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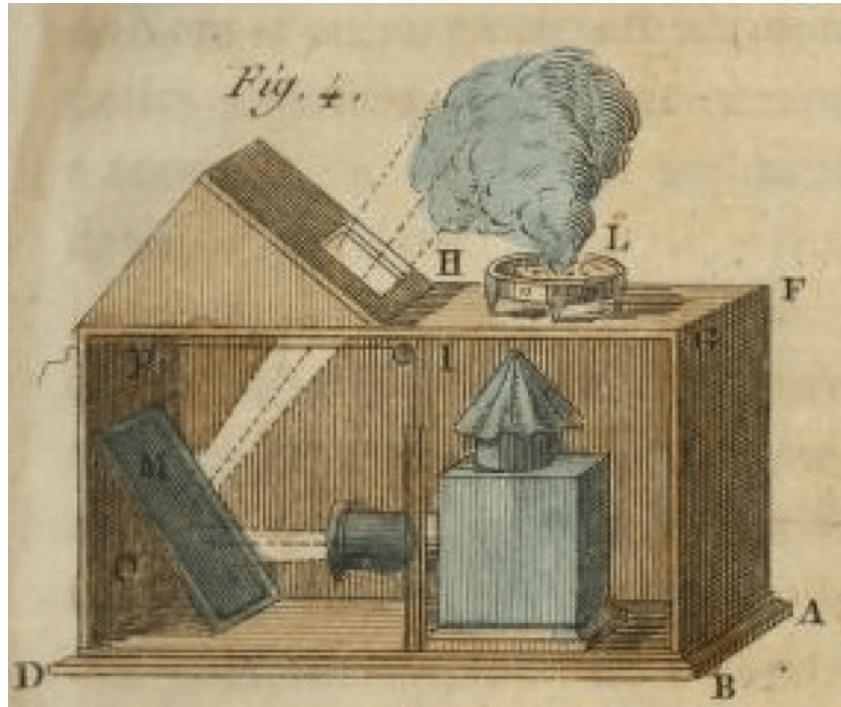
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Smoke and Mirrors: How Israeli Agitprop Lies Become Fact



Projecting an image onto smoke with a mirror, from *Nouvelles récréations physiques et mathématiques* (1770)

That coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the US mass media is distorted by a bias in favor of Israel is hardly news to people more or less in command of their faculties. But events since October 7 have brought to light examples that go well beyond the usual daily distortions to outright lying—lies that rival those of the WMD fabrications used to justify the US invasion of Iraq.

The PBS News Hour ran a piece on February 21 about the recent story that claimed twelve employees of the major UN agency that provides aid to Palestinians, UNRWA, had planned and participated in Hamas's attack on October 7.

The piece was the usual 'balanced' format: two people presenting opposing sides of the story. The Israeli side was represented by Col. Grisha Yakubovich who was the former head of the Israeli agency that coordinated with various NGOs providing various forms of aid in the Occupied Territories, COGA. The other guest Mathis Schmale was the director of UNRWA in Gaza from 2017 to 2021. Nick Schiffrin the journalist began by asking Schmale about UNRWA's general role in 'the territories'—he skipped the usual term 'the occupied territories' possibly out of deference to Yakubovich since the Israeli occupation—now more than five decades long—is illegal according to the UN. 'Occupation' is now a polite term but with two meanings: the IDF presence in the West Bank, illegal per the UN charter and the second sense being the slow and gradual theft of Palestinian land by settlers accompanied by the declaration of more 'military zones' for the IDF.

Schmale began by saying he was now part of a UN mission in Somalia and that he had been the head of the UNRWA mission in Gaza from 2017 to 2021. During that time he had seen no evidence among the Palestinian staffers of any affiliations with Hamas or even sympathizers of Hamas—the Palestinians made up all of the 12 thousand staffers of UNRWA except for a handful of Schmale's immediate UN employees. When Schiffrin mentioned parts of a dossier that Israeli intelligence had shared with the UN and US intelligence Schmale said he had not seen the dossier and could not comment on it.

Schiffrin then addressed Yakubovich, whose service in Gaza overlapped that of Schmale. Yakubovich said that not only were twelve members of UNRWA participants in the planning and attack itself, but at least ten percent of the 12,000 employees of UNRWA in Gaza were members of Hamas or sympathizers. His evidence for this was that 'everyone knew it.' Everyone but Schmale, apparently. The difference between the two men's replies was clear. Schmale's response was factual while Yakubovich was merely assertions. When Schiffrin returned to Schmale he said that this issue was never raised with him by anyone during his time in Gaza and that he and his UN staff were vigilant about making sure that the Palestinians who made up the vast number of UNRWA's employees had no affiliation with Hamas or any other political organization that might compromise the strict neutrality of UNRWA. Yakubovich's retort was simply that no one would 'make up' such a thing because it would not be 'logical.' Schiffrin never pressed Yakubovich to identify who 'everyone' was. Nor did Schiffrin ask that since Israel has an agency called Hasbara devoted wholly to

spreading propaganda, why it would not be ‘logical’ to make up that figure? While Yakubovich spoke in the generalities of propaganda Schmale spoke based on what he could verify from his own experience. Schmale spoke to Schiffrin answering his questions while Yakubovich ignored Schiffrin’s questions and spoke to the American audience.

Schiffrin moved on and brought up the matter of the vast network of tunnels in Gaza. Here Schmale made an interesting comment. While the vast number of the tunnels were the creation of Hamas, in fact the tunnels under the largest hospital in Gaza al-Shifa were made by Israel. Again Yakubovich ignored this remark—with its implication for the Israeli penetration and presence in Gaza before the attack of October 7, 2023 took place.

At this point, it should have been clear that the ‘balance’ of this interview was between Yakubovich—interspersed with remarks about the good works of UNRWA though it was no longer needed—and Schmale’s observations based on his own experiences of what had happened and what had not happened during his tenure in Gaza.

Israel has only provided edited parts of a dossier on this issue, but based on that information—if it deserves that term—the US, Canada, Australia and its European have suspended all aid to UNRWA which has led now to the shortages of medicine, food and water for the Palestinians in Gaza. Only obtuse or ideologically blinded people can deny that the shortages of medicine, food and water are part of Netanyahu’s intent to kill Palestinians who survive the military assault. This story may serve as prologue to another story that is used to justify Israel’s all-out assault on Gaza.

This is the story of what has been called the ‘systematic weaponization of rape’ by Hamas on October 7. This story began in a *New York Times* article published in late December 2023 whose headline was “Screams Without Words: How Hamas Weaponized Sexual Violence on Oct. 7.” What follows here draws upon two exposés of that article. The first is a December 6 article published on the site Grayzone, “Scandal-stained Israeli ‘Rescue’ Group Fuels October 7 Fabrications,” written by that site’s chief editor Max Blumenthal. The second is a February 28 article published on the site Intercept, “Between the Hammer and the Anvil,” written by Jeremy Scahill, Ryan Grim and Daniel Boguslaw. The Grayzone article concentrates mostly on the sources of disinformation about the October attack, while the Intercept articles focus mostly on the *New York Times* article that went viral and has been quoted by Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and numerous other US politicians, and cited by other mainstream news sources such as CNN, the *Washington Post* and numerous other people and publications.

On October 11 CBS reported that a man named Yossi Landau said he, “saw with his own eyes children and babies who had been beheaded.” CNN reported this same claim adding that it had been confirmed by Benjamin Netanyahu—whose record for truth-telling vies with that of Trump. Then Biden repeated the claim at a press conference also on October 11, despite objections by some of his staff and ignoring the recorded deaths that included only one infant dying in the attack, an eleven-month-old, Mila Cohen. Biden said at a press conference said he had seen “pictures of terrorists beheading children.” My quick Google image search yielded no such photos.

On October 12 in an interview with the Israeli Foreign Ministry-funded i24 channel, Landau went on to say that when he entered a home in Kibbutz Beerli, “we see a pregnant lady lying on the floor, and then we turn her around and see that the stomach is cut open, wide open. The unborn baby, still connected with an umbilical cord, was stabbed with a knife. And the mother was shot in the head. And you use your imagination, trying to figure out what came first.”

Then at a Senate hearing on October 31 Antony Blinken described an instance of the savagery done by Hamas on October 7: “A young boy and girl, 6 and 8 years old, and their parents around the breakfast table,” Blinken intoned. “The father’s eye gouged out in front of his kids. The mother’s breast cut off, the girl’s foot amputated, the boy’s fingers cut off before they were executed.”

Both CNN and the White House soon had to retract the claims about beheaded babies. A White House spokesman said, “The president based his comments about the alleged atrocities on the claims from Netanyahu’s spokesman and media reports from Israel.”

Rosenthal says that Landau appeared to have “crafted” his testimony about the pregnant woman with her belly cut open and her unborn child shot dead with the umbilical cord still connected to her based on a rumor that an anonymous military source spread online two days prior, according to which the supposedly pregnant victim was thirty years old. As Rosenthal says, “This alone discredited Landau’s claim, because the only female victims recorded in or around Beerli were 44-year-old Rinat Segev Even and 22-year-old Tair Bira — and neither were pregnant. In fact, no pregnant women were registered among those killed on October 7.”

Yossi Landau, the source for these stories, is the head of a group known as ZAKA that bills itself as devoted to “disaster victim identification”—the acronym ZAKA stands for that in Hebrew. The co-founder of ZAKA was a man named Yehuda Meshi-Zahav according to Brad Pearce who wrote an exposé of the group “attempted suicide while facing a variety of

sex crimes accusations in 2021.” Apparently Meshi-Zahav died a year later in a coma resulting from his attempt.” And he was known in the Haredi or orthodox community as “the Haredi Jeffrey Epstein,” due to what Max Blumenthal calls, “his well-known penchant for raping young people of both sexes”—a fact that must have been known to Landau and other members of ZAKA. That ZAKA was the source for the Israeli investigation of the claims of widespread rape and other gruesome sex crimes is ironic, as Blumenthal says. In addition to his sexual exploits, Meshi-Zahav had also embezzled millions of the donations made to ZAKA with the result that the group was nearly bankrupt by October 7. Landau who was head of the southern branch of the group immediately saw the attack as a potential bonanza for the group and rushed to the site before Israeli police and forensic expert arrived. He was not mistaken. An article in *Haaretz* one of the leading Israeli dailies said that ZAKA had raised 13.7 million dollars since October 7.

The volunteers of ZAKA have no forensic training. According to Intercept, another site that debunked the story of Hamas’s heinous crimes, ZAKA volunteers moved corpses to create photos to support their stories, thus destroying much of site for Israeli forensic experts who arrived later.

Besides the beheaded babies, among the stories propagated by Landau and other ZAKA members and sympathizers were these:

+ The *New York Times* article “Screams Without Words” led off with a story about a woman named Gal Abdush who it said had been raped. The people the *Times* chose to initially put the story together had no experience in investigative journalism as one of them, Anat Schwartz, admitted. Schwartz was an Israeli filmmaker with no experience as a journalist. The other person was Adam Sella, whose own journalism experience before October 7 consisted mostly of writing about food and culture. When the problems with the story emerged Schwartz spoke up about her fruitless quest for other sources to confirm ZAKA’s account. “Israeli police officials said they believed that Ms. Abdush was raped,” the *Times* article labeled Abdush “a symbol of the horrors visited upon Israeli women and girls during the October 7 attacks.” Her sister has denied she was raped. Abdush messaged her family on WhatsApp fifty-one minutes after the Hamas attack began saying she was in trouble at the border—with Gaza that is. Presumably, she and her husband were being taken as hostages. Nine minutes later her husband Nagi Abdush texted that she had been shot and he was next to her body. Whether deliberately or in a crossfire is unclear, but the latter seems likely since obviously they could not serve as hostages. The latter also seems more likely since her husband was right next to her and he was not shot until forty-five minutes later. One

of the residents of the kibbutz also said that the attackers' chief goal seemed to be taking hostages to be used to negotiate with them in exchange for Palestinian prisoners as Hamas had done in the past. During those forty-five minutes, he never mentioned that his wife had been raped. Members of Abdush's family later said they felt misled and exploited by the *New York Times* article that claimed Abdush had been raped. Abdush's sister flat-out denied that she had been raped. Her brother-in-law said simply, "The media invented it." Despite the evidence accumulating in various sources both of web journals devoted to media critiques and other mainstream news sources like Reuters, the *New York Times* has chosen to brazen it out relying on its ability to drown out the criticism of its story. As far as I know, the only major media source that has questioned the *Times* article is CNN. The *New York Times* has only as another Intercept journalist puts it "quietly amended" its headline to "UN Team Finds Grounds to Support Reports of Sexual Violence in Hamas Attack."

+ Simcha Greiniman, Landau's deputy was another copious source for the fabricated atrocities. Greiniman said he found naked women tied to trees at the Supernova music festival. He claimed he found a toddler with a knife stuck through his head. Another ZAKA spokesperson said he found a sexually mutilated woman's corpse under rubble with her organs removed. No evidence was found of this.

+ Hamas fighters were said to have cut fetuses out of Israeli women's wombs, severed a girl's arm and baked a baby in an oven. No evidence was found of this either.

+ Besides the lurid tale of the pregnant woman who was cut open and the unborn fetus taken out of her with the umbilical cord still attached, there were other assertions made by Landau and his assistants of other pregnant women being slaughtered and abused. However, the only female victims in Beerli whose deaths were recorded that day were 44-year-old Rinat Segev Even and 22-year-old Tair Bira. Neither was pregnant and no pregnant women in Beer were in the death records. About the disemboweled pregnant woman, the kibbutz denied the story. To try to bolster the story of the woman and her unborn someone posted a video on social media as 'evidence.' The wife of the President of Israel Isaac Herzog wrote in a November 22 op-ed for *Newsweek*, "a Hamas video from a kibbutz shows terrorists torturing a pregnant woman and removing her fetus." In fact, the video consisted of the claim of a ZAKA volunteer with video footage made by a Mexican drug cartel torturing and killing a captive.

+ Landau said he saw twenty children tied up, shot and then burned, their charred corpses then being heaped into two piles. As Rosenthal says, only thirteen children were recorded as dying that morning and the three were the most found in a single location.

+ In Kibbutz Beeri, a six-year-old boy and his eight-years-old, seated around a table for breakfast watched as Hamas fighters gouged out one of their father's eyes, cut off one of their mother's breasts, then cut off the girl's foot and some of the boy's fingers before they killed them. But the only children in Beeri near that age whose deaths were recorded that day were twelve-year-old twins Liel and Yanai Hetzroni who were killed by a shell from an Israeli tank.

+ The twelve-year-old girl Liel Hetzroni was the subject of many false reports. The Israeli Foreign Ministry wrote on its Twitter/X account of Hetzroni, "This little girl's body was burned so badly that it took forensic archeologists more than six weeks to identify her. All that remains of 12-year-old Liel Hetzroni is ash and bone fragments. May her memory be a blessing." But an Israeli eyewitness said the girl was killed by an Israeli tank shell.

Blumenthal has done a more extensive analysis of the origins of this story in an interview with the frequent contributor to *CounterPunch*, Chris Hedges. What follows is a summary of it.

A resident of the Kibbutz Beeri Yasmin Porat was among the hostages taken by Hamas fighters on the morning of October 7. She was in the house with Liel Hetzroni. She said the Hamas fighters thought mistakenly that the house was surrounded by Israeli troops. So they sent some of the hostages out and called the Israeli police to attempt to negotiate their exit. When Israeli troops finally arrived a ceasefire ensued. Her own captor decided to surrender. He stripped himself naked and used Hetzroni as a shield. The Israelis held their fire seeing he was not a suicide bomber, and the man freed Hetzroni and surrendered. According to Porat, there were still fourteen Israeli hostages in the house along with thirty-nine Hamas fighters. She told this to the Israeli commander and she basically drew a diagram of the various locations of the hostages and Hamas fighters. Regarding Liel Hetzroni she was quite specific about where Liel and her twin Yanai and her great-aunt Ayala were located near the kitchen. The stand-off lasted until about four in the afternoon when both sides started firing. At seven-thirty in the evening the Israelis called for a tank. The tanks fired two shells at the house and only one person came out of the house, an Israeli Hadas Dagan. Dagan told her that the Hamas militants had not killed any of the hostages. Porat concluded her account that the militants "did not abuse us. They treated us very humanely."

The Israeli commander was acting under what has been a standing order in the IDF for some time. The order is termed the "Hannibal Directive" of 1986 due to the fact that the Carthaginian general who killed himself so as not to be taken prisoner and put on display in Rome after his long years of fighting Rome. But the use of 'Hannibal' is a misnomer for the

standing order which over time had given Israeli commanders the option of firing on their own soldiers—and in this case on Israeli civilians—if they deem it necessary to sacrifice them to kill enemy troops and weaponry. The directive was rescinded in 2016 but the Israeli response in Kibbutz Beeri would seem to indicate it is still unofficially operative.

Still more details about the chaotic and inept response of the IDF that day are found in a more recent article published on the site Intercept.

As one Israeli source involved in examining the bodies explained, “the volunteers are not pathology experts and have no professional tools to identify the murdered person and his age, or to declare the manner in which he was slaughtered.” For their part, Israeli police assert they have no record of the incident.

According to *Haaretz*, ZAKA did not document the remains and put parts from different bodies into the same bag. However, ZAKA volunteers did find time to rewrap already bagged remains in materials that “prominently displayed the ZAKA logo.”

Haaretz also said in its reportage after October 7, senior military leaders that, instead of using IDF soldiers specialized in recovering bodies and preserving evidence, they sent in untrained ZAKA volunteers. The ZAKA volunteers turned massacre sites into a “war room for donations,” used corpses as fundraising props to “spread accounts of atrocities that never happened.”

With regard to ZAKA, Landau talked openly on four occasions of inventing stories: “When we go into a house, and we’re using our imagination. The bodies is (sic) telling us the stories that happened to them.” Another ZAKA official in an official Israeli Foreign Ministry video, “The walls, the stone shouted: “I was raped.”

The lurid accounts that the Israeli government exploited to justify their no-holds-barred assault on Palestinian civilians in Gaza and simultaneously to raise funds for ultra-rightwing groups were all recounted by Eli Beer, the leader of one of ZAKA’s rivals United Hatzalah, at the annual summit of the Republican Jewish Coalition. The summit took place appropriately in Las Vegas.

The event was held at the RJC’s usual venue, the Venetian Resort. The hotel and casino were established by its biggest donor, the late Sheldon Adelson. Adelson had given hundreds of millions of dollars to right-wing media outlets that backed Netanyahu and Likud and, of course, Trump who gave Adelson the Presidential Medal of Freedom. That was due to the fact that Adelson and his wife Miriam were the two biggest donors to Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign. Adelson’s donations to establish a new Israeli media outlet friendly to Netanyahu also are part of the graft charges hanging over Netanyahu now.

The grisly fabrications at the Las Vegas conference were taken up by various rightwing nuts and then passed on with new embellishments into the Never-Never land of rightwing websites. “They murdered his father. They gang-raped his mother, over and over and laughed all along. While they baked her baby alive in the oven” – Caroline Glick, the Jewish News Service editor. “THEY BAKED A BABY IN AN OVEN. Say ceasefire one more time you fucking baby-murdering-loving ghouls” – John Podhoretz, the editor of the neoconservative Commentary Magazine, on Twitter/X. And so on.

Given the influence of Hasbara, the Israeli propaganda machine, some of these fabrications and the subsequent hysteria and hate they aroused would sooner or later have played in the delusional world of the right-wing websites and media outlets. But it was the *New York Times* article that ensured it would be covered by mainstream news outlets where these lies are still masquerading as facts.

Now UNRWA has responded to the Israeli claims that staffers of the UN organization were also Hamas members who participated in the October 7 attack.

According to a Reuters article of March 4, in addition to the alleged abuse endured by UNRWA staff members, Palestinian detainees more broadly described allegations of abuse, including beatings, humiliation, threats, dog attacks, sexual violence, and deaths of detainees denied medical treatment, the UNRWA report said. Reportedly the UNRWA said the Israeli interrogations, “included severe physical beatings, waterboarding, and threats of harm to family members.”

Since then a March 11 BBC article said that Ahmed Abu Sabha, a doctor at Nasser hospital, said he was arrested on February 15. Abu Sabha was held for a week during which muzzled dogs were set upon him and his hand was broken by an Israeli soldier. His account matched those of two other medics who wished to remain anonymous because they feared reprisals. The medics told the BBC that they were beaten, doused with cold water all the while being made to kneel for hours. They were detained for several days before they were released.

In a similar incident on February 15, the IDF raided the hospital in Khan Younis in South Gaza. The hospital was one of the few in the Strip still functioning. The IDF said intelligence indicated that there were Hamas operatives in the hospital. Footage secretly filmed in the hospital the next day showed a row of men stripped to their underwear in front of the hospital’s emergency building, kneeling with their hands behind their heads. Medical robes are lying in front of some of them. Dr Atef Al-Hout, who was the general manager of the hospital said, “Anybody who tried to move his head or make any movement got hit. They left them for around two hours in this shameful position.” Unlike the fabricated accounts of

Hamas's torture and rape mentioned above, all of these accounts have been corroborated by the BBC and Reuters.

While Israel has a propaganda machine, the Hasbara, mostly aimed at foreign countries, the US has no official propaganda machine. It doesn't need one because it has the *New York Times*. A great deal of what is printed in it concerning what happens outside the borders of the US is simply 'rip-and-read' restatements of State Department press releases. But when it comes to Israel the paper has divided loyalties. In the case of Israel, the *Times* doesn't always parrot State Department statements, it also seeks to influence State Department policies to favor a right-wing racist government waging a merciless war in Gaza. The *Times* article "Screams Without Words" was itself a scream without basis.

On March 4, the United Nations released a report responding to Israeli claims about rapes and other forms of sexual perpetrated by Hamas October 7. The report was made by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict. The report found "reasonable grounds" that there was sexual violence at the concert, Highway 232 and Kibbutz Reim, but it did not attribute that to Hamas saying a more thorough investigation was necessary. The caution of the UN is warranted because there are reports of Palestinians not associated with Hamas or any organization taking advantage of the attack to loot and possibly commit acts of violence including rape.

The head of that UN office was Pramila Patten went to Israel and visited sites where these actions were to have taken place. But the sites were always chosen by Israeli officials and Patten was always accompanied by Israeli 'minders.' She stressed the nature of her visit—which Israel had pressed the UN for—saying the mission, "was neither intended nor mandated to be investigative in nature." She also stated that despite repeated calls for those affected to come forward, her team had been unable to locate a single victim of sexual assault by Palestinians. Patten's report concluded, "In the medicolegal assessment of available photos and videos, no tangible indications of rape could be identified."

Draw your own conclusions.

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