

Sadly, WaPost Admits No Error in Story Filled with Them

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Articles & Testimony

The paper's editors appear to have taken the path of least resistance by failing to address any of the serious questions raised about its "decomposing babies" story.

The *Washington Post* has spoken. In response to my 5000+ word *Times of Israel* [critique](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/once-again-palestinian-babies-story-merits-washington-post-apology>) of its [December 2 story](#) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/03/gaza-premature-babies-dead-nasr/>) "Israel's assault forced a nurse to leave babies behind. They were found decomposing," the Post's executive editor, Sally Buzbee, sent the following note to me and *Times of Israel* editors:

We have examined the Dec. 2 article in light of the questions you have raised. We have found no errors and no violations of journalistic practice. We stand by the story as accurate and fully in keeping with The Post's standards.

We welcome scrutiny and are committed to correcting any errors. But we are also committed to defending our journalism and our journalists when it is appropriate to do so. To that end, we object strongly to your unfounded assertions in the March 3 article suggesting that our correspondent Hazem Balousha had somehow "concealed the truth from editors" or was complicit in what you called "the possibility of fabrication" in the reporting of the article.

These allegations are inaccurate, irresponsible and deeply unfair to Mr. Balousha and his excellent work. They should be removed from your March 3 article, and it should be updated to include The Washington Post's response.

Regrettably, as this note shows, Post editors appear to have decided to prioritize "defending our journalism" over wrestling with any of the violations of the newspaper's own professional journalistic standards that I identified in my critique. I will here cite three:

- that Post reporters based their wholly uncorroborated story of a male nurse forced to choose which of five infants to

save during the hasty wartime evacuation of a neonatal ICU in a Gaza hospital on the testimony of a single anonymous source without taking account of two other widely circulated versions of the same episode that contradicted the Post's unnamed source. This includes one testimony by a male nurse, identified by name as Fadi Abu Riyala, who claimed to be in the NICU and said on video that no infants were rescued.

- that Post reporters knowingly disregarded inconsistencies, discrepancies and contradictions in accounts of what happened in the hospital's NICU that fateful day, such as whether the infants were alive when the evacuation occurred; whether the oxygen flow was still working; and even how many infants were later found dead. Tellingly, in contrast to the Post, other reputable media, such as [CNN \(https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/08/middleeast/babies-al-nasr-gaza-hospital-what-we-know-intl/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/08/middleeast/babies-al-nasr-gaza-hospital-what-we-know-intl/index.html), looked at the same evidence and concluded that each assertion the Post presented as fact was “unclear.”
- that the Post brushed aside its own “policies and standards”—in which the newspaper “pledged to avoid conflicts of interest or *the appearance of conflict of interest wherever and whenever possible*”—by failing to inform readers that one of its reporters and a key source cited in the story had both personal and familial ties, a fact that Post editors admitted they were not even aware of when the reporter and the source—Hazem and Mohammed Balousha, respectively—worked together on this story.

Since Post editors did not respond substantively to any of these criticisms and offered no corroboration for any of the sole- or anonymously-sourced claims made in the original article, there is no compelling reason to rule out the most damaging accusation I made—namely, that key parts of the Post story could have been fabricated.

The Post's refusal to grapple with any of these critiques, I should point out, is in marked contrast to how the newspaper handled a similar episode late last year, when I [pointed out \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/did-nasty-israelis-really-separate-palestinian-mothers-their-babies\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/did-nasty-israelis-really-separate-palestinian-mothers-their-babies) a series of errors in a November 2023 [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/) alleging a purposeful Israeli policy of separating Palestinian mothers from Gaza and their newborn infants born in Israeli hospitals. The Post handled that situation by responsibly and professionally re-reporting the story and publishing the updated version six weeks later with an editor's note admitting that the original “fell short of the Post's standards for fairness.”

In this instance, I stand by my criticisms of the “decomposing babies” story and remain ready, at any time, to engage publicly or privately with Post editors on the substance of my critique. Readers can judge for themselves how to interpret the refusal of Post editors to address in serious fashion any of the issues that I raised. My own view is that grappling with the many errors of fact and procedure in this case would have exposed so many problems that wishing them away under the guise of “defending our journalism” was the path of least resistance. That's a shame.

Robert Satloff is the Segal Executive Director and Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in U.S. Middle East Policy at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published [on the Times of Israel website](https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/sadly-wapost-admits-no-error-in-story-filled-with-them/)

[\(https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/sadly-wapost-admits-no-error-in-story-filled-with-them/\)](https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/sadly-wapost-admits-no-error-in-story-filled-with-them/). ❖

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Mar 22, 2024

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Michael Singh

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