

CRITIQUE OF THE REPRESSION OF PALESTINIAN MEDIA IN ARABIC CARICATURES ON THE INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT @RAHMA_TOONS (A PIERCEAN SEMIOTIC STUDY)

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini berangkat dari pertanyaan utama mengenai bagaimana lima karikatur politik Arab yang diunggah oleh akun @rahma_toons merepresentasikan represi media terhadap jurnalis Palestina di tengah eskalasi kekerasan di Gaza. Latar belakang masalah muncul dari meningkatnya penargetan jurnalis serta masih terbatasnya kajian semiotika visual yang membaca dinamika kekerasan melalui karikatur digital. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada penggunaan karikatur sebagai teks visual untuk mengungkap represi epistemik, pola penyerangan terhadap jurnalis dan pendekatan yang masih jarang dibahas dalam kajian media Timur Tengah. Pertanyaan penelitian dijawab melalui metode kualitatif deskriptif dengan kerangka semiotika Charles Sanders Peirce yang menganalisis tanda-tanda visual untuk mengungkap pola makna dominan yang tertanam dalam karikatur. Analisis menunjukkan tiga pola dominan: jurnalis sebagai sasaran utama, penghancuran peralatan sebagai upaya menghapus kebenaran, dan pembungkaman sistematis. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa karikatur digital berfungsi sebagai narasi tandingan yang mengungkap kekerasan struktural dan menjaga ingatan kolektif ketika media arus utama dibatasi.

Kata Kunci: Semiotika, Represi Media, Peirce, Jurnalis Palestina, Karikatur Arab.

Abstract

This study addresses the central question of how five Arabic political caricatures posted by @rahma_toons account represent media repression against Palestinian journalists amid escalating violence in Gaza. The background to the issue stems from the increasing targeting of journalists and the limited number of visual semiotics studies that interpret the dynamics of violence through digital caricatures. The novelty of this research lies in the use of caricatures as visual texts to reveal epistemic repression, patterns of attacks on journalists, and approaches that are still rarely discussed in Middle Eastern media studies. The research questions are answered through descriptive qualitative methods using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework, which analyzes visual signs to reveal the dominant patterns of meaning embedded in caricatures. The analysis revealed three dominant patterns: journalists as marked targets, destruction of equipment as erasure of truth, and systematic silencing. These findings demonstrate that digital caricatures function as counter-narratives that expose structural violence and preserve collective memory when mainstream media channels are constrained.

Keywords: Semiotics, Media Repression, Peirce, Palestinian Journalists, Arabic Caricature.

1. Introduction

Israeli repression of Palestinian journalists continues to color the dynamics of the conflict and open long wounds in the global information ecosystem. The attack on Nasser Hospital in August 2025 killed many civilians, including five journalists who were doing their job. Attacks on journalists and the destruction of reporting facilities have become part of a pattern of systematic violence (Arabi, 2025). These actions not only violate humanitarian ethics (2024), but also the principles of international humanitarian law which affirm the protection of civilians and the journalism profession in conflict areas (Melzer, 2021).

This phenomenon has far-reaching individual and social impacts. For journalists, repression means a loss of security and restricted access to information. For civil society, repression of the media creates a fog of information, including the emergence of biased reporting (2025), controlled narratives (2025), and a weakening of the public's ability to understand the reality of the conflict in its entirety (Damanhoury et al., 2025). In situations like this, the need for alternative media capable of penetrating censorship barriers becomes increasingly urgent.

In such conditions, visual art, especially caricature, serves as a medium for criticism and as an alternative form of moral documentation (Shehadeh, 2023). Caricature conveys its message through symbols and irony that can raise public awareness when formal channels of information are silenced. This visual art does not only serve as entertainment, but also becomes a space for political and humanitarian expression that thrives in situations where human voices are silenced (Ersyad, 2021).

A theoretical framework is important to uncover the deeper meaning behind visual artworks. Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics theory was chosen as the analytical tool in this study because it offers a framework for examining how signs work in constructing a message. Peirce's framework, with its distinction between icons, symbols, and indices, allows for a more detailed reading of the relationship between visual signs and the reality they refer to.

Research on visual media has been conducted extensively, such as on magazine covers (2022), movie posters (2022), films (2022), memes (2024), photography (2022), music videos (2025), logos (2022), and advertisements (Ziya'Uddin, 2024). Many studies have also been conducted specifically on the Palestinian issue. However, most of these studies still focus on the themes of boycott (2025), genocide (2024), colonization (2025), or the representation of victims in certain tragedies (Fikriani Fadillah & Nur Chotimah, 2024). There are no studies that specifically examine how Arab caricatures on social media represent media silencing as a recurring structural phenomenon. In addition, there are no studies that use Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics to analyze digital caricatures, particularly the works on the Instagram account @rahma_toons, which feature layered criticism of this repression. This study aims to fill this gap so that understanding of media repression in the context of the Palestinian conflict can be expanded through a more in-depth semiotic visual arts perspective.

2. Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach based on Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory. This framework was chosen because it is able to map the relationship between visual form and social meaning through three categories of signs, namely icons (signs that resemble objects), symbols (signs whose meanings are conventionally agreed upon), and indices (signs that indicate cause-and-effect relationships) (Peirce, 1974). In the context of caricatures laden with political and humanitarian messages, Peirce's triadic model provides a powerful analytical tool for exploring how each visual element shapes the message about the oppression of the Palestinian media.

The research data was obtained online through the Instagram account @rahma_toons on October 8, 2025 (https://www.instagram.com/rahma_toons?igsh=c3cxem9uaDk0NDlw). This account was chosen because it consistently produces caricatures that highlight humanitarian issues, particularly the repression of information and violence against Palestinian journalists. From the entire data set, the researcher selected five caricatures as units of analysis. This selection was based on the representativeness of the theme of systematic oppression of Palestinian journalists.

The research analysis procedure was carried out in several stages. First, each caricature was screenshotted and then documented in a special observation sheet to identify all the sign elements that

appeared. Second, these sign elements were classified based on Pierce's framework. Third, the classification of these signs was analyzed to map the meaning structure formed in the caricature structure, which was then interpreted.

To maintain data validity, the researcher used two strategies, namely ensuring the consistency of sign categorization with reference to Pierce's conceptual framework and matching visual interpretations with the socio-political context related to the silencing of the Palestinian media as depicted in the caricatures. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2020), which consists of three main stages: (1) data condensation, which is the simplification of sign elements into relevant sign units; (2) data display, which is the organization of sign classifications into tables; and (3) drawing and verifying conclusions, which is interpreting the social meaning of the sign network in relation to media repression, as well as rechecking interpretations through reading the context of Palestinian media silencing. This approach is in line with the visual semiotics research conducted by Maysaroh et al. (Maysaroh et al., 2024).

3. Results and Discussion

This results and discussion section begins by outlining the analytical context of five Arabic political caricatures produced by the Instagram account @rahma_toons, each of which visually depicts aspects of media repression within the Gaza conflict. Each caricature is treated as a visual text containing a complex structure of signs that requires interpretation through Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework. The analysis explores the relational dynamics among these signs to understand how they construct meanings related to the position of journalists, power relations, and the repressive conditions illustrated in the visuals. This brief introduction provides the conceptual basis for the interpretive approach taken in this study. A detailed examination of each caricatures is presented in the subsequent sections.

3.1. Identification of Semiotic Elements

Caricature 1













Figure 1. Caricature 1

Caricature 1, published on August 27, 2025 on the Instagram page @rahma_toons (<https://www.instagram.com/p/DN3YFfj0McP/?igsh=bTA0b3jiYW51eDQw>), consists of 3 icons, 3 symbols, and 4 indices that form the core semiotic structure used in this analysis.

Table 1. Identification of semiotics elements in caricature 1

Figure	Description
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	<p>The icon in the form of a blue vest with the word “PRESS” in capital letters in the center represents the protection of journalists and the presence of media in a war zone.</p>
	<p>This icon represents an Israeli soldier.</p>
	<p>The icon depicts a long-barreled firearm used by Zionist soldiers to attack journalists.</p>
	<p>The symbol consists of Arabic text located in the top-right corner. Which means is “The occupation kills those who expose its crimes in Gaza.”</p>
	<p>The “PRESS” symbol indicates a journalist. This text is positioned at the center of the vest.</p>
	<p>The symbol signifies testimony regarding a murder event that occurred in 2025.</p>
	<p>The index sign is represented by blood flowing downward, caused by the victim’s gunshot wounds.</p>
	<p>The index sign appears as bullet holes on the journalist’s vest.</p>
	<p>The shadow of the blue vest indicates that the vest is lying on the ground.</p>
	<p>The index sign appears as smoke, resulting directly from or as an effect of gunfire.</p>

Source: @rahma_toons Instagram account

The first caricature table establishes the main foundation of media repression representation through the relationship between signs. These signs become the basic framework that is then produced and developed in subsequent caricatures.

Caricature 2




Figure 2. Caricature 2

Caricature 2, published on August 26, 2025 on the Instagram page @rahma_toons (<https://www.instagram.com/p/DN0IPJ1UB6a/?igsh=MXh3NG1oNTQ3Y3RqaQ==>), consists of 3 icons, 2 symbols, and 3 indices that form the core semiotic structure used in this analysis.

Table 2. Identification of semiotics elements in caricature 2

Figure	Description
	The icon depicts a cluster of buildings. This icon is located at the bottom.
	The icon represents a missile, depicted as a weapon used by Zionist soldiers.
	The icon shows a Zionist soldier attacking the buildings.
	The symbol consists of Arabic text located in the top-right corner. Which means is “Invasion Gaza.”
	The symbol signifies testimony regarding the murder event that occurred in 2025 and the creation of this caricature.
	The index sign shows smoke from the buildings resulting from the missile attack.
	The index smoke results from the missile launch.

	<p>The index sign appears as blood located at the tip of the missile.</p>
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Source: @rahma_toons Instagram account

The second caricature table expands the pattern of repression in the first caricature table from the individual level to the level of social space and information infrastructure. Thus, the destruction of the city in the second caricature can be read as a logical continuation of the pattern of repression in the first caricature.





Caricature 3

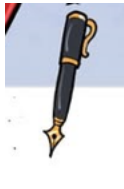


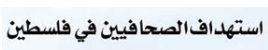








Figure 3. Caricature 3

Caricature 3, published on August 25, 2025 on the Instagram page @rahma_toons (<https://www.instagram.com/p/DNx3rDO0DHd/?igsh=MXV0cGE3M2h2NjB5ZQ==>), consists of 7 icons, 2 symbols, and 5 indices that form the core semiotic structure used in this analysis.

Table 3. Identification of semiotics elements in caricature 3

Figure	Description
	<p>The icon depicts a person being held hostage.</p>
	<p>The icon shows a target board used to detain the victim.</p>
	<p>The icon includes a rope used to tie the hostage.</p>
	<p>The icon shows a camera located below the right hand.</p>

	The icon shows a pen located below the left hand.
	The icon shows bullet marks used to shoot the victim.
	The icon depicts a building located behind the victim.
	The symbol consists of Arabic text located in the top-right corner. Which means is “Targeting of journalists in Palestine.”
	The symbol signifies testimony regarding the murder event that occurred in 2025 and the creation of this caricature.
	The index sign shows blood flowing downward from the victim's body.
	The index shows bullet marks on the target board.
	The index indicates the effect of the camera falling from the victim's grip due to being held hostage.
	The index signifies the pen slipping from the victim's hand.
	The index appears as a shadow, indicating that the victim has fallen to the ground.

Source: @rahma_toons Instagram account

The third caricature table deepens the pattern established in the first and second caricatures tables by shifting the focus from the destruction of bodies and space to the dismantling of journalists' epistemic capacity.

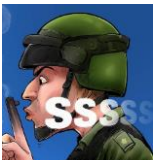






Caricature 4



Figure 4. Caricature 4

Caricature 4, published on August 25, 2025 on the Instagram page @rahma_toons (<https://www.instagram.com/p/DNyXHIU0OR4/?igsh=MWowYWRtaGZjOTRmdQ==>), consists of 2 icons, 2 symbols, and 3 indices that form the core semiotic structure used in this analysis.

Table 4. Identification of semiotics elements in caricature 4

Figure	Description
	The icon depicts an Israeli soldier, identifiable by the Star of David emblem on the shoulder.
	The icon shows the tip of a long-barreled firearm.
	The symbol consists of Arabic text located in the top-right corner. Which means is “Israel tries to silence the voice of truth.”
	The symbol includes the word “PRESS,” representing a journalist, and “SSSS,” indicating silence.
	The index sign shows smoke emerging from the weapon as a result of firing.
	The index shows bullet marks located in the area of the “PRESS” text.
	The index indicates blood flowing from the bullet wounds in the area of the “PRESS” text.

Source: @rahma_toons Instagram account

Unlike the previous caricature tables, the fourth caricature table shows a shift from physical violence to symbolic violence and systematic media silencing.






Caricature 5






Figure 5. Caricature 5

Caricature 5, published on August 26, 2025 on the Instagram page @rahma_toons (<https://www.instagram.com/p/DNydRKkUB7c/?igsh=OHhsMW5raDlwN2N3>), consists of 3 icons, 3 symbols, and 4 indices that form the core semiotic structure used in this analysis.

Table 5. Identification of semiotics elements in caricature 5

Figure	Description
	The icon depicts a journalist standing.
	The icon shows a camera used by the journalist, positioned beside them.
	The icon depicts a microphone held and used by the journalist.
	The symbol consists of the word “PRESS,” located at the center of the journalist’s vest.
	The symbol signifies testimony regarding the murder event that occurred in 2025 and the creation of this caricature.

	The index sign shows a weapon's scope aiming at the journalist.
	The index shows a weapon's scope aiming at the journalist's microphone.
	The index shows a weapon's scope aiming at the journalist's camera.

Source: @rahma_toons Instagram account

As the culmination of the visual art series, the fifth table synthesizes all the patterns of repression that have been established previously. This caricature presents the core of media repression as a conscious system that aims to erase the truth.

3.2. Journalist as Marked Targets

Analysis of the five caricatures reveals a consistent pattern of systematic targeting of journalists. This is clearly evident in the first, fourth, and fifth caricatures. In the first caricature, the press vest icon is placed as the focal point of violence. The vest lies without the journalist's body. The absence of the journalist's body directs attention to the remaining symbol of the profession as the victim. The fourth caricature reinforces this pattern by showing the word "PRESS" overlapping with bullet holes and blood, positioning the journalist's identity as the target of the weapon. Then, the fifth caricature repeats and reinforces this pattern of targeting through the weapon's sights explicitly locking onto the journalist's body. Collectively, these three images confirm that the identity of the press has shifted from immunity to vulnerability.

This pattern of targeting is in line with the findings of Fahmy et al. (2024), which show that Palestinian journalists are often treated as direct targets in conflict zones. Fikriani's study also found that the symbol "press" in Palestinian caricatures is often interpreted as a point of attack, rather than protection (Fikriani Fadillah & Nur Chotimah, 2024). Journalists are represented not as accidental victims, but as strategic targets. This representation shows how media repression works through a mechanism of repeated visual labeling.

3.3. Destruction of Equipment as Erasure of Truth

In the third and fifth caricatures, there is a consistent semiotic pattern that shows the destruction of journalistic equipments. This confirms that the destruction of these equipments is an attempt to erase the truth that can be produced, stored, and disseminated to the public.

The third caricature shows a camera and pen falling from the hands of a journalist who has been taken hostage. The falling camera signifies the severing of public vision, and the loose pen signifies the cessation of narrative articulation. The fifth caricature reinforces the previous pattern by presenting a gun directly aimed at the journalist's camera and microphone. This pattern presents a visual critique of epistemic repression.

This representation is in line with the concept of the erasure of Palestinian archives and collective memory discussed by Kuntz (Kuntz, 2021). In this context, the destruction of journalistic equipments

becomes a metaphor for the erasure of truth. Sidabutar's research mentions that caricatures of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict often visualize the repression of information through symbols of the destruction of information equipments (Sidabutar et al., 2025). Bsharat's research also confirms that the shift in meaning from icon to index in caricatures reinforces the ideological message of narrative control (Bsharat, 2023). This repression works by preventing the truth from emerging even before it has a chance to be conveyed.

3.4. Systematic Silencing

Analysis of these five caricatures also reveals a pattern of symbolic violence and systematic silencing. This pattern is present in the second and fourth caricatures. The second caricature depicts the destruction of a city by a missile attack as an icon of large-scale military aggression. The symbol “اجتياح غزة” indicates that the invasion is not only territorial, but also epistemic. When infrastructure is destroyed, communication networks are also cut off, making it difficult for the public to convey the truth. The fourth caricature narrows the focus of this destruction to the identity of the press. The “SSSS” symbol functioned as a representation of ideological intimidation. In addition, the symbol “اسرائيل تحاول اسكات صوت الحقيقة” functions as an ideological statement that frames acts of violence within a broader political narrative.

This finding is in line with Aritonang's statement that political caricatures often represent structural violence through symbols of silence (Aritonang, 2023). Thus, these two caricatures show that the pattern of media silencing is systematic and that symbolic violence works simultaneously. These caricatures also reveal that silence is not the result of conflict, but rather the result of a planned strategy of repression.

4. Conclusion

This study affirms that the Arabic caricatures posted by the Instagram account @rahma_toons serve as a symbolic form of resistance against the suppression of media in Palestine. The analysis revealed three dominant patterns: journalists as marked targets, destruction of equipment as erasure of truth, and systematic silencing. These signs collectively construct a network of meanings that depict the repression of journalists, violations of international humanitarian law, and Israel's efforts to obscure Palestinian suffering from the world's view. The implicit meanings embedded within each visual sign become a silent language that speaks loudly of courage and truth. The icons represent journalists as moral witnesses, the symbols illustrate the tension between power and voice, and the indices emphasize the tragic consequences of violence inflicted upon them.

Thus, this study answers the central research question by demonstrating that caricatures are not merely visual artworks but function as social criticism that refuses silence. They become visual expressions that amplify humanitarian values amid information blackout. The findings also reveal that visual art can play an important role in enhancing global awareness regarding press freedom and human rights.

Future studies may expand this research by widening the analytical scope for instance, by comparing caricatures from various artists or across different social media platforms to observe variations in visual patterns used to represent media repression. In addition, further research could integrate international humanitarian law more comprehensively to assess the extent to which visual

works such as caricatures can serve as alternative evidence in documenting violations against Palestinian journalists. In this way, subsequent research is expected to strengthen the understanding of how digital art functions as a medium of moral documentation in situations of conflict.

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Declarations

Author Contribution Statement

The first author is the main initiator of this research. The first author designed the research concept and framework, collected data, and analyzed/interpreted the data. The first author also prepared the manuscript thoroughly from the initial draft to final version based on the journal template. Meanwhile, the second author served as the research supervisor, critically revised the manuscript prepared by the first author, and granted final approval prior to submission.

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Data Availability Statement

The data analyzed in this study is publicly available on Instagram. The specific accounts and posts included in the analysis are described in the Methodology section and the results of this paper.

Declaration of Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

AI Use Statement

[1] During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used DeepL and ChatGPT 5.2 solely for language editing (grammar, clarity, and readability). The authors reviewed, revised, and verified the final text and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

[2] The authors used ChatGPT 5.2 to support initial drafting and/or structuring of parts of the manuscript. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, rewritten where necessary, and verified against the study data and cited sources. The authors only use it as a comparison, and exchange of ideas. The authors remain fully accountable for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

Additional Information

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