

The RTBF, Israel and Gaza: The Original Bias

Analysis of RTBF's Coverage of the
First Year of the War in the Middle East
7 October 2023 - 7 October 2024

IA

January 2026

Established in March 2024 following the massacres of 7 October and their repercussions in Europe, the Institut Jonathas is a centre for research and action against antisemitism and all that promotes it in Belgium.

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Sympathy analysis of the RTBF corpus of articles : Innohives

Innohives is an AI research and analytics company specialising in large-scale analysis of media and public discourse. The company is composed of senior scientists and quantitative researchers with expertise in computational neuroscience, artificial intelligence, and data analysis. Innohives was founded by Dr. Haran Shani-Narkiss following his leadership of the RIMe Group, which produced the Asserson Report on the BBC.

Innohives compiled the underlying corpus of articles, conducted the sympathy analysis and developed the analytical frameworks used in the figures. The Institut Jonathas produced the figures included in this report based on the data and figures provided by Innohives and is solely responsible for their interpretation.

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Institut Jonathas

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Table of contents

Summary 07

Part 1: Why this study? 10

□ 1.1. War in the Middle East, but also information war around the world	11
□ 1.2. War in the Middle East: questions and criticism from the media, responses from RTBF	12
□ 1.3. Analysing media coverage: difficulties related to the corpus, the method, but also to this conflict and its imbalances	15
□ 1.4. Why this study by the Institut Jonathas, which fights against anti-Semitism in Belgium?	18
□ 1.5. Our decision to focus on RTBF in light of the Asserson Report on the BBC	21
□ 1.6. Assessing the sympathy generated by the articles: a key issue in the information war	23

Part 2: Presentation of the study and the corpus 25

□ 2.1. Reproducing in Belgium the study by ChatGPT, conducted in the United Kingdom on the BBC	26
□ 2.2. The same four-step methodology for RTBF as for the BBC	29
□ 2.3. RTBF corpus analysed: 2,181 articles between 7 October 2023 and 7 October 2024	31
□ 2.4. Nearly 70% of articles collectively attributed to "the editorial team"	35
□ 2.5. More than 200 journalists named in just over 600 articles signed by name	36

Part 3: Analysis of results 38

□ 3.1. Twice as many articles creating sympathy for Gaza than articles generating sympathy for Israel	39
□ 3.2. Nearly 20% of the corpus generating sympathy for a terrorist organisation	44
□ 3.3. Few articles generating sympathy for both Israel and Gaza	48

□ 3.4. From 14 October 2023 onwards, more articles generating sympathy for Gaza	51
□ 3.5. RTBF seeks balance... only at the very beginning of the war	53
□ 3.6. Bias amplification in headlines in favour of Gaza and the Palestinians	56
□ 3.7. Biased coverage of the war, corroborated by international comparisons	63

Part 4: Case studies

68

□ 4.1. Three examples from the summer of 2025, illustrating the persistence of the original bias	69
- Announcement by the United States of sanctions against Francesca Albanese, UN Special Rapporteur for the Palestinian Territories	69
- RTBF's coverage of the elimination of Anas al-Sharif by the Israeli army	71
- RTBF's coverage of the UN's decision to declare a famine in Gaza	73
□ 4.2. Original bias and confirmation bias in RTBF's coverage of the explosion in Al-Ahli Hospital, Gaza, 17 October 2023	78
□ 4.3. Some biased choices of photographs illustrating articles cited in the report	86

Part 5: Conclusion

90

□ 5.1. Highlighting biased coverage of the war by RTBF	91
□ 5.2. Choosing dialogue over counterproductive stances	93
□ 5.3. Our proposals for less biased coverage of the conflict in the Middle East	94

List of charts

No	Title of charts
1	Monthly breakdown of the corpus of 2,181 articles
2	Weekly breakdown of the corpus of 2,181 articles
3	Key events in the war in the Middle East between 7 October 2023 and 7 October 2024
4	Number of articles in the corpus generating sympathy for each of the six actors studied
5	Weekly curves highlighting three groups among the six actors studied
6	Percentage of articles generating sympathy for Israel each month and percentage of articles generating sympathy for Gaza each month
7	Percentage of articles generating sympathy for Israel each week and percentage of articles generating sympathy for Gaza each week
8	Percentage of articles in the corpus generating sympathy for Hamas each month
9	Percentage of articles generating sympathy for Hamas each week and percentage of articles generating sympathy for Israel each week
10	Breakdown of the corpus of articles according to the sympathy generated for Israel, for Gaza or both
11	Monthly breakdown of the corpus of articles according to the sympathy generated for Israel, for Gaza or both
12	Number of articles generating sympathy for Israel each week and number of articles generating sympathy for Gaza each week
13	Number of articles generating sympathy for Israel and number of articles generating sympathy for Gaza between 7 and 27 October 2023
14	Weekly sympathy ratios, calculated based on the number of articles generating sympathy for Gaza (A) and the number of articles generating sympathy for Israel (B)
15	Number of headlines and number of articles in the corpus generating sympathy for each of the six actors studied
16	Ratio of "Number of headlines generating sympathy" to "Number of articles generating sympathy"
17	Breakdown of articles and headlines in the corpus according to the sympathy generated for Israel, Gaza, or both
18	Percentage, per week, of headlines and articles generating sympathy for Israel and sympathy for Gaza
19	Monthly breakdown of headlines according to sympathy generated for Israel, for Gaza or both
20	Weekly ratios of sympathy for "Gaza" / "Israel" for headlines and articles in the corpus
21	Weekly sympathy ratios, calculated based on the number of headlines generating sympathy for Gaza (A) and the number of headlines generating sympathy for Israel (B)

SUMMARY

The war of 7 October 2023 in the Middle East was also an **information war** of unprecedented intensity throughout the world. National public opinion is clearly one of the issues at stake. It is shaped by the representations conveyed by the media and social networks.

Hence the central and essential role of media coverage of this war.

Why this study on RTBF?

In Belgium, the media were very quickly called into question and criticised, with some accusing them of favouring Israel and others of favouring the Palestinians and being hostile towards Israel, or even towards its very existence. In response, while explaining the difficulties of covering this war, RTBF affirmed its commitment to providing "*verified, clear, balanced and impartial information*",¹ in line with its obligations (CSA, CDJ) and commitments (RTBF Code of Ethics).

Media coverage of the war in the Middle East is a subject of debate, but **ultimately, is this coverage biased?** Answering this question presents several difficulties.

Some difficulties are inherent in any human evaluation, quantitative or qualitative, of media content, as each evaluator has their own subjectivity, biases, prejudices and assessment of the criteria to be evaluated. Others are specific to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to the war of narratives that has been raging for decades, and to the imbalances between the two sides in the war of 7 October, particularly in terms of the number of deaths and destruction.

Nevertheless, the question remains: is there a bias? This is a central issue for the Institut Jonathas, which fights against anti-Semitism in Belgium. Coverage in our country of a war more than 3,000 km away can influence perceptions of Jews and arouse hostility towards them.

In the United Kingdom, the Asserson Report (September 2024) examines the BBC's coverage of the war in the Middle East from several complementary angles. In light of this report, we decided to focus on RTBF because it is also a public company and because it is the most restricted media outlet in terms of information in French-speaking Belgium.

An innovative Big Data approach with solid and reproducible results

The Asserson Report studies **the emotional effect** of BBC web articles on the public and, in particular, the sympathy created by these articles – an essential topic in any information war.

Conducted by specialists in AI, neuroscience and data science, this study uses ChatGPT to assess, through six binary questions (YES/NO answers), whether each article, and then each article title, creates sympathy for six actors in the war: Israel, Gaza, the Israelis, the Palestinians, the Israeli army and Hamas.

¹ *How does RTBF cover the war in the Middle East?*, RTBF, 7 November 2023

We decided to **replicate in Belgium the sympathy analysis that was carried out in the United Kingdom for the Asserson Report**. To this end, we engaged Innohives, the research firm that brings together the team of scientists who worked on the Asserson Report. By applying the same methodology as that used for the BBC, our study benefits from all the work and checks that were carried out to ensure the robustness and reliability of the Asserson Report's results: comparisons with human assessments, ten iterations on ChatGPT, explanation of ChatGPT's responses, etc.

This Big Data approach provides an innovative response to the difficulties inherent in any media corpus analysis and to the difficulties specific to the media coverage of the war of 7 October.

It allows us to study a large corpus, free ourselves from human subjectivity, obtain solid and reproducible results, and objectify phenomena invisible to the naked eye.

It produces results that can **indicate impartiality or bias, not for an individual article, but for a large corpus of articles as a whole**.

Highlighting biased coverage of the war by RTBF

The Innohives study covers **all articles on the RTBF website between 7 October 2023 and 7 October 2024** relating to the war in the Middle East and its repercussions around the world.

The corpus comprises 2,181 articles. 74% of them are based on news agency reports. Nearly 70% are attributed to the editorial team collectively. The remaining 622 articles were written by a total of 209 journalists. Forty of them wrote at least five articles. These high numbers are striking. It is difficult to imagine that RTBF has so many specialists on the Middle East.

ChatGPT's assessment of the sympathy generated by each article shows that, overall, **twice as many articles generate sympathy for Gaza as for Israel**. This result could be explained by the great imbalance between the two sides in terms of the number of deaths and destruction.

However, we find several other Innohives' results striking:

- Nearly 20% of articles generate sympathy for Hamas, and for 10 weeks out of a total of 53, these articles outnumber those generating sympathy for Israel.
- From 14 October 2023, just one week after 7 October, articles generating sympathy for Gaza outnumbered those generating sympathy for Israel.
- Throughout the year, several peaks indicate a very high ratio of articles generating sympathy for Gaza compared to articles generating sympathy for Israel.
- Conversely, there were no peaks indicating greater sympathy for Israel compared to sympathy for Gaza, not even in October 2023, following the Hamas massacres.
- RTBF's quest for balanced coverage was one-sided and only at the very beginning of the war, in order to contextualise or 'compensate' for the horror of the massacres of 7 October.
- The headlines of the articles proportionally amplify the sympathy created for Gaza compared to that created for Israel... yet many readers only read the headlines.
- The ratios of sympathy created for Gaza compared to sympathy created for Israel are higher at RTBF than at the BBC in English (results from the Asserson Report), both for articles and headlines, even though the BBC's coverage of this war has been highly controversial.
- The ratio of sympathy generated for Gaza compared to sympathy generated for Israel is much higher at RTBF than in several leading media outlets, including CNN, CNBC, The Times and The Telegraph (other results from the Asserson Report).

These results, which are all consistent, indicate a bias in RTBF's coverage of the war in the Middle East. We attribute this bias to a framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that predates 7 October and is widely shared within the RTBF editorial team, an old framing that combines a strong sensitivity to Palestinian narratives with sympathy for their cause and their struggle.

We have named this bias "the original bias".

This bias results in RTBF's partial treatment of the war in the Middle East, which contradicts the impartiality advocated in its Code of Ethics and in the statements of its journalists.

Some illustrations of the original bias and some proposals to reduce it

The biased coverage of the war in the Middle East takes various forms. We wanted to illustrate some of these and show the persistence of bias during the summer of 2025 through **three case studies**: RTBF's coverage of US sanctions against Francesca Albanese, the elimination of Anas al-Sharif, and the declaration of famine by IPC, a UN agency.

With the same objective in mind, we conducted a qualitative analysis of RTBF's coverage of **the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza on 17 October 2023**, one of the defining events of the early stages of the war. RTBF's coverage of this explosion and the reactions that followed, as well as its analysis of its own coverage, perfectly illustrate the **original bias**, as well as a **confirmation bias**.

The ChatGPT results say nothing about the accuracy, clarity, completeness or objectivity of the articles, nor about the distinction between facts and opinions in the articles. RTBF's treatment of the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital and the three examples from the summer of 2025 **nevertheless give us a glimpse of how much could probably be said** about compliance or non-compliance with these other principles.

The analysis of media corpora using artificial intelligence tools **is still in its infancy**. But the approach is promising, as shown by a recent study on the pluralism and neutrality of the morning slots on France Info, France Inter and France Culture radio stations.

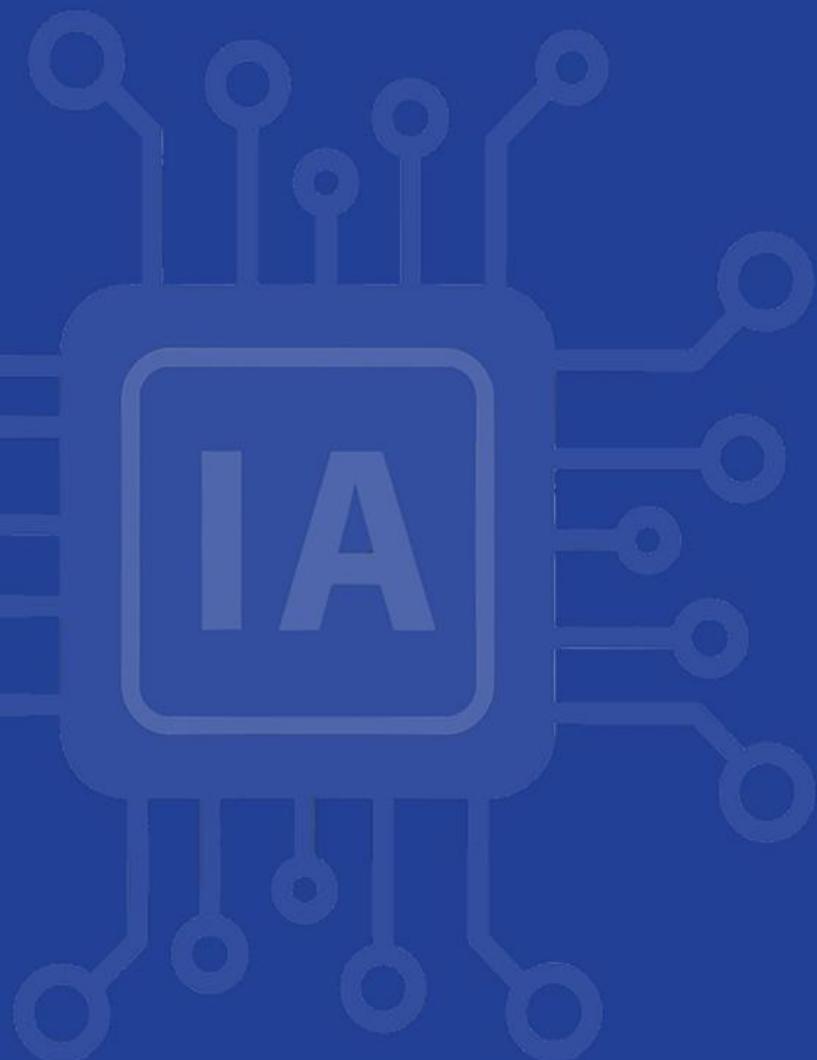
It could soon include photographs, which also play an important role in the sympathy created by the media for a particular actor. We looked at **three photographs** illustrating RTBF articles that we cite in this report. Our analysis shows **biased choices**, deviations from the principles set out by RTBF and the value of a more extensive study.

A bias is not an error, and even less so a deliberate attempt to make a mistake. More often than not, a bias is unconscious. The bias that emerges from our study **leads to misinformation**. However, this does not mean that there is an explicit and deliberate intention to misinform.

Bias cannot be corrected in the same way as an error, by erasing it and starting again. It is a matter of becoming aware of the bias, identifying its manifestations, and then working to reduce them. Our report concludes with **a number of proposals** aimed at achieving this objective.

In light of our study, we wish to engage in **constructive dialogue** with RTBF and other Belgian media outlets. We hope that they will share this desire. Our goal is to **provide accurate, clear, comprehensive and unbiased information** on a complex and polarising subject that is highly inflammatory and has the toxic power to generate anti-Semitism in Belgium.

1. Pourquoi cette étude ?



1.1. War in the Middle East, but also information war around the world

The war that began with the terrorist massacres of 7 October 2023 lasted two years, until the twenty-point plan imposed by the United States on all parties. To date, the war of 7 October is the longest and deadliest war in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

This war was also a war of information and, at times, disinformation. This has been true of all wars for a long time, but this one has one notable difference: **rarely has a war of information had such intensity and such an impact around the world**, particularly in North America, Europe and, here, in Belgium.

The information war in this conflict was a continuous war (24 hours a day for more than 750 days), both global and local, amplified by social media and polarising national opinion. To speak of an information war is an oversimplification: we should talk about a war of words, images, figures (the number of deaths, etc.), symbols (keffiyeh, watermelon, yellow ribbon, etc.), narratives, emotions, memes, slogans, expert opinions, testimonies, concepts (terrorism, war crimes, genocide, ethnic cleansing, etc.).

We who live in Belgium have no direct, immediate experience of this war. **We only have representations of it.** We know and feel it solely through the information, images, opinions and representations conveyed by the media and social networks and, for a tiny minority of the Belgian population, through what their families and friends living in Israel and Gaza tell them.

We only have indirect access to the war in the Middle East, but our minds and hearts, once aggregated into what is commonly referred to as 'public opinion', are one of the issues at stake. **Hence the central and essential role of the media's coverage of this war.**

Covering any conflict is always difficult, dangerous and complicated. "*The first casualty of war is always truth*," Rudyard Kipling is said to have remarked.

The difficulty and complexity are even greater when one of the war zones, Gaza, is in the hands of a terrorist organisation, while the other party, Israel, prohibits journalists from entering, and the stories and images coming out of Gaza are strictly filtered, if not dictated, by Hamas. It is also important to add that this war is part of a conflict that has lasted for nearly a century, which was Jewish-Arab, then Israeli-Arab, before becoming Israeli-Palestinian, and that in Belgium, as elsewhere, the ground was far from virgin before 7 October 2023, in terms of opinions and hearts.

In view of all the above, **it is hardly surprising that media coverage of the war of 7 October has been regularly questioned and/or criticised.**

1.2. War in the Middle East: questions and criticism from the media, responses from RTBF

Many media outlets have been questioned about bias, partiality, omissions, errors or imbalances in articles, reports or their overall coverage of the war. **Criticism has come from both sides.** Some accuse the media of favouring Israel, while others accuse them of favouring the Palestinians and being hostile towards Israel, or even towards its very existence.

Since 7 October 2023, bias in media coverage of the war has been the subject of numerous articles, studies and complaints around the world, not to mention countless posts on social media. What about in Belgium?

Without claiming to be exhaustive, we cite here **seven initiatives carried out in our country**. The first three criticise bias in favour of Israel, the next four criticise bias against Israel:

- Video interview with Michel Collon, founder of the media outlet Investig'Action, by Aloha.be: [Western media, the case of Israel](#) (19 November 2023)
- Study published by the National Coordination for Peace and Democracy (CNAPD): [Belgian newspapers' coverage of events in Israel-Palestine after 7 October: a qualitative survey of *La Libre* and *Le Soir*](#) (25 April 2024)
- Opinion piece by French sociologist Didier Fassin, published in Le Soir: [The media put to the test by the war in Gaza](#) (16 November 2024)
- [Question by MP Olivier Maroy to Bénédicte Linard, Minister for Media](#), on "RTBF's media coverage of the attacks in Israel", pp. 109-113 (17 October 2023)
- [Press release from the Coordinating Committee of Jewish Organisations in Belgium](#) (CCOJB) condemning RTBF's broadcast of unverified information about the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital (19 October 2023)
- [Complaint to the Journalism Ethics Council \(CDJ\)](#) by Mr Godefridi concerning three articles and two posts by RTBF on the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital (24 October 2023) – complaint deemed unfounded on 21 February 2024
- Study [entitled "The sexual violence of 7 October in Israel and the French-language Belgian press"](#) by MP Viviane Teitelbaum² and historian and psychoanalyst Sylvie Lausberg, both former presidents of the Council of French-speaking Women of Belgium (February 2024).

² Viviane Teitelbaum has been Secretary General of the Institut Jonathas since March 2024 and a senator since July 2024.

This criticism of the Belgian media is far from unprecedented when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Following the war in Gaza in the summer of 2014, the CCOJB published a text in March 2015 by Joël Kotek, now president of the Institut Jonathas, entitled: "*Israel and the French-speaking Belgian media. Case studies reflecting the Israeli-Gaza conflict of summer 2014. Between disinformation, misinformation and importation of the conflict.*"

By October 2023, several media outlets around the world had responded to the questions and criticisms addressed to them. This is the case in Belgium with RTBF, which is the subject of this study and which, in its [review of messages received in 2023 by its Mediation Department](#), cited "*the Israel-Hamas conflict, mainly for reasons of balanced coverage*" at the top of the list of news topics that elicited the most public reaction (RTBF did not publish a review of the messages it received in 2024).

On 10 October 2023, RTBF published an article by Maïté Warland in its "**INSIDE – Behind the scenes at RTBF and the media**" section, entitled "["Israel-Gaza war: what terms and images does RTBF choose to use?"](#)". In it, the journalist interviews Jean-Pierre Jacqmin, director of news. Here are a few excerpts:

*"Since Hamas' terrorist attacks on Israeli citizens this weekend and Israel's response with military strikes and a siege of the Gaza Strip, newsrooms around the world have a **significant duty to exercise caution in their choice of words and images**. This is nothing new; within the RTBF newsroom, the issue has been raised for many years."*

Jean-Pierre Jacqmin: *"It's normal that we are being questioned. We are obviously listening and open to discussion. On both sides, some people would like to influence the way we work. But we are committed to reporting the reality of the information we have. [...] We refuse to relay just anything and everything."*

On 7 November 2023, again in the INSIDE section, RTBF published a video entitled "["How does RTBF cover the war in the Middle East?"](#)", which included comments from Aurélie Didier, RTBF's global editorial manager. In particular, she said:

"This is difficult news to cover. We receive a lot of comments and questions about how we handle the information. We are going to be transparent with you. We have therefore decided to explain how we work, on what basis and what precautions we take, as well as the difficulties of reporting on such a conflict."

*"We know that this particular conflict **divides** society. Our responsibility, our role, is to convey information that is as factual as possible. We really strive to **communicate verified, clear, balanced and impartial information.**"*

Aurélie Didier: *"Our aim is really to report the facts accurately, where they are happening, and to identify responsibilities as best we can, at least when we can, and we do so **impartially and without influence.**"*

The October 2023 article and the November 2023 video echo an article published in the summer of 2014, during a previous war in Gaza: an article entitled "["Israel-Palestine conflict: 'RTBF is completely impartial'"](#)", in which Jean-François Herbécq interviews Jean-Pierre Jacqmin. Jacqmin stated at the time:

"We are not biased one way or the other on this issue. We try to report the facts as they are. It is true that **we have often been criticised, sometimes for being pro-Palestinian, sometimes for being pro-Israeli**. I would not say that I am satisfied with the fact that we are criticised by both sides in order to say that we are right, but rather that we continue to do our job as correctly as possible.

We take great care in all our news programmes to show the reality of the current situation and we make sure **to review the demands and explanations**, often historical, behind the behaviour of both sides."

[SANTÉ MENTALE](#)

Guerre Israël-Gaza... et les autres : pourquoi pense-t-on souvent que les médias ont un parti pris opposé à notre opinion ?

12 nov. 2023 à 07:00 - mise à jour 13 nov. 2023 à 11:43. ① 4 min

 Partager

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Ibrahim Molough

On the same subject of criticism of media coverage of the war between Israel and Hamas, on 12 November 2023, RTBF published an article by Ibrahim Molough entitled "[The Israel-Gaza war... and others: why do we often think that the media are biased against our opinion?](#)"

It is surprising and amusing to note that **this article on the cognitive bias known as the "Hostile Media Effect" appears in the "Mental Health" section of the RTBF website**, as if thinking that media coverage is biased were a mental health problem.

Here are a few excerpts:

*"The Hostile Media Effect is a phenomenon that refers to the **tendency of individuals who are strongly committed to an issue to perceive media coverage as biased against their side**, regardless of the actual neutrality or bias of the coverage. In short, people with deeply held beliefs naturally become sensitive to any information that challenges or contradicts their opinions. They may therefore **view neutral reports as hostile, simply because they do not correspond to their preconceived ideas.**"*

*"A first explanation [for this bias] would be that **individuals retain information that is favourable to them less well than information that is unfavourable to them**. The identity explanation, which Olivier Klein [professor of social psychology at the ULB] considers more likely, is that **individuals who identify strongly with their own group want to have and maintain a positive image of that group**. As a result, they tend to easily categorise elements that would seem fairly neutral to outside observers as unfavourable to them."*

1.3. Analysing media coverage: difficulties related to the corpus, the method, but also to this conflict and its imbalances

It is clear that media coverage of the war in the Middle East is a subject of debate, but ultimately, is this coverage biased? And if so, in whose favour or to whose detriment? It is impossible to answer these questions without analysing media coverage.

Traditionally, the analysis of a media corpus can be quantitative and/or qualitative. Both have their merits, but also have several limitations.

Quantitative analysis seeks to measure the space given by a particular media outlet to a particular subject (in the print media: number of articles, characters, photos, front-page presence, surface area of articles and photos, etc.; in the audiovisual media: number and duration of reports, etc.), so that coverage can be compared and assessed to determine whether one or the other is disproportionate. It may also seek to quantify the number of occurrences of a particular word, taken in isolation.

Qualitative analysis can cover several dimensions: fact-checking, lexical analysis, analysis of sources cited, analysis of arguments, attribution of tone (positive, neutral, negative), compliance with journalistic ethics or with the media outlet's stated commitments or intentions (see RTBF comments cited in §1.2), etc. On this last point, it will be necessary to assess whether the media coverage of a given subject is accurate, clear, complete, balanced, impartial, etc.

While it is difficult for the media to cover the war in the Middle East, **evaluating its coverage by the media also presents several difficulties.** Some of these apply to any human analysis of media content. They relate to **corpus and methodology issues.** Others refer to elements that are specific to this war.

Let us begin with qualitative analysis. This is often subject to caution because **each evaluator has their own subjectivity, biases (including the Hostile Media Effect), prejudices, and their own assessment of the criteria to be evaluated:** what constitutes accuracy, clarity, completeness, balance, or impartiality in the media in general and for a particular subject? It seems difficult to reach a consensus with so many terms that are regularly invoked but difficult to define, complex to objectify and therefore left to the discretion of each individual. Furthermore, focusing a qualitative analysis on one or a few articles is useful over a short period of time relating to a specific event or in the case of proceedings before a judicial or professional body (in Belgium, the Journalism Ethics Council), but the selection of the corpus to be analysed may also be considered unrepresentative and likened to 'cherry-picking'.³

³ Cherry-picking: "*In rhetoric or any form of argumentation, cherry-picking is a process of selectively presenting facts or data that lend credence to one's opinion while ignoring cases that contradict it. This misleading technique, which is not necessarily intentional, is typical of confirmation bias.*" (source: Wikipedia)

In the case of a war as long and as widely covered as the war between Israel and Hamas, **a corpus covering several months or a year is preferable in order to produce quantitative results** that are statistically significant, but this type of analysis is very often limited to counting articles, article sizes or word occurrences. Qualitative assessments are therefore summary (tonality) and, too, subject to caution.

In addition to these difficulties, which are fairly typical, there is also a **war of narratives that has been raging for decades**, intertwining several dimensions (politics, ideology, history, geography, religion, law, emotions, etc.) and which has become ingrained in people's opinions, minds and hearts.

It is difficult to say whether the coverage of the war by a particular media outlet is biased or impartial when everyone has their own framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – a framing that is biased by definition, that existed before the massacres of 7 October 2023 and that has since been reinforced or shaken by what has happened in Israel or Gaza. The difficulty also applies to journalists who, despite their "desire" for objectivity and impartiality, also have their own perspectives on this conflict. This point makes it all the more important to evaluate their work.

Similarly, it is difficult to say whether the coverage of the war by a particular media outlet is accurate when Israel denies independent journalists access to Gaza and when all information coming out of Gaza is filtered or staged by Hamas and comes from local correspondents who are either militants, subservient or threatened. **It is also difficult to cover this war clearly** when the lines are blurred on the ground and it is difficult to distinguish between civilians and combatants, between adults and children,⁴ between journalists and activists, between the Palestinian population and members of Hamas, between hospitals, schools, mosques and command centres that Hamas has set up inside or underneath them.

That's not all! Analysing media coverage of the war also aims to **determine whether that coverage is balanced or unbalanced**, whether it presents both sides, their experiences and their points of view with neutrality, rigour and symmetry, giving roughly equal space to each. **But how can we assess the balance of media coverage when the subject itself is characterised by several imbalances?**

Let us explore this question further: if media coverage aims to reflect the realities of the conflict, should it not also be unbalanced? The imbalances in the war between Israel and Hamas are well known. We summarise them here:

- Imbalance between a democratic state protecting its civilian population and an Islamist terrorist movement using part of Gaza's civilian population as human shields.
- Imbalance between the most powerful and technologically advanced army in the region and an army hidden in tunnels, among civilians or behind hostages.
- Imbalance in the perception of Israel's role: attacked and victimised on 7 October, but very quickly seen as aggressor, oppressor, avenger and inhuman.

⁴ Nearly half of Gaza's population is under the age of 18 (source: 2024 report by the United Nations Population Fund, citing the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics). Is a 16-year-old carrying a weapon a child or a combatant?

- Imbalance between Israel and Gaza in the destruction of homes and infrastructure and in the images conveyed of this destruction.
- Above all, imbalance in the number of deaths:

Nearly 2,000 dead in Israel, including 1,200 on 7 October 2023 alone, and a significantly higher but unverifiable number of deaths in Gaza.

To date, the Hamas Ministry of Health has announced more than 70,000 deaths. This number has been reported by numerous media outlets around the world, particularly in Belgium.

On the subject of the number of deaths in Gaza, we reproduce below a post on LinkedIn in August 2025 by Frédéric Martel,⁵ a French writer, sociologist and journalist:

"Gaza. On the number of victims in Gaza: 60,000 dead.

A comment here on the number of victims in Gaza after two (recent) exchanges with Gazans who remained there and after two trips to the Gaza Strip (made before 7 October). This is in no way an attempt to minimise the extent of the destruction and human losses – which, according to several experts, could constitute war crimes – but rather to carefully examine the reliability and scope of the figures put forward.

1. *The available data comes mainly from the Gaza health authorities, which are under the control of Hamas. These figures, which cannot be independently verified, must therefore be considered as having been produced in a specific political and military context and originating from an organisation that France and the European Union consider to be terrorist.*
2. *Given the extent of the destruction, the fragmentation of the territory, and the difficulties in communication and access, it seems unlikely that the health authorities (Hamas or others) have an exhaustive and accurate count. These estimates are necessarily based on partial data and could well underestimate the reality. And what about natural deaths (9 per 10,000 per year on average/country) included here? (i.e. 4,000-5,000 deaths)?*
3. *As the New York Times points out, the figures provided do not distinguish between civilians and combatants. Considering that Israel's stated objective is to destroy Hamas, it is plausible that a significant proportion of the victims are combatants. This proportion, whether 20% or 50%, would significantly alter the interpretation of the data, without reducing the gravity of each human loss. But civilians and combatants cannot be lumped together without distinguishing between them, as all the media do.*
4. *Several testimonies and analyses, including those reported by Jean-Pierre Filiu (in his recent book "Un historien à Gaza" [A Historian in Gaza]), emphasise that some civilian victims were wounded or killed by Hamas itself – due to political dissension or inter-Palestinian rivalries. Having investigated on the ground in Gaza twice, I know that this is a permanent reality (Fatah members and journalists were*

⁵ Frédéric Martel is the author of *Le Rose et le Noir: les homosexuels en France depuis 1968* (Seuil, 2008), *Mainstream: enquête sur la guerre globale de la culture et des médias* (Flammarion, 2010) and *Sodoma: enquête au cœur du Vatican* (Robert Laffont, 2019).

systematically eliminated by Hamas when I was there). Again, in the absence of reliable estimates (2%? 10%? 30%?), it is problematic to include these cases in the overall toll attributed to Israel.

—> Ultimately, while every life lost is a tragedy and Israel's responsibility for attacks on civilians remains a serious and deeply troubling issue, it might be desirable to follow the example of the New York Times and present the figures in a way that specifies the source (Hamas), their composition (civilians, combatants, victims of internal violence) and the methodological limitations that arise from this.

1.4. Why this study by the Institute Jonathas, which fights anti-Semitism in Belgium?

Each of these difficulties raises methodological questions for anyone wishing to analyse media coverage of the war in the Middle East. But this does not in any way dispel the initial question: **is this coverage "verified, clear, balanced and impartial", as RTBF claims to strive for? The Institute Jonathas is asking this question of the Belgian media.**

With a mission to combat anti-Semitism and everything that promotes it in Belgium, in what capacity do we want to evaluate the media's coverage of a war taking place more than 3,000 km away? Why are we seeking to determine whether the coverage of this war is biased and skewed? **It is precisely because of our mission that we are conducting this study. Indeed,**

- **Belgians form their perceptions**, emotions and opinions of the war between Israel and Hamas indirectly, **via the media and social networks**. If media content is biased in favour of or against one side, then part of the public will adopt this bias and lean in favour of or against that side.
- **Some Belgians associate Belgian Jews with the war in the Middle East.**

Twenty-eight per cent of Belgians believe that Belgian Jews are involved in the war between Israel and Hamas. Ten per cent believe that Belgian Jews are "*complicit in genocide*" (IPSOS survey for l'Institut Jonathas, May 2024). This identification of Belgian Jews with the war in the Middle East finds one of its most violent expressions in a column by Hermann Brusselmans for HUMO magazine in August 2024: "**I see the image of a Palestinian boy under the rubble, and I imagine that this boy is my own son Roman, and the mother is my friend Lena, and I become so furious that I want to stick a sharp knife in the throat of every Jew I meet.**"

- **Hostility towards Israel is the source of anti-Semitism in Belgium most often cited by Belgians** (IPSOS poll for the Institut Jonathas, May 2024).

Twenty-four per cent of Belgians cite hostility towards Israel as the primary source of anti-Semitism in their country. Thirty-nine per cent cite this hostility among the top three sources. Fifty-eight per cent of those surveyed believe that Belgian Jews are experiencing a sharp rise in anti-Semitism as a result of the war in the Middle East, and 63% believe that Belgian Jews are concerned about their future in Belgium.

Hostility towards Israel is a reality in Belgian public opinion: 21% of Belgians say they feel antipathy towards Israelis and 9% feel antipathy towards the Israeli victims of the 7 October attack. However, this hostility stems in particular from the representations of Israel that are conveyed in Belgium, and therefore from the treatment of Israel in the Belgian media.

- **Articles and reports are not immune to anti-Semitism.** The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of anti-Semitism (see box below) gives several examples of anti-Semitism related to Israel, while adding that "*criticising Israel as one would criticise any other state cannot be considered anti-Semitism*".

According to this definition, adopted by the European Council, the Belgian Senate and many other Member States, **statements calling for the destruction of Israel, likening it to the Nazi regime or questioning its legitimacy and existence are considered antisemitic.**

Definition of antisemitism by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)

The IHRA now brings together 35 states, including Belgium, and experts with the aim of strengthening and promoting education, remembrance and research on the Holocaust and implementing the commitments of the 2000 Stockholm Declaration. Its non-binding working definition of antisemitism was adopted on 26 May 2016. It is reproduced below:

"Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."

To guide IHRA in its work, the following examples may serve as illustrations:

Manifestations might include the targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity. However, criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic. Antisemitism frequently charges Jews with conspiring to harm humanity, and it is often used to blame Jews for "why things go wrong." It is expressed in speech, writing, visual forms and action, and employs sinister stereotypes and negative character traits.

Contemporary examples of antisemitism in public life, the media, schools, the workplace, and in the religious sphere could, taking into account the overall context, include, but are not limited to:

- Calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion.

- Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonising, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective — such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions.
- Accusing Jews as a people of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Jewish person or group, or even for acts committed by non-Jews.
- Denying the fact, scope, mechanisms (e.g. gas chambers) or intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany and its supporters and accomplices during World War II (the Holocaust).
- Accusing the Jews as a people, or Israel as a state, of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust.
- Accusing Jewish citizens of being more loyal to Israel, or to the alleged priorities of Jews worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations.
- Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour.
- Applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.
- Using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (e.g., claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterize Israel or Israelis.
- Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.
- Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel.

Antisemitic acts are criminal when they are so defined by law (for example, denial of the Holocaust or distribution of antisemitic materials in some countries).

Criminal acts are antisemitic when the targets of attacks, whether they are people or property – such as buildings, schools, places of worship and cemeteries – are selected because they are, or are perceived to be, Jewish or linked to Jews.

Antisemitic discrimination is the denial to Jews of opportunities or services available to others and is illegal in many countries.

1.5. Our decision to focus on the RTBF in light of the Asserson Report on the BBC

Published in September 2024, the [Asserson Report](#) (named after the lawyer Trevor Asserson who led the project) **examines the BBC's coverage of the war in the Middle East in English and Arabic over a four-month period, from 7 October 2023 to 7 February 2024.**

The report focuses on the BBC 1) because the BBC is a public corporation funded by British taxpayers and accountable to them, and 2) because, in addition to the rules that apply to all media, the BBC has committed to complying with the [BBC Editorial Guidelines](#).

The Asserson Report has several complementary components: human analysis and ChatGPT analysis of the sympathy generated by BBC content; study of omissions, inaccuracies, BBC language ("analysis of BBC obscure and ambiguous language") and the description of victims; focus on a few BBC reporters.

In light of the Asserson Report, we have chosen to focus on RTBF:

- because **RTBF is also a public company** financed by taxpayers,
- because it is subject to [specific obligations](#) (public service missions, management contract), in addition to the rules applicable to all French-speaking Belgian media: [Code of Journalistic Ethics](#), [Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel](#) (CSA) (French-speaking Audiovisual Council), etc.,
- because, in addition, it has made a commitment that all its content must comply with its own internal code, the [RTBF Code of Ethics](#) (whose full name is "*internal regulations relating to the processing of information and staff ethics*").

In the French-speaking Belgian media landscape, RTBF is therefore **the media outlet most constrained by legislation in terms of news reporting**. As with the BBC, it therefore seems useful to assess whether the principles enshrined in legislation and affirmed in several recent articles (see §1.2) are being properly applied by RTBF in its coverage of the war in the Middle East.

Our focus on RTBF comes at a sensitive time for several players in the European public broadcasting sector, with regard to issues of finance, but also pluralism and impartiality. The debates and work currently underway in countries close to Belgium should also be borne in mind. They echo debates in Belgium on the missions of RTBF, pluralism and media independence.

In the United Kingdom, the BBC is regularly called into question, particularly for breaches of impartiality on subjects such as the war in the Middle East (see §3.7), Donald Trump, racism, climate change and the debate on gender transition. In July 2024, more than 200 employees and others close to the BBC signed an [open letter](#) calling for an urgent investigation into "*systemic problems of anti-Semitism and bias*" at the BBC. In November 2025, the publication of an internal report on the BBC's failings led to the resignation of the Director-General and the Director of News, as well as the opening of a parliamentary inquiry.

In France, following a controversy involving two France Inter journalists, the National Assembly set up a "commission of inquiry into the neutrality, functioning and financing of public broadcasting" in November 2025.

At the same time, the Audiovisual and Digital Communication Regulatory Authority (ARCOM) launched a mission to "clarify the scope of the principle of impartiality and the obligations it entails for public broadcasting". This mission will have to specify "to what extent [these obligations] differ from **the requirements of pluralism and honesty** in the treatment of information applicable to all audiovisual media, [...] and how the general principle of **public service neutrality**, which also applies to public media, is reconciled with **their independence and editorial freedom**".

With regard to RTBF news, the CSA states: "*RTBF is committed to guaranteeing pluralistic, balanced and accessible news, while ensuring complementarity with the print media and private media*". We supplement this obligation with the **articles of the RTBF Code of Ethics** that are most relevant to our study:

Article 2 – "Every citizen has the right to **accurate and complete information** and has the right to know the facts and **the main points of view** on any issue of importance."

Article 11 – "On RTBF's audiovisual services, RTBF staff members shall ensure that **controversial issues are dealt with by referring to differing opinions**, referring to Chapter III of this code concerning information and the work of journalists, and shall **not express any commitment or conviction in any way**, particularly through words, gestures, signs or emblems. RTBF staff members who have publicly and partisanly engaged in a debate that divides public opinion shall, for the duration of the controversy, refrain from addressing this sensitive issue on RTBF's audiovisual services."

Article 14 – "RTBF journalists must **respect the facts, seek the truth** and defend the freedom and independence of information, commentary and criticism."

Article 17 – "News programmes shall be produced in a **spirit of objectivity**, without any prior censorship or interference from any public or private authority."

Article 19 – "**The spirit of objectivity** requires journalists to demonstrate competence, critical thinking, precision in their vocabulary, clarity in their presentation, accuracy in both their fidelity to the facts and in all forms of communication, honesty without distortion aimed at justifying a particular or partisan conclusion, and fairness through the **impartial reflection of significant points of view**."

Article 20 – "A **balanced representation on the air** of different trends and movements of opinion is one of the foundations of objectivity."

Article 22 – "All news programmes must **distinguish between facts and journalistic opinions and commentary**. Even in programmes where facts, opinions and commentary are closely intertwined, journalists must take care to avoid any confusion."

Article 23 – "When commentary is provided by an RTBF journalist, **it cannot be equated with bias**. It can therefore only be an analysis based on reason and rigour and derived from sufficient knowledge of the subject matter, in order to enable the public to better understand the ins and outs of the issue."

Article 44 – "In **exceptional situations**, such as major international tensions or periods of internal unrest, there shall be no derogation from the fundamental rules governing information at RTBF. Their application shall be subject to **increased vigilance, avoiding the relaying of fragmentary information**, rumours or slogans likely to influence demonstrations that could lead to unrest."

1.6. Assessing the sympathy generated by articles: a key issue in the information war

Analysing the effects of articles on the public – and in particular analysing the emotions generated by articles – complements quantitative and qualitative analysis, both of which focus on describing and evaluating the content of articles. In view of the information war unfolding around the world over the conflict in the Middle East, it opens up a new field of analysis that is at least as important as the other two.

The [Asserson Report](#) included this approach in its analysis of the BBC's coverage of the first four months of the war. **It chose to study the sympathy generated by the BBC's web articles for six actors** (Israel, Gaza, the Israelis, the Palestinians, the Israeli army and Hamas) because:

- sympathy directly reflects the emotional tone of media coverage,
- it is a clear and effective entry point for assessing impartiality,
- it also allows us to assess whether the articles give space to the lived experiences of individuals on both sides.

On the subject of sympathy, Dr Haran Shani-Narkiss, who led this section of the Asserson Report, writes:

“Evoking sympathy for both sides of a conflict does not mean condoning or justifying harmful actions. Instead, it means acknowledging the humanity and experiences of all parties involved.

This approach promotes a more profound understanding, fosters empathy, and supports the ethical standards of journalism, ultimately contributing to a more informed and less polarized public. Creating equal sympathy for different sides in a conflict ensures that all voices and perspectives are represented and acknowledged, allowing a nuanced understanding and reducing dehumanization. This is important for illuminating the root causes of conflicts and fostering a dialogue that promotes peaceful resolutions.

Conversely, by promoting a specific agenda or aligning with one group, the media perpetuates negative stereotypes and prejudices that may exist between different groups involved in the conflict. This may promote false narratives and misinformation, which can further escalate tensions and hinder efforts towards resolution, enforcing an “Us vs. Them” mentality.”

It is clear that the sympathy created by the media for one side or the other is a key issue in any information war, and in particular in the war of 7 October. Following the example of the Asserson Report and drawing on work carried out on the BBC, **we therefore chose to study the sympathy generated by RTBF web articles covering this war.**

If sympathy is a key issue in the information war, the absence of sympathy is just as important. In the case of the war in the Middle East, it can also be seen as a marker. This is the subject of sociologist Eva Illouz's⁶ short and brilliant essay entitled *Le 8 Octobre, Généalogie d'une haine vertueuse* (Tracts, Gallimard, 2024). In it, she analyses the absence of compassion from 8 October 2023 onwards, immediately after the massacres perpetrated by Hamas.

What Eva Illouz writes about compassion and its absence also applies, to a large extent, to the sympathy generated by RTBF articles for certain actors, but not for others.

"As we know, Jean-Jacques Rousseau placed pity – today's 'compassion' – at the very heart of what he called human nature. In his famous 1754 Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men, this human nature is defined as a 'natural repugnance to see any sentient being suffer or perish, especially our fellow human beings'.

In his 1840 treatise entitled The Foundations of Morality, Arthur Schopenhauer rejected Kant's categorical imperative and saw compassion (Mitleid) as the foundation of morality. And it is precisely because such morality does not presuppose reason that Charles Darwin considered "sympathy" to be the strongest of man's evolved "instincts". According to him, human groups that most encouraged sympathy, in the form of caring for others, would not only have prospered the most, but also had the greatest number of descendants. Countless psychological experiments confirm the quasi-innate nature of compassion. There is therefore broad consensus that compassion is universal, instinctive and involuntary.⁷

"The work of social psychology researchers [...] has established that the emergence and expression of compassion can be hindered by three factors: the perception of proximity or distance between oneself and others who are suffering; the attribution of responsibility for suffering to the victim; and the fact that those who are suffering are perceived as powerful. The Israeli victims were thus perceived as distant and foreign, as responsible for their fate and strong enough to cope with aggression."⁸

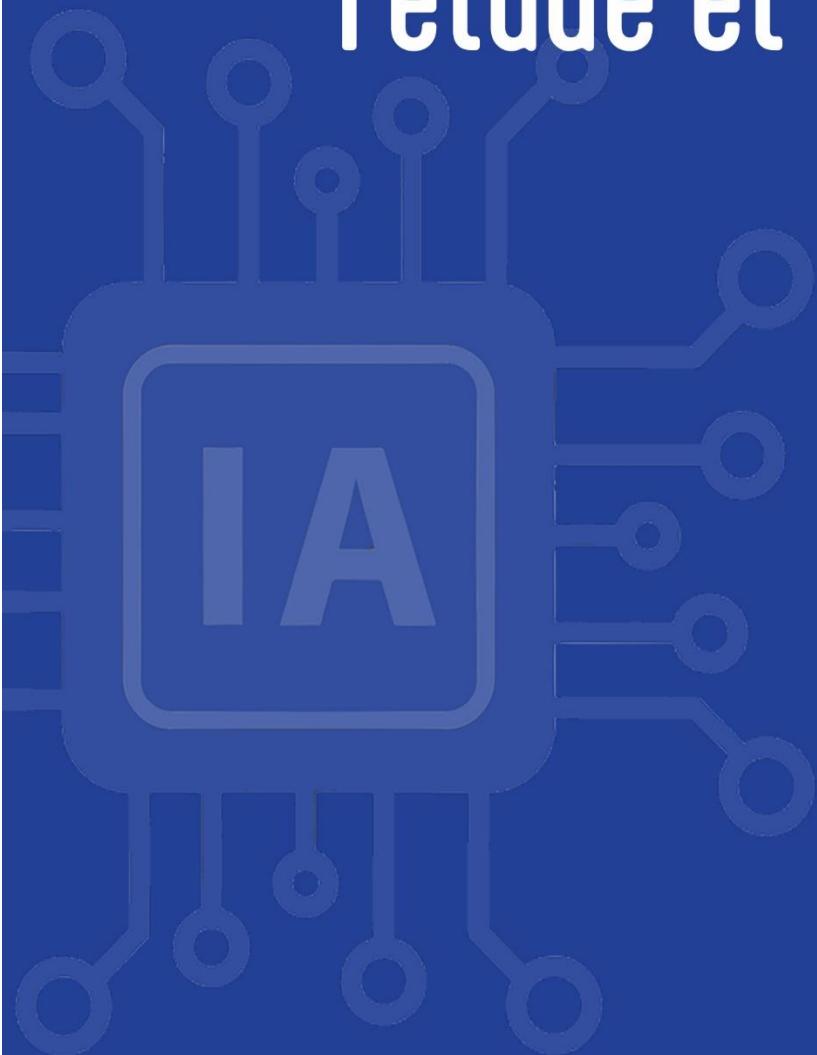
Eva Illouz sees the lack of compassion on 8 October as a marker of what she calls "*virtuous hatred*", which manifests itself in particular through "*ontological hatred of Israel, that is, hatred of the very fact that Israel exists*". Her analyses echo our own study. **It will be useful to bear them in mind when reading our results.**

⁶ Eva Illouz is Director of Studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS, Paris) and author of, among other works, *Explosive Modernity: The Trouble with Inner Life* (Gallimard, 2025), *Emotions Against Democracy* (Premier Parallèle, 2022), *The End of Love: An Inquiry into Contemporary Despair* (Le Seuil, 2020), *Happycracy: How the Happiness Industry Has Taken Over Our Lives* (Premier Parallèle, 2018) and *Why Love Hurts: The Experience of Love in Modernity* (Le Seuil, 2012).

⁷ 8 October, *Généalogie d'une haine vertueuse* (Tracts, Gallimard, 2024), p.10.

⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

2. Présentation de l'étude et du corpus



2.1 . Reproducing in Belgium the study by ChatGPT, conducted in the United Kingdom on the BBC

Our study replicates, in Belgium and over a period of twelve months, the ChatGPT sympathy analysis carried out in the United Kingdom for the Asserson Report over a period of four months.

As with the BBC website articles, it seeks to assess whether the articles on the RTBF website covering the war in the Middle East between 7 October 2023 and 7 October 2024 generate sympathy for six actors in this war: Israel, Gaza, the Israelis, the Palestinians, the Israeli army and Hamas.

Our study was conducted by the same team of scientists who carried out the ChatGPT sympathy analysis in the Asserson Report. It uses exactly the same methodology as that analysis (see §2.2). It benefits from all the work and checks that were carried out to ensure the reliability of the Asserson Report's findings.

Let's start with the team that conducted the BBC study and the RTBF study. This team of neuroscience specialists is led by Dr Haran Shani-Narkiss, founder and CEO of [Innohives AI Solutions](#), a London-based research company.

Innohives offers "*AI-powered quantitative research that turns unstructured data into robust insights, enabling smarter, faster, evidence-based decisions.*" It draws on a network of experts in several disciplines: artificial intelligence, data science, behavioural science and translation. It continues and expands on the work of RIMe Data Science, the entity that performed the data analysis and sentiment analysis using ChatGPT for the Asserson Report.

Before founding Innohives, Dr Haran Shani-Narkiss was a Senior Research Fellow at the Sainsbury Wellcome Centre for Neural Circuits and Behaviour at University College London (UCL). He was a postdoctoral researcher at this UCL research centre from 2021 to 2023. Dr. Haran Shani-Narkiss began his education with a background in music, followed by studies in psychology. He holds a PhD in computational neuroscience from the Edmond and Lily Safra Centre for Brain Sciences (ELSC) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His work focuses on emotions, behaviours, opinion formation, the underlying brain processes and, more generally, the interactions between neuroscience and behavioural science.

The Asserson Report explains the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) by its desire "not to be subject to the subjective judgements inherent in human evaluators". It explains the choice of ChatGPT by 1) the breadth of its knowledge base, which includes media content from all countries, 2) its nuanced understanding of human emotions,⁹ 3) its ability to classify forms of sympathy without requiring extensive prior training, and 4) its ability to process large volumes of data quickly, accurately and robustly.

⁹ The Asserson Report cites Kristina Schaaf et al.'s study "*Exploring ChatGPT's Empathic Abilities*," presented in 2023 at the 11th International Conference on Affective Computing and Intelligent Interaction.

The sympathy study in the Asserson Report used ChatGPT-4, version 4-0613 – a version released in June 2023 with a knowledge cut-off date of September 2021. ChatGPT-4-0613 has, by default, no knowledge of events or texts after that date. **It therefore knows nothing about the massacres of 7 October 2023 or the war that followed**, unlike any human evaluator who would examine a corpus of articles relating to that war.

Our study on RTBF benefited from all the work and checks carried out for the BBC study, as both studies use the same methodology and tools.

The Asserson Report on the BBC includes two parallel analyses of sympathy, as well as a positioning of the BBC in relation to hundreds of media outlets from all countries:

- **a comprehensive analysis of BBC content in English and Arabic (articles, photos, videos) by six lawyers** specialising in argumentation and analysis.

The instructions and analysis grids provided to the lawyers are included [in Appendix 4](#) of the Asserson Report. They are more detailed than the questions asked of ChatGPT to assess sympathy (see next point). These lawyers held weekly debriefing and experience-sharing meetings with Trevor Asserson. Twenty per cent of their work was reviewed by a highly experienced lawyer.

- **An assessment by ChatGPT-4 of the sympathy generated by the BBC articles in English and Arabic**, using six independent questions for the articles (one question per actor tested) and six independent questions for the article headlines.
- Using the global database [The GDELT Project](#),¹⁰ a **corpus of 342,559 articles published by 376 media outlets from all countries between 7 October 2023 and 7 February 2024** was compiled, and then the sympathy generated by the headlines of these articles for Israel and Gaza was analysed. The work involved in compiling and qualifying the corpus is described on page 35 of the Asserson Report. The analysis of sympathy conducted on this corpus gives a fairly good idea of the positioning of the BBC in English and the BBC in Arabic in the global media landscape.

In total, 1,481 BBC articles in English and 574 BBC articles in Arabic, previously translated into English (translation by ChatGPT, then quality control by humans), **were analysed. The comprehensive analysis of these articles by the six lawyers and ChatGPT's assessment of the sympathy generated by these same articles yielded very consistent results.**

In order to ensure the reliability of the results, Dr Shani-Narkiss's team also carried out the following checks on a sample of articles (see [Appendix 5](#) of the Asserson Report):

- Ten iterations of the same procedure, five times changing the order of the questions and five times with slight changes in the prompt (the instruction given to ChatGPT);
- Evaluation of the same articles by ten experienced solicitors, each solicitor answering the same questions as ChatGPT for the entire sample (i.e. ten sets of answers);

¹⁰ GDELT: Global Database of Events, Language and Tone.

"Supported by Google Jigsaw, the GDELT Project monitors the world's broadcast, print, and web news from nearly every corner of every country in over 100 languages and identifies the people, locations, organisations, themes, sources, emotions, counts, quotes, images and events driving our global society every second of every day, creating a free open platform for computing on the entire world."

- Comparison of the ten sets of answers from the ten human evaluators and the ten sets of answers provided by ChatGPT;
- Asking ChatGPT to explain its answers when it indicated that a particular article created sympathy for a particular actor in the war.

These checks showed similar results between the ten iterations of ChatGPT, between the ten human evaluations, and in the comparison between ChatGPT and the solicitors. ChatGPT also explained its answers in a completely satisfactory manner.

In view of all the work and checks carried out on the BBC, **we chose to focus our study of RTBF on ChatGPT's analysis of the sympathy created. This choice is based on a Big Data approach**, where individual results, article by article, are like the pixels in an image, and what matters is the image created by all the pixels together. **It allows us to:**

- **study a large corpus** and objectify phenomena over a long period of time that are often invisible to the naked eye, going beyond quantitative descriptions,
- **to free ourselves from human evaluators, their subjectivity** and their conscious or unconscious framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,
- to obtain **solid and reproducible results** thanks to a rigorous scientific approach whose robustness and reliability have been verified,
- to move from qualitative assessments of article content based on multiple criteria to **an assessment of the effect articles have on the public based on a single criterion: sympathy**,
- **to provide an innovative solution** to the difficulties and questions raised by any analysis of media content, not to mention the specificities of the war between Israel and Hamas,
- **to secure our project** by using a team, methodology and tools that have already proven themselves with the BBC,
- to be able to **compare the results obtained for RTBF** with the results obtained by the same team and using the same method for the BBC in English, the BBC in Arabic and more than 350 media outlets (§3.7).

While it is clear that Artificial Intelligence is transforming the profession of journalism, the production of news and the public's access to information, **it also appears that it will transform the analysis and evaluation of content produced by journalists** and that it may soon be used to assess the compliance of this content with the requirements of journalistic ethics.

Studies based on Artificial Intelligence are beginning to be published on these subjects.

In France, in November 2025, the Thomas More Institute presented a study entitled "[Fair treatment and political orientation of Radio France's morning programmes](#)", which focuses on the main morning news programmes on France Inter, France Info and France Culture in October 2025, covering approximately 200 hours of programming, 2,600 journalistic and editorial statements and mentions of 168 political figures. The study assigns each statement an index of hostility or benevolence and each column or programme an index of left-right orientation. The Thomas More Institute provides the following answer to the question "**Why AI?**":

"AI makes it possible to analyse fairness of treatment and political orientation reliably because it is not concerned with intentions, but with what is actually said. It applies the same criteria to each quote: tone, evaluative vocabulary, ideological consistency, without preference for any guest or political family. Where a human observer selects isolated excerpts or projects their biases, AI systematically measures the entire discourse and makes the results verifiable and reproducible. In order not to bias the results, AI establishes these classifications completely independently, based on all the human knowledge at its disposal."

2.2. The same four-step methodology for RTBF as for the BBC

In spring 2025, Innohives replicated the RTBF study using the same actors and prompts as in the BBC study. The results therefore focus on the sympathy generated or not by RTBF articles for **six actors**: Israel, Gaza, Israelis, Palestinians, the Israeli Defence Force (or Tsahal) and Hamas. The analysis focused separately on articles including their headlines and on article headlines alone. It did not cover videos embedded in articles or photos illustrating them.

For each article in the corpus, Innohives indicates whether or not the entire article creates sympathy for each of the six actors studied, and then whether or not the article's headline alone creates sympathy for the same six actors, **resulting in twelve results in TRUE or FALSE format**. When the result for an article and an actor is FALSE, i.e. when ChatGPT responds that the article does not generate sympathy for that actor, the result does not allow us to say whether the article generates antipathy for that actor or whether the article is neutral, i.e. it generates neither sympathy nor antipathy.

Here we reproduce a **document from Innohives describing the different stages of the RTBF study**: 1) Creation of the corpus, 2) Refining and checking the data, 3) Translation into English, 4) Analysis by language model (LLM).

"1) Creation of the corpus of articles from the RTBF.be website

We implemented two complementary collection strategies, relying exclusively on the public search features offered by the site.

First, we performed an extraction based on keyword queries, collecting all articles returned by the internal search engine from a predefined list of terms. This list included references to geopolitical entities and actors (.g. Israel, Palestine, Gaza, Hamas, Tsahal) as well as lexical variants related to anti-Semitism (e.g. anti-Semitism, anti-Semitic).

Secondly, we systematically identified all articles published in two specific sections – or thematic tabs – established and maintained by the RTBF editorial team, namely: **War in the Near East** and **Middle East**. These sections reflect the thematic structure adopted by RTBF to organise its content relating to Middle East affairs.

Only articles published between **7 October 2023** and **7 October 2024** were included.

2) Data refinement and verification

First, duplicates were eliminated. These resulted from overlaps between the two collection methods, with some articles appearing simultaneously in keyword search results and in editorial sections. In order to avoid any over-representation or distortion of subsequent analyses, the identification of duplicates was based on the examination of similarity measures, in particular the comparison of URLs and titles.

In a second step, additional filtering was performed based on keywords. Although based on lexical queries in the RTBF's internal search engine, the first stage of collection sometimes led to the inclusion of articles that were not thematically relevant, i.e. that did not actually address the subject under study. To remedy this limitation, we conducted a full textual analysis of each article to verify the actual presence of at least one of the central keywords (e.g. Israel, Gaza, Hamas, anti-Semitism) within the body of the text. Articles with no occurrence of these terms were systematically excluded from the final corpus.

This two-step process made it possible to build a homogeneous, manually validated corpus that provides a robust representation of RTBF's media coverage of the Israel-Hamas war and related issues linked to anti-Semitism during the defined time period.

3) Translation of articles into English

As we did for the BBC's Arabic article corpus and as we are doing for other studies on Russian or Farsi content, we have translated all the texts and titles of the articles in the RTBF corpus into English using ChatGPT-4, a model whose translation performance has been the subject of several scientific evaluations and publications.¹¹ We used the following prompt:

"I need a direct, word-for-word (where possible) translation of the following French text into English. Please translate every phrase and word accurately, preserving the original meaning, nuance, and context. Do not skip any part of the text. The goal is to capture the full intent and detail of the original French text."

As part of our internal quality control procedures, we then had the accuracy and consistency of a sample of randomly selected translations checked by human translators who are native speakers of French.

4) Language model (LLM) analysis

As with the BBC study, we used version 0613 of OpenAI's GPT-4 model, with its default settings (model temperature set to 0.7), to systematically classify articles to determine whether the texts and headlines expressed sympathy towards six actors in the conflict. As the cut-off date for GPT-4-0613's knowledge was September 2021, the model had no knowledge of the attack on 7 October 2023 or the war that this

¹¹ See in particular [Benchmarking GPT-4 against Human Translators: A Comprehensive Evaluation Across Languages, Domains, and Expertise Levels](#), Yan et al., November 2024.

attack triggered. Each article was submitted to the GPT-4 model together with a fixed prompt, asking the following six binary questions:

"Please answer only YES or NO to the following questions:

1. Does this text create sympathy for Israel?
2. Does this text create sympathy for Gaza?
3. Does this text create sympathy for the Israeli people?
4. Does this text create sympathy for the Palestinian people?
5. Does this text create sympathy for the Israeli military?
6. Does this text generate sympathy for Hamas?

The model's task was strictly limited to producing a binary response ("YES" or "NO") for each of the questions asked. The model's memory was erased after each query. Queries for articles in the RTBF corpus were therefore independent of each other. The model was therefore unable to develop its own knowledge of the war.

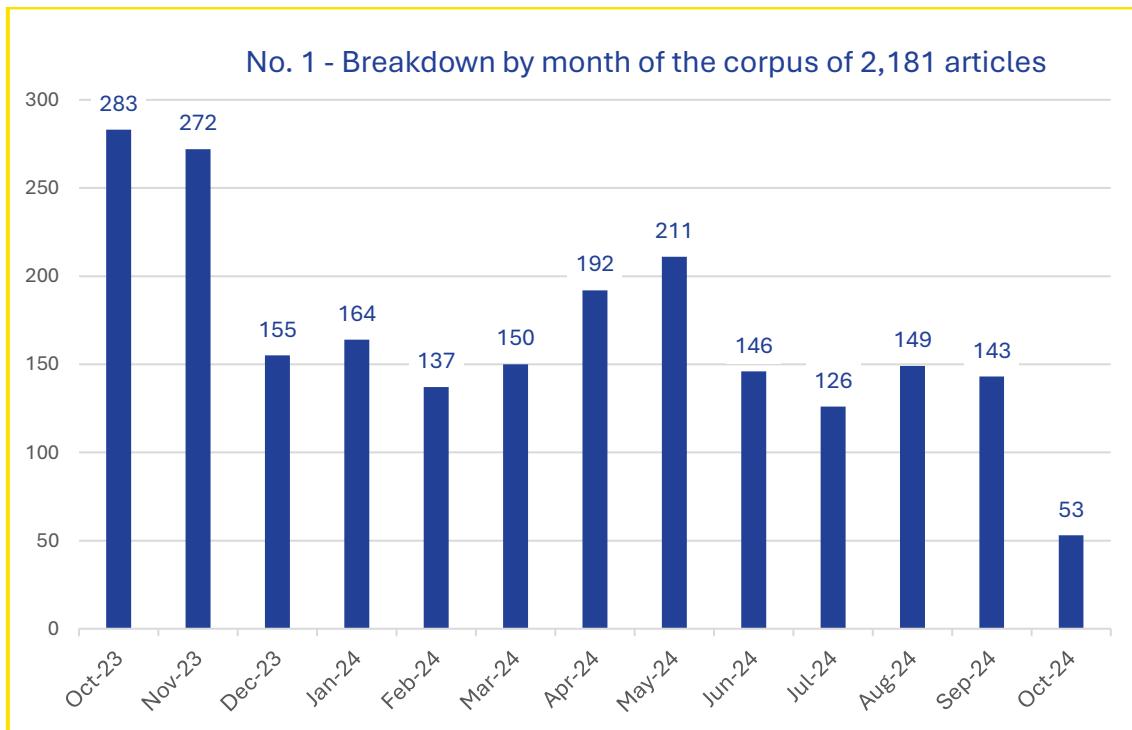
This procedure ensured consistent, reproducible and extensible annotation of the perception of sympathy expressed in the texts towards six actors in the Middle East war.

2.3. RTBF corpus analysed: 2,181 articles between 7 October 2023 and 7 October 2024

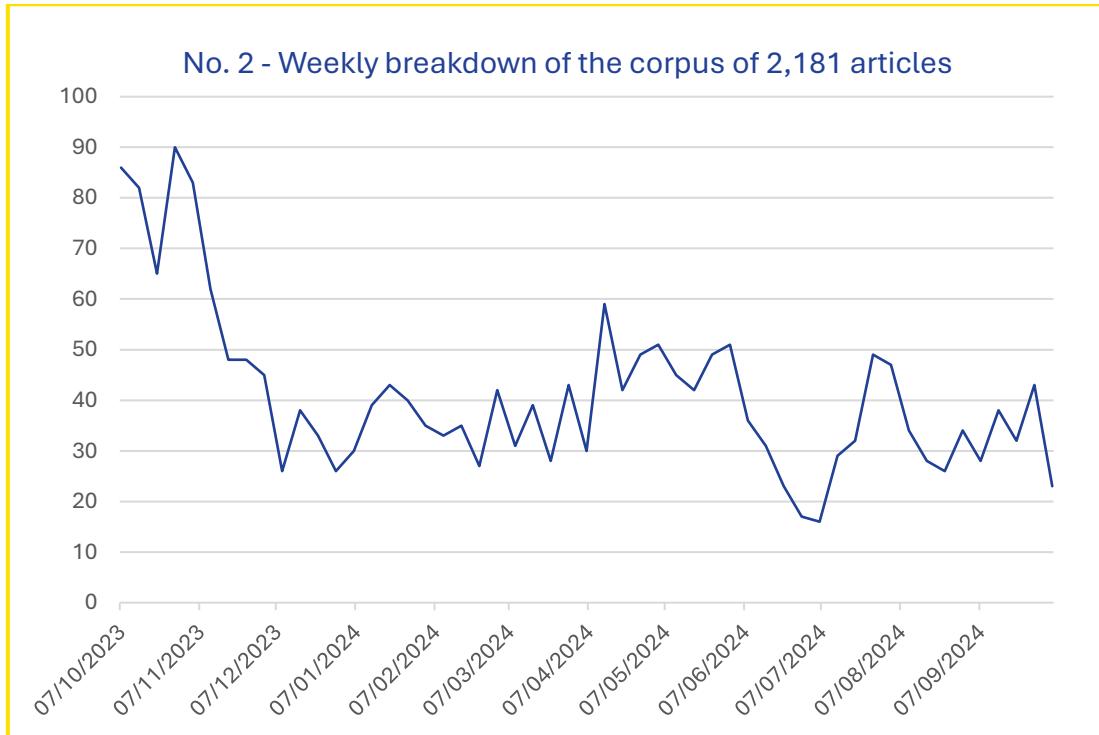
The corpus collected by Innohives on the RTBF website between 7 October 2023 and 7 October 2024 comprises **2,181 articles, an average of 182 articles per month and 41.5 articles per week** (the period studied is 52 weeks and 3 days).

It naturally includes news feeds or "LIVE" updates, which RTBF updates several times a day when they cover the war in the Middle East. Regardless of the number of updates during the day, Innohives considered each "LIVE" feed as a single article. It also includes articles reporting on RTBF press reviews, provided that the war in the Middle East was covered in the press review.

The corpus is broken down as follows by month and by week.



The "October 2023" bar covers the period from 7 October to 31 October 2023. **The "October 2024" bar is not representative as it only covers the first 7 days of that month.**



7 October 2023 was a Saturday. In this study, weeks are defined as beginning on Saturday. The last point on the weekly curve (week of 5 October 2024) only shows the number of articles for 5, 6 and 7 October 2024, i.e. 3 days out of 7.

The period from 7 October to 7 December 2023 includes the massacres of 7 October, the start of the Israeli ground offensive and the first truce with the release of hostages. It accounts for 25% of the corpus, with an average of 68 articles per week, or **nearly 10 articles per day**.

Over the following 10 months, RTBF's website coverage of the war in the Middle East stabilised at an average of 36 articles per week, or **more than 5 articles per day**.

The war of 7 October unfolded in several phases.

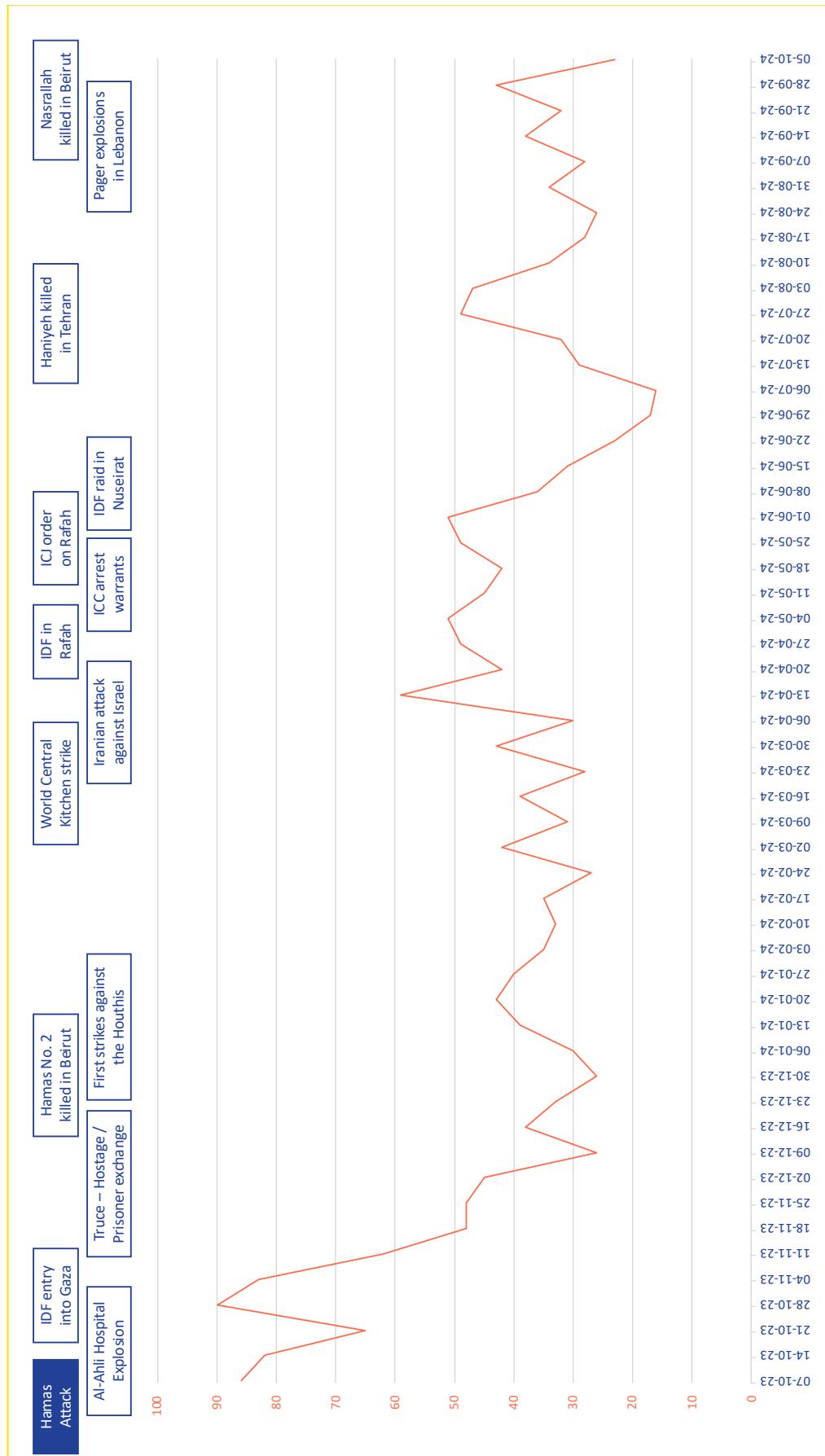
In graph 3, we have indicated the key events of the first twelve months of the war, alongside the curve showing the number of articles per week. These elements may explain the peaks and troughs in the curve, even though the quantitative assessment of RTBF's coverage of the war is not the subject of our study.

Nor does our study focus on RTBF's editorial choices:

- the choice to cover or not to cover, on a given day, the war in the Middle East or its repercussions around the world,
- the choice to cover one event of the war rather than another that took place on the same day,
- the choice to cover this war rather than other international news, particularly other wars taking place at the same time, or the opposite choice to cover other international news
- the choice to cover a particular repercussion of the war in the Middle East in Belgium rather than other national news, or the opposite choice, etc.

Editorial choices are, of course, the responsibility of RTBF. It is up to RTBF to make choices in line with its obligations and commitments (Code of Ethics, etc.), just as it is up to RTBF to check this compliance ex post.

No. 3 – Key events in the war in the Middle East between 7 October 2023 and 7 October 2024



2.4. Nearly 70% of articles attributed collectively to "the editorial team"

Nearly 70% of the 2,181 articles in the corpus (1,504 articles) were written by the RTBF editorial team, with no mention of the name of a journalist. Almost all of these articles (1,474) are based on dispatches from AFP, BELGA or other press agencies, with no further details.

RTBF's DIRECT news feeds, which are updated several times throughout the day, are always signed "the editorial team" because they are the result of collective work, given their hourly frequency.

Assuming (maximalist hypothesis) that there was a LIVE report on the war in the Middle East every day of the year, there are still 1,139 articles in the strict sense (1,504 - 365), or more than 50% of the corpus, which are collectively attributed to the editorial staff.

The other 677 articles in the corpus were written either directly by the BELGA or AFP agencies (55 articles reproducing a dispatch verbatim) or by one or more journalists who are identified by name (622 articles) and who, in some cases, also rely on press agencies.

In total, BELGA, AFP or press agencies are cited as sources or authors for 1,617 articles, or 74% of the corpus. We find 842 citations for BELGA, 480 for AFP and 303 for agencies (some articles cite both AFP and BELGA as sources).

The widespread use of press agency dispatches is commonplace in many online media newsrooms. Depending on the positioning, audience and editorial line of their media outlet, journalists in these newsrooms have the following tasks:

- Selecting the news items to be published on their website from among the agency dispatches.
- Editing or rewriting (more or less extensively) the news item(s) that provide the raw material for each of their web articles.
- Often, they rework the headline and lead paragraph that summarise the article and are designed to entice the audience to click and read.
- Sometimes, supplementing the news item(s) with original content (interviews, data, local news, ...).
- Choosing the photos that will illustrate the article on the website, particularly the photo at the top of the article, which must also entice the public to click and read.
- Format the article for a website (subheadings, links, etc.), then publish it online.
- If necessary, update the article in line with developments in the news and new agency dispatches.

Regardless of whether the changes made by journalists to the news reports are marginal, minor or significant (while, of course, complying with the contractual obligations binding the media outlet to the agencies), articles based on one or more agency news reports are articles belonging to the media outlet that publishes them, the result of its editorial choices and subject to its editorial responsibility.

In principle, there is no reason why the editorial team of the RTBF website should operate very differently, even if, unlike purely web-based media, it can also draw on all the original content produced by RTBF's radio and TV media.

In an article entitled ["How does RTBF select the news published on its website?"](#) dated 5 December 2024, journalist Xavier Lambert writes: **"The very first step in journalism is the selection of news items. Why we publish one news item and not another is an editorial decision. Our choices are based on the editorial values of the news: public interest, (direct) impact on French-speaking Belgian citizens, specificity, potential added value, relevance to our programmes, length and existence of a video."** After specifying RTBF's criteria for selecting articles, the journalist states that **"RTBF must assess the reliability of its sources, [...] make the information accessible [...] and] enrich the information"**. He adds: **"We will always seek to bring an RTBF 'plus' to the news item. With this question: is the information complete?"** **Our case studies (see Part⁴) show that this is not always the case.**

With regard to the corpus analysed in this study, the fact that the majority of articles are based on agency dispatches is **hardly surprising when covering a conflict abroad in a war zone that is off-limits to journalists**, even though RTBF works with two correspondents in Israel and sometimes sends journalists on assignment to the Middle East.

2.5. More than 200 journalists named in just over 600 articles signed by name

622 of the 2,181 articles in the corpus were written by journalists identified by name.

What is surprising at first glance is the high number of journalists, 209 in total, who wrote and signed articles related to the war in the Middle East on the RTBF website between 7 October 2023 and 7 October 2024. Admittedly, this result needs to be refined:

- some authors are freelancers, external contributors or correspondents;
- other authors are RTBF journalists who do not cover international news but who are called upon to write about the repercussions of the war in Belgium, in culture, sport, etc.

Verification is a long and tedious process because, although each journalist has an 'Author' web page with a few words or lines of biography and access to the articles they have written, the website does not provide access to an 'Authors' section, which would be a kind of editorial directory.

Let us focus on the 77 journalists who have each written at least three articles in the corpus: **16 journalists have each written at least ten articles, 24 journalists have each written between five and nine articles, and 37 journalists have each written three or four articles.**

We looked at the roles and titles, as they appear on the RTBF website or on LinkedIn, for the top 40 journalists in terms of number of articles signed.

Broadly speaking, four main profiles emerged: website editorial staff (15 journalists), international editorial staff (9 journalists), Decrypte/fact-checking team (6 journalists), presenters, press review, editorialists (6 journalists regularly on the radio or TV).

Daniel Fontaine, who "*is undoubtedly [in the editorial department] the leading specialist on what is happening in Israel and the occupied territories [because] he has been following the issue for 15 years*",¹² appears in third place, but ultimately only has 29 articles to his name, or 1.3% of the corpus.

RTBF only states that it employs 1,900 people. It does not disclose any information about the organisation and staffing levels of its editorial department. According to information from a few years ago, **RTBF has around 280 journalists**.¹³

In the absence of more recent and accurate data on RTBF's workforce, it appears that:

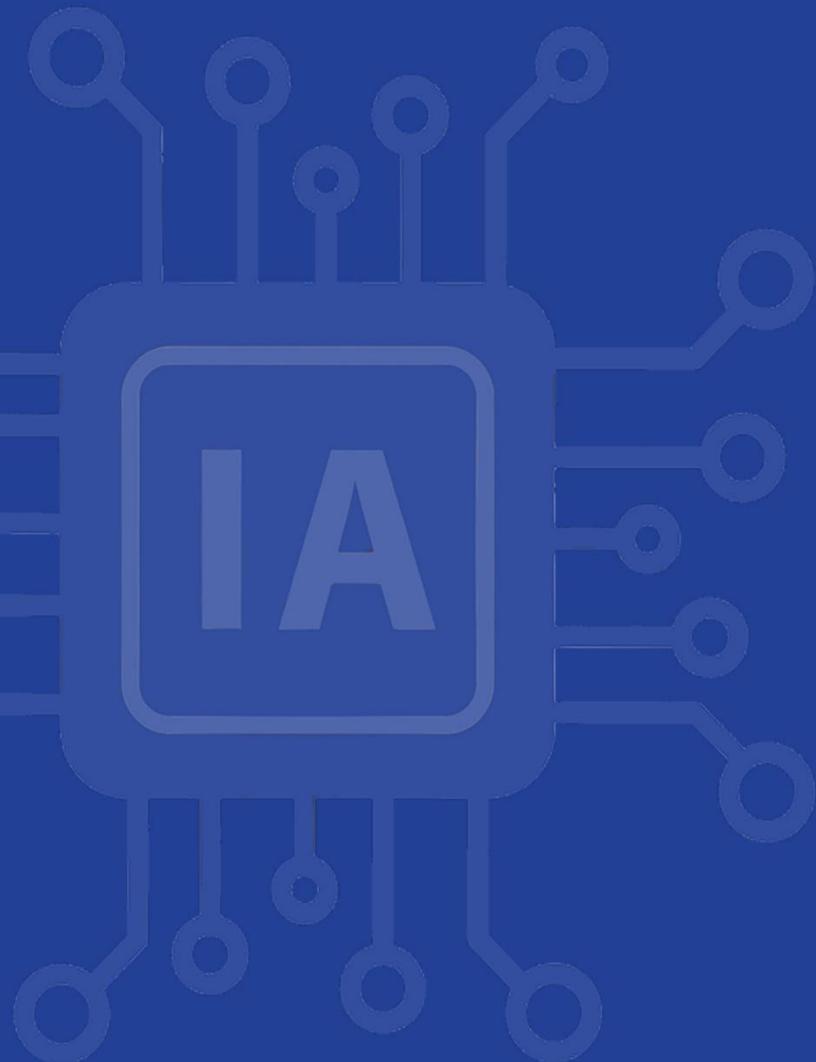
- **nearly 75% of RTBF journalists (209/280) wrote at least one article** on the war in the Middle East on the RTBF website between 7 October 2023 and 7 October 2024;
- **40 journalists each wrote at least five articles** and nearly 100 journalists each wrote a single article on this war.

It is difficult to imagine that the RTBF editorial team has so many specialists in this region of the world.

¹² RTBF article dated 25 May 2021: ["Ultimately, is the Israeli-Palestinian 'conflict' really... a 'conflict'?"](#)

¹³ This figure appears in a 2019 article with a title that is highly relevant to our subject: ["News agency reports: is RTBF 'just copying and pasting'?"](#)

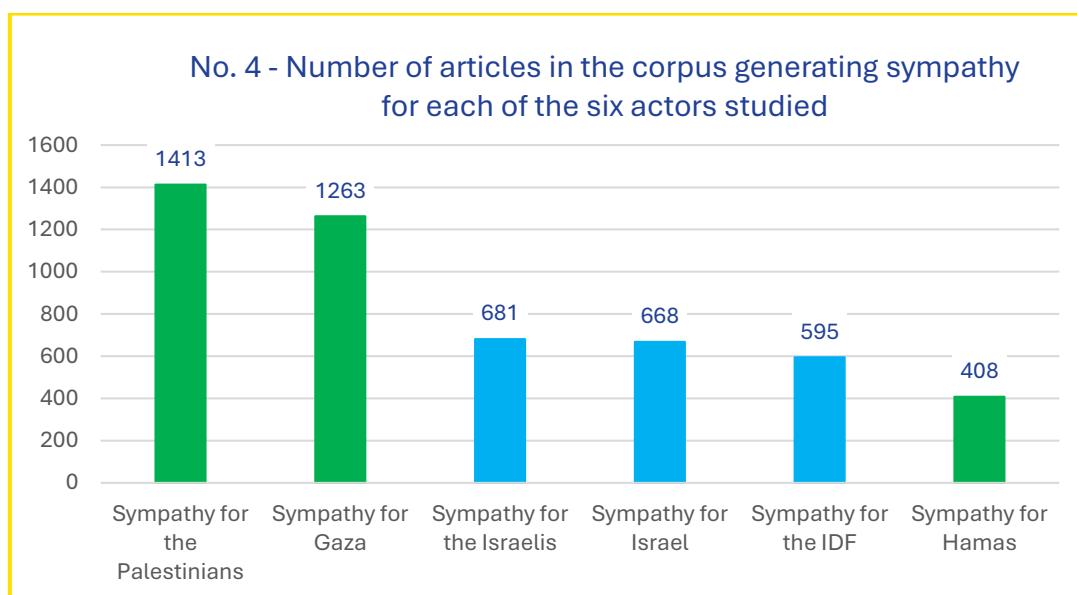
3. Analyse des résultats



3.1 . Twice as many articles expressing sympathy for Gaza than articles creating sympathy for Israel

The overall results of the study indicate the total number of articles in the RTBF corpus generating sympathy for each of the six actors studied. As each article is the subject of six separate results, following six independent questions, an article can:

- generate sympathy for one, two... or all six actors studied. It will then appear in each of the six columns. This is the case for 180 articles, or more than 8% of the corpus;
- fail to generate sympathy for any of the six actors studied. 417 articles, or 19% of the corpus, do not generate sympathy for any actor.



IDF = Israeli Defence Force or Tsahal, its acronym in Hebrew

The number of articles in the corpus that generate sympathy varies significantly between three groups of actors:

- **Palestinians and Gaza are the two actors for whom the corpus creates the most sympathy:** 65% of articles create sympathy for Palestinians and 58% create sympathy for Gaza;
- **Israelis, Israel and the IDF come next, at a level approximately two times lower:** 31% of articles generate sympathy for Israelis and Israel; 27% of articles generate sympathy for the IDF;

- **Hamas comes last at 19%, which is about three times less** than the percentage of articles in the corpus that generate sympathy for Palestinians and Gaza.

The gap between the first two groups could be explained by the imbalance in the number of deaths and destruction.

The monthly and weekly curves showing the number of RTBF articles that generate sympathy highlight the same three groups of actors throughout the year, even though on a weekly basis the curves are rather jagged and some curves intersect over short periods. We present the weekly curves below. They show:

- **the curves for Israel, Israelis and the IDF almost overlap:** what creates sympathy for one creates sympathy for the other two.

Journalists and articles therefore seem to consider that "Israel = IDF, its army = each of its soldiers, whether reservists or conscripts = all Israelis".

This equation does not reflect the diversity of political opinions in Israel. It becomes problematic when we add, for example, Jews, such as those in Belgium, or Zionists – a distorted term that has become synonymous with oppressor or colonist, often used to express hatred of Jews while invoking freedom of political opinion and denying anti-Semitism.

- **There is a slight difference in the curves for Palestinians and Gaza.**

Articles that generate sympathy for Palestinians are slightly more numerous than articles that generate sympathy for Gaza.

While journalists and articles lump Israelis, Israel and the IDF together, they sometimes differentiate between the Palestinian population, which is one of the victims of this war, and Gaza, which is both the main theatre of this war and the territory identified with Hamas because it is under its control.

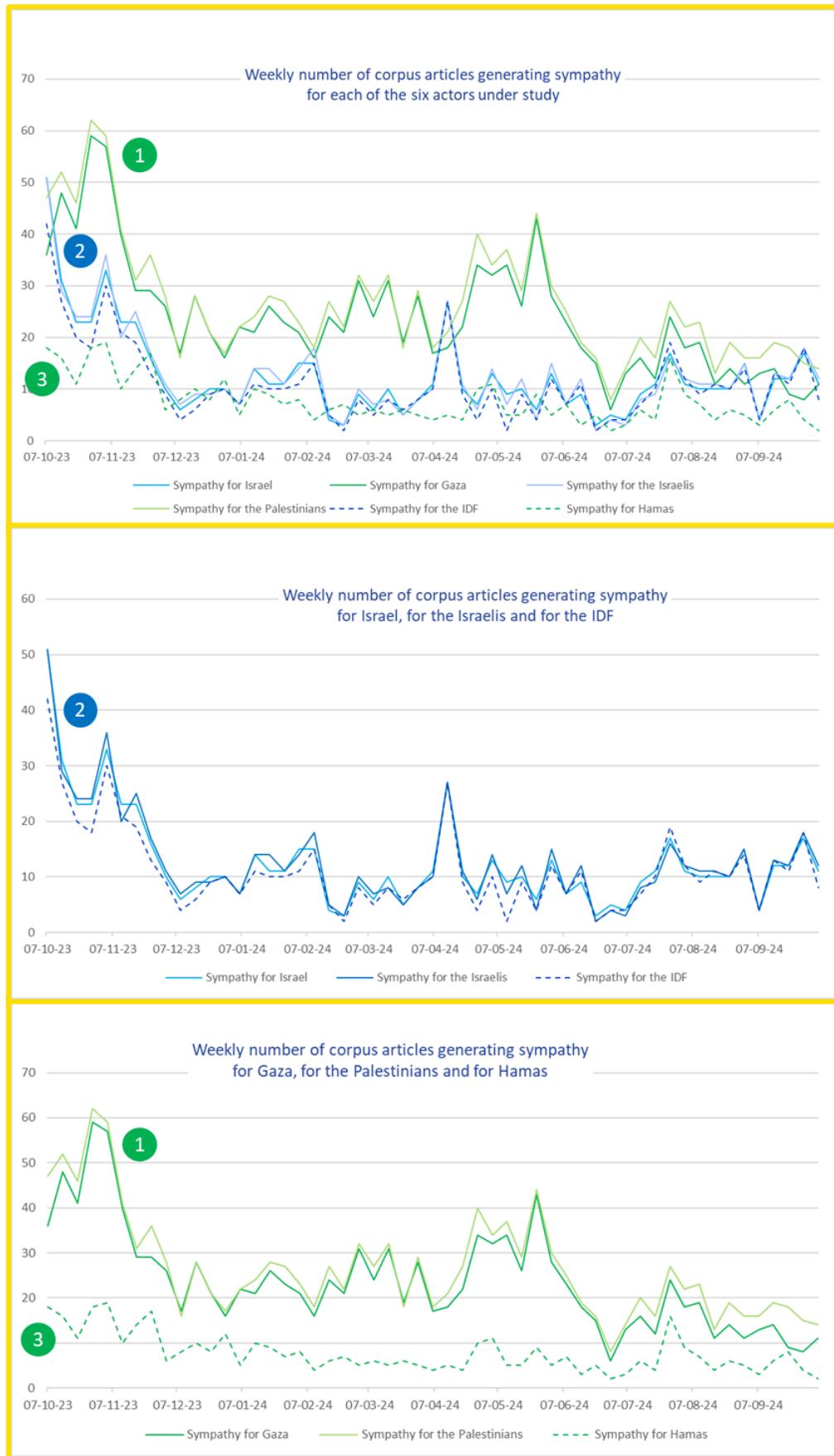
- **A curve for Hamas that is far removed from the curves for Gaza and the Palestinians.**

Journalists and articles make a **very clear distinction between, on the one hand, the Palestinian people and the territory of Gaza, and on the other hand, the terrorist organisation that is Hamas**, even though Gazans often seemed more ambivalent, at least at the beginning of the war, blaming Hamas for their living conditions, not trusting it, but preferring it by far to the Palestinian Authority and supporting the attack carried out on 7 October 2023.¹⁴

While it is far from the curves for Gaza and the Palestinians, **the curve for Hamas is close to the curves for Israel, the Israelis and the IDF over several months.** We will return to this result in section 3.2.

¹⁴ On the state of opinion in Gaza, see in particular the RTBF article of 13 December 2023, ["Israel-Gaza war: peak popularity for Hamas and outright rejection of President Mahmoud Abbas"](#).

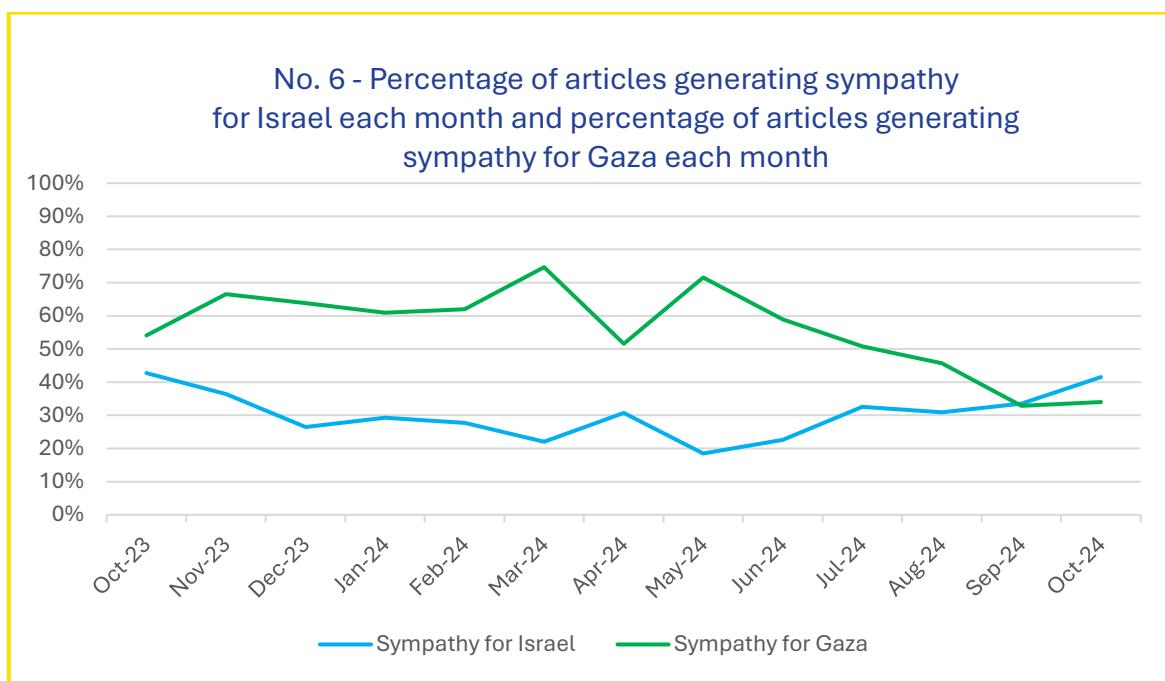
No. 5 – Weekly curves highlighting three groups among the six actors studied



In order to make the graphs more readable and our discussion more fluid, **we will focus in the rest of this report on the results for Israel under the headings Israel, Israelis and IDF, and on the results for Gaza under the headings Gaza and Palestinians**, after presenting a focus on the results for Hamas.¹⁵

Although it stabilises from December 2023 onwards, the number of articles varies significantly from month to month and, even more so, from week to week. In order to present comparable results for the entire 12 months, we calculated the percentage of articles generating sympathy for Israel and sympathy for Gaza each month and each week.

Graphs 6 and 7 show, for the former, the monthly percentages of articles generating sympathy and, for the latter, the weekly percentages. In both graphs, the two curves are independent of each other, since for each article, the question of sympathy generated for Israel and the question of sympathy generated for Gaza are asked separately. In other words, the sum of the two curves is not, except by chance, equal to 100%.



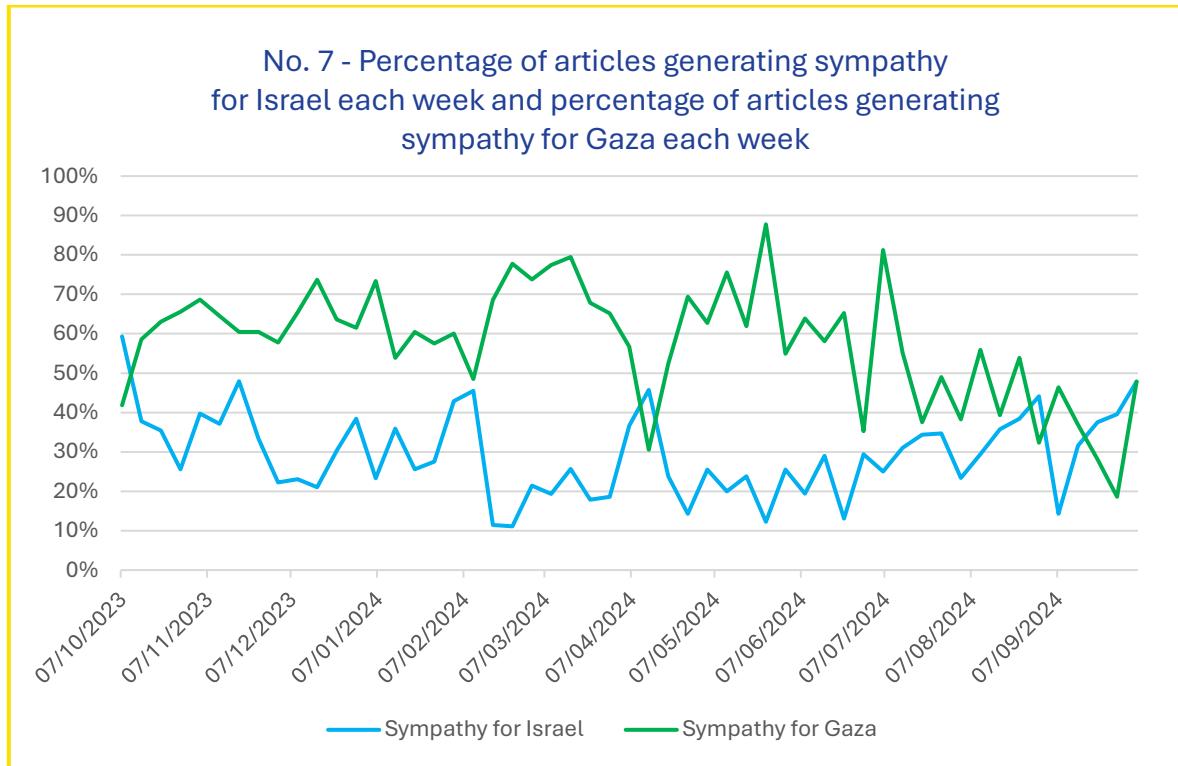
NB: the results for October 2024 cover only 7 days.

¹⁵ When we indicate "sympathy only for Israel" in the caption, this means that the articles in this group generate sympathy for Israel without generating sympathy for Gaza, regardless of the sympathy they may or may not generate for the four other actors studied. The same rule applies to the caption "sympathy only for Gaza". And when we indicate in the caption "sympathy for both Israel and Gaza", this means that the articles in this group generate sympathy for Israel AND sympathy for Gaza, regardless of the sympathy they may or may not generate for the other four actors.

Percentages per month: the "Sympathy for Gaza" curve is significantly above the "Sympathy for Israel" curve for 11 of the 12 months, particularly in October 2023.

It has two peaks, one in March 2024 with 75% of articles creating sympathy for Gaza, and the other in May with 72%. Once the portion of the curve for October 2024 (7 days) is removed, the share of articles in the corpus creating sympathy for Gaza is above 50% for 10 out of 12 months.

The "Sympathy for Israel" curve is at its highest level in October 2023. It is important to **note**, however, **that in the month of the 7 October massacres, articles generating sympathy for Gaza (54%) outnumbered those generating sympathy for Israel (43%)**.



There is a clear imbalance in the sympathy generated between Israel and Gaza.

From 7 October 2023 to 7 October 2024, RTBF published nearly twice as many articles generating sympathy for Gaza as articles generating sympathy for Israel.

However, did RTBF's coverage of the war in the Middle East show bias?

At this stage, it is difficult to answer this question because RTBF's unbalanced coverage of the war may also reflect the imbalances of the war itself (see §1.3).

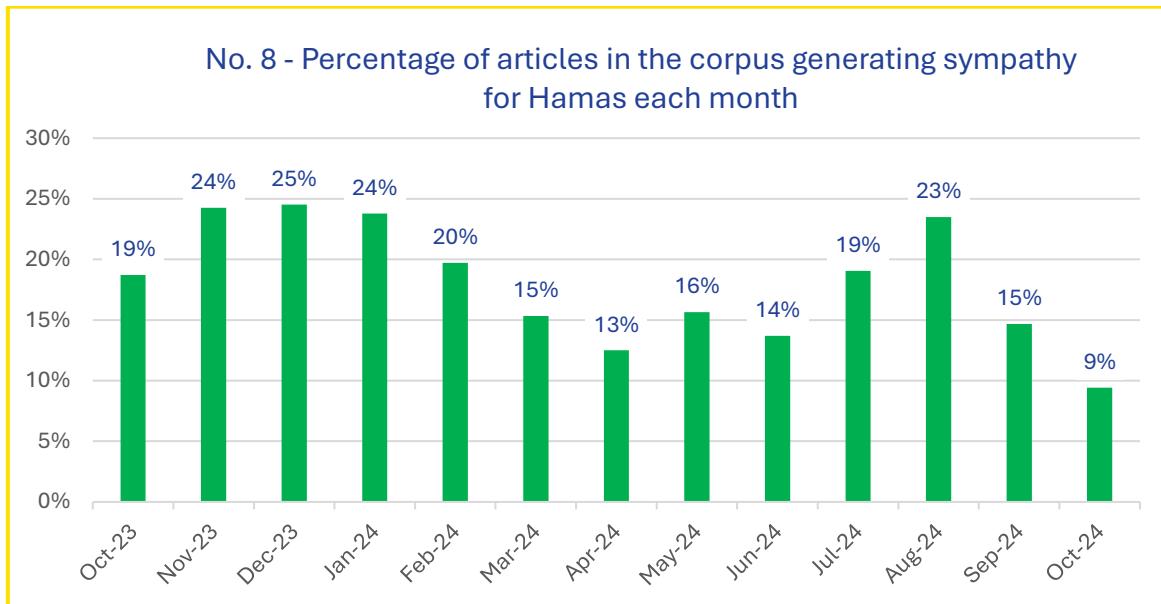
Several other findings, all of which are consistent, deserve special attention.

We explain them by the existence of a bias in favour of Gaza and the Palestinians.

3.2. Nearly 20% of the corpus creates sympathy for a terrorist organisation

Of course, RTBF will deny supporting Hamas. It will also reiterate its instruction to journalists to refer to Hamas as a terrorist organisation. Similarly, the journalists who wrote the articles creating sympathy for Hamas will most certainly say that they had no intention of doing so.

Nevertheless, **contrary to all expectations given the horror of the massacres of 7 October, between 13% and 25% of RTBF articles on the war in the Middle East generate sympathy for Hamas every month** (excluding October 2024, which is not representative as only articles from the first seven days are included in the corpus).



NB: the results for October 2024 cover only seven days.

Even during the month of massacres that triggered the war, 19% of the articles in the corpus generated sympathy for Hamas. In this regard, more than two years after the massacres of 7 October, it may be useful to recall what Hamas is and what these massacres were.

With regard to Hamas, we refer to the book by writer and director Michaël Prazan:

*"For Hamas, as for any Islamist movement, the territorial borders that divide the 'Muslim community' are heresy. All that matters is the umma and the recreation of an Islamic caliphate, in the midst of which Israel is a foreign body that must be annihilated."*¹⁶

"While the Hamas charter recalls the foundations of the Brotherhood's ideology (Islam as a societal and legal framework, the establishment of the 'Islamic State' - the Islamic caliphate; Islamic nationalism" as opposed to patriotic nationalism, etc.), most of its articles are devoted to jihad against the Jews and the destruction of the Jewish state.

*It includes, in no particular order, the famous hadith which states: "The hour will not come until the stones and trees say: 'Muslim! A Jew is hiding behind me, come and kill him. "; a reference to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the anti-Semitic forgery that was Adolf Hitler's bedside reading, and whose authenticity the Muslim Brotherhood does not doubt; and repeated calls, ad nauseam, for the massacre of Jews."*¹⁷

*"In addition to being sacrilegious, Israel, defined as the outpost of the Western conspiracy against Muslims, must be destroyed to ensure the survival and victory of Islam."*¹⁸

As for the massacres of 7 October, we present a factual account, followed by a few sentences from the very beginning of Eva Illouz's text, already quoted above:

- Human toll: 1,188 dead, 4,834 wounded and 251 hostages

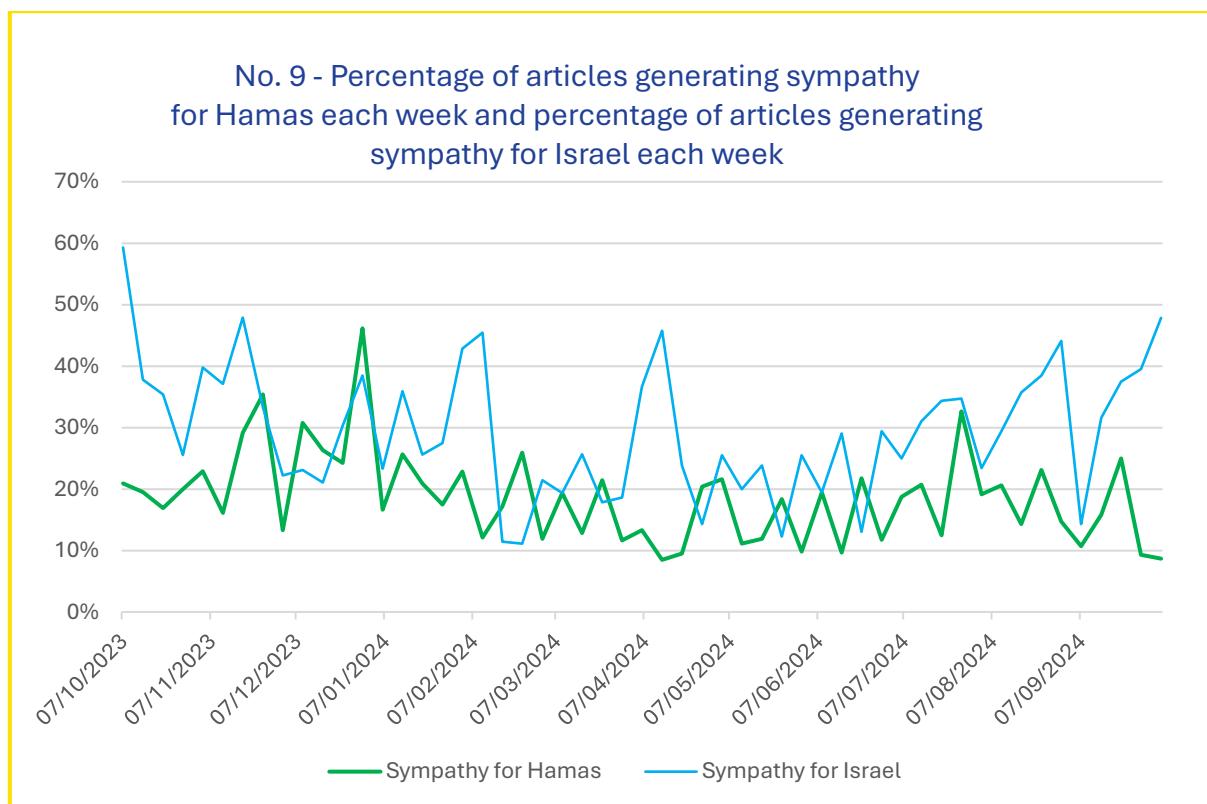
¹⁶ *The Truth About Hamas and Its "Useful Idiots"* (Editions de l'Observatoire, January 2025), p. 51.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 53-54.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

- Massacres of civilians (men, women, children, infants, elderly people) in localities bordering Gaza (Kibbutz Be'eri, Kfar Aza, etc.)
- Grenade attacks and machine-gun fire on the audience at the Nova music festival
- Hostage-taking: abduction of 251 people, including babies, children, pregnant women and elderly people. Several of them have since died in captivity.
- Sexual violence: rape, mutilation and sexual abuse of women and sometimes men, including in front of witnesses or post-mortem.
- Attacks on first responders and medical infrastructure: ambulances targeted, paramedics attacked and killed while responding to emergencies
- Psychological warfare: dissemination of videos captured by victims' body cameras or smartphones, sending these videos to the victims' contacts via their smartphones.

"Even those most grimly accustomed to human savagery shuddered at the deliberate cruelty of these massacres: children and babies killed at point-blank range, sexual violence and abuse of rare intensity, entire families burned to death, public parades of corpses amid dancing and singing crowds, all filmed with glee and broadcast around the world via social media. This was a new regime of atrocity: far from hiding, the terrorists proudly displayed themselves using GoPro cameras and broadcast images of their murders live.¹⁹



In graph 9 (results by week), the "Sympathy for Hamas" curve shows peaks that each call for analysis. The highest point on this curve, 46%, is the week of 30 December 2023: 12 articles creating sympathy for Hamas, out of a total of 26. In addition to Hamas' communication on the human toll of the war on 1, four of these 12 articles dealt with the elimination of Salah Al-Arouri, Hamas's second-in-command, who was killed in Beirut on 2 January. Even if the journalists did not intend to do so, **their coverage of the elimination of a terrorist, without mentioning his "track record", ended up creating sympathy for Hamas.**

The second peak on this curve, 35%, is the week of 25 November 2023: 17 articles creating sympathy for Hamas out of a total of 48. Thirteen of these 17 articles deal with the truce and the first releases of hostages in exchange for prisoners. Here again, even if the journalists did not intend to do so, **their articles on the truce and the release of hostages whom Hamas had abducted under horrific conditions ended up generating sympathy for Hamas**, as if this organisation had humanitarian considerations for the hostages and the population of Gaza.

The third peak, 33%, occurred during the week of 27 July 2024: 16 articles out of a total of 49 generated sympathy for Hamas. It is similar to the first peak in early January: 12 of these 16 articles deal with the elimination of Ismael Haniyeh, leader of Hamas, who was killed in Tehran in the explosion of the house where he was staying. Once again, even if the journalists did not intend to do so, **their coverage of the death of the Hamas leader ended up creating sympathy for Hamas.**

This point is worth noting because journalists' primary objective is to inform, and they do so, more often than not, **without considering the effects their articles have on the public**. They may thus, without intending to or even being aware of it, generate sympathy for terrorists or other emotions that they themselves would strongly disapprove of.

While 19% of the articles in the corpus generate sympathy for a terrorist organisation, it is important to add that the "Sympathy for Hamas" curve is above the "Sympathy for Israel" curve for 10 of the 53 weeks.

The two entities may be at war with each other, but they are not at all the same. Israel is a democratic state, a member of the community of nations, where everyone is free to oppose the policies of the government in power. Hamas is a terrorist organisation whose charter openly advocates genocide, which has ruled Gaza with an Islamist dictatorship since 2006, which launched the attack on 7 October to kill, rape and kidnap Israeli civilians, and which has since been using the civilian population of Gaza as human shields.

So how can we explain the 19% of articles expressing sympathy for Hamas, when we would have expected a figure closer to 0%? How can we explain that for 10 weeks, articles expressing sympathy for Hamas outnumbered those expressing sympathy for Israel?

To answer these questions, **we put forward a hypothesis** that will be corroborated by other findings in the following paragraphs: **the existence of a bias in favour of Gaza and the Palestinians** in RTBF's coverage of the war in the Middle East. The sympathy generated for Hamas by nearly 20% of the corpus would be the result of this bias.

"A bias is a distortion that information undergoes when entering or leaving the cognitive system. In the first case, the subject selects information; in the second, they select responses," writes French psychologist Jean-François Le Ny.²⁰

²⁰ Jean-François Le Ny, *Comment l'esprit produit du sens*. Paris, Éditions Odile Jacob, Paris, 2005, p. 12.

The distortion is not usually conscious. The fact that there is a bias in RTBF's coverage of the war does not necessarily mean that there is a deliberate intention to misinform. Nevertheless, **it often results in misinformation.**

What could be the cause or origin of this bias? We complete our hypothesis: the bias would have originated, well before 7 October 2023, in the framing of a large part of RTBF journalists on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in their greater sensitivity to Palestinian narratives, as well as in their sympathy for the Palestinians, whose cause and struggle they perceive as just. Because this bias is long-standing, we call it "the original bias".

The presence in our corpus of 19% of articles expressing sympathy for Hamas would be an expression of the original bias. This would reflect the **difficulty some RTBF journalists have in condemning Hamas' actions.**

Even though the results of the study (see §3.1) show a very clear distinction between Hamas on the one hand and Gaza and the Palestinians on the other, it seems that, in this case, the end justifies the means. In the eyes of these journalists, the end, namely the Palestinian cause, seems to mitigate, contextualise and downplay the means or instrument, namely Hamas, which is terrorist, Islamist and totalitarian.

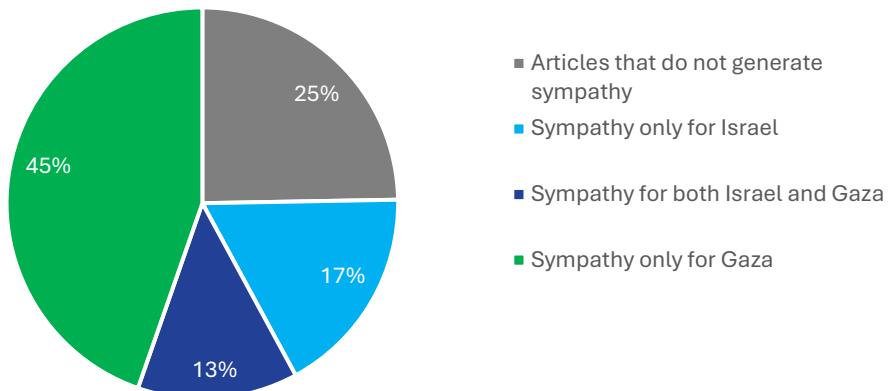
3.3. Few articles generating sympathy for both Israel and Gaza

There are twice as many articles generating sympathy for Gaza as there are articles generating sympathy for Israel. **However, as in any war, there are deaths, injuries, destruction and displaced persons on both sides** (Israeli populations near the borders of Gaza and Lebanon). Do RTBF articles generate sympathy for one side or the other separately, or do they generate sympathy for both sides at the same time?

While the war affects both sides and their civilian populations, **only 13% of the articles in the corpus take a dual perspective and generate sympathy for both Israel and Gaza.**

From 7 October 2023 to 7 October 2024, 45% of articles generate sympathy for Gaza without generating sympathy for Israel, while, conversely, 17% of articles generate sympathy for Israel without generating sympathy for Gaza. The former are 2.5 times more numerous than the latter.

No. 10 - Breakdown of articles
based on the sympathy generated for Israel,
for Gaza, or for both



In view of its commitments (see §1.5) and its statements (see §1.2) on balance and impartiality, **could RTBF not have sought to balance its coverage of the war more?** More generally, and beyond RTBF's commitments, generating sympathy for only one side and for the victims of that side leads to the dehumanisation of the other side and to its victims being overlooked. **This encourages the polarisation of opinions**, as Dr Haran Shani-Narkiss points out in the Asserson Report (see §1.6).

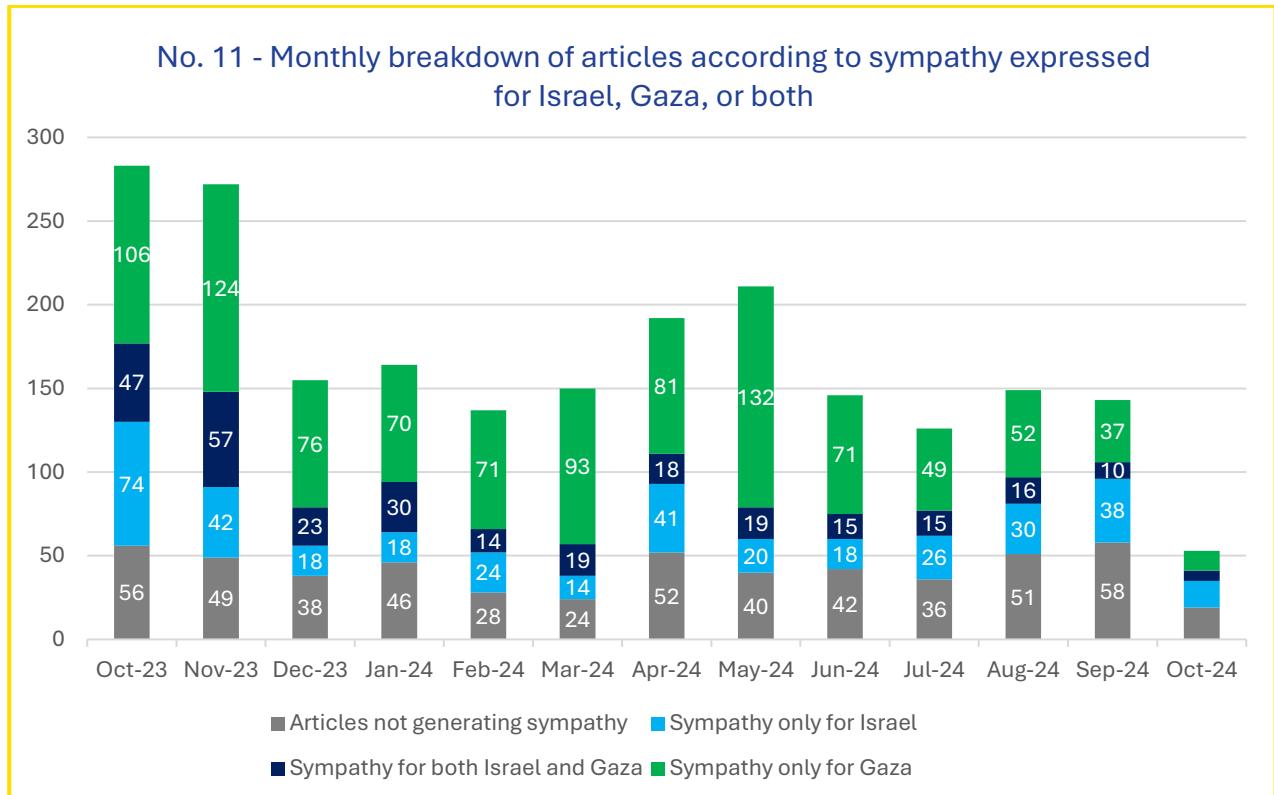
The small proportion of the corpus that creates sympathy for both Israel and Gaza probably reflects the difficulty journalists have in reporting, in the same article, on the points of view of both protagonists and their civilian populations, as if it were easier, for each article, to deal with one side and limit oneself to that side alone.

However, in the articles generating sympathy for Gaza (45% of the corpus, the most numerous), **was it so difficult to recall the events that led to this tragic situation?** Was it so difficult to recall that the massacres of 7 October triggered this war and that Israeli hostages are being held in Gaza? A priori, no. Mentioning these facts would probably have been enough for ChatGPT to say that these articles also generate sympathy for Israel.

So why not do so more often? Our hypothesis, here too, is that some RTBF journalists have a long-standing interpretation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that favours the Palestinians and their narratives. The massacres of 7 October run counter to this interpretation. Hence a reluctance or difficulty in understanding these massacres.

In the absence of a greater number of articles generating sympathy for both Gaza and Israel, could RTBF not have sought to produce roughly the same number of articles reporting on the losses, tragedies and suffering of both sides? The question may seem absurd, but, as we shall see later (see §3.4 and §3.5), RTBF did just that in the first few days following the massacres of 7 October. And it did so to a significant extent, since between 7 and 31 October 2023, there were more articles expressing sympathy only for Gaza (106 articles) than articles expressing sympathy only for Israel (74).

RTBF generally lost sight of this quest for balance between December 2023 and August 2024, as shown in graph 11. Articles generating only sympathy for Gaza were 3.3 times more numerous than articles generating only sympathy for Israel, as if there were virtually no reason in the news during those nine months to generate sympathy for Israel, even though the massacres of 7 October, the hostages held in Gaza and the rocket and missile alerts traumatised Israel during this first year of war and beyond.



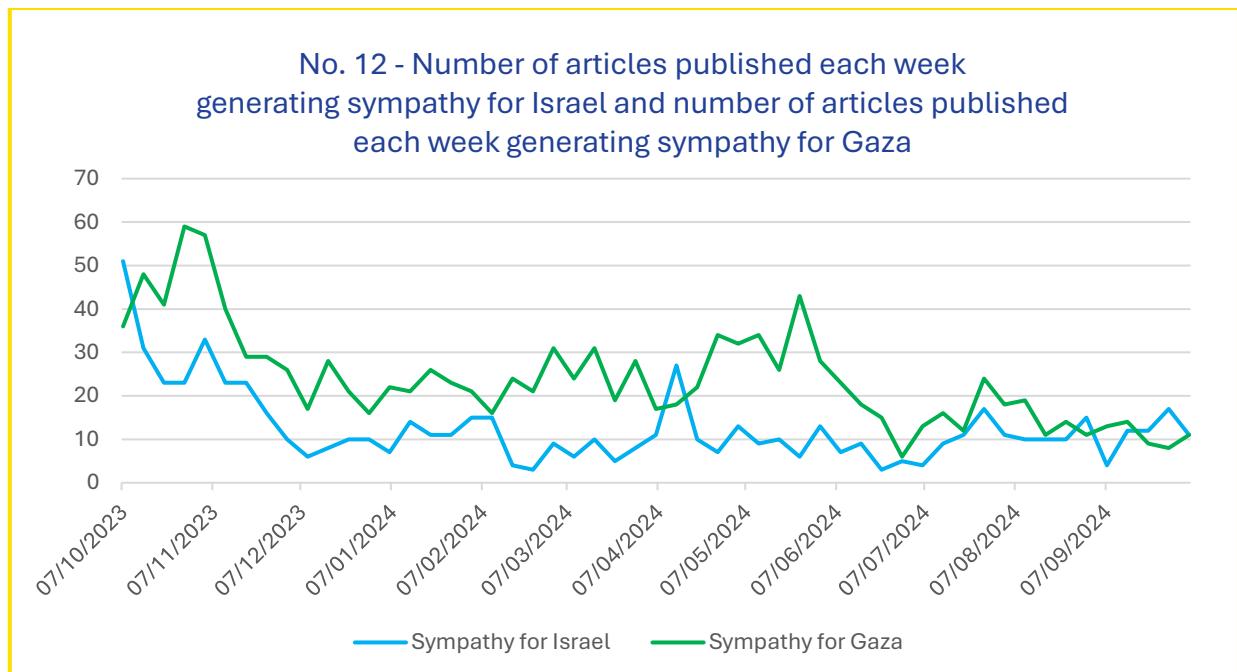
NB: the results for October 2024 cover only seven days.

We attribute this difficulty in reporting on the Israeli experience and trauma during all these months of war and hostage captivity **to the original bias. The result is a biased and unbalanced treatment** of the war in the Middle East by RTBF. Through three case studies (see §4.1), we sought to illustrate this biased treatment and show its persistence during the summer of 2025, i.e. beyond the corpus of 2,181 articles studied, which ends on 7 October 2024.

Our analysis focuses on RTBF's coverage of the US sanctions against Francesca Albanese, the elimination of Anas al-Sharif and the declaration of famine by the UN agency, Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC). For each of these three examples, RTBF could cite the news agency reports on which it relied, as it does for 74% of the articles in the corpus studied. We show that, upon reading these dispatches, journalists could have asked themselves several questions – which would have led them to supplement the dispatches. **They did not do so, and we once again put forward the original bias as an explanation.**

3.4. From 14 October 2023 onwards, more articles expressing sympathy for Gaza

Let us now focus on the first three weeks of the war, between the massacres of 7 October and the start of the Israeli army's ground offensive.

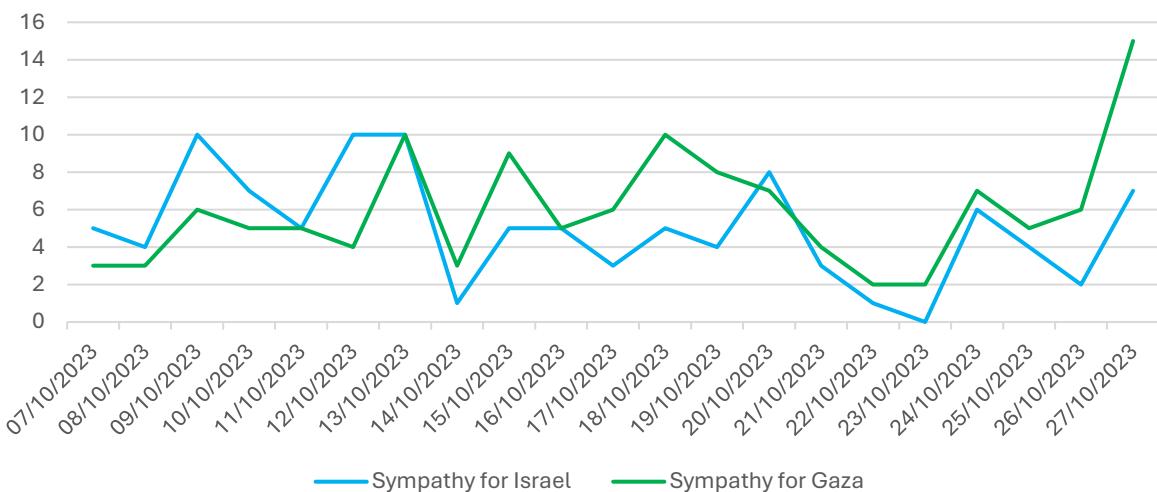


The "Sympathy for Israel" and "Sympathy for Gaza" curves intersect in the week of 14 October. During the week beginning 7 October, RTBF published more articles generating sympathy for Israel (51 articles) than articles generating sympathy for Gaza (36). From the following week onwards, it published more articles generating sympathy for Gaza (48) than articles generating sympathy for Israel (31).

Graph 13, showing the results on a day-by-day basis, shows that articles expressing sympathy for Israel ceased to outnumber articles expressing sympathy for Gaza on 14 October, just one week after the massacres and three days before the explosion in the courtyard of **Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza**, an event that marked the early days of the war and whose problematic coverage by RTBF immediately sparked several reactions.

RTBF's coverage of the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital and the reactions that followed, followed by RTBF's analysis of its own coverage in two long articles, are, in our view, a **textbook case of both original bias and confirmation bias**. In section 4.2, we present a qualitative analysis of RTBF's articles on the explosion.

No. 13 - Number of articles generating sympathy for Israel
and number of articles generating sympathy for Gaza
between 7 and 27 October 2023



We have already described the massacres of 7 October 2023 above. Two years on, it is also useful to **recall the main events that followed until 28 October:**

- Almost daily bombings of Gaza by Israel and rocket fire on Israel from Gaza and southern Lebanon
- 7 October: 1,188 dead and 4,834 wounded in Israel, 251 hostages taken
- 9 October: Israel announces the blockade of Gaza and the evacuation of Israeli civilians around Gaza
- 10 October: first access for journalists to the scenes of the massacre at Kfar Aza kibbutz
- 13 October: start of the evacuation of Palestinian civilians
- 16 October: Israeli army organises first screening for journalists of raw footage of the 7 October massacres
- 17 October: explosion in the courtyard of Al-Ahli Hospital
- 17 October: Journalists gain access to Abu Kabir, the Israeli Institute of Forensic Medicine
- 19 October: publication in Israel of the names of the victims of 7 October begins
- 20 and 23 October: release of two American hostages, followed by two elderly Israeli hostages
- 21 October: first humanitarian convoys enter Gaza from Egypt
- 25 October: a total of 6,546 dead and 17,439 wounded in Gaza, according to Hamas
- 28 October: Israeli army begins ground offensive in Gaza.

This chronology of the start of the war shows that Israel gradually became aware of the scale and horror of the massacres of 7 October, that it had been the target of rocket fire from Gaza and southern Lebanon for weeks, and that it had evacuated its civilian population from these two border areas. **There was therefore scope for articles generating sympathy for Israel during the weeks of 14 and 21 October.**

And today, there is reason to question the crossover, as early as 14 October 2023, of the "Sympathy for Israel" and "Sympathy for Gaza" curves, even though the Israeli ground offensive had not yet begun.

This very rapid crossover of the two curves is a further expression of the original bias. In our view, it reflects the difficulty some RTBF journalists have in seeing and presenting Israelis as victims, due to a long-standing bias in favour of the Palestinians.

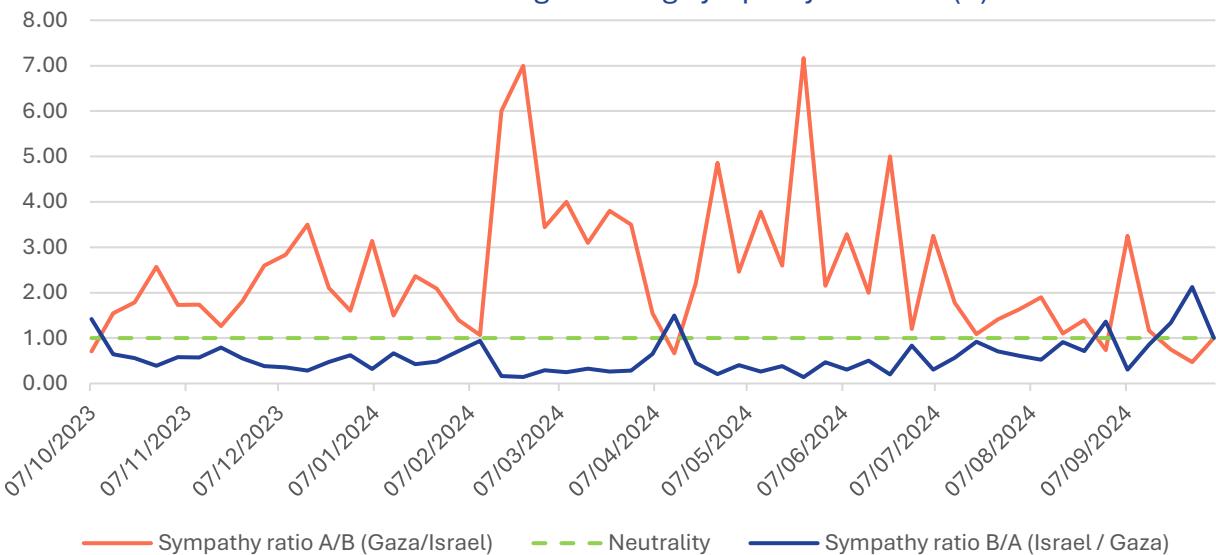
3.5. RTBF in search of balance... only at the very beginning of the war

Over the period from 7 October 2023 to 7 October 2024, there are approximately twice as many articles generating sympathy for Gaza as there are articles generating sympathy for Israel. It is now interesting to analyse the evolution, over the weeks, of two ratios that are represented by two curves in graph no. 14 below:

- Red curve: number of articles generating sympathy for Gaza, divided by the number of articles generating sympathy for Israel.
- Blue curve: number of articles generating sympathy for Israel, divided by the number of articles generating sympathy for Gaza.

In graph 14, the horizontal green dotted curve, called "neutrality", represents the theoretical situation where there would be as many articles creating sympathy for Gaza as articles creating sympathy for Israel each week.

No. 14 - Weekly sympathy ratios, calculated on the basis of the number of articles generating sympathy for Gaza (A) and the number of articles generating sympathy for Israel (B)



The red curve (Gaza/Israel) is very jagged, with four major peaks in February, April, May and June 2024. It is almost always above the green curve of neutrality. For 27 weeks, RTBF published at least twice as many articles generating sympathy for Gaza as articles generating sympathy for Israel. For six weeks, it published at least four times as many articles generating sympathy for Gaza as articles generating sympathy for Israel.

The red curve even has two large peaks, indicating that RTBF published seven times more articles generating sympathy for Gaza than articles generating sympathy for Israel: the week of 24 February 2024 and the week of 25 May 2024.

In comparison, the blue curve representing the inverse ratio (Israel/Gaza) is almost flat, and almost always below the grey curve of neutrality. Its peak is only 2.13. It is reached during the week of 28 September 2024.

In paragraph 3.4, we saw that just one week after the massacres of 7 October, RTBF published more articles generating sympathy for Gaza than articles generating sympathy for Israel. **The rapid crossover of the "Israel" and "Gaza" curves also appears here, but with another element that is just as striking.**

As the war progressed, there were weeks when RTBF published many more articles generating sympathy for Gaza than articles generating sympathy for Israel. These are the peaks, already mentioned, of the red curve (Gaza/Israel) in graph 14 above. Conversely, the massacres committed by Hamas on 7 October, followed by the gradual realisation in Israel of their scale and horror, **could or should have resulted in a large peak at the very beginning of the blue curve (Israel/Gaza).**

This was not the case, even though these massacres shocked the entire world, RTBF devoted 86 articles to the situation in the Middle East that week (the top two of the 53 weeks studied in terms of number of articles) and Israel's ground offensive did not begin until 28 October.

Why did RTBF publish only 1.4 times more articles expressing sympathy for Israel than articles expressing sympathy for Gaza during that week, when a peak of the same magnitude as those observed for Gaza could legitimately have been anticipated?

Our explanation, once again, is the original bias. Through their filmed and sometimes live-broadcast violence, followed by the discovery of tortured corpses, **these massacres run counter to the framing** that sees Palestinians as victims whose just cause must be supported.

If the ratio of sympathy for Israel to Gaza is so low during the week of 7 October, it is because, in a way, RTBF "balanced" or rather "compensated" for articles creating sympathy for Israel with articles creating sympathy for Gaza.

RTBF achieved this "compensation" mainly through articles reporting on the experiences of Palestinians (bombings, evacuations, concern about threats from Israeli leaders and the imminence of a ground offensive, etc.) **and through articles contextualising the massacres of 7 October and ultimately downplaying them.**

Among those invited by RTBF to analyse the Hamas attack on 7 October and the days that followed were François Dubuisson, professor of international law at the ULB, Didier Leroy, researcher at the Royal Higher Institute of Defence and the ULB, Bichara Khader, professor emeritus at the Centre for Studies and Research on the Contemporary Arab World at UCLouvain, and Philippe Hensmans, director of Amnesty Belgium:

- François Dubuisson on RTBF news, 7 October (not included in our study): *"It is very important to remember the context, and this is probably what is missing from Alexander De Croo's statement, which focuses solely on the attack and condemns it without taking into account the much broader context. It should be remembered that the illegalities were initially committed by Israel, which has maintained a military blockade against Gaza for sixteen years now. A military blockade is equivalent to aggression under international law."*
- [War in the Middle East: Hamas' attack comes at a historically symbolic moment](#), 7 October: *"It is clear that the constant factor for years has been the continuation of Israeli colonisation, on which Tel Aviv has no intention of backing down," explains the IRSD researcher. [...] Israeli colonisation is certainly a root cause of what we are witnessing today, claims Bichara Khader [...] And Israel is constantly violating international rules. [...] Why does [Europe] condemn human rights violations around the world but not in Israel, despite the fact that these violations are documented and proven?" asks the professor emeritus.*
- ["There are violations of international law on both sides," says Amnesty Belgium director Philippe Hensmans](#), 8 October: *"Civilians are being deliberately targeted. When they are taken hostage or when buildings are bombed, war crimes are being committed [...] Israeli retaliation affects civilians in the same way that Hamas attacks have targeted civilians. There have been hostage-takings, as Israeli civilians have been taken to the Gaza Strip," said Philippe Hensmans, director of the French-speaking Belgian section of Amnesty International. He concluded: "Clearly, there are violations of international law on both sides and war crimes on both sides."*
- [Israel-Gaza war: are these acts of terrorism or war crimes?](#), 10 October: *"Didier Leroy, a researcher at the Royal Military Academy and specialist in the Middle East, emphasises the fine line that sometimes separates terrorism from resistance."*

- Israel-Gaza war: "Eradicating Hamas is a completely unattainable goal", 13 October: "*If we return to realistic objectives, according to Didier Leroy, Hamas undoubtedly wanted "to break through the technical barrier separating Gaza from Israeli territory, perhaps kill a few Israeli soldiers and take a handful of hostages, two or three, who would be easier to manage: which would have allowed them to negotiate the release of hundreds of Gazan prisoners and potentially negotiate permission to build certain infrastructure, such as a port."*"

Let us be clear: what we are pointing out here is not the validity of this or that statement. It does not matter, moreover, whether we agree or disagree with all or part of the above analyses.

What we are pointing out here is the choice to "shed light" on the massacres by putting them into perspective in a way that downplays them, once again making it difficult to see the Israelis as victims and generating a spike in sympathy for Israel at the very beginning of the blue "Israel/Gaza sympathy" curve. When we compare this blue curve with the red "Gaza/Israel sympathy" curve, which is very jagged and has several peaks between October 2023 and October 2024, it is clear that RTBF did not subsequently seek to balance its coverage of the war in favour of Israel, contrary to what appears to be the case in favour of Gaza during the week of 7 October.

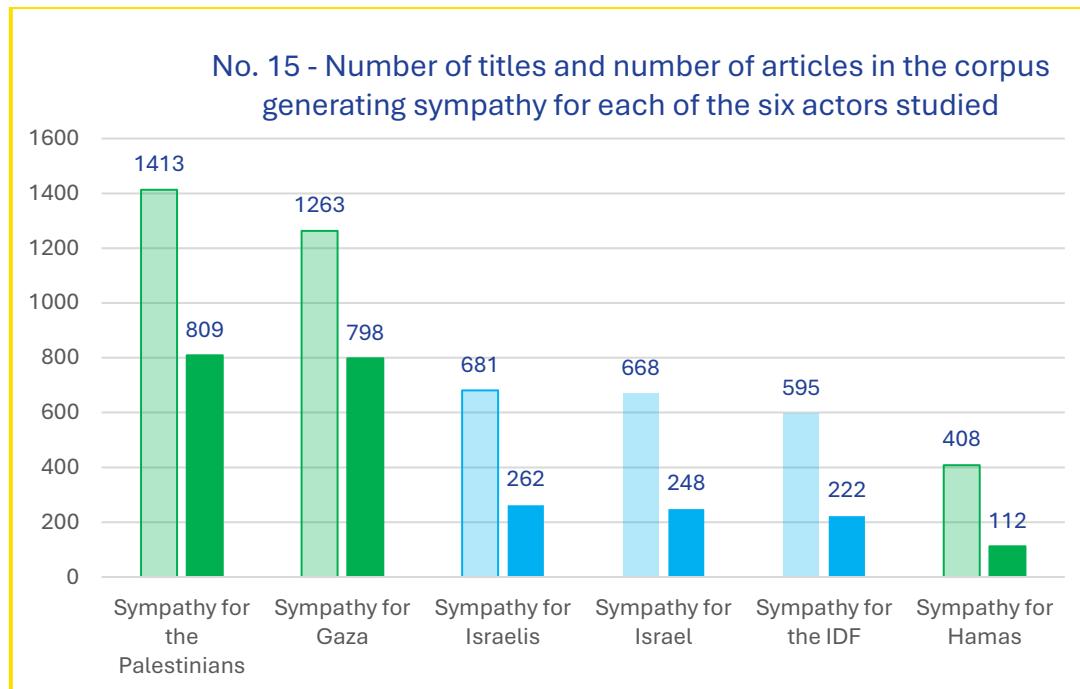
A process that works solely in favour of one side is a sign of bias.

3.6. Bias amplification in headlines in favour of Gaza and the Palestinians

Innohives asked ChatGPT separately, for each article in the corpus, whether the article and its headline created sympathy for each of the six actors studied. **Analysing the sympathy created by headlines alone is interesting for four reasons:**

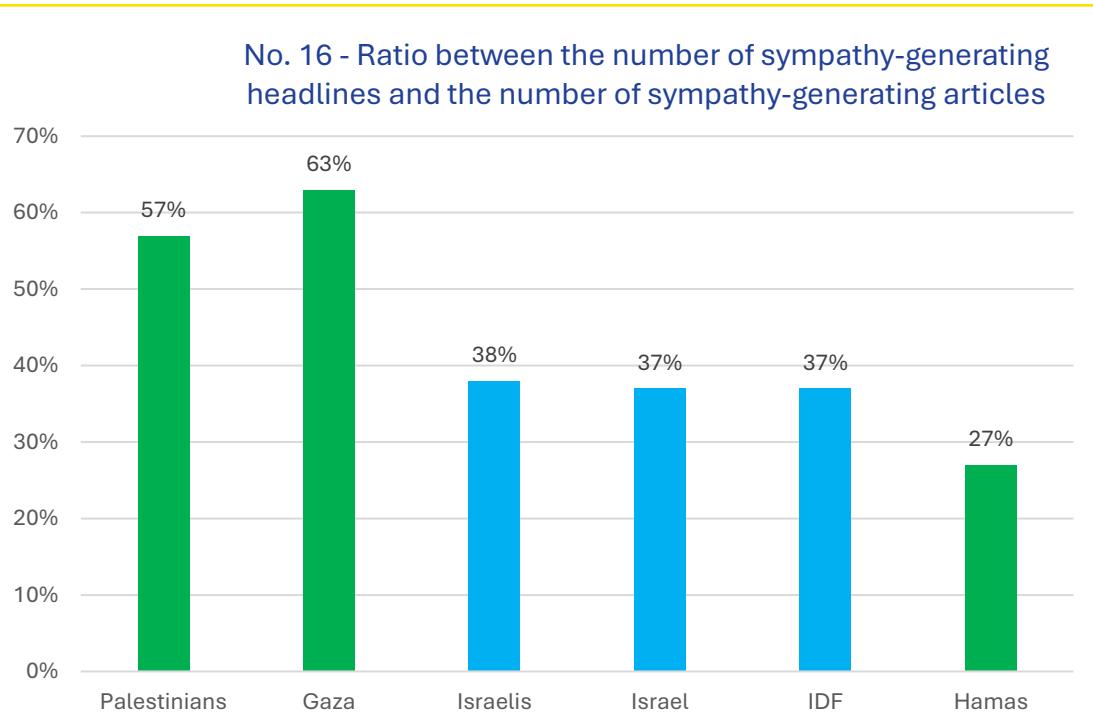
- The headline is the gateway to the article. **Its purpose is more to capture the reader's attention** and make them want to click or read than to inform or summarise the article.
- The title is very short by definition. **It expresses a choice, an angle in the treatment of the information.** It does not allow for nuance, precision or complexity.
- Headlines are often designed or reworked by journalists other than those who investigate, interview and write the articles. **They reflect the identity of the media outlet and its worldview.**
- **Some members of the public only read the headlines of articles** and form their opinions based solely on these elements, which are not intended to inform.

The first finding that emerges from graph 15 is that **headlines generate less sympathy than articles for each of the six actors studied**. This finding is hardly surprising: by definition, headlines contain far fewer words than the articles they introduce, and therefore have far fewer opportunities to generate sympathy than the articles as a whole.



The second result is consistent with the results we have just presented.

Graph 15 shows that the sympathy generated for each actor decreases when moving from articles to headlines. Graph 16 shows the ratio between the number of headlines and the number of articles for each actor. **We might have expected to see a reduction by the same factor between articles and headlines for each of the six actors studied. This is not the case!**



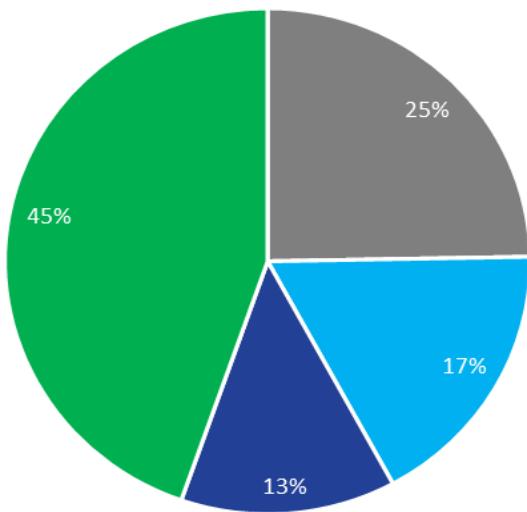
Graph 16 can be interpreted as follows: when two articles generate sympathy, the first for Gaza and the second for Israel, the probability that the headline of the first article will also generate sympathy for Gaza is 63%, while the probability that the headline of the second article will generate sympathy for Israel is only 37%.

Based on this fact alone, and regardless of the imbalances of the war, **people who read the headlines without clicking to access the articles are more exposed to headlines that generate sympathy for Gaza than to headlines that generate sympathy for Israel.**

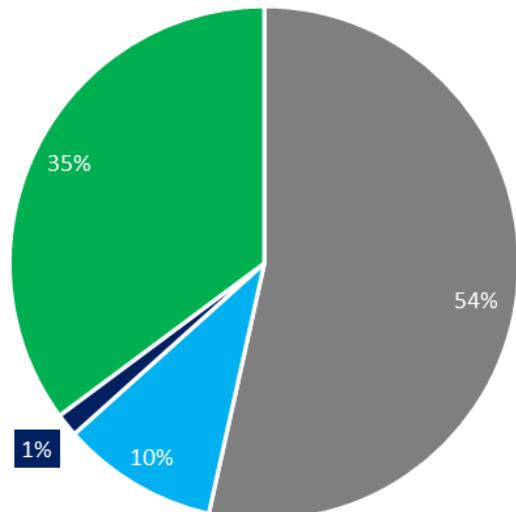
In section 3.3, we looked at the breakdown of articles in the corpus according to the sympathy generated for Israel, Gaza or both. Here, we continue with the same breakdown for headlines.

No. 17 - Breakdown of the corpus according to sympathy generated for Israel, Gaza, or both

Breakdown of articles in the corpus



Breakdown of titles in the corpus



- Articles not generating sympathy
- Sympathy for both Israel and Gaza
- Sympathy only for Israel
- Sympathy only for Gaza

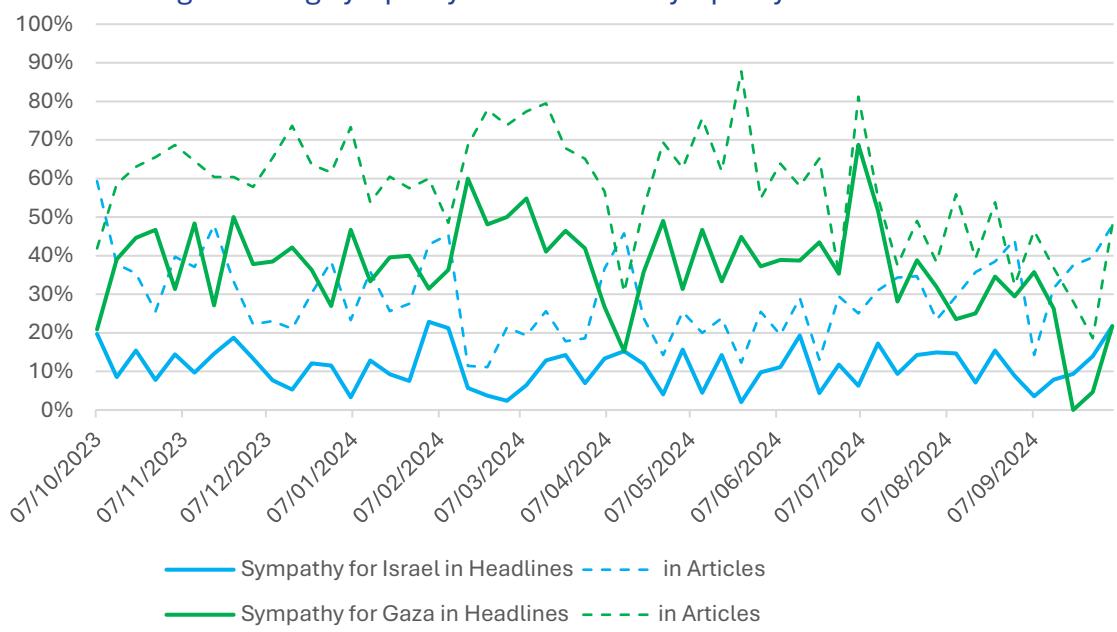
The much shorter format of the headlines and the resulting loss of nuance and complexity **mean** that **only 1% of headlines generate sympathy for both Israel and Gaza**.

54% of the titles in the corpus generate sympathy for neither Israel nor Gaza, compared with only 25% of the articles. This 29-point increase when moving from articles to headlines is due to the virtual absence of headlines generating sympathy for both Israel and Gaza (from 13% to 1%), but also, proportionally, to the smaller number of headlines generating sympathy for Israel alone. In fact, going from 45% to 35% (Gaza) is a 22% decrease, while going from 17% to 10% (Israel) is a 41% decrease.

In a way, the headlines amplify the expression of the original bias at work in the articles. Above, we presented a focus on the sympathy generated by the articles during the period from 7 to 28 October, highlighting that, from the second week of the war onwards, articles generating sympathy for Gaza became more numerous than articles generating sympathy for Israel. In graph 18, the curves show the weekly percentages of headlines creating sympathy for Israel on the one hand and for Gaza on the other. They do not even cross at the very beginning: **from the week of 7 October onwards, headlines creating sympathy for Gaza outnumbered those creating sympathy for Israel.**

Over the twelve months as a whole, the weekly percentage of headlines generating sympathy for Israel varies between 4% and 23%, while the percentage of headlines generating sympathy for Gaza varies between 21% and 69%, with the exception of the last three weeks.

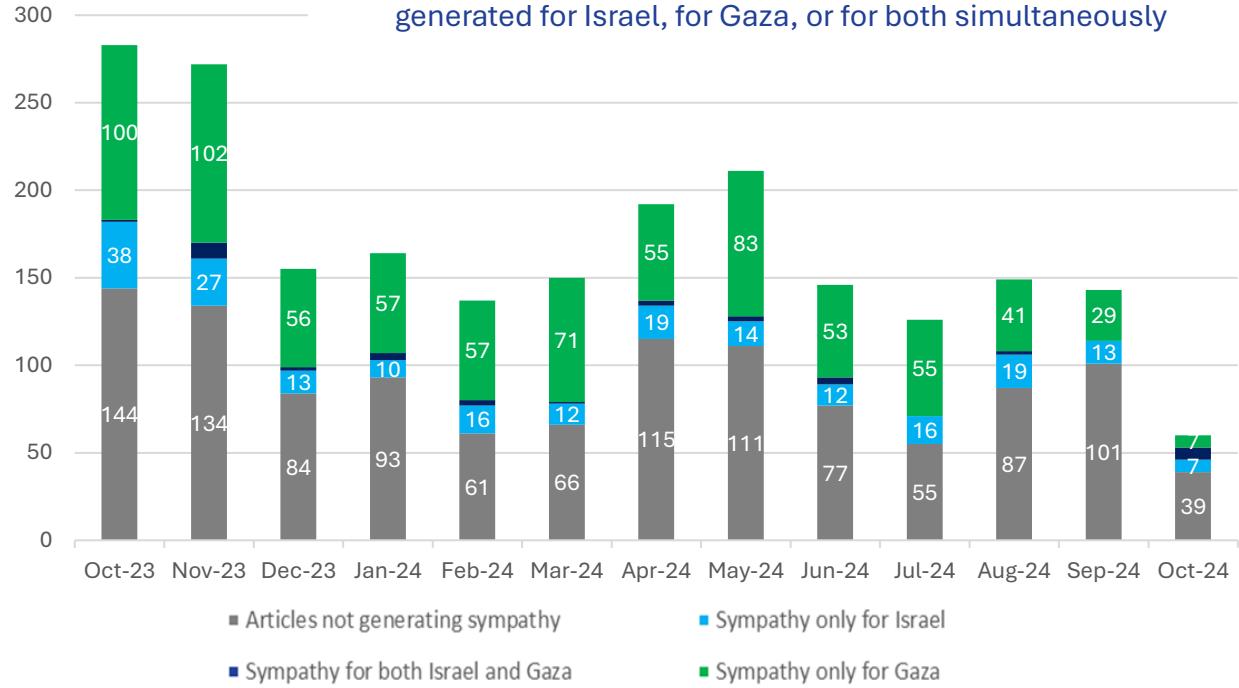
No. 18 - Percentage, per week, of headlines and articles generating sympathy for Israel and sympathy for Gaza



In Graph 19, the monthly breakdown of headlines according to sympathy generated solely for Israel, solely for Gaza, or for both, also shows this stronger decline for Israel than for Gaza when moving from articles to headlines.

In line with the results already presented, **during the period from 7 to 31 October 2023, 38 headlines generated sympathy solely for Israel and 100 headlines generated sympathy solely for Gaza**, even though this period covered the massacres of 7 October and the gradual realisation of their scale and violence, and the Israeli army's ground offensive only began on 28 October.

No. 19 - Monthly breakdown of headlines according to the sympathy generated for Israel, for Gaza, or for both simultaneously



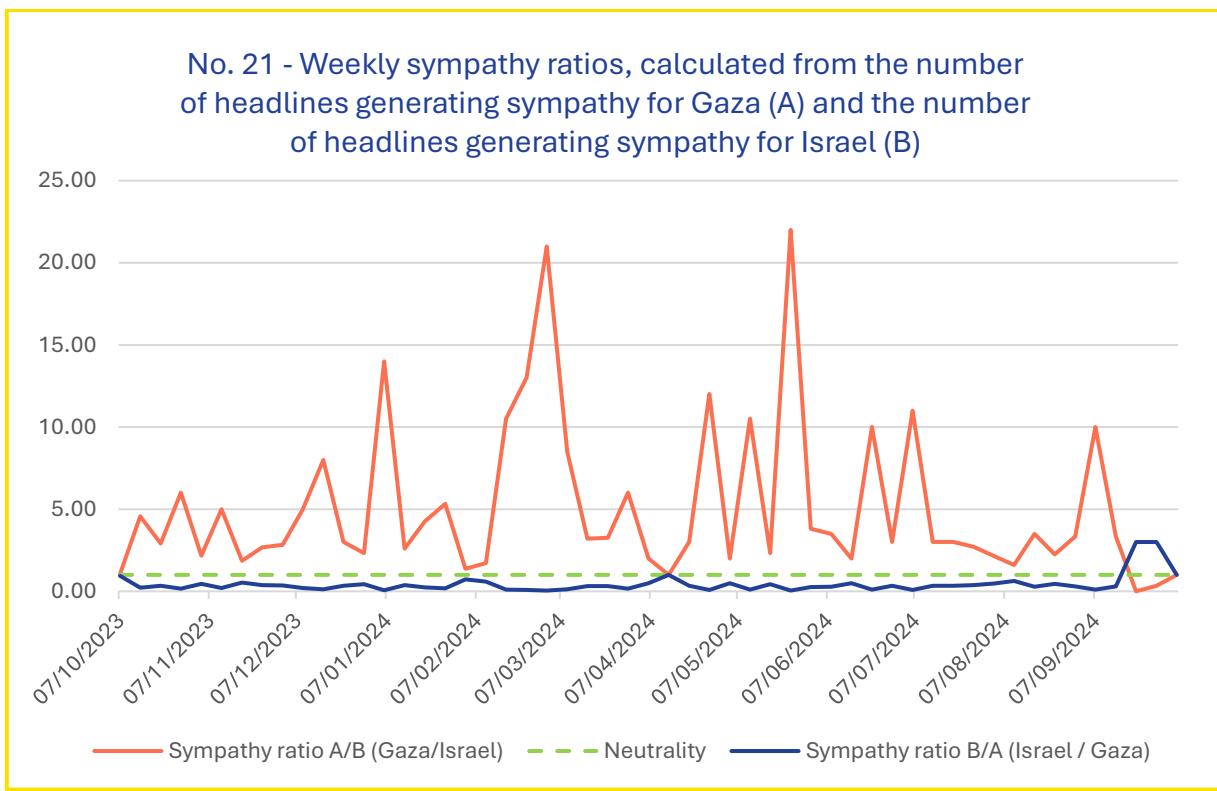
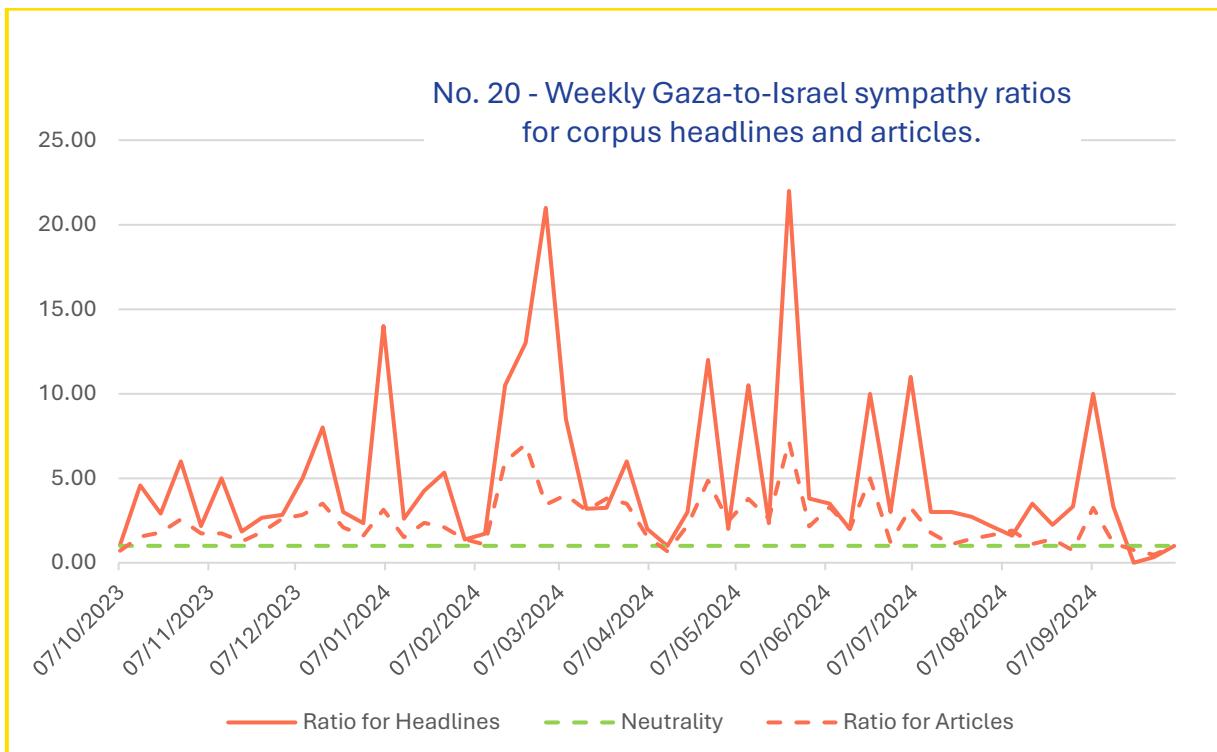
NB: the results for October 2024 cover only 7 days.

The amplification in the headlines of the bias in favour of Gaza and the Palestinians is even more evident in graphs 20 and 21, which show the weekly evolution of the ratio of "Sympathy for Gaza" divided by "Sympathy for Israel".

Graph No. 20 compares the evolution of this ratio for articles and headlines. Graph No. 21 focuses on headlines and compares the evolution of the ratio with the inverse ratio, "Sympathy for Israel" divided by "Sympathy for Gaza".

In section 3.5, we pointed out that the curve for this ratio for articles (red dashes in graph no. 20) was jagged, with two peaks at 7, meaning two weeks with seven times more articles creating sympathy for Gaza than articles creating sympathy for Israel.

We are no longer in the same order of magnitude with the curve for headlines (solid red line). This curve has two peaks above 20, meaning two weeks with 20 times more headlines generating sympathy for Gaza than headlines generating sympathy for Israel. Beyond these two peaks, there are a total of 17 weeks where the ratio is above 5 and 10 weeks where the ratio is above 10. In graph 21, once the last three weeks have been removed, the inverse ratio curve ("Sympathy for Israel" divided by "Sympathy for Gaza") is almost flat and always below the neutrality line (green dashes).



3.7. Biased coverage of the war, corroborated by international comparisons

How does RTBF compare to other media outlets in its coverage of the war in the Middle East? We return to the Asserson Report to answer this question.

Ratio of 'Sympathy for Gaza' to 'Sympathy for Israel' for the period from 7 October 2023 to 7 February 2024 (4 months)		
	Articles	Headlines
RTBF corpus	1.72	3.11
BBC corpus in English	1.50	2.90

The ratio of "Sympathy for Gaza" divided by "Sympathy for Israel" is higher at RTBF than at the BBC in English, both for articles and headlines. In other words, for every article creating sympathy for Israel in either media outlet, there are more articles and headlines creating sympathy for Gaza at RTBF than at the BBC. In view of the biases and prejudices highlighted in the Asserson Report and the multiple controversies that have marked the BBC's coverage of the war in the Middle East, **the fact that both ratios are higher at RTBF than at the BBC corroborates the fact that RTBF's coverage of this war is biased.**

Below, we present **some of the public controversies** surrounding the BBC's coverage of the war in the Middle East:

- Since 2021, the United Kingdom has placed the entire Hamas organisation on its list of terrorist organisations, thereby extending the 2001 designation, which only targeted the military wing. Despite this official classification, **the BBC refuses to refer to Hamas and its members as "terrorists"**, preferring the term "*militants*", which it considers more neutral and potentially legitimising.

To justify this lexical choice, John Simpson, international editor, argued that using the term "*terrorist*" would amount to telling the public "*who to support and who to condemn*" - which would contravene the BBC's claim to objectivity... which has no qualms about using the word "*terrorist*" when referring to Al-Qaeda or Islamic State (IS).

NB: RTBF describes Hamas as a terrorist organisation.

- **On 17 October 2023, the BBC relayed, without critical examination, Hamas' statement on the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital.** Its correspondent, Jon Donnison, stated in particular that "*given the scale of the explosion, it [was] difficult to see it as anything other than an Israeli strike*".

NB: We analyse RTBF's coverage of this explosion in section 4.2.

- On 27 October 2023, Rami Ruhayem, the BBC's Beirut-based correspondent, sent an internal message calling on his colleagues to adopt the terms "*settler colonialism*" and "*ethnic cleansing*" to describe Israel.
- In November 2023, a BBC journalist attributed to the Israeli army the intention to target healthcare professionals at the Al-Shifa hospital complex, whereas the IDF had announced, on the contrary, that it was sending medical teams and Arabic-speaking translators to assist patients. **The BBC later acknowledged that this was "*an error contrary to its usual editorial standards*".**

- In January 2024, star presenter Gary Lineker shared a call from PACBI (Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel) on social media, demanding Israel's exclusion from FIFA and describing Israeli operations in Gaza as "*genocide*".

The BBC deemed that this post did not violate its internal rules. Gary Lineker nevertheless deleted it under public pressure. He left the BBC in May 2025 after sharing a message containing an anti-Semitic image.

- On 1 February 2024, BBC Arabic sought the analysis of General Wasef Eriqat, a former PLO official whom it presented as an "*independent military expert*", even **though the general had hailed the 7 October attack as a "*heroic military miracle*".**

- On 5 February 2024, the BBC dismissed its contributor Dawn Quevas after discovering on social media that she had referred to the Holocaust as a "*holohoax*" and had described Jews as "*Nazi parasites*".

- On 4 June 2024, Qasim Sheikh, a cricket consultant for the BBC and former Scottish international, had to **apologise for suggesting on social media that the attacks of 7 October were justified**. He posted a montage showing Benjamin Netanyahu, Rishi Sunak and Joe Biden with Hitler moustaches, under the title "*Union of Child Killers*".

- In July 2024, when questioned about its Lebanon-based columnist Mayssaa Abdul Khalek, the BBC said it used contributors with a wide range of opinions.

Mayssaa Abdul Khalek called for the "*death of Israel*" and defended a journalist who joked about Hitler barbecuing Jews. She describes Israel as an "*imperialist colony*" and its cities as "*occupied Palestinian territories*".

- On 28 July 2024, a BBC article on Hezbollah's deadly attack in Majdal Shams was published under the headline "*Ten dead in rocket attack on Israeli-occupied Golan*".

This headline omits any mention of Hezbollah, the Druze community, or the fact that the rocket struck children playing football. To date, this strike, which claimed the lives of 12 young people aged 10 to 20, is the deadliest attack against Israel since 7 October.

The headline was changed a few hours later. A BBC spokesperson explained that it was a "*developing story, amended as facts were confirmed*".

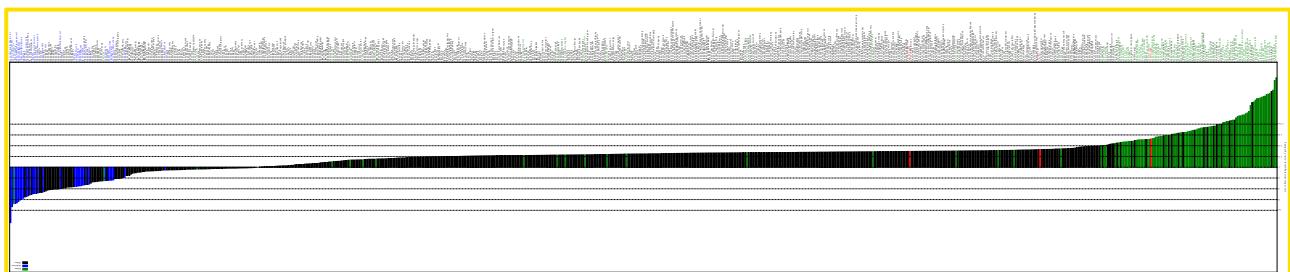
- On 18 September 2024, Jeremy Bowen, the BBC's international editor, claimed at a closed-door seminar that **Hamas was a "reliable source" for casualty figures in Gaza**. He also described The Asserson Report as "defamatory".
- On 6 November 2025, The Telegraph published a **report by former journalist Michael Prescott, commissioned by the BBC, denouncing bias on several issues, including the conflict in Gaza**.

Following the release of this report, Tim Davie, Director-General of the BBC, and Deborah Turness, Director of News, resigned. Among other criticisms, the report states that, from November 2023 to April 2025, BBC Arabic featured Ahmed Alagha, who considers Jews to be "demons," 522 times, and Samir Elzaenen, who calls for "*burning Jews as Hitler did*" or "*shooting Jews*" because "*it solves everything*" in social media posts, 244 times. BBC Arabic has since acknowledged errors in its choice of certain contributors.

Another comparison with the results of the Asserson Report corroborates RTBF's biased coverage of the war in the Middle East: the sympathy analysis, which focuses on the headlines of a corpus of 342,559 articles published between 7 October 2023 and 7 February 2024 by 376 media outlets around the world, accessible via the GDELT Project database (see §2.1).

After asking ChatGPT whether each headline generated sympathy for Israel on the one hand and for Gaza on the other, Dr Haran Shani-Narkiss's team calculated, for each media outlet, the ratio between the "Number of headlines generating sympathy for Gaza" and the "Number of headlines generating sympathy for Israel", placing the higher number in the numerator so as to always have a result greater than 1. They then asked ChatGPT to identify media outlets linked to Jews (in blue in the graph on the next page) and media outlets linked to Muslims (in green). They also marked in blue or green all media outlets in countries with the highest ratios.

What is important in the graph below is the overview that positions each of the 376 media outlets on a single axis. The graph begins on the left with the media outlets with the highest Israel/Gaza sympathy ratios. It ends on the right with the media outlets with the highest Gaza/Israel sympathy ratios. Unsurprisingly, Israeli or Jewish-affiliated media outlets (e.g., The Jewish Chronicle in the United Kingdom), which appear in blue, are heavily represented at the left end of the axis, while media outlets from Arab, Muslim or Muslim-affiliated countries, which appear in green, are heavily represented at the right end of the axis.



Innohives has reproduced this graph, adding RTBF (see next page).

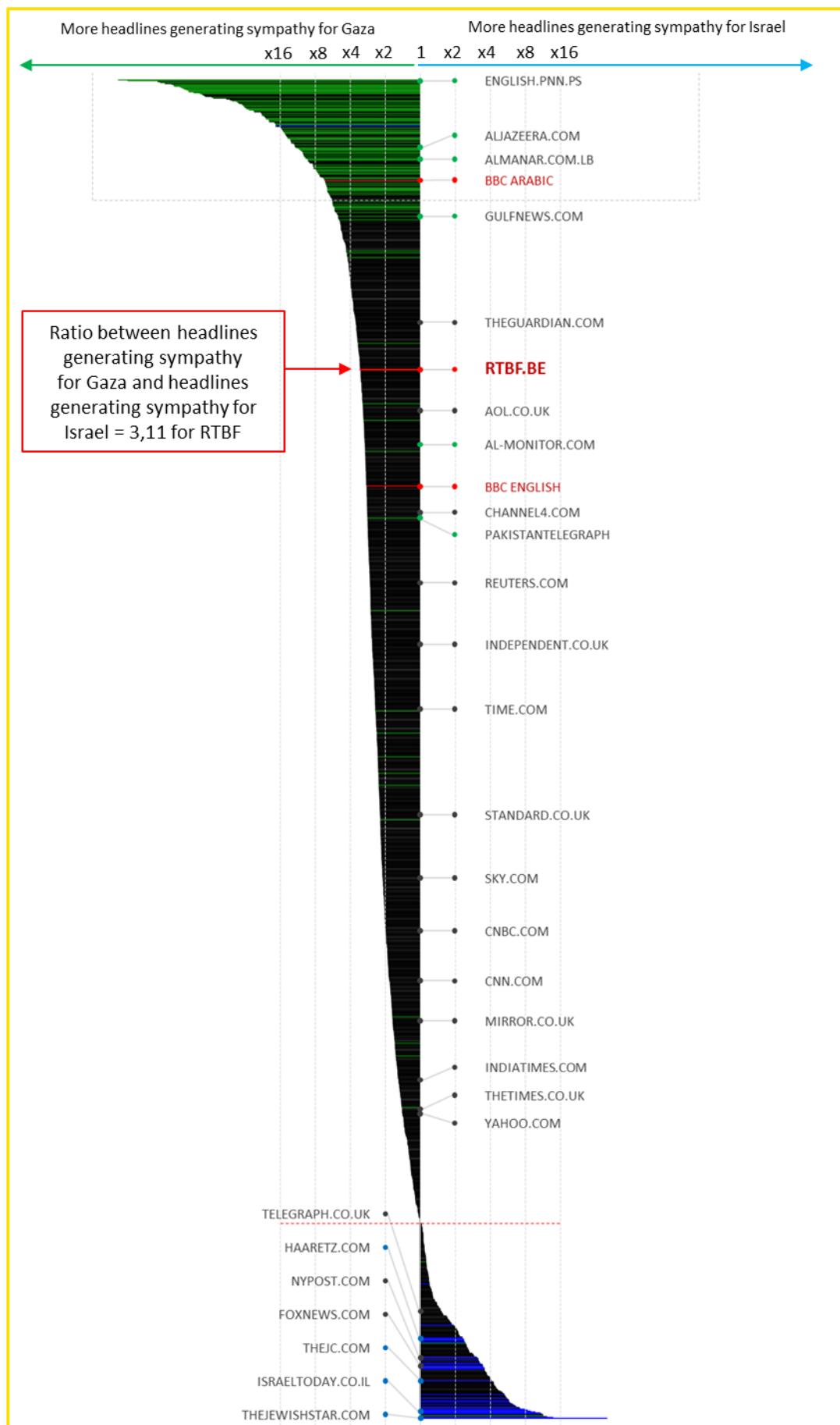
RTBF appears quite far from neutrality. It is close to The Guardian – a newspaper positioned on the left and a long-standing supporter of the Palestinian cause and struggle – between the BBC in English and the BBC in Arabic, which is on the same level as media outlets that are very committed to the Palestinians and/or against Israel, such as Hezbollah's Al Manar channel in Lebanon and the Qatari channel Al Jazeera, whose programmes in English and Arabic are broadcast in Belgium by TV operators.

Beyond the positioning and neighbours of RTBF, the graph shows that it is entirely possible for internationally renowned media outlets to cover the war in the Middle East with a ratio of sympathy in favour of Gaza, but also in favour of Israel (The Telegraph), which is close to neutrality (ratio = 1, i.e. as many headlines creating sympathy for Israel as headlines creating sympathy for Gaza). **These media outlets include CNN, CNBC, The Times and The Standard.**

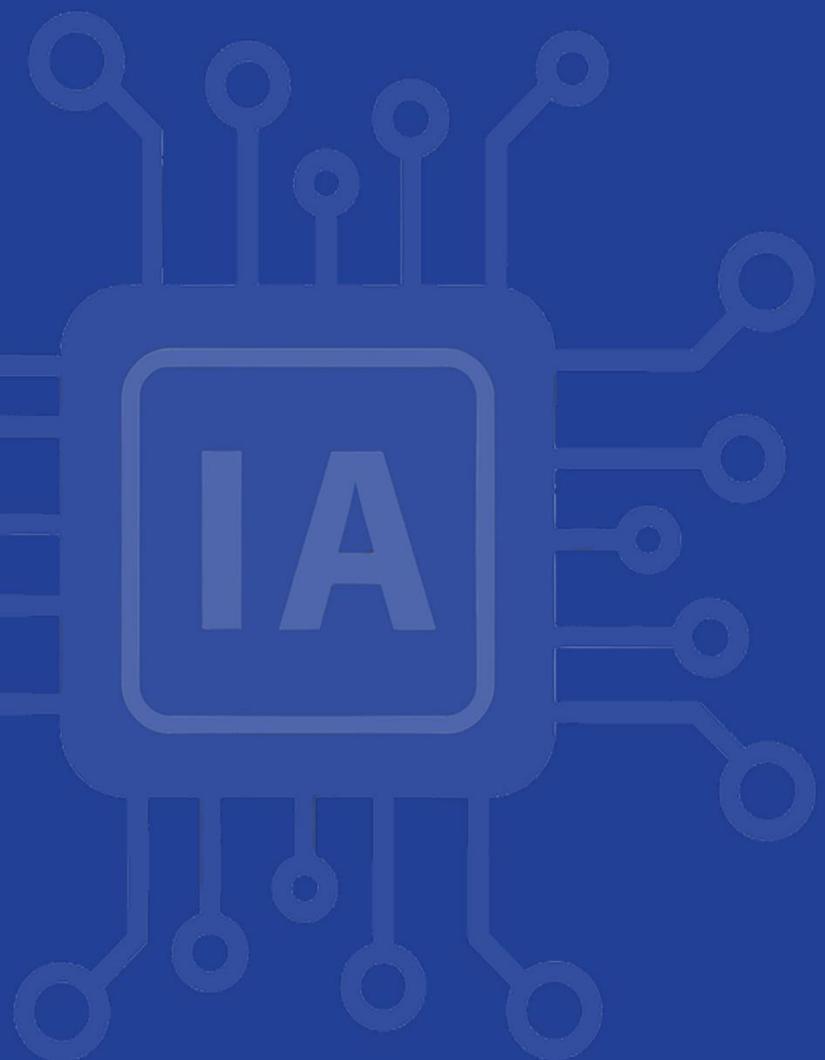
There is therefore no need to have a sympathy ratio in favour of Gaza as high as RTBF's in order to cover the war in the Middle East.

Furthermore, whether a private media outlet has a left-wing or right-wing, liberal, progressive or conservative editorial line, whether it favours Israelis or Palestinians, is a matter for its management and owners to decide, provided that the public regulatory authorities have no objections.

On the other hand, we find it problematic when a public media outlet, funded by taxpayers' money, chooses sides and thus loses sight of the imperative of pluralism and impartiality that should guide its treatment of the news.



4. Etudes de cas



In addition to ChatGPT's analysis of the sympathy generated by each article in the RTBF corpus, we present some qualitative analyses that illustrate the effects of the original bias. These analyses focus on three examples from the summer of 2025 (§4.1), coverage of the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza on 17 October 2023 (§4.2), and the photographs chosen to illustrate three articles cited in this report (§4.3).

4.1. Three examples from the summer of 2025, illustrating the persistence of original bias

Example 1: Announcement by the United States of sanctions against Francesca Albanese, UN Special Rapporteur for the Palestinian Territories

RTBF article dated 9 July 2025, authored by "the editorial team with AFP"

[War in the Middle East: Washington sanctions the UN Special Rapporteur for the Palestinian Territories](#)

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced on Wednesday that the United States will impose sanctions on Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur for the Palestinian Territories in Geneva. Marco Rubio criticised on X the "illegitimate and shameful efforts (by Francesca Albanese) to incite the International Criminal Court to take action against American and Israeli officials, companies and leaders".

In a statement, the Secretary of State subsequently denounced the UN expert's virulent criticism of the United States. According to him, she recommended that the International Criminal Court (ICC) issue arrest warrants against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, among others.

According to the same source, the rapporteur had taken part in "biased and malicious activities", with Marco Rubio accusing her of "unabashed anti-Semitism" and "support for terrorism".

She also allegedly wrote "threatening letters" to several American companies, making what Marco Rubio describes as "baseless accusations" and recommending legal action against these companies and their executives.

On 3 July, Francesca Albanese presented a report to the United Nations Human Rights Council examining "the mechanisms of companies that support Israel's colonial project of displacement and replacement of Palestinians".

In February, she also denounced Donald Trump's plan to occupy the Gaza Strip and displace its population as "illegal" and "completely absurd".

The US president had assured that he wanted to take "control" of the war-torn Gaza Strip and repeated that its inhabitants could go and live in Jordan or Egypt, despite opposition from those countries and the Palestinians themselves. "It is illegal, immoral and irresponsible. It is completely irresponsible because it will exacerbate the regional crisis," lamented the UN expert, who reiterated her accusations of Israeli "genocide" in Gaza.

Israeli Ambassador to the UN Danny Danon welcomed the US Secretary of State's decision, denouncing Francesca Albanese's "relentless and partisan campaign against Israel and the United States".

The article gives considerable space to the accusations made by Marco Rubio and Danny Danon against Ms Albanese: partial and malicious activities, unabashed anti-Semitism, support for terrorism, threatening letters, and a relentless and partisan campaign against Israel and the United States.

However, it mentions only two interventions by Ms Albanese, which were **ultimately not very controversial, and** which may cause the reader to doubt the legitimacy of the US sanctions:

- On 3 July, Ms Albanese presented a report to the United Nations Human Rights Council examining "the mechanisms of companies that support Israel's colonial project of displacement and replacement of Palestinians".
- She also denounced Donald Trump's plan to occupy the Gaza Strip and displace its population as "illegal" and "completely absurd". [...] "It is illegal, immoral and irresponsible. It is completely irresponsible because it will exacerbate the regional crisis."

The article thus ignores several statements made by Ms Albanese, which would have given the reader a more complete picture and legitimised the US sanctions.

RTBF could argue that the AFP dispatch did not mention these other statements. That is a bit of a stretch. It could also put forward one of the following explanations: the RTBF journalist who edited and posted the article online based on an incomplete AFP dispatch:

- was not familiar with Ms Albanese and her problematic statements;
- considered that the comments attributed to Ms Albanese in the AFP dispatch were serious enough to justify the US sanctions;
- considered, on the contrary, that these sanctions reflected an unfair bias on the part of the Trump administration against a senior official responsible for defending the Palestinians.

It is likely that the ^{third} option is closest to reality, given the original bias.

In any case, there is missing information in the RTBF article, and RTBF cannot absolve itself of responsibility by pointing to AFP, whose role is to provide material for its own articles.

Below are several problematic statements made by Ms Albanese:

- Ms Albanese stated that the attack on 7 October **was not** motivated by anti-Semitism: "The worst anti-Semitic massacre of the century? No... The victims... were not killed because of their Judaism, but in response to Israel's oppression."

- She maintained this position in 2025, reiterating that the motives for the attack **were not** anti-Semitic but related to the situation of "occupation".
- She believed that "*Palestinians have a right to resist,*" even with weapons, legitimised by their situation of occupation.
- She rejected the State of Israel's right to self-defence in the context of the occupation, calling Israel's security "*paranoia*".
- Her March 2024 report, entitled *Anatomy of a Genocide*, cites "*reasonable grounds*" for believing that "*acts of genocide*" have been committed by Israel in Gaza, and that this also constitutes "*ethnic cleansing*".
- In early May 2025, she posted on X (since deleted) that there was a "*Jewish brigade and its cronies*" worse than "*genocide deniers*".
- On 10 May 2025, she accused the Israeli army on X of using dogs to "*torture*" and "*rape*" Palestinians.
- In May 2025, she reiterated and defended some of her statements about the "*Jewish lobby*".
- In July 2025, she compared companies that invest in Israel to those that supported the Nazi regime or South African apartheid.
- She urged the media not to report that the death toll came from the "*Hamas-run Ministry of Health*," preferring the shorter version: "*Israel killed 43 Palestinians today*."

Example 2: RTBF coverage of the elimination of Anas al-Sharif by the Israeli army

RTBF article dated 11 August 2025, authored by "the editorial team with AFP"

Five Al Jazeera journalists killed in Israeli strike on Gaza

Al Jazeera announced the death of five of its journalists on Sunday during an Israeli strike in the Gaza Strip, including a reporter well known to its viewers whom the Israeli army acknowledged targeting, describing him as a "terrorist".

As the Israeli government shows determination to implement its new plan of operation in the Palestinian territory devastated and starved by 22 months of war, the Qatar-based channel reported "what appears to be a targeted Israeli attack" on a tent used by its journalists in Gaza City, in front of al-Shifa Hospital.

It reported the deaths of its correspondents Anas al-Sharif and Mohammed Qreiqeh, as well as cameramen Ibrahim Zaher, Mohammed Noufal and Moamen Aliwa.

Their names are added to the list of nearly 200 journalists, according to Reporters Without Borders, killed in the war launched in retaliation for the bloody attack by the Palestinian movement Hamas on 7 October 2023. Anas al-Sharif, 28, was one of the most recognisable faces among the correspondents covering the conflict in Gaza on a daily basis.

The Israeli army confirmed that it had targeted him, describing him as a "terrorist" who "was posing as a journalist". He "was the head of a terrorist cell within the Hamas terrorist organisation and was

responsible for preparing rocket attacks against Israeli civilians and troops," it said on Telegram, without providing any evidence.

The RTBF article states that the Israeli army eliminated Anas al-Sharif on the grounds that he was a terrorist, **but presents this elimination as arbitrary and unjustified since, according to the article, the Israeli army did not "provide any evidence" for this accusation.**

As in the previous example, RTBF could say that it relied on an AFP dispatch and trusted AFP, without considering it necessary to verify whether or not there was evidence establishing that Anas al-Sharif was a terrorist.

On the subject of evidence, the AFP dispatch is inaccurate because the Israeli army provided evidence (see below) as early as October 2024 of Anas al-Sharif's affiliation with Hamas.

AFP could have said that it had examined this evidence and considered it insufficient or questionable because it came from one of the warring parties. It therefore erred in stating, without further clarification, that the Israeli army had not provided any evidence.

The stakes are high because one case involves the elimination of a terrorist and the other the assassination of a journalist. This concerns AFP, but also RTBF.

The RTBF journalist who edited and posted the article online based on an inaccurate AFP dispatch could have taken a step back and done some additional research (simply by going to the Israeli army's X account). It is possible that this journalist did not do so because of his solidarity with a journalist who died for the freedom of information, **but also because of his original bias, which leads him to see Palestinians solely as victims and the Israeli army as unjust, brutal and guilty of assassinating journalists.**

Below we reproduce several pieces of evidence provided by the Israeli army:

- On 7 October 2023, during the massacres, Al Sharif posted on social media: "*9 hours and the heroes are still roaming the country and capturing ... God, God, how great you are.*"
- Between November 2021 and October 2023, Al Sharif celebrated Palestinian attacks that targeted and/or killed Israeli civilians on 17 occasions, describing the attacks as "*heroic operations*" and their perpetrators as "*heroes*" and "*martyrs*".
- The Israeli army provided the press with documents found in Gaza – personnel lists, training records, address books, pay slips, etc. – showing that Anas al-Sharif was part of Hamas' military apparatus.
- It also published the following photos, which attest to Anas al-Sharif's close relationship with Yahia Sinwar, former leader of Hamas in Gaza and the man responsible for the attacks on 7 October.



Example 3: RTBF's coverage of the UN's decision to declare a famine in Gaza

August 2025: the situation in Gaza is dire and **it is clear that there is a problem of malnutrition**.

On 22 August, the Famine Review Committee (FRC) of the UN programme, [The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification \(IPC\)](#), changed the situation with its fifth [report on Gaza](#): for the first time, it declared a famine, the ultimate stage in its evidence-based food crisis classification scale. Since the scale was established in 2004, this is only the fifth time that famine has been declared anywhere in the world and the first time in the Near and Middle East.

The UN's declaration of famine in Gaza was a long-awaited announcement. It allows supporters of the Palestinians and opponents of Israeli policy **to add a most serious accusation against Israel, that of starving its people and thus causing famine**.

RTBF reports on the announcement made by IPC and the reactions it provoked in four articles:

- 22 August 2025: [*"Starving people for military purposes is a war crime," accuses the UN, which declares famine in Gaza, the first in the Middle East*](#), article signed by the editorial team with AFP and BELGA
- 22 August 2025: [*"Moral scandal", need for "immediate action": UN declaration of famine in Gaza further isolates Israel*](#), article by La rédaction with Agences
- 24 August 2025: [*Famine in Gaza: why is the UN only confirming it now?*](#), an article by Wahoub Fayoumi
- 27 August 2025: [*Israel demands withdrawal of "fabricated" report declaring famine in Gaza governorate*](#), article by Editorial staff with BELGA.

Each of these articles presents two diametrically opposed points of view:

- the UN, the ICRC, several NGOs (Médecins du Monde, Amnesty International, etc.) and others accuse Israel of causing famine in Gaza by refusing to allow sufficient food aid into the territory ("moral scandal," "a disgrace for Israel," "this famine will and must haunt us all," "one of the constituent elements of the crime of genocide," etc.);
- Israel (its Prime Minister, the Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) rejects the IPC report, its methodology and its conclusion: "there is no famine in Gaza" ("biased report, based on Hamas' lies", "blatant lie", "Israel has a policy of famine prevention", etc.).

As in the two previous examples, three of the four RTBF articles are based on one or more press agency dispatches.

The first two articles announce the famine and present reactions to this announcement. They give five times more coverage to the accusations against Israel than to the denials expressed solely by representatives of the State of Israel.

The last of the three articles based on news agency reports focuses on Israel's reaction to the accusation of famine: its demand that a "fabricated" report be withdrawn.

Finally, the article by Wahoub Fayoumi is more of an analytical piece that takes a step back and seeks to explain why the UN took so long to declare famine in Gaza, even though many NGOs had been warning about it for a long time.

In their coverage of the IPC report and its aftermath, the news agencies took the IPC's conclusion at face value because it was expected, even hoped for. They focused on the accusations against Israel prompted by this conclusion. Above all, they merely relayed Israel's denials, which were also expected, as if in a role-playing game, without taking an interest in the criticisms levelled by Israel and several NGOs against the IPC report and the distortions it contained in order to reach a conclusion of famine.

Here again, RTBF could say that it relied on news agencies, that it did not have the expertise to assess whether the IPC had applied its methodology correctly or incorrectly, that there was, in any case, an obvious problem of malnutrition in Gaza, or that many actors (IPC, NGOs, etc.) had long been talking about acute malnutrition or the risk of famine.

In the first two articles we cite, RTBF relayed, without perspective or critical analysis, the conclusion of the Famine Review Committee, a public organisation affiliated with the UN that is

responsible for assessing different levels of hunger on a scientific basis and using the same classification scale in order to avoid political manipulation.

In each of the two articles, it indicates the three cumulative criteria that must be met for famine to exist according to the IPC: *"For the IPC, a famine is occurring when three elements are present: at least 20% of households (one in five) face extreme food shortages, at least 30% of children under five (one in three) suffer from acute malnutrition, and at least two people per 10,000 die of hunger every day."*

Just as it was obvious that there was a problem of malnutrition in Gaza, **it was also obvious that there was a problem with medical monitoring in Gaza for measuring the parameters relating to these three criteria.**

But these two obvious facts did not carry the same weight, and RTBF did not seek to find out more about how these three criteria were verified on the ground in a war zone.

Because of the original bias and also because of a confirmation bias, waiting for the declaration of famine in Gaza and having no sympathy for the Israeli government, **RTBF emphasised the accusation against Israel** in the headlines of its two articles, without questioning the veracity of the accusation. In the same vein, it also reported on Israel's denials, but as if they were blatant lies, which are unfounded in the face of evidence.

However, in this case, regardless of any sympathy or antipathy one may have for the Israeli government, it immediately presented solid arguments about the biases that mar the IPC report and invalidate its conclusion of famine.

Israel's various arguments for rejecting the IPC report are presented in a document entitled [*"Politics Disguised as Science. Systematic distortions in the IPC's Gaza report of 25 August"*](#), the first version of which was posted online on 27 August. **Here we reproduce three of these arguments, which are easy to understand** even for those who are not specialists in the IPC classification scale:

- **Biased and unrepresentative sample:** the IPC report relies heavily on hospital records, as well as records from malnutrition prevention programmes, for the IPC criterion relating to children under five. This contravenes the IPC guidelines because children in these facilities are not representative of all children, as healthy children are by definition excluded from these facilities.
- **Selection of partial data:** the criterion relating to children under five would have been met (the first indicator, which is the weight-for-height ratio, could not be used in Gaza; therefore, another indicator, which is more complex to analyse, was used), but only with part of the data from July. On 6 August, when all the data became available, this criterion was no longer met, but the IPC report was not completed or corrected.
- **Political bias on the part of two of the eight members of the IPC Famine Review Committee,** who made comments on social media that were, to say the least, biased and problematic: Andrew Seal, Associate Professor of International Nutrition at UCL, and Zeina Jamaluddine, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Epidemiology and Population Health at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. The following four posts are cited in the Israeli report:

Post from 28 October 2023

Andy Seal @andrewj_seal Follow ...

Tonight we are witnessing the collapse of perceived moral authority within western governance systems and an implosion of international norms and law. It's a watershed moment for global society that will have profound implications.

#Gaza_Genocide

1:11 AM · 28 Oct 23 · 274 Views

4 Reposts 5 Likes

Andy Seal @andrewj_seal Follow ...

Replying to @TRyanGregory

Hamas, the de facto government of #Gaza, has to go because of extreme rhetoric and war crimes? Under that criteria the Israeli government would also have to be removed. Not helpful. Biden has to radically move to a realistic peace plan and impose ceasefire. No one else can.

11:51 AM · 02 Nov 23 · 315 Views

Andy Seal @andrewj_seal · 27 Jan 24 ⚡ ...

Replies to @andrewj_seal

Today @CIJ_ICJ ruled that accusation of genocide against Israel is plausible & issuing of provisional measures to stop genocide is necessary. The Houthi government in Yemen is claiming that its #RedSea shipping blockade is to enforce those very measures.

Q1 t1 147 B 2

Andy Seal @andrewj_seal · 27 Jan 24 ⚡ ...

The US and UK is bombing Yemen to try and prevent it taking actions that are designed, at least in part, to enforce the will of the ICJ.

Things are getting complicated!

Post from 16 October 2023

... 16.10.2023 · Zeina Jamaluddine Dear @LSHTM @LSHTM_Crises if not now when do we "decolonize"



Birzeit University · 15.10.2023

Do Not be Silent about Genocide
Open Letter from Birzeit University
in Palestine to International
Academic Institutions
bit.ly/3tE2viS

The third RTBF article, written by Wahoub Fayoumi, indicates from its title **an angle marked by original bias and confirmation bias: "Famine in Gaza: why is the UN only confirming it now?"** The journalist asks: *"Is it inconsistent for the UN to officially declare a state of famine in Gaza on 22 August, when NGOs have been talking about it for weeks?"*

In other words, why did the UN wait so long to confirm something that everyone knew, namely that there was famine in Gaza? With this framing, it is impossible to take a critical stance towards the IPC report, which would have been relevant.

Here again, the article lists the criteria that must be met for a famine to be declared according to the IPC, but does not question how these criteria were measured and verified in a war zone.

While recounting the history of warnings issued by NGOs about acute malnutrition in Gaza, **it quotes several NGO officials who point to a single culprit for this situation: Israel**.

Hamas is not mentioned once in this article, as if the ongoing war had nothing to do with malnutrition, as if Hamas had nothing to do with this war, and as if Hamas were not looting food aid entering Gaza.

This absence of Hamas in the article can probably be explained by an **outdated framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict**, in which Palestinians are solely victims and Israel is the aggressor, guilty of all evils, including, now, famine as defined by the UN.

The fourth RTBF article could give the impression of rebalancing the coverage as it focuses on the Israeli position. This is not the case.

The article presents Israel's demand that IPC withdraw its report, Israel's threat to put pressure on the donors that fund IPC (the European Union, Canada, Germany and the United Kingdom), and Israel's denials of famine in Gaza. **On the contrary, it gives the impression that Israel is stubbornly and brutally denying a reality that is obvious to the rest of the world.**

It has this negative effect for Israel because, like the other three articles, it says nothing about Israel's arguments for rejecting the IPC report and also because it ignores Israel's offer of dialogue and cooperation, as well as the problems raised by the IPC's previous work in Gaza.

Here again, RTBF could say that these elements were not included in the BELGA dispatch that provided the raw material for the article. However, it was easy to find on the Internet [the full text of the letter](#) sent on 27 August to José Lopez, Director of the IPC Programme, by Eden Bar Tal, Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

But, assuming that a journalist had been curious enough to search for and read this letter, presenting Israel's arguments against the IPC report would have quickly led to the rejection of the word "famine", with all its infamy, as well as the accusation against Israel of starving the Palestinians.

Ultimately, whether one sympathises with or dislikes the Israelis or the Palestinians, it is clear that there was a problem of malnutrition in Gaza and that this problem needed to be addressed and resolved, but the fact remains that, **based on the scientific criteria required by the IPC classification scale, there was no famine in Gaza during the summer of 2025, as defined by the IPC.** An analysis carried out on 10 October 2025 provides definitive proof of this: between 22 August 2025 (the date on which the IPC declared famine) and 10 October 2025, 10,143 deaths linked to the famine should have been recorded according to the IPC's own criteria. However, only 192 cases were reported, a number that is highly questionable since it comes from Hamas.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the issue of famine in Gaza has since disappeared from the media agenda.

4.2. Original bias and confirmation bias in RTBF's coverage of the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital, Gaza, 17 October 2023

We conducted **a qualitative analysis** of RTBF articles covering the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza on 17 October 2023 for the following reasons:

- on 18 October, just a few days after the massacres of 7 October, this event contributed significantly to a peak of 10 articles expressing sympathy for Gaza;
- **RTBF's coverage of the event was the subject of several criticisms**, including a statement from the Coordinating Committee of Jewish Organisations in Belgium (see §1.2);
- **RTBF responded to this criticism by publishing two articles explaining and "deciphering" its work** and the difficulties of covering such news in real time:
 - 18 October at 6.12 p.m.: [Who fired a rocket at a hospital in Gaza? What we already know and what we don't know yet](#), by Guillaume Woelfle with Agencies and Himad Messoudi for the programme Déclic, a talk show focusing on news analysis and debate.
 - 20 October at 5:53 p.m.: [INSIDE: Did RTBF "misinform" by presenting the explosion in the Gaza hospital as the work of Israel?](#) by the INSIDE editorial team, a section that deals with behind-the-scenes stories at RTBF and in the media;
- RTBF's coverage of this explosion also gave rise to a **complaint to the Journalism Ethics Council** (see §1.2); [this complaint will be ruled unfounded](#) on 21 February 2024;
- between 17 and 20 October, as events unfolded, **RTBF changed its narrative four times regarding the perpetrator of the strike on Al-Ahli hospital**;
- despite the difficulties of covering war news in real time, **RTBF's coverage of this explosion perfectly illustrates the original bias**;
- The coverage of this explosion also highlights another bias, well documented by psychologists and stemming, in this case, from the original bias: **confirmation bias**.

In its long article of 20 October, RTBF's INSIDE editorial team rightly points out that it is easier to draw conclusions *"with hindsight than in the rush of live coverage of an event where a news flash comes in every four minutes"*. **It also makes several important points:**

"The information is difficult to cross-check and verify due to the small number of journalists on the ground (almost all of whom are from Gaza) and the lack of international or independent observers in the field. The vast majority of information will therefore come from the warring parties, who are obviously biased in the conflict. Newsrooms must therefore strike a balance

between the necessary caution to be exercised with information that may be propaganda and the need to report on what is happening, even if it is one of the warring parties who is saying it."

Beyond the general comment on the bias of information coming from any belligerent and the need for caution, **it is important to remember, in this case, that the belligerents are not of the same nature and therefore cannot be treated as equals.**

Hamas is a terrorist and totalitarian entity that is accountable to no one and can therefore say whatever it wants without consequence, while the Israeli army is the army of a democratic state that was attacked ten days earlier.

Unlike Hamas, the IDF must answer for its actions to the Israeli political authorities, Israeli public opinion and the international community.

This is one of the imbalances to be taken into account in the media coverage of the conflict (see §1.3). It is symptomatic that it is not mentioned in the INSIDE article of 20 October.

The INSIDE article then presents, in detail, the various AFP and BELGA dispatches used by RTBF that evening to cover the explosion at Al Ahli Hospital. We reproduce here its comments on the first alert issued by AFP at 7:12 p.m.

"An AFP alert is the most urgent message that can be sent; it is supposed to 'alert' newsrooms as quickly as possible that something important is happening. For information as important as this, it is not possible for AFP journalists to cross-check all the facts in order to write several dozen lines of context in a matter of minutes. Alerts are therefore, by definition, only one line long, with no title.

[...] At 7:12 p.m., the AFP alert received by RTBF was as follows: "Gaza: at least 200 dead in Israeli raid on hospital compound (Hamas)". The parentheses indicate that the source of this information is Hamas. The details (the number of deaths, the perpetrator of the strike, or even the explosion) cannot be confirmed by AFP. AFP therefore indicates the source: Hamas, so that editors know that this information has not been cross-checked by AFP using three different sources, as is the basic rule.

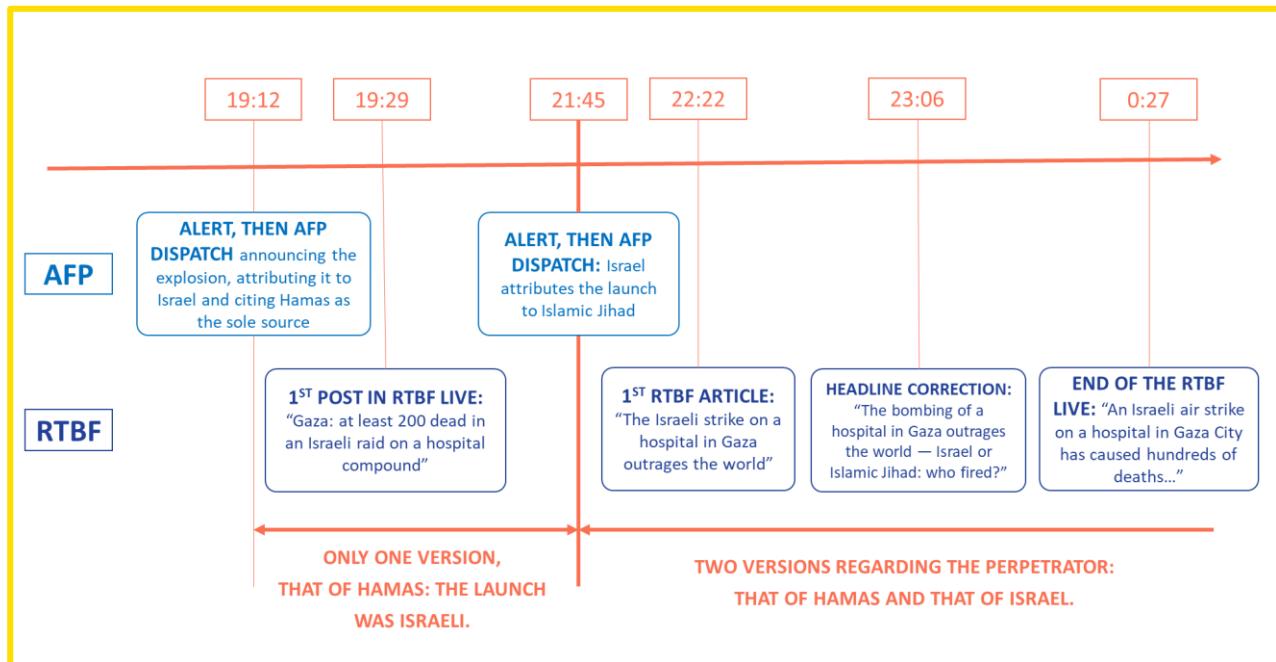
For AFP, as for international newsrooms, it is difficult to verify these details given the small number of international journalists on the ground. Nevertheless, the information is considered credible to a certain extent: Israel has been carrying out strikes on the Gaza Strip for several days, so it is likely that this strike originated from Israel.

After lengthy deliberation, **the INSIDE editorial team acknowledged a few "inaccuracies and errors", but instead praised RTBF** for tempering another AFP alert and a BELGA dispatch that evening, while emphasising that *"it was a difficult evening for many editorial teams to manage"*. It concludes by stating that *"the news management confirmed the editorial team's work with a commitment to rigour, adherence to the facts and the necessary caution regarding sources of information and origins of viewpoints"*.

For our part, we disagree with the analyses and conclusions of this INSIDE article. They seem to us to be more a matter of professional solidarity and a desire to close ranks in the face of criticism. We consider that RTBF's coverage of the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital from 17 to 20 October **is marked by**

its original bias in support of the Palestinians, by confirmation bias²¹ and by several shortcomings, even if this coverage is not the result of a conscious and deliberate intention to misinform.

In a way, ten days after the massacres of 7 October, which challenged their preconceived ideas about the victims and the aggressors, RTBF journalists seem to have found an opportunity to return to their old framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, accusing Israel of bombing a hospital and causing hundreds of deaths. **As a result, they gave priority to information confirming this framing and were reluctant to write anything else.**



Chronology of AFP alerts and dispatches, as well as RTBF posts, articles and corrections on 17 October 2023

Here are the various points that support our argument:

- The first post in the LIVE feed (7:29 p.m.) and the first article (10:22 p.m.) by RTBF on the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital did not treat the information released by Hamas with caution. Both should have indicated in their headlines that the only source was Hamas, but what is sufficient for AFP, which targets professionals, is not sufficient for a website such as RTBF, which targets the general public. **They should therefore have included an explicit warning message urging caution. This was not the case.**
- The INSIDE article of 20 October gives the impression that the sentence "*it is likely that this strike came from Israel*" is an analysis by AFP. This is not the case.

²¹ Confirmation bias is "a cognitive mechanism that consists of favouring information that confirms one's preconceived ideas or hypotheses, or giving less weight to hypotheses and information that contradict one's beliefs, which results in a reluctance to change one's mind" (source: Wikipedia).

This assessment is certainly the analysis made by the RTBF editorial team "in the heat of the moment" on 17 October, after reading the AFP alert (7.12 p.m.) and the AFP dispatch (7.23 p.m.), under the dual influence of the original bias and confirmation bias. It is solely attributable to RTBF.

The AFP alert and dispatch merely relayed Hamas' statements, while informing an informed and professional audience of journalists that AFP was not yet in a position to cross-check and verify three distinct pieces of information: 1) an explosion took place at Al-Ahli hospital, 2) this explosion was caused by Israeli army fire, 3) it resulted in heavy human casualties, with at least 200 dead. The AFP alert and the AFP dispatch say nothing more.

- The INSIDE article gives RTBF's editorial team credit for not attributing the strike to Israel in a post at 9:27 p.m. **We see this more as a dysfunction.**

This post in the LIVE section repeats a short AFP dispatch, removing the mention of Israel as follows: "*WHO chief condemns strike on Gaza hospital*".

However, if the editorial team had doubts at 9.27 p.m. about the origin of the explosion, then it could not simply write "*the strike*" instead of "*the Israeli strike*" in a post. **It must inform the general public of this doubt and must no longer attribute the strike to Israel in its subsequent posts and articles** – which it will not do, as evidenced by the title of its 10:22 p.m. article or the first sentence of the post that will conclude the LIVE coverage at 12:27 a.m.

- [The first RTBF article on the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital](#) was published at 10:22 p.m. **Its initial headline, "Israeli strike on Gaza hospital outrages the world", also indicates a problem** because AFP had already published an alert (at 9:45 p.m.) stating that the Israeli army attributed the strike to Islamic Jihad, and because the last paragraphs of the article present the Israeli version and therefore contradict the headline.

The RTBF editorial team corrected the headline at 11:06 p.m. with the aim of "*better representing what is in the body of the article*." The new version is: "*Bombing of a hospital in Gaza outrages the world: Israel or Islamic Jihad responsible?*"

- **The article published at 10:22 p.m. is very ambiguous about the fact that Hamas is the only source attributing the strike to Israel.** We reproduce the first paragraph, which is the only one to indicate a source:

"Reactions poured in on Tuesday evening, condemning an Israeli strike on a hospital compound in Gaza City, which killed at least 200 people, according to the Health Ministry of the Hamas-controlled Palestinian territory."

In this sentence, the Hamas Health Ministry is clearly the source of the human toll, "*at least 200 dead*". However, it is not at all clear that this same ministry is also the source – let alone the only source – attributing the strike to Israel, since this Israeli strike is denounced by third parties and this denunciation is the main piece of information.

- **The 10:22 p.m. article also has an unbalanced and biased structure. It begins with eight paragraphs attributing the strike to Israel**, followed by a subheading and three paragraphs in which the Israeli army "denies" responsibility and attributes the strike to Islamic Jihad.

When RTBF posted its article online at 10:22 p.m., both Hamas and the Israeli army had issued statements, so there were two conflicting versions of who was responsible for the strike.

The article could have begun by saying that there had been an explosion in a hospital in Gaza and that it was not yet known who was responsible for the attack, as there were two conflicting versions.

It is biased because it favours one version over the other. Indeed, how can the reader take the attribution of the strike to Israel with a grain of salt when so many reactions are piling up precisely to denounce an Israeli strike? And even if they continue reading to the subheading, how much credence can they give to Israel's "denial" after so many reactions from figures who are supposed to be well informed?

- **At 11:06 p.m., the RTBF editorial team corrected the headline but decided that there was no need to modify the article.** We see this as a further expression of the original bias and confirmation bias.

The RTBF editorial team explained its decision as follows: "*The body of the article stated that the attribution of this explosion to Israel ("if confirmed") was not confirmed. The first version of the article stated that Israel denied being behind the explosion.*"

The fact that the Israeli version is only mentioned in the^{ninth} paragraph, after eight paragraphs supporting the opposite theory, **is therefore, in their view, neither unbalanced nor biased.**

- **We also disagree with the second reason given by the RTBF editorial team for not modifying the 10.22 p.m. article,** which is repeated in the INSIDE article of 20 October. Let us begin by quoting the passage in question from the 10.22 p.m. article:

"The destruction of a hospital by Israeli strikes in the Gaza Strip, if this information is confirmed, would not be in accordance with international law, European Council President Charles Michel said on Tuesday evening at the end of a European summit by videoconference on the situation in the Middle East."

The RTBF editorial team considers that the phrase "if confirmed" is sufficient to indicate that it has not been confirmed that the strike was carried out by Israel. The INSIDE article adds that this phrase, taken from a BELGA news report at 9.14 p.m., is "*the first to cast doubt on the origin of the attack*". It also states that it does not know "*whether the precautionary measure was taken by Belga or Charles Michel*" – which is important – while referring to the LIVE feed where the dispatch was published at 9.25 p.m.

Firstly, the phrase "if this information is confirmed" is unclear. Let us repeat: the RTBF website is aimed at the general public – not at a professional audience of journalists or ethicists, who are used to interpreting and decoding the slightest reservation.

Secondly, in Gaza, where journalists are banned, who could possibly confirm this information? A statement from Islamic Jihad? Furthermore, at 10:22 p.m., instead of being confirmed, the "information" from Hamas had already been refuted once, albeit by the Israeli army... but why give more credence to one than the other?

Moreover, reading the BELGA dispatch, as posted in DIRECT at 9:25 p.m., it is clear that **it is Charles Michel – and not BELGA, nor a fortiori RTBF – who is taking the precaution of using careful language**, but also that he invalidates this precaution in the following sentence:

"European Council President Charles Michel said on Tuesday that an attack on civilian infrastructure was not in accordance with 'international law', following a deadly Israeli strike on a hospital in Gaza. 'It seems to be confirmed, and an attack on civilian infrastructure is not in accordance with international law,' Mr Michel said."

Let us emphasise once again that at 11:06 p.m., there were two conflicting versions, that of Hamas and that of the Israeli army, and that it would have been simpler and clearer to say so from the outset. **Unless it was biased, the RTBF editorial team had no reason to favour one version over the other.**

- **The 10:22 p.m. article calls for a final comment on the choice of words and quotation marks for the Israeli position presented in the last paragraphs.**

The RTBF editorial team based its presentation of this position on the AFP dispatch at 9.45 p.m. Its choices in rewriting this dispatch reveal its reluctance to include the Israeli version.

In the AFP dispatch, the Israeli army is assertive and certain of its facts. It "claims" that this was a missed shot by Islamic Jihad. The RTBF editorial team distances itself from the Israeli army through a long quotation in quotation marks – something it does not do for Hamas at the beginning of the article. In the RTBF article, the Israeli army, assigned the role of the accused, is forced to "deny" and its military intelligence is uncertain: it merely "estimates" that the strike against the hospital was a missed shot by Islamic Jihad.

- **The RTBF editorial team repeats the biased structure of the 10:22 p.m. article in its summary of the day's news** at the end of its LIVE broadcast at 12:27 a.m.: first, Hamas' version; then, reactions to this version; then, in one sentence, the Israeli army's version:

"An Israeli air strike on a hospital in Gaza City killed hundreds of people on Tuesday, according to authorities in the Hamas-controlled Palestinian territory.

Following this announcement, clashes broke out on Tuesday evening between demonstrators calling for the departure of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and his security forces in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank, while a war rages between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, AFP journalists reported. Dozens of demonstrators tried to break into the Israeli embassy in Amman on Tuesday evening to express their anger.

Israeli military intelligence believes the hospital was hit by a misfired rocket from Palestinian Islamic Jihad, an IDF spokesman said.

- **The following day, the RTBF editorial team had to report both on the reactions to the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital and on the fact that the Israeli version was appearing increasingly likely.**

It was reluctant to give credence to this version and changed its stance on the perpetrator of the strike twice: at midday, it juxtaposed the two versions (Hamas accuses Israel, which points the finger at Islamic Jihad); then, in the evening, it refused to take a position on the perpetrator of the strike.

Thus, at 12:43 p.m., as Hamas' version began to crack, RTBF's editorial team chose to give a voice to sixteen Arab countries or organisations that continued to refer to this version and accuse Israel of the strike: ["Israel-Gaza war: Arab countries hold Israel responsible for the explosion in the Gaza hospital"](#).

"Arab countries, whether signatories to the peace agreement with Israel or not, unanimously attributed the deadly explosion in a Gaza hospital to the Israeli army, despite Israel's denial. At least 200 people were killed on Tuesday evening in a strike on the Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City, according to the Ministry of Health of Hamas, the Islamist organisation in power in the Gaza Strip. Other estimates put the death toll higher. Hamas blamed Israel for the strike, and Islamic Jihad

dismissed the Israeli state's accusations as "lies," pointing to it as the source of the attack, while international condemnation mounted.

- **At 6:12 p.m., RTBF gave an initial update on its coverage of the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital: "[Who fired a rocket at a hospital in Gaza? What we already know and what we don't know yet.](#)"**

It now states its refusal to decide on the perpetrator of the strike: "A grey area remains: who fired the rocket? Israelis and Palestinians are accusing each other. The Israelis, initially blamed, are releasing 'evidence' of their non-involvement. A video of the event exists and has been verified by several journalists and observers specialising in OSINT (open source intelligence). **Our editorial team is not ruling on the origin or responsibility for this explosion, which will have to be determined by proper investigations.**"

However, at this time, US President Joe Biden and the US National Security Council have already given credence to the Israeli version of a failed Islamic Jihad attack. While the 6:12 p.m. article echoes the American position, it also counterbalances it and gives credence to Hamas' version... by quoting a quickly deleted tweet from a former press secretary of Benjamin Netanyahu.

Due to confirmation bias, RTBF appears reluctant to change its mind. It continues to give space to information that confirms its preconceived ideas, even if that information is marginal, far-fetched or conspiratorial.

- **Two days later, [the INSIDE article](#), already cited several times, is striking because it attributes things to RTBF articles that they do not say, or even refute.**

Who fired on the hospital? As we have seen, RTBF changed its narrative three times over the course of 17 and 18 October. **On 20 October, the INSIDE article gives a fourth answer, namely that the Israeli version is the most likely hypothesis.** Of course, because of the original bias and confirmation bias, it does not write this in terms that would prove Israel right:

*"An article published on the afternoon of 18 October in Décryptage indicated that, according to open source intelligence specialists, **the Palestinian lead is indeed the most likely.**"*

*"Journalistic investigations have multiplied into the veracity of the information communicated by Hamas that evening. Numerous press articles, on RTBF and elsewhere, have come to the conclusion that **the most likely hypothesis** is that of a failed rocket launch by the Palestinians."*

These two excerpts from the INSIDE article refer to the article published on the evening of 18 October, **but surprisingly, the 18 October article does not say this at all. On the contrary, it states its refusal to take a position.**

The only mention in the RTBF articles and posts from 17 to 20 October that the firing on the hospital was probably a failed Palestinian attack appears in an article dated 20 October, 7.30 a.m., entitled "[Israel-Gaza war: Palestinians hope for aid to arrive in the enclave](#)":

"A US intelligence memo, excerpts of which were seen by AFP [...] states [...] that Israel 'probably did not bomb the hospital in the Gaza Strip'."

But contrary to what the INSIDE article indicates, **this is not a conclusion reached by RTBF**, but rather RTBF's quotation of an American document – which is not at all the same thing.

This leaves one question: why did RTBF claim on 20 October that its editorial team had concluded that the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital had been caused by a Palestinian misfire,

when it had long given prominence to Hamas's version of events, then indicated its refusal to attribute the firing to either side when Hamas's version lost credibility?

Ten days after the massacres of 7 October, the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital, Hamas's accusation against Israel, and then the confrontation between Hamas's version and Israel's version, attracted intense media coverage around the world, in Belgium and at RTBF.

Attributing the shooting and the deaths of hundreds of civilians to Israel **encouraged a return to an older framing of the conflict**, one in which the Palestinians are victims and the Israelis are the perpetrators. The confrontation between the two versions then forced the media to change their narrative. Some, such as RTBF, were **reluctant to do so because of confirmation bias**.

The RTBF's coverage of this explosion and its aftermath, followed by analysis of that coverage, has already **been the subject of much discussion**, particularly at the RTBF and the Journalism Ethics Council (CDJ).

Despite a few "*inaccuracies and errors*", RTBF considers that, overall, it did a good job, at least as good as, if not better than, "*reputable media*" in Belgium and the rest of the world.

As for the CDJ, [its decision of 21 February 2024](#) states that RTBF "*reported the events correctly*" and "*correctly and clearly identified the sources cited, which allowed the public to appreciate the views expressed at their true value*". "*It concluded that the absence of an explicit correction did not constitute a breach of professional ethics in this particular case.*"

We do not share their conclusions. With supporting quotations, we have therefore taken the time to highlight the biases and errors in RTBF's coverage of the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital, as well as in RTBF's own analysis of its coverage.

Our criticisms and arguments differ significantly from those put forward in the complaint filed with the CDJ. To date, they have therefore not been addressed by either RTBF or the CDJ.

We would like to emphasise that the RTBF website is a media outlet aimed at the general public and that its content cannot therefore be analysed or evaluated as if the site were aimed at an informed audience of ethics professionals who read and decode everything.

Finally, and most importantly, we consider that formal compliance with ethical rules is not sufficient to produce good, clear and unbiased information.

We cite as evidence the present qualitative analysis and, beyond that, the results of ChatGPT's evaluation of the sympathy generated by the corpus of 2,181 RTBF articles.

4.3. Some biased choices of photographs illustrating articles cited in the report

Photographs, particularly those appearing at the top of a web page, just below the article title and the author's name, play an important role in creating sympathy for a particular actor. Here too, there may be **discrepancies between the principles set out by RTBF and the choices made on a daily basis** to illustrate articles. Without claiming to be representative, we have observed this in three of the articles from which we quote excerpts in this report.

Let us begin with the principles. Jean-Pierre Jacqmin, Director of Information, states in particular in the article entitled "[INSIDE - Israel-Gaza war: what terms and images does RTBF choose to use?](#)", dated 10 October 2023 and quoted in paragraph 1.2:

*"We treat images with seriousness and rigour," explains Jean-Pierre Jacqmin. "**We broadcast images that are informative above all else.** In some cases, these violent images are informative and important in helping to understand what is happening. In such cases, and under certain conditions, we choose to broadcast them." What precautions are taken? "**Not to expose people in distress. That's the first thing. Secondly, not to show images that are not informative.** So we sometimes decide not to broadcast them and to blur them."*

The illustration at the beginning of this article contravenes the principles set out therein.

It juxtaposes two photographs that are neither dated nor located. The one on the left shows Israeli rescue workers from the front and back, busy with stretchers. The one on the right shows a close-up of a veiled woman raising her left hand (in a gesture of prayer?) and holding a veiled woman in tears in her right arm, in a gesture of consolation.

It is clear that one of these two photos, while not informative, creates more sympathy for the people photographed than the other photo, which is informative.

Inside - Guerre Israël-Gaza : quels termes et quelles images la RTBF choisit-elle d'utiliser ?

10 oct. 2023 à 16:22 • 3 min

Partager

Écouter

Maïté Warland



© Getty

The second photograph opens the 17 October 2023 article on the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital, "The bombing of a hospital in Gaza outrages the world: who fired the missile, Israel or Islamic Jihad?" – an article we quote several times in paragraph 4.2.

Against a neutral blue background, the photograph shows a close-up of an adult, facing the camera, crying with his eyes closed. He is holding a girl in his arms, who is also crying and clinging to him.

The caption indicates that these are **two people in distress who were wounded by an Israeli strike** (no injuries are visible in the photo) and who are waiting, on 17 October 2023, to be treated at another hospital in Gaza, Nasser Hospital (there is no indication of a hospital in the photo).

The photo is not, strictly speaking, informative. It is unrelated to the article since the two people are not in the bombed hospital... even if, indirectly, it answers the question posed in the article's title **since it states that these two people were wounded by an Israeli strike.**



The third photograph opens an older article, which is also cited in paragraph 1.2: ["Israel-Palestine conflict: 'RTBF is completely impartial'"](#), dated 14 July 2014.

The article focuses on RTBF's coverage of another war in the Middle East, the one in Gaza in the summer of 2014, and on RTBF's guidelines for conducting this work. Its title on impartiality is a strong and engaging position of principle, **but its illustration contradicts the principle stated in the title**. Some might see this as a Freudian slip.

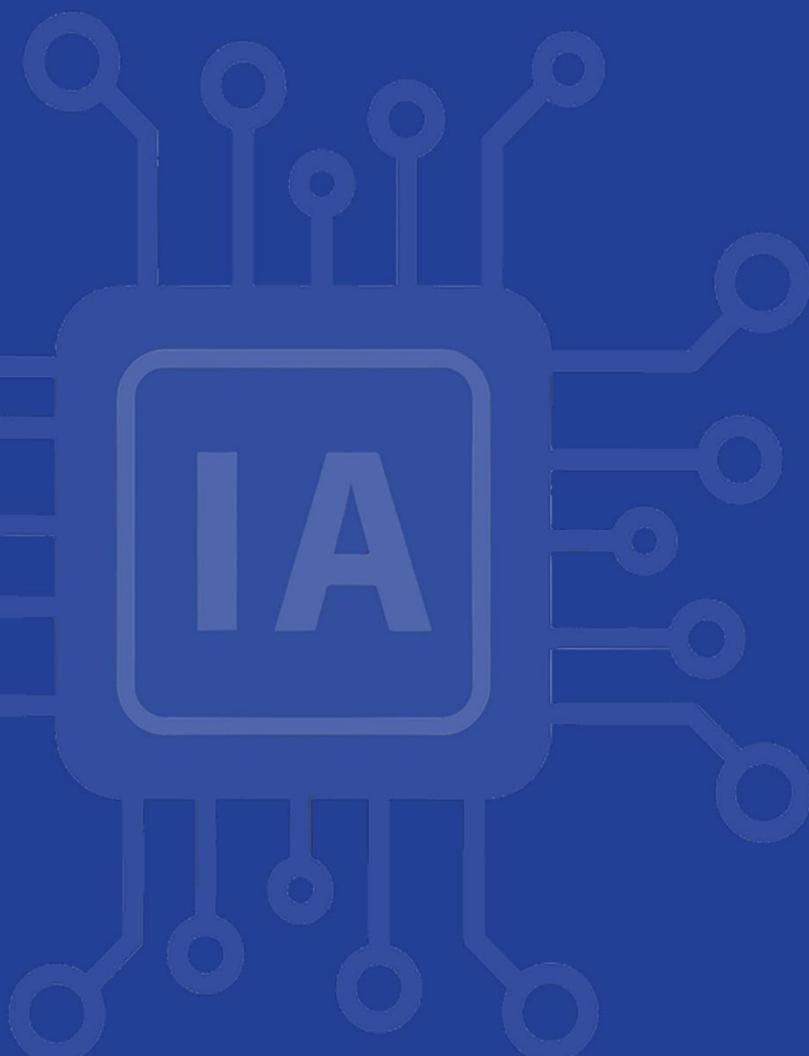
The photograph is a screenshot of a television screen showing, live from the Gaza Strip, a man in profile walking with a baby (asleep, injured or dead?) wrapped in a white cloth, with a painting in the background showing the Palestinian flag flying over the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

It is clear, here again, that the photograph creates sympathy for Gaza and is far from neutral and impartial, even if Jean-Pierre Jacqmin, Director of Information, says the opposite in the article about the work of RTBF.



This analysis of three photographs shows how interesting it would be to also conduct a study on RTBF's choices for illustrating articles related to the war in the Middle East.

5. Conclusion



ChatGPT's analysis of the sympathy generated by each of these articles shows that, overall, **twice as many articles generate sympathy for Gaza as for Israel**. This result could be explained by the great imbalance between the two sides in terms of the number of deaths and destruction.

The first concerns the subject matter of the study itself. Unlike many qualitative or quantitative analyses, this study does not examine the content of the articles (angle, structure, tone, vocabulary, arguments, sources, etc.) or the conformity of this content with principles that are far from unambiguous (clarity, accuracy, completeness, balance, impartiality, objectivity, etc.), but rather **their emotional effect on the public** and, in this case, whether or not each article and its headline creates sympathy for a particular actor.

The second change is the use of Artificial Intelligence. This has several advantages: it allows us to study a very large corpus, free ourselves from the subjectivity of human evaluators, highlight phenomena that would not be visible to the naked eye, and produce solid, reproducible and comparable results across different media outlets. It thus enables a Big Data approach.

This new type of study produces results that can indicate impartiality or bias, not for an individual article, but for a large corpus of articles as a whole.

It broadens and enriches the vast field of media corpus analysis, without replacing it, as shown in section 4.1 by our three examples from the summer of 2025, illustrating the persistence of the original bias, and in section 4.2 by our focus on RTBF's coverage of the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza on 17 October 2023.

5.1 . Highlighting a biased coverage of the war by RTBF

RTBF published 2,181 articles on the war in the Middle East and its repercussions in Belgium and the rest of the world between 7 October 2023 and 7 October 2024.

ChatGPT's analysis of the sympathy generated by each of these articles leads to an overall result that could be explained by the great imbalance between the two sides in terms of the number of deaths and destruction: **the corpus contains about twice as many articles generating sympathy for Gaza as articles generating sympathy for Israel.**

However, we find several other results of ChatGPT's analysis striking:

- Nearly 20% of the articles generate sympathy for Hamas, and for 10 weeks out of a total of 53, these articles outnumber those generating sympathy for Israel.
- From 14 October 2023, just one week after 7 October, articles expressing sympathy for Gaza outnumbered those expressing sympathy for Israel.

- Throughout the year, several peaks indicate a very high ratio of articles expressing sympathy for Gaza compared to articles expressing sympathy for Israel.
- Conversely, there are no peaks indicating greater sympathy for Israel compared to sympathy for Gaza, not even in October 2023, following the Hamas massacres.
- RTBF's quest for balanced coverage was one-sided and only at the very beginning of the war, in order to compensate for and contextualise the horror and scale of the massacres of 7 October.
- The headlines of the articles proportionally amplify the sympathy created for Gaza compared to that created for Israel... yet many readers only read the headlines.
- The ratios of sympathy generated for Gaza compared to sympathy generated for Israel are higher at RTBF than at the BBC in English (results from the Asserson Report), both for articles and headlines, even though the BBC's coverage of this war has been highly controversial.
- The ratio of sympathy generated for Gaza compared to sympathy generated for Israel is much higher at RTBF than in several leading media outlets, including CNN, CNBC, The Times and The Telegraph (other results from the Asserson Report).

These results, which are all consistent, indicate a bias in RTBF's coverage of the war in the Middle East. We attribute this bias to a framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that predates 7 October and is widely shared within the RTBF editorial team, an old framing that combines a strong sensitivity to Palestinian narratives with sympathy for the Palestinian cause and struggle. **We have named this bias "the original bias".**

This bias results in RTBF's partial treatment of the war in the Middle East.

Following the massacres of 7 October, it has resulted in a **difficulty in seeing Israelis as victims and feeling sympathy for them.** In her essay cited in paragraph 1.6, Eva Illouz identifies three factors that can block this emotion, which she describes as "*universal, instinctive and involuntary*": perceiving Israeli victims "*as distant and foreign, as responsible for their fate and strong enough to cope with aggression*". These three factors seem to us to explain several of the findings highlighted by our study.

By focusing on the emotional effect produced by RTBF articles, our study reveals, on the basis of a large corpus, a bias that contravenes the principle of impartiality, which is enshrined both in the RTBF's code of ethics (see §1.5) and in the articles (INSIDE section) in which the RTBF explains how it covers the war in the Middle East (see §1.2).

It is now up to RTBF to indicate how it intends to address the non-compliance with one of its principles in its coverage of the war as a whole (rather than article by article).

As the ChatGPT assessment focused solely on the sympathy generated by the articles in the corpus, its results say nothing about the accuracy, clarity, completeness or objectivity of the articles, nor about the distinction between facts and opinions in the articles.

Our analysis in paragraph 4.1 of three examples from the summer of 2025 illustrating the persistence of the original bias, as well as our analysis in paragraph 4.2 of the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital and RTBF's coverage of this explosion, **nevertheless suggest that there is probably much to be said about compliance or non-compliance with the other principles throughout the corpus.**

5.2. Choosing dialogue over counterproductive stances

The analysis of media corpora using artificial intelligence tools is still in its infancy.

Soon, artificial intelligence will probably be able to assess whether articles are accurate, clear, complete, objective or balanced. Today, these analyses require lengthy development and are often subject to caution. Tomorrow, they will make it possible to identify and objectify trends in very large corpora, such as the 2,181 articles that are the subject of this study. Media corpora include photographs, reports and programmes in audio (radio, podcasts) or video (television, web and social networks) format. All of this content could also soon be analysed by artificial intelligence.

Photographs play an important role in the sympathy created by RTBF for a particular actor. **In section 4.3, we present an analysis of three photographs chosen by RTBF to illustrate articles from which we quote excerpts in this report.**

Without claiming to be representative, **our analysis shows biased choices**, deviations from the principles set out by RTBF in terms of iconography, and the value of conducting a more extensive study on this subject.

Studying and analysing is all very well, but what happens next?

The answer to this question depends largely on our position and the position that RTBF will take once it has read this report.

Let's start with our own position. We are whistleblowers who want to engage in dialogue in light of the study's findings.

After analysing 2,181 articles using ChatGPT, we have come to the conclusion that there is a bias in RTBF's coverage of the war in the Middle East. A bias is not an error, and even less so a deliberate attempt to make a mistake. More often than not, a bias is unconscious.

The bias that emerges from our study leads to misinformation about the conflict in the Middle East. However, this does not mean that there is an explicit and deliberate intention to misinform.

Our challenge is to provide accurate, clear, comprehensive and unbiased information on a complex and polarising subject that is highly inflammatory and has the toxic power to generate anti-Semitism in Belgium.

We therefore hope that RTBF will also be willing to engage in dialogue.

The use of artificial intelligence tools to evaluate journalistic work is set to grow. These tools, like the analysis of the emotional impact of media content, open up promising avenues for evaluating the treatment of many national and international news topics. We therefore believe it would be preferable for RTBF and other Belgian media outlets to adopt them.

5.3. Our proposals for a less biased coverage of the conflict in the Middle East

Bias cannot be corrected in the same way as an error, by erasing it and starting again.

When faced with biased coverage of a news topic, the first step is to become aware of the bias and identify its manifestations, and then to work to reduce it.

We conclude this report with a number of proposals aimed at achieving impartial coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by RTBF.

These proposals concern, of course, journalists who produce articles on current events in the Middle East, most often based on agency dispatches (see §2.4), but also many journalists who cover political, social, cultural and even sporting news in Belgium, as Palestine has become a central topic in public debate and media coverage in our country.

RTBF will certainly have other ideas for action to be taken. We look forward to a constructive dialogue with them on this subject.

- Establish a select pool of specialist journalists responsible for covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at RTBF, ensuring diversity of opinion on this conflict within the pool.**

A large number of journalists have written articles on the war in the Middle East for the RTBF website. However, this region and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are two complex, sensitive and divisive subjects. Diversity of opinion is recognised as an effective approach to reducing bias. It also contributes to "*the balanced representation of different trends and movements of opinion [which] is one of the foundations of objectivity*" (Art. 20 of the RTBF Code of Ethics).

- Conduct Big Data studies similar to ours on RTBF's coverage of Belgian and international current affairs.**

Studies such as ours are relatively quick to conduct on corpora of several hundred or thousand articles thanks to Artificial Intelligence and their focus on a single indicator: the sympathy generated by the articles for the main actors in the corpus.

Unlike analyses focusing on the content of articles or on each article's compliance with ethical standards, they can be undertaken **immediately on a large scale**.

These studies would certainly be very useful in objectifying RTBF's treatment of political, economic or social issues (e.g. elections, the crisis in Brussels, education, religion and secularism, Congo and Rwanda, etc.) in response to questions, interpellations or criticism.

The identical renewal of our study on articles relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to be published by RTBF **throughout 2026** would also be very useful for measuring developments with the

results of the present study and, where appropriate, for assessing the impact of actions that would be implemented to reduce the effects of the original bias.

- **Organise pluralistic working sessions on the different dimensions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and on the different concepts that are regularly invoked in relation to it.**

The subject is so divisive that it is difficult, if not impossible, to find 'neutral' speakers who are able to convey the multiple narratives that contribute to its complexity.

The word "multiple" is essential because there is no single Israeli narrative facing a single Palestinian narrative, nor is there a single Jewish narrative facing a single Arab or Muslim narrative. Among these different narratives, some are vectors of racist or anti-Semitic hatred, particularly those that support the Palestinians in their efforts to destroy the State of Israel or delegitimise its existence.

In light of these pluralistic working sessions, it is important that RTBF's content decodes and denounces these hateful narratives more effectively and that it also strives to reduce the radicalism and hostility that can sometimes characterise the debate in Belgium on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

- **Use the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism as a reference** when determining whether an act or statement is antisemitic, given that this definition is used by European institutions and many EU Member States and countries around the world.

The IHRA definition (see box in §1.4) includes examples illustrating different forms of antisemitism, including questioning the existence of the State of Israel, but contrary to the unfair criticism levelled at it by some in Belgium, it explicitly states: "*criticising Israel as one would criticise any other state cannot be considered antisemitism*".

Why the name Jonathas?

Jonathas was a Jew wrongly accused of desecrating communion wafers in Brussels in the 14th century. His story is depicted in the stained glass windows of Saints Michael and Gudula Cathedral in Brussels. In 1369, Jonathas, who lived in Enghien near Brussels, was falsely accused of stealing and desecrating communion wafers, then murdered. In 1370, Jews in Brussels and Leuven were also accused of desecrating communion wafers stolen by Jonathas. They were tortured, tried and sentenced to death. On 22 May 1370, they were burned alive at the end of a procession that subjected them to torture with red-hot pincers at every street corner. Following this absurd accusation and the anti-Semitic crimes it led to, the Jews left Brussels and the Duchy of Brabant. By choosing the name Jonathas, we are anchoring our action in Belgium and setting out its challenge: to live in Belgium without our Jewish identity being a source of concern, threats, hatred or danger.



Stained glass window depicting the desecration of the hosts
(Saints Michael and Gudula Cathedral in Brussels)

The war of 7 October 2023 in the Middle East was also an information war of unprecedented intensity across the globe. National public opinion is clearly one of the issues at stake. It is shaped by the representations conveyed by the media and social networks.

In Belgium, the media were very quickly called into question and criticised, with some accusing them of favouring Israel and others of favouring the Palestinians and being hostile towards Israel, or even to its very existence. The media's coverage of the war is a subject of debate, but is it ultimately biased?

We answer this question by looking at the RTBF website's coverage of the war between 7 October 2023 and 7 October 2024, a corpus of 2,181 articles. To this end, we used an innovative Big Data approach, employing Artificial Intelligence and focusing on the emotional effect of each article on the public.

This report presents several striking findings that lead us to conclude that RTBF's coverage of the war in the Middle East was biased.

<https://jonathas.org> | info@jonathas.org

