

Once Again, a “Palestinian Babies” Story Merits a Washington Post Apology

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Mar 3, 2024

Also published in Times of Israel

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Articles & Testimony

A heartrending story about finding decomposing infants in a Gaza hospital is full of troubling holes, discrepancies, and conflicts of interest that should have raised serious questions at the paper.

The world waits with hope and expectation for the announcement of a “temporary ceasefire” in the Hamas-Israel war that would [include \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/details-40-day-gaza-truce-draft-proposal-being-studied-by-amas-2024-02-27/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/details-40-day-gaza-truce-draft-proposal-being-studied-by-amas-2024-02-27/) the release of Israeli hostages and an opportunity for a substantial flow of humanitarian goods into the war-battered Gaza Strip. If the previous week-long pause in late November 2023 is any guide, a ceasefire will also be a moment for journalists to circulate around Gaza and report the many stories they were unable to cover while the fighting raged. Indeed, during that pause and the days that followed, a flood of stories emerged to fill in reporting gaps from the previous six weeks of combat.

Before those new stories appear, it is important to take a close look at [one such article \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/03/gaza-premature-babies-dead-nasr/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/03/gaza-premature-babies-dead-nasr/) from the last pause. Published in the Washington Post late on December 2 and updated the following day, this is the gripping saga of what happened three weeks earlier to a handful of Palestinian infants in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) of Gaza City’s al-Nasr Children’s Hospital when the facility’s staff and patients were forced to evacuate on November 10—a story so powerful and emotive that it made headlines around the world.

The 1,368-word article by reporters Miriam Berger, Evan Hill and Hazem Balousha is, in reality, a mash-up of three interconnected stories. First is the he-said/she-said between Israeli military spokespeople, the International Committee of the Red Cross and hospital administrators over whether staff were promised that Israel would provide ambulances to safeguard and transport patients when the army ordered the evacuation of al-Nasr and the al-Rantisi

hospital next door. Second is the story of an unnamed male nurse at al-Nasr Hospital who was faced with the terrible decision of choosing which among a group of premature infants to take with him and which to leave behind on oxygen respirators. And third is an intrepid journalist's shocking discovery two weeks later of the infants' decomposed bodies, still connected to machinery but mauled by dogs and covered with insects.

Stitched together in a single narrative, the story depicts Israelis as heartless and mean-spirited toward the plight of Palestinian infants. In contrast, the key Palestinian in the story—the nurse whose impossible quandary opens the article—faces a heartrending “Sophie’s choice” decision about which babies should live and which to leave for near-certain death. It is no wonder the story—under the headline “Israel’s assault forced a nurse to leave babies behind. They were found decomposing”—triggered thousands of comments and was picked up by numerous news agencies.

As it turned out, this was the second story focused on the plight of Palestinian infants that appeared in the Post in a brief span. On November 17, the Post published [a front-page article](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/17/israel-gaza-war-babies-families/)

[\(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/17/israel-gaza-war-babies-families/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/17/israel-gaza-war-babies-families/) alleging a purposeful Israeli policy of separating Palestinian mothers from Gaza and their newborn infants born prematurely in Israeli and West Bank hospitals. In the weeks that followed, I (and others) [identified numerous flagrant errors](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/did-nasty-israelis-really-separate-palestinian-mothers-their-babies) [\(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/did-nasty-israelis-really-separate-palestinian-mothers-their-babies\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/did-nasty-israelis-really-separate-palestinian-mothers-their-babies) in that piece. Ultimately, on December 28, 2023, the Post formally admitted that the article “fell short of The Post’s standards for fairness” and issued an updated version with a 230-word introductory “editor’s note.”

Before Post reporters take advantage of the hoped-for temporary ceasefire to catch up on reporting since the last pause, it is instructive to take a close look at the “decomposed babies” story. On close inspection, the results are shocking. In my view, the journalistic violations in this article are no less severe—and perhaps worse—than those of the “separating moms and babies” story. They include:

- over-reliance on anonymous sources;
- selective citation from interviews;
- lack of corroboration for key assertions;
- ignoring discrepancies and conflicting evidence;
- and an emphasis on speed over accuracy.

There is one additional violation that deserves special attention: conflict of interest. By the Post’s own after-the-fact admission, one of the article’s reporters and a key figure in the story had a longstanding personal connection that was kept from Post editors, raising concerns about potential conflicts of interest that were not previously disclosed.

All this describes a generous characterization of what really went into this story. As will become apparent, even more damning explanations cannot be ruled out.

The bottom line is that the article exemplifies an abuse of the trust of readers, who would expect a newspaper of the Post’s standing to flag each of these problems. In fact, every single one is a textbook case of what reporters should avoid and what editors should prevent; as we shall see, it was, for example, a very different account than the far more balanced, less melodramatic version than the one presented by CNN. And given the emotional power of stories about babies, especially in the middle of a conflict that has triggered as much passion and fury as the Israel-Hamas War, it is particularly important to call out these journalistic violations, even months after the fact.

From the very beginning, something about the Post’s story of the decomposed babies left in the al-Nasr Children’s Hospital NICU seemed odd. To be sure, one could not but be deeply moved by the terrible fate of the Palestinian infants, as innocent as any civilians in wartime could possibly be. But just like the earlier story about premature Palestinian babies in Israeli hospitals, this story was also built on anonymous sources—in this case a single unnamed

male nurse who, according to the article, was associated with the medical aid group Doctors Without Borders.

In describing events at the hospital that fateful day, the article notes that “doctors refused to leave the facility without their patients” but that apparently didn’t apply to the infants because no doctor is cited as being responsible for the infants or involved in the decision of which infants to evacuate—not one pediatrician, ICU specialist or hospital administrator. Evidently, the last person who had responsibility for the infants was an unnamed male nurse who the Post gave anonymity not out of fear of retribution (which was the unsubstantiated claim that unnamed sources used in the other premature babies story) but merely “to protect his privacy.”

Strangely, there seems to have been no one else left in the hospital to corroborate the nurse’s story—not a doctor, not an orderly, not another nurse. Moreover, there was also no one cited who confirmed the rest of the nurse’s story, which was that he left on foot with the infant and the rest of his family to head south to Khan Younis, that at some point he handed the infant to an ambulance driver, that the ambulance brought the baby to al-Shifa Hospital, which was less than two miles away from al-Nasr Hospital, and that the infant was at al-Shifa when the Israelis “raided” that facility several days later. Indeed, the identity and fate of the infant at the heart of this story, as well as the ambulance driver who allegedly took the infant to al-Shifa, remain unknown.

As it turns out, the Post was not the first outlet to tell the story of what transpired in the NICU on November 10, the day al-Nasr Children’s Hospital was evacuated. In fact, there were at least two first-person testimonies offered of those events, each by male nurses who described themselves as being connected to Doctors Without Borders.

One of these was captured in an interview dated November 10 that was publicly released in a **podcast** (<https://www.msf.fr/video/la-guerre-contre-les-hopitaux-de-gaza>) by Doctors Without Borders itself on November 29. This version includes an important wrinkle that does not appear in the Post story. Here, the unnamed nurse—who evidently sought refuge in al-Nasr Hospital with his family and, while there, volunteered to assist the medical team—makes a startling statement: “The equipment for the infants in intensive care who survived thanks to the ventilators no longer functioned. There was no more oxygen.” Later in the interview, he says that when details of the evacuation were finally worked out, “five patients” were left on respirators and that he took one baby, who he later handed off to an ambulance driver to bring to al-Shifa hospital.

From this statement, oxygen in the NICU ran out even before the evacuation was complete. The infants were left connected to the respirators but it is not at all clear they were alive when the staff finally left the hospital. Remember: this nurse was evidently the last person to see the infants.

And then there is a second testimony circulating online, also dated November 10, also by a male nurse affiliated with Doctors Without Borders who also says he was in al-Nasr Children’s Hospital on the fateful day of the evacuation. But in two key respects, this **video statement** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmmoOFs3ieg>) is different from the one just cited: first, this nurse is identified by name, Fadi Abu Riyala; and second, he tells a very different story. According to Abu Riyala, infants were left in the NICU but he specifically notes that “We could not take any patients with us,” contradicting the main theme of the Post story about a nurse rescuing one of the infants.

Could there have been two Doctors Without Borders nurses in al-Nasr Children’s Hospital? Apparently, no. See this important passage from an **NBC News report** (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/abandoned-babies-found-decomposing-gaza-hospital-evacuated-rcna127533>) of the al-Nasr hospital story that appeared on December 2, the same day as the Post article: “A Doctors Without Borders (MSF) representative confirmed that while Al-Nasr Children’s hospital is not an MSF-supported facility, the organization did have one nurse ‘who was there in their own capacity’ at the time the hospital was evacuated.”

The pivotal phrase is “one nurse.” Was this Fadi Abu Riyala? If he was the sole nurse affiliated with Doctors Without Borders at that place at that time, there is a huge hole in the Post story because Abu Riyala specifically refuted the

idea that any infants were rescued from the NICU. (This quote, attributed by name to Abu Riyala, was repeated in [this CNN report \(https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-12-23/h_d46d5283daa5913043d86d20c1ed9ec3\)](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-12-23/h_d46d5283daa5913043d86d20c1ed9ec3) on November 13. Indeed, CNN's article says Abu Riyala's quotes were actually circulated by Doctors Without Borders.)

If there was only one nurse there, the available evidence is inherently contradictory—the video testimony of a named nurse and the claim of the unnamed nurse cited in the Doctors Without Borders podcast cannot both be true. In that circumstance, there are only three options:

- the nurse was Abu Riyala, who originally hid the fact that he rescued a baby and later changed his story when he spoke with Post reporters. This flip-flop would be a major blow to his credibility and would explain why he would ask the Post for anonymity;
- the nurse was someone else and Abu Riyala was not truthful in his original video testimony about being in the NICU during the evacuation;
- or the entire “rescued infant” story was fabricated.

Let's assume for a moment that there was a second Doctors Without Borders-affiliated nurse in the al-Nasr Hospital NICU who did try to save one of the babies, as the Post story alleged. Indeed, the best-case explanation for the Post's reporting is that their reporters never heard of Abu Riyala or watched his video testimony. Instead, the best-case scenario is that they listened to the Doctors Without Borders podcast, contacted the organization and were put in touch with the unnamed nurse, who agreed to cooperate with the Post after he was granted anonymity.

But if they only listened to the podcast, the Post reporters would also have heard that the NICU had run out of oxygen before the evacuation. Yet the clear impression from the Post version of the story is that the infants were alive when the nurse chose one to save, which means the best-case scenario for the Post is that it discarded key testimony in its reporting.

And even in the unlikely circumstance that there were two nurses in the NICU that day affiliated with Doctors Without Borders, the possibility that Post reporters never came across Abu Riyala's video is virtually nil. After all, it circulated widely [on Twitter \(https://twitter.com/ninalahoud4paix/status/1723746530971226261\)](https://twitter.com/ninalahoud4paix/status/1723746530971226261) and, as noted above, was even cited in a CNN story on November 13. At the very least, Post reporters owed it to readers to grapple with Abu Riyala's on-camera claim that the central assertion of their article—that a nurse rescued an infant from the NICU—was false.

And then there is discrepancy in the number of dead infants in the hospital. According to the Post, the unnamed nurse said he chose one of five to save and left four behind. However, the [Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor \(https://euromedmonitor.org/en/article/5987/Int%27l-committee-must-be-formed-to-investigate-Israeli-army%E2%80%99s-abandonment-of-five-infants,-now-dead,-alone-in-Gaza-hospital:\)](https://euromedmonitor.org/en/article/5987/Int%27l-committee-must-be-formed-to-investigate-Israeli-army%E2%80%99s-abandonment-of-five-infants,-now-dead,-alone-in-Gaza-hospital:), which called for an international investigation into the deaths of the infants, said there were five dead infants, not four. To make things even murkier, the NBC News report included references both to Dr. Mustafa al-Kahlout, the hospital director, saying five infants were left behind as well as to the unnamed nurse who said he took one of the babies, leaving four. In its story, NBC left the discrepancy without clarifying it.

How many infants were left behind in the NICU? Was there oxygen in the respirators when the staff left the hospital? Were the infants already dead by the time of evacuation? Were living infants connected to respirators to keep them alive or were dead corpses connected to respirators to make it appear as though they died because of Israel's mean-spirited indifference, not the tragic circumstance of war? Did the unnamed nurse really save a baby from al-Nasr? To all these questions, the only reasonable answer is “we don't know.”

The news outlet that came closest to portraying openly and honestly the uncertainty of the story was CNN. On

December 8, six days after the Post story went online, it issued a [story bylined by five journalists \(https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/08/middleeast/babies-al-nasr-gaza-hospital-what-we-know-intl/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/08/middleeast/babies-al-nasr-gaza-hospital-what-we-know-intl/index.html) that *inter alia* said “The condition of those left behind alive—both at the time the fighting reached the hospital and when the evacuation took place—remains unclear” and that “It’s unclear whether oxygen cylinders, seen next to some of the beds in the video from the hospital, were functioning or whether supplies had run out.” CNN also had this to say about the unnamed nurse’s story about taking one of the infants: “He said he managed to carry one baby with him as he escaped and handed it to an ambulance headed for the Al-Shifa hospital. But four children were left behind in the NICU according to the nurse, in a discrepancy from the number given by [hospital director] Kahlout.”

The Post article included none of that fog of war. There, the story is black-and-white. And that is even before it gets further complicated by the third piece of the article, the discovery of the infants’ corpses.

Two weeks after the unnamed nurse’s alleged hand-off to the ambulance driver, a reporter with the Dubai-based al-Mashhad news channel was in Gaza City. His name is Mohammed Balousha. According to the Post, he was allegedly venturing through the rubble during the weeklong Israel/Hamas hostage-for-prisoners pause to report on unclaimed corpses when he fortuitously came across some unnamed local people who told him the “strongest story” was the case of the decomposed bodies of infants left in the pediatric ward of al-Nasr Children’s Hospital.

Like a man on a mission, Balousha later told Post reporters that he then evaded Israeli soldiers who had cut off access to the hospital and “jumped from wall to wall” to reach the key building and find his way to the NICU. For Balousha, the subsequent November 27 [broadcast \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f12BkqcZIHA\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f12BkqcZIHA) of this story was a journalistic coup—his filmed account of the dead babies, blurred out of respect for their memory, was chilling and powerful. (Tragically, unrelated to the al-Nasr Hospital story, Balousha was [injured by gunfire \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/18/israel-gaza-journalist-shot-mohammed-balousha/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/18/israel-gaza-journalist-shot-mohammed-balousha/) in mid-December.)

Balousha...Balousha...That name should ring a bell. That’s because there’s another Balousha in this story, Hazem Balousha, one of the three Washington Post journalists who shared a byline on the story. (A fourth contributed to the reporting from Cairo.) Balousha’s [Post bio \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/people/hazem-balousha-/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/people/hazem-balousha-/) describes him as “a distinguished journalist based in Gaza [who] brings over two decades of experience covering security, politics and culture in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.” He is also a longtime stringer for the Guardian and Deutsche Welle, and in a [first-hand account \(https://www.dw.com/en/israel-hamas-war-gaza-journalist-describes-life-under-siege/a-67419818\)](https://www.dw.com/en/israel-hamas-war-gaza-journalist-describes-life-under-siege/a-67419818) of his family’s travails during the war published on the latter’s website on November 16, he explained that he left Gaza for Egypt on November 3 and then relocated to Amman, Jordan.

So, when the events at al-Nasr Children’s Hospital occurred on November 10, Balousha was no longer in Gaza—indeed, it appears that none of the reporters on the story were in Gaza. For this explosive, high-profile story, the Post seems to have had no one on the ground. That means they had to rely on long-distance reporting—that is, listening to podcasts, watching online video clips and talking with contacts in Gaza. This adds to the likelihood that the Post found the nurse at the center of this story through his online testimony, which only underscores the contradictions outlined earlier.

Despite those inconsistencies, the Post version of what happened that terrible day at al-Nasr Children’s Hospital is all very neat—one Balousha (Hazem), from his new base in Amman, along with his Post colleagues finds the unnamed nurse who is key to the “who shall live and who shall die” angle of the story while another Balousha (Mohammed) finds the rotting corpses of infants. Indeed, the two pieces of the story are ultimately connected, since the story notes that the Post relied on the unnamed nurse to corroborate the authenticity of Mohammed’s video.

Two Baloushas? Did they know each other? Were they related? Impossible—the Post would have a solemn responsibility to note any connection between a reporter and one of the main characters in a story. If the two

Baloushas did have a relationship and the Post knew and failed to disclose it, this would be a breach of one of the most basic rules of journalistic ethics, an especially egregious violation given the sensitive, controversial and high-profile nature of the story.

It took me three months of digging but I am now convinced that the answer is yes: Hazem and Mohammed knew each other before this story. There is documentary evidence that they were in direct contact. They may even be related.

Balousha is not an uncommon name among Palestinians, but it is not, by any stretch, a Palestinian “Smith” or “Jones.” The family, which originally hails from the now-destroyed Palestinian village of al-Majdal, was traditionally a strong supporter of Fatah, Yasser Arafat’s nationalist movement. Indeed, Hazem Balousha—the Post stringer—was not always a journalist. According to his own LinkedIn page (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/hazem-balousha-5aabb7851/>), he served from April 2004-May 2006 as chief of public relations for the Palestinian Central Elections Commission in Gaza, a significant position in the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority hierarchy. Only after Hamas’ victory in the 2006 legislative election did Hazem return to being a journalist.

Troubled by the coincidence of two Baloushas in the same story, I have been looking for connections between them. About six weeks ago, I received word through an intermediary that a source in the United Arab Emirates confirmed the two are cousins. Then, during a visit to the West Bank in mid-February, a highly reputable second source independently confirmed to me that the two are cousins.

But even with two sources telling me about the family connection between Mohammed and Hazem, I would not accuse the Post of flouting a basic rule of journalistic ethics without this: On June 17, 2015, Hazem was briefly detained (<https://www.mezan.org/fr/post/20464>) by Hamas in Gaza, ostensibly because the Islamist regime didn’t like an article he wrote for the Guardian. A review of Hazem’s Facebook posts from that same day shows that he received a message of commiseration and support from none other than Mohammed, the al-Mashhad journalist. (See below: the colloquial translation of Mohammed’s message linked above is “It’s ok, they got life [the world] wrong. May we all be well every year and at all times.” Mohammed’s Facebook photo is the same that appears on his account as of this writing.)



(/sites/default/files/2024-03/balousha-facebook-image-Satloff-TimesIsrael.jpeg)

That is a smoking gun—a reporter and a key subject of the story knew each other; they are apparently family members and they have been in direct contact with each other. But the Post made no mention of this in its article. Why?

There are two possibilities: either Post editors knew of this relationship and decided it did not constitute a serious enough conflict of interest to disclose it to their readers, or Hazem kept his editors in the dark about this relationship and the story was published without editors knowing that the two Baloushas—one a reporter, the other a subject of the story—had any connection.

According to the Post, the answer is door number two. I posed the question to the relevant authorities at the Post and received this reply from a spokesperson: “At the time of publishing, The Post was not aware that Hazem Balousha and Mohammed Balousha knew each other professionally as journalists who at one point both worked in Gaza, and we are not aware of any conflict of interest this presented to the reporting.”

That explanation itself begs this question: Did Post editors ask Hazem Balousha if he had any prior connection with Mohammed Balousha and Hazem hid their relationship? Or did the Post not even ask Hazem? Either option is problematic. If Hazem concealed their connection, that raises the prospect that he was not truthful about other aspects of the story—such as, perhaps, the unnamed nurse’s claim to have saved an infant. If the Post didn’t even inquire about a connection, that is further evidence of the Post’s indifference to all the uncertainties and contradictions that emerge from a close read of this episode.

Here’s the bottom line: On November 10, a terrible tragedy happened at al-Nasr Children’s Hospital in Gaza City—the

death of multiple infants. Beyond that, we know very little: we don't really know when they died, how they died, how many died, or who was responsible for their deaths, if indeed their deaths were avoidable.

That's not the Post's version of the story. The most generous interpretation of the Post's version is that, in their haste to publish a blockbuster story, Post reporters cherry-picked the parts of the unnamed nurse's account that fit a certain conception of how the story should be told. Specifically, the Post led with the heartrending—but totally uncorroborated—story of an unnamed nurse saving an unnamed infant and then handing off the baby to an unnamed ambulance driver who allegedly gave the infant to an unnamed doctor at al-Shifa hospital.

And rather than take a few more days to track down witnesses, confirm claims, clarify conflicting testimonies and reach the more balanced finding that characterized CNN's report, Post reporters simply avoided grappling with all discrepancies and inconsistencies. This includes contradictions in the unnamed nurse's own podcast testimony or the very different story told by Abu Riyala, who said definitively that no patients were taken from the NICU.

Uncertainties about the number of dead infants, their status at the time of the hospital's evacuation and the level of oxygen supply merited no discussion whatsoever.

One cannot ignore the possibility of an even darker interpretation, in which the entire story of an unnamed nurse making the terrible choice to save one of five infants never happened. In this scenario, the "rescued baby" story is a fabrication, perhaps designed to heighten the emotive aspect of the already horrible story of the decomposed infants. Indeed, the idea that the "rescued baby" story is fiction is the most logical way to resolve the various discrepancies and inconsistencies.

Add to this the possibility that Hazem Balousha concealed the truth from his editors about his connection to Mohammed Balousha and the odds increase. This would help explain why this was one of only two stories in the Post's entire reporting of the Hamas-Israel War, including hundreds of articles going back to October 7, in which the central character was given anonymity on the basis of "privacy." Interestingly, the only other such case was [a December 3 article \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/03/israel-hamas-war-news-gaza-palestine/#link-QS3AU3UIPVGB3BDR2BZNY4JYCA\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/03/israel-hamas-war-news-gaza-palestine/#link-QS3AU3UIPVGB3BDR2BZNY4JYCA) by...Hazem Balousha. (Among the numerous times the Post gave a source anonymity in its war coverage, it appears there were ten other occasions when "privacy" was given as the reason—all to protect the privacy of a minor character whose quotation is buried deep in a much longer article. Interestingly, in all ten, one of the reporters on the byline was Miriam Berger, one of the three reporters on the "decomposed babies" story.)

Moreover, one cannot discount the possibility that the discovery of the decomposed infants by Mohammed Balousha at the suggestion of helpful passers-by in Gaza City was a fabrication, too. The Post article leads readers to believe that the story of infants left behind in the al-Nasr NICU was not widely known. But Fadi Abu Riyala's video testimony was available on Twitter and Telegram since November 10 and, as noted in the November 13 CNN report cited above, Doctors Without Borders was actually circulating his comments for two weeks before Mohammed Balousha serendipitously came across the story on the bombed-out streets of Gaza City.

Did Hazem see the Abu Riyala video and then tip off his cousin, who was in the area during the November pause in fighting, with camera in hand? Did someone else see the video and pass the information to Mohammed? Did Mohammed see the video himself? Citing any of those possible explanations for Mohammed's discovery of the decomposed infants—rather than the fortuitous tip from passers-by—would have required the Post to reckon with the details of Abu Riyala's account, namely his assertion that hospital staff could not take any of the infants with them during the evacuation, which would have undermined the main thrust of the Post story. Since all we have is Mohammed's version, without any confirmation from Gaza City passers-by, none of these alternatives can be ruled out.

Take all this together and this article exposes a series of serious professional errors by the Post, reporters and editors

alike. The most benign view of these errors is damning enough; the reality, including the possibility of fabrication, may be much worse.

What happened in the al-Nasr NICU on November 10? Sadly, we don't know. The Post, however, tried to impose the clarity of "truth" on an uncertain situation filled with uncorroborated assertions and conflicting testimonies. At best, war reporting should be viewed as the first draft of history but, in this article, the Post presented its account of a hazy, complex story as the final word. This doesn't absolve Israel of its role in the tragedy, but neither does it earn Israel the plaintive, emotional condemnation of the unnamed nurse that was the last line of the story: "Why did the army target [the babies]?"

Before Post reporters take advantage of a hoped-for temporary ceasefire to dig for new stories they were unable to tell during the past three months of Gaza fighting, there is still unfinished business from the last pause—a full retraction of the "decomposed babies" story and an apology to Post readers.

Addendum: To put some of these reporting and editing violations in context, here are relevant excerpts from the Post's official **Policies and Standards** (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/policies-and-standards/#facts>):

Conflict of interest

This news organization is pledged to avoid conflicts of interest or the appearance of conflict of interest wherever and whenever possible.

Fairness

Reporters and editors of The Post are committed to fairness. While arguments about objectivity are endless, the concept of fairness is something that editors and reporters can easily understand and pursue. Fairness results from a few simple practices: No story is fair if it omits facts of major importance or significance. Fairness includes completeness.

No story is fair if it consciously or unconsciously misleads or even deceives the reader. Fairness includes honesty—leveling with the reader.

Policy on sources

The Washington Post is committed to disclosing to its readers the sources of the information in its stories to the maximum possible extent. We want to make our reporting as transparent to the readers as possible so they may know how and where we got our information. Transparency is honest and fair, two values we cherish.

Confidential sources

Sources often insist that we agree not to name them before they agree to talk with us. We must be reluctant to grant their wish. When we use an unnamed source, we are asking our readers to take an extra step to trust the credibility of the information we are providing. We must be certain in our own minds that the benefit to readers is worth the cost in credibility.

In some circumstances, we will have no choice but to grant confidentiality to sources. We recognize that there are situations in which we can give our readers better, fuller information by allowing sources to remain unnamed than if we insist on naming them. We realize that in many circumstances, sources will be unwilling to reveal to us information about corruption in their own organizations, or high-level policy disagreements, for example, if disclosing their identities could cost them their jobs or expose them to harm. Nevertheless, granting anonymity to a source should not be done casually or automatically.

Named sources are vastly to be preferred to unnamed sources. Reporters should press to have sources go on the record. We have learned over the years that persistently pushing sources to identify themselves actually works—not

always, of course, but more often than many reporters initially expect. If a particular source refuses to allow us to identify him or her, the reporter should consider seeking the information elsewhere.

Editors have an obligation to know the identity of unnamed sources used in a story, so that editors and reporters can jointly assess the appropriateness of using them. Some sources may insist that a reporter not reveal their identity to the reporter's editors; we should resist this. When it happens, the reporter should make clear that information so obtained cannot be published. The source of anything that is published will be known to at least one editor.

We prefer at least two sources for factual information in Post stories that depend on confidential informants, and those sources should be independent of each other. We prefer sources with firsthand or direct knowledge of the information. A relevant document can sometimes serve as a second source. There are situations in which we will publish information from a single source, but we should do so only after deliberations involving the executive editor, the managing editor and the appropriate department head. The judgment to use a single source depends on the source's reliability and the basis for the source's information.

We must strive to tell our readers as much as we can about why our unnamed sources deserve our confidence. Our obligation is to serve readers, not sources. This means avoiding attributions to "sources" or "informed sources." Instead we should try to give the reader something more, such as "sources familiar with the thinking of defense lawyers in the case," or "sources whose work brings them into contact with the county executive," or "sources on the governor's staff who disagree with his policy."

Attribution

Readers should be able to distinguish between what the reporter saw and what the reporter obtained from other sources such as wire services, pool reporters, email, websites, etc.

We place a premium value on original reporting. We expect Washington Post reporters to see as much as they can of the story they are reporting and to talk to as many participants as possible. Reporters should consider the advantages of reporting from the scene of events they are covering whenever that is possible.

If a reporter was not present at a scene described in a story, the story should make that clear. Assertions that something actually happened although it was unseen by the reporter should be attributed, so the narrative device of describing an event as it was recounted to us by witnesses must include attribution. If we reconstruct statements or exchanges between people based on the recollections of those people or witnesses who heard them speak, we must attribute those recollections transparently. If you are unsure about the application of these guidelines in a particular situation, discuss it with your editors.

Robert Satloff is the Segal Executive Director and Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in U.S. Middle East Policy at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published [on the Times of Israel website](https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/once-again-a-palestinian-babies-story-merits-a-washington-post-apology/)

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