

Media Bias in Reporting the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah Evictions: A Van Dijkian Discourse Analysis

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Abstract:

This paper aims to examine ideological bias in Western media coverage of Palestinian political discourse using Teun A. van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model. The 2021 Sheikh Jarrah evictions serve as a case study, with findings based on a sample of news articles from key Western and Arab media outlets. Linguistic and discursive patterns of language use that build polarized accounts are found. It identifies ways in which Western media typically employ lexical choices, thematic organization and source selection that normalize Israeli actions and exclude or criminalize Palestinian perspectives. Van Dijk's concepts, such as the ideological square, semantic macro structures and social cognition and the function of power reproduction, are used to reveal how power reproduction is practiced through discourse. The findings highlight the necessity for critical media literacy and request more balanced reporting in global journalism in covering conflict areas.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, media bias, Palestine, Sheikh Jarrah, van Dijk, ideological square, political discourse

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, public understanding of international conflicts is often shaped less by direct experience and more by mediated narratives. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict offers a striking example of how media discourse can reflect and reinforce ideological bias. The language and structure of media discourse do not only convey information but also shape perceptions, attitudes, and ideologies. The eviction of Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in East Jerusalem in May 2021 sparked international attention, triggering protests, political responses, and a flood of media coverage. However, significant disparities emerged in how different media outlets reported the event. These disparities raise important questions about the role of media in framing political discourse and sustaining ideological narratives.

Western media have long been criticized for biased portrayals of the Palestinian struggle, often presenting Israeli actions as defensive or justified, while depicting Palestinian resistance as violent or irrational. Such representations are not merely linguistic choices but are embedded in broader ideological structures that support certain worldviews while marginalizing others. In this context, discourse becomes a bridge of power, and media serve not only as channels of communication but also as instruments of ideological reproduction.

This paper adopts Teun A. van Dijk's model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how Western media discourse constructs and conveys ideological positions in reporting on the Sheikh Jarrah evictions. According to Van Dijk's framework, there is a connection between the textual, cognitive and social or ideological dimensions. This offers a powerful lens to uncover implicit bias and power inequalities in news narratives. By analyzing selected articles from Western and Arab media outlets, this study aims to reveal the discursive strategies used to legitimize dominant perspectives and delegitimize others.

In practice, the study's qualitative design sampled a focused corpus of English-language news reports on Sheikh Jarrah from selected Western outlets (e.g. BBC, CNN, New York Times) and Arab media (e.g. Al Jazeera, Middle East Eye, and Al Arabiya) during May 2021. Articles were retrieved by searching archives and databases for coverage of the Sheikh Jarrah eviction events in that period. Each text was then read closely and coded according to Van Dijk's scheme: the **macrostructure** coding captured the main theme or narrative frame of the story (what aspect of the event was foregrounded), while **microstructure** coding labeled each occurrence of ideologically salient language or construction (e.g. terminological choices for Israeli or Palestinian actors, syntactic patterns like passive voice, use of modal verbs or quotation marks, etc.).

The central argument of this paper is that media discourse plays a crucial role in shaping public and political understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Through selective representation, lexical choices, and thematic framing, Western media often reproduce narratives that align with dominant geopolitical interests. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how language is used to maintain ideological control and underscores the need for critical media literacy in the consumption of global news.

2. Literature Review

The analysis of media discourse surrounding political conflicts has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, particularly within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Researchers have highlighted how discourse not only reflects but also constructs social realities, legitimizing certain ideologies while marginalizing others (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, numerous studies have drawn attention to the disparities in how Western media represent the two sides, often privileging Israeli perspectives and framing Palestinian actors through a lens of violence or irrationality (Philo & Berry, 2004).

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Van Dijk's (2000) approach to CDA provides a useful analytical lens for examining these patterns. His model focuses on the role of discourse in reproducing and challenging power relations through textual structures and cognitive representations. Central to van Dijk's theory is the concept of the *ideological square*, which refers to discursive strategies that emphasize positive attributes of the in-group ("us") and negative attributes of the out-group ("them"), while minimizing the opposite. This framework has been widely used to uncover the discursive reproduction of bias and inequality in news reporting.

Several empirical studies have applied CDA to media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For example, Philo and Berry's (2004) analysis of British media coverage revealed systematic omissions of Palestinian perspectives, as well as the frequent use of passive voice when describing Israeli military actions. Similarly, Khalil (2017) found that American media outlets tended to decontextualize Palestinian resistance, framing it as spontaneous violence rather than a response to systemic occupation. These findings align with van Dijk's argument that discourse serves as a vehicle for ideological control, particularly when the media act as gatekeepers of information and interpretation.

Moreover, Recent analyses have highlighted persistent patterns of bias in Western media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For instance, a study examining CNN's reporting during the October 2023 escalation found that Israeli military actions were frequently framed as self-defense, whereas Palestinian responses were portrayed as acts of aggression, reflecting an underlying ideological bias in narrative construction (Polecom, 2024). Similarly, the Centre for Media Monitoring's report on Gaza coverage in late 2023 identified a consistent underrepresentation of Palestinian perspectives and a tendency to depoliticize the context of Israeli actions, often omitting references to occupation or international law violations (CfMM, 2024).

In this light, the framing theory developed by Entman (1993) complements van Dijk's CDA by explaining how specific aspects of a perceived reality are selected and emphasized in media coverage. In the case of the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah evictions, headlines and lead paragraphs in many Western news sources framed the event as a legal property dispute rather than an act of forced displacement with political implications. Such frames serve to depoliticize the conflict and obscure the power imbalance between the occupying and the occupied.

Contrastingly, Arab media outlets such as Al Jazeera and Middle East Eye often adopt a discourse that centers Palestinian voices and highlights the colonial and settler dimensions of Israeli policies. These alternative discourses challenge dominant Western narratives and offer a more contextualized understanding of the conflict. However, their reach and influence are often limited in Western public spheres, where mainstream media continues to dominate the production of political knowledge.

Therefore, this body of literature tries to unveil the fact that Western media discourse on Palestine is not neutral but ideologically structured. By drawing on van Dijk's model, the present study builds on these insights and seeks to deepen the understanding of how language functions as a tool of ideological reproduction in the representation of Palestinian political realities.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically following the framework proposed by Teun A. van Dijk (2000). CDA is particularly appropriate for analyzing media discourse, as it allows for the investigation of how language both reflects and reinforces power relations, ideologies, and social inequalities. The methodology is structured to analyze selected news texts from Western and Arab media outlets in order to examine patterns of ideological bias in the coverage of the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah evictions in East Jerusalem.

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3.1 Research Design

The current research is exploratory and interpretative in nature, focusing on how discourse is used as a vehicle for ideology within journalistic narratives. Van Dijk's model offers a tripartite approach—textual analysis, cognitive structures, and social context—which together allow for a comprehensive understanding of media bias. Particular attention is paid to van Dijk's concept of the *ideological square*, polarization strategies, and both macro- and microstructural elements of discourse.

3.2 Data Collection

The corpus consists of **six news articles** selected from four Western media outlets: **BBC News, CNN, The New York Times**, and articles from two Arab media outlets—**Al Jazeera English, Al Arabiya and Middle East Eye**. Articles were chosen based on their relevance to the Sheikh Jarrah evictions and their publication during the peak coverage period: **May 1 to May 31, 2021**.

Selection criteria included:

- Relevance to the Sheikh Jarrah events (headlines and main story focus).
- High readership or mainstream status of the outlet.
- Availability of full-text, English-language articles.

3.4. Analytical Framework

The analysis follows Van Dijk's three-level model:

- **Macro-structure:** This includes the **overall topic, headlines, lead paragraphs**, and the **main themes** emphasized in the reports.

- **Micro-structure:** This involves analyzing **lexical choices**, **syntactic structures** (e.g., passive vs. active voice), **quotation patterns**, **source attribution**, and **modality** (certainty vs. doubt in reporting).
- **Social and ideological Structure:** This level examines the **underlying mental models** promoted by the discourse, such as how Palestinians and Israelis are represented, and connects these patterns to broader ideological positions and power structures.

Additionally, elements of **framing theory** (Entman, 1993) are used to support the CDA by identifying how narratives are constructed through selection and emphasis.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedures

1. Articles were first coded for **macro-level structures**: themes, headlines, and narrative frames.
2. A close reading was then conducted to identify **micro-level discursive features**, including vocabulary, source use, and grammatical structures.
3. Findings were compared across outlets to determine patterns of representation, with attention to **polarization strategies** and **ideological square mechanisms**.
4. Interpretations were contextualized in light of **social and political power dynamics**, especially regarding Western foreign policy alignments and public opinion shaping.

3.6. Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its **sample size** and **focus on English-language coverage**, which may not capture the full breadth of global reporting. Moreover, as a qualitative analysis, findings are not generalizable but are intended to offer **critical insights** into how ideology functions in media discourse about Palestine.

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4. Discussion and Analysis

The analysis of selected media coverage reveals significant discursive disparities between Western and Arab outlets in how the events surrounding the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah evictions were reported. Drawing on van Dijk’s (1998) CDA model, specifically his notions of the *ideological square*, *macro- and microstructures*, and *cognitive models*—the findings illustrate how linguistic choices serve to construct and sustain ideological narratives that reflect broader power dynamics. The following table demonstrates these levels of analysis by highlighting three distinct Western news outlets.

Media Outlet & Excerpt	Macrostructure (Headline Framing)	Microstructure (Lexis, Syntax, Source Attribution)	Cognition & Ideology (Interpretive Effects)
BBC News "Clashes in Jerusalem over East Jerusalem evictions."	Frames the event as a neutral or mutual conflict ("clashes") without specifying perpetrators or victims. Avoids mention of occupation or forced displacement.	Use of the noun "clashes" implies equal sides and mutual aggression. Passive or agentless structure removes responsibility. No reference to affected Palestinian families.	Shapes public perception of a symmetric conflict, downplaying Israeli state power. Reinforces a "balanced" frame that masks structural violence. Highlights <i>their bad</i> , omits <i>our bad</i> .
The New York Times	Presents the evictions as a legal or bureaucratic	Attribution is explicitly from "Israeli	Encourages cognitive alignment with

<i>"Israeli authorities say the dispute is a long-standing legal matter over property ownership."</i>	issue rather than a political or human rights matter. Centers the narrative on institutional authority.	authorities," lending official weight. The term "property dispute" depoliticizes the eviction. No counter-narrative or Palestinian voice is cited.	state legitimacy and Western legal frameworks. Reinforces <i>our good</i> (Israeli authority as lawful) and silences <i>their good</i> (Palestinian claims). Supports dominant pro-Israeli ideology.
CNN <i>"Israeli police entered the Al-Aqsa mosque compound after being attacked with rocks."</i>	Positions the Israeli action as reactive and justified. The headline foregrounds the "attack" on Israeli police, not the broader context of occupation or provocation.	Causal sequencing implies Palestinian aggression ("after being attacked"). Israeli police appear as passive victims, while Palestinians are the active initiators. No mention of peaceful protest or context.	Supports a mental model where Israel acts in self-defense and Palestinians as aggressors. This reflects the ideological square: <i>our violence = legitimate, their resistance = illegitimate</i> . Frames Palestinian actors as irrational or violent.

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**Table1: The Western Media Representations of the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah
evictions**

The above table illustrates how Western media outlets: BBC News, The New York Times, and CNN cover the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah evictions through distinct yet ideologically aligned discursive strategies. At the **macro-structural level**, headlines commonly frame the events as neutral or legal disputes, obscuring the underlying power imbalance and the broader colonial context. **Micro-structural choices**, such as the use of passive voice, vague terminology (“clashes,” “dispute”), and selective attribution to official Israeli sources, serve to neutralize the events and minimize Palestinian agency.

These linguistic patterns contribute to the **cognitive and ideological effects** Van Dijk describes, shaping public mental models in ways that legitimize Israeli state actions while delegitimizing Palestinian resistance. The repeated emphasis on Israeli perspectives and the marginalization of Palestinian voices reflects a broader ideological alignment with dominant Western geopolitical narratives. Thus, the analysis confirms that media discourse is not merely descriptive but is deeply involved in the reproduction of power and ideological dominance.

The following table compares how three Arab media outlets: **Al Jazeera English**, **Middle East Eye**, and **Al Arabiya English**, framed the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah evictions using Van Dijk’s Critical Discourse Analysis model. **Al Jazeera** and **Middle East Eye** employed active voice, named agents, and emphasized legal and historical context, thereby highlighting Israeli aggression and Palestinian victimhood. Their discourse aligns with Van Dijk’s concept of counter-hegemonic framing, revealing structural injustice and supporting the Palestinian narrative. In contrast, **Al Arabiya** adopted more neutral and vague language similar to Western outlets, using terms like “clashed” and “planned evictions,” which obscure agency and depoliticize the event. This suggests that some Arab media may reflect dominant global ideologies, depending on their political positioning.

Media Outlet & Excerpt	Macrostructure (Headline Framing)	Microstructure (Lexis, Syntax, Source Attribution)	Cognition & Ideology (Interpretive Effects)
Al Jazeera English <i>"Israeli settlers, backed by police, forcibly evicted Palestinian families in occupied East Jerusalem."</i>	Frames the event explicitly as a forcible eviction in occupied territory. Establishes a clear power dynamic and legal-political context.	Active voice names the agents of eviction ("Israeli settlers, backed by police"). The term "occupied" aligns with international legal discourse.	Constructs a mental model of Israeli aggression and Palestinian victimhood. Challenges hegemonic narratives. Emphasizes <i>their bad, our good</i> .
Middle East Eye <i>"The neighbourhood at the heart of recent protests has been targeted for decades by settler groups intent on erasing its Palestinian presence."</i>	Frames the situation as a long-term campaign of demographic erasure, rather than a single conflict event.	Uses historically loaded terms such as "targeted" and "erasing" to suggest intentional settler colonial practices.	Promotes understanding of structural oppression. Aligns with counter-hegemonic ideology, centering Palestinian identity and dispossession.
Al Arabiya English <i>"Israeli police and protesters</i>	<i>Uses neutral, conflict-based framing ("clashed") and avoids</i>	<i>Vague and agentless. "Clashed" suggests mutual</i>	<i>Reflects discursive mitigation: downplays injustice and obscures</i>

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<i>clashed in East Jerusalem amid rising tensions over planned evictions in Sheikh Jarrah."</i>	attributing blame. Refers to “planned evictions” rather than forced displacement.	hostility. Omits reference to occupation or power asymmetry.	agency. Conveys a depoliticized view, aligning more closely with Western frames.
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Table 2: The Arab Media Framing of the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah evictions

5.Van Dijk’s CDA Model

These excerpts collectively demonstrate how media discourse constructs ideological narratives:

- **Macrostructure:** Western outlets often frame the conflict around law and order (*clashes, disputes*), whereas Arab outlets emphasize occupation and settler-colonialism.
- **Microstructure:** Passive voice, selective quotations, and lexical choices create implicit moral hierarchies between Israelis and Palestinians.
- **Cognition and Ideology:** These discursive patterns contribute to the formation of public mental models in Western societies that view Israel as democratic and rational, and Palestinians as unstable or violent.

a. Macrostructure: The Framing of the Conflict

The macro-structural framing of the Sheikh Jarrah evictions varied significantly between Western and Arab media outlets. **Western sources** such as *BBC News*, *The New York Times*, and *CNN* frequently employed neutral language, framing the events as “clashes,” “property disputes,” or reactions to “attacks.” Such headlines downplayed the political nature of the evictions and masked the unbalanced power dynamics at play. This aligns

with Van Dijk's observation that elite discourse often emphasizes the in-group's virtues ("*our good*") while suppressing its role in injustice ("*our bad*"), particularly when covering Western-aligned states.

In contrast, **Arab media outlets** like *Al Jazeera English* and *Middle East Eye* framed the evictions using politically and legally charged terms such as "forced eviction," "settler violence," and "Israeli occupation." These framings not only named agents but also restored Palestinian agency, positioning the events within a broader context of settler colonialism and international law. While *Al Arabiya English* deviated somewhat by adopting a more neutral tone, using terms like "clashed" and "planned evictions", the dominant trend among Arab media reflected a counter-hegemonic framing that challenged dominant Western interpretations and highlighted the structural dimensions of the conflict.

b. Microstructure: Lexical and Grammatical Devices

The micro-structural analysis, as it is mentioned in the above two tables, reveals that **Western media outlets**, such as *BBC News*, *The New York Times*, and *CNN*, frequently use **lexical softeners and passive grammatical constructions** to mitigate the portrayal of Israeli state violence. For instance, *BBC*'s use of "clashes" presents the situation as mutual aggression, while *The New York Times* frames the eviction as a "legal dispute," aligning with Israeli state rhetoric. *CNN* portrays Israeli police action as a reaction to being "attacked with rocks," thereby reversing causality and positioning Israeli forces as defensive. These choices obscure agency and dilute the structural nature of the violence, consistent with Van Dijk's concept of **discursive mitigation** and ideological control at the micro level. Lexical decisions such as "evictions" instead of "expulsions," and syntactic structures like passive voice ("Palestinians were injured"), conceal the role of Israeli authorities and shift attention away from state accountability.

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In contrast, **Arab media outlets**, particularly *Al Jazeera English* and *Middle East Eye*, adopt **active voice and explicit agent identification** to expose the unbalance of power and the coercive nature of the events. *Al Jazeera's* phrase "Israeli settlers, backed by police, forcibly evicted Palestinian families" directly attributes action and emphasizes occupation through the use of the term "occupied East Jerusalem." *Middle East Eye's* language, "targeted for decades" and "erasing its Palestinian presence", reflects long-term settler-colonial dynamics, invoking historical depth and intentionality. These choices align with Van Dijk's notion of **counter-discourse**, where marginalized perspectives resist hegemonic representations through direct, politicized language.

Notably, *Al Arabiya English* diverges from other Arab media by employing **ambiguous phrasing** similar to Western outlets. Its use of "clashed" and "planned evictions" avoids naming responsible actors and strips the event of its political context. This reflects a **hybrid discursive stance**, suggesting ideological alignment with more neutral or state-centric narratives, possibly influenced by geopolitical positioning. As Van Dijk argues, such microstructural features are never neutral; they function to shape readers' interpretations and reinforce or resist dominant ideologies.

c. Ideological Framing and Polarization

Van Dijk's *ideological frame* provides a valuable lens for understanding how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is polarized through discourse. Western media generally emphasized the "positive self-presentation" of Israel and the "negative other-presentation" of Palestinians. For instance, Israeli state violence was frequently portrayed as a defensive response to Palestinian aggression, while Palestinian resistance was framed as irrational or violent. This clash reflects a broader tendency in Western discourse to align with state power and Western-aligned democracies.

In contrast, Arab media coverage disrupted this polarization by emphasizing Palestinian victimhood and resistance as legitimate responses

to systemic injustice. This reverse polarization challenges dominant narratives and reorients the reader's cognitive model to consider structural violence and occupation.

6. Cognitive Effects and Public Perception

These discursive strategies contribute to shaping public understanding of the conflict. In Western societies, where the mainstream media remain a primary source of information, the repetition of biased interpretations can reinforce stereotypical representations of Palestinians as aggressors and Israel as a democratic state under threat. This contributes to what van Dijk (2000) describes as the “cognitive dimension of ideology,” wherein media discourse informs collective mental models that align with dominant political agendas.

The ideological framing of Palestinians as a security threat, rather than a people resisting occupation, serves to justify continued diplomatic and military support for Israel. Meanwhile, the marginalization of Palestinian voices and experiences limits international solidarity and weakens calls for accountability.

Through the application of van Dijk's CDA framework, this study demonstrates that:

- Western media coverage of the Sheikh Jarrah evictions predominantly used neutral or pro-Israel macro-structural frames.
- Lexical and syntactic choices in these texts often obscured Israeli agency and delegitimized Palestinian resistance.
- Arab media provided more contextually grounded and politically explicit narratives that aligned more closely with international human rights discourses.
- These patterns contribute to the ideological reproduction of power asymmetries and influence global public perception of the conflict.

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7. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the ideological structures embedded in Western and Arab media discourse surrounding the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah evictions in East Jerusalem. Using Teun A. van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model, it has shown that news reporting is far from neutral; rather, it is shaped by the social, political, and ideological positions of the media institutions involved. Through an analysis of macrostructures, microstructures, and underlying cognitive models, it became evident that Western media outlets often employed language that masked structural injustices and favored Israeli state narratives, while marginalizing or decontextualizing Palestinian voices.

The use of passive voice, legal euphemisms, and conflict-neutral framing in Western outlets served to obscure Israeli agency and frame the events as symmetrical clashes or administrative disputes. In contrast, Arab media provided more politically explicit accounts, naming Israeli actions as part of an occupation and highlighting Palestinian resistance as a response to systemic oppression. These contrasting discursive practices reflect deeper geopolitical alignments and help construct different public understandings of the conflict.

Ultimately, this paper underscores the role of media discourse in maintaining or challenging global power relations. It contributes to the growing body of critical scholarship that calls for a more ethical and contextually grounded approach to reporting on Palestine. Future research might expand the scope of analysis to include visual media, social media platforms, or explore how these discourses influence policy and public opinion in specific national contexts.

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