GLOBAL MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT

Reporting the Sheikh Jarrah Evictions

SOAS PALESTINE STUDIES

NOUREDDINE MILADI
Global Media Coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict
SOAS PALESTINE STUDIES

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Global Media Coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

Reporting the Sheikh Jarrah Evictions

Edited by
Noureddine Miladi
To my family
## Contents

List of Contributors ix

Introduction 1

*Noureddine Miladi*

**Part 1  Mediating the Conflict: Cross-Country Perspectives**

1 Digital media and the war of narratives in reporting the Palestinian-Israeli conflict 11

*Noureddine Miladi and Aaya Miladi*

2 Gaza 2021: Newsworthiness and context in the Spanish news coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict 31

*Ruth Sanz Sabido*

3 Counter-hegemonic global media narratives on the Palestine–Israel conflict: The Sheikh Jarrah protests on CGTN, RT, France 24 and TeleSUR 47

*Christopher D. Tulloch and Jose Luis Gordillo*

4 Media coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, comparing Al Jazeera English and i24News 65

*Noureddine Miladi, Rania El-Malky and Karima Miladi*

5 SDG16 in the news: Digital news coverage of Sheikh Jarrah in Nigerian newspapers 93

*Muhammad Jameel Yusha’u*

6 Reporting the Sheikh Jarrah evictions on TRT World’s Twitter account 107

*Yusuf Devran*

**Part 2  Digital Media and the Competing Media Narratives**

7 Digital activism and the politics of protest: Palestine and the struggle for global popular representation 121

*Mazhar Al-Zo’by*
8 The orchestration of activist events: Making protests heard (and seen)  Konstantin Aal, Sarah Rüller, Peter Tolmie and Volker Wulf 139

9 #PalDigiplomacy: Palestinian online public diplomacy during Israel’s 2021 attacks  Loreley Hahn-Herrera 153

10 Social media, activism and mass protest: Framed narratives of the May 2021 Sheikh Jarrah events  Shadi Abu-Ayyash and Hussein AlAhmad 171

11 Palestinian war narrative and social media: Ethnographic account of the victims of Israel–Palestine war during May 2021  Tawseef Majeed and Ali M. Abushbak 187

Part 3 Social Media Management and Public Opinion Control

12 Comparative analysis of Israeli and PLO diplomacy practices during the May 2021 Israeli attacks against Gaza  Sherouk Maher and Dina Matar 203

13 Platform necropolitics: Content moderation and censorship of pro-Palestinian voices on social media  Kelly Lewis 219

14 Pro-Palestinian activism: Resisting the digital occupation  Dounia Mahlouly and Zaina Erhaim 237

15 The media war in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: Examining interstate character assassination in international media  Aspiadis Neofytos 251

Index 267
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Introduction

Noureddine Miladi

This edited volume discusses the complexity of the media war that took place in Palestine/Israel during May 2021. Various international news media organizations covered the outbreak of the dramatic events at the time, which started with the forced eviction attempts of Palestinian residents in Sheikh Jarrah area in East Jerusalem by the Israeli army and Israeli settlers. Covering the Arab-Israeli conflict remains one of the hot yet contentious issues on the international news agenda. It has generated more attention as well as complaints about the discrepancies in news reporting than any other conflicts in other parts of the world. The region has one of the highest concentrations of journalists in the world, reflecting the intense worldwide interest in the conflict. But how have local, regional and global media outlets been covering the ongoing conflict? To what extent have citizen journalists challenged the propaganda war? What competing narratives emerge about the conflict due to the explosion in digital technology widely available to activists on both sides?

This edited book attempts to unpack the media management of this war by the different players in this crisis. It looks at the stance Israeli as well as Western media have taken in covering the conflict as compared to the Palestinian, Arab and other world media. What alternative news have social media networks been providing in reporting this war as compared to global media channels supportive of the Israeli narrative? In sum, the book argues that the media war, which previously used to take place on TV screens, radio airwaves and newspapers, is nowadays mostly conducted on virtual platforms. Social media sites have become the new sophisticated battlegrounds of activism where the war narratives are reported and challenged at the same time.

Book outline

Part One of the book presents a cross-country perspective on the media coverage of the Sheikh Jarrah events in Jerusalem during May 2021. Contributions are concerned here about the discrepancies on how the conflict was reported, and what distinguished one narrative from another.
Chapter 1 titled ‘Digital Media and the War of Narratives in Reporting the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict’ introduces the debate about the media coverage of the conflict in light of the modern technological changes. Noureddine Miladi and Aaya Miladi argue that the media war, which ignited in May 2021, revealed yet again a complex picture in relation to how the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was told by various actors. The chapter highlights the growing presence of social media platforms as tools employed to counterbalance fake news, and whitewashing attempts to duck the Palestinian narrative about what takes place on the ground. The chapter also furnishes the reader with background context on the history of the conflict and the continuous occupation as key reasons for Palestinians’ growing tension.

In Chapter 2, ‘Gaza 2021: Newsworthiness and Context in the Spanish News Coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict’, Ruth Sanz Sabido employs a Critical Discourse Analysis of 369 articles published by the online version of 3 mainstream Spanish newspapers (El País, El Mundo and La Vanguardia) and three alternative native online newspapers (El Español, El Confidencial and OK Diario) as a way of comparing the media coverage of the Sheikh Jarrah events. Her chapter explores two main aspects of the coverage: the newsworthiness of this conflict in the Spanish press and the contextualization of the May 2021 clashes in relation to the past and contemporary events. The analysis indicates that the newsworthiness of the conflict increases when new violent clashes erupt, and violence tends to be represented as retaliatory. There is a significant focus on the resulting humanitarian crisis and, above all, proper historical contextualization is mostly lacking. The chapter argues that this contextual gap should be addressed in order to challenge the reductionist views that emphasize the religious and violent nature of the conflict and minimize its political and territorial aspects.

Chapter 3, titled ‘Counter-Hegemonic Global Media Narratives on the Palestine–Israel Conflict: The Sheikh Jarrah Protests on CGTN, RT, France 24 and TeleSUR’ by Christopher D. Tulloch and Jose Luis Gordillo, presents an original perspective on the media coverage of the conflict by examining the news production on the websites of four counter-hegemonic state-funded television channels during the conflict in Gaza and Israel following the forced evictions of Palestinian families in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of East Jerusalem in May 2021. The case study features the global media platforms of three permanent members of the UN Security Council – China, Russia and France – along with those financed by three Latin American governments – namely Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua – and identifies a divergent news narrative on this story compared to the dominant version of events offered by the Anglo-American media. A qualitative content analysis of the main stories produced and a detailed consideration of the discursive frames, visual aspects, sourcing techniques and semantic structures deployed by them allowed the authors to discover common lines of argument as well as some specific elements in their media discourse regarding the Israel–Palestine story. As well as highlighting the most salient of these shared narrative elements, this analysis points out how in each case the official media outlets of each country instrumentalized the story to fit their wider ideological interests.

Chapter 4, titled ‘Media Coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, Comparing Al Jazeera English and i24News’ by Noureddine Miladi, Ranya El-Malky and Karima Miladi, analyses what the authors consider manifest discrepancies between the news
coverage of Israeli TV channel i24News and Al Jazeera English (AJE) satellite TV of the Sheikh Jarrah events and the violent conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis in May 2021. The chapter discusses the news agenda and editorial line of i24News and AJE by analysing language uses, news sources, framing and the historical narrative each network advances. Based on recordings from two weeks of the conflict, Miladi, El-Malky and Miladi analyse news values of each network, especially issues related to objectivity and impartiality, and identify the extent to which each of the two channels covers the news objectively.

In Chapter 5, ‘SDG16 in the News: Digital News Coverage of Sheikh Jarrah in Nigerian Newspapers’, Muhammad Jameel Yusha’u posits that the news coverage of the Sheikh Jarrah quarter in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict has generated strong interest in the global and local news media organizations. While news media organizations pay attention to news about conflicts, the coverage of Sheikh Jarrah is unique in many ways. It took place during the Covid-19 pandemic when the lockdown placed a heavy toll on the local population. Most importantly, it took place in the so-called decade of action (2020–30) when the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are supposed to be accelerated. SDG16 focuses on peace, justice and strong institutions. In this chapter, Yusha’u asks how is it possible to achieve SDG16 by 2030 without resolving the Israeli/Palestinian conflict? Do news organizations reflect the targets of SDG16 on peace, justice and strong institutions in their coverage of Sheikh Jarrah? How do Nigerian newspapers report the Sheikh Jarrah eviction, and is SDG16 a factor in the reporting?

Chapter 6, titled ‘Reporting the Sheikh Jarrah Evictions on TRT World’s Twitter Account’ by Yusuf Devran, discusses how TRT World covered the conflict, in which Israeli forces attempted to evacuate Palestinians from their homes in early May 2021. Both in traditional media and on internet platforms, the events covered gained great interest. In this study, content published on TRT World Twitter account between 14 and 20 May 2021 about the above-mentioned events in Palestine is analysed. The language, words, sentence structures, cause-and-effect relations, news sources, experts’ opinions, background information and all rhetorical dimensions of TRT World Twitter account have been examined. Through this analytical method, the study discusses whether TRT has objectively presented the case to its global audience. It is anticipated that this work will contribute to both the readers and media professionals towards helping them analyse TRT World’s social media reporting on the current conflict and other issues in the Middle East.

Part Two of this book moves to address the social media management by various players in an attempt to influence both local and international public opinion.

It starts with Chapter 7 titled ‘Digital Activism and the Politics of Protest: Palestine and the Struggle for Global Popular Representation’ by Mazhar Al-Zo’by, who argues that the tragic limit of reporting the Palestinian plight in global media persists in its denial of the Palestinian self-narration and the writing of its own collective communal identity into history. However, the dramatic evolution of the global public sphere has ushered in alternative and shifting forms and features in social advocacy and political mobilization in many contemporary societies. During the Israeli military assault on Gaza and East Jerusalem in the summer of 2021, it was amply clear that alternative social media as well as global mass-mediated digital discourse played a vital and
Global Media Coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

transformation role in the coverage and representation of the Palestinian struggle, experiences and realities under occupation. Within this digital-political ecology, this chapter argues that celebrities as public figures have assumed a critical role in advocacy communication strategies as well as the mobilization of discursive tactics in mass-media politics. In order to analyse the critical features of this form of celebrity powered activism related to Palestine, this chapter, argues Al Zo' by, revisits the Gramscian notion of the ‘organic intellectual’ as dirigenti, where the public figure assumes a ‘directive’ role to guide and frame public and popular discourse for transformative collective action and political change. By analysing celebrity social media discourse and narratives, this chapter contends that celebrity social media platforms critically challenged the hegemonic capacity of conventional media narratives to manage and regulate the production, framing and dissemination of mass communications and information related to the war.

Then, Chapter 8 titled “The Orchestration of Activist Events: Making Protests Heard (and Seen)” by Konstantin Aal, Sarah Rüller, Peter Tolmie and Volker Wulf draws upon a detailed longitudinal ethnographic study of an activist in a village in Palestine. It examines the rhythm and routine of the demonstrations he was involved in and the well-oiled division of labour that enabled them to be orchestrated across time. The authors argue that as demonstrations in the village changed over time, their focus also changed, with a shift away from physical demonstrations and towards virtual and online demonstrations. They illustrate how the multi-modal, multi-party character of demonstrations and their orchestration demands a wide variety of ICT-based cooperative practices and articulation work. Through this, the authors offer a variety of new insights about what it takes to make protests happen and the role ICT plays within that.

In Chapter 9 titled ‘#PalDigiplomacy: Palestinian Online Public Diplomacy during Israel’s 2021 Attacks’, Loreley Hahn-HERRera examines the online content production of the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PMoFA) on Twitter (@pmofa and @MofaPPD) and Instagram (@palestine.mofa) during Israel’s military campaign against the Gaza Strip between 6 and 21 May 2021. The chapter focuses on the main frames used by the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to articulate strategic narratives through its digital diplomatic practice. Conducting a frame analysis of 286 tweets and 18 Instagram postings reveals that the frames articulated by the PMoFA were emotion and affection, settler colonialism, violence, human rights, and solidarity and internationalization. Findings show how the PMoFA articulates its institutional voice during a highly contested time by using these frames in an overlapping way. This serves, argues Hahn-HERRera, as a storytelling mechanism that aims to construct knowledge, bypass negative mainstream media coverage and improve Palestine’s international standing by aiding its overall soft power strategy and the creation of online affective publics. The digital diplomatic practice of the PMoFA constructs and portrays a national identity that makes visible and legitimizes the history of the Palestinian struggle for justice and self-determination.

In Chapter 10, titled ‘Social Media, Activism and Mass Protest: Framed Narratives of the May 2021 Sheikh Jarrah’s Events’, Shadi Abu-Ayyash and Hussein AlAhmad examine the Palestinian narrative on social media platforms during May 2021, in which
the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood was at the centre of political and media attention. The study follows contents of social media accounts of renowned activists, politicians, academics, celebrities and solidarity groups in Palestine and its diaspora, examining how collective narratives were framed. The authors applied narrative segmentation, framing analysis and binary opposition analysis to digital content. Using the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah as a key word for searching content, the chapter found two dominant frames in the narratives: colonial policies frame and resistance frame.

Findings indicate that intervention of social media platforms by acts of censorship and deleting activists’ accounts play a role in the mediatized conflict’s dynamics. Meanwhile, the high engagement of Palestinian youth on social media provided very rich visual contents, which contributed to the notion that, in mediatized conflicts, social media actors who are at the centre of events play a significant role in enriching conflict digital content, amplifying events and framing their own narratives.

Chapter 11, ‘Palestinian War Narrative and Social Media: Ethnographic Account of the Victims of Israel–Palestine War during May 2021’ by Tawseef Majeed and Ali M. Abushbak, takes a comprehensive look at the victims, who are also social media users, and offers perspectives on documenting, disseminating and archiving personal war memories using social media as means and space. The main arguments reflect on structures of space on social media as an alternative stage, facilitated by media accessibility, immediacy, lesser censorship and wider reach.

Contextualizing the Israel–Palestine conflict, the key prospects of the chapter explore the shift from the physical spaces of memories and experiences to the virtual space on social media, especially peoples’ memories and emotional associations with (what becomes) the past/history. The victim–user perceptions towards their personally recorded evidence evoke possible degrees of emotional interaction and a participatory approach to witnessing the war. Looking through the produsage theory (Bruns, 2007) and the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010) lenses, the current section tries to understand the specific behaviour of the war victims (users) to record and share their intimate (war) memories, and how that (changed) behaviour affects the broader narrative of resistance literature and journalism. By employing an ethnographic approach, the chapter uses phenomenology and in-depth interviews with the victim-users as a comprehensive methodological pattern to manifest their testimonies. It aims to have an inclusive understanding of their behaviour to (personally) portray the war narratives as their individual experiences and perception. Besides, the methodological design also ensures an evocative conception of the socio-politico-technological aspects of the narratives. Keeping in view the narratological portrayal of the war memories facilitated by social media, the chapter comprehends embedded motivations, behavioural changes and spaces of war memories in the context of social media usage during the recent Israel–Palestine war in May 2021.

Part Three of this book, titled 'Social Media Management and Public Opinion Control', brings in various contributions about the way various actors on social media attempt to manage the dissemination of information on the conflict.

Chapter 12, titled ‘Comparative Analysis of Israeli and PLO Diplomacy Practices during the May 2021 Israeli Attacks against Gaza’ by Sherouk Maher and Dina Matar, offers a comparative analysis of the public diplomacy practices of Israel and
the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). By employing a thematic analysis of the contents of the official Twitter accounts of the Israeli prime minister’s office and that of the PLO during the May 2021 armed violence in Gaza, in which 240 Palestinians and 12 Israelis were killed, the chapter addresses the different modes of delivery that the two entities used to communicate their messages to the intended recipients. Based on the analysis of tweets published by the official Twitter accounts of the Israeli prime minister (@IsraeliPM) and the PLO (@nadplo), the authors discuss how state and non-state actors consistently seek to maintain what may be called effective strategic public diplomacy that adapts to the rapidly expanding technologies. The chapter suggests that public diplomacy practices are determined by socio-political contexts and, in this case, the nature of the ongoing asymmetric conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. It also suggests the challenges to these practices by grassroots activists and ordinary people using digital platforms to tell alternative narratives of lived experiences and events, thus underscoring the complex and fluid dynamics between media, politics and diplomacy in the twenty-first century.

In Chapter 13, titled ‘Platform Necropolitics: Content Moderation and Censoring of Pro-Palestinian Voices on Social Media’, Kelly Lewis posits that the violence of the May 2021 Israeli-Palestinian conflict revealed the significance of social media platforms as spaces for Palestinians to publicize instances of human rights violations, conflict and dispossession. It also highlighted the implications of asymmetrical content moderation processes and platform policies that led to the removal of this content and re-obscured the Palestinian struggle. Lewis develops the notion of platform necropolitics and demonstrates its theoretical resourcefulness through an examination of pro-Palestinian censorship during the May 2021 Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Platform necropolitics manifests through the corporate and sovereign logics of platforms that violently police the boundaries of speech and space – determining who has the right to speak and who has the right to appear as a legitimate digital citizen, and who does not – and that take as their object the articulations of digital subjects and enact their ‘right to kill or let live’. Exploring the tensions of digital media technologies as spaces that we live with, in and through, considering platforms as political and material actors that determine and condition the social, political and material (in)existence of digital subjects, the author examines how platforms enact forms of necropolitical power though corporate and machinic logics that simultaneously extend and reproduce the necropolitical power of the Israeli state.

In Chapter 14, titled ‘Pro-Palestinian Activism: Resisting the Digital Occupation’, Dounia Mahlouly and Zaina Erhaim draw on a case study of the gatekeeping processes that precluded biased media coverage of the events leading to the destruction of Gaza’s al-Jalaa tower by Israeli forces in May 2021. They start by examining how recent experiences of Palestinian online activism feature in the history of surveillance and censorship imposed on the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank. By referring to these long-lived experiences of ‘digital occupation’, the authors argue that corporate and military control over Palestinian communication networks extends far beyond the region. Mahlouly and Erhaim’s case study specifically explores the challenges faced by transnational networks of pro-Palestinian activists, who worked collaboratively to relay Palestinian voices during the crisis of May 2021. The chapter highlights different
forms of systemic control over technological infrastructures that resulted in a lack of impartiality and inclusiveness on the part of international media outlets.

Finally, in Chapter 15, titled ‘The Media War in the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: Examining Interstate Character Assassination in International Media,’ Aspriadis Neofytos examines the presence of character assassination in international media regarding the coverage of the conflict. Neofytos argues that this would expand the hypothesis of character assassination in international relations and shows that such strategies could affect or be used by international news media. In addition, it would add to the existing literature on the Israel–Palestine conflict coverage proposing another explanation for the bias observed. Character assassination is the deliberate destruction of a person’s reputation or credibility through character attacks. Such attacks may be used against collective targets like groups, states or nations. This is common among political elites of a country and the media. Data analysis in this work was conducted on three major news media networks, CNN, The Times of Israel and Al Jazeera English. The author aims, through this investigation, to examine the mediated character assassination in interstate conflicts based on the formation of images of the countries in conflict.

Bibliography

Part One

Mediating the Conflict: Cross-Country Perspectives
Digital media and the war of narratives in reporting the Palestinian-Israeli conflict

Noureddine Miladi and Aya Miladi

Background to the conflict: The blockade of Gaza, occupation of Palestinian land and the expansion of Israeli settlements

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is among the longest witnessed in modern history. Origins of the conflict date back to the British Mandate for Palestine (1918–48), marked by a period of consolidation of imperial rule and exploitation of Palestinian land in favour of waves of Jewish settlers coming from Europe and the United States. A landmark historical turn was the forced eviction of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, which began on 14 May 1948 and coincided with the declaration of the state of Israel (Khalidi, 2019). As a result, the first war of many broke out between Palestinians and Jewish groups armed by the British colonial power. This led to what is called the ‘Nakba’, the violent expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from their homeland. Most of the expelled Palestinians eventually sought refuge in other parts of Palestine or migrated to various neighbouring Arab countries (Khalidi, 2019). As for the historical Palestine as a country which existed prior to that date, it was split into Israel, the West Bank (of the Jordan River) and the Gaza Strip.

Relations with neighbouring Egypt, Jordan and Syria were not smooth over the following decades with the new Jewish state. The 1956 Suez crisis was the start of a series of major wars after Israel’s invasion of the Sinai Peninsula. The next major clash was during the 1967 war, where Israel attacked Syrian and Egyptian air forces, preventing any attempts at retaliation by the Egyptian army led by President Gamal Abdel Nasser. The Camp David Accords signed between Egypt and Israel in 1979 paved the way for a long-term peace treaty but did not serve justice to Palestinians, as it delayed them gaining the right to self-determination and self-rule. Palestinians had to wait until 1993, for the Oslo Accord, to earn a form of unprotected sovereignty on Gaza and the West Bank. The Palestinian Authority (PA), headed by the late Yasser Arafat, was then formed, which became the political umbrella for Palestinians’ mediation with the state of Israel as well as the outside world.
Over the decades, the Israeli government has been very reluctant to address the underlying issues of the occupation, hence tensions escalate again and again, following a seemingly determined cycle. For instance, the second ‘Intifada’ was sparked in 2000 due to the deterioration of Palestinians’ living conditions, coupled with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s invasion of the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem sheltered by hundreds of armed Israeli police. Israel’s landmark decision to build a separation wall around the West Bank in 2002 further worsened the occupation’s ongoing stifling of Palestinian lives by confiscating more and more Palestinian lands. The Apartheid Wall (as called by Palestinians), deemed illegal by the International Court of Justice, has kept Palestinians and Palestinian land in total isolation from each other. Occupied Palestinian areas have also remained under very strict restrictions on the movement of goods and people. Various civil society organizations have warned Israel and the international community against the drastic repercussions on Palestinian lives due to this wall. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) affirmed in 2002 that the wall would restrict Palestinian freedom of movement, Palestinian livelihoods and Palestinian access to land – a wall, which divides upon ethnic, national and religious identity. The apartheid wall involves the illegal annexation of some of the most fertile lands in the West Bank and water sources, while pushing Palestinians further into Bantustans, cantons and enclaves, where Israel can ensure maximum control over Palestinian lives and land. (OCHA, 2002)

The ensuing years evidently witnessed an ebb and flow of violent events between the Israeli occupation forces and Palestinians, including armed groups like Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. On 8 July 2014, the Israeli army launched what it called ‘Operation Protective Edge’, an attack on Gaza ostensibly targeting Hamas’s infrastructure. About 2,256 Palestinians were killed during the offensive, 70 per cent of whom were civilians, as recorded by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The cumulative death on the Israeli side was seventy people, of whom sixty-six were Israeli Defense Force (IDF) soldiers (UNRWA, 2014). Joronen (2016: 337) studied the Israeli government discourse during Operation Protective Edge and attempted to analyse ‘the argument used to morally justify killing on the calculative basis of causing only the minimum necessary collateral damage’. Joronen contends that the military aggression, which resulted in the death of 2,256 Palestinians in Gaza was ethically justified by the Israeli army through various ‘warning techniques which range from roof knocking to cautionary phone calls, text messages and air-dropped flyers’ (Joronen, 2016: 337).

House demolition and land confiscation by Israel

There are limited statistics on demolitions during the first few years of Israeli occupation since 1967; however the UN documented information on demolitions as early as 1971,
reporting on the destruction of thousands of houses and at least eleven entire villages (UN Special Committee, 1971: Chapter III. Section C). The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD), in combining information from various organizations, estimates that 54,000 Palestinian homes have been demolished in the occupied territories, including Gaza, from 1967 to 2018 (Halper, 2018: 58). This is not including the estimated 52,000 demolished within Israel during the first Nakba of 1947–48.

Demolitions come in three types: punitive (as punishment for specific people who live in the habitations), administrative (for homes without building permits, which are near impossible for Palestinians to acquire) and military/land-clearing (Halper, 2018: 58). The vast majority, 66 per cent, are military demolitions, with 20 per cent administrative (Halper, 2018: 58). Between 1967 and 1969, a period known as the second Nakba, when the West Bank and East Jerusalem became Israeli-occupied territories, 7,554 homes were demolished. After 1971, the numbers of demolitions per year drastically decreased, nevertheless in the first decade from 1967, 10,308 homes were destroyed (Halper, 2018: 59).

Israeli demolition of Palestinian homes continued under various pretexts over the decades in a systematic manner. From 1977 to 1986, the total was 216, but by the third decade (1987–97) demolitions increased again, on an average, 284 a year, and so totalling 2,841 homes. In the early 2000s, the rate only increased further, totaling 6,747 from 1998 to 2007. In the last decade that ICAHD recorded, 2008–18, the total comes to a staggering 27,861 homes (Halper, 2018: 59). This includes the 18,000 destroyed in the Gaza Strip during the war on Gaza in 2014 (B’Tselem, 2019).

Moreover, according to OCHA, in the six years from 2009 to 2015, 3,784 Palestinian buildings in the West Bank were demolished or confiscated, leaving a total of 6,305 people displaced (OCHA, 2017: 3). This means that their primary place of residence was taken from them. The above figure does not include the many more Palestinians affected by other forms of property seizing/demolition (OCHA, 2017: 2). Vitally, the vast majority of buildings that Israel targets get demolished, either fully or partly. From 2009 to 2022, 932 buildings in the West Bank were confiscated, sealed or had people evicted from them. Yet in comparison, 7,733 were demolished in the same period (OCHA, 2022b). From 2016 to June 2022, 4,755 Palestinian buildings in the West Bank were demolished or confiscated by Israel, which resulted in displacing more than 6,300 people (OCHA, 2022a: 3). The year 2016 proved to be the worst, with 1,094 buildings targeted – on an average, 91 a month (OCHA, 2022a: 3). This included houses and other structures in East Jerusalem, in Areas A, B and C (OCHA, 2022a: 3). From 2009 to 2022, 26.6 per cent of the total 8,665 targeted structures were inhabited homes.

**Israeli settlements built on confiscated Palestinian land**

Another significant factor which leads to the renewal of tension between the Israeli government and Palestinians is the incessant and blatant confiscation of Palestinian land/properties. Every plot of land seized by force from its Palestinian owners becomes a new settlement project for Israeli Jewish settlers. From 1967 to 1997, the number of Israeli illegal settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem has been growing
steadily on confiscated Palestinian land. OCHA’s dataset, based on 139 of the 149 settlements that existed by 2005, shows that in the first ten years from 1967 to 1977, 48 illegal settlements were built on Palestinian land (OCHA, 2007: 16). By 2017, the total number rose to at least 250 (OCHA, 2017). It is important to factor in the land mass covered by settlements. For example, in 1987, 128 illegal settlements spanned 4,127 hectares of land. By 2005, the number of illegal settlements had increased to 149, but the land they covered increased by nearly 400 per cent to 16,375 hectares (OCHA, 2007: 18).

Between 1987 and 2004, despite new settlement building slowing down, the settler population still increased by nearly 150 per cent – from 169,200 to 421,669 people (OCHA, 2007: 16, 20). This is an average growth of 5.5 per cent per year. From 1993 to 2004, illegal settler population increased by 63 per cent (an increase of more than 163,000 settlers). It is relevant to note that the settlement population growth rate is much larger than the rate inside Israel. Between 2003 and 2004, for example, the settler population increased by 4.6 per cent, compared with 1.8 per cent in Israel (OCHA, 2007: 16). By 2007, the UN reported that 460,000 Israeli settlers lived in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. At this time, 40 per cent of this occupied land was privately owned by Palestinians (Dugard, 2007: 2). Furthermore, in the twelve years from 2005 to 2017, around 100 new illegal settlements were built, with a total of about 250. With a population of 611,000 people, this was an increase of 151,000 in ten years. Two-thirds of the settlers live in Area C of the West Bank, and one-third in East Jerusalem (OCHA, 2017).

As of 2020, B’Tselem reported that settler population increased to 662,000 in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, with about 280 illegal settlements, 138 of which are officially recognized by Israel (B’Tselem, 2020: 9). The other 150 or so are unofficial outposts, which usually contain Jewish farms that illegally take up extensive Palestinian farming land. These tend to be retroactively approved of later by the Israeli government. By the end of 2020, the population of the two largest settlements, Modi’in Illit and Beitar Illit, made up nearly a third of all settlers in the West Bank (B’Tselem, 2020: 9). While little information is available after 2020, the EU and Peace Now report a trend of ever-increasing settlement house plans and tenders, particularly in East Jerusalem (EU, 2022: 1). As of 2021, plans for 14,000 more settler housing units are approved of, to be built in and around East Jerusalem. This is double the units compared to 2020 (EU, 2022: 2).

Sheikh Jarrah evictions and the war on Gaza, May 2021

Israel’s attempt to violently evict Palestinian residents of the Sheikh Jarrah quarter in East Jerusalem, back in May 2021, was another phase of the systematic policy of confiscating Palestinian land and properties as cited earlier. The new wave of violent clashes on 8 May 2021 in Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories was evidently a result of the simmering tension between Palestinians and Israelis due to the ongoing occupation. At the time, the upcoming Israeli Supreme Court ruling on 6 May 2021, regarding the eviction of nineteen Palestinian families from their homes, was the
Digital Media and the War of Narratives

15

catalyst that led to the escalation of events. Palestinians held anti-eviction protests in
Palestinian cities across the West Bank and Jerusalem in support of families in Sheikh
Jarrah. Violence further escalated due to the Israeli military’s assault on Gaza, which
led to twenty-one Palestinian deaths (PRC, 2022).

Moreover, the situation worsened because of continuous assaults by small groups
of Jewish settlers who repeatedly invaded the Al-Aqsa Mosque, followed by the Israeli
police’s violent intervention and dispersing of Palestinian worshippers in the mosque
during the holy month of Ramadan. This marked the start of the Palestinians’ intense
protests and violent retaliation from Hamas and other Palestinian factions by launching
hundreds of missiles towards Tel Aviv. The ensuing events led to the Israeli army’s
brutal bombardment of Gaza, which lasted eleven days and resulted in the killing of
248 Palestinians and colossal destruction of Palestinian infrastructure.

Silencing the witnesses

Over the years, international journalists reporting on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict
experienced continuous harassment and deterrence from covering conflict zones
(Saraste, 2021). A report by the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR)
documented systematic persecution of scores of journalists from various international
media outlets, aiming to impede their normal work of reporting events, especially
during military assaults. The report reveals that

Israeli occupation forces’ grave violations against journalists include threats to
their personal safety and attack on their equipment with live and rubber bullets,
physical and emotional assault, restrictions on the freedom of movement,
bombardment of their office and other violations demonstrating a well-planned
scheme to isolate the oPt from the rest of the world and to provide cover-up for
crimes against civilians, and impose a narrative opposite to the reality on the
ground. (PCHR, 2020)

Violations that aim to silence the Palestinian story are complex and multi-layered, as
reported by the PCHR (2020). Attempts to obstruct journalists from reporting events
on the ground include detaining a crew of journalists, physical assault and verbal
abuse. When journalists insist on defying the Israeli army’s harassment, they may face
attacks or are simply blocked from having any further access to conflict zones. Jevara
Albudiri (Al Jazeera’s correspondent in Jerusalem) reported on the Israeli media’s
misinformation about her arrest by the Israeli army while covering events in Sheikh
Jarrah (East Jerusalem) in early May 2021. In a one-on-one interview with her on Al
Jazeera, Albudiri argues that the Israeli newspapers and TV channels simply sided
with the Israeli army’s narrative. They ‘claimed that she was a Qatari journalist who
attacked an Israeli soldier’ (Albudiri, 2021). Another notorious case of the Israeli
army’s violent assault and cold-blooded killing is that of Rachel Corrie, an American
diarist and activist from Washington. On 16 March 2003, she was crushed to death by
an Israeli army bulldozer when she was documenting the demolition of Palestinian