

Israel's Culture of Deceit

By Chris Hedges – ScheerPost, October 19, 2023

Israel was founded on lies. The lie that Palestinian land was largely unoccupied. The lie that 750,000 Palestinians fled their homes and villages during their ethnic cleansing by Zionist militias in 1948 because they were told to do so by Arab leaders. The lie that it was Arab armies that started the 1948 war that saw Israel seize 78 percent of historic Palestine. The lie that Israel faced annihilation in 1967, forcing it to invade and occupy the remaining 22 percent of Palestine, as well as land belonging to Egypt and Syria.

Israel is sustained by lies. The lie that Israel wants a just and equitable peace and will support a Palestinian state. The lie that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East. The lie that Israel is an “outpost of Western civilization in a sea of barbarism.” The lie that Israel respects the rule of law and human rights.

Israel’s atrocities against the Palestinians are always greeted with lies. I heard them. I recorded them. I published them in my stories for The New York Times when I was the paper’s Middle East Bureau Chief.

I covered war for two decades, including seven years in the Middle East. I learned quite a bit about the size and lethality of explosive devices. There is nothing in the arsenal of Hamas or Islamic Jihad that could have replicated the massive explosive power of the missile that killed an estimated 500 civilians in the al-Ahli Arab Christian Hospital in Gaza. Nothing. If Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) had these kinds of missiles, huge buildings in Israel would be rubble with hundreds of dead. They don’t.

The whistling sound, audible on the video moments before the explosion, appears to come from the high velocity of a missile. This sound gives it away. No Palestinian rocket makes this noise. And then there is the speed of the missile. Palestinian rockets are slow and lumbering, clearly visible as they arch in the sky and then tumble in free fall toward their targets. They do not strike with precision or travel at close to supersonic speed. They are incapable of killing hundreds of people.

The Israeli military dropped “roof knocking” rockets with no warheads on the hospital in the days leading up to the Oct. 17 strike, the familiar warning given by Israel to evacuate buildings, according to al-Ahli hospital officials. Hospital officials also said they had received calls from Israel saying “we warned you to evacuate twice.” Israel has demanded that all hospitals in northern Gaza be evacuated.

Following the strike on the hospital, Hananya Naftali, a “digital aide” to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, posted on X, formerly Twitter: “Israeli Air Force struck a Hamas terrorist base inside a hospital in Gaza.” The post was quickly deleted.

Since the Oct. 7 incursion into Israel by Palestinian resistance fighters, which reportedly left some 1,300 Israelis dead, many of them civilians, and saw some 200 kidnapped as hostages and taken to Gaza, Israel has carried out 51 attacks on healthcare facilities in Gaza that have killed 15 healthcare workers and injured 27, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Out of 35 hospitals in Gaza, four are not functioning due to severe damage and targeting. Only eight of the 22 UNRWA primary healthcare centers are “partially functional,” the WHO says.

The brazenness of Israeli lies stunned those of us who reported from Gaza. It did not matter if we had seen the Israeli attack, including the shooting of unarmed Palestinians. It did not matter how many witnesses we interviewed. It did not matter what photographic and forensic evidence we obtained. Israel lied. Small lies. Big lies. Huge lies. These lies came reflexively and instantly from the Israeli military, Israeli politicians and Israeli media. They were amplified by Israel’s well-oiled propaganda machine and repeated with a cloying sincerity on international news outlets.

Israel engages in the kinds of jaw-dropping lies that characterize despotic regimes. It does not deform the truth, it inverts it. It paints a picture that is diametrically opposed to reality. Those of us who have covered the occupied territories have run into Israel’s Alice-in-Wonderland narratives, which we dutifully insert into our stories — required under the rules of American journalism — although we know they are untrue.

Israel has invented an Orwellian lexicon. Children killed by Israelis become *children caught in crossfire*. The bombing of residential districts, with dozens of dead and wounded, becomes *a surgical strike on a bomb-making factory*. The destruction of Palestinian homes becomes *the demolition of the homes of terrorists*.

The Big Lie — *Große Lüge* — feeds the two reactions Israel seeks to elicit — racism among its supporters and terror among its victims. The Big Lies fosters the myth of a clash of civilizations, a war between democracy, decency and honor on one side and Islamic terrorism, barbarism and medievalism on the other.

George Orwell in his novel “Nineteen Eighty-Four” called the Big Lie “doublethink”. Doublethink uses “logic against logic” and “repudiate[s] morality while laying claim to it.” The Big Lie abolishes nuances, ambiguities and contradictions that can plague conscience. It is designed to create cognitive dissonance. It permits no gray zones. The world is black and white, good and evil, righteous and unrighteous. The Big Lie allows believers to take comfort — a comfort they are desperately seeking — in their own moral superiority even as they abrogate all morality. It feeds, what Edward Bernays called, the “logic-proof compartment of dogmatic adherence.” All effective propaganda, Bernays writes, targets and builds upon these irrational “psychological habits.”

Israeli supporters thirst for these lies. They do not want to know the truth. The truth would force them to examine their racism, self-delusion and complicity in oppression, murder and genocide.

Most importantly, the Big Lie sends an ominous message to the Palestinians. The Big Lie states that Israel will wage a campaign of mass terror and genocide and never take responsibility for its crimes. The Big Lie obliterates the truth. It obliterates the dignity of human thought and human action. It obliterates facts. It obliterates history. It obliterates comprehension. It obliterates hope. It reduces all communication to the language of violence. When oppressors speak to the oppressed exclusively through indiscriminate violence, the oppressed answer through indiscriminate violence.

The cartoonist Joe Sacco and I watched Israeli soldiers taunt and shoot small boys in the Khan Younis refugee camp in Gaza. We interviewed the boys and their parents afterwards in the hospital. In a few cases we attended their funerals. We had their names. We had the dates and locations of the shootings.

Israel's response was to say that we were not in Gaza. We had made it up.

The Israeli Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Defense Minister and Israeli Defense Force (IDF) spokesperson immediately blamed the killing of the Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh in 2022, on Palestinian gunmen. Israel disseminated footage of a Palestinian fighter they said shot and killed the journalist, who was wearing a flak jacket and helmet marked "PRESS."

Benny Gantz, who was at the time Defense Minister, stated that "no [Israeli] gunfire was directed at the journalist," and that the Israeli army had "seen footage of indiscriminate shooting by Palestinian terrorists".

This lie was peddled until video footage examined by B'Tselem, The Israeli Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, identified the location of the Palestinian gunman depicted in the video. The video, the human rights organization found, was taken in a different location from where Shireen was killed.

When Israel is caught lying, as it was with the murder of Shireen, it promises an investigation. But these investigations are a sham. Impartial investigations into the hundreds of killings by soldiers and Jewish settlers of Palestinians are rarely carried out. Perpetrators are almost never brought to trial or held accountable. The pattern of Israeli obfuscation is predictable. So is the collusion of nearly all of the corporate media along with Republican and Democratic politicians. U.S. politicians decried the murder of Shireen and dutifully repeated the old mantra, calling for a "thorough investigation" by the army that carried out the crime.

A few months later, Israel admitted that there was a "high possibility" that an Israeli soldier killed the journalist by accident, but by then the eruption of street protests and rage over the killing of the journalist was over and her murder largely forgotten.

By the time the conclusive proof comes out about the bombing of the hospital, it too will be a distant memory.

There is dramatic footage captured in September 2000 at the Netzarim junction in the Gaza Strip — where I saw a nineteen-year-old boy shot and killed by an Israeli sniper — by France 2 TV, of a father trying to shield his traumatized 12-year-old son, Muhammad al-Durrah, from Israeli gunfire that ultimately killed him.

The killing of the boy resulted in the typical propaganda campaign by Israel. Israeli officials spent years lying about the killing, first blaming the Palestinians for the shooting, later suggesting that the scene was faked, and finally insisting the boy was still alive.

When an Israeli soldier, in 2003, murdered the 23-year-old student and American activist Rachel Corrie, by crushing her to death with a bulldozer as she tried to prevent the illegal demolition of a Palestinian doctor's home, the Israeli army said it was an accident for which Corrie was responsible.

The Israeli military has killed “at least” 20 journalists since 2001, with no accountability, according to a 2023 report by the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists. “Immediately after a journalist is killed by security forces, Israeli officials often push out a counter narrative to media reporting,” the CPJ concluded. This includes blaming the deaths on “indiscriminate fire” by Palestinians or attempts to discredit those killed as “terrorists.”

Israel blocks the work of independent human rights organizations into atrocities and war crimes it commits in Gaza and the West Bank. It refuses to cooperate with the International Criminal Court into possible war crimes in the Occupied Territories. It does not cooperate with the U.N. Human Rights Council and prohibits the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, from entering the country. Israel revoked the work permit for Omar Shakir, the Director of Human Rights Watch (Israel and Palestine), in 2018 and expelled him. In May 2018, Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy published a report calling on the European Union and European states to halt their direct and indirect financial support and funding to Palestinian and international human rights organizations that “have ties to terror and promote boycotts against Israel.”

After the bombing of the hospital, Israel first released a video that purported to show Palestinian Islamic Jihad rockets which struck the hospital. The Israelis hastily removed the video when journalists noticed that time stamps showed the images were taken 40 minutes after the strike on the hospital.

Israeli propagandists — aware that Palestinian rockets have little explosive power — then claimed that Hamas stored munitions under the hospital. This caused the massive explosion, they said. But if this was true, it would mean there would be a secondary explosion. There was none. And now Israel has released what they say is a recording of two Hamas militants discussing the missile strike on the hospital. The militants ask each other, in a self-

incriminating conversation that is too ridiculous to believe, if Hamas or PIJ carried out the strike. Please. How was Israel completely in the dark about an incursion by thousands of armed Palestinian militants from Gaza into Israel on Oct. 7 and able to capture this incriminating conversation by two supposed militants?

“Israel has a whole unit of ‘mistaravim’, Israeli Jewish undercover agents trained to pose as Palestinians and secretly operate among Palestinians,” the reporter Jonathan Cook writes. “Israel produced a highly popular TV series about such people in Gaza called Fauda. You have to be beyond credulous to think that Israel couldn’t, and wouldn’t, rig up a call like this to fool us, just as it regularly fools Palestinians in Gaza.”

Israel has also long targeted medical facilities, ambulances and medics, as Middle East scholar Norman Finkelstein points out. It bombed a Palestinian children’s hospital during the 1982 war in Lebanon, killing 60 people. It also carried out missile strikes on clearly marked Lebanese ambulances during the 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon. It damaged or destroyed 29 ambulances and almost half of Gaza’s health facilities, including 15 hospitals, during the 2008-2009 assault on Gaza known as Operation Cast Lead. It routinely prohibited wounded Palestinians from being picked up by ambulances during this operation, often leaving them to die. During Operation Protective Edge, the 51-day assault on Gaza in 2014, Israel destroyed or damaged 17 hospitals and 56 primary healthcare centers and damaged or destroyed 45 ambulances.

You can see my interview, released today, with Professor Finkelstein about Gaza and Israel here.