



**Determining the Narrative:
The Use of Narratives, (Mis)Information,
and Media for Unrepresented Nations and
Peoples in the 21st Century**

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A Report Prepared for the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Introduction	4
Key Terms, Frameworks, & Theories	5
Framing Theory and Narrative Framing	5
Information disorder	6
Social persuasion and mobilization	7
Methodology	8
Case Studies & Results	10
Palestine	10
Somaliland	16
Western Sahara	20
Questionnaire Results	26
Recommendations: Lessons for Self-Determination in Contested Information Environments	28
1. Own Your Frame Before Others Claim It	28
2. Name and Disrupt Depoliticizing Language	29
3. Diversify Stories and Storytellers	30
4. Tailor Messages Without Losing the Core Claim	31
5. Protect Internal Credibility as a Narrative Asset	32
6. Build Long-Term Narrative Infrastructure	33
Conclusion: Narrative Power as Political Power	34
References	36



Introduction

Narratives and information are never politically neutral (Parenti, 1986). For unrepresented nations and peoples, the struggle is not only about autonomy or sovereignty, but also about meaning. The boundaries of what is considered reasonable, legitimate, and common sense are shaped by cultural hegemony. That said, narrative power can also be used to challenge dominant discourses—particularly for self-determination movements. In such contexts, narrative power becomes a form of political power: a resource for visibility, legitimacy, and self-representation. This topic becomes even more pressing in the current information ecosystem. Fake news has become a major global issue, and the rapid dissemination of information on social media platforms has altered the landscape of news production and consumption. These new media ecosystems and information disorders emerge at the intersection of economic incentives and a shifting world order, shaping how self-determination movements communicate, how they are perceived, and how they can resist dominant narratives.

This report investigates in detail how self-determination movements strategically use information to challenge dominant media discourses in the 21st century. It does so by answering two interconnected questions: what is the role of information disorder and narrative framing in self-determination movements, and how can self-determination movements construct narratives and counter information disorder? The first section of the report locates our research within the current academic debate about narrative framing, information disorder, and social mobilization. From here, the paper dives into three major case studies, Palestine, Western Sahara, and Somaliland, that provide promising practices and lessons learned on how self-determination movements can construct their own narratives and combat misrepresentation in major media framing. These unique cases, each with its own history and political structures, provide present examples of media engagement in the face of misrepresentation. The paper then outlines the results of the supplemental survey administered to members of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), evaluating the challenges faced and lessons learned from diverse self-determination movements around the world. The final section provides evidence-based recommendations on media engagement and narrative framing. This section draws on the comprehensive desk research of the three major case studies, supplemented by the survey responses from other unrepresented nations and peoples. These recommendations



are then put into practice through the corresponding media toolkit, which provides tangible, evidence-based guidance on how self-determination movements can strategically communicate their goals and narratives to combat misrepresentation and information disorder.

Key Terms, Frameworks, & Theories

Framing Theory and Narrative Framing

Framing theory originates in Goffman's (1974) observation that individuals interpret social reality through shared schemata that render ambiguous situations meaningful. Entman (1993) operationalized this for political communication, defining framing as the selection and emphasis of certain aspects of perceived reality to "promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). The political stakes of this process are built into its logic: what is omitted is as consequential as what is shown. Snow et al. (1986) and Benford and Snow (2000) extended the concept to social movements, arguing that collective action frames, the strategic interpretive structures through which movements define grievances, assign blame, and mobilize participation, are not peripheral to political struggle but constitutive of it.

In self-determination contexts, framing operates at the deeper level of narrative. Somers (1994) argues that identity itself is narratively constituted: individuals and communities understand who they are through stories that connect past, present, and future into a coherent whole. For self-determination movements, narrative framing is the process by which these stories are made politically legible, translating historical grievance, cultural distinctiveness, and claims to sovereignty into a form that demands recognition. Crucially, these narratives do not merely describe a people's circumstances. They construct the collective subject that makes the claim. Movements asserting independence, autonomy, or Indigenous rights must therefore contest state-imposed frames that cast their demands as separatism or destabilization, while building counter-narratives grounded in historical injustice and international legal norms.

The effectiveness of this process depends on what Snow et al. (1986) call narrative alignment, meaning how well a movement's story resonates with its target audiences, both internally and externally. Internally, a shared narrative holds a movement together; when the meaning of that narrative fractures, so too does the movement (Gunzelmann, 2025). Externally,



movements seek to connect their narrative to internationally recognized frameworks such as democratic principles, human rights discourse, and the norm of self-determination. As Yeh’s (2024) comparative study of Taiwanese and Korean anti-colonial movements shows, the most durable self-determination narratives are those that successfully link local grievances to global values, building a sense of shared identity that resonates across different contexts. Narrative alignment is therefore not a fixed achievement but an ongoing communicative practice, one that is continually vulnerable to disruption from within and suppression from outside.

Information disorder

The media plays a dual role as both a critical source of information and a political actor itself, curating information to fit economic constraints and political contexts (Tahraoui, 2025). Through the “CNN effect,” Robinson (1999) explains, the media “provoke[s] major responses from domestic audiences and political elites to global events” (301). The two-way relationship between media and political agendas is more urgent in the current information ecosystem, characterized by increasing democratic decay and information disorder. Wardle and Derakhshan’s (2017) idea of information disorder clarifies the pathways by which contemporary misrepresentation occurs. Modern information technology has increased the spread of false information to a greater magnitude than seen in the 20th century. Wardle and Derakhshan’s (2017) conceptual framework outlines three major forms of information disorder (mis-, dis-, and malinformation) through which to classify this complex phenomenon and understand its spread around the globe:

Type of Information Disorder	
Misinformation	When false information is shared, but not maliciously
Disinformation	When false information is knowingly shared maliciously
Malinformation	When genuine information is shared maliciously, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere

Table adapted from Wardle & Derakhshan’s (2017) Information Disorder Taxonomy

This rapid dissemination of information on digital media platforms has fundamentally altered the landscape of news production and consumption, shifting public opinion of and confidence in democratic processes (Bhadra, 2024). Just as social media shifted how



information is filtered and processed, it has also fundamentally altered how global conflict is reported and, concurrently, understood by the public. Readers used to wait for the morning newspaper to learn about international affairs; conversely, “we now witness a constant, unfiltered stream of images and stories,” Cherkaoui (2025) explains (86). Conflicts are now mediated through complex digital networks that enable both visibility and manipulation. In shifting geopolitical orders and media environments, self-determination movements must strategically align their communication with contemporary promising practices to gain support and resist dominant narratives.

Social persuasion and mobilization

As Klandermans and Oegema (1987) argue, participation in social movements is best understood as a staged process rather than a singular decision. Individuals must first recognize a movement's mobilization potential, become targets of mobilization, find motivation to participate, and overcome barriers that prevent participation (Klandermans and Oegema, 1987). This formulation shifts the analysis from the assumption that sympathy automatically produces action. Seen in these terms, persuasion is an organizational process through which movements transform diffuse grievance into sustained participation.

Klandermans and Oegema (1987) distinguish several routes of recruitment, including mass media, mail, organizational ties, and friendship ties, while noting these channels do not have equal operating force. Mass communication may broaden awareness, but where participation is costly, contentious, or risky, trusted interpersonal networks are more effective in converting latent support into action (Klandermans and Oegema, 1987). The persuasive task is not merely to inform audiences that a movement exists, but to embed its claims within networks of trust through which participation becomes thinkable, legitimate, and actionable.

This is also why framing remains central to mobilization. As Caiani (2023) notes, collective action depends on the construction of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames, as well as identity frames that specify on whose behalf a movement speaks. Frames help produce the shared identity that collective action requires. By articulating shared fate, identifying opponents, and linking grievance to morally intelligible forms of action, framing provides the interpretive bridge between structural injustice and mobilized response (Caiani, 2023). This is particularly important in contested political environments, where movements must



simultaneously persuade internal and external audiences while also resisting hostile representations imposed by states or dominant institutions. Simons (1970) suggests that persuasion is intrinsic to the movement's survival at multiple levels. Social movement leaders, he argues, must attract, maintain, and discipline followers into an organized unit; secure adoption of the movement's program by the larger political structure; and respond strategically to resistance from that same structure (Simons, 1970). Persuasion, then, is not only outward-facing. It is equally concerned with internal cohesion, labour distribution, leadership legitimacy, and the maintenance of commitment over time. This makes mobilization inseparable from organization: movements must not only win attention, but also sustain capacity.

Edrington (2022) highlights that communication strategies function as relationship-building practices through which movements foster identification with the public and attract new members. Polletta (2023) similarly shows that personal storytelling can build support by making unfamiliar experiences legible and emotionally resonant, while also warning that stories are constrained by institutional norms that shape which voices appear credible and which do not. These accounts suggest that social persuasion is most effective when movements align framing, identification, and organizational strategy. Mobilization succeeds not when audiences are merely exposed to a cause, but when they are persuaded to see themselves in it, trust its messengers, and believe that participation is both meaningful and possible.

Methodology

This project employs comparative case studies to examine how self-determination movements use narrative framing to challenge dominant media discourses in contexts shaped by information disorder. It asks two related questions: first, what role do narrative framing and information disorder play in self-determination movements, and second, how can such movements construct effective narratives and counter hostile information environments. To answer these questions, the report analyzes three cases:

- **Palestine:** Palestinians can trace their ancestry in the region back thousands of years. In 1948, following the creation of the state of Israel, over 700,000 Palestinians were ethnically cleansed from their ancestral territories in what is now known as the Nakba (catastrophe). Forced into the diaspora or into increasingly annexed zones of Gaza and



the West Bank, Palestinians have been routinely dispossessed of their lands, farms, cultural practices, legal standing, and stories for over 75 years. Following the terrorist attacks on October 7th, 2023, and the ensuing 2-year Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip, the situation has become more dire, and increasingly diverse calls for Palestinian self-determination, human rights, and decolonization have emerged around the world.

- **Western Sahara:** Following Spain's withdrawal in 1975, Morocco moved into the territory, and the Polisario Front launched an armed struggle for Sahrawi independence. Although the 1991 ceasefire was formally linked to a referendum on self-determination, the referendum never materialized. Instead, the conflict hardened into a prolonged struggle where Morocco controlled most of the territory. The Polisario Front and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) continue to operate from exile and from the area east of the berm (Sansanwal and Kamath, 2020; Darbouche and Zoubir, 2008). Under these conditions, narrative framing has become central to the conflict itself: the struggle is not only over territory, but also over whether Western Sahara is understood as an unfinished decolonization case, a territorial dispute, or a managed diplomatic impasse.
- **Somaliland:** Somaliland was a British protectorate that achieved recognized sovereignty in June 1960 before voluntarily uniting with Italian Somalia days later. That union proved deeply unequal and ended in mass violence. It is estimated that between 1987 and 1989, Siad Barre's regime massacred 200,000 Isaaq people through extra-judicial killings and the 1988 bombardment of Hargeisa and Burao, driving a further 300,000 people into exile in Ethiopia in what is widely characterized as the Isaaq genocide. When the Somali state collapsed in 1991, the people of Somaliland declared the restoration of their pre-union borders. In the decades since, without international recognition or external support, Somalilanders have built functioning democratic institutions, held credible multiparty elections, and maintained relative stability. In January 2026, Israel became the first sovereign state to recognize Somaliland formally.

Each case represents a distinct struggle for self-determination shaped by contested sovereignty, unequal media visibility, and competing political narratives. At the same time, they differ in important ways, including the structure of international recognition, the intensity of armed conflict, and the relationship between internal legitimacy and external representation. Rather than treating them as identical, the project uses comparison to identify recurring narrative patterns across different political environments. Each case study is organized around



the same two-part analytical framework. The first examines how dominant narratives, media framing, and forms of information disorder shape the movement's representation and political possibilities. The second examines how movements construct counternarratives, communicate legitimacy, and respond to hostile or distorted information environments. Case findings are then synthesized to identify recurring themes, areas of consensus, and broader lessons for self-determination movements navigating narrative contestation.

The comparative case study analysis is complemented by questionnaire findings, which provide additional insight into how movement narratives circulate, resonate, and are challenged in practice. The questionnaire was administered to UNPO Member States from regionally distinct self-determination movements. To obtain holistic responses, the 13-question survey combined open-ended qualitative questions with Likert and multiple-choice questions. These survey results will supplement our desk research on Palestine, Western Sahara, and Somaliland, allowing the project to move between conceptual analysis and practical application. Together, these mixed methods support the research report, final recommendations, and media toolkit.

Case Studies & Results

Palestine

It is well-documented that the mainstream Western media systematically prioritizes Israeli perspectives and narratives over Palestinian ones (Barari & Yacoub, 2024; Ibrar & Khan, 2025; Al Shebi, Casara, & Maas, 2026). Particularly after the terror attacks on Israel in October 2023, and ensuing bombardment of Gaza by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), the legacy media have legitimized occupation and violence against the Palestinian people through binary framing, asymmetrical reporting, and the explicit censorship of human rights and decolonization dialogues. To counter this misrepresentation, the Palestinian movement has grounded its arguments in international law, everyday resistance, and on-the-ground journalism. The following section analyzes how, despite limited access and active misrepresentation by the traditional media, there has been a documented increase in support for Palestinian self-determination, including from major Western countries, illustrating the movement's success in capturing global attention and shifting how their struggle is discussed in the public sphere.

Sensationalizing the Palestinian Terrorist

A recurring terrorist motif is often exploited by major Western journalists when reporting on the current crisis in Gaza. BBC, CNN, and the New York Times often rely on the qualifier “ Hamas-run ” to describe institutions in Gaza, delegitimizing state infrastructure and demographics as unreliable (Al Shebi, Casara, & Maas, 2026). This qualifier oversimplifies the institutions and governance in Gaza, which includes Hamas, alongside the Palestinian Authority and the United Nations. Investigations by the Centre for Media Monitoring (2025) confirm that between October 2023 and 2024, the BBC attached this “ Hamas- run ” qualifier to Palestinian casualty figures in 1,155 articles, which is almost equal to the number of times the death toll was mentioned (p22). At the same time as attaching “ Hamas-run ” to statistics, these articles decontextualize the barring of international observers from Gaza who could provide third-party verification. Additionally, while pro-Israel advocates have accused the mainstream media of anti-Israel bias, claiming their “ blind reliance on Hamas statistics... has helped promote a false narrative in which Israel is recklessly or intentionally killing innocent civilians, ” (Lax, 2025), as of January 2026, the Israeli government has accepted the (so-called Hamas-run) Gaza Ministry of Health’s casualty numbers (Johnson, 2026), thereby disqualifying this critique. Nonetheless, the CBC ombudsman confirmed that this recurring qualifier contributes “ to a belief that every single Gazan is somehow linked to an organization that carried out the October 7th attacks ” (Nagler, 2024). This language leads to a justification of Israeli violence and a dehumanization of the civilian cost of war.

The use of the term “ terrorist ” is reserved for Palestinian resistance groups, and has even been applied to non-violent movements to quash dissent. Comparatively, Israeli groups who burn down Palestinian villages and attack civilians are rarely described as terrorists; rather, they are given labels like ‘ settler ’ or ‘ far-right extremist, ’ despite engaging in ethnic cleansing (Warshagha, 2026). Where Israelis are depicted as logical and democratic, Palestinians are depicted as aggressive. This binary framing reinforces hatred and sensationalism, to the detriment of peace-building (Warshagha, 2026).



Dehumanizing Palestinians: Asymmetrical Reporting and False Equivalence

A second common trope in the misrepresentation of the Palestinian self-determination movement is the asymmetrical reporting of suffering and violence. Across their platforms, the BBC prioritized Israeli deaths by a ratio of 33:1 (Centre for Media Monitoring, 2025, p. 9). There is also an asymmetry in how journalists prioritize sources of information and informants themselves: a study analyzing 35,000 BBC news stories found that Israelis are interviewed twice as often as Palestinians (Centre for Media Monitoring, 2025, p. 67). Similarly, members of the Israeli military appeared on Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC 44 times in October 2023, while no Palestinian representatives were interviewed in the same time frame (Youmans, 2024).

Where Palestinians do appear, they are pressured to condemn Hamas's actions. Compared to 38 Palestinian interviewees who were asked to condemn the October 7th attacks by the BBC, zero Israelis were asked to condemn IDF actions (Centre for Media Monitoring, 2025, p. 71). Israel's 'right to defend itself' was mentioned 962 times by British media between October 2023 and 2024, in comparison to the rights of Palestinians, which were only mentioned 163 times in the same period (Centre for Media Monitoring, 2024, p. 48). Through this disproportionate prioritization of Israeli suffering and rights, Western journalists have engaged in a form of selective humanitarianism, where Palestinian lives are rendered less deserving of attention and grief (Dogutas, 2026).

Explicit Censorship: Lack of Information as Information Disorder

There is also a documented issue of the censorship of legal and political language – editorial decisions that shape what audiences understand about the conflict. Leaked editorial guidelines from the New York Times and CNN reveal directives against the use of terms like genocide, refugee camps, and occupied territory (Scahill & Grim, 2024). This breach of ethics also occurred at the BBC, where over 100 interviewees were censored for mentioning the word genocide (Centre for Media Monitoring, 2025, p. 68). The misrepresentation of the Palestinian movement by the mainstream media not only impacts current understandings of the crisis but also the possibility for transitional justice and peace processes. This epistemic injustice, in which some groups are deemed legitimate and grievable, while others are purposefully devalued and dehumanized, exacerbates divisions (Dogutas, 2026). In this crisis, the media feeds information disorder that justifies and reinforces violent solutions.

Re-Contextualization: Centring Human Rights and International Law

In response to the decontextualization and misrepresentation of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination, movement narratives emphasize the political structure of the conflict and its historical roots. They use human rights language to highlight genocide, apartheid, and ethnic cleansing (Al-Najjar & Zaid, 2025). An emphasis on the right to self-determination legitimizes Palestinian resistance (Abdel-Wahab, 2022). Moving away from the passive voice of the mainstream media, counternarratives explicitly name the perpetrator – Israeli settler colonialism – and contextualize its violence within international legal frameworks, including stipulations in the UN Charter on the rights to self-determination and resistance against occupation (King & Jelic, 2023). In this frame, Palestinians are no longer terrorists, but rather an autonomous peoples legally resisting displacement. Instead of sanitizing or condemning resistance, Palestinian groups have recalibrated their struggle against occupation as a fight for human rights.

Since its inception, the Palestinian struggle has applied a decolonial framework, arguing its right to self-determination before major international bodies, including the United Nations General Assembly and the International Court of Justice. This garnered international attention and sympathy from the decolonized world, including recognition by most UN members across Asia, Africa, and South America. The recent addition of human rights language, using terms like ethnic cleansing, genocide, and apartheid, has been a successful rhetorical device in increasing support in the West. Today, 50% of Americans polled by Quinnipiac University Polling (2025) and 52% of Canadians polled by the Angus Reid Institute (2025) believe Israel is committing genocide. Moreover, major Western countries, such as the United Kingdom, Canada, France, and Australia, have been pressured by their populations to recognize the Palestinian state in line “with the principles of self-determination and fundamental human rights reflected in the United Nations Charter” (Carney, 2025). While these countries have always supported a two-state solution, this massive wave of recognition for Palestine, based in human rights language, marks a turning point in global support.



Diversifying Stories of Resistance

Another key strategy employed by the Palestinian movement has been to highlight the diversity of Palestinian resistance, rejecting the stereotype that represents all Palestinians as terrorists. Practices including farming, litigating, community organizing, and striking are championed as everyday resistance under occupation (Horoub, 2023). Palestinian groups have also contextualized their resistance, including Israeli repression against peaceful protest.

Like the traditional media, social media is “increasingly modulated by expansive surveillance and the regulatory leverage of state and corporate power, which is used to suppress the emergence of a critical mass” (Wodajo, 2021, 228). For example, between October and November 2023, Human Rights Watch (2023) documented 1050 instances of censorship of Palestinian content on Facebook and Instagram. That being said, social media has also opened new spaces for self-determination movements to mobilize and counter misrepresentation and hate. Enhancing reach and awareness, the Palestinian movement has created alternative forums for contesting dominant paradigms and connecting with transnational solidarity networks.

For an occupied people, joy is an act of resistance. Cervi and Marin-Llado (2021) investigate the use of TikTok by the Palestinian diaspora movement, where skits, memes, and Arab songs provide a collective digital space for activism. On TikTok, Palestinians can reach a wide global network, allowing them to unpack complicated histories and make context-appropriate comparisons (Cervi & Marin-Llado, 2021). By painting a more holistic and nuanced image of life in Palestine, advocates push back against dehumanization and delegitimization.

Across the West, sympathy for Palestinian self-determination is growing. From 2001 to 2025, Israel held a double-digit lead in American sympathy, with an average gap of 43 percentage points according to Gallop polls (Vigers, 2026). In 2026, for the first time, 41% of Americans sympathize with Palestine, compared to 36% who sympathize more with Israel (Vigers, 2026). Research by the NORC Centre for Public Affairs also points to shifting public empathy for the Palestinian people, confirming that in 2025, 20% of American adults believe the US should provide military aid to Israel, down from 36% in 2023 (Madhani, 2025). These findings are similar in other Western countries: in the UK, YouGov surveys show that sympathy



for Palestinians rose by 13% between 2023 and 2024 (Smith, 2024), while in Canada, sympathy rose by 19% in the same period (Angus Reid Institute, 2025). Empathy and sympathy are difficult to quantify; however, shifting perspectives on Palestinian oppression indicate that a more holistic representation of the movement is replacing the dehumanizing terrorist binary.

Citizen Journalism: Countering Censorship from the Ground Up

The war in Gaza has been one of the most dangerous and deadly for journalists in the 21st century (Al-Najjar & Zaid, 2025). Bureaucracy and bombs have limited international press from reaching on-the-ground perspectives, and foreign media are forced to rely on official Israeli government statements (Khamis & Dogbatse, 2024). Countering dominant narratives and misrepresentations, social media holds democratic potential in diversifying the sources and topics covered. Through TikTok, Instagram, and X, Palestinian citizen journalists connect with the diaspora and civil society. Figures like Motaz Azaiza and Bisan Owda feature stories of Palestinian resilience and resistance in the face of dehumanization and discreditation (Avelar & Rolandsson, 2025). From a shaky hand-held video, Owda explains that her “role and the role of the rest of the journalists in Gaza is to document our stories and the stories of our people, and your role is to put an end to this genocide” (Avelar & Rolandsson, 2025, p.10). Mortensen and Trezn (2016) describe this phenomenon as moral spectatorship, whereby audiences around the world witness constant, unfiltered images and videos of suffering and feel compelled to act. Utilizing hashtags, soundtracks, dances, humour, and satire to gain attention, these reporters are refiguring war journalism in the 21st century in democratic ways (Matar & Tawil-Souri, 2024).

Only 2% of all editorials in US newspapers between 1970 and 2019 on Palestine were written by Palestinians (Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy). When Palestinian voices are delegitimized and censored, social media expands the reach and credibility of their counter-narratives. Especially among young people, who overwhelmingly get their news via social media, sympathy with the Palestinian movement is growing. According to an NBC News (2026) poll, in 2023, 37% of young Americans (18-34) held negative views of Israel; by 2025, 63% did, more than any other age group. “The public now is far more sophisticated in navigating a larger and more fractured news and media landscape that includes independent journalists and editorially distinct foreign news media,” Youmans (2024) underscores. Through these daily



unfiltered updates, the public, particularly younger generations, can compare traditional media with what they see on their phones and make their own conclusions.

Somaliland

The most important dynamic shaping information disorder in Somaliland's case is a deep and persistent gap between the narratives that sustain internal legitimacy and the frameworks through which external actors evaluate claims to self-determination. Pegg and Kolstø (2015) document this paradox precisely: successive Somali transitional governments received international recognition before controlling even their own capital city, while Somaliland, with a functioning currency, elected parliament, and security forces built without external support, remains unrecognized. The UN Charter's emphasis on territorial integrity and the African Union's preference for colonial-era boundaries create a pre-existing framework in which Somalia's claim to territorial unity requires no defense while Somaliland's independence requires constant justification (Adam, 2021). Information disorder here does not require fabrication. It operates through the uneven allocation of legitimacy to competing claims about the same political reality (Pegg & Kolstø, 2015).

This default framing is reinforced by external actors who engage Somaliland as a strategic asset rather than a self-determination case. The UAE signed a 30-year DP World contract to develop the port of Berbera, and US legislators introduced the Somaliland Partnership Act in 2022, framing the territory as a democratic counterweight to China (Aidi, 2022). Heritage Foundation president Kevin Roberts described Somaliland as valuable precisely because it had "been immune to Beijing's overtures and threats" (Aidi, 2022). As Ylönen (2025) notes, the US and UK have "for decades flirted with the idea of recognizing Somaliland," yet have been "repeatedly thrown back by their respective Somalia policies." Since March 2025, the Trump administration has engaged in talks about establishing a US military base near Berbera in exchange for partial recognition, the most concrete recognition offer in Somaliland's history, yet one framed entirely in transactional terms (Ylönen, 2025). The normative self-determination claim gets absorbed into a conversation about Red Sea security that serves external interests without necessarily advancing the recognition question (Aidi, 2022).



How Language Shapes the Story

One of the most consequential forms of information disorder operates through routine media language. Terms such as "breakaway," "self-declared," and "unrecognized region" are used by major outlets as neutral descriptors, but each encodes a political judgment that embeds the territorial-integrity presumption into the vocabulary through which Somaliland's claim reaches general audiences (Sela, 2026).

Sela's (2026) analysis of BBC coverage following Israel's January 2026 recognition documents this in measurable detail. Across three BBC articles, Somaliland was consistently described as "Somalia's breakaway region," and the word "controversial" appeared in the headline and opening sentence of the December 30 explainer and again in the January 6 follow-up (Sela, 2026). By contrast, BBC articles covering the UK's recognition of a Palestinian state in September 2025, a case widely seen as involving significant controversy and violence, used neither "controversial" nor any analogous qualifier (Sela, 2026). The 1988 bombardment of Hargeisa was referenced only as deaths of "tens of thousands," with the Yale Genocide Studies Program's classification of the campaign as the Isaaq genocide absent entirely (Sela, 2026). Somalia's territorial arguments were positioned as the natural starting point, while Somaliland's thirty-year trajectory of self-governance appeared as background detail (Sela, 2026). This reflects what Entman (1993) describes as the power of emphasis and omission: the selective foregrounding of some realities and suppression of others produces a systematically distorted picture without requiring any deliberate editorial decision.

Internal Contestation as a Narrative Vulnerability

A further dimension of Somaliland's information disorder is generated by internal political fracture. Norman (2023) documents how the assassination of opposition politician Abdifatah Abdullahi Abdi in December 2022 triggered protests to which security forces responded with live ammunition, reportedly killing up to 20 demonstrators. By February 2023, the Dhulbahante clan leadership had issued the Las Anod Declaration, formally rejecting Somaliland's claim for independence (Norman, 2023). The conflict produced at least 150 dead, approximately 600 wounded, and 185,000 displaced (Norman, 2023). Representational disparities that had long existed became legible to international audiences as evidence of structural exclusion: Awdal region held only 13 parliamentary seats compared to 56 for Hargeisa, and of 97 scholarships for



Somaliland students at Ethiopian universities in 2022, only one went to a student from the Sool region (Norman, 2023). Hoehne (2019) had identified this vulnerability earlier, noting that Somaliland had effectively become a "mono-clan state" in which non-Isaaq clans in the east had joined the independence project "for the sake of peace" rather than shared political conviction. Las Anod converted this structural critique into a live counter-narrative that Somaliland could not easily rebut (Norman, 2023).

Walls (2024) extends this analysis by showing how elections and human rights controversies compound the problem. Parliamentary elections due in 2010 were delayed six times over sixteen years (Walls, 2024). The unelected Guurti extended President Bihi's term by two years in 2022 without a popular mandate, then unilaterally extended its own mandate by a further five years (Freedom House, 2024). Freedom House (2024) downgraded Somaliland's electoral process score in both 2023 and 2024, reducing its overall score from 44 to 43 out of 100. External support for Somaliland's democratic exception narrative is conditional on governance living up to the values it claims to embody (Walls, 2024). When it does not, external advocates lose the grounds on which they defend that narrative.

The Gap Between Internal and External Legitimacy

Somaliland's internal legitimacy rests on a well-developed narrative. Hoehne (2019) describes a framing in which the right to self-determination is grounded not only in ethnic difference but in the lived experience of state-sponsored atrocity, followed by demonstrated capacity for self-governance without international support. Bade (2024) demonstrates how this narrative is reproduced institutionally through school textbooks, generating domestic cohesion and sustaining the political will necessary for state-building over multiple decades.

The difficulty is that these features (emotional depth, historical rootedness, and mobilization of community memory) do not translate automatically into the technical and legal idioms of international recognition decisions (Pegg & Kolstø, 2015). The external recognition framework is procedural, precedent-sensitive, and skeptical of unilateral claims (Adam, 2021).

The Somalia-Somaliland talks framework illustrates this concretely. As Madar (2024) shows, international dialogue between Mogadishu and Hargeisa positions the relationship as a negotiation within a shared Somali framework rather than a recognition question between a

functioning state and an aspiring one. Engaging in dialogue through these terms partially validates Somalia's narrative, while refusing them risks characterization as intransigent (Madar, 2024). This bind, in which both engagement and non-engagement are narratively costly, is a direct product of the gap between Somaliland's internal legitimacy and the external frameworks through which its claim is processed (Madar, 2024). Bridging this communicative gap is the fundamental challenge structuring Somaliland's engagement with the international community.

Constructing Counternarratives and Combating Misrepresentation

Somaliland has developed a deliberate response to these conditions. The Government of Somaliland's Foreign Policy Strategy (2020) positions the territory as a responsible actor, a democratic exception in a volatile region, and an investment-ready partner. Bakker's (2022) systematic analysis of official communications between 2012 and 2022 identifies a consistent emphasis on prognostic framing, articulating what recognition would enable rather than dwelling on historical grievance, with motivational appeals calibrated to specific audiences (Bakker, 2022; Bile, 2025). The Horn Review (2025) documents how this operates in practice as Somaliland maintains representative offices in nine countries. The Washington office functions as a de facto embassy, and coordinated diaspora lobbying has produced State Department policy reviews and expanded bipartisan Congressional engagement (Horn Review, 2025).

This strategy has produced measurable traction. Freedom House (2024) rated Somaliland at 43 out of 100, making it the only territory in its immediate neighbourhood not ranked "unfree," outscoring Somalia (8), Ethiopia (26), Djibouti (24), and Eritrea (3). The May 2021 elections registered 1.1 million voters across 2,709 polling stations using iris biometric technology and were 70% internally funded (Mills et al., 2021). The Royal United Services Institute called Somaliland "a regional democratic superpower," and former Nigerian President Obasanjo described it as "a place that has made something out of virtually nothing" (Mills et al., 2021). The November 2024 presidential election saw opposition candidate Irro win 63.92% against incumbent Bihi's 34.81%, with power transferring peacefully — one of only five successful opposition victories recorded across Africa that year (Mahmood, 2025). Reflecting this recovery, Freedom House (2025) raised Somaliland's overall score from 43 to 47 out of 100.

Different audiences receive different arguments. For US audiences, Somaliland frames itself as a democratic anti-China partner, producing active Trump administration talks about a



military base near Berbera in exchange for partial recognition (Ylönen, 2025). For Gulf partners, the port infrastructure emphasis secured the UAE's 30-year DP World contract at Berbera (Aidi, 2022). For African bodies, the colonial-era boundary argument frames the claim as the restoration of the recognized territorial unit from 1960 (Adam, 2021). However, when the self-determination claim is consistently framed in the language of strategic partnership, external actors engage on those terms while setting the recognition question aside (Aidi, 2022). Thus, effective audience segmentation requires ensuring that each argument leads back to the core claim rather than substituting for it.

Somaliland's most underutilized resource remains the origin story. Between 1987 and 1989, the Barre regime massacred around 200,000 members of the Isaaq tribe, with an estimated 60,000 people killed in the 1988 bombardment of Hargeisa and Burao alone (Africa Watch, 1990; Kennard & Einashe, 2018). This sequence of events forms what has been defined as the Isaaq genocide (Lemkin Institute, 2026; Yale University, n.d.). As Sela's (2026) analysis shows, when this context is absent from the first news cycle, territorial-integrity framing fills the vacuum, and subsequent coverage follows. Pre-prepared backgrounders, accessible genocide documentation, and multilingual historical primers deployed before major diplomatic events would directly address this vulnerability (Sela, 2026). The Las Anod conflict, election delays, and press restrictions all provided damaging material for counter-narratives (Walls, 2024), but the 2024 election demonstrated the possibility of narrative recovery (Mahmood, 2025). Movements that act consistently with stated values and ground their institutional achievements in a moral and historical context can be more resilient to counter-narratives over time.

Western Sahara

Western Sahara illustrates how self-determination movements are shaped not only by territorial dispossession and diplomatic exclusion, but also by the struggle to define the conflict itself. Dominant political and media narratives have often reframed Western Sahara away from decolonization and towards territorial integrity, procedural deadlock, and regional stability, obscuring the continued denial of Sahrawi self-determination (Porges, 2019, pp. 129–130; Darbouche and Zoubir, 2008, pp. 91–93). In this context, information disorder operates less through outright fabrication than through omission, episodic visibility, elite-driven framing, and the normalization of stalemate as a neutral condition. (Kerrouche and Badad, 2025, pp. 61–63;



Zoubir, 2007, pp. 158–160). In response, Sahrawi counternarratives have sought to reassert Western Sahara as an unfinished decolonization case, foreground the political continuity of Sahrawi institutions in exile, and use transnational and digital communication to sustain visibility in an environment structured by surveillance, diplomatic asymmetry, and chronic erasure (Fernández-Molina, 2020, pp. 83–84, 93; Hamdani, 2017, pp. 18–23).

Decolonization vs. Territorial Integrity: Competing Frames of Legitimacy

The central framing struggle in Western Sahara is between two incompatible narratives of political legitimacy. On the Sahrawi side, the conflict is framed as an unfinished process of decolonization in which an Indigenous people has been denied the opportunity to exercise self-determination. Morocco represents Western Sahara as an integral part of the Moroccan nation, often through the historical frame of “Greater Morocco,” while the Polisario Front is cast as an Algerian-backed proxy rather than a legitimate national liberation movement (Porges, 2019, pp. 129–130). The significance of the dissonance in framing is that it determines the baselines through which the conflict is received internationally. If the issue is understood through the lens of decolonization, then self-determination and referendum-based resolution remain central. Conversely, if the issue is understood as one of territorial integrity, Moroccan sovereignty becomes the default assumption, and Sahrawi claims are recast as destabilizing or unrealistic (Darbouche and Zoubir, 2008; Omar, 2008). This asymmetry is not merely rhetorical. It structures whose claims appear legally and politically intelligible. While the Sahrawi position is grounded in self-determination and decolonization, diplomatic discourse often shifts attention toward feasibility, autonomy, and regional stability. In doing so, the conflict is subtly reframed away from legal principle and toward geopolitical management. Narrative framing in Western Sahara, therefore, does not simply describe the dispute; it helps determine which political futures appear reasonable, legitimate, or even imaginable.

Stalemate as Narrative: Depoliticizing Occupation Through Proceduralism

A defining feature of the Western Sahara case is that the stalemate functions as a political frame. The conflict is frequently described as “frozen,” “forgotten,” or in deadlock, language that appears descriptive but normalizes the status quo (Darbouche and Zoubir, 2008, p. 91; Zoubir, 2007, p. 158). Framed this way, the lack of resolution results from technical deadlock, procedural complexity, and diplomatic fatigue. One side continues to control territory,



resources, and access, while the other remains divided across refugee camps, occupied territory, and exile.

The political effect of the stalemate frame is to depoliticize occupation by refiguring it as a procedural issue. Delays appear unfortunate but politically neutral, rather than the product of sustained political choices and conflicting international interests. Darbouche and Zoubir (2008) show that the persistence of the conflict reflects a contradiction between international legality and geopolitical calculation, which allows procedural maintenance to substitute for meaningful resolution. In this sense, “stalemate” is not only a description of the conflict’s current condition. It is a narrative that diffuses responsibility, naturalizes postponement, and makes the denial of self-determination appear administrative rather than political.

Dominant Media and Political Framing: Elite Narratives and Episodic Visibility

Media attention to the conflict is often intermittent, surfacing mainly during diplomatic crises or state-level controversy, further reinforcing political asymmetries. This episodic pattern encourages reporting that privileges immediate political developments over historical and legal context. Kerrouche and Badad’s (2025) analysis of Spanish press coverage shows that the conflict frame dominates across outlets, while heavy reliance on official sources helps normalize institutional narratives even when editorial positions differ. In such an environment, state actors gain disproportionate power to define the terms of debate; meanwhile, Sahrawi claims are more likely to appear as reactions to diplomacy rather than as the central issue in their own right.

This kind of information disorder operates through repetition, source hierarchy, and omission. The issue is not simply that competing narratives exist, but that some are structurally privileged by diplomatic institutions and the media. The result is a form of representational narrowing in which Western Sahara is repeatedly narrated through the lenses of interstate relations, crisis management, and diplomatic maneuvering. Meanwhile, the underlying question of decolonization is backgrounded. This explains why the conflict remains simultaneously internationally visible yet politically obscured.

From Armed Conflict to Information Warfare

The 1991 ceasefire did not end contestation so much as relocate it. As Sansanwal and Kamath (2020) note, the ceasefire marked a shift from military confrontation toward civilian and political forms of resistance, even as the underlying conflict over sovereignty remained unresolved. In this context, the struggle increasingly moved from the battlefield to the terrain of representation. Hamdani (2017) argues that the ceasefire shifted the conflict from “fighting on the ground” to “the realm of cyberspace,” when both Morocco and the Polisario Front began communicating online to influence domestic and international opinion (pp. 18–19). Where earlier phases of the conflict were shaped by military asymmetry and territorial confrontation, later phases have been increasingly shaped by the ability to manage legitimacy, visibility, and public perception. Hamdani (2017) demonstrates that both sides adopted online propaganda techniques to shape perceptions of the conflict, mobilize support, and secure narrative advantage.

The movement from armed struggle to informational struggle has also heightened the significance of surveillance and repression in the occupied territory. Porges (2019) emphasizes that Moroccan surveillance is not only extensive but visibly performative, creating an atmosphere in which protest is anticipated and contained before it can fully circulate. Under such conditions, control over information is inseparable from control over dissent. The struggle for self-determination thus unfolds not only through protest and diplomacy, but also through the contested production of evidence, testimony, and political visibility.

Reasserting Decolonization and Self-Determination

In response to the depoliticizing effects of dominant media and diplomatic framing, an effective Sahrawi counternarrative must reassert Western Sahara as a decolonization case rather than allowing it to be absorbed into the language of autonomy, territorial management, or endless negotiation. The legal and political significance of self-determination has been repeatedly displaced by frameworks that treat Moroccan sovereignty as the practical baseline and Sahrawi independence as a disruptive demand. Re-contextualization, therefore, requires restoring the core terms of the dispute: non-self-governing territory, occupation, and the unresolved denial of a promised act of self-determination (Darbouche and Zoubir, 2008; Zoubir, 2007).



This strategy is not simply semantic, but a necessary response to a political environment in which the conflict is often narrated in ways that dilute legal clarity. By re-centering international law and decolonization, the Sahrawi movement can challenge frames that portray autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty as the natural or realistic endpoint of the conflict. Narrative construction in this case depends on conceptual precision. If the issue is allowed to remain framed as a territorial dispute or frozen diplomatic problem, the normative basis of self-determination is weakened before the argument even begins.

Disrupting the Stalemate Frame: Naming Asymmetry, Delay, and Occupation

A second strategic task is to challenge the normalization of stalemate. The discourse of frozen conflict obscures the fact that delay is politically productive for the occupying power. It presents the absence of progress as mutual paralysis rather than as a condition structured by unequal control over territory, institutions, and external recognition. A more effective Sahrawi narrative must therefore politicize time itself. Rather than treating delay as unfortunate drift, it should be framed as an active mechanism through which occupation is consolidated, and decolonization is indefinitely deferred (Darbouche and Zoubir, 2008; Deubel, 2015).

This reframing is especially important because procedural language often masks substantive injustice. Negotiation, mediation, and diplomatic processes can appear constructive while leaving the underlying asymmetry intact. Countering information disorder in Western Sahara, therefore, requires more than correcting factual errors. It requires exposing how apparently neutral language naturalizes postponement and diffuses responsibility. To disrupt the stalemate frame is to restore the political structure of the conflict to view.

Building Credibility Through Political Continuity

A further narrative resource lies in the sustained existence of a Sahrawi political community that has reproduced institutions, governance practices, and collective identity despite dispossession. Fernández-Molina (2020) argues that the SADR occupies a distinctive position as both a parastate and a state in exile, combining limited territorial control with ongoing institutional continuity, diplomatic practice, and claims to sovereignty. This allows the movement



to frame itself as an existing political community that has maintained forms of governance under conditions of exile and constraint, rather than as an abstract national aspiration for statehood.

This type of framing can counter narratives that seek to reduce the movement to dependency, proxy politics, or diplomatic symbolism. The persistence of Sahrawi institutions, representation, and political rituals demonstrates that the movement's claim is historical, ongoing and embodied. In narrative terms, this provides an important bridge between grievance and capacity: the movement can present itself as rooted in dispossession, but also as demonstrably capable of sustaining collective political life.

Transnational and Digital Communication: Sustaining Visibility Beyond Crisis Moments

Digital and transnational communication remain crucial to countering the episodic visibility that has long shaped the Western Sahara issue. Hamdani's (2017) analysis of online propaganda shows that the digital sphere has become a central arena of contestation. The strategic value of digital communication extends beyond immediate message competition: it also lies in the possibility of building more continuous forms of external visibility, particularly through solidarity networks, multilingual communication, and human-rights-oriented advocacy.

The conflict often enters international media during moments of diplomatic rupture; as such, reactive communication alone is insufficient. A more durable strategy requires anticipatory and sustained narrative infrastructure: communication that keeps occupation, repression, exile, and resource dispossession legible even outside major news cycles. In this respect, visibility itself becomes a strategic objective.

Narrative Survival as Political Resistance

Western Sahara demonstrates that in hostile information environments, narrative strategy is a form of political struggle. Where occupation, surveillance, diplomatic asymmetry, and media proceduralism shape what can be seen and said, the preservation of a coherent counternarrative becomes an act of resistance in its own right. The central challenge is not only to rebut hostile frames, but also to maintain a historically grounded, legally precise, and institutionally credible account of Sahrawi self-determination across exile, occupation, and international neglect.



The broader lesson of the case is that information disorder in self-determination struggles often operates less through direct falsehood than through depoliticizing frames, controlled visibility, and the narrowing of interpretive possibilities. Western Sahara reveals how easily decolonization can be recoded as deadlock, and how difficult it is to sustain a counternarrative under conditions of repression and diplomatic marginalization. Yet it also shows that narrative continuity, when grounded in law, history, and lived political community, can serve as a durable form of resistance against erasure.

Questionnaire Results

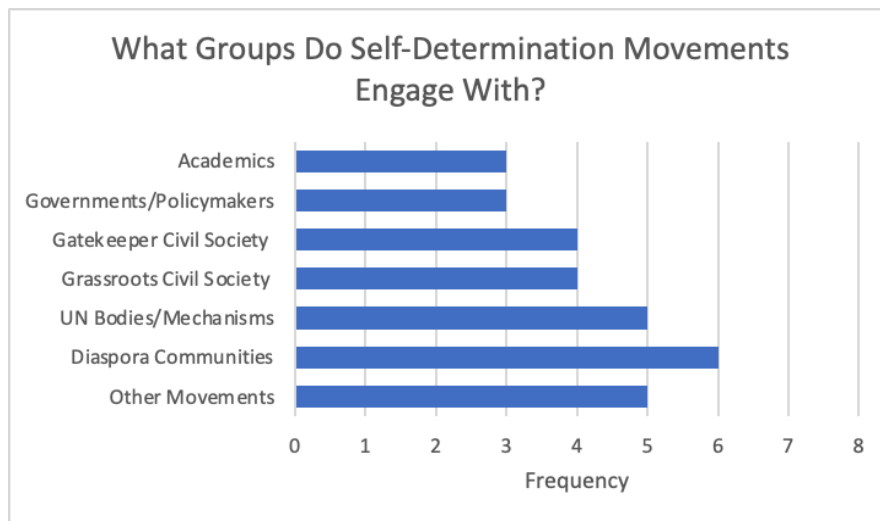
To supplement the case studies, we surveyed UNPO member states, gaining first-hand insights into how regionally diverse self-determination movements face misrepresentation and information disorder, and what strategies have successfully reclaimed narrative power. In all, eight movements participated: the Khmer Kampuchea-Krom Federation, Catalan National Assembly, Gilgit Baltistan United Movement, World Uyghur Congress, Parbatya Chattagram Jaha Samhait Samiti (Jumma Indigenous People of the Chittagong Hill Tracts), Douar Ha Frankiz (Breton), Homeland Study Group Foundation (Western Togoland), and European Hong Kong Diaspora Alliance.

These groups feel misrepresented by the traditional media. Common narratives employed by the mainstream media often align with, thereby justifying, the occupying powers' authority. Movements report struggling with major communication challenges, the most prominent of which include crafting narratives (7), countering mis/disinformation (6), and social media strategy (6). Hate speech, stereotypes, tokenism, labels of 'extremism' and 'terrorism,' libel, and erasure work to delegitimize self-determination movements around the world.

That being said, all eight movements have dedicated social media/communications teams, advocating via Facebook, X, YouTube, Instagram, and, to a lesser extent, TikTok, BlueSky, LinkedIn, Telegram, Websites, and MailChimp. All eight movements use a human rights narrative framework, and the majority of movements also employ democracy (6), security (5), and decolonization (4) narratives in their advocacy.



Unrepresented nations and peoples engage with a diverse variety of stakeholders, recognizing the important role of transnational advocacy in forwarding narratives of self-determination. The most central groups are diaspora communities, UN bodies/mechanisms, other movements, and civil society. Member-based organizations like UNPO provide important spaces for collaboration between movements, diasporas, and the international sphere, enabling the dispersion of lessons learned and promising practices between members and their allies.



Movements seek inspiration from other self-determination movements that have successfully achieved recognition by the international community, with role models emerging from the secession movements of Timor-Leste, the Baltic States, and Ireland. They have also drawn their own lessons from successful strategies in their respective advocacy:

Movement	Strategy
Khmer-Krom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Linking local repression to international legal obligations - Framing climate change as indigenous survival - Highlighting forced confessions and religious repression - Engaging youth interns and diaspora students to amplify content digitally - Connecting advocacy to trade agreements and business responsibility
Uyghur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Framing the situation as genocide, crimes against humanity, and forced labour - Connecting forced labour to international supply chains - Using credible evidence: survivor testimony, satellite imagery, leaked documents

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coalition-building with journalists, researchers, and civil society - Centring personal stories of victims and families
Western Togoland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Countering information from the government through constant press releases - Raising awareness at the UN Human Rights Council

Recurring in these promising practices is the importance of locating grassroots self-determination struggles within international rights-based frameworks and global supply chains. The ability to engage with diverse transnational advocacy networks, including human rights bodies and diaspora communities, is a crucial communication strategy to embolden widespread international action.

Recommendations:

Lessons for Self-Determination in Contested Information Environments

Across the cases of Palestine, Western Sahara, and Somaliland, a set of structural challenges emerges with striking consistency. Each movement operates within an information environment shaped by dominant powers with disproportionate access to media institutions, diplomatic channels, and definitional authority over political language. Each risks having claims depoliticized, absorbed into frameworks that serve other interests, or simply rendered invisible. And each has, to varying degrees, developed strategies to resist these conditions.

The following recommendations synthesize the shared lessons from these three cases into an integrated framework. The shared lessons from these cases are supplemented by insights from our questionnaire delivered to UNPO member states. Rather than treating each movement's experience in isolation, this section identifies the cross-cutting practices and principles that have proven most consequential and most transferable to self-determination movements.

1. Own Your Frame Before Others Claim It

The most consequential lesson across all these cases is that the framing of a struggle is determined by who defines it first. In each case, dominant actors, including occupying states, major diplomatic institutions, and mainstream media outlets, have established baseline narratives that movements must contest from a position of disadvantage. Palestinian suffering is



filtered through an Israeli security frame. Western Sahara is processed as a territorial dispute or a frozen diplomatic impasse. Somaliland is introduced to international audiences as a "breakaway region," with Somalia's territorial arguments positioned as the natural starting point. Similarly, repression against the Uyghur population, through forced education and labour programmes, is framed as a 'poverty alleviation' campaign. The implication is not simply that movements should communicate more assertively. The work of framing must be proactive and anticipatory. Movements must define the terms of their struggle in the language of decolonization, self-determination, and international law before major diplomatic events, judicial rulings, or media crises create conditions in which default frames harden. Once elite narratives crystallize around a crisis moment, inserting movement-centered framing requires significantly more effort. The Palestinian movement's re-centring of human rights law and the Sahrawi insistence on framing Western Sahara as an unfinished decolonization case rather than a territorial dispute both illustrate what is at stake when this battle is either won or lost.

In practice, this means:

- **Anchor the core claim in international legal norms:** define the struggle in the language of non-self-governing territory, occupation, and the right to self-determination rather than the language of autonomy arrangements or administrative impasse.
- **Lead with the origin story:** movements that ground their claims in historical specificity and lived experience are more resistant to reframing than those that rely solely on procedural or strategic arguments. Somaliland's under-deployment of its 1988 genocide narrative illustrates the cost of leaving this ground unoccupied.
- **Prepare messaging infrastructure before it is needed:** backgrounders, legal primers, and accessible historical context should be drafted and ready to deploy before major news cycles, diplomatic moments, or recognition events occur.

2. Name and Disrupt Depoliticizing Language

One of the most consistent mechanisms of information disorder across all three cases is not outright fabrication of fact but the use of language that appears neutral while encoding political judgments. In the Palestinian context, the qualifier " Hamas-run " is applied systematically to Gazan institutions while no analogous framing is applied to Israeli government bodies. Additionally, terms like " genocide, " " occupied territory, " and " refugee camp " are actively suppressed in editorial guidelines. In Western Sahara, describing the conflict as " frozen " or " in



deadlock" makes the absence of resolution appear to be a technical or procedural condition rather than the product of sustained political choices. In Somaliland, routine use of "breakaway," "self-declared," and "unrecognized region" embeds the territorial-integrity presumption into the vocabulary through which the claim reaches general audiences. For the Khmer-Krom in the Mekong Delta, their claims to Indigeneity and self-determination have been reframed as "minority issues," thereby limiting the state's obligations.

These linguistic patterns are not incidental. They are structurally reproduced through beat journalism, institutional source hierarchies, and editorial convention. Correcting them requires more than sending corrections to individual journalists. Movements must consistently name these patterns, explain their political function, and offer precise, legally grounded alternatives that can, over time, enter mainstream usage.

In practice, this means:

- **Identify and document recurring linguistic patterns:** track which terms are used, how frequently, and by which outlets. Systematic monitoring builds the evidentiary base for public advocacy and media engagement.
- **Produce accessible language guides:** offer journalists, advocates, and policymakers clear alternatives grounded in international legal vocabulary, with explanations of why specific terms matter.
- **Politicize the stalemate frame where it appears:** rather than accepting "frozen conflict" or "deadlock" as descriptions, movements should insist that delay is politically productive for the occupying or dominant party.

3. Diversify Stories and Storytellers

A dominant tendency in the misrepresentation of self-determination movements is to reduce complex, multi-layered political communities to a single, often threatening, image. In Palestine, this is the terrorist. The Uyghur and Catalan movements deal with similarly delegitimizing label of 'extremist.' In Somaliland, this is the failed-state exception. In Western Sahara, this is an abstract diplomatic dispute without visible human subjects. In Brittany and the Chittahong Hill Tracts, stereotypes of alcoholism, low education, and poverty are used to invalidate suffering and justify occupation. The counternarrative strategy must work against this reductionism by diversifying both the stories told and the people telling them.



The Palestinian case offers the clearest illustration of what this can look like in practice. Through TikTok, Instagram, and X, citizen journalists like Motaz Azaiza and Bisan Owda have brought the texture of daily life, resistance, grief, and resilience under occupation to global audiences in ways that bypass editorial gatekeeping. Practices of everyday resistance, like farming, litigation, community organizing, and cultural expression, are framed not as subsidiary to political struggle but as integral to it. This approach does more than generate sympathy; it builds the empathetic infrastructure for wider mobilization. The Somaliland case adds a further dimension: diaspora networks and civil society actors reach registers and audiences that formal diplomacy cannot access, making the coherence of the movement's external identity something simultaneously cultivated across multiple channels.

In practice, this means:

- **Platform grassroots and citizen voices:** amplify on-the-ground perspectives, particularly those that complicate the dominant representation of the movement.
- **Champion the full spectrum of resistance:** reject binaries that render only certain forms of action as politically legible. Cultural production, legal advocacy, and community life are part of the movement's story.
- **Engage diaspora networks as narrative producers:** diaspora communities operate across languages, jurisdictions, and institutional contexts. Their role in narrative production should be supported and coordinated rather than treated as peripheral.
- **Use digital platforms strategically:** hashtags, short-form video, memes, and satire are not substitutes for political argument but vehicles for reaching audiences, particularly younger generations, who consume information through these channels.

4. Tailor Messages Without Losing the Core Claim

A recurring tension across all three cases is between the need to adapt messaging for different audiences and the risk that that adaptation displaces the movement's fundamental demand. Somaliland's experience is instructive here. By framing its case in terms of strategic geography, port infrastructure, and democratic governance for different Western and Gulf audiences, it has attracted significant diplomatic attention. But as external actors have increasingly engaged with Somaliland primarily as a strategic asset, the underlying recognition



question has been set aside. Visibility has come at the cost of progress on the core claim. The Palestinian movement faces an analogous challenge: as the language of human rights has gained traction, it must continue to link these frames to concrete political demands rather than allowing solidarity to remain purely expressive. For the Khmer-Krom, in their collaboration with the greater environmental movement to protect the Mekong Delta, their call for self-determination has been sidelined. Recalibrating the debate, Khmer-Krom have found success in emphasizing the integral role of Indigenous cultural survival in climate adaptation to diverse audiences, including the global environmental movement and Vietnam's international trading partners. Effective audience segmentation, therefore, is not simply a matter of using different language for different listeners. It requires monitoring how external actors translate and reframe movement narratives, and maintaining sufficient emphasis on the core self-determination claim to prevent it from disappearing within adjacent frameworks.

In practice, this means:

- **Adapt the argument, not the demand:** different audiences may respond to different arguments (legal, moral, strategic, historical), but each argument should be designed to lead back to the core claim, not substitute for it.
- **Monitor narrative translation actively:** track how external commentators, journalists, and policymakers are characterizing the movement's position. When the core claim is being absorbed into other frameworks, correct the record promptly.
- **Maintain normative grounding alongside strategic framing:** movements that rely exclusively on strategic or transactional arguments may secure engagement without advancing recognition. Legal and moral framing provides the foundation that strategic arguments cannot replace.

5. Protect Internal Credibility as a Narrative Asset

External legitimacy is not built solely through communication. It depends on the evidentiary base that a movement's actual political practice provides. This is most clearly illustrated by the Somaliland case, where the democracy narrative, the movement's most powerful external asset, is conditional on Somaliland's governance living up to the values it claims to embody. When internal political practice falls short, external advocates lose the grounds on which they defend the narrative, and opponents gain a counter-narrative that is



difficult to rebut. The 2023 conflict in Las Anod illustrates the speed with which internal fractures can be incorporated into external commentary and used to challenge identity claims. For the Palestinian movement, a similar dynamic operates regarding the representation of Palestinian life and agency. Counternarratives that humanize and diversify Palestinian experience are most effective when they engage honestly with complex internal debates, rather than presenting a uniformly heroic image that is vulnerable to challenge. Western Sahara's experience highlights the persistence of Sahrawi institutions and political continuity, despite decades of exile and constraint, and provides evidence that the movement can present itself not only as a people with grievances, but as a functioning political community with demonstrated capacity.

In practice, this means:

- **Recognize that governance and narrative are inseparable:** gaps between claimed values and practice undermine external advocacy and provide ammunition for opponents.
- **Engage honestly with internal complexity:** movements that acknowledge internal debate and complexity are more resilient to counter-narratives than those that project false uniformity.
- **Frame institutional continuity as evidence:** the sustained existence of political institutions, civic practices, and collective identity, even under conditions of exile or repression, constitutes a form of argument in its own right.

6. Build Long-Term Narrative Infrastructure

Perhaps the most consequential structural gap shared across all cases is the absence of sustained, anticipatory narrative infrastructure. Western Sahara's media visibility is episodic, surging during diplomatic crises and receding otherwise. Somaliland's most powerful narrative asset, its origin story, is consistently under-deployed, allowing territorial-integrity framing to fill the vacuum during key news cycles. Palestinian voices, despite growing traction on social media, represent only 2% of opinion pieces published in US newspapers on Palestine since the 1970s.

Reactive communication, responding to hostile frames after they have crystallized, is necessary but insufficient. Movements must invest in the kind of sustained, institutionally embedded narrative infrastructure that keeps their claims visible, legible, and accurately framed



even outside major news cycles. This includes long-term relationships with journalists, researchers, and policy analysts; multilingual communication strategies that reach audiences beyond the Anglophone West; and the cultivation of transnational solidarity networks that can amplify movement narratives through trusted intermediaries. For UNPO members, the most responsive group to international advocacy has been diaspora communities and other self-determination movements. Investing in these reciprocal relationships, sharing successful strategies, and learning from other movements can expand the reach of messaging. For example, the Uyghur movement has successfully built broad coalitions with journalists, researchers, and civil society, providing direct and credible evidence (survivor testimony, satellite imagery, leaked documents) to international audiences, thereby building long-term relationships.

In practice, this means:

- **Invest in relationships, not only campaigns:** durable narrative credibility is built through consistent long-term engagement with journalists, researchers, civil society, and policymakers rather than through single high-visibility interventions.
- **Communicate continuously, not only reactively:** establish multilingual, multi-platform channels for ongoing narrative production to maintain visibility between crisis moments.
- **Build transnational solidarity infrastructure:** transnational networks that share frames, amplify messages, and provide credible external voices are among the most valuable assets to develop.

Conclusion: Narrative Power as Political Power

The cases examined in this report confirm what critical media scholars have long argued: information is never politically neutral, and the struggle over how a conflict is named, framed, and rendered legible is inseparable from the struggle itself. For self-determination movements operating in hostile information environments, narrative strategy is not supplementary. It is a primary site of political contestation.

What these cases collectively demonstrate is that information disorder in these contexts operates less through outright fabrication than through depoliticizing frames, controlled visibility,



source hierarchy, and the quiet normalization of asymmetrical language. Contesting these conditions requires more than rebutting specific claims. It requires building the institutional, relational, and communicative infrastructure through which a movement can sustain its own narrative over time, and doing so proactively, before others define the terms of debate.

The six recommendations above are not a formula. Different movements operate under different constraints, with different histories, resources, and audiences. But the underlying principle is consistent: narrative power, like political power, must be actively built, sustained, and protected. In hostile information environments, survival as a legible political community is itself an act of resistance.

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