



Bart Cammaerts

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## The UK media's silence on the Palestine Action activists' hunger strikes is a deliberate editorial choice

*LSE's Professor Bart Cammaerts discusses the lack of coverage of the hunger strikes of imprisoned Palestine Action activists in the UK media.*

At the time of writing a total of 8 **Palestine Action** activists, awaiting trial in UK prisons, are on hunger strike (**a further two have recently ended their hunger strikes**). Some of these have been on hunger strike since 20 October (one month and a half from the time of writing). This constitutes the largest hunger strike in Britain since imprisoned members of the IRA went on hunger strike in 1980-1981. In contrast to the robust media coverage of the Irish hunger strikes in the 1980s, the Palestine Action hunger strikes have been largely met with media silence.

A search on the newspaper archive **Nexis** using the keyword 'hunger strike', exposed the very low level of coverage of the hunger strike by Palestine Action activists. Since the announcement of their hunger strike on 20 October till 10 December 2025, the hunger strike by jailed Palestine Action activists was mentioned a total of 12 times in the British mainstream newspapers:

- The Guardian: 4 mentions (20 Oct, 18 Nov, 26 Nov, 2 Dec)
- The Daily Telegraph: 2 mentions (20 Oct, 21 Oct)
- The Independent: 1 mention (28 Oct)
- The Observer: 2 mentions (16 Nov, 7 Dec)
- The Daily Mail: 2 mentions (9 Nov, 15 Nov)
- The Evening Standard: 1 mention (22 Nov)
- The Times: no mentions
- The Sun: no mentions
- The Daily Express: no mentions

- The Financial Times: no mentions

Broadcasters' tallies are even lower: a search on 'Palestine Action' on **Box of Broadcasts** from 20 October till 10 December yielded no results at all. **BBC Online** published a piece referring to the hunger strikes on the 10 December, a month and a half after they started. The piece failed to mention, however, that a day earlier (9 December) one of the hunger strikers, **Kamran Ahmed, was rushed to hospital** amid severe health complications on the 29th day of his hunger strike. Sky News Online did mention the hunger strike in **a piece** published on 28 October, and also **mentioned** the hospital admittances on 11 December. The British press published more reports on the BBC's new factual drama *Prisoner 951* portraying the plight and hunger strike of British Iranian Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, imprisoned in Iran, than on the ongoing hunger strike of Palestine Action members in the UK itself.

## The historical perspective

This degree of media silence is unusual if we place this in a historical perspective. The hunger strikes and force feeding of the Suffragettes (1909-1914) was amply covered in the British press, especially in the so-called popular press. In her autobiography, Emmeline Pankhurst **wrote** that "[t]he newspaper correspondents were not so reluctant to acknowledge our influence. Even when they condemned our policy, they were unsparing in their admiration for our energy, and the courage and ardour of our workers". After analysing the representation of the Suffragette hunger strikes in the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mirror* at the time, historian David Vessay, **concluded** that "with the exception of the *Express*, they did periodically sympathize with the ordeal of imprisoned women and challenge the application of forcible feeding". The popular press also regularly published letters and testimonials from imprisoned Suffragettes, as well as from the leadership of the WSPU (the organisation of the Suffragettes), denouncing the "brutality on the part of the government" (printed in the *Mail*, 24/09/1909). So while the actions and the hunger strikes of the suffragettes were met with a "mixture of fascination and hostility", as Vessay **put it**, they were still covered by the press at the time.

The same ambiguity vis-à-vis hunger strikes could be observed in the media coverage of the hunger strikes by members of the IRA in the early 1980s. In her PhD thesis on the British media representation of the Troubles, Roseanna Doughty **stated** that the British press "showed limited compassion" towards the IRA hunger strikers in 1981, but at least contrary to today they generated "copious media attention". Likewise, Irish sociologist Aogán Mulcahy's analysis of press coverage of the 1981 Irish hunger strikes **concluded** that they "generated unprecedented levels of media coverage of the Northern Irish conflict."

The 1981 hunger strikes were a running story in the British Press. Furthermore, as Roseanna Doughty argues, although the British press mostly perpetuated "the narrative set by the government, [...] they increasingly departed from the official line and showed a readiness to engaging with more



nuanced readings of the *Troubles*". The BBC and ITV also provided ample coverage of the hunger strikes, and Doughty's analysis showed that "current affairs programmes often provided a history of the prison protests, as well as Irish hunger protests generally, offering audiences clear evidence that the hunger strikes were the culmination of a long-running dispute". She went on to write that the hunger strikes of 1980-1981 "were first and foremost media events".

## A deliberate editorial choice

The hunger strike tactic or "**starving for change**" has a long history in the context of non-violent protest, both in the wider world as well as in the UK, as the example of the Suffragettes demonstrates. While often criticised and derided by the media in the past, it has always been deemed worthy of mainstream media attention and a voice. In other words, denying the Palestine Action activists, their plight and the hunger strikes they are engaging in, the attention and voice they deserve, in effect silencing them, erasing them from the mainstream public sphere, is a deliberate editorial choice by the British media. They are thereby falling short of their ethical and deontological codes and acting as sleeping lapdogs rather than the critical watchdogs of the *powers that be* which liberal norms of journalism prescribes. This is, however, not entirely surprising, but still disappointing and fuelling the **high levels of distrust** the broader population has towards mainstream media, be they print or broadcasters. It also begs the question: what will it take for the British media to pay attention to the plight of jailed pro-Palestinian activists? The death of an activist? Or the awakening of a moral conscience?

*This post gives the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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## About the author

### Bart Cammaerts

Bart Cammaerts is Professor of Politics and Communication and former Head of Department in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. His current research focuses on the relationship between media, communication and resistance with particular emphasis on media strategies of activists, media representations of protest, alternative counter-cultures and broader issues relating to power, participation and public-ness.

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