Timothy Dorr
Baird Howland
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Documenting the depictions of victimhood US/UK media coverage of Gaza

Introduction

For decades, the Israel-Palestine conflict has been marked by instability and tragedy (Abujidi, 2014). It returned to global headlines after Hamas' October 7 attack, which killed over 1,200 Israelis—mostly civilians—and was widely condemned as terrorism. Israel's military response has been devastating, killing more than 60,000 Palestinians in Gaza (83% civilians[1]) and declaring ethnic cleansing an official war objective. Critics from human rights organizations to the UN and the ICC have accused Israel of war crimes and genocide[2]. Yet major Western governments—led by the United States, which has funded at least 70% of Israel's war budget[3]—have continued to back its "war against Hamas." US public opinion is increasingly divided, with younger generations showing more solidarity with Palestinians while older cohorts remain more supportive of Israel[4].

Supporters of both sides argue that news media bias has distorted public understanding. Advocates of Israeli say overly emotional and frequent coverage of killed Palestinian children unfairly vilifies Israel's right to self-defense[5]. Pro-Palestinian voices counter that media devalue Palestinian lives and sanitize Israeli attacks that would otherwise appear indefensible. This study empirically evaluates such claims of bias in leading US/UK outlets. Using ~56,000 news articles from nine US and one UK publication (Oct 2023–Dec 2024), we compare both the volume and language of coverage of violence against each side.

To analyze such a large dataset, we leverage an LLM (GPT-5) to identify descriptions of violence and extract them in a structured format, with fields including the language used to describe the perpetrator (e.g. "Hamas militants"), the victim (e.g. "women and children"), the violent act (e.g. "killed"), victim affiliation (Israel or Palestine), and other information. We then analyze coverage of the conflict in terms of the extracted violence descriptions, with the analysis included here focusing mainly on comparing the quantity and quality of violent act descriptions between the two victim groups.

Preliminary results indicate a pro-Israel coverage bias, especially in the US outlets. In fact, all nine US outlets that we consider in this study published more articles that mention violence against Israelis than violence against Palestinians—despite Palestinians suffering vastly higher levels of violence by any quantifiable measure. Moreover, all ten outlets were vastly more likely to describe violence against Israelis with emotionally charged language (i.e. using words

[1]www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2025/aug/21/revealed-israeli-militarys-own-data-indicates-civilian-death-rate-of-83-in-gaza-war
[2]www.btselem.org/publications/202507_our_genocide
[3]watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2024/USspendingIsrael
[4]www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/02/younger-americans-stand-out-in-their-views-of-the-israel-hamas-war
[5] https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/rationalizing-the-horrors-of-israels-war-in-gaza

like “massacre”, “slaughter”, “murder”). Future research will advance this study in two ways over the coming months. First, to gauge how the trends found in these ten major outlets are reflected across the broader Anglophone news media, including smaller regional publications, we will expand the publisher list to over 300 outlets. Second, we will examine additional forms of bias, specifically by focusing on how the media portray victims and perpetrators of violence in ways that signal innocence, guilt, or moral legitimacy.

Why does this matter? The United States and its allies shape the lives of millions through foreign policy and military support, yet remain accountable—at least in principle—to the public. That accountability depends on accurate reporting, without which authoritarian impulses can escalate into mass violence justified as strategic necessity. By documenting patterns of bias in US media coverage, this study offers early evidence that can inform how we think about holding governmental and media institutions to account.

Background & Research Questions

Journalistic coverage is often described as people's ‘window into the world’. In this specific context, it is absolutely crucial, as most news consumers in the West have no other way of keeping up with what is happening in Gaza. Thus, we depend on news to create “pictures in our heads” of the world outside our immediate reach (Lipmann, 1922). Yet, this window is never without bias; journalism is never simply a regurgitation of facts, but rather a connection of facts with evaluation and interpretation.

This crafted presentation of events is often called framing, where facts are organized in ways that suggest a problem definition, causal interpretation, or moral evaluation (Entman, 1993). Relatedly, Herman and Chomsky (1988) describe “news filters”—structural pressures such as advertising, ownership, fear of backlash, or reliance on government sources—that shape how stories are framed. One effect of these influences is the division of “worthy” and “unworthy” victims, where coverage signals whose suffering deserves sympathy. Vivid descriptions of violence, for example, can increase the perceived legitimacy of victimhood (Anastasio Costa, 2004; Wright et al., 2021) and mobilize collective action (Lu, 2021).

In the current conflict, coverage consistent with this dynamic has already been noted: the Center for Media Monitoring found that Israeli victims received more than 30 times the coverage of Palestinian victims on the BBC[6]. Building on this study, our goal is to investigate the ways in which the two sides in Israel's war on Gaza are portrayed in a larger set of outlets. We use a large dataset of news articles and computational methods to examine how ten prominent US/UK outlets describe violence depending on the victim’s identity. Specifically, we ask:

RQ1: To what extent does the total mentions of violence against Israelis and Palestinians in the news reflect underlying casualty numbers?

RQ2: Are news outlets more likely to use extreme terms of violence (such as slaughter vs killing) for one group in this conflict?

[6] https://cfmm.org.uk/bbc-on-gaza-israel-one-story-double-standards/

Data & Methods

Data: The data set used for this study was from the Media Bias Detector of the University of Pennsylvania, which collects the top 30 articles daily for 10 publishers[7] (Wang et al., 2025). For this study, data from October 2023 - December 2024 was used, to capture the timeframe after the October 7 attacks. Our goal was to create a data set with all the articles that contain any mentions of violence about the war in Gaza. To this end, we only included those articles that contained one of the following terms: "Palestin*", "Gaza", "Hamas", "West bank", "October 7". This left us with a sample of 56,427 of articles. To make the dataset smaller and less expensive to annotate with GPT, we then randomly sampled ~30% of the articles from each publisher.

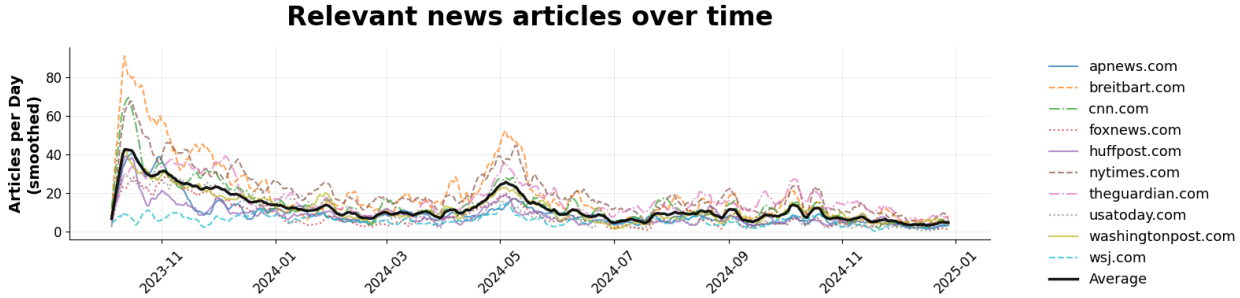

Figure 1: Number of articles that mention any of the seed terms for each publisher over time (we count every day that an article appears, so some articles count multiple times).

Extracting violence triplets from articles: We used GPT-5 to extract all mentions of violence between Israelis and Palestinians. Specifically, for each description of violence, we extract the language used for the perpetrator, victim, violent event/process, victim group (I or P), and whether the victim(s) was described as being a military person or civilian (also allowing the LLM to indicate it was unclear or the victims were comprised of both). The prompt can be seen in Appendix A. A positive side effect of this strategy was that articles that were falsely included in our sample were excluded here as the LLM did not return any results. We ended up with a dataset of 121,101 violence mentions from 14,688 different articles (a detailed breakdown can be found in Appendix B).

Results

In order for victimhood to be visible, at the absolute minimum an article needs to describe violence happening to a group. Thus, our first descriptive analysis quantified the amount of articles that allude to Israeli and Palestinian people experiencing violence at least once. As displayed in figure 2 below, all 9 US outlets have a higher number of articles that display Israeli victimhood than they do Palestinian ones, yet most articles show both. The starkest contrast can be seen in Breitbart, where the articles alluding to Israeli victimhood are

[7] The ten publishers are: Associated Press News, Breitbart News, CNN, Fox News, The Guardian, The Huffington Post, The New York Times,USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post.

almost 80% more than those describing Palestinians experiencing violence. Interestingly, The Guardian has more articles that mention Palestinians experiencing violence at least once than articles that mention Israelis experiencing violence at least once.

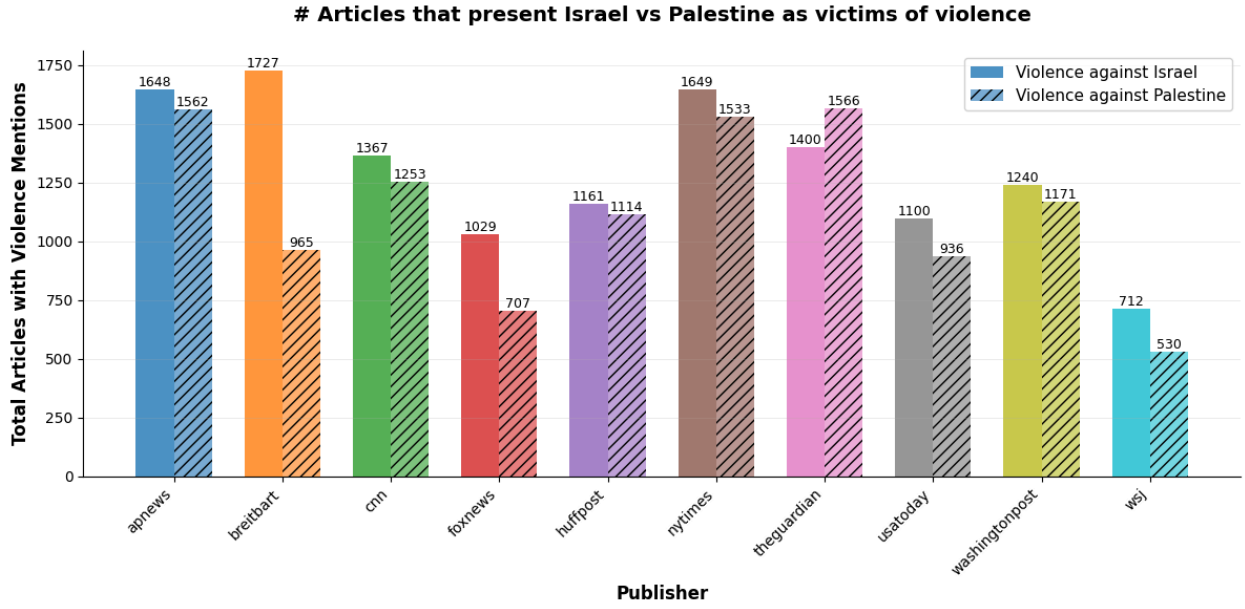

Figure 2: Comparing the number of articles with at least one mention of violence perpetrated against Israel versus against Palestine, by publisher.

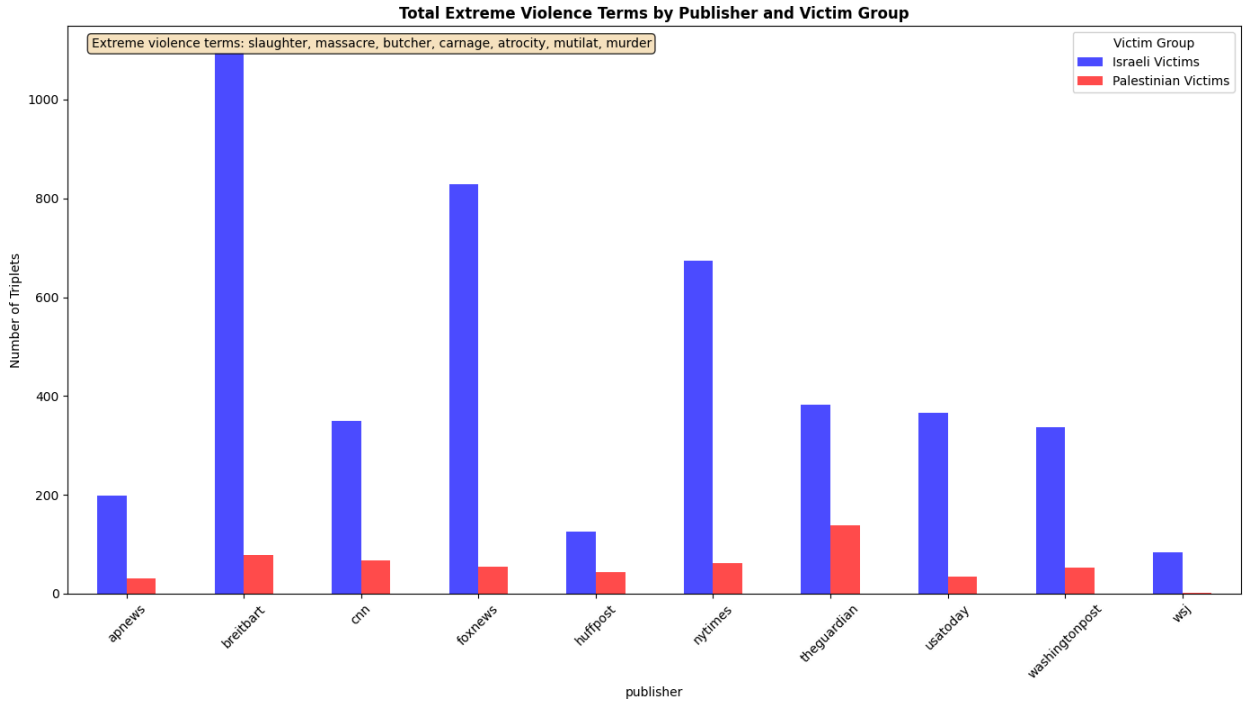

Figure 3: Number of descriptions of violence that include emotionally charged language when Israel versus when Palestine is the victim group, broken down by publisher. Emotionally charged

violence descriptions are defined as those that contain any of the terms: *slaughter*, *massacre*, *butcher*, *carnage*, *atrocity*, *mutilat**, *murder*.

The second research questions regards not just who was described as having experienced violence, but the extent to which this violence was described with words known to elicit an emotional response. As Figure 3 below demonstrates, there was a sharp imbalance in the direction of Israeli victimhood for all publishers. The strongest such difference can be seen for Breitbart, where such language was used 14 times more often for Palestinian than Israel conducted violence. The publisher with the smallest difference, The Guardian, still used the emotional language for Israeli victims 4 times more often.

Discussion

Although preliminary, the results are stark. Figure 2 shows that US outlets, especially Fox News and Breitbart, publish more articles mentioning Israelis experiencing violence than articles describing Palestinians experiencing violence. For other outlets the gap is smaller, but still striking given the context: tens of thousands of Palestinians—over 80% civilians—were killed in 2024, compared to very few Israelis. Thus, even equal coverage would tilt in Israel's favor, and the fact that mentions of Israeli victimhood exceed those of Palestinians underscores a systematic imbalance in how victims are portrayed. Appendix C shows violence mentions over time: although 2024 averages are slightly higher for Palestinian victims in most outlets, rates remain nearly equal, reflecting continued reference to the October 7 attack.

Figure 3 illustrates a clear imbalance when it comes to morally charged language, with "gruesome" terms for violence being mainly used to describe attacks on Israeli victims. Our claim is not that such language is inappropriate to describe the October 7th attack, but that the mass killing of Palestinians civilians deserves to be recognized with the same emotional weight and clarity. The difference in coverage is not subtle, with the ratio of emotionally charged violence mentions ranging from 4:1 to 14:1 across the different publishers.

In sum, by using emotionally resonant language for violence against Israelis while describing the vastly greater violence against Palestinians in neutral terms, the coverage constructs a clear hierarchy of victimhood.

Limitations and future directions

First, our current focus is on whether violence is mentioned, not how it is framed—for example, as justified retaliation, terrorism, or unprovoked aggression. Future work will use more advanced NLP methods to classify the narrative context of each act of violence, i.e. whether it is portrayed as justified military retaliation, an act of terrorism, or unprovoked aggression.

Second, our analysis of emotionally charged terms is only an initial step toward capturing humanization. While gruesome descriptions matter (Anastasio & Costa, 2004), other cues—such as adjectives, adverbs, and personal details about victims and perpetrators—also shape

perceptions. We plan to expand beyond our current set of terms to more fully measure how reporting evokes moral and emotional responses.

Third, our dataset currently includes only 10 publishers. To capture a more representative picture of the media landscape and cross-national variation, we will expand to hundreds of global outlets. Fourth, this analysis barely address temporal variation, which we plan to include in future iterations.

Finally, aside from victims' national affiliation, we have not yet examined how victims and perpetrators are depicted. Our next phase will analyze symbolic portrayals—e.g., women and children vs. militants—to show how outlets construct heroes and villains that shape broader narratives of the conflict.

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Appendix A - Prompt

You are an AI assistant for data extraction specializing in conflict reporting. Your task is to extract all descriptions of physical violence that occurred in the Middle East where the victims are either Israeli or Palestinian.

Article

{article}

Variables to Extract
1. **Excerpt**: The exact sentence from the article that contains the description of violence or its immediate aftermath.
2. **Violence**: This concept captures that a specific group (either Israelis or Palestinians) experienced violence of some sort. In text, this can manifest as a process, or act that is perpetrated by one actor or group of actors to another. It can also manifest in language that clearly implies that a violent act has taken place (e.g. Fighters invaded the city leaving 100 dead). If the same process is described in multiple distinct ways, count each as a separate "Violence" entry. Language that references a conflict neutrally and mutually without alluding to a specific perpetrator or victim (i.e. "Israel-Hamas War", "deadly clashes") should not be included. Extract the exact words that are used to describe the violence. If any words from the text are omitted, replace them with "…" This field *cannot* be `null`.
3. **Perpetrator**: The agent or agency responsible for the violent action. This must be extracted verbatim from the text. If the text mentions a perpetrator, extract the whole noun phrase, if it does not explicitly mention the perpetrator, use `null`.
4. **Victim**: The agents or group that experience the violence. This must be extracted verbatim from the text. Ideally this is a reference to specific people, but it can also take the form of numbers or geographical regions that are used to allude to the victim group. (e.g. "Israel" in "attacks on Israel" or "Gaza" in "attacks on Gaza"). Include the full noun phrase.
5. **Victim_Group**: An indicator for the victim's group affiliation. Return "I" if the victim is Israeli, and "P" if the victim is Palestinian. This can be inferred from the context of the article even if the specific victim is not explicitly named.
6. **Active_Passive**: An indicator variable. Return "Active" if the sentence uses active voice to report on the violence, return "Passive" if it uses passive voice.
7. **Military_Victim***: An indicator variable indicating whether the victim(s) are explicitly or implicitly described to be part of a military group Return only one of the following four labels, with no additional explanation: "Military" if the victims are presented as members of an armed or militarized group (e.g., soldiers, police, Hamas fighters, IDF members, rebels, militants); "Civilian" if the victims are presented as non-combatants (e.g., civilians, families, children, bystanders); "Both" if the victims are presented as a mixture of civilians and military; or "Unclear/Other" if the description does not make it possible to determine or does not clearly fit either civilian or military.

Instructions
* **Completeness**: Extract every mention of violence. If the same violent event is mentioned multiple times, extract each separate violence mention.
* **Geographic Scope**: Only extract events of violence or its immediate aftermath that seem to having occurred in the Middle East.
* **Victim Relevance**: Only extract mentions of violence where the victim is identifiable as either Israeli or Palestinian. Disregard all other mentions of violence, that go against another group or that present the violence neutrally.
* **Directional Violence**: Only include examples that focus on directional violence (one group doing something to another group). Do not count neutral/bi-directional terms such as conflict or war

* **Temporal Scope**: Ignore any hypothetical scenarios, future predictions, or discussions of violence that has not yet transpired. Focus on events that have already occurred.
* **Verbatim Extraction**: For 'Perpetrator', ‘Violence’, and 'Victim', you must extract the exact phrase (or noun phrase) from the article. Do not infer or paraphrase, but keep words that describe either the groups or the actions (e.g. "innocent", "barbaric", "brutal"). You may omit words with a “...”
* **Violence Requirement**: Every extracted mention *must* include an 'Violence'. This field cannot be `null`.
* **Null Values**: If the text does not explicitly mention the 'Perpetrator' or 'Victim', use `null` for those fields. However, for 'Victim_Group', you should infer 'I' or 'P' if the context makes it clear the victim was Israeli or Palestinian, even if the specific victim is `null`.
* **Output Format**: Your response must be a single JSON object. The top-level key should be "extracted_violence", and its value should be a list of JSON objects, where each object represents one extracted mention of violence. Provide nothing but the JSON object.

Appendix B - Data

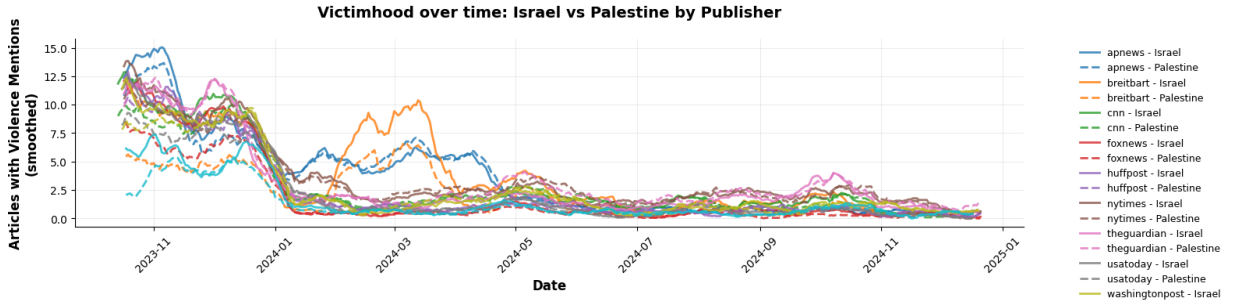
Sampled Data annotated by GPT

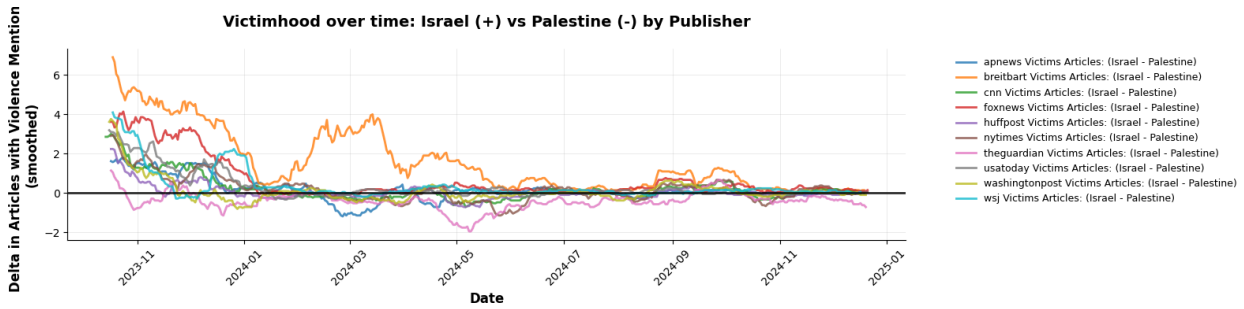
Publisher	**Unique Articles**	**Number of Violence Mentions**
AP News	1794	17629
NYTimes	1877	16891
CNN	1559	15207
The Guardian	1747	15031
Washington Post	1407	12329
HuffPost	1254	10636
USA Today	1207	9849
Breitbart	1953	9682
Fox News	1130	8830
Wall Street Journal	760	5017

The unique articles included for each publisher all contain at least one of the seed terms.

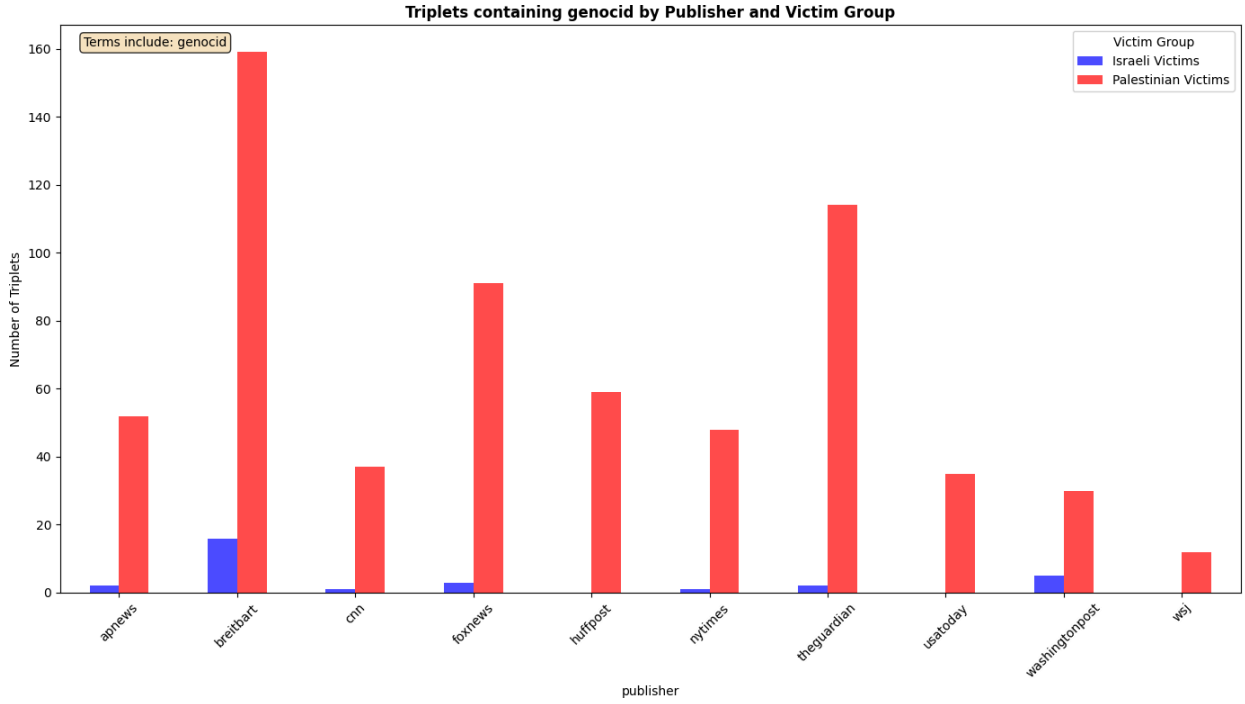
Appendix C - Violence mentions over time

Comparing the violence mentions against Palestinians and Israelis over time.

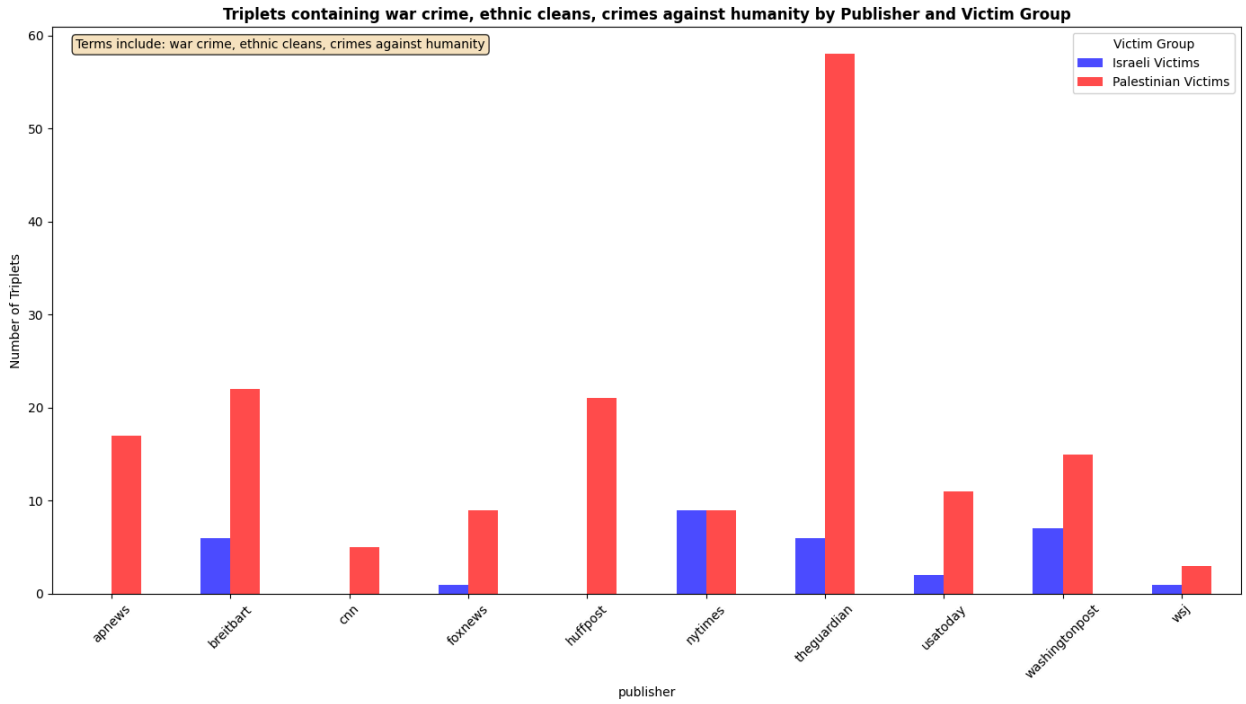




Appendix D - References to genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing



Number of times violence described as a ‘genocide’ for each publisher



Number of times violence described as a a ‘war crime’, ‘ethnic cleansing’, or ‘crime against humanity’ for each publisher