

From Villains to Victims: The Contrasting Portrayals of Palestinian Men in Social Media and Traditional Western Media

Nareg Assadourian

Biology Major

Abstract

The representation of Palestinian men in Western media has long been marred by harmful stereotypes that dehumanize and demonize them as violent, misogynistic terrorists. This study explores how such portrayals in traditional media outlets differ from emerging narratives on social media during the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian colonial war. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following question: What is the image of Palestinian men circulated on social media during the current war in Palestine, and does it differ from traditional Western media portrayals depicting them as perpetrators of violence and oppression? Through a review of recent literature, the paper first examines how mainstream Western media have perpetuated Islamophobic, Orientalist tropes rooted in colonial biases to depict Palestinian men as uncivilized perpetrators of violence, thus justifying oppression against them. However, the rise of social media has challenged these one-dimensional stereotypes by providing a platform for Palestinian voices to humanize their experiences of resilience, suffering and resistance. Specific instances where social media footage contradicted misrepresentations in mainstream coverage are analyzed. The paper then evaluates policy recommendations for further shifting media narratives, such as establishing monitoring mechanisms, promoting narrative diversification, providing cultural sensitivity training, amplifying positive stories through UN channels, and leveraging public awareness campaigns. By systematically counteracting dehumanizing stereotypes through multi-pronged strategies, more balanced portrayals recognizing Palestinian humanity can emerge to aid conflict resolution based on mutual understanding and respect for human rights. Overcoming institutionalized biases is an uphill battle, but harnessing digital discourse offers paths towards this crucial goal.

Introduction

The representation of Palestinian men in mainstream media has long been an issue of dispute, having significant consequences on our understanding of the Israeli-

Palestinian colonial war and the humanity of those involved, whether in the 2014 war on Gaza, as explained by Abdulhadi (2019) or in the current situation (October 2023 till present). Traditional Western media outlets have consistently perpetuated stereotypes depicting Palestinian men as vicious barbarians and sexual predators as mentioned by Barnett (2023). However, with the emergence of social media, alternative narratives have developed, shattering these one-dimensional stereotypes. This shows that Palestinian men's identity and experience are represented differently across traditional media and new digital platforms during the Palestine-Israel colonial war. As Weiner (2023) has stated, negative depictions in media can have far-reaching impacts by shaping public perceptions and influencing policies and actions. Dehumanizing portrayals that reduce Palestinian men to stereotyped villains enable denial of their rights and justify violence against them. In contrast, Maharani (2024) claimed that balanced representations foregrounding Palestinian perspectives and centering human experiences could promote greater empathy, understanding, and non-violent conflict resolution. This paper explores how these contrasting media narratives take form and grapples with their profound real-world implications. By unpacking the historical roots, underlying biases, and power dynamics involved in media framing of Palestinian men's identity, the research illuminates what is at stake and why transformation is urgently needed. Finally, potential policy recommendations will be addressed in order to propose solutions regarding the issue, as policy interventions in traditional and social media spaces could catalyze this paradigm shift toward more ethical, pluralistic depictions that uphold human rights and human dignity for Palestinian men as well as recognize their resilience, struggle, and basic humanity in the face of profound adversity: Israel. The research question is as follows: What is the image of Palestinian men circulated on social media during the current war in Palestine and does it differ from traditional Western media portrayals depicting them as perpetrators of violence and oppression? Also, what are the policy implications of this shift in representation?

Methodology

The study seeks to examine how Palestinian men are portrayed in the media using a qualitative content analysis and secondary research. The information is gathered from academic journals, websites, mainstream Western media, and social media posts about Orientalism and Palestinian masculinity. Moreover, this qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the underlying messages, ideologies, and potential impacts conveyed through media portrayals of Palestinian men. In addition, by utilizing multimodal techniques and critical discourse analysis, the study contrasts how Palestinian men are presented in traditional and social media.

Literature Review

The following literature review examines how Palestinian men have been portrayed in both traditional Western media and emerging social media narratives. It analyzes the deep-seated biases and prejudicial framing employed by mainstream outlets, rooted in Orientalist and colonial ideologies that perpetuate dehumanizing stereotypes. The review explores how social media have challenged these dominant narratives by providing a platform for Palestinian voices and lived experiences that assert their humanity, resilience, and rights in the face of oppression.

Western Media's Islamophobic and Orientalist Portrayals of Palestinian Men since Day One

The portrayal of Palestinian men in Western media is characterized by dehumanizing stereotypes and Islamophobic narratives, depicting them as vicious barbarians and terrorists. Throughout the years, media, whether traditional or social, have always been an instrument of war by informing the public and shaping their opinion. Media may also falsify history and frighten the audience from a certain group (David & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2023). In this paper, the "certain group" are the Palestinian men. In fact, literature agrees that Western mainstream media frequently dehumanize and negatively portray Palestinian men as "vicious barbarians"; "sexual predators"; and "perpetrators of violence and injustice." Here are some additional comments used by the Western media: "terrorists"; "inherently dangerous"; "aggressive"; "inferior human animals"; "barbaric"; "ridiculous"; "fanatical"; the list goes on... Abdulhadi (2019) and Beydoun (2023) highlight the use of Islamophobic and Orientalist as well as racist narratives to depict Palestinian men using the discourse mentioned above.

Moreover, Edward Said explains the concept of Orientalism which leads to the dehumanization of Palestinian men (Beydoun, 2023). Orientalism is a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient," and "a structure of lies or of myths which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away"; generally, Orientalism is "a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles," as cited in Said (1979, p. 2). In addition, King and Jegić (2024), by using the aforementioned concept, argue that displaying Palestinians, including men, as aggressive "blames the victims" for their resistance, which is an Orientalist discourse. Hence, the prejudice in the media toward Palestine is a reflection of the cultural Orientalism that penetrates Western hegemony and plays a major role in upholding colonial power relations in Palestine (King & Jegić, 2024).

Furthermore, Ridouani (2011) claims that Western media have long promoted detrimental stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims, including Palestinian men, portraying them as barbaric, ever since the Crusades and colonial times. From the Middle Ages forward, particularly during the Crusade Wars and the Arab conquest throughout Europe, the West has perpetuated nearly identical caricatures about Arabs and Muslims, and continues to conceptualize them as a foreign "Other" or "Enemy," regardless of when interaction occurred, whether it was centuries ago or more recently. Abdulhadi (2019), Barnett (2023), and Beydoun (2023) show the continuity of these stereotypes in the war on Gaza in 2014, as well as after the attack of October 7, 2023, as an excuse to validate bloodshed and ethnic cleansing. Indeed, as Ridouani (2011, p. 12) puts it: "As representatives of terrorism, Palestinians are always presented stereotyped as aggressors, while Israelis, being victims of Palestinians' 'aggression,' have the right to defend themselves." This quote further proves and demonstrates what the highly classified individuals in Israel perceive Palestinians as in general and Palestinian men in particular. Here are some of these demonizing perceptions:

- Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu: "This is a struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness, between humanity and the law of the jungle"; "the scope of this mission [is] to defeat the bloodthirsty monsters who have risen against Israel to destroy us."

- Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant: “We are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly.”
- Israeli Minister for National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir: “They are all terrorists, and they should also be destroyed.”

Hence, it is evident that Western media have consistently dehumanized and negatively portrayed Palestinian men through the use of Islamophobic, Orientalist, and racist narratives, perpetuating harmful stereotypes that contribute to the justification of violence and oppression against them.

Demonizing Palestinian Masculinity: Media Bias and Cultural Stigmatization in the West

Western media outlets exhibit a pervasive pro-Israel bias in their coverage, consistently dehumanizing Palestinian men by depicting them as violent, misogynistic terrorists through negative stereotyping, dismissing allegations of Israeli human rights abuses against them, and prioritizing narratives that demonize Palestinian masculinity - reflecting deeply entrenched racist and Islamophobic prejudices that serve to justify the continued oppression of Palestinians. In fact, numerous western media personalities have themselves discredited allegations of Israel’s dehumanization of Palestinian men – for example, Julia Hartley-Brewer accusing Palestinian guests of misogyny, and Cable News Network’s (CNN) Dana Bash dismissing claims of Israeli soldiers raping Palestinian women (Jamal, 2024). Talking about CNN, scapegoating and pigeonholing various Arab and Muslim populations into a single entity linked to terrorism is normalized in the United States. One example, as cited in Ridouani (2011), is the aftermath of a bombing incident, where CNN, influenced by prejudices against Arabs, quickly implied that the act was carried out by Muslim terrorists. However, after capturing the person at fault, who was an American, CNN dropped the term “terrorists” and switched it with “offensive” to conform with the “mainstream ideology” and biases within American society.

On another note, Siddiqui and Zaheer (2018) conducted a sentiment analysis of fifty years’ worth of news headlines and found that the Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal all consistently exhibit a pro-Israel news bias (as cited in King & Jegić, 2024). Moreover, Beydoun (2023) emphasizes how Palestinian men were absent from Western leaders’ demands for a ceasefire, including those from Trudeau and Macron, who focused mainly on children and women:

- President Emmanuel Macron of France: “These babies, these ladies, these old people are bombed and killed. So, there is no reason for that and no legitimacy. So, we do urge Israel to stop.”
- Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau: “Israel must stop ‘this killing of women, children, babies’ in Gaza.”

Another factor leading to the misinterpretation of Palestinian men is the stigmatization and distortion of Arabs and Muslims in Western art, cinema, and entertainment, depicting them as uncivilized and dangerous. One example is the popular cartoon show *Ali Baba*, which aired on several Western networks in the 1940s, and was given

the nickname “the mad dog of the desert.” In this cartoon, the main character, which is an Arab Muslim, is vilified to the point that no portion of his body reflects his humanity anymore. His reputation is not based on his smart, wise, giving, or altruistic intents, but rather on his cruel, dishonest, and spiteful gluttonous behavior (Ridouani, 2011). The latter provided further instances of distortions, including the reckless Arab merchant who narrates the story of Aladdin’s opening, as well as a frightening royal guard who was given stereotyped facial traits by Disney animators, such as a heavy eyebrow, a hooked nose, thick lips, and missing teeth.

This set of physical features in the Western media could have affected Palestinian men which led Sa’ar and Yahia-Younis (2013) to investigate a perceived crisis of masculinity among Palestinians, stating that this crisis is mirrored in a widespread discourse within Palestinian communities regarding a rise in violence and damaging hyper-masculine practices. The authors argue that this dilemma originates from Palestinian men’s liminal situation, in which they lack avenues for conventional military masculine acts owing it to their exclusion from both the Palestinian struggle and complete absorption into Israeli culture and institutions. Moreover, Beydoun (2023) highlights the current interests that prioritize demonizing Palestinian men and equating masculinity with terrorism. This is shown to be deliberate as innocent men are being portrayed as terrorists, losing their dignity and manhood in front of the entire world – humiliated, then degraded to animals and objects of contempt. Unless these pernicious narratives and biases are actively challenged and counteracted through more balanced, humanizing portrayals of Palestinian men in media and public discourse, their dehumanization will persist, further enabling the perpetuation of injustice, violence, and denial of their basic rights and dignity.

Changing the Image: Impact of Social Media on the Perception of Palestinian Men

The image of Palestinian men has started to gradually change due to the presence of the alternative media. Social media and first-hand accounts challenge the dehumanizing and stereotypical portrayals of Muslim men propagated by mainstream media, showing their compassion, resilience, and dedication to their families and communities in the face of adversity. Indeed, Beydoun (2023) depicted the widely shared photo of Palestinian men being paraded by the Israeli military while they are nude, with the Israeli military claiming the guys are “ Hamas fighters.” This particular image garnered widespread international attention, as it vividly depicted the harsh reality of Israeli aggression toward defenseless Palestinian men.

Moreover, Jamal (2024) explained that social media have evolved as a platform for putting attention on the violence against Palestinian men, perhaps providing a counter-narrative to the mainstream media’s marginalization of their victim experiences. The latter further claimed that without the widespread coverage of the events by social media, the Israel army would not confirm these events and would try to hide its atrocities. Additionally, Abdulhadi (2019) stated that this shift in portrayal is caused by two factors: first, the growth of a worldwide ultra-right that demonizes underprivileged people, notably Muslims, and second, Israel’s inability to suppress Palestinian resistance after decades of occupation and brutality. The unrestricted display of anti-Palestinian speech and violence helps to show Israel as a superior, civilized power while enslaving and insulting Palestinians.

Furthermore, Abdulhadi (2019) mentions photos of an Israeli female soldier posing with blindfolded Palestinian male prisoners, showing the latter's incapability and dehumanization. The implications of this shift are indeed significant. It sheds light on the activities of Israel, which normalizes and justifies gendered and sexualized violence against Palestinians, portraying these activities as an inevitable consequence of their resistance. Despite the fact that social media have shed light on incidents of violence against Palestinian men, articles, news and media still maintain that mainstream discourse to some extent and continue to marginalize and ignore their experiences as victims.

Figure 1: Israeli Woman Soldier Posing with Blind-Folded Palestinian Prisoners



Figure 2: Israeli Army Arresting Palestinian Civilians and Forcing them to Take off their Clothes



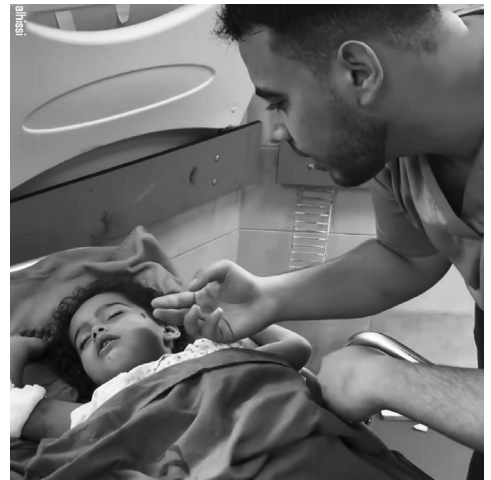
The following post, taken from the social media platform Instagram, provides examples of Palestinian men acting with compassion, bringing joy to children, and comforting others amid tragedy, thus countering the dehumanizing stereotypes:

The next time the media tells you Muslim men are terrorists, I want you to remember Motaz Aziza, the journalist who cradles babies in between helping families pull their loved ones out of the rubble. I want you to remember the men dressed up as Mickey Mouse in Gaza going around putting smiles on children's faces. I want you to remember the doctors of Gaza who perform surgeries non-stop yet still pray over their patients and comfort them through catastrophic losses. I want you to remember the imam at my *masjid* who delivered his *khutbah* while holding his baby girl in his arms. You see, genocide is easy when you dehumanize people. For decades now, the media have told us Muslim men are savages, terrorists, wife beaters, and everything in between. I want you to challenge this trope the next time you see it in the media. Let these photos serve as a reminder. (Khan, 2023)

Figure 3: Palestinian Man: Mickey Mouse



Figure 4: Palestinian Man: Doctor



Policy Review and Recommendations

The discussed literature demonstrates the need for more actions to be implemented to maintain the shift in Palestinian men's representation between traditional and social media. As a result, a number of policy recommendations may be proposed to address the research question. For instance, Abdulhadi (2019) did not provide policy suggestions directly. However, the author argued that a broad-based grassroots movement, which uses collective action from the local level to implement change at the international level, that refuses to prioritize one kind of justice over another, would be required to reverse the tide of racist and colonial violence perpetrated by settler-colonial nations, such as the United States and Israel. Hence, collective action is a crucial factor to push and implement a policy. There are no explicit policies in the literature to address this problem in any way.

Moving forward, social media are trying to shift the narrative as a primary source of information and allowing for people to seek new perspectives about pre-existing ideologies, such as the image of the men of the Orient, succeeding in this mission at times (Maharani, 2024). Focus should be drawn to these digital platforms when looking for ways to promote this change in perception. One way to achieve this goal is by:

- Monitoring these digital social networks by making use of newly emerging artificial intelligence tools and employing specialists to objectively analyze and publicly make available the necessary social contents. This method will not only allow a meticulous control of discriminatory content in regard to sensitive topics, such as the perception of certain gender groups in Oriental societies, but will also offer a correct and factual image of the targeted protagonists.
- Establishing cultural sensitivity and raising awareness about unconscious bias at the heart of major tech companies, which are in charge of sharing social media content, through engaging workshops and interactive discussions about this topic to guide misunderstood ideologies in the right direction and allow space for more realistic views. Moreover, the bounds of this social consciousness could be extended further than companies to more fundamental social institutions, as follows.
- Schools and universities could be a major hub for instilling social awareness about cultural and gender discrimination as they shape students' ideas and equip them with necessary critical thinking skills for them to become effective pillars of the generations to come and help identify biased depictions of Palestinian men in media coverage to pressure Israel into ending the genocide.
- Public areas such as exhibitions, open mic events, and parks could also be useful spaces to spread the targeted messages and to increase media literacy related to cultural sympathy and social sensibility to a sizeable audience, including different age groups and social categories. On another note, a few policies that have the potential to diminish bias and discrimination in traditional media outlets may include:
- Establishing media monitoring mechanisms under the United Nation (UN) or other international organizations to track and document instances of biased, dehumanizing or inflammatory media coverage of Palestinians. This data can then be used to engage with offending outlets and push for more balanced reporting. Additionally, a fine ought to be imposed on anyone who disobeys these regulations.
- Diversification of narratives can be implemented to promote a broader range of viewpoints and voices in media coverage to challenge the stereotypical representations of Palestinian men as perpetrators of violence. This method may include boosting local Palestinian journalists to be more confident and outgoing to present a more balanced picture of the conflict,

which leads to international pressure on Israel to comply with Human Rights protocols by the UN.

- UN bodies should regularly highlight positive human stories and achievements of ordinary Palestinian men through their media channels to counter violent stereotypes. The key is using the moral authority and soft power of the UN and Human Rights framework to incentivize more ethical media practices without infringing on protected free speech principles.

Although Mikdashi said in the interview, as cited in Jamal (2024, para. 27), that “the gendering of the Palestinian genocide will mean Palestinian men will most likely not have their stories heard, their pain will go unrecognized, and their torture will be categorized as routine practice.” However, if the human world works together, there is hope for every individual, every group, and every Palestinian man. Through grassroots action, policy changes, education, public awareness campaigns, media monitoring, and narrative diversification, dehumanizing stereotypes of Palestinian men may be transformed. Social media may amplify authentic Palestinian voices. Schools may teach cultural sensitivity and critical thinking skills. International bodies may incentivize ethical media practices without impinging on free speech. Over time, nuanced representations may hopefully replace reductive stereotypes, reclaiming Palestinian humanity, which could pave the way for a more just future.

Conclusion

In sum, this paper’s literature review has demonstrated that traditional Western media outlets have long perpetuated dehumanizing stereotypes and Islamophobic narratives when portraying Palestinian men, depicting them as violent, dangerous perpetrators, to justify oppression against them. However, the rise of social media has allowed for alternative narratives to emerge that challenge these reductive stereotypes and highlight the humanity, resilience, and dignity of Palestinian men in the face of adversity. By amplifying authentic Palestinian voices, social media have started shifting perceptions, though barriers still remain. Moving forward, the policy recommendations outlined – such as media monitoring mechanisms, narrative diversification, cultural awareness training, and use of the UN’s moral voice – could help accelerate this positive shift. With concerted efforts across grassroots activism, educational initiatives, policy changes and public awareness campaigns, portrayals of Palestinian men could evolve from violent stereotypes to nuanced representations of their lived experiences as victims and survivors. Reclaiming Palestinian humanity through ethical storytelling is not only a matter of justice, but a crucial step toward resolving the long-standing conflict through mutual understanding, empathy and respect for human rights on all sides. Though challenges lie ahead, the foundations for changing hearts and minds have been laid by the powerful testimonies now circulating on social media.

REFERENCES

- Abdulhadi, R.** (2019). Israeli settler colonialism in Context: Celebrating (Palestinian) death and normalizing gender and sexual violence. *Feminist Studies*, 45(2–3), 541–573. <https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.45.2-3.0541>

- Barnett, A.** (2023). *Palestinian men are people too*. Medium. <https://andrewbarnett567.medium.com/palestinian-men-are-people-too-aef0111fc359>
- Beydoun, K.** (2023, December 8). *Demonizing Palestinian men: Terrorists until proven otherwise*. <https://khaledbeydoun.substack.com/p/demonizing-palestinian-men>
- David, Y., & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N.** (2023). Racializing human rights: Political orientation, racial beliefs, and media use as predictors of support for human rights violations – a case study of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 46(10), 1947–1971. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2166792>
- Jamal, H.** (2024, January 18). *Western feminism and the dehumanization of Palestinian men*. The New Arab. <https://www.newarab.com/opinion/western-feminism-and-dehumanisation-palestinian-men>
- Khan, N. [@natty.a.khan].** (2023, October 23). *It's high time we regain our narrative in the media*. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CywCZN-u2Q1/?img_index=1
- King, G., & Jegić, D.** (2024). Copyediting Palestine: Media bias in journalism style guides. [Editor Palestina: Sesgo Mediático en los Manuales de Estilo Periodístico]. *Revista Latina De Comunicación Social*, (82), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2024-2052>
- Maharani, N.A.M.** (2024). Social media as a primary source of information: Exploring its role in disseminating the current situation in Palestine. *Gema Wiralodra*, 15(1), 275–281. <https://doi.org/10.31943/gw.v15i1.628>
- Ridouani, D.** (2011) *The representation of Arabs and Muslims in western media*. Raco. <https://www.raco.cat/index.php/Ruta/article/download/243531/326280>
- Sa'ar, A., & Yahia-Younis, T.** (2013). Masculinity in crisis: The case of Palestinians in Israel. In Salhi, Z.S. (Ed.), *Gender and diversity in the Middle East and North Africa*, (pp.13-31). Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315875897-2/masculinity-crisis-case-palestinians-israel-amalia-sa-ar-taghreed-yahia-younis>
- Said, E.** (1979). *Orientalism*. Random House. https://monoskop.org/images/4/4e/Said_Edward_Orientalism_1979.pdf
- Weiner, M.F.** (2023). Palestinian erasure and dehumanization in introductory sociology texts. *Critical Sociology*, 49(6), 991-1008. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205221132839>