

Palestinian Children during the Al-Aqsa Flood: A Socio-Semiotic and Socio-Cognitive Analysis

Asst. Lect. Rasha Hilal Kareem

The General Directorate of Education, Al-Qadisiyah, Iraq.

rashahk901@uowasit.edu.iq

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the visual depiction of Palestinian children during the Al-Aqsa Flood through a combined socio-semiotic and socio-cognitive discursive model. The circulation of photographic representations of children became some of the leading visual texts that foreground humanitarian suffering, vulnerability, and loss. Though these images achieved wide circulation, limited academic attention has been paid to the semiotic and ideological processes that constitute the meaning-making of these images. The research agenda, therefore, is to examine how the visual representation of the Palestinian children was constructed and to determine how visual decisions helped create images of power relations, vulnerability, victimhood, and victimization. The study is based on a qualitative interpretive methodology, which brings together the social semiotics by Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) and the socio-cognitive model by van Dijk (2008).

The sample size was six purposively chosen images of the Palestinian children in the Al-Aqsa Flood. The empirical evidence shows that the images do not simply serve as records of humanitarian suffering; instead, they are ideologically structured visual practices. The Palestinian children are continually staged as symbolic representations of collective vulnerability, realized through visual resources such as gaze, salience, spatial organization, and symbolism. The representations foreground suffering but place agency and responsibility in the background, a process that helped create shared cognitive frames with regard to childhood in conflictual conditions..

Keywords: social semiotics, socio-cognitive approach, visual discourse, multimodal discourse, Al-Aqsa Flood

الأطفال الفلسطينيون أثناء طوفان الأقصى: تحليل سيميائي اجتماعي واجتماعي-معرفي

م. م رشا هلال كريم
المديرية العامة لتربية القادسية

الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة التمثيل البصري للأطفال الفلسطينيين في أحداث «طوفان الأقصى» عبر نموذج تحليلي يجمع بين السيميائيات الاجتماعية والمنظور الاجتماعي-المعرفي في تحليل الخطاب. وقد أسهم التداول الواسع للصور الفوتوغرافية التي تُظهر الأطفال في هذه المرحلة في جعلها من أبرز النصوص البصرية التي تُبرز معاني المعاناة الإنسانية والهشاشة والفقْد. وعلى الرغم من انتشار هذه الصور على نطاق واسع، فإن الاهتمام الأكاديمي بالعمليات السيميائية والأيدولوجية التي تُنتج دلالاتها ما يزال محدودًا. وعليه، تهدف الدراسة إلى فحص كيفية تشكل التمثيل البصري للأطفال الفلسطينيين، وبيان الكيفية التي تسهم بها الاختيارات البصرية في بناء علاقات القوة، وتمثيلات الهشاشة، وصناعة صورة الضحية. اعتمدت الدراسة منهجًا نوعيًا تفسيريًا يجمع بين إطار السيميائيات الاجتماعية لدى كريس وفان ليووين (2021) والنموذج الاجتماعي-المعرفي لدى فان دايك (2008). وتكوّنت العينة من ست صور مختارة قصديًا لأطفال فلسطينيين في «طوفان الأقصى». وتُظهر النتائج أن هذه الصور لا تؤدي وظيفة التوثيق الإنساني فحسب، بل تعمل بوصفها ممارسات بصرية منظمة أيديولوجيًا. كما تُقدّم الطفولة الفلسطينية بصورة متكررة بوصفها تمثيلًا رمزيًا للهشاشة الجماعية، يتجلى عبر موارد بصرية مثل النظرة، والبروز، والتنظيم المكاني، والرمزية. وتُبرز هذه التمثيلات المعاناة، على حين تُقصي الفاعلية والمسؤولية إلى الخلفية، بما يسهم في بناء أطر معرفية مشتركة تخص الطفولة في سياقات الصراع

الكلمات المفتاحية: السيميائيات الاجتماعية، المنظور الاجتماعي-المعرفي، تحليل الخطاب البصري، الخطاب متعدد الوسائط، طوفان الأقصى، الأطفال الفلسطينيون

1. Introduction

Visual texts are socially structured semiotic resources that help to produce, distribute and define meaning within a specific cultural and ideological milieu. Under social semiotics, Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) theorised that images do not create a reflective depiction of the culture, rather they are structured objects shaped by the power relations, cultural practices, and institutional discourses. As a result, images of children in conflictual spaces are highly ideologically charged sites, in which the ideas of vulnerability, innocence, and moral positioning are formed through discourses (Machin, 2013; Rose, 2022).

Barthes (1977) developed the concept that the images work at various levels of signification, a combination of denotation and culturally situated connotations. Following this semiotic convention, suffering children have been commonly used in photographs to maximise emotional responses, shape ethical interpretation, and frame political realities through moral binaries (Chouliaraki, 2006; Zelizer, 2010). From the perspective of visual politics, conflict images are also understood as a proactive producer of public narratives and collective interpretations, rather than merely documenting events (Bleiker, 2018; Bleiker et al., 2013).

In critical discourse studies, van Dijk (2008) proposed that discourse contributes to the reproduction of ideology through recurring patterns of representation, emphasis and evaluation, whereas Fairclough (2013) maintained that meaning-making existed within broader structures of power where semiotic choices could make some sense and marginalise others. In this view, visual texts can be examined as part of wider discursive formations that shape perception of power, victimhood, and responsibility (Machin & Mayr, 2023; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Nevertheless, methodological limitations remained: the analyses tended to focus on the affective impact rather than on the systematic examination of the semiotic processes (Machin, 2013), and the ideological critique was often treated separately from the visual meaning, which led to the fragmented accounts of how images encoded power and evaluation (Wodak, 2011).

In this context, a gap remains in scholarship on visual representation of Palestinian children during the Al-Aqsa Flood. Although such images circulated widely within media and humanitarian discourses, discussion often remained descriptive or emotive rather than grounded in a systematic socio-semiotic analysis that explicitly accounted for ideology and power (Chouliaraki, 2006; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; van Dijk, 2008). The present study examines how Palestinian children were visually represented during the Al-Aqsa Flood by applying social semiotics to gaze, framing, salience, modality, and compositional structure (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Rose, 2022) and interprets emerging patterns through van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to clarify how

representational choices contributed to ideology, power relations, and evaluative positioning in mediated conflict narratives (van Dijk, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

To this end, this study addresses a methodological and conceptual gap in the existing literature on visual conflict by providing a systematic socio-semiotic and socio-cognitive study of popularly circulated images of Palestinian children during the Al-Aqsa Flood. The study analyses representational, interactional, and compositional choices and interprets the resulting patterns through socio-cognitive discourse theory to examine how victimhood, agency suppression, and moral evaluation are constructed visually in mediated conflict narratives. The following research questions lead the current study:

(RQ1) What socio-semiotic resources (e.g., gaze, framing, salience, modality, symbolism) are mobilised to represent Palestinian children during the Al-Aqsa Flood?

(RQ2) How do these visual choices contribute to socio-cognitive framing, particularly the construction of shared mental models, in-group moral alignment, and backgrounding of responsibility?

(RQ3) What is the role of the circulation context of these images (e.g., news and humanitarian platforms) in stabilising specific childhood and conflict framings?

Accordingly, the analysis adopts a critical lens that focuses on the meaning potentials encoded in visual representation rather than event-level causality or political judgement.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Social Semiotics and Visual Grammar

According to Halliday (1978), meaning is socially constructed through semiotic systems that existed in a particular cultural and ideological context. Based on this, social semiotics developed as an approach concerned with the social construction of semiotic resources and the cultural application of these resources to produce meaning (Hodge & Kress, 1988). In this context, images are treated as systems of signification, rather than neutral and purely aesthetic objects. Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) suggested that images are subject to a visual grammar, in a way comparable to linguistic grammar, and governed by systematic principles, which determine how to depict participants, actions, and relations. Their theory describes three metafunctions, namely, representational, interactional, and compositional, drawing on Halliday's functional linguistics. The representational metafunction concerns the description of social actors and events, the interactional metafunction explains relations between the image, its participants and the viewer and the compositional metafunction describes how the elements are organised, which produces the effect of salience and coherence.

Jewitt (2014) noted that social semiotics enables researchers to interpret images as culturally situated communicative practices that are formed through institutional processes, power dynamics, and ideological placement. Gaze, framing, distance, and modality are visual decisions that are crucial in the interpretation and emotional association in conflict-related imagery (Rose, 2022). Social semiotics thus offers a methodological approach to studying the role of images of Palestinian children in media discourse as resources in the production of meaning.

2.2 Critical Discourse Perspective and Visual Meaning

Fairclough (2013, 1995) claimed that discourse was a type of social practice, where power relations, ideologies, and social identities were created and reproduced, and meaning is shaped by institutional interests and prevailing ideological frameworks. Van Dijk (2015) saw critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a form of discourse-analytic study that primarily focuses on the ways in which social power, abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted through text and talk in sociopolitical situations (as cited in Shahad & Hashim, 2023, p. 863). While CDA traditionally prioritised verbal texts, Machin (2007) noted that visual discourse also functioned as a central site of ideological representation.

Van Dijk (2008) highlighted that discourse, whether verbal or visual, was an important mechanism for reproducing social power and inequality and that media images played a role in creating mental models that shape how the social actors, victims, and conflicts were perceived. According to this perspective, the images of children in war-torn areas may implicitly structure the discourses of innocence, victimhood and moral urgency through selection and framing.

According to Chouliaraki (2015), the mediated representations of suffering did not simply describe violence but position viewers within moral and emotional contexts that regulate the proximity, sympathy, and distance. Together with social semiotic analysis, critical discourse perspectives thus enable analysis of the interaction visual signs with broader power relations, ideological discourses, and socio-political circumstances (Fairclough, 2013; Machin & Mayr, 2023). Accordingly, integrating these approaches allowed the present study to move beyond descriptive reading toward a critical account of how images of Palestinian children contributed to constructing meaning, power, and ideology in contemporary media discourse.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive design grounded in visual social semiotics and informed by a socio-cognitive discourse perspective. Qualitative approaches are widely used in visual and media studies because they enable in-depth interpretation of symbolic, affective, and ideological dimensions in images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Rose, 2022). Accordingly, images

are treated not as transparent reflections of reality but as semiotic artefacts that actively construct meaning within specific socio-political contexts. The analysis focuses on the meaning potentials encoded in the images rather than audience reception, which lies beyond the scope of the current study. The researcher approaches the dataset as a discourse-analytic investigation of meaning-making rather than a verification of factual event causality.

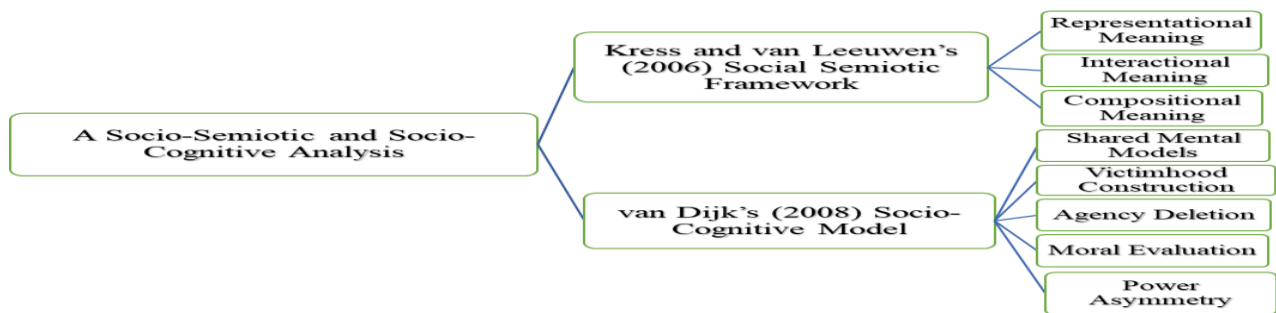
3.2 Data Selection

The dataset comprises a purposive sample of images of Palestinian children during the Al-Aqsa Flood. Purposive sampling is suitable for selection of information-rich materials that are in line with the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). The images were retrieved via web-based searching from publicly accessible news websites during the Al-Aqsa Flood period, where they circulated widely as part of mediated conflict discourse. To ensure contextual consistency, data collection was limited to the Al-Aqsa Flood period. The choice of images was based on three criteria: (1) children centrally represented, (2) visual expression of suffering, vulnerability, or innocence, and (3) circulation through media or humanitarian discourses. The research is not intended to be statistically representative; instead, it is a thorough qualitative study of a small, information-rich dataset, which is in line with interpretive visual research. Analytic saturation informed the sample size as more images could not provide significantly new semiotic patterns that could be used to answer the research questions (Given, 2008). The six photographs were chosen intentionally due to their wide spread during the Al-Aqsa Flood period and as a collection, they represent diverse semiotic configurations relevant to the research questions (e.g., direct/averted gaze, national symbolism and captions, enclosure/barriers, environmental collapse and bodily fragmentation). Only the publicly available images were considered, and the analysis addresses the patterns of representation rather than identifying individuals.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis is based on social semiotics, which conceptualises images as socially organised systems of meaning in which choices of gaze, framing, salience, and composition encode social relations and values (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). A critical discourse perspective is used to interpret and situate semiotic patterns within broader structures of power, ideology, and representation, particularly in media portrayals of Palestinian childhood (Fairclough, 2013; van Dijk, 2008). Figure 1 outlines the analytical levels used in examining the selected images in relation to the research questions.

Figure 1. *Analytical Framework of the Study (developed by the researcher, drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) social semiotic framework and van Dijk's (2008) socio-cognitive model).*



3.4 Procedure of Analysis

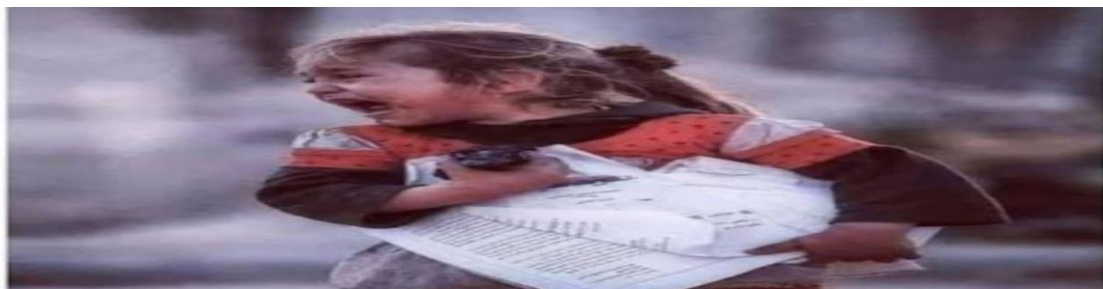
The analysis is conducted in three stages. To begin with, each image is carefully analysed to identify salient elements such as participants, settings and symbolic resources. Second, the semiotic features, such as gaze, framing, composition, and salience, are examined to outline the way the notions of childhood, vulnerability, and suffering are constructed. Third, the findings are interpreted through a critical discourse perspective to connect visual choices to broader socio-political, and ideological narratives surrounding the Al-Aqsa Flood.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Given the heightened sensitivity of visual representations of minors and suffering, the current analysis deliberately avoids sensationalism and focuses on representational patterns rather than individual identities. The images are treated as publicly available, discursively mediated artefacts, consistent with ethical guidance for visual research (Rose, 2022). Only publicly available images were used, and no private accounts or restricted materials were accessed.

4. Data Analysis

Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) visual social semiotic framework, the socio-semiotic analysis was organised around three analytical dimensions: representational, interactional, and compositional meanings. In line with van Dijk's (2008) socio-cognitive model, the socio-cognitive analysis focused on shared mental models, victimhood construction, agency deletion, moral evaluation, and power asymmetry.



Extract 1: Crying Palestinian Child Holding a Paper in a Devastated Setting

Note. Image retrieved from The Hindustan Gazette (2023).

4.1.1 Socio-Semiotic Analysis

The visual meaning of the image is organised through representational, interactional, and compositional organisation. On a representational level, the image is, to a great extent, narrative: the child's open mouth, visible crying, and tense posture index embodied distress and urgency, making the distress a dynamic, real-time process rather than a static outcome. Therefore, the photo emphasises suffering as being instant and continuous.

The child's face is turned sideways and lacks any direct eye contact. Through this setup, the viewer is placed as an observer who witnesses suffering rather than a participant who is directly addressed. The lack of gaze enhances helplessness and sustains moral engagement at a distance, as the child appears unable to seek support through visual contact.

At the compositional level, the child occupies the majority of the centre of the frame whereas the background is blurred and indistinct. This increases the child's salient and reduces contextual detail, thereby foregrounding individual suffering. The paper that is clutched to the torso of the child serves as a salient semiotic resource, which indicates vulnerability, loss and the disruption of ordinary childhood routines like schooling. The object, therefore, contributes to the meaning-making beyond the expression of the child by grounding the emotion in a material manifestation of discontinuity.

4.1.2 Socio-Cognitive Analysis

At socio-cognitive level, the image portrays the child as a victimised social actor whose suffering stands for broader collective hardship. This emphasis on an individual child invites an interpretive move, in which one character is made to represent a broader group, compressing a complicated struggle into an individualised scene of suffering.

The image foregrounds the effects of the situation _crying, vulnerability, and damaged belongings, whereas the causes and the agent of harm are not in the frame. Consequently, the viewer is directed toward empathy and moral urgency, rather than toward explicit political accountability, and suffering is very visible but structurally unexplained. By so doing, the image can play a role normalising unequal power relations by foregrounding harm while leaving its causes outside the frame.

Lastly, the fact that there is no guardian or authoritative figure supports the themes of abandonment and marginalisation. It positions the child as powerless and vulnerable and creates a collective mental image in which the group being represented is perceived as vulnerable and as lacking agency in dominant discourses.



Extract 2: *Palestinian Children Holding the Flag with Religious Caption*

Note. Image retrieved from Ma'an News Agency (2023).

4.2.1 Socio-Semiotic Analysis

The visual meaning is structured by representational, interactional, and compositional resources. The foreground features three children who are closely positioned at the centre of the frame. Their bodies and faces are covered in dust, indicating exposure to destruction. The children are not engaged in any dynamic action, instead, they are posed frontally, thus, placing the image within a conceptual (symbolic) process. Within such a setup, the children function less as participants in an unfolding event and more as carriers of abstract meanings related to innocence, continuity, and collective identity.

On the interactional level, the three children look directly at the camera. The direct gaze creates a demand image, a social relation that is imagined and invites a response from the viewer. The facial expressions, especially the hint of a smile on the older children, contrast with the surrounding destruction, creating a semiotic tension between vulnerability and resilience. The youngest child positioned in the middle and a bit lower, enhances salience due to age-related vulnerability and compositional positioning.

Compositionally, the Palestinian flag takes up a central position in the foreground which is held by one child, and echoed in another child's scarf. Colour function as key semiotic resource: the bright red, green, black, and white of the flag contrasts sharply against the grey and brown of the rubble. This juxtaposition increases salience and guides interpretations with the symbolism of the nation standing out visually as the destruction is in the background. The Arabic text over the image adds an additional semiotic layer. Through overlaying text on the image, the visual text can be said to be multimodal so that meaning is not merely depicted but framed more explicitly along religious-moral and ideological lines.

4.2.2 Socio-Cognitive Analysis

Socio-cognitively, the image is engaged in the process of creating the group shared mental models between childhood suffering and the collective morality. The children are located as belonging to an in-group, the innocence of which is foregrounded, whereas the responsibility of suffering is left implicit and backgrounded. By prioritising consequences over causes, the image invites empathy and moral appraisal while leaving responsible agents unnamed.

The religious caption initiates an ethical discussion that cuts across the immediate visual context. This textual aspect positions the children as moral witnesses to their own suffering, just as it is relevant in terms of both its moral and eschatological nature. This kind of moral framing helps to build collective mental models whereby injustice is explained using wider belief systems and value systems.

Further, the fact that children are combined with the national symbols and religious language contributes to ideological polarisation. The eye contact enhances the emotional appeal, whereas the caption grounds the analysis in condemnation and moral responsibility. Through this, the image serves as a visual discourse, which reinforces a specific interpretation of the conflict by giving it a moral and community story.



Extract 3: *Children in a Flooded Shelter during the Al-Aqsa Flood*

Note. Image retrieved from LaSexta (2025).

4.3.1 Socio-Semiotic Analysis

The image in question depicts a group of children who have gathered in a building that is partially flooded with water. Regarding the representational aspect, there is a preponderance of collective stillness, as opposed to action, in the image. The image foregrounds collective stillness rather than action, positioning the children as emblematic of displacement and enforced waiting, which aligns the representation with a conceptual (symbolic) process.

Interactionally, all the shown children do not look directly into the eyes of the viewer; their eyes are lowered or turned to the water. This lack of gaze makes the viewer an outside observer, being invited to reflect on the reality represented as opposed to being addressed. The lack of demand reduces immediacy and, on the contrary, stimulates a thoughtful approach to the scene.

The compositional meaning is organised in terms of salience, the use of spacing and a muted colour palette. The children are placed in the upper and middle of the frame, and floodwater covers the bottom foreground and the floodwater in the foreground materialises vulnerability and distress. The dullness of the colour cast is emphasised through the use of greys and browns, which underline the deprivation and the instability, and the vertical pole in the middle of the group cuts the group in half as well as supports the shelter. As a compositional element, the vertical pole both supports the shelter and visually divides the group, signalling provisional protection and fragility.

4.3.2 Socio-Cognitive Analysis

Socio-cognitively, the image constructs of the children as a shared in-group representation, which is defined by common exposure to hardship. The absence of visible adults backgrounds protection and accountability, leaving responsibility implicit, thus solidifying a victimhood frame where the sufferings seem to be structurally in place but without any agent. This dynamic adds to an interpretation that the condition is a normalised state of being and not a responsible consequence.

The group composition and the muffled body language also reinforce an ideological connection between the Palestinian childhood and survival during the crisis. This frame preempts outcomes displacement, flooding, insecurity, and puts causes and actors of responsibility in the background. The image contributes to solidarity by emphasising in-group suffering through creating moral judgment and uses culturally shared knowledge to mobilise the injustice and neglect sensations. As a result, the visual discourse adds to the common mental models that associate the Palestinian children with the vulnerability of the system in the Al-Aqsa Flood situation.



Extract 4: *Children Requesting Food Behind a Barrier*
Note. Image retrieved from Anadolu Agency (2024).

4.4.1 Socio-Semiotic Analysis

The image constructs a narrative action process as a child stretches a cooking pot toward the iron bars. The gesture acts as a clear vector of action that foregrounds the act of requesting food as

the most common act being conveyed. The pot is a salient material sign, which grounds the scene in a sense of immediacy of need and survival, instead of an abstract symbolism.

Interactionally, the child has an open mouth and forward leaning posture, which signifies a vocal request to an off-frame addressee. The lack of direct gaze positions the viewer in an “offer” relation, while the child’s posture and open mouth orient the demand toward an off-frame addressee. Such disposition increases the emotional salience since this arrangement makes the deprivation visible and the addressee—and the response—are not in the frame.

Framing and salience are used to organise the compositional meaning. The iron bars cut the image in half and physically separate the children from the unseen origin of help and function as a physical and a symbolic boundary to predetermine limitation and regulated access, reinforcing restriction and controlled access. The most salient figure is the central one, as it is placed and given focus; other children seem to be somewhat obscured behind the barrier, giving a collective representation that emphasises shared condition over individual identity.

This reading is supported by colour contrast. The environment is dominated by muted greys and browns; a bright pink sleeve on the left creates an accent, which reminds one of human presence in an atmosphere of scarcity, and acts to focus the area of vulnerability in deprivation.

4.4.2 Socio-Cognitive Analysis

At the socio-cognitive level, the image visualises Palestinian children as an in-group characterised by need and dependency, while institutional responsibility is backgrounded by the absence of visible providers of aid or authority figures. The fact that the children are placed behind bars foregrounds constraint and power asymmetry that implies that access to basic needs is controlled, instead of being assured.

The barrier functions ideologically by isolating the requesting group from those who grant access without referring to the agents of regulation, leaving them unnamed and unseen. This advances a shared mental model in which deprivation is not merely conceived as absence, but as a constraint embedded in unequal access relations. The children grouping behind the barrier further strengthens the group identity and imparts the association of Palestinian childhood and structural deprivation, reinforcing systemic deprivation under the state of the conflict and conflict conditions.



Extract 5: *Palestinian Children Standing over a Deceased Body amid Rubble*

Note. Image retrieved from Al-Shahed Online (2024).

4.5.1 Socio-Semiotic Analysis

Representationally, the image realises a narrative process in which the children are positioned as active participants. The arm raised by the older child, which is aimed upwards, acts as a powerful vector, leading outside the frame and content of the image to direct the interpretation to a not-seen origin and an unseen source. The movement can be interpreted as an appeal, a questioning, or a supplication, thus making the child an agent and an actor in the represented moment of destruction and devastation within a scene of crisis.

The frame is composed of a severe vertical hierarchy. The lower foreground is occupied by a deceased body, and the rest of the children are standing above it a great contrast between death and life. Such a spatial order and spatial arrangement enhance the meaning as the lower zone is marked with finality and passivity and the upper zone with presence, agency, and potential. The salience is maximised and increased by the central placement of the children, which makes them focus on their facial expressions and gestures, as the main message creators and the primary meaning-making cues.

Interactionally, the image enhances the moral address through the direct gaze of the children and their expressive posture and gesture of being in control, rather than inviting detached observation, the direct gaze constructs a moral address. Wide eyes, an open mouth, the raised arm function as cues of urgency that invite recognition and response. The dull, dusty and dust-covered muted colour palette and the debris-strewn and rubble-filled background and setting also contribute to a sense of naturalism and perceived realism and increase and heighten the level of emotion and emotional intensity.

4.5.2 Socio-Cognitive Analysis

The children are positioned as direct witnesses to death, compressing a complex conflict into an immediate scene of loss. Their closeness and proximity to the body create and construct a narrative surrounding childhood that is being presented as traumatic immediacy and an immediate

trauma, as this invites the viewer to perceive the children as the moral subjects within the event, and the subject of the action being performed, and not outsiders and distant observers to the action.

The innocent victims are framed in the foreground, whereas agents of violence are not included in the image, leaving agents of violence outside the image. This foregrounds consequence over causation, steering interpretation toward grief and moral judgement while responsibility remains implicit. The children's upward gaze and raised arm can be interpreted as a call and an appeal to absent authority, be it institutional, international, or transcendent, and thus strengthen a discourse and narrative of abandonment and injustice.

Lastly, the image also recreates and reproduces the power asymmetry and power imbalance by showing the children as emotionally expressive but structurally powerless and structurally weak. Their body language and gestures express a sign of urgency and signal urgency, although the rubble and a body that appears lifeless give emphasis and underline the limits and boundaries of agency in situations and conditions of systemic violence, which maintains and sustains the feeling and sense of moral imperative and moral compulsion alongside political irresolution and political incompotence.



Extract 6: *Fragmented Child's Body amid Rubble with a Red Balloon*

Note. Image retrieved from Transcend Media Service (2023).

4.6.1 Socio-Semiotic Analysis

The meaning of the image is organised through a conceptual representational framework and not a narrative sequence. The absence of the action is compounded with the fragmentation of the child's body. This produces a sense of temporal rupture and irreversible aftermath. The partially buried body—most visibly the legs, serves as symbolic marker of loss, erasure, and interrupted childhood.

Altogether, rubble takes over the frame, crowding the visual field, and the body fragment can be seen low and in the middle of the rubble. This salience is achieved not through spatial prominence or clarity, but through the figure's isolation and stillness. The dullness of the greys and beiges of the rubble creates a low-saturation palette, which is related to desolation and deathliness.

The red balloon standing alone is the brightest semiotic resource because of the stark chromatic contrast with the rest of the rubble. Being the symbol traditionally associated with fun and childhood, the balloon adds another opposing layer of meaning, bringing tension between innocence and devastation. Its vertical placement above the rubble counterpoints collapse, setting elevation against ruin and childhood against loss.

Interactionally, the image acts as a strong “offer” image. The lack of facial features and gaze removes interpersonal contact, placing the viewers as remote observers of an irreparable outcome. This approach reduces the communication with the viewer and instead enhances thinking and ethical reflection.

4.6.2 Socio-Cognitive Analysis

At the socio-cognitive level, the child is represented through absence and fragmentation, which is a type of strategy that intensifies the magnitude of loss and depersonalises the victim. The absence of distinguishing features in the figure makes it less of a single entity and more representative of a symbolic condensation of collective suffering.

The red balloon is ideologically a contrastive signifier that enables the image to emphasise the innocence that is ruined amidst a terrain of structural violence. The framing foregrounds consequence over causation by the contrast of a childhood mark with destruction and by the lack of visible agents. This puts death in the context of a silent event, which is observed and lamented, with responsibility remaining backgrounded.

Lastly, the image can reinforce an extreme power asymmetry by portraying the childhood as being voiceless and utterly vulnerable. Both the immobile body and the lack of action support the motives of abandonment and helplessness, and develop a mental model of misery as ongoing and structurally embedded instead of contingent and interruptible.

5. Findings

The analysis of the 6 images reveals a consistent visual–discursive arrangement that has been persistently constructed through which Palestinian children are depicted as central figures of vulnerability, innocence, and structural powerlessness within the visual discourse of the Al-Aqsa Flood. Systematically, semiotic resources—facial expression, bodily posture, gaze, spatial positioning, and compositional salience—make distress salient and heighten emotional exposure. Children are mostly depicted crying, shocked, silent or physically tired; thus, childhood is not agentic; it is vulnerable and defenceless.

At the social cognition level, such representations engage common mental models of victimhood and moral urgency, which invite interpretation in the direction of empathy and humanitarian concern. It is worth noting that although suffering may appear normalised, the

perpetrators or agents of violence are never present and hence causality is backgrounded and consequences have been foregrounded. This omission supports an ideological framing of suffering, in which suffering is made normalised and politically unresolved.

Symbolic elements, like national flags, destroyed educational materials, and objects of childhood, take the meaning beyond the immediate scenes, connecting personal suffering with the collective identity and national trauma. Spatial arrangements, such as enclosure, low positioning and entrapment in rubble or fences only further codify unequal relations of power and place children as voiceless subjects within structures of domination. All in all, the images reproduce a discourse wherein Palestinian childhood is emotionally expressive but structurally silenced, moral witnesses of violence and not social or political actors. Notably, the recurring victimhood framing is not created using a single visual approach; rather, it is achieved using diverse semiotic arrangements, such as enclosure and barriers, environmental destruction, fragmentation, multimodal captions, and grouping. These results thus give a basis to further discussion, which questions the functioning of the identified patterns in larger discursive and ideological systems of childhood and conflict.

6. Discussion

While vulnerability is a dominant pattern across the dataset, there are also semiotic cues of symbolic strength and identity affirmation, particularly through direct gaze and national symbolism. Across the dataset, images of Palestinian children during the Al-Aqsa Flood function not only as records of suffering but also as visual discourses that organise meaning, affect, and judgement. Throughout the data, children are repeatedly positioned within spaces of devastation, imprisonment, and deprivation, framing childhood as structurally vulnerable rather than merely incidentally victimised. The visual means of central positioning, close framing, and expressive or averted gazes position viewers as moral observers and heighten the emotional appeal. Simultaneously, the systematic lack of perpetrators foregrounds consequences over causes, thus the presence of suffering is clear while responsibility remains implicit. Individual pain is connected to collective identity and shared trauma with the help of symbolic elements, such as national and childhood-related objects. All in all, the images construct the Palestinian childhood as emotionally expressive but politically silenced, generating a moral reaction and recreating a discourse in which injustice appears unresolved and violence seems to lack accountability.

7. Conclusion

This study has discussed the visual portrayal of Palestinian children during the Al-Aqsa Flood using the combined frameworks of socio-semiotics and a socio-cognitive discourse perspective. This analysis showed that the images of children did not function as visual records of humanitarian misery, but as organised semiotic texts that actively constructed meanings related to vulnerability,

power, and group identity. Based on social semiotic principles, the results indicated that representational, interactional, and compositional choices consistently foregrounded children within scenes of destruction, deprivation, and loss. Childhood was represented as emotionally vulnerable and socially confined through salience, gaze, spatial organisation, and symbolic elements. From a socio-cognitive perspective, such visual patterns contributed to the construction of shared mental models in which Palestinian children were positioned as structurally weak within asymmetrical power relations. The paper has also shown that the systematic absence of visible perpetrators shifted emphasis from causality to consequence to support ideological mechanisms of agency backgrounding and moral evaluation. Where national or symbolic content appeared, individual pathos was re-contextualised in terms of broader collective contexts, and childhood was re-associated with struggle and belonging. In general, the study shows that a social semiotics and socio-cognitive discourse approach provides a solid approach to the analysis of the images of children in conflict situations and demonstrates how the visual discourse constructs meaning, ideology, and emotional engagement. One of the limitations of the research is that it considers the meaning potentials encoded in the images rather than audience reception, which can be addressed in future research by reception-oriented approaches.

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