

Truth is defeating Israel's monopoly over the victim narrative



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After his speech at the UN General Assembly, Netanyahu met with a group of American digital influencers in New York. During this meeting, he declared social media platforms to be the "Eighth Front," calling them "the most important weapon" for maintaining Israeli influence in the United States. He singled out TikTok as especially strategic, asserting that controlling it would yield great impact, and said the same of the X platform. Calling these forums battlegrounds where competing narratives about Gaza and Palestine collide, he said that if influence is secured on these two platforms, Israel will gain "a lot." Seeking to convert influencers into what he termed "digital soldiers," Netanyahu insisted that the battle of consciousness is no less important than the military battle, and may be even more decisive in resolving international positions and ensuring continued Western support.

This strategy is hardly new in Israel's long-running narrative war. Since 1948, the Israeli discourse has dominated Western public consciousness, framed as a small Jewish state surrounded by "enemies" on all sides, facing existential threat. This narrative was adopted early by Western political, media, and technocratic institutions, represented by the adoption of European governments and successive American administrations, and has become the foundation for Western policy and media framing of the Palestinian issue. That dominance was crafted deliberately, with huge budgets, and channelled through pro-Israel lobbies directing funding toward decision-making centres, media organisations, and arts institutions, particularly cinema, which played a pivotal role in consecrating the image of Israel as a victim trapped in the midst of a hostile ocean.

These resources and networks have enabled Israel and its lobby groups to maintain deep influence within capitals such as Washington, Paris, and London. Major media outlets from *The New York Times* to *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian* to *Le Figaro*, have long echoed pro-Israeli narratives. In film and television, especially in Hollywood, the investment in imagery and storytelling has reinforced this bias. Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim characters are frequently portrayed as terrorists or backward, while Israelis are portrayed as a symbol of progress, modernity and democracy. These ideas have penetrated Western collective consciousness, hardening the visual memory of Palestine through the lens of the Israelis.

Israel also established its presence in digital spaces early and intensively. It created specialised websites and official social media accounts, and deployed organised electronic propaganda units enabled by bots (sometimes referred to as "digital armies") that publish targeted messages designed to influence Western, Arab and Muslim audiences. This digital machinery has long marketed the Israeli perspective by using psychological warfare, invoking the Holocaust and centuries of Jewish suffering to secure a justifiable framework for Israel's occupation of Palestine. Even major Western academic institutions have come under influence, funding programmes or research aligned with the Israeli narrative, and branding dissenting voices as antisemitic, which has been an effective weapon to silence their opponents. The West also punishes pro-Palestinian voices with threats of expulsion and sabotage of their future.

The strength of this narrative was particularly evident after the October 7,

2023, attack. Israel successfully framed itself in Western media as the victim under existential threat. Western media, driven by the influence of the Israeli lobby, even published false news in favour of Israel. Many agencies had to retract the news later, but the damage had already been done. The voices of Palestinians were muted, marginalised, and portrayed as doubtful or misleading. This replayed the old trope: Israel under siege,

weapon, brought deep doubt into the minds of millions around the world about the truth. Over time, Israel began to lose its ability to shape the narratives, as it could no longer deny the crimes and violations broadcast in real time, such as targeting schools, hospitals and refugee camps. This public exposure pushed Israel into a real dilemma: how can it defend its image as the victim while playing the role of executioner before the eyes of the world?

an alternative narrative that denies, or at least questions, the discourse promoted by traditional Western media funded in part or entirely by Israeli lobbyists. More importantly, these platforms succeeded in creating broad popular sympathy for the Palestinian cause and in rehumanising the Palestinians who have long been treated as numbers and portrayed as a security threat.

The impact of this transformation started to alter political discourse in many parts of the West. Opposition parties in several European countries began to adopt stronger criticism of Israeli policies, labelling them "war crimes" or "genocide." Some states have even openly declared recognition of the Palestinian state, reflecting the depth of the ongoing public shift in the narrative balance.

What we are witnessing today is a battle of narratives, in which Israel is no longer capable of absolute monopoly as it has been since 1948. The occupation's tools of money, media, powerful lobbies and political influence remain formidable, but they no longer suffice in the face of real time exposure of the unimaginable violence it inflicts on Palestinians. The war in Gaza has demonstrated that Israel's narrative falls apart like a house of cards in the face of truth. Meanwhile, the Palestinian narrative, despite its weak capacity, can withstand and even gain new ground when it finds the right platforms.

Whether Thursday's ceasefire and hostage-release deal between Israel and Hamas, as part of US President Donald Trump's 20-point Gaza peace plan, holds or falters, Israel, long presented to the world as a permanent victim, now stands widely accused of crimes against humanity. Palestinians, long silenced in traditional media, are asserting their presence in a space no longer dominated by Israel. The war in Gaza is not merely about words or images anymore. It has become a battle for consciousness itself: the consciousness of populations, of policy makers, and of future generations. The balance of narrative is shifting, perhaps irreversibly, so that recognition of Palestinian rights is not just a moral or humanitarian position but rather a political reality that cannot be ignored.



Images coming from Gaza, of destroyed cities and children under rubble, of severe malnutrition resulting from the use of starvation as a weapon, are challenging Israel's long-standing victim narrative.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Palestinians as aggressors.

However, Israel's monopoly over the narrative began to falter with the continuation of its war on Gaza, as phone screens began to display a livestream of the destruction, killing, and displacement committed by Israel. Images coming from Gaza, of destroyed cities and children under rubble, of severe malnutrition resulting from the use of starvation as a

Here, social media was essential. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, X, and YouTube opened space for Palestinian voices, where activists, civilians, and journalists are posting minute-to-minute accounts of life under siege. Despite censorship, their accounts thrived. These voices pushed the Palestinian narrative to the forefront of the global media landscape and presented

WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY

The pain we don't see



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One of the most insidious challenges of the 21st century, that has grown into a tsunami we remain unprepared for, is the global mental health crisis. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), over a billion people around the world are living with some form of mental health condition. Words such as "stress," "depression," "ADHD," or "OCD" frequently appear in casual conversations. Yet, many people fail to recognise their existence and admit that they are real, complex, and deserving of attention.

As someone who has suffered from major depressive disorder for almost four years, I know the drawbacks that arise from a lack of basic awareness. Even for someone like me, a socially active person, deeply connected to others and constantly plugged into the internet, it took far longer than I'd expected to recognise that I was struggling with depression. Even those closest to me couldn't see it. The delay might be partly because of our collective ignorance of the issue, but the stigma that still strongly surrounds conversations of mental health in our society

also played a key role.

I have survived so far through therapy, physical activity, family support, and, I must admit, a significant amount of luck. But I often wonder: can I count on that luck forever? And what about the countless others who still cannot speak about their suffering at all, especially in our society?

In Bangla, terms related to mental illness are often reduced to one crude word: *pagol* (a mad person). That single label, loaded with mockery and shame, pushes families and friends into denial. It prevents them from recognising anxiety, panic attacks, or depression as real, serious conditions that need care, not ridicule. Sadly, in Bangladesh, disabilities caused by mental health conditions are often not acknowledged, yet five percent of the global population suffers from major depression at some point in their lives, and it is now the fourth leading cause of disability worldwide. Countless people miss work, school, and other necessary daily activities due to depression. But, in our society, it is unimaginable for a student or

an employee to talk about this disability with their teacher or supervisor and expect to be understood.

Perhaps suicide is the only visible marker in our society that underscores the significance of mental health issues. A 2021 WHO estimate reveals that every year 727,000 people die by suicide globally, making it the third leading cause of death among individuals aged 15–29. In Bangladesh, at least 310 students—from

Social media and the internet have also made things worse. Negative news travels fast and the sheer scale of it leaves us feeling helpless in a world where problems never seem to end. The resulting anxiety is worsened by online bullying, harassment, and the hostility one often faces just for holding a different opinion.

schools, colleges, and universities—died by suicide in 2024, as per a survey published by Aachol Foundation earlier this year. We often discuss these lives lost in numbers, but rarely do we stop to consider the human beings, the families, and the pain that remained unseen behind those numbers. Perhaps those lives lost to suicide could have been saved through timely attention and proper care.

While there's a lack of acknowledgment, the growing issue of self-diagnosis in mental health is also becoming a concern on the other hand. Inadequate formal, affordable support and high internet-dependency drive many people to turn to social media or online content and self-diagnose. However, misdiagnosis can delay proper help or worsen the situation, as most of us are not qualified to understand the complexities of the mind just from the internet. We need professional intervention.

Such intervention is more crucial in today's world as we are paradoxically more disconnected than ever, despite being constantly "connected" through social media. The pandemic made this painfully clear. Beyond the fear of the virus itself, one of the most claustrophobic experiences of lockdown was the sudden interruption in human contact. Seeing loved ones through screens gave us the illusion of connection, but deep down, we longed for face-to-face connection. Human beings are inherently social creatures; no algorithm can replace that.

Social media and the internet have also made things worse. Negative news travels fast and the sheer scale of it leaves us feeling helpless in a world where problems never seem to end. The resulting anxiety is worsened by online bullying, harassment, and the hostility one often faces just for holding a different opinion. You can share dozens of beliefs with someone, but one disagreement can still lead to abuse and isolation. It's exhausting and corrosive, and young people are mostly bearing the brunt of this crisis.

Then there's the dopamine trap. Apps and algorithms are designed to keep us hooked with tiny bursts of pleasure, but over time, the same amount isn't enough. The pleasure narrows. It takes more scrolling, more clicking, and more screen time to feel the same small hit. That's why it's so difficult to put down the phone: at first, it's fun, but soon it becomes a compulsion.

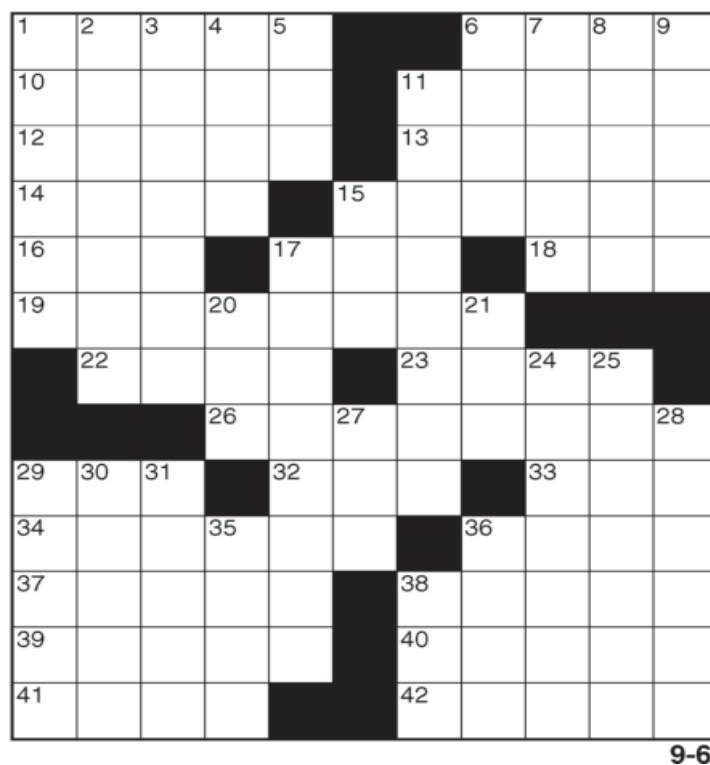
And while our minds are overstimulated, our bodies are underused. We move less than ever. We don't walk, we don't play, and we don't exercise. According to the WHO, 31 percent of adults and 80 percent of adolescents do not meet the recommended levels of physical activity. Besides, our interaction with the natural environment has become limited, especially in urban areas. Plus, we have turned to junk food, replacing natural nourishment. All these together impact our mental well-being.

Though this crisis is reshaping our lives and societies, we continue to look away, because it's invisible, it's uncomfortable, and because we don't want to admit how unprepared we are for it. But denial won't save us. Awareness and compassion will. We must build systems that care for our minds with the same seriousness we devote to our bodies. Most of all, talking openly and honestly, without shame, is crucial. To address this mass health and social issue, we need robust mental health support systems. We need to ensure accessible institutions, trained professionals, and social mechanisms designed to help people seek and receive care without fear or shame.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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