

Visual Framing of Israel and Palestine on the Covers of Time Magazine

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ABSTRACT

Since its unofficial inception, Israel has persistently sought to legitimise its existence while obscuring the ethnic cleansing associated with its de facto establishment in 1948. This effort includes the consistent erasure of Palestine's history from global consciousness, intertwining historical revisionism with political narratives to reshape public perception. Contextualised within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a protracted and contentious dispute in modern history, this study explores the visual framing of the social agencies, Israel and Palestine, in the covers of TIME magazine from the year 2000 - 2025. As visual framing has been described as a method of shaping social realities by influencing readers through various interpretations of events and occurrences, this study investigates how magazine covers are used to produce meaning and social representations by contemporary image-makers and how these 'meanings' connect to the historical events. This paper utilises Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) interactional metafunction framework and van Dijk's (1998) notion of ideological square as analytical and conceptual frameworks. The findings reveal a disparity in the representation of the two parties by TIME magazine; however, there is a balanced ideological positioning as TIME can be seen "humanising" both parties and rejecting polarised political leanings. Ultimately, this paper may serve as a call for emancipatory movements against war crimes, as suggested by the covers of TIME magazine.

INTRODUCTION

The inception of this study stems from the socio-political conflict and historical events that surround the discourse related to the Israel-Palestine war. Following the Gaza Strip in 2023, Israel's immense political and military power and their western reinforcements as well as the uprising of unverified atrocity propagandas has been the modus operandi of Israel to launch misinformation to incite fear and fury among their people and the world (Matthews, 2011). Consequently, news media and magazines worldwide have increasingly focused on the coverage of the Palestinian genocide and Israel's colonial ideologies over the past two years. However, recent research on this conflict has predominantly concentrated on textual analysis (Bhowmik & Fisher, 2023; Qawariq, 2016; Wang, 2017) and visual elements (Adawiyah, Junining & Tabiati, 2020; Manor & Crilley, 2018; Yarchi & Ayalon, 2023) within newspapers and social media, aiming to uncover the ideologies promoted by these outlets. This focus originates from the understanding that articles in influential mainstream news media utilise textual framing as a method to construct social realities, persuading readers through varying interpretations of events (Vliegthart, Boomgaarden & Boumans, 2011).

Nonetheless, despite the decline in the distribution of printed magazines, previous studies have largely overlooked their role as a significant medium for disseminating global news and affairs, particularly in terms of visual discourse. McQuail (2005) has emphasised that due to "their diffuseness and uncertain impact", magazines have not received much attention in communication research (p. 31). This leaves room for further exploration on the perspective on salient social and world issues and how they are framed in news magazines, along with the diverse factors that shape the news coverage and media portrayals. While there is a significant body of literature on this topic, the ongoing and persistent nature of the Israel-Palestine conflict makes it a crucial issue to continue exploring. Notably, the role of magazine covers in disseminating news about this conflict has been under-researched, often overshadowed by other media forms. Time magazine, as one of the most influential global news outlets, has consistently addressed the conflict through its iconic covers, which

act as powerful visual narratives. These covers frequently feature real-life photographs depicting the suffering and displacement of Palestinians, as well as symbols of Semitism. According to Abu Hatoum (2017) in regards to photojournalism, photographs are not just representational; they are political acts that inscribe and archive events. Moreover, deconstructing and reconstructing the narratives within a photograph requires a thorough examination of both the image and the context in which it is framed. This aligns with Kress & Hodge's (1979) view that visual discourse cannot be separated from the social meanings and underlying ideologies it conveys.

With the outset of looking into the Israel-Palestine sociopolitical issue, coupled with the perception of Time as a relatively progressive media outlet that supports journalistic advocacy using visual images and reported texts, this study examines how Time magazine constructs the ideological bias in depicting Palestine and Israel regarding the latest conflicts from the year 2000 to 2024. This period is particularly significant due to the major events that have shaped the conflict and the evolution of media practices. Hence, this paper addresses the empirical gap by critically analysing how these covers have visually represented Israel and Palestine, and what their representations reveal about the polarisation of ideological biases, in-group and out-group dynamics, and the magazine's influence on global public opinion regarding the conflict.

Israel-Palestine Conflict From The Year 2000 To 2025

From the end of the nineteenth century until now, the Israel-Palestine conflict has dominated socio-political discourse. The conflict witnessed significant escalations during the early 21st century, starting with the Second Intifada in 2000. The term "intifada," which is Arabic for "tremor," was used in this context to describe a large-scale uprising triggered by Ariel Sharon entering the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem. This specific incident signalled the start of a protracted period of conflict that claimed hundreds of lives and widened the rift between Israelis and Palestinians (Pappe, 2007). In 2002, the conflict escalated dramatically with the Passover Massacre, a suicide bombing at a hotel in Netanya that killed 30 Israeli civilians, prompting the launch of Operation Defensive Shield by Israel. Moving on, the situation worsened in 2006 when Hamas gained control by winning the Palestinian legislative elections, leading to a split in Palestinian leadership and heightening tensions with Israel. This period of unrest further intensified with Israel's military operations in the Gaza Strip from 2008 – 2010, which caused several fatalities and extensive damage, and intensified the phase of warfare between Israel and Palestine (Khalidi, 2020).

Over the years, the conflict continued to escalate, characterised by multiple military operations and crises. In 2014, Israel initiated Operation Protective Edge in response to rockets fired from Gaza, leading to a 50-day war that inflicted widespread devastation in Gaza and resulted in over 2,000 Palestinian martyrs and 10,000 fatalities from both parties (Anti-Defamation League, 2016). The situation remained unstable, culminating in the Israel-Hamas Crisis in 2021, which involved 11 days of intense fighting, causing hundreds of deaths and further complicating the already tenuous peace process. Most recently, the Gaza Strip Genocide of 2023 marked another devastating chapter in this ongoing conflict, with severe humanitarian impacts and renewed international demands for a resolution. The Human Rights Council (2024) has reported that as of April 30, 2024, the number of injured was estimated at 77, 908, with detailed data available for 53,019 individuals, including 12,332 children and 13,996 women, with thousands of people remaining missing, many likely trapped and deceased under the rubble.

Due to the ever-growing numbers, on January 15, 2025, the United States, Egypt, and Qatar facilitated a negotiated ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, aiming to conclude fifteen months of hostilities in Gaza. According to the Gaza and West Bank Interim Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment in February 2025, it is estimated that Israel's military campaign in Gaza resulted in \$49 billion in damages between October 8, 2023, and October 8, 2024. These events highlight the relentless cycle of violence and the complex dynamics of the Israel-Palestine conflict, which continue to influence regional and global politics.

Magazine Covers As Visual Artefacts

Magazine covers still remain substantial and improve through time with the aid of technology and marketing strategies, providing a positive impact to readers (Held, 2005). McLoughlin (2000) and Tseronis (2015), quoted British Glossy magazine's editor, "Magazine covers and cover lines are persuasive selling tools that

arouse readers to purchase our magazines.” This notion is consistent with Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1998) idea of visual framing, where the choices made for the covers, comprising the image, content, layout, verbal and visual style, are understood to have rhetorical means which play a vital role in promoting magazines as a whole. It is interesting to note that Kress and van Leeuwen’s idea was an augmentation of Stuart Hall’s cultural theory (1997), in which he states “culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings” (p. 2); hence, magazine covers serve as a visual artifact communication that reflect the worldview of the represented issue while simultaneously influencing how society interprets reality (Kress, 2003). Moreover, images contribute to the reinforcement of hegemonic ideologies that serve the interests of those in positions of power (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001).

For example, TIME magazine, a well-known weekly news magazine created in 1923 by Briton Hadden and Henry Luce in the United States, served as a valuable resource for semiotic and multimodal researchers. Scholars have analysed its cover images to explore ideological encoding and representation (Cantrell-Rosas-Moreno, Harp & Bachmann, 2013; Norwood & Turner, 2013; Phillips, 2024). Ever since the magazine company first started, it has had a unique fondness towards its coverage of sociopolitical issues, especially war crimes (Steuter, 1990). Throughout its 7-7-decade-long history, TIME has featured prominent newsmakers on its cover pages, and it unceasingly affects people who do not read the article – pedestrians, shoppers and people who happen to seize a glimpse of the magazine (Popp & Mendelson, 2010).

However, as the media landscape evolves with the shift to a continuous news cycle and digital distribution, the relevance of weekly news magazines comes into question. Nonetheless, TIME currently maintains a subscriber base of 1.3 million for its print edition and 250,000 for its digital version, making it one of the leading publications that continues to retain a significant readership despite the industry's digital transformation. The covers strive to strike a balance between addressing their regular readers and appealing to new readers as well, in order to remain both recognisable and innovative (Bateman et. al., 2007). This indicates that audiences interact with visual texts in diverse ways, whether by accepting them, dismissing them, or critically evaluating their meaning and implications (Kachorsky, Reid & Chapman, 2020). While Hall (1997) believes that readers passively accept the intended message conveyed in the covers by the visual artefact’s creator, Janks (2010) and Serafini (2012) argue that readers have the agency to challenge the underlying interpretation. This encourages further research into the various methods of representation and image portrayal on magazine covers, even across different genres such as sports (Wasike, 2020; Webb et al., 2017), health (Bazzini, Pepper, Swofford & Cochran, 2015) and news (Chavez, 2023; Rizvi & Borad, 2016).

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (Mcda) And Visual Framing Ideology

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) broadens the scope of traditional Discourse and Critical Discourse Analysis by incorporating not just textual language, but also other forms of communications, such as modes, images, signs and colours, which work together to convey meaning (Ledin and Machin, 2017). While conventional analyses focus on the relationship between text and context, MCDA examines how power, ideology, hegemony and identities are expressed through various semiotic resources (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). According to Jewitt (2009), utilising multiple semiotic modes enhances the communication of intended meanings within specific social groups, as these meanings are usually contextually driven and deliberate.

Similarly, Hertog and McLeod (2001) argue that the power of frames lies in their symbolic significance, often drawing on familiar myths and metaphors that resonate within a culture and evoke related ideas. Images are particularly effective as framing devices because they are less intrusive and require less cognitive effort than text, which makes audiences more likely to accept visual frames without question. Visual frames often take precedence over textual ones, partly because images are perceived as more realistic and evoke strong emotional reactions, making them memorable and impactful in shaping perceptions (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011).

This leads to the extension of MCDA into visual framing ideology, which posits that the arrangement and presentation of visual elements are powerful tools for shaping public perception and reinforcing specific ideological viewpoints. Therefore, this study employs the MCDA approach to analyze both textual and visual elements in the covers of *Time* magazine that portray Israel and Palestine, utilizing van Dijk’s (1998)

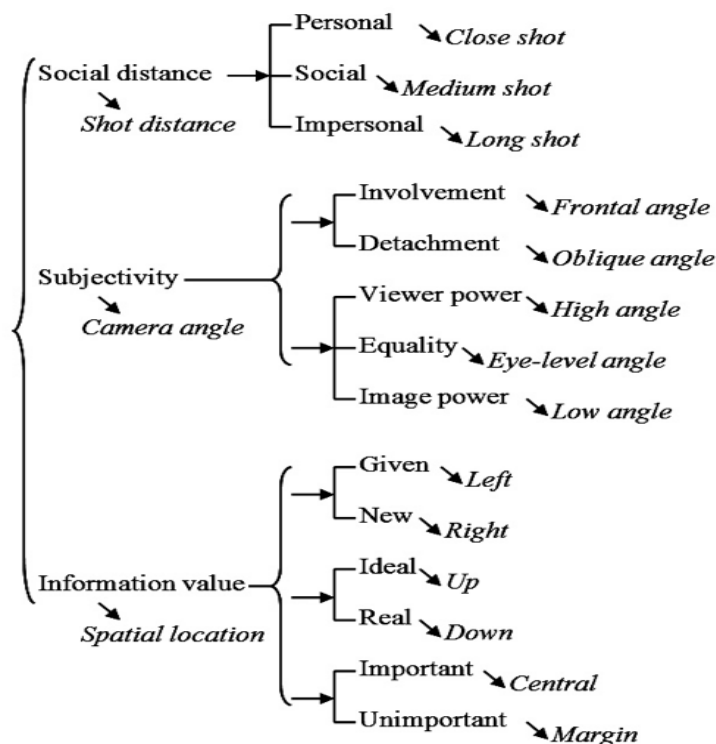
conceptual framework alongside Kress and van Leeuwen's Interactional Metafunction framework (2016) as an analytical tool. By linking MCDA with visual framing, this study aims to uncover how images and other visual resources are deliberately crafted to communicate and perpetuate ideologies within specific social contexts.

METHODOLOGY

As mentioned in the research background, this paper studies the depiction of Palestine and Israel on the cover of *Time* magazines; hence, a qualitative multimodality critical discourse analysis is used to go about this paper, with the aid of a multimodal framework by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) that interprets social actors' representations as well as van Dijk's notion of ideological square (1998) to show the social construction of the communicative events portrayed on the covers.

This study focuses on all covers (10 in total, refer to the appendix) featuring Israel and Palestine from *Time* magazine from 2000 until 2025. The covers are retrieved from *Time* magazine's official content website in the archives - <http://time.com/>. The justification for the chosen years is that the years 2000 to 2025 are crucial for studying the Israel-Palestine conflict because they include major events like the Second Intifada and Gaza Wars, which significantly influenced global perceptions and media coverage. During this period, media reporting evolved, especially with the rise of digital journalism, affecting how conflicts were visually represented. The post 9/11 focus on terrorism also played a role in shaping portrayals of Israel and Palestine. Extending the study to 2025 allows for a complete analysis of how *Time* magazine has depicted the conflict in response to ongoing events and recent global shifts.

To answer the first research question, "How are the agencies (Israel and Palestine) represented in *Time* magazine from the year 2000 – 2025 according to the historical events that occurred during the time frame?", this study uses Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Interactional Metafunctional framework as an approach to examine and analyse visual elements such as images as independent modes of communication. It is fairly useful to describe and identify the hidden meanings within images and to relate them to the social issues and phenomena that surround the features and settings of the image (Babaii, Atai & Kafshgarsouteh, 2016).

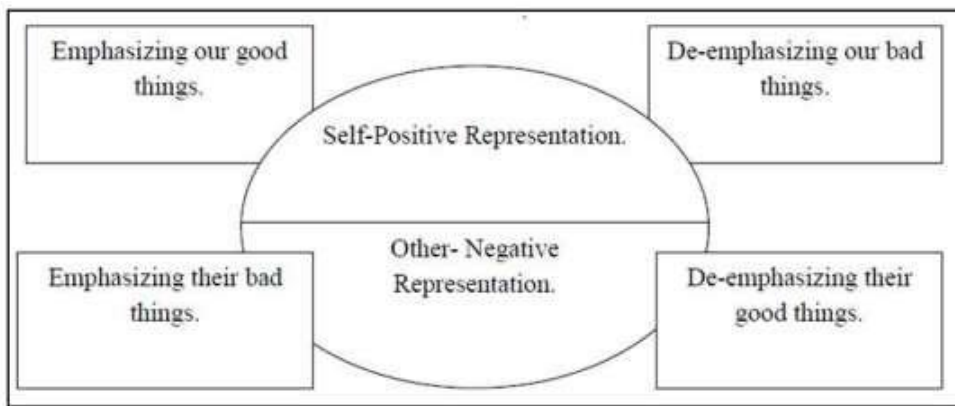


(Figure 1: Kress and van Leeuwen's Interactional Metafunctional Framework, 2006)

Unsworth (2008) claimed that "narrative processes represent the social actors as being involved in doing something either to or for each other. The focus of these processes is on the social actors' transactions and

reactions”. Furthermore, answering the first research question emphasises deciphering the representation of Israel and Palestine and relates it back to the historical events that contribute to the usage of the particular image in the magazine.

As for the second research question, “What do the representations suggest about the polarisation between in-group and out-group in the underlying ideological implications of *Time* magazine?”, the researcher uses the findings from the first research question and further investigates how the exclusion and inclusion of social actors (Israel and Palestine) could be polarised into in-groups and out-groups via the conceptual framework ‘notion of ideological square’ by van Dijk (1998). The overall strategy for this analysis is broken down into four aspects, which are:



(Figure 2: van Dijk’s Ideological Square, 1998)

The Reoccupation Of The West Bank Cities And The First Gaza War



Figures 3 and 4: (A - Left) *TIME Magazine* (2002, August 19). (B - Right) *TIME Magazine* (2009, January 9). Taken from *TIME Vault*, <https://time.com/vault/>. Copyright 2026 by TIME USA, LLC.

After the Passover Massacre on 27 March 2002, where a Palestinian resistance attack killed nineteen people during a Passover celebration at a hotel in Netanya, the Israeli military responded by reoccupying parts of the West Bank (CNN, 2002). In addition, Israel started building a barrier, citing it was for security reasons. The barrier, known as the “West Bank Separation Wall”, was meant to separate Palestinian communities in the occupied West Bank from East Jerusalem, and Israeli settlements built on Palestinian land in violation of international law (IMEU, 2024).

This event is reflected in the August 2002 issue, where the representation of the woman in the image is strong and powerful. She is depicted in a long shot, which creates an impersonal mode of address, suggesting emotional distance or unfamiliarity. The use of long shot positions her far from the viewer, fostering a sense of detachment, as though the viewer is merely observing rather than directly engaging with her as a social actor. However, this framing may also serve a compositional purpose. The woman is positioned smaller in the frame,

which highlights the background more. This change in visual focus encourages viewers to think about the woman's emotional expression as well as the larger backdrop of Palestine's devastation. Interestingly, the woman is shown performing an action, both arms extended in a desperation pose that resembles a praying position. By representing the lived experience of those living through the destruction in Palestine, this gives the picture a narrative dimension and gives it more human depth and emotional impact. To further underscore, the woman's position between two destroyed buildings may symbolise Israel's efforts to exclude Palestinians from Jerusalem through the construction of the West Bank Separation Wall.

Additionally, the woman is portrayed at an oblique angle, indicating that she is slightly turned away from the audience. By presenting the viewers as observers rather than participants in the situation, this visual orientation reinforces the absence of direct engagement. Nonetheless, the eye-level camera perspective suggests a neutral power dynamic in which neither party is in control of the other, establishing a sense of equality between the woman and the viewer. Viewers' interpretation of the image can be shaped by the subtle representation with ideological overtones produced by the juxtaposition of the eye-level framing and the oblique angle. This combination works especially well in journalistic images, when the objective is to inform and offer a version of reality without resorting to overt emotional manipulation, as Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) contend. In this instance, the woman maintains autonomy, and the viewer is encouraged to observe from a respectful distance while remaining in a reflective position.

In terms of information value, the woman is centrally positioned, establishing her as the focal point and the core of the image's message. Her importance, tenacity, and persistent existence in the midst of the surrounding destruction are highlighted by her prominent positioning. The ruined buildings in the margins serve as contextual elements, situating her within the broader scene of destruction and potentially eliciting empathy from viewers. Visually, the image asserts that her presence carries more emotional weight than the backdrop of war. However, the visible scale of destruction in the periphery may still dominate the frame for some viewers, potentially evoking meanings of helplessness, chaos, or even indirect blame toward those responsible for the devastation.

To construct a composite system of contextual meaning, the cover image in Figure 3 relies heavily on the salience created through both visual and textual elements. TIME magazine emphasises this by featuring the lead article title, "The Palestinians," in bold red and white contrast with a significantly larger font size than the supporting cover line, "How the bloody cycle of attack and revenge is changing every aspect of an ancient society," which appears in white. Kaliciak, Song, Wiratunga, and Pan (2013) describe this as a complementary representation, where visual feature spaces are meaningfully aligned with textual content to reinforce interpretation. In visual communication, colour functions as a semiotic resource, with its meaning shaped by social and cultural contexts. The stark contrast between red and white enhances legibility and visual impact which can draw immediate attention to the headline. Red, a highly saturated colour, is often associated with urgency, danger, and emotional intensity, making it effective for evoking strong viewer engagement. This chromatic choice amplifies the headline's emotional weight, functioning almost as a visual call to action. Additionally, the lexical choices in the supporting line, terms such as "bloody" and "revenge", carry intense negative connotations that reinforce the urgency and assertive tone of the cover's messaging.

On the other hand, as indicated on the cover of the January 2009 issue, the photograph on the cover features actual footage of the Israeli missile strike on Gaza and its survivors during the attack on 27 December 2008, which resulted in approximately 370 deaths, including an estimated 70 civilians (EBSCO, 2021). Similar to the issue in August 2002, the salient social actors are centrally placed, specifically, two individuals aiding a casualty whose face and body are covered in dust and debris. They are engaged in their immediate humanitarian duties instead of acknowledging the camera's presence. Visual language theorist, Len Unworth, characterises this lack of direct eye contact as fostering an observing rather than demanding relationship with the audience (2014). The medium-full shot of the three social actors in the centre, combined with the absence of eye contact, employs an oblique angle that positions the viewers as witnesses to the tragedy rather than active participants in a direct communication exchange. However, the size of the frame reinforces the documentary nature of the image while maintaining respect for the subjects' dignity during their moment of vulnerability.

Nonetheless, it is essential to note that the three social actors in the middle of the cover are significantly smaller than the lady in Figure 3, emphasising more on the background that displays the ongoing Gaza war. It can be said that the surrounding landscape serves as contextualising information that complements the primary narrative without overriding it. With more figures in the backdrop, the informational scope is increased without overpowering the main message, resulting in what composition theory refers to as a hierarchical information structure (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). This can be seen in Figure 3, where the surrounding destruction (thick smoke, extensive rubble, the destroyed vehicle, and the sparse remaining vegetation) functions as more than mere background. These elements serve as visual testimony to the scale of the Israeli airstrikes across Gaza.

Besides that, the January 2009 cover image's intense monochromatic colour scheme emphasises melancholy and sadness, strengthening the image's emotional impact. The image's predominantly grey and sepia tones are a result of both the photographic processing and the environmental elements, particularly the dust, smoke, and debris that literally pervade the landscape. The monochrome look, which also invokes cultural connections with past battle photographs, adds to the documentary's authenticity. In keeping with Western cultural norms that associate desaturated images with tragedy, severity, and historical significance, the absence of vibrant colours highlights how severe the incident is (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020).

This melancholy tone is underlined by TIME magazine's inclusion of the striking headline "Again" in Figure 4, together with the accompanying image, which displays intersemiotic complementarity. This is because the term "Again" has cyclical and temporal connotations that make the Israeli airstrike in December 2008 a metaphor for recurrent violence. In contrast to the photographic image's immediate, stressful realism, the subheading "What will the new U.S. Administration do?" adds a forward-looking political intervention. This combination of text and visual shifts the focus of accountability from the direct perpetrators of violence to the United States as the main actor responsible for and able to resolve the situation. It is interesting to note that while the literary components offer the political framework for comprehending guilt from the United States, TIME's implied condemnation of US policies can be emotionally justified by the horrific visuals portrayed in the image.

Israel's Siege Of Gaza



Figures 5 and 6: (A - Left) *TIME Magazine* (2009, August 19). (B - Right) *TIME Magazine* (2010, September 13). Taken from *TIME Vault*, <https://time.com/vault/>. Copyright 2026 by TIME USA, LLC.

Firstly, it is important to note that there is a clear distinction between Figures 5 and 6, where Israel is mostly represented through symbolic images, especially the Star of David, and Section 3.1, where TIME Magazine used photojournalism on its covers depicting Palestine in Figures 3 and 4. These covers lack human forms and direct look, in contrast to covers that depict Palestinian suffering. Instead of being placed in relation to specific

performers, the audience is presented with impersonal symbols. As a result, a symbol that invites reflection and critical distance instead of emotional identification is produced, which Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) refer to as an “offer”. Moreover, a detached, analytical way of engagement is reinforced by the composition’s flat, schematic layout and absence of perspective, which keeps the viewer at a distance. As there are no narrative action or emotional indicators, viewers are encouraged to decipher the symbols’ meaning on their own rather than feel sympathy for the people they see.

In the January 2009 issue, *TIME* magazine employs a potent combination of symbols, the Star of David, barbed wire, a concrete wall, and a thought-provoking “Why” question, instead of human figures or images of suffering. Positioned in the centre, the Star of David is a prominent symbol that serves as a metonym for Israel and, more generally, Jewish identity. Individual agency is taken away by its geometric, abstract design, which portrays Israel as a collective and symbolic entity. Furthermore, the symbol serves as the main object of the viewer’s attention, which takes up the compositional centre. To further intensify the meaning behind the symbol, the cover is spatially divided by the sharp contrast created by a barbed wire strand that cuts horizontally across the Star of David. This component heightens the composition’s overall sense of tension while also reinforcing notions of conflict and imprisonment. In addition to referencing the actual physical boundaries in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the wall at the bottom of the cover represents separation, division, and the difficulties of balancing freedom and security. Its bleak, impenetrable appearance serves to further emphasise notions of alienation and exclusion of the other agency, which would be Palestine. It is crucial to note that in terms of information value, the “real” or material is represented by elements at the bottom of an image, whereas the “ideal” or abstract conceptions are typically represented by elements at the top. In Figure 5, the wall might anchor the image in the tangible realities of borders and conflict, while the Star of David and barbed wires dominate the upper and central areas, which could represent the abstract problems of identification and security.

Similarly, in Figure 6, the “nucleus of meaning” is the Star of David, which is composed of daisies and occupies the compositional centre according to Kress and van Leeuwen’s compositional structure (2020). A deep-seated semiotic tension is created by the arrangement of white daisy petals in the shape of the Star of David, which both challenges and reinforces notions of innocence in the Israel-Palestine conflict. White daisies are usually associated with “innocence and peace”, which specialists in floral symbolism define as “simplicity and vulnerability” (Hansen, 2024). However, when used as national emblems in a conflict situation, the symbolic purity of the white daisies creates a fundamental tension, as these ideals are embedded within contexts of political disagreement, military conflict, and territorial struggle. Hence, the configuration of these symbols of purity into the increasingly militarised and politicised Star of David creates intersemiotic conflict.

Additionally, the blue background serves as “environmental context” and offers colour symbolism that supports the composition’s meaning. In Western visual culture, blue is typically associated with calm and serenity (Alhuthali, 2024); therefore, the strong headline casting doubt on Israel’s commitment to peace creates an instant visual contrast. The headline “Why Israel Doesn’t Care About Peace” poses a presuppositional question that implies the embedded assertion is true. That is because rather than asking whether Israel’s alleged lack of interest in peace is real, the relative pronoun “why” approach frames viewers as detectives trying to comprehend this situation. When the headline asks for an explanation for presumed behaviour as opposed to providing impartial information, it demands textual positioning, where the structure of the question suggests that Israel’s disregard for peace is a fact that must be explained. Hence, the interplay between texts and images acts as a form of intersemiotic complementarity, where both construct meanings that neither could produce on its own.

In short, both Figures 5 and 6 highlight the negative effects of the Gaza siege, not just for Palestinians but also for Israel’s own security, identity, and reputation abroad by using strong imagery and thought-provoking headlines. These covers, in contrast to previous ones that explicitly depicted Palestinian suffering, abstract the conflict through national and cultural symbols, directing attention to the siege’s wider ramifications and ethical dilemmas. Together, the covers question the siege’s efficacy and morality, emphasising the cyclical nature of violence and the erosion of prospects for peace.

The Gaza War, The Second Nakba



Figures 7 and 8: (A - Left) *TIME Magazine* (2023, October 23). (B - Right) *TIME Magazine* (2023, November 20). Taken from *TIME Vault*, <https://time.com/vault/>. Copyright 2026 by TIME USA, LLC.

TIME magazine created a powerful cover to depict the second Gaza conflict in its October 23, 2023, issue. Firstly, the representational meaning of this cover is both portrayed with symbols and real imagery. The cover features streaks of light that resemble festive fireworks lighting up the sky. However, the light streaks are missile trajectories when viewed closely and in conjunction with the contextualised headlines. This visual ambiguity is a prime example of Kress and van Leeuwen’s idea of “modality”, which holds that visuals can elicit several interpretations at once based on the cultural background and knowledge of the viewers.

The intentional oxymoron of opposing celebration and violence, peace and disorder, and celebration and war are the conversion of joyous fireworks into destructive instruments. Additionally, the dusk setting illuminates the sky with orange and red hues, colouring the struggle in dramatic and sombre tones. This semiotic resource of red and orange colours may signify fury, intensity, as well as danger. At the same time, dusk as a milieu denotes liminality, where it shows the transition between day and night, calm and conflict. By evoking both the beauty and horror of the ‘war’, the use of colour and light elicits the emotional severity of the situation. Moreover, beneath the missile-lit sky, the cityscape seems calm, almost peaceful in its stillness. The contrast between vibrant urban infrastructure and a lack of human presence introduces an unsettling tranquillity, amplifying the dissonance between quotidian existence and sudden warfare. This is further accentuated by the caption in capitalisation and quoted — ‘WE ARE AT WAR’. It is unclear whether the pronoun “we” refers to Palestinians, Israelis, Americans, or perhaps a worldwide collective. The cover’s omission of specifics encourages viewers to reflect on their own roles in the conflict.

In contrast to the potential state of the city a month later that could be seen in Figure 8, devastated, disorderly, and strewn with rubble, these “before and after” images from the two covers serve as a poignant reminder of vulnerability and the rapidity with which stability can be disrupted. Consistent with the findings in 3.1, the use of photojournalism in TIME magazine’s coverage of Palestine in its October and November 2023 issues demonstrates the suffering of Palestinians in real-life situations. As shown in Figure 8, a young boy captured in a long shot is seen staring directly out of what appears to be a blasted building. Although there is an absence of eye contact between the social actor (young boy), the image demands attention and emotional engagement as the viewers are positioned as witnesses to the destruction of the city and individual suffering. TIME magazine’s choice in using photojournalism as “live footage” is essential to the symbolic construction of emotional potency, as it gives the impression that the events are portrayed realistically and establishes a direct connection between the viewers and the scene of suffering. Chouliaraki (2006) emphasises that this technique pivots on mediation as immediacy, whereby semiotic modes that are used to stage the sufferings, such as

camera angles and shots, are disregarded by the viewers as they are preoccupied with witnessing the suffering of others. Hence, it can be said that this method transforms passive observation into moral implication.

In addition, it is worth noting that the social actor who is occupying the compositional centre in the November 2023 issue is a child, which signifies vulnerability and the future generation. In this issue, the boy can be established as a universal representative of Palestinian's civilian innocence. According to research on war photography, children elicit stronger reactions than adults, which revises the focus of public discourse towards humanitarian urgency (Van Leeuwen & Jaworski, 2002; Slovic et al., 2017). This serves as the interactional metafunction of the cover, indirectly involving the viewers in a sense of duty because the child's helplessness portrayed in the cover may challenge the viewers' relative power and security. The interactional metafunction is underlined by the compositional meaning of the white box that the social actor is seen seated on, since the box visually suggests instability. The surrounding rubble and destroyed buildings provide a peripheral framing that contextualises Palestinian's narrative within the context of widespread destruction as a post-bombing aftermath. The positioning of the boy peering out of a precarious vantage point personalises the caption "The Horror of Gaza" abstractly, turning statistics into a single, relatable human body that demands awareness and outrage.

In short, this actual image of a young boy employs high visual modality, shifting from abstract representation in the findings of section 3.2 to narrative realism, in contrast to symbolic covers (e.g. the Star of David). Aligning with Kress and van Leeuwen's highlight on how realistic portrayals foster viewers' empathy and urgency, TIME's decision to use photojournalism on the cover intensifies emotional impact by making the "Horror of Gaza" tangible through lived experience rather than metaphorical.

The October 7 Attack And The New Anti-Semitism



Figures 9 and 10: (A - Left) *TIME Magazine* (2023, November 6). (B - Right) *TIME Magazine* (2024, March 11). Taken from *TIME Vault*, <https://time.com/vault/>. Copyright 2026 by TIME USA, LLC.

According to the report by The Globe and Mail (2023), Hamas launched a coordinated air, sea and land assault on Israel from the Gaza Strip on October 7, 2023. About 1,200 individuals who were mostly Israeli nationals were killed in the attack. Following the attack, Israel started a war in the Gaza Strip in an attempt to free more than 240 hostages and depose Hamas. "I Can't Erase All the Blood from My Mind": Palestinian Armed Groups' October 7 Assault on Israel" (2024), a 236-page Human Right Watch report details several dozen instances of grave breaches of international humanitarian law by Hamas where civilians were attacked on October 7, which include war crimes, hostage-takings and other serious offenses against humanity. This incident was labelled as the "worst anti-Semitic massacre" since the Holocaust.

TIME's November 6, 2023, cover (Figure 9) features a close shot an older Israeli couple seated intimately together, which Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) categorise as having personal social distance with the viewers that would create a sense of emotional connection. The gap between the viewers and subjects in the cover is

reduced by this “distance” produced by the close shot, encouraging empathy as opposed to objective observation. What makes the cover more appealing is the way the ‘wife’ or ‘mother to the victims’ is seen wrapping her arms around her husband’s arms. Edward Hall’s theory of proxemics (1966), the original schema adopted by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), explains that in a close shot, one can hold or grasp the other person. This type of camera framing humanises the couple’s pain and make their trauma personally relatable to viewers, in contrast to the sweeping images of devastation on covers representing Palestine. In addition, the intimacy is further strengthened by the two little framed pictures of the hostage teenagers on the table in front of the couple. The teens’ faces fill the frames, symbolising their lost innocence up close. The relational hierarchy constructed by the camera shots and graded distancing, with the parents at close proximity and children even ‘closer’, draw viewers into the familial devastation.

Furthermore, by placing viewers as equals in a shared emotional space rather than objective outsiders, the frontal camera angle conveys high involvement and subjectivity. Kress and van Leeuwen comment that frontal perspectives imply equal status and involvement, which is further supported in Figure 9 by the eye-level viewpoint that places the viewers as the same height as the parents who are seated. Their expressions, which include joined hands, downturned gazes and gentle embraces may evoke sympathy from the viewers, suggesting empathetic alignment. Besides that, the parents and the captive images of the teenagers, who represent the “hostage nightmare” as the main emotional core, are the central information value. The foregrounded ‘real’ space is occupied by the table and caption of the cover, which ground abstract trauma. The caption also the central ‘real’ by serving as ideal information. ‘OCT 7 MASSACRE’ anchors temporality, while ‘NIGHTMARE’ and ‘ENDURING TRAUMA’ heighten solemnity. In terms of multimodality, these capitalised texts promote the visual demand for ongoing psychological destruction.

In contrast to raw Gaza photojournalism in the previous covers depicting Palestine, the November 2023 issue use a posed studio portrait with regulated lighting, a neutral couch and a reflective table that achieve high visual modality through realism with low candidness. With regards to Kress and van Leeuwen’s paradigm, this can be highlighted as ‘constructed’ subjectivity which gives emotional truth over event documentation. It shifts from the turmoil of battle to private aftermath, presenting the feelings of hostage families. On the other hand, the cover of March 2024 is remarkably similar to the cover of 13 September 2010, especially with the use of the Star of David once again.

Though similar, instead of the barbed wires and flowers, TIME uses white block and space for the Star of David, along with blue typography for the title of the cover “The New Anti-Semitism”. This may suggest TIME explicitly frames and situates the topic in the aftermath of the October 7 Hamas attack and argues that antisemitism has “revamped” or “reinvented itself” in modern forms, which can be seen in the cover’s minimal design. The pristine white background gives the cover a clean, almost clinical authority, and with the combination of the blue coloured title, it can inferred that this white and blue palette has an indirect reference to the Israeli flag, which is traditionally white with blue stripes and a blue Star of David at the centre. The overall effect is less about depicting suffering but more about producing a controlled, symbolic warning; that antisemitism is presented as enduring and institutional.

Polarisation Of Ideologisation Of Time’s Magazine

Van Dijk’s notion of ideological square (1998) breaks down polarised discourse by maximising positive ‘Us’ and minimising positive ‘Other’ or ‘Them’. It emphasises on the negative ‘Other’ qualities and downplays negative ‘Us’ qualities, which often take the form of salience, modality and gaze as integrated with Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006). As shown in Sections 4.1 to 4.4, the ideological positioning of TIME magazine towards the Israel-Palestine conflict is relatively balanced, though with subtle emphasis that reflects editorial timing and narrative focus. This is because the covers exhibit multidirectional empathy and contextual nuance, effectively balancing humanitarian portrayals of suffering from both sides even while using discursive strategies in visual grammar that steer clear of superficial binary polarisation. It can be said that TIME employs a strategic metafunctional differentiation whereby the representation of Palestine leverages high modality photojournalistic realism for interpersonal demand and narrative immediacy while the depiction of Israel in the covers is seen to be a combination of conceptual symbolism with intimate realism (as presented in

Figure 9). This asymmetry supports editorial complexity in which abstract symbols allow criticism of Israeli policies without dehumanising Palestinians, whereas direct authenticity amplifies the necessity of Palestinian humanitarian and emancipatory efforts.

This outcome aligns with Slovic et. al. (2017), opining that such balanced modality use in war photography encourages cross-conflicts empathy rather than ethnic bias as iconic victim images such as children universally stimulate emotional responses that drive shared moral outrage. TIME's November 6, 2023, cover (Figure 9) features a close shot an older Israeli couple seated intimately together, which Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) categorise as having personal social distance with the viewers that would create a sense of emotional connection. The gap between the viewers and subjects in the cover is reduced by this "distance" produced by the close shot, encouraging empathy as opposed to objective observation. What makes the cover more appealing is the way the 'wife' or 'mother to the victims' is seen wrapping her arms around her husband's arms. Edward Hall's theory of proxemics (1966), the original schema adopted by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), explains that in a close shot, one can hold or grasp the other person. This type of camera framing humanises the couple's pain and make their trauma personally relatable to viewers, in contrast to the sweeping images of devastation on covers representing Palestine. In addition, the intimacy is further strengthened by the two little framed pictures of the hostage teenagers on the table in front of the couple. The teens' faces fill the frames, symbolising their lost innocence up close. The relational hierarchy constructed by the camera shots and graded distancing, with the parents at close proximity and children even 'closer', draw viewers into the familial devastation.

The covers used by TIME to represent Palestine may evoke viewer empathy by purposefully maximising the positive image of Palestinian civilians through the central placement of vulnerable figures such as women (Figure 3) and children (Figure 8). For instance, the November 2023 cover featuring a young boy's contemplative 'offer' position from a precarious white box amid rubble creates medium emotional involvement (rear view, eye-level equality), negatively framing Israeli-implied destruction via salient debris and distant rescuers. This partially conforms with van Dijk's negative 'Other' emphasis. However, this negation is significantly lessened. While the cover in 12 January 2009 (Figure 2) presents oblique composition of Palestinian casualties along with the cyclical heading "AGAIN" rhetoric multidimensionally contextualise violence, implicating United States' policies alongside direct perpetrators, the background figures imply resilience and agency, precluding total victim passivity. In line with past literature showing that child imagery in war photography elicit two to three times more sympathetic and prosocial reactions (e.g. donations) than adult depictions (Wells, 2007; Slovic et. al., 2017; Midberry, 2020), this high visual modality realism, which is also demonstrated by pictured particulate debris and structural collapse, arouse horror without overt vilification. This may indicate that TIME prioritise humanitarian discourse than political partisan alignment.

On the other hand, TIME strategically use both symbolic abstraction and studio portrait to equilibrate humanitarian empathy with ideological critique when depicting Israel in its covers. This counters apparent representational asymmetry through victim amplification. In line with van Dijk's notion of ideological square (1998), symbolic covers such as the 19 January 2009's barbed wire entangled Star of David evoking entrapment as well as and the 13 September 2010's peace daisies, were position centrally appearing as national metonyms that fulfil the ideational metafunction. It is further enhanced by the headings and subheadings of the covers in the form of policy interrogation (e.g. "Why Can't Israel Win?" and Why Israel Doesn't Care About Peace"). As a result, this multimodal technique employed by TIME positively mitigates negative 'Self' (Israel) via historical vulnerability (specifically the Holocaust barbed wire iconography). Additionally, this subtlety is supported by empirical research of symbolic war imagery. Barthes (1972) and subsequent multimodal papers display that metonymic abstraction prevent glaring dehumanisation threats of graphic realism while preserving dignity and prompting reflections (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Moreover, through frontal camera angle and direct involvement via the close-shot social distance and eye contact, the cover on 6 November 2026 (Figure 9) restores partial photojournalistic parity. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the cover is an image taken in either a studio or the home of the victims, and not a 'real footage'. In contrast to the chaotic image of Gaza, this controlled studio portrait highlights long-lasting psychological damage over immediate violence, which is consistent with Sontag's (2003) difference between

spectacular suffering and contemplative aftermath. It can be observed that in order to preserve credibility across readerships, TIME strategically differentiates immediacy (Palestinean realism) from reflection (Israeli symbolism). Past media discourse papers have also indicated that this equilibrium pushes ceasefire advocacy above partisan success (Wolfsfeld, 2004; Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012). Rather than a display of ideology and politics, the modality distinction in terms of narrative authenticity for immediate suffering versus conceptual abstraction for geopolitical dilemmas illustrates the complex use of visual grammar. This finding is agreement with Slovic et. al. (2017), revealing that TIME's pattern prioritises reporting international warfare over Us/Them polarisation. Ultimately, the covers operationalise van Dijk's ideological square in a reciprocal manner, reducing extremes to encourage introspection and emancipation as opposed to strengthen binary hostilities.

CONCLUSION

As a wrap, by using Kress and van Leeuwen's Interactional Metafunctional framework, this study targets to reveal the representation of Israel and Palestine on the covers of TIME magazine and how historical events plays a vital role in the selection of images that are displayed on the covers. Despite the adequate data analysis, it is indisputable that there are limitations in the study in terms of the editorial process and audience reception that could shape meaning differently. Hence, this study can show how the TIME covers construct representation, but it does not fully establish how viewers perceive and understand them. Furthermore, another key limitation of this paper is that it relies on a small and selective corpus of TIME covers. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to all TIME representations of the Israel and Palestine conflict, let alone to broader Western media coverage.

Declarations

Use of AI Technology: The first author used Claude (Anthropic) to assist with structural editing and language revision during the preparation of this manuscript. The authors reviewed and verified all content, findings and analysis as well as references. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity of the work.

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