

# From 9/11 to Humanise Palestine: Investigating the Terror of Grievability

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## From 9/11 to Humanise Palestine: Investigating the Terror of Grievability

<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/03/23/from-9-11-to-humanise-palestine-investigating-the-terror-of-grievability/>

CHENGLONG YIN, MAR 23 2024

In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler (2020, p. 2) meditates that there is a profound human rights failure in how the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, instigated by the US War on Terror (WoT), is represented and perceived by the West. As Butler contends, through framing terrorist activities in the Middle East and terrorism as a global security threat against humanity, what the discourse of WoT sustained and justified is not wars and killings but also *violence over life* that reduces lives in the Middle East ‘ungrievable’ – violence that ironically dismisses an estimated 432,093 casualties under the name of WoT and ‘global peacekeeping’ (Watson-Institute, 2023). Following a post-structuralist position and inspired by Butler’s conceptualization, I argue in this essay that this violence over life can constitute ‘an order of grievability.’ Through images and videos, the representation of wars and terrorism constitutes another layer of *violence as reproduction*. Manifesting itself as an *injunction of terror*, such reproductive violence registers an order of grievability that fails to recognise the value of lives in the Middle East—including that of the terrorists—as lives.

Setting out from a queer theory and post-colonial perspective, this essay will proceed in four sections. In the first part, I argue that images and videos as representations of violence and suffering that took place on 9/11 constitute an injunction of terror that is at the core of the reproduction of violence through the discourse of WoT. Then, I illustrate in the second part that there lies an ‘order of drivability’ that functions through the same injection of terror, denouncing the lives that are Orient and rejecting the lives that are terrorist. Lastly, focusing on the campaign of Humanise Palestine in the aftermath of the 2014 Gaza War, I provide a case study on how the very act of ‘naming’ constitutes an important resistance that could possibly remedy the order of grievability and its terror.

### An Injunction of Terror: Reproducing Violence in 9/11

From image to video, the media in which we engage and perceive war matters. As many scholars suggest, digitalisation is the key marker that sets modern warfare apart from its traditional meanings (Der Derian, 2000, p. 772). As Dagget (2015, pp. 361-363) denotes, the deployment of drone attacks in wars blurs the distinctions between homeland and battlefield and between distance and intimacy—the temporality and spatiality of war collapse. Killings that once needed to be engaged in a foreign land now become a satellite image and a joystick in a computer located in a military base somewhere in the US; a battle that once required months of on-the-ground preparations could now be calculated in a CIA war room within a click of the mouse (Der Derian, 2009, p. 83). Killings and bombings, the physical violence that once must have been enacted through the actualisation of wars, are now actualised through the very *representations* of wars – a series of simulations of training drone killings on the computer screen that collapses the differences between violence and its representations (Daggett, 2015, p. 368; Der Derian, 2009, p. 38).

As Der Derian (2009, p. 228) remarks, the violence of the 9/11 terrorist attack is both actualised and sustained through a series of reproduction of violence. The four coordinated hijackings that happened on the morning of 11 September were actually a result of training and practices that happened in the flight simulation cockpit in the al-Qaeda bases (Der Derian, 2000, pp. 777-778). 9/11, in this sense, was not an action but a ‘re-enactment’ of terrorism. But more importantly, terrorism is itself performative – it is a speech act, a message, a social ritual of ballistic violence that demands public attention at the cost of human lives (See Ramakrishna, 2011). If the aim of

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terrorism is, ultimately, terror, then what manifests its fears is precisely the reproduction of violence—a bombardment of images and videos that constantly reproduce the moment of the attack and its aftermath (Der Derian, 2009, p. 247). Consequently, the spatiality and temporality that once contained the violence of killing collapsed. As Der Derian (2000, p. 771) asserts, there's no 9/11, but only its 'effect'—the 9/11 attack itself holds no power for political agents outside of the temporality and spatiality in which the terrorist event took place (i.e., loosely speaking, non-Americans), but its terrorising effect permeates across the globe.

Here, the terror of 9/11, which itself manifests, is essentially an aesthetical one—the photo of the crashing of the World Trade Tower *is* the terror per se. 9/11 was no doubt a moral outrage, but it was also a terrific visual event, terrifying in its ballistic destructiveness (Cottee, 2019, p. 85). As Lars Svendsen (2008, p. 86) puts it, "Violence can give rise to aesthetic delight, even though we find it morally deplorable." From videos of mothers screaming for help to photographs such as *The Falling Man*, traumatising in viewing these documentations is inevitable because violence perpetuates itself into the very way in which we seek to *apprehend* such events. The ability to actualise fear in reproducing unimaginable violence into what is, terrifyingly, aesthetically imaginable representations—this is the ultimate terror of 9/11.

It is in this sense we can see how violence and terror are manufactured through its representations in instigating the discourse of the War on Terror. The issue of global security, or the omnipresent sense of insecurity instigated by 9/11, was sustained not by the event itself but by its representations in the news and on the screens (Cottee, 2019, p. 6). Similarly, if insecurity is sustained through our affection for what is imaginable, i.e., afflictions and losses represented on the screens, then the threat that terrorists and terrorism dwell is something outside of the screens, an unimaginable threat that prohibits us from comprehending through any means of representation – it is, as Rumsfeld puts it in justifying US invasion of Iraq, the 'unknown unknowns' (See Graham, 2014).

However, or rather consequently, Butler reminds us that here lies another layer of violence towards humanity that perhaps functions through an inversion of this logic of terror. In the bombardment of representations of violence, what we, the mass public, could possibly apprehend and grieve are only those lives that are presented in front of us, but not those losses and sufferings outside of the representations—killings and violence instigated by the US in the Middle East prior to the 9/11 (Butler, 2016, p. 24). From 9/11 to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, in comprehending, raging, and mourning violence and terror through news and coverages, we nonetheless acquiesce to an *injunction of terror* that manifests itself on screens through the dehumanising discourse of WoT—that certain lives (lives in the Middle East and that of terrorists) are not worth grieving, and cannot be grievable (Butler, 2016, p. 25).

Here, I will turn to the second part, in which I argue that what this injunction of terror manifests in the discourse of WoT is an 'order of grievability', registering a sexualised body of terrorists through its demarcation of the West and the Orient, and the civilian and the terrorist.

## An Order of Grievability

In *Frames of War*, Butler (2016, p. 4) argues that the representation of violence matters because it registers a power over one's ability to grieve—in order to perceive someone as grievable, one has first to be able to *recognise such life as life*. Grievability depends on a 'normative production of ontology' that lies deeply in the *reproductive effect* of our political configurations (Butler, 2016, p. 4). Here, grievability is a sexualised concept. As Butler (2006, p. 93) demonstrates in *Gender Trouble*, in naturalising gender through binary sex, what the heterosexual matrix imposes on individuals is inherently a 'normative injunction' that limits our intelligibility outside of heteronormativity. Similarly, as Jasbir Puar (2017, p. 8) suggests in *Terrorist Assemblages*, 'terrorism' is itself a normative injunction coined by the US, registering a 'homonormativity' that limits our intelligibility of lives in the Middle East that is outside of the Western liberal discourse. In justifying the invasion of the Middle East under the discourse of WoT, what the US reproduces is not only mass killings and wars that underline the similar logic of violence from al Qaeda but also, as Puar (2005, p. 122) identifies, a biopolitical ontology that reproduces a homophobic and perversive image of the Middle East, justifying its violence through proliferating a self-referential liberal discourse of 'tolerance' that deems the US as the 'sexually, racially, and gendered normal'. Palestinians' subjection to the violent and enduring Israeli occupations and subjugation was justified under counterterrorism precisely because Israeli was able to confirm such

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homonormativity through a series of US-led 'pinkwashing' propaganda that distanced itself from the homophobic and perverse Middle East, regaining an ontological privilege under US regional hegemony (Puar and Mikdashi, 2012).

Puar (2017, p. 35) observes that if biopolitics—the power to kill or preserve the living—is what is enabled by US wars and violence in the Middle East, then there also exists a corresponding *necropolitics*—a power over the dying that determines which of them are lives. There lies a general Western-centric 'hierarchy of death' in media representations that Puar identifies, in which 'deaths at home provide human interest stories that people want to know about, while the deaths of foreigners are merely statistics' (Lloyd, 2017, p. 267). The suffering of Palestinian women is less grievable compared to that of Israeli women and to that of a white liberal woman precisely because, as Butler reminds us, they do not fully qualify as the sexual and racial subject established by the US homonormativity, thus failing to dwell an 'ontological status as fully human' (Lloyd, 2017, p. 269). But what's more important is that in reproducing the terrorists as homophobic and perverse, the discourse of WoT also insinuates a particular body of terrorists that is also sexually, racially, and gendered *abnormal* (Puar, 2017, p. 77). The lives of terrorists not only deviate from Western lives as the lives of civilians in the Middle East but also pose themselves as something that *opposes* the very categorisation of life. The body of a jihadist suicide bomber is something that cannot be grieved because what its body represents is not the imaginable precariousness of lives but unimaginable and absolute ballistic violence manifested in its potentiality to annihilate lives (Puar, 2005, p. 128). Here, Puar (2017, p. 32) reminds us that this ungrievableness of abnormality and perversion of the body shares an indefinite similarity to the queer subjects that once historically connected death, and more specifically, abnormal bodies that are wounded and terrorised by the HIV pandemic, yet nonetheless are ungrivable by the society for the death and terror themselves symbolise.

In *Disagreement*, Rancière (1999, p. 18) asserts that there exists a 'police order' that ontologically justifies brutality and violence through a series of injunctions of ordering (reordering) and allocation (reallocation) of bodies. I think Rancière's remark is well exemplified here. Under the bombardment of the US 'Middle East peacekeeping counterterrorism' coverage, perhaps there also lies another form of terror that shares the same logic of the way in which al-Qaeda enabled through presenting and representing lives and deaths in 9/11—a terror of orchestrated order of grievability that disciplines the degree of grieving lives that favours the West over the Orient and polices the capability of comprehending lives that exclude the terrorist from the civilians.

## Naming the Unnameable

From July to August 2014, Gaza broke into yet another episode of the deadly conflict between Israel and Palestine. After Hamas' snapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) claimed a counterterrorist operation, launching a seven-week-long war in the Gaza Strip, resulting in the death of 2,251 Palestinians, of whom 299 women and 551 children (UNCHR, 2014). The mainstream Western media's coverage of the Gaza War through the 2014 summer reaffirms an order of grievability that I have argued previously. Lloyd (2017, p. 267) observes that mainstream media in the UK, the US and Israel follow a similar narrative that categorises its violence as part of the decade-long Middle East conflict, primarily featuring images and videos featuring women and Children in Gaza. At the same time, with the war continuing, Gaza's deaths have been less represented visually, instead being primarily presented in numerical terms, in which only civilians' deaths are counted towards casualties (Lloyd, 2017, p. 268). Palestinian lives, not to mention terrorists, are not grievable in this sense because, as Butler (2020, p. 6) reminds us, how can anyone grieve through screens with a mere abstraction of numbers?

Yet, at the same time, there were also campaigns going on seeking to name the dead of Gaza. As Lloyd (2017, p. 272) records, one of the largest movements was led by the Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem, campaigning for a partial list of all the names of killed Palestinian children and forming a database for the casualties in the Gaza Strip. Among these efforts, there's also an online crowdsourcing venture in 2015, resulting in 'Humanise Palestine', an alleged community-set-up memorial website using online resources, including the B'Tselem database, to honour the losses in the 2014 wars, hosting the images and detailed information of hundreds of dead Palestinians (Lloyd, 2017, p. 273; also see HumanizePalestine, 2023b).[1] As a result, on the original 2015 website, we could see the face of Abdulla Mansour Radwan Amara, a 22 years old future human right lawyer who was 'killed on 19 July, 2014 in the Shuja'iyya massacre'; five members of the Elzowidi family were also killed on that day, although they 'did not

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participate in hostilities' (HumanizePalestine, 2023b). Citing Rancière, Lloyd suggests that naming those unnamed is the single powerful way to resist this order of grievability. In giving their names, we actively inscribe their lives into the existing order of discourse, renounced to participate in 'prolonging a certain invisibility, the feeling that these lives are external to the world of discourse' (Lloyd, 2017, p. 271). In remembering those losses through names and images, we, as observers of this war, mourn and grieve them as lives that are closer to our proximity.

Yet, there is another subversion lies beneath this initial reading of Humanize Palestine. After changing multiple domains, Humanize Palestine was shut down and stopped its activity in 2017. After a series of anonymous efforts, it has been found that the original 2015 website contains extensive misinformation provided by B'Tselem, disguising terrorists' deaths as civilian casualties (See HumanizePalestine, 2023a). A reconstructed website of the same name was published in 2023, hosting detailed comparative information that reveals that at least 256 terrorist-affiliated names listed on the original Humanize Palestine are mourned and remembered with false narratives (HumanizePalestine, 2023a). Abdulla Mansour Radwan Amara was, in fact, registered as a soldier of al-Qassam Brigades, the Hamas military wing, and The Elzowidi family was founded as part of the Palestinian terrorist operative, Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades (HumanizePalestine, 2023b).

At a glance, it seems that this reveal has subverted the purpose and the meaning of the original movement in 2015, to name those lives worth mourning and grieving. But as I have attempted to illustrate in the last section, in agreeing on this conclusion, we nonetheless perpetuate another deeper order of grievability that fails to see the precariousness of the lives of the terrorists. It should be noted that what was revealed was the false stories attached to those 256 terrorist-affiliated Palestinians; the images of their *faces* and their *names* and deaths in the Gaza War remain true (HumanizePalestine, 2023a). Naming still functions as a powerful resistance here, if not a more transgressive one. When naming those unnameable lives, we are bringing those 'we are asked not to mourn' under the rubric of the 'human' (Butler, 2020, p. 47). If, as Puar (2005, p. 129) reminds us that the body terrorist is not a fixed being, but a becoming of queer assemblage that transgresses the normative meaning of lives with its ballistic violence, then the fact that one would be able to grieve their lives through a falsely narrated stories, precisely demonstrates the falseness of policing the grievability of lives in categorising the 'civilian' and 'terrorist'. It signifies a more subversive power to transgress the normative injunction governing our inability to recognise the *precariousness* of the human condition in itself. 'One would need to hear the face as it speaks in something other than language to know the precariousness of life that is at stake (Butler, 2020, p. 151).' To mourn and grieve the names and faces of terrorists is not to justify or sympathise with their violence to any degree, but precisely to resist the reproduction of violence, to reject to be terrorised by its ordering of grievability that sustained that consummates our own inhumanity (Butler, 2020, p. 151).

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to illustrate another layer of violence that is sustained in the discourse of WoT, violence that reproduces an order of grievability that, through the injunction of terror—a logic that predicated the trauma of 9/11—failed to recognise the precariousness of life, for the civilians and the terrorists. This order of grievability firstly is a colonial and imperialist biopolitics that designates a hierarchy of life, but more importantly, it is also a necropolitics that precursor a sexual, racial, and gendered homonormativity that deems the lives of terrorists abnormal. To name the unnameable has long been a queer resistance to fighting violence and invisibility of those deemed abnormal bodies in the HIV pandemic and in the 2016 Orlando massacre. And it registers perhaps an even more subversive power when naming those 'turbaned queer bodies' of the terrorist.

On 27 October 2023, Israel launched another invasion of the Gaza Strip as a response to Hamas's terrorist attack and kidnappings on 7 October. At the time of writing this essay, over 12,000 lives have been lost in this conflict (Ruby, Artur and Júlia, 2023). These lives include Palestinians and Israelis, civilians and terrorists, but such categorisations should not matter in acknowledging their precariousness *equally*. Because 'only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear' (Butler, 2016, p. 14).

## Notes

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[1] The cited website here and below is a reconstructed archive of the same name. The original website has been seized for the reason I will explain later.

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