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Strategic Non-Recognition:
A Galtungian Analysis of Dutch Political
Discourse on Israel-Palestine

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Is there not something suspicious, indeed symptomatic, about this focus on subjective violence – that violence which is enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds? Doesn't it desperately try to distract our attention from the true locus of trouble, by obliterating from view other forms of violence and thus actively participating in them?

Slavoj Zizek (2008, 9)

Introduction

The Israel-Palestine conflict periodically attracts global attention, typically following escalations of violence. Between 2008 and 2021, four wars have claimed the lives of hundreds of Israelis and over 7000 Palestinians (OCHA 2023). The war that followed Hamas's attack on 7 October 2023 has been especially devastating, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of Palestinians, a majority of them civilians (AJLabs 2025; OHCHR 2024a). Some reports suggest that the death toll has already reached the hundreds of thousands (Democracy Now 2024; Khatib, McKee, and Yusuf 2024). Despite mounting evidence that Israel's conduct in Gaza constitutes genocide (International Court of Justice 2024a), it continues to receive unwavering support from many Western governments, including the Netherlands (Amnesty International 2024a; Human Rights Watch 2024; OHCHR 2024b).

The Netherlands is one of Israel's most arduous supporters and consistently abstains in UN General Assembly votes that call for a ceasefire in Gaza (Al Jazeera 2024; United Nations 2024). However, the Dutch government's continued support for Israel has become increasingly difficult to justify. Therefore, this essay examines how the Netherlands frames the conflict by disregarding its structural causes, particularly Israel's illegal occupation of the West Bank and its blockade of Gaza. Drawing on Johan Galtung's (1969) framework of direct and structural violence, it argues that the conflict is decontextualised and dehistoricised in Dutch political discourse. The essay begins by introducing Galtung's typology of violence, proceeds with a discourse analysis of relevant statements and concludes that the Netherlands engages in "strategic non-recognition" by ignoring the structural conditions that perpetuate the conflict's status quo.

Structural Violence

Galtung defines violence as a condition where "human beings are ... influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (Galtung 1969, 168). This broad conceptualisation encapsulates two distinct forms of violence: (1) the direct, physical administration of harm and (2) impairment caused by indirect, structural forces that limit human capacity. By extension, Galtung distinguishes two types of peace. Negative peace indicates the absence of direct violence, which to distant observers might appear as actual peace, while positive peace entails the absence of structural violence (Galtung 1969). If positive peace requires the complete absence of violence as Galtung defines it, then there should be no (preventable) barriers for any individual within a defined space to flourish in every aspect of their lives. Evidently, some level of inequality exists everywhere, which means positive peace

appears to be a rather utopian concept. However, the same might be said for negative peace, which, if defined as the non-existence of direct violence, appears virtually unachievable. Nonetheless, the concepts remain theoretically useful to understand how the appearance of peace does not equate to an experienced peace. Structural violence frequently breeds direct violence and vice versa, as people seek to either challenge or maintain systems of oppression. Therefore, I agree with Galtung that to achieve peace “action should be directed against personal as well as structural violence” (Galtung 1969, 172).

Even though both forms of violence exist in virtually every country to some degree, their presence is not equally acknowledged. Traditional approaches focus on interpersonal violence, because they “tend to associate violence with visibility and with actions that can be attributed to an individual subject” (Winter 2012, 196). Perpetration of this form of violence is recognised because “it corresponds to our ideas of what drama is and ... there are persons committing the violence” (Galtung 1969, 171). Structural violence, however, does not manifest itself in the same sensational manner: “it does not show - it is essentially static, it *is* the tranquil waters” (Galtung 1969, 173, emphasis in original). This does not mean, however, that structural violence is not recognisable; to the contrary, many of its instantiations are entirely evident, such as the discriminatory policies of the Jim Crow era in the United States, apartheid rule in South Africa, and, of course, Israel’s illegal occupation of Palestine. Hence, the main issue with indirect violence is not its invisibility per se, but rather the lack of attention and recognition it receives.

The reason structural violence receives less attention than direct violence is quite straightforward: direct violence makes headlines, structural violence does not; direct violence is easy to grasp, structural violence is complex. Direct violence occurs in the form of discernible instances that dramatically disrupt ordinary everyday existence, whereas structural violence often appears mundane, despite its potential to inflict profound harm on individuals and communities. In addition, the horrific effects of direct violence are often immediately visible and are clearly related to its preceding perpetration. In contrast, the consequences of structural violence are usually not immediately evident. As Deborah Winter and Leighton (2001, 99) note, “the damage is slower, more subtle, more common, and more difficult to repair.” Therefore, it is rarely considered newsworthy and receives little media attention.

Structural violence also lacks recognition as a category of violence. Galtung’s expanded conceptualisation has been rejected by positivist scholars, supposedly on epistemological grounds. Although engaging at length with the arguments presented in favour of restrictive conceptions of violence is beyond the scope of this essay, I will briefly aim to demonstrate the use of an inclusive definition. When such conditions are imposed on individuals or communities that their potential realisations are severely obstructed or outright destructed, and that as a consequence they are systematically deprived of their ability to sustain their own livelihoods, it has to be designated in meaningful terms that reflect the gravity of the situation. Recognising it as “problematic” is not sufficient, because such specifications whitewash the tremendous suffering that is caused. In the words of Yves Winter (2012, 197), “calling these conditions violence is an attempt at scandalization, an effort to make them visible and recognizable within the socio-political grid.” Indeed, it is incumbent on scholars of violence to

register complex dynamics that are generally overlooked in public discourse and to label them accordingly. Therefore, the usefulness of expanding the concept of violence to include structural violence resides in its capacity to signify its manifestations in a manner that other terms cannot.

The Israel-Palestine conflict demonstrates the consequences of a limited conception of violence. Israel's military operations are often justified as counterterrorism while Palestinian actions are framed as terrorism. This framing is possible because Israel's illegal occupation is not recognised as a form of violence, despite the immense suffering and desperation it imposes on the Palestinians, as will be shown in the next section.

Structural Violence in Israel-Palestine

There are two main manifestations of structural violence at the heart of the Israel-Palestine conflict: Israel's illegal occupation of the West Bank and its siege of the Gaza Strip. In the West Bank, Palestinians' freedom of movement is severely restricted due to a web of checkpoints, walls and fences (Amnesty International 2022, 20). In addition, Palestinians require permits to travel beyond their municipal area, which are arbitrarily denied. These restrictions are a "tool through which Israel segregates Palestinians into separate enclaves, isolates them from each other and the rest of the world and, ultimately, enforces its domination regime" (Amnesty International 2022, 95). They lead to many practical problems for Palestinians in the West Bank, "hindering their ability to access markets, workplaces, emergency services, as well as health and educational facilities" (OCHA 2024). Israel justifies these restrictions as security measures, thereby legitimising structural violence as a necessary tool for combating the threat of direct violence. According to Brockhill (2021, 452), Israel deliberately employs a selective conception of violence, limited to tactics used by the Palestinian resistance. Even though the restrictions on freedom of movement have devastated the Palestinian economy and resulted in widespread harm and suffering, it has not widely been acknowledged as a form of violence. However, as Brockhill (2012, 469) observes, this recognition is essential to ensure that Israel's policies cannot be dismissed as mere inconveniences, instead relating the "experiences of harm and devastation ... to acts of violence."

Gaza has been under an Israeli blockade since the mid-2000s, which severely restricts the movement of people and goods, effectively turning it into an "open-air prison" (Human Rights Watch 2023). Israel even uses "mathematical formulas to determine how much food to allow into Gaza, limited to what is deemed essential for the survival of the civilian population" (Amnesty International 2022, 80). Additionally, Israel controls the electricity supply to Gaza, which it has restricted to a few hours per day, usually provided in the middle of the night (Amnesty International 2017). The blockade has resulted in a "perpetual humanitarian crisis" in Gaza (Amnesty International 2022, 27), causing immense physical and psychological suffering among young Gazans, who "struggle to survive [and] are trapped in inescapable politically imposed poverty" (Hammad and Tribe 2020, 1805). Pace and Yacobi (2021) conceptualise these restrictions as a form of "slow violence," which gradually deteriorates the living conditions of Gazans, while also acknowledging that they constitute structural violence.

Similar to the restrictions in the West Bank, the blockade has been justified as a necessary security measure, while some pro-Israel scholars even claim it complies with international law (Bell 2007). However, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has declared both the West Bank and Gaza illegally occupied under international law (International Court of Justice 2024b, 29-31, 71-74). While the legality of the occupation is separate from the question of whether it constitutes structural violence, the ICJ's rulings do challenge Israel's justifications for its actions, which are evidently not in accordance with international law.

Despite the ICJ confirming that Israel is a serial violator of international law, many Western states – including the Netherlands – continue to support Israel, presenting it as a legitimate actor upholding democratic and international-legal values. For instance, in December 2024, just a week after Amnesty International (2024b) released a report accusing Israel of committing genocide in Gaza, the Dutch Prime Minister Dick Schoof stated that the government believes Israel has not yet violated international humanitarian law in Gaza. This directly contradicts findings by the ICJ (2024a), the International Criminal Court (ICC 2024), UN experts (OHCHR 2024b) and various human rights organisations. The Netherlands' consistent denial of Israel's violations of international law reflects a political discourse in which the current conflict is decontextualised and the structural elements systematically overlooked. To demonstrate this, the essay conducts a discourse analysis of Dutch government statements on Israel-Palestine.

Israel-Palestine in Dutch Political Discourse

The purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate how the Israel-Palestine conflict is framed in Dutch political discourse. Employing Galtung's typology of violence, the study explores how references are made to direct violence and structural violence in the context of the conflict. The analysis examines a selection of written statements (n=10) on Israel-Palestine by Dutch government representatives, including unilateral statements by the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, correspondence between the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs and Parliament, as well as answers of cabinet ministers to parliamentary questions on the issue.¹ The statements were gathered from the Dutch government's database (<https://www.officielebekendmakingen.nl>) and its official website (<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten>).² The timeframe - 19 July 2024 to 20 December 2024 – covers the release of some important reports and rulings, including the ICJ's opinion (2024b), the issuance of arrest warrants for Netanyahu and Gallant by the ICC (2024) and reports on the humanitarian conditions in Gaza by, *inter alia*, Human Rights Watch (2024), Amnesty International (2024b) and Doctors Without Borders (2024).

Gaza

With regard to the Gaza Strip, the statements essentially only refer to direct violence. While discussing the origins of the current war between Hamas and Israel, the government states that it “strongly condemns the terrorist attacks by Hamas” and “supports Israel's right to self-defence” (Veldkamp 2024g). In addition, the belief is expressed that the Hamas attack “unleashed [a] spiral of violence on October 7, 2023” (Veldkamp 2024g). When mentioning the

¹ Since the Ministers speak on behalf of the Dutch government, I will be referring to the “government” or “cabinet” when analysing the statements.

² The written statements are originally in Dutch and were translated to English by the author.

Israeli attacks on Gaza, the cabinet refers to “military actions” or “hostilities,” while implying they are necessary since “ Hamas continues to pose a threat to Israel” (Veldkamp 2024g). In another statement, the government expresses “concern” for the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip and that humanitarian organizations have “insufficient access to Gaza for the delivery of aid,” while “call[ing] on Israel to facilitate the work of humanitarian organizations” (Veldkamp 2024h; Veldkamp and Klever 2024a, 2024b). In terms of what is required to resolve the conflict, the government repeatedly mentions the need for a ceasefire (Veldkamp 2024a, 2024c, 2024f, 2024g, 2024h) and a release of the Israeli hostages in captivity (Veldkamp 2024a, 2024f, 2024g, 2024h). Concerning violations of international law, the government “calls on all parties, including Israel, to adhere to international humanitarian law,” adding that it “considers it essential that potential evidence of alleged violations of international humanitarian law and international crimes is investigated” (Veldkamp 2024g). This implies that it is entirely undetermined whether there even is evidence. Furthermore, the government claims it has “reminded Israel of its obligations under international law” (Veldkamp 2024e).

Although the Dutch government repeatedly notes the need for humanitarian aid in Gaza, this should not be seen as an acknowledgement of structural violence. Galtung (1969, 174) distinguishes two types of personal violence: a) anatomical and b) physiological. The direct denial of food and water constitutes direct physiological violence as it is an action attributable to a specific subject with immediate, observable consequences. However, the restrictions on goods and services imposed by Israel’s blockade of Gaza do represent structural violence. This is a multidimensional policy that is enacted through a series of separate but related actions and omissions – such as strict import and export license requirements or complex travel permit procedures – whose effects cannot be tied to a single action or subject. In addition, Israel’s limited allowance of essential goods into Gaza ensures that the consequences are temporally and spatially dispersed. Even with a ceasefire, a release of the hostages and increased humanitarian aid, there is little reason to assume that the long-term situation will improve for Gazans. This dynamic remains unaddressed in analysed statements, except for a brief acknowledgement that Gazans “will depend on humanitarian aid for a significant period” (Veldkamp 2024g). This aid dependency, however, should be viewed as an element of structural violence, rather than an elimination of direct violence. Before the war, 80% of Gaza’s population already relied on humanitarian aid due to the blockade (Amnesty International 2024b, 52). This manufactured dependency is not only a consequence of structural violence but also an ongoing instance of it, trapping Gazans in a cycle of perpetual reliance on aid and precluding the development of a self-sustaining economy. The Dutch government’s observation that Gazans will depend on aid for the foreseeable future falsely implies that this is a new phenomenon resulting from the current war, when in fact, it has been the lived reality for Palestinians in Gaza for two decades.

West Bank

In relation to the situation in the West Bank, one Dutch government statement expresses concern about “increased instability” as a result of “various factors and actors, including settler violence” (Veldkamp 2024d). To prevent further escalation, the statement reads, the Netherlands advocates for sanctions against violent settlers within the EU (Veldkamp 2024d).

The government frequently reiterates that it considers “violent settlers” (Veldkamp 2024b, 2024c, 2024f, 2024g, 2024h) and “settler violence” (2024b, 2024c, 2024d) as an important issue, claiming that sanctions “send a strong signal that settler violence is unacceptable” (2024d). Evidently, the factors contributing to increased instability are primarily specified in terms of direct violence. Nonetheless, in response to parliamentary questions on Israeli annexation of land, the government admits that “Israel’s settlement policy ... does not bring a sustainable solution any closer” (2024c). However, the statements clearly separate the “settlers” and Israel’s “settlement policy,” implying there is no direct connection between the two. When discussing settlers, the government readily refers to “violence” and responds with sanctions. Yet, it also states that it does not believe Israel’s settlement expansion warrants sanctions (Veldkamp 2024c). Instead, the government describes it as “unlawful” (2024d) and “a threat to the two-state solution” (2024a). However, the settlement policy constitutes one of the main instances of structural violence against the Palestinians, of which settler violence is an inevitable symptom.

Another factor that is mentioned as a cause for concern is the unstable financial situation of the Palestinian Authority (Veldkamp 2024a, 2024f, 2024g). Alleviating this issue, the government states, requires economic and democratic reforms. However, it is Israel that is primarily responsible for the Authority’s financial peril, as it “aim[s] to devastate the [Palestinian] economy through human dispossession, land confiscation, local production disarticulation, resource exploitation, in addition to myriad policies that target the spheres of land, natural resources, and labor” (Dana 2021, 27). Israel systematically steals and exploits Palestinian natural resources in Gaza and the West Bank, while preventing the local population from accessing them (OHCHR 2019). In this context, both sanctions on violent settlers and economic reform of the Palestinian economy amount to symptomatic treatment, addressing consequences (direct violence) rather than the root causes (structural violence) of the conflict.

Conclusion: Strategic Non-Recognition

The Dutch government frames the conflict primarily in terms of direct violence. It offers little recognition of Israel’s evident war crimes in Gaza, referring only to “potential evidence of alleged violations” (Veldkamp 2024g). Its repeated call for a ceasefire – despite consistently abstaining on General Assembly resolutions on the issue – and emphasis on increasing humanitarian aid demonstrate a narrow focus on reducing direct violence. Therefore, the current eruption of violence is framed as a state of exception, while it actually constitutes a continuation of the status quo: Israel’s complete domination over life (and death) in Gaza, marking the fifth war since 2005 (Courty 2023).

Discourse surrounding the West Bank reveals a similar pattern. By referring to “Israel’s presence in the Palestinian territories” (Veldkamp 2024g) and stating that it “distances a peaceful resolution” (2024c) the occupation is framed in vague and legalistic terms, which sanitises the reality of its impact. While settlement expansion is considered problematic, real action is only taken in relation to violence committed by settlers, thereby neglecting that these settlers are protected by the Israeli army and act with complete impunity (Amnesty

International 2023). Moreover, the Dutch government suggests that the Palestinian economy needs to be reformed, overlooking Israel's decades-long destruction of Palestinian livelihoods.

Evidently, Palestinians endure a combination of excessive direct violence and structural violence, which are mutually reinforcing. It must be noted that eliminating direct violence without dismantling the underlying structures that perpetuate it is unsustainable. As Galtung notes, "tools of oppression may have internalized the repressive structure so that their personal violence is an expression of internalized, not only institutionalized norms" (Galtung 1969, 180). Therefore, without attempting to eliminate structural violence, direct violence will persist, either to reinforce the structure (Israel) or to challenge it (Palestinians).

Finally, there are two possible scenarios regarding the stance of Dutch government representatives: 1) they are unaware or fail to understand this dynamic, or 2) they are aware but choose not to acknowledge it for strategic or other reasons. I argue that the first scenario is highly unlikely, provided that the government receives advice from international affairs experts advocating for a radical shift in policy towards Israel-Palestine (Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken 2024). Therefore, it seems that the government intentionally neglects the structural factors driving the conflict, adopting what I term "strategic non-recognition" to avoid addressing deeper issues and challenging the fundamental structures that underpin the conflict. By strategically omitting structural violence in discourse on Israel-Palestine, the conflict is both decontextualised and dehistoricised, while instances of direct violence are detached from the system of repression that enables it.

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