



Journalist Fellowship Paper

# Evolving conversations on religion and race in Singapore media: a Gaza case study

By **Arlina Arshad**

December 2024

Michaelmas Term

Sponsor: SPH Media

# Contents

Preface	3
Introduction	4
The context for caution	6
In Singapore	6
In Indonesia	7
An additional caution factor: foreign wire bias	8
Comparing coverage of Gaza in Singapore and Indonesia	13
Observation 1: Narratives stick closely to official lines	13
Observation 2: Tiptoeing through the terminology	14
Observation 3: Silence is not always golden	15
A comparison of local coverage: Gaza protests in Singapore and Indonesia	19
What qualifies as acceptable “protest” coverage in Singapore?	21
A six-point plan for improved coverage of Gaza in Singapore press	23
1. Training and immersion programmes for journalists	23
2. Enhance religious literacy in the newsroom	23
3. Engage journalists in the Middle East	24
4. Promote media literacy among readers	24
5. Engage with religious communities and civil society	24
6. Increase ground reporting and explainer content	24
Conclusion	25

# Preface

This report was prepared by *The Straits Times*' Indonesia bureau chief, Arlina Arshad. It is the product of a three-month industry-sponsored fellowship at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, funded by SPH Media.

With a career spanning over two decades, Arshad has covered numerous challenging stories across Southeast Asia, from terror attacks and tsunamis to protests and plane crashes. Prior to her role at *The Straits Times*, Arshad was the Indonesia and Timor-Leste correspondent for Agence France-Presse.

# Introduction

The Gaza conflict is not just a war between Palestinians and Israelis; it is a multifaceted, deeply emotional issue that resonates on a personal level for many people around the world.

In multicultural Singapore, the conflict evokes an array of responses that may impact peaceful coexistence. Among some members of the Muslim community (15.6% of residents in Census 2020), the suffering of Palestinian civilians in Gaza evokes a desire for justice and humanitarian support.<sup>1</sup> Among Singapore's Jewish community (0.02% based on Census 2020 extrapolations), certain individuals may still carry immense pain, fear, and anger about fatalities and hostages seized during the Hamas attacks on Israel in October 2023, resonating with historical traumas and ongoing concerns for Israel's security.

The Singaporean Christian population (18.9% in Census 2020) and Buddhist population (31.1% in Census 2020) might interpret the violence in Gaza as necessary retaliation, collective punishment, or neither – depending on their interpretation of their respective religious texts and personal beliefs.

Between 7 October 2023 and 31 March 2024, the police received 43 reports of alleged offensive remarks or actions from members of the Jewish or Muslim communities in Singapore.<sup>2</sup>

Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law, K. Shanmugam, warned in Parliament on 24 March 2024: “External developments, especially those as emotionally charged as the conflict in the Middle East, often spill across borders. They can cause tensions between people who feel differently about, and who identify with different sides of the issue... Deeply held feelings can also result in words or actions that offend other communities.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Singapore Department of Statistics, 2021. Census of Population 2020. [online] Available at: <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/reference#Census-of-Population-2020> [Accessed 10 January 2025].

<sup>2</sup> *Oral reply to parliamentary question on the next steps for the incident where a social media posting was taken down by the Israeli Embassy in Singapore on 24 March 2024 (2024) Ministry of Home Affairs.* Available at: <https://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/parliamentary/oral-reply-to-pq-on-the-next-steps-for-the-incident-where-a-social-media-posting-was-taken-down-by-the-israeli-embassy-in-singapore-on-24-march-2024/>

Born and raised in Singapore, I have seen firsthand how religion and race shape views. At *The Straits Times*, Singapore's English-language broadsheet where I work, we are mindful to balance social harmony and reporting on the diverse – and sometimes polarising – views held by different groups in the society.

By contrast, in Muslim-majority Indonesia, where I lead my outlet's bureau, religion often shapes political views and the media there must grapple with navigating the strong pro-Palestinian sentiment within the country.

Having worked as a journalist for over two decades, I understand the difficulties of covering sensitive topics without stoking anger or reinforcing stereotypes. Religion and race will always be sensitive topics. Given the evolving global context, it is even more urgent that journalists handle these conversations with care, thoughtfulness, and a willingness to adapt and listen.

The Gaza conflict offers an opportunity for journalists to examine how we address these issues without reinforcing biases or enflaming tensions. How can we ensure accuracy without oversimplifying lived experiences? And how can we foster understanding rather than division?

This project will argue that it is time for Singapore to consider fostering more open conversations on these topics – not in defiance of conflict or at the cost of neutrality, but to foster understanding and empathy. Respectful discussion can also help counter misinformation in today's increasingly connected world. My project also challenges the notion of silence as neutrality. By not engaging in or reporting these conversations, silence becomes a form of communication in itself.

By examining Gaza coverage in Singapore and Indonesia between October 2023 and 2024, I aim to shed light on how each country balances religion and social harmony. But, first, I will unpack the context informing each nation's cautionary stance.

By sharing insights from journalists and experts, I hope to demonstrate how having more conversations on religion and race can foster a deeper understanding – ultimately strengthening the social fabric of society.

## The context for caution

In secular, multicultural societies like Singapore and Indonesia, reporting on religion and race requires careful handling. Both topics carry close links to national identity, social cohesion, and political stability.

Journalists must balance reporting facts with cultural sensitivity – navigating legal restrictions, government interventions, and public sentiment to ensure their coverage does not exacerbate tensions. Reporting missteps can deepen divisions, while nuanced coverage can promote dialogue and understanding.

### In Singapore

In Singapore, religious harmony is integral to social stability. The demographic composition of the country's 3.61 million citizen population includes a majority ethnic Chinese population (75.6%), alongside Malays (15.1%) and Indians (7.6%).<sup>3</sup>

Given this diversity, the government adopts a proactive approach to managing potential conflicts, enforcing a zero-tolerance policy against threats to national unity and intervening when necessary to prevent religious or ethnic tensions.

The Constitution guarantees religious freedom, but this is carefully regulated to ensure public order and harmony. Key legislation, such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, the Penal Code, and the Protection from Harassment Act, outlines boundaries for acceptable religious expression.

#### What led to this regulatory stance?

*The 1950 Maria Hertogh Riots:* A legal battle over custody of Eurasian girl Maria Hertogh, raised as a Muslim, sparked violent unrest between the Malay and European communities. Media frenzy surrounding the case fuelled ethnic and religious tensions, leading to riots that left 18 people dead, 173 others injured, and 200 vehicles damaged.

*The 1964 Racial Riots:* Religious and economic tensions between Malays and Chinese, including grievances over housing and employment, erupted during a religious procession celebrating the Prophet Mohammed's birthday. The violence left 23 people dead and 454 injured.

*The 1969 Racial Riots:* Racial violence spilled over from neighbouring Malaysia into Singapore, sparked by election results that the native Malays saw as a threat to their

---

<sup>3</sup> *Population-in-brief 2023.PDF* (2023) *Population in Brief 2023*, Table 3, p20. Available at: <https://www.population.gov.sg/files/media-centre/publications/population-in-brief-2023.pdf>

traditional socio-economic position relative to the ethnic Chinese population. The riots left four people dead and 80 injured.

These incidents have shaped Singapore's approach to preventing similar unrest. Often cited as cautionary tales, they were used to justify strict regulations aimed at "nipping in the bud" any threats to stability.<sup>4</sup>

As then Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong [stated on 12 May 2015](#): "We will not hesitate to act firmly, when necessary, because if conflict erupts, it will cause grave damage to our social fabric. Our limits may be stricter than some other societies, but we make no apology for that. It is because of the nature of society and the different faiths which have been brought together here, and which must live peacefully together here. We should not change fundamental policies that have served Singapore well in our unique situation."<sup>5</sup>

Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, Associate Professor at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, has [hypothesised that](#) "while the state is suspicious toward any forays by religion into the public sphere, greater caution is applied in the case of Islam".<sup>6</sup> Among the reasons he cites: Singapore's past, including racial riots, and its proximity to Muslim-majority countries, has made Islam a focal point in national discussions. Malays, who are majority Muslim, are recognised as the native people in Singapore, and the government is responsible for supporting their culture, religion, and community. And finally, because of the links between a handful of Islamic activists and terrorism in the past, the government is particularly cautious in addressing issues related to Islam.

### **In Indonesia**

In Indonesia, despite its national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), tensions and conflicts over ethnic, racial, and religious differences are not uncommon. Such conflicts often capture public interest and become prominent news stories.

Religion is central to its national identity and political discourse, and over 87% of the population identify as Muslim. This can [create challenges](#) when addressing contentious religious issues.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Hill, M. (1970) *The rehabilitation and regulation of religion in Singapore*, SpringerLink. Available at: [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4419-9094-5\\_24](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4419-9094-5_24)

<sup>5</sup> Transcript speech prime minister Lee Hsien Loong 66th anniversary inter religious (2021) Prime Minister's Office Singapore. Available at: <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/transcript-speech-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-66th-anniversary-inter-religious>

<sup>6</sup> Abdullah, W.J. (2021) *Islam in a secular state: Muslim activism in Singapore on JSTOR*, *Islam in a Secular State: Muslim Activism in Singapore*. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1hw3xzw>

<sup>7</sup> *Indonesia: Population by religion 2023 (2024) Statista*. Available at:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1113891/indonesia-share-of-population-by-religion/>

A notable example is the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, where incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, an ethnic Chinese Christian, faced accusations of blasphemy against Islam. He was ultimately convicted and [jailed for two years](#), which sparked widespread controversy and divided the nation along religious and ethnic lines.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the [rising influence of conservative Islam in Southeast Asia](#), Islamic political parties are expected to remain on the fringes due to limited support from the broader Muslim population and internal fragmentation within the parties.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, religion remains a potent tool for political mobilisation, as illustrated by the controversy over Israel's participation in the [2023 FIFA U-20 World Cup](#), which sparked significant opposition from several political figures.<sup>10</sup> Indonesia had originally bid to host the event but later withdrew.

The Hamas attack on Israel coincided with Indonesia's preparations for the February 2024 presidential and legislative elections, prompting some observers to suggest that the pro-Palestine demonstrations were an effort by nationalist candidates and parties to appeal to conservative Muslim communities and secure Muslim votes. Although the nationalist government portrayed the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories as a remnant of colonialism (rather than an inter-religious conflict), the protests provided an opportunity for political leaders to align themselves with Muslim concerns.

#### **An additional caution factor: foreign wire bias**

Media outlets in both Singapore and Indonesia face significant challenges in reporting on the Gaza conflict, largely due to geographical distance, limited resources, and a lack of on-the-ground correspondents. They rely heavily on foreign news services, which can, whether intentionally or not, introduce biases and limit the diversity of perspectives.

---

<sup>8</sup> Wijaya, C.A. (2017) *Ahok guilty of blasphemy, sentenced to two years - city*, *The Jakarta Post*. Available at: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/05/09/ahok-guilty-of-blasphemy-sentenced-to-two-years.html>

<sup>9</sup> Zulian, P.B. and Hayati, N.N. (2024) *2024/37 'Bleak future for Islamic parties in Indonesia after the 2024 election' by Pradana Boy Zulian and Neni Nur Hayati*, *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute*. Available at: <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2024-37-bleak-future-for-islamic-parties-in-indonesia-after-the-2024-election-by-pradana-boy-zulian-and-neni-nur-hayati/>

<sup>10</sup> Suhenda, F.H. and D. (2023) *FIFA U-20 World Cup draw canceled as controversy grows over Israel participation - politics*, *The Jakarta Post*. Available at: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2023/03/27/fifa-u-20-world-cup-draw-canceled-as-controversy-grows-over-israel-participation.html>



In Singapore, *The Straits Times* (ST) does not have a bureau in the Middle East and depends largely on news agencies such as Reuters, AFP, Bloomberg, and outlets like the *New York Times*. Zakir Hussain, Associate Editor at ST, confirmed these sources at times exhibit biases, with headlines or angles that tend to “lean to one side”.

Indonesia’s *Kompas*, the largest national Indonesian-language daily, faces similar challenges. Its deputy editor for international desk, Bonifasius Josie Susilo Hardianto, noted that the outlet previously had a correspondent in Egypt who had since retired. Efforts to send a journalist to Gaza during the current conflict were unsuccessful due to permit issues. Consequently, *Kompas* relies on a mix of Western news agencies and outlets like *Al Jazeera*, *The Jerusalem Post*, and *Anadolu Agency* for a range of perspectives from the region.

Systemic bias in Western coverage of the Gaza conflict has been highlighted in many studies. [The Intercept](#) found that major U.S. newspapers mentioned “Israel” or “Israeli” more often than “Palestinian,” despite far higher Palestinian casualties.<sup>11</sup> It also found emotive language, like “massacre” and “bloodbath”, was used to describe Israeli victims.

Similarly, the [Centre for Media Monitoring](#), a project of the Muslim Council of Britain, observed that the UK media quoted pro-Israeli sources more frequently, and their language portrayed Israelis as victims more frequently than Palestinians.<sup>12</sup>

Israeli media are not immune to bias either. Ayala Panievsky, a media researcher at City University of London, told me Israeli media exhibit a range of approaches to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: from total loyalty, such as Channel 14, to more critical perspectives on him personally, such as seen on Channel 13.

“However, the shift to the right is tangible, where even criticisms of Netanyahu often come from a right-wing, hawkish perspective. Palestinian voices are hardly ever heard outside of *Haaretz*,” she said, referring to the left-wing Israeli newspaper. She praised *Haaretz* for its balanced and comprehensive coverage which included diverse perspectives such as interviews with Palestinians in the West Bank, including Gazan refugees.

Panievsky’s [own research](#) has found that journalists in Israel adopted a “strategic bias” over the past two decades in response to increasing government pressure and

---

<sup>11</sup> Adam Johnson, O.A. (2024) *Coverage of gaza war in the New York Times and other major newspapers heavily favored Israel, analysis shows*, *The Intercept*. Available at:

<https://theintercept.com/2024/01/09/newspapers-israel-palestine-bias-new-york-times/>

<sup>12</sup> Monitoring, M. (2024) *CFMM report 'media bias: Gaza 2023-24*, *Centre For Media Monitoring*. Available at: <https://cfmm.org.uk/cfmm-report-media-bias-gaza-2023-24/>

criticism.<sup>13</sup> By the time the latest conflict unfolded in 2023, media coverage of Palestinians and opposition voices was limited, and the discourse had shifted far right. “The Israeli media were already very, very weakened, and so were the critical voices,” she said.

Panievsky also pointed out that many Israelis who consume Hebrew-language media remain unaware of the situation in Gaza if it is not reported. “There is something about war that makes people very self-centred and ethnocentric,” she said, adding that people care more about their own casualties than those of the enemy.

*Al Jazeera*, an independent news organisation partly funded by the Qatari government, has gained prominence, particularly in Indonesia, for providing alternative perspectives on Gaza. Although its coverage is not free of bias either, it provides alternative perspectives on the Gaza conflict – particularly regarding human suffering and civilian casualties often underreported by Western media.

Endy Bayuni, a veteran Indonesian journalist, has criticised Western media for presenting a biased view of the Gaza conflict that favours Israel and downplays the suffering in Gaza. He commended *Al Jazeera* for offering a more balanced portrayal, noting that the network’s direct reporting from the ground, particularly on the experiences of women and children which are often overlooked by Western media. He proposes a media diet that draws from a spectrum of perspectives to gain a fuller picture of the situation.

Bayuni, who is also a board member at the International Association of Religion Journalists, a network of journalists promoting responsible coverage of religion, said: “As a journalist, I would say the Indonesian media are doing a much better job than what the Western media are doing. The Western media are doing a big disservice to the audience by not giving a complete picture about what is happening in general.”

#### **A comparison of diplomatic stances on Gaza**

Singapore has maintained a firm stance rooted in international law, advocating for Palestinian rights while maintaining good ties with both Israel and Palestine. The country has consistently voted in support of UN General Assembly resolutions that reject Israeli settlement activities and called upon Israel to rescind all unilateral measures that have been taken to change the status of Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Panievsky, A. (2022) *The strategic bias: How journalists respond to Antimedia populism*, *Apollo*. Available at: <https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/items/05853e40-5dd2-4d51-b1ad-e1d9d71a784f>

<sup>14</sup> *Minister for foreign affairs dr Vivian Balakrishnan’s oral reply to parliamentary questions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, 7 August 2024* (2024) *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore*. Available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2024/08/Min-FA-PQ-Oral-Reply-August-2024>

Following the 7 October 2023, Hamas attack, Singapore denounced both the attack and Israel's subsequent military actions. It also extended humanitarian aid to Gaza, showcasing its commitment to supporting affected civilians.<sup>15</sup>

Domestically, Singapore has taken decisive action against individuals and groups claiming to act on behalf of their faith, regardless of which side they support. On 24 March 2024, which coincided with the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, a Facebook post from the Israeli embassy in Singapore surfaced. It stated the Quran refers to Israel 43 times but does not mention Palestine "even once". It went on to say: "Each and every archaeological evidence – maps, documents, coins, link the land of Israel to the Jewish people as the indigenous people of the land".

Minister Shanmugam condemned the post as "completely unacceptable", warning that it "has the potential to create tension between our Jewish and Muslim communities, and may also put our Jewish community, in particular, at risk". The Israeli embassy clarified that the post was unauthorised and removed it.

Indonesia's stance on the Gaza conflict is unequivocally pro-Palestinian, rooted in historical ties, anti-colonial values and commitment to justice, shaped by the country's own struggle for independence. Palestine was one of the first countries to recognise Indonesia's independence in 1944, and Indonesia has supported Palestinian statehood since 1988, opening a representative office in Ramallah in 2013.<sup>16</sup> As former Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa said: "Indonesia is partisan in a sense that our loyalty, our support, our solidarity is clearly with the Palestinian side."

Indonesians largely view Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories, including Gaza, as a violation of Palestinian rights. This perspective aligns with Indonesia's founding principles, as stated in the preamble of the 1945 Constitution, which asserts that "independence is the inalienable right of all nations" and declares that "all colonialism must be abolished".<sup>17</sup>

Indonesia's position is unlikely to change. Newly-minted President Prabowo Subianto reaffirmed the country's anti-colonial stance in his inaugural speech, stating, "We are against oppression because we have been oppressed. We are anti-racism, anti-apartheid, because we have experienced apartheid. We support the independence of the Palestinian people."<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Minister for foreign affairs dr Vivian Balakrishnan's written reply to parliamentary question on Humanitarian Assistance to Gaza, 12 November 2024 (2024) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore. Available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2024/11/Written-PQ-12-Nov-2024>

<sup>16</sup> Abdul Hakim/Naufal Ammar, T.N. (2023) *Indonesia and Palestine: Two states, One heart*, Antara News. Available at: <https://en.antaraneews.com/news/285396/indonesia-and-palestine-two-states-one-heart>

<sup>17</sup> *The 1945 constitution of the Republic of Indonesia*. Available at: [https://en.mkri.id/download/constitution/constitution\\_1\\_1625426222\\_4c1e13f466840d7ed721.pdf](https://en.mkri.id/download/constitution/constitution_1_1625426222_4c1e13f466840d7ed721.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Office of Assistant to Deputy Cabinet Secretary for State Documents & Translation (2024) *Remarks of president Prabowo Subianto before the Plenary Session of the People's Consultative Assembly of the Republic of Indonesia on the occasion of the inauguration of the president-elect and vice president-elect of 2024-2029 term of office, October 20, 2024, Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia*. Available at: <https://setkab.go.id/en/remarks-of-president-prabowo-subianto-before-the-plenary-session-of-the->

Bayuni stressed that Indonesian Muslims are not anti-Semitic and recognise Judaism and Christianity as Abrahamic faiths sharing a belief in the unity of God. He said: “There is no reason for Indonesian Muslims to hate Jews or Christians, because we recognise them. We have the same God; we just practise differently.”

# Comparing coverage of Gaza in Singapore and Indonesia

A comparative analysis of coverage in Indonesia and Singapore was prepared through a broad reading of English language coverage of the Gaza conflict between October 2023 and 2024 in Singapore (*ST*), and Indonesia (*Kompas* and *Republika*). This review was followed by interviews with key editorial figures across publications to test three observations and record critical responses.

## Observation 1: Narratives stick closely to official lines

In Singapore, the media are often criticised for their reliance on official statements, which can result in a lack of in-depth analysis and broader context in reporting. However, it is not uncommon for national media to toe the line – particularly in times of conflict. For instance, *Kompas* in Indonesia aligns its reporting with diplomatic stances and supports government positions, such as backing United Nations Security Council resolutions and calling for a Gaza ceasefire.

In both countries, coverage was broadly aligned with the diplomatic stances adopted by their governments (as outlined at the end of the last section). Such alignment is, however, less of an issue in Indonesia, due to the [diversity of the media environment](#), and independent outlets expressing a wide range of views.<sup>19</sup>

For example, Indonesia's *Republika*, which caters to a largely Muslim audience, often adopts a more outspoken and emotive stance. In the past year, it has expressed solidarity with Palestine through symbols like the watermelon in its logo, and its language includes terms like "[brutal](#)" to describe Israeli actions and "martyrs" for Palestinian casualties.<sup>20</sup>

By contrast, Singapore's media were more uniform in their coverage of the crisis, prioritising balanced reporting over diversity of perspectives. The result is similar narratives across outlets: one that is largely focused on humanitarian aid to Gaza. Reporting on only humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip risks portraying Palestinians

---

<sup>19</sup> Janet Steele 14th June 2023 and Steele, J. (2023) *Indonesia, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/indonesia>

<sup>20</sup> ID, R. *Serangan Israel makin brutal, 55 Warga Gaza syahid: Republika ID, republika.id*. Available at: <https://www.republika.id/posts/55143/serangan-israel-makin-brutal-55-warga-gaza-syahid>

as a helpless group, overlooking their individual stories. Similarly, focusing solely on Israeli atrocities reduces them to mere aggressors, oversimplifying the conflict.

The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, a leading journalism school, stresses the importance of recognising diversity within the Palestinian population to avoid framing the conflict as a simple religious war.<sup>21</sup> Portraying Gaza solely as a religious conflict is dangerously reductive, and can obscure the complex web of geopolitical interests, territorial disputes, and human rights issues at stake.

*Kompas* tries to balance this by incorporating multiple perspectives in its reporting, including those from foreign officials and experts, even if their views lean in favour of Israel. Deputy international desk editor Hardianto said: “Our position is that we are against war. We portray all victims of war, whether Palestinians or Israelis, without discrimination.”

While strict laws in Singapore grant the government broad powers to restrict speech that could incite religious discord, *ST* Associate Editor Hussain was unequivocal: “What is clear is that no external party outside the newsroom gets preview or vetting rights for an article. They have to wake up and see the paper or e-paper to find out for themselves,” he said.

Despite this, the pressure remains. One Singaporean journalist, speaking anonymously, admitted to feeling like they’re “walking on eggshells” when covering topics of race or religion. “No matter how careful you are, someone will be offended,” the journalist said.

### **Observation 2: Tiptoeing through the terminology**

One way that outlets in both countries have emphasised neutrality is to avoid the use of inflammatory language. This is standard journalistic practice globally. Hardianto from *Kompas* said his media only uses terms like “genocide” when quoting credible sources and prefers phrases like “strongly criticised” over “condemned” when describing criticism of Israeli military actions to maintain a balanced tone. *ST* follows similar practices.

However, for those directly affected by the conflict, putting too much focus on neutral language can obscure or disqualify the stories of individuals impacted. Gazan journalist Yousef Hammash, in a discussion with Reuters Institute journalist

---

<sup>21</sup> Al Tompkins, K.M. (2023) *The basics on Israel, Gaza, Palestine and Hamas for local journalists*, Poynter. Available at: <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2023/history-israel-palestine-hamas-gaza/>

fellows, urged against getting bogged down in debates over casualty numbers or terms like “genocide”. Instead, he stressed the need to humanise those affected, saying, “Let’s hear their names, who they are, not just the numbers.”

### **Observation 3: Silence is no longer golden**

What is unreported in mainstream media today is often taken up by social media, with audiences left to interpret for themselves why the mainstream coverage is missing. Silence or omissions on a particular topic may become glaring signals that draw attention to themselves.

Silence can also be seen as tacit approval of behaviour. While Indonesia’s media coverage of Gaza has been prominent – and at times emotive – its reporting on the 7 October attack was similarly intensive. Then President Joko Widodo called for an immediate halt to “the war and acts of violence” to prevent further casualties and urged the protection of Indonesian citizens in conflict zones.

While the media did not justify the actions of Hamas, some outlets did report on the context belying the group’s actions.

By comparison, Singapore media has sometimes opted for silence over coverage, at least during the days following the attack.

Since then, the government narrative in Singapore surrounding the Gaza conflict has shifted from blaming Hamas for the 7 October attack to focusing on Israel’s atrocities since the war began. Observers noted that the ground has shifted away, especially among the young, because the atrocities were grossly disproportionate.

Carl Skadian, senior associate director of the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore and former senior editor at *TODAY* and *ST*, highlighted specific gaps in Singapore’s media coverage.

He also noted that the Singapore government has recalibrated its stance on the conflict, from strongly defending Israel’s right to self-defence, to emphasising humanitarian concerns, and reiterating its longstanding support for Palestinian aspirations. Skadian argued that these constant calibrations, which likely reflected the sentiments of significant segments of the population, were not critically examined in the media.

He also noted a lack of substantive coverage on neighbouring Malaysia’s support for Hamas, despite its direct relevance to Singaporeans due to its geographic and psychological proximity. Skadian attributed gaps in coverage to a lack of “gumption, to give it a go”.

“Covering religion and race requires care, thought, and perhaps a bit of risk-taking,” he said. “While we must avoid exacerbating existing fault-lines, the issue is far more nuanced, and careful consideration would have improved the coverage.”

### **A sample of public sentiment**

A reader survey by Singapore weekly digital magazine, [Jom Media](#), found Gen Zs and Malays are relatively more concerned than other ages and races, respectively, about Israel and Palestine.<sup>22</sup>

Jom's report noted that ignoring these issues “may not be wise”, as youth activism on Gaza-related issue, such as the Gardens by the Bay” incident (detailed later in the paper) “has caught the government off guard”.

Some Malay-Muslims told me they wished Singapore media would report on the different views of ordinary people on the Gaza conflict, not only the elites. They also welcome perspectives from people of other faiths.

There is no singular stance on the issue in any community. Some Muslims are cautious when discussing Gaza to avoid being linked to religious extremism, lest “being too vocal” and expressing strong solidarity with Palestine be misconstrued as tacit support for militant groups.

Singapore’s top Muslim body, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, [issued an advisory](#) urging Muslims to maintain peace and avoid division or conflict in response to overseas crises. “The Muslim community in Singapore is in a unique position, which may not be the same as the situation of Muslim communities in other countries,” it said.<sup>23</sup>

The Singapore Mufti, in a letter to Singapore’s chief rabbi shortly after the Hamas attack, urged both Jewish and Muslim communities in the affected regions to move beyond political ideologies and adopt a “different model of respect, tolerance, and harmony” before hailing Singapore’s “model of coexistence” as an example.

---

<sup>22</sup> Jom (2024) *Singaporeans’ political interests and imperatives: Jom’s first voter sentiment survey*, Jom. Available at: <https://www.jom.media/singaporeans-political-interests-and-imperatives-joms-first-voter-sentiment-survey/>

<sup>23</sup> *Religious advice to the community regarding the Middle East conflict (2023) Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS)*. Available at: <https://www.muis.gov.sg/Media/Media-Releases/2023/11/22-Nov-23-Religious-Advice-to-the-Community-Regarding-the-Middle-East-Conflict>



Online criticism of the Mufti's statement published by [The Straits Times](#) suggested the statement lacked cultural sensitivity and reflected a disconnect from the complex realities faced by those living in a conflict far removed from Singapore's context.<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, some Muslims questioned the necessity of such a gesture for a conflict unrelated to Singaporean Muslims. They felt it might come across as overly apologetic and did not fully reflect the community's sentiments regarding the longstanding conflict.

*ST* Associate Editor Hussain said the plurality of public opinion adds to the challenge of reporting. "Even within the Muslim community, while sentiments on Gaza are deeply felt, there is a range of perspectives on the conflict," he said.

*ST* Associate Editor Hussain said regulations governing religious harmony do not mean that issues of religion and race are ignored in the media. The ongoing challenge, he noted, lies in understanding the sensitivities of a topic, presenting accurate and balanced coverage, and providing the necessary context for readers.

Since the Hamas attack on Israel and Israel's retaliation in Gaza, *ST* has been on the receiving end of complaints from both sides of the conflict – both in letters to the editor and on social media. Recognising that the issue resonates strongly with a spectrum of readers, he said *ST* has "taken care in curating and presenting stories" to ensure balance. This involved giving proportionate space to both Palestinian and Israeli perspectives, being sensitive about headlines, and using deliberate language.

He agreed, however, that expertise on religion and race could be further developed. He noted that *ST* previously had reporters specialising in religion and heritage, enabling them to build valuable contacts and gain deep knowledge on key developments in these areas. Although coverage is now more dispersed between general assignment staff, it remains an important focus. The newsroom's diversity ensures that this area of reporting can be prioritised when needed, he said.

"*The Straits Times* has long recognised its responsibility to cover all key communities in Singapore and reflect their views and concerns when needed," he said. "We aim for balanced and contextual coverage."

To this end, the paper has sought to publish stories that humanise the conflict and present multiple viewpoints, such as a profile of [Dr Ang Swee Chai](#), a Singaporean

---

<sup>24</sup> Hamzah, A. (2023) *S'pore mufti and chief rabbi exchange letters, reiterate importance of unity as Israel-hamas war rages on*, *The Straits Times*. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/s-pore-mufti-and-chief-rabbi-exchange-letters-reiterate-importance-of-unity-as-israel-hamas-war-rages-on>

orthopaedic surgeon who has worked in Gaza.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the paper has hosted discussions, published op-eds, and forum letters reflecting the views of the Muslim minority. For example, it covered controversy over how the Israel-Gaza conflict is taught in classrooms, with some parents and teachers claiming the material was biased and oversimplified. Another controversy involved influencers detained by immigration authorities over posts encouraging Singaporeans to protest overseas.<sup>26</sup>

“One challenge,” Hussain noted, “is the shift [in audience appetite] from long articles to more multimedia and video content. However, there is still room for in-depth features on these issues when needed.”

### **Hostile media effect**

No outlet is immune to the “[hostile media effect](#)”: where different groups perceive media coverage as biased against their side.<sup>27</sup>

“We know that people are sometimes unhappy with our reporting,” said Panievsky. “People often repeat these claims and believe them to be true. But at the end of the day, the important thing is to remain consistent.” Being transparent in reporting, she said, would allow those with genuine interest to assess their claims.

---

<sup>25</sup> Hoh, W.K. (2024) ‘gaza makes me cry every day’: Humanitarian ang Swee Chai is devoted to helping Palestinians, *The Straits Times*. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/gaza-makes-me-cry-every-day-humanitarian-ang-swee-chai-is-devoted-to-helping-palestinians>

<sup>26</sup> Iau, J. (2024) *MHA confirms that s’porean influencers were advised on content about Gaza conflict*, *The Straits Times*. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/mha-confirms-that-s-porean-influencers-were-advised-on-content-about-gaza-conflict>

<sup>27</sup> Person, M., R. and Perloff (2018) *A three-decade retrospective on the hostile media effect: 12: Advanc*, *Taylor & Francis*. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315164441-12/three-decade-retrospective-hostile-media-effect-richard-perloff>

## A comparison of local coverage: Gaza protests in Singapore and Indonesia

On 2 February 2024, a group of around 70 people carrying watermelon-print umbrellas – a symbol of Palestinian resistance and solidarity – walked from Singapore’s Orchard Road shopping strip to the Istana, the office of Singapore’s President. They had [prepared letters](#) to deliver to then-Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, calling on the government to sever ties with Israel in protest of the ongoing attacks on Palestinian civilians in Gaza.<sup>28</sup>

Much earlier – on 18 October 2023, shortly after the conflict broke out – the Singapore police and National Parks Board announced they would reject applications for public events or assemblies related to the Israel-Hamas conflict due to safety and security concerns.

At the time of the umbrella walk, the event received limited coverage in the Singapore media, including in *ST*. When the police investigation into the incident was [released later that month](#), it received coverage – but the focus was primarily from the government’s perspective.<sup>29</sup>

Five months after the walk, on 27 June, [three women were charged](#) with organising a procession in a prohibited area without a permit, violating the Public Order Act.<sup>30</sup>

One of them, social activist Kokila Annamalai, told me in an interview: “[The mainstream media] don’t cover the actions, they don’t cover the rallies, they don’t cover our efforts, our demands, anything. They just cover the police press release.”

She expressed her frustration at being “only covered through the lens of criminality” and criticised the one-sidedness of the media for “reproducing the police press

---

<sup>28</sup> *Singapore Police Force (SPF) media reply for events – letters for Palestine: With Love, from Singapore, steadfast for Palestine, and the Singapore airshow 2024* (2024) Singapore Police Force. Available at: [https://www.police.gov.sg/media-room/news/20240213\\_media\\_reply\\_for\\_events\\_letters\\_for\\_palestine\\_with\\_love\\_from\\_singapore](https://www.police.gov.sg/media-room/news/20240213_media_reply_for_events_letters_for_palestine_with_love_from_singapore)

<sup>29</sup> *Police probing two events in Singapore related to Israel-hamas conflict* (2024) *The Straits Times*. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/police-probing-two-events-related-to-israel-hamas-conflict-urge-responsible-and-respectful-discussions>

<sup>30</sup> *3 women charged with public order offences for allegedly organising procession outside Istana* (2024) *The Straits Times*. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/3-women-charged-with-public-order-offences-for-allegedly-organising-procession-outside-istana>

release in their own voice” without contacting the group to provide their “right of response” regarding the police investigations.

The Istana, which is used to receive and entertain state guests, is a particularly security-sensitive area and is a prohibited area under the country’s public order regulation. In a statement, police said several reports had been lodged by the public against the march, adding that “their actions advocate the political causes of other countries and have the potential to stir up tensions and lead to public disorder”.

The Middle East Institute’s Skadian also believes Singapore media rely too heavily on official statements, highlighting the failure of coverage to go beyond legal aspects of protesting. “It would take a Singaporean living under a rock to be unaware of strict injunctions against importing foreign issues into Singaporean politics,” he said. “This is no different. That such protests would not be allowed is not new. But why is it that this issue has taken on a particular resonance? If you depended on Singapore media for the answers, you would get none.”

Annamalai described herself as having a “deep sense of horror, shock, and distress” about Gaza, she doesn’t expect to see this reflected in Singapore’s press. “To me, if we want to look at any reflection of what the people of Singapore care about, what are they preoccupied with? What are their opinions on things? What are their experiences? What are the conversations they want to have? You need to look at Reddit, you need to look at Instagram. You need to look at Facebook. You don’t look at *The Straits Times*.”

In Indonesia, protests and the coverage of protests is handled completely differently. A month after the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, the Indonesian government organised a massive rally at Jakarta’s main sports stadium to express solidarity with Palestine. Hundreds of thousands of Indonesians, including prominent figures and ordinary citizens, gathered: giving speeches, reciting poetry, waving Palestinian flags, and chanting slogans like “God is great” and “Free Palestine”. The rally, held on 5 November, was one of many over the past year, calling for an end to Israel’s siege of Gaza.

The Indonesian media, including [Kompas](#), gave extensive coverage to these rallies, with TV channels broadcasting the event live and print outlets featuring it on the front page.<sup>31</sup>

By contrast, the 2 February Istana march was a talking point in Singapore – but it was discussed on platforms like Reddit.

“There is no obligation to publish protesters’ messages simply based on their actions, such as carrying signs or chanting slogans,” according to the Poynter Institute. It further advises journalists to avoid amplifying unverified claims, spreading hatred, or misrepresenting groups.

### **Singapore’s stance on protesting for Gaza**

Singapore’s Minister for Communications and Information and Second Minister for Home Affairs Josephine Teo had said while Singaporeans are free to express their views, it must be done legally and without disrupting social harmony. Singapore, she said, has made its stance on Gaza clear through official channels, such as co-sponsoring and voting for a humanitarian ceasefire at the UN in December 2023.

Home Affairs Minister Shanmugam said that while protests may begin with good intentions, they can turn violent if groups with their own agendas infiltrate them. He acknowledged that it’s difficult to know the full extent of external involvement, but warned that “if we allow protests on this issue, initially it may be peaceful, but over time, as the protests take a life of their own – there could be some violence, breach of the peace and law, occupying of buildings”.

### **What qualifies as acceptable “protest” coverage in Singapore?**

On 15 April 2024, three protesters unfurled a banner at OCBC Skyway, located at Singapore’s popular tourist destination, Gardens by the Bay. The banner called for an end to Singapore’s arms trade with Israel. This protest coincided with global demonstrations which targeted economic hubs to highlight human rights abuses in Gaza. [ST](#) reported on this incident, deeming it newsworthy as it took place at a prominent public location.<sup>32</sup> With or without coverage, it was a protest that gained some attention on social media.

---

<sup>31</sup> Krisiandi (2023) *Solidaritas Untuk Palestina Bergema dari Jakarta Halaman all*, *KOMPAS.com*. Available at: <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2023/11/06/07052931/solidaritas-untuk-palestina-bergema-dari-jakarta?page=all>

<sup>32</sup> Hamzah, A. (2024) *Police Probe Protest Banner Incident at gardens by the Bay*, *The Straits Times*. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/police-probe-protest-banner-incident-at-gardens-by-the-bay>

On 17 November 2024, around 300 volunteers wearing “Give to Gaza” sandwich boards walked across Singapore [to raise funds](#) for Gaza relief. The event, attended by government officials, received positive media coverage. The campaign was organised by Humanity Matters, a local non-profit, in partnership with the Rahmatan Lil Alamin Foundation, a charity established by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, a statutory body and the highest official Islamic authority in Singapore.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Chia, O. (2024) *Singapore Humanitarian Group has sent over 50 tonnes of aid to Gaza, launches fund-Raising Drive*, *The Straits Times*. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/humanitarian-group-has-sent-over-50-tonnes-of-aid-to-gaza-launches-new-fund-raising-drive>

# A six-point plan for improved coverage of Gaza in Singapore press

Official narratives rarely provide context and nuance, overly cautious language can have a silencing effect, and silence is problematic in its own way. What then can newsrooms do to prepare to cover issues of race and religion more sensitively and comprehensively, so that our society is equipped to understand each other's viewpoints and hold constructive conversations?

## 1. Training and immersion programmes for journalists

*Kompas* in Indonesia offers a useful model: though it does not have a dedicated religion editor, it employs journalists with expertise in religious affairs and strong expert networks. Its editors overseeing international news coverage have backgrounds in theology and philosophy. Journalists typically need at least 10 years of work experience to be considered for the desk.

Adopting similar strategies in Singapore could prepare journalists to navigate religious and conflict-related issues more effectively. Even then: journalists who cover sensitive issues involving religion or race – like the conflict in Gaza – should receive training in ethical and balanced reporting. Training would focus on developing a clear understanding of Singapore's legal frameworks and boundaries (so that they do not self-censor unnecessarily), how to assess their own unconscious bias to improve impartiality, and how to handle diverse perspectives with care.

## 2. Enhance religious literacy in the newsroom

Religion is a deeply personal and influential aspect of many societies, but it is often underrepresented or oversimplified in media coverage.

One solution is the introduction of specialist religion correspondents or editors to consult on coverage. Although all journalists, regardless of their beat, should have a basic understanding of the religious contexts of the communities they cover.

Editors should also receive training and mentorship, particularly in areas such as politics, religion, and regional conflicts. Pairing experienced editors with newer staff helps foster knowledge transfer and ensures religious and cultural sensitivities are integrated into editorial decision-making. Empowering editors to critically analyse content and challenge assumptions will help maintain high standards of reporting.

### **3. Engage journalists in the Middle East**

For more comprehensive coverage of Middle Eastern conflicts, Singapore media should consider hiring correspondents from the region or partnering with local outlets. Including their insights would provide context that is often missing in Western-dominated narratives.

Additionally, incorporating different kinds of voices from Muslim communities – those with lived experience and not just the usual go-to experts and leaders – can create stories that are more reflective of local concerns.

### **4. Promote media literacy among readers**

If our audience is turning to social media for news about Gaza, empowering them to critically evaluate sources may be essential to combating misinformation. Equally, media outlets should be transparent about their own sourcing and editorial processes to help audiences understand how stories are constructed.

Providing fact-checking resources, organising workshops on evaluating news credibility as well as spotting fake news, and continuing to facilitate discussions on contentious topics can improve public understanding. Encouraging readers to consult multiple sources ensures a broader, more balanced view of events.

### **5. Engage with religious communities and civil society**

Journalists should actively engage with religious communities and civil society in the communities they report on. Open dialogue with religious leaders, community representatives, and stakeholders can highlight underrepresented perspectives and provide the media with insights into how their coverage impacts these groups.

### **6. Increase ground reporting and explainer content**

By keeping an eye on community platforms like Reddit, journalists may identify missing grassroots perspectives and voices. They can then conduct their own reporting to confirm, contextualize and bring these narratives into mainstream coverage. Doing so may provide valuable insights into public sentiment – a crucial view, but one that is often missing from elite-dominated coverage.



## Conclusion

At the Trust Conference in October 2024, *Al Jazeera* correspondent Youmna El Sayed, a journalist and exiled former resident of Gaza, criticised a room full of global media representatives for “clear double standards”, misinformation, and a lack of journalistic integrity. She accused journalists of downplaying the severity of the Gaza conflict and neglecting to cover violations of international law and human rights, adding, “Journalists today are the reason why the public is getting their information through social media.”

The gaps in traditional media coverage of the Gaza conflict have been filled by social media, which offers its audience real-time updates and personal stories. However, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) [has warned](#) that social media algorithms often reinforce a single perspective, present a narrow view and lack necessary fact-checking or credibility.<sup>34</sup> Very few platforms are still working to address this, and their efforts only scratch the surface of the issue.

Instead, CSIS calls for bridging polarised narratives and promoting open dialogue through respectful discussions, diverse perspectives, and factual reporting. Media decisions – what stories to cover, which headlines to use, and which images to show – greatly influence public perception of the Gaza conflict.

Norshahril Saat, Senior Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, said in his paper, [Managing Islam in Singapore](#), that the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore is exposed to a broad range of religious views, not only from local leaders but also from Malaysia, Indonesia, the Middle East, and South Asia.<sup>35</sup> This adds complexity to religious discourse.

The rise of a globally connected society has made it harder to control information, shifting discussions and debates about religion from traditional media and mosques to platforms like WhatsApp, YouTube, and Facebook. This affects all age groups, including older generations. While social media can encourage more involvement in religious matters, it also opens the door to misinformation, fake news, and harmful ideas that could threaten social harmony.

Prof Abdullah, of NTU’s school of social sciences, analysed Muslim activists in Singapore and found that while they have limited influence on outcomes, they have options: cooperate with the state, operate within permissible bounds, or challenge

---

<sup>34</sup> *Gaza through whose lens?* Available at: <https://features.csis.org/gaza-through-whose-lens/index.html>

<sup>35</sup> Saat, N. (2022) *Managing Islam in Singapore: A strong and resilient state*, *Studia Islamika*. Available at: <https://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/studia-islamika/article/view/25215/11139>

the state at the risk of retaliation. Most opt for the first two, which, though reducing credibility, offer greater gains.

To me, this same analysis may well apply to journalists. When I first embarked on this project, I faced scepticism from some of my interviewees, who questioned whether I was reporting for *The Straits Times* or writing independently. Some sources declined to speak altogether, while others agreed to be interviewed but later withdrew. Those who were willing to share their views often insisted on anonymity, given the sensitivity of the topic.

The experience has reinforced my belief that thoughtful, open dialogue – especially on issues like religion and race – requires a safe, respectful space where all voices can be heard without fear of reprisal. I value that *The Straits Times* has given me the opportunity to undertake a fellowship on this issue, which shows its commitment to raise the standards of its reporting on global conflicts like Gaza.

Prof Abdullah's analysis of activists also came with a warning: he said that many Singaporeans "miscalculate the boundaries of permissible dissent", leading to self-censorship. This again, may apply to journalists and the sources we interview.

My goal is never to turn discussion into dissent, or dialogue into discord. Instead, it is to foster understanding and encourage meaningful engagement.

Truth and the pursuit of it is a foundational concept in journalism, but truth itself is a construct. We all interpret facts through our own lenses, shaped by our personal realities and perceptions. Ultimately, what is being reported in the media depends on whose perspective is being considered.

If only one or two perspectives are being presented in the media, then the media risks an oversimplification of the Gaza crisis that distorts reality and hinders meaningful dialogue.

That is not what quality journalism is about. Legacy media like *The Straits Times* have a unique responsibility to add layers to the reporting of Gaza, proving itself as a reliable reference in an era of polarised narratives.