



Statement on US Media Responses to the Deaths of US Citizens in Israel-Palestine

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The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention and Human Security has been surprised by the widespread, apparently systemic, dehumanization of Palestinians within the Western Press, particularly in the United States. Nowhere has this been more clear to us than in the reporting on the deaths of American citizens in the region. The deaths of citizens who are believed to be killed by Hamas are mourned as national tragedies; the deaths of citizens believed to be killed by Israel are mentioned, if at all, as accidents worthy only of private mourning. We protest this inhumane and nihilist discriminatory approach to human life, which bodes poorly for all human beings in the future.

Late this past summer two American citizens in their twenties were shot and killed in Palestine-Israel within eight days of each other: Hersh Goldberg-Polin and Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi. Both were young and full of life. The loss of each of these irreplaceable human beings is a tragedy. Given that both of them were civilians, their deaths at the hands of combatants in the region also ran contrary to international legal norms. The Lemkin Institute condemns the use of violence against civilian non-combatants in all cases, as well as the arbitrary use of lethal force outside of armed conflict situations. Unlike major news outlets in the US, we consider both incidents to be tragic examples of unnecessary, intentional violence which could have been avoided.

In this statement, we would like to bring attention to the different framing used by major US news media outlets to report on each incident. For the purposes of this statement, the Lemkin Institute collected all online coverage from the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, Reuters, the Boston Globe, and CNN.

To properly set the scene, the undisputed facts – as summarized from the articles cited in this piece – are as follows:

- On August 31, members of the Israeli military recovered bodies of six hostages in a Gaza tunnel, including one American citizen — 23-year-old Hersh Goldberg-Polin. The military immediately claimed that Hamas was responsible for their deaths, which Hamas initially denied. At first, Hamas assigned blame to Netanyahu, arguing that his refusal to agree to a ceasefire deal rendered him culpable for the death of the hostages. Hamas later claimed that the hostages had been killed by the Israeli military. According to the Israeli health ministry, a forensic examination revealed that the hostages had been shot at close range a few days before they were found. The Lemkin Institute issued a statement condemning Hamas for the murders.
- Just over a week later, Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi, a 26-year-old American citizen, was shot in the head while attending a protest in the West Bank. More specifically, when she was shot, she was standing in an olive grove near a protest she had attended earlier. At one point during the protest, violence had erupted between the military and the attendees. Eye witnesses said that IDF soldiers had fired shots after the protest had already dispersed. It was one of those shots which killed Eygi. A few days later, Israel released a statement claiming that their own investigation into the incident had concluded one of its soldiers had unintentionally shot at Eygi. Their real target was allegedly the “riot” instigator. The Lemkin Institute set about writing a statement on her killing and recognized glaring differences in how her death was treated in the American press relative to the hostage murders. We decided to write this present statement instead.

There have been accusations levelled at US news organizations across social media concerning the use of passive voice in headlines describing the murder of Eygi; similar accusations of the use of passive voice have been levelled regarding headlines covering the execution of the six hostages, including Goldberg-Polin. The truth is that where major media organizations did devote articles to the deaths of these individuals, they often used passive voice in headlines in both cases. The Lemkin Institute is of the opinion that it would be erroneous to claim that the headlines alone betrayed any sort of erasure of responsibility in one case more so than in the other.¹ Rather, it is in the quantity of coverage and in the bodies of the articles themselves that media organizations revealed bias.

Whereas the media oftentimes presented both the six hostages and Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi as victims of nameless killers in their headlines, the narrative similarities ended there. In the New York Times, the execution of Hersh Goldberg-Polin and the other five individuals killed alongside him was portrayed as a brutal, intentional murder by Hamas. The same article, along with others from various media organizations, presented Israeli accusations against Hamas as credible, dismissing Hamas’s counter-accusations for lack of evidence. When it came to

¹ This does not exclude the possibility that passive voice has been used to detract attention from Israel’s responsibility in many other instances. An in-depth analysis would be required to make such a claim.

Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi's murder, Israel's unsubstantiated claims that the shot fired at her head by an IDF soldier was accidental were presented as credible. Although the New York Times did mention the fact that eyewitnesses disputed these claims and did cover Eygi's family's call for an independent inquiry, it did not dismiss Israel's denial of responsibility outright as it did Hamas's similar denial a week earlier. In both cases, Israel's claims were presented as so trustworthy and legitimate that they required no substantiation. The complete lack of evidence backing up Israel's position regarding Eygi's murder was never pointed out.

Regarding the victims themselves, discrepancies in media treatment of Eygi and Goldberg-Polin are stark. Almost every single media outlet published the same profile piece on all six hostages. Neither CNN nor the Wall Street Journal joined in publishing these profiles, but they both published pieces specifically about Goldberg-Polin. Alongside profiles of all six executed hostages, some media outlets also published standalone, emotionally charged articles about Goldberg-Polin and his family, including one profile of his mother in the Wall Street Journal. In these pieces, the media portrays him as a symbol, whose death resulted in national grief and heartbreak back in the US. And although many Israelis, including Goldberg-Polin's parents, have renewed their push for Israel to conclude a ceasefire deal in the aftermath of his death, the Wall Street Journal saw it fit to publish a piece filled with misinformation which inveighed against those placing any responsibility for his death on Netanyahu, who has consistently rejected a ceasefire and put the lives of hostages at risk.

The Lemkin Institute joins US media outlets in grieving the deaths of the six hostages. We wonder, however, if the same media organizations sincerely join us in grieving the death of Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi. Most news outlets covered her murder, but not to the same extent as the execution of the hostages. The Wall Street Journal only felt fit to mention her death in passing in an article about Goldberg-Polin. Reuters neglected to cover her death until the US government spoke out about it. Nowhere was her death described as a tragedy for the American people. Rather, she was mourned by her family and the Palestinian people. Many outlets described her death as the result of "West Bank violence," with the Washington Post even mentioning that she had been warned against travelling to the region, in what many would consider to be an exercise in victim-blaming. Outbursts of violence — often instigated by IDF forces — at protests against illegal occupation, such as the one Eygi was attending, are described as "clashes" in articles covering Eygi's death. This simplifies and distorts their character as resistance by an Indigenous people in the face of colonial and genocidal violence. It also is an insult to Eygi, her family, and her generous act of solidarity with an oppressed people.

Moreover, the majority of the news articles failed to properly contextualize the historical and political conditions that resulted in the deaths of these two Americans. Instead of acknowledging the past 76 years of oppression, abuse, and genocidal violence that Palestinians have been subjected to, journalists presented October 7 as the beginning of a conflict unilaterally initiated by Hamas. This kind of framing is purposely misleading. It serves to misrepresent the past year of bloodshed as the consequence of an unprovoked attack by

Hamas, failing to inform the reader of the decades long history of violence on the part of Israel against the Palestinian people. Such disinformation is intended to victimize Israel and legitimize its genocidal campaign. It criminalizes all Palestinians, who then appear to be opposing peaceful coexistence rather than fighting for it. The mis-framing of the conflict is reflected in the treatment of Egyi, whose commitment to justice was belittled if mentioned at all.

The difference in media coverage of the deaths of Hersh Goldberg-Polin and Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi clearly demonstrates a bias on behalf of US news media organizations in favour of Israel. It also betrays a striking dehumanization of Palestinians, even though Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi was not Palestinian or of Palestinian descent. Because Egyi was in Palestinian space, fighting for the right of Palestinians to life and property, her life has been treated as less grievable than the lives of Israeli citizens or Americans in Israel or fighting on the Israeli side. Such a breathtakingly stark politicization of the value of life is not only dangerous but also potentially criminal. Within the context of Israel's ongoing genocide against Palestinians, this media devaluation of life within Palestinian space materially supports the killing of Palestinians, including Palestinian civilians.

The Lemkin Institute must conclude that, within US media circles, the tragic nature of the death of an American citizen in the Middle East is dependent upon who shot the bullet. If Israel is directly responsible for an American death, the deceased receives less coverage and is not mourned by their nation.

The Lemkin Institute urges US media outlets to treat all American deaths in the region as equally lamentable, and to cease their misrepresentation of protests against illegal occupation. We further warn US media that their asymmetrical coverage of death in Palestine-Israel in favor of the value of Israeli lives borders on complicity in the crime of genocide.