

The US media is biased against Palestinians

Compassion compels us to remember people journalists choose to forget.

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Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

A few weeks after Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack on Israeli soldiers and civilians, as bombs ripped apart schools, hospitals, homes, and churches along the narrow strip of Gaza, I joined my Jewish neighbors to pray. They were gripped by existential fear. Several had children in Israel. On the bench sat an empty chair, where it remains to this day—a place held for Israeli hostages whose fate is unknown. I prayed for their release, and over the coming months my empathy swelled as I learned their names and stories from their parents or from the news. In my prayers, I

pictured the faces of Or and Kfir, of Omer and Judi.

In January 2024, when the ceasefire I'd vigilantly prayed for came to fruition, I rejoiced that Israelis and Palestinians would return to their families and communities through the hostages-for-prisoners agreement. I watched the news to learn which Palestinians would be released, to see if families I knew in Aida refugee camp or Ramallah would be reunited with their loved ones.

Instead, each news report, from Fox News to ABC to NPR, gave me a number. I did not learn the names of Palestinians who were freed or the condition of their bodies and minds. I saw photos of Israeli hostages, gaunt and hopeful, but none of Palestinian child prisoners, incarcerated without trial for months based only on secret evidence. I saw no weeping mothers holding Palestinian daughters whose crime was protesting or joining a group banned by Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories.

For decades, media scholars have identified the way major news outlets consistently downplay Palestinian suffering. Writing in *Middle East Eye*, one scholar, Mohamad Elmasry, identifies a pattern: Journalists normalize the death and detention of Palestinians and the destruction of their homes as unfortunate but legitimate aspects of war. "Palestinian violence," however, "is barbaric and senseless."

At times these tropes escalate into anti-Palestinian racism. In an article for the American Bar Association, human rights attorney Deena Hurwitz describes this ideology: It "silences, excludes, erases, stereotypes, defames, and dehumanizes Palestinians"—whether Muslim, Christian, or neither—in order to justify violence against them and dismiss their collective identity, human rights, and dignity. Last year, Tom Friedman wrote a *New York Times* column that characterized Middle Eastern countries as insects, reducing complex geopolitics to animalistic savagery.

Anti-Palestinian bias was a feature of US reporting in the first year of the war. *The Nation* found that during that time, the four major Sunday morning news shows covered the conflict extensively, mentioning Gaza 2,557 times and hosting 20 Israeli guests—but just one Palestinian. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu—a primary architect of what Human Rights Watch, the UN, and Amnesty International all deem a genocide—appeared in five different episodes.

Similar bias was revealed by an open-source analysis, published in *The Intercept*, of articles during the weeks just after the Hamas attack and the subsequent bombing

of Gaza. *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* mentioned the deaths of Israelis 16 times more often than those of Palestinians, even as Israeli bombs killed thousands of Gazans a week. Journalists reserved for slain Israelis the terms *slaughter* (60 to 1) and *massacre* (120 to 1); Palestinians “died” or, in passive voice, were “killed.”

I know the name of one of the men released from an Israeli prison as part of the ceasefire deal, and I would like you to know it, too. The Israeli Defense Forces detained Mohammed al-Halabi during a routine drive between meetings in his work as a branch manager for World Vision. He spent 50 days in administrative detention—an Israeli judicial tool that allows Palestinians to be held without charges for up to six months or even longer with extensions. Prosecutors eventually charged him with diverting \$43 million of his employer’s funds to Hamas, an accusation both he and World Vision denied. As a result, World Vision suspended its work in Gaza while it underwent an external audit—which surfaced no misappropriation of funds. Despite overwhelming evidence of his innocence, al-Halabi was sentenced to 12 years in prison on August 30, 2022. When he was released as part of the exchange, his body—like those of hundreds of other Palestinian prisoners—showed signs of torture and starvation.

In an interview with Amnesty International, al-Halabi described the terror he felt when he lacked information from Gaza. “That was the worst,” he said, “not knowing whether my wife and children are alive, not knowing how they were coping. Have they been displaced? Have they been bombed? Will I ever see them again? That was even worse than the starvation and torture.”

My friends who knew al-Halabi’s work, who knew his optimism and his care for children in Gaza, wept when they heard of his release. Like me, these friends have rejoiced when Israeli hostages return home. Each Israeli is precious, made in the image of God, and so is each Palestinian. Their names and stories matter to me and to all of us who work toward an Israel and a Palestine free of occupation, violence, and endless war.

I invite you to know and remember, as an act of compassion and humanization, the names of Palestinians who suffer under Israel’s repression. Remember Ahmad Salaymeh, a 14-year-old boy arrested for throwing stones at an illegal Israeli settlement in East Jerusalem. Remember Said Maarouf, a 57-year-old pediatrician who was detained at Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital and then starved and beaten in prison.

Remember Diala Ayesh, a human rights lawyer who was arrested at a checkpoint and then assaulted and strip-searched in administrative detention.

Media narratives shape how we see the world; they help determine who we judge and who receives our empathy and advocacy. Looking away from the vast suffering of Palestinian people legitimizes their dispossession and dehumanization. The media's silence about this suffering is a choice—one our humanity and our hope for peace cannot afford.