

Rinke Verkerk – De Correspondent – June, 11th, 2025

As a journalist, I witnessed a genocide unfold. But only later did I realize that Israel is also destroying the evidence of it.

I only realized how wrong things were when Israel bombed eighteen Arab journalists at a holiday resort in Lebanon.*

That was in October 2024. Israel had already been wreaking extreme destruction in Gaza for a year, had invaded Lebanon, and had killed more than 40,000 Palestinians – among them 174 journalists and media workers.

I had by then been writing for ten months about what I still called the ‘Israel-Palestine conflict’. I thought it was a brave choice on my part to consistently call Palestine ‘Palestine’ rather than ‘the Palestinian territories’, like the Dutch government and public broadcaster NOS do. I thought that by doing so, I was already granting Palestinians more legitimacy than was common, and apparently, I also thought it was perfectly normal for me to have a say in whether Palestinians had a right to exist. Who did I think I was, I wonder now.

Anyway.

I spoke with Palestinian and Israeli civilians, journalists,* activists.* With scholars.* I interviewed the mayor of Bethlehem and a founder of Hamas’ military wing* who had become a peace activist, but who, after being involved in ceasefire negotiations between Israel and Hamas, had eventually fled Gaza. I interviewed an Israeli negotiator and rabbi for hours about the paths to peace and spoke with a hotshot from the Israeli intelligence services about military self-defense. I devoured books, films, and academic papers like they were cookies.

Seeing blind

Meanwhile, Israel had blocked humanitarian aid and plunged Gaza into famine, bombed hospitals (19 of the 36 hospitals in Gaza were already disabled; 17 were still partly functioning),* bombed schools (493 of the 564 school buildings in Gaza were already largely or completely destroyed),* orphaned 17,000 children, shot its own hostages, arrested 11,100 Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, including 740 children and 108 journalists.* Forty prisoners had already died in custody.

On 9 October 2023, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant had already called Palestinians ‘human animals’* and said that ‘Gaza will never be the same again’ and: ‘We will destroy everything.’* The International Criminal Court had already warned of the risk of genocide.

My eyes and ears registered it all. And I thought I was seeing and listening. Because I was appalled. Because I found it reprehensible that innocent civilians were being bombed. Because I understood that the attacks on Palestinian journalists – like Al Jazeera journalist Ismail al-Ghoul (27), who was driving through Gaza with his colleague Rami al-Rifi in a clearly marked press car when they were blown to bits by an Israeli drone – were wrong.

But then came the Israeli bombing of eighteen Arab journalists sleeping in wooden cabins at a holiday resort in Lebanon. Three journalists were killed. And what didn’t come – just as after those 174 times a Palestinian journalist was killed – were consequences.

There was an Israeli statement claiming the attack had been aimed at Hezbollah targets – ‘a mistake’ – and an investigation was announced. But no evidence. Human Rights Watch and The Guardian investigated on the ground – which was possible in Lebanon, unlike in Gaza – and found

no trace of a Hezbollah target.* What they did find were three observation towers from which Israel could clearly have seen the journalists. The charred remains of marked vehicles and flak jackets (PRESS, in capital letters) were unmistakable.

Only when I saw Israel use insane and illegal violence in a non-Palestinian context – against non-Palestinian journalists on non-Palestinian territory – and then lie about it outright, and nothing happened, no consequences, no retaliation, no condemnation, no sanctions, no halt to arms shipments, nothing – only then did I understand that everything was completely and utterly wrong.

I didn't understand exactly what. But I understood that I had understood nothing until then.

174 times too late to ask

What is so threatening or important about eighteen journalists at a holiday resort that Israel decides to drop two bombs on them?

What are they not allowed to show?

What do they have to say that I'm not supposed to hear?

What do these journalists represent that must be destroyed with such force?

What risk do they pose that is greater than the risk of international outrage over bombing journalists – a direct attack on the free press?

Or did Israel already know it would get away with it?

But then why am I still surprised?

What did I not see, not hear, not understand, that this is a shock to me?

And how is it that I am only now asking these questions? Why didn't I ask them all 174 times, for every Palestinian colleague of mine who was killed by Israel in the year before it launched this attack on journalists in Lebanon?

I realized then that I had been blind as a bat.

What the hell was behind that?

The destruction of the destruction of destruction

I wrote a piece on Israel's targeted attacks on journalists.* And only through the research I did for that, did I begin to see beyond the blinders what Palestinians have been saying for so long, but what I hadn't heard: Israel is systematically destroying the Palestinian people. With weapons and political support from the West. From America, from Europe, from the Netherlands.

And because this destruction of Palestinians is not meant to be recognized as such, and certainly not to have negative consequences for Israel or its Western allies aiding in it, this destruction must be made as invisible and unprovable as possible.

Killing journalists is one of the methods Israel uses for this.*

Silencing journalists – literally or figuratively – not only makes it harder for Palestinians to show the world what is being done to them. It also makes it far harder to document that destruction and thereby make it provable and prosecutable.

It is also the final stage of destruction: by silencing Palestinian journalists, Israel erases the Palestinians from the narrative about what is happening.

Israel claims the destruction of Gaza and the West Bank is about self-defense. That Palestinians pose an existential threat to the state of Israel and even to the safety of the Jewish people. The Palestinians, on the other hand, say this is genocide and ethnic cleansing. That Israel wants to claim Palestinian land, and that therefore the Palestinians must disappear.

There is a battle over these two Grand Narratives.

Which story of what is happening here will be told later? What will children learn from their history books about this struggle? Will these events even make it into the history books?

By systematically and deliberately silencing every Palestinian journalistic voice – Israel has now killed more than two hundred* – their perspective is being erased. That is horrific, and enormous.

And I only began to see it after those two bombs fell on those eighteen journalists at a holiday resort in Lebanon.

What blinded me?

Why did I only realize how wrong things are when Israel bombed non-Palestinian journalists on non-Palestinian territory?

Because I grew up with violence against Palestinians and had unconsciously been made to believe that bombing Palestinians is normal. Because I came to believe that there must be *something*, something fundamentally wrong with Palestinians that explains why Israel uses so much violence against them. And that there must also be *something*, something fundamentally good about Israel that justifies all that violence.

I dehumanized Palestinians. Subtly enough not to notice.

Apparently, it's possible.

To speak out against violence, to be anti-war, to be appalled by human suffering, to follow injustice inflicted on people for ten straight months – and still, deep down, to dehumanize the victims.

It's a common thinking error. Blaming the victims for the violence done to them. Instead of placing responsibility on the perpetrator of that violence.

How we collectively keep the blinders on

If only I were the only one who had been this blind.

But if that were the case, we wouldn't be here.

Then Israel could not have exterminated the Palestinian people continuously and with impunity for twenty months, both in Gaza and the West Bank. Then Israel would not have succeeded in erasing the traces of that extermination – and in erasing the erasure.

Israel is successful because most institutions and citizens surrounding this genocide have the same blinders I had. And because we collectively keep those blinders in place, in a thousand and one subtle ways.

Because for decades we've let Israel act as if Palestinians do not exist.

The one-liner "A land without a people for a people without a land" was not accidentally used to justify the founding of the state of Israel in 1948. It coincided with the expulsion of over 750,000 Palestinians, the destruction of more than 500 Palestinian villages, and the massacre of around 15,000 Palestinians.

And "There is no such thing as Palestinians" was not a throwaway line when former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir used it in 1969 to legitimize the erasure of Palestinian rights and the annexation of Palestinian land. The phrase was repeated in 2023 by Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, one of the architects of this genocide.

Both statements were not only never countered – they were so cleverly recycled by Western media, Western sermons in pro-Israel churches, and Western history lessons that I grew up unconsciously believing them, until I was finally re-educated during my Middle Eastern Studies degree at the University of Amsterdam. That's also where I first heard about the Nakba, which I had never been taught about – even though there had been plenty of opportunity for it in the six years of history classes I took in high school.

Since 7 October 2023, all eyes have been on the Palestinians. But do we actually **see** the Palestinians?

Erasure: the crime itself is being erased

Now I also understand why I didn't see this earlier: because that's the intention. The erasure of crimes is only successful when the erasure itself is erased too.

To destroy Palestinians with impunity, the destruction itself must be destroyed. And the best way to do that? Erase every trace of the Palestinian people.

The systematic destruction of Palestinians isn't just done by killing tens of thousands – conservative estimates are now approaching 60,000 dead.

Every trace of their existence is being destroyed: historic buildings, libraries, universities, churches and mosques, the streets they walked, the homes they lived in, the squares they gathered in, the photo albums, the archives that proved they existed here.

Four thousand embryos in fertility clinics have been bombed.* Doctors trying to keep the population alive are arrested,* bombed,* and tortured.* Aid workers transporting wounded Palestinians to bombed-out hospitals are executed in cold blood and buried in a pit.* After which Israel tries to erase their identities as Palestinian aid workers by labeling them 'potential Hamas fighters'.

Generations of children are starved, maimed, orphaned – so that they are damaged for life in every possible way. Families are torn apart.

Emergency aid is used as a weapon. The shooting of Palestinians risking their lives for sunflower oil and a few cans of lentils is denied.*

Palestinian poet Mosab Abu Toha,* who literally saw his fellow Palestinians being torn to pieces and shot dead in the sand, wrote: "So now the massacres Israel commits against us are a lie? Just propaganda? I can't believe I'm witnessing this."

Palestinians are driven to such despair that they leave their land – an ethnic cleansing that Israel and America erase by calling it 'voluntary emigration', a term the media* repeats with caveats,* and which thus ends up in the Grand Narrative anyway.

Even the cemeteries where destroyed Palestinians are laid to rest are bulldozed beyond recognition.*

The last trace of the Palestinian people that remains is their stories.*

The images, the memories, the testimonies. About the people who were destroyed. How they were destroyed, and by whom. About every trace of their existence that was erased. These stories are a testament to who the Palestinians are. And they are, in themselves, an indictment of Israel: they show what Israel has done.

The bearers of that indictment are Gaza-based journalists.

Israel targets these journalists so deliberately that in the past year and a half, it has killed more

journalists than have been killed in all modern wars worldwide combined.* On a strip of land that would fit ten times into the Netherlands.

Gazan journalists are being attacked so that even the stories and testimonies are slowly erased, so that in the end, it will be as if the Palestinians never existed.

And a people that never existed cannot have been destroyed.

(And the same goes for the historical heritage – saj).