



Wounded Sovereignty: The Palestinian Body as Symbolic Capital in the Age of War Economies

In this article, the Palestinian body is studied not only as a physical entity, but also as a symbolic surface through which practices of control are transmitted and systems of conflict are rewritten. From the field to the image, from oppression to resistance, the article traces how the body is persecuted, consumed, and re-represented, while exploring the possibility of restoring its meaning and sovereignty from within the visual space itself.

/ Wadah Abu Jame February 12, 2026

In the Palestinian context, the body is not just a biological existence or human presence in a given arena, but also a subject of meaning, an instrument of control, and a space for political negotiation. It is no longer perceived as an isolated individual, but is interpreted within a network of discourses: what is worn on it or removed, how it is photographed, when it is exposed, and when it is hidden. All these are mechanisms belonging to what Michel Foucault has called "biopolitical power" (biopower), in which life and death are managed not only through killing, but through the organization, shaping, and direction of bodies¹.

Since the Nakba, the Palestinian body has been associated with images of loss, displacement, and rupture. However, it has not remained merely a symbol of ongoing injury; it has become a site of reclaiming - an image of resistance, of political agency, and a front that exposes the characteristics of the occupation and its consequences.

Inspired by Rana Barakat's call to rewrite Palestinian history from an indigenous rather than a colonial perspective, the Palestinian body can be thought of as a "counter-narrator"—a subject that retells the Palestinian story through visual presence, physical gestures, or charged silence. For Barakat, Palestinian return is not only a territorial realization but also an act of remembrance, storytelling, and insisting on a local narrative grounded in rights, memory, and life. In this sense, the body itself becomes a site of return and cultural continuity². This shift in the body's status from an absent object to a focal point raises fundamental questions: who owns the image? Who formulates its meaning? And who profits from the pain?

Within this representational framework, the transformations undergone by the Palestinian body—from the keffiyeh to amputation, from arrest to stripping—are revealed, and it becomes a visual image laden with messages. The body is not presented as it is, but as it is meant to be interpreted. When it appears as a "terrorist" in the Israeli media, or as a "humanitarian victim" in aid reports, its image is constructed according to the political needs of the moment.

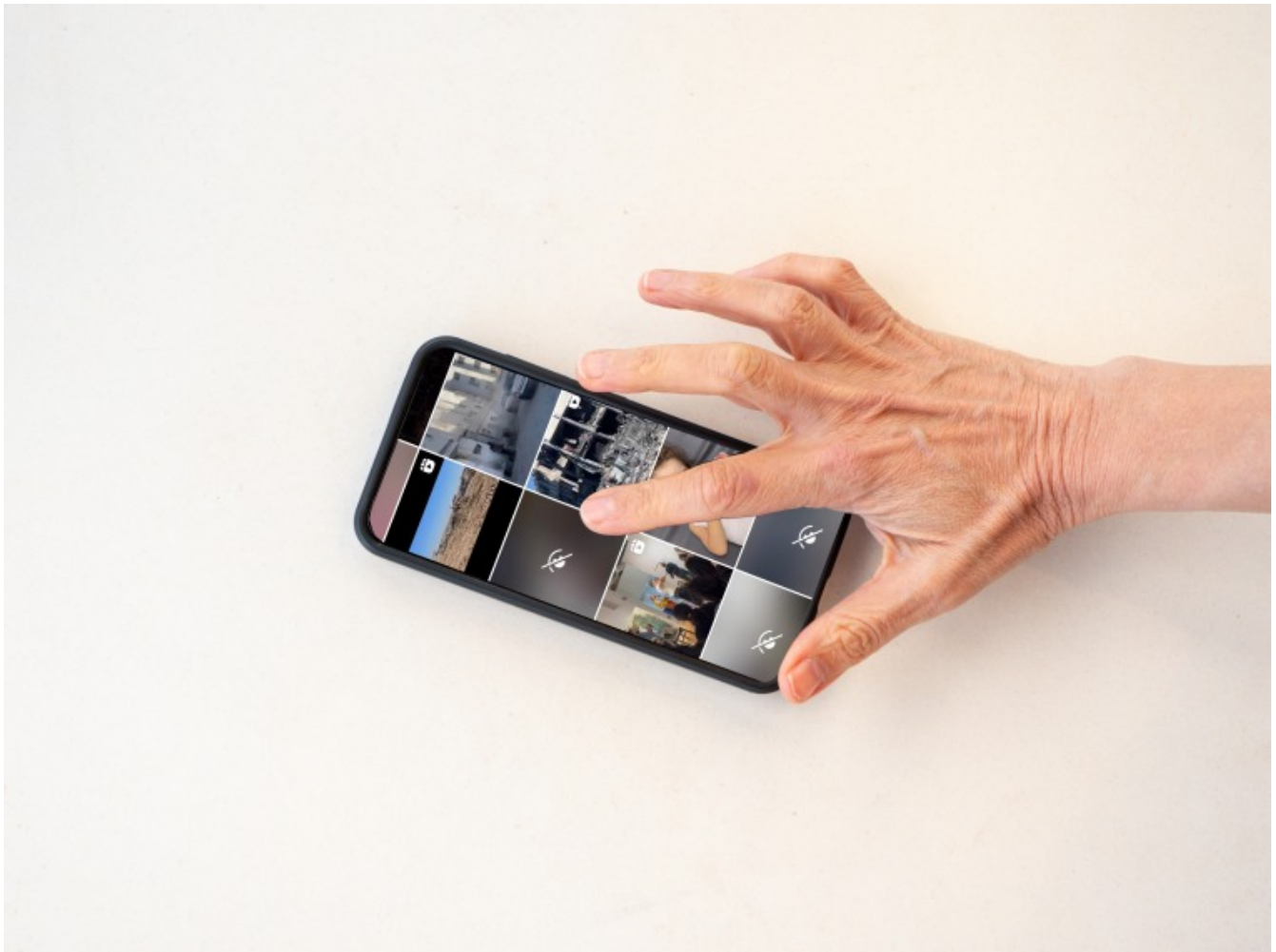
Crisis in the Palm of My Hand



Hand, Digital Photography, 2025
courtesy of the artist

[1]Ofri Cnaani, Crisis in the Palm of My

[Crisis in the Palm of My Hand](#) [2]



[3]Ofri Cnaani, Crisis in the Palm of My Hand, Digital Photography, 2025
courtesy of the artist

The representation here does not seek only to reflect reality, but to control it. As Susan Sontag points out, a photograph of pain does not convey the feeling of pain, but recreates it in a language controlled by the viewer—a language that imposes on the victim the gaze of the person holding the camera³. The question is not only what is being illuminated, but how the vision itself is shaped: Who is seeing? How do they see? And why do they see it that way?

This perception is consistent with Edward Said's concept of "the monopoly of the narrative." The lives of Palestinians, Said argues, are often narrated not from within, but from outside—by others⁴. In this context, the body is not only a site of suffering, but also speaks (or narrates) in silence, through what it presents and through what is silenced. It becomes an arena of conflicting meanings: between those who wish to present it as an image of misery and those who force it to be raw material for intimidation and deterrence.

Moreover, control is not limited to narrative and gaze; it penetrates the body itself, over which authority is exercised through forced representation: the body is photographed while bound, humiliated, wounded. In the Great March of Return in 2018, the body served as a deliberate visual message: shooting at the legs was not random, but a systematic policy designed to produce injured bodies that would serve as a means of deterrence against the masses. The body here is not only a site of pain, but also a means of visual communication, designed to convey a clear message: resistance exacts an almost unbearable price on the body.

Thus, the case of the child Muhammad al-Dura (2000) can be seen as a visual turning point that shaped global collective consciousness. His body, which sought refuge in his father's arms, became a



symbol of the loss of security, even within the family. However, this image has also been challenged, denied, and reinterpreted as part of the mechanisms of pain denial.

In every military invasion, the Palestinian body is presented as evidence and a means of humiliation. But this representation does not disappear - it is recycled in the Palestinian collective memory and becomes a symbol. Images of bodies hang on walls, are painted on walls, and reappear in protest slogans. The humiliated body thus produces the opposite meaning: from victim to witness, from invisible to iconic.

[4]

[A-dura-sequence01.jpg](#) [5]



Jamal al-Dura is looking toward the corner of the junction and waving his hand.



Father attempting to shield his son.



Father looking across street, directly toward Palestinian photojournalist Talal Abu Rahma who was filming the event.



Camera goes out of focus, apparently during firing of fatal shot.



Father and son both shot, the boy fatally.

[6]

Screenshots from the video film, France 2, From Wikimedia



The occupying power is aware of the power of this representation and therefore constantly strives to control it: sometimes through distortion (such as the claim that the Al-Dura incident was staged, despite the documentation), sometimes through erasure (by denying photographers access to combat zones, for example), and sometimes through reuse (when the image of the Palestinian body is repeatedly exploited as the embodiment of a security threat). The result is that the body is not allowed to follow its natural course; instead, it is managed as a resource: produced, displayed, stored, and recycled as needed. Within this cycle of repetition, the Palestinian body becomes a scene of negotiation - not only between the political and the military, but also between the symbolic and the real, and between the personal and the collective.

[4]

Conversely, there are moments when sovereignty over the body is reactivated - as in the hunger strikes of Palestinian prisoners. Khader Adnan, for instance, who was on a hunger strike until he died in 2023, used his body as a tool of resistance: he refused treatment, food, and words. His body was a defenseless battlefield, exposing the logic of control and redefining political action. His hunger was not a sign of weakness, but a declaration of agency. As Judith Butler writes: "The resisting body redefines itself the moment it is denied recognition."⁵

خضر عدنان [7]



[8] Painting of Khader Adnan using a stencil technique on a wall near Al-Manara Square, Ramallah, February 23, 2012.

Adnan's experience is not unique, but part of a recurring pattern: Palestinian resistance is repeatedly manifested through the body, which becomes a weapon that cannot be confiscated. When pain itself

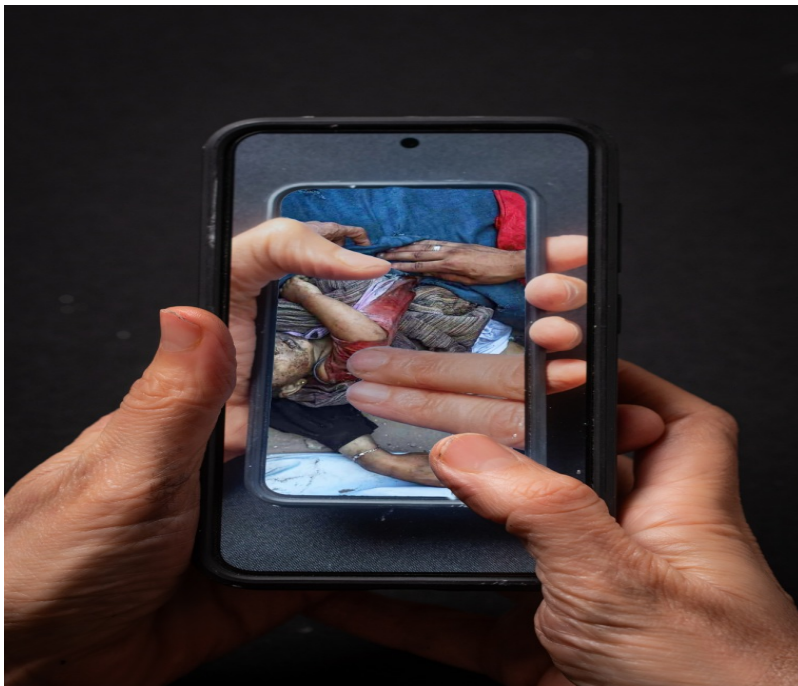


becomes a political statement, and suffering a form of action, the entire equation changes: the body that was meant to remain silent speaks with the loudest voice.

This raises a profound philosophical question: what does it mean for people to own their bodies? To choose how they experience their suffering? To refuse forced representation and formulate their own independent representation? These questions are not limited to prison cells. They are being asked wherever the body is under supervision, dictation, or objectification. But in the age of digital imagery, this sovereignty is once again under threat. The Palestinian body, which has always been a battleground, is now also entering the market: it is photographed, packaged, and sold. Prizes are awarded for the most "shocking" images, which are used in solidarity campaigns - campaigns that are sometimes not free of political or commercial interests. Humanitarian tourism, such as that which visited hospitals in Gaza, photographed and disseminated images of wounded children for media purposes, producing the body not as a site of struggle, but as a political backdrop within a framework of explicit visual consumption.

Thus, the representation of the Palestinian body cannot be separated from the broader economic dimension of the occupation. Just as the body is politically managed, it is also economically exploited, within the framework of what can be called the "economy of suffering." Images of wounded bodies serve as a means of attracting funding, are included in organizational reports, appear in campaigns, and are even adapted for film and television productions. This symbolic economy not only generates meaning but also capital: the images are sold, marketed, and embedded in aid and media networks with vested interests. Thus, the Palestinian body becomes a component of the "war market," where identity and pain are exploited for profit, not always for the benefit of the Palestinians, and often at their expense.

[bodies of evidence](#) [9]



Hand, Digital Photography, 2025
courtesy of the artist

[10]Ofri Cnaani, Crisis in the Palm of My

Contemporary Palestinian artworks have begun to deconstruct the image economy of the Palestinian body, pointing to the profound contradiction between the body as a political symbol and the body as



a marketing product. Art, in this sense, not only documents the Palestinian wound but also reveals how that wound is consumed, distributed, and shaped within cultural and economic mechanisms subject to the logic of the market, consumerism, and image. Thus, for example, in her works, Mona Benyamin uses dark humor, photographed images, and performative reenactments of childhood traumas to challenge the expectation that the Palestinian body should always "play" the role of the victim. In the video *Tomorrow, Again* (2023), Benyamin reclaims control over the narrative of pain, employing a media-like visual language - not to reproduce it, but to expose the very mechanisms of distribution and consumption that shape it.

Here, the moral contradiction becomes clear: on the one hand, art seeks to present the reality of Palestinian suffering and break the silence. On the other, the very act of repeatedly representing the wounded body in the media, in campaigns, and in artistic work, may perpetuate the image of Palestinians as victims. When Palestinians are repeatedly portrayed as sad, exhausted, and fragile, they are denied the opportunity to be seen as whole, active, and sovereign. The body becomes a prisoner of the image: it must appear to be suffering to be seen at all. This is the moral failure. Even representations intended to elicit empathy and solidarity may, in fact, reinforce the role of victim and deprive Palestinians of the opportunity to express life, action, and hope.

The question remains open: who has the right to represent the Palestinian body? Who determines how it will be shown, and to what audience? And will Palestinians ever be able to reclaim the image of their bodies—outside the lens of the other, and outside the logic of consumption and pity?

The real challenge lies not only in refuting the colonial image, but in creating a different image - one that does not glorify suffering or trade in tragedy, but opens up a horizon for life. For the Palestinian body is not only a scene of pain, but also of meaning. And if in the past it was a target of oppression, it has also become a space of resistance. But resistance to the image - to its exposure, its design, its dissemination - is no less essential today than resistance to weapons.

At this point, the role of art, literature, and alternative media becomes essential: to produce a representation of the Palestinian body that does not replicate the wound, but restores dignity, sovereignty, and the right to be seen as a whole person—not as an icon, not as a victim, but as a living voice. Such representation is not limited to presenting the Palestinian body through a different lens, but rather to opening up a new field of visual relations that enables discourse between subjects of equal status—and not just between the presenter and the viewer.

[Crisis in the Palm of My Hand](#) [11]



[12]Ofri Cnaani, Crisis

in the Palm of My Hand, Digital Photography, 2025
courtesy of the artist

- [1.](#) Michel Foucault, **The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge**, Vol. 1, trans. Gabriel Ash, Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz HaMeuchad, 1996.
- [2.](#) Rana Barakat, "Writing/Righting Palestine Studies: Settler Colonialism, Indigenous Sovereignty, and Resisting the Ghost(s) of History," **Settler Colonial Studies**, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2018), 349-363.
- [3.](#) Susan Sontag, **Regarding the Pain of Others**, translated from English by Mati Ben-Yaakov. Ben-Shemen: [Modan](#) [13] 2005.
- [4.](#) Edward Said, **Culture and Imperialism**, translated by Noam Rachmilovich, scientific editing: Yoram Meital, Tel Aviv: Resling, 2019.
- [5.](#) Judith Butler, **Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence**. Verso, 2004.

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- [12] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/P1155694_1.jpg



[13] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinneret_Zmora-Bitan_Dvir