

Visualization of Violence against Palestine in the Digital Caricature 'Nawaftoon'

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ABSTRACT

The humanitarian tragedy in Palestine perpetrated by Israel still continues. The cruelty of this occupation is being covered up by killing journalists and censoring social media. This will result in a reduction in the amount of information available about Israel's occupation of Palestine. If this is allowed to continue, the world's attention to Palestine could disappear. Therefore, research on Nawaftoon's caricatures is important because they focus on exposing Israel's brutality towards Palestine. This study aims to analyze how violence is visualized in a Palestine-themed poster. This research uses Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's social semiotics approach through representational, interactive, and compositional meaning analysis. The results of the analysis show that Nawaftoon's caricature depicts Israel's violence, and simplifies the complexity of Israel's occupation of Palestine so that it reinforces the narrative of cruelty and the brutality of Israel's colonization towards Palestine, and also reinforces the narrative of Palestinian resistance. The caricatures clearly identify the perpetrators and frame the actual events in a direct way through specific color, symbolism, and character representation. These findings reveal that such visual elements function not only as illustrations but also as a form of accessible documentation that simplifies complicated events and makes them more comprehensible to the public. Thus, these images play a crucial role in countering media censorship and redirecting public attention toward the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, particularly amid the turmoil of ongoing political events.

Keywords: *Caricature, Nawaftoon, Palestine, Visual Activism, Sosial Semiotics*

INTRODUCTION

The genocide committed by Israel against Palestine on a massive scale over the past three years since October 7, 2023, has killed 72,120 people as of March 5, 2026, and Israel has committed 636 attacks since the last ceasefire on October 10, 2025 (AJLabs, 2026). This humanitarian disaster has provoked widespread reactions. Among them was a mass demonstration entitled March for Humanity by Australian citizens on August 3, 2025, in which more than 100,000 people gathered on Sydney Harbour Bridge to show their support for Palestine (Holcombe, 2025). In fact, what Israel has done to Palestine is a long history that can be seen through the framework of colonialism, particularly settler colonialism (Siddiqui, 2024). This colonialism began with British control of the Middle East after World War I and the Balfour Declaration in 1917 (Zhang, 2022). The establishment of Israel in 1948 was a phase that reinforced land robbery, a period known as the Nakba in which Israel forcibly expelled 750,000 Palestinians (Choonara, 2024).

Then, the 1967 war was seen as the second phase of Israeli colonialism, which expanded its control over Palestine and led to ongoing policies that restricted Palestinian sovereignty and rights (Khoury, 2025).

Israel's occupation is documented in various media. However, the massive number of videos showing expulsions, bombings, and genocide that have been spread have been restricted by Israel. A report from the 2024 Digital Rights Index, released in April, documents more than 25,000 violations against Palestinian digital content on various major platforms, including content removal, shadowbanning, account suspension, and other forms of algorithmic suppression (Sada, 2024). This surge in censorship coincided with international judicial proceedings (ICJ) when digital expression was most needed to document Israeli war crimes on the ground (Houry, 2025). This censorship sparked creativity in the form of artworks created by artists to expose and resist Israeli atrocities (Miladi, 2025).

The consequence of this is the emergence of an abundance of pro-Palestinian content in various aspects. This is also driven by the ongoing genocide in Gaza and forced displacement in general in Palestine. However, the reality of Israel's cruelty towards Palestine can be obscured if the visual content is not focused on the reality that Israeli media censorship seeks to erase, as discussed above. Nawaf Al Mulla is a Bahraini caricaturist who actively depicts the real situation experienced by the Palestinian people. His work is uploaded to Instagram under the account name @Nawaftoon. As someone who lives in the Middle East, Nawaf has not only witnessed the war firsthand, but has also experienced it himself, which strengthens his position as a messenger. Therefore, analyzing Nawaf's cartoons is important for understanding how the Palestinian tragedy is portrayed through visual elements and symbols.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The object of this study is a caricature. Caricatures are a form of visual art that can be used to document and criticize political events. As stated in (Supriyadi, 2024), caricatures are part of cartoons that are portrayed in a fictional form or as characters of certain figures with the aim of satire, criticism, appeal, and making an impact on the target audience. Because of this purpose, caricatures are commonly used in visual activism. According to (Mattoni, 2014) in (Young, 2021), visual activism is the use of the power of images to convey messages of activism through the reproduction and redistribution of various visual forms to encourage the emergence of collective resistance movements.

To understand how messages and meanings are conveyed through visual elements, an approach that can interpret the signs that appear in images is needed. One approach that can be used is social semiotics. Social semiotics is an approach in communication and cultural studies that examines how meaning is formed and understood in social life, where signs and messages as objects of semiotics cannot be separated from the context of the social relationships and processes that underlie them (Hodge & Kress, 1988). The social semiotics approach is relevant to this study because it views visuals as a system of signs that cannot be separated from the creator's experience and social life.

Research on caricatures and visual activism has been conducted by (Suari, 2022), who examined the text and visuals of 29 cartoons by "Komik Kita". The purpose of this study was to describe and identify multimodal visual components and verbal texts associated with constructing satirical meaning. The results showed that the visuals in the cartoons depicted the activities of political figures more than their symbolic content. Another study was conducted by (Sosnytskyi, 2025) that examines social posters in Ukraine. The aim of this study is to analyze how the combination of text and images functions as a sign system in conveying social, emotional, and cultural messages, particularly in the context of social crises and conflicts in Ukraine. This study uses the theories of Charles Sanders Peirce and Roland Barthes. The results show that the effectiveness of social posters lies in the harmonious integration of text and visuals, where the two complement each other to produce messages that are emotionally and conceptually powerful, reinforcing cultural identity and making posters a tool for shaping social consciousness and collective memory.

In visual media research related to the Palestinian tragedy, a study conducted by (Adhy & Rachmawati, 2025) analyzed photos uploaded by Motaz Azaiza on his Instagram account, aiming to analyze the representation of the Palestinian genocide using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach. The results show that Motaz's photography effectively represents the reality of genocide in Palestine through visual symbolism, such as building debris and the emotional expressions of victims, which illustrate the tragic impact of the conflict in Gaza. In the study (Sarimulya et al., 2024), the "All Eyes on Rafah" poster was analyzed with the aim of explaining the Palestinian-Israeli conflict through visual analysis. This study used a qualitative method with a visual literacy approach to interpret the visual elements in the media. The results show that the poster functions as a visual campaign that builds public awareness

and encourages support for the Palestinian people. The Palestinian symbol of a watermelon was analyzed using Pierce's semiotics with the aim of examining the meaning of the symbol (Masnani et al., 2024). The result is that the watermelon is interpreted as a sign of support for the Palestinian people's struggle and rejection of the oppression they experience.

Based on several prior studies, it was found that research on Palestinian caricatures is still scarce. The caricatures studied more often feature certain figures or characters in socio-politics. Meanwhile, analysis of visual media related to Palestine is still limited to symbols and their use as support or solidarity. Motaz's photography, although effective in showing the situation in the region and the victims of genocide, still has the potential to be subject to social censorship, especially if it displays visuals that are too tragic. In addition, the photographs analyzed do not show who the perpetrators of the genocide are.

Therefore, this study will examine Nawaftoon's caricatures to reinforce previous research because these works depict the ongoing tragedy in Palestine. This study also aims to contribute to the study of culture and visual communication, particularly in enriching the understanding of how a conflict is represented through caricatures and how visual elements form specific meanings from a social semiotics perspective.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses social semiotics. Social semiotics is an approach that examines how semiotic resources are used and developed in a sociocultural context to produce meaning, as well as an open and contextual method of examination (Nirwana & Yulianto, 2025). Based on this, Nawaftoon's caricatures, which are a form of visual activism created by a caricaturist living near a conflict zone, will be analyzed using social semiotics. The aim is to determine how visual elements and signs as semiotic resources are used to create meaning and their connection to the Palestinian genocide. The primary data in this study are Nawaftoon's digital caricatures taken from Instagram posts, which will be analyzed using the social semiotics of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2020), and interviews conducted with the creator of these caricatures, Nawaf Al Mulla, to obtain more detailed information about the caricatures and their background. Meanwhile, the secondary data are literature that will support this study.

DISCUSSION

There are four Nawaftoon cartoons to be analyzed, as follows:



Figure 1. *A Brazen Thief Who Doesn't Care About Anyone*, 1080 x 763, Source: Instagram @nawaftoon, 2024



Figure 2. *Trump's Deportation Proposal Makes No Sense, 1080 x 782, Source: Instagram @nawaftoon, 2025*



Figure 3. *Used (U.S. VETO) When A Fire Breaks Out in Israel, 1080 x 1080, Source: Instagram @nawaftoon, 2025*



Figure 4. *Israel's Real Goals in the War, 1080 x 763, Source: Instagram @nawaftoon, 2025*

These four images were chosen for analysis after selecting Nawaftoon's Palestinian cartoons through (Feldman, 1992) visual analysis in (Soewardikoen, 2020), which is divided into four stages: description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. It was found that the cartoons created by Nawaftoon had specific topics, representing, among others, the forced occupation of Palestinian territory, Israeli atrocities in their attempts at genocide, the influence of the United States as Israel's main supporter and colonizer of Palestine, and the media censorship efforts carried out by Israel together with its allied media. From this, one image was taken that was most relevant to each topic.

Following this, the four images were analyzed using social semiotics. Social semiotics views signs as part of social practice (Kress & Leeuwen, 2020). The meaning of a sign is influenced by who created it, the situation in which it was created, and the purpose for which the sign is used (Aiello & Leeuwen, 2022). In other words, meaning can change depending on the social context. In visual analysis, it is broken down into three aspects, namely representation meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. Representation meaning is how reality and truth are presented in an image; interactive meaning is how the image relates to the audience viewing it; while compositional meaning is how the visual elements are composed to form a specific meaning (Kress & Leeuwen, 2020). These three aspects will be analyzed in the four Nawaftoon cartoons.

Table 1. *Social Semiotic Analysis of Figure 1*


Representation Meaning
Figure 1 constructs a narrative of occupation and forced expulsion, depicted by two people standing in front of a house. The identities of the two people can be determined from the clothes they are wearing. One person, representing Israel, is seen doing two things: painting a Palestinian resident's house blue and injuring him with a sharp weapon held in his other hand, blood still flowing.
Interactive Meaning
The subject in Figure 1 does not make direct eye contact with the audience, indicating that the audience is merely an observer. The audience can see what is happening from a distance that is not too far away, allowing them to feel the tension and horror inflicted by an Israeli on the Palestinian population.
Compositional Meaning
On the left side of Figure 1, there is a door with a wall covered with Palestinian flags. There is a human body wearing a keffiyeh as a sign of Palestinian identity, lying face down in a pool of blood. On the right side of Figure 1, there is a human figure with a Star of David symbol on his shirt. His left hand is painting the wall blue, and in his right hand he is holding a knife covered in blood. These two human compositions show that there has been a killing of Palestinians and a seizure of their homes by Israel.

The relationship between these three meanings reveals the acts of violence committed by Israel against Palestine. Israel kills civilians indiscriminately. As reported by Middle East Eye (Daniel, 2026), the Ministry of Health states that 72,072 Palestinians have been killed since October 7, 2023, and more than half of them are women, children, and the elderly. Israel has also seized their homes and territories, and Palestinian land has been forcibly recognized as Israeli land, especially since Israel declared its independence in 1948 after the United Nations proposed the partition of Palestine for Israel a year earlier (Nabulsi, 2024). Palestinian homes were occupied by Israel in an inhumane manner. The human rights of the Palestinian people were completely disregarded for the sake of the occupiers, and Palestinians were killed on their own land (Bollero, 2025).

Table 2. *Social Semiotic Analysis of Figure 2*


Representation Meaning
Figure 2 depicts the actors involved in the occupation of Palestine. Trump is cutting the key held by the Palestinian man's hand with his scissors. Standing behind Trump is Netanyahu. This shows that the forced expulsion of the Palestinian people is not solely the result of Israel's actions, but that there is a greater ally than Israel itself that is helping this tragedy to happen. The key that has not yet been cut by the scissors signifies that Trump has not yet been able to fully obtain Palestine in its entirety.
Interactive Meaning
In Figure 2, Trump and Netanyahu are not looking directly at the audience. This indicates that the audience is positioned as observers of this event. The subjects are not far enough away from the audience. This relatively close distance gives the impression that the audience can be involved even though there is no direct eye contact with the subjects.
Compositional Meaning
Looking closely at Figure 2, one realizes that Palestine has strong resilience. The outstretched hand of the Palestinian people is almost as large as Netanyahu's, and the key held in one hand is quite large. The scissors held by Trump's two small hands appear weaker than the key. From this, we can see the aspect of resistance to the violence experienced. Even though they have been expelled for a long time, the land of Palestine has not yet been completely controlled by the occupiers and their allies.

Netanyahu, who is behind Trump, shows that what happened in the Palestinian genocide tragedy cannot be separated from the geopolitical foreign policy of the United States (Kiros, 2025). Netanyahu's position itself is considered to lack the power to face resistance from Palestine (Muhammadin et al., 2023). Therefore, cooperation between the two is needed to perpetuate their power over Palestine. On the other hand, Palestine, especially Gaza, has the strategic potential to strengthen the United States' position in the Middle East to control it. Trump has repeatedly proposed that the residents of Gaza be relocated to another country in order to achieve his goal of building New Gaza (Boxerman, 2025). However, the Palestinian people have shown strong resistance to leaving their land, even since the Nakba (Awad, 2023), as represented by the large key held in one hand by a Palestinian compared to Trump and his scissors.

Table 3. *Social Semiotic Analysis of Figure 3*



Representation Meaning

Figure 3 shows a bloody hand wearing a shirt with the Israeli emblem swinging a hammer at an emergency box. Inside the box is the word “VETO” with the American flag motif. Above the box is written “break the glass when recognizing Palestine,” as if recognition of Palestine is a danger to Israel itself, so it must be canceled or prevented by the United States' veto power.

Interactive Meaning

This emergency box is close enough to the audience that they can feel the intensity of the glass breaking. The lack of direct contact between the subjects in the image indicates that the audience is in the position of observers.

Compositional Meaning

The word “VETO” in large letters at the center of Figure 3 reinforces the position of the United States as a major obstacle to Palestinian independence. Israel is indeed the occupying power, but the decision was made with the permission of its allies. The wooden hammer that can break glass shows that the United States' “VETO” can easily be used by Israel to prevent the recognition of Palestine as an independent state.

Figure 3 shows the large word “VETO,” which indicates the significant influence of the United States' decision on the continuation of Israel's occupation of Palestine. Since 1970, Israel has used the US veto 49 times for various interests in the Middle East (Staff, 2024) and 34 times to support Israeli interests in Palestine (Asrar & Hussein, 2023). Recognition of the state of Palestine has been granted by 155 countries, but has always been blocked by the United States' veto power (Suryavanshi, 2025).

Table 4. Social Semiotic Analysis of Figure 4



Representation Meaning
Figure 4 shows civilians, health workers, and journalists. A target sign is written on their bodies by an Israeli hand holding a bloodstained missile. Behind the civilians, there is a building sign that has also been marked as a target. The narrative in this image is that Israeli attacks killed them and deliberately destroyed public facilities.
Interactive Meaning
Interactively, the subject in Figure 4 faces the audience directly. This indicates that there is a demand for the viewers of the image to do or feel something. The image, taken with a medium shot, provides a distance that is not too far. The audience can feel the tension of the subject as a target of genocide.
Compositional Meaning
The position of the Israeli soldier's hand above the civilian, depicted as larger, shows the power and strength that Israel has to commit genocide. When looking at Figure 4 from the left, the information that schools, journalists, hospitals, and health workers were targeted by Israel becomes more important to know than who the perpetrators of the targeting were.

It is clear that Israel intentionally targets civilians, journalists (Nassar, 2025), and health workers (Gorani & Sowden, 2024). Their murders are shown daily in various media reports. Figures 1-4 are not only revealing Israel's brutality, but also the world's inability to stop this tragedy from happening. This is indicated by the red marks that show their positions as targets. This means that these killings could have been prevented. According to a report by the Geneva International Centre for Justice (Bochnakian, 2025), 197 journalists have been killed since October 7, 2023.

From the analysis of these four Nawaftoon cartoons, the visualization of violence is clearly visible. These cartoons do not hesitate to show weapons, blood, and wounded civilians. The perpetrator of genocide is clearly shown to be Israel. These cartoons not only document the tragedy, but also make Israel's violence easy to comprehend. In an interview with Nawaf Al Mulla, the cartoonist said that his reason for creating political cartoons was to simplify the complexity of events and document them. Nawaf also said that the visual elements used in his cartoons were the result of his reflections on various news stories. He chose symbols whose meanings are widely known so that the simplicity of his message is preserved. The results of this analysis are in line with the statement by (Al-Dala'ien et al., 2022) that visual posts are seen as a more effective and direct expression than the conventional written form, as they can convey messages easily and quickly.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The results of analysis using a social semiotic approach clearly show the visualization of violence in this digital cartoon. However, the violence here does not stand alone. In the narrative, there is resistance reflected in the gestures of the subject with Palestinian identity. Violence is not positioned as exploitation to attract attention; rather, it is violence that attracts the attention of the audience, which is easily seen and understood through the caricature. This makes the audience not only informed that the occupation is still happening, but also aware that the Palestinian people are still fighting and demanding support from anyone who knows their situation. The audience is positioned as witnesses to all these actions, as seen from the arrangement of visual elements that reinforce the focus on the symbols of conflict and its victims. Thus, the violence in this poster serves as a visual strategy to assert political stance and resistance, not merely to reproduce the violence of one state entity against another. For further research, a perception analysis of Nawaftoon's caricatures can be conducted to gain a broader perspective on how audiences receive and understand the messages conveyed by these caricatures.

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