framing them as perpetual threats rather than victims or oppressed populations (Said, 1979, p.5). This Orientalist framing prevents readers from perceiving the Palestinian plight as a humanitarian crisis, downplaying the possibility of genocide by rebranding it as a symmetric and routine military engagement.

The implications of this framing are ideologically significant, as this portrayal has the effect of manufacturing public consent by shaping perceptions in ways that justify foreign policy decisions and discourage interventions that might challenge the status quo. When Western media frames the situation in Gaza as a “war” rather than an asymmetric humanitarian crisis, it obscures the systematic nature of the violence, rendering the atrocities as the unavoidable outcomes of a complex “conflict” rather than as preventable or unjust acts of aggression. This terminology aligns with Noam Chomsky’s Propaganda Model, which describes how media often serves to normalize state violence by framing it as necessary self-defense

against dangerous, racialized others (Mullen & Klaehn, 2010, p. 220). The “war” framing thus becomes a powerful rhetorical tool that deflects accusations of genocide, recasting Israeli military action as a proportionate response within a balanced conflict.

The use of the term “war” also has a numbing effect on Western readers, as it positions the violence inflicted on Gazans within the familiar framework of military conflict rather than as a potential genocide. Framing tactics like these encourage public disengagement by transforming crises into routine events, implicitly justifying ongoing violence. Furthermore, by treating the conflict as a “war,” the article invites readers to view Palestinian casualties as collateral damage in an unfortunate but equal battle, rather than as targeted/intentional victims of disproportionate violence. This framing sustains an ideological narrative that diminishes the urgency of Palestinian suffering, allowing Western audiences to remain detached in the face of ongoing human rights violations.

Furthermore, beyond its framing of Palestinians as either helpless victims or violent aggressors, the CNN article also employs humanitarian language that reinforces a racialized portrayal of Palestinians as dependent on Western aid. By only describing the extreme conditions in Gaza in a way that highlights restrictions and the lack of essential resources, the article presents Palestinians primarily as passive recipients of aid, a narrative that evokes both pity and a sense of helplessness. This portrayal, while grounded in real hardships, risks obscuring Palestinian agency by framing their suffering as a static condition mitigated only by external assistance.

Humanitarian language in Western media often subtly frames non-Western populations as fundamentally reliant on foreign intervention for survival, which reinforces racialized assumptions about their perceived incapacity to alter their circumstances. The CNN article’s references to Gaza as an “open-air prison” with “no electricity, no food, no fuel” convey the severity of the crisis but also cast Palestinians in a role of passive dependence. The media’s focus on humanitarian narratives in conflict zones can serve to reinforce Western ideological stances by positioning non-Western populations as subjects of pity rather than political actors with agency. This framing influences how readers perceive Palestinian identity, subtly suggesting that Palestinians are incapable of self-sufficiency or self-determination without foreign aid. The ideological implications of this framing are significant. Noam Chomsky’s Propaganda Model emphasizes

that media narratives often support state policies and foreign aid agendas, framing aid as a benevolent necessity rather than examining the structural conditions that necessitate it (Herman & Chomsky, 2011). By highlighting Palestinians' need for basic resources without addressing the historical and political factors that have created these conditions, the article reinforces a racialized portrayal of Palestinians as perpetually dependent on Western aid. This framing aligns with Said's critique of Orientalism, which explains how Western narratives often depict Eastern populations as static, unable to control their circumstances, and in need of Western intervention. Through this lens, the article's humanitarian language inadvertently sustains a racialized view of Palestinians as reliant on foreign support, diverting attention from the broader political struggle for autonomy and human rights.

Furthermore, by focusing on the absence of basic resources and portraying Western aid as the primary recourse, the article frames Western intervention as the only practical response to Palestinian suffering. This approach can have a numbing effect on Western readers, framing the crisis as an unfortunate but static condition that requires continuous assistance, rather than as an injustice demanding structural change. In this way, the humanitarian language used in the article reinforces a passive perception of Palestinian identity, overshadowing Palestinian agency and resilience in favour of a narrative of dependence. This framing aligns with Orientalist and racialized assumptions that portray Eastern populations as lacking the ability to self-govern or overcome adversity without Western help, shaping how Western audiences perceive and respond to the Palestinian plight.

To conclude, the media's portrayal of Palestinian identity within conflict zones is deeply but subtly influenced by racialized narratives and Orientalist tropes that frame Palestinians as inherently linked to violence, helplessness, and dependency. These depictions do more than describe a distant conflict, they shape Western perceptions and reinforce state agendas. By presenting Palestinians either as passive victims of unavoidable hardship or as aggressors in a seemingly endless "war," the media perpetuates a skewed view that normalizes suffering and minimizes the urgency of Palestinian humanity and agency. This framework discourages Western audiences from critically examining the power imbalances and political systems perpetuating these crises, reducing a complex humanitarian issue to an inevitable cultural conflict. Importantly, these narratives reflect a distinctly Western viewpoint, one that positions the West as morally

superior, rational, and benevolent, in contrast to an irrational and violent “Eastern” Other. As Said argues, Orientalism is not just a system of stereotypes, but a political ideology that sustains Western dominance by naturalizing its authority over the East. The CNN article, while appearing neutral, participates in this tradition by framing Palestinian suffering through a lens that distances, decontextualizes, and implicitly justifies foreign control. The implications of such portrayals are profound: they not only dehumanize those affected by conflict but also shape global attitudes and policies that can overlook, excuse, or even endorse ongoing injustices. A shift toward narratives that emphasize Palestinian agency and highlight the political realities shaping their struggles could challenge these racialized tropes, fostering a more nuanced understanding that prioritizes justice over stereotype. By rethinking how media frames the identities within such conflicts, there is potential to inspire more informed, empathetic, and just international responses.

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