

Press Freedom: Netanyahu's boycott of Haaretz won't stop us reporting the grim truth about Israel's wars

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Unlike most Israeli news outlets, my paper shows the suffering in Gaza and Lebanon. That's why the government has targeted us

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"Truth is the first casualty of war" goes the old cliché, but like any other adage, it holds a grain of verity. Battlefield reporting is always challenging: you are hampered by limited access, mortal danger, deliberate fog, and officials who get away with being less than truthful. And it becomes even more complicated when the journalists are part of a belligerent society, especially if the fight enjoys wide popular support as a just war.

On 7 October 2023, Israel was attacked by Hamas, invading from Gaza to kill, loot, rape and kidnap civilians and soldiers. The next day Hezbollah joined the fray from Lebanon. Israel fought back with a vengeance, depopulating and destroying the Gaza Strip towns and villages, killing many civilians along with Hamas militants and operatives. In September 2024, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) [launched a counteroffensive](#) on the northern front, delivering a crippling blow to its arch-rival Hezbollah and razing the Shia villages that served as its frontline bases.

Overwhelmed by the enemy's surprising attack and Hamas atrocities, the Israeli Jewish public united in overwhelming support for what appeared to be an existential fight against diehard, merciless enemies. This attitude prevails well into the war's 14th month, despite the rising number of IDF casualties and the ongoing failure to achieve the "total victory" promised by prime minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#).

The public attitude has dictated the boundaries of news coverage in mainstream Israeli media: show no mercy to the other side. Most news outlets don't air the killing, destruction and human suffering in Gaza and Lebanon. At most, they quote international criticism of Israel's actions, framing it as antisemitic and hypocritical. Gaza and Lebanon are seen only through the lenses of embedded reporters within the invading IDF units.

The embodiment of wartime news coverage is Danny Kushmaro, a news anchor at Channel 12, Israel's largest TV network. Joining an infantry force in Lebanon last month, a helmet-clad Kushmaro [blew up a house](#) in an occupied Shia village while boasting: "Don't mess with the Jews." When the international criminal court issued arrest warrants for Netanyahu and former defence minister Yoav Gallant, Kushmaro [reacted emotionally on primetime TV](#), surrounded by pictures of the dead and kidnapped kids of 7 October, saying the warrants were "against all of us, our soldiers, this people, this country". Kushmaro, and his colleagues on air, never bothered to explain the factual basis

behind the [ICC accusations](#) of deliberate starvation as a method of warfare and other crimes against humanity, allegedly ordered by Israel's leaders.

Israel has a military censor, and each news story about national security or intelligence must get their clearance. Censorship is a nuisance, but in wartime, the statutory constraint and filtering pales in comparison to the self-censorship of the audience. Israelis simply don't want to know.

Almost always alone, Haaretz has been reporting [for decades](#) on the suffering of Palestinians under Israeli occupation and on what the IDF considers the "collateral damage" of fighting terrorism. Time and again, the newspaper has been castigated for criticising the morality of IDF actions. Readers have cancelled their subscriptions, and politicians rallied against us. But we never budged. When you see war crimes, you must speak out while the war is raging, rather than wait until it's too late to make a difference. The 7 October war is no different: alone again, we report on the other side of the conflict, despite the difficulty of accessing sources in Gaza or Lebanon, while also embedding our reporters with the IDF like other media.

Netanyahu has never liked our critical stance towards him and his policy of occupation and annexation, calling Haaretz and the New York Times "[the greatest enemies of Israel](#)" in 2012 (though [he later denied it](#)). Having built his career on media manipulation, Netanyahu can't stand independent, critical voices. In the previous decade, his abuse of state power to twist media coverage, exposed by Haaretz in 2015, led Netanyahu to the dock in a still-pending [criminal corruption trial](#). But even after his indictment, he only changed the tactics, not the strategy, borrowing from the successful playbook of his Hungarian friend and mentor Viktor Orbán: attack the mainstream media as hostile, have your billionaire supporters launch supportive channels, build a "poison machine" to unite your base across social networks. Over time, the mainstream would shift its stance, adding the leader's mouthpieces to primetime panels, fearing the loss of viewers to the no-holds-barred Channel 14, [Israel's Fox-on-steroids](#).

Netanyahu is a divisive figure, and the Israeli Jewish public, while united behind the war, is deeply split between pro- and anti-Bibists. But Netanyahu is using the external fighting to justify silencing his domestic critics. Shortly after 7 October, communications minister Shlomo Karhi, a crony of the prime minister, submitted a draft cabinet resolution to boycott any government advertising or subscription to Haaretz, citing the paper's "anti-Israel propaganda". Initially blocked by the justice ministry, Karhi has relaunched his plan to undercut Haaretz, using the pretext of [controversial remarks](#) by our publisher Amos Schocken.

Last Sunday, the Haaretz boycott resolution, now sponsored by Netanyahu, passed unanimously in cabinet. For good measure, Karhi also launched a bill to privatise Israel's public broadcaster, which has acted as a thorn in the government's side, in contrast to its array of media mouthpieces. "We're elected by the public, and we can enact regime change if we want," [he said](#) of his boss's deeper motive. The boycott of Haaretz lacks a legal basis, but Netanyahu couldn't care less: if it's struck down, he would launch a tirade against "the legal deep state" and its undermining of his rule. And he bet right on opposition leaders who, adhering to nationalist-militaristic fervour, refrained from standing by the paper.

But we will prevail over the recent Netanyahu assault, just as we prevailed over his predecessors' anger and shunning. Haaretz will stand by its mission to report critically on the war and its dire consequences for all sides. The truth is sometimes hard to protect, but it should never be the casualty of war.

Aluf Benn

P.S.

- The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/nov/26/benjamin-netanyahu-haaretz-israel-gaza-lebanon-war>

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