

## Who is Involved: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Al Jazeera and CNN Headlines on Yahya Sinwar's Death (Van Leeuwen's Theory)

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### Article Info

#### Article history:

Submitted December 25, 2024

Revised May 30, 2025

Accepted October 16, 2025

Published November 5, 2025

#### Keywords:

critical discourse analysis;

headline news;

Palestine;

social actors;

Yahya Sinwar

### ABSTRACT

The media significantly shapes public opinion and influences societal perceptions of diverse local and worldwide issues. Consequently, news coverage has the potential to shape public discourse significantly. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze patterns in the reporting of Yahya Sinwar's death by CNN and Al Jazeera, utilizing Theo Van Leeuwen's (2008) framework for critical discourse analysis. Through the application of Van Leeuwen's theory, the study examines how Western and Middle Eastern media providers frame Sinwar's death and represent the social actors involved in his assassination. Van Leeuwen's framework categorizes the representation of social actors into two primary strategies: exclusion, encompassing suppression and backgrounding, and inclusion, which includes Activation/Passivation, Genericization/Specification, Assimilation, Association, Indetermination, Functionalization/Identification, and Personalization/Impersonalization. The analysis highlights distinct differences in the framing strategies of the two media providers. CNN and Jazeera differ in their framing strategies, with CNN emphasizing individual actions and a direct narrative style, while Jazeera uses a context-driven approach, emphasizing collective experiences and connecting individual events to larger systemic issues.

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## INTRODUCTION

The media plays a critical role in shaping public opinion and influencing societal perceptions of various local and global issues (Kellner, 2003). In reality, media providers are often not completely neutral, especially when it comes to reporting the news. Whether consciously or not, they often align with particular political interests, which can lead to "introduce" of certain narratives while marginalizing or downplaying the public. This selective framing can deeply influence public perception, especially when the news controls how stories are presented and the language used. Furthermore, headline news are made to reflect the political or even religious agendas of those in power, shaping how audiences interpret events (Zurriyati, et. al, 2023). In many cases, the news that publics' consumes isn't as objective or unbiased as it may seem; rather, it's often filtered and shaped to reflect particular ideological or political stances. Media news providers use

certain terms of language, words and phrase, and specific framing techniques to influence not only how the public accepts an issue but also how the public think about it. By subtly guiding the public's thoughts and emotions through the news they produce, they can steer the public's toward specific viewpoints, ultimately shaping the public's understanding of complex events and situations. Furthermore, the mass media, especially news providers frequently assumes a crucial role in modern conflicts by acting as both a platform for information dissemination and a tool for influencing public opinion (Fisher, 2023).

For example, Western and Middle Eastern news frequently present contradictory news narratives about the same events, driven by their respective ideologies and political interests, with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict being a prime example. Western media frequently align their reporting with the political interests of Israel, framing the situation around themes like security, defense, and peace-building. Palestinian groups are often labeled as "terrorists," while Israel's actions are justified as measures of self-defense against perceived threats. In contrast, Middle Eastern media emphasize the suffering of Palestinian civilians, focusing on issues such as occupation, resistance, and human rights violations, casting Israel as the aggressor and Palestine as the oppressed. These differing news narratives reflect deeply rooted biases and political alliances that shape how each side presents the conflict. For instance, during the Israel's bombing of the Rafah refugee camp because they were concerned about Hamas hiding in there, Western media providers described the event in terms of military operations or counterterrorism, while Middle Eastern media providers highlighted the civilian casualties and humanitarian devastation.

Hamas is frequently labeled as a terrorist organization in Western media, reflecting the political and ideological stance of many Western governments that officially designate Hamas as such. This framing positions Hamas as the primary aggressor or "the real villain" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, emphasizing its role in violence and attacks against Israel. In contrast, many Middle Eastern media portray Hamas as a resistance movement fighting against Israeli occupation and advocating for Palestinian rights. Western media and Israel views Hamas as a long-standing adversary that must be eliminated, frequently targeting its leadership in military operations. Less than two months after the death of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in 31 July 2024, Israel launched a major offensive on October 16, 2024, known as the *Banjir Al-Aqsa* operation, which killed Hamas leader, Yahya Sinwar.

Yahya Sinwar, a significant figure in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, served as a prominent leader of Hamas, heading its political and military operations in Gaza. Born in Khan Yunis in 1962, he co-founded Hamas's internal security apparatus and became known for his strategic influence and firm stance on Palestinian resistance. Furthermore, he symbolized defiance against Israeli occupation, while others saw him as a controversial, hardline figure. His assassination in October 2024 underlined the deeply divided narratives surrounding him. Western media often portrayed Sinwar as a terrorist leader, while Middle Eastern media highlighted his role as a defender of Palestinian rights. This makes his story a compelling subject for academic exploration, as it illustrates how media narratives, shaped by political and ideological biases, can influence public perception of key figures in global conflicts. By applying Van Leeuwen's critical discourse analysis, this study delves not only how western-middle east news providers framed Sinwar's death, and how the media represent the social actors in his assassination.

Numerous studies have explored how Theo van Leeuwen's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) theory can reveal media biases and narrative strategies. Suharni (2022)

examined how online media, particularly Facebook, shapes narratives around crime, uncovering underlying ideologies through CDA. Kamaludin (2023) applied van Leeuwen's Inclusion Theory to analyze the portrayal of social actors in the coverage of Brigadier Joshua's murder on tvonenews.com. Similarly, Wulandari (2023) used the theory to study discourse in a video podcast, highlighting its use in education. Henarni (2024) contrasted Western and Middle Eastern media narratives about Hamas in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while Putri (2024) analyzed CNN and Al Jazeera's coverage of George Floyd's murder, using Corpus-assisted CDA to identify ideological differences in their reporting. Despite these contributions, there is a lack of research focusing on the representation of Yahya Sinwar's death, a significant and timely event that has drawn attention globally. This study aims to fill that gap by examining headlines from CNN West and Al Jazeera East through van Leeuwen's CDA framework. It seeks to uncover what social actors are associated with Yahya Sinwar's death in the headlines of Al Jazeera and CNN and how Van Leeuwen's theory of social actor representation informs the critical discourse analysis of Al Jazeera and CNN headlines about Yahya Sinwar's death. This research will focus on how these media providers construct their narratives and shape public perceptions of this critical event in the headline news by analyzing the social actors using Van Leeuwen's theory.

## THEORY AND METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design to analyze the representation of social actors in the headlines of Al Jazeera and CNN regarding Yahya Sinwar's death. Utilizing its strength to provide a clear and extensive study of social actor representation in media discourse, which aligns closely with the research's focus on examining headlines through van Leeuwen's theoretical lens. By staying closer to the facts and providing a direct portrayal of the experience, qualitative descriptive methodology is a methodological technique that offers a thorough overview of events or experiences (Hall et.al, 2024). It is derived from naturalistic inquiry and is dedicated to examining phenomena in their natural state (Hall et.al, 2024).

The data for this study were sourced from the official online platforms of Al Jazeera and CNN. Specifically, the research focused on news headlines, which were transcribed into a table created by the researchers. The instrument in this study was the researchers themselves, while the tools used included computers and the internet for data collection and analysis.

The process of data collection involved several steps. First, the researchers searched for news related to the topic of Yahya Sinwar's death on Al Jazeera and CNN. Once relevant news articles were identified, the researchers extracted and compiled their headlines. These headlines were then systematically classified and organized into a table based on theoretical frameworks relevant to the study.

For the analysing technique this research uses Spradley's theory (2016) to analyze the data which has four steps; domain analysis, taxonomy analysis, componential analysis, and cultural theme analysis. The domain analysis borrows Theo Van Leeuwen's critical discourse analysis theory (2008) to reveal how social actors are represented, excluded, or foregrounded, and how social actor representation informs the critical discourse analysis of these headlines.

Theo van Leeuwen (2008) identifies two primary categories for representing social actors: exclusion and inclusion. A more in-depth explanation, as described by Abdulkareem and Qassim (2017), provides a detailed account of the concepts of inclusion and exclusion.

### 1. Exclusion

Refers to the process of omitting social actors from the text, which can occur for various reasons.

#### a. Suppression (sup)

Is a form of exclusion where both the social actor and their actions are completely omitted from the text, leaving no reference to them at all. This type of exclusion is particularly significant because it can shift the focus of the narrative away from the actor, often directing attention towards the victims or the consequences of the actions instead.

#### b. Backgrounding

Is a form of exclusion where social actors are not explicitly mentioned, but their presence is implied in the text. This means that while the social actors may not be directly referenced, there is still a trace of their involvement in the narrative.

### 2. Inclusion

On the other hand, inclusion refers to the process of explicitly mentioning social actors in a text, thereby placing them at the center of attention. According to van Leeuwen, inclusion is more common in discourse compared to exclusion, as it clearly identifies social actors and their roles within the narrative

#### a. Activation/Passivation

Activation occurs when a social actor is presented as the performer of an action, highlighting them as active and dynamic forces within the narrative.

Passivation refers to situations where the social actor is depicted as the recipient of an action, rather than the one performing it.

#### b. Genericization/Specification

Genericization occurs when social actors are represented as groups or classes rather than as individual entities. This means that the focus is on the collective characteristics of a group rather than on specific individuals.

Specification refers to the representation of social actors as specific and identifiable individuals. This approach emphasizes the uniqueness of the actor, making them stand out in the narrative.

#### c. Assimilation

Assimilation describes social actors in terms of groups but focuses on plurality. It can be divided into two types: aggregation, which quantifies groups and treats them as statistics, and collectivization, which uses collective terms like "this nation" or "the community".. Assimilation emphasizes the group aspect of social actors, while genericization focuses on their classification as a collective entity.

d. Association

Refers to the representation of groups through participants or groups of participants, such as 'politicians, bureaucrats, and ethnic minorities', without explicit labeling in the text.

e. Indetermination

Indetermination refers to the representation of social actors as unspecified or anonymous entities within a text. This means that the actors are not clearly identified, which can create a sense of ambiguity regarding who is involved in the actions being described.

f. Functionalization/Identification

Functionalization occurs when social actors are portrayed based on their activities or roles rather than their personal characteristics. This means that the emphasis is placed on what the actors do rather than who they are as individuals.

Identification refers to the representation of social actors in terms of their inherent characteristics or identities, rather than their actions. This approach focuses on who the actors are, such as describing someone as "a brave soldier" or "a dedicated activist."

g. Personalisation/Impersonalisation

Personalization occurs when social actors are described as human beings, emphasizing their human characteristics and individuality. This approach allows readers to connect with the actors on a more personal level, as it highlights their emotions, motivations, and unique identities.

Impersonalization refers to the representation of social actors in a way that abstracts their human qualities. This can involve using abstract nouns or concrete nouns that do not convey the feature of being human.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Results

Through the process of data collection and analysis from both news sources, a total of 56 news reports concerning the death of Yahya Sinwar were identified. Specifically, 22 reports were published by Al Jazeera and 34 by CNN. The headlines from all articles were analyzed using Van Leeuwen's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, with a particular focus on the "Who is Involved" dimension to examine the representation of actors, institutions, and roles implicated in the death of Yahya Sinwar. The analysis further revealed that a single headline often employed multiple representational strategies in depicting the social actors involved in Yahya Sinwar's death. The detailed results of the analysis and classification of findings are presented in the following table:

Table 1. Table Findings of CNN and Al Jazeera Social Actor Analysis in Yahya Sinwar's Death

News	Exclusion		Inclusion						
	Sup	BGR	Act/Pas	Gen/SPC	ASM	ASC	InDet	Func/Idnt	PSN/IMP
Al Jazeera	8	2	14	4	10	3	0	9	7
CNN	17	0	15	13	12	10	1	13	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>		<b>117</b>						

As seen on the table 1, a total of 144 data points, comprising 57 from Al Jazeera and 87 from CNN, based on the classification of techniques used to identify social actors involved in the death of Yahya Sinwar across all headline data from both news sources. The analysis revealed that the Inclusion category was the most frequently employed representational strategy, accounting for 117 data. Among the Inclusion techniques, Activation/Passivation emerged as the most commonly used, with a total of 29 occurrences. These findings indicate that, overall, both news sources tend to explicitly identify the social actors involved in the death of Yahya Sinwar. This explicit representation typically focuses either on naming the actors directly responsible for the event (Activation) or on illustrating how certain actors were affected by it (Passivation).

When examined by individual news sources and the dominant techniques employed, CNN shows a marked tendency to utilize the Suppression technique, which falls under the Exclusion category, with 17 occurrences. In contrast, Al Jazeera more frequently employs the Activation/Passivation technique, classified under Inclusion, with 14 data. Further discussion of the classification and techniques used by each news sources is provided in the subsequent Discussion section.

## B. Discussions

### 1. Al Jazeera

Based on the analysis, a total of 23 news headlines addressing the death of Yahya Sinwar were identified. From these 23 headlines, 57 data points were extracted and analyzed based on the methods used to identify the social actors involved in Sinwar's death. The classification and the number of findings are presented in the following table.

Table 2. Al Jazeera Analysis Table

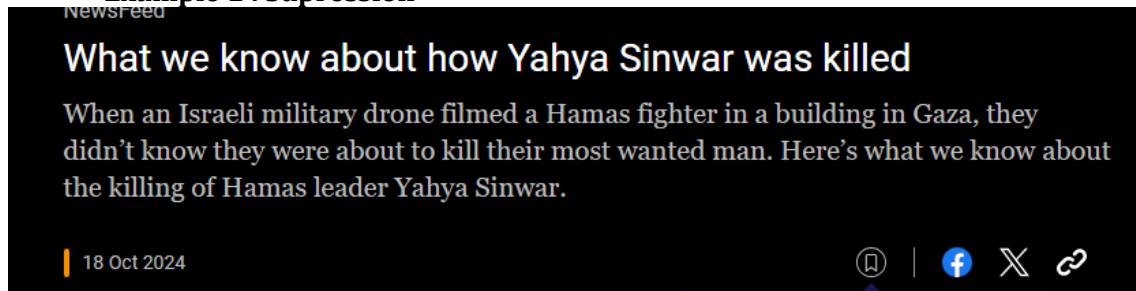
Classification	Exclusion		Inclusion						
	SUP	BGR	Act/Pas	Gen/S PC	ASM	ASC	InDet	Func/I dnt	PSN/IMP
Data Result	8	2	14	4	10	3	0	9	7
Total	10		47						

From the result of the table 2, it was found that Al Jazeera predominantly employed the Inclusion classification, with a total of 47 data points. The most frequently

used technique within this category was Activation/ Passivation, appearing in 14 data. Notably, the Indetermination technique, which also falls under the Inclusion classification, was not identified at all in the dataset. The following are several examples of data analysis based on the respective classifications:

#### a. Exclusion

##### Example 1 : Suppression

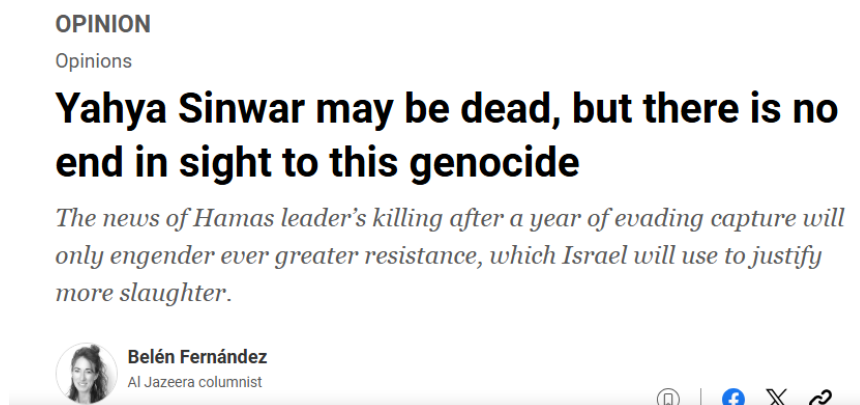


Picture 1. Al Jazeera's Headline News with Suppression Strategy

*"What we know about how Yahya Sinwar was killed"*

In this headline from picture 1, the main topic is the death of Yahya Sinwar. However, it does not include any reference to the perpetrator or main actor involved in the assassination, nor does it provide any clue that would indirectly suggest who the actor might be. The complete omission of the perpetrator's involvement is a defining feature of the Suppression technique under the Exclusion category.

##### Example 2: Backgrounding



Picture 2. Al Jazeera's Headline News with Backgrounding Strategy

*"Yahya Sinwar may be dead, but there is no end in sight to this genocide"*

Picture 2 shows the headline mentions the death of Yahya Sinwar in conjunction with the term "genocide". While no actors are explicitly stated, the mention of genocide indirectly references the perpetrator. In the context of the news event, the term "genocide" is associated with events in Palestine and implicitly refers to Israel as the perpetrator. The

indirect mention of actors through associated events is characteristic of the Backgrounding technique within the Exclusion category.

## b. Inclusion

### Example 3: Activation and Functionalization

## Updates: Israel claims killing of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar in Gaza

By Lyndal Rowlands, Alastair McCreedy, Ylenia Gostoli, Edna

Mohamed, Nils Adler and Virginia Pietromarchi

17 Oct 2024



Picture 3. Al Jazeera's Headline News with Activation Strategy

*"Updates: Israel claims killing of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar in Gaza"*

In picture 3, the actor involved in Yahya Sinwar's death—Israel—is explicitly identified, with direct involvement emphasized through active voice. This reflects the use of the Activation technique under Inclusion, which highlights the agent responsible for the action. Additionally, Yahya Sinwar is represented with an attached role or function—*Hamas leader*—which is indicative of the Functionalization technique.

### Example 4: Passivation and Genericization

News | Israel-Palestine conflict

## Hamas confirms leader Yahya Sinwar killed in combat in Gaza by Israeli army

*Group says captives held in Gaza will not return until Israel stops its attacks on Gaza and withdraws its forces.*

Picture 4. Al Jazeera's Headline News with Passivation Strategy

*"Hamas confirms leader Yahya Sinwar killed in combat in Gaza by Israeli army"*

Picture 4 is an example contrasts with Activation by employing Passivation, wherein the focus is on the social actor being acted upon—Yahya Sinwar—rather than the actor performing the action. Furthermore, the agent is referred to as a collective group—the *Israeli army*—which aligns with the Genericization technique.

### Example 5: Specification, Association, and Personalization

News | Israel-Palestine conflict

## Why Netanyahu won't let Israel stop fighting after killing Hamas's Sinwar

*The Israeli PM has seized every opportunity to expand the fighting, and to sink any possible ceasefires.*

Picture 5. Al Jazeera's Headline News with Specification Strategy

*"Why Netanyahu won't let Israel stop fighting after killing Hamas's Sinwar"*

Picture 5 shows headline illustrates the use of three techniques simultaneously. Specification is evident in the explicit mention of *Netanyahu* as an individual actor directly involved in the context of Sinwar's death. This individual is also connected to a broader entity—*Israel*—which reflects Association. Additionally, Yahya Sinwar is referenced with specific identification (*Hamas's Sinwar*), reflecting Personalization through possessive form and organizational affiliation.

## 2. CNN

A total of 34 news reports related to the death of Yahya Sinwar were identified in CNN's coverage, a number significantly higher than that found in Al Jazeera's reporting. The greater frequency of coverage by CNN may be attributed to its positioning as a globally recognized international news outlet and its role as a key media platform within the Western world. Consequently, CNN's reports not only cover the chronology of Yahya Sinwar's death but also include commentary from various figures across different countries and perspectives from multiple stakeholders, both directly and indirectly involved. Based on the 34 reports identified, the analysis of social actor representation was conducted using Van Leeuwen's theoretical framework, with the following classification results:

Table 3. CNN Analysis Table

Classification	Exclusion		Inclusion						
Technique	SUP	BGR	Act/ Pas	Gen/S PC	ASM	ASC	InDet	Func/I dnt	PSN/IMP
Data Result	17	0	15	13	12	10	1	15	4
Total	17		70						

Based on the analysis of the table 3, it was found that CNN predominantly employed the Suppression technique under the Exclusion classification, with 17 data recorded. However, within the same classification, the Backgrounding technique was not found at all. In contrast, the most dominant classification in CNN's coverage was Inclusion,

with a total of 70 data points. Within this category, the Activation/Passivation technique appeared most frequently, with 15 data. This was closely followed by Genericization/Specification and Functionalization/Indetermination, each with 13 data points. The use of techniques under the Inclusion classification demonstrated only slight variation in frequency, with the exception of Indetermination, which appeared only once, and Personalization/Impersonalization, which appeared six times.

#### a. Exclusion

##### Example 6: Suppression (Exclusion) and Specification (Inclusion)

## CNN pieces together visual evidence from Sinwar's death



Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas has been killed by the IDF. But how did it happen? CNN looked at drone video, photographs and open-source intelligence to piece together what we know about the killing so far.

02:24 - Source: [CNN](#)

Picture 6. CNN's Headline News with both Suppression (Exclusion) and Specification (Inclusion) Strategy

*"CNN pieces together visual evidence from Sinwar's death"*

In this example of picture 6, no explicit reference is made to the actor directly responsible for Yahya Sinwar's death, which is indicative of the Suppression technique under Exclusion. However, within the same headline, another social actor is clearly identified—CNN itself, which is portrayed as the investigator or collector of evidence regarding Sinwar's death. The explicit mention of this actor, by name, demonstrates the Specification technique under Inclusion.

#### b. Inclusion

##### Example 7: Passivation, Assimilation, Association, and Specification

World / Middle East

## After Sinwar's killing, Israelis call on Netanyahu to seize the moment and strike a deal with Hamas

By Ivana Kottasová, CNN

5 minute read · Published 7:41 PM EDT, Sat October 19, 2024

Picture 7. CNN's Headline News with Passivation, Assimilation, Association, and Specification

*"After Sinwar's killing, Israelis call on Netanyahu to seize the moment and strike a deal with Hamas"*

This headline reflects the use of multiple Inclusion techniques. The Passivation technique is visible in the way "Israelis" are mentioned after the focal point of the headline—Sinwar's killing—shifting the emphasis away from the agent. "Israelis" are also referenced as a collective identity, demonstrating the Assimilation technique. Furthermore, the headline includes other associated actors—"Netanyahu" and "Hamas"—which reflects the Association technique. Both are mentioned specifically by name, indicating Specification.

#### Example 8: Indetermination

### 'It's not revenge, it's justice': October 7 hero on the death of Yahya Sinwar

Amanpour



On October 7, 2023, , Retired Israeli Major General Noam Tibon picked up his pistol and drove straight into the fire, to save his family. He tells Christiane Amanpour the death of Sinwar is a "golden opportunity" to bring the hostages home.

09:18 - Source: [CNN](#)

Picture 8. CNN's Headline News with Indetermination Strategy

*"It's not revenge, it's justice': October 7 hero on the death of Yahya Sinwar"*

In this headline, the referenced social actor is described only as a "hero," without any further clarification or contextual detail, making the referent ambiguous. This vagueness is characteristic of the Indetermination technique. This particular technique appeared only once in CNN's overall dataset.

#### Example 9: Identification (Inclusion)

### Man who performed autopsy on Sinwar's body reveals details of his death



CNN's Jeremy Diamond speaks to the man who performed the autopsy on slain Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar who was assassinated by the Israeli Defense Force.

02:18 - Source: [CNN](#)

Picture 9. CNN's Headline News with Identification Strategy

*"Man who performed autopsy on Sinwar's body reveals details of his death"*

Picture 9 is an example illustrates the Identification technique, where the actor is described not by name but through identifiable characteristics: gender ("man") and specific function ("who performed autopsy"), both of which serve to categorize the social actor without personalizing them.

### 3. Social Actors and Patterns

The findings reveal that the social actors involved in the discourse surrounding Yahya Sinwar's death include direct perpetrators or responsible parties (e.g., *Israel, Israeli army/forces/IDF, Israel's Minister, and Netanyahu*), indirectly involved entities (e.g., *the United States, the U.S. government, the father of a hostage*), observers or media commentators (e.g., *CNN, journalists, and international figures*), and victims or those directly affected (e.g., *Hamas and Palestinian/Gazan civilians*).

The analysis further indicates that both news reports tend to explicitly mention the perpetrators and other relevant social actors. In both CNN and Al Jazeera, there is a pattern of linking Yahya Sinwar with specific roles or affiliations to emphasize his significance as the central figure of the narrative.

However, CNN more frequently omits direct reference to the perpetrators involved in Sinwar's death, instead focusing on the chronology, consequences, or broader commentary from indirectly involved actors or observers. In contrast, Al Jazeera tends to name the perpetrators directly and clearly, either as individuals or collective entities, highlighting their involvement in the event.

### CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the analysis conducted on the two news reports (CNN and Al Jazeera) it is evident that CNN produced a greater number of headlines related to the death of Yahya Sinwar. However, despite this domination, CNN's reporting predominantly centers on outlining the chronology and consequences surrounding Sinwar's death, rather than directly addressing or highlighting the perpetrators involved in the event. The focus of CNN's coverage includes narratives that detail the aftermath experienced by civilians in Gaza, statements and responses from international political figures such as U.S. President Joe Biden, as well as broader discussions concerning issues like the status and treatment of prisoners of war. This approach demonstrates CNN's inclination to contextualize Sinwar's death within a more generalized and multifaceted international framework, thereby avoiding overt attribution of blame or responsibility to specific actors.

In contrast, Al Jazeera representing a news report rooted in the Middle Eastern socio-political context that demonstrates a markedly different discursive pattern in its coverage of the same event. Al Jazeera places significantly greater emphasis on explicitly identifying the parties responsible for Sinwar's death. This is reflected in the consistent mention of key actors such as the Israeli government, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), or even Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself, as directly involved in the killing. The framing employed by Al Jazeera thus indicates a discursive strategy aimed at asserting responsibility and foregrounding the culpability of the Israeli state or its representatives within the broader context of regional conflict and power dynamics.

From these patterns of news headlines, it can be inferred that CNN, operating within the ideological and cultural framework of Western media discourse, adopts a more detached and generalized narrative stance. Rather than emphasizing accountability or the identity of those involved in perpetrating the act, CNN's coverage tends to focus on the sequencing of events and their global ramifications. While Al Jazeera's approach reflects a more localized and justice-oriented perspective, wherein the explicit identification of perpetrators serves not only to inform but also to frame the event in terms of responsibility, accountability, and potential injustice. This contrast in representational strategies may also be indicative of broader geopolitical alignments and the media institutions' respective roles in shaping public opinion within their target audiences.

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