



# VISIBLE WARS, FORGOTTEN WARS AND WORLD ORDER. MEDIA ATTENTION, COGNITIVE COMPETITION AND GLOBAL RESPONSE

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The current information environment has intensified competition for salience and widened the gap between what happens and what becomes visible. The unequal visibility of armed conflicts reveals a hierarchy of attention that is neither accidental nor politically neutral. Attention has material effects, not only affecting the behaviour of actors inside conflict zones but also with significant international consequences.

**W**ar is no longer fought only through force, territory and destruction. It is also fought through visibility, legitimacy and emotional salience. Some conflicts become permanent media events, shaping diplomatic agendas, humanitarian mobilisation and public debate far beyond the battlefield. Others remain strategically important yet fade from international attention, even when they produce grave human suffering and regional instability. This disparity suggests that the visibility of war is not determined solely by the scale of violence. It is also shaped by geopolitical relevance, narrative accessibility, communicative capacity and the architecture of digital platforms. In this sense, visibility has become a strategic resource in contemporary international relations (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Reuters Institute, 2024).

The unequal visibility of armed conflicts reveals a hierarchy of attention that is neither accidental nor politically neutral. Wars involving major powers, European security, migration pressure, energy routes or highly symbolic narratives are more likely to dominate the international media cycle (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Reuters Institute, 2024). By contrast, conflicts located in politically peripheral regions, involving fragmented armed actors or lacking sustained journalistic access

often receive less durable coverage, even when their humanitarian consequences are severe (CARE, 2026; Norwegian Refugee Council, 2025). Public relevance is therefore not distributed evenly across wars. It is filtered through geopolitical and communicative asymmetries. This hierarchy matters because attention has material effects. A highly visible conflict is more likely to trigger diplomatic

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initiatives, emergency funding, elite statements and sustained public engagement (CARE, 2026; Norwegian Refugee Council, 2025). A low-visibility conflict is more easily normalised as chronic instability and pushed to the margins of internation-

al concern. In practice, visibility affects which crises are treated as urgent, which victims are recognised and which theatres of violence become part of the global political imagination. The result is a politics of conflict visibility in which media exposure becomes part of the strategic structure of war itself. This hierarchy of visibility also has implications for international order. It shapes which crises receive diplomatic attention, institutional engagement and normative urgency, thereby influencing the priorities, selectivity and legitimacy of global governance.

## Attention economy and global hierarchy

The current information environment has widened the gap between what happens and what becomes visible. Digital abundance has not created equal awareness (Reuters Institute, 2024). On the contrary, it has intensified competition for salience. What circulates most widely is not always what is most devastating in human terms, but what is easiest to personalise, dramatise and amplify. Conflicts that produce dramatic footage, emotionally legible victims and simplified narrative roles are better adapted to fast media cycles than wars marked by fragmented actors, unclear frontlines or protracted violence (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Reuters Institute, 2024).

FIGURE 1. CONFLICT VISIBILITY CYCLE

Source: Author's elaboration.



From conflict onset to policy salience: visibility increases through media selection and platform amplification

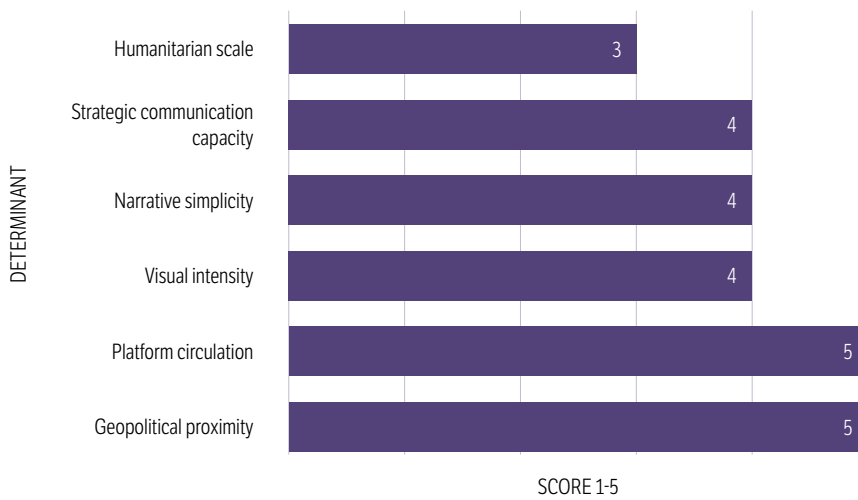


### BOX 1. WHAT MAKES A WAR VISIBLE IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA?

A war becomes highly visible when several conditions converge: geopolitical relevance, emotional imagery, access for journalists, narrative clarity and strong digital circulation. Visibility is therefore not a neutral reflection of severity. It is the result of a competitive process shaped by media routines, platform incentives and strategic communication. In a saturated information environment, conflicts that can be rapidly simplified and emotionally coded are more likely to dominate public attention. Wars that are remote, fragmented, difficult to film or hard to narrate in binary terms are structurally disadvantaged. A forgotten conflict is not a conflict about which nothing is ever reported. It is a conflict that remains below the threshold of sustained international attention despite serious humanitarian, political or regional consequences.

FIGURE 2. DETERMINANTS OF CONFLICT VISIBILITY

Source: Author's elaboration | Higher scores indicate stronger influence on global attention.



The issue is not simply that some wars are ignored. It is that others are better positioned to dominate the attention economy through strategic communication, algorithmic circulation and geopolitical resonance.

This creates a self-reinforcing pattern. Once a conflict reaches a high threshold of visibility, it benefits from recursive amplification across television, online news, social media and political speech (Reuters Institute, 2024). Coverage generates commentary, commentary generates reaction, and reaction extends the life of the original event. Other conflicts remain below that threshold and struggle to enter the wider public agenda. They do not disappear because they are irrelevant.

They disappear because they cannot compete as effectively within the infrastructures of attention.

This attention economy does not operate in a political vacuum. Geopolitical proximity still matters. Conflicts close to Europe, involving Western actors or affecting strategic corridors are more likely to be framed as immediately consequential. The same applies to wars with clear implications for energy, migration, alliance politics or regional order. Media hierarchies therefore reflect not only editorial choices but wider assumptions about which spaces, populations and crises count as strategically meaningful (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

#### Cognitive dimension

This pattern can be analysed through the lens of cognitive warfare (Marsili, 2023; du Cluzel, 2020). Contemporary conflict increasingly extends into informational and cognitive domains where actors seek to influence beliefs, emotions and judgement in order to secure strategic advantage.

Applied to war visibility, this means that media attention should not be read as a neutral mirror of events. It is a contested space in which states, non-state actors, journalists, platforms and online communities compete to impose relevance. Cognitive competition includes disinformation, but it also extends beyond falsehood. It involves framing, repetition, selective amplification, emotional coding, symbolic simplification and the strategic timing of communication (Marsili, 2025; Reuters Institute, 2024). The key issue is not only whether information is true or false, but whether it is capable of structuring perception in a crowded and accelerated environment. This helps explain why some wars become cognitively central even when other conflicts are equally or more destructive. The issue is not simply that some wars are ignored. It is that others are better positioned to dominate the attention economy through strategic communication, algorithmic circulation and geopolitical resonance (Marsili, 2023; du Cluzel, 2020).

This framework also helps move beyond a simplistic moral critique of journalism. Forgotten wars are not only the product of negligence or compassion fatigue. They are often the outcome of unequal communicative capacities, uneven platform incentives and asymmetrical access to transnational audiences. Actors capable of sustaining visual output, narrative coherence and emotional mobilisation are more likely to remain visible over time. In that sense, visibility becomes part of conflict strategy rather than a secondary by-product of war (Marsili, 2025).

#### Strategic effects on international order

Selective visibility has significant international consequences. First, it can distort public understanding of global insecurity by concentrating concern on a limited number of crises while obscuring cumulative instability elsewhere. Second, it can influence foreign policy priorities by privileging conflicts that produce domestic resonance, reputational value or sustained media returns. Third, it can shape humanitarian response by affecting donor attention, advocacy capacity and the tempo of institutional reaction (CARE, 2026; Nor-



wegian Refugee Council, 2025). What is seen tends to attract resources. What fades from view risks becoming politically and diplomatically residual. Selective attention also shapes patterns of institutional prioritisation and legitimacy within global governance (Hurrell, 2007; Barnett & Duvall, 2005).

Visibility also affects the behaviour of actors inside conflict zones. Armed groups, governments and external sponsors increasingly understand that communicative performance matters (Marsili, 2023; du Cluzel, 2020). They adapt messages, images and claims to the expectations of distant audiences. As a result, war is not only reported but staged, framed and circulated with an awareness of its media afterlife. The boundary between battlefield action, propaganda and symbolic performance becomes increasingly porous. In this sense, cognitive competition does not merely influence public perception; it also affects how international actors interpret responsibility, urgency and the acceptable boundaries of intervention (Marsili, 2025; Hurrell, 2007). This is one reason why the struggle for attention cannot be separated from the struggle for power.

A more adequate reading of present-day insecurity should therefore ask not only who fights, where and with what means, but also who is seen, by whom and under which informational conditions. The hierarchy between visible and forgotten wars is not external to war. It is one of the mechanisms through which contemporary international order is prioritised, interpreted and acted upon in global governance (Marsili, 2025; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Hurrell, 2007; Barnett & Duvall, 2005). ●

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