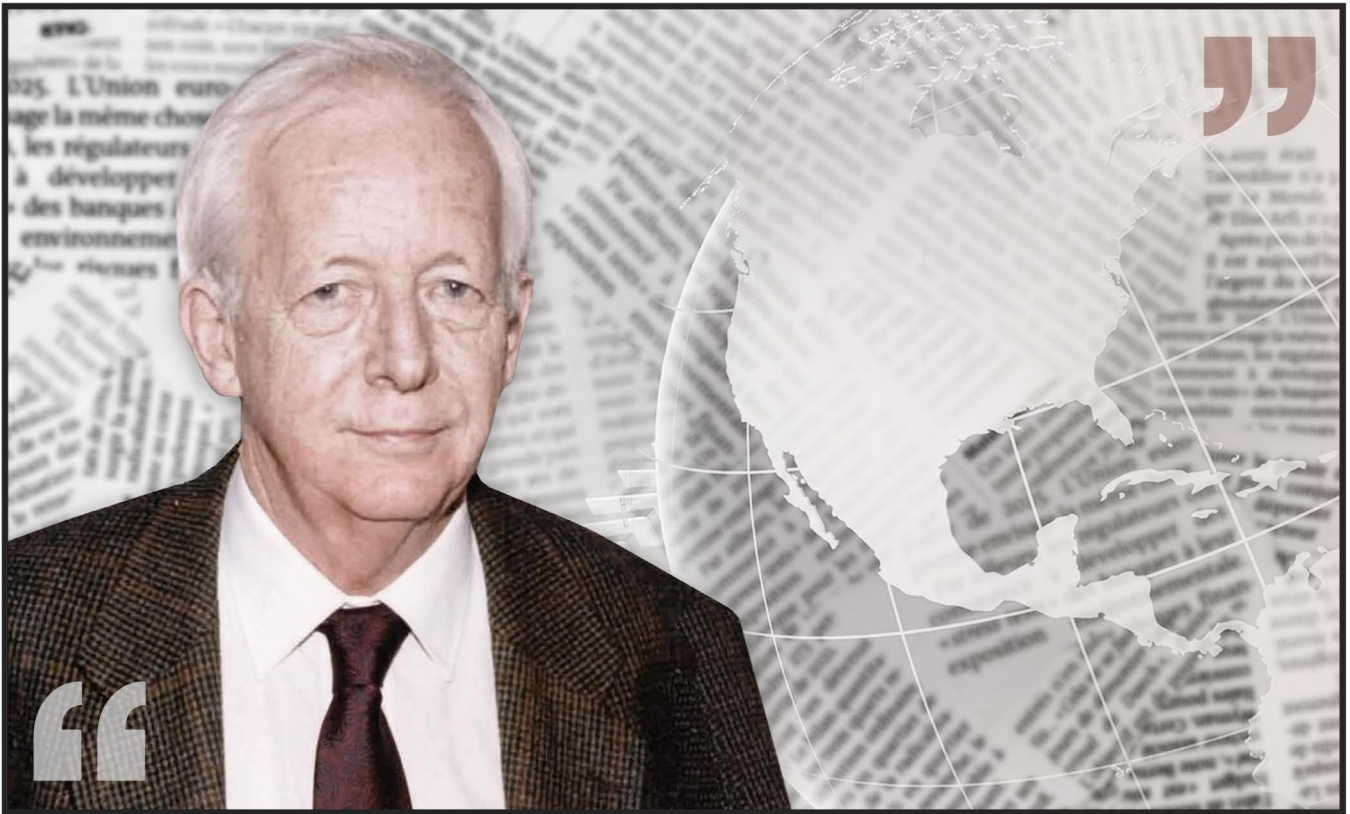




Academic Paper

David Hirst and the Deconstruction of the Western Narrative

Critiquing US–Israeli Media Dominance and the Limits of Epistemic Fairness Toward Arabs



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Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations

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Abstract

David Hirst and the Deconstruction of the Western Narrative: Critiquing US–Israeli Media Dominance and the Limits of Epistemic Fairness Toward Arabs

The paper examines the work of the late British journalist and thinker David Hirst (1936–2025) as a unique case of dissent within Western media, emphasizing his efforts to challenge prevailing Western narratives on the Middle East and the Palestine–Israel conflict. Drawing primarily on his seminal work *The Gun and the Olive Branch: The Roots of Violence in the Middle East*, as well as his later articles and analyses, the study highlights the deconstructive methods and ethical rigor Hirst employed in confronting the structural biases of Western media and the overarching US imperial framework. The study conceptualizes its research problem as an epistemological gap generated by the dominance of Western media, through which knowledge is reproduced within frameworks that reinforce US–Israeli dominance. Accordingly, it addresses the central question of how David Hirst deconstructed the epistemological underpinnings of the Western narrative, and whether he advanced an independent epistemic alternative.

The study further contends that the significance of David Hirst lies not merely in reporting, but in his ability to reconstruct the analytical tools of journalism and political inquiry. In this respect, he advances an epistemological model of the critical intellectual who confronts media and political pressures in order to uphold historical justice. Furthermore, the study recommends that Arab actors move beyond reliance on critical Western testimonies toward the production of autonomous epistemic frameworks and narratives, endowed with the capacity for effective international media and political representation.

Keywords:

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|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| David Hirst | Western media | settler colonialism |
| counter-narrative | the Hirstian case | the Palestinian–Israeli conflict |
| critique of US policy | dissident intellectual | |



David Hirst and the Deconstruction of the Western Narrative: Critiquing US–Israeli Media Dominance and the Limits of Epistemic Fairness Toward Arabs

Dr. Islam ‘Abdullah Abu Khait¹

Introduction

In profound silence, drowned out by the clamor of “instant media,” British journalist and thinker David Hirst passed away, leaving a critical legacy that for decades unsettled the dominant Western narrative. While his death is a significant loss for the transnational pursuit of truth, the Arab media’s neglect represents a striking epistemic and ethical lapse. Hirst dedicated his career to dismantling imperial power structures and exposing the “Israeli exception” with unmatched rigor, yet news of his passing was met with indifference, reflecting both a crisis of institutional memory and a lost moral compass within Arab media. This disregard harms not Hirst but the Arab epistemic sphere itself, revealing its inability to honor one who long served as a historical advocate for its cause in forums where support was scarce.



Western media discourse on the Middle East constitutes one of the most complex epistemic fields, where geopolitical interests intersect with entrenched orientalist traditions. Within the dominance of the central narrative shaped by major institutions, dissenting voices have sought to challenge the liberal consensus and reinterpret regional conflicts from historical perspectives that contest official propaganda. Foremost among these voices is David Hirst, who, beginning his career with *The Guardian* in 1964, became not merely a reporter but an epistemic lens for understanding the region’s persistent instabilities.

The study of David Hirst’s thought holds exceptional significance given his unique background. An English middle-class intellectual who refined his skills through Arabic studies at the American University of Beirut (AUB), he developed a narrative marked by depth, audacity, and an ability to command the attention of newsrooms with measured, incisive analysis.

His book *The Gun and the Olive Branch: The Roots of Violence in the Middle East* remains the cornerstone of his deconstructive project; upon its 1977 publication, it provoked a storm and was hailed in American circles as “the most anti-Israel book in English.” Hirst’s boldness extended beyond critiquing Israeli actions to a nuanced epistemic assessment of Arab leadership, combining recognition of courage with rigorous critique of authoritarian practices.

This study examines the dimensions of the epistemic rupture in the work of David Hirst, who, drawing on insider knowledge, exposed the inconsistencies of Western policies

while maintaining an uncompromised moral stance. It analyzes the “Hirstian case” as a lens for interrogating the ethical crisis of Western liberalism and underscores the need to reclaim “narrative sovereignty,”² beginning with recognizing those who have shaped it through intellectual commitment and a principled alignment with justice. Across its chapters, this study explores the mechanisms through which entrenched frameworks are dismantled, asking to what extent the “Hirstian language” offers a model of the intellectual who transcends detached neutrality and instead prioritizes historical truth over political calculation?

Research Problem

The study addresses a profound representational gap in Western mainstream media concerning Middle Eastern issues, where knowledge is produced within frameworks that reinforce US–Israeli dominance. David Hirst represents a divergent case attempting to bridge this gap.

The study centers on the following question:

How did David Hirst deconstruct the epistemological frameworks underpinning the Western narrative? and to what extent did he succeed in offering an independent epistemic alternative, rather than remaining constrained by the very Western epistemic tools he sought to challenge?

Research Questions

The study seeks to address the following:

Primary Question

What deconstructive mechanisms did David Hirst employ to expose Western epistemic biases in the Palestine and US narratives?

Sub-Questions

- ▶• How did Hirst redefine “settler colonialism” in challenge to the narrative of the “only democracy”?
- ▶• To what extent does Hirst’s critique of US foreign policy constitute a structural critique of empire rather than a reformist critique of administrative decisions?
- ▶• What are the limits of fairness in Hirst’s discourse toward Arabs? Do they emerge as historical agents or merely as victims of Western double standards?

Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: David Hirst’s critique is not merely an ethical stance but a reconstruction of an investigative journalistic methodology that rejects false balance in favor of objective truth.

Hypothesis 2: Hirst’s discourse serves as an epistemic bridge, allowing Western readers to escape the confines of Zionist propaganda, yet it continues to face reception challenges within formal academic and media institutions.



Hypothesis 3: Hirst’s contribution lies more in deconstructing falsehoods than in constructing an alternative Arab narrative, leaving the task of building such a narrative to the Arab intellectual sphere itself.

Methodology and Tools

The study adopts a multi-method approach:

- ▶ **1. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):** to examine the writings of David Hirst, focusing on vocabulary, framing, and silences within his texts.
- ▶ **2. Deconstruction:** to show how Hirst unsettles dominant narrative binaries, such as “terrorism/ self-defense” and “authoritarian East/ democratic West.”
- ▶ **3. Comparative Method:** to contrast mainstream media coverage, such as *The New York Times* and BBC, with Hirst’s interpretations of the same pivotal events.

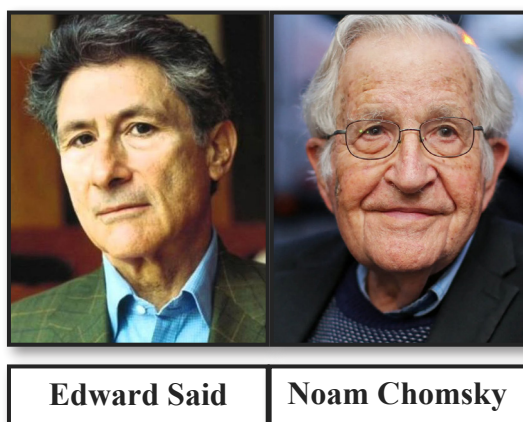
Overall, this framework is both comprehensive and analytically rigorous, advancing the study from a mere reading of a journalist’s biography to a critical inquiry within the sociology of media discourse. By linking the theoretical dimension, particularly the contributions of Noam Chomsky and Edward Said, with key empirical issues such as settlement expansion, the US role and the Arab Spring, it provides a useful balance for the study between theory and empirical analysis.

Added Value of the Study

The originality of this research lies in its approach to David Hirst not as an individual, but as a sociological and media phenomenon that exposes the crisis of Western liberalism. It further provides a critical perspective on Arab epistemic dependence, which persistently seeks a “certificate of legitimacy” from a Western author to validate the justice of its narrative.

First: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework (Epistemic Foundations)

This framework centers on deconstructing Western media discourse by combining Noam Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent* model as a mechanism of structural control with Edward Said’s representation of the “Other” thesis as a tool of cultural dominance. Within this approach, the “dissident intellectual” is analyzed as a critical breach of the system, with the trajectory of David Hirst serving as a case study of moving from an instrumental role within the institution to intellectual independence that challenges hegemonic dominance.



▷ 1. Media Dominance and the Mechanisms of “Manufacturing Consent”: A Theoretical Reading

The “epistemic rupture” in Hirst’s narrative cannot be understood apart from the consensus structure dominating major Western media institutions. His departure from the official narrative was not merely a journalistic difference of opinion; it represented a direct challenge to a hegemonic system that predefines what is discussable and what remains beyond perception.³ This dominance operates on two theoretical levels:

a. Media as an Ideological Apparatus and the Regulation of the Expressible

Drawing on the Propaganda Model developed by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, Western media functions as a structural filter that ensures the flow of information remains aligned with the geopolitical interests of dominant elites.⁴ The operation of this model and its effect on David Hirst can be observed at two levels:

- ▶ **Structural Control (Filters and Flak):** Media discourse is subjected to rigid filters aimed at disciplining dissenting voices.⁵ In Hirst’s case, this manifested as direct “flak,” including repeated protests by the Israeli embassy in London against his reports, accusing him of bias to reinforce the prevailing narrative.⁶
- ▶ **Epistemic Control (Ideology and the Bounds of the Expressible):** Media serves as an ideological apparatus, delineating strict limits on what can be expressed.⁷ Hirst breached these boundaries in *The Gun and the Olive Branch* by moving beyond superficial accounts and critically examining the structures of Israeli violence, thereby placing his narrative outside the acceptable limits of Western liberal discourse, which tends to isolate outcomes from their historical and structural causes.

b. Framing Policies and the Containment of Truth

Edward Said’s thesis offers a critical lens for examining how historical truth is constrained within narrow ideological frameworks, where “framing” reduces the conflict to simplistic binaries that erase context in favor of immediate events.⁸ This operates on two interrelated levels:

- ▶ **Constructing the Frame:** Framing presents the audience with cues that depict Palestinian action as the “initiation of violence,” while Israeli action appears as an inevitable, defensive “reaction.”⁹ This approach strips events of their roots, reducing the conflict to a transient “security crisis.”
- ▶ **David Hirst’s Deconstruction of the Frame (Historical Context as a Critical Tool):** The epistemic strength of Hirst’s narrative lies in his rejection of the “false balance” imposed by Western liberalism. He deconstructs the media frame by tracing the conflict to its foundational origins in 1881,¹⁰ rather than limiting analysis to the contemporary moment. This date marks the practical beginnings of the Zionist movement as an organized settler-political project (through “pogrom” waves in Tsarist Russia and the ensuing First Aliyah) and enables Hirst to redefine the conflict as a prolonged “settler-colonial process” that began with the dispossession of Palestinian



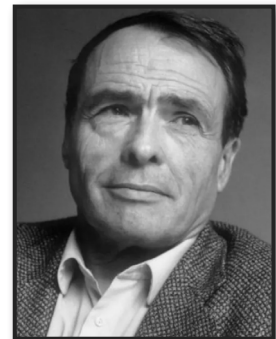
peasants decades before “statehood,” rather than a mere territorial dispute emerging in 1948 or 1967.¹¹ Such a methodical departure from dominant frames led mainstream circles to label him biased, as “objectivity” in this context is defined by adherence to a narrative that suppresses historical depth in favor of the prevailing account.

▷2. The Dissident Intellectual Problem: David Hirst’s Position within the Western Intellectual Landscape

The Hirstian case provides a unique model for examining the sociology of dissent within liberal media systems. In contexts dominated by procedural professionalism that suppresses historical context in favor of the prevailing narrative, epistemic dissent emerges as both a critical and ethical act, redefining the journalist’s role as a public intellectual.

a. From Institutional Dependence to Radical Independence

David Hirst experienced a structural transformation in his relationship with Western media institutions. While Pierre Bourdieu argues that the journalistic field is constrained by commercial and ideological pressures, imposing strict limits on its actors,¹² Hirst transcended these constraints through radical independence from the system of illusory neutrality. This transformation is reflected across two interrelated trajectories in his career:



Pierre Bourdieu

▶• **Deconstructing the Permissible Scope (Epistemic Confrontation):** Drawing on Noam Chomsky’s concept of The Bounds of Expressible Controversy, liberal systems define the limits of acceptable debate, allowing critique of outcomes while shielding underlying premises.¹³ David Hirst’s divergence is evident in his book *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, where he challenges the moral premises of Zionism, thus moving beyond the role of a reporter to that of a critical intellectual who refuses to function as an instrument in manufacturing consent.

▶• **Consensus Clash (Institutional Confrontation):** Accusations of “bias” by Israeli embassies illustrate the mechanisms used to discipline voices outside the “Western consensus.”¹⁴ This confrontation was not merely a professional dispute but signaled Hirst’s definitive exit from media hegemony toward an independent epistemic and critical narrative space.

b. Hirst and the Rejection of Intellectual Betrayal

David Hirst’s epistemic integrity may be understood through Julien Benda’s thesis on the intellectual’s commitment to universal values (truth and justice) over narrow political or material interests.¹⁵ This perspective can be distilled into two principal dimensions:

▶• **The Intellectual versus the Ideologue:** Benda posits that the genuine intellectual resists the prevailing *Zeitgeist* when it is grounded in falsehood. In this regard, Hirst challenges the dominant Western narrative that presents Israel as an extension

of Western civilization in the East, opting instead to align with historical truth. Consequently, this position rendered him an epistemic outlier within a journalistic milieu that privileges political stability over historical justice.¹⁶

- ▶• **The Sociology of Silencing the Room:** Accounts from colleagues highlight Hirst’s distinctive ability to command attention and silence in professional settings, reflecting what Max Weber conceptualizes as “intellectual charisma.”¹⁷ Crucially, this authority was not derived from institutional standing but from rigorous field expertise, a sustained engagement with the region, and mastery of Arabic, factors that collectively endowed him with epistemic authority exceeding the fleeting force of ideological narrative.¹⁸

c. The “Engaged Intellectual” and the Construction of Alternative Narratives

In the later phase of his career, David Hirst exemplified the “engaged intellectual,” moving beyond passive observation to actively advancing truth through alternative platforms that challenge the epistemic monopoly of traditional institutions. This epistemic shift is evident in his turn toward constructing and promoting counter-narratives:

- ▶• **Transcending Hegemony and Constructing Counter-Narratives:** Hirst’s endorsement of regional media outlets (such as Al Jazeera), and his characterization of them as credible, was not merely a professional assessment; rather, it reflected a broader commitment to narratives capable of challenging Western centrality and disrupting hegemonic dominance.¹⁹ Thus, his “dissent” was not confined to institutional departure but extended to the constructive production of alternative knowledge that re-centers the victim within the narrative. In this regard, Hirst aligns with Edward Said’s conception of the intellectual as one who “speaks truth to power,” transforming the role from a transmitter of information into a defender of historical truth against institutional distortion.²⁰

Second: Deconstructing “Israeli Exceptionalism” in the Narrative of David Hirst: A Settler-Colonial and Political-Metaphysical Approach

The analysis here examines the deconstructive approach adopted by the journalist and historian David Hirst in critiquing dominant Zionist discourse, particularly the notion of “Israeli exceptionalism.” This perspective draws primarily on his foundational work, *The Gun and the Olive Branch: The Roots of Violence in the Middle East*, as well as his later writings, which subject the “peace process” and the logic of “normalization” to sustained structural critique.

Hirst’s argument moves beyond transient political developments to interrogate the “political metaphysics” that grant Israel exceptional moral immunity within the Western consciousness. Through a “history from below” approach, he exposes the structural character of Zionist violence, situating the conflict within a “settler-colonial” framework, one oriented toward the displacement of the indigenous population, rather than a mere existential struggle for survival.²¹ Moreover, this epistemic trajectory advances a critique of the illusion of “peace-making,” viewing the Oslo Accords and subsequent



normalization processes as mechanisms that consolidate regional hegemony and entrench a status quo sustaining Israeli superiority.

▷1.From “Conflict” to “Settler Colonialism”

David Hirst’s work represents an epistemic rupture with the dominant Western narrative of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Rather than framing the situation as a “conflict” implying relative parity between two parties disputing land, Hirst adopts an approach consistent with settler colonialism.²² This concept, central to critical scholarship, views Zionism not simply as a nationalist movement seeking self-determination, but as a settler project aimed primarily at replacing, rather than merely exploiting, the indigenous population.²³

a. Deconstructing Foundational Myths: Violence as Structure

In *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, Hirst employs deconstructive historiography, tracing the project’s origins to 1881 to show that violence was neither incidental nor reactive to Arab resistance, but structural and constitutive of the Zionist project.²⁴ As Hirst demonstrates, the founding figures of Zionism recognized that achieving a “land without a people” necessitated the systematic displacement of the existing population.

Table 1: David Hirst’s Deconstruction of the Settler-Colonial Reality

| Zionist Myth | Hirst’s Deconstruction (Settler-Colonial Reality) |
|---------------------------|---|
| “Historical Right” | Foundational violence: Zionism recognized from the outset the necessity of Palestinian displacement. |
| “A Land Without a People” | Bottom-up historiography: Demonstrates the existence of a rooted and vibrant Palestinian society prior to 1948. |
| “Oasis of Democracy” | Colonial reality: Democracy limited to Jews, while an apartheid system is imposed on Palestinians. |

The analytical strength of David Hirst’s narrative derives from his rigorous integration of historical documents with firsthand field testimony, reflecting a practical application of a “history from below” approach. Rather than relying on official accounts produced by dominant power centers, Hirst highlights the voices of victims and marginalized actors as historical agents, thereby challenging the Western consensus and revealing what is suppressed in the colonial narrative.²⁵ Refined over five decades of conflict-zone reporting, this field-based method grants his work epistemic authority that extends beyond conventional journalism into the realms of political anthropology and critical historiography.²⁶

b. Political Metaphysics and the “Israeli Exception”

David Hirst highlights that Israel enjoys “moral immunity” in Western consciousness, rooted in a political metaphysics that elevates the Zionist narrative as a final refuge from the Holocaust, placing it beyond epistemic scrutiny or legal accountability.²⁷ This exceptionalism is evident in Hirst’s narrative through his deconstruction of three core pillars of hegemonic dominance:

- ▶• **Deconstructing US Neutrality:** David Hirst challenges the notion of the United States as an impartial mediator, portraying it as an active partner that leverages diplomatic rhetoric and the language of “peace” as ideological tools to legitimize settlement expansion and consolidate demographic realities that undermine any future resolution.²⁸
- ▶• **Critique of the Illusion of “Peace” (Oslo as Proxy Colonialism):** Hirst provides an structural reading of the Oslo Accords (1993), interpreting them not as a missed opportunity but as a “structural surrender.” The accords reconfigured the Israeli occupation into a form of “proxy colonialism,” turning the Palestinian Authority (PA) into a security instrument that safeguards the occupier in exchange for symbolic benefits, thereby entrenching the status quo and restricting Palestinians to fragmented geographic cantons.²⁹
- ▶• **Normalization as a Reconfiguration of Regional Hegemony:** In his analysis of contemporary developments, such as the Abraham Accords, Hirst argues that normalization is not a diplomatic act but a project aimed at reorganizing the region with Israel at its center, while marginalizing the Palestine issue, which he describes as an enduring “ember of anger” that cannot be extinguished.³⁰

Table 2: Comparison between the Crusaders and Zionist

| Historical Analogy | Insight in David Hirst’s Analysis | Academic Significance |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Crusader States | Original sin: Founding of both entities involved massacres and displacement of the indigenous population (1099 vs. 1948). ³¹ | Sustainability and fragility: dependence on Western support renders their survival contingent on its continuation. ³² |
| Hellenic Extremism | Hubris and delusion: belief in absolute superiority preceding catastrophic collapse. ³³ | Psycho-political critique: a warning that exceptionalism can produce political delusion, disregarding objective reality. ³⁴ |

Hirst contends that this trajectory, characterized by contemporary “Zionist hubris” reflects a form of revived Hellenistic extremism that historically culminates in catastrophic collapse. In doing so, he situates the fate of Israel within a broader historical context that transcends the immediate dynamics of the conflict.³⁵

Through a deconstructive approach and a “history from below” methodology, David Hirst offers a significant contribution to critical scholarship on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He effectively shifts the narrative framework from one of “conflict” to that of settler colonialism, while exposing the political metaphysics underpinning “Israeli exceptionalism.” Furthermore, his critique of the peace process and normalization remains highly relevant, as he interprets both as mechanisms for consolidating regional hegemony. His historical analogies, particularly to the Crusader states and Hellenistic extremism, provide a nuanced analysis of the long-term fragility of the Zionist project,



thereby reinforcing the importance of engaging with his work as a key reference for understanding the structural roots of violence in the Middle East.

Third: Representations of Imperial Alienation in US Foreign Policy: A Genealogical Reading in Light of David Hirst’s Deconstruction of Decision Capture and the Legitimation of Exception

Introduction: The “Hirstian Condition” and the Paradigm of Hegemony³⁶

US foreign policy toward the Middle East constitutes one of the most contested phenomena in contemporary International Relations, not only because of its evident bias, but also due to its structural resilience in the face of major geopolitical shifts. This analysis advances a genealogical reading, drawing on the critical work of David Hirst, and argues that Washington has moved beyond the role of a strategic ally of Israel to function as a structural enabler operating within a captured epistemic matrix. This matrix generates what may be termed the “Hirstian condition,” a form of epistemic dependency that disrupts imperial strategic rationality in favor of a settler-colonial project, thereby subordinating US sovereign decision-making to the imperatives of sustaining that project.

▷1.Epistemology of “Exception”: Critiquing the Rules-Based Order

A Hirstian analysis demonstrates that Washington’s official discourse on the rules-based international order operates less as a universal legal framework than as a “sovereign technique,” selectively deployed to legitimize exception and consolidate hegemony.³⁷

a. Law as a Functional Instrument

Within the Palestinian context, international law is transformed from a normative standard of justice into a functional instrument for suspending accountability. The US invokes the notion of the “sovereign exception,” in the Carl Schmittian sense, whereby sovereignty is defined as the authority to decide on the exception.³⁸ Imperial power thus resides in the capacity to determine “who is subject to the law” and who “enjoys absolute immunity from it.”



This logic is most evident in the US use of the veto within the UN Security Council, which functions as a “legal black hole” that absorbs international will. Consequently, it creates a protected “zone of legal void,” affording Israeli settlement expansion temporal and ideological immunity that surpasses the logic of international accountability.³⁹

b. Ontology of Silence and Double Standards

This double standard is evident in an epistemological comparison of Washington’s discourse on the Ukrainian crisis, where the rule of law is upheld, with its narrative on GS, where absolute exception is invoked. The US political mind engages in what can be termed an “ontology of silence,” systematically suspending legal language when addressing violations.⁴⁰ This conduct transforms the international system from a realm

of universal principles into a mirror of “imperial hierarchies,” stripping institutions of ethical substance and reducing them to procedural tools for consolidating the status quo.⁴¹

▷2.Sociology of Entrapment: The Lobby as an Ideological State Apparatus

David Hirst penetrates the “black box” of US decision-making, showing that pressure groups, most prominently the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), do not act as conventional external lobbies but function as an “ideological state apparatus,” in the Louis Althusser sense.⁴²

a. Engineering Consensus and Self-Censorship

These apparatuses reproduce the dominant ideology within state structures, shaping political and media discourse to serve the strategic ally’s interests. The “Hirstian case” reveals a culture of “institutionalized fear” within the State Department and Congress, where absolute support becomes a “rigid political doctrine.”⁴³ Any departure from this consensus entails professional risk that could terminate an official’s career, effectively constraining sovereign will and subordinating it to a third-party agenda, what Hirst terms “inescapable entanglement.”⁴⁴

b. Alliance of History and the Sacred

This dependency rests on the foundations of “Christian Zionism,” which grants the settlement project a metaphysical legitimacy that transcends pragmatic state calculations.⁴⁵ By combining this religious dimension with the instrumentalization of historical guilt over the Holocaust, an ideological shield is erected that precludes accountability. Consequently, political support becomes a “moral duty” that overrides rational strategic debate, effectively limiting the empire’s ability to critique or restrain its subordinate.⁴⁶

▷3.The Empire Confronts Itself: Implications of Imperial Estrangement

Hirst’s critique extends beyond identifying conventional political bias, examining the existential crisis an empire faces when its declared ideology collides with its actual practices. This study frames this as “strategic suicide,” denoting the sacrifice of soft power and international legitimacy to protect the exceptionalist settler agenda.

The relationship between eroding soft power (Axis One) and leased sovereignty (Axis Two) is mutually reinforcing: as Washington cedes strategic autonomy to its client, it must compromise universal values to justify its actions, thereby eroding its global moral authority.

a. Erosion of Soft Power and Leadership Legitimacy

Hirst’s analysis reveals a structural moral disintegration within the US-led international order. The loss of ethical legitimacy indicates that the empire can no longer exercise Gramscian “hegemony,”⁴⁷—leadership grounded in consent and voluntary adherence—but is reduced to mere domination through coercion and material intimidation.⁴⁸



►• **Geography of Epistemic Decay:** Double standards produce a “cognitive rupture” with the Global South. While Washington champions human rights in Ukraine, its silence in Gaza transforms these values into “colonial instruments,” used solely to discipline adversaries, shifting global perception from admiration to recognition of duplicity.⁴⁹

►• **Emergence of Moral Poles:** South Africa’s growing role in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) represents an epistemic challenge, reclaiming Western legal frameworks to adjudicate imperial exceptions and signaling the end of Western monopoly over defining legal truth.⁵⁰



b. Rented Sovereignty and Strategic Dependency

In Hirst’s epistemic reading, Washington appears as a superpower exercising what may be termed “rented sovereignty,” a condition in which imperial resources (diplomatic and military) are effectively subordinated to the regional ambitions of a smaller power, thereby reversing conventional agency.⁵¹

►• **Mechanics of Containment:** Consequently, the US no longer functions as a steward of order but rather as an embedded actor in the conflict, with diminished strategic autonomy. In this context, Israel is recast not as a strategic asset but as a sovereign liability, imposing policy choices that diverge from US national interests and entangling it in protracted conflicts and recurrent international censure.⁵²

▷4. Cognitive Dependency and the Disintegration of the Imperial Mind

The empire’s existential crisis is reflected in the ability of a regional power to shape the priorities of a superpower through lobbying channels and a directed epistemic matrix. This dynamic erodes the autonomy of the “imperial mind,” reducing it to a condition of cognitive dependency.

a. The Lobby as an Epistemic Filter and the Engineering of Alienation

According to Hirst, the lobby operates as an “editor of the US geopolitical imaginary,” filtering information and steering narratives in ways that replace pragmatic calculation with externally driven ideological commitments. Consequently, US perceptions of national security become closely aligned with Israeli demands, producing a condition of “epistemic alienation” in which the empire comes to interpret its own interests through the lens of its subordinate.⁵³

b. The Erosion of Pragmatic Logic

Although the imperial mindset has historically been characterized by flexibility and strategic adaptability, conditions of epistemic dependency have rendered US decision-making increasingly rigid ideologically and fragile strategically. The alignment with the settler right has curtailed Washington’s capacity to interpret global shifts or accommodate

the rise of competing powers. Consequently, the US has shifted from a strategic actor to one constrained by a singular geopolitical trajectory shaped by a third-party agenda.⁵⁴

c. The Geopolitical Cost of Alienation: The Isolation of the Center

Within the “Hirstian case,” Washington appears to trade off core strategic interests (most notably its relations with the Muslim world and its legal credibility) in order to sustain the superiority of a single regional power. This asymmetry reflects a structural distortion in the imperial mindset, whereby “internalized ideology” supersedes “pragmatic realism.” As a result, this dynamic accelerates the transition toward a multipolar order increasingly oriented toward more equitable ethical and legal alternatives beyond an alienated US-centered system.⁵⁵

Fourth: Arabs in Hirst’s Mirror: Between Epistemic Fairness and the Problem of Representation

David Hirst, as a journalist–historian departing from dominant Western narratives, presents an account of the Arab world that moves beyond conventional Orientalist frameworks. His analysis not only critiques colonialism and Israeli exceptionalism but also deconstructs internal mechanisms of repression, while maintaining a degree of epistemic fairness toward aspirations for Arab emancipation. However, this stance raises the persistent problem of representation, particularly concerning the limits of a Western intellectual’s capacity to articulate the concerns of the Global South.



▷ 1. The Dialectic of Revolution and Counter-Revolution: Deconstructing Constraints on Emancipation

Hirst advances the concept of historical rupture in the context of the Arab Spring, contending that the 2011 mobilizations were not merely transient socio-political disturbances but rather marked the terminal decline of the Arab authoritarian state, whose functional and normative legitimacy had been exhausted. He further interprets their aftermath by deconstructing the counter-revolutionary axis into two structural levels that explain the containment of transformative change:

- ▶ **Instrumentalization of Political Islam:** Electoral victories by Islamic movements were reframed as transnational existential threats, thereby furnishing the ideological and political rationale for military intervention and the disruption of nascent democratic trajectories.⁵⁶
- ▶ **Organic Regional and International Intervention:** Hirst emphasizes the central role of regional actors, particularly the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, in financing and coordinating counter-revolutionary operations in concert with international powers, thereby entrenching the model of the “absolute ruler” as the presumed guarantor of regional stability.⁵⁷



▷ 2. Problem of Representation: Limits of the Western Intellectual’s Critique

While largely fair-minded, Hirst’s work underscores a central challenge in postcolonial studies: as a dissident Western intellectual, his capacity to fully represent the sufferings and aspirations of Arab peoples remains inherently constrained.

Table 3: Hirst’s Role (Dissident Mediator)

| Problematic Dimension | Critical Question | Hirst’s Role (Dissident Mediator) |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| Self-Centrality | Can the Western “Other” address the Arab “Self” without falling into reversed Orientalism? | Hirst refrains from speaking on behalf of Arabs, instead deconstructing Western narratives that justify their oppression, thus opening space for the authentic “voice of the concerned.” ⁵⁸ |
| Epistemic Fairness | Is analytical fairness sufficient for a Western intellectual to transcend his/ her structural role within the imperial system? | Hirst enacts an epistemic rupture with the imperial narrative, using his position as an “insider observer” to reveal the falsehood of Western policies. ⁵⁹ |
| Political Agency | Does Hirst focus on the victim or the actor in the Arab world? | Hirst foregrounds the political agency of Arab peoples, attributing revolutionary failures to repressive forces rather than cultural inertia, aligning with Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism. ⁶⁰ |

It can be argued that Hirst adopts a stance grounded in ethical responsibility, seeing his role not as representing Arabs but as deconstructing the mechanisms of oppression that prevent them from representing themselves. This perspective positions him as an epistemic bridge between Western self-critique and a rigorous analysis of Arab realities, thereby redefining the role of the Western intellectual in colonial and post-colonial contexts. Rather than merely documenting events, Hirst seeks to delegitimize imperial narratives that justify authoritarianism under the guise of stability. This approach culminates in what may be termed the “Hirstian case,” which moves beyond human empathy to embody an epistemic commitment to justice. For Hirst, the text becomes a tool to resist systemic ignorance and political illusion, establishing him as a distinctively critical voice that rejects false neutrality in a conflict marked by deeply asymmetrical power relations.

Study Findings: Hirst’s Tools for Breaking the Consensus

The study finds that Hirst effectively deconstructed the manufacture of consent through several epistemic and methodological strategies:

- ▶ **Disrupting the Event Frame:** Hirst shifted the discourse from the immediacy of isolated incidents to the broader historical trajectory. While the Israeli narrative erases temporal depth to justify reactive measures, Hirst emphasized historical accumulation and structural violations across decades.

- ▶• **Humanizing the Victim through Justice:** He presented the Arab individual as a bearer of legal and historical rights rather than a passive figure seeking sympathy. This transition from emotive humanitarian language to a rights-based epistemic framework generated a significant rupture in Western propaganda.
- ▶• **Deconstructing the Metaphysics of Security:** Hirst revealed that “Israeli security” functions instrumentally to justify expansion and repression, security for the colonizer at the expense of the colonized, thereby exposing the operational logic of US veto power and exceptionalist protection.

Study Recommendations: Towards an Independent Arab Narrative

The study raises a central question: why must a Western “translator” always validate our cause? In response, it proposes the following recommendations:

- ▶• **Overcoming the Translator Dependency:** Move beyond supplying data to Western scholars and toward producing original theory. Arabs should develop their own conceptual frameworks (such as framing apartheid as a legal system) without waiting for Western endorsement.
- ▶• **Building an Epistemic Bloc in International Arenas:** Foster Arab intellectuals who can engage Western institutions using their own tools (international law, ethical philosophy) while maintaining authentic reference points. This would transform the “Hirstian case” from an individual example into a transnational Arab “epistemic institution.”
- ▶• **Re-politicizing History and Decision-Making:** Establish research approaches that deconstruct global power structures, such as AIPAC’s lobbying mechanisms, to understand how they shape or obstruct Western decision-making, rather than relying solely on a narrative of victimhood.
- ▶• **Globalizing the Discourse While Preserving Particularity:** Produce a rights-based global discourse that resists reducing the Palestine issue to a “border dispute,” framing it instead as a universal struggle for national liberation.

Conclusion

In sum, Hirst did more than expose a gap in the Western epistemic framework; he provided a roadmap for challenging it. Contemporary Arab thought must move beyond merely navigating this gap toward dismantling the walls of “exception” entirely. This study underscores that genuine sovereignty begins with control over the narrative: those who command the language and interpretive tools of history alone can shape the future and overcome the legacies of imperial domination.



Endnotes

- ¹ Dr. Islam ‘Abdullah Abu Khait: holds a PhD in Political Science from Hassan II University, Morocco. He has lectured at Salman bin ‘Abdulaziz University (KSA) and Princess Sumaya University for Technology (Jordan), and currently serves as Director of Institutional Development and Training at Jordan’s Ministry of Local Administration (MOLA).
- ² The author has embarked on a broader research project aimed at deconstructing Western, US, and Israeli narratives, beginning with the study “Deconstructing the Israeli Narrative: A Foresight Analysis of Shifts in International Legitimacy after Operation al-Aqsa Flood.” Within this trajectory, the present study “David Hirst and the Deconstruction of the Western Narrative: Critiquing US–Israeli Media Dominance and the Limits of Epistemic Fairness Toward Arabs,” constitutes a central component. The project further includes “Engineering Terrorism and Deconstructing Its Narrative: Between the Terrorism of the Pirate and the Terrorism of the Empire: A Critical Analysis of the Philosophical Foundations of Violence and Dominance in the Modern World,” as well as “The Myth of Democracy and Human Rights: Deconstructing the Western Narrative on Democracy and Human Rights.”
- ³ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), pp. 1-2.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- ⁵ Victoria Brittain, David Hirst obituary, *The Guardian* newspaper, 23/9/2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/23/david-hirst-obituary>
- ⁶ David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch: The Roots of Violence in the Middle East*, 3rd ed. (London: Nation Books, 2003).
In the introduction, David Hirst details how his reporting for The Guardian faced organized campaigns of diplomatic and institutional pressure aimed at discrediting his narratives.
- ⁷ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York & London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 127.
- ⁸ Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 21.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.
- ¹⁰ This historical anchoring is examined in detail: David Hirst traces the origins of the Zionist project to 1881, marking the practical beginnings of Zionism as an organized settler-political movement, based on four key foundations:
 - **Geopolitical Shift:** Waves of persecution in Tsarist Russia following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II prompted mass Jewish emigration.
 - **Settler Practice:** The First Aliyah (1881–1903) emerged as an organized, Europe-backed settler project, not merely individual religious longing.
 - **Political Institutionalization:** The idea transitioned from theological discourse to political action, including land purchases prior to the Basel Congress in 1897.
 - **Structural Friction:** Early dispossession of Palestinian peasants established the settler/landowner dynamic.Through this epistemic grounding, Hirst deconstructs the “false balance” narrative, showing that the conflict did not begin as an Arab reaction to an established state or the events of 1917 or 1948. Instead, it originated with an incoming settler project guided by a logic of replacement from 1881, reframing the Palestine issue as a long-term settler-colonial process rather than a sequence of reciprocal “acts of violence.”
- ¹¹ David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, p. 22.
- ¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (trans.) (New York: New Press, 1998), pp. 39–40.
- ¹³ Noam Chomsky, *The Common Good* (Berkeley: Odonian Press, 1998), p. 43.



- ¹⁴ David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, pp. 12–15.
- ¹⁵ Julien Benda, *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, trans. Richard Aldington (New York: Transaction Publishers, 2007), pp. 30–35.
- ¹⁶ David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, pp. 24–26.
- ¹⁷ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (ed.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 241–245.
- ¹⁸ Victoria Brittain, David Hirst obituary, *The Guardian*, 23/9/2025.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), p. 15.
- ²¹ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2006, pp. 387–409.
- ²² Ibid., p. 390.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 387–388.
- ²⁴ David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, pp. 15–20.
- ²⁵ Ibid., pp. 15–20.
- ²⁶ See E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: New Press, 1993).
- ²⁷ David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, p. 250.
- ²⁸ Ibid., Foreword to the 3rd ed., p. xxi.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 350; and see Ron Pundak, “From Oslo to the Road Map,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2004, pp. 20–35.
- ³⁰ David Hirst, “Is Israel going the way of the Crusaders?,” *Middle East Eye*, 3/6/2024.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ David Hirst, Gaza genocide: Is Israel going mad?, *Middle East Eye*, 4/11/2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/gaza-israel-genocide-going-mad-is>
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ David Hirst, Gaza genocide: Is Israel going mad?, *Middle East Eye*, 4/11/2024
- ³⁶ The “Hirstian condition” is not advanced as a rigid, classical concept; rather, it is proposed as an “emergent critical paradigm” that seeks to capture an integrated epistemic, political and media pattern. The term draws on the intellectual and professional trajectory of the British journalist David Hirst, whose analyses of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict have been marked by an ability to penetrate the veils of Western propaganda. More precisely, the “Hirstian condition” denotes an epistemic–analytical mode grounded in the deconstruction of imperial narratives, the exposure of latent ethical bias within Western media discourse, and the re-centering of historical justice through dismantling ideological conditioning. In this sense, it constitutes a form of critical consciousness that challenges dominant narratives. Furthermore, the “Hirstian condition” operates at the intersection of multiple critical traditions. It may be effectively employed in media and postcolonial studies to examine the reproduction of symbolic hegemony, while also serving as a model in critical journalistic epistemology for analyzing the relationship between knowledge and power. At its core, it reflects an epistemic condition that converges with the work of Edward Said on *Orientalism*, Noam Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent*, and Michel Foucault in his analysis of *The Order of Discourse*.
- ³⁷ David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, pp. 245–250.
- ³⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, George Schwab (trans.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 5–15.
- ³⁹ Noura Erakat, *Justice for Some: Law and the Question of Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), pp. 141–150.



- ⁴⁰ David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, pp. 250–258.
- ⁴¹ Stephen M. Walt, “The End of Hubris and the New Age of American Restraint,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 98, no. 3, 2019, pp. 26–35.
- ⁴² Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” pp. 127–145.
- Note:**
- Althusser understands ideology as a material system that reproduces relations of domination through ideological state apparatuses (media, education, religion and culture) where individuals are “interpellated” as subjects obedient to the system, not by coercion but through persuasive compliance.
- In essence:
- Ideology is a daily practice, not an illusion.
 - Domination is maintained through consent rather than force.
- The state is reproduced epistemically before it is imposed politically.
- ⁴³ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), pp. 150–165.
- ⁴⁴ David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, pp. 390–405.
- ⁴⁵ Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), pp. 102–115.
- ⁴⁶ David Hirst, *Beware of Small States: Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East* (New York: Nation Books, 2010), pp. 310–318.
- ⁴⁷ Hegemony, in the thought of Antonio Gramsci, denotes a form of domination exercised through consent rather than coercion, whereby the ruling class succeeds in rendering its worldview natural and self-evident within the social consciousness. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds. and trans.) (New York: International Publishers, 1971), pp. 12–13, 57–58.
- ⁴⁸ David Hirst, *Beware of Small States*, pp. 315–320.
- ⁴⁹ David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, pp. 415–442.
- ⁵⁰ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), pp. 310–320.
- ⁵¹ David Hirst, *Beware of Small States*, pp. 315–322; and for more about “reversing conventional agency,” see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, pp. 42–78.
- ⁵² David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, pp. 582–588.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 585–590.
- ⁵⁴ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, pp. 104–110.
- ⁵⁵ David Hirst, *Beware of Small States*, pp. 410–415.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 305–312.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 315.
- ⁵⁸ David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch*.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 20–25.