

## Palestine at the Heart: The Shadow War Between Egyptian Media and Meta | Investigative Report

*By Karim Hussain*

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On October 7, 2023, at exactly 7:00 a.m., Shahrat Abu al-Makarem, Head of the Digital Media Department at "Cairo 24" news website, received a phone call informing her of the outbreak of "Operation al-Aqsa Flood" and the Palestinians breaking through the separation barrier between the Gaza Strip and Israel for the first time—an event that signaled a war between the two sides unlike any other before. However, Abu al-Makarem had no idea that she would soon be engaging in another type of war—this time on social media.

On the morning of October 7, as the confrontation between Gaza and Israel escalated, Abu al-Makarem was surprised to find that “Cairo 24” social media platforms had been restricted. She encountered vaguely defined and undeclared limitations imposed by Meta and its affiliated networks. As news of what would become the most significant Arab event began to spread, it became clear that the restrictions were not limited to a single media outlet but affected Egyptian and Arab media more broadly. “Cairo 24” experienced financial losses of up to 50% compared to the previous year, along with a noticeable slowdown in its growth.

This pushed her to take action to avoid Meta's restrictions, seeking alternative words and phrases with similar meanings that differed from those mentioned in the policies of social media sites, particularly those owned by Meta. This included changing the titles of all Palestinian resistance movements and removing the identities of their commanders, as Meta had prohibited their appearance. A large amount of journalistic material was also withheld from release to guarantee that posting continued and to avoid further limitations or violations.

In this context, the Sada Social Center for Palestinian Digital Rights produced a report titled "[A Year of Digital Censorship of Palestinians](#)," which detailed the digital violations that accompanied the war in the Gaza Strip beginning October 7, 2023, and lasting one year. The report focused on the numerous facets of digital censorship, which included suppressing Palestinian information and imposing control on social media sites.

The report documented that Palestinian content on social media platforms was subjected to over 23,000 digital violations. Meta platforms were responsible for 56% of the violations, TikTok for 25%, X (previously Twitter) for 15%, and SoundCloud for 3.7%. Furthermore, 29% of all digital violations targeted journalists and media outlets. The report also received over 1,200 complaints from journalists about attempts to hack their digital accounts, and it documented over 80,000

instances of Israeli incitement posts on social media platforms, including calls for genocide and justifications for violence and mass killings of Palestinians.

### **Restrictions affected profits**

According to Khaled Abdel Radi, Head of Social Media at "Al-Masry Al-Youm" newspaper, the outlet, like many others, was subjected to several restrictions following events that occurred after October 7, 2023. He stated that, according to Meta's criteria for news publishers, publishing statements from Palestinian factions should be acceptable because providing information in a journalistic capacity does not contradict any of the platform's content guidelines.

However, that was not the case. Since the start of events on October 7, Meta has increasingly deleted any content related to the Palestinian cause, even going as far back as 2014 and earlier. The platform's algorithms now automatically flag and remove images of Hamas leaders as violations of its policies. These algorithms, according to him, no longer distinguish between legitimate news publishers and users. As a result, Meta has effectively contradicted its own policy, which grants exceptions to news publishers.

He mentioned that they are subject to restrictions that hinder them from freely using imagery linked to the Palestinian conflict. The content they publish has limited reach and is not effectively recommended to users on social media networks. This has generated a situation that has had a considerable impact on media institutions' editorial policies, notably their use of social media.

Abdel Radi further explains that the decline and restriction in reach—both for newspapers and Palestinian content more broadly—has inevitably led to a drop in financial revenues. “Reach is directly tied to profits,” he states. “Once reach decreased after October 7, profits dropped proportionally, regardless of content. There was a distinct and explicit decline in reach beginning on that day. And as for war-related content, it barely brings any revenue on Facebook; its profitability is almost non-existent.”

### **Algorithms restrict Palestinian content**

Regarding how the algorithms work, Dr. Fadi Ramzy, a digital media consultant and lecturer at the American University in Cairo, explains that Meta's algorithms search for predetermined keywords—most notably “Palestine,” “Gaza,” as well as the names of Palestinian movements and their leaders. Content containing these keywords is subject to various levels of restriction, starting with limited distribution and reach of posts related to the Palestinian issue, and can escalate to suspending or disabling the page, and even to the entire deletion of the page.

Dr. Ramzy also pointed out that there is nothing preventing algorithms from operating retroactively on social media due to the fact that social media policies are often ambiguous and unclear, so as to avoid being held accountable. While these platforms claim to uphold freedom of expression, in reality, they delete posts and restrict users according to their interpretations.

The “Al-Shorouk” newspaper has been affected by Meta's algorithms since October 7, and has faced several restrictions and penalties since then, including the deletion of posts and videos, or subjecting them to review and then restoring them after a long period of time—at which point they have lost their relevance for publication and engagement, according to Mohamed Bassal, the Managing Editor of Al-Shorouk newspaper and serves as the Rapporteur of the Freedoms and Legislation Committee at the Egyptian Journalists' Syndicate., which was held shortly before the end of 2024.

Bassal went on to say that all of the aforementioned penalties could be implemented individually alongside a decline in the page's quality, which normally has a negative impact on reach or engagement. He explained that media outlets have been forced to curtail or limit their coverage of events in Gaza, handle it selectively, or refrain from broadcasting actual photos of the events.

These limits, together with their reliance on social media platforms, have resulted in a drop in the number of people exposed to Egyptian narratives about the Palestinian issue, as well as a decrease in participation with them. However, there has been a general decline in Arab readers' interest in the Palestinian cause.

He stated that the “Al-Shorouk” newspaper was forced to make editorial adjustments to meet with Meta's constraints and standards while maintaining the content's meaning. He noted that, at one point in 2024, these restrictions had an impact on Egyptian public interest in the subject, resulting in a decrease in the amount of Gaza-related articles published on Egyptian websites. However, the topic resurfaced after the ceasefire came into effect, and interest increased in light of the return of displaced people and the Egyptian state's tough stance, particularly following statements made by US President Donald Trump about displacement.

### **Digital Restrictions on Journalism**

A [report](#) issued by the Middle East Institute, based in Washington, indicated that tech companies (including Meta) play a fundamental role in suppressing, isolating, stereotyping, defaming, demonizing, and devaluing Palestinian viewpoints online—whether intentionally or not—due to systematic bias in algorithms and content management, ineffective reporting mechanisms, and a general lack of understanding of local contexts and languages.

It also noted that since October 7, 2023, social media platforms have witnessed a flood of disinformation and hate speech, further worsening the situation. Meta's various platforms have played a significant role in this due to their widespread use in the region and the frequent, unexplained technical glitches that have increased algorithmic bias against Palestinians.

The report added that without proper content management, Meta platforms also actively suppress Palestinian content documenting human rights violations in Palestine, such as videos containing evidence of hospital bombings. It pointed out that Palestinians and their allies, including journalists, human rights defenders, and media organizations, have been disproportionately subjected to shadow banning—a term referring to undisclosed measures taken by social media platforms to limit the number of views or the reach of a particular post or account.

According to Oday Ibrahim, Managing Editor of the "Cairo 24" website, these restrictions have forced Egyptian newspapers to conceal Palestinian leaders in the Gaza Strip, turning them into “ghosts” on social media platforms. If the public wishes to have more information about them, they must turn to television.

Ibrahim added that journalists are no longer able to fulfill their primary role of reporting on the issue and its main figures in the war between Gaza and Israel. As a result, the facts of the war have become less accessible to younger generations, who rely on social media for information and knowledge.

He stressed that what is happening amounts to misinformation or the concealment of facts, meaning the Egyptian message regarding the Palestinian issue does not reach its audience, while the Israeli message, on the other hand, is fully conveyed. This is because Facebook and other Meta platforms are not neutral regarding the war, and this has primarily affected journalists and media institutions in their coverage of the Palestinian issue throughout the conflict.

In a survey of 15 journalists from 15 worked for different Egyptian websites and newspapers, we discovered that 13 journalists, or 87%, reported that Meta-affiliated social media platforms had restricted their media outlets' coverage and presentation of journalistic content about the Gaza Strip since October 7, 2023.

This has the consequence of limiting the reach of the newspaper's page on social media platforms, deleting postings, and banning the page. Furthermore, journalists have had to make changes to the content they want to publish on social media about the Palestinian side of the fight to ensure it may be shared without being exposed to Meta's restrictions.

Furthermore, 60% of surveyed journalists reported that their platforms adapted their journalistic writings to comply with Meta's requirements regarding the war. In addition, 33% claimed that

Meta's measures had an impact on the financial returns of their media outlets, while 20% stated that their platforms had a major financial impact as a result of Meta's actions.

### **Restrictions on Pages Run by Journalists**

This was confirmed by media personality Riham Ayad, host of the Facebook program "The Story," who stated that Meta has significantly restricted content reach across the Middle East—particularly for those discussing the Palestinian issue. According to her, speakers have faced penalties at a rate of 100%.

Ayad also stated that her page's reach was restricted due to the political content she published, particularly after she produced five consecutive episodes about the Palestinian conflict. As a result, her page's views fell to less than 1% of its 5 million followers. She pointed out that these restrictions reappeared when conversations concerning Palestinian relocation from Gaza gained prominence and were widely condemned throughout the Middle East, resulting in a major drop in financial returns from her content due to her coverage of Palestinian issues.

In addition to Riham, Noha Lamloum, journalist and co-producer of the "Voices from the War" page, recounts that when they first created the page, they faced concerns about Facebook's policies regarding the Palestinian issue. Chief among these was the page's original name, "Voices of War Podcast," as well as the visual identity and graphic designs for the page. These concerns led them to rely on artificial intelligence to create the images used on the page instead of using real-life photos of events, out of fear that the content would be deleted or its reach restricted.

In addition to Riham, Noha Lamloum, journalist and co-producer of the "Voices of the War" page, says that when they originally started the page, they were concerned about Facebook's regulations on the Palestinian issue. Among these were the page's original name, "Voices of War," as well as its visual identity and graphics. These fears prompted them to use artificial intelligence to generate images rather than real-life shots of events or letters and symbols in words like "G\*z\*" and "W\*r," for fear that the content would be deleted or its reach limited.

Lamloum added, "My specialization in training journalists on digital security helped me avoid many of the publishing challenges imposed by Facebook. However, the most significant problem for every journalist and content creator is the ability to reach their target audience easily—a challenge that has long been a cause of concern. The algorithms were working against us, requiring daily monitoring of updates, as Facebook's algorithms are constantly being updated to detect information written regarding the Gaza war."

Ahmed Saad, the owner of the "Asl News" page, claims that his Facebook page has been subjected to three forms of limitations, all aimed at minimizing the reach of Palestinian content to the public. This forced him to completely change the page, while the global audience continues to have uninterrupted access to the Israeli narrative via media outlets and digital platforms. This, he says, leads to the monopolization of the digital space by the Zionist narrative, making it difficult for the public to access the truth.

He added: "I had created an entire page to follow the news, but I was forced to shut it down due to the many restrictions, especially after posting videos about Benjamin Netanyahu."

### **From October to November 2023: 1,050 deletions of peaceful Palestinian content**

In addition to journalists' opinions and testimonies, we also contacted the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), a New York-based non-governmental organization, which sent us a report from Human Rights Watch (HRW). The report documented that Meta's policies and practices have silenced voices supporting Palestine and Palestinian human rights in a wave of heightened censorship on social media during the fighting between Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups since October 7, 2023.

According to HRW's report, more than 1,050 cases of content removal and other forms of suppression were documented between October and November 2023 alone, targeting Palestinian content. Of the 1,050 cases reviewed, 1,049 involved peaceful content supporting Palestine that was unjustifiably blocked or removed, while only one case involved the removal of content supporting Israel. The cases included content from more than 60 countries worldwide.

The report also noted that censorship of content related to Palestine led to the wrongful removal of Palestinian-related content, and that Meta's conduct does not meet its due diligence responsibilities regarding human rights.

### **Legal Action Against Meta**

Journalist Mahmoud Kamel, head of the Freedoms Committee at the Egyptian Journalists Syndicate, explained that the restrictions imposed by social media platforms since October 7 have allowed the Israeli narrative to circulate, while forcing Egyptian newspapers not to publish many facts related to the Palestinian issue and to avoid using clear words and names regarding the Palestinian cause in order to avoid restrictions and to be able to continue reporting on the war in Gaza.

He emphasized that social media platforms are limiting Egyptian and Arab journalistic work on the Palestinian issue, and that this highlights the critical need for Egypt and Arab countries,

represented by the Arab League, to take legal action against the companies that own these platforms.

He also indicated that they sent repeated inquiries to Meta regarding the accusations made against it by Egyptian journalists and media outlets, contacting the company three consecutive times via the email address provided on Meta's official website. However, they did not receive any responses up to the time of publishing this investigation.

We also reached out to Facebook through the platform's support center, which instructed us to contact the platform's press office for the required information. Again, we did not receive any answers or clarifications by the time this investigation was published.

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