

Beyond the Screen: How Aid Dehumanizes Suffering

By Sarah Al-Baghdadi

Are the refugees on our screens—the ones on aid campaigns—real? What about the starving children in Africa? Does the orphan waiting for his next meal, or the mother mourning by her child's grave, continue to suffer after we donate and turn off our phones?

Of course, they are real. They are physically, anatomically, and geographically real. If you go to Africa, you will see malnourished children. If you go to the Middle East, you will find overcrowded refugee camps. This is not a trick question—you will find them. But the real question is: Are they real people—equal to you? Or are they merely a subclass of tragic characters, written to suffer in the script of life?

If they aren't, then name ten things that exist in both Australia and Somalia.

We are raised with the idea that we should be grateful because “there are starving children in Africa.” But how many of us live in genuine fear that we will suffer the same fate? We don't, because deep down, we know that the tables will likely never turn.

What about Sudan? When someone says they are from Sudan, do we instinctively raise an eyebrow in pity? Sudan is currently facing one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world, with atrocities beyond comprehension. But before this war, what do people actually know about Sudan beyond its suffering? Do people have the same understanding as they do for the history of Japan, or Mexico?

For generations, the "starving African child" has been one of the most misrepresented images in history. Two or three generations have now grown up with the same one-dimensional depiction: Africans are poor, hungry, tragic, and stuck in an inevitable cycle of hardship. But why are some people born into misfortune while others live in havens? Still, the pity towards them is well-intentioned, isn't it? After all, pity fuels sympathy, and sympathy fuels donations.

But if pity serves a good purpose and raises millions, does that outweigh the harm it causes?

As the author, I'll answer with a simple no.

Using images of malnourished infants with ribs poking through their skin, their eyes swarmed by flies, does not generate true empathy—it breeds apathy. It reinforces the belief that poverty is an unsolvable reality of life, that it is too complicated to fix, that all we can do is donate and move on. The narrative of “us vs. them” is great for fundraising, but it robs those suffering of true connection and dignity.

They exist inside our phones, frozen in charity campaigns, waiting for aid. We are the benefactors, they are the receivers. We are the saviors and they are just waiting to be saved. Critics call this "poverty porn," and while it may raise money, and it goes along way for providing valuable resources, it simplifies the causes of poverty to a mere accident of geography rather than a result of global policies and exploitation.

This reduction of suffering to an image isn't new.

I often wonder how Iraqis and Palestinians were perceived in the early 2000s. Was the world shaken by the image of Muhammad Al-Durrah, the young boy sheltering behind his father during the Second Intifada, before Israeli bullets ripped through his body like flimsy paper? Do people still remember his name? Did they feel the weight of his death the way we did? Or was he just another flicker of tragedy on their television screens?

And what about Iraq? I had to leave my classroom when my class watched a documentary on the Iraq-American invasion. Then, my teacher mentioned that there were protests against the invasion here in Australia—public outrage, demonstrations that she took part of. I remember being shocked—it was news to me, I never knew Australians protested the invasion, but I never felt happy to learn about the Iraq war protests. How much did people really care? When I arrived in Australia, the biggest cultural shock wasn't just the language or the people—it was the realization that in 2003, while Iraq felt like the end of the world, life elsewhere continued as if nothing had happened.

There were movies, TV shows, premieres. People lined up to watch *50 First Dates* while millions of Iraqis lined up to flee their homes. Hearing people say, “We protested the war” angered me more than hearing slurs. Did you care enough to stop watching movies while your soldiers massacred 2 millions of us? Or were we just an ego boost to your altruism?

And for the refugees who made it out—what do you think we needed most? More resources? Water? Shelter? Medical aid? Perhaps.

What we needed most was the liberation of Iraq. We needed the occupying forces to leave. I'd happily live and die in the slums of a free Iraq. But it's one of those instances where I doubt we were asked what we wanted, or if the solutions presented were what Iraqis believed to be important, or if it was what the Westerners believed.

Was it kind to think we needed to ask for foreign aid from the very countries that had destroyed us? Or was it inhumane? (personally, I wouldn't eat with the hand that shook the hand of an occupier)

"Inhumane" seems like an extreme word to describe aid—but when you reduce people to numbers in the top left corner of an application form, when you photograph them as nothing more than refugees, when you strip them of everything but their suffering—what else is it?

This is what war and colonization do: they don't just destroy lives; they control the way victims are perceived. They dictate who is worth mourning and who is just another casualty of war.

And what about the soldiers? The ones who returned from Iraq and Afghanistan traumatized beyond repair. Statistically, their casualties were nothing compared to those they killed. But that was exactly their trauma.

They murdered people who did not deserve to die. And suddenly, it hit them: the men they dragged out of their homes in front of their shaking children were not terrorists. They were fathers. Husbands. Men who wore the same soccer jerseys as them. Who watched the same cartoons as their kids back home. Who, to their horror, spoke English back at them.

That was the final straw for many soldiers—the moment they realized we were just like them. We were never supposed to be just tragic characters in their war movie.

Now, let's talk about Palestine.

I once heard someone from a humanitarian organization that provides aid to Gaza speak about the genocide. They justified the organization's decision not to officially call for a ceasefire, saying that they needed to stay neutral in order to maintain access to Gaza and continue providing aid.

That reasoning was painfully naive.

Israel considers anyone neutral as pro-Palestinian. Because neutrality threatens a state that thrives on dehumanization. And so, these aid organizations, trying to protect their “neutral” status, ended up denying Palestinians the one thing Israel could never take from them—their dignity.

Palestinians are not victims of war. They are the only people in the world who fight and resist occupation with their nails and teeth and refuse to be defeated.

I've heard Palestinians say that only Iraqis can truly understand Palestinians, and only Palestinians can truly understand Iraqis. Iraqis are a people marked by tragedy. Our poetry is sad. Our voices are always mourning. Ever since the blood of Imam Hussein ibn Ali watered the soil of Karbala, grief has been an inextinguishable fire in our hearts.

But Palestinians?

Palestinians turn refugee camps into symbols of honor. Their prisoners serve life sentences in glory. Their martyrs live forever.

These are people who have lost everything—homes, families, futures—but refused to lose their dignity. And yet, the world still tells them that as long as they receive aid, that's all that matters. That their suffering is only legitimate if they accept their oppression quietly.

And this is the trap of foreign aid.

Sudan and Yemen are two other nations that were dealt some of the worst hands in the Middle East. Thanks to British colonization in the early 20th century, Iraq was the only Arab country with a British medical curriculum, allowing Iraqi doctors to qualify for work anywhere—including Britain itself. This is why many Iraqi doctors migrated to the UK in the late '90s, while those who stayed behind and fought for a fair, uncorrupt Iraq were either killed or forced into exile.

To paint a picture—and I say this as unbiasedly as possible—Iraq had the best education system in the region. Iraqi professionals are known to dominate any sector they enter. And like most Arabs, we are a people with immense pride—but being the cradle of civilization doesn't help humble us either.

Yet, with all that said, if a doctor was able to work in Yemen, it meant he was one of the most capable and advanced in his field. You may not understand why Iraqis so often mention that they or their parents worked in Yemen. To the West, Yemen is known only for famine—but it was once an abundant, thriving country, where only the most elite professionals worked.

Of course, its people remain the same—as the Prophet Muhammad described them:

"They are the most kindhearted and tenderhearted."

And Sudan? The nation of intellect. The only university that an Iraqi would proudly name alongside British or Ivy League institutions was never Oxford or Harvard. It was, and has always been, the University of Khartoum.

There is no greater injustice than the one committed against people who have no one to protect them except their God. But none of these people have ever been shaped by their suffering or tragedy. We are used to injustice and death, and we thrive despite it.

We are not allowed to exist beyond our tragedy. Because the moment we do, the world will stop feeling sorry for us and start feeling angry at the systems that keep us suffering.

And if that happens?

Donations will be seen as useless, and action will become necessary.

Perhaps the younger generation in the West is finally beginning to understand. Maybe Israel, by breaking every moral compass and human rights law, has finally shattered the illusion. But despite everything terrible happening in the Middle East, I still am able to see what is a false narrative and what is fact. All of these political opinions about the Middle East are nothing more than opinions that will inevitably change over time.

I often lose sleep thinking about things I have no control over and that I can't change, but the only thing I never lose sleep thinking about is Palestine. I've had people assume my political stance and think the worst of me because of how I voice my thoughts. However, I truly believe that in this two-sided conflict, only one side is innocent and righteous. As every history book has ever taught us: no tyranny or empire lasts forever.

It is useless to engage in meaningless discussion because the indigenous people remain indigenous whether we say so or not. However, if you do choose to speak up on their behalf and play the role of an ally, why would you send a message that doesn't resonate with them?

These behaviors do harm. While the innocent remain innocent, you contribute to making these colonizers and invaders scarier than they actually are, prolonging the conflict instead of making it easier for them. While the fight is not equal in weaponry size, there was no outcome in which Iraq would have lost to Americans: the biggest idiots in the world. The same as there is no reality where Israel continues to exist and diminishes Palestinians because they are a cowardly people with no morals, ethics, or humanity to live by.

So at the end of the day, if you want to actually help those people, ask them, and they won't have a shortage of ways you can help them. But isn't it easier to relieve your guilt with a donation?

You send the money, close the tab, and turn off your phone.

But what happens to them after your screen turns black?