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ABSTRACT: Palestinian journalists have been Orientalized to silence their voices on the multiple events and situation under occupation stemming from the Palestinian partition. Palestinian journalists are aware of what it means to face discrimination and stigmatization for belonging to an ethnic or religious group. The history of Palestinian journalism is built on constant attacks against their credibility. At the beginning of the 20th century, they were considered too biased to do a professional job, too nationalists to be objective, and thus unprofessional. Then during the second half of the 20th century, they were suspected of supporting terrorism or even designated as terrorists. Nowadays, they are still asked to be less activist and more objective by their mainstream media colleagues. This article analyses empirical cases that show how Palestinian journalism has articulated a successful counter-narrative to fight against stigma and Islamophobia. Palestinian journalism has been Orientalized in a process which has overshadowed the narratives, memory, and identity of Palestinian society.

INTRODUCTION

One cannot understand Islamophobia until one has thoroughly examined Orientalism, and every project aimed at demystifying or deconstructing Islamophobia must begin with Said’s work.

Khaled Beydoun

Islamophobia is a type of narrative that simplifies Islam and caricaturizes Arabs and Muslims as violent and uncivilized. In his book American Islamophobia. Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear, Khaled Beydoun explains the way Orientalism helps to define and understand modern Islamophobia. He defines this discriminatory phenomenon as a system shaped by three dimensions: private, structural, and dialectical or the narrative between them. Orientalism is a narrative that widens the difference between “us” and “them” and builds a representation of that “other” that tends to dehumanize them.

Islamophobia … (is) … the presumption that Islam is inherently violent, alien, and unassimilable, a presumption driven by the belief that expressions of Muslim identity correlate with a propensity for terrorism. Islamophobia is the modern progeny of Orientalism … a worldview that casts Islam as the civilizational antithesis of the West and that is built upon the core stereotypes and baseline distortions of Islam and Muslims embedded in American institutions and the popular imagination by Orientalist theory, narratives, and law … Islamophobia is not an entirely new form of bigotry, but rather a system that is squarely rooted in, tied to, and informed by the body of misrepresentations and stereotypes of Islam and Muslims shaped by Orientalism. (Beydoun 2018, 28–9).
Edward Said coined the concept Orientalism back in the 1970s while describing how a discourse became a powerful tool to justify Western domination over the east, the “other,” the Orient. This narrative has been built through art and academics, cinema, and media. In practice, this narrative translates into policies that normalize discrimination against Arabs and Muslims.

It is not a coincidence that the scholar who elucidated the Orientalist narrative was a Palestinian. Palestinians and especially Palestinian journalists have faced ongoing racist and cultural discrimination. For example, Hossam E. Hamdan held an international press card from AFP at the time he was interviewed. Nevertheless, he was not allowed to cross the checkpoint from Ramallah—where he lived—to Jerusalem if he needed to cover an event there. “You are still Palestinian, so turn around” (Hamdan, personal communication, 2010) Israeli soldiers usually told him at those checkpoints.

The beginning of the 20th century represented a watershed moment for the Palestinian society. Their national aspirations were crushed, their whole identity as a nation was at risk. Palestinians have been racialized since the signing of the Balfour Declaration on November 2, 1917. Regardless of whether they were Muslims or Christians, they were simply not Jewish within a Zionist project for Jews. For Palestinians the Orientalist reduction of their identity as “non-Jewish communities,” established the grounds of their dispossession. They have been banned to have political rights, to own their land, and to represent themselves ever since the signing of the Balfour Declaration.

The Orientalist narrative intersects with an Islamophobic narrative. Islamophobia is a type of cultural racism and fear towards anything that seems or can be perceived as Muslim. Palestinians are perceived as that threat just for being what they are not: they are not Jewish. Distinction between race and religion in the colonial policies during the late 19th century was important because Christianity could mean the entrance to whiteness. Palestinian Christians could not assure their rights and their properties in the Mandate of Palestine, nor in the brand-new state of Israel that emerges from it. As Palestinians, Christians became subjects of dispossession just as their Muslim counterparts, not citizens with rights.

Palestinian journalists have fought to make their narrative heard as their journalism has been done under adverse conditions from the beginning of the 20th century until today. Since its origins in 1908, these journalists have been defying the Orientalist narrative that forbids them to represent themselves. They have also been defying an ensemble of distinct laws that have dispossessed them from their political rights. As the Palestinian case shows, the colonial occupation of late modernity is a chain of multiple powers: disciplinary, “biopolitical” and “necropolitical” (Mbembe 2006, 52).

This paper aims to show the way this bionarrative has been used as an argument to disregard Palestinian journalists and their historical context, and propose other approaches to study their work. One way of studying Palestinian journalism is to consider the historical perspective to understand the Arab tradition of journalism in which the Palestinian journalistic tradition is embedded. A second way is to consider Palestinian journalism as a type of counter-narrative facing the bionarrative of Israeli government which is inspired from an Orientalist-Islamophobic narrative rooted in Western culture.

The case studies presented in this paper reveal the way professionalism is a tool to impose a narrative over another. They also show the way religion and ethnicity set up the basis of Orientalist and Islamophobic discrimination. Even if Islamophobia and Orientalism affects the Arabs and the Muslims of the entire world, Palestinians live within a biospatial reality that shapes and limits the journalistic work in these territories. It is within this relation of power that a bionarrative has been implemented to delegitimize Palestinian journalists as depicting them unprofessional.
An analysis of those case studies will consider the relationship between bionarrative and professionalism in Palestinian journalists. Michel Foucault’s work about biopower and the works inspired on this notion display the ever-present relation between power and resistance. Thus, where there is a bionarrative a counter-narrative will flourish too.

**RELIGION AND ETHNICITY AS A BASIS FOR DISCRIMINATION**

The story of Sherene Seikaly’s ancestor is revealing. Her great-grandfather Naim Cotran was hired in 1916 by the British Crown to serve as a doctor in Sudan. Some decades later, after the 1948 war—the Independence war for Israelis and the nakba or catastrophe, for Palestinians—Naim became a colonized subject after being part of the colonizing project. He lost everything and had to flee from Nahr al Nabi’a, near the city of Acre north of Haifa, to exile with the rest of his family.

Unlike their Lebanese, Syrian, Transjordanian, and Iraqi counterparts, Palestinians under the mandate regime were denied access to representative institutions and developmental infrastructures. As a Palestinian native, Naim would soon realize, he was not worthy of “treatment.” The Balfour Declaration of 1917, which became a juridical pillar of British mandatory rule, afforded Palestinian Muslims and Christians civil and religious but not political rights. The declaration and the mandate defined these Muslims and Christians by what they were not. They became “non-Jews.” (Seikaly 2019, 1684).

Naim’s story shows how indigenization works and creates the grounds of dispossession for natives, the very indigenous people from the land that is being disputed. To dehumanize and take away the “other’s” land and rights it is necessary to define them by what they are not. In the case of Palestinians, they are “non-Jews”. For the rest of Arabs and Muslims, they are “non-whites” or “non-Christians”. In the case of Palestinian journalists, they are unprofessional as they are “partisan”. Arab Palestinians have been racialized on the basis of the religion they do not belong. While the Arab-Jews living there before the arrival of Zionism were racialized on the basis of the religion they belong to.

In the same way, Islam has been racialized in the United States since the birth of the country as a nation. The first Muslims in the United States were Black slaves and the first Arabs who acquired the American citizenship were Christians. According to Khaled Beydoun Orientalism prevents Americans from perceiving the Middle East as a place full of cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity.

In conjunction with the racialization of blackness as synonymous with property and slave, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Orientalism manufactured a racially narrow understanding of Muslim identity as exclusively Arab or Middle Eastern. Thus, an entire religion was remade into a racial identity. If black meant property and slave, and Muslim meant Arab or Middle Eastern, then black Muslim was a legally contradictory and impossible identity in early American history. (Beydoun 2018, 49).

This kind of discriminatory narrative is not exclusively imposed on Palestinians, either Muslims or Christians. The “war on terror” has placed the Muslims and Arabs around the world in a position of vulnerability. Kouross Esmaeli, an Iranian American from a long-standing atheist family, explained how he was turned into a Muslim the day Al-Qaeda attacked the Twin Towers in New York. Coming from a Muslim majority country became a race after 9/11. It did
not matter that he was atheist, Persian and not Arab, if he came from a Shia country and not a Sunni one, he was perceived as a Muslim and he was a threat for being so.

Those individuals who carried out 9/11 hailed from one tiny faction of Sunni Islam birthed by the CIA during a Cold War anti-communist campaign. In its response, the U.S. came to see all Muslims as essentially the same. Abroad, U.S. forces attacked “terror threats” from Africa to Southeast Asia. At home, it directed law departments to search out supposed fifth columns of Muslim sleeper agents and potential terrorists. (Esmaeli 2021).

The Afghans understand this Orientalist and Islamophobic rhetoric that turned them into a race too. Afghans are not Arabs and there is a vast cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity within this country, but they also became a “Muslim threat”.

In responding to the atrocious attacks of 9/11 in terms of civilizational war rather than as a crime, this country made a fateful decision. The U.S. didn’t merely pursue those individuals responsible for the attacks; it decided to wreak vengeance on the entire civilization that they purportedly came from. To this day, my atheist mother still cannot fathom how the Saudi perpetrators of the terror attacks would result in the targeting of her son. (Esmaeli 2021).

Palestinians have been targeted as a race long before 9/11, long before the scholars began to argue about Islamophobia. Palestinians, either Muslims or Christians, have been racialized and dehumanized to justify their ethnic cleansing by the Zionist bionarrative.

**BIOSPATIAL REALITY AND LEGAL DISCRIMINATORY RESTRICTIONS**

Palestinians are still being constantly dehumanized as a consequence of the Orientalist and Islamophobic bionarrative that portrays them as potential terrorists in mainstream media. They live in a biospatial territory that racializes the space they inhabited, inhabit, and would ever inhabit as Jewish. Being declared “non-Jewish” in that space by the Balfour Declaration, Palestinians became and are still perceived as foreigners in their own birth land. This biospatial territory “produces a bifurcated racial reality where Jewishness trumps all other categories of identification, which, in turn, both reflects and helps reproduce the state’s mechanisms of control as well as its spatial politics” (Cohen and Gordon 2018, 203).

Giorgio Agamben marked out the many ways our modern political systems have created spaces where the bare life is the only way of living. “The concentration camp, as pure, absolute and unsurpassed biopolitical space ... appears as the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity, from which we will have to learn to recognize metamorphoses and disguises” (Agamben 2006, 156). That is the kind of modernity that Palestinians live in. Zionism has racialized Judaism and the state of “Israel has adopted biotechniques and has developed a series of classifications to help constitute Jews and Israelis while distinguishing them from Palestinians” (Cohen and Gordon 2018, 216).

Palestinians assume themselves as the living dead of a necropolitical state of emergency. They know they are dispossessed of any political right from their birth. At the same time, they feel tied from birth to a territory without a nation.

Lana Tatour has shed some light on the way Israeli 1952 Citizenship Law has created an apartheid system. Although around 1.6 million Palestinians live inside Israel and carry
Israeli passports that identify them as Arab-Israelis, they have always been second class citizens. It is true that they have an Arab Party that represents them in the Knesset (Israeli Parliament), but they cannot run for Prime Minister through elections. Arab-Israelis are not obliged to do military service, as are Jewish-Israelis. Instead, they are considered residents, not owners, in their own land.

Citizenship transformed space from Arab/Palestinian to Jewish, rendered settlers indigenous, and produced Palestinian natives as alien. The racialization of the territory as Jewish was intertwined with the production of new legal and political subjects. While the Israeli citizenship regime viewed Jewish settlers as natural, authentic subjects of citizenship who were therefore entitled to automatic semi-birthright citizenship, it perceived Palestinian citizenship as a benevolent act by the state. The Israeli state thus designed its citizenship regime to function as the legal embodiment of wider processes of settler indigenization and native de-indigenization, in which “settlers and their polity appear to be proper to the land” and natives become foreign invaders.4 (Tatour 2019, 10).

Palestinians have become strangers in their own land, while any person considered Jewish from any part of the world can become a citizen with full rights on the basis of the 1952 Israeli Citizen Law. The fact that Israeli authorities designate Palestinians as Arab-Israelis shows the intrinsic Orientalist and colonial narrative that tries to blur their identity and particularities. By the end of 2021, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Harvard Law School and B’Tselem—an Israeli NGO—have labeled the Israeli government as an apartheid. The Israeli Citizenship Law of 1952 was inspired in the Australian, American, Canadian, and South African laws that created different legal status among natives and settlers (Tatour 2019, 9–10). This law was meant to divide the new state of Israel into races, this Zionist law racialized Judaism to justify their domination over Palestinians. This law prevents Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah or Silwan to claim their property as their own. This law “has functioned as an instrument of ethnic cleansing, a way of seeking to deny Palestinians the right to return to their land” (Tatour 2019, 14).

In this frame, Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank do not have a clear legal status as they are subjects without a state. The Gaza Strip is known to be the largest open-air prison in the world.5 Palestinians in Gaza have been segregated from the world and left to physical starvation and mental despair. Air raids in May 2021 left a toll of more than 250 Palestinian deaths, including around 66 children and a great number of buildings destroyed, international media buildings included.

The West Bank faces the continuous process of illegal colonization from Israeli settlers that have created a complicated system of routes and checkpoints. Besides, inside of East Jerusalem and the Palestinian Territories there also inhabit refugees who have a different legal status than their stateless counterparts. These physical and legal obstacles, as well as the construction of the wall have made impossible the establishment of a Palestinian State and have paved the way to the stagnation of Oslo Agreements.

Turning to the history of citizenship making in settler colonial contexts, including in Israel, indicates that citizenship is not failing. It is doing what it was created to do: normalize domination, naturalize settler sovereignty, classify populations, produce difference, and exclude, racialize, and eliminate indigenous peoples (Tatour 2019, 11)
Legal and historical context for Palestinian journalism

We must consider the four different sociohistorical contexts in which Palestinian journalism has evolved: under Ottoman rule, under British rule, under Egyptian, Jordanian, or Israeli rule, and under Palestinian Authority rule.

For the purpose of this text, it is important to clarify the diversity of legal scenarios that the Palestinian journalists have had to deal with. By understanding these different legal contexts, we will be able to identify how the Israeli context aims to control not just the legal framework, but the whole bi/spatial territory and the narrative about this territory and its inhabitants. Thus, the bi/narrative is part of the impositions to control Palestinian bodies and every aspect of their existence.

The war of 1948 or the nakba resulted in the rule of Israel, Egypt, and Jordan over Palestinians. Israel controlled the cities under its new established state. Egypt administrated the Gaza Strip, and Jordan the West Bank and East Jerusalem. After the war of 1967—the Six Days War for Israelis and the naksa or setback for Palestinians—all the Palestinians came under Israeli jurisdiction due to occupation. Then the Oslo Agreements were signed on September 13, 1993, and with the “establishment of the Palestinian Authority, a new press law was enacted in 1995 for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. By contrast, East Jerusalem remained de facto under Israeli administration” (Hernández Vilchis 2015, 134).

Throughout all these periods Palestinian journalism was committed to showing the difficulties of the everyday life of Palestinians. Palestinian journalists criticized the indifference of Ottoman and British rulers facing Zionist immigration. An entire generation of Palestinians became journalists and worked in the diaspora after 1948. The journalists that remain in the West Bank founded the first journalism programs in the 1960s at Birzeit University, and it was in the 1990s that international media began to hire them. After the Oslo Agreements and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in the Palestinian Territories, the Palestinian press became dependent on the new authority.

For local Palestinian journalists the censor presented a daily reminder of their occupied condition and their role in disseminating their story to a world they perceived to be all too saturated with only the Israeli version... This furthered the papers’ PLO dependence, as the weak Palestinian economy provided few means for revenue through local advertisements or investors not preoccupied with the nationalist struggle. Without a chance to develop a tradition of journalism or media institutions prior to the Israeli occupation, the professionalization of the Palestinian press became intimately intertwined with the nationalist struggle (Berger 2012, 43).

One of the consequences of a simplistic and Orientalist explanation of a journalistic tradition such as Palestinian is that we are always looking for “capitalist signs of professionalization”. Private funding is not the only way to professionalize media. One extreme consequence of this reductionist analysis just focusing on those “capitalist signs of professionalization” is that usually the Orientalized subject internalizes and normalizes such Orientalist narrative. For example, Majda El Batash states in a collective book about being a journalist in the Mediterranean that “Al-Quds is the first newspaper of the Occupied Territories to be published in Arabic in Jerusalem (in 1968)” (El Batash 1994, 73). This statement ignores more than ten years of history of this specific newspaper and half a century of Palestinian journalistic tradition. She did not consider important to explain and display the legacy, showing a normalization of Orientalism. For some Palestinian scholars and journalists, it is still important to reach and fulfil the standards of capitalist rules.
Even the generations of journalists that grew up inside the Palestinian Territories—and began working during the First Intifada in the 1980s—tend to believe that their professionalization was achieved only until they started collaborating with the foreign media and colleagues.

There are two stages in Palestinian journalism (affirmed Hossam, in his forties at the time of the interview). The first stage is before 1994, before the second Intifada and you cannot talk of a professional journalism. We were under occupation, so we had to focus on that topic ... After 1994 there was just one newspaper that had license in Israel, Al Quds and was under the military censorship, the Israelis approved the articles ... Later journalism became more professional. And little by little the foreign agencies began to accept Palestinian journalists. At the beginning they thought we were part of the terrorism, so unable to be professionals. Then they realized that we were doing a new kind of journalism, a new kind of criticism toward the PA and their leadership. (Hamdan, personal communication, 2010).

Miriam Berger argues in her PhD dissertation that professionalization came to Palestinian journalists through interaction with Western colleagues. Another analytical approach could suggest that the 1990s marked the beginning of the professional recognition of Palestinian journalists, but not the beginning of their professionalization itself. It is a mistake to reduce a professionalization process to a specific political event, or to reduce Palestinian journalists’ process of professionalization to the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in the Palestinian Territories.

These mistakes reinforce the bionarrative and the biospatial control of the subjects and bodies under that spatiality. It is paternalistic, thus Orientalist, to claim that the interaction with Western colleagues provides professionalism. This interaction was possible after the signing of Oslo Agreements, that is why Orientalist narrative considers this event the “foundation” of professional journalism in Palestine. The history of Palestinian journalism has been curbed to a political event, setting in motion the bionarrative that disregards their knowledge, their know-how.

It is important to mention that in the 1980s, there were already some well-established Palestinian media networks. The broadcast Voice of Palestine and the news agency Wafa (Palestine News and Information Agency) that have been sponsored by the PLO, set up in the Palestinian Territories in 1994. The history of these two media outlets can show the extent of adaptability of Palestinian journalism through adversity and exile.

In fact, the history of the agency (Wafa) is highly bound to the history of PLO. The agency began functioning in 1972 in Beirut, then it was transferred in 1982 to Tunis and finally established at Ramallah in 1994 ... Another example ... is Voice of Palestine. This broadcast began transmission in 1965 at Cairo. Then, the production team was transferred on several occasions to different places: to Algeria and Bagdad in 1969, to Amman from 1969 to 1973, to Sanaa and Aden in 1973, to Beirut in 1975, to Tunis in 1993, to Jericho in 1994 and finally to Ramallah in 1995. (Hernández Vilchis 2015, 218–19).

There is a particular journalistic tradition that has been developing for over a century now. It began with the restoration of the 1876 Constitution by Young Turks after the 1908 revolution and since then, Palestinian political newspapers have not disappeared. Above, Al-Quds diary was mentioned and after the Oslo Agreements there were established two brand new dailies: Al-Hayat Al-Jadida and Al-Ayyam.
Nowadays it is possible to find different TV and radio stations all over the Palestinian Territories and it is also relevant to remember that some Palestinian journalists began their career writing for Jordanian or other Arab outlets. Besides, social media and news agencies are common workplaces for the new generation of Palestinian journalists, the Ma’an News Agency the largest and most recognized.

**BREAKING BIONARRATIVE ASYMMETRY**

A recent chapter of colonial and Orientalist narrative over Palestinians took place in May 2021. Over the course of nearly a month, the world witnessed the umpteenth war in Gaza. What mainstream media did not contextualize enough was the origin of this “new war”. Palestinian refugees, displaced from the 67 or naksa war were facing eviction from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood at East Jerusalem.

Mainstream media does not usually cover everyday life Palestinian stories but shows interest when the clashes and the bombing become more violent. Nevertheless, Palestinian reaction to the media bionarrative was different and more articulated this time than previously. Two siblings, Mohammed and Muna El-Kurd were some of the new figures arising within Palestinian youth challenging Zionist bionarrative. Even the *Times* magazine have named them among the 100 most influential people of 2021.

Mohammed and Muna El-Kurd—who were temporarily detained by Israeli authorities this summer—challenged existing narratives about Palestinian resistance through viral posts and interviews, humanizing the experiences of their neighbors and pushing back against suggestions that violence was being predominantly carried out by Palestinians. Charismatic and bold, they became the most recognizable voices of those threatened with losing their homes in Sheikh Jarrah. Around the world, their grassroots organizing helped inspire the Palestinian diaspora to renew protests. And in the U.S., long Israel’s strongest ally, polls show growing support for Palestinians, so far without any cost to public support for Israel. (Mansoor 2021).

This bold narrative is not new to Palestinians. Ghassan Kanafani7 was one of the champions fighting Zionist bionarrative back in the 1960s and early 1970s. He was a fierce critic of Zionism, of Arab regimes, but also of Palestinian failure to establish a state by their own. It was precisely because he was capable of articulating a self-critical narrative that he was murdered by the Mossad in Beirut at the age of 36. On July 8, 1972 he died as he switched on his car engine and his 12-year-old niece was in the car with him when it exploded.

Ghassan Kanafani described the facts and named them in a straightforward way. He explained why it was impossible to talk to Zionist leaders under asymmetric conditions and under the reality of occupation. He was not involved in the army struggle of the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), he was the spokesperson, the chief editor of *Al-Hadaf* weekly magazine and he was aware of the relevance in fighting with the words and not just with the weapons (*Al Jazeera* English 2020). Mohammed El-Kurd is just following in his footsteps.

As opposed to many Palestinian speakers, in his interviews with Western media Mohammed calls the Israeli presence in the lands occupied in 1948 “occupation”. He clearly states that Israel is a terrorist regime that Palestinians cannot coexist with, and that it practices policies of settler colonialism, ethnic cleansing, and forced displacement—in addition to practicing the policy of “apartheid”, which has come into vogue with pro-Palestine advocates. (Metras Editorial Board 2021).
It is still uncertain if the new wave of indignation around the world against the injustices of Zionist leaders toward Palestinians will last and be able to change, not just the narrative but also the support of powerful allies towards Israel. What is true is that we are witnessing the beginning of a shift in the narrative, and this is due to the long-standing work of Palestinian journalists, scholars, and activists, as Mohammed El-Kurd explained in an interview.

I think there are too many reasons responsible for raising the ceiling of the new Palestinian rhetoric. The wave of advocacy in the recent months is only a continuation of a cumulative process that advocates and varied institutions have done for several decades. This time, with insightful and politicized use of social media platforms, Palestinians were able to overcome all obstacles and attempts of silencing they had to face by Western media companies, forcing them to discuss and shed light on the viral news in social media. (Metras Editorial Board 2021).

The thirst of self-representation

It is not a coincidence that the youngest journalist in the world holding a press card is a Palestinian teenager, Janna Jihad. She was seven when she began covering the demonstrations against the Israeli occupation at Nabi Salih, her hometown. She decided to fulfill the lack of presence of international media covering those manifestations and the daily challenges her community faced.

In 2018 she was interviewed by SABC News during her visit to South Africa and the channel describes her as “The world’s youngest journalist …, she films and reports protests, attacks, and everyday happenings in the West Bank, and then posts the videos on social media platforms …, on which she has more than 270 000 followers” (SABC News 2018). Janna is Ahed Tamimi’s friend, another Palestinian female teenage activist imprisoned by the Israeli army and released in 2018 after some months in captivity. Janna considers, as some other of her colleagues have said before, that the camera is her weapon.

I always say that my camera is my weapon of choice, because using my camera, it’s a very peaceful and nice way to resist this occupation … By using my camera, I can send a message, and it can be even more effective than a gun, more effective than violence, more effective than killing people. (SABC News 2018).

Hossam E. Hamdan assured when interviewed that Israel imprisons journalists because “to be a journalist or to throw stones is the same (for Israelis), but maybe with the camera it will get further” (Hamdan, personal communication, 2010). I asked Janna about the biggest problems she must face being such a young journalist. She answered that the lack of movement affects not just her work, but her daily life.

Considering that the Israeli occupation has more than 700 checkpoints on the Palestinian roads in the West Bank, controlling our ability to move from one place to another … For example, on my way to school I personally face checkpoints which would make me super late to my classes, instead of reaching school in 25–30 minutes I must take a longer way that may take me up to 3 hours without having checkpoints on it. And it’s the same for journalists. (Jihad, personal communication, 2020).

One of the biggest problems as a Palestinian journalist is to move freely. That is why Muntaser Hamdan, and other members of the Union of Palestinian journalists began a
campaign to criticize Israeli authorities and gain international support and attention. The petition they wrote in English and in Arabic details the restrictions for Palestinian journalists in circulating freely between cities. These obstacles are growing as times goes by.

In July 2018, OCHA completed a comprehensive “closure survey” that recorded 705 permanent obstacles across the West Bank restricting or controlling Palestinian vehicular, and in some cases pedestrian, movement. This figure is three per cent higher than in December 2016, the date of the previous survey. These obstacles are deployed by Israeli forces citing security concerns. The deployment of obstacles has become more flexible and, combined with the relatively low level of violence since the completion of the previous survey, has a less disruptive impact on the daily life of Palestinians travelling between Palestinian localities (excluding East Jerusalem and the H2 area of Hebron city) than previously. (OCHA 2018).

The Zionist bionarrative prevents Israelis from acknowledging their responsibility in the refugee crises created by their ethnic cleansing. This bionarrative prevents Israelis from any kind of accountability. “How many times do Palestinians have to refute anti-Semitism claims when stating their explicit oppression before understanding this tactic is used to suppress us. Apartheid, settler-colonialism, ethnic cleansing, displacement, these are all accurate words to describe 73 years” (Al Masri 2021).

Palestinians are still being constantly dehumanized as a consequence of the Orientalist and Islamophobic bionarrative that portray them as potential terrorists in mainstream media. Palestinian journalists, activists, and scholars have been aware for decades that they are struggling against the bionarrative that stigmatizes them constantly. They have built a self-critical narrative and most of them reject being used as a justification for anti-Semitism.

Palestinians are constantly searching to raise awareness of the hard conditions they face on a daily basis. They are aware that their very existence is considered an affront, their body is a battlefield, and what they do with their life will be probably politicized. It is time to consider Palestinian journalists’ work as part of the counter-narrative that fights to disentangle the Orientalist and Islamophobic narrative that has been going on for decades.

The unrightful journalist: activism and profession

Nidal Rafa, producer at France 24 and fixer at the time she was interviewed held Israeli citizenship. With her passport she was able to move freely between the West Bank and Israel. Because of this ease of movement, some foreign colleagues have asked her to write stories about the West Bank for them to publish as their own.

Media is capable of forming an opinion, a “public opinion” [...] that is precisely why I am offended and disappointed by the laziness or lack of courage of some international media that do not hire Palestinian journalists and settle for the work of Israelis. There you have a way of reinforcing only one side of the story! Although I understand that this lack of motivation is also due to the fact that Israeli authorities are the ones responsible for granting visas to foreigners who want to reside in the Palestinian Territories. (Rafa, personal communication, 2010)

Nidal Rafa became the protagonist of an embarrassing episode back in 2009. She was working for CNN and was accused of being too “partisan” by British journalist Tom Gross
while she was questioning Danny Ayalon, Israel’s former ambassador to the United States, during a press conference. She called him a fascist and could not manage to hide her anger.

Both Ayalon and Zahlaka were professional, courteous, and generally reasonable in what they had to say. So were the journalists who asked the questions, including Ethan Bronner, the New York Times’s senior Jerusalem correspondent. But one journalist, sitting in the row in front of me, was far from courteous, and I have today posted on YouTube a video of her extraordinary tirade against Danny Ayalon, in which she harangues and berates him, uses expletives, and calls him “fascist, fascist.” (Gross 2009)

Palestinian journalists can be hired to write stories that will be signed by their foreign—usually Western—colleagues, but they are not allowed to question an authority and to show their ideology. Doing so is seen as unprofessional, period.

The Zionist bionarrative goes further as the case of a young American journalist Emily Wilder demonstrates. She was working for AP during the May 2021 incidents that led to the bombardment of Gaza by Israel. She was fired for criticizing the Israeli government policies and supporting the Palestinians. Being Jewish did not protect her, neither did the fact that the Israel army bombed the AP offices in Gaza in those raids. Apparently, to be accepted as a professional journalist by the mainstream media requires belonging to the “right” ethnicity, the “right” religion, and the “right” side of the history.

Mainstream journalism criticizes Palestinians for doing their job while being Palestinians. They are criticized for not being able to escape their sociopolitical background and the truth is that nobody can do so. A professional journalist must exercise journalism ethically, being able to do his or her job in an impartial way, but there is no journalist in the world able to get rid of all the biases that have shaped his or her life. “Journalists, beyond idiosyncrasies and work logics, belong to social environments and cultures that are produced and reproduced through their discourses” (Maigret 2010, 158).

**CONCLUSION**

Palestinian journalists have been considered too activist, too politicized, too militant, too nationalist or biased to be professional. Delegitimizing their professionalism is a way to delegitimize their narrative and to forbid them from telling the story from the Palestinian point of view. Orientalism and Islamophobic prejudices are used as tools to impose a narrative over other. Palestinian journalists do their work in a *biospatial* space, as Yinon Cohen and Neve Gordon have stated but they also face a bionarrative that looks forward, erasing their voice, their memory, and their identity. Ethnic cleansing is composed by forced displacement and segregation, but it is completed by erasing the “other’s” narrative and expelling it from the dominant narrative.

The so-called “war on terror” has placed Palestinian journalists and Palestinian society in a more vulnerable position than before the 9/11 attacks. No matter if they are Christians or Muslims, Palestinians are part of that “exotic Middle East” region, and they are a threat. Usually, mainstream media forgets to explain that the region is a wide ethnic, cultural, and religiously diverse region. As a matter of fact, the very term Middle East is Orientalist and colonialist, we should consider the use of a better concept by naming that region West Asia.

Palestinians have been fighting for over 105 years against an Orientalist and Islamophobic bionarrative since the Balfour Declaration. That is why they have been able to place their own narrative in the mainstream media during the May 2021 events in Sheik Jarrah, Jerusalem, West Bank, Gaza, and Israel.
The new generations of journalists, as well as the youth in Palestinian Territories and inside Israel have been able to find enough strategies to profit from the gaps in mainstream media, and make their voices heard. Even if mainstream media holds and supports the hegemonic narratives, it is possible to break this hegemony and build spaces where counter-narratives can be heard and become visible.

The media tend to reproduce the ideological field of the society and its structure of domination but it is not a systematic tendency ... all the dominated social fractions participate in the cultural game and express themselves by means of or in relation with the mass media. (Maigret 2010, 139)

Maybe the Palestinian counter-narrative leaking on mainstream media is not enough to finish with the occupation and to get them their own state, but Palestinians are moving in the right pathway. By fighting Islamophobia they are uncovering the real nature of Zionist policies and their supporters. Islamophobia can be found in the right spectrum of social and political interactions—as in Fox News or Donald Trump’s speeches and policies, for example—but it is possible to find them also in the patronizing left.

By fighting Islamophobia Palestinians are establishing the pillars to face an Orientalist and racist narrative that not only affects them but also affects all Arabs and Muslims in the world. By fighting Islamophobia Palestinian journalists, activists, and scholars are sharing an example of peaceful resistance to other minorities. As Foucault’s study of biopower shows, the relation of power is composed by the part exercising the power and the other part resisting this power.

ENDNOTES

1 By Orientalized journalism, I mean the process of delegitimizing their voices through a bionarrative imposed over them.

2 Todd Green defines Islamophobia as “the fear of and hostility toward Muslims and Islam that is rooted in racism and that results in individual and systemic discrimination, exclusion, and violence targeting Muslims and those perceived as Muslim” (Green 2019, 3).

3 “The identity-civilizational trait that we want to understand by ‘whiteness’ is consolidated, in real history, in a casual or arbitrary way on the basis of the ethnic appearance of the northwestern European population, on the background of a racial-cultural whiteness” (Echeverría 2007, 18).


5 In June 2022 “Human Rights Watch described Gaza as an ‘open-air prison’ 15 years after Israel imposed a siege on in wake of the Hamas takeover of the coastal enclave” (Asharq Al-Awsat 2022).

6 Miriam Berger interviewed for her PhD research some of the journalists I have also talked to. One of the Hamdan brothers told me pretty much the same that Miriam Berger heard from her interviewees, but we arrived at different conclusions.

7 Journalist and novelist from a Christian family displaced by the 48 war (nakba) from Acre. His funeral in Beirut was widely attended and mediatized. The same happened last May with Shireen Abu Akleh’s funeral, a Christian
Palestinian American journalist from Al Jazeera. She was intentionally killed by the Israeli army while doing her job at Jenin, wearing a press vest and a helmet on May 11, 2022. https://theintercept.com/2022/09/20/shireen-abu-akleh-killing-israel/

According to the dictionary definition, the fixer assists an experienced reporter in fieldwork. Usually they are local journalists who know the language and serve as translators as well.

AP explained that her pro-Palestinian tweets “violated its social media policy” (Goldman 2021). She gave an interview to Democracy Now. https://youtu.be/1gBmlQXXrfQ

REFERENCES


