

Israel's war on journalism

A Kiwi journalist's response

Abstract: Whether it is termed as 'self-defence' or 'mowing the lawn', the Israel Defence Force (IDF) has common phrases to describe its ongoing attacks on the besieged Palestine enclave of Gaza. The phrases obscure the devastation of death and disaster in the 2023/24 genocidal war on Gaza. While global reports have tended to focus on the horrendous and rapid climb of civilian casualties, especially women and children, Gaza has also claimed the worst ever death of journalists, many apparently targeted by the IDF because of their profession. Journalists in this article argue that it is time to 'call these [Israeli state] terrorists by their true name: enablers of genocide.'

Keywords: Al Jazeera, civilian casualties, ethnic cleansing, Gaza, genocide, human rights, investigative journalism, Israel, killing of journalists, Palestine, war correspondence

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PALESTINIAN journalist Ahmed Alnaouq's first published story dealt with what he described as Israel's murder of his brother Ayman in 2014 (Alnaouq, n.d.). The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) would call it 'self-defence' or 'mowing the lawn'—a common phrase in Israel for the periodic attacks on Gaza aimed at depleting Hamas's military capacity.

The essay—published on the *We Are Not Numbers* website—describes Ayman coming home, in the early 2000s, after five of his primary school mates had been killed by Israeli soldiers, and another 12 injured while playing.

By the time Israel invaded Gaza in what it dubbed Operation Cast Lead, in 2008, Ayman was in secondary school and once again he saw friends being killed. Operation Cast Lead left 1,400 Palestinians dead, 46,000 homes destroyed and more than 100,000 homeless. Thirteen Israeli soldiers died during the invasion.

The blockade that followed the war left Ayman and Ahmed's disabled, taxi driver father unemployed as the supply of petrol dried up. As the eldest son, Ayman took on the role of breadwinner.

Then in 2012 Israel again 'mowed the lawn' in Operation Pillar of Defence—and once again hundreds were killed and thousands left homeless. Ahmed wrote: 'When this war was over, Ayman was not the same.'

His older brother joined the Hamas' armed resistance force—the Al Qassam Brigades. It was a decision that would cost him his life. In 2014, Israel yet again

invaded Gaza and Ayman was killed by a missile fired from an F16 as he made his way to battle the IDF.

The world is divided on what to call the likes of Ayman. To Palestinians he is a martyr, a freedom fighter, and a patriot - to Israelis he is a 'terrorist'. Some will praise him for his decision to join the armed struggle. Others will condemn him.

Ahmed chose another form of resistance: journalism. In 2014, he helped set up *We Are Not Numbers*, a website that provides a platform for young Gazans to share their stories, in English, with the outside world. Then in 2019 he teamed up with Israeli journalist Yuval Abraham to bring the stories to an Israeli audience in Hebrew in a project called *We Beyond the Fence*.

On 21 October 2023, Israel dropped a bomb on Ahmed's family home killing 21 members of his family—including 14 of his nieces and nephews all under the age of 13. The house was in the south of Gaza in an area Israel had declared a safe zone.

Ahmed heard of the massacre in the UK where he is on a scholarship. He has been tirelessly telling people the stories behind the numbers ever since. But as we enter the seventh month of what leading Holocaust scholar, Hebrew University professor Amos Goldberg, declared in April 2024 to be a genocide, the numbers tell other important and horrific stories (Goldberg, 2024).

The media has been updating the death count daily—at the time of preparing for publication it was more than 37,000, the vast majority women, children and civilian men—but there are other numbers that are less well known.

About 100 journalists—10 percent of Gaza's journalists have been killed to date. It is by far the most deadly war for journalists in the 21st century (Robie, 2024). The reason I have fudged the numbers is twofold: firstly, whatever figure I use is likely to be out of date by the time this article goes to print; and, secondly there is a discrepancy between the figures given by the Committee to Protect Journalists which reports that 92 Palestinian, three Lebanese and two Israeli journalists have died since the Hamas' October 7 attack and the Gaza media office which claims more than 140 journalists have been killed.

The Palestinian Journalist Syndicate reports that 84 media offices have been bombed—including the *We Are Not Numbers* offices.

Professor Goldberg includes the targeting of journalists in his carefully argued case for declaring the assault of Gaza to be genocidal.

What is happening in Gaza is genocide because the level and pace of indiscriminate killing, destruction, mass expulsions, displacement, famine, executions, the wiping out of cultural and religious institutions, the crushing of elites (including the killing of journalists), and the sweeping dehumanisation of the Palestinians—create an overall picture of genocide, of a deliberate conscious crushing of Palestinian existence in Gaza. (Goldberg, 2024)

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) filed a complaint with the International Criminal Court (ICC) on 31 October 2023, asking for an investigation into the targeting of journalists by Israel which it believed constituted war crimes (RSF, 2023). In February 2024, a group of UN experts, including four special rapporteurs, issued a statement calling on the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the ICC to look into the targeted killing of journalists in Gaza. A spokesperson said:

We have received disturbing reports that, despite being clearly identifiable in jackets and helmets marked 'press' or travelling in well-marked press vehicles, journalists have come under attack, which would seem to indicate that the killings, injury, and detention are a deliberate strategy by Israeli forces to obstruct the media and silence critical reporting. (RSF, 2023)

Ahmed Alnaouq is far from alone among Gaza's journalists in having multiple family members murdered. In April 2024, he tweeted: 'Israel killed my sister and all her children while sheltering in my home in October. Today they have bombed her husband's home. This home sheltered over 70 people. 7 flats.'

Al-Jazeera's bureau chief Wael Al Dahdouh—probably Gaza's best known journalist—lost his wife, son, daughter and grandchild, when an Israeli airstrike hit their home in the Nuseirat refugee camp on 25 October 2023. On January 7 his son, Hamza Al Dahdouh, a journalist, was killed by an Israeli airstrike while travelling in a car, marked press, along with a colleague.

It is an open question whether Israel is targeting not just journalists but their families. As well. What is certain is that Israel has a terrifyingly high threshold for the number of civilian deaths resulting from its targeted killing.

Yuval Abraham—who worked with Ahmed on the We Beyond the Fence project—published an investigation on the progressive +972 website which revealed an AI programme called Lavender that identified 37,000 suspected militants in the first weeks of the war (Abraham, 2024). The article, based on interviews with six IDF intelligence officers, claimed Israel systematically targeted those on the kill list while they were home, usually at night.

Another automated system called Where's Daddy? was developed to identify when suspected militants arrived home. Two of those interviewed claimed that in the early weeks of the war it was permissible for 15 to 20 civilians to be killed for every militant targeted.

The Committee to Protect Journalists issued a statement in December saying it was alarmed by journalists in Gaza reporting death threats and subsequently their family members being killed. CPJ Middle East and North Africa programme coordinator Sherif Mansour said:

The killing of the family members of journalists in Gaza is making it almost impossible for the journalists to continue reporting, as the risk now extends beyond them also to include their beloved ones.

On 5 May 2024, Israel closed Al Jazeera's office in occupied East Jerusalem, confiscating broadcast equipment and taking the channel off air (Al Jazeera, 2024). The move came almost exactly two years after an IDF soldier shot and killed the American-Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh while covering a raid on the Jenin refugee camp in the Israeli-occupied West Bank for Al Jazeera.

At first, Israel claimed Abu Akleh, who was wearing a blue vest identifying her as media, had been shot by a Palestinian militant. When that story became untenable, due to video evidence, the IDF launched its own investigation which declared there was a high probability that the Al Jazeera journalist had been accidentally hit by an IDF bullet and there would be no further criminal investigation.

Israel's targeting of journalists and their families, the closure of Al Jazeera's Jerusalem office, the imprisonment and alleged torture of journalists, and the refusal to let foreign journalists enter Gaza amounts to a war on journalism.

Ahmed Alnaouq remains committed to the craft of journalism but he is critical of much of the mainstream coverage of Israel's assault of Gaza. 'The Western media played a pivotal role in the murder of 21 members of my family, including my parents, siblings, nieces, and nephews,' he tweeted on X.

Yes, Israel executed the attack and the US supplied the weaponry, BUT the Western media provided cover. I hold every propagandist for Israel and every Western journalist who repeated the narrative of 'Israel's right to self-defence' against the civilian population of Gaza, including children and women, accountable. The era of diplomacy is past. It's time to call these terrorists by their true name: enablers of genocide. I refuse to tolerate Israeli propaganda any longer. I refuse to be intimidated any longer, and neither should anyone else."

With leading Holocaust scholars like Amos Goldberg declaring Israel guilty of genocide it is time for media outlets to ask themselves whether Ahmed Alnaouq has a point.

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