

# Media Portrayal of Child Refugees in Photographs during Two Distinct Historical Events: The Nakba in 1948 and the Syrian Civil War in 2015

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the media portrayal of child refugees in photographs during two distinct historical events: The Nakba in 1948 and the Syrian Civil War in 2015. It focuses on the evolution in representations of child refugees in journalistic photographs at different times. The study draws on various sources, including archival photojournalism and academic literature, to analyze photographs from these two periods. The 1948 photographs, mostly of Palestinian children, reflect themes of vulnerability and disempowerment amidst the Nakba, a significant event in Palestinian and Middle Eastern history. These images often portray refugee children in the context of their families, highlighting the human ramifications of conflict and displacement. In contrast, the 2015 Syrian Civil War photos, particularly of Aylan Kurdi and Omran Daqneesh, display a stark difference in media representation. These images, capturing individual suffering, garnered global attention, prompting political and humanitarian reactions. The paper argues that while the Kurdi photographs temporarily disrupted degrading discourses, they alone cannot fully depict the depth of the crisis. The paper concludes by noting significant shifts in media portrayals of refugee children over time, emphasizing the importance of both humanitarian and political perspectives for understanding these representations. This analysis contributes to the discourse on the media portrayal of refugees, highlighting the impact of visual media in shaping public perception and political response.

## Keywords

Child Refugees, Nakba 1948, Media Portrayal, Media Representation, Public Perception, Political Response, Visual Media Impact

## 1. Introduction

The dynamic media landscape has long been influential in shaping the societal lens through which we perceive global events, particularly those involving vulnerable populations such as refugees (Alotaibi, 2023a). This study ventures into the nuanced realm of media portrayal, focusing on the evolution in the representation of the child refugee in journalistic photographs across two poignant historical milestones: the Nakba in 1948 and the Syrian Civil War in 2015. A systematic literature review illuminates past discourse and current understanding, setting the stage for this research's contribution. This work critically examines archival photojournalism and contemporary media narratives to unpack the progression of the media's depiction of child refugees, thereby contributing a novel perspective to the field of media studies and humanitarian communication.

The purpose and scope of this study are to dissect and compare visual representations across different eras, assessing the implications of these portrayals for public perception and political action. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this research integrates qualitative content analysis with a theoretical framework grounded in visual rhetoric and social representation theory. The analytical lens is refined through Barthes' concept of the rhetoric of the image, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the interplay between visual imagery and textual narrative in the formation of collective understanding. The objective is to elucidate the transformative potential of media in both historical contexts and to consider its broader impact on societal attitudes toward refugees, thus providing an intersectional understanding of media, policy, and empathy in the global narrative.

The news media exerts a substantial influence on global events, shaping readers' perceptions and engagement, thereby amplifying their role in the democratic process and public discourse (Alotaibi, 2023b). Moreover, it communicates objective information and depictions, influencing personal perspectives and collective sentiment. Harmful media portrayals can result in social isolation, psychological disorders, and acts of violence motivated by hatred (Chen et al., 2023). Chen et al. (Chen et al., 2023) mention that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has raised concerns regarding the portrayal of refugees in the media and the impact that such portrayals have on public perception. Roland Barthes defined the "rhetoric of the picture" as the way that the juxtaposition of image, text, and caption works to create meaning in specific rhetorical events (Finnegan, 2012). Studies have examined the use of visual depictions of children, aiming to amplify the feeling of compassion in viewers by exploiting their perceived innocence and the societal notion of children as embodiments of purity, untouched by the complexities and moral ambiguities of adult life (Johnson, 2011).

According to Webster's definition as cited in Lehtonen (Lehtonen, 2011), photography is a form of communication. However, linking intersubjectivity and socialization directly is an oversimplification. Also, as Sontag (Sontag, 2001,

5 p) observes, “A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is what’s in the picture.” For example, Carter’s photography has the ability to evoke an emotional response due to its powerful visual impact. The 1993 photograph captured by *The New York Times* depicting a girl in Sudan ignited a worldwide uproar, leading to an influx of contributions to humanitarian organizations (Lorch, 1993). The clash between societal responsibilities and professional commitments arises when the potential drawbacks of not offering prompt assistance to distressed persons are weighed against the advantages of increasing worldwide awareness of the situation.

Průchová Hrůzová (Průchová Hrůzová, 2021) observed that the pictures of refugees published in Central European media were not captured by the refugees themselves, leading to the perpetuation of visual stereotypes created from the perspective of an external observer. So, this study examines the visual depictions of refugee children, a subject that is seldom examined in academic research. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to understand the changes in the representations of child refugees in journalistic photographs over time. We will be analyzing several photos of Palestinian child refugees from the 1948 Palestine-Israel war (Nakba) and two of the iconic Syrian photos that were spread on media outlets in 2015 and 2016. Chen et al. (Chen et al., 2023) found that over the past two decades, there has been a significant surge in the global population of Syrian refugees and displaced individuals.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. 1948: Representations of Child Refugees in Photographs

Photojournalism frequently depicts children in settings of starvation, natural disaster, and armed conflict, while giving less consideration to children as young migrants (Kędra & Sommier, 2018). These visual depictions are integrated into discussions regarding children as vulnerable individuals who are detached from political circumstances (Wells, 2007). For example, Moeller (Moeller, 2002) argued that if photographs depicting a catastrophe portray malnourished children without parents, then the solution is to provide humanitarian aid. If the photos depict a cruel and oppressive ruler, then the appropriate solution is the use of armed force. Visual representations thus have a crucial impact on how the viewer attributes significance to occurrences, and they increase understanding of situations that are distant either in terms of geography or emotions. (Alotaibi, 2023c) Kędra and Sommier (Kędra & Sommier, 2018) noted that visual oxymorons, which depict both serene and lethal settings, can intensify the stereotype of innocent children and enhance viewers’ empathy and concern for refugee children. The majority of news photographs do not possess the rhetorical devices of visual comparison or synecdoche.

Critics argue that the portrayal of refugees primarily through images of vul-

nerability and victimhood not only constrains their voices but also grants authority to the viewer to interpret their experiences, leading to a significant power asymmetry (Alotaibi, 2023c; Kędra & Sommier, 2018). As Strauss and Berger (Strauss & Berger, 2003) emphasize, while photographs taken from this perspective may elicit feelings of compassion, they do not actively encourage societal transformation; instead, they perpetuate existing dichotomies between the North and South, the wealthy and the impoverished, and the dominant and the subordinate. Depicting male figures in photojournalism as caregivers in maternity contexts can evoke empathy for both children and adult males by assigning traditional maternal qualities to men and portraying them as recipients of harm. Furthermore, in images that are widely recognized and interpreted, it is frequently observed that children are depicted alongside their fathers or other male adults, suggesting a familial or protective context, which challenges the stereotype of male refugees as potential dangers (Wright, 2002). However, unlike other media representations, depictions of child refugees often fail to highlight Syrian refugee children's cultural, social, and personal assets, thus overlooking their encounters with early childhood education and care (ECEC) facilities and their experiences of resettlement. According to Erdemir (2022), adopting a strategy that showcases Syrian refugee children in light of their cultural, social, and personal strengths, including their engagement with ECEC and their resettlement journeys, directly confronts and challenges the negative narratives that typically portray refugees as lacking in areas such as economic self-sufficiency, social integration, cultural assimilation, and personal agency. This approach promises a more nuanced and empowering narrative, shifting the focus from perceived deficits to recognized potentials and contributions.

## **2.2. Why There Is Not an Iconic Photo of Nakbar (1948)?**

Ow Yeong (2014) outlines the confusion regarding the link between photography and empathy, as it is not apparent whether a photograph showing suffering elicits sympathy or empathy from the viewer. Sympathy entails the act of feeling compassion for or pity towards someone else's misfortune, whereas empathy involves the experience of understanding and sharing the feelings of others, essentially feeling "into" others. Viewers may regard the victim as someone who is different from themselves, leading to a lack of understanding and compassion, and an inability to connect with the victim emotionally. This disconnect might be a reason why child refugees in 1948 did not earn viewers' empathy.

## **2.3. Representation of Alyan Kurdi and Omran Daqneesh in the Syrian War**

The pivotal role of news media as a cornerstone of modern society is undeniable. It underpins the very fabric of informed citizenship, steering public discourse and enabling democratic engagement. With its unparalleled reach, the media

serves as a conduit for diverse perspectives, playing a critical role in the dissemination of information. (Alghamdi & Alotaibi, 2024) Its representations can significantly influence societal norms, public sentiment, and political dynamics. In light of this, the present study scrutinizes the media portrayal of child refugees across historical contexts, acknowledging the profound impact that media narratives can have on shaping humanitarian and political responses to crises.

Aylan Kurdi is a refugee who has left a lasting impression on people's minds as a symbol of the refugee crisis (Mattus, 2020). On the morning of September 2, 2015, Nilüfer Demir, a photojournalist working for the Doğan News Agency (DHA), published a photo of a dead Syrian child (Mattus, 2020). Following this, Peter Bouckaert, the emergency head of Human Rights Watch, tweeted a photo of Alan Kurdi, spreading the image worldwide via social media and other news sources (Fehrenbach & Rodogno, 2015). Alan Kurdi's little sneakers reminded Bouckaert (2015) of cherished memories, such as helping his children put on their shoes in the morning, and he hoped for a political response to Europe's immigration dilemma. The Syrian civil war has been extensively reported by the news media since 2011. However, the images of Kurdi marked a distinct moment when public, journalistic, and political focus converged on a worldwide scale (Mattus, 2020). Photo editors and image brokers often utilize journalistic pictures depicting children in distressing circumstances, with recent instances including the tragic drowning of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi in 2015 and the rescue of five-year-old Omran Daqneesh in 2016 (Kędra & Sommier, 2018). According to Kędra and Sommier (Kędra & Sommier, 2018), images depicting distressed children frequently reinforce the paradigm of the blameless child, necessitating continuous safeguarding and prompt action. The discussion around these images and their impact is informed by international laws and treaties, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, highlighting the ethical considerations and responsibilities in the portrayal of child refugees. Nevertheless, the visual depiction of the European migration crisis has undergone a transformation, as expressed by the shifting portrayals of migrants (Bleiker et al., 2013; Malkki, 2005).

Pugh (2004) highlights the humanitarian dimensions of marine traditions and regulations, asserting that addressing these dimensions can be a way to address issues regarding national security and morality associated with refugees. Also, Ticktin (2016) argues that infants, particularly toddlers, are the most deserving recipients of humanitarian sympathy due to their innocence and lack of guilt or bad intent. Ticktin characterizes the depictions of Alan Kurdi as exemplifying the unadulterated innocence of a refugee child i.e., a victim in desperate need of rescue and a deserving recipient of compassion. The photographs captured the global spotlight, evoking compassion instead of the typical combination of dread and apathy towards individuals who have migrated to European shores. According to Bleiker et al. (2013), there is a higher frequency of photos of huge

groups of migrants and boats than of individual refugees. However, it is important to note that the latter are less likely to evoke feelings of sympathy. Photographs depicting specific individuals who endure the burden of external factors beyond their control might serve as a reminder that photographic subjects are not generic symbols but rather unique persons who warrant the sympathies of viewers (Ow Yeong, 2014).

So, we ask why the photo of Aylan Kurdi went viral compared to those of other child refugees. Ticktin (2016) stated that age could be a contributing factor; Alan was still a very young child and appeared to possess a complete sense of innocence typically associated with infants. In humanitarian photographs, this sense of innocence emanates from the pre-political state of children: the younger they are, the greater their perceived innocence. According to Mattus (2020), iconic images are formed as a result of the viewers' focus and the photograph's characteristics. Demir's photographs of Alan were shaped by the expansive beach setting and the contrasting implications of the various parts of the setting, including a joyful shoreline and rugged cliffs (Mattus, 2020). Rosen and Crafter (Rosen & Crafter, 2018) argue that the depiction of migrants in the media which has the capacity to cultivate bias, comprehension, and embrace of refugees. From this specific perspective, the media possess the capacity to either increase or resolve problems, while also promoting empathy between host and refugee populations. That is why the photo of Aylan Kuri impacted humanitarian assistance as an individual phenomenon that occurred as a result of the state's utilization of the "spectacle of bare life," which impacts public opinion, policy formation, social interactions, and individual identities. The 2016 Syrian war utilized Omran Daqneesh's memorable images as a means to garner public attention. In spite of the relentless aircraft attacks, international news outlets refrained from deploying their own journalists or photographers to the city or country. Instead, they relied on local individuals who were not fully trained or experienced in photography or journalism (Mortensen & Grønlykke Mollerup, 2021).

The dissemination of Omran Daqneesh's images was the result of persistent efforts by amateur or semi-professional photographers to document war crimes, aiming to raise global awareness about the dire situation in Aleppo (Mortensen & Grønlykke Mollerup, 2021). Rosen and Crafter (Rosen & Crafter, 2018) observed that separated child migrants, like Omran, were depicted with compassion and empathy, portrayed as defenseless and in urgent need of assistance. The iconic photograph of Omran Daqneesh shows him sitting in an emergency vehicle, in shock, with his body covered in blood and dust. His bare feet and his solemn, expressionless face poignantly convey the horrors he has faced. However, Beeley, a journalist supportive of the Assad regime, criticized the photograph, controversially alleging it was staged with a different, younger child to manipulate public sentiment. This image gained further prominence after being referenced by US President Obama during his speech at the UN Leaders' Summit on Refugees, highlighting the significant role such iconic images play in shaping



public perception of conflicts and influencing global political discourse (Mortensen & Grønlykke Mollerup, 2021).

Chen et al. (Chen et al., 2023) highlighted the significant role the United States plays in shaping public understanding and perceptions of Syrian refugees amidst the crisis. Furthermore, they observed that public opinions on refugees have become increasingly polarized, particularly along political party lines. In the wake of the 2017 US presidential election, the percentage of Republicans who felt the United States had a responsibility to admit migrants fell from 35% to 26%, while among Democrats, it rose from 71% to 74% (Chen et al., 2023). A recent study by Chen et al. (Chen et al., 2023) delves into how partisan news media differ in their coverage of Syrian refugees, revealing that outlets with left-leaning ideologies tend to portray refugees as vulnerable individuals in need of protection by the United States, whereas right-leaning outlets are more likely to depict them as linked to Islamic terrorism. Additionally, left-leaning media often present refugees as potential contributors to American society, whereas right-leaning media portray them as liabilities or security threats. To counteract negative media narratives about refugees, Chen et al. (Chen et al., 2023) recommend that government stakeholders undertake targeted interventions and communication campaigns. They advocate for the promotion of narratives that emphasize prolonged and meaningful interactions between refugees and host communities, aiming to foster a sense of shared identity and understanding. Moreover, Chen et al. (Chen et al., 2023) call for media outlets to increase their awareness of problematic language and strengthen their review processes to avoid marginalizing refugees, which could, in turn, encourage acceptance and potentially reduce instances of hate crimes.

Hence, the portrayal of a refugee in a photograph can readily be interpreted as a sympathetic and multifaceted representation, i.e., as simultaneously embodying feminine and maternal qualities along with infantile and innocent characteristics (Malkki, 2005). These contributions to the depoliticization and dehistoricization of refugees reinforce images of the refugee that are prevalent in Western discourse, which often strips them of their political and historical contexts (Rajaram, 2002). The disparity between the initial portrayal and later narratives of migrants creates a visual representation that may not align with their interests, potentially skewing public perception and impacting their treatment. The transnational imagination of the first and second crisis stages is primarily driven by this logic, which becomes a significant symbolic activity characterized by an anti-immigrant gaze. This framework, shaped by media and symbols, captivates readers from Central Europe and hinders the ability of migrants to express themselves (Průchová Hřůzová, 2021). Furthermore, it has exposed the utilization of visual communication techniques that strip away the political, historical, and personal backgrounds of individuals who migrate to the continent. Additionally, there is a deliberate effort to depict refugees as victims, devoid of agency and direction, by employing a strategy that emphasizes their femininity (Průchová Hřůzová, 2021).

## 2.4. Measures to Protect Children in War

In the wake of the distribution of poignant imagery of child refugees, it becomes imperative to discuss the measures that should be taken to protect children in war. International protocols, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, lay a foundation for the rights and protection of children, yet the implementation of these laws often falls short in conflict zones. Proactive measures must be prioritized, including the establishment of safe zones, the enforcement of ceasefires in areas heavily populated by civilians, and the provision of unhindered humanitarian aid. Furthermore, the international community must bolster efforts to hold accountable those who perpetrate violence against children, ensuring that war crimes do not go unpunished. Educational programs designed to support displaced children in maintaining their schooling can offer a semblance of normalcy and hope. Collaborative global action is required, not only to provide immediate relief but also to address the long-term welfare of children affected by war, safeguarding their right to develop into well-rounded individuals free from the shadows of conflict.

### Comparative Analysis of Mass Media and Traditional Media Platforms

The emergence of social media platforms, such as Facebook, has revolutionized the media landscape, transitioning from the linear dissemination of traditional media to the dynamic interactivity of digital platforms. This shift is critically relevant to the representation of refugees. The immediacy and potential virality of social media content can swiftly shape public perception, offering both a platform for widespread empathy and a breeding ground for misinformation. In contrast, traditional media's gatekeeping role and editorial processes often result in more deliberate, narrative-driven content. This comparative analysis aims to dissect the nuanced ways in which these divergent media forms influence societal understanding and engagement with the plight of refugees.

## 3. Historical Background

### 3.1. 1948: Palestine-Israel War (Nakba) and Palestinian Refugee Crisis

The year of the Nakba holds significant importance in the Palestinian people's history, representing a momentous disruption in the continuous progression of historical events and the passage of time in Palestinian history (Masalha, 2009). Also, 1948 is considered a significant event in the Middle East, particularly for the Israelis and Palestinians who were directly involved (Sela & Kadish, 2016). Israel's initial engagements with the Arab world were characterized by upheaval, originating from the dispute over Palestine under Ottoman rule and intensifying during the British Mandate, and culminating in the 1948 war (Zisser, 2023).

According to Pilecki and Hammack (Pilecki & Hammack, 2014), the Israel-Palestine conflict spans more than six decades, dating back to 1948. The memory of 1948 is firmly embedded in the shared and personal consciousness of



Israelis and Palestinians, characterized by the presence of refugee camps, obligatory military duty, checkpoints, and apprehension regarding loss and sacrifice (Jawad, 2006; Sa'di & Abu-Lughod, 2007 as cited in Pilecki & Hammack, 2014). The Nakba had a lifelong impact on the lives of Palestinians, both within their local communities and on a global scale, and its consequences are still unfolding to this day (Masalha, 2009). Also, the Nakba of 1948, marked by ethnic cleansing and rupture, had a tremendous impact on society, history, and the Palestinian identity (Masalha, 2009).

According to the Department of State (United States Department of State, 1999), the primary components of ethnic cleansing encompass two key aspects. Firstly, it involves the intentional deployment of artillery and snipers to target civilian populations residing in major urban areas. Secondly, it entails the coerced displacement of civilian populations, which includes the systematic demolition of homes, the plundering of personal belongings, and physical assaults, as well as both targeted and indiscriminate killings and massacres. The conflict resulted in the expulsion of Palestinian Arabs, who became refugees, in order to establish a Jewish state (Zisser, 2023). Following 1948, Palestinians were regarded as refugees, categorized either as humanitarian or economic concerns, necessitating international assistance or resolution through relocation and job programs (Masalha, 2009).

Initially, UNRWA did not have a specific legal definition for who could properly be considered a Palestinian refugee. However, they later decided to restrict the number of people receiving humanitarian assistance because the number of registered refugees was artificially inflated. According to Albanese and Takkenberg (Albanese & Takkenberg, 2020), the 1952 definition, which continues to be widely recognized, delineates a Palestinian refugee as an individual who experienced displacement from their residence and means of subsistence as a consequence of the 1948 conflict in Palestine. This definition has legal implications for the provision of assistance and the recognition of refugee status. Following the Nakba, the majority of Palestinian refugees were born in rural areas, and UNRWA offered humanitarian assistance and support to reconstruct Palestinian society (Bocco, 2009).

In 1948, Palestinian refugees were suddenly forced to leave their ancestral lands, similar to the indigenous populations in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand. The most impoverished refugees were compelled to enroll with UNRWA in order to ensure their survival. They experienced arduous voyages prior to reaching refugee camps such as those located in al-Baq'a. In the course of the 1967 conflict, they withdrew from their positions and relocated many times, crossing the Jordan River (Randa, 2013). During the 1950s, Palestinian activists utilized UNRWA schools as a means to provide education to young refugees. Upon the establishment of the PLO in 1964, UNRWA's primary objective became the implementation of the right of return, liberation, and independence (Bocco, 2009).

### 3.2. 2011: The Syrian Civil War and Refugee Crisis

On 18 March 2011, demonstrations broke out in the southern Syrian city of Dar'a

and subsequently extended to nearby cities and villages in the north, including Hama and Banyas. The eruptions indicated the beginning of the “Arab Spring” in Syria, which had previously occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen (Zisser, 2017). Since 2011, the ongoing conflict in Syria has resulted in the internal displacement of 6.5 million individuals and the forced migration of an additional 5 million to foreign countries, primarily to neighboring nations including Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey (Chen et al., 2023). In 2016, the Syrian crisis led to around 500,000 deaths, with 10 million Syrians being displaced from their homes and 8 million forced to seek asylum elsewhere. This occurred as a result of the mutual campaign of annihilation of both factions and the intentional strategy of the Syrian government to forcibly remove populations from certain regions. The war resulted in the fragmentation of the Syrian state into many political entities, such as ISIS, the original Syrian state, self-governing Kurdish enclaves, and rebel forces under the leadership of Fath al-Sham Front (Zisser, 2017).

According to Byman and Speakman (Byman & Speakman, 2016), Syria holds the distinction of being the primary source of refugees worldwide since the ongoing Syrian civil war has resulted in the displacement of over 6 million individuals and the forced relocation of an additional 7 million people. More than 50% of the population prior to the war had been forced to leave their homes and become displaced. The problem has reached a global scale, as Europe took in approximately 500,000 Syrian refugees in 2015, while other nations imposed restrictions on the number they welcome (Byman & Speakman, 2016). Throughout history, the United States has demonstrated a willingness to take in numerous migrants, such as those from Cuba and Vietnam during the Cold War. However, in the case of the Syrian conflict, the US has not exhibited the same level of charity, having received fewer than 2000 Syrian refugees in the last five years (Martinez, 2015). Therefore, in April 2016, the European Union (EU) and Turkey implemented an agreement to deter refugees from crossing the Aegean Sea by promptly sending newly arrived individuals back to Turkey (Byman & Speakman, 2016).

The investigation of this period is crucial because of the long-lasting influence it had on a large number of Palestinian homes, totaling one hundred thousand in 1948, when they were forcibly relocated. To thoroughly understand this impact, the researchers collaborated with a photojournalist. Together, they interpreted the media portrayal of this tragedy for the refugee children, taking into account the historical context of the event and conducting an in-depth investigation. This collaboration aimed to analyze how the excessive portrayal, moderate representation, or underrepresentation of child refugees in the media has evolved over time. It also sought to understand how these shifts have influenced both the human and political perspectives on the refugee crisis.

### **3.3. Archival Photojournalism**

This research conducts an analysis of the work of fourteen photojournalists selected from various archival sources, focusing on photographs of refugee child-

ren from two significant time periods: the 1948 Palestine-Israel War (Nakba) and the Syrian Civil War in 2011. The impact of these wars has been profound, displacing hundreds of thousands and resulting in significant loss of land and homes. Archival photography from these periods is invaluable for researchers seeking to understand the political and humanitarian narratives that arise from portraying children as refugees.

During the photographic research, various digital repositories were consulted including the Congressional library's digital archives, *The New York Times'* picture collection, Getty Images, and the UNRWA agency's archives. Selected works of thirteen photojournalists were sourced from these resources. The Getty Images database provided a number of these, while one particular image of note was obtained from *The New York Times'* archives. Another image that demands attention for its powerful impact came from the Congressional archives. Additional images were secured from the archives of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), an organization formed after the 1948 conflict to aid in relief and development efforts and to facilitate discussions with Near Eastern governments about the termination of international aid, as per UNRWA's mandate from December 8, 1949.

This curated collection from the 13 photojournalists provides a window into the evolution of the portrayal of child refugees in journalistic photography over different historical periods. A close examination of several photographs depicting the displacement of Palestinian children during the Nakba was undertaken. Furthermore, a detailed analysis of two particularly striking Syrian photographs that drew significant media attention in 2015 and 2016 was conducted. This examination is pivotal for understanding how the representation of child refugees has shifted over time.

#### 4. Analysis

The photographs in **Figure 1** and **Figure 2** are archived on the Getty Images digital archive. These two photos depicting Arab children huddling together under a shared sack as a means of protection serve as a significant historical artifact, providing insight into the wider refugee situation that emerged as a consequence of the Arab-Israeli War. The photograph depicts the early aftermath of the fighting, with Palestinians hastily evacuating their residences in search of safety. The Palestine predicament, a pivotal aspect of the Arab refugee quandary, is a fundamental concern in the region. The snapshot enhances comprehension of the human ramifications of conflict in the Middle East, emphasizing the displacement and anguish resulting from the Arab-Israeli War. The collective bag represents the ability of a community to endure and the collective responsibility of being displaced, highlighting the human aspect of political and military conflicts. The snapshot enhances the overall story of the Palestinian refugee crisis by providing a visual representation that helps to understand the intricate historical and political circumstances of that period.



**Figure 1.** Young Arabs share sack for protection. (Original Caption) 11/3/48-Amman, Trans-Jordan: These young Arabs share a sack in an effort to protect themselves from the elements. They are part of a large group of Palestinian Arabs who fled from their homes when fighting broke out between Arab and Jewish forces. The Arab refugee problem has been one of the focal issues of the present Palestine dilemma.



**Figure 2.** Young Arabs share a sack for protection. (Original Caption) 11/3/48-Amman, Trans-Jordan: These young Arabs share a sack in an effort to protect themselves from the elements. They are part of a large group of Palestinian Arabs who fled from their homes when fighting broke out between Arab and Jewish forces. The Arab refugee problem has been one of the focal issues of the present Palestine dilemma.

The photograph in **Figure 3**, taken on December 16, 1948, depicts the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli War, a crucial phase in the displacement of Palestinian Arabs. The Ramallah region, known for its rich Palestinian cultural legacy, experienced significant demographic displacement due to the conflict. The image serves as a prime example of the broader historical pattern of Palestinian displacement and the profound human consequences faced by Palestinian refugees.



**Figure 3.** Palestinian refugee mother. An Arab refugee mother, and her child, from the Ramallah region, near Jerusalem, Israel, December 16, 1948. (Photo by PhotoQuest/Getty Images)

It serves as a historical artifact, documenting the impact of war on Palestinian families and facilitating the understanding of how the struggle has shaped the Palestinian identity. The photograph's emotional effect, symbolic depiction, ethical ramifications, and cultural significance contribute to the narrative that advocates for recognizing the Palestinian refugee experience and safeguarding the human rights of persons affected by conflict.

The image in **Figure 4** was taken in 1948, an important decade in the protracted conflict between Israel and Palestinian Arabs. A considerable percentage of Palestinian Arabs were forced to vacate their dwellings as a direct consequence of this conflict, thereby compounding the preexisting refugee crisis. The image portrays two women, one of whom bears a resemblance to the child's mother, while the other is likely a family member. The snapshot contributes to a more complete historical narrative of the tribulations endured by refugees by drawing attention to the challenges faced by Palestinian families as a result of their relocation within their own country. It is an important historical artifact that depicts how refugee children were put in a vulnerable position along with their mothers in 1948 after having lived in their homes. By depicting the immigrant woman and her child in such a way, the photograph is able to convey the significance of the experience quite effectively. Both the facial expressions of the mother and the child's vulnerability generate empathy, which captivates viewers on an emotional level and humanizes the larger geopolitical issue.

**Figure 5**, taken on 3 May 1948, portrays a Palestinian mother holding her child after the founding of the State of Israel. Through analysis of earlier pictures, **Figure 5** provides evidence of several Palestinian refugee children and families from various regions of Palestine, including Gaza, Ramallah, and Haifa,



**Figure 4.** Palestinian refugees. Portrait of an unidentified Arab family, typical of nearly half a million refugees rendered homeless by the fighting, 1948 (Photo by PhotoQuest/Getty Images).



**Figure 5.** Arab refugees. 3rd May 1948: A mother and child, Arab refugees from Haifa, on arrival at Port Said after the founding of the State of Israel (Photo by Keystone/Getty Images).

who faced significant challenges due to being forcibly displaced after the events of 1948. The focus of this image is the mother's countenance, intended to depict her sense of powerlessness and vulnerability. Although the viewer, not depicted in the image, is intended to empathize with those portrayed, such empathetic sentiments did not influence the governmental decision-making process that led to the implementation of measures prompted by this picture.

**Figure 6** was taken in 1968 and shows Palestinians from Gaza leaving the occupied West Bank; the image serves two purposes: it is both a historical document and an instrument of propaganda. In terms of history, it provides a chronological account of a certain time period following the Six-Day War. It does a





**Figure 6.** Palestinians from Gaza leaving the occupied West Bank to go to Jordan in 1968. (Photo by Agence France-Presse/Getty Images)

good job of appealing to viewers' emotions, making use of symbols, and addressing ethical problems, which all contribute to a more profound understanding of the complex geopolitical matters and human repercussions in the area. Despite depicting a woman who is carrying one child and holding the hand of another, the facial expression of the mother in this photograph conveys a sense of fear. Furthermore, it demonstrates the dominance of the two Israeli military soldiers positioned behind the mother, while highlighting the vulnerability of the others.

To conclude the previous photos represent a humanitarian narrative that frequently depicts refugees as voiceless and powerless, thereby fostering a sense of distance and superiority for the viewer.

However, **Figure 7** was taken during the 1948 War between Israel and Palestine. This photo was found in the Congress Library digital archive. The image depicts a father carrying his child, which could be interpreted as symbolizing a masculine caregiver role. This depiction contrasts with the traditional visual motif of a mother and child. The emotional investment of the father and child is evident in their facial expressions, reflecting their concern for the child's future.

**Figure 8** and **Figure 9** depict children who were portrayed following the 1948 conflict between Israel and Palestine. The children seen in **Figure 8** are lying on the ground and appear to be smiling and cheerful. Furthermore, the image reveals that numerous residences have been constructed in the vicinity of these children. Additionally, **Figure 9** provides evidence that this photograph was captured around 1950, subsequent to the Nakba in 1948. The image depicts multiple children holding a large UNRWA sign. In this photo, the children exhibit signs of contentment and fulfillment. This portrayal exemplifies the presence of happiness and hope for the future of these children. This particular photograph would not alter the actual circumstances that these youngsters encountered while being forcibly displaced from their residences. While these photographs



**Figure 7.** The Flight: 1948|UNRWA.



**Figure 8.** “The Long Journey”: Digitizing the palestine refugee experience|UNRWA.



**Figure 9.** 1948 Nakba|UNRWA.

depict the youngsters adapting to their new circumstances in the camps, they specifically convey sentiments of happiness, hope, and resilience. These images were released by the UNRWA and may be found in their digital collection.

**Figure 10** and **Figure 11** depict children during the 1948 war, presenting child refugees in a positive light. The photographers highlight their resilience, adaptability, and personal capabilities rather than framing them as victims. These images illustrate that refugee children in 1948 had access to education in the camps, portraying them as empowered individuals. Furthermore, the photos suggest that the global community provided significant support to these children, enabling



**Figure 10.** UNRWA at the world humanitarian summit|UNRWA.



**Figure 11.** UNRWA at the world humanitarian summit|UNRWA.

them to lead relatively normal lives despite their experiences of forced displacement.

**Figure 12**, a photograph first published by a Turkish news agency in 2015, the body of a little Syrian refugee named Alan Kurdi was found washed up on a shore in Turkey. Since that time, Alan Kurdi has become a globally recognized image of the refugee crisis. This photograph emerged amidst the Syrian civil war, capturing the exodus of several Syrians fleeing their homeland in search of safety. This photo was captured by Turkish photojournalist Nilüfer Demir. The photograph triggered political disputes and compelled governments to reevaluate their approach to welcoming migrants. In doing so, it brought attention to the moral and ethical responsibilities that states have during times of humanitarian crisis. The photographs of Kurdi's corpse serve as evidence of the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the southern Mediterranean. However, they also convey the deep existential chaos caused by the secretive and insufficient actions taken by government agencies (Snow, 2020). Also, the photographs of Kurdi represent the power of photography and how they have been attacked for breaking taboos and showcasing infancy and innocence, which has caused anxiety and brought attention in a variety of media circles to the need to give greater consideration to the crisis (Snow, 2020).



**Figure 12.** A young migrant, who drowned in a failed attempt to sail to the Greek island of Kos, lies on the shore in the Turkish coastal town of Bodrum, Turkey. (Photo by REUTERS/Nilufer Demir/DHA)

Due to its authenticity, this photograph effectively conveyed trustworthiness and evoked sympathy, prompting an emotional response that inspired proactive efforts to address the harrowing situation. Snow (2020) characterizes images of Aylan Kurdi as depicting a profound sense of solitary, debilitating powerlessness. Consequently, these photographs were anticipated to have a significant impact, evoking feelings of abandonment and isolation in viewers. In the prevailing political climate, where there is a deliberate disregard for the essential needs of humanity, images like that of Alan Kurdi hold a prominent position. Under such circumstances, the use of persuasive language intended to instill fear and concern among politically vulnerable groups may experience a temporary cessation (Snow, 2020).

The photograph depicting Omran Daqneesh, captured amidst the backdrop of the Syrian Civil War, exerted a profound impact on individuals across the globe. It raised awareness about the difficult situation faced by Syrian citizens and emphasized the seriousness of the ongoing humanitarian crisis. Furthermore, it prompted debates regarding the significance of worldwide engagement and the transgressions of international law committed during military operations. Omran's shot was essential to the broader narrative around the Syrian refugee crisis. It emphasized the substantial influence that the crisis has had on innocent children and families. The photograph's symbolism, accompanied by its poignant and evocative nature, elicited empathy and contributed to the humanization of the wider struggle. Furthermore, it fulfilled the function of promoting and endorsing a range of causes, while also sparking discussions regarding humanitarian aid, truces, and diplomatic actions intended at resolving the Syrian conflict.

Through the photographs, Omran Daqneesh has his individuality portrayed as did Aylan Kurdi. As a consequence of this, the shot was anticipated to generate a sizable impact due to the fact that it gave viewers the impression that the people pictured were abandoned and cut off from the rest of the world.

## 5. Themes

### 5.1. Humanitarian Aspect

This theme emerged in Figure 12 and Figure 13. The photographs were captured



**Figure 13.** Wounded Syrian Kid Omran Daqneesh. ALEPPO, SYRIA - AUGUST 17: (EDITORS NOTE: Image contains graphic content.) 5-year-old wounded Syrian kid Omran Daqneesh sits alone in the back of the ambulance after he got injured during Russian or Assad regime forces air strike targeting the Qaterji neighbourhood of Aleppo on August 17, 2016. (Photo by Mahmud Rslan/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)

of two Syrian refugees, namely Alyan Kurdi and Omran Daqneesh. According to Long (2013), the humanitarian discourse that is mainly generated by media and agencies seeks to cultivate sympathy and understanding towards refugees, who are frequently depicted as apart from other migrants. Long (2013) argues this discourse disregards the intersection between oppression and poverty in the nation of origin and portrays suffering and persecution as the exclusive narrative. Kędra and Sommier (Kędra & Sommier, 2018) mention the considerable extent to which the media contributes to humanitarian discourse by reporting on tragedies and inspiring empathy in its audiences. Photojournalists and those who practice journalism of attachment seek to bring attention to the suffering of civilians and inspire readers to feel compassion for them. However, sales strategies and audience sympathy fatigue might undermine the efficacy of this enterprise (Kędra & Sommier, 2018). Another result from previous research indicates that Canadian print media predominantly depicts immigrants through an economic lens, with particular emphasis on refugee claims, security concerns, and social welfare initiatives (Lawlor & Tolley, 2017). Between 2012 and 2016, the portrayal of conflicts started to change, moving towards a more compassionate portrayal of refugees. Refugees were portrayed as potential dangers with greater frequency in conservative media than in liberal media. Exploring these discrepancies requires the use of extensive computational methods (Nassar, 2020).

## 5.2. Portraying the Disempowerment, Fragility, and Vulnerability of Refugees

The theme emerged in Figures 1-7, all capturing the 1948 war between Israel and Palestine and depicting child refugees. Several researchers, including Sen (2018) and Strelakova-Hughes & Wang (2019), argue that actively listening to the perspectives of refugee children and documenting their abilities and resilience in both research and media can challenge negative assumptions and promote a more positive understanding of their experiences. Turkish scholars, as revealed by Çobaner (2015) and Gok & Çifci (2017), indicate that over 50% of



news coverage concerning Syrian refugee children in newspapers carries a negative tone, focusing on topics such as mortality, destitution, and educational deprivation. This marginalization fails to portray the children as human beings, intensifies fear and hatred towards foreigners, and promotes negative narratives in European and U.S. media. Erdemir (2022) reports that academic literature often documents the impactful experiences of refugee children, eliciting strong emotions such as astonishment, pity, and wonder. Additionally, media coverage tends to perpetuate misconceptions about these children. Therefore, Erdemir (2022) emphasizes the significance of refugee children as unique individuals with inherent abilities, autonomy, and significant resources that are worth distributing and acknowledging.

In addition, Rosen and Crafter's (Rosen & Crafter, 2018) analysis of child migrants featured in British tabloids in 2016 highlights the ongoing debate surrounding their legal status, particularly due to their geographical proximity to Britain. The categorization of these children is rooted in racialized, advanced capitalist, and Eurocentric ideals. This categorization forms the basis for a discourse that divides child migrants into two categories: deserving vulnerable children and undeserving adult migrants. According to Rosen and Crafter (Rosen & Crafter, 2018), while advocating for shelter for separated child migrants may provide immediate assistance, it falls short of ensuring social and economic fairness for all.

### 5.3. Hope and Resilience amid Adversity

This theme emerged in **Figures 8-11**, which depict the 1948 war between Israel and Palestine. In these photos, the theme of hope and resilience is evident in the representation of the children.

### 5.4. The Influence of News Media on Worldwide Political Views

News media not only reflect political realities but also mold the political terrain. The framing of events, the selection of which stories to tell, and the narratives constructed around them can substantially shape political ideologies and public policies. Images and stories in the media can trigger international empathy or apathy, thereby influencing political decisions and actions. This section has addressed the relationship between media portrayals of refugee crises and shifts in political sentiments and policies across the globe.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, this study conducted a thorough examination of multiple photographs depicting Palestinian children who were displaced during the 1948 Palestine-Israel war, which is also referred to as the Nakba. Additionally, the investigation of the two iconic Syrian photographs garnered significant attention from media sources in 2015 and 2016. The analysis of this era was crucial due to the enduring influence of the events of that time on several Palestinian families, amounting to one hundred thousand, who were forcibly uprooted in 1948. The



photojournalist assisted the researchers in understanding the media portrayal of the refugee children's crisis by considering the historical context of the crisis and doing a comprehensive analysis. In addition, photojournalism gave us a comprehensive evolution of the portrayal of child refugees in the media. Specifically, it highlighted the extreme representations of Syrian child refugees during the civil war, emphasizing their individuality and the potential for their stories to influence political perspectives. While the Kurdi photographs temporarily disrupted a degrading and bigoted discourse, they alone cannot depict the depth of migrants' suffering or change the reality of the issue (Snow, 2020).

In terms of the political perspective, European politicians offered regrets and sympathies after the Kurdi photos were released. In the UK, David Cameron admitted 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years to fulfill what he believed to be a moral obligation. In response, UK tabloid-mentality sensationalist media returned to racist logic, saying Britain had done enough for the Kurds. The mainstream news hardly covered the value of Britain's armaments trade to the region (Snow, 2020). On the other hand, the representation of the children in 1948, who were typically depicted within the context of their families, received assistance and international support and aid.

In light of the analysis presented here, this paper also considers the critical measures necessary for protecting children in conflict zones. International laws and protective policies must be enforced, with a concerted effort from the global community to prevent the exploitation and harm of the most vulnerable. Drawing from the historical context of the Nakba and the Syrian Civil War, it is evident that media portrayals can serve as a catalyst for such protective measures. Therefore, the media's responsibility extends beyond reporting; it must advocate for the rights and protections that children in war-torn regions desperately need. To sum up, the major themes that emerged through this analysis were humanitarian considerations, along with the portrayal of the disempowerment, fragility and vulnerability of refugees, as well as hope and resilience amid adversity.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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