

Did Nasty Israelis Really Separate Palestinian Mothers From Their Babies?

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Articles & Testimony

If Washington Post reporters had asked Israeli officials, they would have written a very different story.

On November 17, the Washington Post published a [front-page article \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/17/israel-gaza-war-babies-families/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/17/israel-gaza-war-babies-families/) titled “Israel’s war with Hamas separates Palestinian babies from their mothers.” It claimed that the expiration of transit passes that allowed Palestinian women with complicated pregnancies to cross from Gaza to give birth in hospital neonatal wards in Israel or the West Bank compelled those new moms to leave their newborn infants in the care of hospital nurses and that the outbreak of war on October 7 has prevented parents from reuniting with their babies.

Moreover, the article included assertions from unnamed hospital administrators that the newspaper could not print further details—even to name the hospitals where the babies were cared for—out of fear of reprisals from the Israeli government. That fear allegedly was the reason the reporters did not even approach Israeli authorities to ask for their comment on the various allegations made against them.

Four days later, I posted [a lengthy critique \(https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/how-the-washington-post-turned-a-feel-good-story-into-an-anti-israel-attack/\)](https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/how-the-washington-post-turned-a-feel-good-story-into-an-anti-israel-attack/) of the article, highlighting numerous journalistic flaws. The most serious, in my view, was that the Post’s reporters took an essentially good news story about babies being cared for during wartime and turned it into an attack on Israel based largely on unnamed sources without making any effort to check the claims with the relevant Israeli government agencies.

The original story has gnawed at me. It cried out for more details. Could Israeli officials really be so heartless as to separate mothers and their preemie infants just hours after birth? Could Israeli officials really be so cruel as to repeatedly deny those mothers access to reunite with their babies?

So, over the past three weeks, I have done what three Washington Post reporters— [Louisa Loveluck](https://www.washingtonpost.com/people/louisa-loveluck/) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/people/louisa-loveluck/>), [Sufian Taha](https://twitter.com/sufiantaha1?lang=en) (<https://twitter.com/sufiantaha1?lang=en>) and [Hajar Harb](https://www.linkedin.com/in/hajar-harb-001b0142/?originalSubdomain=uk) (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/hajar-harb-001b0142/?originalSubdomain=uk>)—did not do: I asked relevant Israeli government agencies, including the office of the Israel Defense Force’s Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT (<https://www.gov.il/en/departments/coordination-of-government-activities-in-the-territories/govil-landing-page>)), the Israeli Ministry of Health, and the Israeli embassy in Washington, for their side of the story. This is what I learned. None of this appeared in the original Washington Post story.

- The established procedure for Palestinian parents from Gaza to seek exceptional medical care—whether for themselves, as in the case of mothers with complicated pregnancies, or for their children who might need cancer treatment, kidney dialysis or other specialized treatment—is to apply via the Palestinian Authority, which then passes requests on to Israel. The PA bureaucracy in Ramallah is fully involved in all these cases. (Israel and the PA often disagree over how to pay for the medical care of these patients, but the patients’ access to care is never impeded by this dispute, nor are the patients themselves charged for this care.)
- Israel requires entry permits for all Palestinians from Gaza to transit to the hospitals where such care is delivered, which is almost exclusively hospitals in the West Bank or East Jerusalem. It is exceedingly rare for the PA to request transit to a hospital inside pre-1967 Israel.
- Israel strongly prefers that mothers accompany children, as there have been cases in the past when fathers abandoned children to seek employment while in Israel or, even rarer, engaged in prohibited political/security activity. In a few cases, other family members—most often, grandparents—accompany the children. Obviously, in the case of difficult pregnancies, the issue concerns mothers.
- When travel permits expire, the traveler does not usually return to Gaza. That is because permits can be renewed electronically online; for post-partum mothers with newborn infants in hospital, renewals are swift and virtually automatic. As a senior official of the Israeli Ministry of Health explained to me, “In all cases like these, permits are extended automatically on a weekly basis with no requirement to return to Gaza.”
- If permit renewals are automatic, how could mothers and babies get separated? That happens when mothers give birth in West Bank or East Jerusalem hospitals and then decide to return to Gaza for personal or family reasons, usually to care for their other children, confident in the knowledge that their newborns are in good hands. As the Israeli Health Ministry official explained: “Mothers who do return to Gaza in peacetime do so generally to care for additional children left at home.” In other words, separation, when it happens, is almost always the choice of the mother, not something imposed by Israeli administrative fiat.
- It is true that Hamas’ terrorist attack on October 7 and Israel’s subsequent declaration of war against Hamas suspended the normal issuance of travel permits. Still, Israel has received no special request—either via the Palestinian Authority or UN specialized agencies such as the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) or the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)—to arrange for the reunification of these mothers and their babies.
- In the meantime, all the babies remain in the care of the relevant hospitals, at no cost to the families. Both the PA and the Israeli Ministry of Health have records of each case, so the idea that the Post could not check on the accusation that patients would suffer “reprisals” if details of their hospital stay were known is, on the face of it, absurd.

Bottom line: On closer inspection, the Washington Post’s flouting of conventional rules of journalism was even more egregious than I originally thought.

- The article asserts that “the war...parted newborns from their mothers and fathers.” Actually, the parents in question

appear to have chosen to leave their children in the care of the hospitals and return to Gaza long before the outbreak of war. According to the Israelis, the war may have made it difficult for them to reunite, but the original decision to separate was the parents’.

- The article claims that “If a baby needs to stay in the incubator longer, the mother must return to Gaza and start the process again.” According to the Israelis, this is false.
- The article allows most of the medical staff and Palestinian mothers interviewed to maintain anonymity, “citing security concerns for staff and patients,” noting that “in the aftermath of Oct. 7, hundreds of Palestinians from Gaza, including hospital patients with permits, were arbitrarily detained by security forces, **rights groups say** (<https://gisha.org/en/israeli-cabinet-decision-to-return-gaza-workers-to-the-strip/>).” The article then links to a single November 3 press release by a group called Gisha: Legal Center for Freedom of Movement, that asserts that “hundreds of Gaza residents, including both workers and people who had entered Israel with permits to receive medical treatment, who were present in Israel on October 7...had since been unlawfully, secretly detained by Israeli authorities.” Evidently, the Post did not do any independent reporting on the accuracy of this charge. More to the point, the Post did not do any independent reporting to learn whether any of the alleged detainees were mothers of newborns.
- The article states that a Gazan woman identified only by her first name, Sabrina, gave birth to premature twins on August 3 and then, by August 5, “it was time for [her] to go.” The article continues: “She left in tears, staff said, reassured only by their promise to apply for another permit as soon as possible so she could come back and collect them. Israeli authorities rejected it without explanation, they said. The war began soon after that.”

The article does not cite Sabrina directly but relies on second-hand, unnamed remembrances of her parting words three months after her departure. Moreover, the article makes no mention of why Sabrina actually left—was it because she lacked a valid permit or because she chose to return to Gaza for some other personal reason?

This paragraph is the key to the entire article but the reporters don’t ask whether Sabrina took advantage of the online system to apply for a permit before her return to Gaza, don’t ask what efforts she made to reunite with her children in the two months between her departure and the Hamas attack (e.g., did she approach the PA? did she make an appeal to the relevant UN specialized agencies?), and don’t ask any question of Israeli authorities to confirm that the request was rejected or why.

- The article notes that “The Post is not providing the name or location of the hospital for the security of patients, as staff members fear reprisals from Israeli authorities.” But the Post reporters made no effort to check the assertion with any Israeli government entity, all of whom categorically reject the allegation. Nor did the reporters cite any specific reprisal that had already occurred against any Palestinian mother with babies in one of the neonatal wards described in the article.
- The article then cites the one mother named in the story, Hanan al-Bayouk from Khan Younis, who allegedly said “she was forced to go home” on August 28, just 30 hours after giving birth to triplets. It adds that Bayouk “had secured a permit to return for their discharge. It was dated Oct. 10, four days too late.” Here, too, the Post reporters don’t ask what “forced” al-Bayouk to return home—was it the expiration of a permit or some other issue in Khan Younis?—nor do they ask whether al-Bayouk tried to use Israel’s online system for permit renewal or if she sought the intercession of PA or UN authorities. And what precisely happened that made it “too late” for al-Bayouk to reunite with her children? It was not some punitive decision by the Israeli government; it was the Hamas attack of October 7 that triggered a total border shutdown, much like what occurred with the close of US land and air borders following the September 11 attacks.
- Bayouk’s case is the only one in which the mother’s full name is used in the story. In response, the Israeli health ministry official offered this: “In the single case mentioned [by name] in the article, the mother is in contact with both

the hospital and the Israeli authorities, the infants have completed their course of care. The mother returned to Gaza of her own choice prior to the Hamas attacks of Oct 7. Due to the current state of war forced upon Israel by Hamas, it is not possible for civilians to cross the Israeli border with Gaza in either direction. While Israel has offered to return the infants to their mother via the Rafah crossing, the mother is clear that she does not have the capability of accepting the infants back in Gaza due to the ongoing war. During her absence, her babies are well cared for. The State of Israel would like to see the reunification of the mother with her children as soon as possible.”

What’s the bottom line? All the key elements of the story that appeared in print on November 17, occupying most of the front-page above the fold, were either false, unsubstantiated or, at a bare minimum, rejected by statements by Israeli government officials who painted a very different picture than the one presented by the Post. The reporters appear to have taken on face-value claims and assertions made by the Palestinian mothers and the hospital administrators, without any independent verification. Their failure to seek comment from the relevant Israeli authorities violated the most fundamental rules of journalism. At the very least, the Post would then have had a “he-said/she-said” story, presenting two contradictory views of the same situation. Why the Post’s editors didn’t insist the reporters follow these rules may be the most inexplicable part of this tale.

Here is what a senior Israeli official told me: “If asked we would have described the numerous cases of our providing humanitarian care to Palestinian civilians, especially children, even during wartime—care for patients with cancer, dialysis, and other medical needs. We would also have described the procedure for entry and renewal of permits, which does not require the mother to return to Gaza. And we would have rejected completely any absurd idea that medical personnel face ‘retaliation’ for helping these patients, as an unnamed hospital administrator alleged in the article.”

As I wrote in my original critique, at its core, this appears to be a good news story about well-meaning people taking care of premature babies across battle lines that, for some unknown reason, the Washington Post turned into an unsourced, unnamed, unverified attack on Israel.

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