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Digital illusions, political delusions: Israel's Hasbara propaganda revisited in a time of genocide

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ABSTRACT

Debates about digital technologies absorbing old political conflicts have intensified in recent years. In an ebb and flow between optimistic promise and pessimistic anxiety, discussions regarding the transformative abilities of technology include cyber warfare; digital activism during the 2011 Arab uprisings and the Black Lives Matter movement; the impact of 'fake news' on elections; and more recently the domination of Artificial Intelligence. This article discusses Hasbara, a mixture of propaganda and diplomacy that operates mostly through digital media. I offer a longitudinal and return to earlier analyses and assertions. On the surface, the professionalisation of Hasbara was completed with Israel's formation of an informal Ministry of Hasbara that expanded under the influence of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and additional investment in a social media strategy. The evolution of Hasbara has nurtured discontent regarding Palestine and consent for Israel. Yet this has deformed into a major paradox where Israel is executing a military war and actively influencing opinions through racism and violence, and simultaneously highlights Western complicity with settler colonialism through regional alignment with (Western) imperialism. Digital infrastructures afford an ecology in which genocide cannot be hidden away: with every publicly live-streamed urban bombing and assassination, its moral neglect is laid bare.

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Introduction

In March 2024, during an air strike on his house in Gaza City, one of eight-year-old Mahmoud Ajjour's arms was mutilated. Then, as he was searching for his family during the chaos, a follow-up bombardment¹ struck, severely damaging his other arm. Like many in Gaza, Ajjour underwent surgery without anaesthetic owing to a lack of medical supplies. In the end, both his arms had to be amputated. Photographer Samar Abu Elouf's photo of Ajjour, missing both of his arms, is one of the most haunting images of the present genocide and was chosen as the 2025 World Press Photo.

Much has been written about the political power of visuals, from the iconic picture of a naked Vietnamese child fleeing US napalm attacks to depictions of skeletally thin children

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in famine-torn Ethiopia. The adage 'one picture is worth a thousand words' certainly applies to Abu Elouf's image. As the World Press Photo Executive Director Joumana El Zein Khoury stated: 'This is a quiet photo that speaks loudly'.² Some of the things it speaks of include Mahmoud Ajjour's inability to hold a colouring pencil between his fingers, to hug his mother or to eat falafel with his own hands.

The image of Mahmoud Ajjour represents a major challenge to Israel's public diplomacy/propaganda efforts, or 'Hasbara' (which literally means 'to explain'): firstly, because it is impossible to legitimise what Israel did to Mahmoud Ajjour and, secondly, because by becoming a news item in its own right (through winning the World Press Photo award), the picture penetrated the mainstream arena: it was shared widely, escaping the usual editorial gate-keeping about Palestine/Israel. This whole case calls to mind Sontag's (2004) famous description of the relationship between image and warfare as a *double* relation: while war itself is visually mediated, there is also a war over such visuals.

In recent years, ideas about the transformative possibilities of technology have coincided with new debates about cyber warfare. Following the Arab revolutions in 2011 and the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013, digital activism once again became a central topic of discussion. This in turn was followed by a growing interest in disinformation ('fake news') during Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign and the UK Brexit referendum in the same year, and then by the current frenzied concerns about the impacts of artificial intelligence (AI). It is against the background of these developments and the genocide in Gaza that, in this article, I investigate how war and propaganda come together.

The article forms part of an ongoing research project on digital media propaganda that I began in 2012. In this project, and in the present article, I study Israeli Hasbara as a phenomenon that nurtures a particular visual or linguistic syntax that is no longer mainly about making counterarguments or demonstrating alternative facts but instead is about 'casting doubt' on what is *actually* happening. This approach to Hasbara emerged during Israel's 2008/2009 war on Gaza (*Operation Cast Lead*) and has been standard practice ever since. One of its familiar tactics is to claim that news of dead or injured Palestinians is fake, and that the scenes shown in images and videos are staged (termed 'Pallywood'). In short, the claim is that children like Mahmoud Ajjour fake their own suffering.

As part of my project, I seek to conceptualise the Hasbara and online propaganda of pro-Israeli lobby groups that is dedicated to protecting and revamping Israel's reputation (Appendix 1). In doing so, I argue that Israel aims to construct and maintain affective loyalties both for its own domestic public and for the broadly termed 'international community', through both manipulation and intimidation. In this article, I delve into this duality, alongside Sontag's 'double relation' of image and war.

To better understand the absence of Palestinian concerns in mainstream media, and the evolution of (colonial) propaganda, I bring together Herman and Chomsky's (1988) critique in *Manufacturing Consent* (regarding news manipulation of corporate media) and Edward Said's (1995) *Peace and Its Discontents* (reflecting on how Palestinians as historical subjects are 'absent whilst present' in the Western public imagination). The erasure of content or people is therefore neither personal nor random but occurs in the context of imperialism (and the orientalism this produces), and through an ideologically motivated institutional bias. This is not a deterministic process, because capitalist democracies that espouse a liberal ideology must at times allow themselves to be challenged, and also because the refusal by some to accept the status quo (in the form of resistance and solidarity) shapes the objective

circumstances. This is *especially* the case when moral neglect, selective outrage and double standards are laid bare every time an urban bombing, house demolition or assassination is publicly aired or live-streamed. This, conversely, heightens the need to alienate ordinary people from the Palestinian cause even more.

I situate the conceptual grounding of Israel's Hasbara during its ongoing genocide in Palestine within the intense confluence of two historic-material conditions: the enormous increase in debate taking place via digital media; and the unequal access to digital infrastructure. Here, it must be noted that the colonial and exploitative conditions of supply chains that are solidified through past wealth accumulation are mapped onto present extractions of computational infrastructure. Israel is just one example of this phenomenon: it benefits greatly from owning, controlling and maintaining the infrastructure that enables its Hasbara. Therefore, I associate Israel's public diplomacy as a discursive policy with the historic trajectory of imperialism and settler colonialism, and I connect Israel's ability to advance Hasbara with the material gains provided by technological dominance. I thus identify Israel's supremacy in warfare as being the outcome of an imperial context. In doing so, I consider how modern Zionism was wedded to the need to expel the indigenous population of Palestine and to take their property. Those who remained were (and continue to be) either marginalised as internal *sub*-citizens or subjected to military occupation, resulting in subordination through expulsion, control and domination. Comparing the current genocide with previous phases of Israeli domination and destruction of Palestinian lives helps us to understand why the digital mediation of propaganda is one important part of the debate that surged in the aftermath of the October 7 attacks.

This article makes five contributions. First, through reflections on analyses of digital data, I highlight the methodological implications for this kind of social media research. Second, I show that the significant increase in the number of digital Hasbara interventions (and the soaring funding for these campaigns) only *implies* a confluence of political conviction and public relations: amidst the current horrific situation (which all too often leaves us hopeless), Hasbara is becoming far less convincing; this is because the prevalence of digital platforms makes it more difficult to conceal imperial warfare and genocide within the mainstream public sphere. Third, I describe how Palestinian digital politics must battle both cyber-colonialism and Israeli settler colonialism, the roots of which are deeply embedded in local and international interests. I show how settler colonialism condemns Palestinians to infrastructural servitude, through a *double* impact.³ Fourth, through analysing social media data, I argue that illusions about Israeli superiority require ever-increasing self-delusion on the part of Israel and its supporters. I offer empirical evidence of a digital dynamic that reflects a different picture of the global realities. I show how, despite the entrenched power of a system that subjugates pro-Palestinian activists, students and scholars, the present juncture is seeing an overwhelming expansion of pro-Palestine solidarity. I end by describing how rather than *hiding* the injustices, Israel's Hasbara tactics actually *highlight* Western complicity in the cruel conditions of Israeli settler colonialism

Digital methodology and the progress of Palestinian epistemology

This article builds on the online–offline methodology I have developed over a number of years within the field of digital anthropology. I have deployed this methodology during fieldwork in Palestine and in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan, and in

participant observation and interviews with political activists and internet stakeholders. Applying critical media theory completes this generative epistemology, enabling me to strike a needed balance between embedded ethnography, engaged scholarship and conceptual analysis.

There have been many technological advances in the 15 years since I first began my research into Hasbara. At the same time, there has been a vast increase in the number of studies about Israeli propaganda and Hasbara. While previously I had to find much of the primary sources for my study through primary research, today there are plenty of easy-to-find archives containing relevant material on the subject, and digital applications have even been developed to detect Hasbara (shared in the appendices). This positive shift has occurred owing to the increase in studies of Palestine/Israel more generally and, importantly, the increase in Palestinian anthropology.

A decade after the publication of Furani and Rabinowitz's (2011) pioneering article 'The ethnographic arriving of Palestine', an equally significant essay by Atshan (2021) appeared titled 'The anthropological rise of Palestine'. The latter provides a very helpful overview of the many different sub-disciplines and fields of interest that link Palestine studies and anthropology. This cannot of course be separated from the important increase (especially since 2011) in the number of academics of colour focusing on Palestine (nearly half of these Palestinian), and the expansion of ethnographic engagement with Palestine (including explorations in the areas of media and communications). This methodological and intellectual progression has enabled a diversification of academic approaches that are informed by a Palestinian epistemology. This means this scholarship is not only descriptive or responsive but also undertaken by 'epistemic equals' (Atshan 2021). Intersectional work on Black solidarity and Palestinian solidarity (such as by Marc Lamont Hill) has widened this space still further (Atshan 2021, 11). As a result, critical studies are supported by a robust ecosystem of Palestinian anthropologists who are uniquely positioned.

This phenomenon is taking place alongside the growth in other areas of Palestine-related research into, for example, Palestinian cinema, journalism and technological infrastructure. This scholarship includes work on 'visual occupation' and the digital pontification of Israeli soldiers *themselves* (Bishara 2013; Hochberg 2015; Kuntsman and Stein 2015; Tawil-Souri and Aouragh 2014; Yaqub 2018). Moreover, many fact-finding initiatives that document the situation in Palestine have been aggregated by various groups (Appendix 2). Taken together, this shift is an empowering one and amplifies the formation of a critical mass of scholars committed to solidarity with Palestine.

In contrast to these positive developments in the academic sphere, commercial and political interests in legacy media continue to function as gatekeepers that impede efforts to convey the Palestinian narrative and to contextualise Israel's wars. Numerous Palestinian reports and graphics, including the work of *Zamla* and *Visualising Palestine* (Appendix 3), document online censorship of Palestinian perspectives. Extensive research about the default Israeli perspective of Western news reporting provides evidence of pro-Israeli media hegemony and anti-Palestinian news manipulation, linked to Israeli press disinformation. However, the media landscape is shifting, with the spread of textual, visual and audio narratives that can avoid the confines of censorship.

For this article, I have undertaken a social media data analysis to investigate the relative popularity of pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian social media content. Since it is impossible to interpret online politics without understanding offline social dynamics and power relations,

in the following pages I relate social media trends to offline events in order to test the offline–online dialectics, and I show that offline events are linked to online trends (and vice versa). Adding this quantitative empirical approach allows me to better understand the strategies used by content creators. It also allows me to identify the limitations of quantitative data tools ([Appendix 4](#)), in a context in which quantitative data collection focusing on digital content has become a source of concern for researchers because algorithms have a pro-Israel bias. Generalising from such observations is a problem not only in analyses of online trends relating to Israel/Palestine, but also in the wider media studies discipline – something I discuss in the article’s last section.

Two key points must be underlined here. First, social mediation is not a social agent of change in the way that labour strikes, mass protests, occupations and successful boycott campaigns are. In the context of the present genocide, we have seen an acceleration of Israel’s ethnic cleansing and urban destruction taking place alongside very successful pro-Palestine social media campaigns. In other words, correlation is not the same as causality. But that is not the full story either, since a high correlation *could facilitate* a stronger causality: for example, normalisation of the language of *genocide* and *apartheid* could legitimise campaigns for institutional divestment from Israel and companies linked to its crimes. Second, digital media is not a neutral playing field that generates scientific data about social movements. For example, in extreme cases of digital repression, a lower presence of pro-Palestine activity online may not signal a lower presence of pro-Palestine activism *per se*.

These ambiguities can only be made visible through qualitative and grounded (digital) ethnography. Thus, while social media analysis helps us to identify the most popular hashtags (pro-Israeli vs pro-Palestinian), as discussed in this article, structural exclusion and political disadvantage must always be included in the contextual analysis.⁴ Applying this mixed model allows me to bring to bear a number of analytical layers that ensure the analysis is both consistent and deep. Because diplomacy forms part of the strategies employed in international (geopolitical) relations, I consider English-language content. X and TikTok were chosen because these two platforms have a very broad communicative and demographic variety, and their data can be assessed using multiple data-analysis tools (here a combination of WebDataRA, Brand24 and Exolyt was used). The full analysis is presented in [Appendix 5](#). Using these tools, for each platform I analysed six hashtags appearing between November 2023 and May 2025, along four different timeframes, each separated by six months (November, February, September, April). I investigated the intensity of engagement (number of posts containing specific hashtags within specific timeframes and interactions and engagement metrics). My approach of using different timeframe observations allows for detection of fluctuations in participation. This occurred across all four periods reviewed. I also observed possible comments in order to obtain a coherent impression of social media representation and to avoid inauthentic engagement (i.e. bots).

The hashtags #StandwithPalestine #StandwithIsrael #FromTheRiverToTheSea and #BringThemHome were selected for direct comparison. The all-purpose #FreePalestine and the specific #CeaseFireNOW were also added to minimise filtering biases and to explore possible cultural preferences. #StandwithPalestine consistently had significantly more content and higher engagement on a general level than #StandwithIsrael. The disparity was especially pronounced in TikTok videos, where #StandwithPalestine had nearly 20 times more content. In terms of views, #StandwithPalestine received over six times more

views than #StandwithIsrael. Considering the consistent pro-Palestine movements and mass protests across all continents, this indicates a correspondence between online and offline outcomes.

In addition to the insights the collected data offer regarding political engagement, specific observations can be made in relation to the different platforms, over the four months analysed. Firstly, there is a fluctuation in online engagement related to specific political temporalities. Secondly, there is a shift that has to do with the discriminatory policies of corporate platforms and the political repression that has been extended from the offline space to social media. From excessive moderation of pro-Palestine content on social media platforms, or systematic shadow-banning, removal or slowing down, to biased ChatGPT answers about the causes of the October 7 attacks, the main goal of efforts to suppress pro-Palestine discourse on social media is to make it less visible.⁵ When faced with this reality, it is likely that activists change their use of language (e.g. alternative spellings) and hashtag terminology. In other words, it is crucial to recognise that social media engagement is not a permanent phenomenon. I return to this important dynamic towards the end of this article, as this might explain the uneven oscillations I observe.

Destruction of Palestinian technology: cybercide

The unevenness of digital representation reflects systemic variations in the level of digital access, which arise owing to material conditions. For this reason, when analysing Israel/Palestine generally, and Hasbara specifically, it is crucial to bring digital infrastructure and imperial politics together. In Palestine, digital infrastructures are linked to Israel's geographic, military and political policy of colonial domination. From its inception, computational infrastructures have been a part of Israeli repression (Gürses et al. 2020; Lindtner et al. 2020). For this reason, Israel's covert technological hegemonic practices, and their historical scientific roots, are crucial to the conceptualisation of how digital infrastructure shapes Palestinian politics (Appendix 6). Importantly, there is a crucial correlation between ownership of the means of production (through settler colonialism) and securing the ability to disseminate content production through Big Tech nepotism (Appendix 7).

Israel's suppression of Palestinians has been captured accurately by Baruch Kimmerling in the notion of *politicide*. This framework for understanding the contemporary Palestinian political experience can be complemented by the notion of *urbicide*, which refers to the violent destruction of the urban environment, and *spaciocide*, which denotes the destruction of physical space – both of which are taking place in Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza (Graham 2003; Hanafi 2009; Kimmerling 2003). I extend these powerful frameworks by adding the notion of *cybercide* designating the prevention, surveillance and destruction of Palestinian internet (Aouragh 2013). Cybercide must be seen as the *effect* – rather than a *cause* – of imperialism. It is important to note here that although the term 'imperialism' is avoided in mainstream media and communication studies, the development of infrastructural technologies is part of the geopolitical story of imperial power.⁶ This combination of political will and technological ability allows Israel to hide its war crimes, or to 'vanish' the annihilation of Gaza from Israeli consumption (Stein 2025). Importantly, there is a crucial correlation between ownership of the means of production (through settler colonialism) and securing the ability to disseminate content production through Big Tech nepotism (Appendix 7).

Updating Hasbara 2.0: old wine in broken bottles

As Hasbara has evolved, it has nurtured a linguistic frame and constructed an affective (negative) interpretation regarding Palestine in order to construct consent for Israeli crimes. The perceived wisdom of engaging in public diplomacy is based on the principle that antipathy to one's power may negatively affect the ability to pursue one's interests. One example of this is the activities of the Israel Project. This is a key body that offers advice on how to better perform Hasbara by applying certain linguistic tools: for example, applying certain words only in relation to Hamas and not to Palestinians as a whole, and avoiding other words like *accountability, children and prevention*.

Hasbara is thus both an Israeli institutional and policy approach *and* a practical toolkit that is applied across international pro-Israel networks. In the mid-2000s, this unusual variant of diplomacy efforts moved to online platforms – something I wrote about in my study *Hasbara 2.0* (Aouragh 2016). Since then, the use of social media as a tool of Hasbara has grown in unprecedented ways, including contracting copywriters to write Wikipedia entries on Israel, enlisting volunteers from the main Israeli student union to engage in social media activity on Israel's behalf, using trolls to attack pro-Palestinian accounts, harassing individuals through doxing and spreading false information about the Arab 'slave trade' in an attempt to separate Black activists from Palestine solidarity (Appendix 8).

Having permission to narrate one's own history and to be represented on one's own terms is ordinarily reserved for those who have the privilege of being regarded as legitimate human subjects. As Edward Said argued, Palestinians are often not accorded this privilege, as can be observed through the (*manufactured*) discontented framing of Palestinian self-determination (Said 1995). Israel applies this framing through an adjusted lingo that excludes Palestinians from the category of human beings as constituents of humanity. In this approach, Israeli interests are the measure for defining morality, and Palestinian humanity is never a default position. Dehumanisation and denial are two sides of the same coin. There are various manifestations of this perspective: from calls to eliminate Palestinians to the erasure of Palestinian history, in a form of (symbolic) violent colonial subjugation. Within this tendency, depictions of Palestinians vary from classic portrayals of unruly natives to comparisons with animals. For instance, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant claimed Israel is fighting 'human animals', while former Israeli Ambassador to the UN Dan Gillerman called Palestinians 'inhuman animals'. Meanwhile, Thomas Friedman, a pro-Israeli journalist at the *New York Times*, has compared Arabs to insects.⁷

Israeli public relations policy has received billions of Shekels in funding and years of policy attention across different departments of the Israeli government. On the surface, the professionalisation of Hasbara took a step forward with the establishment of the Ministry of Hasbara, under the influence of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, in 2012. At that time, efforts were beginning to move towards the internet and social media platforms.

In essence, Hasbara's mission is to respond to shifting public opinion in an ever-changing media ecology, in an effort to manufacture consent for Israel's dominance. To do this so that it can continue to deliver *without breaking*, Israel must apply several modifications. Hasbara failures have been a recurring anxiety from the inception of Hasbara during the founding of the State of Israel up to the most recent public relations drive. Indeed, the publication of harsh reports about the failures of Israel's Hasbara, followed by a reshuffling of staff

responsible for it, goes back at least four decades. For example, in 2023, the director of Hasbara resigned, as her interventions were regarded as counter-productive and unprofessional, in both the domestic and international arenas. Having to face these failures, Israel tends to resort to more racism and more violence, as events over the past decade since my Hasbara 2.0 study has shown. This phenomenon – disappointment and sometimes surprise, followed by those responsible being reprimanded – is itself a typical Hasbara performance (Israel is a democracy/Israel is always picked on).⁸

A reminder that this is part of a long trail of Hasbara failures is provided by former Israeli Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Abba Eban following Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. It is as if we are reading about the current Gaza genocide when we read Eban in *The Jerusalem Post* arguing that it is '[just] short of idiotic to believe that this movement of opinion could have been arrested by technical means such as a transfer of responsibility for "hasbara" from one Cabinet desk to another'.⁹

Israel is currently stuck in a loop in regard to Hasbara. The Israeli National Public Diplomacy Directorate (known in Israel as the Hasbara directorate), which initially picked up the pieces of a collapsed national Hasbara policy under the auspice of the Prime Minister's Office of Diaspora & Antisemitism, is afflicted by many internal conflicts. No lessons have been learned from earlier reflections. The frequent Israeli (internal) protests and investigations are a well-rehearsed diplomatic act. Since October 2023, the Ministry of Hasbara has had no director, and its budget has been moved to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The fact that Amihai Shikli, who led the Hasbara policy, hosted neo-Nazis did not help (Haaretz 2024a).¹⁰

It was expected that the October 7 attack would be leveraged in pro-Israel propaganda in unlimited ways. In a play on the terminology of *manufacturing consent* and *peace and its discontents*, I argue that after this event, Israel refocused its attempts, moving to a focus on *manufacturing discontent* of 'the other'. It has often done this by feeding into an existing *information bias* (e.g. stigmatisation of Arabs/Muslims) or spreading false claims.¹¹ This is exactly what mainstream media stepped up to provide. In an approach that can be described as coming straight from the 'Hasbara Handbook', accounts of the devastation of Gaza include statements like '*according to the Hamas-controlled ministry of health ...*' and '*The bombing of Hamas-administered Islamic University*'.

It needed to be more impactful than ever. Nonetheless, even by 2024, the national Hasbara Twitter/X account was still not performing well, having fewer than 700 followers. This was despite the fact that Israel offers scholarships to students in return for engaging in online Hasbara.¹² Furthermore, while public embarrassments caused by Israel's military campaigns could be avoided in previous years, they returned with a vengeance in 2023–2024.¹³ In its advisory opinion in 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) deliberately only used videos and texts showing/referring war crimes that had been posted by the Israeli army itself.¹⁴ Does the ICJ's and the International Criminal Court's framing of the war on Gaza (International Criminal Court 2024) signal a shift? Israel's protected status under US imperial domination is shifting: the challenge posed by the ICJ (and the issuing of arrest warrants) to the present norms that allow Israel to kill Palestinians shows the fragility of that status (Ayyash 2025). Aside from its material strategy, in the form of warfare, Israel must develop new Hasbara schemes to draw attention away from the main issues (Appendix 9). As I have argued, Israel's *Operation Cast Lead* produced the propaganda operation *cast doubt*, a form of mega gas-lighting (Aouragh 2016). Yet despite ongoing efforts to cast doubt on Palestinian perspectives, an increase in negative views of Israel has been evident on media platforms in recent years.

By the end of 2023, merely three months into what the most prominent international legal bodies and experts were already describing as a genocide, content from Gaza dominated (social) media platforms (Segal and Daniele 2024). The online anger that was evident on these platforms was an extension of offline protests, with counter-hegemonic engagements on digital platforms often juxtaposed with scenes of large physical protests from across the world. While some of this seeped through the iron walls of mainstream media, it was only after public pressure against the intense violence that conventional outlets began to adjust their coverage.¹⁵

Ten years ago, I showed that public opinion polls were indicating a decrease in Israel's popularity. Since then, as recent data show, the situation has deteriorated further. For instance, a June 2025 survey by the US-based Pew Research Centre indicates that declines in Israel's popularity have been especially sharp in North America and Europe. In seven of the countries that Pew had last polled in 2013, the share of negative views of Israel had grown considerably by 2025 (Pew Research Center 2025). In the United Kingdom, 44% had an unfavourable view of Israel in 2013, compared with 61% in 2025. This matters because these are the very states that provide Israel with financial, military and political support. Together with the mounting volume of evidence about Israel's genocide, this pressure explains why the news coverage may have become more critical of Israel than had previously been usual.

The use of digital platforms makes it possible to document wars in real time. This raises the question of what it means to document a devastating tragedy in blunt and poignant detail, such that audiences are live witnesses to genocide. We can assume that the relation between political and media arenas changes at this point, even if only temporarily. This reminds us that political alliances are never really fixed: diplomatic fallouts do not occur in a constant pace.

Deterring support for Palestinians became the most crucial goal after the Israeli military operations that began in October 2023 crossed every imaginable line of liberal approval. Hasbara's falsehoods became more commonplace, and its disinformation much bolder. As part of this trend, the use of AI for Hasbara disinformation has recently become another tool in Israel's toolbox. However, it has not always been successful: AI accounts spreading pro-Israel messages on X have accidentally promoted a Palestinian state and have denied certain claims about Hamas.¹⁶ Leaving aside the issue of AI, over the last two years, the deceptions propagated by Israel Hasbara have intensified to obscene levels. An early example was fabricated radar footage and the use of sound recordings to claim that the destruction of Al Ahli Hospital was due to a Hamas rocket that had backfired. This was an upsetting falsehood but one that most media outlets adopted. Other blunt but common assertions have included that flattened civil buildings, schools and medical centres housed Hamas command centres; that UNRWA had to be defunded because its staff were members of Hamas; and that agreed-upon 'safe corridors' for refugees, as well as cars containing World Central Kitchen volunteers, were legitimate military targets. Other astonishing claims include that the extrajudicial murder of Al Jazeera journalists is legitimate. And yet, as more and more such manufactured claims appeared, they began to be perceived as less and less convincing (Appendix 10).

The genocide will [sometimes] be televised

You can pay off Meta, you can't pay off me

Politicians who serve by any means
 AIPAC, CUFI, and all the companies
 You see, we sell fear around the land of the free
 But this generation here is about to cut the strings
 You can ban TikTok, take us out the algorithm
 But it's too late, we've seen the truth, we bear witness
 Seen the rubble, the buildings, the mothers and the children.
 (Macklemore [2024](#))

Having shown how the affective politics of propaganda are nurtured in an overactive military ecology, I now consider how a political ecology of anticolonial resistance in turn challenged this relation. The successes of the pro-Israel lobby are often assumed to have been achieved thanks to remarkable talent, phenomenal 'lobbies' or viewing Israel as a 'start-up nation', the poster-boy exquisite technological innovation. The truth is that they work well because their agenda is aligned with imperial interests. It is also for this reason that Israel's genocide is *wilfully ignored* by powerful liberal states who could change the reality of countless suffering people. These states' deafening silence in the face of unimaginable misery has only sharpened the outcry from people of conscience around the world. Transnational solidarity campaigns, protests, encampments, marches and calls for divestment have all signalled major shifts in consciousness and solidarity. In response, surveillance and repression of activism have exploded, with the main targets being Palestine solidarity efforts and anti-war campaigns. These efforts seek to prevent cracks in the media ecology that could afford marginalised voices the ability to communicate directly. The internet has mitigated territorial fragmentation and facilitated a unification of Palestinian voices (Aouragh [2011a](#)).

In a context in which Israel's policies mean that Gaza risks becoming uninhabitable (Ayyash [2025](#)), we need to return to the geopolitical parameters of imperialism. As discussed above, not analysing the political economy of geopolitics misses the embedding of colonial oppression.¹⁷ By contrast, applying an understanding of colonialism also assumes that there has always been Palestinian anticolonial resistance, since the history of oppression is also the history of resistance.¹⁸ Seen through this lens, contemporary Palestinian activism can be traced along a continuous line all the way back to efforts to oppose Zionism and Palestinian dispossession in the 1880s. This movement reached its height during the 1936–39 revolt and in the revolutionary fedayeen movements (*ayyam al-thawra*) in Jordan and Lebanon after 1967. The grassroots struggles of the First Intifada and the outbreak of the Second Intifada offer examples of different modes of resistance to colonial subjugation. The Palestinian liberation movement is manifested in *different* ways and cannot be reduced to any single form of resistance (*muqawama*): for example, there is *muqawama musallaha* (armed resistance), *muqawama madaniya* (civil resistance) and *muqawamma sha'biya* (popular resistance). This historical background shapes digital Palestinian politics: which we can refer to as *al muqawamma al electroniyya* (digital resistance). Though the latter is not separate from anticolonial resistance, the (capitalist and imperial) balance of forces often renders alternatives like a *cyber intifada* less effective (Aouragh [2008](#)). Palestine teaches us that if the dominant medium were the main message, the long list of efforts against Israeli military oppression or settler violence (as far back as the Active Stills and Shooting Back projects

documenting army and settler abuse in the Occupied Palestinian Territories) would have tilted the balance years ago.

In the past two years, the limits to what is considered acceptable or normal have crossed several lines, and the blatant Israeli discourse is highly confrontational. Yet, even as soldiers strike influencer-style poses or take selfies as they commit their crimes, in this context the surrounding horrific scenes inadvertently come into view too. As indicated above, such videos and images have already been sourced as evidence in legal actions against Israel. A key question arises here: why are Israeli military content creators allowed to document their activities during combat operations, knowing the diplomatic damage this can cause? It has become impossible to deny Israel's criminal acts of violence because they have been live-streamed by Israeli soldiers themselves. An answer to this riddle lies in the historical challenges faced by the Israeli army (including the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, as referred to in the earlier quotation from Abba Eban). Ground invasions and urban warfare result in high death tolls for both the invaders and the urban population under attack. This terrifies soldiers and their families; the negative impact on Israelis of body bags returning from battlefields in Gaza or Lebanon remains huge. The associated low morale creates a significant challenge to Israel's attempts to maintain the upper hand in its Hasbara efforts. It is in this context that the ambiguous bravado and Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) social media posts are allowed: they are permitted because they are considered useful for raising morale among the military.¹⁹ This produces one of the most dangerous double binds for Israel.

Settler colonialism is that it leads to a constant cycle of warfare and diplomatic failures, because (1) Palestinian resistance to Israeli control will not cease, but this also meant that (2) local and international publics tend to sympathise with those who are oppressed. What we have witnessed in recent years is that this simultaneously transpires along a much younger demographics, and that this is partly related to digital platforms.

Demographic transformations are deepening the tendency towards digital mediation. In 2025, I observed a clear shift in political conscience compared with my previous research (between 2012 and 2016). As numerous studies regarding the massive protests in Sheikh Jarrah (Jerusalem) in 2021 (discussed below) show, we are not dealing with a tabula rasa: the current genocide is taking place in the context of a complex pre-existing Palestinian/Israel digital sphere, even as today's computational ecology is different from that which existed in the past. Moreover, digital media itself cannot be generalised: for example, the rhythm and tone of Instagram or TikTok are not the same as those of Facebook or X.

Neither do social media users in the Global North (who exist in a context in which there is strong mainstream support for Israel) deal with the same concerns as those in the Global South. It is therefore important to move beyond the usual global reference points for social media 'popularity', which mainly draw on Euro-American sources, and to consider what matters for social media users in the Global South. For example, a study that looked at hashtags used in Indonesia and Malaysia between November 2023 and January 2024 found that they were predominantly concerned with sharing information about how to support Palestinians: #FreePalestine ranked first, followed by #GazaUnderAttack. These hashtags were closely followed by an invocation of Islamic charity #JulidfiSabilillah. The study's authors add that this movement on social media helped spark protests in various countries (Husna and Nihayati 2024). Pro-Israel accounts predominantly used the hashtag #Hamasislsis, but in the Global South #Gazaunderattack was more prominent; connotation is solidarity and community efforts for charity fundraising (Appendix 11) (Ismail and Hafidz 2024).

#StandwithPalestine: a metonym for freedom

Returning to the topic of Hasbara two decades after I began my research into Palestinian online engagements and Israeli digital colonialism, it was somewhat surprising for me to discover that pro-Palestine content continues to dominate on social media. This surprise is due not to my underestimation of pro-Palestine feeling, but rather to my awareness of the fact that these corporate platforms have become inadequate. What kind of spaces do they offer, in light of their political partiality and corporate algorithms? My new research finds very clear evidence of the double features of these platforms: while the brutality of Israel's genocide is visible in real time on them (which supports collective digital archiving initiatives that amass evidence of the genocide), there are also damning accounts of cloud computation and of AI being complicit in Israeli crimes.

Before I delve into this contradiction, it is important to make clear that my research around certain key events shows that social media incorporates structural biases that must be considered when conducting empirical analysis. When aiming to test the hypothesis that one kind of political input is more popular than another on social media, there is a need to access mass quantitative datasets (e.g. recording the number of posts, interactions, shares) that can indicate 'popularity'. Considering the unsuitable data tools and methods discussed earlier, this calls for thoughtful discussion among social media researchers ([Appendix 12](#)). Any achievement by pro-Palestine solidarity on digital platforms occurs *despite* those very platforms.

So what are these achievements? A review of comparative literature about social media engagement during major protests in 2021 (relating to an uprising in Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood and Israel's bombing of Gaza) shows that Israel's aim of dominating digital platforms failed. Furthermore, a study of TikTok as a space for diplomacy analysed two sampled hashtags to examine visual social media activity during 2021. Focusing on the aesthetic values of pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian activity through a study of the #Israelunderattack and #Gazaunderattack hashtags, it found that the Israeli strategy was to promote a sense of victimisation, while for Palestinians it was to share personal narratives (Yarchi and Boxman-Shabtai 2025). Two other studies that also analysed the 2021 context, focusing on content creation, discussed how the particular characteristics of the TikTok platform engendered a new form of *playful* activism (Cervi and Divon 2023; Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2022). In a multimodal analysis of TikTok videos posted under the hashtag #gazaunderattack, the authors observed lip-syncing duets and pop music enactments. These two studies showed how Palestinians narratives were presented in a light-hearted way, with performances employing humorous routines, facilitating the dissemination of political messages to a youth audience. It is possible that many within this audience had no previous interest in (or even knowledge of) Palestine. Another digital ethnography of the #SaveSheikhJarrah hashtag analysed the social media presence of prominent activists. The study's discussion of the comment sections on selected Instagram posts, stories and tweets revealed a fascinating connection between activists' online posts and grassroots activism (Daniele and Kelsch 2025).

The sample size across studies varies, but some rely on only two (self-evident) popular hashtags, which reduces the ability to evaluate the variety and interwovenness of public discourse *across* hashtags. In the research for this article, I address these gaps by comparing multiple hashtags, and by studying both X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok. Moreover, I

investigate popular social networks *since 2023*. Since I assume that Israel is well aware of these developments, I include the Hasbara pushback against Gen Zs' social media engagement in my account, through analysing asynchronous hashtag dynamics.

Roughly since 2000 (the Second Intifada), we see that, even faced with the escalation of Hasbara efforts, the Palestinian cause has been embraced by increasing numbers of people, growing into a global cause whose supporters extend far beyond those in the postcolonial Global South or the countries of the former USSR. It is obvious that the quest for Palestinian liberation has mobilised massive international solidarity networks. This international affinity has only deepened during the current genocide.

My new empirical study shows that creative participation on digital platforms ignites users to engage in political expression. These virtual symbols and hashtags affect global politics – at the very least by shedding light on just how far-reaching the global community that supports Palestine is. There is also a demographic aspect to this development, because the current younger generations are less prone to absorbing propaganda, since they are not as attuned to mainstream news or legacy media. Rather than waiting to be heard, young people actively participate in the distribution and curation of content.

Social media content shows that these young people, who have massive reach, are driven by a high degree of curiosity and often employ an original style: from canny musical dedications to carefully designed make-up tutorials, they present pro-Palestine graphics and narratives in novel ways. Indeed, a clear difference from older content creators is that these younger creators rarely present 'prosaic' videos of dead bodies accompanied by cries of grief. Yet even when they present entertaining and smart content, it has a heavy meaning. It is a part of the zeitgeist of the current times that digital content is both amusing and also distinctly political. In many cases, political anger leads to the voicing of principled demands targeting Big Tech itself. Furthermore, content creators also present humorous exposures of Hasbara itself. The discrepancy between Hasbara campaigns and this demographic is indisputable.²⁰

The most shared X and TikTok posts using the hashtags *StandwithPalestine* and *StandwithIsrael* are presented in [Figures 1](#) and [2](#). They demonstrate, in one look, the overwhelming support for Palestine. Taken together, these developments present a huge challenge for Israeli Hasbara. The affective and popular culture tactics are of course also part of the strategy of Hasbara operations. But a closer look – in terms of both quantity and quality – offers several meaningful insights.

Not standing with Israel

Opting for different timelines and allowing for a six-month gap between each data collection helped to uncover asynchronous digital temporality. After a relatively strong start in November 2023, videos and views of *#StandwithIsrael* plummeted and remained very low, with only minor fluctuations. On the other hand, *#StandwithPalestine* consistently had significantly more content and higher engagement than *#StandwithIsrael* across all four reviewed periods over the 18 months of analysis, as the absolute numbers in [Tables 1](#) and [2](#) confirm. This disparity is especially pronounced for TikTok videos, with *#StandwithPalestine* having nearly 20 times more content. In terms of views, *#StandwithPalestine* received over six times more views than *#StandwithIsrael*. The fact that TikTok allows for more creative alternatives, and that X is more explicitly anti-Palestinian,

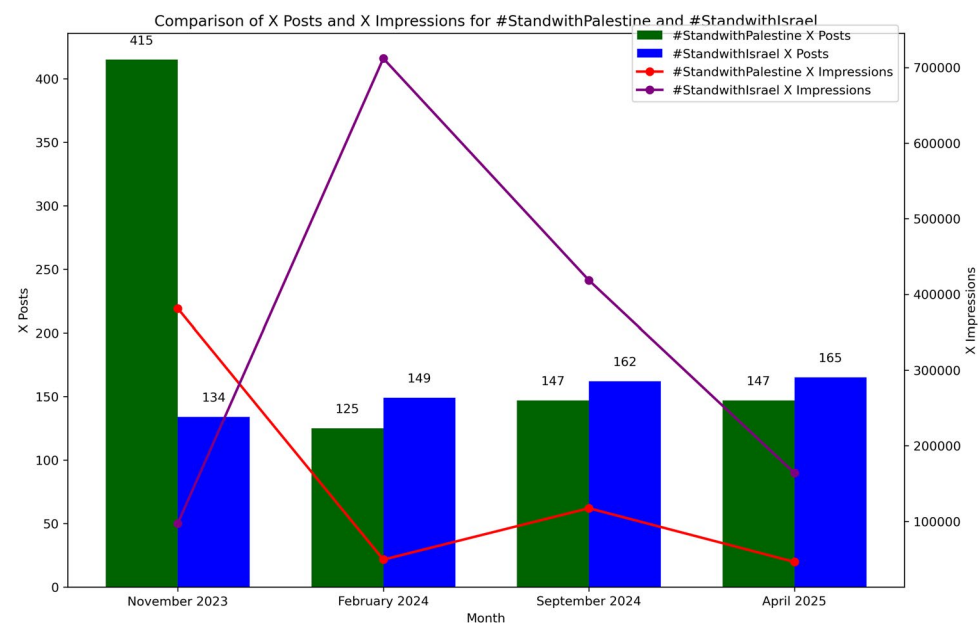


Figure 1. Bar chart comparing the number of X posts and X impressions for the hashtags #StandwithPalestine and #StandwithIsrael.

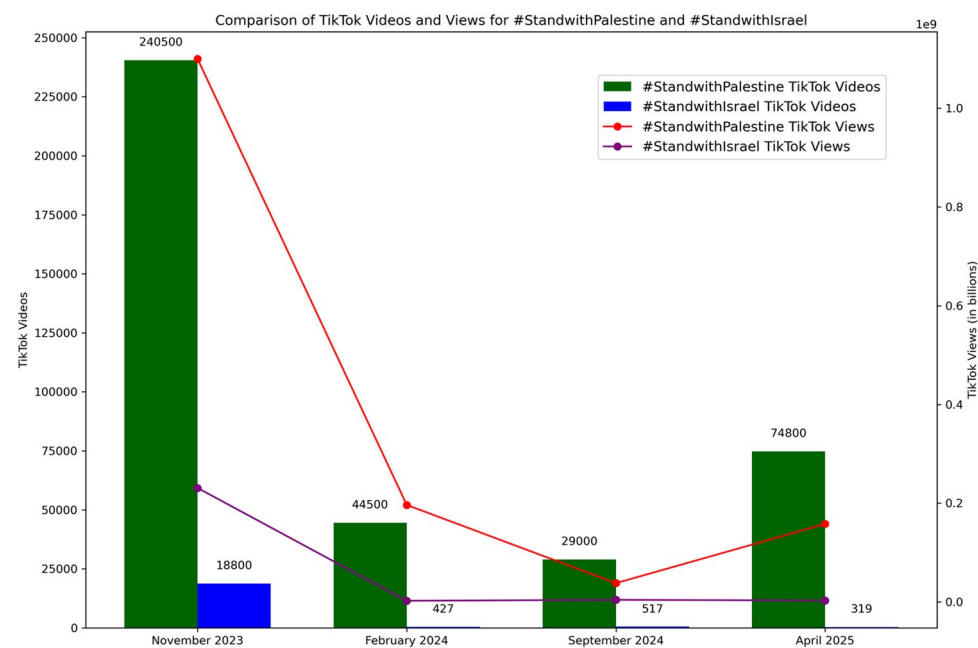


Figure 2. Bar chart comparing the number of TikTok videos and views for the hashtags #StandwithPalestine and #StandwithIsrael.

helps explain why #StandwithIsrael is seen to grow on X but pales in comparison with #StandwithPalestine on TikTok. Looking further into the hashtag classifications confirms an interesting asynchronous tendency. By studying the data *across* platforms, *across* hashtags and *across* timelines, we see that online users change tactics over time.

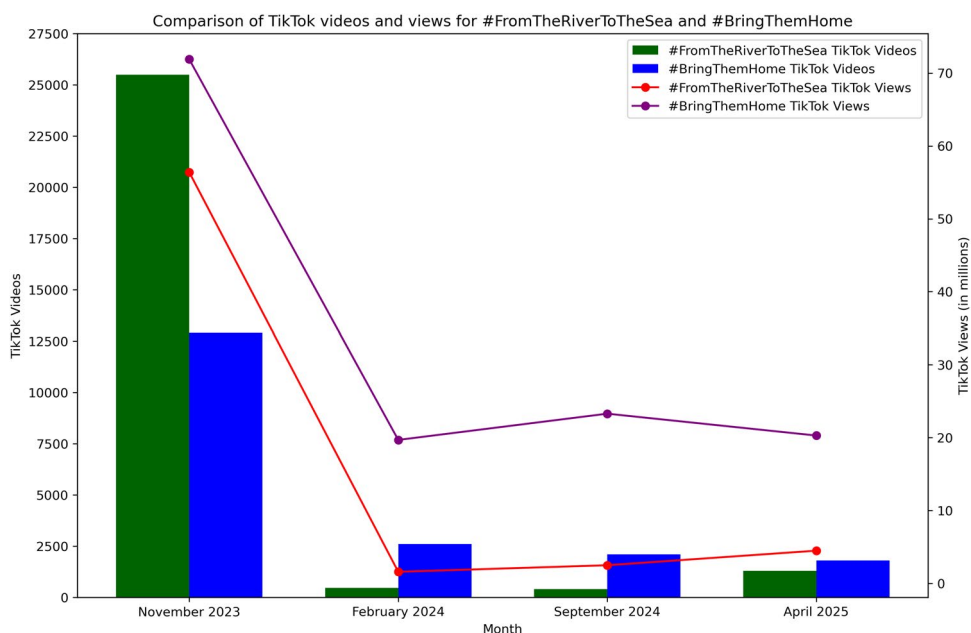


Figure 3. Bar chart comparing the number of TikTok videos and TikTok views for the hashtags #FromTheRiverToTheSea and #BringThemHome.

Table 1. Comparison of the number of X posts and X impressions for the hashtags #StandwithPalestine and #StandwithIsrael.

Month	Hashtag	X posts	X impressions
November 2023	#StandwithPalestine	415	381 397
November 2023	#StandwithIsrael	134	97 229
February 2024	#StandwithPalestine	125	49 404
February 2024	#StandwithIsrael	149	712 026
September 2024	#StandwithPalestine	147	117 384
September 2024	#StandwithIsrael	162	418 603
April 2025	#StandwithPalestine	147	46 340
April 2025	#StandwithIsrael	165	164 002

Table 2. Comparison of the number of TikTok videos and views for the hashtags #StandwithPalestine and #StandwithIsrael.

Month	Hashtag	TikTok videos	TikTok views
November 2023	#StandwithPalestine	240.5K	1.1B
November 2023	#StandwithIsrael	18.8K	230.9M
February 2024	#StandwithPalestine	44.5K	196.5M
February 2024	#StandwithIsrael	427	2.4M
September 2024	#StandwithPalestine	29.0K	38.1M
September 2024	#StandwithIsrael	517	4.3M
April 2025	#StandwithPalestine	74.8K	158.0M
April 2025	#StandwithIsrael	319	3.0M

Regarding the hashtags #FromTheRiverToTheSea and #BringThemHome, both hashtags experienced both high and lows in visibility. #FromTheRiverToTheSea had the highest number of videos initially, but it experienced a drop from November 2023 to February 2024 (see Figure 2). By contrast, although it did decline on TikTok, with a downward trend over time,

#BringThemHome maintained a more stable presence. This is not surprising, as this hashtag is a more broad-based discursive statement overall, reflecting an aspiration that is shared by many of those against the war.

As [Figure 3](#) and [Table 3](#) show, #FromTheRiverToTheSea had less engagement than #BringThemHome. While, based on this finding, it *seems* that pro-Israel hashtags were stronger in terms of video representations and viewers, the relative increase in pro-Israel hashtags was not because of but *despite* the liabilities of Hasbara and what it stands for. The ancillary factors (distinctive power relations and levels of media access) become clearer when we zoom in to #FromTheRiverToTheSea, which is a more ‘provocative’ discursive statement. After a peak in November 2023, videos and views of this explicitly pro-Palestine hashtag declined (as stated above). This coincided with a major shift in public discourse: at around this time, this phrase became a focus of criminal prosecutions when it was used as a chant during protests.

I also consider the fact that pro-Palestine contributions continued tirelessly (when attacks increased into an all-out war and then genocide) to share content expressing solidarity and exposing Israeli crimes. Sharing or consuming content under these hashtags is not only reactive (against Hasbara or exposing media bias) but also about *processing* dreadful events. It reflects the unprecedented nature of Israel’s genocide in Gaza, which is unlike anything seen before in contemporary modern history. Witnessing injustice on this scale, today’s social media users are digesting the trauma during the genocide in real time. In this context, a younger public/audience is taking sides more explicitly.

Assessing the decline in views of pro-Palestine posts is necessary because it allows us to counterpose the datasets with metrics based on total public mentions using a more generic hashtag, and also the *overall* interactions. This allows us to better understand *reach*. For this purpose, running tests for #FreePalestine and #StandwithPalestine on X and TikTok, using the tools Brand24 and BrandMentions, is very valuable as a second layer of data gathering. The indications are less about active participation – rather than informing us about posting, this analysis tells us more about viewing. I do not choose these tools because I am specifically interested in commercial data or because the different types of data they provide are subtle or detailed: rather, I use them because, owing to the commercial nature (potential costumers) of the algorithms, they can tell me about the essence of impact (reach→consumption) on a macro level. The fact that the volume of Palestine-related content is indicated with a ‘B’ (billions), whereas Israel content is indicated with an ‘M’ (millions) (depicted in [Figure 4](#)) says a lot. Today’s pro-Palestine content is not prepared in a calculated manner in order to make it more palatable for Western audiences. [Figure 5](#) confirms that a large proportion of social media users – the so-called GenZ youth – have a sixth sense

Table 3. Comparison of the number of TikTok videos and TikTok views for the hashtags #FromTheRiverToTheSea and #BringThemHome.

Month	Hashtag	TikTok videos	TikTok views
November 2023	#FromTheRiverToTheSea	25.5K	56.4M
November 2023	#BringThemHome	12.9K	71.9M
February 2024	#FromTheRiverToTheSea	0.471K	1.6M
February 2024	#BringThemHome	2.6K	19.7M
September 2024	#FromTheRiverToTheSea	0.411K	2.5M
September 2024	#BringThemHome	2.1K	23.3M
April 2025	#FromTheRiverToTheSea	1.3K	4.5M
April 2025	#BringThemHome	1.8K	20.3M

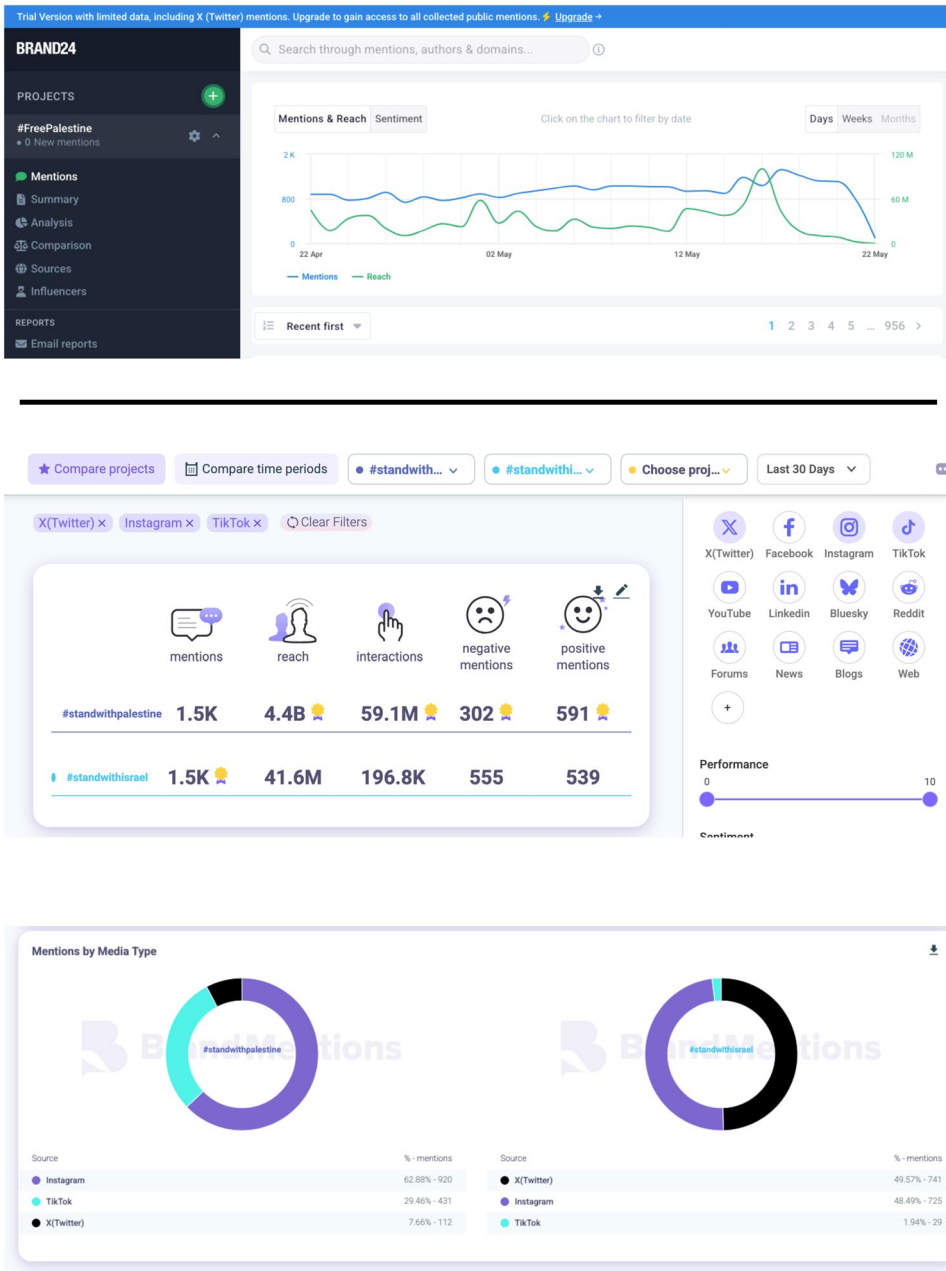


Figure 4. Brand24 and BrandMentions denoting #FreePalestine and #StandwithPalestine.

regarding fakery. Nor are they – a generation of teenagers – likely to abandon their stance or commitment.²¹

Analysing these datasets shows that their organic links with digital media *re-sensitise* Palestine, and that they do so through the formation of shared opinions. Constructing a kinship with like-minded others can nurture political subjectivity. When activism achieves a broader acceptability, it is a cause of concern for Hasbara, not only because it makes it

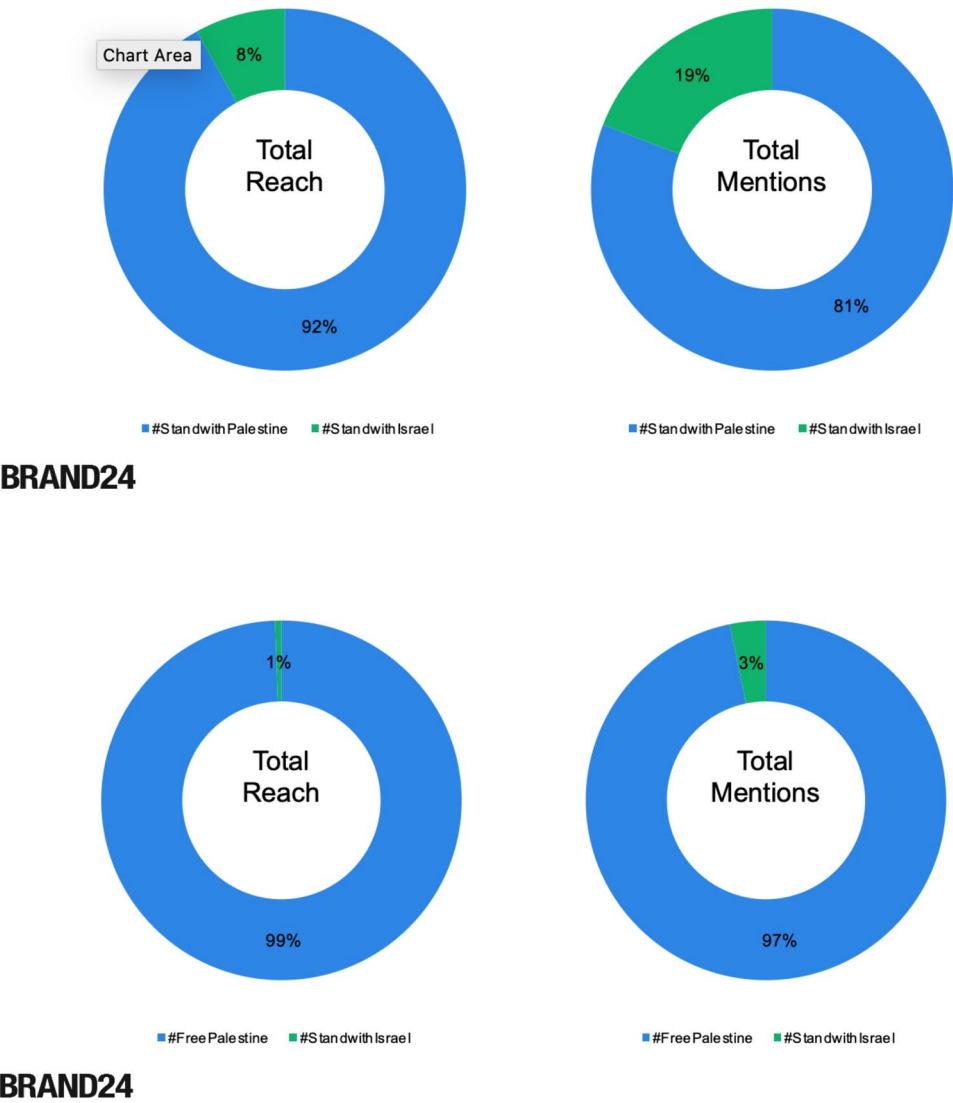


Figure 5. Brand24 total reach #StandwithIsrael vs #FreePalestine and #StandwithPalestine.

more difficult to render pro-Palestinian activism a taboo in the present moment, but also because it is very difficult to know how this engagement will develop in the future, when the younger generation become parents, professionals, teachers and civil servants. Pro-Palestinian teenagers (many of whom are Jewish) have become attuned to the algorithmic logic of popular digital platforms because it is strongly shaped by *their* performative activity. The fact that many of these users (especially on TikTok) are coming of age now suggests that attempts to influence them later on will not be very successful. How will the repercussions (for standing against injustice) affect people who are witnesses to a live genocide?

The IOF (alongside numerous Israeli ministries that engage in Hasbara) also engages on social media. But as this engagement serves both domestic and international audiences, its messaging is mixed. As mentioned above, Hasbara is faced with the need to showcase Israeli

military successes for its own *internal* audience, including through engaging in racist supremacy. At the same time, the publicness of settler colonialism puts Israel increasingly at odds with the global community.

Moving on from the descriptive analysis of online data, there are several conceptual propositions we can draw out from these observations. On the one hand, the negative features of digital platforms (bias, shadow-banning, censorship, moderation) are hostile to pro-Palestine voices. On the other hand, their technical affordances (retweets and asynchronous) support political reproduction and operational amplification. Hashtags support the construction of community symbols, turning this bonding into a social glue. This was seen in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, and has been evident in the experiences of marginalised Twitter communities (Lockett 2021; McLeod 2025). While this kind of activist engagement does require some digital skills, these accessible tools, which can be easily mastered by non-experts, combined with devices that support oral communication through automated options for screenshots, selfies, and vlogger options on mobile (hand) devices, all make it possible to construct vernacular narratives. Edited sound collages played over lip-syncing performances or make-up tutorials can inspire and create ripple effects in the elaboration of Palestine solidarity in the short term (though it is important to remember that the increase in the spread of emotional expressions also increases risks, such as those related to deeper surveillance). Taken together, the uncomplicated digital tools can be leveraged for political aims, and they determine the pace and content of the online dynamic.

Of course, digitally connected and politically conscientious youth did not *suddenly* emerge as agents of change. For those who speak out against Israel, crackdowns on their activities are transformative. Digitally connected youth are all too aware of the 'real' world: its kinetic violence is there for all to see. In other words, even mundane content denotes a sense of commitment – including a commitment to the notion that bearing witness is a duty and that people should not turn away from the reality in Gaza, however disturbing. Horror is in abundance because the logic of elimination is not vague: it is the literal experience of Palestinians and is Israel's stated policy in Gaza. Such massive pressures impose mental burdens. Seen before with the so-called 'diaspora wars' on Black Twitter/X, sometimes the frustrations and political tensions grow inwards.²²

On the other hand, something as outside the ordinary as genocide unifies and transcends differences. The context since October 7 has *lowered the bar* for moral, ethical and political affinity with the Palestinian cause. Here, it helps to recall what we saw with regard to the increase in the impact of *pro-Israel* hashtags. It may seem to researchers that the different quantities represent *both sides of the conflict*. However, looking closer at the *StandwithPalestine* and *FromTheRiverToTheSea* hashtags, we see that they initially attracted significantly a higher number of views before eventually #StandwithIsrael surged in September 2024. If we only follow the meta data, we would conclude that there was a shift in political alliances. Not only is this an incorrect discursive supposition, but empirically speaking such quantitative indicators are debatable markers. In fact, what happened is that conditions changed in regard to making explicit references to Palestine: doing so led to people being banned from platforms or risking their careers. For example, the social media profiles of students making college applications were investigated. In particular, evidence of pro-Palestinian engagement (whether through individuals' own postings or sharing posts by others) was – and remains – suspect. This became far worse and even a cause for the rejection of student applications.²³ Put differently, *qualitative* analysis based on the *quantitative* data leads me to interpret the

decline of pro-Palestine representations as being related to activist crackdowns and academic censorship.

Leaving aside the sensitivities related to expressing solidarity/affinity for a moment, what also matters is the difference between online Hasbara and Palestine activism in terms of how generative the political involvement is. We can see that whereas #StandwithIsrael is a Hasbara tool that is mainly used in reaction to military events, #FreePalestine is an anticolonial statement reflecting a century of struggle for liberation. This slogan often corresponds with grassroots initiatives and operates through globally connected campaigns. This creates an organic link between movement-building and digital engagement. And here is an interesting difference between the situation now and the one I explored in my previous research covering the period 2009–2014. There is now a different international dynamic because in the intervening period, we have had the global Black Lives Matter movement and the 2021 major Palestine protest waves discussed earlier.

Israeli Hasbara efforts often carry racist or violent undertones, and so are incapable of adapting organically to the natural culture of a platform like TikTok. Israeli wishful thinking cannot escape from this.²⁴ The expression ‘no one is free until we are all free’ reflects the fact that the struggle for anticolonial justice is at its core motivated by an ethics of solidarity. Anticolonial morality does not have a particular religious, ethnic or cultural condition: it is understood as a universal vision, in terms of both scale and principle. Hasbara’s moral outrage or guilt-tripping is overshadowed by support for boycott and divestment. The above observation regarding the language of pro-Palestinian social media that expresses freedom makes more sense now. The #StandwithPalestine hashtag has been viewed billions of times, 10 times more than #StandwithIsrael, because it indicates a principled attachment

This does not mean there are no problems, as the decline in numbers showed. In fact, in terms of its reach and dominance, corporate internet has reached a limit in the past few years. The political repressions also affect digital activism. And yet, Hasbara fails to convince younger people precisely because it is propaganda in the service of colonial domination.

Digital power can act like a *fata morgana*, tricking the viewer with an optical illusion. This tells us why enforcing settler colonialism in the twenty-first century relies on delusional expectations. As mentioned above, numerous opinion polls confirm that there has been a significant increase in support for Palestine among younger demographic groups. Quinnipac, Harvard Harris and Pew polls all illustrate clearly that younger people are more likely than older people to have an unfavourable view of Israel. Particularly in high-income countries, the age gaps in regard to positive/negative views of Israel are shifting very clearly. A key conclusion is that online analyses must be read through the prism of international solidarity around Palestine. Like the rapper Macklemore says, in his hit track ‘Hind’s Hall’, ‘you can take us out the algorithm/but it’s too late’.

Conclusion

Social media has undoubtedly redefined conventional public diplomacy including Hasbara. In general terms, there is a widespread belief that digital infrastructures are producing tectonic shifts in the basic foundations of social life. Not only do the repertoires of GenZ bleed into the mainstream public sphere, but also they affect the offline political arena. Clearly, in spite of itself, a platform like X enables the global sharing of experiences of some of the most traumatic events in contemporary history, while a space like TikTok allows people to

negotiate truth telling and tactical silence in the service of the Palestine solidarity movement. The initial objective of this article was to look back at the impact of Hasbara without exercising academic reflexivity as an academic end *in itself* and for the sake only of my own scholarship. Owing to its paradoxical position as both a diplomatic vehicle and a domestic propaganda tool, Hasbara involves noticeable ambiguities on a conceptual level. It is a form of wishful thinking that rarely comes to fruition because its ambitions are so difficult to achieve. The apocalyptic conditions that Hasbara attempts to cover up via diplomacy opposes simplistic answers. Hasbara answers the wrong question because public diplomacy cannot be implemented successfully alongside mass killings. It has become clear that Hasbara cannot reproduce itself successfully, let alone transition to a point where it can exonerate itself. Like old wine in a broken bottle, Hasbara has collapsed even further in its efforts to limit the fall-out from Israel's genocide.

Through mediatised social worlds that from a distance look random or light-hearted, we can detect how online behaviours reflect a sense of urgency. The wider context leads to the conflation of hyper-real fragments of the genocide and AI-generated perversity. The impunity granted to Israel, even in a context of communicative and ethical algorithmic changes, presents a major paradox. These materialities are counter-intuitive in two ways. Firstly, new forms of mourning and coping strategies are experienced collectively through digital infrastructures as support bases that are themselves complicit in the genocide. At the same time, they offer the means with which to mediate the emotional stress of witnessing a genocide: utilising hashtags makes it much easier to sustain interpersonal interactions across the world; and fusing expressions of grief with solidarity efforts helps users to navigate the risks of surveillance and intimidation. Secondly, these infrastructures are not separate from racism, harassment or colonialist content. Meanwhile, internal disagreements also exist online. This matters in specific ways for communication that takes place on online platforms. Social media algorithms deepen conflicts because they prefer controversy. This is likely to increase tensions relating to political strategies, ideological divergences, regional perspectives and class subjectivities.

Political conflicts have absorbed abundant contestations about the implications of digital technologies, and recent public debates have fused these contestations with certain narratives about AI and anxieties about the undermining of democracy. Against this background, this article has offered four contributions to this ongoing dialogue. (1) Engaging with Palestine/Israel, I have situated Hasbara within the context of imperial infrastructures and the complicit role of Big Tech (Aouragh 2016). (2) Relating to a unique paradox, my online–offline methodology, which centred on activity surrounding the ongoing genocide, allowed me to complement the quantitative analysis. (3) Revisiting previous research, I have offered a unique temporality. Focusing on specific periods in time *and* over time has enabled me to challenge the presentism that is so familiar in social media studies. (4) While online (quantitative) data analysis is useful in illustrating overall trends, on its own it cannot be considered adequate. I have investigated the consequences of this for empirical research that is heavily reliant on representative hashtags. Academic studies or media reports that adopt conceptual reductionism distort the conceptual boundaries between entertainment and resistance, the private and public, and individual and collective engagement. In response to this last point – whilst also ensuring my research is as reliable as possible in developing this article – I have experimented with a number of analytical tools to avoid possible methodological pitfalls. The article has challenged the well-known claims that digital engagement reduces agency, but it has done so without the risks that arise from empirical flattening. The practical features

of digital platforms must be thought of in relation to cultural features, including socially appropriate engagement vis-à-vis cultural norms, and thus do not exist in a vacuum.

The success of pro-Palestine solidarity mobilisation is mainly because, for the general public, Palestine today is a metonym for the (unfinished) project of dismantling colonial structures through anticolonial resistance. By contrast, Israel has become a metonym that mobilises political power, states/oppressors and powerful Big Tech. The material gains provided by technological dominance and funding schemes produce a self-deceiving illusion. This, in turn, as I have argued above, leads to political delusions. This does not mean that the achievement of decolonisation in Palestine is only a matter of time, or that Israeli military dominance is fragile. In fact, it is precisely because this crisis of Hasbara needs to be overcome ad infinitum that the price in human life is so enormous. Modern-day Hasbara thus embodies the paradox – repression and resistance – of imperialism. Collective safety and community care in this context initiate new challenges, and further research is required to investigate responsibility, accountability and liability. As long as Israel is not open to a vision of Palestinian liberation, its obsession with the proverbial splinter (Hasbara) while ignoring the beam (settler colonialism) will also remain. The cracks in the system of cultural hegemony are appearing with greater rapidity and on bigger stages than ever: in recent years, intense debates have emerged regarding Israel's inclusion in major events, from the Eurovision Song Contest to the Football World Cup and the Olympic Games.

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Notes

1. This cruel phenomenon, whereby Israel bombards civilians entering a previously bombed site to recover survivors, is well known. See <<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c80d2zrdj7vo>>.

2. See: <<https://apnews.com/article/world-press-photo-award-palestinians-gaza-acbf4fa0051bdb4196e99cb7a6366cc3>>.
3. Compared with Israelis, Palestinians pay *more* for *less* internet. Israel regularly confiscates or holds back equipment and charges Palestinian firms exorbitant import fees. See also: <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2024/07/digital-apartheid-gaza-unjust-content-moderation-request-israels-cyber-unit>.
4. Commercial platforms are under constant pressure. In the case of TikTok, an investigation found that the data did not support such claims, but as a gesture of cooperation, the platform nevertheless removed almost a million videos in the MENA region for policy violations.
5. On repression against union activists since October 2023, see: <https://apnews.com/article/microsoft-fired-workers-israel-palestinians-gaza-72de6fe1f35db9398e3b6785203c6bbf>.
6. We have to engage with it as an analytical tool and as a phenomenon within the current global order. See Chakravartty and Aouragh (2016).
7. Rendering a people sub-human – dehumanisation – is a key component that enables genocide. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fr24GcCDgyM> and <https://www.politico.eu/article/ron-prosor-israel-evoy-hamas-animals-must-be-destroyed/and> https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/israel-defense-minister-human-animals-gaza-palestine_n_6524220ae4b09f4b8d412e0a, and Naureckas (2024).
8. Self-deception includes Israeli scholarship: for instance, in *Israel Studies* and the *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*.
9. Quoted in *The Electronic Intifada*: <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ben-white/abba-ebans-comments-idiocy-hasbara-just-true-three-decades-later>.
10. Chikli launched several heavily funded initiatives since 2023, e.g. training North American Jewish day schoolteachers; developing programmes on Jewish day schools around the world to strengthen Jewish identity in line with Zionism; sending delegations of the families of the Israeli hostages in Gaza to meet politicians around the world; and financing a touring exhibition related to the Nova music festival.
11. The use of the term ‘Pallywood’ has become a part of official narratives. An exposé of an operation commissioned by the Ministry of Diaspora and operated by a private company was even elaborated in the Israeli daily *Haaretz* Hebrew edition (Haaretz 2024b).
12. See the government website: <https://www.gov.il/he/departments/units/information050821>; and the X account: <https://x.com/nationalhasbara>. Influencer accounts like Ella Travels (initiator of Bright Mind) are much more effective than government accounts. I do not have clear confirmation that this is a Hasbara-recruited influencer, but they would not be the first. Owing to the often cruel and strong outspoken support for the military actions of Israel, there has been much critique of this account, and there is a parody account called *Ella Travels to the Hague*: <https://x.com/smolan9>.
13. Similar debates took place after the literal crackdown (Operation Break Their Bones) of the mass civil uprising of the First Intifada, the Qana (Lebanon) bombing of 1996, *Operation Defensive Shield* in 2001–2002, when Israel instituted a violent military campaign in the West Bank, and the Second Intifada (2000–2004).
14. See https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/186/186-20240719-adv-01-00-en.pdf?__cf_chl_tk=YnHFglzDJiYHYVGsS6SXQ.RhVB6eQRFnDXztHmvMvt8-1732209742-1.0.1.1-8NcRjHWy09xp4yTKYG1YtMluzMurwvqqcwHPkFpXdo.
15. It is likely that this is also caused by internal tensions that confront editorial teams who cope with the distress arising from the ethical dilemmas they face.
16. AI-based propaganda tools have received funding from the Diaspora Ministry (Haaretz 2025).
17. This calls for decolonial attention in the many discursive and visual research approaches and in the focus on epistemic violence. Communication blackouts in Kashmir, Syria, Myanmar, Sudan, Congo and Palestine in recent years remind us that where counter-narratives are disseminated, they will be silenced. The destruction of their communication infrastructure and censorship of their platforms become a priority.
18. It is outside the scope of this article to discuss this important context, but it is discussed extensively elsewhere (Aouragh 2008, 2011b).

19. Although outside the scope of this article, it is important to point out that the bravado is negated by their mocking of life in Gaza under an international blockade, destroying children's toys, defecating in living rooms, wearing women's underwear, cheering while they kill children, etc. By the same logic, the digital videos produced during the October 7 Tufan al Aqsa operation of Israeli soldiers in the best military gear and protective outfits hiding and running away have been comforting to Palestinians and detrimental to Israelis. Owing to the risk of international warrants and because a 'Goliath versus David' frame damages Israeli social media PR, the IOF – supported by Israeli media – often hides the faces of soldiers.
20. All figures and tables in this article are by the author.
21. See <https://phscharge.com/3908/uncategorized/passing-on-the-torch-teens-worldwide-take-a-stand-for-palestine/>.
22. Although all referred to as Black Twitter, the USA, Africa and Caribbean have repeatedly been in tension (Musgrave et al. 2025; Walcott 2021).
23. See, for example, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/06/foreign-student-visas-pro-palestinian-ai>, as well as <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jun/06/michigan-university-gaza-surveillance>.
24. See <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/why-so-many-teenagers-support-palestine/>.

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