

Red Lines and Real Choices: Media Perspectives and the Recent London Ceasefire Marches

Since the Israel-Gaza conflict began, seven massive [ceasefire marches](#) have been organized in London, drawing hundreds of thousands of people from across the UK to demand an urgent end to the violence.

Following the traumatic 7 October attack, hostage-taking and killing of 1,139 people, including 766 civilians according to revised [Israeli social security data](#), the ensuing military carnage in Gaza has killed more than 19,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children. Efforts by the UK government and the media to demonize repeated ceasefire protests as antisemitic 'hate marches' have failed to stem the outcry against the mass killing of innocent civilians. As the UN Security Council considers once more if there is a correct form of words to stop the slaughter, we will reflect on the twisting narratives of [media coverage and social messages](#) in the last three London ceasefire marches.

The Armistice Day Ceasefire March

Despite dire warnings of disrespect and desecration of war memorials, the 11 November ceasefire march went off peacefully. A river of humanity amounting to [some 800,000 people](#) flowed in mile after mile of banners, placards, and babies in push chairs under gently waving Palestinian flags. Trade unions, health worker associations, and LGBTQ groups were joined by wider messages of solidarity like 'Tamils for Palestine', 'Panjabis 4 Palestine' and people of all backgrounds chanting 'We are all Palestinians'.

Accusations of spreading antisemitic hate were the more perplexing given the diverse Jewish presence at every march, including the Jewish Bloc, Jewish Voice for Labour, Na'amod, Jews for Palestine and the Hasidic community, as well as many Jewish individuals carrying signs with such slogans as 'Jewish and Devastated' and 'Not in Our Name'. Placards carried by other protesters called out the hypocrisy of efforts to block the protest as inappropriate to the sentiment of Armistice Day. There were at least three signs that said 'Armistice Literally Means Ceasefire!'. Another read 'Suella, This Is Not a

Hate March. It's a STOP BOMBING CHILDREN March!'. A child of no more than twelve solemnly carried a sign reading 'Killing Over 4,000 Children Isn't Self-Defense'.

In sharp contrast to the call for peace, press coverage of the march rushed to paint a picture of [arrests](#), 'violent scenes' and ' Hamas sympathisers'. While the [Guardian](#) later confirmed that the violence arose from right-wing counter-protests battling police at the Cenotaph, the headline in the [Mail on Sunday singled out the 'Pro-Palestine Hate Mob'](#) and proclaimed, 'Terrifying scenes as extremists from ALL sides tarnish Armistice Day'. The [Sunday Telegraph](#) went with 'Sunak: Far Right thugs and Hamas sympathisers disrespect our heroes', and the Sun headline just read 'Despicable'.

The 'Pause' and 'UN Veto' Ceasefire Marches

The next London ceasefire march on 25 November, during the 'humanitarian pause', drew hundreds of thousands demanding a *permanent* ceasefire. Placards emphasized the cynicism of both the pause and its timing. One sign read 'A Ceasefire Should Be Forever, Not Just Thanksgiving' while another said, 'Black Friday, Cyber Monday, Genocide Tuesday?'. Another raised the question 'If A Pause Is Humanitarian, What Do We Call Its Resumption?'. Some placards emphasized the overwhelming sense of tragedy, with names and pictures of Palestinian civilians killed, or the painful reality faced by survivors: 'She's my Mum. I Know From Her Hair'. Speeches at the end of the march referred to new humanitarian acronyms for things there should never be acronyms for: WCNSF, meaning 'Wounded Child, No Surviving Family'. The newspaper headlines on the following day focused on the shared joy of released Israeli hostages, but ignored that for the Palestinians of Gaza, the ordeal was set to continue.

The most recent march, on 9 December, drew 100,000 people in the wind and rain to express their dismay at the US veto and UK abstention at the UN Ceasefire Resolution the day before. A wide range of Jewish groups were out in force, alongside banners of educational and allied unions, communication workers, journalists, transport workers, and health workers. While individual placards were more muted given heavy policing of messages, Psychologists 4 (watermelon emoji) carried a placard reading 'Justice Is The Only Therapy', and a particularly sobering poster read 'You know what also DIED in GAZA? The myth of western HUMANITY & DEMOCRACY'. Alongside the usual focus on placard policing and arrests by the [Telegraph](#), the [Daily Mail](#) and other papers on the day, only the [Independent](#) gave the protest front page coverage on the morning after, in

a story focusing on the pro-Palestinian protest at COP28.

Red Lines and Choices

Media and government responses to these protests have created a sense of being caught in an upside-down world in which war is peace and peace is war. Protesters marching for ceasefire and the enforcement of international law are portrayed as antisemitic extremists, yet those called counter-protesters attacked police and were caught on video giving a [full Nazi salute](#) in front of the Cenotaph. Government officials vilify the former, incite the latter, and call this enforcing order. Tightening red lines attempt to choke off humanitarian protest through government pressure for police crackdowns while remastering principled criticism and freedom chants as antisemitic. One might ask if chants of 'South Africa shall be free' were racist, and whether the actual liberation of South Africa involved the extermination of any of the parties involved.

Yet red lines crossed on the other side are not subject to similar zero-tolerance condemnation: [Islamophobic hate-speech](#) coming from UK government ministers, reckless [Israeli TikTokers](#) mocking Palestinian suffering; or the chilling video aired on Israeli national television of [children singing](#) about the annihilation of everyone in Gaza. [Rightwing interests among the Western powers](#) are cynically using the veil of antisemitism to remoralise the 'war on terror' agenda, badly tarnished by the devastating moral and political failures of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Libya. Meanwhile Netanyahu seeks to distract political opposition at home by mobilizing the collective trauma of his own people to justify the mass killing of Palestinians, in the process making Jews and Muslims across the world less safe. As [Israeli citizens know well](#), no state should be above criticism.

Far from leaving Israel with no choice, an article in the [Observer](#) notes that the current conflict is a product of multiple choices. Reports in [The Guardian](#), [New York Times](#) and [Times of Israel](#) point out that the Israeli state, and particularly Netanyahu, supported the funding of Hamas for decades as a political counterweight to ensure the Palestinians remained 'a house divided'. [The Times of Israel](#) states: 'Israeli policy was to treat the Palestinian Authority as a burden, and Hamas as an asset' to undermine any prospect of a two-state solution. Numerous [reports](#) also reveal that government and military officials chose not to heed repeated and detailed warnings from [low-ranking Israeli soldiers](#) and an [Egyptian intelligence official](#) that militant groups in Gaza were planning 'something

big’.

While this does not excuse Hamas violence, it questions the current narrative. In the face of what Americans call ‘blowback’ from mobilizing fundamentalists against one’s adversaries, compounded by extreme security failures or worse, the contention that Israel has no choice and only Hamas is to blame for the massacre of civilians in Gaza is beginning to wear thin. Israel and the international community have a choice, and the only moral one is immediate ceasefire and a just political resolution that recognizes the rights of Palestinians as well as Israelis to freedom and dignity. History has shown that the alternative is unthinkable for everyone.

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

Image credit: Kate Meagher