

# The ‘pact of silence’ between Israelis and their media

Sunday 20 October 2024, by [KONRAD Edo](#), [PERISCO Oren](#) (Date first published: 16 October 2024).

**Israel’s long-subservient media has spent the past year imbuing the public with a sense of righteousness over the Gaza war. Reversing this indoctrination, says media observer Oren Persico, could take decades.**

*A woman in Jerusalem watches Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speak at a press conference on her TV, September 28, 2024. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)*

Halfway into our conversation, Oren Persico makes a startling confession. The veteran Israeli journalist, whose job for the better half of the last two decades has been to monitor his country’s media, doesn’t watch mainstream Israeli news.

“I just can’t do it,” Persico, who has worked as a staff writer for the Israeli media watchdog site The Seventh Eye since 2006, tells me. “It’s depressing and infuriating — it’s propaganda, it’s full of lies. Mostly, it’s a mirror image of the society I live in, and it’s hard for me to break the dissonance between my worldview and my surroundings. I need to maintain my sanity.” Instead of watching, Persico stays abreast by scrolling through news sites, social media, and watching select clips that people send his way.

But even turning off the TV cannot stop the dissonance and despair Persico feels, which have only grown since the Hamas-led massacres on October 7 and the Israeli army’s ensuing year-long onslaught on the Gaza Strip. When the war began, the Israeli media found itself at a critical juncture, navigating the trauma of a nation that was shaken by unprecedented violence and quickly retreated into a deeply-entrenched perception of historical victimhood. News broadcasters responded to this national trauma, Persico notes, by [slipping further into the clutches](#) of state-sanctioned propaganda.



*Oren Persico. (Courtesy)*

As days of brutal violence turned into weeks and months, the Israeli media reverted to familiar patterns: rallying around the flag, [amplifying state narratives](#), and marginalizing any critical coverage of Israel's brutality in Gaza, let alone showing images or telling stories of human suffering among Palestinians in the Strip.

The path to this moment was paved long ago. Israel's media landscape, which Persico says has always been subservient to the political and military establishment, has come under relentless pressure from Benjamin Netanyahu over the last decade; the Israeli prime minister has [attempted to transform it](#) into a tool for wielding power and ultimately ensuring his own political survival. Commercial media outlets, more interested in maintaining viewers than challenging power, have fallen prey to Netanyahu's strategy of [coercion, self-censorship, and economic pressure](#).

Recent years have also seen the rapid rise of Now 14 (widely known as Channel 14), [Israel's version of Fox News](#) that has openly aligned itself with Netanyahu, and is now challenging the long-held dominance of Channel 12. It offers viewers not just news, but anti-Palestinian polemics — which are often [outwardly genocidal](#) — cooked up as entertainment. Netanyahu's adept use of propaganda outlets like Channel 14, as well as social media, has helped him mold a devoted following that defends and bolsters him against domestic and international pressure.

In an interview with +972, which has been shortened and edited for clarity, Persico reflects on the media's historical role in the denial of Israel's human rights violations, its failure to challenge the political establishment, and the near-complete lack of solidarity for Palestinian journalists under bombardment in Gaza.

### **Edo Konrad - Tell me about the media landscape in Israel in the lead-up to October 7.**

**Oren Persico** - On Oct. 6, the Israeli media — whether public or private, on television, the radio, or the internet — was weakened and beleaguered following more than a decade of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's persistent struggle to control it. While some media outlets had simply become a tool in Netanyahu's propaganda war, others gradually submitted to his pressure, platforming the prime minister's allies and talking points in their broadcasts.

[Just months before Oct. 7,] Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi had announced a bill to [reform](#) the media landscape — based on his desire to shut down Israel's Public Broadcasting Corporation [known colloquially as KAN] and to “take care of” [i.e. assert control over] the private media sector. This was all done under the slogans of “opening up the market” and “removing barriers” — slogans that actually meant easing the path of outlets that serve Netanyahu's interests while restricting outlets that criticize him.

*Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi presents his reform in the communication market to journalists, in Jerusalem, July 17, 2023. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)*

### **What steps have Netanyahu and his successive governments taken to suppress the press over the past decades?**

Since 1999 [when Netanyahu lost the election after his first term as prime minister], he has marked the media as his rival, and has gradually unified his base in a populist struggle against it. This has been especially true since 2017, when his [numerous legal scandals exploded](#) — all of which are directly related to his attempts to control the media.

In the past decade, Netanyahu has tried to shut down [Channel 10](#); sought to [eviscerate](#) Yedioth Ahronoth's dominance in Israeli print media; [allegedly promised](#) a media mogul beneficial regulatory

changes in exchange for positive coverage of him and his family; and meticulously [placed his supporters](#) in every single possible Israeli outlet, from Channel 12 and Israeli Army Radio to i24 and KAN.

And yet, we cannot place all of the blame on the prime minister. Netanyahu is operating in a country where most of the media outlets are privately-owned and where the public is moving to the right. These commercial outlets don't want to lose viewers and readers. They can't sell ads if they don't have an audience, and they can't keep their audience if they show them things that anger them.

**No discussion of the Israeli media today is complete without talking about Channel 14, which has become a tour de force in the landscape, and could yet overtake Channel 12 in its dominance.**

Channel 14 grew out of the Jewish Heritage Channel, a small and mostly failed station dedicated to providing religious content that lacked a news broadcasting license. But gradually, Netanyahu and his allies began chipping away at these regulations: eventually it was granted a license to broadcast news and became the full-blown propaganda outfit we know today.

Even though it is now the second most popular channel in Israel, it still [receives benefits](#) as if it were the small outfit it started out as. Today, the channel is owned by the son of an oligarch who enjoys close ties to Netanyahu, and who allegedly has connections to Vladimir Putin and other shady figures.

*Benjamin Netanyahu speaks at a Conference of Channel 14 in Jerusalem, on October 23, 2022. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)*

With the onset of the [judicial overhaul](#) at the beginning of 2023, many media outlets remembered their purpose and role: to cover critically all nodes of power in the country — both economic elites and the ruling class. Channel 14, on the other hand, kept speaking in one voice with the government.

Channel 14's viewership also forms a kind of community. Polls consistently [show](#) that, as opposed to Channel 11, Channel 12, and Channel 13, whose viewers float between the stations, — Channel 14's viewers are devotees of the network [and don't seek news or analysis from other channels]

**Does this mean that if Netanyahu wakes up one morning and decides to take a certain position, Channel 14 will deliver that message to its viewers?**

Like the entire media apparatus that Netanyahu has built — which is often nicknamed the “poison machine,” and makes use of both conventional and social media — Channel 14 is a propaganda tool. It is seen as fun: it provides entertainment for the masses.

**This sounds very similar to what Donald Trump and Fox News do in the United States. What does this look like on Channel 14?**

Israelis have been in a bloody war for over a year, and the bottom line they get from Channel 14 is a feeling that we are winning, that life is good. The channel emphasizes Israel's military successes while downplaying its failures — and slanders other news channels for promoting panic and defeatism.

For example, following Sunday's [drone attack](#) on an IDF military base, which killed four soldiers and wounded dozens of others, Israeli media sites kept the story as their top headline through the night and into the morning. Not so with Channel 14, which had it as the main story on their website for half an hour, after which it was replaced by a poll showing that most Israelis support an attack on

Iran.

It also targets “common enemies” — other media outlets, the army elite, and the attorney general — accusing them of colluding against the government and blaming them for Israel’s current predicament. It is full of incitement, propaganda, and conspiracy theories, appealing to the public’s desire for revenge following October 7. Commentators who appear on “The Patriots,” the station’s flagship talk show hosted by Yinon Magal, regularly call for genocide and extermination [of the Palestinians]. Many viewers feel good when they see this; it confirms what they are already feeling.

*Israeli Journalists Yinon Magal and Ben Caspit attend the Muni Expo 2024 conference in Tel Aviv, on June 10, 2024. (Avshalom Sassoni/Flash90)*

### **It seems as though Channel 14’s popularity came out of nowhere. How did this happen?**

From the moment the mainstream media in Israel stood up against the judicial reform, Channel 14’s ratings started to grow rapidly. Its second bump in ratings took place immediately after October 7. Both of these bumps represent the channel’s ability to form its viewership into a community.

After two to three weeks of displaying a kind of “national unity” following the Hamas attacks, Israeli media outlets quickly returned to their previous positions of either pro- or anti-Netanyahu. There were several voices on Channel 14 in the immediate aftermath who blamed the prime minister for what happened on October 7, but they too very quickly retreated to the party line.

The continued growth and mainstreaming of Channel 14 following October 7 is, in my mind, the most significant development we have seen in the Israeli media since the massacre.

### **But displays of extremist rhetoric and warmongering were certainly not limited to Channel 14. We’ve seen this on pretty much every single mainstream news outlet following October 7, whether or not they are critical of Netanyahu.**

You’re right — the entire Israeli public has swung hard to the right, and for the first time in its history, Channel 12 is facing tight competition from Channel 14. It has made the classic mistake of trying to be palatable to everyone, including the fascists who watch Channel 14, and thus provides a platform to people like Yehuda Schlesinger [who [called for](#) making the [rape of Palestinian detainees](#) at Sde Teiman detention center official policy].

*Bezalet Smotrich speaks with Channel 12 News anchor Dana Weiss during the conference of Channel 12/the Israeli Television News Company in Tel Aviv, September 5, 2019. (Hadas Parush/Flash90)*

You need to remember that journalists in Israel are part of Israeli society. They know people who were killed or kidnapped on October 7. They know soldiers in Gaza.

### **Of course, but they also have a responsibility to the public to report what is happening, and not only to Israelis. Otherwise it’s a dereliction of duty.**

It is, but I also see their behavior — in which they are putting aside their journalistic integrity in order to create a kind of unity among the public — as a natural and human response following such a traumatic event. I don’t think it’s a good thing, I think it’s a mistake. But I don’t think I could expect anything different from them.

### **Aren’t you going a little easy on them?**

Israeli journalists see it as their patriotic duty to focus on our victimhood, to ignore victims on the other side, and to boost the national morale — particularly the morale of Israeli soldiers. I believe that the patriotic thing to do is to provide reliable information to the public so that it can form a real worldview of what's happening around them. Otherwise, Israeli society — or any society — will have a warped understanding of reality based on ignorance, lies, and denial. That leads to a weak society that can come apart at the seams far more easily. Telling the truth will have the exact opposite effect, but journalists here don't believe that.

**Does the Israeli media show the public what the army is doing to Palestinians in Gaza?**

No.

*Palestinian journalists covering damaged roads from an Israeli military raid in the West Bank city of Jenin, September 6, 2024. (Nasser Ishtayeh/Flash90)*

**Does it track Israeli human rights violations in the West Bank?**

No.

**Does it track the [repeated lies](#) of the IDF Spokesperson?**

No.

**I understand your point about the first few weeks in which journalists were deeply traumatized, but we are a year after October 7 and journalists are still, for the most part, abdicating their responsibilities when it comes to contending with these fundamental issues. Have they simply stopped caring?**

The entirety of Israeli society has many years of experience in ignoring our crimes against the Palestinians. Whether it's the Nakba, which is a completely taboo subject, or the ongoing military occupation over millions of people. The media and the viewership are implicated by entering into a kind of pact of silence: the public doesn't want to know, so the media won't talk about it. These psychological mechanisms were already so ingrained that when October 7 happened, they sprang into action and only became more powerful.

What we have seen over the last year is the result of a decades-long process of educating both journalists and viewers that there are things we simply don't talk about and don't show on the news. Most of the journalists working at these mainstream outlets know what is happening, but they don't want to alienate their viewers for fear of losing ratings. It could take decades to reverse this kind of indoctrination.

**They just pretend like these things don't exist?**

Mainstream outlets understand that human rights violations are not something to be celebrated, so they simply ignore them. We don't see any headlines on Gaza's Health Ministry announcing that 40,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza. We don't see any human stories of Palestinians under Israeli bombardment. We don't hear about the [diseases ravaging the Strip](#). Personally, what I have heard from journalists is that "this is simply not the time to talk about these issues."

*A press helmet is placed over the grave of Hamza Dahdouh, a Palestinian journalist who worked for Al Jazeera and the son of Al Jazeera's Gaza bureau chief Wael Dahdouh, who was killed in an Israeli drone strike on Rafah, January 7, 2024. (Mohammed Talatene/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)*

**It seems that whenever you turn on any of these news channels, they are constantly reliving the horrors of October 7 — whether through stories of survivors or new investigative reports. What kind of effect does this have on the Israeli public?**

October 7 was an event that puts Israeli Jews back in the position of the historical victim. The images of Israeli kibbutzim and cities being overrun and massacres by Hamas gunmen remind us of historical images from the Holocaust. This is no joke — we are a deeply post-traumatic society that has yet to overcome the Holocaust, and that day was the first time in which the state that was meant to prevent future Holocausts from happening failed to do so.

And yet, the propaganda we have seen on the news over the last year only reinforces and justifies state violence against Palestinians. It provides a rationalization to do anything necessary to annihilate those who are being portrayed as an “absolute evil.” Ultimately, it imbues Israelis with a sense of righteousness, which is necessary during a long war with no clear end date.

**How big of an influence does the Israeli media actually have on the public, especially when so many have access to other forms of news on social media?**

If in the past, the media’s role was to mediate and organize reality [for the viewer], the central role of the Israeli media today is to mark both the boundaries of legitimacy vis-a-vis the public discourse, as well as who is allowed to participate in that discourse. If you look at Channel 12, for instance, you will see that when it comes to military matters, it is former military personnel — most of them men — who participate in the conversation.

**It’s also hard to avoid another dimension of the media’s role: providing a platform for, and often serving as an arm of, Israeli hasbara efforts, with influencers such as [Yoseph Haddad](#) appearing regularly on the various news shows.**

Absolutely. Hasbara is highly in demand, and the media — both commercial and public — gives it to the public, because it is what the public wants. It has reached the point that Yoseph Haddad constituted more than [a third](#) of all appearances by “Arab experts” in Israeli media in the first half of 2024. It’s okay that they invite him, but he in no way represents the majority of Palestinian citizens of Israel.

*Yoseph Haddad, an Arab-Israeli advocacy activist, seen with soldiers during a military operation in Beit Lahia, in the northern Gaza Strip, December 28, 2023. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)*

**Israel often boasts that it has a free press that is extremely critical of the government. Is this true?**

In every major [historical] event, the Israeli media has always been loyal to the country’s political and military establishment — whether it’s a war, a peace plan, or an economic program. Until the judicial overhaul, it went along with pretty much every major political move the government took. It is very critical of Netanyahu because he is a corrupt liar who clearly puts his private interests ahead of those of the state. But it is not critical of the army or the state itself.

It’s worth recalling that in 2002 there was a tremendous amount of public outrage after Israel assassinated Hamas leader [Salah Mustafa Muhammad Shehade] and killed 14 members of his family, including 11 children. But a continuing occupation that gets hardly any mainstream coverage also leads to an erosion of both public outrage and journalistic standards. Today, the army [has no problem](#) killing 14 people if it means taking out a low-ranking member of Hamas — and the media, apart from newspapers like Haaretz, goes along with it.



## **What could the media have done differently in its coverage following October 7? What difference could it have made?**

First of all, during those first few days after the attack, the media did an exceptional job at a moment when the rest of Israel's institutions were simply not functioning. The media brought images to the public, [which helped to] assist refugees from the south and those who survived the massacre by literally providing logistics for people because the state simply did not function at that time.

No one is forcing the Israeli public not to know what is happening in Gaza and the West Bank. Those who want to know can turn to the New York Times or The Guardian. Imagine taking Haaretz or +972 and turning them into a mainstream news channel — would it change anything? Maybe somewhat, but we are talking about undoing generations of indoctrination here.

Over the last month we've seen a kind of public euphoria since the [pager attacks](#) and Hezbollah leader [Hassan Nasrallah's assassination](#), after which we saw Channel 12's Amit Segal and Ben Caspit [pouring shots and toasting to his death](#) on TV. That euphoria has extended to Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon, and the onslaught on northern Gaza as part of what is known as the "Generals' Plan" to [effectively liquidate](#) the area. What do you make of this outwardly celebratory atmosphere in the news studios?

*Israeli newspaper headlines on September 29, 2024, two days after Israel's assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)*

The Israeli successes in Lebanon were received with much fanfare and celebration. In the days after these "victories," there was very little discussion in the media about the geopolitical significance of this moment, beyond Israel's damage to Hezbollah, which pundits said could bring about its declaration of defeat. No one stood up and gave a realistic assessment that we are entering a phase in which we will see [an increase in] rockets and drones across the north.

This is reminiscent of what happened immediately following Hamas' attack, when media outlets [claimed](#) that the operation would only last several weeks to a few months. [They entirely ignored the fact that] in 2014, the IDF [estimated](#) that the reoccupation of the Strip could take five years, and would claim the lives of tens of thousands of Palestinians and Israelis. Netanyahu reportedly leaked this assessment to Channel 2 back in 2014 precisely because he understood these immense costs and did not want to re-occupy Gaza militarily. Why doesn't the media remind the public of these assessments? Why doesn't Udi Segal, the Channel 2 journalist who first exposed this presentation, speak up today?

I am sure that there are similar assessments regarding Hezbollah, but when the Israeli army began its invasion the media claimed that it would last only a few weeks. This takes us back to the first Lebanon War when the media made very similar claims about the length of the operation [the Israeli army would go on to remain in southern Lebanon for nearly two decades].

**Israel has killed 168 Palestinian journalists in Gaza since last October, according to the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate. How much solidarity is there from Israeli journalists with their Palestinian counterparts in Gaza, or with the journalists of Al Jazeera who have been banned from working in Israel and whose offices in Ramallah were [raided and shut down](#) by Israeli forces in September?**

Zero. Late last year, I was assisting Reporters Without Borders in organizing a petition of solidarity from Israeli journalists to their Palestinian colleagues. I told them that no one, aside from some people on the radical left, would sign that kind of statement, and instead offered to try and get

Israeli journalists to sign a petition demanding media outlets show more of what was happening in Gaza, because I thought we would be able to get more mainstream journalists to sign it. It just didn't happen. Very few people wanted to sign.

What Israeli journalists do not understand is that when the government passes its "[Al Jazeera Law](#)," it is ultimately about something much larger than merely targeting the channel. The current law is about banning news outlets that "endanger national security," but they also want to give the Israeli communications minister the right to prevent any foreign news network from operating in Israel that could "harm the national morale." What the Israeli public doesn't understand is that next in line is BBC Arabic, Sky News Arabic, and CNN. After that, they're going to come for Haaretz, Channel 12, and Channel 13.

### **Do you see this happening?**

We are heading toward an autocratic, Orbán-esque regime and everything that comes with that — in the courts, in academia, and in the media. Of course it is possible. It sounded unrealistic 10 years ago, then it sounded more realistic five years ago when Netanyahu's media-related legal scandals blew up. Then it became even more reasonable with the judicial overhaul, and even more so today. We're not there yet, but we are certainly on the way.

### **Edo Konrad**

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#### **P.S.**

- +972. October 16, 2024:  
<https://www.972mag.com/edo-konrad-last-letter/>
- Edo Konrad is the former editor-in-chief of +972 Magazine.
- *Edo Konrad's articles on +972 Magazine:*  
<https://www.972mag.com/writer/edokonrad/>
- Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war. The world is reeling from Israel's unprecedented onslaught on Gaza, inflicting mass devastation and death upon besieged Palestinians, as well as the atrocious attack and kidnappings by Hamas in Israel on October 7. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing this violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to intensify their attacks on Palestinians. The most far-right government in Israel's history is ramping up its policing of dissent, using the cover of war to silence Palestinian citizens and left-wing Jews who object to its policies.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 14 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, entrenched occupation and apartheid, and a normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land.



Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is a leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists, activists, and thinkers can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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