

This Photograph Demands an Answer

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By [Lydia Polgreen](#) - Opinion Columnist

If you don't look too closely you might think the photograph is a dimly lit snapshot from a slumber party or a family camping trip. Six small children lie in a row, their heads poking out from the white sheet that is casually lying across their little chests. None appear to be older than 10, though it is hard to say for sure.

At first, you might not notice the smear of drying blood in the upper right hand corner of the image. But then you do, and then it is impossible not to see that one child, second from the left, appears to be missing a chunk of skull. When you now look with your full attention, the horror of this tableau takes shape, and you see that only one child — a girl with a ponytail, probably 8 or 9 years old — looks even remotely as if she is sleeping. Her head is turned slightly, as if she had been drowsily whispering something to the girl beside her.

Then you might see the terse caption, which reads: "The bodies of children killed in an Israeli strike lie on the floor at the morgue of Al Aqsa Hospital in Deir al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip on Oct. 22, 2023, as battles continue between Israel and the Palestinian Hamas group." The caption comes from Agence France-Presse; the photo from Mahmud Hams, a staff photographer there.

The children are not named. The photograph tells us nothing about whether or how these children are related. All we can know is that they are six of the [more than 4,500 children](#) who have been killed in Gaza, according to its Ministry of Health, since Israel began its military campaign in response to the brutal Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel. On that day, Hamas fighters slaughtered [1,200 people](#), among them many children. Hundreds of Israeli hostages, including children, are believed to be held in Gaza by Hamas, their families desperate for their safe release.

This photograph has not been published by a mainstream news organization, so far as I can tell. Because of its graphic nature, [The Times has decided not to publish it in full](#); this column is accompanied by a cropped version of the image. The full image can be seen [here](#). It is a rare thing for mainstream news organizations to publish graphic images of dead or wounded children. Rightly so. There is nothing quite so devastating as the image of a child whose life has been snuffed out by senseless violence. The longstanding norms are to show such images sparingly, if at all.

Of course, the news media no longer needs to disseminate an image for it to be seen. Social media bludgeons us with a flood of brutal images. And in a long reporting career that has taken me to many war zones, I have seen more than my share of death in real life. I've gone to these places because I believe deeply in bearing witness to all facets of the human experience, including war and suffering. One of the hardest parts of journalism is witnessing horror and then trying, in words, sound and image, to convey that pain to the wider world. Many people may want to look away, to see the world as they prefer to see it. But what should we see when we see war? What should war demand all of us to see and understand? Given my experience in war zones, it is a rare thing for a violent image to stop me in my tracks. But I believe that this is an image that demands to be seen.



When the news media does choose to publish these images, they can be galvanizing. Emmett Till's mother insisted that his [brutalized body be photographed](#) so the world would be forced to bear witness to his lynching. The photograph of Kim Phuc Phan Thi, the screaming child burned by napalm captured in Nick Ut's indelible image, has often been credited as helping turn sentiment against the American war in Vietnam, though that turn had arguably already begun. In 2015, the lifeless body of Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian toddler, was photographed washed up on a Turkish beach. He had drowned, along with his mother, in attempting to sail from Turkey to Europe. The image brought a [flood of attention and donations](#) to the victims of the Syrian civil war, and for a time may have softened hearts that have long since rehardened against the plight of refugees seeking safety from war and oppression.

Like many people, I have been struggling to come to grips with the scale and devastation of the conflict unfolding right now in Gaza. Hamas's heinous attack on Israel was a rampage of unrelenting brutality and cruelty that the killers [live-streamed](#). Israel has responded with a bombing campaign in Gaza that "has become one of the most intense of the 21st century, prompting growing global scrutiny of its scale, purpose and cost to human life," [The Times reported](#).

In the early days of this conflict [I wrote that I hoped](#) that President Biden would use his hard-won experience and willingness to speak impolitic but necessary truths to temper the Israeli response. His administration has [become more critical](#) of the Israeli military campaign in Gaza in recent days, but [Biden has also cast](#) the huge death toll as inevitable, saying, "I'm sure innocents have been killed, and it's the price of waging a war."

Many have rightly criticized those on the far left across the globe who lionize Hamas, or excuse the horrific violence visited upon defenseless men, women and children on the grounds that all Jewish

Israelis are somehow legitimate military targets because of the actions of their government or, worse still, because of the actions and decisions of those who created the state of Israel 75 years ago in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Defenses of the atrocities of Oct. 7 on these grounds are repugnant. Collective blame is morally wrong.

But as the days grind on and the death toll mounts, it is hard not to conclude that Israel's government and its defenders are willing to subject the Palestinians of Gaza to collective punishment for the actions of those who rule them without their assent.

If there was doubt about the sentiment among Palestinians in Gaza regarding Hamas's rule, [a survey completed in Gaza](#) the day before the Oct. 7 assault on Israel gave a useful glimpse into how unpopular the group is. The overwhelming majority of the respondents in Gaza said they had no or very little trust in Hamas, and a plurality blamed the Hamas-led government for shortages of food, rather than external factors like the Israeli and Egyptian blockade. Just 27 percent said that Hamas was their preferred political party. Hamas last won an election in 2006; it has not held another.

Hamas calls for the destruction of the state of Israel, but the poll found that 54 percent of people in Gaza supported the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel as outlined by the Oslo Accords, and nearly three-quarters said they supported a peaceful resolution to the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Which brings me back to the image that has haunted me since I first laid eyes on it. What did the children in this photograph believe? It is a pointless question. They are children. And so we must look at them, the promise of their future lives broken, never to be wakened from the sleep of death. Children are not a metaphor for the future. They *are* the future.

But it is fair to wonder whether such a brutal photograph can do more than shock, temporarily. In her scathing 1977 book "On Photography," Susan Sontag was not kind to the medium.

"To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate," she wrote. "It can also corrupt them. Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more — and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize."

In 2003, the year before her death, Sontag wrote "Regarding the Pain of Others," another slender volume that was preoccupied with photography. The intervening years had changed her. She had gone to Bosnia, spending time with war photographers in Sarajevo. She lived through the aftermath of 9/11, watching in horror as her country launched itself heedlessly into wars of vengeance. She made a life with a [famous photographer](#).

Her view of the photography of political violence became more nuanced, if not softer. Images, she wrote, "cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers. Who caused what the picture shows? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged?"

Scrolling through a database of unpublished graphic images by photojournalists of injured and dead children in Gaza, I often had the impulse to look away. This photograph had the opposite effect. It made me want to look deeper. Perhaps it is the sleight-of-hand way this gruesome image of bodies placed on

the floor of a hospital morgue evokes a cellphone snapshot of the peaceful slumber of children. Perhaps it is the classic composition — two-thirds of the screen is taken up with a white sheet whose intricate crinkles are worthy of a Dutch master. Mostly it was because, as Sontag said, the photograph required me to ask a question: What set of arrangements, what assumptions, must be overturned to answer for this tableau of death?

It was perhaps fitting that the crisis in Gaza and Israel was pushed off the top of the American news agenda, albeit briefly, by a mass shooting in Maine. The story was so awful in its familiarity. The gunman had been known to law enforcement. Warnings about him were ignored. He of course enjoyed unfettered access to machines that kill. In his rampage he killed 18 people, including [14-year-old Aaron Young](#), a passionate bowler who was gunned down with his father while attending a youth league game.

We don't see [graphic images of dead American children](#) from mass shootings, in part because photojournalists do not generally have access to these horrific scenes, and authorities do not release crime scene photos. In their place we often substitute [images of maternal anguish](#). And so the slaughter in Maine reminded me of another [image](#) from Gaza, one you may have seen on social media. In it, a female figure cradles the body of a child swathed in white cloth. The photograph shows no faces — indeed the only hint of flesh is the woman's hand, which clutches the child's head. The woman's head is covered with a scarf, a practice that at various times and places in history has been shared by devout women of all the Abrahamic faiths. The original Reuters caption told us little: "A woman embraces the body of a Palestinian child killed in Israeli strikes, at a hospital in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip." It was taken by a Reuters photographer in Gaza named Mohammed Salem.

Later, Reuters [reported](#) that the woman, Inas Abu Maamar, was holding the body of her 5-year-old niece, Saly. But the image requires no words, no faces, no names to transmit, inescapably, a profound and universal grief. The image instantly recalls one of the most famous works of art in the world: Michelangelo's La Pietà. The marble sculpture depicts Mary holding the lifeless body of Jesus after he is taken down from the cross. It is the ultimate symbol of maternal grief, of the sacrifice of a child to a cruel world. In her agony she could be any mother, grieving any child stolen too soon, anywhere in the world.

And so I ask you to look at these children. They are not asleep. They are dead. They will not be part of the future. But know this: The children in the morgue photo could be any children. They could be Sudanese children caught in the crossfire between two feuding generals in Khartoum. They could be Syrian children crushed under Bashar al-Assad's bombs. They could be Turkish children who died in their beds when a shoddily constructed apartment block collapsed upon them in an earthquake. They could be Ukrainian children slain by Russian shells. They could be Israeli children slaughtered in a kibbutz by Hamas. They could be American schoolchildren gunned down in a mass shooting. These [children are ours](#).