EMPTY CHAIRS: MEDIA, MOVEMENT AND LIBERATION

CADEIRAS VAZIAS: MEDIA, MOVIMENTO E LIBERAÇÃO

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Abstract

This paper explores how Palestinian children and their communities of parents and relatives use digital media to document their experiences during the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Drawing on sustained engagement with publicly shared testimonies; including videos and posts circulated by children, families, and local news sources and acquaintances residing in the occupied territories, the article reflects on how these narratives operate as forms of resilient witnessing, survival, and education in the absence of formal schooling. Rather than approaching this material through a detached lens, the paper adopts a methodology of ethical witnessing, grounded in the researcher's embedded position as a Palestinian scholar. The digital expressions examined are not treated as isolated data points, but as part of a broader, collective archive responding to the erasure and dehumanisation of Palestinians. In line with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirms children's right to express their views in matters affecting them, this paper positions these testimonies as acts of public pedagogy, namely lessons in grief, memory, and resistance. The paper critiques the global economy of spectatorship, in which Palestinian suffering is often consumed but rarely acted upon. Instead, it argues that Palestinian children's practices of remembrance, documentation, and resistance constitute a curriculum of testimony, one that challenges colonial erasures, redefines educational praxis, and demands that witnessing become both a political and pedagogical responsibility.

Keywords: Palestinian Childhood; Curriculum of Testimony; Bearing Witness; Critical Childhood Studies; Digital Media, Genocide; Scholasticide; Epistemicide

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Resumo

Este artigo explora como as crianças palestinianas e as suas comunidades de pais e familiares utilizam os meios digitais para documentar as suas experiências durante o genocídio em curso em Gaza. Com base num envolvimento contínuo com

testemunhos partilhados publicamente, incluindo vídeos e publicações divulgados por crianças, famílias, fontes de notícias locais e conhecidos que residem nos territórios ocupados, o artigo reflete sobre como estas narrativas funcionam como formas de testemunho resiliente, sobrevivência e educação na ausência de escolaridade formal. Em vez de abordar este material através de uma lente distanciada, o artigo adota uma metodologia de testemunho ético, baseada na posição incorporada do investigador como académico palestiniano. As expressões digitais examinadas não são tratadas como pontos de dados isolados, mas como parte de um arquivo coletivo mais amplo que responde ao apagamento e à desumanização dos palestinianos. Em consonância com o Artigo 12 da Convenção das Nações Unidas sobre os Direitos da Criança, que afirma o direito das crianças de expressar as suas opiniões em assuntos que as afetam, este artigo posiciona esses testemunhos como atos de pedagogia pública, ou seja, lições de luto, memória e resistência. O artigo critica a economia global da espectatorialidade, na qual o sofrimento palestiniano é frequentemente consumido, mas raramente levado a ação. Em vez disso, argumenta que as práticas de memória, documentação e resistência das crianças palestinianas constituem um currículo de testemunho, que desafia os apagamentos coloniais, redefine a prática educativa e exige que testemunhar se torne uma responsabilidade política e pedagógica.

Palavras-chave: Infância palestiniana; Currículo de testemunho; Testemunhar; Estudos críticos sobre a infância; Media digital, Genocídio; Escolaricídio; Epistemicídio

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"Let It Be a Story": Palestinian Storytelling as Resistance

> "I wish children didn't die - I wish they would be temporarily uplifted - to the skies until the wars end - and when their parents ask them - 'where have you been?' - they would say 'we've been playing among the clouds.' (Ghassan Kanafani)

Ghassan Kanafani's words capture the painful juxtaposition of childhood innocence and the brutal reality of war. Kanafani, a Palestinian thinker, writer and journalist, was assassinated 50 years ago when a Mossad-planted bomb exploded as he stepped into his car, killing both him and his seventeen-year-old niece, Lamis. Beyond his political activism, Kanafani had a profound personal connection to Lamis, dedicating his children's book The Little Lantern (1966) (Al Qandeel Al Zaghir) to her. Kanafani's storytelling was not primarily narrated from children's perspectives, but his work consistently centred children as figures shaped by, and responsive to, political loss and exile. In Returning to Haifa (1969), the character of Khaldun (renamed Dov by his adoptive Jewish family) embodies the painful questions of identity, dispossession, and return. In The Land of Sad Oranges (1963), a young boy witnesses the disintegration of his family following their displacement

during the Nakba, offering a child's-eye view of catastrophe. These characters, and the silences surrounding them, allowed Palestinian readers, both young and old, to see their experiences reflected in the fiction. Kanafani's use of children was never apolitical; rather, it revealed how even the most intimate relationships were transformed by colonial violence.

While Kanafani's stories emerged from a mid-20th-century context of literary resistance, today's Palestinian children are crafting their own narratives through digital platforms. They echo the same urgency of loss and erasure under what scholars such as Noura Erakat (2019) and Rashid Khalidi (2020) characterize as Zionist settler-colonialism: a structure aimed at the displacement and replacement of the native population. This paper examines the reciprocal relationship between media activism and the Palestinian liberation movement, foregrounding children's contributions through self-produced digital testimonies and those shared by caregivers. By tracing recurring themes across platforms like TikTok and Instagram, I explore how digital media becomes a site of resistance, remembrance, and public pedagogy. This landscape also reveals the imperial dimensions of narrative warfare, as digital technologies amplify disinformation and frame Palestinians as less than human. Edward Said (1978) critiqued the Orientalist gaze that enabled such portrayals, though today's algorithmic and militarised media systems render that gaze even more pervasive. Guided by Abdelnour and Abu Moghli's (2021) call for political reflexivity, this research centres children's self-representations while resisting extractive, sensationalist approaches.

Storytelling, especially when undertaken by those most impacted, becomes not only a mode of expression but a refusal of erasure. This ethos is evident in the work of the late Refaat Alareer, a leading voice in this tradition. He was a writer, educator, and co-editor of Gaza Unsilenced (2014) and Gaza Writes Back (2015). He was killed in an Israeli airstrike in December 2023, along with several members of his family. His final poem, If I Must Die, written just days before his death, has been shared globally by Palestinian youth as both memorial and manifesto, embodying a refusal to be erased: "Let it be a story." The poem opens, "If I must die, / you must live / to tell my story". Foregrounding storytelling as an act of political continuation and collective duty. I adopt Karma Nabulsi's (2003, p. 488) account of Palestinian identity: "Indeed my definition of Palestinian identity is the general will. Whenever I am amongst it, I am home…". As Nabulsi writes, Palestinians "no matter where they were, no matter what they were doing, found themselves (and still do) living in the same mysterious and acute situation, and they also saw themselves quite clearly like this" (p. 488). Their digital resistance, shaped by grief, urgency, wit, and witness, is inseparable from the literary, communal, and moral traditions to which Alareer contributed. Storytelling here is not simply testimony; it is an act of solidarity and survival.

Methodological Reflections: Listening, Witnessing, and Ethics

In the midst of devastation, a Palestinian teacher reflected on what it means to keep teaching in Gaza. She spoke not of missing supplies or classrooms, but of the unbearable loss of students. Classrooms, she explained, were shrinking not because children had graduated, but because they had been killed. Still, she insisted: "We keep trying to make it possible." Her reflection captures a broader reality: the persistence of teaching, speaking, and documenting in the face of violence meant to silence.

This study adopts a methodology of narrative inquiry, which treats stories not as passive reflections of reality, but as acts of survival, resistance, and meaning-making. It centres the presence of Palestinian children and their communities, who continue to create and educate amid systematic erasure. Narrative inquiry foregrounds lived experience and insists on honouring the contexts from which testimony emerges. This ethos is evident in Young Palestinians Speak (Robinson & Young, 2017), a collection of first-person accounts by youth across the West Bank and Gaza. Their words offer not only accounts of trauma, but expressions of longing and political awareness. Similarly, the narratives examined in this study—shared by children and caregivers on digital platforms—form a living archive: fragments of a collective history told in real time.

Rather than apply a formal content analysis, I adopt a relational and ethical practice of witnessing, guided by the conviction that these digital expressions merit attention not as isolated data points but as parts of a collective narrative against erasure. Informed by my position as a Palestinian scholar, I engage with this material from within a space of belonging, shaped by shared grief, linguistic intimacy, and political entanglement. This weight is not invoked to centre the self but to acknowledge the relational lens through which I witness and interpret these testimonies. Therefore, I maintained a research diary to record thematic observations, emotional responses, and ethical dilemmas throughout the process. This reflexive practice allowed me to remain attentive to my positionality and to trace how insights emerged through sustained and situated witnessing. Anti-colonial Arab Feminist scholarship reminds us that knowledge is not produced from nowhere; it emerges from specific histories, bodies, and proximities. This tradition frames liberation as necessarily intersectional, resisting both colonial and imperial domination. As such, my proximity to this violence does not compromise objectivity; it redefines the terms of ethical scholarship in contexts where professed neutrality too easily becomes complicity.

I ask, then: what does it mean to listen carefully, critically, and responsibly when those speaking are children living through a broadcasted genocide? The goal is not to interpret on their behalf, but to trace the patterns of language, memory, and meaning that emerge when children speak publicly in moments of unspeakable and apocalyptic violence. Consistent with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirms children's right to express their views in matters affecting them, I regard their digital testimonies as acts of political

communication that demand recognition of dignity, not extraction of data. I deliberately refrain from citing or embedding specific videos: many were recorded under duress, and further circulation risks retraumatization, decontextualization, or unwanted exposure. What emerges is a public archive of defiance, grief, and survival; one that belongs to Palestinians and must be protected from erasure.

When schools are destroyed and childhood itself is targeted, education persists in altered forms: through storytelling, witnessing, and digital communication. For nearly two academic years, Palestinian children in Gaza have been unable to sit for their Tawjihi exams, the final secondary school tests marking the transition to adulthood. Tawjihi is more than an exam; it is a deeply rooted ritual in Palestinian life. Families wait anxiously for results; when they arrive, neighbours celebrate. Streets fill with music, young people dance dabke, and trays of homemade sweets are shared. These are moments of pride and possibility, shared by entire communities. To be deprived of this milestone is not simply to miss an academic opportunity. It is to be cut off from ordinary joys, from public recognition, and from the fleeting but vital sense that a future can still be imagined. In the West Bank, too, repeated school closures, military raids, and settler violence have disrupted these rhythms and deepened learning loss. When such rituals are stolen, so too is the child's place in the unfolding life of the community.

Rethinking Childhood in the Palestinian Context

"Do not believe that man grows. No: he is born suddenly. A word, in a moment, penetrates his heart to a new throb. One scene can hurl him down from the ceiling of childhood onto the ruggedness of the road." (Ghassan Kanafani, 1999)[1].

In defining Palestinian childhood, I interrogate how existing frameworks capture, or fail to capture, the lived realities of Palestinian children. Traditionally, childhood is defined within an age-based framework, intertwined with specific social and psychological markers. However, contemporary scholars in childhood studies challenge this static approach. Jens Qvortrup (1987) argues that "childhood as a structural form [exists] more or less irrespective of children," emphasising that childhood is an integrated social structure shaped by broader societal forces rather than merely individual experiences. Building on this, Ismail Nashef (2023) asserts that, in the Palestinian context, childhood functions both as a modern socio-political category and as a site of resistance, especially in the aftermath of the Nakba. He reads Ghassan Kanafani's literary work as portraying Palestinian children not as passive victims but as active agents within national and historical struggle.

This reconceptualization of Palestinian childhood resonates with two distinct but converging critiques of dominant childhood paradigms. In the sociology of childhood, James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) argue that childhood is historically and culturally constructed, challenging developmentalist assumptions that treat it as a

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[1] Original work published in 1962.

universal biological stage. As Strandell (1998) notes, this shift foregrounds children's agency and the political nature of childhood as a social category. Working from a different disciplinary and political tradition, Burman (1994) critiques developmental psychology for embedding racialised, gendered, and classed assumptions under the guise of objectivity and universality. She exposes how dominant psychological models marginalise non-Western childhoods and contribute to the regulation of cultural and political difference. While not building on the same theoretical lineage, both strands of critique disrupt Eurocentric framings of the child and call for greater attention to the power relations embedded in knowledge production. These interventions align with this paper's concern with epistemic violence, settler-colonial logics, and the framing of Palestinian children as agents of resistance and knowledge.

a. Childhood, colonial disruption and national imagery

This perspective positions childhood not merely as an age-based identity, but as a contingent social role shaped by colonial structures. In modern Arab societies, the institutional construction of childhood began in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly in Egypt and Bilād al-Shām. In Palestine, however, this development was severely disrupted by Zionist settler colonialism, which intensified under British rule and culminated in the Nakba of 1948. This was not a sudden occupation, but the outcome of decades of organized Zionist settlement and militarization. By the 1930s, Zionist militias had acquired arms with British support and were integrated into colonial policing structures, and hence laying the groundwork for the systematic expulsion of Palestinians and destruction of their towns and villages. Zionist institutions expanded their political, economic, and social infrastructure during this period, functioning as an emerging settler-colonial society within Mandate Palestine.

As Nashef (2023) notes, Palestinian children became central figures in the nation's post-Nakba reconstruction, with their experiences documented in literary and political narratives as symbols of both vulnerability and resilience. This duality, the Palestinian child as both victim and defiant figure, is perhaps best embodied in Handala, the iconic cartoon character created by Naji al-Ali[2]. In this sense, Handala represents more than an individual child, he is a collective embodiment of Palestinian identity, exile, and resistance. The image of the child, whether in literature political rhetoric or visual culture, continues to function as a site where the struggle for Palestinian self-determination is both mourned and reaffirmed. My use of the term 'child' reflects this paradox, on one hand, it acknowledges the absence of an institutional framework that protects Palestinian childhood; on the

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[2] *First drawn in 1969, Handala is a 10-year-old barefoot refugee, forever facing away from the viewer with his hands clasped behind his back. His perpetual childhood symbolises the stunted development of Palestinian refugees, forced into exile with no return in sight. At the same time, his refusal to turn around and his unwavering stance reflect a steadfast resistance to normalization, erasure, and compromise. Al-Ali once stated that Handala would only grow up when he could return to his homeland—an assertion that underscores the political weight placed upon Palestinian childhood as both a site of suffering and a force of defiance.*

other, it recognises the active role children play in meaning-making processes within the Palestinian national struggle.

b. From victimhood to epistemic agency

To witness Palestinian children's testimonies is to confront the limits of conventional frameworks of childhood. Palestinian children do not experience childhood as a passive phase. They actively shape historical narratives and resistance strategies. While dominant discourse often reduces them to victims, their digital testimonies express a form of "hybrid child-adult agency" that emerges in response to colonial oppression and intergenerational struggle (Nashef, 2023).

This framing aligns with critical childhood studies, which challenge adultist epistemologies and call for recognizing children as political and epistemic agents. Spyros Spyrou (2018) critiques how knowledge about children is often shaped by adult anxieties and institutional power. He advocates for a situated, reflexive approach that centres context, discourse, and positionality. Similarly, Laura Briggs (2020) examines how the U.S. state has historically used the figure of the child to advance nationalist, imperial, and racial projects. Her work reveals how the politics of childhood are deeply embedded in broader systems of domination. This is further illustrated by U.S. foreign policy, particularly its repeated use of UN Security Council vetoes to protect Israel from accountability. Between 1970 and 2017, the U.S. cast 79 vetoes, including 42 blocking resolutions critical of Israel's actions in Palestine (Visualizing Palestine, 2017). Such patterns reflect how global institutions are leveraged to maintain colonial hierarchies. Together, these perspectives show that Palestinian children's digital testimonies are not simply expressions of suffering but forms of resistance and knowledge production.

c. Personal memory and parallel time

These dynamics are not abstract. They are lived intimately, carried in personal memory, and echoed in the everyday experiences of Palestinian children and their communities.

For many of us born after the Oslo Accords, often described as the "peace generation," the gap between political promises and lived reality was immediately evident. As a child in the late 1990s, I witnessed how our family's land was gradually reclassified and appropriated to expand a nearby Israeli settlement. These changes arrived slowly but unmistakably: first electric fences, then surveillance cameras, gates, and finally concrete walls. I do not remember each stage in order, but I remember the atmosphere: shifting landscapes, deepening fear, and the quiet resilience of those around me. I recall women waiting in silence while the men protested. Raids were frequent. My generation remembers them well: the night knocks, overturned furniture, flashlights in our faces, the drawer emptied, the door left swinging. These were not exceptions; they became part of everyday life.

Palestinian time does not follow a linear sequence. It moves between memory and interruption. As Walid Daqqa (2005) describes, "parallel time" reflects how ordinary life continues alongside, and is constantly shaped by, political violence.

Agency and Bearing Witness

Palestinians have long recognised that survival under settler-colonial rule and military occupation carries both the weight of endurance and the imperative of critique. In the first weeks of Israel's 2023 assault on Gaza, global media repeated official formulas that normalized mass death. Two images framed those formulas: Amalek, the biblical enemy marked for total annihilation, and the Manichean claim that the war pits "children of light" against "children of darkness." When Prime Minister Netanyahu invoked Amalek on 28 October 2023, he was not reaching for metaphor. He was drawing from a narrative scaffold deeply embedded in national memory and formal education: one where ancient war are made proximate and conquest is presented as moral duty. The child is not spared in this formation. As Kisler (2022) observes, Israeli students are taught to see themselves as heirs to biblical warriors, as "three-thousand-year-old soldiers" whose historical continuity justifies present-day violence. This is not the language of the military; it is the language of education. It trains the child into mythic time and into a worldview where erasure becomes righteous. The cosmic vocabulary of light and darkness completes the abstraction, turning civilians into shadows and preparing the ground for annihilation. Against these narratives rise the voices of Palestinian children, speaking from the ruins. Their testimonies refuse abstraction and summon us to the difficult, necessary work of bearing witness.

a. Children's digital testimonies

This paper does not emerge from detached observation. As a Palestinian, I watched, listened, and grieved from within. The footage I engaged was not abstract material but a documentation of home, community, and lived reality. Since October 7th, I have witnessed hundreds of videos and posts publicly shared by Palestinians, recording the destruction of their lives. These testimonies function as expressions of survival, fragments of collective memory, and acts of political communication.

This was not a neutral process. At times I cried, recoiled, or felt numb. Each moment reminded me that research in this context is not merely intellectual. For Palestinians, witnessing is a form of resistance, born from the urgency to counter persistent erasure and distortion. I did not reduce these videos to coded data. I listened to what they carry and what they demand. While patterns emerged—children narrating loss, expressing fear, asserting dignity—I refrained from formalizing them into fixed categories, which would risk detaching them from the violence that gives them meaning. I write not only as a researcher but as someone living through what is being recorded. The genocide is not distant; it arrives in real time, on my phone and within my community. As Walid Daqqa (2010) writes,

occupation produces "organized chaos," a system that suspends life in fragmentation. And still, Palestinian children speak. They assert presence. They testify to a life that refuses disappearance.

If normalization was the goal, then Israel has largely succeeded. Over nearly two years, the destruction of Gaza has been absorbed into global discourse with little disruption. What was once extraordinary has become routine. Western political and media frameworks rarely name this violence. Instead, they justify atrocities using the language of strategic necessity, national defense, or counterterrorism. In a settler-colonial context, this framing is deeply inadequate. It assumes the presence of a legal and moral order that colonial power has already dismantled. International law affirms the right of peoples under occupation to resist, including by armed means, so long as such resistance complies with international humanitarian law. Palestinians, however, are consistently denied this right. Dehumanized and cast outside the bounds of political subjecthood, their existence is treated as inherently threatening. Their erasure becomes comprehensible, even palatable, within dominant narratives. As El-Kurd (2025) argues in Perfect Victims and the Politics of Appeal, Palestinians are permitted to suffer only in forms that align with Western expectations of innocence. They must remain quiet, apolitical, and patient. To resist, to speak with anger, or to survive visibly is treated as a violation. This demand for moral perfection does not serve justice; it functions as a mechanism of control. It delegitimizes resistance and licenses continued violence. Within such a structure, even survival becomes an act of defiance.

b. Targeting 'life' as warfare

The destruction of Gaza's educational institutions is not only the erasure of infrastructure but a calculated assault on Palestinian childhood and the possibility of collective intellectual life. As Amer (2024) argues, education in Gaza has long been a cornerstone of resilience; its targeting is a strategic attempt to dismantle both resistance and the future. The obliteration of all twelve universities and thousands of schools signals an attempt to suppress not just knowledge, but the possibility of becoming. Many of these schools had become shelters for nāziḥīn—forcibly displaced civilians seeking refuge from bombardment—collapsing the boundary between sanctuary and slaughter.

Recent spatial analyses, including a report by Yaakov Garb (2025) through the Harvard Dataverse, underscore the scale of devastation and suggest a death toll far beyond official figures. According to Garb's findings, at least 377,000 Palestinians remain unaccounted for, many likely buried under rubble or dismembered beyond recognition. The same report shows that the so-called humanitarian compounds established in May 2025 were shaped more by military strategy than humanitarian need, excluding large segments of the population, especially the one million residents of Gaza City isolated by the Netzarim corridor. This violence targets all structures that sustain life. Children have been killed in tents. Premature infants died in powerless incubators. Health workers, journalists, and aid volunteers have

been deliberately targeted. Gaza now has one of the highest per capita populations of amputees in the world, with thousands of children permanently disabled. These are not isolated incidents, but part of a systematic assault on life itself.

In response, Palestinian children continue to speak. Through digital platforms, they document their realities and assert their presence. Their testimonies demand accountability. As Mahmoud Darwish wrote, "We love life whenever we can find a way to it." That insistence on life becomes an unrelenting form of resistance.

Psychological Warfare and the Occupation of Consciousness

Former Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon once described Israel's strategy as "moulding consciousness"—a doctrine that reflects a shift from material control to a more sophisticated form of psychological and cultural domination. This effort seeks to shape Palestinian perception, identity, and resistance. While Israel has failed to erase Palestinian identity physically, it has turned to what Walid Daqqa (2010) called "organized racism," a systematic attempt to justify apartheid through legal and security discourse. According to Al-Shaikh's (2021) reading of Daqqa's Parallel Time, this domination extends beyond land and bodies to time itself. Palestinians, particularly prisoners, are suspended in a kind of temporal limbo that mirrors the wider psychological siege imposed on the population.

Fragmentation plays a key role in this system. Palestinians within the 1948 borders face growing limits on protest and speech. In the West Bank, grief is often eclipsed by Gaza's devastation. In Gaza, the scale of violence resists articulation. This dispersal of pain is not incidental but strategic; as it is designed to isolate trauma and weaken collective consciousness.

Technological systems have deepened this psychological warfare. AI-powered targeting platforms like Lavender and Where's Daddy have reportedly flagged tens of thousands of civilians as military targets (Abraham, 2024). These technologies are part of a broader military-industrial complex supported by global tech firms. As Loewenstein (2023) explains, Palestinians have become test subjects for surveillance and weapons systems later marketed globally as "combat-proven." Gaza functions not only as a battlefield but as a laboratory and showroom, converting suffering into military capital.

Media as a Tool of Erasure and Resistance

This precarious state became even more visible after October 7th, when global media normalised the killing of Palestinian children, exposing the complicity of global media in framing Palestinian suffering through dehumanizing narratives. More than 500 Palestinian children were killed in the early weeks alone as dominant media coverage often presenting these deaths as unfortunate but justified within a framework of strategic retaliation. This normalization of violence created the discursive ground for further atrocities. At the same time, Palestinians have used

digital platforms to resist their erasure. Through video, text, and live testimony, they have documented the destruction of their lives and asserted their presence in the face of disappearing infrastructure. This moment has produced a powerful archive of digital resistance, where Palestinians educate the world directly about their lived experiences. However, this resistance has come under sustained attack. Over 70 percent of Gaza's telecommunications infrastructure has been destroyed by Israeli bombardments (Osseiran & Smith, 2024). Internet access is unreliable and dangerous, with many residents walking long distances in search of a signal. Others rely on eSIMs distributed by aid organizations, but even these often work only intermittently. The fragmentation of connectivity severely limits the ability to document events in real time.

Palestinian voices are also subject to digital suppression. Major social media platforms have been widely criticized for censoring Palestinian content. According to 7amleh (2024), content removals, account suspensions, and shadow bans have disproportionately affected Palestinian users, often under the pretext of vague moderation policies. These practices do not occur in isolation. They form part of a broader strategy that targets both physical and digital infrastructures, systematically undermining the ability of Palestinians to narrate their own reality. As Tawil-Souri and Aouragh (2014) have shown, Palestinian digital resistance takes place within a system of what they term "cyber-colonialism." Internet access in Gaza is routed through Israeli-controlled networks, bandwidth is restricted, and communications infrastructure is regularly attacked. In addition to censorship, activists face near-total surveillance. Israeli forces have bombed media offices, raided digital NGO hubs, and confiscated hardware, targeting not only expression but the very means of recording and preserving memory. Digital visibility, then, is not inherently liberatory. In the Palestinian context, it is shaped by a deeply unequal technological and political landscape. The act of being seen—let alone heard—is something Palestinians must continually fight to secure.

How Palestinian Children Educate and Resist

At times of genocide, it is difficult to imagine how anyone, especially children, would react. The relentless bombardment of Gaza has produced harrowing images of extreme violence, including mutilated bodies and unrecognizable remains. These traumatic visuals saturate mainstream media, reinforcing a one-dimensional narrative of Palestinian children as passive victims, devoid of agency. Within this landscape of death and destruction, Palestinian children have taken to social media as a tool of resistance, documentation, and education. While children in other parts of the world use TikTok and Instagram for dances and trends, Palestinian children use social media not for play, but as a means of reaching the world with their appeals. They post in Arabic and English, share pleas for assistance, use trending formats, and engage global audiences with subtitles and viral audio. Their intent is clear: to be seen, heard, and humanized. One common strategy is to incorporate popular TikTok trends such as using viral songs or participating in challenges when

sharing donation requests or advocacy content. This helps push their videos through the algorithm, increasing the chances of visibility. Supporters often leave long comments to further boost engagement and ensure the content is seen by more people.

These tactics have become essential for navigating restrictions and amplifying their voices online. Their messages are not just cries for help; they are deliberate acts of political testimony demanding justice and action. These digital expressions are not only modes of survival or resistance, but acts of public pedagogy in themselves. In sharing what they see, feel, and endure, Palestinian children are not just telling the world what is happening, they are teaching it, actively shaping global understandings through a curriculum of testimony. The form of learning I describe here arises in conditions of violence, displacement, and urgency. The curriculum of testimony is not delivered in classrooms or designed by institutions. It emerges from lived experience, grounded in the struggle for justice and sustained by the need to speak truth to power. Through videos, captions, and appeals, these children teach the world about steadfastness, dignity and love for life. Their testimonies challenge dominant narratives and function as informal, grassroots pedagogy that transform witness into teacher, and trauma into a powerful form of knowledge-sharing. Teacher Shirihan Bakrun (2025) captures this poignantly: "In Gaza the school year is measured not by the Ministry's calendar but by the number of terms that never begin, and by the teachers and pupils who have become mere names on the walls of memory. Education here is now an existential question; what has been lost is not only a curriculum but an entire generation on the verge of being forgotten". Even emergency online lessons, she notes, become "a thread of hope," though they cannot replace classrooms lost to rubble or students without power, devices, or safety.

Bakrun's words affirm that these children are not only enduring loss—they are central to a struggle for education, justice, and futurity. While they transmit knowledge under fire, many young people outside Palestine encounter this violence through screens. As Pankaj Mishra (2024) argues, "On the cusp between childhood and adulthood, they have received a brutal and quick education in history's barbarities, and how the grown-ups in charge excuse and justify them: an experience wholly foreign to their collective experience thus far. As politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen and journalists lied and obfuscated, or pretended ignorance, young students were left to deal in real time with a maddening phenomenon that historians of genocides tackle retrospectively" (p. 276). This contrast makes clear: Palestinian children are not only living catastrophe but shaping its interpretation. Their testimonies are not just stories; they are lessons in witnessing and resistance.

a. Children as educators and journalists

One of the earliest videos I encountered during the first months of the war showed a group of children holding a press conference outside Al-Shifa Hospital in

Gaza, pleading for the world to stop Israel's bombardment. It followed Al-Ahli hospital massacre, when at least 1,500 Palestinian civilians, mostly women, children, and elders, were killed in an Israeli strike on a hospital in Gaza City. Even as this massacre unfolded, Western media continued amplifying fabricated stories, such as the debunked claim of Hamas beheading babies (Maad, Audureau, & Forey, 2024). A young boy, about 12 years old, standing behind microphones and surrounded by at least 20 other children, speaks in clear, urgent English:

"Since October 7, we've faced extermination, killing, bombing over our heads—all of this in front of the world. They lied to the world that they kill the fighters, but they kill the people of Gaza, their dreams, and their future. Kids of Gaza run out of their hopes and wants. We come now to shout and invite you to protect us. We want to live, we want peace, we want judgment for the killers of children. We want shelter, food, and education, and we want to live as other children live." (The New Arab, 2023).

These children were not waiting for mainstream media to tell his story. He is telling it himself. The clarity of his words, the desperation in his tone, and the presence of other children behind him transform what might have been a plea into a direct political statement. The boy's demands for life, peace, and justice (judgment for the killers) constitute a clear political articulation, not a vague appeal. They emerge in defiance of a long history in which Palestinian voices have been ignored, distorted, or actively silenced in dominant media and educational narratives. A group of children in a documentary in many Western contexts, as Baak, Mayes, and Rizvi (2024) note, Palestinian suffering is often deemed too "controversial" or "complex" to discuss, leading to curricular silence. When some histories are considered teachable and others are not, this produces what Paraskeva (2016) calls "curricular epistemicide"—the erasure of knowledge that challenges dominant geopolitical frameworks. The boy's statement stands as a refusal of this erasure. In making his case to the world directly, he claims not only the right to live, but the right to speak and be known. His testimony is thus both a political intervention and a pedagogical act.

The figure of the child journalist resonates deeply in the Palestinian context. As someone who grew up during the Second Intifada, I remember watching the news in silence, the sounds of conflict shaping our childhoods. We learned to understand violence through journalists like Shireen Abu Akleh, whose assassination in 2022 felt like an attack on all who dare to speak. That sense of fragility shaped my own early political awareness. During the U.S. invasion of Iraq, I began documenting news stories in a notebook I titled Memories of the Day. It became a private act of resistance, a way to remember those the world preferred to forget.

Today, children in Gaza take on similar roles, not only as survivors or caregivers, but as documentarians. Their testimonies are political interventions and pedagogical acts. As one boy says in Born in Gaza (Zin, 2014), "I was born in the sea,

and I want to live the rest of my life in the sea." His words are not just poetic; they are an attempt to imagine life beyond siege.

b. Digital testimonies as curriculum of survival

Following the Al-Ahli massacre, hospital bombings—including the siege of Al-Shifa—have become disturbingly routine. These attacks shattered even the last perceived sanctuaries of care. Amid this violence, over 20,000 children have been orphaned. Medical teams, including Médecins Sans Frontières, now use the acronym WCNSF—Wounded Child, No Surviving Family—to describe those arriving at hospitals alone (Perreaut Revial, 2024). Yet even in these conditions, Palestinian children refuse silence. Their digital testimonies do not merely recount suffering; they offer a defiant presence. Through language and image, they challenge erasure and transform witness into resistance.

Gaza has often been called a city of children, with nearly half of its population under the age of eighteen. In a place where childhood is constantly interrupted by war, siege, and displacement, Palestinian children navigate contradictory emotional landscapes, expressing both grief and unwavering resistance in their speech. Their testimonies on social media do not merely document suffering; they function as linguistic acts of defiance, disrupting global narratives that position them solely as victims.

Linguistic Patterns and the Digital Archive of Palestinian Children

Between fear and steadfastness

In moments of extreme violence, many children verbalise the raw fear of immediate survival. Their voices, often trembling, carry pleas that demand recognition from a world that remains indifferent. One of the most repeated phrases I encountered was: "Meshan Allah twakfo hal harb" (For God's sake, stop this war). The weight of this statement extends beyond a simple appeal; it is a desperate confrontation with the powerlessness imposed upon them, a demand not just for peace, but for the world to acknowledge its role in pressuring the perpetrators to halt the war machine. In many videos, children appeal not only to the global community but specifically to the Arab and Muslim world, repeatedly asking, "Ween el Arab, ween el Muslimeen?" (Where are the Arab nations? Where are the Muslim nations?). This question underscores the perceived abandonment of Palestinians in their struggle, highlighting how even children understand the politics of regional inaction and global complicity. Just as frequently, I found expressions that rejected fear entirely. While some children cry out "Khayfeen" (We are afraid), others actively resist this framing, choosing instead to emphasise resilience over despair. In numerous videos, young voices declare: "Rah ndal samdeen" (We will stay steadfast), and many invoke the phrase "Hasbunallah wa ni'ma al-wakeel" (God is sufficient for us, and He is the best disposer of affairs). These words are not just expressions of

faith, but acts of defiance, a refusal to succumb to fear and a declaration of trust in justice beyond human intervention. This reversal of expected emotional responses, where a child experiencing extreme violence does not say they are scared, but rather asserts their determination to endure, reveals the deeply political consciousness embedded in Palestinian speech, even among the very young. These words echo generations of Palestinian resistance, transforming what might have been expressions of helplessness into affirmations of survival. Beyond fear, these testimonies also serve as expressions of mourning. Many children speak of familial annihilation, their words carrying the weight of entire lineages erased within seconds. One of the most devastating phrases I encountered was "Ahli kolhom rahoo" (My whole family was annihilated). This utterance is not just a personal lament but an indication of collective destruction, reflecting Israel's targeting of entire family units in airstrikes. Others attempt to rationalize their loss through spiritual reframing, saying, "Rahoo al Janna" (They went to heaven). The prevalence of this phrase speaks to a survival mechanism, a way for children to mentally process mass death when no material form of justice exists.

Mourning, memory, and home

This linguistic defiance is especially visible when children speak about displacement and belonging. While many question their uncertain future by asking "Wein nrooh?" (Where do we go?), others counter this existential fear with statements that ground them firmly in their land: "Hay aradna" (This is our land). Unlike the language of forced migration that dominates the refugee experience, this phrase serves as a rejection of dispossession, a refusal to accept the erasure that occupation seeks to impose. These children, many of whom have never stepped outside of Gaza's besieged borders, assert their right to remain even when everything around them is being destroyed. Beyond survival, many children express a longing for normalcy, for a life beyond war. One of the most striking and heartbreaking patterns in children's speech is the repeated phrase: "Eshtakna lal madraseh" (We miss school). In a world where childhood is structured around education, friendships, and routine, this simple statement carries enormous weight. It is not just a reflection of interrupted schooling, it is a mournful acknowledgment of a stolen childhood, a desire for the ordinary in the midst of catastrophe. Even as bombs fall around them, Palestinian children articulate a yearning to return to the innocence that war has stripped away. At the same time, this longing is accompanied by a firm insistence on life itself. Many children, despite witnessing the deaths of their families, declare: "Benna n'eesh" (We want to live). This phrase, repeated in video after video, is more than a plea, it is an act of resistance. In a war that seeks to obliterate not just bodies but futures, not just people but possibilities, to say "we want to live" is to reject the logic of extermination itself. This insistence on life is also met with an unbearable despair. Just as frequently, many children express the opposite wish, longing for death rather than enduring survival in an empty world. In countless videos, young voices whisper "Ya reitni rohet ma'ahom"

(I wish I had gone with them), as they sit beside the remains of their families, their homes reduced to rubble. This phrase reveals a pain beyond mourning, an exhaustion with existence itself, where life without their loved ones feels like an extended form of death. To stand amid such destruction and still utter "Benna n'eesh" is an act of unimaginable defiance, while to say "Ya reitni rohet ma'ahom" is a reminder that for many, survival feels like a cruel continuation of loss.

Insisting on life

At the beginning of the war, many Palestinian mothers began writing their children's names on their bodies to ensure they could be identified if killed. This practice speaks to the unbearable precarity of life in Gaza, where even the integrity of a child's body cannot be guaranteed. In this context, a child's testimony functions not only as remembrance but as resistance; a refusal to be erased, even in death. Even when Palestinian children narrate their deepest losses, their words carry an awareness that their voices matter, that their testimonies will live on even if they do not. In some of the most haunting videos, children describe witnessing the deaths of their loved ones in real time, recounting scenes of unbearable brutality. "Takho emmi koddami" (They killed my mother in front of me), one child states, his small face filled with emotion as he speaks fluently, recounting the moment in vivid detail, despite being only five years old. The ability to speak in the immediate aftermath of trauma reveals not just the scale of suffering, but the necessity of documenting it. For many, the camera is not just a tool; it constitutes a last medium of defence against erasure. And yet, in the same breath that he relives the unimaginable, the child adds something startlingly ordinary: he liked hamburgers. This moment, almost surreal in its innocence, is a reminder that even in war, children remain children, carrying both their grief and their simple joys in the same fragile existence. The contrast is devastating, a child who has just witnessed his mother's death, who now speaks as if the weight of the world has been placed on him, still holds onto a fragment of normalcy, a piece of life that war has not yet stolen.

Alongside their testimonies of loss, some children are also showing us how they insist on life. A young girl posts cooking videos from a tent, offering cheerful instructions despite the deliberate starvation imposed by Israel. Another shares content about styling her hair. A boy gathers a group of orphans and teaches them, calling himself both their teacher and their father. Every child seems to take on a role. While such scenes could be flattened by distant observers into examples of child labor, that reading ignores the political meaning of these acts. These are not children being exploited, but children preserving life. As Gaza teacher Asma Ramadan Mustafa (2025) writes, Gaza "teaches us to love life when it lights a candle in the tent... when it raises children on dignity, not fear, and on dreaming, not submission." Even in the rubble, children are not just surviving. They are making meaning.

These repeated words and phrases are not isolated expressions of grief but part of a larger, collective linguistic pattern that has historically defined Palestinian resistance. Just as previous generations articulated their suffering through poetry, oral history, and literature, today's Palestinian children inscribe their pain onto digital platforms, transforming personal trauma into a form of testimony meant to outlive them. The repetition of language is significant as it reflects not only the universality of Palestinian suffering but also the way trauma imprints itself onto speech. The phrases spoken by children today echo the laments of previous generations, revealing that the struggle for Palestinian survival is ongoing and unbroken. This shared vocabulary, passed down through decades of displacement and siege, is not merely a cry for help; it is a linguistic act of defiance. Despite the erosion of hope in international justice, Palestinian children persist in bearing witness. Their digital testimonies are not simply expressions of victimhood but acts of agency, ensuring that their realities are not erased, even when their bodies are.

A community of Storytellers: Preserving Memory Amid Erasure

It is not only children's voices that matter. Parents, too, document their lives and deaths in real time. One mother, writing from a tent by the sea, tries to distract her children from the trauma of war:

> "After sunset, the idea of seeking refuge in a tent by the sea becomes more bearable. The sea breeze grows sweeter as the night progresses. We sit in front of our tent to forget the heat of the day and the pain of waiting in lines for fresh water, as well as the burns on our fingers from lighting fires all day. My children look up at the sky, fascinated by the twinkling stars. I explain to them that this brilliance is merely a distant burning in this vast universe. I show them the 'Big Dipper' constellation and its brightest star, which points us to the North Star. I tell them that this direction leads us back to our city. They recall their games and days, missing their friends and relatives. They ask many questions, and I answer, masking the tremor in my voice, grateful for the darkness that hides my face and eyes."

In these moments, Palestinian mothers teach their children not just survival but memory. The night sky becomes a map back to a home under rubble. Another mother, speaking about death, explains:

> "No one dies complete after a missile strike. Everyone searches in the debris to put their loved ones back together. Mothers search for their children's heads to match their bodies. To be a good mother in the rest of the world is to feed your children good food and keep them warm, but to be a good mother in Gaza is to bury your children whole."

This grotesque inversion exposes the absurdity of Palestinian motherhood under siege. In many cases, pregnant women are forced to give birth without anesthesia, or undergo C-sections without sterilization, and in many cases dying

with their unborn children. The destruction of and relentless attacks on the very institutions meant to sustain any form of remaining life: mosques and churches, bakeries, schools, aid centres and workers, and food distribution points has left survival itself precarious. In many videos, it is children who comfort their parents. One particularly haunting clip shows a four-year-old boy telling his wounded father, "Yaba tkhafish yaba" (Don't be afraid, Dad). In this moment, the traditional roles of protector and protected collapse. The child becomes the source of comfort, reassuring his father in a war that stripped away parental power and even the most basic self-immunity mechanisms.

Palestinian men, especially fathers and young adults, are erased in other ways. Western coverage rarely portrays them as grieving or caring, instead reducing them to threats. This framing dehumanizes men and distorts the Palestinian family. In response, many young Gazans document daily life with dark humour, vlogs, or short videos—cooking in overcrowded shelters, improvising tools, planting in rubble. These quiet acts of care resist dominant portrayals not through direct confrontation, but through visibility. Others take more direct approaches. One poet shared a family tree: thirty relatives killed in a single airstrike: eighteen children, five mothers, one elderly grandmother. Among the few adult men was a disabled man in a wheelchair. The poet's aim, as he asserted, was not only to memorialize the dead, but to challenge the narrative behind Israel's casualty ratios. As he pointed out, 80% were clearly civilians.

In January 2024, the International Court of Justice found it plausible that Israel's actions in Gaza could amount to genocide. Netanyahu dismissed the ruling outright. Meanwhile, Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya, a pediatrician in northern Gaza, was detained and tortured by Israeli forces after months of treating wounded children under siege. This asymmetry is glaring: a head of state faces no consequence, while a physician saving lives is criminalized. It reflects a broader colonial logic in which care is punished, and violence is protected.

Ongoing Trauma, Renewed Silence

Since this paper was first drafted, the situation has worsened. On March 18, 2025, Israel violated a two-month ceasefire by launching massive airstrikes across Gaza, killing at least 404 Palestinians and wounding 562. Many of the victims were children (Al Jazeera, 2025). For Palestinian children, this return to large-scale violence shattered any fragile sense of safety, intensifying psychological trauma such as hypervigilance, bedwetting, and a profound sense of betrayal. The cycle of attacks leaves no space for healing, compounding trauma into layers of unresolved grief.

Global media coverage once again followed a familiar pattern of passive and decontextualized reporting. Many Western outlets acknowledged Palestinian deaths but failed to identify the perpetrators, presenting Palestinian suffering as inevitable rather than as the result of deliberate state violence. This rhetorical

strategy obscures accountability and normalizes impunity. The case of six-year-old Hind Rajab exposes the stakes of such erasure. Her voice reached the world through a desperate emergency call. A joint investigation by Forensic Architecture (2024) found that her vehicle was hit with more than 335 bullets. Her cousin, 15-year-old Layan, was killed by Israeli tank fire from just 13 to 23 meters away—close enough to see that the car was full of children. The paramedics who attempted to reach Hind were also killed. Their ambulance was hit by a 120mm tank round, and their remains were found just 50 meters from her location. These findings, based on satellite imagery, acoustic analysis, and 3D modelling, were entered into the US Congressional Record in June 2024 by Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib.

That this level of forensic reconstruction was required to validate what Hind and her family had already communicated—through cries, silence, and unanswered calls—speaks to a global reluctance to believe Palestinian testimony unless confirmed by Western technical tools. Some news outlets referred to Hind only as a child "who died" or "was killed," omitting any mention of who killed her. In a particularly troubling case, CNN anchor Kasie Hunt described Hind as "a woman who was killed in Gaza," revealing how Palestinian childhood is often denied or erased altogether. This phenomenon, commonly described as the adultification of Palestinian children, reflects the systemic denial of their innocence. Even five- and six-year-olds are treated not as victims but as political subjects. Others have compared Hind to Anne Frank, a gesture that, while perhaps well-intentioned, obscures her Palestinian identity and detaches her story from the context of ongoing settler-colonial violence. Unlike Anne, whose story is preserved in Western institutions, Hind's memory risks distortion, erasure, or appropriation into frameworks that avoid naming Israeli aggression.

Erasure Through Language and Selective Mourning

The way global media reports on Palestinian deaths is not accidental; it is part of a broader system of erasure and selective mourning. Victims are acknowledged, but only in ways that strip them of political agency, historicize their suffering, and render their deaths palatable to Western audiences. This bias reflects what Edward Said (1978) theorized as Orientalism, in which the non-Western "Other" is constructed as inferior, passive, or politically threatening. Within this framework, suffering is not universally recognized but filtered through Western political and moral interests.

The global media's portrayal of Palestinian deaths reflects more than negligence; it reveals a systematic process of erasure and selective mourning. Victims are often acknowledged only in ways that strip them of political context, de-historicize their suffering, or frame their deaths as unfortunate but apolitical. This pattern aligns with what Edward Said (1978) described as Orientalism, a framework that positions the non-Western "Other" as either passive or threatening, depending on what best serves dominant interests. Ibrahim (2022) extends this analysis through the concept of the "Orientalism of suffering," where non-Western

trauma is either sensationalized or minimized based on its political utility. Within this logic, Palestinian deaths are grievable only when they conform to Western expectations—tragic enough to evoke sympathy but not pointed enough to provoke accountability. Recent coverage of Israel's March 2025 attacks exemplifies this pattern: headlines often acknowledge the number of casualties without naming the perpetrator, while phrases like "Palestinian children die in airstrikes" make their deaths seem like natural disasters rather than acts of war. In doing so, Western media not only obscures accountability but reinforces colonial hierarchies of whose lives and losses are deemed intelligible.

Amid this structural erasure, Palestinians continue to bear witness, often at the cost of their lives. Despite censorship, deplatforming, and the deliberate suppression of Palestinian voices, their testimonies continue to emerge and circulate. By sharing their daily struggles in Gaza, documenting settler violence in the West Bank, or resisting digital silencing, Palestinian communities compel the world to see what it might otherwise ignore. One of the greatest challenges of this war lies in coping with grief, not only for individuals, but for an entire nation, a culture, and a future under siege. This war is not only about territory; it is about the destruction of possibility and the denial of tomorrow. Bearing witness is therefore not just an intellectual act but also an emotional, psychological, and moral responsibility.

Counting the Dead, Refusing Disappearance

The devastation in Gaza is often described in terms of numbers, statistics, and casualty reports, reducing human lives to figures that struggle to convey the full extent of Palestinian suffering. But to count the dead in Gaza is not merely an act of documentation, it is an act of recognition in the face of erasure, desensitisation, and dehumanisation. The Lancet's report, "Counting the Dead in Gaza: Difficult but Essential," warns of the staggering scale of loss, estimating that:

> "In recent conflicts, indirect deaths range from three to 15 times the number of direct deaths. Applying a conservative estimate of four indirect deaths per one direct death to the 37,396 deaths reported, it is not implausible to estimate that up to 186,000 or even more deaths could be attributable to the current war on Gaza." (Khatib et al., 2024)

This projection suggests that 7 to 9 percent of Gaza's population may already have died—an unthinkable toll in any other context, yet one met with silence and a refusal to demand accountability. As UNICEF (2023) states, Gaza has become "a graveyard for thousands of children."

A Generation of Palestinian Children Already Under Attack

To describe Palestinian children as passive casualties of war is to misrepresent a deeper truth: they have long been targeted. Even before October 7, 2023, that year

had already become the deadliest for children in the West Bank in two decades (Save the Children, 2023). By that time, 41 children had been killed in 2023 alone. From 2008 to October 6, 2023, at least 1,434 children were reported killed and over 32,000 injured, primarily by Israeli occupation forces. Among them, 1,025 children in Gaza lost their lives since the beginning of the blockade in 2007[3]. These deaths did not occur in wartime conditions, but within the everyday realities of apartheid, military incursions, settler violence, and targeted assassinations.

I witnessed this myself, not only as an adult but as a child growing up under occupation. Military raids in the West Bank, once mostly carried out at night to induce fear and disrupt families, are now often conducted in broad daylight. Increasingly, these incursions take place around midday, when children are walking home from school. In areas surrounded by Israeli settlements, soldiers wait until children are exposed on the streets, making them easy targets for arrest or harassment. I have seen children chased, blindfolded, and beaten in front of their peers and relatives. The message is clear: there is no safe time, no protected space, and no sanctuary for childhood. This shift is not just tactical; it represents a deeper transformation in how occupation functions into an all-encompassing, 24-hour system of control, where even the most mundane aspects of life, like walking home from school, become sites of confrontation, terror, and dispossession.

One moment captures this violence with haunting clarity. At a primary school I visited, a Palestinian principal collected tear gas canisters that had been fired into the schoolyard. She repurposed them into flower pots, filling the metal shells once used to choke children with soil and fragile blossoms. Whether this was a symbolic attempt to reclaim life from violence or simply a quiet act of resistance, it remains a stark reminder that even beauty emerges from remnants of brutality.

Hostage Childhoods: The Criminalisation of Palestinian Children

Thousands of Palestinian children are systematically targeted for imprisonment. Since the start of this war, at least 460 children have been detained, adding to the more than 10,000 Palestinian children held in Israeli military prisons over the past two decades. They are the only children in the world systematically prosecuted in military courts (Save the Children, 2024). Many faces physical and sexual abuse, solitary confinement, and forced confessions. Some are arrested at night, dragged from their beds at gunpoint; others are held for weeks or months without trial under administrative detention, which permits indefinite imprisonment without charge (Defense for Children International; Addameer, 2023). These detentions function as psychological warfare, signaling that no one is safe—not even children who have committed no crime. The objective is not only to punish individuals but to instil fear across a generation and suppress resistance before it begins.

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[3] According to data from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), retrieved in August 2024.

Samah Jabr, a Palestinian psychiatrist and psychotherapist based in Jerusalem, explains that Western trauma interventions often fail in Palestine because they rely on the assumption that a safe space must first be created (Seitz, 2023):

> "All the Western interventions in trauma depend on first establishing a safe place, something that we can rarely do in Palestine. A safe place, relaxation, and narrating or retelling the story. This is an individual intervention and [whatever the type of therapy], we need to reprocess the traumatic events."

But what does therapy mean in a war zone, where trauma is continuous? Where do children process their pain when the rubble of their homes becomes their graves? She critiques international organisations for overemphasising neutrality, arguing:

> "I view oppression and military violence as a major cause of pathology. If every health professional has the obligation to inform about gender-based violence when we confront that in our work, how can we be silent about military violence in our work?"

At the same time, the organisations that defend children's rights face escalating repression. Civil society groups report a rapidly shrinking space due to office raids, asset seizures, travel bans, and donor defunding tied to unfounded terrorism designations (Tartir, 2025). In a 2025 survey of eleven CSOs working on prisoners' rights, healthcare, and legal aid, 70 percent reported smear campaigns; half lost major funding between 2017 and 2022; and 80 percent lost funding after October 2023. This crackdown weakens accountability and deepens the impact of child detention by criminalising even those who document or resist it.

Scholasticide and the Assault on Knowledge

For Palestinians, the expectation of loss is not a matter of if, but when. In 2021, I interviewed a young woman from Gaza who, by the age of 20, had already survived four wars. Reflecting on Israel's routine severing of internet access during military offensives, she remarked, "Perhaps they can cut that too." Her casual tone masked a deeper awareness: that every aspect of life in occupied Palestine—electricity, water, medicine, communication, and life itself—is under the control of a force that decides who gets to exist and who does not. This was not paranoia, but lived experience, shaped by the constant threat of another loss.

Karma Nabulsi (2024) calls this condition scholasticide: the systematic destruction of Palestinian educational institutions, archives, and intellectual life. The bombing of schools and universities in Gaza and the West Bank is not collateral damage but a deliberate strategy to dismantle knowledge production, sever intergenerational learning, and suppress the capacity for critical thought. As Scholars Against War (2024) note, scholasticide is a colonial weapon aimed at erasing both historical memory and future possibility. Internet blackouts,

assassinated educators, and razed libraries are not random acts as they target the very capacity of Palestinians to think, imagine, and resist.

Importantly, scholasticide and epistemicide are not incidental to war; they are structural conditions that enable and sustain it. These practices are embedded in the logic of Zionist settler colonialism and have become routine across Gaza and the West Bank. Far from ending with bombs, this erasure is perpetuated through institutional complicity. Maya Wind (2024), in her study of Israeli universities, documents how these institutions support the occupation through military research, surveillance partnerships, and the exclusion of Palestinian scholars. While she does not use the term epistemicide, her work makes clear that Israeli academia functions as part of the occupation's intellectual machinery.

Spectacle, Slacktivism, and the Failure to Protect Palestinian Children

Although Guy Debord wrote The Society of the Spectacle in 1967, his critique of image-saturated culture is uncannily suited to the digital age. Debord argued that the spectacle turns social relationships into representations. Today, visibility and performance often displace material engagement and political action. If a child were drowning in a lake, bystanders would instinctively intervene. When the same tragedy unfolds on a screen, viewers share the clip, express outrage, and move on. Urgency dissolves into passive observation, and the race to circulate graphic images eclipses the imperative to stop the violence itself.

Studies on "slacktivism" confirm that online gestures can simulate engagement without leading to structural change (Lee 2013; Kristofferson 2014; Schumann & Klein 2015). While digital platforms have played a key role in exposing the realities of Palestine, they also give rise to what scholars' call "clicktivism", forms of engagement that simulate action without effecting change. Capitalist spectatorship has turned watching into a celebrated form of activism. People want to be seen condemning injustice, but they are increasingly unwilling to engage in costly or collective resistance (Cabrera et al. 2017; Greijdanus et al. 2020). In many cases, verbal skirmishes or ideological performances have replaced sustained political action. Although social media has exposed new audiences to Palestinian realities long ignored by legacy media, the platform economy favours shareable pain over structural transformation.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees, in Article 12, that children have the right to be heard in all matters affecting them. Palestinian children have exercised that right with extraordinary resolve, livestreaming their own genocide and reaching millions. Yet their testimonies are often silenced or discredited. The BBC's removal of Gaza: How to Survive a Warzone—after criticism that one child's father held a government post (Sabbagh 2025)—demonstrates how media platforms claiming neutrality can still reproduce dominant political hierarchies. Systematic violations of the UNCRC continue to mount: arbitrary detention, blocked access to education, and exposure to lethal

force remain widespread (Deyab & Elshaikh 2022; Chaney 2022; Kovner & Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2017). Article 6, which promises a child's right to life, survival, and development, becomes a hollow guarantee when it is cited rhetorically but ignored in practice. The gap between global visibility and meaningful protection reinforces Debord's warning: a society consumed by spectacle will confuse representation for reality, and in doing so, it will abandon its most vulnerable.

Phoenix Pedagogies: Palestinian Children, Memory, and the Future of Education

To speak of Palestinian children today is not to speak of victims. It is to speak of witnesses, of survivors, of voices rising from a place the world has tried to silence. Their faces are not hidden. They are everywhere: on your screen and in the dust of homes no longer standing. The question is not whether they are seen. It is whether anyone will do anything about it. International law, conventions, statements of concern—these are the rituals of those who mourn without risking consequence. Article 6 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees the right to life. Israel blocks aid. Article 28 guarantees education. Israel strikes schools and universities. The UN says it's "deeply concerned." The child is buried.

In Gaza, where every institution has collapsed, it is the people who have kept each other alive—parents teaching under tents, children carrying water for the sick. No framework drafted in Geneva or New York accounts for this. Jebril (2025) describes how, in the absence of public institutions, Gazans have relied on "commons-style initiatives" to secure basic services, blurring lines between formal and informal governance. The Gaza Phoenix Framework names what has long been happening: people reclaiming authorship over land, rebuilding not as charity or consultation, but as dignity. Conceived "with and for the people of Gaza," it rejects the Strip as a blank slate for external visions and instead centres reconstruction as a collective, place-rooted act (Abdel-Wahab, 2025, p. 21).

These contributions call for a broader vision of education; one that moves beyond formal institutions to include informal, intergenerational, and community-rooted learning. When caregivers, especially parents, are supported with dignity rather than charity, they are better able to create learning environments that are emotionally stable, culturally grounded, and pedagogically alive, even in precarity. Informal education becomes not just survival, but a space to rebuild social cohesion, transmit memory, and sustain resistance.

Future research and action must therefore embrace four interlinked principles:

1. Deep participation: Move beyond token consultations. Projects must be co-designed with children, caregivers, and local educators, who should hold real decision-making power over priorities, timelines, and definitions of success. This requires a fundamental shift from research on communities to research with and for them.

2. Reflexive ethics: Scholars and practitioners must interrogate their own positions—recognising how funding streams, disciplinary boundaries, and geopolitical pressures shape not only what is said, but what is omitted.
3. Commons-based and informal governance: Consistent with Jebril's (2025) call for enabling grassroots self-organisation, reconstruction efforts must resource local committees, neighbourhood educators, and caregivers who sustain education and care outside formal institutions.
4. Legal and economic pressure through BDS: When states and institutions fail to uphold even the most basic provisions of international law, civil society must act. The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement is a legally grounded strategy aligned with UN General Assembly Resolutions 2625 and 2649. It is not a symbolic protest, but a concrete method for demanding accountability and disrupting the economic and institutional networks that enable ongoing violations of children's rights and collective punishment.

The question is no longer whether the world sees Palestinian children, but whether it will act against the states and systems that harm them. Advocacy must speak not only for children but to the governments, courts, and institutions that claim to protect them while enabling their continued disposability. I return to a moment from my own childhood, a speech written for me by my teacher, meant to be read at a graduation ceremony at a church school in a nearby Christian village. The blockade had forced our schools to relocate, and so we gathered elsewhere, carrying with us the weight of our disrupted education and uncertain futures. Perhaps my words resonated then, perhaps not. But they are carved in my memory, and more than ever, I now understand their meaning, because I have lived them year after year:

Between the destroyed home and the road covered in dust, every Palestinian must find a way to cling to life. This is another year among years of catastrophe and sacrifice, yet we write with our pens only that we will never abandon our dream of freedom. Knowledge is our path, and understanding is our goal. We bear witness before the whole world that we are students of truth. In this academic year, which we crossed as if walking through a field of thorns, we proved, beyond doubt, that we are students in the fullest sense of the word. We proved that the power of killing and destruction in the hands of the 'enemies of life' will never kill our determination to seek knowledge and continue our journey. Time and again, we struggled to reach school, but the will to live always triumphed. And each morning, we repeated: My homeland, my homeland, my homeland, to you belong my love and my heart[4].

Disclosure Statement

The author reports there are no competing financial or non-financial interests arising from the direct applications of this research.

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[4] Translated from Arabic.

Data Availability Statement

Due to the ethically sensitive nature of the data—specifically social media content created by Palestinian children documenting experiences of violence and displacement—underlying materials cannot be publicly shared. Sharing this content risks further harm, misrepresentation, and violations of privacy, particularly given the ongoing nature of the conflict and the vulnerability of the individuals involved. Ethical considerations and the need to protect children's dignity take precedence over open data sharing in this case.

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