

Constructing Narratives: Arab Leadership Rhetoric and Its Influence on Public Opinion During the Gaza War

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Abstract

This study examines how Arab leaders used political language during the 2023-2025 Gaza War and whether or not their discourse mirrored or deviated from public opinion throughout a number of Arab nations, including Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Palestine. This case study's qualitative comparative approach uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to investigate popular opinions stated in regional surveys and Arabic-language social media platforms as well as official Arabic leadership comments. The study findings reveal that the themes of humanitarian framing, diplomatic hedging, symbolic opposition, and rising public criticism were prevalent in the rhetoric of Arab leadership during the conflict. In contrast, public expectations for more forceful, justice-focused reactions in support of the Palestinian cause frequently clashed with government rhetoric that frequently placed an emphasis on moral arguments or diplomatic prudence. Reactions from the public, especially Online, revealed a general dissatisfaction with what was thought to be representative of insufficient leadership. According to this study's findings, the public is increasingly contesting official narratives through decentralized and oppositional discourses, which has led to a wider crisis of political legitimacy in the area. This study provides fresh perspectives on the dynamics of political communication, legitimacy, and discourse contestation in the modern Arab world by examining the connection between elite speech and public mood during a moment of severe regional crisis.

Keywords: Arab leaders, diplomatic hedging, political legitimacy, media and conflict, symbolic opposition

I. Introduction

Deep rifts in Arab regional politics and public debate are still evident in the Gaza War, which is both a humanitarian disaster and a political flashpoint. The responses of Arab leaders are closely watched by their citizens and the Arab public at large, notwithstanding the dominance of pictures of devastation and human casualties in regional and international media. Political discourse is transformed from a governing instrument into a representational act that communicates legitimacy, loyalty, and moral authority during the times of regional conflict. In addition to reflecting geopolitical ties, Arab leaders' reactions to the Gaza War—which range from loudly denouncing Israeli actions to the use of diplomatic language that is more subdued—also highlights the conflicts between public expectations and state narratives.

Public opinions, national and regional identities, and the legitimacy of leadership are all significantly influenced by political rhetoric during times of conflict. Fairclough (1995) states that discourse is a method by which social reality is created and challenged, not only a mirror of it. Halliday (2005) as well highlights how language plays a crucial role in negotiating political meaning, especially in situations when there is conflict and an imbalance of power. These theoretical observations are especially pertinent to the Arab world, where oppositional rhetoric spreads via social media, satellite television, and international networks where it frequently clashes with official state narratives.

Many Arab rulers were criticized by their citizenry during the Gaza War for what they saw as their symbolic or indifferent responses. As seen, some leaders condemned Israeli actions and showed solidarity with the Palestinians using strong moral rhetoric. In contrast, others took a more measured approach by putting internal stability or diplomatic connections ahead of public advocacy. Arab publics, who increasingly turn to grassroots movements and independent media to voice their annoyance and support with Gaza, were increasingly disillusioned as a result. In many instances, the disparity between popular opinion and leadership rhetoric has exposed a crisis of political legitimacy in the area.

Scholarly attention has mostly focused on media portrayals of the Gaza crisis or on public opinion alone, despite the importance of leadership rhetoric in forming political realities during times of war. Analysis of how Arab leaders formulate and use their rhetoric during these crises, as well as how these discursive tactics affect or contradict popular opinion, is still severely lacking. Assessing the internal political legitimacy of Arab governments as well as the larger social and political coherence of the Arab world requires an understanding of this dynamic.

Few studies have provided a discourse-based comparative examination of leadership discourse during times of active conflict, despite the fact that research by scholars like Lynch (2006) has looked at Arab media environments and public spheres. Fewer yet have connected this conversation to quantifiable changes in public sentiment. By critically examining the narratives that Arab leaders created during the Gaza War and evaluating their influence on public opinion throughout Arab nations, this study aims to close this gap. Thus, this study investigates the following research questions:

- i. How do Arab leaders rhetorically frame the Gaza War in official discourse?
- ii. In what ways does this rhetoric influence or diverge from public opinion across different Arab countries?

2. Literature Review

The debate over the Gaza crisis holds a central place in the Arab world's political, communication, and ideological spheres. Several studies have looked at how Arab regimes, media, and publics use the Palestinian question as a matter of strategic and symbolic importance. However, rather than concentrating on the rhetoric of the Arab leadership itself and its dynamic relationship with popular emotion during times of war, the majority of these studies have tended to independently analyze the influence of media narratives or public opinion.

2.1 *The Discourse of the Arab Leaders in Times of Conflict*

State leaders use political rhetoric as a vital instrument to control domestic challenges, establish international alliances, and establish legitimacy. Leadership speech is frequently highly centralized and meticulously constructed to represent state aims in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian Arab regimes. Discourse is a "social practice" that simultaneously creates and reflects power relations, according to Fairclough (1995). This is especially true during wartime, when leaders have to carefully balance public expectations, regional alliances, and national objectives.

Historically, the vocabulary of Arab leadership during regional crises has alternated between practical diplomacy in the post-Cold War era and revolutionary rhetoric, particularly during the Nasserist era. In order to preserve internal stability and avoid a direct clash with the Western or regional powers, Arab rulers frequently adopt measured language during crises like the recurrent Gaza wars or the 2006 Lebanon War, as studies like Gause (2009) demonstrated. While avoiding actual political action, this speech may contain appeals for international intervention, sentiments of solidarity, or symbolic censure. These meticulously constructed narratives help to preserve the legitimacy of the government, particularly in times when the populace is emotionally invested and is calling for strong leadership.

2.2 *Public Opinion and Political Legitimacy in the Arab World*

In the Arab world, public opinion has grown in prominence and visibility, especially since the 2010 and 2011 Arab upheavals. More candid criticism of political leadership is now possible due to the disruption of traditional state control over information made available due to the emergence of social media, citizen journalism, and Arab satellite television. Lynch (2006) asserts that increased participation and opposition to state-sponsored narratives, especially during times of crisis, are characteristics of the "new Arab public sphere." Studies and surveys conducted by institutions like the Pew Research Center and the Arab Barometer have often demonstrated that Arab publics find great resonance in the Palestinian cause, which is frequently used as a yardstick for evaluating moral standing and leadership reaction. People frequently look to alternative narratives, such as those propagated by Islamist organizations, activists, or independent media sites, when they believe that the state's rhetoric is insufficient or hypocritical. Trust in political institutions may be damaged by this discrepancy between official narratives and popular opinion, particularly when regimes are seen as putting geopolitical connections ahead of moral or nationalist pledges.

2.3 *The Rhetoric Construction of the Gaza Conflict*

Particularly in the Arab world, the situation in Gaza has been a frequent location for rhetorical disputes. It serves as a rhetorical tool, a political emblem, and a human tragedy all at once. Arab leaders have traditionally utilized Palestinian hardship to convey regional unity, divert attention from internal problems, or strengthen nationalist legitimacy (Farsoun and Aruri, 2006). However, as publics have grown more astute and critical in recent years, this rhetorical device's potency has decreased. The use of language by state and non-state actors to frame the conflict in ways that support their strategic goals has been the subject of recent studies. There is a dearth of comprehensive research that clearly connects leadership speech during the Gaza War to quantifiable or visible public responses, despite the fact that the body of extant material provides insightful information about Arab political discourse, media framing, and popular sentiment. The majority of published research findings have treated public opinion and

political speech as distinct fields, neglecting to look at their dialogical interaction during high-stakes conflict situations. By concentrating on the rhetorical tactics used by Arab leaders during the Gaza War and examining their effects on public opinion, this study seeks to close this gap. This study adds to an expanding corpus of research aimed at comprehending the performative aspects of leadership in the Arab world, especially in times of regional emergencies.

2.4 Recent Studies about Arab Leadership Rhetoric and Its Influence on Public Opinion during the Gaza War

More recent research has concentrated on the political and digital aspects of Arab reactions to the 2021 and 2023–2024 wars in Gaza. Numerous studies have emphasized how, in light of the rapid dissemination of information on social media sites like X, formerly known as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, these recent wars have put Arab regimes under unprecedented pressure to react to Israeli aggression more convincingly. Harutyunyan (2025) notes that the outbreak of the 2023 Gaza–Israel war significantly increased anti-Israel sentiment among the Arab public, reigniting historical and political sensitivities surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He argues that this surge influenced public opinion and posed challenges to normalization efforts between certain Arab states and Israel, as reflected in the Abraham Accords, including the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco. The researcher explains that these states sought to balance their official commitments to Israel with public anger over events in Gaza, employing dual rhetorical strategies that combined political symbolism and regional unity with caution and diplomatic restraint. Harutyunyan concludes that analyzing these dynamics demonstrates how armed conflict can reshape political and media priorities and highlights the critical role of leadership in managing internal pressures alongside external obligations, with Arab public opinion central to the trajectory of regional political normalization. This change was seen as a manifestation of the widening gap between popular movements and governments on a regional level. Additionally, their data showed that influencer-led online solidarity efforts and viral popular content frequently eclipsed leadership statements, criticizing government actions as incompetent or complicit. The Arab Center in Washington, D.C. and the Center for Arab Studies and Public Policy (2024) reported that the majority of the Arab public viewed the 2023 Gaza War negatively, citing U.S. support for Israel and the failure of some Arab governments to take decisive steps to stop the conflict. Many respondents linked these attitudes to a decline in confidence in the political leadership and its policy choices. El Damanhoury, Saleh, and Lebovic (2025) argue that the media coverage of the 2023 Gaza War on Al Jazeera English and the BBC relied on specific framing strategies and linguistic choices that systematically and deliberately shaped the public's perception of the conflict. The researchers point out that this coverage went beyond simply reporting events; it focused on selecting specific narrative angles and language to direct public attention toward the humanitarian dimensions of the conflict, such as the protection of civilians, the documentation of casualties, and urgent calls for a ceasefire, while minimizing the focus on the political or ideological statements of leaders.

They further explain that these linguistic and framing strategies helped construct a human and tragic image of the conflict, reflecting the media's role in influencing public opinion and highlighting certain aspects of events over others. They emphasize that media discourse can shape public understanding and influence priorities, such as portraying humanitarian tensions rather than political or ideological conflicts. They conclude that analyzing such strategies shows how modern journalism can use language and framing to highlight the human dimension of conflicts, which is of particular importance in the study of comparative media and war journalism.

3. Methodology

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) serves as the main analytical framework in this qualitative comparative case study approach. It investigates how Arab leaders shaped their discursive narratives during the Gaza War of 2023–2024 and how these narratives either supported or contradicted popular sentiment. The study design integrates thematic and descriptive analysis of public opinion data, such as social media content and extensive public opinion polls, with a discourse analysis of official leadership remarks. A multifaceted comprehension of the connection between political rhetoric and public sentiment in the Arab world is made possible by this multi-method approach.

The qualitative approach was adopted to provide an in-depth analysis of political discourse, revealing its semantic, intellectual, and ideological dimensions. The study focuses on understanding language within its social and political context, without relying on statistical generalizations, while paying particular attention to interpreting meanings related to sensitive issues.

Four Arab nations—Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Palestine—are the subject of the study. They were chosen for their geopolitical significance, their active support of the Palestinian cause, and their varied representation in terms of political orientation and regime type. These nations offer a good starting point for comparative study since they represent divergent rhetorical and policy reactions to the Gaza crisis. Official speeches, declarations, and press releases made by high-ranking political figures—specifically, heads of state, foreign ministers, and presidential spokespersons—between October 7, 2023, and March 31, 2024, make up the primary data. These texts were taken from state-run media channels and official government websites.

The selection of countries was also based on the diversity of their positions and political relations with Israel, the United States and regional powers, with the aim of allowing for a broader comparative analysis of discourse styles in multiple political environments.

- **Egypt**
 - Presidency of the Arab Republic of Egypt: <https://www.presidency.eg>
 - Ministry of Foreign Affairs: <https://www.mfa.gov.eg>
 - Ahram Online: <https://english.ahram.org.eg>
- **Jordan**
 - Royal Hashemite Court: <https://rhc.jo/en>
 - Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates: <https://mfa.gov.jo>
 - Petra News Agency: <https://petra.gov.jo>
- **Saudi Arabia**
 - Ministry of Foreign Affairs: <https://www.mofa.gov.sa>
 - Saudi Press Agency (SPA): <https://www.spa.gov.sa>
- **Palestine**
 - Wafa Palestinian News and Information Agency: <https://wafa.ps>

These websites gave users access to a variety of leadership responses, including press conferences, bilateral meetings, broadcast speeches, and public remarks at international summits (including the Arab-Islamic Emergency Summit and the Cairo Peace Summit). Fifty speeches and official declarations in all were carefully chosen using the following standards: The remark, which was made by a senior government official and released to the public via official or state-affiliated media, specifically addressed the Gaza conflict of 2023–2024.

The study relied on purposive sampling in selecting texts, so that materials were chosen that directly serve the research objectives and reflect pivotal stages of political discourse during the conflict period.

Two types of public opinion data were utilized to examine how much the leadership's language supports or deviates from popular opinion:

The Arab Center in Washington, D.C. and the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) Poll (2023–2024).

The poll was conducted in 16 Arab countries between December 2023 and January 2024, assessing Arab citizens' views on the Gaza War, normalization with Israel, and leadership responses.

(Link: Arab Public Opinion Poll - Gaza War)

- The Arab Barometer, 8th Round (2023–2024).

Provides nationally representative survey data on political trust, leadership legitimacy, and attitudes toward Palestine across several Arab countries.

(Link: Arab Barometer, 8th Round)

- The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR).

Face-to-face public opinion polls in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, conducted between September and October 2023.

To assess spontaneous and unfiltered public sentiment, Arabic-language posts were collected from Twitter (now known as X) using relevant hashtags such as:

- #غزة_تحت_القصف (*Gaza _under attack*)
- #فلسطين (*Palestine*)
- #التطبيع_خيانه (*Normalization is treason*)

For qualitative theme coding, a random sample of 500 tweets from each nation (a total of 2,000) was taken. Posts were only accessible to people who lived in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine. The degree to which these posts conveyed approval, annoyance, or disapproval of the leadership's statements and deeds was examined. The study also makes use of annotated datasets, such the Fig-News 2024 dataset, which comprises posts in Arabic that were classified by political bias and propaganda during the Gaza War.

(Link: Sina in the Fig-News 2024 dataset - arXiv)

Leadership data were analyzed using the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework of Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (2006) to reveal the following:

- Framing strategies (e.g., humanitarian, religious, nationalist, diplomatic).

- Method (e.g., assertiveness, negativity, ambiguity).
- Attachment of responsibility (e.g., blaming Israel, the international community, or internal actors).
- Action-oriented language (e.g., calls for a ceasefire, condemnation, support).

All discourses were imported into NVivo for qualitative coding. A deductive coding system was developed from the literature and inductively from the data. Categories included: solidarity framing, appeals to history, moral appeals, diplomatic positioning, and legitimacy strategies.

4. Findings

Four major themes emerge from an examination of public opinion and leadership rhetoric during the Gaza War in 2023–2024. The rhetorical devices used by Arab leaders and the public's reaction to these discourses are reflected in these themes. The following thematic findings provide insight into the strategic construction of meaning in leadership discourse and how the public interprets these narratives, based on Van Dijk's (2006) focus on ideology and power in political language and Fairclough's (1995) theory of discourse as a form of social practice.

Along with studying the language used in 2023–2024, comparing it with earlier Gaza conflicts in 2008–2009, 2014, and 2021 shows both similarities and changes in political communication. In all these periods, leaders used humanitarian language and showed symbolic support. However, in the current period, people are more doubtful, more active on social media, and more willing to question official narratives. Over time, practices such as avoiding real political action and offering symbolic support have become clearer and are now more openly criticized by the public. In addition to official data and survey results, qualitative analysis of social media content has greatly helped in identifying these topics, as these platforms have been an important place for political expression and mobilization during conflict.

Theme 1: Humanitarian Framing as a Tool of Depoliticization

During the Gaza War, the application of a humanitarian framework dominated the discourse of Arab leaders. Leaders frequently minimized or ignored direct political responsibility while emphasizing the human cost of war—devastation, relocation, and casualties.

For instance, the governments of Saudi Arabia and Egypt made official declarations urging the "protection of civilians" and a "quick truce," but they made few mentions of Israeli occupation or violence. Passive constructions (e.g., "civilians are being injured") and clichés (e.g., "they must be protected") were frequently used in humanitarian rhetoric, exhibiting a weak formulation and semantic ambiguity—a characteristic of what Fairclough (1995) refers to as depoliticized language.

A comparison over time shows that in earlier conflicts, especially in 2014 and 2021, leaders also used humanitarian language that focused on civilian suffering while avoiding clear political responsibility. However, in 2023–2024, people are much less accepting of this kind of neutral language. This is clear from the quicker and wider criticism on social media.

This rhetorical strategy helped avoid political escalation while projecting moral authority. However, public reactions—particularly on platforms such as Twitter—revealed widespread frustration. Hashtags such as:

#التطبيع_خيانة_ (Normalization is treason)

#أين_العرب؟ (Where are the Arabs)

The gap between moral speech and political inaction has been contested by the public with the help of these hashtags. Analysis of the most widely shared posts showed that users tended to attach humanitarian statements to images of destruction and civilian suffering, making official narratives appear morally weak and politically irresponsible.

This disparity exemplifies van Dijk's idea of elite control over discourse from the standpoint of ideological discourse theory: Arab leaders avoided the ramifications of open conflict with Israel or the United States in an effort to influence public opinion through moral arguments. Social media engagement data, including likes, shares, and comments, indicates that posts critical of official discourse consistently garnered more engagement than supportive posts, reflecting the public's preference for more critical and politically aware content.

Theme 2: Strategic Ambiguity and Diplomatic Hedging

The use of strategic ambiguity was the second main subject in the leadership discourse, especially among the Gulf states that were normalizing relations with Israel or were thinking about doing so. In Saudi and Emirati declarations, phrases like "de-escalation," "restraint on all parties," and "regional stability" were commonly employed, portraying the war as a security matter rather than a resistance or colonial fight.

Fairclough's (2003) idea of discourse as an activity that changes and reshapes identities and social relations is in line with this phrase. Arab regimes used diplomatic hedging to present themselves as impartial mediators or regional stabilizers as opposed to partisan players.

Compared with earlier periods, especially before the 2020 normalization agreements, leaders in past Gaza wars showed stronger symbolic support for Palestinian resistance. In contrast, the language used in 2023–2024 is more neutral and careful, focusing on diplomacy. This shows a long-term change in how foreign policy is communicated. However, a clear moral and political affiliation with the Palestinian cause was strongly desired, according to public opinion data from the Arab Center in Washington, DC Poll (2023–2024). Social media posts have contributed to confirming this result, as they have frequently accused the leaders' vague diplomatic discourse of "hiding behind neutrality" and "preferring foreign interests over achieving justice." Of the sixteen Arab states polled, 78% said they rejected the normalization agreements, and 89% said Israel was exclusively or mostly to blame for the conflict.

Legitimacy theory is reflected in this discrepancy: a leadership runs the risk of losing its symbolic legitimacy when its rhetoric does not conform to the normative expectations of the populace. Despite being diplomatically convenient, the language of strategic ambiguity has become less and less effective in satisfying public aspirations for a discourse centered on justice.

Theme 3: Symbolic Resistance and Performative Solidarity

The employment of symbolic resistance language was another subject that surfaced in leadership discourses, especially in Palestine and Jordan. Drawing on nationalist and religious views, King Abdullah II and President Mahmoud Abbas used statements about historical responsibility, the sanctity of Jerusalem, and Arab unity to present their nations as protectors of Palestine.

Using declarative and emotionally charged language, such as "barbaric aggression," "ethnic cleansing," and "holy duty," these statements frequently reflected Van Dijk's (1998) focus on the use of strong language to convey a sense of community cohesion and belonging. By claiming moral superiority, these rhetorical devices aim to recontextualize power disparities, according to Christian Democratic discourse analysis. Over time, this kind of symbolic resistance has stayed mostly the same since the early 2000s. However, it has become less convincing because it has been repeated many times without real policy changes. As a result, people have become more skeptical. In 2023–2024, audiences were more likely than before to see this language as a performance rather than something sincere.

However, analysis of public responses and social media discussions suggest that this language was perceived as symbolic rather than practical. Protests broke out in many Arab countries, where demonstrators specifically called on their leaders to make symbolic declarations rather than take any real action (such as canceling treaties with Israel or stopping trade). This is an example of what academics studying political communication refer to as rhetorical dissonance. Audiences frequently suffer a crisis of credibility when politicians use emotionally charged but pointless rhetoric. Many social media posts have described official speeches as mere "slogans without substance" and "media spectacles," often comparing past promises with present inaction. Its persuasive power has been undermined, especially among activists and young people, by the disconnect between symbolic discourse and actual political action.

Theme 4: Public Contestation and Counter-Discourse Online

The public's response, through counter-discourses on social media that contested official narratives, is the concluding subject, rather than the leadership's speech. Discursive opposition emerged on platforms like X and TikTok, where users questioned the effectiveness, motivations, and sincerity of leadership responses.

Examples include memes ridiculing representative declarations of solidarity, reposts of previous pro-normalization statements by Arab leaders, and viral posts denouncing the lack of sanctions on Israel. One prominent trend is the use of irony or sarcasm to appropriate and subvert official slogans; this is in line with Bakhtin's ideas about dialogism and intertextuality in discourse.

A longitudinal comparison shows that although online activism existed in earlier conflicts, especially in 2014 and 2021, it became much larger, faster, and more influential in 2023–2024. The spread of short video platforms and global online networks has strengthened critical voices and made it harder for authorities to control the narrative.

These internet responses also show how inadequate traditional state control over narrative production is. According to Castells (2012), the capacity to create meaning is what gives people power in a networked society. The discursive environment during the Gaza War was marked by democratization, in which the general population actively disputed, opposed, and reframed the leadership's language in addition to receiving it.

Additionally, the eighth wave of the Arab Barometer's polling results verified a notable discrepancy between elite message and general opinion. While the leadership in Egypt prioritized border control and national security, over 70% of respondents said their government's stance on Gaza was "extremely weak" or "insufficient."

These results support Fairclough's theory that the discourse is a location of conflict, where meaning is contested, and where audiences with digital connections are more likely to challenge prevailing beliefs.

5. Discussion

The study's findings reveal a complicated and frequently conflicting relationship between public sentiment and the rhetoric of Arab leaders during the Gaza War in 2023–2024. Even though leaders' rhetoric was frequently presented as morally sound, diplomatically circumspect, or symbolically encouraging, it did not always reflect the attitudes and expectations of their constituents. This study also provides a more comprehensive understanding of the social and political ramifications of leadership narratives during times of conflict by interpreting the substantive findings in light of theoretical viewpoints on discourse, power, legitimacy, and political communication.

According to Fairclough's (1995) theory of discourse as a social practice based on power dynamics, Arab leaders used rhetorical techniques to uphold their regimes' legitimacy without taking on a great deal of political risk. While avoiding overt criticism of Israel or escalation with its Western friends, governments were able to show empathy and concern through humanitarian appeals, moral laments, and calls for peace.

This trend exemplifies the "elite management of mental models" described by Van Dijk (2006), a process whereby leaders try to influence public opinion by highlighting some frames (like human misery) and stifling others (like occupation, complicity, and normalization). Nevertheless, during the Gaza War, Arab elites' selective framing frequently fell short of the public's aspirations for strong, moral stances. This discrepancy supports the notion that discourse is a site of ideological contestation as well as a mirror of ideology, a theme that is becoming more and more noticeable in digital forums where official narratives are publicly contested, ridiculed, or rejected.

According to social media analysis and public opinion statistics, many Arab citizens believe that leadership discourses are becoming less legitimate. Based on the legitimacy theory of Suchman (1995), normative congruence—the degree to which leaders' words and deeds reflect the norms and expectations of the public—is just as important to legitimacy as legal authority.

Symbolic expressions of solidarity, such as those including references to Arab unity or Islamic heritage, are increasingly seen as meaningless or charades in places like Jordan and Egypt. A crisis of symbolic legitimacy is indicated by the frequency of phrases like "hypocrisy," "double standards," and "paying lip service" in user-generated material. Mainly, when leaders refrain from taking tangible policy actions like rescinding treaties, removing ambassadors, or terminating economic cooperation, audiences seem to be growing more conscious of the distinction between rhetorical performance and tangible actions. This dissatisfaction is consistent with theories of discursive dissonance, which hold that citizens may become cynical, disengaged, or even rebel openly as a result of ongoing discrepancies between the messages of the elite and the experienced reality.

Social media users' use of memes, satire, and recontextualization to highlight alleged discrepancies or shortcomings is a prime example of this. By doing this, they regain their influence over the moral and political discourse surrounding Palestine in addition to undermining the legitimacy of official speech.

The reinterpretation of the Palestinian issue itself is the last implication. Public opinion still frames the Palestinian cause in terms of justice, resistance, and decolonization, despite the fact that official rhetoric in many nations has steadily turned toward pragmatic engagement, regional diplomacy, and strategic ambiguity, especially among Gulf states.

This disparity indicates a widening gap in discourse between the governing class and its constituents. Publics are turning to the language of moral obligation, historical grievances, and collective identity; whereas, leaders are increasingly acting according to the logic of *realpolitik*. In addition, this disparity may make undermining confidence more difficult for regimes to control internal dissension or preserve their credibility during regional peace initiatives or normalization procedures in the future.

As a result, the Palestinian issue continues to be a morally compelling norm for Arab audiences, serving as a prism through which more general concerns about justice, dignity, and sovereignty are perceived. Therefore, any effort by Arab leaders to downplay or depoliticize this narrative is sure to cause controversy, especially among younger, tech-savvy people.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how the rhetoric of Arab leaders during the Gaza War in 2023–2024 resonated with the people in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine. The study investigated how leaders created discursive narratives about the conflict and how the public absorbed, rejected, or reinterpreted these narratives using critical discourse analysis (CDA) and a multi-source public opinion dataset. Four major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) The use of the humanitarian frame to depoliticize; (2) elite discourse's strategic ambiguity and diplomatic hedging; (3) the use of performative solidarity and symbolic resistance; and (4) the notable increase in public counter-narratives, especially on social media. These results show a growing discrepancy between official discourse and public opinion, underscoring a discursive mismatch that calls into question established frameworks for governmental legitimacy and communication in the Arab world.

This study supports the theoretical stances of Van Dijk, who stresses ideological discourse and elite control, and Fairclough, who views speech as a type of social practice. This study does, however, also highlight how inadequate these frameworks are at capturing the dynamics of digital contestation, in which viewers are becoming more capable of

challenging and deconstructing prevailing narratives. This changing digital environment turns language into a platform for political accountability rather than just an instrument of power. Several suggestions are offered for policymakers, political communicators, and civil society actors in light of these revelations. Since symbolic declarations devoid of real political commitments run the risk of further undermining legitimacy and confidence, Arab leaders should embrace a more open, consistent, and transparent discourse that is in line with public values and expectations. Instead of depending only on conventional media, governments are urged to interact positively with internet audiences since stifling or ignoring digital counter-narratives may make the public even more disillusioned. Furthermore, the Palestinian cause cannot be reduced to a humanitarian crisis; instead, regional actors must reestablish strong moral and political leadership on it and confront the underlying causes, which include occupation, embargo, and settler colonialism. Bridging the communication gap and regaining some degree of democratic responsiveness may be possible by facilitating organized discourse between leaders and citizens through public forums, civil society platforms, and foreign policy consultations.

A number of the study's limitations are significant. Discourse analysis ignored nonverbal cues, closed-door diplomacy, and internal communications in favor of concentrating on official and publicly accessible statements. Although social media data is useful for gauging public opinion, some demographics may be underrepresented, such as younger, urban, and tech-savvy people. Language and translation barriers also present difficulties because leadership comments that were first given in Arabic were occasionally translated into English for analysis, which may have changed the subtleties of rhetorical devices. Furthermore, the analysis concentrates on a particular period of time—October 2023–March 2024—during which public opinion and discourse might have changed in reaction to continuing events.

To provide a more thorough knowledge of Arab political communication tactics across time, future studies should be built on these findings by analyzing leadership speech throughout several crises. Comparative studies including other nations with a majority of Muslims or those in the Global South may also shed light on how public opinion and leadership speech interact in various geopolitical circumstances.

The 2023–2024 Gaza War ultimately served as a discursive battlefield in the Arab world where political identities, moral assertions, and meanings were actively created, disputed, and redefined in addition to being a humanitarian and geopolitical disaster. Leadership discourse must change from functioning as a top-down instrument for reaching consensus to interacting with a dynamic and frequently hostile public sphere, where language functions as a tool of power and a mechanism for accountability, as Arab societies grow more politically conscious and technologically connected.

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Authors contributions

Ibrahim Bani Abdo designed the study and drafted and revised the manuscript. Abdelhameed Al Awabdeh collected the data. Mheel Al-Smailhyeen analyzed the data. Raed Hamad Almharat approved the final version of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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