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What's Wrong with the NY Times' Report on Children's Deaths? So Much.

by [Robert Satloff](#)

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Articles & Testimony

By failing to provide essential information on sourcing, the reporting environment, the victims' proximity to legitimate military targets, their family connections with combatants, and other matters, the article presents a skewed, sensationalist image of the Gaza conflict.

On the front page of its May 26, 2021 edition, the *New York Times* ran a powerful, moving spread titled “They Were Only Children,” featuring thumbnail photos of children it says were among the 69 youths under 18 years old—67 Palestinians and two Israelis, one Arab and one Jewish—killed in the 11 days of conflict between Israel and Gaza-based Palestinian terrorist groups Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).

On May 28, former national director of the Anti-Defamation League Abraham Foxman tweeted: “I am cancelling my subscription to NYTimes. I grew up in America on the NYT—I delivered the NYT to my classmates—I learned civics-democracy and all the news 'fit to print' for 65 years but no more. Today's blood libel of Israel and the Jewish people on the front page is enough.”

Soon thereafter, I retweeted Foxman and added: “Few people on this planet have more authority on confronting anti-semitism than @FoxmanAbraham. When he makes an accusation of 'blood libel,' sit up and take notice. @nytimes”

While “blood libel” is not usually a term in my lexicon, I stand by that tweet, given my respect for Foxman, whose books on antisemitism include “Never Again? The Threat of the New Anti-Semitism,” “Viral Hate: Containing Its

Spread on the Internet,” and “The Deadliest Lies: The Israel Lobby and the Myth of Jewish Control.” Ironically, within moments, Twitter lit up with viral hate directed at Foxman and me, focused on those same deadly lies.

No one ever accused Foxman of being a shrinking violet and he can certainly respond for himself to ad hominem attacks. My response is this: a detailed critique of “They Were Only Children” and why it merits criticism for presenting a skewed, distorted, largely unsourced account of the events in Gaza.

Doing Journalism in Gaza

A fundamental deficiency of “They Were Only Children” is that it is silent on what role, if any, Hamas—the US-sanctioned foreign terrorist organization that controls Gaza—played in arranging, supervising, facilitating, directing or otherwise affecting the reporting of this story, either directly or via the sources cited. Specifically, readers have a right to know if the blandly referenced “Palestinian officials” cited as sources for the “identities of the children killed, their photographs and the circumstances of their deaths” were, in fact, Hamas officials, members or sympathizers. Readers have a right to know if the reporters traveled to Gaza and interviewed family members face-to-face, inspected sites where children reportedly died, and assessed claims and counter-claims about the precision of Israeli bombing that allowed the story to repeatedly ascribe responsibility to Israel and what role, if any, Hamas minders played in this effort; alternatively, readers have a right to know whether reporting was second-hand, through local stringers and online interviews, and what role, if any, Hamas minders played in that effort. The reference to “Palestinian officials” as a source for this story is woefully inadequate for what purports to be the world’s newspaper of record.

Photo sourcing is an especially tricky matter. Indeed, an observant reader identified one of the pictures used from the top line of the “They Were Only Children” photo spread as a reprint of a photo circulating on the web for years. It has since been replaced by the *New York Times* with one “supplied by the family,” which raises questions about the origin of the photo that first appeared in the newspaper. See [the full thread here](#).

Connections to Hamas

“They Were Only Children” includes no references to any of the victims being related to Hamas/PIJ operatives or themselves members of Hamas or PIJ, nor does it make any reference to children being in proximity to Hamas/PIJ rockets or other Hamas/PIJ facilities or being used by Hamas/PIJ as “human shields.” This is not an incidental issue; it goes to the heart of the argument about who is responsible for the deaths of these children and whether Israel was discriminate—and therefore legitimate—in its use of force.

For example, the article tells the story about a 10-year-old Gaza City girl killed after being hit by shrapnel and rubble from an Israeli attack on a building nearby, but there appears to be no attempt to report on why Israel hit that building. Similarly, the article describes the destruction of two Gaza City apartment buildings owned by the al-Qawlaq family, resulting in the deaths of eight children, but there appears to have been no effort to ascertain whether there were any military facilities in those buildings. It matters greatly if children were asleep in a bedroom with rocket launchers or intelligence networks set up in the kitchen next door. No fewer than nine times, “They Were Only Children” states that children were killed either by an Israeli airstrike, Israeli warplane or Israeli bomb, ascribing responsibility solely to Israel; in reality, responsibility for these deaths can shift 180 degrees depending on the answers to questions that don’t even seem to have been asked.

Interestingly, some information on these issues is available elsewhere. See, for example, the press releases of Defense for Children International-Palestine, an organization cited as a source for this article even though it appears to have [disturbing connections](#) to a different Palestinian terrorist group. A May 11 press release on the DCI-P website detailing the death of Muhammad Saber Ibrahim Suleiman, age 15, notes that “Mohammed’s father was reportedly a commander in the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, a Palestinian armed group and the armed wing of Hamas,

according to information collected by DCIP.”

That fact does not appear in “They Were Only Children,” only Muhammad’s photo. Other DCI-P press releases also provide details about past incidents in which child members of armed terrorist groups were injured in “work accidents” perpetrated by those groups, lending credibility to claims that some of the children killed in the recent conflict may have been participating in the hostilities themselves.

To its credit, on May 30, the *Times* [posted a story noting](#) that one of the children featured in the photo display, Khaled al-Qanou, was found to be a member of the radical Islamist terrorist group Mujahadeen Brigades. It remains unclear the standard by which the *Times* required extra time to determine his membership in a terrorist organization, whether the newspaper had concerns about al-Qanou’s activities before it went to print on May 26, and whether the newspaper has information that does not yet rise to the level of confirmation that other youths killed in the conflict were also combatants.

Abuse of the Thumbnail Photo Format

There are few more evocative formats to underscore the human dimension of calamity than publishing numerous thumbnail photos, especially children, across the front page of a newspaper. Usually, this is a format reserved for the most horrendous terrorist acts (think Orlando, Charleston, or Pittsburgh) or destructive natural disasters (such as Hurricane Katrina)—in other words, singular events for which the cause is clear, the perpetrator is readily identifiable and the absence of responsibility for the death on the part of the victim or his/her family is obvious.

As tragic as the deaths of the Gaza children certainly are, none of those conditions were met in this case. “They Were Only Children” brought together images for what was not a singular event but eleven days of fighting; it provided no substantive, independent accounting for the cause of individual deaths, and offered an implicit free pass to the terrorist groups that, at least in some cases, were responsible for placing children in harm’s way and, in all cases, chose to provide no basic defense for civilians (e.g., bomb shelters) as they launched their own attacks from heavily populated areas. By applying a format normally reserved for the black-and-white of terrorist attacks or natural disasters to the gray, unknowing reality of Gaza, *New York Times* editors debased its use.

Numbers Killed by Palestinian Friendly Fire

“They Were Only Children” notes that among the Palestinian children who died in the conflict, two “may have been killed” by a Hamas/PIJ rocket that fell short, not as a result of Israeli fire. In fact, multiple sources suggest that number is higher. The same DCI-P May 11 press release cited above raises doubt about six additional children killed, noting that they died just 800 meters west of the Gaza perimeter fence, with both Israeli aircraft overhead and Palestinians “firing homemade rockets toward Israel” nearby. Even more definitively, OCHA, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories—not an organization known for its pro-Israel proclivities—[released details](#) of the Gaza conflict that noted that 63 of 66 children who died in Gaza were “seemingly” killed by Israeli fire, clarifying that three, not two, were definitely not victims of Israeli attacks and hinting that the number may be higher.

Factual Reporting or He Said/She Said

“They Were Only Children” is repeatedly inconsistent in reporting some items as fact and others as opinion. Take, for example, this paragraph: “Israel blames Hamas for the high civilian death toll in Gaza because the group fires rockets and conducts military operations from civilian areas. Israeli critics cite the death toll as evidence that Israel’s strikes were indiscriminate and disproportionate.” The article sets this up as two unproven assertions—Israel blames and its critics respond—when it is an objective fact that Hamas fires rockets from civilian areas whereas the charge of indiscriminate and disproportionate response is inherently subjective. In contrast, the article

takes as fact every statement it cites by a family member, without mentioning any connections the family may have with Hamas, either by having membership or sympathies with Hamas or coming under Hamas pressure to report the narrative a certain way.

The charge of “indiscriminate and disproportionate” use of force itself deserves the close look that this article avoids altogether. Observers not usually accused of pro-Israel bias, like Matthias Schmale, local Gaza representative of the UN Relief and Works Agency, told an interviewer that Israeli attacks were “precise.” The numbers bear this out: even according to OCHA, of the 245 Gazans it says were killed in Israeli attacks, only 128 “were believed to be civilians,” meaning that at least 117 were legitimate military targets—a number that could well be higher.

This percentage—about half military and half civilian victims—compares favorably with reportage of similar cases of fighting against terrorist groups embedded in civilian areas. See, for example, [the accounting of civilian casualties](#) in the context of the US-led bombing of Mosul to free the city from ISIS control in 2017. This is also generally in line with the record of US and Afghan airstrikes over the last five years, according to UN data as analyzed in [a report](#) recently released by the British NGO Action on Armed Violence, which showed children constituting 40 percent of all civilian casualties in Afghanistan. For the record, it bears noting that the *Times* did not do front-page spreads with thumbnail photos of Iraqi or Afghan children killed by American warplanes, American missiles or American bombs—but for some unexplained reason, children allegedly killed by a foreign country, Israel, do merit this special coverage.

Mischaracterizing the Fighting

In “They Were Only Children,” Israel is characterized as the aggressor and initiator of the entire Gaza conflict, as the article states “An average 15-year-old [in Gaza] would have lived through four major Israeli offensives.” Whatever one’s view of the 2021 Gaza conflict, it was certainly not “an Israeli offensive,” as Israel’s May 10 airstrikes were a response to Hamas rockets fired on Jerusalem and there was no attempt to retake territory. (See numerous media citations, [including this BBC article](#).)

However, this is not the first time the *New York Times* accused Israel of having initiated the recent Gaza conflict in a news analysis. In [a May 25 tick-tock of the fighting](#), the newspaper noted in the second paragraph that “Israeli warplanes started bombarding Gaza City on May 10, compounding the civilian suffering in the coastal enclave. *At the same time*, the rocket barrage by Hamas—the militant group that has ruled Gaza since 2007 and does not recognize Israel—took a toll on Israeli cities, including Tel Aviv, the commercial center of the country.” (emphasis added)

It is not until thirteen paragraphs later—thirteen!—that the writer corrects himself, no longer suggesting that Hamas rockets and Israeli airstrikes were simultaneous. Instead, buried deep in the story, he writes: “Militants in Gaza then began firing rockets in Jerusalem’s direction, to which Israel responded with airstrikes on Gaza. Barrages by both sides intensified through the week, as did casualties—though Gazans have suffered a disproportionate number of deaths.” It is unlikely many readers made it to the fifteenth paragraph to get a more accurate picture than the one from the second paragraph; even there, the article makes an assertion of an ill-defined “disproportionality,” hinting the situation would somehow have been more equitable if more Israeli children had died.

Another example of slanted reporting in “They Were Only Children” is the sentence that says: “The low death toll on the Israeli side also reflected an imbalance in defensive capabilities.” A more accurate statement would have been “The relatively low death toll on the Israeli side also reflected a difference in strategic priorities Israel and Hamas each placed on providing protection for their people.”

After all, the “imbalance” was not an act of nature, like a meteorological phenomenon; it has human causation—namely, that Israel invests significantly in defense, while Hamas does the exact opposite, purposely (some would say

cynically) choosing to expose civilians to harm. If, as the article says, “In Gaza, most people have no access to safe rooms or shelters,” that is the responsibility of the local governing authority, Hamas. However, at no point in “They Were Only Children” is responsibility for any of the children’s deaths definitively ascribed to Hamas; except for the “maybe two” children killed by Palestinian friendly fire. Israel bears sole responsibility.

Imbalance on Mental Health Reference

“They Were Only Children” says it is focused on children’s fatalities and does include the stories of two Israelis killed along with the Palestinian children. However, the article also goes into a discussion of the mental health implications of the Israel-Gaza conflict. Here, there is a major imbalance, as it discusses the psychological trauma of Palestinian kids, without any reference to the psychological trauma of Israeli kids. It notes that “mental health experts and independent organizations who work with children in Gaza say they commonly suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic fear and anxiety.” Missing is whether experts who work with Israeli children find that fleeing night after night to bomb shelters, fearing their homes and families may be hit, has any impact on those kids’ mental health. One would never know from this story.

Despite a veneer of balance (namely, the description of the two Israeli children killed), “They Were Only Children” is a deeply flawed article that presents a skewed, sensationalist image of the Gaza conflict. It falls short of meeting basic journalistic standards in failing to provide essential information on the reporting environment, on the family connection of child victims to combatants, on the proximity of the victims to legitimate military targets, and other key facts about the circumstances of many deaths. The slippery discussion of sourcing—including the reference to unnamed “Palestinian officials” in Hamas-controlled Gaza—makes the reporting fundamentally suspect.

Despite these flaws, the writers and editors had no compunction in ascribing responsibility for numerous deaths, repeatedly blaming one side (Israel) for killing these children, apparently not even inquiring whether local actors knowingly placed some of the victims in harm’s way. Without these details, readers receive a distorted and incomplete picture of what happened during these eleven difficult days. Yet even with all these unknowns, *New York Times* editors chose to give this story a format—front-page treatment with thumbnail photos of victims—normally reserved for the most clear-cut cases of terrorist barbarity and natural disaster. In the process, they abused the trust of their readers.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute and author of [Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands](#). This article was originally published [on the Times of Israel website](#). ❖



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