

Constructing Silence, Evasion, and Moral Responsibility in Arab and Western Leaders' Responses to Starvation in Gaza: A Discourse-Historical Analysis

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Abstract

The current study aims to examine how selected Arab and Western leaders construct silence, evasion, and moral responsibility in their responses to starvation in Gaza within their socio-political context through discourse-historical strategies. In this respect, humanitarian crises have increasingly been influenced by political discourse. The Gaza starvation crisis is one of the most serious humanitarian crises in the contemporary world and is marked by famine conditions, an acute food shortage, and malnutrition caused by complicated political and structural factors. Political discourse, in this context, shapes how people perceive the crisis and defines responsibility, prioritising humanitarian concern and concealing accountability. Although the crisis is severe, little attention has been paid to how responsibility is constructed using discourse-historical and linguistic strategies within wider historical and political contexts. To fill this gap, the study adopts a model based on Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) discourse-historical approach (DHA) within a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework. Through a qualitative approach, this study analyses four official speeches produced in 2025, two by Arab leaders and two by Western leaders. The findings indicate that the leaders ideologically employ discourse-historical strategies to negotiate responsibility. These discursive strategies construct silence by concealing the responsibility of Israel, enact evasion by diverting attention away from Israel, and project moral responsibility by foregrounding the leaders' humanitarian positioning. Contextually, this reflects the examined leaders' diplomatic interests with Israel and its major ally, the United States (US).

Keywords: Gaza starvation crisis, silence, evasion, moral responsibility, discourse-historical approach

1. Introduction

The Gaza famine is not interpreted as a natural phenomenon or unexpected crisis. Instead, it has been described as the result of a deliberate starvation policy (Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations Network [PNGO], 2025). In this context, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2025) reported that malnutrition rates in Gaza are alarming, as almost one in five children under the age of five are acutely malnourished.

Building on this, crisis narratives can be used in political discourse to legitimise some types of inclusion and exclusion, perpetuate power dynamics, and influence political agendas (De Rycker & Mohd Don, 2013). Discourse is strongly connected to power and ideology (Fairclough, 1995). Against this backdrop, van Leeuwen (2008) noted that the discursive presentation of social actors, whether

including or excluding them, may serve as a strategy for the obfuscation of responsibility. In this respect, various discursive and linguistic strategies have been used by political leaders to depict the humanitarian crisis in Gaza (Al-Rawe, 2024).

The current study examines how Arab and Western leaders construct silence, evasion, and moral responsibility in their speeches delivered in 2025 in response to the Gaza starvation crisis. It employs Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) DHA within a CDA framework.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Silence

According to Gray (2013), silence refers to a condition where nothing is said. Silence is defined as the unspeakable, the overlooked, or the perceived but preferably unsaid (Patton, 1989). Perez and Dionisopoulos (1995) argued that the strategy of silence can be used in political discourse by politicians in a number of ways. Some of the functions of silence include Rose Garden silence, the denial of the existence of problems in an effort to deny legitimacy, and avoidance by political leaders. In all these cases, politicians try to address state-related problems by using the rhetorical device of silence. According to Heath (1978), the politician can attempt to evade responsibility through silence-derived avoidance during a crisis.

2.2. The Concept of Evasion

Dou and Zhang (2007) demonstrated that the concept of evasion refers to the intentional employment of ambiguous, confusing, or indirect utterances that usually occur when dealing with a problematic topic. A reply is said to be evasive when either it challenges the question or it does not give a straightforward answer (Harris, 1991). Evasion may serve to avoid issues, preserve one's reputation, reduce adverse responses, avoid being blamed or avoid speaking about specific issues that are generating conflicts in the media, as well as avoid appearing dishonest while concealing underlying motivations. In addition, evasion is mainly employed by politicians and presenters to persuade rather than to inform (Baji Jebur & Shamal, 2024).

2.3. Moral Responsibility

Moral responsibility is categorised as descriptive rather than normative (Bauman & Skitka, 2009). Unlike the normative perception of how individuals ought to allocate moral responsibility, the reviewed theories and studies are based on how individuals assign moral responsibility (Skitka et al., 2005). In politics, Vetterlein (2018) clarified that moral responsibility is the result of engagements and deliberations among political actors with the purpose of solving problems through policy. In the last two decades, global leaders have often emphasised the moral responsibility to end unjustifiable human suffering, vulnerability to climate change, and poverty in the world (Beardsworth, 2015).

3. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a form of discourse analysis that focuses on how language wields power in society (van Dijk, 1993). CDA essentially deals with both transparent and opaque relations of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as reflected in language (Wodak, 1995). Van Dijk (1998) noted that the manner in which ideology works in discourse is an important feature in CDA. According to Reisigl and Wodak (2001), Wodak's discourse-historical approach (DHA) plays a significant role in CDA as it focuses on the importance of context (Datonji & Amousou, 2019). This method was inspired

by the Frankfurt School, which emphasises the significance of historical events and political discourse in communities (Wodak, 1995).

3.1. Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) Discourse-Historical Approach

Wodak and Meyer (2001) argued that discourse is historical by definition and cannot be understood outside of its context. Although the DHA was initially designed by Wodak, the formulation of its analytical strategies was subsequently improved by her collaboration with Reisigl. They provided a set of five discursive strategies of the DHA (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001).

3.2. Types of Discourse-Historical Strategies

According to Reisigl and Wodak (2001), the DHA includes five discursive strategies which are as follows:

3.2.1. Nomination Strategy

The referential or nomination strategy is the first strategy in the DHA framework. The formation of in-groups and out-groups is identified by analysing the lexical choices of naming and representing various categories of social actors.

3.2.2. Predication Strategy

Once the social actors, actions, and events have been identified or named, speakers employ the predication strategy to assign stereotypical evaluative qualities. They are linguistically articulated through implicit or explicit predicates.

3.2.3. Argumentation Strategy

The positive or negative presentations of the chosen social actors and actions are justified with the help of the argumentation strategy. Within this strategy, the most common topoi are those of burden, numbers, history, threat, reality, authority, justice, urgency, and definition.

3.2.4. Perspectivisation Strategy

This strategy is used by speakers to express their participation in the discourse and to place their viewpoint in the discursive flux.

3.2.5. Intensification and Mitigation Strategy

The degree of softness or emphasis given to discriminatory or inclusive statements is dealt with by the discursive strategy of intensification and mitigation.

4. Methodology

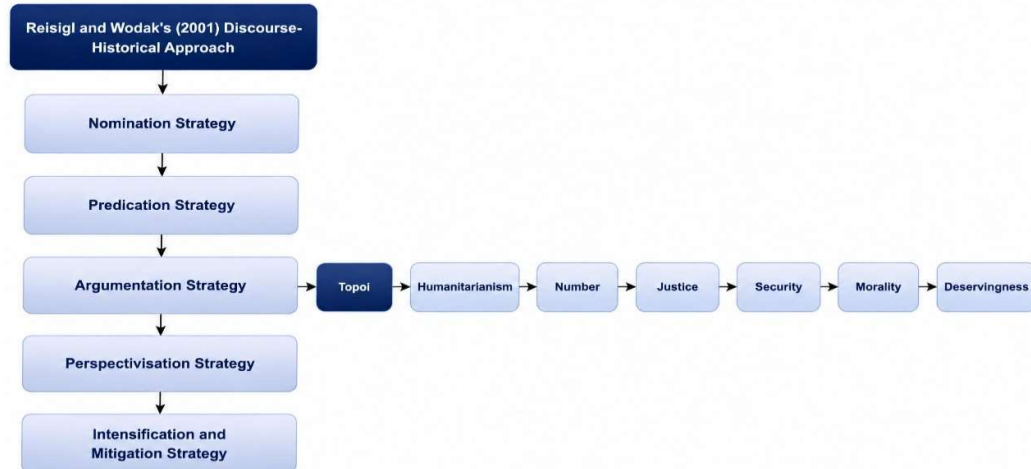
The current study is qualitative in nature. Studies on qualitative research have shown that this approach can deliver data that are undeniable in terms of quality (Al-Hilu, 2017). The data consist of four speeches delivered in 2025 during the heightened starvation crisis in Gaza, two by Arab leaders and two by Western leaders. The four leaders are selected on the basis of four criteria: the political strength of their respective states, their involvement in the Palestinian issue, executive and direct political influence in the establishment of official positions (not only titles), and the presence of complete and verified transcripts of their speeches in 2025. The criteria are best fulfilled by Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani (among the Arab leaders) and by Donald Trump and Keir Starmer (among the Western leaders).

Figure 1:

Theoretical Framework of the Study Adopted from Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) Discourse-Historical Approach

5. Data Analysis

This section analyses the four selected speeches drawing on Reisigl and



Wodak's (2001) DHA. It is divided into two principal parts: the discourses of Arab leaders and the discourses of Western leaders.

5.1. The Discourses of Arab Leaders

This section examines the speeches of two Arab leaders: Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, the Egyptian President, and Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the Qatari Amir. They were delivered in 2025, as a reaction to the Gaza starvation crisis.

5.1.1. Analysis of Extract (1)

On 5 August 2025, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, the Egyptian President, produced a statement, in which he said:

The lives of the Palestinian people in Gaza, and possibly also in the West Bank, are now being used as a political bargaining card. ... Before the war, 600–700 trucks of food and basic necessities used to enter Gaza daily to support 2.3 million Palestinians. Imagine reducing that number to zero over the past 21 months. The current situation in Gaza stems from this, not from Egypt abandoning its role or participating in the siege. ... The Rafah crossing has not been closed by Egypt at any point. (Ahram Online, 2025, paras. 4, 10, 12)

According to Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) DHA, the speaker used the nomination strategy of collectivisation by referring to "the lives of the Palestinian people in Gaza ... in the West Bank." In comparison, Israel is ideologically unnamed by the use of passive forms like "are being used" and "has not been closed." However, Egypt is specifically mentioned in "not from Egypt abandoning its role" and "has not been closed by Egypt." Contextually, a combination of these decisions presumably creates intentional linguistic silence on Israel due to the wider diplomatic sensitivities with the US, the key ally of Israel.

By the predication strategy, Palestinians are portrayed as exploited and deprived by such expressions as "used as a political bargaining card" and the implication of "reducing that number to zero." Egypt, on the contrary, comes out as a stable and innocent humanitarian actor with the use of references to "used to enter ... daily to support." Israel is strategically not named and is implicitly described as being destructive by its unstated agency in "reducing that number to

zero." Within the political context, such dependence on implicit predication can be construed as politically delicate, as being explicit may make Egyptian coordination with Israel difficult.

The argumentation strategy justifies the position of Egypt by means of selective mobilisation of the most significant topoi. The constructions "600–700 trucks," "2.3 million Palestinians," and "over the past 21 months" appeal to the topos of number in order to give factual authority, constructing evasion of mentioning Israeli violence. This is supported by the topos of humanitarianism in "food and basic necessities ... to support." The appeal "imagine reducing that number to zero" seems to put Egypt in the position of being morally responsible without taking concrete action. Taken together, these topoi may serve an ideology to mollify domestic anger and avoid charges of complicity.

With the use of the perspectivisation strategy, the speaker placed Egypt in a morally viable past by making references like "before the war." The hedge "possibly" acts as an indicator of epistemic caution, while understanding suffering and yet not directly blaming. The deictic "this" of "stems from this" can be interpreted as strategic silence. It appears to be conditioned by larger contextual conditions that curtail the possibility of open criticism. The refusal "not from Egypt abandoning its role" creates a self-presentation which is defensive. All these discursive decisions may uphold diplomatic stability considering the Egyptian security issues and economic interests related to Israel.

Through the intensification and mitigation strategy, intensification is manifested through the emotive appeal of "imagine reducing that number to zero." In contrast, mitigation is passive in nature, using "are being used," "possibly," "used to enter," "has not been closed," and "stems from this." This position could also be seen as a sign of diplomatic restraint, as continuing to have major global alliances would constrain Egypt from condemning Israel directly.

5.1.2. Analysis of Extract (2)

On 21 October 2025, His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad, Amir of the State of Qatar, delivered a speech, in which he emphasised:

The Palestinian cause is not a matter of terrorism, but rather one of prolonged occupation that must come to an end. This is the foundation of a just peace – a peace that ensures security for both the Palestinian and Israeli peoples. ... It is regrettable that international legitimacy remains incapable of enforcing its respect when it comes to the tragedy of our brotherly Palestinian people. ... Qatar continues to play a significant role internationally through mediation in conflict resolution and in humanitarian efforts. We in our position align with what is being embraced by global public opinion and all peace-loving forces around the world. (Amiri Diwan, 2025, paras. 19, 25)

Following Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) DHA, the speaker nominated "the Palestinian cause" as a case of long-term occupation through the nomination strategy. However, the open denial of "terrorism" may be discursive silence, which can carry an ideology of backgrounding the political reality of the cause and justifying Israeli actions. It is remarkable that Israel is not nominated throughout the text. In comparison, Qatar is explicitly nominated through "we" and "Qatar." In light of the political context, this evasion may serve to protect the mediatory role of Qatar by avoiding the confrontation with Israel and its potential diplomatic expenses.

At the predication strategy level, Palestinians are predicated as victim subjects through "the tragedy of our brotherly Palestinian people," which humanises them. However, Qatar is positively projected as an active ethical actor by the use of "mediation," "conflict resolution," and "humanitarian efforts." Israel, on the other hand, is not much predicated, praised, or blamed. Contextually, such selective allocation probably serves to safeguard strategic alliances and economic interests with Israel by eliminating language which could attract outside pressure.

In this context, the argumentation strategy relies on a topos of justice. The Palestinian cause is presented as "prolonged occupation that must come to an end" and as a foundation of "a just peace," which justifies the claim without directly blaming. Through "the tragedy of our brotherly Palestinian people," a topos of humanitarianism is played out. This statement foregrounds the moral responsibility and makes Qatar a proponent of the Palestinian cause before Arab society. This can calm domestic outrage and forestall the accusations of complicity with Israel.

The alignment to abstract moral collectives but not recognisable actors invokes the perspectivisation strategy. The speaker attempted to compress a disputed international space into a semblance of moral agreement by referring to the "global public opinion" and "peace-loving forces around the world." This action appears to generate discursive silence, in that it does not explicitly condemn Israel, align itself with the Palestinian cause, or engage with historical accountability. Within the geopolitical context, this cautious position arguably expresses the knowledge that open condemnation of Israel would lead to discursive retaliation. Such retaliation can then be ideologically instrumentalised to justify aggression and put the stability and security of Qatar at risk.

Finally, the intensification and mitigation strategy tunes the discourse to a common moral tone. The intensification operates through the emotive lexis "tragedy" and the adverb "internationally," which projects the position of Qatar outside the regional level. Mitigation, however, is manifested by avoiding direct accusation of Israel, especially through abstractions such as "international legitimacy."

5.2. The Discourses of Western Leaders

This section provides an analysis of speeches delivered by two Western leaders: Donald Trump, the President of the United States (US), and Keir Starmer, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (UK). They were produced in 2025 in response to starvation in Gaza.

5.2.1. Analysis of Extract (3)

Donald Trump, the President of the US, delivered a speech on 27 July 2025 at a public meeting in Turnberry, Scotland. This speech was a response to a journalist's question: "Should Israel be doing more to allow food into Gaza?"

We gave 60 million dollars two weeks ago and nobody even acknowledged it for food and it's terrible. You know, you really at least want to have somebody say thank you. No other country gave anything. We gave \$60 million two weeks ago for food for Gaza. And nobody acknowledged it. Nobody talks about it. And it makes you feel a little bad when you do that and you know you have other countries not giving anything. ... I mean nobody gave but us and nobody said thank you very much. And it would be nice to have at least a thank you. (Hindustan Times, 2025, 03:06:19)

Within Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) DHA, the discourse creates a definite in-group of morality by incorporating the collective references to "we" and "us"

repetitively at the nomination strategy level. This nomination indicates an ideology that shows the speaker as the sole significant humanitarian player and morally responsible. Most crucially, Israel is not even nominated. That Trump did not nominate Israel as a responsible actor can be an indicator of strategic silence. It is reasonable to assume that it potentially reflects perceived mutual advantage and the protection of diplomatic ties between the US and Israel, pre-empting self-credit without directly criticising.

Through the predication strategy, positive value is attributed to the in-group by means of giving and moralisation of aid, as in "\$60 million," and "for food." Israel is not positively or negatively predicated, as its condemnation is evaded by non-response and redirection of the topic to avoid the question of access presented by the journalist. This evasion could be based on the perceived defence interests in a broader politics, in which censure of Israel may jeopardise a security-related alliance.

The argumentation strategy is based on humanitarian morality and deservingness topoi. The figure of "60 million dollars" is a legitimising warrant and this is an indication that the speaker has fulfilled the moral obligation and deserves to be thanked. The discourse ideologically redefines justice as gratitude and recognition rather than taking a firm action against Israeli actions in Palestine, particularly Gaza. On contextual grounds, the perceived economic interests of the speaker's state may also support such a turn to the stress on donor credit instead of direct blame.

The speaker took a self-centred moral position based on the perspectivisation strategy that places the crisis in an emotional perspective of the donor. Configurations like "it makes you feel a little bad" and the emphasis on the person "really ... want ... somebody to say thank you" foreground the feelings of the donor as the prevailing point of view. Thus, this perspective relegates the lived starvation located in Gaza and sidelines the political process of deprivation. This formulation of perspective perhaps also fits the assumed value of regional sharing of information, in which the open denunciation of Israel can become rhetorically expensive.

Lastly, the intensification and mitigation strategy works through the interaction of both of its elements. The repetition of "we gave," "nobody," and the maximiser "anything" adds to the virtue of the donor and builds the ungratefulness of Palestinians. This amplification is constructed with mitigation, where donor credit crowds out any mention of the Israeli control of access to food.

5.2.2. Analysis of Extract (4)

On 29 July 2025, Keir Starmer, Prime Minister of the UK, gave a speech, in which he affirmed:

Now, in Gaza because of a catastrophic failure of aid, we see starving babies, children too weak to stand ... Yesterday I discussed this with President Trump. And we are mounting a major effort to get humanitarian supplies back in. ... Our goal remains a safe and secure Israel, alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state. ... Our message to the terrorists of Hamas is unchanged and unequivocal. They must immediately release all the hostages, sign up to a ceasefire, disarm and accept that they will play no part in the government of Gaza. (GOV.UK, 2025, paras. 2–3, 5, 7)

Within Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) DHA, the nomination strategy creates a moral in-group with repetitive use of "we," "I," and "our." This is seen in "we see," "I discussed," "we are mounting," "our goal," and "our message." Such repetition ideologically presents the speaker as a manager of the humanitarian crisis.

Hamas is specifically indicated as the "terrorists," constituting an explicit out-group. Israel, on the other hand, is nominated as a security object in "safe and secure Israel," not as an actor in the starvation scene, establishing silence. Considered in political terms, this cautious nomination can be seen as a sign of caution to avoid any perceived threat to the UK interests and ties with Israel.

This rationale is supported by the predication strategy, where civilians are depicted as highly vulnerable by the use of "starving babies" and "children too weak to stand." Israel is legitimised by the use of "safe and secure," and Palestinian statehood is reduced to the status of diplomatic abstraction by use of "viable and sovereign." Hamas is predicated by the criminalising term "terrorists" and exclusionary positioning "play no part in the government of Gaza." Evasion stands out when Hamas is characterised as an unsuitable government instead of Israel.

In line with the argumentation strategy, humanitarianism and security topoi are incorporated. Humanitarian urgency is based on bodily signs such as "starving babies" and "too weak to stand." This kind of framing apparently makes the speaker morally responsible. Yet strong pressure is directed at Hamas by deontic force in "they must ... release ... sign up ... disarm ... accept." This triggers the security topos, in which terrorism is positioned as the major obstacle and cause of starvation in Gaza.

The speaker adopted the voice of a crisis-manager through the elite alignment with the help of the perspectivisation strategy in "yesterday I discussed this with President Trump." Contextually, mentioning the US President by the UK leader, as opposed to any other actor, may be an ideological indication of mutual positioning. Such reference can be understood as a repetition of a similar trend of silence and evasion in condemning Israel. It possibly reflects the UK-US alliance and their preference to act in a similar strategic direction. Moreover, direct blame of Israel by the UK might be considered as putting UK interests and relations with the US at risk. In this regard, the two-state line "our goal remains" introduces a moderate diplomatic perspective that appears plausible.

With the intensification and mitigation strategy, the intensification is manifested in the word "catastrophic" and in the body imagery of collapse, which increases the emotional power. Mitigation then comes as a result of abstraction and omission. Famine is described as "aid failure," and the Israeli involvement is never mentioned but mitigated by foregrounding responsibility on Hamas.

6. Conclusions

The analysis shows that the construction of silence, evasion, and moral responsibility in the analysed speeches of the selected Arab and Western leaders is structurally realised through coordinated discourse-historical strategies, rather than in an incidental manner. In all the speeches, Israel, as the perpetrator of the starvation, is omitted or substituted with other actors, and Palestinian suffering is portrayed sympathetically, diverting the focus away from its political origins. Justificatory reasoning emphasises humanitarian aid, and the leaders are always depicted as morally responsible actors, without mentioning Israel as the cause of the famine. The intensification of concern for Palestinians is accompanied by the linguistic mildness of Israeli actions. The analysed speeches as a whole do not merely put the crisis in historical perspective. Rather, they call on historical and political frameworks to reshape starvation as a politically delicate diplomatic issue in which strategic interests with Israel are safeguarded. This indicates that discourse-historical strategies in the chosen speeches are not merely neutral

ways of contextualising, but are politically calibrated mechanisms that manage accountability while linguistically protecting alliances with Israel and its Western partners, mainly the US.

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