

“The Palestinian narrative is fragmented, and children are its first media victims”.. interview with Dr. Nishat al-Aqtash



In breaking coverage, a single line is enough to close the book on an entire life. “A girl was killed,” “a child was arrested”, and then the news moves on quickly, leaving behind everything that breaking news cannot contain: the name, the face, the home, the school, the fear, the small dreams, and the details of life that make a child a human being, not a number in a daily tally.

The problem begins with the way the story is told. In much coverage, the event overshadows the person at its center, and Palestinian childhood is reduced to a shocking image or a fleeting report, while the life that existed before the loss remains outside the frame, as if it were invisible.

In this interview, we speak with Dr. Nishat al-Aqtash, a professor of media at Birzeit University and its former head of the media department, about one of the most persistent problems in coverage: the image of the Palestinian child in the media, and how journalism can restore that child as a complete story, not a passing number on a news ticker.

We also try to open broader questions with him about the responsibility of

Palestinian and Arab media, the limits of speed in coverage, and the absence of human storytelling when the child appears only at the moment of death or arrest, and is absent from everything that came before.

To the interview..

How is the image of the Palestinian child presented in the media today, and how has that image evolved in recent years?

For many years, the global media dealt with Palestinian child victims as mere numbers. It would be said that three Palestinian children were killed, without even indicating who killed them. Arab media, meanwhile, was weak in its early stages and unable to confront the Israeli narrative or present a different one.

Later, some Arab channels emerged that began offering more detailed and in-depth content, with Al Jazeera unquestionably at the forefront of these satellite channels, and it remains so to this day. These channels managed to break the barrier in front of global media and presented a different narrative sourced from their correspondents on the ground, not from the Jewish Zionist agencies that long dominated the narrative circulating globally.

After that, dozens of news satellite channels appeared, including Palestinian channels such as Palestine Today and other partisan broadcasters, which began presenting content about Palestine in a way that was closer to reality. Even so, to this day we still speak of martyred children as numbers and victims. It is better than before, but it is still not enough.

Then came the first and second intifadas, followed by the wars on Gaza, which exposed the Israeli narrative before the world. The Israeli narrative is no longer received as it once was; it has become the subject of widespread doubt and is increasingly seen as a false narrative.

During the period from the first intifada until 2005, around 10,000 Palestinians were killed, including 6,000 children. Yet hardly anyone remembers the names of those children, except for Muhammad al-Durrah, because a French camera carried his image to the world.

The same was true of the girl Iman Haju, who was killed inside her home, prompting a foreign correspondent to confront the Israeli army spokesperson, saying that their talk of the “precision of the weapon” could not justify the killing of an infant girl sleeping in her bed inside her home.

These scenes clearly helped change the image of the Palestinian child in the global media.

Do you think the media succeeds in conveying “the child’s story,” or does it merely convey “the event” associated with the child?

To this day, Palestinian and Arab media still chase the event more than they convey the child’s story itself. The scale of Israeli crimes, the pace of events, and the large number of those killed have left the media preoccupied with rapid follow-up, from one martyr to the next and from one massacre to another, until it can barely catch its breath.

Journalists today work under enormous pressure. Before one martyr’s blood has dried, there are already more martyrs. As a result, coverage has often remained quick and abbreviated, focused on relaying the daily event more than pausing over the human stories of children and their families.

Palestinian and Arab media also move constantly from one village to another and from one checkpoint to another in an attempt to keep up with rapidly unfolding facts. This is different from media that operates according to a clear vision and strategy, allowing it to present the Palestinian child as a human being with a life, a story, and distinct features, not merely a number in breaking news.

Why does the Palestinian child so often become a number in the news instead of being presented as an independent human story?

A set of factors has pushed media coverage of Palestinian children’s issues into this rapid and superficial form. The first is the density of events, the scale of the crimes, and the number of those killed, which has left the media preoccupied with the daily chase for news more than with producing deep, detailed human coverage.

But the most important factor is the absence of a clear strategic media plan, whether on the part of the Palestinian Authority or the Palestinian parties. There is a major difference between media that merely follows the daily event and media that has a clear vision of what should be presented to the world and how it should be presented. Unfortunately, that vision still is not sufficiently clear in Palestinian media.

In addition, partisan Palestinian media has been consumed by internal Palestinian conflicts, distancing it from deep human coverage and weakening its ability to transform Palestinian children from numbers in news bulletins into voices and real human stories.

All of these factors, along with field and political pressures, have made media coverage of Palestinian children’s issues to this day closer to fast event coverage than to deep human storytelling.

To what extent do the nature of media platforms – television, websites, social media – and the speed of news publishing affect the way a child’s story is told and the depth of its coverage?

Social media has great effectiveness, and it has indeed broken some of the barriers that once controlled traditional media — that is true. But at the same time, we must recognize that in practice we are playing on the “Zionists’” field, in the sense that we are operating within platforms we do not fully own and whose rules we do not control.

For example, on Facebook, posting the Palestinian flag may lead to an account being banned, and publishing phrases supportive of Palestinians may result in content being deleted or removed. So we are dealing with a digital environment that operates under clear censorship policies.

I spoke about this at media conferences 10 years ago, when I raised the idea of the need to create Arab search engines, similar to what China, Russia, and India have done, so that control would be removed from Zionist lobbies and from the dominance of Western platforms.

In this context, we have often found ourselves on social media resorting to changing words. When writing the word “Hamas,” for example, the letter h or s is altered, or an alternative expression such as “the green one” is used, because electronic censorship relies on tracking specific words, and once they are entered, the content is automatically deleted or restricted, without any actual person reviewing every post.

Here lies one of the core problems. At one stage — especially with the early explosion of social media in 2011 — these platforms managed to break some barriers and open wider space for publishing. But as their systems evolved, their experts became more alert to these spaces, and any content understood as supportive of Palestinians or critical of Israel became subject to bans or reduced reach. So in practice, we operate within these platforms, but according to their rules, not ours.

It is also notable that many Palestinians have not seriously asked the question: Why don’t we have independent Palestinian, Arab, or Islamic search engines or applications? Is that really so difficult or impossible?

In reality, no. Today there are between 46,000 and 47,000 applications and platforms in the world similar to Facebook and social media platforms. But the question remains: Where are we in this field? It has been said that there was an individual Palestinian attempt in this direction, but the question remains: How far did it get, and where is it now?

How does coverage of the Palestinian child in international media differ from coverage of children in other conflict zones?

Israeli media. If a child is injured or killed, the event is not presented as a passing

news item or a momentary incident. Rather, it is treated as a fully fledged media issue that receives broad and concentrated coverage, within a clear strategic vision for managing media coverage.

This media does not merely relay the event; it works to build a complete narrative around it, through precise detail about the child’s life, background, and human environment, giving the story a highly influential emotional and human dimension. This approach was more effective and clearer before 2023, when the ability to manage and shape the narrative within a coherent media structure was more present and influential.

It has the ability to produce and reshape the media narrative. For example, when Muhammad al-Durrah was killed, international media coverage underwent a sharp shift, and experts in strategic communication and public relations were brought in to offer approaches based on crafting a complete media “story,” not merely relaying an incident.

At first, narratives were put forward saying that an innocent child had been killed in Gaza, along with references to opening an investigation and holding those responsible for his death accountable. But soon afterward, within a short period, a counter-narrative emerged promoting the idea that the child had been killed by “Palestinian terrorists,” and this narrative was pushed into media circulation. As the promotion continued, that narrative expanded and became entrenched in some media spaces.

Later, the scene was reframed through additional, more complex narratives, through which the event was re-presented in multiple and contradictory ways, as part of an ongoing process of reshaping and directing media consciousness. This clearly reflects that what is taking place is strategic management of the media narrative, not merely spontaneous or emotional transmission of an event.

The issue is not just superficial coverage or a momentary emotional reaction, and it cannot be reduced to going to the mother of a martyred child and asking her how she feels after losing her son. That kind of question does not rise to the level of deep coverage if it is detached from building the full narrative.

What is required in media terms is to unpack the child’s life itself: his feelings, his school, his books, his toys, his friends, and all the details that shape the contours of his human existence, so that he is presented as a complete story, not as a passing incident or a shocking moment. Even asking the mother how she feels in a moment of such immense loss remains, by its nature, incapable of encapsulating a human experience of that weight.

So it can be said that the media scene is moving without a vision. Palestinian media, despite its many outlets — around 29 satellite channels and hundreds of

thousands of websites, many of them tied to different funders and entities — reflects this in the independence and consistency of its media discourse.

We are living through a real Palestinian catastrophe. Were it not for the scale of the bloodshed that exposed Israel before the world, a large part of international public opinion would still be dealing with reality through a ready-made image or “mask,” far removed from the truth on the ground. In some Western contexts, perceptions have reached misleading or inaccurate levels, including claims that “the settlers in the West Bank are Palestinians,” which reflects the scale of confusion and misunderstanding among segments of the public.

All of this expresses the height of negligence in dealing with the Palestinian narrative on multiple levels.

By contrast, one of the most prominent aspects of the problem lies in the Palestinian media reality itself. Official Palestinian media is preoccupied with personalization and narrow circles — the president, the government, ministers, and directors — with a focus on polishing images more than building a comprehensive national discourse. That makes this media closer to partisan media than to inclusive national media, which negatively affects its effectiveness and role.

Why does coverage often focus on the moment of killing or arrest, while the child’s life before that remains absent?

There is a clear flaw in the media work environment itself. Many journalists have been trained according to the logic of the “scoop” as the primary goal, so the focus is on catching up with a report from any agency and going straight to cover funerals and the immediate moment of the martyr as the fastest material to publish.

In this context, thinking outside that framework is not given real space. Departing from the prevailing pattern becomes something that is not encouraged, whether because of workplace pressure or the absence of professional support, leading to the reproduction of the traditional form of coverage: a quick report, a funeral image, then a move to another event.

As a result, the task of conveying the initial news and the first image is left to the agencies, while what should happen afterward is a move toward building deeper journalistic stories, something that often does not happen sufficiently.

Today’s world has come to favor short content and quick videos, and audiences are no longer prepared to follow long reports that may run for half an hour or more. In this context, the nature of media consumption changes, and speed and brevity become the main determinants of a piece of content’s reach.

As a result, some children’s stories appear and remain present in media memory, while others quickly disappear. Often this is not tied to a clear media plan, but to spontaneous factors such as the chance of coverage, the presence of a powerful image, or an unconventional mode of presentation that makes the child appear as a human being rather than a number. In such cases, “media luck” becomes the decisive factor, not prior planning.

As for the density of images of child victims, it has a complex effect on audiences. On the one hand, it may strengthen sympathy and increase awareness; on the other, it may lead to the opposite result: a state of “emotional numbing” or normalization of pain due to intense repetition. Over time, audiences may lose the ability to respond to shocking scenes, not because the tragedy is any less severe, but because repetition has weakened its impact.

So it can be said that coverage is often governed less by studied media planning than by a fast, spontaneous rhythm shaped by the nature of platforms and audience behavior more than by a clear narrative strategy.

How can a journalist balance reporting the news accurately and quickly with preserving the child’s dignity and humanity during coverage?

The idea of “reporting the news quickly” is tied to what some American journalists and academics have written about the concept of speed in publishing and coverage. But that model, as it is usually presented, does not necessarily meet the needs of the Palestinian context.

What Palestinian media needs is not simply a rush to report the news quickly, but a narrative capacity to depict reality as it is, with precision and clarity, far from emotionalism, sentimental language, or grandiose terminology.

What is needed is a media language capable of presenting the event as it is, without reduction or verbal loading, and in a way that allows the recipient to understand reality objectively. In this context, the issue of word choice becomes prominent. It is not enough to use general or abstract phrases; clear and direct information must be provided that accurately reflects the nature of the event.

Instead of settling for vague descriptions, meaning should be conveyed through details and facts that allow a deeper understanding of reality, without turning the discourse into slogans.

Hence, the essential need is for a journalist who has the ability to convey reality with this precision and balance. This kind of journalist does in fact exist, but the problem is that the opportunities available to them remain limited in many media contexts.

In your view, what does the media need today so that the Palestinian child does

not become merely a number or a passing image?

Palestinian media must be Palestinian first. There are several levels of this media. First, there is official media affiliated with the Palestinian Authority and funded by it, which is often preoccupied with a discourse centered on polishing the authority and the leadership and highlighting their achievements in a promotional way.

Second, there is partisan media linked to political factions, whether in the context of Fatah or Hamas, and it is heavily preoccupied with the internal struggle between these parties instead of focusing on building an inclusive national narrative.

Third, there is externally funded media, which is widespread and whose orientations differ according to its funding sources, since the funding party directly or indirectly affects tone and editorial policy, even if this is not explicitly declared.

As for international media, it often tends to fall in line with the Israeli narrative through multiple tools such as funding, advertising, and networks of influence and media and political lobbies. Even so, it can be observed that in the recent period there has been a kind of relative slippage, such that Israel no longer has the same previous ability to fully control the media narrative.

But, as has been raised on more than one occasion, the absence of Palestinian media readiness makes it easy for the counter-narrative to be reproduced at any moment. The narrative can be overturned or reshaped over time if there is no coherent media discourse built on a clear strategy.

In the end, we still do not have an inclusive Palestinian national media. What is required is not the exclusion of partisan, official, or funded media, but its organization within a clear national framework that puts the public interest first and gives journalists real professional space to work. But reality indicates that this framework does not exist in the required form, and therefore the Palestinian narrative remains fragmented and unstable.