

The Media Is an Accomplice in Erasing Palestinian Life

The erasure of Palestinian life has been ongoing since the start of the Nakba in 1948. This erasure is material -- massacre-propelled ethnic cleansing -- but it is also narrative.

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The late Palestinian scholar and activist Edward Said [wrote in 1996](#) that the phrase ‘complex situation’ “too often is a rhetorical signal given before a lie is to be pronounced, or when a grave and immoral complicity with injustice is about to be covered up.” Both-sides-ism appears often: we saw it in Charlottesville in 2017 as Trump declared “good people on both sides.” We saw it on May 4, 2021 when Mississippi police killed a father and his baby boy, then referred to the father’s ‘murder suspect’ status and contorted a baby into a [‘juvenile’](#) to obfuscate blame and undermine the gravity of the harm.

Edward Said was specifically targeting liberals’ use of ‘complex situation’ in the above quote. Reading it my mind went immediately to Palestine, a situation that, despite its constant portrayal as complex, is fundamentally one of occupier and occupied.

It’s as simple as this: in a [video](#) on my Twitter feed [Saeed Odeh](#)’s father huddles over his sixteen-year-old child’s lifeless body, planting kiss after kiss on his face, sobbing. One of the men present with him, and then another, and another, rest their hands on the father’s back, to comfort this friend or neighbor or—I don’t know what these men are to each other, but in this moment they are each other’s anchor. *Habibi habibi habibi*, the father says to his son, as the men remind him, so gently, to keep it together. One of them tells him there’s time for one more *bawsi*, one more kiss goodbye.

Or this: Saeed’s sister, a small girl with a messy pony tail, is crying in every photo I come across. In [one image](#) she holds a phone that is almost bigger than her forearm as she faces a poster of her brother. She is trying so desperately to hold on to this image of him, alive, even while I know she has seen his shrouded body, and she will never not remember this day. I wonder what memories will carry her through the days and years ahead.

We live in a world where certain people have to display their suffering for their humanity to

have a chance at plausibility. And one where this humanity, granted by self-appointed gatekeepers, is a precondition for the legitimization of resistance against injustice. Saeed's family, like every family, should have the right to grieve in private. Neither I nor anyone else outside his community should know how this boy looks dead, or what this father sounds like when he cries.

In an [occupying ethno-state](#), the occupier is *ipso facto* innocent. We have seen in Sheikh Jarrah Israeli forces form human shields to protect Jewish Zionist settlers as they assault the Palestinian inhabitants whose homes they are trying to occupy (via ethnic cleansing). And we have seen these same Israeli forces repress and attack the inhabitants of Sheikh Jarrah themselves.

Meanwhile the occupied are by-default guilty—and less-than-human, as testifies the ease with which the occupier issues [collective punishment](#) and displaces and restricts rights. If Palestinians, when they suffer Israeli state-sanctioned terrorism, do not offer their bodies, their children's bodies, as evidence of the breadth of the injustice they face, their aggressors will have won twice. Stilling the life, then silencing its aftermath.

Circumstances dictate what details about a person warrant mention, and what we remember. Were Saeed to introduce himself, he might have said he was a footballer, played on his local team. Liked school or didn't, dreamed to be something more precise than alive in the future. I can't ask him, I don't know.

Instead, from news sources we learned a sixteen-year-old boy named Saeed Odeh from Odalah, a village near Nablus, was shot twice in the back with live ammunition by Israeli forces. He was prevented from receiving medical care for fifteen minutes at least. Another boy, who tried to help Saeed, was shot by soldiers and injured also. In a photo from the night her son died, Saeed's mother can be seen sitting in the passenger seat of a car, barely conscious. The funeral procession the next day stopped in front of Saeed's school, where rows of men prayed before his body, draped with a Palestinian flag.

Erasure of Palestinian life, since before the mass expulsion of Palestinians from their homes in 1948, remains ongoing. This erasure is material: massacre-propelled ethnic cleansing, home demolition, carpet bombing.

And the erasure is also narrative, via social media censorship, as when Instagram and Facebook continue to mass-delete reporting on the violence in Sheikh Jarrah and Al-Aqsa.

As when *The New York Times* and other outlets referred to the ongoing forced expulsions of Sheikh Jarrah families from their homes as "[evictions](#)," or when the Israeli Foreign Ministry referred to ethnic cleansing (gently termed "[Judaizing](#)," or preservation of Israel's "[Jewish character](#)") as a "[real-estate dispute](#)."

As when *The Jerusalem Post* wrote a teenager had been shot in the midst of "[violent clashes](#)," a favorite buzzword for both-sides-ism, and didn't so much as mention his name.

As when Israeli forces stormed Al-Aqsa mosque on May 7, 2021, using stun grenades and firing rubber bullets at close-range with, as usual, intention to maim (at least one person was blinded, 200+ others wounded). They attacked worshipers, then attacked makeshift medical spaces where the injured were being treated, and media outlets and American officials called all of this what? "Clashes." A "scuffle." "Confrontations." "Tensions." A "face

off.”

As when Israeli forces attacked Al-Aqsa again on May 10, throwing tear gas and stun grenades and firing rubber-coated bullets into one of Islam’s holiest sites, this time injuring hundreds and killing at least one person inside the mosque, all while denying medics access to the wounded. Against 10,000 armed Israeli troops who attacked them in order to vacate the mosque during Ramadan for Jewish settlers celebrating Jerusalem Day, Palestinians had rocks to defend themselves and their holy space; still, the media insisted on ‘[clashes](#).’ Reuters opened an [article](#) with the breathtakingly irrelevant line, “Palestinian protesters threw rocks and Israeli police fired stun grenades and rubber bullets in clashes outside the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem on Monday as Israel marked the anniversary of its capture of parts of the city in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.” Opening with Palestinians first (as ‘protesters’ rather than ‘civilians’) to imply cause-and-effect in the wrong direction? Wedging a historical moment in to suggest ideological-Arab vs Israeli-rather than immediately material-police attacking civilians-cause of the violence? Writing in the title that violence ‘erupted’-another both-sides-ism favorite-as though the violence wasn’t ongoing? All these framings imply two equal sides, and obscure the gross power imbalance systems rooted in supremacy necessitate by definition.

The erasure is also of memory. I have watched clips of Palestinian parents mourn over their children’s bodies since I was a child. Enough time has passed that it is now easier to see myself in the parents. Israeli occupation forces killed a child on May 6, 2021. Israel has killed thousands of Palestinian children, deemed terrorists-in-the-making, [disabled thousands of others](#). And it will continue to do so. As Saree Makdisi [wrote](#), “it is not possible for a settler-colonial regime to racially enable one people at the expense of another people without the use of violence.”

Part of Israel’s propaganda is to reduce these children to faceless statistics, numbers obscuring personhood. The goal is not so much erasure of blame as of the victim in their entirety. As the numbers of injured and dead rise, the magnitude of the suffering somewhat paradoxically becomes harder to fathom, as the singularity of a life collapses into anonymity. This is why in the face of aggression these videos and images are invaluable: the reality of loss is each time and for each person specific, and it is heartbreaking, and it is unforgettable.

His name is Saeed Odeh. I will not write, ‘he loved life,’ because that implies some of us do not. I will not write ‘peaceful’ because I have already written ‘child,’ and because I want no part in systems that require some of us to qualify our existence or earn our humanity. I will tell you he was murdered. And I will tell you there will be no accountability, no consequences for those who, when the ‘complexity’ settles, killed a child.

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Featured image: A photo of Saeed Odeh that is being shared on social media. (Twitter)

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