



From forced displacement to forced immobility: the Israeli mobility regime to the post-disengagement Gaza Strip

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Abstract: The article investigates the effects of the mobility regime imposed by Israel after the disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005, when Israel withdrew all its Jewish settlements from the region. Although the Israeli State claims to have no further responsibility for Gaza under international occupation law, its remote-control policies reveal the continuation of colonial domination by other means. In this scenario, we argue that Gaza emerges both as a space of expulsion, where Palestinians must move and remain, and as a deathscape, since the effects of the policy of (im)mobility of people generate fatal effects. In a historical perspective, the article argues that Gaza experienced two contrasting phenomena: a moment of forced displacement, when 200,000 Palestinians took refuge in the region during the crea-

tion of the State of Israel, in 1948, and a moment of forced immobility, caused by restrictions on the movement of people and products, occurring since 2005. Although contrasting, both phenomena can be understood through the Zionist settler colonialism framework, which, since its foundation, has sought to deal with the “Arab” problem: the demographic threat to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

Keywords: Gaza Strip; Mobility Regime; Israeli settler colonialism.

Do deslocamento forçado à imobilidade forçada: o regime israelense de mobilidade para a Faixa de Gaza no pós-desengajamento

Resumo: O artigo investiga os efeitos do regime de mobilidade imposto por Israel na Faixa de Gaza após o desengajamento de 2005, quando Israel retirou todos os seus assentamentos da região. Embora o Estado de Israel afirme não ter mais responsabilidade sobre Gaza de acordo com a lei internacional de ocupação, suas políticas de controle remoto revelam a continuação da dominação colonial por outros meios. Nesse cenário, argumentamos que Gaza emerge tanto como um espaço de expulsão, onde os palestinos devem se deslocar e permanecer, quanto como uma *deathscape*, já que os efeitos da política de (i) mobilidade de pessoas geram efeitos fatais. Em uma perspectiva histórica, o artigo argumenta que Gaza experimentou dois fenômenos contrastantes: um momento de deslocamento forçado, quando 200 mil palestinos se refugiaram na região durante a criação do Estado de Israel, em 1948, e um momento de imobilidade forçada, causado por restrições à circulação de pessoas e produtos, que funcionam desde 2005. Embora contrastantes, ambos os fenômenos podem ser compreendidos por meio do enquadramento teórico do colonialismo por povoamento sionista, que desde o seu surgimento procurou lidar com o problema “árabe”: a ameaça demográfica ao estabelecimento de um Estado judeu na Palestina.

Palavras-chave: Faixa de Gaza; Regime de Mobilidade; Colonialismo por povoamento israelense.

Del desplazamiento forzado a la inmovilidad forzada: el régimen de movilidad israelí para la Franja de Gaza posterior a la retirada

Resumen: El artículo investiga los efectos del régimen de movilidad impuesto por Israel en la Franja de Gaza en el período posterior a 2005, cuando Israel retiró todos sus asentamientos de la región. Aunque el Estado de Israel no reclama más responsabilidad por Gaza bajo la ley de ocupación internacional, sus políticas de control remoto revelan la continuación de la dominación colonial por otros medios. En este escenario, argumentamos que Gaza emerge tanto como un espacio de expulsión, donde los palestinos deben moverse y permanecer, como un paisaje de muerte, ya que los efectos de la política de (in)movilidad de las personas generan efectos fatales. Desde una perspectiva histórica, el artículo argumenta que Gaza vivió dos fenómenos contrastantes: un momento de desplazamiento forzado, cuando 200.000 palestinos se refugiaron en la región durante la creación del Estado de Israel en 1948, y un momento de inmovilidad forzada, provocada por las restricciones a la circulación de personas y productos, que opera desde 2005. Aunque contrastantes, ambos fenómenos pueden ser entendidos a través del marco teóri-



co del colonialismo por asentamiento sionista, que desde sus inicios ha buscado enfrentar el problema "árabe": la demografía amenaza para el establecimiento de un estado judío en Palestina.

Palabras clave: Franja de Gaza; Régimen de Movilidad; Colonialismo por el asentamiento israelí.

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INTRODUCTION¹

In October 2022, eight young Palestinians died after drowning in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Tunisia while attempting to escape the 15-year-long Israeli and Egyptian blockade of the Gaza Strip (SHURAFU; AKRAM, 2022). Currently, the 365 km² Gaza Strip is inhabited by 2.17 million Palestinians, with almost 70% of them – 1.48 million – registered as refugees (OCHA, 2022). They live in a siege, with land borders, air and sea controlled by Israel, which also manages the movement in and out of Gaza. The Israeli control of Gaza impacts various aspects of the population's daily lives: 95% of the water in Gaza is unfit for human consumption; electricity is generally available for just eight hours a day; youth unemployment stands at 62.5%; about 62% of the population requires food assistance, and 80% depends on international aid (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2023; OCHA, 2022).

Gaza's isolation did not start with the 2007 Israeli blockade. Rather, it is a result of decades of separation and closure policies, aiming at eliminating a racialized and dehumanized "surplus" population. Central to this dynamic is the mobility policy, an instrument of control that deals with Palestinian population as a political problem and intends to govern its collective body. The literature about the mobility regime in Palestine/Israel tends to focus on the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, where colonizer and colonized share the same space. In Gaza, however, there are no more Jewish settlements since 2005, when Israel implemented its unilateral disengagement plan - unilateral since there was no negotiation with Palestinians.

Although there is no physical presence of Israelis inside Gaza, we cannot critically understand Israel's control over that land and its population if we detach its historical construction from the Zionist settler colonization of Palestine. According to Baconi (2020, p. 2), usually the context of Gaza's current situation is "misunderstood, misrepresented, or overlooked". Therefore, we must situate Israel's remote-control policies towards Gaza in the historical, and especially ideological, Zionist settler colonial framework. Israeli disengagement may give the impression that the settler colonial efforts towards the Gaza Strip have ended. However, a careful look at the mobility regime proves that Israel's control over Gaza not only continued, but instead was strengthened in a way that puts Gazans in a limbo of life and death.

In this article, we examine the Israeli human mobility regime towards the Gaza Strip after the 2005 disengagement and the effects of this permit policy on the lives of the Gazan population. Our main argument is that the sociospatial dynamics in the Gaza Strip are part of a *continuum* of the Zionist settler colonialisation of Palestine. We demonstrate that Gaza was and still is one of the biggest demographic concerns of the Israeli settler colonial project, par-

1 The research and writing was completed before the events of October 7, 2023, and the genocide of Gazan population led by the State of Israel.



ticularly because 70 per cent of its 2 million residents are refugees from the Nakba. During the ethnic cleansing that created the State of Israel (1948), the Gaza Strip became a refuge area for 200.000 expelled Palestinians (Filiu, 2014, p. 71). But since the end of the 1980s, it has turned into an isolated space, until it gradually materialized into a deathscape due to the various Israeli colonial policies of sociospatial isolation. In this scenario, the mobility regime, also called the permit regime, reveals the strong and rational articulation between the Zionist settler colonial politics – the conquest of maximum land with minimum indigenous people – and the policies that pave the way for achieving this strategic goal.

The research findings are interpreted mainly through two bodies of literature about colonial domination and violence: the settler colonialism framework (WOLFE, 2006), the notion of body-territory (GAGO, 2020) and the concept of necropolitics (MBEMBE, 2003). These concepts shed light on how Israeli settler colonial governmentality works by managing Gazan territory and population at a distance, aiming at eliminating a “surplus population”. In Wolfe’s (2006) theoretical elaboration of settler colonialism, the logics of elimination and the conquest of the territory are manifested jointly and, sometimes, dialectically. In Gaza after the Israeli disengagement, the settler colonialism is manifested “without settlers” within the territory (Pace; Yacobi, 2021), in a “remote control occupation” (Salamanca, 2011) that put Gazans daily life in a limbo between life and death. The logics of elimination is expressed by the mobility regime, which can also be understood through the concept of necropolitics, as discussed in the following section.

In what follows, the argument is developed in four different sections: we begin by reviewing the body of literature about human circulation in and out of the Gaza Strip. Following Gago’s interpretation of the Latin American indigenous feminist notion of body-territory, we argue that it is impossible to detach the body and the space and defend that we can better comprehend Israeli ongoing colonial violence over the Palestinian population and territory as an embodied and pluralized violence. The second section draws a brief genealogy of the sociospatial construction of the Gaza Strip, highlighting its gradual transformation from an area of refuge to an isolated area. The third section examines the Israeli mobility regime towards Gaza and is divided into three main consequences that emerge from this policy: (i) the enduring de-development, (ii) the separation of Palestinian families, and (iii) the slow death promoted by COGAT’s bureaucracy. We conclude that the mobility regime ends up being a bio-necropolitical tool that puts Gazans in a life-death limbo. Consequently, the Gaza Strip emerges both as an expulsion area, where Palestinians must go and remain, as well as a *deathscape*, since the effects of the Israeli (i)mobility regime can be fatal.



ISRAELI MOBILITY REGIME TOWARDS GAZA'S BODY-TERRITORY: A LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature about Israeli permit regime and mobility policies towards Palestine usually takes the West Bank as the most notorious example of Israeli apartheid. The West Bank separation wall is the aesthetic representation of Israeli-Zionist settler colonial efforts to physically, spatially, and racially segregate the colonized people. Perhaps the most complete academic investigation about Israeli mobility policies was made by Julie Peteet (2017), in her work "Space and Mobility in Palestine". Her research focuses mainly on the West Bank, where she made ethnographic work, and gives us powerful insights about Israel's "active relational geography of inclusion and exclusion" and how the "managed chaos has become a modus operandi of daily life in Palestine" (PETEET, 2017, p. 2). The author carefully examines how the closure policy crafts spatiotemporal zones, making Palestinians trapped in the unpredictability of colonial bureaucracy. Mobility is an expression of the linkage between power and the production of space:

The regime of control over Palestinian mobility, I contend, works to transform cartographies and the meaning of space and to manage the collective and individual body. I frame mobility as socially produced and, in turn, productive and reproductive of particular social orders and landscapes. (PETEET, 2017, p. 72).

Although there is still a gap in the broader literature on the Israeli mobility regime related to the specificities of Gaza, we can highlight some existing works that explore the multifaceted dynamics of Israeli control and restrictions on mobility in Palestine/Israel. It is worth mentioning the literature on colonial control, violence, and power dynamics in Palestine/Israel. Israeli architect Eyal Weizman (2012), for example, explored the architecture of Israeli occupation, arguing that there is a politics of verticality, meaning that domination of space and resources functions in a threefold manner: by land, sea, and air. Weizman's (2012) powerful insight about the existence of a frontier architecture in Palestine/Israel highlights the existence of various types of borders - fixed and elastic, stable and dynamic - which destabilizes the static notion of a Westphalian border. Weizman (2012, p. 7) also argues that space must not be treated as a mere background for Israeli actions, but instead as a "medium that each of their actions seeks to challenge, transform or appropriate". In this sense, infrastructure can also be interpreted as a target and a medium of Israeli violence over Palestinians.

The infrastructure of Israeli occupation is also explored by Salamanca (2011) and Winter (2016), both focusing on Gaza. The authors agree with Wolfe's (2006) interpretation of settler colonialism as a structure, and that its tactics may change over time, possibly acquiring seemingly contradictory paths, but the main goal, *i.e.*, ideology and politics, remain the same. Both



Winter (2016) and Salamanca (2011) argue that Israeli disengagement from Gaza was accompanied by new forms of spatial violence, with infrastructure control and isolation being one of them. Indeed, Salamanca (2011, p. 2016) points out that infrastructure networks serve as “an umbilical cord that ties colonized bodies and territory to the colonizer while at the same time enforce a severe and enduring dependency”. As for Winter (2016, p. 311), “the siege of Gaza can be understood as a prototype for a new mode of managing a population deemed hostile”. In similar manners, both authors shed light on how the control over basic life resources – water, electricity, food – severely impact Gazans life, but there is a gap regarding how human mobility restrictions can also be deadly.

Sari Bashi’s (2013) investigation on the Israeli permit regime over Gaza is perhaps the most notorious example of robust work based on official documents obtained through the Israeli Freedom of Information Act. In her research, Bashi (2013) has a Human Rights approach, but lacks a critical engagement with the Zionist settler colonial framework. We aim to analyze the mobility regime not through an International Law perspective, but instead locate it in the historical Israeli-Zionist settler colonialisation of Palestine, including its seemingly contradictory movements.

Population management in Gaza has been mainly investigated by scholars from Political and/or Human Geography (BHUNGALIA, 2010; 2012; SMITH, 2016). A careful and critical look at the settler colonial policies over the colonized body enables us to assess the effects of this particular type of colonial governmentality, whose main target is the population understood as a political problem. Smith (2016), for example, argues that Gazans have become a “surplus” population that has little or no economic value to Israel, who does not need it as a workforce. Thus, the siege is a long-term way to isolate and manage this invaluable and deemed “surplus” population (SMITH, 2016).

Michel Foucault (2009, p. 108) defines governmentality as “[...] the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument”. This means that the population is treated as a political problem - a collective body - and must be managed in economic and security terms. In settler colonial contexts, such as Gaza, the logic of elimination tends to be the cornerstone of the colonial power tactics, which targets the native population as a political problem that will be either eliminated - physically or symbolically - or explored (WOLFE, 2006). As argued and empirically demonstrated throughout the article, the logic of elimination in the Gaza Strip after the Israeli disengagement is developed through policies of sociospatial control, such as over the circulation of goods and people in and out of Gaza.



Moreover, the colonial governmentality in Gaza after the Israeli disengagement points to the operation of a politics of death, or necropolitics in Mbembe's (2003) conception. Beyond the "cycles of violence", i.e. the continuous Israeli military operations since 2009, the conditions of life in Gaza are restricted by the Israeli colonial domination over space and resources. Life is described by Gazans as a death-in-life or slow death. As described by Mbembe (2003, p. 30), necropolitics is not limited to the immediate act of killing - fast death - but works by controlling access to infrastructure and resources, as well as limiting human mobility in and out of the territory:

Entire populations are the target of the sovereign. The besieged villages and towns are sealed off and cut off from the world. Daily life is militarized. Freedom is given to local military commanders to use their discretion as to when and whom to shoot. Movement between the territorial cells requires formal permits. Local civil institutions are systematically destroyed. The besieged population is deprived of their means of income. Invisible killing is added to outright executions. (MBEMBE, 2003, p. 30).

It is precisely the "invisible killing" that we aim to investigate through an analysis of Israeli mobility policies towards Gaza. The human mobility regime is part of this colonial governmentality and illustrates the intimate connection between territory and population, which is addressed by Bhungalia (2010; 2012), who claims that the classification of Gaza as a hostile entity extends beyond the land and impacts the collective and individual body. According to Bhungalia (2010, p. 348), Gaza's siege is a "counter-insurgency strategy [that] entails regulation and management of the Palestinian body combined with the active subjugation of Palestinian life to the power of death". Bhungalia (2012) also mobilizes the notions of biopolitics and necropolitics to comprehend the effects of the Israeli (im)mobility regime towards Gaza. She goes further and argues that, in the Gaza Strip, "territory and body are collapsed into one" (BHUNGALIA, 2012, p. 271).

We follow this provocative insight. By relying on the rich aforementioned body of literature, we aim to develop a more robust theoretical approach to the Israeli mobility regime towards the Gaza Strip. This is possible by establishing a dialogue with Veronica Gago's (2020) interpretation of body-territory as an analytical and political concept, capable of exploring the nuanced dimensions of colonial violence and acknowledging that it is not possible to detach the control over territory from the control over the body. According to Gago (2020), understanding the pluralization of violence is not merely enlist various types of violence, but "a way of mapping their **simultaneity** and **interrelation**" (GAGO, 2020, p. 72, our translation, original emphasis). The concept of body-territory means that "it is impossible to cut and isolate the individual body from the collective body, the human body from the territory and the landscape" (GAGO, 2020, p. 107, our translation). Therefore, examining the effects of the Israeli mobility

regime towards Gaza requires a careful look at the settler colonial historical and theoretical framework, as well as the various and interrelated violence that emerge from Zionist politics throughout the history of Palestine/Israel Question.

FROM EXPULSION TO ISOLATION: A GENEALOGY OF THE SOCIOSPATIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE GAZA STRIP (1948-2005)

Much has been written about the origins of Zionism as a political, nationalist movement, and its racist basis (SALAMANCA *et al.*, 2012; SAYEGH, 2012; VERACINI, 2013). By drawing a brief genealogy of Gaza's sociospatial construction, we aim to highlight the demographic dimension of the Zionist settler colonial project in Palestine. We follow Foucault's (2021) conception of genealogy not as a search for the origins of a particular phenomenon, but as a dive into the emergence in a given state of forces, a movement that guides us to the identification of social forces and mechanisms of power in dispute. In this methodology, it is crucial to understand the intimate relationship between knowledge and power.

As stated by Veracini (2013, p. 33), "the settler colonial project is obsessed with demographic concerns". Since its very beginning, Zionist thought and practice searched for ways of acquiring the maximum land in historic Palestine with minimum indigenous population. From transfer proposals (MASALHA, 2021) to ethnic cleansing (PAPPÉ, 2016), Zionists created the State of Israel – narrated by Palestinians as the Nakba, catastrophe in Arabic – by expelling 700.000 natives from their homes between 1947 and 1948. Of them, 200,000 sought refuge in Gaza, which at that time had only 80,000 inhabitants. In no other Palestinian territory has the influx of internally displaced people been so significant.

The Gaza Strip space was constructed by various social forces in dispute throughout the years. Perhaps its most outstanding feature is that the majority of the population is registered as refugees by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). According to Feldman (2007), the immediate post-Nakba in Gaza was marked by difficult distinctions between native and refugee, two categories that produced changes in the region's social fabric. UNRWA's relief work, for example, is directed solely to the refugees. However, both refugees and natives, although in different ways, experienced the effects of the Nakba in their daily lives, largely due to the economic devastation that was established in Gaza.

From the 1950s on, Gaza's landscape has been marked by refugee camps. Currently, there are eight camps, home for 1.48 million refugees. In demographic terms, refuge is no longer the exception and has become the norm in Gaza (TAYEH, 2022). According to Bocco (2010, p. 248), the economic, social, and spatial relations of the Palestinian refugees from the camps with their surroundings, due to the porosity – or non-existence – of borders, influenced



the political imaginary of Palestinian nationalism, bringing the camps to the center of political action. In this way, the camps also have the symbolic role of representing Palestinian dispossession, and the ambiguous role of the international community, represented here by UNRWA, at the same time maintaining the *status quo* and being responsible for preventing the collapse of the Palestinian population of Gaza. Thus, one can argue that the Gaza Strip's landscape and population, or Gaza's body-territory, are a constant and powerful reminder of the Nakba and the Palestinian right of return.

After the Six-Day War, in June 1967, Israel occupied the Palestinian territories of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The 1967 occupation revived claims about the demographic threat posed by the number of Palestinians under Israeli rule. According to the documental research by Shafer-Raviv (2020; 2021), in the first months after the occupation of 1967, the Israeli state elaborated attempts to stimulate the emigration of Palestinians to reduce Gaza's population. The documents analyzed by Shafer-Raviv (2021) reveal a re-elaboration of the idea of transfer – a euphemism for expulsion, as argued by Masalha (2021). These failed policies were elaborated in order to ensure that the demographic balance was favorable to the Jewish population.

In an effort to normalize the occupation and pacify the Palestinian population, the 1967 occupation regime also introduced economic measures such as integrating Palestinian labor into Israel. In February 1969, the Israeli government began to allow Palestinians from Gaza to work in Israel as low-skill manual workers. This increased the number of Palestinian workers from Gaza in Israel from 6.000 in 1970 to 36.000 in 1980. By offering higher wages compared to Gaza, labor in Israel slightly improved living standards – for example, the number of households with refrigerators increased from 5.7% to 66,2% from 1972 to 1981 (SHAFER RAVIV, 2021, p. 353). Although they meant a certain level of prosperity and improvement in living conditions, these economic policies represented, above all, a strong dependence of Palestinians on Israel (ROY, 1988).

In spatial terms, for the Israeli authorities, the refugee camps were treated as an external body that had to be removed from Gaza's map, for example through its assimilation with the native inhabitants. In the 1970s, the attempt to integrate the refugee camps in Gaza with the urban surroundings was conducted with a view to diminishing the national Palestinian ethos and the demands for return, that is, a form of pacification (ABREEK-ZUBIEDAT; NITZAN-SHIFTAN, 2018). In his investigation on house demolitions and resettlement schemes for Palestinian refugees in Gaza, Dahlan (1990) shows how this policy ultimately sought to purge the landscape of refugee camps from Gaza and, along with it, the symbolism of the Palestinians' right of return to their homes. The refugees themselves refused to accept the settlement schemes, since it did not resolve the chronic condition of the refuge (DAHLAN, 1990).



With Israeli occupation's economic policies, Gaza's economic growth was not accompanied by development, but instead by de-development, a deliberate and systematic process of undermining the "ability of an economy to grow and expand by preventing it from accessing and utilizing critical inputs needed to promote internal growth beyond a specific structural level" (ROY, 1987, p. 56). Gaza's economy was getting even more dependent on Israel and had strong difficulties in developing its own industry and agricultural sector.

The economic policies of the Israeli occupation towards the Palestinians rapidly showed signs of discontent and paved the way for the radicalization of resistance. The high taxation, unemployment, and exploitation of Palestinian workers within Israel can be considered the driving forces of the political organization against the occupation that characterized the First Intifada (GORDON, 2008). This national levant, which started in December 1987 and lasted until 1993, is considered a turning point for the Palestinian history in general, since it showed to the international community the various violence promoted by Israeli occupation and paved the way to the negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis that led to the 1990s peace process.

More importantly, the First Intifada marked the beginning of the closure and separation policies. In 1991, Israel canceled the general exit permit, which allowed Palestinians to circulate, without much severe limitations, through the West Bank and Gaza during the two first decades of the occupation. Israel imposed a system that required that every individual person should apply for a permit to leave these territories. It also implemented various barriers, checkpoints, roadblocks, and other mobile or fixed frontiers to restrict Palestinian movement. For the Gaza Strip, the closure policy was directed mainly at closing the Israeli market for Palestinian workers in the region, which generated high levels of unemployment, due to Gaza's dependence on the Israeli economy. Israel also imposed night curfews from 1988 to 1994, as well as introduced the green identity cards regime in order to better control the movement of Palestinians (GORDON, 2008).

It was in the late 1980s that the Israeli demographer and geostrategist, Arnon Soffer (1989), published an article warning that Gaza was a demographic threat to the Jewish majority in Eretz Israel. In 1989, 98% of Gaza's population was Palestinian, and that number was about to rise until 2000. The region was then understood as an undesirable land, a tiny piece of territory that could be "given back" to the Palestinians without impacting the Zionist settler colonial project. Indeed, then Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, ordered the construction of a 48 km barrier on the border of the Gaza Strip with Israel. In October 1994, he declared: "We have to decide on **separation as a philosophy**. There has to be a clear border. Without a border demarcating the lines, whoever wants to swallow 1.8 million Arabs will just bring greater support for Hamas" (RABIN *apud* MAKOVSKY, 2004, p. 52, our emphasis). From then on, the discussions would be less about the possibility of a Palestinian state and more about containing a demographic border.



The sociospatial fragmentation of Palestine was consolidated and institutionalized by the Oslo Accords (1993-1995). Even though the peace process created the Palestinian Authority (PA) as a governmental body to manage the Palestinian population, the land and the borders would be and still are in control of the Israelis. In Oslo's framework, according to Bashi (2013, p. 246), Israel tried to establish "a distinction between control over the land, for which it claimed the powers granted to an occupant under international humanitarian law and responsibility for the people living in that land. The latter, Israel claimed, belonged to the PA".

In 2005, with the unilateral disengagement plan, Israel tried to detach the body from the territory – a separation that, notably in colonized spaces, only serves to support the colonizer's argument of not having any responsibility over the population. The disengagement plan itself established that it would "serve to dispel the claims regarding Israel's responsibility for the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip" (ISRAEL, 2004).

The Israeli unilateral disengagement from Gaza happened in the context of the Second Intifada, the Palestinian popular uprising which started in September 2000, as a discontentment with the results of the Oslo Accords, mainly the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. The mobility restrictions for Palestinians were intensified: before the outbreak of the Second Intifada, Israel issued more than 12.000 permits per month for Gazans to cross the border into Israel and the West Bank. Between 2001 and 2004, this number dropped by 98%, with around 260 permits released per month (LEIN, 2005, p. 16).

The disengagement and the blockade of the Gaza Strip in 2007 consolidated the historical effort to separate and isolate that region. Along with the U.S.-led international War on Terror after the 09/11 attacks, counter-terrorism became a strong argument to deal with the Gaza Strip. The blockade is justified by Israel as a sanction after Hamas – the Islamic militant group emerged in Gaza during the First Intifada – took power in Gaza after the civil war with Fatah, who didn't accept Hamas' victory in the 2006 elections. Hamas is considered a terrorist group by Israel, the U.S., and the European Union. Since 2007, the Gaza Strip's separation and isolation from Israel, the West Bank and the rest of the world is perhaps the most advanced stage of Israeli settler colonialism control over Palestine. This can be understood as the historic milestone for the improvement of Israeli necropolitics. The (i)mobility illustrates the limbo between life and death that Gazans face on a daily basis.



THE POST-DISENGAGEMENT ISRAELI PERMIT REGIME AND THE GOVERNMENTALITY OF GAZANS' (I)MOBILITY: BETWEEN SUSPENDED LIFE AND SLOW DEATH

Even though the Israeli State claims to have no further responsibility for Gaza under international occupation law since its disengagement in 2005, its remote-control policies reveal the continuation of colonial domination by other means (SALAMANCA, 2011). The authority responsible for the circulation of people in and out of Gaza through the border with Israel is the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), a unit of Israel's Ministry of Defense. COGAT also coordinates the passage of goods in and out of Gaza, such as food supply². Since 2007, the only crossing points in operation in the Gaza Strip are the Erez crossing, also called Beit Hanoun, located in the north of the region and where the human passage to Israel is coordinated, and the Rafah crossing point, in the south, at the border with Egypt.

The human mobility policy, also called the permit regime, is based on some official documents from COGAT, such as "the Entry to Israel order (Exemption of Gaza Strip residents) 5765-2005" and "the prerogatives of the Area Commander under the Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law (Temporary Order) 5763-2003" (COGAT, 2022). These laws were elaborated during the Second Intifada and the Israeli unilateral disengagement from Gaza, and basically stipulate that no Palestinian resident has vested right to enter Israel, as well as no Israeli citizen has a right to enter the Gaza Strip (COGAT, 2022, p. 3). According to COGAT's documents:

Against the backdrop of the security/political situation in the Gaza Strip it has been decided on State level **to limit the movement** of residents between the Gaza Strip and the Judea and Samaria Area **to the necessary minimum**, so that **for all practical purposes entry of residents of Gaza into the Judea and Samaria Area [the West Bank] shall only be allowed in the most exceptional humanitarian cases**. (COGAT, 2013, our emphasis).

[...] the restrictions will be applied in accordance to the legal obligations incumbent upon Israel and that **a humanitarian crisis must be avoided**. [...] the policy on the movement of people between the Gaza Strip and Israel is inextricably linked to the shifting political-security circumstances between Israel and the Gaza Strip and its surroundings. [...] **all applications are reviewed on their merits, according to the individual circumstances of each and every case and according to an individual security check** relating to the applicant

2 For instance, in 2012 it was revealed that the Israeli Ministry of Health conducted a research, in 2018, on Gazans' daily food intake in order to calculate the amount of calories a regular Palestinian from Gaza should eat and not starve or be in a state of malnutrition. With that calculus, COGAT established the average number of trucks that could cross the Gaza Strip on a daily basis (GROSS; FELDMAN, 2015). This is an example of how far the Israeli biopolitics towards the Palestinian people can materialize.

and/or his relatives, and a review of the security, **political and strategic interests of the State of Israel in approving the applications**. (COGAT, 2011, our emphasis).

The excerpts highlighted above indicate that the Israeli authorities' justification for restricting the movement of people into and out of Gaza is primarily based on national security, whereas "humanitarian" cases are exceptional concessions. Israel's political and strategic interests are the guide for approving or rejecting requests, although these objectives are not clearly stated. The standard rule is that Palestinians from Gaza cannot travel to the West Bank or Israel, although there are exceptions, such as those listed by COGAT (2022) and which may or may not be approved, mainly due to the uncertainties generated by the COGAT's bureaucratic labyrinth.

The separation and fragmentation of Palestinian society and territories is the implicit objective in these declarations and of which the isolation of Gaza, orchestrated in part by the permit regime, is a means to achieve it. Thus, the mobility regime is an example of the intrinsic relation between the Zionist politics, understood as the great strategy of building a Jewish national State – if not entirely, at least with Jewish demographic majority –, and the Israeli various policies, which we can also call tactics, that paves the way for achieving this objective.

In what follows, we demonstrate three ways in which the mobility regime works and the effects it promotes in Gaza's body-territory. Although Israel argues that the blockade of Gaza is a type of humanitarian sanction (BHUNGALIA, 2010) – a better alternative instead of adopting a direct conflict – the Israeli mobility regime proves to be a governmentality apparatus that not only serves as a counterinsurgency method, but also puts Gazans in a limbo between life and death.

ENDURING DE-DEVELOPMENT: CONSTRAINING LABOR AND STUDY

As stated by COGAT (2022), entry of Palestinian workers or students in Israel depends on its authorization. If they are from the Gaza Strip, they must pass through a security check and fit into the various, and sometimes dubious, categories listed by the authority. The criteria may change depending on COGAT's willingness and subjectivity.

Since the Israeli disengagement, hundreds of Palestinians have been unable to leave Gaza to study elsewhere, whether in the West Bank, Israel, or other countries, even if they get acceptance letters from foreign universities. Those who do manage to get out are the exception, not the rule. The Israeli blockade thus disrespects the right to higher education of Palestinians (GISHA, 2009). The Israeli authorities argue that the exit is authorized only for humanitarian cases and medical emergencies, and that "the State of Israel has no legal obligation" to



authorize a student from Gaza to go abroad, since “the entry of students from Gaza to Israel so they can travel abroad to study is far beyond the humanitarian standard that Israel is obligated to uphold” (GISHA, 2008). Again, the humanitarian argument is brought and used to isolate Gazans and impede physical contact with the outside world.

Gazans in general are prohibited to work in Israel, at least since 1991, when Israel started the implementation of its closure policy. But in September 2022, for the first time since the 2005 disengagement, the number of people leaving Gaza and entering Israel was over 43,000, including people who left multiple times. This number, however, is only 9% of the monthly average of departures that occurred in 2000, before the outbreak of the Second Intifada and the imposition of new categories of restriction. Around 89% of exit cases in September 2022 were related to categories of “traders” and “economic needs”. On the other hand, only 5% of cases involved people with medical needs (OCHA, 2022).

This was largely due to Israel’s recent decision to increase work visas for Gaza Palestinians. Before the Second Intifada, around 230,000 Palestinians from Gaza worked in Israel, a number that dropped dramatically after disengagement and the blockade (MEMO, 2022). According to COGAT (2022, p. 14), generally “the employment of residents of the Gaza Strip in Israel is not approved”. However, quotas for specific categories such as business people were available, although they did not specifically refer to Gaza workers in Israel. In October 2021, for the first time since 1991, COGAT increased the number of visas for Palestinians from Gaza to work in Israel. On the occasion, Israeli authorities opened 7,000 vacancies for Palestinians from Gaza – 2,000 more than allowed in 2019. On the first day of registration, more than 10,000 people requested permission, which generated crowding and chaos in Gaza’s Chamber of Commerce (HAJJAJ, 2021). Since then, Israel has progressively increased work visas: in February 2022, the quota went to 10,000, followed by 14,000 in June and 20,000 in August, with more than 100,000 applications for these positions (FABIAN, 2022; ZAKEN, 2022). In February 2022, Defense Minister Benny Gantz stated:

We intend to expand our **civilian humanitarian policy**, including an immediate increase in the quota of Palestinian workers who can enter Israel. [...] Since Operation Guardian of the Walls, we have created **a new deterrence equation**. We are building the force and the operational plans, and we are creating **a civilian equation** – directly with the residents of Gaza. (GANTZ *apud* SHOVAL, 2022, our emphasis).

Most of the jobs available are linked to the agriculture and construction sector, with almost no job security (ETKES; ADNAN, 2022). In a survey, Gisha (2022a) revealed aspects of the daily life of Gaza workers in Israel: in general, they wake up at three in the morning to be able to cross the Erez checkpoint on time, due to bureaucracy and security inspections. In general,



Israeli authorities let Palestinians into Israel with only the clothes they are wearing, a cell phone and a pack of cigarettes, as backpacks and suitcases are generally prohibited.

Once in Israel, in case a Palestinian does not have his job already “guaranteed”, he must wait at the collection points, a space where employers contact workers and offer at least one day of work. This means that most jobs are informal, temporary and without any kind of right for the Palestinian worker. As for payment, for example, agreements between employer and employee are verbal, and payment can come on the same day or at the end of the “contracted” work period. At the end of the working day, which generally lasts from 8 to 12 hours, the Palestinian worker must choose between returning to Gaza and repeating the journey the next day or staying in Israel and gaining time, returning home only once a week or month. Some employers rent beds in collective rooms for workers to spend the night, for around 60 to 90 dollars a month (GISHA, 2022a). Other Palestinians end up sleeping on the construction sites where they work, on mattresses on the floor.

Meanwhile, the international humanitarian agencies, specially UNRWA, remain responsible for impeding Gaza’s total collapse. This is the result of decades of the closure policy and 16 yearlong blockade, which also endures the de-development of Gazans. For instance, in 2022, the unemployment rate in Gaza was at 46.6% - compared to 13% in the West Bank (OCHA, 2022).

FRAGMENTING AND SEPARATING PALESTINIAN FAMILIES

Since the 1967’s occupation, Israel’s legal regime “categorizes Palestinians based on their residence, or lack thereof, as registered with the Israeli authorities (which may or may not reflect where they actually live) and restricts movement accordingly” (GISHA, 2015, p. 6). The mobility regime follows this legal framework, which means that a Palestinian must have COGAT’s authorization to cross every single checkpoint, crossing point and other different frontiers. Even though the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are Palestinian territories, they are not a contiguous territory.

If a Palestinian from the West Bank wants to live in the Gaza Strip, he must apply for COGAT’s permission. In this case, the applicant must complete an application for permanent residency in Gaza “for any purpose that is considered humanitarian (usually family unification)”, but priority is given to “the need to allow the family unit to be maintained in the Gaza Strip” (COGAT, 2018). The request must be accompanied by a statement that “the applicant will not be able to return from Gaza to the Judea and Samaria Area, other than in exceptionally rare cases” (COGAT, 2018). In other words, the person must renounce his right to live in the West Bank and eventually return there. In that sense, it is much easier for a Palestinian from the West Bank to move to the Gaza Strip than it is for a Palestinian from Gaza to move to the West Bank.



This procedure was created in 2009 following an order of the Israeli Supreme Court, as a way to manage the relocation of Palestinians in the occupied territories.

From 2009 to 2017, only five applications were approved by Palestinians from Gaza who wanted to move to the West Bank, all after legal intervention by human rights organizations. Of the five, four were under 16 years old who had no relatives to care for them in Gaza. In the case of moving from the West Bank to the Gaza Strip, 58 requests were approved, 51 from women – it is customary in Palestinian society for the woman to move to her husband’s family home. The number of Palestinians who were able to leave Gaza and live in the West Bank increased to 2.775, although requests exceeded 5.000, after Israel agreed to the suggestion of the Quartet representative, Tony Blair, to authorize the displacement of these people (CHACAR, 2020).

According to Gisha (2015), it is difficult to measure exactly all the impact that the human mobility policy has on the daily lives of Palestinians in Gaza, since there are not only material and financial impacts, but also physical and emotional ones. However, there is no shortage of stories about the separation of Palestinian families (BASHI; DIAMOND, 2015; CHACAR, 2020). Since the blockade, Israel has defaulted to not accepting requests to visit from family members living in different parts of Palestine. A couple in which one has an identity linked to Israel and the other to Gaza is considered by Israel as a “divided family”. The part of the couple that has an Israeli ID must apply for permission to live in Gaza and renew it every six months (GISHA, 2020a).

The separation of families has a stronger impact on Palestinian women, who often move in with their husbands’ families once they get married. When a Palestinian woman from the West Bank marries a Palestinian from Gaza, she must renounce her right of residence in the West Bank, which will make it difficult or prevent her from visiting her family whenever she wants, causing a fracture in the family fabric (GISHA, 2020). According to research by Gisha (2020), the Israeli criteria for a Palestinian from Gaza to visit a relative in the West Bank or in Israel exclude particularities of women’s life cycles, since they do not recognize, for example, pregnancy or childbirth as specific medical conditions, which places the pregnant woman in even more vulnerable moments without the presence of a close family member.

In 2010, Colonel Uri Mendes, then commander of COGAT’s coordination and operations, stated that around 35,000 Palestinians with residency registration in Gaza were living illegally in the West Bank, therefore they were considered undercover criminals (CHACAR, 2020). Cases of expulsion of Palestinians who were “illegally” in the West Bank, according to Israeli authorities, were recurrent from the Second Intifada. According to a report by the Israeli human rights organizations B’Tselem and HaMoked, some Palestinians who were detained at checkpoints in the West Bank were expelled to Gaza, with the argument that their identity cards had the Gaza Strip as their address. In other cases, even if the address on the Palestinian ID was in the West Bank, Israeli officials claimed that it had not been approved by the Civil Population Registration



Administration. From September 2000 to March 2005 – months before the disengagement – the Israelis expelled 32 Palestinians from the West Bank to Gaza.

This situation indicates that the Gaza Strip may be a destination of no return. According to Dani Shenhar, from the Information Department of the Israeli organization HaMoked, “Gaza is a one-way ticket. If you move there, you won’t come back” (SHENHAR *apud* CHACAR, 2020). In this sense, Israeli mobility policy consolidates the effort of isolating Gaza’s body-territory by imposing a bio-necropolitical regime.

SUSPENDED LIVES, SLOW DEATHS: UNCERTAINTY AND UNPREDICTABILITY IN COGAT’S MORTAL BUREAUCRACY

As stated by COGAT (2022, p. 3), “with respect to the movement of people, the authorized offices frequently review the criteria and revise them according to that situation”. The subjectivity and unpredictability from COGAT’s officials have various effects on Gazans that need to exit Gaza, especially those in need of urgent medical treatment. The health system in the Gaza Strip is extremely precarious: as of 2022, beyond the water and electricity shortages, the hospitals suffer from shortages of 40% in essential medicines, 32% in medical disposables and 60% in laboratory and blood bank supplies, according to the Gaza Health Ministry (HUSSAINI, 2022).

Thus, to get proper medical treatment, patients must leave Gaza. They must apply for permission from COGAT, which often takes months to review and approve. In 2010, 80% of 18.000 applications for treatment of Gaza Palestinians with cancer in Israel were approved, and their companions could not leave the hospital during the treatment period (IRIN, 2011). In 2022, about 20.000 applications for medical exit permits were received by COGAT. Approximately 34% of them were rejected - the rejection was either informed by the authorities or not responded before the scheduled appointment. Moreover, 219 applicants were interrogated by the authorities who demanded to examine the patients’ applications. Of them, 66 were cancer patients, 38 women, and 26 elderly persons over 60 years old. Additionally, 91% of the 219 applications were rejected (B’TSELEM, 2023).

Approximately 1800 new cases of cancer appear in Gaza each year, 15% of which are breast cancer. The head of the Oncology Department at Al-Rantissi Hospital in Gaza pointed out that 50% of cancer patients need urgent treatment outside Gaza, such as radiotherapy and chemotherapy³, but in many cases requests are denied or approved with delay – for example,

3 Israel’s dual-use policy prohibits the entrance of various items considered dangerous. They are usually civilian goods that Israeli authorities argue can be used by “terror organizations”, with military purposes. Items included in the list are, for example: x-ray machines, various medicines, cement, steel bars, wood planks etc. For more information on Israeli dual-use policy, see Gisha (2022c).

the approval comes after the scheduled appointment date (ABUALI, 2021). In 2021, 32% of requests to leave Gaza for cancer treatment were denied. Between 2008 and 2021, Israeli restrictions on the mobility of Palestinians in Gaza led to 839 cancer patients dying, that is, more than 800 Palestinians died waiting for permission to leave the region in search of treatment (FAYYAD, 2022).

In this sense, the Israeli-controlled human mobility regime becomes, at least for cancer patients, a matter of life and death. The spokesman for the Gaza Ministry of Health, Ashraf al-Qedra, commented that the crisis in the health system and the Israeli policy of denying or delaying the release of permits means a “death sentence” for the sick (AL- QAEDRA *apud* HUSSAINI, 2022).

Those who actually get authorization to leave often must return on the same day, as the permission released by the State of Israel lasts only twenty-four hours, that is, those who need longer treatment need to constantly face the bureaucratic process and unpredictable request to leave Gaza or remain “illegally” in hospitals abroad (HAJJAJ, 2022). In addition, many patients are unable to be accompanied by their next of kin. For example, Palestinian Gaha Majadle, mother of a seven-month-old baby, did not receive authorization from the Israelis to accompany her son outside Gaza, who had to be accompanied by his grandmother, who was also in poor health (FAYYAD, 2022).

In another case, the five-year-old child Aisha Lulu, diagnosed with brain cancer and referred for treatment at the Augusta Victoria hospital in East Jerusalem, could not be accompanied by her parents – both had their requests rejected by the Israeli authorities, who claimed “security issues”. An elderly friend of Aisha’s aunt was the only one to get permission to accompany her (HUMAID, 2019). Interestingly, on COGAT’s website (2020), in the section about applying “for a humanitarian entry permit to Israel from the Gaza Strip for medical reasons”, it is indicated that, in relation to the companions of patients, “preference will automatically be given to parents of minors”.

The application process to leave Gaza to seek treatment is lengthy and bureaucratic. First, patients must fill in the form with all their health information, the report and treatment prescription signed by the doctor in charge and the conditions that prove that the treatment is unfeasible in Gaza. Then, the PA’s high medical committee evaluates the applications and decides whether or not to cover the financial costs of the applicants’ treatments in West Bank hospitals, which must be sought by the patients themselves. Only then can patients file the COGAT claim. This whole process can take weeks or even months, which puts the lives of Palestinians with cancer at risk and may even lead to their death. This was the case of 17-year-old Saleem Nawaty, who died after officials at the Al-Najah hospital in Nablus, as well as the hospital in Ramallah, refused to treat him on the grounds that the Palestinian Authority had debts with



hospitals. Nawaty died at the door of the Palestinian Medical Complex, in Ramallah, after 13 days trying to start his treatment (HAJJAJ, 2022).

This long wait for permission to leave Gaza is another mechanism of control used by Israel. The colonial domination over Palestinian lands, resources, and population extends over the spatial-temporal dimension of existence. According to Amir (2021, p. 5), "Israel has compressed the time of the Strip. [...] Israel's designation of Gaza to a post-occupation landscape, it claims, strangles the Strip in a protracted stagnation, rendering it to a time which is deprived of both past and future". In this sense, Israel has trapped Gazans in a spatiotemporal dimension deprived of predictability and certainty.

FINAL REMARKS

The article explored the deadly dimensions of the Israeli permit regime towards Gaza. In a historical-genealogical perspective, we argued that the Gaza Strip's sociospatiality has turned from an area of refuge, in 1948, into a *deathscape* – a territory framed as hostile and where Palestinians from other territories must move and remain, therefore an isolated area of expulsion. Despite Israel's allegation of not having any further responsibilities over Gaza's population after the 2005 unilateral disengagement, the continuation of colonial dominance and control over space and resources has daily and bodily impacts on the lives of Gazans. Regarding the Gaza Strip, the main concern appears to be with eliminating a surplus, undesirable population, and not so much acquiring that piece of territory.

The settler colonialism framework and the notion of body-territory enabled us to critically assess and comprehend the interrelation and simultaneity of different Israeli colonial violence. The mobility regime is the expression not only of the linkage between power and the production of space, but of the intimate relation between body - individual and collective - and territory. Moreover, we discussed the importance of analyzing the mobility policies related to Zionist politics and main goal of acquiring maximum land with minimal indigenous presence.

By relying on official documents, Human Rights reports, and testimonies, we identified three main consequences that emerge from Israeli mobility regime towards Gaza (i) the enduring de-development of Palestinians from Gaza, (ii) the separation of Palestinian families from the West Bank and Gaza, and (iii) the slow death promoted by COGAT's bureaucracy, which puts Gazans not only on a spatiotemporal trap, but on a limbo between life and death. Finally, the Gaza Strip can be considered an advanced model of remote colonial governmentality adopted in other Palestinian territories, which are gradually being transformed into small enclaves controlled by Israel.



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