

# Protest, Propaganda and Politics: Media coverage of the London ceasefire marches

Professor Kate Meagher writes about the media coverage of the recent London ceasefire marches.

Marches held in London against the devastating bombardment of Gaza have been among the largest anti-war demonstrations in Britain since the 2003 protest against the Iraq war. On four consecutive weekends since 14 October, as many as [300,000](#) people from all walks of life have come out to demand an end to the relentless bombing of Gaza in which over 10,000 people, overwhelmingly civilians, have now been killed. These bombings followed the previous horrific killing of 1,400 Israeli citizens on 7 October, and the abduction of some 240 hostages. Key London tube stations have been shut down by the crowds as [a vast river of demonstrators](#) braved torrential rain and an intensifying police presence, to call for ceasefire, for protection of civilians, and for freedom from oppression. Yet each week, on the following day, not a single newspaper had front page coverage of the demonstrations, and the articles that appeared on inside pages and in online news stories showed a disturbing slant. The one exception that proves the rule was the front page story in the Sunday Express on 5 November, when a full page story on the 'anti-Israel marches' bore the headline: ['My Terror Over Race Hate Mobs'](#).

On their inside pages, much of the mainstream media carried photo spreads of masked youth, shouting protesters in Palestinian keffiyehs, and a sea of Free Palestine signs and Palestinian flags, accompanied by headlines like ["People Shouting 'jihad' in London 'inciting violence', says Robert Jenrick"](#) in the Guardian; "Hopes and Jeers: ...in London 100,000 Rage at Israel Amid 'Jihad' Chants" inside the Sun, despite confirmation in both stories that the highlighted chants had not occurred in the large London demonstration, and that no offense had been committed.

The Standard ran headlines like 'Police Clashes as Thousands of Pro-Palestinian Protesters Descend on Central London', or, in the Independent ['Dozens arrested as pro-Palestinian protesters march through London as Oxford Circus brought to a standstill'](#).

Arrests of 2-10 people per protest, rising to 29 on 4 November, compare favourably with the 64 arrests on Coronation Day last May, and mostly involved public order offenses like setting off fireworks or blocking traffic.

More fanciful headlines inside the Daily Mail proclaimed '[Iran 'hijacking' Pro-Palestinian Protests in the UK](#)', based on nothing more than innuendo and Conservative ministerial musings that protesters are being misguided by subversive fake news. Meanwhile, on the evening of the fourth demonstration, the Standard warned that "[Pro-Palestinian march in London on Armistice Day 'risks cenotaph being desecrated', says MP amid ban row](#)". The prospect of a further ceasefire march on 11 November has been branded 'provocative and disrespectful' by the Home Secretary, Suella Braverman. Imagine, a ceasefire march on Armistice Day. One shudders.

Much more alarming are reports of intensifying demands by the Home Secretary and other government ministers for the expansion of the legal definition of 'extremism' in order to facilitate arrests for peaceful political expression, such as Palestinian freedom chants. This was reported in the [Observer and reposted in the Guardian](#) under the headline 'Revealed: plan to brand anyone 'undermining' UK as extremist'.

Demonizing headlines about jihad, disorder and desecration have tended to obscure the peaceful objectives of these demonstrations, and the wide range of groups thronging the streets of London to express solidarity, 'in their thousands, in their millions...'. Imposing banners of the Stop the War Coalition, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and trades unions, including the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU), UNITE, Teachers unions, and a huge Rainbow banner, processed alongside a range of NHS and health worker groups as well as Jewish organizations and individuals declaring that the bombing of Gaza was not in their name. Along with mass-produced signs declaring Free Palestine carried by people of every race and creed, many wearing keffeyehs in solidarity, there was a wide array of hand-made placards proclaiming 'Stop War Crimes: US, UK, EU Shame on You', 'Jews Against Genocide', and 'Health Activists Say: End the Seige, End the Occupation'.

More poignant were signs that read 'How Did We Normalize Evacuating Hospitals', and a banner listing the names of the scores of healthcare workers killed in Gaza up to that point. Even more striking were placards drawing attention to the cruel irony of what is taking place in Gaza: 'You're waging war on a Concentration Camp', or more distressing

still “Never Again’ means Never Again for Anyone”. There is an eerie sense that we’ve been here before: rising authoritarianism, dehumanizing language directed against a particular group, mass killing of civilians, and the international community turning a blind eye. When was that?

Among the news media that did not cover the London protests on the morning after were some that focused on the wider politics behind the conflict. The Observer drew attention to the ‘shameful Western acquiescence’ in the attack on Gaza. Earlier on, the Guardian highlighted the role [of Israel’s internal politics](#), and the role of war in diverting widespread internal dissent against the Netanyahu government. The article noted the findings of the Israeli polling firm Dialog Centre that ‘more than half of those surveyed – 56% — said once the new war in Gaza is over, Netanyahu must resign’, suggesting more venal incentives for a long war in Gaza.

None of this minimizes the horror and distress experienced by Jewish and Palestinian communities alike, or the deep historical trauma of the Holocaust and the Nakba which the current conflict has reopened. Indeed, it is in recognition of these unbearable histories that international law seeks to protect all people from the excesses of war and crimes against humanity. These fundamental obligations allow nations to hold each other to account amid the fog of war and amid the pressures of nationalist agendas and geopolitical interests.

While remaining silent on the London protests in the morning after, the Financial Times engaged with related issues in the following days. Most striking was their [article on a recent letter by eight eminent UK judges and lawyers](#), two of whom are Jewish, who insist that the laws of war are a binding obligation, regardless of the conduct of the opposing side, indeed to save us from abandoning our humanity at such times. Far from being ‘insensitive or inappropriate’ to remind Israel of its international obligations at this time, the eminent lawyers insist that it is essential that we do so. ‘In these times of pain and terror, the notion that there are laws that we must all live by is challenging but essential. Jewish history teaches us that we cannot give up on them.’

Meeting these obligations is not about humanitarian pauses and feeble statements about avoiding civilian casualties while dropping bombs on civilians. The fifth London march on 11 November is doing what the international community should be doing: demanding an immediate ceasefire and the full enforcement of international law in Gaza.

***The views expressed in this post are those of the author and do not reflect those of the International Development LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.***

Image credit: Kate Meagher