PALESTINE INSIGHTS

CRITICAL INTERVENTIONS

Edited By:
Dr. Karin A.Gerster | Mahmoud Muna

Palestine Insights:
Critical Interventions

The Educational Bookshop
19 Salah Eddin Street, PO Box 54008, Jerusalem 91540
Tel: +972 (0)2 6275858
Email: info@educationalbookshop.com
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RLS Regional Office Palestine & Jordan
2nd Floor, Al Atari building 67 Nile street, Al Tireh, Ramallah, Palestine
Phone: +970 (2) 2973306
Email: info.ramallah@rosalux.org
www.rosaluxemburg.ps

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Introduction

This publication is the result of our considerations at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's Ramallah office to publish a collection of texts featuring mostly Palestinian voices on the political situation in Palestine. The aim was to create a publication that does not talk about Palestine and the Palestinians, but with them – with people who live every day in the reality of an occupation that is illegal under international law: in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. This reader brings together essays, analyses and commentaries written in the last years, during the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, which was the Israeli government's response to the attack carried out by militant Palestinian groups led by Hamas on 7 October 2023.

What makes this reader special are the perspectives: they come from people who do not speak about occupation, war, displacement, and resistance in theoretical terms – but from experience. They write to make visible what is often overlooked or deliberately ignored. Palestinian authors in this publication analyse from their own contexts and perspectives. These perspectives can be uncomfortable. They challenge familiar narratives, especially those that arise from privileged, often Western viewpoints. But this is precisely where the opportunity lies: in the friction and confrontation with other perspectives. This requires a willingness to listen before judging, and that in turn requires space and courage. In recent years, there has been little such space in the western media landscape, including Germany, with regard to Palestine, which is often dominated by certain perspectives shaped by Israeli ethno-nationalist narratives.

In their analyses, the authors of this publication use terms such as 'colonialism' or 'settler colonialism' and others; this is discussed further in the editorial note. The views presented in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and its funding body. We believe that inclusive democratic debates are necessary and important, therefore, it is essential to include authentic, valid and underrepresented Palestinian perspectives.

Last but not least, we extend our sincere thanks to all those who helped bring this volume to life. We are deeply grateful to our friends and colleagues at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (in the Palestine and Jordan office, as well as at headquarters) whose support, thoughtful comments, and guidance were instrumental throughout the process. We also thank the team at the Educational Bookshop in Jerusalem, who not only grounded this project in Palestine, where it most needed to be, but also enabled it to materialise by offering essential expertise and timely advice. Special thanks go to Carol Khoury for her meticulous attention to detail and for refining the language with such care, and to Arsen Aghazarian for his immaculate and skilful translation. Of course, our sincere appreciation to both Mohammad Hassouna and Khalil Kahwaji for their artistic capability in design, layout, and printing of this volume.
We hope these articles are insightful, and you will enjoy reading them.

Dr. Karin A. Gerster
Director / Regional Office of the RLS Palestine & Jordan

Mahmoud Muna
Editor, Educational Bookshop - Jerusalem

Editorial Note, Terminology and Context

While we were at the final stage of completing this volume, we felt the need to share with our readers the complicated process of bringing those pieces together. A process of more than one year, it included selecting, editing, translating, and presenting them in the current form you are now holding in your hands. We would also like to take this opportunity to contextualise these contributions, and to give what could be a helpful explanation of the choice of political frameworks, choice of terminology, and our editorial attitude towards those frameworks. The contributors are mostly Palestinians, and were selected based on the merit of their work, and the excellence of their overall research and knowledge. We also aimed to platform new and emerging scholars who will undoubtedly play an important role in future Palestinian knowledge production. We are proud to have been able to present many female writers, from a wide range of social and geographical backgrounds. We hope this will reflect the diverse and the analytical analysis presented in their contributions.

The contributions were written in English and Arabic, and then underwent several processes of editing. The final draft was then translated, and then edited by both content and language editors, to preserve the authentic nature of each paper, but also to ensure fluidity of the text for readers of English and Arabic alike.

The final layout was chosen to improve the reading experience, and to bridge the gap, creating an overall feeling of the volume as book of analytical and critical intervention, but also a book for general readers on current Palestinian affairs. To further improve the reading experience, we causally divided the articles into several chapters, yet, the topics overlap in nature. We hope the readers find the entire selection of articles to be insightful.

The language used in this reader is not accidental. Terms such as ‘settler colonialism’, ‘apartheid’, and ‘genocide’ are not polemical, nor theoretical, but are actually common political frameworks that are increasingly being used in UN reporting, humanitarian organisations’ reporting, and also diplomatic communication. When used, they are also supported by academic referencing and legal contextualising. On the question of settler colonialism, early Zionist leaders such as Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, and Ze’ev Jabotinsky used the term openly, making a strong connection between Zionism and colonisation. Theodor Herzl and other figures in the Zionist movement were aware that the Zionist movement would need the support of European states. They were able to convince the British government that they had common strategic colonial interests in the region, which was reflected in the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and in the text of the British Mandate, which resulted in the marginalisation of Palestinians; which continues to this day. David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, and Chaim Weizmann, its first president, saw themselves as colonisers.

Palestinian intellectuals realised early on that a Jewish state in Palestine would be accompanied by expropriation, expulsion, and marginalisation. As early as 1965, Fayez Sayegh analysed the Zionist movement as a form of settler colonialism –long before this term appeared in broad academic debate.[1] In the 1990s, international “new historians” continued this perspective. Researchers such as Patrick Wolfe, Ilan Pappé, and Edward Said showed that Zionism goes hand in hand with displacement, land grabbing, and replacement. This is similar to what happened in the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. For Sayegh and Wolfe, one of the specific characteristics of settler colonialism is the systematic conquest of land, the occupation of land and, in relation to Israel and Palestine, the conversion

1 Fayez Sayegh was director of the Palestinian Research Centre in Beirut, author of the book, Zionist Colonialism in Palestine (Beirut, Palestine Research Centre). It is now available in the PLO archive: https://archive.org/details/sayegh-plo.

of land into Israeli state land and the incorporation of illegal Israeli settlements into the State of Israel under international law, and the replacement of Palestinians with Israeli settlers.

Apartheid is not a metaphorical attribution either. Human rights organisations such as Al Haq, B'Tselem, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch clearly speak of an apartheid system, partly in relation to the occupied territories, partly in relation to the entire Israeli state. Separate legal systems, road networks for Israelis and Palestinians, restrictions on freedom of movement linked to a permit system, and access to resources follow ethnic logic; and are structurally discriminatory against Palestinians. Statistics, reports, and analyses confirm that continued settlement construction, especially since the Oslo Accords in 1993, is increasingly transforming the West Bank into fragmented reservations. The so-called "Judaization" of certain areas, targeted resettlement, and the deprivation of rights all fit into a colonial pattern.[2]

The usage of the word 'martyr' in Western discourse usually refers to someone who dies for their religious, fundamentalist, beliefs, in common understanding with the Christian tradition or religious extremism. However, in the Arabic language and Palestinian context, the word (shahid, meaning 'witness') is much broader and refers to anyone who dies violently in the context of struggle or oppression, including civilians killed in conflict, as a way of honouring their sacrifice. Therefore, when Palestinians use the word 'martyr', it isn't inherently about religious fundamentalism but about recognising loss and resistance; a nuance often lost in Western interpretations.

The use of the term 'genocide' has been argued for by several respected international bodies and human rights groups. They have all studied the pattern and the scale of the Israeli actions, including mass civilian casualties, displacement of nearly all of Gaza's population, widespread destruction of infrastructure, and restrictions on essential supplies; actions that, when committed, meet the internationally recognised legal criteria for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The list of highly respected organisations include the International Association of Genocide Scholars, the world's leading academic body on genocide studies, in fact, they adopted a resolution stating that Israel's policies and actions in Gaza "meet the legal definition of genocide" and called for an end to acts they identify as genocidal, including deliberate attacks on civilians and deprivation of humanitarian aid, water, and fuel.[3] Similarly, Amnesty International's in-depth investigation concluded that the cumulative effect of repeated strikes, destruction of life-sustaining infrastructure, forced displacement, and denial of essential services could only reasonably be interpreted as an intent to destroy Palestinians in Gaza —a hallmark of genocide under international law— although Israel rejects this characterisation.[4] Finally, a United Nations commission of inquiry reported findings that Israel's conduct met several recognised genocidal criteria, citing evidence of mass killings, conditions meant to bring about group destruction, and statements by officials that the commission interpreted as indicia of genocidal intent.[5] Additionally, several individual academics and scholars have referred to the Israeli actions in Gaza as 'genocide'. The list includes esteemed scholars of genocide and international law, including Omer Bartov, an Israeli-American professor of Holocaust and genocide studies at Brown University, who described Israeli actions in Gaza as "genocidal actions," noting parallels in mentality that he studied in historical genocides.[6]

2 Report on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 – A/79/384, https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/a79384-report-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights-palestinian.

3 Genocide Scholars Association, https://genocidescholars.org/publications/resolutions/.

4 Amnesty International, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-international-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/

5 UN, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/09/israel-has-committed-genocide-gaza-strip-un-commission-finds

6 https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/15/opinion/israel-gaza-holocaust-genocide-palestinians.html

In addition, legal and genocide scholars such as Melanie O'Brien and others interviewed in academic forums[7] argue that patterns of conduct and statements by leaders can be interpreted as indicating genocidal intent, reinforcing scholarly support for applying that term. A wider group of over 800 scholars and practitioners of international law, conflict studies, and genocide studies signed a statement early in the war warning that the situation could amount to genocide, reflecting concern from a broad academic community.[8]

With this in mind, we hope these articles are insightful and you will enjoy reading this publication.

Mahmoud Muna and Karin A. Gerster

7 https://opiniojuris.org/2025/08/04/is-genocide-happening-in-gaza/

8 https://twailr.com/public-statement-scholars-warn-of-potential-genocide-in-gaza/

Gary Fields
Raya Ziada

GEOGRAPHY & LAND

CONFINED!

Encounters on the Carceral Landscape in Palestine

By Dr. Gary Fields

Gary Fields is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Communication and is now Professor of the Graduate Division at the University of California, San Diego. A historical geographer by training, he has focused his research and teaching on the changing geographical landscape of Palestine. Fields is the author of Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror and has contributed articles to a broad range of publications, including The Journal of Palestine Studies, The International Journal of Middle East Studies. He is also an accomplished photojournalist and photographer with work that is integral to his upcoming book: Imprisoned: Voices and Images from Confinement Landscapes in Palestine.

The term “confinement” in everyday use refers generally to the lock-up and incarceration of individuals within the confines of institutions known virtually everywhere as prisons.[1] Those who are incarcerated have invariably been convicted of transgressing the law and are designated as criminals. Yet, in some contexts – including the context of this essay -- authorities have fixed the outcome of the proceeding to determine the guilt of the individual charged with an offense, while in other cases, there is neither a charge of breaking the law, nor a conviction but the individual is still incarcerated, confined to a limited space. In this way, confinement is basically a condition of punishment for individuals designated as criminals who are kept largely immobilized within the constrained and limited spaces of prison institutions. There is, however, a very different way of understanding confinement that plays out on landscapes.

In his acclaimed book, Palestinian Walks, Raja Shehadeh recounts how when he began hill walking in Palestine years ago, he was unaware of traversing through a vanishing landscape.[2] For centuries, he writes, the terrain of the Palestinian Highlands remained largely unchanged, but in just a few decades, newcomers who claimed this land as their God-given right, remade these hills in their own image and likeness, pouring untold amounts of concrete into its contours to build settlements for themselves. As a result, “beautiful wadis, spring cliffs and ancient ruins were destroyed.” This environmentally destructive pattern of settlement is continuing to spread across the Palestinian landscape, intensifying the presence of these settler-newcomers while constantly enlarging their territorial footprint on the land. At the same time, those routes and places where Shehadeh and other Palestinians reveled in the pastime of sarha’ – walking – have become ever-smaller, while the areas where Palestinians can live, work, and walk are contracting in an ongoing march of dispossession and disappearance. This vanishing landscape, as it continues to grow smaller, is spawning a carceral-like geographical space on the land; an ever-more enclosed territorial container for Palestinian life akin to confinement.

Driving this disappearance of the Palestinian landscape and the carceral spaces resulting from it is the project of illegal settlement in the West Bank by the State of Israel with its insatiable hunger for land.[3] As more and more of the Palestinian landscape disappears into the inventory of Israeli lands, the landscape itself becomes reconfigured with a constantly-expanding cartography of lines marking areas off-limits to Palestinians. As part of this reconfigured map of trespass, the State of Israel has engineered an elaborate system of barriers to Palestinian mobility – “walls” -- on the land. These walls, however, consist not only of the easily visible, large-scale material impediments to free movement on the land. Walls preventing the movement of Palestinians across landscapes have emerged through the everyday practices of intimidation and violence carried out by the settler population against the Palestinians to which the State tacitly supports or turns a blind eye. In effect, the ever-expanding share of the West Bank landscape coming under illegal Israeli settlement, with its corresponding enlargement of spaces off-limits to Palestinians, alongside practices of settler violence and intimidation, are giving the West Bank landscape its carceral character.

To support this argument, this essay enlists an ethnographic and photographic account of Palestinian encounters with this carceral landscape in two Palestinian locales, one a rural agricultural village (Iraq Burin), the other the large city of al-Khalil (Arabic name for the town Hebron). Focusing on an individual in these two places, this article documents a story of confinement on the landscape in the voice of Palestinians supported by visual images in two parts. The first part examines the expansionary tendencies of Israeli settlement in the West Bank, the primary driver of confinement on the Palestinian landscape. Part two focuses on Palestinians in the two locales, along with images of the confinement system confronting them in these two places. A final section of “Concluding Remarks” summarizes the findings in this essay.

1 For a more theoretical treatment of this topic see Gary Fields, “Confined! Voices and Images from the Carceral Geography in Palestine,” Arab World Geographer, Vol. 27, no, 3-4 (2024), pp. 187-204.

2 Raja Shehadeh: Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape, Profile Books, UK 2008

3 ICJ advisory opinion: https://www.icj-cij.org/node/204176

The Israeli Project of Colonization and Settlement[4]

When the State of Israel emerged from the war of June, 1967 and occupied the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, it found itself in control of the entire territory designated as Palestine during the British Mandate. Central to the State's vision for these newly-conquered areas was a plan framed in July, 1967 by Labor Minister and former General, Yigal Allon -- the Allon Plan – for settling the conquered territories with Israeli citizens. Despite a legal opinion written by one of its own legal counsels, Theodor Meron that such a Plan violated Article 49 of the 1949 Geneva Convention (to which Israel was signatory), the State disregarded this opinion and began establishing Jewish-only colonies in the newly occupied areas. Although modest at the outset, civilian settlement of the West Bank and Gaza intensified over time, and despite terminating settlements in Gaza in 2005, continues its expansion to this day.

Arguably, the most formidable problem for the State of Israel in establishing these civilian colonies was land acquisition.5 To overcome this obstacle, commanders in the conquered territories issued military orders for the seizure of Palestinian land and justified such seizures as necessary for military rule in accordance with provisions of the Hague Convention. From 1967-76 the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) issued military orders for the first 20 colonies in the West Bank, mostly in the Jordan Valley but also including the settlements of Ofra, Kiryat Arba, and Har Gilo but after1976, the settlement project expanded markedly. By 1979, the State of Israel had used military orders to seize 61,000 dunums (1 dunum is 1000 square meter) of privately owned land belonging to West Bank Palestinians, most of which served as the anchor for settlement building. In 1979, however, military orders for the seizure of private Palestinian land formally ended owing to an Israeli High Court Case known as Elon Moreh. Owing to this Court decision, the State was forced to seek an alternate instrument for the seizure of Palestinian land for its settlement activity. What emerged from this imperative was the "State Land Declaration," used to this day to seize Palestinian land for settlement building and expansion.

The idea behind the State Land Declaration was to locate land in the West Bank without registered owners, land that technically belonged in the category of "state land." This approach involved a reinterpretation of the so-called "Dead Land Law" from the 1858 Ottoman Land Code, still partially in effect in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt). During the late Ottoman period, the law defined the physical attributes of dead land without owners but enabled rural cultivators to farm such land and from this effort obtain an ownership deed, provided that the cultivator farmed it continuously and paid the land tax to the Ottoman Treasury. The State of Israel, however, enlisted the law but used it not to extend ownership of empty land to ambitious [Palestinian] cultivators or collect tax on it. Instead, the State of Israel used the law to identify empty land so as to retain it as State property.

Just prior to the Elon Moreh case, Israeli surveyors had estimated the size of land in the West Bank without registered owners at 1.5 million dunums, close to 30% of the West Bank land inventory. The dilemma for the State of Israel was how to turn this vast inventory into land belonging to the State. During the 1960s, in court rulings, the State of Israel crafted a definition of land without ownership – dead land -- if it was less than 50% cultivated. This legal doctrine was exported to the oPt as a means of identifying parcels of land fitting the Israelis' updated definition of land considered empty.[6]

4 Early Zionist leaders like Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, and Zeev Jabotinsky openly talked about Zionism being connected to colonization. Later, Israeli politicians like David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, and Chaim Weizmann, the first president, also saw themselves as colonizers. In the 1960s, during the decolonization of Africa and the Middle East, people began to analyze the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a settler colonial lens. This idea became more popular in the 1990s, especially among Israeli and Palestinian scholars known as the New Historians. They challenged some of Israel's early stories and argued that the displacement of Palestinians (the Nakba) is still happening today. Their perspective of Zionism, includes also processes of elimination and assimilation of Palestinians, like other colonization movements such as in the United States, Canada, New Zealand or Australia.

5 This paragraph and the following three taken from Gary Fields, Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror, Oakland: University of California Press (2017), pp, 282-83, 288-94.

6 Geremy Forman, "A Tale of Two Regions: Diffusion of the Israeli '50 Percent Rule' from the Galilee to the Occupied West Bank," Law and Social Inquiry, 34, no. 3 (2009), 671-711.

Armed with this legal ruling, the State embarked on a quest largely through aerial reconnaissance to identify West Bank land less than 50% covered with trees or crops. Once located and fixed with specific coordinates, such land was placed in an inventory that was eligible to be reclassified as state property by means of the state land declaration. If cultivators of such land did not produce ownership documents, the State of Israel could and did confiscate the land. The burden of proof for land ownership fell to Palestinians, who in a hostile occupation environment found it virtually impossible to prove an ownership claim when the State of Israel declared an area as state land -- even in instances where the claimant did possess registration documents.

In this way, the State of Israel weaponized the State Land Declaration after 1979 turning the hilltops of the West Bank Central Highlands into targets to anchor Israeli settlements. What ensued was a distinct spatial pattern in which Israeli settlements began to dominate the West Bank hilltop landscape as they multiplied across the land. It is the territorial spread of the settlement project, with its ancillary spatial impacts, that is driving the confinement regime on the Palestinian landscape today.

Figure 1
The Pattern of Israeli Settlement

The Palestinian town of Marda (foreground) and the Israeli settlement of Ariel (2019). Photo by author.

Three attributes of settlements reveal their centrality in driving confinement on the Palestinian landscape. The first is the expansion in the number of Israeli settlements. From a modest handful in the early 1970s, Israeli settlements now number over 141200[7], occupying Three attributes of settlements reveal their centrality in driving confinement on the Palestinian landscape. The first is the expansion in land throughout the West Bank (May 2025). Second is the growth of the settler population. Since 1972, the number of settlers has increased 100-fold to 869,446 today (Table 1). Although some of this population growth is occurring in newly-established "outposts" – illegal even by Israeli standards -- most of the growth in the number of settlers is occurring through increases in existing settlements. In order to accommodate ever-greater numbers of people, Israeli settlements are occupying an ever-widening territorial footprint. The third aspect of Israeli settlements central to the confinement regime derives from Military Order 378, issued in 1970 which empowered Israeli commanders to declare any lands in the oPt as "Closed Areas." In 1996, the Israeli military amended this order, designating Israeli settlements as "closed areas," off-limits to Palestinians which was renewed in 2002 and is enforceable today.[8] As settlements expand and occupy ever-larger territorial footprints, the lines of trespass around them expand commensurably. The result is a landscape of ever-expanding areas off limits to Palestinians that is constantly encroaching into the remaining spaces of Palestinian life, enclosing Palestinians in an ongoing process of confinement.

Table 1
Israeli Settlement Population (1972-2024)

	1972	1977	1986	1991	2024
West Bank	800	4323	55,690	95,165	529,446
Gaza	700	740	2150	3900	0*
East Jerusalem	6900	30,300	161,740	137,400	340,000**
Total	**8400**	**35,363**	**219580**	**236,465**	**869,446**

* Figure is zero due to "disengagement" in 2005.
** Figure for East Jerusalem is an estimate.
Source: https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20160219-israeli-report-more-than-400000-settlers-in-west-bank/
https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/israeli-settlements-population-in-the-west-bank

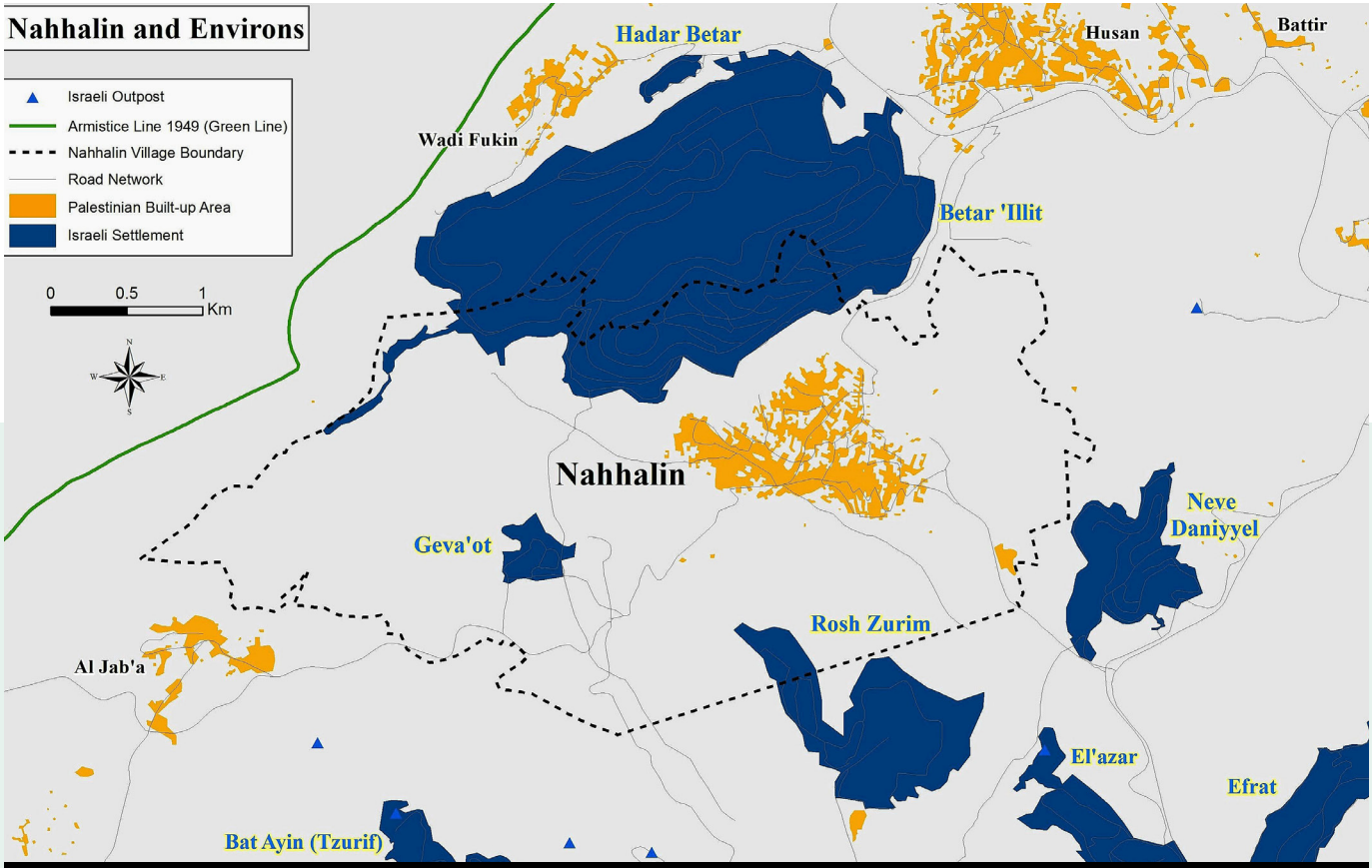
One example of how settlement growth is leading to the disappearance and confinement of Palestinian spaces on the land comes from the Palestinian town of Naḥḥālīn (Bethlehem Governorate) and the nearby Israeli settlement of Beitar Illit. In 2013, Beitar had a population of 39,710 but by 2019, the population had surpassed 60,000, eclipsing Ma'ale Adumim as the second largest Israeli settlement next to Mod'in Ilit. In its Master Plan, Beitar envisions a population of 100,000. Such growth, however, requires land and the State of Israel, anticipating this requirement, announced in 2014 the largest single declaration of state land ever in the West Bank, seizing 5000 dunums in the vicinity of Naḥḥālīn.[9] This 5000-dunum declaration is visible in Figure 2 while the physical growth of the settlement from 2014-24 is documented in time-series photos in Figure 3.

7 https://peacenow.org.il/en/settlements-watch/settlements-data/population

8 BIMKOM [Planners for Planning Rights], The Prohibited Zone: Israeli Planning Policy in the Villages in Area C (Jerusalem, 2008), 17. http://bimkom.org/eng/wp-content/uploads/ProhibitedZone.pdf

9 Chaim Levinson and Jack Khoury, "Israel Appropriates Massive Tract of West Bank Land" Haaretz (2014). https://www.haaretz.com/2014-08-31/ty-article/.premium/israel-seizes-west-bank-land/0000017f-e857-da9b-a1ff-ec7f56360000
OCHA, "Large Area in Bethlehem Declared 'State Land.'" OCHA (2014). https://www.ochaopt.org/content/large-area-bethlehem-declared-state-land#_ftn3

Figure 2
Naḥḥālīn and Environs Showing State Land Declarations 2014



"Naḥḥālīn and Environs" showing 'State Land Declarations of 2014 in light blue cross hatching.
Map designed by Issa Zboun, Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem; reproduced by permission.

Figure 3
The Spread of Settlement: Detail of Naḥḥālīn and Beitar Illit 2014 (top) / 2023 (bottom)

Naḥḥālīn and Beitar Ilit in 2014 (top), and in 2023 (above) taken from roughly the same location. The build-out to the West is clearly visible in the later photo. Also of note are the trailers in the center right of the image from 2023 signaling expansion toward Naḥḥālīn to the South. These time series photos from figure 3 show convincingly how settlements are growing and creating ever-larger footprints of land off-limits to Palestinians, driving the process of confinement on the landscape. Photos by author.

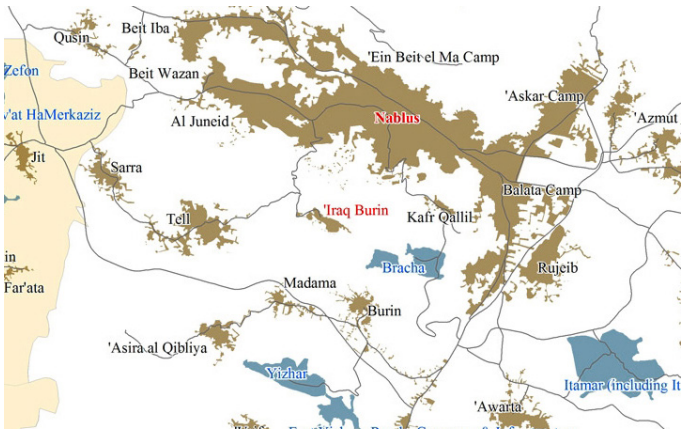
Wall Unseen: Confinement in Iraq Burin

Iraq Burin is a small agricultural village located seven kilometers south of Nablus but the change from the Nablus city limit to the village is dramatic. Iraq Burin has about 1000 residents and a total land area of 7595 dunums of which 186 dunums comprise the built-up area of the village. During the Ottoman period, some village residents lived in Burin three kilometers to the South but during the Mandate period a branch of one of the Burin families – the Qadous -- left Burin and relocated to the hilltop known as el Arak and hence the name of the village became Iraq Burin. Today, the Qadous is the main family in the village.

In 1983, Iraq Burin was transformed by the establishment of an Israeli settlement on its Southeastern flank, the settlement of Har Bracha (Figure 4) which was created on lands confiscated from nearby Burin along with 291 dunums of land belonging to villagers of Iraq Burin. Both villages lie in an area of intense violence from settlers. One of the villagers most affected by settlement expansion and violence is Izzat aged 67 (2019) who has lived his entire live in Iraq Burin.

Figure 4

Iraq Burin (Center) and Environs



Source: http://poica.org/2009/10/the-expansion-of-the-colony-of-brakha-at-the-expense-of-iraq-burin-lands/

Figure 5

Izzat with Iraq Burin in the background (2012). Photo by author.

"We are relatively large landowners in Iraq Burin," says Izzat. "I myself own 67 dunums in three different parcels. These lands have been in our family since the late 19th century. They belonged to my grandfather and his parents before that…." Izzat goes on to emphasize that his difficulties as a farmer began in 1983 with the establishment of the settlement of Har Bracha. Although small at the outset, the settlement began a steady pattern of growth in 1991 and by 1999, surpassed 700 residents. Ten years later in 2009, the population of Har Bracha more than doubled to over 1500, and by 2024 the population more than doubled again (Table 2).

Table 2
Har Bracha Settlement Population (1999-2024)

	Year	1999	2009	2019	2024
#Residents		714	1533	2582	3318

Source: https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/israeli-settlements-population-in-the-west-bank

During this 10-year period, Izzat explains, "settlers would come down the hill and damage my olive trees and seasonal crops, sometimes cutting branches of my trees, other times burning trees along with my winter wheat crop but by 2009 these incursions were becoming more intense." It was in early 2009 that Izzat suffered a fatal misfortune at the hands of these settlers.

> Settlers from Har Bracha came to my land with bulldozers and uprooted my olive trees located in the valley between the village and the settlement. They destroyed several dunums in a 20-dunum area close to the settlement and in this particular case, army personnel came with the settlers and protected them while they were using the bulldozers to uproot my land. They destroyed trees on several dunums that I cultivated myself.[10]

Izzat recounts how he went to the Israeli District Command Office (DCO) in Huwaara to report this criminality. As is the case with most of these reports, especially in the Nablus region where settler violence is commonplace, the commander did nothing except to say that Izzat's 20-dunum parcel was so close to the settlement that it was being reclassified as land needed for security. "I was incensed," Izzat exclaims.

"I returned to the DCO with papers showing my ownership of the parcel, but the commander allowed the order for the seizure to stand. According to Izzat, what happened next is revealing:

> "What the settlers did with this land shows that it is not land for security," he explains.
>
> These settlers replanted the land they bulldozed and confiscated from me with grapes, and they have put up a building there that is now a winery. What do grapes have todo with security? You [author] saw this earlier this afternoon when we were walking and I pointed it out to you. Basically, they have stolen my land on the pretext of security and have replanted it with grapes. This is theft, pure and simple.

Izzat then reveals how, after settlers destroyed the crops on his land and replanted it with grapes, he confronted a situation of confinement on the landscape.

> Since 2009, these settlers have prevented me from accessing my land that now borders their grapes and winery. They are watching all the time from the settlement. If I come too close to the area to tend my olives, they shoot me or they call the army to arrest me. That is why we [Izzat and author] could not go to my olive trees this afternoon. If we go there, they can shoot us (author interview, 2011).

10 Author interview, 2011. All quotations on this page from this 2011 interview. The author has visited Izzat and Iraq Burin six times since 2011, including 2012, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2022.

Figure 6
Iraq Burin and Har Bracha (2011)

Settlers from Har Bracha (top of the hill) came with bulldozers in 2009 and uprooted several dunums in a 20-dunum parcel planted with olives and seasonal crops belonging to Izzat and replanted the land with grapes. The small white building adjacent to the grape orchard houses a wine press. Izzat still has olive trees in the valley area bordering the grapes, but he faces danger from settlers in getting too close. Photo from 2011 by author.

Around 2009-10, the village organized weekly protests against these land confiscations. "We marched to this area every Saturday to protest but the army would shoot teargas and rubber bullets at us if we approached too close," Izzat says. "Often, after these protests, the army came into the village and forced everyone into their homes…." Now let me tell you a story about what happened here in 2017.

> A journalist from Reuters came to Iraq Burin to do a story and asked to interview me where you [author] wanted to go many times near the grapes, so we went there and started the interview. Not 10 minutes later, two army jeeps drove up to where we were speaking. When the soldiers got out of the jeeps and started walking toward us, we quickly retreated from the area because I did not want them to arrest us. So, you can see, all of the area near the grapes is off-limits to me.

Izzat then pivots to the issue of the expansion of Har Bracha. "I'll tell you, the settlement is getting bigger and bigger," he says. "They have constructed tall apartment blocks that were not even there three years ago. And more and more settlers are living there taking more and more of our land. I'm fearful that one day, they will reach the village. What will happen to us then?" (Author interview, 2019).

Figure 7
Iraq Burin and Expansion of Har Bracha (2018)

Expansion of Har Bracha: showing new high rise apartment blocks (2018). Photo by author.

There is a wistful resignation in Izzat's descriptions of his situation in Iraq Burin in trying to resist the settlers and keep his lands. "I do try many times to reach my land near the settlement," he laments, "but the soldiers always come and demand to know what I am doing there. I tell them I AM IN MY OWN LAND! But it makes no difference. They tell me to stop and leave the area. At times, I play a kind of game with them. They tell me to go -- and I do what they say. But then I return and tend to my olives. But this is no solution." In the end, like many other Palestinian farmers in the same predicament, Izzat strikes a defiant note. "I can tell you that I am not going anywhere," he says. "I am not going to let them just take my land. I am part of this land and will never leave." (author interview, 2022)

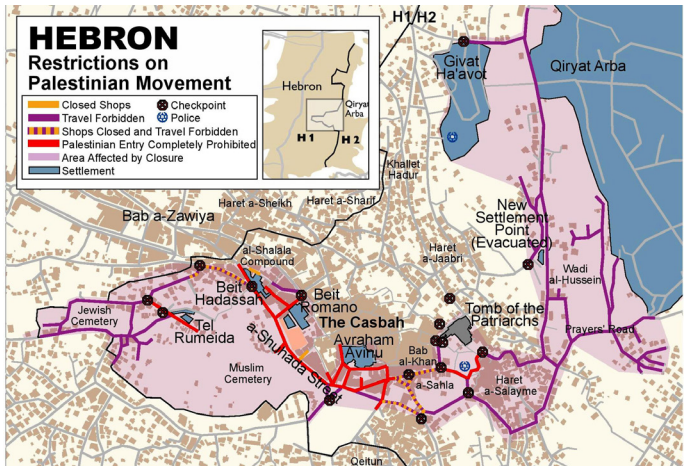
‘Imprisoned in My Own Home’: Confinement in al-Khalil

At the other end of the West Bank, a world away from Iraq Burin, lies Al-Khalil, a major center of Palestinian trade and commerce and the largest city in the West Bank with a population of roughly 245,000 people (Palestinian Central Bureau Statistics /PCBS 2019). One of the most ancient cities in the world, Khalil has a venerable history and culture and is one of the holiest cities in Islam. Despite a pattern of settlement imposed within its urban core in contrast to the rest of the West Bank, Khalil is in many ways a microcosm of Israeli colonization and confinement.[11]

In Khalil’s Old City, roughly 500-700 Israeli settlers live among 30,000 Palestinian Old City residents. These settlers came to the Old City in 1978 when seven families from the settlement of Kiryat Arba just outside the Eastern edge of Khalil came to the Beit Hadassah medical clinic inside the Old City and claimed that Jews owned the building before 1948 and therefore they had the right to reclaim it. This group brought bedding, clothing and guns – and they would not leave. The following year, the Israeli Government recognized these squatters as a settlement -- the settlement of Beit Hadassah – and soon allowed other settlers to take control of three additional public buildings: a school that became the settlement of Beit Romano; a vegetable market that became Avriham Avinu settlement; and a bus station that became an expansion to Beit Romano. These three settlements form a settlement “bloc” along a primary circulatory spine of the Old City, Shuhada Street. A fourth settlement, Tel Rumeida came into being in the mid-1980s and received official recognition by the Israeli Government in 1998 with Givat Ha’avot constituting a settlement outpost linking Kiryat Arba to these new settlers in the Old City.

In 1997, the Palestinian Authority and the State of Israel signed an agreement that recognized the Israeli settlements in the center of Khalil by dividing the City into two zones. The zone of H1 is where most of Khalil’s residents live and was placed under Palestinian control. H2 is under Israeli control and comprises the Old City along with a primary access route through this area along Shuhada Street running from the al-Ibrahimi Mosque (Tomb of the Patriarchs) past the settlements of Avriham Avinu, and Beit Romano to the settlement of Beit Hadassah. Within this core area of the Old City the military has created a system of free movement for settlers, and a system of impassible space for Palestinians, replete with prohibitions on access and circulation, similar to the logic of settlement zones in the rest of the West Bank. Along this route on Shuhada Street, roughly midway between Beit Hadassah and Beit Romano lives a spirited 60-year old woman who has lived all of her life in the Old City of Al-Khalil. The name of this woman is Zleikha.

Figure 8



Source: https://emekshaveh.org/en/tel-rumeida-hebrons-archaeological-park/

11 B’tselem, “Playing the Security Card: Israeli Policy in Hebron as Means to Effect Forcible Transfer of Local Palestinians.” https://www.btselem.org/publications/summaries/201909_playing_the_security_card

"I am 60 years old with no children of my own," says Zleikha, "but everybody knows me and I know them and so to everybody, I am the 'Mother' of the Old City." Zleikha admits that from 1967-78 the Israeli occupation barely touched residents within the City limits but that changed in 1978 when the settlers came to Beit Hadassah. "Once there were settlers in Beit Hadassah," she explains, "the Government sent soldiers there to protect them. That is how we got our first checkpoints in the Old City." [12]

Figure 9

Zleikha.on her balcony overlooking Shuhada Street (2022). Photo by author.

12 Author interview, 2022. All references to conversations with Zleikha in what follows occurred over the course of two days in June, 2022. The author has visited Al-Khalil at least six different times.

Zleikha then explains the significance of another event in 1994, the massacre of 29 Palestinians in the Ibrahimi Mosque by Baruch Goldstein, which signaled major changes in the life of Palestinian residents of the Old City. "We were punished for that crime," says Zleikha. "The Israelis used the massacre as a pretext for implementing a system of controls on Palestinian movement throughout the Old City."

> After the massacre, we had to get permits to go in and out of our houses and we were issued special cards with our addresses that the military used to restrict where we could go and move around according to the addresses on the cards. They made a kind of Apartheid system on Shuhada Street. Settlers walked freely. Our movement on Shuhada Street was tightly controlled and at times even prohibited.

In addition, the Israeli military created a more physically daunting series of blockades to Palestinian mobility within the Old City, notably the fence-like barrier with turnstiles controlled by Israeli soldiers at the Western edge of Shuhada Street that pre-empted Palestinian vehicular traffic from entering the Street while tightly restricting Palestinian pedestrian traffic into the area (Figure 9). As Zleikha tells it: "The Old City was being taken from us and handed over to settlers who were now being protected by the army."

Checkpoint controlling entry into Shuhada Street. There are 6 additional fortified checkpoints with turnstile gates throughout the Old City (2022). Photo by author..
https://www.ochaopt.org/content/dignity-denied-life-settlement-area-hebron-city

> "Let me give you an example of how the Old City was turned over to these settlers who made the life of 30,000 residents a living hell," says Zleikha.

You know these settlers number only about 500, maybe 600 but not more. On Saturdays [before the pandemic], these settlers would force the army to close the entire Old City so that they could parade around for Shabat. We were completely confined in our houses during these settler walks. They even forced us to close our curtains so that the settlers could not see us, and the army would shout at us

Figure 11

Settlers parading through the Old City on one of their Saturday walks, protected by Israeli soldiers who force shops to close, confine residents to their homes, and prohibit Palestinians on Old City Streets (2010). Photo by author.

to not look out of our windows at the settlers walking around our neighborhoods. We were basically prisoners in our own houses. Although Zleikha has lived her entire life in the Old City, she moved into her current residence on Shuhada Street only in 2005. "Our house by the Ibrahimi Mosque had become very crowded with the families of my two brothers now living there," she recounts, "and therefore I decided to move into this house with my mother on Shuhada Street, despite knowing that there could be problems with settlers." Nevertheless, even Zleikha did not know how unseemly the situation would become.

Settlers walking on Shuhada Street constantly threw rocks at the windows of the house and mercilessly taunted the owners. In response, the family draped carpets over the balcony railings to protect the windows from the stone throwers. You might think it is strange, but I was not afraid when I moved here even though I knew about the situation. The house is very nice and I love the Old City so much that I can't imagine living anywhere else.

Shortly after she and her mother moved into the house, the Israeli military, in response to the ongoing vandalism perpetrated by settlers against the Palestinian residents on Shuhada Street, came to the front doors of each Palestinian house and welded the doors shut to prevent access into the Street. "My front door on Shuhada Street is welded shut to this day," says Zleikha. "When you [author] came here, you used a back entrance that was built by breaking through a wall after the Israeli military welded and sealed the front door. Now, it has been remade into an entryway which is how I get into my house."

Six months after Zleikha and her mother moved to Shuhada Street, however, an incident occurred at the house that changed everything. "On that day in 2006, I forgot to close the shutters in front of the windows after I went out, Zleikha recalls, "and settlers attacked my house viciously with stones."

> The entire interior of my house was covered with stones and broken glass. I took photos of all of it. And I took these photos to two organizations here in Khalil: The 'Temporary International Presence in Hebron' (TIPH) and 'Hebron Rehabilitation Committee' (HRC). They provided me with funds so that I could install the cages you now see. If I did not install these cages, my house would literally be destroyed by these settlers.

If settler violence was unceasing during this period, the Israeli response to it was nothing short of macabre. Israeli authorities closed Shuhada Street from Beit Hadassah to Avraham Avinu to Palestinian vehicular traffic and virtually all pedestrian traffic but informed Palestinian residents on Shehadeh Street that they could apply for permits to walk on their own street. "I received a permit for three months," Zleikha reports, "but in 2007, an Israeli High Court decision ordered Shuhada Street to be open to all,

> During this 10-day period, settlers harassed us mercilessly when we were walking on Shuhada Street. After the ten days, the Israelis closed the Street once again, even though there was an Order from the Israeli High Court to keep it open. The military got around this order by designating Shuhada Street a closed military zone. When I was walking on Shuhada Street in front of my house, a soldier stopped me and told me that I was not allowed there. I told him it was my house. He said it did not matter. I could not be in Shuhada Street because it was a closed military area.

The military informed Palestinian residents on Shuhada Street that they would get permits to access the street. Zleikha and four other Palestinian families received permits renewable at 3-month intervals. "In August, 2008," recounts Zleikha, "we asked for our renewals but that date marked the end of our permits. Settlers now walk on this street all the time but I cannot even walk in front of my own house."

> Sadly, Shuhada Street remains closed to Palestinians including myself. We face an ongoing situation of daily apartheid here in the largest City in the West Bank. There is no other way to describe it. What was once one of the main streets in the Old City of Hebron full of Palestinian life with many shops and people walking freely, now has a ghostly presence. If you want to see the living hell of what the Israeli occupation is all about, come to Hebron's Old City.

Zleikha then concludes in a sorrowful tone. "Although I have this cage protecting the windows of my house, when I come out to my balcony, if settlers are passing by on Shuhada Street, they will throw stones at me. I am not afraid of these settlers. But you can say that I am a prisoner in my own house."

Figure 12

Zleikha on her balcony facing Shuhada Street (2022). Her front door (bottom right) is welded shut. Photo by author.

Concluding Remarks

Israeli settlement in the West Bank is continually expanding across the Palestinian landscape. As Israeli settlement grows and as the settler population increases, the aggregate territorial footprint occupied by settlements and settlers is expanding in size and spreading across the land surface. At the same time, the territorial spaces where Palestinians can live, work, and circulate are disappearing in an ongoing process whereby ever-greater portions of the Palestinian landscape are changing hands and coming under the control of the Israeli settlement project. What has emerged from this process of colonization and settlement is a carceral geography in which Palestinians find themselves confined to ever-smaller spaces on the landscape stemming from ever-more settlers and their violent hunger for land.

Although the confinement regime developed by the State of Israel has its own specific attributes, the practice of limiting mobility and regimenting colonized subjects follows a more general pattern of power, control, and confinement in other historical environments of settler colonization.[13] What the Palestinian landscape shares with these other historical environments of settler colonialism is a condition on the land akin to the conditions of control over movement and behavior imposed on incarcerated prisoners in modern prison institutions. Little wonder that Palestine is often described as, The Biggest Prison on Earth.[14]

At the same time, there is a critical adjunct to the State of Israel in enforcing the lines of control over the State's colonized Palestinian subjects -- the settlers themselves. Although Israeli settlers derive their power from the State level project of settler colonization, it is settlers who in many ways form shock troops to enforce lines of control that push and drive Palestinians into ever-smaller spaces. Examples in this essay from Iraq Burin and al-Khalil testify to this power of the settlers to act as enforcers of rules over Palestinian presence and mobility on the landscape itself. Even more disturbing, both places emphasize how settler violence is part of the confinement system of the colonizer itself. This phenomenon is not without precedent.

One of the most trenchant examples of such settler violence and intimidation in pushing the colonized into smaller spaces and dispossessing them comes from U.S prior to, and following passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. In a historical echo of Israeli settlers, settlers in Georgia who wanted Indians removed from the land in order to establish cotton plantations worked by slave labor, found favor from a rabidly anti-Indian Administration in the person of Andrew Jackson alongside key Georgia state and federal politicians. Tacitly encouraged by this cultural and political climate, Georgia settlers engaged in sustained campaigns of vigilantism including crop burning, livestock slaughtering, and house destruction to convince Cherokee and other Indian tribes from Georgia to remove themselves so that white settlement could expand unimpeded. [15]

In Palestinian Walks, Raja Shehadeh takes readers on a series of six sarhat as reminders of those places on the landscape in need of defending so that they do not vanish. In his account, Israeli settlements and settlers are cast as purveyors of disappearance, coveting and absorbing ever-greater portions of the Palestinian landscape, while at the same time immobilizing and otherwise confining Palestinians within spaces that are perched at all times on the precipice of perishing and becoming Israeli patrimony. This essay makes a similar argument. The spirited voices of Izzat in Iraq Burin and Zleikha in al-Khalil reveal encounters with this coarsened regime of confinement and its settler shock troops who have usurped vast portions of the landscape where these two individuals live. In the aftermath of October 7th 2023 Israeli settlers have become more emboldened than ever in their tactics of terror and intimidation thereby intensifying the confinement tendencies of colonization. The struggles of these two individuals to move freely and regain what is theirs will likely continue for some time to come.

13 Laleh Khalili, Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies Stanford: Stanford University Press (2013); Gary Fields, "Lockdown: Gaza Through a Camera Lens and Historical Mirror," Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol. XLIX, no 3 (2020), pp. 41-69.

14 Ilan Pappe, The Biggest Prison on Earth: A History of the Occupied Territories, New York: Scribner & Sons (2017).

15 See Adam Pratt, Toward Cherokee Removal: Land, Violence, and the White Man's Chance (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2022).

FROM SIEGE TO SOIL

Food Sovereignty and the Politics of Survival in Palestine and the Global South

By Raya Ziada

Raya Ziada is a programmes manager for food sovereignty at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Palestine and Jordan. Her work bridges agroecology, radical pedagogy, and collective action, focusing on confronting colonial violence and advancing practical strategies of decolonial feminism and food sovereignty. She is co-founder of the Manjala Agri-cultural initiative and the Palestinian Agro-ecological Forum.

“He who feeds you, controls you.”
Thomas Sankara (1983)[1]

Food sovereignty transcends agricultural practice; it represents resistance against colonialism, capitalism, and environmental exploitation. It is a fundamental political struggle, fought not only for sustenance but for autonomy, dignity, and the reclamation of stolen lands. As Thomas Sankara’s words remind us, food sovereignty is not merely about access to food, but about power; the power to control one’s future and resist subjugation. This article explores food sovereignty as a decolonial strategy, focusing on its role in Palestinian resistance against Israeli settler colonialism, its historical parallels with Latin American and African struggles against land dispossession, and its connections to indigenous movements. Drawing upon insights from scholars and activists, the article highlights how food sovereignty is central to liberation movements. Employing a comparative approach, it analyses settler colonialism, monoculture, greenwashing, and grassroots resistance, while integrating academic and activist perspectives.

Introduction: Food Sovereignty as Decolonial Resistance

> If the colonized subject could only realize that by accepting the colonizer’s language, culture, and values, he is accepting his own subjugation, he would understand that the first step toward liberation is a return to his own heritage.[2]
>
> —Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth

Food sovereignty, defined as the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems, serves as a political and ecological tool for self-determination. Unlike food security, which focuses on food access without addressing systemic injustices, food sovereignty challenges colonial power structures. It asserts that control over food systems must remain in the hands of those who cultivate the land, rather than corporations, settler states, or foreign aid organisations that use food as a weapon of dependency.[3]

In Palestine, indigenous food ways have been systematically disrupted through land confiscation, monoculture, and settler-colonial expansion. The Israeli state’s use of agriculture as a weapon of control echoes European colonial policies in Latin America and Africa, where indigenous communities were displaced for cash crop economies. Just as European colonisers uprooted the traditional food systems of indigenous Latin Americans and Africans to impose sugarcane, cotton, and coffee plantations for imperial wealth, Zionist expansion has sought to erase Palestinian agricultural heritage through the systematic destruction of olive groves, water theft, and restrictions on local farming practices.[4]

This article examines food sovereignty as a means of decolonisation by analysing Palestinian agricultural resistance, Latin American agrarian movements, and African struggles for land autonomy. It traces how colonialism has used food production as a method of control, how indigenous peoples have resisted through agroecology and self-sustaining agricultural models, and how reclaiming food sovereignty remains at the heart of anti-colonial struggles worldwide.

1 Thomas Sankara, Thomas Sankara Speaks: The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983–1987, ed. Ernest Harsch (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1988), 72.

2 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 14.

3 Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty. Declaration of Nyéléni. Sélingué, Mali: Nyéléni Forum, 2007, 1. Accessed 1 December 2025. https://nyeleni.org/IMG/pdf/DeclNyeleni-en.pdf.

4 Eyal Weizman, Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation (London: Verso, 2007), 184–192; Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” Journal of Genocide Research 8, no. 4 (2006): 388–390; Eduardo Galeano, Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 33–45; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Humanitarian Needs Overview: Occupied Palestinian Territory 2024 (New York: United Nations, 2023), 30–34.

Historical Continuity of Colonial Tactics

For over five centuries, colonial powers have employed consistent strategies to dominate indigenous populations, primarily through the control of land and food systems. From the 16th century onwards, European colonisers-imposed monoculture plantations in Africa, the Americas, and Asia, disrupting traditional, diverse agricultural practices. This shift not only served economic interests but also functioned as a means to control and suppress indigenous populations by undermining their self-sufficiency and cultural practices. The replacement of diverse cropping systems with single cash crops made colonised regions dependent on colonial markets and vulnerable to food insecurity.

Eduardo Galeano, in The Open Veins of Latin America, Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent highlights how the Spanish and Portuguese invaders systematically replaced indigenous poly-cultural farming with vast sugarcane and coffee plantations, transforming self-sufficient agricultural societies into labour-exploiting economies serving European markets. The forced introduction of monoculture led to soil exhaustion, economic dependency, and the violent dispossession of indigenous peoples from their lands. This agricultural transformation was not just about producing goods for export—it was a mechanism of control, as food systems were increasingly removed from the hands of local communities and placed under the jurisdiction of colonial powers. As Galeano writes, “The colonial system was built on hunger: the hunger of the enslaved, the hunger of the dispossessed, the hunger of a continent that fed the wealth of Europe.”[5]

A similar logic operated in Palestine. Shukri Arraf shows how British Mandate policies restructured Palestinian agriculture to serve imperial markets, prioritising citrus (especially Jaffa oranges) for export to Europe at the expense of subsistence crops and community food systems. This shift mirrored the plantation transformations imposed in Latin America, where Indigenous food production was dismantled to supply European demand. The British colonial project in Palestine, like its counterparts across the Global South, reconfigured agricultural labour and land use to secure political control through economic dependency.[6]

The British Mandate not only promoted export-oriented monoculture but also facilitated the systematic transfer of land from Palestinian farmers to Zionist settler-colonial projects.[7] The role of land registries and legal frameworks during the Mandate period mirrored colonial tactics used in Latin America, where Spanish land reforms erased indigenous communal landholding traditions in favour of privatised, European-controlled estates.[8] The establishment of large Jewish settlements, backed by British policies, laid the groundwork for the systematic fragmentation of Palestinian agricultural landscapes; a process that continues under Israeli occupation today.

The replacement of diverse agricultural systems with colonial cash crops was a fundamental tool of subjugation. In Africa, British and French colonial administrations introduced cotton plantations, coffee estates, and peanut farms, replacing indigenous farming systems and rendering local populations reliant on European markets.[9] This destruction of indigenous self-sufficiency ensured colonial dominance over food production and economic stability, a pattern that has persisted into the present era with multinational agribusinesses continuing the legacy of extractive agricultural economies.

5 Eduardo Galeano, Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 33–45. (These pages cover colonial agricultural restructuring, sugar and coffee plantations, and hunger as a colonial tool).

6 Shukri Arraf, The Land, the People, and the Effort (Jerusalem: Arab Studies Society, 1987), 112–28. (These pages document British Mandate agricultural restructuring, citrus export orientation, and the diversion of Palestinian agriculture toward imperial markets).

7 Rashid Khalidi, The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 23–41. (These pages detail British land laws, Mandate land registries, and the facilitation of Zionist land acquisition and settlement expansion).

8 Eduardo Galeano, Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 57–69. (These pages discuss the destruction of Indigenous communal land systems and the imposition of European-controlled estates).

9 Mahmood Mamdani, Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 44–59. (These pages explain the forced introduction of colonial cash-crop regimes and the resulting economic dependency).

The same strategies of control are visible in contemporary Palestine, where Israeli occupation forces manipulate agricultural policies to further fragment Palestinian land and food sovereignty. The destruction of Palestinian olive groves, the restriction of access to fertile land, and the monopolisation of water resources all serve as modern manifestations of colonial agricultural strategies.[10] As Shukri Arraf notes, the control of land and food production is not just an economic act but a deeply political one, aimed at severing the connection between indigenous people and their land.[11] This agricultural repression mirrors broader colonial practices, where ecological domination is used to fracture cultural continuity and impose structural dependency. By drawing these connections (between Latin America, Africa, and Palestine) it becomes evident that food sovereignty is not simply a struggle over agriculture but a broader battle for autonomy, cultural preservation, and resistance against colonial erasure. As history demonstrates, the manipulation of food systems remains one of the most insidious and effective tools of colonial oppression—one that indigenous communities across the world continue to resist through the reclamation of land, the revival of traditional agricultural practices, and the assertion of food sovereignty as a fundamental human right.

Monoculture, Environmental Manipulation, and Food as a Weapon

> The land does not belong to us; we belong to the land. —Indigenous proverb

Monoculture farming has long been a central mechanism of colonial conquest; an imperialist tool designed to erase indigenous agricultural knowledge and replace it with extractive economies. In Palestine, the illegal Israeli occupation has systematically replaced agricultural biodiversity with monoculture farming, mirroring the devastation wrought in Latin America and Africa through centuries of colonial extraction. The aim is not merely economic but deeply political: to sever indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands, fragment their relationship with nature, and impose dependency on external systems of control.

In Palestine, olive trees, central to cultural heritage and resistance, have been methodically uprooted by Israeli settlers and military forces. Over 800,000 olive trees have been destroyed since 1967, a deliberate act of agricultural erasure meant to dispossess Palestinian farmers and dismantle their means of self-sufficiency.[12] This destruction is not random; it follows the logic of settler-colonialism, in which land is not only stolen but restructured to eliminate its former caretakers.[13] Similarly, in Latin America, the imposition of sugarcane monoculture devastated indigenous agricultural diversity. Brazil's Atlantic rainforest was cleared to accommodate European sugar mills, leading to both long-term ecological collapse and the forced labour of enslaved peoples to sustain this exploitative system.[14] Today, multinational agribusinesses continue this colonial trajectory, expanding soy and palm oil plantations while displacing indigenous land stewards.[15]

10 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Humanitarian Needs Overview: Occupied Palestinian Territory 2024 (New York: United Nations, 2023), 30–34.
(These pages document destruction of olive trees, restricted land access, and water monopolisation).
Eyal Weizman, Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation (London: Verso, 2007), 184–92.

11 Shukri Arraf, The Land, the People, and the Effort (Jerusalem: Arab Studies Society, 1987), 55–63.
(These pages explicitly address control of land and agricultural production as political instruments to weaken Indigenous presence).

12 Applied Research Institute–Jerusalem (ARIJ), The Humanitarian Impact of the Israeli Occupation: Agricultural and Land-Based Violations (Bethlehem: ARIJ, 2015), 22–27; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Humanitarian Needs Overview: Occupied Palestinian Territory 2024 (New York: United Nations, 2023), 30–34.

13 Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," Journal of Genocide Research 8, no. 4 (2006): 392–96.

14 Eduardo Galeano, Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 53–62. (These pages provide a detailed account of sugarcane plantations, Atlantic rainforest destruction, and coerced labour systems).

15 Philip McMichael, Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2013), 98–112.

> Greenwashing in Palestine: The Jewish National Fund and Ecological Colonialism
> "They make a desert and call it peace."
> —Tacitus[16]

One of the most insidious forms of colonialism in Palestine is the practice of greenwashing—the attempt to mask settler-colonial expansion under the guise of environmentalism. The Jewish National Fund (JNF), established in 1901, has played a central role in this deception. Through so-called reforestation projects, the JNF has sought to erase the natural Palestinian landscape, planting non-native pine forests over the ruins of depopulated Palestinian villages. This strategy is not about conservation; it is about conquest. The aim is to erase the memory of Palestinian land stewardship and replace it with a settler narrative that claims to have 'redeemed' a barren desert.[17]

This mirrors the 'greening' projects in apartheid South Africa, where forests were planted to justify land expropriation from Black communities, transforming vast tracts of indigenous land into state-controlled reserves that excluded those who had tended them for generations.[18] In both cases, colonial powers weaponised nature, turning it into a mechanism of displacement and ecological imperialism by constructing an environmental facade over violent dispossession.

As Eyal Weizman demonstrates, Israeli military industries are deeply intertwined with environmental infrastructure projects, particularly in water and land management. The same companies that manufacture military surveillance technologies are also involved in the development of water pipelines and irrigation systems, often using conservationist rhetoric to obscure their role in the colonial control of resources.[19] The construction of national parks, nature reserves, and renewable energy projects frequently serves as a front for further land expropriation, echoing the colonial projects of European empires in Algeria, Kenya, and Brazil, where 'environmental protection' was used as a tool to mask territorial control.[20]

A striking comparison can be made with the British colonial administration in Kenya, which expelled indigenous Maasai and Kikuyu communities from fertile lands under the pretext of wildlife conservation, only to later allocate those lands to white settler plantations and private hunting reserves.[21] Similarly, in Latin America, multinational corporations working alongside state actors have displaced indigenous Amazonians under the guise of 'sustainable' agribusiness expansion, even as these projects exacerbate deforestation and soil degradation.[22] The logic of colonial environmentalism remains the same: the imposition of a foreign ecological vision that prioritises capitalist extraction while excluding the very people who have historically preserved and cultivated the land.

In Palestine, the JNF's afforestation efforts are designed not only to erase Palestinian villages but also to reinforce a settler narrative of 'making the desert bloom'—a mythological trope used to justify Israel's expansionist policies. This mirrors Zionist

16 Tacitus, The Annals, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (London: Macmillan, 1876), Book 15, Chapter 44. Tacitus was a Roman senator and historian of the first century CE, known for his critical and insightful accounts of the Roman Empire.

17 Eyal Weizman, Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation (London: Verso, 2007), 20–31, 70–83. (Details JNF forestry, pine monoculture, and the political purpose of covering destroyed Palestinian villages).
Ilan Pappé, The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 225–33. (Documents JNF's role in planting European pines over depopulated Palestinian villages after 1948).

18 Jane Carruthers, The Kruger National Park: A Social and Political History (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995), 117–34. (Discusses how colonial and apartheid authorities used conservation and afforestation to justify eviction of Indigenous communities).

19 Eyal Weizman, The Least of All Possible Evils (London: Verso, 2011), 145–58. (These pages examine how military industries, humanitarian optics, environmental rhetoric, and infrastructure projects—pipelines, water systems—integrate into a single colonial apparatus).

20 Diana K. Davis, Resurrecting the Granary of Rome: Environmental History and French Colonial Expansion in North Africa (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 71–88.
Philip W. Porter and Kevin M. Campbell, in The Lie of the Land: Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment, ed. Melissa Leach and James Fairhead (Oxford: James Currey, 1996), 98–112.

21 David Anderson, Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire
(New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 52–63. (Documents displacement of Kikuyu/Maasai for settler estates and "game reserves").

22 Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn, The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers, and Defenders of the Amazon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 95.

propaganda from the early 20th century that framed Palestine as an empty, barren wasteland, despite its rich agricultural history and the thriving Palestinian farming communities that had been exporting citrus, wheat, and olives for centuries.[23] Just as European colonial projects sought to rewrite history by erasing indigenous land relationships, Israeli greenwashing projects today attempt to overwrite Palestinian existence through an ecological lens that prioritises settler claims over historical realities.[24]

Movements and Agroecological Resistance

> If the present order is incapable of giving us land, bread, and freedom, we must take it ourselves.
> —Emiliano Zapata[25]

These words by Emiliano Zapata, the revolutionary leader of the Mexican peasant movement, continue to resonate across decolonial struggles today. In contexts like Palestine, where land and livelihood are systematically denied through occupation and ecological erasure, Zapata's call underscores the imperative of reclaiming food sovereignty as a political act. Just as the Zapatistas challenged the hacienda system and neoliberal reforms in Mexico, Palestinian farmers resist settler-colonial agribusiness through seed saving, community farming, and indigenous ecological practices that affirm collective rights to land and life, as do the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil has reclaimed fundamental forms of resistance against neoliberal and colonial systems.[26] These transnational struggles highlight how food sovereignty serves as both a practical and symbolic challenge to global capitalist and settler-colonial domination.

Despite systematic suppression, indigenous communities continue to resist through agroecology. In Palestine, farmers and grassroots movements have reclaimed land by refusing to conform to settler-imposed agricultural models, embodying a decolonial praxis that seeks to reconnect people with their ancestral soil. As Fanon argued, true decolonisation is not simply about political independence but about reclaiming the material conditions that sustain life, including land and agriculture.[27]

The Palestinian Agroecological Forum, Om Sleiman Farm, the Heirloom Seed Library, Manjala Agricultural and Cultural Initiative, Sakiya, and initiatives such as the Palestinian Farmers Union, the Palestinian Permaculture Association, and the Rural Women's Cooperative in the Jordan Valley are more than agricultural projects; they represent vibrant forms of active resistance and decolonial praxis, reclaiming food sovereignty in the face of settler-colonial dispossession. These initiatives work to revive indigenous crop varieties such as za'tar[28] and 'aqoub,[29] as well as heirloom wheat and traditional legumes, which have historically sustained Palestinian communities and now serve as cultural symbols of defiance against the Israeli agribusiness complex. By rejecting Israeli agribusiness models that promote dependency on imported seeds, chemical inputs, and industrial farming, these initiatives preserve not only traditional agricultural knowledge but also foster independent and resilient food systems rooted in community autonomy. They challenge the imposed neoliberal structure of food production that turns farmers into

23 Ilan Pappé, The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 225–33. (JNF planting pines over destroyed villages; early Zionist propaganda about "desert").

24 Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," Journal of Genocide Research 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–400.

25 Emiliano Zapata, quoted in John Womack, Zapata and the Mexican Revolution (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 377.

26 John Womack Jr., Zapata and the Mexican Revolution (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 45–58. (Covers Zapata's land doctrine, communal autonomy, and peasant resistance).

27 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 27–39.

28 Za'tar (Thymbra spicata or Origanum syriacum) is a wild Levantine thyme central to Palestinian culinary and medicinal traditions. Harvested seasonally and frequently dried and blended with sesame and sumac, it forms an essential part of indigenous foodways. Israeli "environmental protection" laws restrict its foraging, effectively criminalising traditional Palestinian harvesting practices and disrupting cultural continuity.

29 'Aqoub (Gundelia tournefortii) is a wild spring thistle widely consumed across Palestine and the Levant, valued for its culinary and medicinal uses. Gathered according to long-standing indigenous ecological knowledge, it has been designated a "protected species" by Israeli authorities, resulting in fines and arrests for Palestinian harvesters and transforming a cultural food practice into a criminalised act.

passive consumers of externally controlled resources and assert sovereignty over seeds, water, and land.

Beyond these, initiatives such as the Palestinian Permaculture Association actively promote agroecological education and training, empowering small-scale farmers to adopt sustainable practices that prioritise ecological balance, community autonomy, and social justice. The Rural Women's Cooperative in the Jordan Valley organises women farmers around the cultivation of traditional crops such as date palms[30] and figs,[31] securing control over land, labour, and subsistence under conditions of settler-colonial dispossession. Another significant project, the Yatta Seed Bank, works to collect, preserve, and protect seeds from Palestinian villages facing demolition orders and land confiscation, highlighting the inseparable relationship between seed sovereignty and territorial rights. Together, these diverse agroecological movements embody a broader decolonial praxis that challenges settler-colonial domination by reclaiming land, biodiversity, and cultural identity within frameworks of food sovereignty.

These efforts resonate strongly with movements in Latin America, where Indigenous communities resist corporate agribusiness and reclaim their food systems through agroecology. As scholars of agroecology argue, ecological farming has emerged as a global mode of political resistance as much as a scientific practice.[3] In Chiapas, the Zapatista movement employs agroecology not merely as an agricultural method but as an assertion of autonomy and a rejection of neoliberal food regimes.[32] In Brazil, the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) has mobilised millions to occupy unused land and establish collectively managed agroecological settlements, directly challenging capitalist agriculture and strengthening food sovereignty through sustainable, community-based production. In Burkina Faso, revolutionary leader Thomas Sankara articulated a radically anti-colonial agricultural vision, insisting that liberation requires breaking dependency on imported food and external aid. His declaration that "we must produce what we consume, and consume what we produce"[33] remains a foundational statement of food sovereignty.

This philosophy continues to inspire Palestinian agricultural movements, where farmers assert their right to cultivate despite military restrictions, land confiscation, and settler violence. Yet the struggle remains unfinished: ongoing occupation, ecological constraints, and resource theft demand expanded support for Palestinian agroecological initiatives. These projects show that agroecology is not merely a question of sustenance; it is a profound political claim, reaffirming the enduring connection between land, culture, and resistance.

Nowhere is this struggle more visible than in Gaza, where agriculture and food have been weaponised as a tool of genocide. The Israeli blockade has deliberately restricted access to seeds, fertilisers, and water, ensuring that Palestinians remain dependent on external food aid and systematically starving them as a tool of control and domination.[34] This is not a natural famine or accidental scarcity, Palestinians are not starving; they are being starved through a calculated siege designed to inflict maximum suffering and submission.[35] Recent reports indicate that acute malnutrition has risen sharply in Gaza since late 2023, with UN agencies warning of "imminent famine conditions" affecting the entire population.[36] The destruction of farms, wells, and irrigation infrastructure, alongside the militarisation of humanitarian aid distribution, often controlled by US and Israeli-backed actors, turns food aid sites into "death traps," where Palestinians have been killed while seeking life-saving assistance.[37]

This engineered starvation is a continuation of settler-colonial tactics, deploying food as a weapon to sever Palestinians'

30 Date palms (Phoenix dactylifera): long-cultivated fruit trees central to Levantine agriculture, producing clusters of edible sweet dates.

31 Figs (Ficus carica): a traditional Mediterranean fruit with soft pulp and edible seeds, historically grown in Palestinian terraced agriculture.

32 Steve Gliessman, Agroecology: The Ecology of Sustainable Food Systems, 3rd ed. (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2015), 213–231.

33 Thomas Sankara, Thomas Sankara Speaks: The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983–87, ed. Ernest Harsch (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1988), 154.

34 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Gaza Strip: Humanitarian Access Snapshot, updated regularly 2024–2025. Accessed 8 December 2025. https://www.ochaopt.org.

35 Human Rights Watch, Israel: Starvation as a Weapon of War in Gaza, December 2023. Accessed 8 December 2025. https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/18/israel-starvation-weapon-war-gaza.

36 World Food Programme (WFP), Gaza: Emergency Food Security Assessment, 2024–2025. Accessed 8 December 2025. https://www.wfp.org.

37 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Gaza Situation Report, issues published 2024–2025 documenting attacks on aid convoys and distribution sites. Accessed 8 December 2025. https://www.ochaopt.org.

connection to their land and weaken their capacity for resistance. It echoes Frantz Fanon's analysis that colonial violence works not only through direct physical destruction but also through the systematic dismantling of the material conditions that sustain life, targeting both the body and its social world.[38] The infrastructure of domination is reinforced by multinational corporations, such as Amazon, Google, and Microsoft, whose cloud services and surveillance technologies support Israeli military targeting systems, illustrating how contemporary capitalism is entangled with the machinery of settler-colonial war.[39]

Yet, despite these brutal conditions, resistance persists. During the 2023–2025 genocide, Gazan farmers continued to plant crops under bombardment, asserting their right to life and land through agriculture itself. As one farmer told Al Jazeera after returning to his devastated fields: "They destroyed everything, but we will plant again."[40] This insistence transforms agroecology into a radical act of decolonial defiance, reclaiming food sovereignty and challenging the colonial order that seeks to extinguish Palestinian existence. It resonates with historical and transnational struggles, from Irish peasants starved under British imperial rule to Indigenous communities in Brazil resisting agribusiness, where food systems become terrains of liberation rather than instruments of domination.[41]

Through reclaiming land, seeds, and agricultural knowledge, Palestinians join Latin American and African movements in refusing the imposed conditions of dispossession and dependency. Agroecology emerges not merely as a method of cultivation but as a political praxis that binds land, culture, and resistance against ongoing settler colonialism and imperialism. The Zapatista movement in Mexico and Indigenous farmers in Bolivia model similar forms of agroecological autonomy, rejecting capitalist food regimes and resisting genetically modified seeds.

38 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 27–40.

39 Amnesty International, Automated Apartheid: How Israel Uses AI-Driven Targeting and Surveillance in Gaza, 2024. Accessed 9 December 2025. https://www.amnesty.org.

40 Al Jazeera, "Gaza Farmers Return to Destroyed Fields Determined to Replant," 8 January 2024. Accessed 9 December 2025. https://www.aljazeera.com

41 Eduardo Galeano, Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 15–38.

In Africa, Thomas Sankara's revolutionary government placed food sovereignty at the centre of political transformation, rejecting foreign aid dependency and revitalising local agriculture through land redistribution and collective farming. His declaration ("He who feeds you controls you") remains one of the clearest critiques of colonial and neoliberal food systems and a rallying call for Indigenous sovereignty worldwide.[42]

Cultivating Resistance, Sowing Liberation

We start by saving our seeds. We start by cultivating with our hands. We start by connecting with our sisters and brothers facing the same oppression of colonisation and capitalism. For one plant's death, another must be planted for life. The battle for food sovereignty is not just about sustenance, it is about resistance, dignity, and decolonisation. From Al Falujeh in Gaza[43] to Chiapas to Burkina Faso, Indigenous peoples have always reclaimed their right to land, refusing to let colonial forces dictate their food systems. They resist through their hands, their seeds, and their solidarities with other oppressed peoples. The future of resistance lies in these connections: the refusal to cede the soil, the rejection of colonial agriculture, and the steadfast belief that food sovereignty is an act of liberation.

Frantz Fanon reminds us that true decolonisation is not a mere transfer of power but a complete overturning of the colonial system, one that severs the economic and ideological chains imposed by the oppressor.[44] This remains true in contemporary settler-colonial contexts, where food sovereignty has become

42 Thomas Sankara, Thomas Sankara Speaks: The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983–87, ed. Ernest Harsch (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1988), 154.

43 Al Falujeh (Al-Falujah) was a Palestinian village in the Gaza district depopulated during the 1948 Nakba. Located near present-day Kiryat Gat, it was historically known for fertile farmland, wheat cultivation, olive groves, and subsistence agriculture. Its inhabitants—many of whom became refugees in Gaza—maintained strong agricultural traditions central to Palestinian food culture and communal life, making Al Falujeh a symbol of agrarian dispossession under settler-colonial expansion. Sources: Walid Khalidi, All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948 (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992), 102–06; Salman Abu Sitta, The Atlas of Palestine 1917–1966 (London: Palestine Land Society, 2010), 194–95.

44 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 1–52.

one of the most vital battlegrounds. Food has long been understood by colonial and capitalist systems as an instrument of domination: control over food is control over life itself. As Al-Haq documented in 2024, the destruction of agricultural lands, systematic theft of water resources, and bombardment of Gaza's farmland demonstrate how food is weaponised as a tool of war and subjugation.[45] Similarly, during the Bengal Famine of 1943, British colonial policies diverted food and shipping capacity toward the imperial war effort, exacerbating scarcity and allowing millions of Bengalis to perish.[46]

Conclusion: Seeds Against Empire: Food Sovereignty as Decolonial Horizon

Colonial powers have always understood that famine is not merely a by-product of war but a weapon in its own right. From the deliberate destruction of Palestinian farmlands to the British, engineered Bengal Famine, food has been mobilised to dismantle Indigenous resistance and entrench domination. The ongoing starvation in Gaza, where Israeli forces have repeatedly targeted bakeries, farms, water pipelines, and humanitarian aid routes, follows this historical pattern of engineered deprivation.47 The same tactic was deployed against the Irish during the Great Famine, when British landlords continued exporting grain and livestock while the population starved.[48] In Africa today, neo-colonial land grabs, marketed as "development" or "agricultural modernisation," continue to dispossess Indigenous farmers, replacing subsistence cultivation with export-oriented monoculture controlled by multinational corporations.[49]

Israel's complicity in land theft and resource extraction extends beyond Palestine. Through commercial alliances and settler-colonial expansion, Israeli and Israeli-linked companies have participated in exploitative extractive industries across the African continent, particularly in the mining sector. Investigations have repeatedly linked Israeli firms and brokers to illicit diamond and mineral networks in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Angola, and the Central African Republic—economies whose natural wealth is plundered at the expense of local populations.[50] These networks are not external to Israel's military-industrial economy; they are part of the same architecture that finances colonial expansion, fuels arms industries, and entrenches global systems of subjugation.

And yet, resistance persists. Across Africa, movements are reclaiming food sovereignty as a strategy for self-determination. In Burkina Faso, agroecological initiatives inspired by Thomas Sankara's revolutionary policies are restoring soil fertility, rebuilding local seed systems, and reducing dependence on imports. In Kenya, Indigenous land defenders continue to fight for the return of farmland stolen under British colonial rule, resisting multinational agribusinesses that seek to expand industrial monocultures.[51] In South Africa, small-scale farmers are revitalising Indigenous crops, including sorghum, millet, and amaranth, to counteract the ecological devastation caused by plantation agriculture. These movements are not merely reclaiming land; they are reclaiming the future.

The struggle for food sovereignty is, at its core, a struggle against slow and spectacular forms of death, a battle between those who plant life and those who cultivate destruction. This is not a theoretical claim but a lived reality for communities on the frontlines of settler-colonial violence. Indigenous farmers in Brazil, despite violent land grabs, continue to cultivate and protect sacred lands, knowing that every seed planted is an act of resistance. Their struggle echoes across borders and resonates deeply with Palestinian farmers who continue cultivating under siege, refusing erasure even as orchards, wells, and greenhouses are repeatedly destroyed.

45 Al-Haq, Starvation as a Weapon of War: Israel's Deliberate Impediment of Aid and Destruction of Food Systems in Gaza (Ramallah: Al-Haq, 2024). Accessed 9 December 2025. https://www.alhaq.org.

46 Madhusree Mukerjee, Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India During World War II (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 147–210.

47 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Gaza Situation Report, 2024–2025; Human Rights Watch, Israel: Starvation as a Weapon of War, 2023.

48 Christine Kinealy, This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845–52 (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994).

49 Saskia Sassen, Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

50 Global Witness, Undermined: How Corruption, Mismanagement and Political Influence Is Destroying the DRC's Mining Sector, 2023; United Nations Security Council, "Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic," 2019.

51 David Anderson, Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).

Food sovereignty is more than survival. It is revolution. It is the declaration that Indigenous, colonised, poor, and oppressed peoples will not be erased; that land will not be privatised; that seeds will not be patented; and that no colonial occupations or capitalist systems, will dictate the future of those who cultivate the earth. The act of planting despite devastation, of reclaiming land despite displacement, of refusing to let colonialism define the boundaries of life.

This is not romanticisation. The truth is far more dystopian. In Gaza, farmers are not simply resisting occupation, they are surviving an orchestrated genocide. The destruction of agricultural lands, the targeting of wells, and the use of starvation as a military weapon are not incidental, they are strategic acts of extermination.52 Grassroots movements alone cannot counter the scale of devastation imposed on them. The crisis demands more than localised resistance; it demands a global political awakening.

To save our seeds is to take a political stand grounded in justice. The struggle for food sovereignty cannot be reduced to farming practices alone; it must be understood as a global confrontation with extraction, exploitation, and systemic violence. It requires a radical rethinking of consumption, production, and complicity.

Ask: What is the price of the tomato I eat today?

Not in money, but in its ecological and political cost.

Is my mobile phone stained with the blood of Congolese miners?

These are difficult questions, but they are the questions that orient us toward survival, and toward resistance.

They are also the questions the wider international community can no longer avoid. Climate justice cannot be claimed, while importing goods produced through land theft, monoculture, and forced displacement. It cannot offer development aid while sustaining the same corporate architectures that extract the Global South's minerals, water, seeds, and labour.

This requires dismantling structures that enable contemporary forms of colonial domination, from Gaza to Congo to the Amazon. To confront these realities is uncomfortable, but comfort has never been the ground on which liberation grows. The work begins in the soil, by recognising the cost of what we consume, the violence embedded in global supply chains, and the colonial economies that still shape our daily lives.

To ask these questions is to refuse complicity.

To answer them honestly is to choose resistance.

52 Al-Haq, Starvation as a Weapon of War: Israel's Deliberate Impediment of Aid and Destruction of Food Systems in Gaza (Ramallah: Al-Haq, 2024).

Arwa Ayoub
Ibrahim Shikaki
Naser Abdelkarim

ECONOMY & POLITICS

PALESTINIAN DISOBEDIENCE

Knowledge Production & Self-Determination

By Arwa Ayoub

Arwa Ayoub holds a Master's degree in International Education Development from Columbia University. Her interests lie at the intersection of knowledge production, power, and global governance, with particular attention to the Global South, while her research interests have ranged widely to include global development and refugee global governance. Her writings focus mostly on governance frameworks and how they are shaped and interpreted. Her work reflects engagement with theoretical debates and with the ways in which global categories are articulated, contested, and understood across different political and historical settings, raising issues about framing, conceptual assumptions, and analytical positioning when it comes to global development, governance, and refugee studies.

Introduction

Palestinian resistance has long been a focal point of discourse across diverse domains. Academically, it is often associated with colonialism, displacement, and the enduring fight for sovereignty, reflecting the profound impact these forces have had on the Palestinian experience. Situated within the complex geopolitical environment of the Middle East and entangled in entrenched colonial structures, Palestinians have been struggling for sovereignty and self-determination for decades. The Palestinian Question, therefore, cannot be explored in isolation. It must be understood through its positionality within the larger context of colonial history and its ongoing legacies. Decolonial Theory offers a conceptual framework to analyse Palestinian positionality within the broader Global South, shedding light on Palestinian practices of resistance and their continuous fight against colonisation.

The term "Global South" and its development in various academic disciplines reflect the shifting aspects of coloniality, moving beyond a rigid geopolitical boundary to encompass any space—whether tangible or intangible—that has been affected by forms of colonialism, imperialism, domination, exploitation, and marginalisation. By expanding this definition, we gain a broader understanding of coloniality's reach, recognising that resistance can emerge from any context where decolonial thought takes root. The Global South is, in essence, a space for both the recognition of oppression and the active resistance against it.

Building on this broader understanding, Decolonial Theory provides a framework to analyse Palestinian positionality, resistance, and epistemology within the Global South. It challenges the traditional understanding of political domination by broadening the discussion to include issues of identity, agency, and knowledge production—key concepts central to Decolonial Theory. These ideas intersect significantly with the framework of Orientalism, another crucial lens for analysing the Palestinian Question, as discussed by Edward Said[1]. Considering these frameworks, this article aims to explore Palestinian resistance through key concepts of Decolonial Theory.

The first section introduces Decolonial Theory by discussing two of its most prominent works: Coloniality and Modernity/ Rationality (2007) by Aníbal Quijano and Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing: On (De)coloniality, Border Thinking, and Epistemic Disobedience (2011) by Walter Mignolo. These foundational texts provide insights into how coloniality shapes modern structures of power, knowledge, and identity. The section also introduces the concept of the Global South and explores its connection with both coloniality and decoloniality, emphasizing the significance of these frameworks in understanding the Palestinian experience. The second section delves into Palestinian positionality, resistance, and epistemology within the context of the Global South. It explores how Palestinians have navigated colonial structures, particularly through intellectual resistance. This section also sets the stage for a deeper examination of specific practices of resistance, focusing on the challenges posed by foreign aid and its implications for Palestinian education. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and its education system are presented as key examples of resistance in this context, highlighting how the agency's approach to education serves as a form of epistemological disobedience. The article concludes by analysing how Palestinian resistance challenges political domination and simultaneously rejects colonial knowledge production and imposed identities, embodying epistemological disobedience.

Decolonial Theory: Key Scholars & Concepts

Anibal Quijano developed the concept of Eurocentered Colonialism which establishes a dominant relationship with the colonized: politically, socially and culturally. Starting in America,

1 Said, E. W. (2025). The Question of Palestine. Text Publishing.

this direct domination was eroded; mostly acknowledged as the end of the formal system of domination. However, it was succeeded by imperialism and structures of power that identified and codified social discrimination as 'racial', 'ethnic', anthropological' and 'national'. Despite the formal elimination of political colonialism, the scales of power were not changed. Colonized populations were categorized with these codes while being exploited, dominated and discriminated against. These dynamics are not merely external, as they influence the colonized cultures as well. While Quijano (2007) focuses on the origin and apparatus of coloniality, Walter Mignolo focuses on the origin and apparatus of decoloniality. The former points out the west as the origin of coloniality, while the latter points out the origin of decoloniality, the Third World. Mignolo (2011) also elaborates on the link between decoloniality and the 'immigrant consciousness' which he claims to be located in the 'routes of dispersion of decolonial and border thinking'; thus, stretching the location of this discussion.

Both "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality" (2007) and "Geopolitics of sensing and knowing: On (de)coloniality, border thinking, and epistemic disobedience" (2011) are a key reference to Decolonial Theory; and understanding the complementarity between these foundational texts is a critical entry point to understand the framework, theory and practice. Mignolo (2011) often expands on concepts Quijano (2007) presented. For example, Quijano (2007) highlights coloniality of power, whereas Mignolo delves into how to practice border thinking and delinking. Both works consolidated three concepts in the framework: 1) coloniality was not eroded, it only transformed shape, 2) as a result the Global South faces a coloniality of knowledge which disguises itself as modernity and rationality. 3) Yet, one of the most important contributions they made is to expand the border of the Global South, to include not only the geopolitical regions, but the minds that carry decolonial thought and practices regardless of their physical location. This contribution resulted from their profound analysis of coloniality/modernity, beyond the conventional concept of it as an eroded formal political system. Quijano (2007), in his discussion of intersection of race and coloniality of power, argues that modernity/rationality is the cornerstone of this power. The paradigm of rationality sustains two alternative options: social totality and knowledge as a subject-object relation. While Quijano (2007) problematizes rationality Mignolo (2011) provides the solution, to view modernity/rationality as an option, and not as an ontological phenomenon.

Quijano (2007) critiques the European tendency for intellectual and social totality. He identifies two assumptions within social totality, the first is that social structure is a closed totality, a structure that is linked, and operates collectively through a single logic. This idea contributed to the creation of structural functionalism. The second assumption compares society to the human body. Each organ has an assigned role, and these roles have varying levels of importance. In society, different groups, although connected, hold varying levels of power. Thus, Europeans not only considered the rest of the world homogeneous, and less vital than themselves as the brain of the world, but also considered themselves as the 'mirror of the future' setting the standard for civilisation and modernity with the rest to follow.

In the paradigm of rationality, the fundamental preposition is that knowledge is a product of a subject-object relation. There are two categories in this proposition, the 'subject' and the 'object'. The first refers to an isolated individual that "constitutes itself in itself and for itself" (Quijano, 2007, p.26). Whereas the latter refers to a category that is different from the subject and external to it by nature. This proposition defines the relationship between an object and another object through the 'properties' assigned by the subject.

According to Mignolo (2011) both modernity and the concept of 'anthropos' were introduced as global hegemonic and ontological phenomena. This parallels the concept of object in Quijano's (2007) discussion of rationality. However, the discussion of the anthropos focuses on the anthropos' perspective of itself and the west, but more importantly how to not be one. The solution, border thinking, leads to the realisation that modernity is a

western narrative that reveals regional history of the west, and that it is an option, not a universal design.

One of the key concepts Mignolo (2011) presents is delinking as an action of decoloniality. It is done by delinking from dominant western epistemologies and paradigms shaped by modernity - such as ideas from ancient Greece, Rome, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and Christian theology. Connecting with these epistemologies risks creating the illusion that no other epistemologies exist. For example, in the sixteenth century Greek and Latin were the only languages considered suitable to sustain knowledge, and other languages were considered inferior. This supports his argument that independent thought cannot be achieved within categories of western thought. Considering that all knowledge is constructed with a purpose; therefore, asking the questions when, why, where and for what knowledge has been created is a crucial step to delink. Mignolo (2011) presented the Bandung Conference (1955) as an example of not only delinking, but also a historic grounding of decoloniality. In this conference 29 African and Asian countries gathered to discuss a future vision that was neither capitalism nor communism. These existing options were rejected with the goal of creating new options.

Delinking occurs after the realisation that whatever category one belongs to is constructed. 'The other', or anthropos, does not exist ontologically, the constructed identity is imposed on the collective imaginary by an annunciator.

According to Quijano (2007), coloniality distinguished between knowledge that it deemed useful for global colonial domination and what is not. The former, mainly knowledge in fields such as agriculture and engineering, was plundered, while the latter was repressed. Most importantly, modes of producing knowledge were replaced by the mystified western modes of producing knowledge, which at first were placed out of reach then offered selectively. Access to western modes of producing knowledge was presented as a promise for material gain and power. Whereas Mignolo (2011) focuses on how colonial history shapes knowledge and identity creation, he proposes three options to carry forward: rewesternisation, dewesternisation, and decoloniality. The first two exist in the colonial project, namely in the fight over control and the economy. Dewesternisation stays within the margins of decoloniality. Both of them require border thinking to be challenged; however, dewesternisation cannot exist too far from westernisation itself. Thus, despite both requiring border thinking, they would serve different goals.

The Global South

To discuss the Palestinian positionality in the global colonial structure, and its connectedness to the history of a dominant apparatus, we must first explore the concept of the Global South, which refers to any space where coloniality or decoloniality occur. The elusiveness of the term Global South and its diverse uses in a variety of disciplines only reflects how entrenched the colonial structure is.

Before its prominence in postcolonial studies and international development discourse in the late 20th century, the term Global South. was conceptualized by Oglesby (1969) whose work referenced dependency theory. While his critique of U.S. imperialism presented the Global South as regions historically marginalized in global power structures, the constantly evolving concept of Global South transcends rigid political borders. In the 1970s and 1980s theorists such as Samir Amin (1976), Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), and André Gunder Frank (1969) expanded on the dynamics between the Global South and the Global North; as a result, they expanded the definition of the Global South to highlight the socio-economic divide between the two.

By serving as an alternative to Third World or underdeveloped countries, the Global South term emphasizes the power dynamics with the Global North. Commensurately, the term also became interwoven with systems of inequality and struggles for sovereignty and self-determination; thus referring to more than mere geographical territories. Decolonial Theory scholars frame the Global South in relation to other concepts beyond geographical territories.

Sylvia Wynter is a novelist and critic whose work draws from a multitude of disciplines, including literature, history, anthropology, and philosophy. One of her claims in her criticism of western culture is the construction of the concept of 'the human'. Thus, emphasizing the need to decolonize 'the human'. Her work expanded the definition of the Global South yet further by considering it as a space for cultural, racial, and epistemological otherness (Wynter, 2006).

Aníbal Quijano (2000) defined the Global South by his concept of Coloniality of Power, which refers to the historical and ongoing process of colonisation, in which colonialism restructures power relations. He addresses coloniality in different locations, America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The combination of massive genocide and cultural repression in America turned the high culture of the continent into subcultures that lack intellectual expression. African culture was deprived of its legitimacy in the global culture. Cultures in the Middle East were rendered as subordinate, not only in relation to western cultures, but also to its creators.

Mingolo (2000) defined the Global South as a site of resistance to the epistemic domination of the west, and alternative worldviews that challenged the normalized western thought. According to Mignolo (2011) decoloniality originated in The Third World, which he defines by the western imperial interference with local histories. However, decoloniality is connected to the "immigrant consciousness" (p.132). Mignolo clearly mentions Western Europe and the U.S. It can be inferred that the Global South is not confined to geopolitical locations but follows decolonial consciousness.

According to Hogan & Patrick (2024) the concept of the Global South, and the discourse about the political and economic divide in the world, are resurfacing with rising popularity. The term is utilized by the United Nations and has been used by the Secretary-General António Guterres. This popularity is not limited to the international affairs stage. The concept of the Global South has become part of academic discourse in a variety of disciplines.

The multifaceted definition lays the groundwork to understand the holistic aspect of Palestinian resistance in multiple spheres including political, economic, cultural and intellectual. This section is also an entry point to understand the role Palestinian resistance plays in a global issue. But most importantly, it demonstrates the expansion of the concept of Global South. To include any location, whether it is in the diaspora or not, where a Palestinian creates, or practices epistemological disobedience.

Palestinian Positionality in The Global South

It is impossible to discuss Palestinian resistance or epistemological disobedience without referencing orientalism which shapes the discourse of post-colonialism and influences decolonial thought. Edward Said (1935–2003) the Palestinian-American theorist who challenged Eurocentric epistemologies, played a crucial role in postcolonial studies, and critical theory. His seminal work, Orientalism (Said, 1978), in particular, has a powerful impact on the field. In his later work Culture and Imperialism (1993) he built on this critique to explain how colonial hierarchies are sustained through western literature and culture. Said proposed that imperialism is sustained by knowledge production (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2013). This argument was centralized and expanded on in Decolonial Theory.

Said (1978) argues that the west defines the orient based on a hierarchical and fixed binary opposition assuming the role of 'subject races'; thus, constructing the orient as exotic and inferior. This dehumanisation justifies western domination, coloniality, hegemonic modes of knowledge production and the study of the 'object' orient. While Said did not explicitly use the term Global South he argues that imperialism and Zionism share a "system of thought "that justifies racial domination (Maurice,2022). Although Said's work continues to contribute to critical theory and Decolonial Theory (Young, 2001), postcolonialism was criticized by both Mignolo (2018) and Quijano (2000) for not delinking from western thought and relying on western thinkers to frame the arguments. Mignolo (2017) also argues that the prefix 'post' is a

constraint to the unipolar time conceptions of the west. Whereas decoloniality seeks to completely separate from coloniality instead of thinking within its border.

Despite the criticism, Said, the person and the work, are indispensable to acknowledge and understand the Palestinian passion for education, and its role in their resistance.

Since the Palestinian question is not merely a national issue, but a global decolonial imperative; it is important to understand its positionality in the Global South and its history within the colonial project. Shaped by the tension between settler colonialism and anti-colonial resistance, the Palestinian experience is an embodiment of "coloniality of power". The reality of every single Palestinian in the world, regardless of their geopolitical location, is a representation of how colonialism has been shifting forms, and a clear representation of the need to decolonize the human before addressing a global system. Palestinian resistance has been taking many forms, political, cultural and intellectual, representing Mignolo's (2011) delinking concept. Said (1978) contextualizes the role of western hegemony in the Palestinian question by describing how Palestinianism is subjected to the imperialism lens reinforcing the subject-object dynamics and justifying Israeli and western domination.

Palestinian entanglement in the colonial project dates back to 1916, when the League of Nations divided the Middle East into spheres of European domination. The indigenous inhabitants of the land were disregarded, reducing the Arab collective, especially Palestinians, to mere inferior objects with no agency or the right to self-determination. This treaty, Sykes-Picot, is a portrayal of constructing identity with purpose. The colonial project was further solidified by the Balfour Declaration shortly in 1917.

Said's discussion of the Balfour Declaration in both The Question of Palestine (1979) and Culture and Imperialism (1993) addresses the colonial structure of power. Referring to the declaration as a key moment in history as it was a pivotal act in establishing the state of Israel, which laid the foundation for political instability and the displacement of Palestinians (Said, 1979). Said (1993) frames the Balfour Declaration as an expression of the British imperial project, a part of a larger pattern of western imperialism in the Middle East, disregarding the political and civil rights of Palestinians. One of the methods employed to achieve that, is depoliticizing Palestinian resistance, through language that describes mere "unrest" and "security concerns" (Massad, 2006). Colonial apparatus functions through erasure and elimination (Masalha, 2007 & Mamdani, 2020). Therefore, the decolonial project in the Middle East not only disregarded Palestinian's right to self-determination, attempted to construct identities with new borders, but also attempted to control the Palestinian narrative and representation.

According to Said (1978) Palestinians do not exist in the western imagination, and if they do, they are an inferior exotic anthropes. Quijano (2009) describes the subject perspective of the anthopes, the latter exists in relation to the former. And this is exactly how the west, including Israel view Palestinians. In the constructed identity and narrative Palestinians came to exist in the wake of establishment of Israel in 1948. One of the fundamental concepts of the construct of Israeli identity is its opposition with the Palestinian identity. The inflected erasure on Palestinianism is both ironic and paradoxical; but perfectly logical in the colonial framework that is incapable of perceiving the other outside the subject-object dynamic. As a result, an illusion was created that the Palestinian existence is inseparable from the Israeli, whereas the opposite is the likely reality.

This illusion contributed significantly to the misrepresentation of Palestinianism, it tied the Palestinian identity to suffering, displacement, and political instability. This portrayal overshadows a rich cultural, historical, and social heritage of the Palestinian people. The misrepresentation systematically erased the image of a flourishing Palestinian society, one that existed long before the colonial project in the Middle East. The erasure not only diminished the image of a flourishing Palestinian society prior to the existence of Israel, but also its ties with the Arab world.

Palestinian Resistance and Epistemological Disobedience

In exploring Palestinian resistance as an expression of epistemological disobedience, Mignolo's (2011) broader framework can shed clarity on the trajectory of status-quo and most importantly, how Palestinians challenge their reality in the colonial power structure. The framework presents three options: rewesternisation, dewesternisation, and decoloniality. Whereas the first one reinforces colonial domination structure, dewesternisation offers a shift; yet stays in the same structure, decoloniality and delinking from the colonial structure which would offer a shift towards Palestinian sovereignty (Mignolo,2011). This section will discuss the manifestation of these options in the politics of the Palestinian Question, foreign aid and Palestinian education such as in Birzeit University. By examining the application of these concepts, the role of Palestinian intellectual spaces as a site of resistance and delinking from colonial epistemologies is uncovered.

Rewesternisation:

All western diplomatic interference in the conflict resolution efforts is a form of rewesternisation. The neoliberal peacebuilding framework imposed through Oslo Accords signed in 1993 is an example of rewesternisation through diplomatic interference. The treaty created economic reliance on western and international institutions; coupled with security arrangements with Israel, colonial power merely shifted forms (Turner, 2012). Deprioritizing sovereignty, a donor dependent political economy was created by the process of Oslo Accords to maintain financial stability. The status quo was and is still maintained, as western led state-building efforts are characterized by reinforcing existing power structures (Le More, 2008).

International aid contributes to maintaining these power structures, according to Ibrahim and Beaudet (2012), the absence of statehood and the presence of occupation hinders development while stabilizing the occupation. In addition, the emphasis on economic stability led to the integration of the Palestine economy with Israel's, limiting the Palestinian Authority's sovereignty and decision-making (UNCTAD, 2019). Palestinian financial subjections, whether it is conditional foreign aid or Israeli control, sustains the coloniality of western power.

Dewesternisation:

Mignolo (2011) does not frame dewesternisation as an ideal solution. On the contrary, one of his arguments in criticizing post-colonial studies is that it does not completely delink from colonial epistemologies (Mignolo, 2017). However, Palestinians find themselves in an entangled colonial project with superpowers as agents; therefore, dewesternisation can act as a steppingstone to a decolonial future. Political and economic shifts can occur; yet decolonisation of culture, identity, society and epistemology is a process. At present, decolonisation and delinking may not be entirely feasible on a large scale. Therefore, dewesternisation has a crucial role in reaching a decolonial future through reducing reliance on western epistemology and institutions, and taking a step towards autonomy and sovereignty.

Foreign aid is one of the domains where dewesternisation is being actively pursued, especially conditional aid. Such aid determines which institutions receive funding and the working fields they operate in. Conditions often come with aid from the United States and the European Union requiring security cooperation with Israel. Palestinian institutions are making efforts to explore alternative sources of funding, including Arab donors and independent grassroots organisations. This is an attempt to reduce dependence on western aid and take a step towards economic autonomy (Hanafi & Tabar, 2005).

In addition, there is a rise in cultural dewesternisation. Palestinian scholars and artists are challenging the western constructed portrayal of the Palestinian narrative. Aiming to combat colonial narrative is still engaging with colonial matrix; therefore, it is dewesternisation.

This process parallels the development of Orientalism and postcolonial theories, which can be understood as forms of dewesternisation that preceded Decolonial Theory.

Decolonisation

Decoloniality in practice is to delink and exist outside the matrix of colonial power (Mignolo, 2011). Practicing decoloniality in the political and economic spheres, and fully delink from the western colonial project, may not be a viable objective in the current reality. However, Palestinians have long engaged in intellectual decoloniality, or epistemological disobedience, or as it is best known Palestinian resistance. Starting from early childhood education to higher academic discourse, Palestinians have consistently sought to assert their agency through education. As an example Birzeit University can be seen as a representation of Palestinian intellectual resistance. It started as a small school in 1924 and transitioned into a university in the 1970s. This institution has been a home for Palestinian resistance facing many challenges imposed by Israel (Naseef et al., 2021).

Unlike many universities in the Global South that rely heavily on the colonial languages English and French as instruction languages, Birzeit University is intentional in using the Arabic language in curriculum and as an instruction language. Mignolo (2011) emphasized the risk of thinking in a colonial language; not only does it shape the thought but also creates the illusion that thinking cannot happen outside the borders of colonial knowledge. Moreover, the programmes in this university integrate Palestinian history and culture. Disciplines such as political science, sociology and law prioritizes the Palestinian narrative over epistemologies that marginalizes and misrepresent the Palestinian narrative.

Birzeit University is known for its contribution to the discourse of decolonial theory, post-colonialism, and orientalism; in addition to incorporating these theories into their curricula. But more importantly, the institution practices delinking in addition to teaching it. For example, in an attempt to decolonize aid and work toward financial sovereignty, the Development Studies Program explored development strategies to reframe the connection between socio-economic development and national resistance. The centre presented a study that aimed to strategize resource mobilisation to empower grassroot and address the population's needs (Hanafi & Tabar, 2005). These are only but two examples of the initiative the institution takes in fostering, creating and applying Palestinian epistemologies.

The university's Development Studies Program practices delinking and resistance through exploring alternative models of development to address the issue of reliance on foreign aid. Drawing on Palestinian resources and epistemologies, these efforts go beyond dewestrnisation and exit the matrix to exist and function in the Palestinian community. Through reframing the dynamics between Palestinian economy and conditional foreign aid Birzeit University challenges the popular assumption that western diplomacy is the answer to the Palestinian question.

UNRWA as a site of Epistemological Disobedience

Examining Palestinian resistance through the framework of rewesternisation, dewesternisation, and decoloniality reveals how educational institutions serve as a site of delinking from colonial structures. It also reveals the challenges that come with foreign conditional aid. The pursuit of sovereignty becomes even more challenging for displaced Palestinians. The reliance on foreign aid and the fight for identity preservation are even greater in refugee camps. In addition, examining the case of UNRWA can also trace the Palestinian routes of dispersion in the Global South. This section will discuss the role that UNRWA's policy of almost exclusively hiring Palestinian refugees plays in turning UNRWA's education into a site of resistance and epistemological disobedience.

Operating since 1949, the agency became a quasi-government for Palestinian refugees in the five fields: Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. In 2012 a policy shift impacted its education system. As the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) implemented their inclusion policy, integrating refugee children into national systems, UNRWA schools adopted local curricula. The agency's role in education policy was negatively affected (Lughod, 1973). As coloniality

shifts forms and constructs identities, integration and assimilation into host countries' education systems and culture is framed as the only option.

However, tension between UNRWA policy and UNHCR policy was inevitable; and it was observed between the official curricula and educators' proactive role in preserving the Palestinian identity (Shabaneh, 2012). UNRWA has been protecting Palestinians from being absorbed into host systems (Shabaneh, 2012); officially it functioned as an agent in negotiating the policy implementation with host countries (Kelcey, 2020). UNRWA's policy serves as an outlet for Palestinians' agency, which has been protecting them from integration and assimilation, from disconnecting from their identities including their culture, history, narrative, and dialect.

One of the distinctive aspects of UNRWA is its exclusive service to Palestinian refugees, making it the only United Nations agency to serve a dedicated group of refugees. This uniqueness has contributed to fostering a strong sense of identity for Palestinian refugees (Ifran, 2018). Coupled with the central role education plays in UNRWA's mandate, Palestinian educators create the ground for epistemological disobedience and resistance. This does not only demonstrate awareness of the subject-object relationship, but also the agency to refuse to be one. Palestinians see themselves and their narrative and identity through Palestinian eyes.

The agency's engagement with western donors and stakeholders maintains the entanglement with western epistemologies and the power of coloniality at play. When western stakeholders apply western perspective and epistemologies in shaping UNRWA's mandate, Palestinian educators practice delinking. It is evident that Palestinian refugees in UNRWA camps reject non-Palestinian epistemologies as the only option. Modernity/rationality are treated as an option when Palestinian refugees act as a subject that "constitutes itself in itself and for itself".

Dealing with multiple actors and complicated circumstances in displacement, Palestinians refugees face the threat of a constructed identity being imposed on them.

Schools as a site in UNRWA camps play a crucial role in providing the space for Palestinian refugees to practice delinking. They host organized socialisation and exclusive interaction. Through poetry, music, plays, paintings, short stories, traditional songs, and dance workshops, the extracurricular activities held in educational spaces, UNRWA contributed to the reconstruction and preservation of the Palestinian identity in its camps.

Conclusion

The analysis in this article highlights the ongoing legacies of colonisation and how it continues to affect the lives of the colonised and the displaced as it shifts forms. Viewing the Palestinian Question through the decolonial lens affirms the crucial role education and knowledge production play in sovereignty and self-determination. It sheds light on the intricate influence of coloniality and offers a glimpse of how colonialism manifests in the Global South. The discussion reveals how epistemological disobedience combats attempts to erase the Palestinian identity and narrative. Despite conditional foreign aid and the complex governance Palestinians must engage with, cases such as Birzeit University and UNRWA education demonstrate how crucial delinking and practicing decolonisation are. Through epistemological disobedience and knowledge production, Palestinians can preserve their identity and seek sovereignty.

Ultimately, the Palestinian Question serves as a microcosm of the ongoing struggle for decolonisation across the Global South, providing an embodiment of decolonial practices that can be applied to face the colonial structure as it shifts forms and adapts to new global realities. The Palestinian experience offers valuable insights on practicing decoloniality and challenging colonial power structures. It also highlights the need for shifts in international refugee policies. In the grand scheme of the Global South, Palestinian resistance and epistemological disobedience ought to prompt reflection on the importance of unconditional aid and refugee autonomy in refugee policymaking.

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WEAPONIZING ECONOMICS AGAINST PALESTINE

Neoclassical economics has consistently failed the Palestinian people, and must be abandoned in Gaza's reconstruction

By Dr. Ibrahim Shikaki

Ibrahim Shikaki, is an associate professor of economics at Trinity College, Connecticut. He has taught at several institutions, including the New School for Social Research (NSSR) in New York, the International University College of Turin, Birzeit University, and Al-Quds University in Palestine. He also held research positions at the Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) in Ramallah and Diakonia's IHL Research Centre in East Jerusalem. His writings range over several topics, including growth and distribution, the political economy of dependency, and class formation in Palestine.

On 3 June 2025, 27 Palestinians were killed[1] and 147 injured while attempting to access one of the new, controversial[2] aid distribution sites established in the devastated Gaza Strip by Israel and the United States. Just two days earlier, 31 others were killed[3] and 170 injured under similar circumstances while seeking food for their families.

The immediate context of these tragedies is Israel's decision to cut off all aid and supplies to Gaza beginning in early March, effectively using the starvation of over 2 million Palestinians as a means of exerting pressure on Hamas. The broader backdrop, of course, is a war that even some of Israel's closest allies have now described as "unjustifiable".[4] According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS)[5], the Israeli military has killed approximately 54,000 Palestinians since October 2023. This staggering figure includes 30,400 women and children, 1,411 medical personnel, 800 educators, 219 journalists, and 203 UN staff members.

Yet even these numbers fail to capture the full scale of the horror.[6] Stories of murder[7], torture[8], and starvation[9] continue to reach the outside world — despite Israel's ongoing ban on international journalists entering the Gaza Strip. These and other actions have prompted several European countries to call for an unprecedented arms embargo.[10]

1 https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/least-24-palestinians-killed-near-gaza-aid-site-medics-say-2025-06-03/

2 https://abcnews.go.com/International/humanitarian-groups-heavily-criticize-new-aid-distribution-plan/story?id=122360739

3 https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-hamas-war-news-hostages-aid-06-01-2025-67688833abb96fc068c42d10da90a0a4

4 https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2025-05-26/ty-article/germanys-chancellor-israels-gaza-offensive-no-longer-justified-by-fight-against-hamas/00000197-0c89-df85-a197-0ee9a6db0000

5 https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/default.aspx

6 https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/killing-six-year-old-hind-rajab-war-crimes-rcna162824

7 https://www.npr.org/2025/04/20/nx-s1-5370617/israeli-probe-killings-15-palestinian-medics-gaza-finds-professional-failures

8 https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn7vje365rno

9 https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/30/world/middleeast/gaza-children-hunger.html

10 https://www.dw.com/en/amid-calls-for-arms-embargo-who-supplies-israels-weapons/a-72675978

Meanwhile, genocide scholars, nearly unanimous in their assessments, have aligned[11] with the UN Special Rapporteur's report[12] concluding that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza.

Restricting basic human needs, particularly food, as a tool of coercion is not new. Israel has employed such tactics long before[13] the events of 2023. This weaponization of economic necessity serves as a clear example of how those in power can manipulate access to resources for political gain. That said, here I am not primarily concerned with such direct forms of economic coercion, but rather focus on the broader landscape of economic thought, theory, and policy, arguing that dominant economic paradigms tend to depoliticize the field by presenting economic analysis as a value-free, objective science.

This technocratic approach has underpinned the strategies of international aid[14] and development institutions in Palestine and shaped diplomatic discourse in the region. Its logic was perhaps most visibly embodied in Trump's proposal to transform Gaza into the "Riviera of the Middle East"[15] — an initiative that, even a few months later, deserves a closer look. After all, this depoliticized approach to economics is not unique to Palestine. It reflects a broader, centuries-old intellectual project aimed at defending capitalism and removing politics from economic inquiry altogether. In Palestine, it merely shows its most brutal side.

The Neoclassical Turn

The late nineteenth century witnessed one of the most influential paradigm shifts in economic thought: the marginalist revolution, which laid the foundation for neoclassical economics — the

11 https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2025/05/14/zeven-gerenommeerde-wetenschappers-vrijwel-eensgezind-israel-pleegt-in-gaza-genocide-a4893293

12 https://www.un.org/unispal/document/anatomy-of-a-genocide-report-of-the-special-rapporteur-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-the-palestinian-territory-occupied-since-1967-to-human-rights-council-advance-unedited-version-a-hrc-55/

13 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/17/israeli-military-calorie-limit-gaza

14 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13629395.2014.967014

15 https://www.americanprogress.org/article/trumps-riviera-of-the-middle-east-plan-fundamentally-misreads-the-arab-world/

dominant school of thought that continues to shape mainstream economics today. Prior to the rise of marginalism, early economic inquiry was led by classical political economists and their critics, such as Karl Marx. These thinkers analysed the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism in Western Europe, focusing on issues such as economic growth, technological change, and income distribution. Central to their analysis was the role of power, especially as new forms of class dynamics and authority emerged within industrial capitalism.

The subsequent neoclassical turn was driven by two key motivations. First, it represented a deliberate counter to Marxian critiques of capitalism — particularly his theories of surplus value, exploitation, and historical materialism. Neoclassical thinkers sought to reframe capitalism not as a site of struggle and inequality, but as an efficient, self-correcting system. John Bates Clark, for example, who initially held critical views of capitalism, became one of its most ardent defenders in neoclassical thought. He famously claimed[16] that "the distribution of the income of society is controlled by a natural law, and that this law, if it worked without friction, would give to every agent of production the amount of wealth which that agent creates."

Second, there was a concerted effort to cast economics as a value-free natural science. Inspired in part by the growing prestige of physics[17], neoclassical economists adopted the mathematical language of classical mechanics, emphasizing abstract concepts such as equilibrium. This scientific veneer helped position economics as a rigorous, apolitical field, distancing it from the more normative and interpretive roots of political economy.

Perhaps most significantly — and most relevant to this article — was the redefinition of the field's purpose and scope. Political economy, with its emphasis on power, class, distribution, and conflict within the production process, was considered too ideological and too open to contestation. In contrast, the newly defined discipline of economics was framed as a "positive" science — one that studied markets, exchange, and efficiency through the lens of mathematical modelling and theoretical abstraction. In this way, politics was systematically separated from economics.

16 https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/clark-the-distribution-of-wealth-a-theory-of-wages-interest-and-profits

17 https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/more-heat-than-light/4CD2ADE8D5DE8665E43E2922D7E360B3

Apolitical Economics Comes to Palestine

Mainstream economic scholarship is largely produced by white men in the Global North, and often fails to reflect the lived experiences of the vast majority of people around the world. Beyond this demographic imbalance, there exists a rich body of critical scholarship that challenges the colonial foundations[18] of economics, exposes the harmful legacy[19] of international financial institutions in the Global South, and links mainstream economic thought to austerity policies[20], authoritarianism, and market fundamentalism. Scholars have explored how the creation of the Nobel Prize[21] in Economics was itself a political act meant to bolster neoliberal ideology and undermine alternatives like social democracy. Others have shown how economic frameworks frequently erode notions of community[22] and solidarity.

In the Palestinian context, neoclassical economics — stripped of its historical and political dimensions — has served as the dominant framework for policy and planning since the early 1990s, coinciding with the beginning of the formal peace process. The World Bank played a central role in shaping this agenda. Although its reports have gradually acknowledged the economic consequences of the Israeli occupation, they consistently refer to it euphemistically as "Israeli restrictions", avoiding explicit recognition of its structural and colonial nature. Despite this understatement, the World Bank has continued to advocate for unregulated market integration[23] between the Palestinian and Israeli economies, suggesting that such arrangements

18 https://ingridhk.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/cmlix42191024ingrid-harvold-kvangraven.pdf

19 https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/unholy-trinity-9781848132528/

20 https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/C/bo181707138.html

21 https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691166032/the-nobel-factor?srsltid=AfmBOoq0NZqoBnNkM0q2yCLVPy5JB6oEZMzc6NdT3VfKWAb208y_OXi0

22 https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674047228

23 https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-flaws-and-failings-of-the-world-banks-research-on-the-palestinian-economy/

would generate positive spill-over effects, enhance Palestinian development, and create incentives for "economic peace".[24]

In practice, however, the gap between the two economies has only grown. What exists is a deeply asymmetrical relationship of one-way dependency[25]: the Palestinian economy relies heavily on the Israeli labour and goods markets, Israeli-controlled financial transfers[26], and increasing flows of international aid and private debt. These dynamics have deepened rather than diminished over time.

Over the past 15 years, three major economic plans have been proposed by Western actors: the Office of the Quartet plan (2011), the John Kerry initiative (2014), and the Kushner plan (2019). All of these initiatives[27] were rooted in the same flawed premise: namely, that a political conflict could be resolved economically. Unsurprisingly, none of these plans were fully implemented, most failed to progress beyond the proposal stage. The latest proposal emerging from Washington, however, may stand as the clearest example yet of how economic discourse can be weaponized in service of injustice.

Economics as a Tool for Evil: Trump's Gaza "Plan"

On 4 February 2025, in a joint press conference with the Israeli Prime Minister, President Donald Trump publicly unveiled the US "day-after" plan for Gaza. In brief, it involved the forcible transfer of nearly 2 million Palestinians and the transformation of the Gaza Strip into a massive real estate development project.

Like many of his second-term policies, Trump has partially walked back aspects of the plan — most notably the relocation of Palestinians to Jordan and Egypt. Observers have characterized this as another example of the "flood the zone"[28] strategy, popularized by former Trump adviser Steve Bannon. In this view, the proposal is less a concrete policy and more a bargaining chip to extract political and economic concessions from directly affected countries like Jordan and Egypt, as well as more fragile states like Syria.

Notably, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's reserved demeanour during the press conference was interpreted not as opposition but strategic restraint. The Israeli government's dehumanization of Palestinians has been deeply institutionalized, as reflected in multiple rulings from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on genocide[29] and the illegality of the occupation[30], as well as International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrants[31] issued for Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant.

The idea of "cleansing the colony" of its "native inhabitants" is not alien to Netanyahu. The codename for Israel's current military operation in the West Bank is "Iron Wall," a direct reference to Ze'ev Jabotinsky's 1923 infamous essay.[32] In the essay, Jabotinsky, a key ideological forefather of Netanyahu's Likud party who has 57 streets, parks, and squares named after him in contemporary Israel, suggests to his readers to study the history of colonization and "see whether there is one solitary instance of any colonization being carried on with the consent of the native population. There is no such precedent. The native populations, civilized or uncivilized, have always stubbornly resisted the colonists". As such, he states that "Zionist colonization … can proceed and develop only under the protection of a power that is independent of the native population – behind an iron wall, which the native population cannot breach".

What has been largely overlooked by media coverage, however, is the economic ideology underpinning Trump's plan. The source of Trump's supposedly "out of the box" and "creative" proposal turns out to be an academic paper titled An Economic Plan for Building Gaza: A BOT Approach.[33] Authored by an economist at

24 https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/02/palestine-israel-conflict-occupation-peace-economy-trade-services-manufacturing-agriculture-labor-dependency/

25 https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-68643-7_3

26 https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/gdsapp2019d2_en.pdf

27 https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/an-economic-analysis-of-kushners-failed-plan/

28 https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1229996820

29 https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203454

30 https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/07/experts-hail-icj-declaration-illegality-israels-presence-occupied

31 https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-state-palestine-icc-pre-trial-chamber-i-rejects-state-israels-challenges

32 https://en.jabotinsky.org/media/9747/the-iron-wall.pdf

33 https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/full/10.1142/S219456592450009X

The George Washington University and shared with the Trump administration in July 2024, the paper envisions a multi-trillion-dollar investment initiative that effectively transfers Gaza's sovereignty to foreign investor "stakeholders", placing the Strip under full AI-driven supervision. According to the paper, "foreign investors are given equity shares in Gaza for a 50 year period where their investment will reconstruct Gaza. … Sovereignty for the inhabitants (Transfer) in Gaza will be determined by these stakeholders after the 50 year leasing arrangement is completed." The paper is riddled with historical inaccuracies, unsupported claims about Palestinian casualties and infrastructure destruction, vague assertions about Gaza's population size, and questionable sources including Wikipedia entries. It misrepresents Palestinian public opinion, and even claims that Israel's military actions have been consistent with international law. That such a document was published in an academic journal is astonishing.

More fundamentally, the paper is steeped in the market fundamentalism and depoliticized economic logic. In its opening paragraph, the author proudly assert his intent to "use a more reasonable economic methodology devoid of political factors as constraints", aiming to create "a civil governing system based on the general philosophy of private provision of public services". Gaza, they argue, should be approached as a post-bankruptcy scenario that can be solved via "investment solutions".

The cost of this real estate megaproject is estimated at 1–2 trillion dollars, with a projected completion time of five to ten years. Investors would hold a direct equity stake in Gaza via a 50 year lease.

While the paper avoids explicitly calling for population transfer, Section Four includes troubling implications. It proposes to "dig up the entire 365 square kilometer Gaza land mass" and establish a three- to five- kilometre buffer zone. Coupled with high population density figures and a five-year construction timeline, these plans provided rhetorical ammunition for Trump's ultimate aim: ethnic cleansing.

Further details are equally alarming. The paper suggests that Gaza's civil administration be "subcontracted by the selected investors and/or their representatives", and calls to "create the common law principles known as the 'rule of law'[34] as it is applied to property, contract, criminal and tort law under a market system". It should be noted that aside from the troubling history of the rule of law notion, common law is in fact alien to the legal system in the Arab world outside of Israel (which is influenced by both common and civil law systems). Finally, education, it proposes, should be overseen by foreign experts with the authority to design a "balanced" curriculum.

Heterodox Visions for a Free Palestine

The plan described above should be discredited outright, and yet, the fact that it originated from a paper rooted in mainstream economic methods such as Computable General Equilibrium (CGE) modelling lends it a veneer of legitimacy. This is not to suggest that all mainstream economics is necessarily harmful, but rather to caution that its apolitical logic can be weaponized for profoundly unjust ends. Thus, when seeking to formulate visions for Palestine after the war, it is vital that we look to heterodox economic ideas for inspiration.

Heterodox schools[35] of thought emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of economics, and challenge the assumption that more data and computational power[36] automatically result in better, more "scientific" policy. In the Palestinian context, local research institutions have underscored the political economy[37] of the Israeli occupation and the potential pathways towards Palestinian disengagement[38] from the Israeli economy. Globally, new institutions like the Center for Heterodox Economics[39] (CHE) are advancing alternatives focused on workers' rights, housing justice, and inclusive development — prioritizing the welfare of society over the maximization of shareholder value.

It is within this critical tradition that I propose three short-term economic policy measures aimed at easing the burden on Palestinians living in the world's largest open-air prison[40], and helping re-establish basic human dignity. It goes without saying that in the midst of an ongoing genocide and humanitarian

34 https://www.wiley.com/en-in/Plunder%3A+When+the+Rule+of+Law+is+Illegal-p-9781405178952#description-section

35 https://developingeconomics.org/2019/05/08/why-so-hostile-busting-myths-about-heterodox-economics/

36 https://cup.columbia.edu/book/bernoullis-fallacy/9780231199957/

37 https://mas.ps/en/events/12439.html

38 https://mas.ps/en/publications/2925.html

39 https://sites.utulsa.edu/chetu/

40 https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/14/gaza-israels-open-air-prison-15

catastrophe, the immediate priority must be to put an end to the war, pressure Israel to withdraw from the Gaza Strip, and facilitate the entry of basic humanitarian aid. But after that, Gaza will need a fundamental transformation of its economy.

When this war finally ends, a basic income should be provided to all adults living in Gaza for two years. Given the destruction of physical infrastructure, economic capacity, and educational institutions, such a measure is essential for restoring purchasing power. With an average household size of 5.5 and a population of 2.1 million[41] — half of whom are under 19 — a 500 dollar monthly household stipend would cost approximately 4.5 billion dollars over two years, and could be administered through existing platforms such as the Ministry of Social Affairs.

A baby bond[42] program would allocate an initial endowment starting at 2,000 dollars for each child born in Gaza, to be invested in a secure, interest-earning fund. These funds would be accessible between ages 18 and 25 for major life needs: housing, business investment, education, or retirement. With a crude birth rate[43] of 32 per 1,000, Gaza sees around 67,200 births annually. Based on international[44] estimates for similar programs, the cost would range from 1 to 1.5 billion US dollars per year.

A third initiative would establish productive-sector projects — particularly in manufacturing and agriculture — under a cooperative ownership model. Workers would earn fair wages, participate in management, and reinvest profits democratically. This model draws inspiration from the SAMED projects started by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon to support families of fallen fighters, as well as successful international models like the Mondragon Corporation[45] in the Basque region and the Rojava economic experiment in Kurdish Syria.

Clearly, these policies will be costly, and will require substantial external financing. It is important to note, however, that the only alternative to Trump's plan is the Egyptian-led Arab reconstruction initiative[46], currently estimated at 53 billion dollars. For context, the last major donor conference for Palestine in 2007 successfully secured over 7 billion in pledges. A similar effort could be revived to initiate a broader investment campaign, with a pivotal role played by Arab states and Palestinian investors from the diaspora.

While these policies are neither perfect nor intended as long-term solutions to the deep structural distortions caused by decades of Israeli occupation, they do offer meaningful short-term responses to the pressing challenges of poverty, unemployment, and economic dependency on Israel. In the long term, the objective must be to dismantle Palestine's entrenched economic dependency on Israel — an outcome of asymmetric power dynamics and unilateral control over resources and policy space. Strategic goals should include reducing reliance on Israeli labour, goods, and capital markets, and launching a comprehensive push that mobilizes both public and private sectors. This would involve targeted investment in productive industries, the knowledge economy, and significantly increasing female participation in the labour force, which remains strikingly low at just under 20 percent.

The feasibility of such long-term policies must be examined within a broader political and stakeholder framework, akin to the analysis conducted by the Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) in its recent report, The Political Economy of Palestinian Nationhood, Independence and Development in the Wake of War.[47] That report, alongside a subsequent academic symposium titled Priorities for Palestine's Economy in the Midst of War[48], stands in contrast to the apolitical lens of neoclassical economics. Together, they represent a rare yet essential body of local work that diagnoses the underlying conditions, symptoms, and remedies with much-needed clarity and intellectual integrity.

41 https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Downloads/book2710.pdf

42 https://time.com/collection/closers/6564916/darrick-hamilton-william-darity/

43 https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Downloads/book2639.pdf

44 https://www.kansascity.com/news/nation-world/article194230924.html

45 https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2024/apr/24/in-the-us-they-think-were-communists-the-70000-workers-showing-the-world-another-way-to-earn-a-living

46 https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/what-egypts-plan-gaza-reconstruction

47 https://mas.ps/en/publications/12348.html

48 https://mas.ps/cached_uploads/download/2025/04/09/international-academic-symposium-1744200396.pdf

THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY'S DIRE FINANCIAL STRAITS

Decades of Israeli occupation and restrictions on the Palestinian economy make sovereignty practically impossible

By Dr. Naser Abdelkarim

Naser Abdelkarim is an economist specialising in finance and accounting. He has held senior academic roles at Birzeit University and Al-Najah National University, including Dean of the College of Business and Economics, and Director of the MBA Program. He currently teaches at the Arab American University in Palestine. He has also served as Research Director at the Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) and worked as a consultant for organisations including the World Bank, UNDP, ILO, GIZ, the Palestine Monetary Authority, and the Palestine Investment Fund. His work focuses on economic development, fiscal policy, corporate governance, and financial markets.

The destruction of Gaza before the eyes of the world has underlined, in a dramatic and brutal manner, the extent to which the conditions of Palestine's existence hinge on the whims of the Israeli occupation. Although the current war may be unprecedented in terms of scope and duration, it fits into a long pattern of Israeli control over Palestinian political and economic sovereignty. Indeed, the Palestinian Authority (PA), established in the 1990s as the institutional precursor to an independent Palestinian state, remains a deformed state at best, with its finances — crucial to any project of national sovereignty — strictly controlled by Israel.

The Palestinian economy is closely bound up with political events and policy choices made almost exclusively within Israel. Movements of labour, goods, and trade are heavily shaped by the fact that Israel controls all points of entry and exit to the Occupied Territories. The PA's fiscal well-being depends on a complicated combination of grants and Israeli-imposed restrictions on the Palestinian economy. Moreover, the Paris Protocols and the Oslo Accords put in place a framework that subjects the Palestinian economy to extensive Israeli control, including over its arrangements for trade, customs, and excise, as well as the terms and conditions dictating the establishment of the PA itself, which severely restrict Palestine's sovereignty over its own economic policies, resources, and borders.

The political division between Gaza and the West Bank since 2007 further complicated the PA's finances. It had a significant impact on revenues generated from economic activities in Gaza, whether via domestic taxes or clearance revenues, especially in the first years of division. It is estimated that the contribution of Gaza to the PA's total revenues declined by almost 50 percent, equivalent to the decline in its contribution to Palestinian GDP. At the same time, spending on Gaza continued, albeit on a smaller scale. This all set the stage for the situation the PA finds itself in today.

The task of reconstruction following this devastating war, both in Gaza itself but also across the West Bank where Israeli attacks have escalated significantly, will prove immensely costly, and there is no reason to think that Israel, as the occupying power, will be inclined to help the PA shoulder those costs. As long as the Palestinians are denied control over their economy, national sovereignty will remain an impossible proposition.

Situational Constraints on the PA's Finances

The PA's ability to generate revenue by taxing trade as well as via domestic commerce and natural resource utilization faces several limitations, mostly imposed by the agreements with Israel made in the 1990s. These include situational limitations such as access restrictions, as well as systemic constraints imposed by recurrent and ongoing closure policy of military checkpoints. They include:

- Economic activities that could potentially enable the PA to generate funds are vitally dependent on the Palestinians' ability to trade and move, both of which are severely hampered by multiple Israeli restrictions. This is relevant given the size and diversity of an economy's tax base, which has a significant impact on the potential for generating revenue sustainably.
- One of the PA's major fiscal constraints stems from limited sovereignty over its own territory and resources. A large portion of the West Bank (especially the resource-rich Area C) is under direct Israeli civil and/or military control, in addition to continuous settlement expansion and recurring settler aggression against the local population. This control imposes several constraints on Palestinian access to natural resources, especially land and water, which in turn limits the potential revenue from these resources. This structural limitation has led to substantial fiscal dependency on foreign aid and external sources.
- Another major constraint on PA fiscal independence is Israel's recurring withholding of clearance funds. Authorities cite several reasons for doing so, the most recent being due to the PA's financial support for families of prisoners and "martyrs", which had already created a significant financial burden.
- Furthermore, there are certain internal constraints on the finances that are available, some of which are a direct result

of the need for external sponsorship. The PA's chronic budget deficit, the size of the Palestinian public sector, and the misalignment between political sovereignty and fiscal as well as economic independence are factors that shape Palestinian policymaking in this regard.

These budgetary constraints are so severe that they turn even the most basic government spending into a significant challenge. Moreover, any variation in the scale of recurrent Israeli constraints has the potential to trigger a new financial crisis for the PA. Such crises, in turn, can only be resolved by borrowing funds. As a result, periodic borrowing has become a quasi-permanent feature of the PA fiscal deficit. Given these circumstances, the constraints imposed by Israel represent a critical policy challenge, one that must be resolved should Palestine have a future in the wake of any possible ceasefire in Gaza.

The Status Quo

To develop a more complete picture of the PA's fiscal performance, it is useful to look closer at financial statistics and trends over the 2019–2023 period, including revenue, non-revenue financing, expenditures, as well as arrears and public debt. Statistics over this period show that the Palestinian economy as well as the PA's fiscal position weakened due to a number of factors. The first factor was the Israeli decision in late 2019 to start withholding around 50 million shekels (roughly 12.5 million euro) of clearance revenue, equivalent to the salaries and allowances paid to prisoners, martyrs, and persons wounded in struggling against Israeli occupation. The second was the COVID-19 pandemic. The third factor was the sharp decline in international aid, particularly budget support.

The composition of total revenues and grants collected by the Palestinian Authority over the period 2019–2023 is illustrated in the table below. This represents the portion of income sources generated from domestic revenues, clearance revenues, grants, and donations. Aggregated income denotes actual monies collected rather than provisions for which the receiver anticipates collection. The statistics in the table provide a quantitative look at the PA's inflows. The rate at which domestic and clearance revenue changes from one year to the next can offer qualified insights into the PA's fiscal and economic development.

Table 1: Breakdown of PA Total Net Revenues,
Domestic Revenues, Clearance, and Grants (2019–2023) (Million USD)

Type Income	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
grants and revenues net Total	3,782.7	3,990.3	4,546.1	5,029.9	4,715.7
revenues Total	3,428.8	3,610.0	4,315.9	4,921.7	4,369.7
revenues domestic Gross	1,209.6	1,210.0	1,539.0	1,775.5	1,639.3
revenues Tax	763.3	737.4	994.9	1,146.8	1,074.7
revenues tax-Non	355.7	374.6	402.5	458.1	433.3
revenues clearance Gross	2,219.2	2,399.9	2,776.9	3,146.2	2,730.4
donations and Grants	492.1	464.1	321.4	344.8	357.6

Source: Palestine Ministry of Finance, Palestine Monetary Authority

Clearance revenues — including VAT applied to imports into the Occupied Territories (either directly from or through Israel, given that Israel controls all Palestinian borders), purchase taxes, custom duties, petroleum taxes, and income taxes from Palestinians working in Israel and Israeli settlements — form a significant part of the PA's revenues, around 67 percent. Israel collects these taxes and then transfers the funds to the PA Ministry of Finance on a monthly basis through a process called the "clearance mechanism".
Yet the PA has encountered many problems in dealing with Israel in this regard. One of the key technical problems encountered lies in what may be called "information asymmetry", as the relevant Israeli authorities often decline to share full tax data with their Palestinian counterparts. This is in addition to the more serious problem of "politicizing" clearance revenues, i.e. withholding them with the aim of putting pressure on the Palestinian economy and fiscal space.

Analysis of these revenues over the years shows they increased slightly between 2019 and 2020, despite the pandemic and resulting fluctuations in global trade. In 2021, as economic activity gradually returned to normal and supply chains began to stabilize, clearance revenues increased from 2,299.9 to 2,776.9 million US dollars. The upward trend continued until 2022, but was curtailed by the economic instability as a result of the war in the Gaza Strip and subsequent withholding of clearance funds as a punitive measure following the PA's refusal to stop disbursing allocations to the Gaza Strip. The average amount of revenues withheld is estimated at around 300 million shekels (75 million euro) per month, around 40 percent of the PA's total clearance revenues.

As can be seen in Table 2, there was significant improvement in the PA's current account balance between 2020 and 2022. This was driven by increased external financial support, a rise in clearance revenues, and enhanced domestic revenue collection. These factors collectively turned the current balance from a large deficit to a substantial surplus — in 2019, the PA had a negative current balance of 369.5 million dollars. The budget deficit deepened further to 428.7 million dollars in 2020 as a result of the impact of the pandemic on the Authority's finances. In 2021, it turned into a surplus of around 189.6 million, which increased significantly to 527.0 million in 2022. In 2023, the balance remained positive but decreased to 336.5 million compared to the previous year due to the war in Gaza.

External financial support has played a crucial role in transforming the PA's financial situation since 2021. The impact of support was particularly evident in 2022, resulting in a clear surplus in the financing budget. To illustrate, in 2019 the PA required 77.3 million dollars to cover the budget deficit. In 2020, the requirement increased to 133.4 million, before flipping negative to 342.9 million in 2021 as a result of external budget support. The balance after external budget support continued showing a surplus in 2022 and 2023.

It thus can be said that despite the improvements in the current balance, reliance on external support remains a key factor in maintaining the PA's budgetary stability. As with economic reliance on Israeli whims, this reliance on generally conditioned aid has diminished the PA's sovereignty and limited its ability to act in Palestinians' best interests.

Table 2: Fiscal Balance and Budgetary Gaps (2019–2023) (Million USD)

Balance/Gap	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Current balance	-369.5	-428.7	189.6	527.0	336.5
Overall balance (including development expenditures)	-569.5	-597.5	21.5	348.9	121.6
Balance after external budgetary support	-77.3	-133.4	342.9	693.7	479.2
Financing budget	77.3	133.4	-342.9	-693.7	-479.2

Source: Palestine Ministry of Finance, Palestine Monetary Authority

Ongoing Fiscal Challenges amidst the Gaza War

The war in Gaza has presented the PA with fiscal challenges on two different fronts. The war has generated serious political and security challenges, while also contributing to immediate fiscal challenges by increasing demands on the health, security, and other social sectors. It has also increased the PA's political vulnerability. The crises facing the PA since the start of the war have developed beyond a fiscal and economic challenge alone into a crisis of liquidity.

Generally speaking, the PA's financial crisis was significantly exacerbated by the aggression in the Gaza Strip in 2023, due both to factors that directly affected the Authority's finances as well as challenges that affected the Palestinian economy as a whole. These included:

- **The sharp contraction in the Palestinian economy.**Palestinian GDP declined by 33 percent (over 80 percent in Gaza, 22 percent in the West Bank). This was followed by a significant increase in unemployment rates, reaching 74 percent in the Gaza Strip and 29 percent in the West Bank. Economic activities also declined as a result of the closure or destruction of most commercial establishments in the Gaza Strip, which led to the Palestinian economy losing about 2.3 billion dollars during the first four months of the war alone. The activities of a large percentage of establishments in the West Bank also declined. This led to huge losses, and many businesses were forced to stop work temporarily or even permanently.
- **The cessation of Palestinian employment in Israel.** The closure of crossings and the cessation of granting work permits to Palestinian workers led to a huge decline in Palestinian employment in Israel and Israeli settlements. The total number of Palestinian workers in Israel (with or without permits) is estimated at 200,000, earning around 1.3 billion shekels (some 322 million euro) per month — a huge amount of liquidity inflows into the PA economy. The loss of jobs in Israel also pushed unemployment and poverty to unprecedented levels, which in turn led to a decline in income tax revenues as well as a sharp decline in purchasing power for a large segment of the population, further negatively affecting both local production and imports. This triggered a dip in the PA's revenues due to the significant decline in taxes and fees collected on these activities.

- **Huge losses incurred by the private sector.** The tourism sector — including hotels, resorts, restaurants, and others — was deeply affected, especially in cities such as Bethlehem. The registration of new companies also declined significantly, leading to a decline in fees and taxes. This was accompanied by an increase in inflation and a significant rise in prices, as the consumer price index rose by 6 percent in 2024, eroding purchasing power for Palestinian families and increasing poverty levels.
- **Ongoing withholding of clearance revenues by Israel.** Since 7 October 2023, clearance revenues have declined to 100 million dollars per month on average, compared to 200 million before the war. This led to an increase in the PA's budget deficit and aggravated the liquidity and financial crisis, forcing the Authority to borrow from banks and postpone payments to suppliers of goods and services, which in turn increased public debt and arrears to the private sector.
- **Adecline in foreign aid.** Foreign aid has witnessed a continuous decline over the past years, exacerbating the funding crisis for social programmes and basic services. Foreign support amounted to less than 3 percent of GDP in 2023, compared to 10 percent in 2013 and over 25 percent in 2008. This long-term decline highlights the growing reliance on domestic revenues and the PA's vulnerability to external financial fluctuations, which has affected the government's ability to provide services, fund social programmes, and support individuals and facilities affected by Israeli aggression in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

In conclusion, the PA economy has bled heavily over the past year, resulting in a severe shrinkage of its fiscal space. There is a serious and growing concern that the PA may not be able to meet its obligations vis-à-vis Palestinian constituencies in a year or so should the war in Gaza not end and international aid not increase to the level of 2014 at least. Nevertheless, the probability of an outright collapse is remote at least in the short term, simply because the international community recognizes the huge risks such a collapse would pose for the stability of the whole region, if not the globe.

Charting a Path beyond Physical Occupation and Fiscal Dependency

Without an end to the war in the Gaza Strip, it is hard to imagine any positive change in the Occupied Territories. A renewed ceasefire would at least allow the free flow of humanitarian aid and, eventually, the reconstruction of Gaza. But even if the fighting ends and reconstruction begins, fundamental changes are needed if a sovereign Palestine is ever to emerge on the territory that Israel has illegally occupied for over 60 years.

It is practically impossible for the Palestinian Authority to consolidate sustainable finances under the prevailing geopolitical and economic circumstances. This is becoming more evident as the war on Gaza escalates further, not to mention the severe restrictions applied by Israel on trade, labour mobility, and fiscal conditions in the West Bank. The PA's dependence on clearance revenues and the unpredictable nature of Israeli deductions create persistent fiscal instability. This structural fiscal imbalance has resulted in increasing public debt and arrears to the private sector, thereby reducing fiscal manoeuvrability and increasing the risk of financial distress. Moreover, the reliance on declining external aid to bridge deficits has compounded the fiscal crisis and exacerbated the PA's debt burden, which reached 7 billion US dollars in April.

Given the dire state of the PA's finances and the situation in Palestine overall, international donors, whether countries or institutions, should resume PA budget support and consider activating what is called a "Fiscal Safety Net" to avoid total collapse. Reforms of PA fiscal policy on both sides (taxation and spending) are necessary, and indeed long overdue, but an insufficient condition for achieving full economic recovery and fiscal sustainability. Ultimately, the fundamental precondition to enhancing the PA's fiscal sustainability and reducing its economic dependency on Israel, thereby preventing its financial and economic collapse and the far-reaching consequences associated with such a collapse, is an end to the occupation and the establishment of a fully independent, unified, and economically viable Palestinian state in accordance with international law.

Bayan Haddad
Nour Bader
Carine Metz Abu Hmeid
Mahmoud Muna

SOCIETY & CULTURE

“DO YOU SEE ME DEAD?”:

Laughter as Refusal, as Dignity, as Care

By Bayan Haddad

Bayan Haddad is a lecturer in the Department of English Language and Literature at Birzeit University and a former George Antonius Visiting Fellow at the University of Oxford’s Middle East Centre. Her interests include anti-colonial pedagogy and the affective dimensions of storytelling in contexts of political struggle. Her research traces the manifestations of historical trauma in Palestinian and Irish cultural production.

"Do you see me dead?": Laughter as Refusal, as Dignity, as Care

I recently translated my mother Deena's diary from 1988, written during what would later be known as the First Intifada. In its final entry, she recounts how Israeli soldiers stormed their house and twisted my grandmother Suhair's arm. Part of the account reads:

> Our mother was hanging washing outside the house when a rude Druze Israeli soldier [speaking Arabic] approached and ordered her to come to him. She refused, went back inside the house, and locked the door. Enraged, the soldier, accompanied by another who spoke English and Hebrew, forcefully broke the door open with his army boots. The lock splintered, the window shattered, the handle snapped. They entered the house, dragged our mother outside, and twisted her arm. In response, she struck one soldier with her boot. When asked who was throwing stones, she responded with curses and called for our father. Her cries drew neighbours to the scene, but the soldier threatened them and attempted to take her to the military Jeep. It was only after neighbour Dr Yusuf Al-Sha'arawi intervened, explaining that she had young children, that they let her go. Meanwhile, the second soldier was pointing the rifle at my siblings, who were crying and screaming. Lolo spoke to the soldiers in English, imploring them, "This is the last time [that we would defy orders]." Eventually, the soldiers left. Relative Fawzi Hijazi came afterwards to repair the damaged door, and neighbours gathered to express relief at our mother's safety ... Later, our father returned home and heard the details ... Fawzi and Uncle Nader went to the Civil Administration office to formally lodge a complaint about the incident.

When I first read this entry, my attention was drawn, almost automatically, to the soldiers: the figures of violence, the emblem of occupation. However, with conscious effort, I learnt to shift the frame. The story was not only about the soldiers' tactics of terror; it was also about my grandmother's refusal to submit. In recentring my gaze, I learnt to pay more attention to my grandmother's defiance and agency.

My grandmother refused to heed the soldiers' command. She said loudly and clearly, "I do not want to," and went inside. The soldiers' retaliatory reaction was to break in and twist her arm in an attempt to break her spirit. Still, she did not give in and tried to resist by kicking the soldier. My grandmother refused to name the stone-throwers and instead cursed the soldiers. In the wake of the incident, and for a full week afterwards, neighbours and family friends arrived, with Silvana, the famous local chocolate, and comforting words. My grandmother would tell the story many times, eliciting varied reactions: some would say, "What a hero!" others, more cautious, would murmur, "You should have just followed orders, my dear. It's too dangerous not to."

More than a decade on, during the Second Intifada—to be read as a "living continuation of the same tragic history"[1]—my grandmother was injured again. On 15 March 2002, a bullet fired by Israeli soldiers near my grandparents' house penetrated their kitchen window. My grandmother, who was doing crossword puzzles at the kitchen table, was struck by the shell of the bullet. The glass shattered, and she screamed before being rushed to the nearby hospital by my grandfather and neighbours. At the hospital door, a journalist approached and asked for her thoughts about the visit of the then U.S. special envoy, Anthony C. Zinni, to the region. Calm and calculated, my grandmother responded, "Do you see me dead? I look gorgeous being dead," referring to a line from the famous Egyptian play Madrasat al-Moshaghibin (The School of Mischief). Luckily, she was lightly wounded and was later discharged from the hospital on the same day.

By invoking a beloved line from Egyptian pop culture, my grandmother reached out for a moment of connection, albeit fleeting, one dependent on the listeners' familiarity with the reference, a shared memory of the play. A signal of her wit being

1 https://www.thenation.com/article/society/gaza-trauma-israel/.

intact, my grandmother was also refusing to be reduced to a soundbite and instead asserted her agency. In so doing, she was moving beyond a "psychology of the victim" even though she was just subjected to colonial violence.[2] Indeed, her biting response disrupted a normative script, the expected image of a silently suffering body on which violence was doing its work and made available to journalistic consumption, and she also challenged the prioritisation of geopolitical commentary over pain.[3] This goes to show how profoundly the Palestinian political landscape has been shaped and punctuated by performative visits of U.S. envoys proposing recycled versions of 'peace.' By shifting the focus from the event to herself, my grandmother was asserting her agency.

Humour, in this context, can "turn a situation upside down to reveal its absurdity," inviting deeper contemplation of lived experience under occupation.[4] My grandmother was doing a mundane activity when a bullet by the Israeli military found its way to her. Her home, a private sphere supposed to be 'safe,' was an invisible shooting range, demonstrating Tobias Kelly's insight that "the ordinary does not exist in opposition to violence, but is deeply implicated within it."[5] Like other Palestinians, she was under the sniper's gaze even when not fully aware of it. To that end, writer Abdeljawad Omar poignantly writes about this collective absurdity:

> Writing about life at the crosshairs, or life as a target is a funny undertaking. This lifestyle requires one to be perpetually present in the moment—to survive an encounter with death, only to find another around the corner … This successive play is a collective play, it's comedic indeed, since it always summons laughter at the absurdity of the hunter, the things that set them off. Then there's the laughter at almost being killed.[6]

Indeed, my grandmother's question, "Do you see me dead?" embodies this paradox Omar and Kelly describe: Omar writes that life at the crosshairs "always summons laughter at the absurdity of the hunter … and at almost being killed," and Kelly adds that under violence "the expected is always partly surprising." Thus, even the impossible feels only half-surprising.

Reflecting on the use of humour in Palestinian society, and particularly during the ongoing genocide, I was reminded of its multifaceted role through a tweet shared by Eman Basher, who is now in the US and her family is in Gaza:

> My mom uses sarcasm and humour as a way to cope. When I ask her to send me photos of herself and my sisters, she dodges the request and instead sends me voice messages of her singing favourite Om Kulthoum songs. She does this because she knows that if I were to see how much weight she's lost and how much she's aged, it might break me. I keep insisting on getting photos because I'm afraid that if I don't have a picture of them now, the next time I see them might be in one of those photos where they gather the pieces of their bodies into rice bags.

Here, humour reassures, distances, and binds. It reflects on harsh reality without confronting it. In a sense, it acts as both shield and scalpel, protecting dignity while exposing truth. Like my grandmother's quip, this humour does not indicate the absence of pain, but the reanimation of human complexity within it and is shaped not in spite of violence but within it, a gesture that insists on life in the very mouth of death.

In both instances, the figure of the Palestinian who is 'azizat al-nafs ("noble of soul") is illuminated. The term combines 'aziz

2 Sheehi, Lara, and Stephen Sheehi. Psychoanalysis Under Occupation: Practicing Resistance in Palestine. Taylor & Francis, 2022, p.9

3 Bhungalia, Lisa. "Laughing at power: Humor, transgression, and the politics of refusal in Palestine." Politics and Space, vol. 38, no. 3, 2020, p.394

4 Ibid, p.397

5 Kelly, Tobias. "The Attractions of Accountancy: Living an Ordinary Life during the Second Palestinian Intifada." Ethnography, Sage Publications, vol. 9, no. 3, 2008, p.353

6 https://rustedradishes.com/crosshairs/

[for male; 'aziza for female] meaning strength, preciousness, and inaccessibility, along with nafs, meaning soul or self. Writer Abdaljawad Omar introduces this concept in exploring Palestinian subjectivity and illustrates that it refers to someone who maintains their dignity and honour even in devastating circumstances. It describes individuals who refuse humiliation while preserving their integrity during collapse, without resorting to begging or performing victimhood.[7] Humour serves as a vehicle to embody this concept.

Humour also emerges as a community-building tool in the face of profound communal pain endured by people under genocide. Constant bombardment, forced displacement, and the severing of ties to loved ones and community fragment social cohesion and distort every attempt at meaning-making. Hence, sharing jokes becomes an act of sumud, steadfastness in place and spirit infused with a spiritual blend of defiance and surrender. In Arabic, taslim denotes acceptance or submission to God's will. Perhaps laughter itself is a form of taslim to absurdity: an acknowledgement that the world has spun out of control, without necessarily accepting that it must remain so. Indeed, to laugh in the face of death is to admit the insanity of one's reality and yet insist on living beyond it. In the darkest nights, a single joke can answer Suad Amiry's rueful question, "Nothing makes sense, why should I?,"[8] and still ring out as a rallying cry that spirits will not break.

In these conditions, humour carries both survival and communal care. It forges camaraderie, uniting people against the isolating force of fear. This fellowship is especially potent given that "the goal of the colonial state is to atomize and isolate Palestinian individuals, removing them from their communal networks."[9] A shared joke dissolves pain into togetherness; each punchline passed around the circle declares a shared solidarity. The sound of laughter, the choice of words in a punchline, the particularity of reference, or even the cadence of a retort: each element reinforces communal bonds, creating a secret language of belonging for those who 'get' it. This humour embodies what Henri Bergson termed "social signification," requiring contextual understanding to be fully appreciated.[10] Yet, communal laughter may also be "a painful mode of sharing the world, a sharing deprived of consolation."[11] These jokes carry both connection and ache: they bind people together precisely through their shared recognition of loss, creating solidarity around what cannot be easily comforted or resolved.

This communal humour is also an act of defiance: under occupation, Palestinians are trapped in a "temporal chasm" that indefinitely postpones proper mourning.[12] When the rituals of bereavement are denied, funerals barred, burials disrupted, and bodies under rubble, laughter steps in as both survival tactic and defiant strategy. In Gaza, laughter arises not from joy but from a desperate need to reclaim agency amid threats of annihilation. Such paradoxical laughter shields against total emotional collapse and constitute "momentary and ephemeral recognitions of ordinary life lived in hard times"[13] or a respite from "'beastly seriousness' of ongoing oppression."[14]

In thinking about the dissonant space in which laughter operates in Gaza under the ongoing genocide, Husam Maarouf's piece, "Laughter Without Joy: Between Gaza's Reality and Beckett's Stage," offers a poignant reflection. Maarouf observes that laughter briefly bridges "the torn-up inside and the out-of-control outside," much like the playwright Samuel Beckett's characters who cling to humour amid their bleak circumstance and the unbearable weight of waiting. This laughter, empty of joy yet brimming with existential vulnerability, sustains life even as it

7 https://mondoweiss.net/2025/04/palestinian-elites-threw-a-huge-party-for-the-opening-of-a-megamall-in-ramallah-as-bombs-ripped-through-gaza

8 Amiry, Suad. "Night Hunters: A Journey with Murad." Jerusalem Quarterly, no. 38, Institute for Palestine Studies, 2009, p.8

9 Sheehi, Lara, and Stephen Sheehi. Psychoanalysis Under Occupation: Practicing Resistance in Palestine. Taylor & Francis, 2022, p.40

10 Lionis, Chrisoula. Laughter in Occupied Palestine: Comedy and Identity in Art and Film. I.B. Tauris, 2016, p.16

11 https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-laughter-of-hannah-arendt/13401584

12 https://rustedradishes.com/can-the-palestinian-mourn/

13 Bhungalia, Lisa. "Laughing at power: Humor, transgression, and the politics of refusal in Palestine." Politics and Space, vol. 38, no. 3, 2020, p.391

14 Ibid, p.398

critiques the absurdity of survival itself. Even as they wait in the shadow of death, people giggle at the macabre. Like Beckett's characters in Waiting for Godot, they decide, "Let's laugh so we don't cry." Maarouf's understanding of laughter's function resonates with Hannah Arendt's insight about laughter which, in the words of Michelle Boulous Walker, provides an "intermediary state, between thoughtlessness and the ability to think. Laughter is what bridges the chasm between, on the one hand, shock and distress, and, on the other, our ability to face these experiences."[15] In Gaza, laughter becomes a necessary pause before facing the unspeakable.

Laughter often constitutes a cognitive rupture, a break from grief that momentarily overturns reality's grim logic. Maarouf captures this transformation through specific moments that reveal laughter's power to sustain the psyche "so that you don't fall apart."[16] For example, he describes how, when a bomb shatters the street, a terrified man collapses like a clown, then bursts into laughter at his own fall. Elsewhere, two once-elegant women climb onto a donkey cart and, confronting the collapse of their dignity, laugh in a gesture of humility rather than despair.

In these moments, laughter serves as both a reminder of bodily existence—the physical act of breathing, moving, surviving—and an acknowledgment of the limits of reason when confronting the absurd reality of genocide. Here, laughter is a way of regaining "existential balance" and part of a "ritual of permissible madness," a dark irony born where survival and collapse merge.[17] This is what Hiyem Cheurfa terms as "comedic resilience," reflecting "the Palestinian reality, one which is positioned within the unheroic, the absurd, and the routinely, instead of the (sometimes crudely) political and overwhelmingly lyrical frames…."[18]

15 https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-laughter-of-hannah-arendt/13401584

16 https://arablit.org/2025/04/21/laughter-without-joy-between-gazas-reality-and-becketts-stage

17 https://arablit.org/2025/04/21/laughter-without-joy-between-gazas-reality-and-becketts-stage.

18 Cheurfa, Hiyem. "Comedic resilience: Arab women's diaries of national struggles and dissident humour." Comedy Studies, Taylor & Francis, vol. 10, no. 2, 2019, p.187

This dark, resilient humour is powerfully captured in Akram Sourani's viral Facebook text, "Leaked High School Exam Questions in Gaza!," which reframes the mundane horrors of survival as academic subjects. Sourani's satire weaponizes the format of a high school exam to dissect the absurdity of daily life while launching a sharp critique against the systems—international legal, humanitarian, and economic, among others—that have failed Gazans. Among the posed questions are to differentiate between "the sounds of canned fava beans, canned kidney beans, and the sounds of your stomach after eating lentils"; to decide, "if you have any teeth left," whether to brush "with sand or with seawater"; to rank "an Emirati tent, a Qatari tent, and a UNICEF tent in terms of the number of flies"; to write "what you know about the sociology of displacement," and to compute a cash-out fee: "If you withdrew 1,000 shekels in cash and the commission fee was 99%, how much would you have to transfer to the scoundrel on the app?" These questions mock academic detachment, humanitarian aid, and the predatory opportunism that arises in crisis. Sourani's exam is a curriculum of survival that exposes the moral and systemic collapse of the world that allows such questions to be conceivable in the first place.

By juxtaposing academic language ("sociology of displacement") with the grim reality of choosing between brushing one's teeth with sand or seawater, Sourani critiques the profound disconnect between observing suffering and enduring it. In so doing, he transforms shared trauma into a powerful piece of social commentary, forcing the reader to confront the surreal calculus of daily life in Gaza.

Comedy, here, does more than relieve tension; it interrupts power at multiple levels. Satire and parody target not only the machinery of occupation but also local elites, patriarchal norms, and the logic of humanitarianism. When Abboud Battah, a young Gaza influencer, calmly reports under air-raid sirens that "the situation is ice coffee," he transforms terrifying moments into ironic respite, reclaiming the narrative. When a mother quips about UN aid 'parachuted' onto her roof only to be looted, she exposes the

farce of aid delivery mechanisms. Each jest becomes a political act, a dissident strategy, and a refusal to accept the authority of power structures.

The humour of the oppressed stands in stark contrast to the oppressor. While the Palestinian sense of humour thrives on sharp self-critique, parody, and absurdity, the settler-colonial regime remains strikingly humourless. As Fady Joudah observes, "Zionism has no sense of humour… All it has left to stand on two legs is radical violence, pre-emptive and reactionary destruction."[19] Power cannot afford to laugh at its own contradictions; it must present itself as coherent, legitimate, inevitable. Indeed, laughter opens spaces of freedom where alternative realities become thinkable, and for this reason, power cannot tolerate the unpredictability and plurality that laughter represents.

By contrast, the oppressed cultivate an imaginative freedom through laughter. For Joudah, the capacity to laugh at oneself and even at one's oppressor "is to leave a window open for understanding."[20] It is an offering, a small act of hope and humanisation amid hopeless conditions. This way, humour becomes a site of resistance precisely because power cannot parody itself, but those under its heel can: each jest punctures its pretensions and reclaims the narrative.

When the occupier's worldview is "unimaginatively vulgar," the laughter of the oppressed carries the power to envision realities beyond brute force. Through such wit, people assert their humanity in environments designed to dehumanise them. Each joke essentially asks: What if we still remain human in spite of everything? Nowhere is this dynamic clearer than in Gaza, where gallows humour has become a mode of survival and a protest of the soul.

Moreover, humour unlocks liberatory imagination. It becomes a way of imagining beyond present constraints while remaining rooted in lived experience. Esmat Elhalaby insists, "In the face of genocide, we must imagine, in the stead of those Palestinians who have struggled for years, the opposite of genocide."[21] In that sense, radical joy becomes a liberatory act, a laugh, a spark of possibility in a landscape engineered for despair, and a punchline sketches a tomorrow unbound by walls and curfews.

To laugh is to look up, around, and beyond—to rehearse freedom, to practice self-discovery and societal engagement that outpaces the occupier's drive to atomise and isolate. In refusing to be passive vessels of sorrow, Palestinians refuse despair as a commodity. In these acts of comedic resilience lie the unvanquished soul of a people: not mere survivors of despair, but architects of community, forever journeying toward a horizon of ongoing becoming, where hope and critique are entangled.

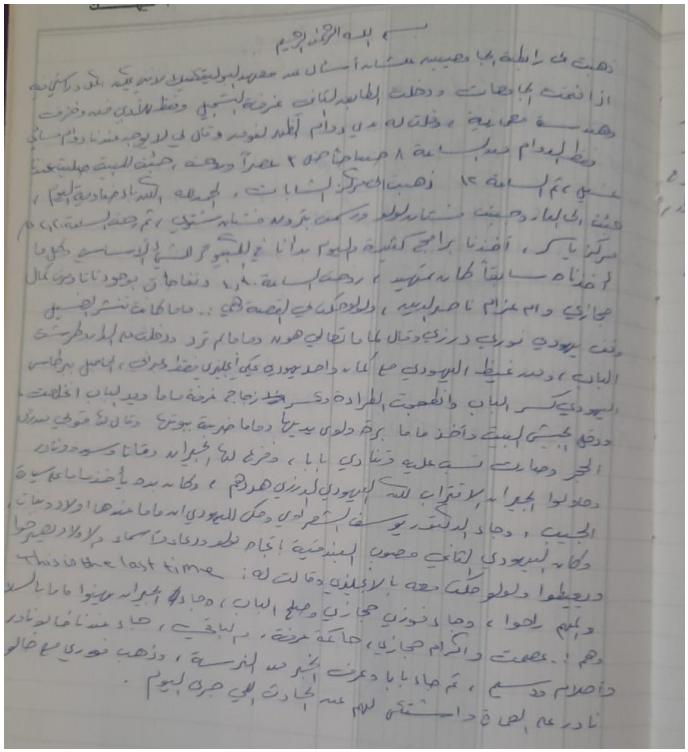
In the end, the jokes of my grandmother and of the people in Gaza proclaim that humour is far more than a fleeting relief or coping mechanism; it is a vital engine of refusal, defiance, and care.

Born from communal social pain and nurtured in the cracks of a "temporal chasm" that denies proper mourning, these moments of levity do not erase suffering but transform it into fellowship—people asserting their capacity to create meaning together. This collective creation of meaning is a deeply political act of resistance. A shared laugh becomes a lifeline: acknowledging horror while binding people in a secret language of defiance, fortifying the very social fabric that occupation seeks to shred.

19 https://thenewinquiry.com/when-it-takes-root-in-the-heart-a-conversation-with-fady-joudah

20 https://thenewinquiry.com/when-it-takes-root-in-the-heart-a-conversation-with-fady-joudah

21 https://thebaffler.com/latest/toward-an-intellectual-history-of-genocide-in-gaza-elhalaby



My mother's diary entry of the year 1988. (Photograph by Deena Hijazi, Hebron, 2024.)

My grandmother lifting the torn orange-and-navy plaid curtain, its strips dangling from a warped rod. Shards of glass glint on the kitchen counter below. (Photograph by Mohammed Hijazi, Hebron, 2002.)

A close-up of the kitchen window screen that shows the jagged bullet hole through the glass pane. (Photograph by Mohammed Hijazi, Hebron, 2002.)

In the aftermath: Shards of shattered window glass and bits of brick rest on the black countertop around the kitchen faucet. (Photograph by Mohammed Hijazi, Hebron, 2002.)

Rubble and shattered glass litter the floor beneath the damaged window, mixed with splintered plaster and fragments of the curtain rod. (Photograph by Mohammed Hijazi, Hebron, 2002.)

Piles of crossword puzzle magazines that my grandmother still unravels, one clue at a time. (Photograph by Bayan Haddad, Hebron, 2025.)

A sketch by my grandmother, bearing her signature, of a woman who appears lost in introspection, held now in a broken frame. Undated. (Photograph by Bayan Haddad, Hebron, 2025.)

A sketch by my grandmother of a young person in profile, drawn in blue pencil, holding what appears to be a face in agony. Undated. (Photograph by Bayan Haddad, Hebron, 2025.)

GENOCIDAL POLICIES

and Spaces of Motherhood in Gaza

By Dr. Nour Bader

Dr Nour Bader is a Palestinian researcher and academic specialising in sociology, gender studies, and health. She has taught at Bethlehem University and is the Director of the Studies and Research Unit at the Palestinian Research Center. Her research focuses on qualitative and field-based studies of social policy, gender, colonialism, and social transformation. In 2023, she published Engineering of Death: Policies of Controlling Silent Bodies and produced a documentary on Palestinian women's experiences with breast cancer. She is a DAWN Foundation Fellow, and has published widely and participated in regional and international conferences.

On the Meaning of Motherhood

In the midst of genocide, bombardment and starvation do not only target people's bodies, but also the maternal bond and relationship between a mother and her children. As mentioned by Jill E. Korbin, in contrast to the idealised Western view of childhood as a stage of life filled with play, school, friends and family, attention has shifted towards children ravaged by famine and wars. This is because childhood is not being experienced in a similar manner everywhere.[1] For a long time, the subject of mothers and children has undergone extensive research and concern, especially within the spheres of care and education. However, within the context of genocide, the established relationship between a mother and her children is targeted per se. Therefore, it is imperative to reconsider the actual emotions and relationship between a mother and her children in the context of death.

This leads us to the main questions addressed by this article: How is motherhood shaped when it becomes a space affected by genocidal patterns (massacres, forced displacement, etc.)? What are the generated forms of a maternal relationship when it is forcibly dismantled in the midst of genocide? And how do mothers in Gaza express their emotional and physical experiences vis-à-vis their relationship with their children?

This article attempts to deconstruct motherhood through the trinity of bloody extermination (murder), bulletless annihilation (forced displacement), and cancer, drawing on the accounts of women suffering from cancer in the Gaza Strip. These personal stories provide a deeper understanding of the meaning of motherhood under the claws of death, and how the relationship between a mother and her children transforms from being centred around care and education, to one that revolves around saving her children from death and protecting them from starvation. This paper's main contribution is manifested by exploring how mothers shape their motherhood in the most extreme moments of death, transforming a mother from her stereotypical image and symbol of 'tenderness,' to becoming the main source of rescuing her children from death; whether due to bombardment and gunshots, or the daily conditions accompanying forcible transfer (including displacement).

The importance of the 'epistemological production' approach on motherhood through women's accounts, and its intersection with the trinity of bloody extermination (murder), bulletless annihilation (forced displacement), and cancer, **stems from three reasons:**

First Reason: Emergence of numerous forms of death in Palestine, where dying from cancer (due to the lack of treatment, closure of borders, or widespread famine) is considered milder and less burdensome than dying from missiles and shelling, where people's body parts get scattered and corpses unburied. Thus, we see that the 'less burdensome' forms of death have been substantially absent from media and research outlets.

Second Reason: Since most women are mothers, they have faced a certain 'standoff', where their thoughts about cancer faded away in favour of the concern for saving their children's lives. This means that motherhood reshaped itself from being a matter of caring for a child and providing his or her educational and health needs to becoming an issue of saving one's children from death under indiscriminate shelling, gunfire, starvation, malnutrition, and lack of water and hygiene. Amidst these circumstances, women's focus shifted from merely providing care for their children's convenience and well-being, towards a motherhood tasked with saving one's child from death.

Third Reason: When granted permission to leave Gaza for cancer treatment, women with cancer are forced to conduct an 'internal negotiation within themselves' (so to speak). This trade-off is between staying in Gaza with the children even if they might die from the disease or travelling abroad for treatment and leave the children in Gaza. This is another formation of motherhood, based on an internal compromise affecting the deepest parts of a woman's maternal emotions. The said 'negotiation process' is considered a painful dialogue inside a mother's heart, and it is the most important aspect shaping Palestinian maternal experiences in Gaza during the witnessed genocide.

1 Jill E. Korbin, Department of Anthropology, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, 431.

"I travelled in order to live, but they told me "Without your kids": Women Who Left the Gaza Strip for Treatment

Israeli forces destroyed numerous hospitals throughout their genocide on the Gaza Strip, most notably the Turkish-Palestinian Friendship Hospital. A report by the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) indicates that the Turkish-Palestinian Friendship Hospital is the only cancer hospital in Gaza, providing specialized medical services to around 12,500 cancer patients. However, this hospital was deliberately targeted by Israeli forces, forcing it to go out of service in November 2023.[2] Since then, many women have attempted to leave Gaza to receive treatment. This process is usually managed through the Medical Evacuation ("Medevac") mechanism supervised mainly by the World Health Organization (WHO). However, Israel imposed almost impossible terms and conditions and rejected the majority of these women's requests. This article discusses how women who obtained a travel approval were forced to leave their children behind in the Gaza Strip.

Mrs. Rasmiyya expresses this form of suffering as follows: Her children, who remained in Gaza, ask her: "Do you love me? **Why did you leave me?" Rasmiyya states that:**

> It was a difficult decision to leave them behind. My heart aches excruciatingly! My children in Gaza are far away from me, as I am in the United Arab Emirates. I miss them so much, and missed them even more when I underwent hysterectomy here. I need them even more now and can't describe my feelings! I am afraid for their safety, scared that I might lose them. I speak to my son every day, and he asks: "Mom, do you love me? Mama, why didn't you take me with you?!" This breaks my heart… I feel that something bad is going to happen to them! Since long ago, I have been waiting for an Israeli response and approval regarding my husband and children's travel. I haven't seen my kids all year long. I left for treatment on 7 December 2023. I grew accustomed to aching and illness, no problem, but the greatest pain is being away from my children. I consider it a disaster not to see my children. It is forbidden to keep a mother away from her children for so long![3]

This motherhood, severed by physical separation, created another space of maternal emotions not necessarily based on saving one's children from death, but also checking on them moment-by-moment to make sure they are okay. This reassurance is way beyond a daily basis and takes place minute-by-minute and hour-by-hour, especially due to bombardments, shootings, hunger, and thirst. In such cases, obtaining reassurance becomes a serious issue of constant monitoring, almost like an obsession where the mother does not intervene, but simply awaits the next opportunity to be reassured. Mrs. Rasmiyya regrets traveling abroad for treatment, and highlighted the inner conflict faced within the 'internal negotiations' taking place within her (which led to her departure for treatment). She describes the long period of separation from her children with the words: "It is truly forbidden!!" She considers this a violation of maternal laws and believes she made "a mistake." She thinks she should have stayed with her children in Gaza "even if the price of my staying there is death!" according to her words.

The sense of regret experienced by Mrs. Rasmiyya is almost identical to that of **Mrs. Suheir, who noted:**

> The most important thing for me is not my illness, but to see my children alive! I have twin daughters of thirteen years old and a nine-year-old son. They are currently staying with their sick father in Gaza. I forgot about my illness and everything else and am only preoccupied with my children. They are okay for the time being, but are in great need of food. Whenever they receive a coupon [aid], they rush to make ends meet. They keep telling me: "Mom, we miss having food." And I try to reassure them saying: "It will be okay. God-willingly you will receive food

2 Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), Blowing Up Gaza's "Turkish-Palestinian Friendship" Hospital: A War Crime and Perpetuation of Genocide, 22 March 2025, accessed 8 July 2025, https://pchrgaza.org/blowing-up-gazas-turkish-palestinian-friendship-hospital-a-war-crime-and-perpetuation-of-genocide.

3 Rasmiyya (H) (pseudonym), cancer patient from the Gaza Strip, interviewed by Nour Bader, 19 November 2024.

> soon." However, I am deeply and intensely regretful for departing and leaving them behind![4]

Many women expressed deep regret for deciding to seek treatment abroad and leave their children behind. This is because 'motherhood' for them is to stay with their children to save them from death under rockets, hunger, and water scarcity, even if that meant their own death! They consider that this heavy price (i.e., their own life) is worth paying in return for staying with their children and not leaving them behind. Hence the stark expression: "Even if the price is my own death!" These women are willing to bear this difficult cost in return for staying with their children, even for a short while. Moreover, both Rasmiyya and Suheir noted that they did not expect the genocide to last this long and thought it would end soon, which was not the case. The ongoing genocide is therefore preventing these women from returning to Gaza, while failing to get their children out of there and holding them close.

This shows how borders reshape maternal emotions, as mothers constantly follow border news and updates regarding Rafah Crossing. For example, they check to see whether Rafah Border Crossing is open, and if there are any relevant updates. Hence, this crossing became a "window" through which mothers anxiously wait for their next personal contact with their children.

This reality brings us back to the meaning of Genocide, and how extermination reshapes the decisions taken by women in the context of motherhood. This turned their motherhood into a space for internal deliberation, where they ask themselves: Is it worth going far away to receive treatment and leave the kids behind? Or shall I stay with my children even if the cost is death?! If this kind of 'negotiation' succeeds at first glance, its outcome will lead to regret. Therefore, examining how genocide affects motherhood deepens the maternal feelings of women suffering from cancer. For example, under such a context, their illness itself becomes a topic of compromise.

Also worth noting that the genocidal events which deprived mothers of their children's accompaniment reshaped mothers' decisions in Gaza. This was quite evident in the story of Mrs. Khuloud, who travelled through Rafah Border Crossing to receive medical treatment in Egypt. She insisted to depart for treatment only with her children, firmly refusing to leave them under missile attacks and the lack of food and water:

> I submitted many requests to receive travel approval and eventually obtained permission. However, when I asked to be accompanied by my underage children, they told me this is forbidden. I refused to leave without them, insisting that they accompany me. I applied again and [ultimately] received approval to take them with me. It was a difficult journey, but thankfully I departed [for treatment] and protected my children's lives.[5]

Khuloud compromised her life by refusing to receive treatment except if allowed to take her children with her. In her own words: "I would prefer to die than to leave my children!" This form of motherhood and internal compromise also forced Mrs. Ola to decide not to leave her children behind. She applied again and again, under heavy bombardment, until being allowed to take her children with her to Egypt. However, this is heavily dependent on luck. In general, women are not allowed to have their children accompany them, but there are some fortunate cases.

This was elaborated in Mrs. Laila's account:

> Things got really difficult since the eruption of the war. I registered my name at the Turkish-Palestinian Friendship Hospital, accompanied by my children. When I received travel approval, I took them with me to the border crossing, where they told me that my children must go back to Gaza. I strongly refused, insisting that either I return with them to Gaza [thus compromising treatment], or leave to Egypt with them. They told me to come the following day, but later on, an officer at the crossing called me, and they [eventually] allowed me to pass with my kids despite that their names were not recorded in the travel list. We entered the border crossing at 7 a.m. and

4 Suheir (H) (pseudonym), cancer patient from the Gaza Strip, interviewed by Nour Bader, 17 November 2024.

5 Khuloud (D) (pseudonym), cancer patient from the Gaza Strip, interviewed by Nour Bader, 17 November 2024.

> departed from there after sunset. They allowed me to take my seven underage children, but refused to let my eldest son accompany me. Oh my God! My son told me: "Go, Mother," so I departed and left him in Gaza.[6]

This compromise by Mrs. Laila at the border crossing highlights her critical decision of "Only with them and never without them!" Therefore, many mothers choose to either stay with their children in Gaza even at the cost of death, or be accompanied by their children, as seen in the case of Mrs. Laila; where she was eventually allowed to take her children with her, except for her eldest son (who is above eighteen years). Whenever Mrs. Laila mentions her children, she never stops talking about her son who remained in Gaza. She considers that a piece of her heart still remains in Gaza! And although she succeeded in bringing seven of her kids with her, her eldest son (who stayed in Gaza) occupies her mind and anxiety. She does not regret leaving without her eldest son, because she could at least bring seven children with her. However, she obsessively keeps track of him non-stop (Where did he go? What is he doing?). In her eyes, he is a small child, but to the world, he is above the legal age. Nevertheless, the 'legal age' doesn't bear much significance here.

The patient's deprivation of traveling with her children or parents due to the difficulty of obtaining permits created a certain distance. This led to great pain and an 'internal deliberation' to see if it is worth it. This pain, at first level, involves fearing for her children's lives. At second level, it involves the fear of her children's suffering from food and water shortages. As for the third level, it involves feelings of longing for the children, while considering that communication with them (to check if they are alive and received a loaf of bread, or simply expressing that longing) is oftentimes unavailable due to internet outages. Mrs. Ghadeer used an accurate description of internet non-availability as follows: "We are like nomads. We have no nearby internet."[7] People are being displaced from one location to another, and each area's internet has different arrangements. This is due to the destruction of telecommunication towers and solar energy, thereby affecting the ways and opportunities of communicating with one's children to check on their well-being.

6 Laila (S) (pseudonym), cancer patient from the Gaza Strip, interviewed by Nour Bader, 22 November 2024.

7 Ghadeer (S) (pseudonym), cancer patient from the Gaza Strip, interviewed by Nour Bader, 15 November 2024.

"We were there before everything exploded": Women Who Got Stuck in the West Bank

In a related context, there is a group of Palestinian women from the Gaza Strip who were in the West Bank for medical treatment prior to the genocide, thus they got stuck there. Due to the blockade on Gaza since 2007 and Gaza's lack of medical and remedial equipment, some Palestinian women from the Gaza Strip were transferred to the West Bank for treatment after "succeeding" to receive a permit from Israeli authorities. These women are currently trapped in the West Bank, unable to return home. Consequently, a physical distance was created, in a manner that reshapes the communication method between mothers and their children during genocide. This also led to intense pain among these women, having been separated from their children even before the genocide. One of the interviewees expressed this as follows: "We came for a few days and have been stuck here for a year and a half."

Nawal, who came for her daughter's cancer treatment, also got stuck in the West Bank. She explains how her son – who was an infant when she left – had forgotten her and now calls his grandmother "Mama." Nawal states that: "Their grandmother takes care of them. My children do not even know me! My son calls his grandmother "Mama." I left him when he was young, my children forgot me!"[8] It was also noted that the most difficult thing a mother can experience is her child forgetting her. A child forgets his mother and her facial expressions if s/he lost her at an age below five years. This happens when a mother dies, for example, but the tragedy lies in that this child forgot his mother although she is less than three hours away by car! This 'distance' extended so much that it now reached more than a year and a half! So how can a mother accept the fact that her child forgot her and thinks his grandma is his mom?! This highlights the great pain experienced by women who are forcibly separated from their children, unable to embrace them and provide them with care, or even rescue them from death. All they do is wait for news that their children are okay, accompanied by feelings of agony due to their children not recognising them.

8 Nawal (R) (pseudonym), cancer patient from the Gaza Strip, interviewed by Nour Bader, 23 November 2024.

Mrs. Fatima, who is also stuck in the West Bank, spoke about her son's feelings of longing for her: "My four-year-old son says to me: "I miss you, Mommy. I love you," and he sings "Muhammad Nabiyyuna" [Muhammad is our Prophet] song."[9] In ordinary moments, the most beautiful thing a mother can hear is her son's expression of love to her, that he would say: "I love you, Mama" or sing children's songs to her. In this context, women's primary fear is that their children would die (thus causing tremendous pain). They are also hurt due to their children forgetting them, and their inability to embrace their scared and hungry children. There is also great joy when a mother hears her child sing "Mohammad Nabiyyuna," which indicates that the kid is evolving. This is a development not brought about by the mother, but is noticed abruptly when the child starts singing. In that case, the mother is reassured that her son is growing up and memorising songs. However, it is a kind of joy mixed with pain.

According to another interviewee called Mrs. Wafa, being away from one's children means that they are lost. In her words:

> Recently, my children were displaced from an area in Rafah called Shakoush, towards another area in that governorate. My niece got killed as a result, and they waited for two days to retrieve her body and bury her. My sisters keep telling me: "Sister, you entrusted us with a burdensome responsibility that we cannot carry! Have someone else take your children, we can't handle them!" I feel emotionally exhausted, both from my illness and from being away from my children. And each time we say: "It's going to be okay," things only get worse.[10]

While waiting for the genocide to end, these women hear countless family complaints that their children are a 'heavy burden.' This burden is not related to caring for them and feeding and cleaning them. Rather, the biggest challenge is rescuing the children from death. So technically you will be responsible for keeping children alive, within a context and environment surrounded by death from all directions.

I also interviewed Mrs. Zahra. She has a son who has cerebral palsy, and suffers tremendously due to being away from him:

> My son in Gaza has cerebral palsy. He suffers from urinary incontinence and is attacked by flies day and night. I left him with people who take care of him.[11]

This suffering is similar to that of Mrs. Khadija, who expressed the pain of being away from her disabled son as follows:

> "The condition of my disabled son is very difficult. He has acute bone-related diseases. His body is tiny compared to his age, and his height is only one meter, they call him a dwarf. I did all that I could and persistently sought after doctors for help, all in vain. My son's condition requires ongoing treatment. I need to take him to the bathroom and clean him up constantly, but I am far away from him!"[12]

In such dire circumstances, a family's care for someone else's child becomes extremely difficult. There is neither food nor water, and the risk of death is imminent and instantaneous. Assigning your children's care to others is a form of trust, and in Palestinian culture the most difficult thing a person can bear is being entrusted with something. In the normal context, 'entrustment' means giving someone the money of another to take care of. But in Gaza, the concept of 'entrustment' became related to children, i.e., human beings to be protected from death and carrying a responsibility towards them. This causes great hardship for families due to the massacring of entire households (large-scale deaths). Consequently, many families ask the mother to find another guardian for her children, and in some cases, the children are left to suffer on their own.

"I carry them in my heart, and in the cemetery too": About the Women Present in Gaza

Another lady, Amina, talked about losing her son, who was suffering from the autism spectrum disorder (ASD). She stated:

> I saw missiles above our heads and fainted. Consequently, I suffered from a fractured skull and an amputated hand. I was totally unconscious and did not know what was

9 Fatima ('A) (pseudonym), cancer patient from the Gaza Strip, interviewed by Nour Bader, 22 November 2024.

10 Wafa (R) (pseudonym), cancer patient from Gaza Strip, interviewed by Nour Bader, 24 November 2024.

11 Zahra (K) (pseudonym), cancer patient from the Gaza Strip, interviewed by Nour Bader, 25 November 2024.

12 Khadija (S) (pseudonym), accompanying her granddaughter who has cancer, interviewed by Nour Bader, 25 November 2024.

> happening. I gained consciousness only a week later, and was told that my son was martyred. He passed away at the age of seventeen. We were living in the family home, and the young men – including my son - used to sleep on the roof. His name is Lateef, and he was autistic. His mental age was not more than of a thirteen-year-old. One night, he took a piece of nylon and put it on asbestos panels, then went up to the roof to protect himself from rain. A missile struck him immediately, but my son didn't understand the danger, as he had a child's mind. If I knew he was going to do this, I would have stopped him with all my might! Lateef passed away…. poor child… I ask God to grant me patience to bear his loss and meet him again…[13]

What helps in healing the difficult shock experienced by Amina is her hope that God will grant her patience over her child's loss, and that she will meet him again in the afterlife. Nevertheless, Amina recounts a prolonged period of agony and sadness regarding her son's medical condition (autism and a lack of general awareness). She also blames herself, because had she known that he would go up with panels to the roof (to protect himself from rain) she would have prevented him. This terrible anguish will accompany her forever. Her grief over her son's illness and the way he was martyred – along with her self-blame – are what constitute Mrs. Amina's internal dialogue (a compounded sorrow). She concludes the conversation by wishing to be granted patience by Allah. This is the meaning of motherhood in the context of genocide, including self-blame, while wishing for patience amid the perpetual grief.

Susanne Schaal explains how people who lose a loved one due to a violent death are more at risk of prolonged grief. This is because they must not only deal with the loss itself, but also with the traumatising aspects of that incident. Violent death often includes shocking aspects, such as the element of surprise, which can hinder the consolation process and lead to deeper levels of grief. However, religious beliefs can sometimes alleviate the situation and help individuals extract meaning from loss.[14] In such cases, grief is not only linked to the loss of a loved one, but also to the violent death that befell them. Here we see the significance of religious interpretations and their role in giving meaning to violent death, i.e., spiritual reward and merits in heaven and to be granted patience by God. However, there is still a sadness that does not disappear despite faith-based hopes.

Within this context, motherhood is also shaped by standing in queues. Mrs. Reem notes that:

> Women suffer a lot under war. I have breast cancer and thyroid gland problems. During this war, I carried the burden of four children singlehandedly. The oldest is a twelve-year-old boy, and the youngest is a six-year-old girl. Besides my difficult illness, my life revolves around standing at takaya (community kitchens in Gaza) and feeding my children. I don't have a breadwinner who would stand on the line instead of me. I push women around in order to get a plate before the food is gone. And many times, I leave disappointed without receiving a single plate of food.[15]

Standing on long queues to receive food is the living picture of famine in the Gaza Strip. Children, women, and men stand there, wishing to receive a plate of food prepared by volunteers in case there is a donor. This became important to feed one's children. Throughout Gaza's starvation, takaya became one of the most important sources of food for families to overcome this hardship. Motherhood starts by saving one's children from starvation and death by standing in line. Thus, queuing up became an everyday practice by women, in addition to taking care of their children. It begins immediately after fajr (dawn) prayer and continues until all meals are distributed. But mothers do not have the guarantee of receiving food. It all depends on a person's place within the queue, as distribution ends when the food is finished. Thus, not all people in the queue will receive food. This requires mothers to get a turn within the line, because having a turn will increase the chances of receiving a meal.

13 Amina ('A) (pseudonym), cancer patient from the Gaza Strip, interviewed by Nour Bader, 22 November 2024.

14 Susanne Schaal et al., "Rates and Risks for Prolonged Grief Disorder in a Sample of Orphaned and Widowed Genocide Survivors," BMC Psychiatry 10, no. 1 (December 2010): 1, https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-244X-10-55.

15 Reem (W) (pseudonym), cancer patient from the Gaza Strip, interviewed by Nour Bader, 14 November 2024.

On her part, Mrs. Maryam clings to the hope that this distress will end:

> Even food and drink are not available here. People are starving! We neither have flour nor bread. There are numerous people inside queues, lining up at takaya and water points. We also have a gas shortage. However, we have a beam of hope that we will survive this tribulation. Indeed, we insisted to overcome this ordeal.[16]

In Gaza, tribulation is connected to hunger, a hunger that kills mothers. Mrs. Rasmiyya believes that motherhood requires providing food even if unavailable: "No one can bear this burden! You, the mother, must feed your children even if there is no available food."[17] And on her part, Mrs. Suad describes her children's hunger as more horrendous than death, stating: "It is worse than death to see your children hungry and not be able to do anything."[18]

"We were eating fodder designated for chickens," notes Mrs. Rania regarding the plight of families in Gaza. She added:

> I swear to God, we were eating chicken feed! It is disgusting, something unimaginable! Even buying a bag of flour is dangerous here. My children risked their lives to go buy one from the Nabulsi Square. They didn't tell me they were going there. I was at my family's house in al-Shati', and they said they will visit their uncle. However, when they returned, they said they had been at Nabulsi Square, where people were jostling aggressively [it's a dangerous place]. Parents risk their lives to avoid seeing their children suffer. I am very fortunate that the said incident passed well.[19]

On the 9th of July 2024, experts from the United Nations declared the spread of famine throughout the Gaza Strip, and the death of more Palestinian children due to hunger and malnutrition, which left no doubt that famine has spread across the entire Gaza strip. Fayez Ataya, who was barely six months old, died on 30 May 2024 and thirteen-year-old Abdulqader al-Serhi died on 1 June 2024 at the al-Aqsa Hospital in Deir al-Balah. Nine-year-old Ahmad Abu Reida died on 3 June 2024 in the tent sheltering his displaced family in al-Mawasi, Khan Younis. All three children died from malnutrition and lack of access to adequate healthcare. When the first child dies from malnutrition and dehydration, it becomes irrefutable that famine has taken hold.20 Women suffering from cancer continuously emphasise this famine, especially since many of them became the sole breadwinners. And the concept of sustenance has shifted from working to supply the basics of a decent life, to searching for flour to make a loaf of bread. This requires going to the black market, getting coupons, and catching aid dropped by planes, while making sure that the flour is not spoiled or expired, as well as securing firewood. Amidst this battle for survival, many mothers starve to keep half a loaf of bread for their children. These women's standing in long queues, following airdropped aid packages, and collecting firewood from border areas enables us to understand and deconstruct famine in light of Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant's declaration on 9 October 2023: "There will be no electricity, no food, no water and no fuel, everything is closed."[21]

Motherhood in Gaza is manifested by the daily act of eagerly asking for reassurance from the children in the case of Gazan women currently in the West Bank or abroad for medical purposes. However, in the case of mothers present in Gaza, motherhood is embodied as the rescuing and 'salvation' of their children. In such spaces, motherhood is not merely a biological relationship or social role but, rather, a different formulation based on rescuing, protecting, and eagerly receiving reassurance in light of a perpetrated genocide. This transformed the mother's relationship with her children from a 'care provision' relationship to an emotional one affected by the fear of losing them. Therefore, the said rescuing, caring, eagerness, and reassurance are emotional aspects that reshaped the traditional role of a mother from being a symbol of tenderness to becoming "Mom the saviour."

16 Mariam (Gh) (pseudonym), cancer patient from the Gaza Strip, interviewed by Nour Bader, 18 November 2024.

17 Rasmiyya (H) (pseudonym), cancer patient from the Gaza Strip, interviewed by Nour Bader, 19 November 2024.

18 Suad (Kh) (pseudonym), cancer patient from the Gaza Strip, interviewed by Nour Bader, 1 November 2024.

19 Rania ('A) (pseudonym), cancer patient from the Gaza Strip, interviewed by Nour Bader, 12 November 2024.

20 United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "UN Experts Declare Famine Has Spread Throughout Gaza Strip," United Nations, 9 July 2024m accessed 8 July 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/07/un-experts-declare-famine-has-spread-throughout-gaza-strip.

21 "Gaza without Water, Electricity, and Food: What is the Position of International Law?" BBC News, 10 October 2023, accessed 8 July 2025, https://www.bbc.com/arabic/articles/c518kr2yrxpo?utm_source=chatgpt.com

RESILIENT DEFIANT STEADFAST

Palestinian Women‘s Unyielding Strength

By Carine Metz Abu Hmeid

Carine Metz Abu Hmeid is the programmes coordinator at the Democracy and Workers’ Rights Center in Palestine, which she also represents in the Palestinian National Committee for Women’s Employment. For the past two decades, she has been involved in reviewing national legislation and policies, including from a gender-equality perspective, as well as developing programs, labour education tools and research on women’s rights and gender equality issues in the world of work in Palestine.

For decades, Palestinian women in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) have faced the daunting challenge of increasing their economic participation and combating discrimination, all within the context of Israel's brutal settler colonial occupation. This occupation has stifled both Palestinian economic development and aspirations for self-determination and statehood, before and after the Oslo agreements. Over the past fifteen months, Palestinian women—particularly in Gaza—have endured forcible mass displacement, domicide, enforced disappearances, the killing and maiming of loved ones and the destruction of their livelihoods by the Israeli occupying power. Despite these hardships, they have shown remarkable resilience, never ceasing to work for their families' survival. While Israeli bombs and bulldozers have buried their memories, lifetime achievements, and hopes beneath the ruins of their homes and workplaces, women have continued to care of their families and seek ways to earn an income to provide for their most basic needs.

Palestinian women have long faced a hostile labour market under the protracted and exploitative illegal Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territory

Decades of restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupying power have severely constrained all aspects of Palestinian life, crippling economic activity and limiting women's access to paid work and income-generating opportunities.[1] After the Oslo agreements and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, some sectors—such as banking and telecommunications—offered limited new jobs for both men and women. The economy, however, has never generated enough employment to match population growth or to absorb a young, educated, and largely female workforce.

According to projections in the Palestine 2030 - Demographic Change: Opportunities for Development report, one million jobs will need to be created between 2020 and 2030 to keep pace with the expanding labour force.[2]

Before the war on Gaza, there were 1.5 million Palestinians (men and women) in the labour force, with 368,000 unemployed, including 119,400 women. Labour underutilisation affected 457,200 people, of whom 169,200 were women.[3] Recent estimates show that unemployment now affects half the labour force; about 80% in Gaza and 35% in the West Bank.

Since 1967, the economies of the West Bank and Gaza Strip including East Jerusalem, have been captive and subservient to Israel's, fragmented into isolated labour markets with varying restrictions. While Palestinian men have worked in Israel from the early 1970s—often in low-wage sectors like construction, agriculture, and hotels & restaurants, and to a lesser extent manufacturing—only a small number of Palestinian women have accessed such jobs. One exception has been the employment of women and children in Israeli agricultural settlements in the Jordan Valley, often on land confiscated from their villages and families.

The only sub-sector where women's employment share has steadily increased is the Palestinian Authority's civil service, where women now make up nearly half the workforce, and slightly more in the West Bank.

This, however, has not translated into an equal representation in senior roles—women hold just 14.9% of director general grade A4 and above, and only 11% of most senior positions in 2024.[4]

1 ICJ advisory opinion, July 19. 2024, Case186 - Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem https://www.icj-cij.org/node/204176

2 https://palestine.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Palestine%202030%20Full%20Report%20English.pdf

3 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2023. Labour Force Survey: (July-September 2023) Round, (Q3/2023). "Press Report Labour Force Survey. Ramallah - Palestine., page 11

4 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2024. Women and Men in Palestine: Issues and Statistics, 2024. Ramallah – Palestine, p. 82, https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Downloads/book2706.pdf

While recent efforts have included women with disabilities in public sector employment (to abide by the 5% quota stipulated in laws), they represent only 1% of female employees and 40% of all employees with disabilities, indicating significant room for improvement.

Globally, higher education is linked to better job prospects for women. Palestinian women and girls are highly educated: in 2023, 50.5% had completed secondary education compared to 41.8% of men, and 25.1% of women aged 25 years and above held a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 20.8% of men. More girls than boys attend high school, and women make up 62% of university and college student (year 2022/2023). Yet, despite these achievements, women have not been able to translate their education into employment. Women's labour force participation remains among the lowest in the world—just 18.3% in the West Bank and 17.5% in the Gaza Strip before the war (2023). Unemployment is highest among the most educated women, and only 4.6% of working-age women with disabilities are economically active, according to 2017 census data.

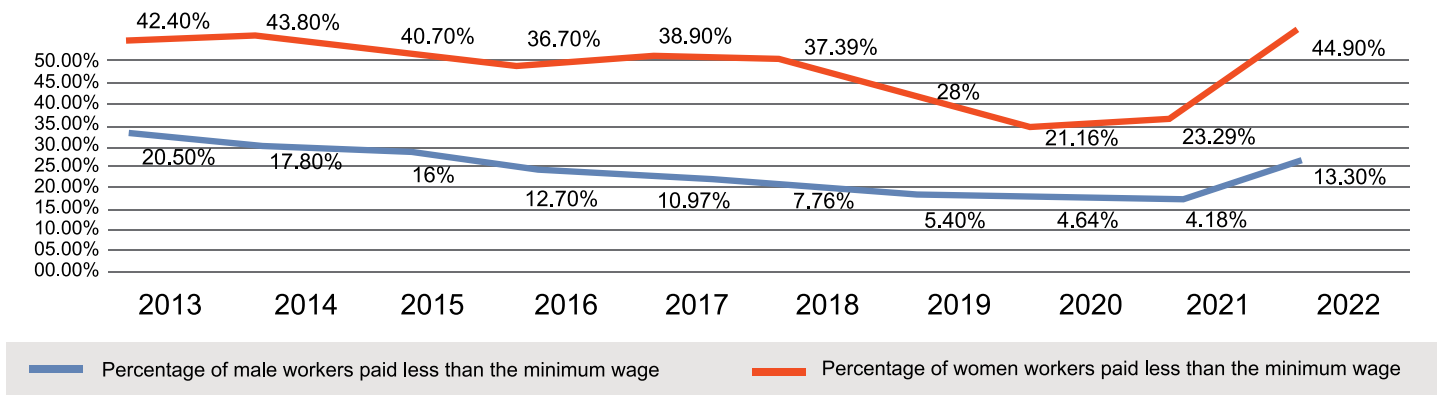
Out of every ten Palestinian women of working age (aged 15 and over), fewer than two participate in the labour market and only one is employed

Before the war on the Gaza Strip, women in the Strip already faced severe barriers to employment. Israel's blockade, in place for over fifteen years, has devastated the Gaza Strip's economy and pushed overall unemployment rates to 45.8%. Women in the Gaza Strips urban areas faced unemployment rates as high as 67.7%, and 65.5% among women in refugee camps. In the West Bank, unemployment was highest among women in refugee camps (53.1%), followed by urban (42.7%) and rural (22.3%).

Beyond the impact of the occupation, traditional conservative social norms continue to constrain women's choices, often viewing women's work as secondary despite economic pressures. The minimum wage in Palestine, raised to 1880 shekels per month in 2022, remains unenforced in the Gaza Strip and is more than three times lower than in Israel. Horizontal and vertical gender-based segregation persists in the labour market, and wage disparities between men and women remain significant.

The failure to enforce the minimum wage is a clear marker of economic and social inequality. When the minimum wage was first introduced at 1450 shekels per month, over 42% of women wage workers in the West Bank's private sector earned less, compared to just 20.5% of men. By 2021, the proportion of men paid less below the minimum wage had dropped to 4%, but for women it remained high at 23%. After its increase in 2022, 45% of women were still paid less than the minimum wage. Between 2013 and 2022, accumulated wage losses for women paid below the minimum wage in the West Bank reached 971.4 million shekels, compared to 781.6 million shekels for men.

Percentage of male and female wage workers in the private paid less than the minimum wge west bank from 2013 until 2022



Source: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. Palestinian Labour Force Survey: Annual Reports for 2013 to 2022. Ramallah, Palestine.

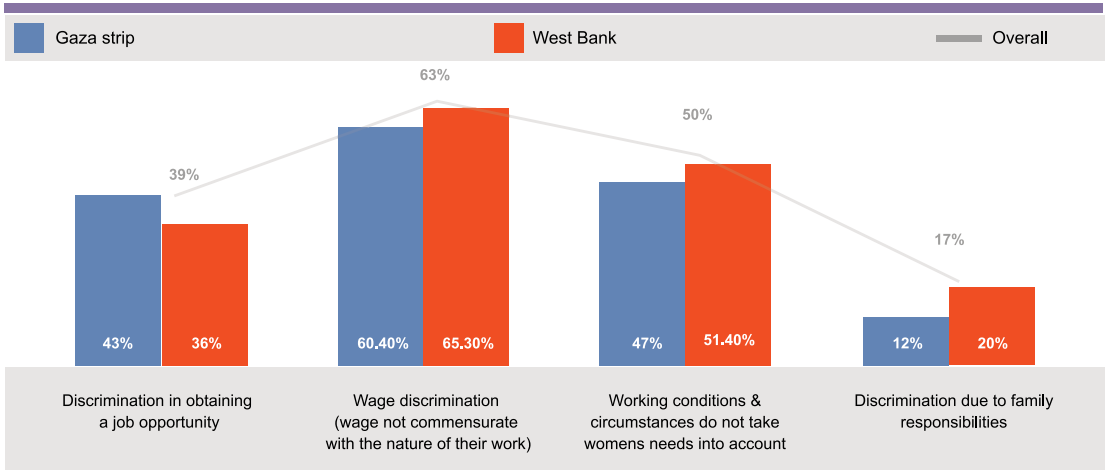
A study on gender-based discrimination in the Palestinian labour market by Moayad Afaneh[5], based on field surveys in both the West and Gaza Strip prior to the recent Israeli aggression on Gaza, found that women in all sectors experience various forms of discrimination, with the private sector being the most affected. The survey revealed that 63% of women working in private sector were dissatisfied with their wage, feeling they did not reflect the nature of their work. Half of these women reported that their work environment failed to accommodate their needs.

In the public sector, 44% of female employees felt their salaries were not commensurate with the work they performed. Additionally, 17% of women in both sectors reported discrimination linked to family responsibilities such as marriage, pregnancy, and childcare. Exploitation by supervisors or employers—such as being required to perform tasks outside their job description—was reported by 21% of women in the private sector and 15% in the public sector. Harassment was another significant issue: 15% of women in the private sector reported experiencing some form of harassment (verbal, physical, or through gestures), with the rate rising to 21% in the West Bank compared to 5.3% in the Gaza Strip. In the public sector, 4% of reported harassment, with 4.9% in the West Bank and 3.5% in the Gaza Strip.

5 Democracy and Workers' Rights Center in Palestine, Moayad Afaneh, Gender-based Discrimination in the Palestinian Labor Market, 2023, Ramallah, Palestine, https://dwrc.org/index.php/gender-based-discrimination-in-the-palestinian-labor-market/

Main findings of the field survey on discrimination against women in the labour sector

prevalence of various forms of discrimination againt women workers in the private sector in WBGS, 2023



Source: Democracy and Workers' Rights Center in Palestine, Moayad Afaneh, Gender-based Discrimination in the Palestinian Labor Market, 2023, Ramallah, Palestine

prevalence of various forms of discrimination againt women emplyees in the public sector in WBGS, 2023

Source: Democracy and Workers' Rights Center in Palestine, Moayad Afaneh, Gender-based Discrimination in the Palestinian Labor Market, 2023, Ramallah, Palestine

widespread gender-based violence and denial of their rights to life and safety. In the Gaza Strip, starvation has been used by Israel as a weapon of war against civilians, compounding the suffering of women and girls.

Over the past fifteen months, women—including workers—have been endured unprecedented levels and layers of violence. Between October 2023 and 6 March 2025, Israeli forces killed 48,346 Palestinians in Gaza, including 12,316 women. In the West Bank, 26 women were among the 923 Palestinians killed by the Israeli forces and settlers. Women and children made up 69% of the 111,759 injured and 70% of the 14,222 missing in Strip. The war has also created 13,901 widows, making then the sole providers for their families. Before the war, already 12% of women were heads of their households, who already faced higher poverty rates than male-headed households.

A 2024 study conducted in the Gaza Strip by Louay Joudeh found that 93% of women surveyed were displaced, and 75.5% had experienced violence by the Israeli occupying power since the war began. Nearly all had their homes destroyed (95.3%), 62.3% lost children or relatives, and almost half (49.7%) suffered ill-treatment by the Israeli forces. Additionally, 35.9% were injured, 14.6% faced other forms of violence—including psychological abuse, deprivation of medical care and food, and 13.2% were detained.[6] A report issued in March 2025 by the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel concluded that "Israel has increasingly employed sexual, reproductive and other forms of gender-based violence against Palestinians as part of a broader effort to undermine their right to self-determination and carried out genocidal acts through the systematic destruction of sexual and reproductive healthcare facilities."[7]

Joudeh's study also indicated that shelters, where displaced Palestinian women sought refuge, often became sites of further abuse. Since the war began, 64% of the women surveyed have reported facing violence—including harassment and exploitation, at shelters, workplaces, and when receiving aid. Half experienced verbal violence, 35.8% economic violence, 8.8% physical violence or harassment, and 5.4% electronic violence. Most (70.3%) endured this violence continuously. Overcrowding and lack of sanitary facilities worsened women's trauma; 85.5% felt uncomfortable psychologically, physically, and financially due to insufficient separate bathrooms and lack of privacy. A striking 93.5% reported too few bathrooms, and 72% said there were no women-only facilities. Basic necessities were scarce: over 80% lacked access to health services, psychological support, or legal aid, and 78% reported no safe spaces for women. Economic hardship compounded these issues, with 62% of employed women losing their jobs during the war.

In the illegally occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, women have also faced increased insecurity at home and while commuting due to ongoing Israeli military operations, violent raids—especially at night—and the dense network of hundreds of Israeli military roadblocks, checkpoints and movement barriers. Constant illegal Israeli settler violence has further endangered women. Although such conditions have been a daily reality for decades, while Israeli perpetrators enjoying near-total impunity, the scale and severity of violence against Palestinian civilians are now unprecedented.

6 Democracy and Workers' Rights Center in Palestine, Louay Joudeh, "A field study on Gender-based Violence in the Work of World and the Effects of the Israeli Aggression on the Gaza Strip from October 2023 on Women's Exposure to Violence and Harassment", Gaza, Palestine, 2024, page 45 & 46, https://dwrc.org/index.php/gender-based-violence-in-the-world-of-work-and-the-effects-of-the-israeli-aggression-on-the-gaza-strip-from-october-2023-on-womens-exposure-to-violence-and-harassment/

7 https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session58/a-hrc-58-crp-6.pdf

By January 2025, the Israeli occupation army had established 898 military checkpoints and iron gates blocking roads and paths to and from Palestinian communities in the West Bank.[8]

In Gaza, Israeli bombings and shelling have destroyed women's homes, workplaces, and businesses, yet they have never stopped working to support their families and serve their communities.

Despite the blockade and the ongoing economic crisis, women had painstakingly built careers and businesses that were shattered by Israel's massive destruction of residential and commercial areas. Most women who had jobs, businesses, or income-generating projects lost everything due to displacement and devastation.

In January 2024, Democracy and Workers Rights Center in Palestine (DWRC) shared the testimony of Samaher, a 37-year-old beauty salon worker and mother of four, who lived apart from her husband and faced unbearable loss alone. Before the war, she earned 700 shekels a month. Her home in Jabalia Al-Fakhoura, northern Gaza, was destroyed when the neighbouring house was bombed. She was injured, and two of her children were killed. Displaced to Rafah with family members, she describes her ordeal and resilience:

> We sought refuge in Rafah, we went to the shelters in UNRWA schools, but no one cared about us. We did not get enough food for me and my remaining children. I only obtained one mattress and two blankets, and every week we got some canned food. We prepare bread and food on firewood at the school, and fill water from outside the school, where we have to wait in long lines. The prices are very high and I cannot meet the needs of my 9-year and 3-year-old children. Despite my pain over the loss of my daughters, who were 14 years old and 6 years old, I had no choice but to try to work under these conditions in the displacement camps. I bought simple tools and offer my services to the women in the tents, cutting children and women's hair. I earn the equivalent of 40 shekels per day for a full day's work and moving between tents. I can only afford the price of firewood for bread, and a little for my children's needs due to the insane rise in prices. I do not see any future perspectives for me and my children, and I do not know until when this will go on.[9]

Many women in Gaza, like Samaher, continued working despite the losses they suffered to feed their families and to support their communities. They provided health services, psychological support, humanitarian aid, ran soup kitchens, taught, baked bread, prepared food, repaired and repurposed clothes, among other roles. Some, like Samaher, received small wages, while many others volunteered due to lack of alternatives. Employment across all sectors was severely affected.

While some local associations managed to continue relief work, many were forced to halt operations temporarily or indefinitely due to displacement, destruction of premises and equipment, and loss of funding. This impacted the jobs of their staff, members and beneficiaries.

An assessment in June 2024 by DWRC and the National Society for Rehabilitation surveyed 52 Gaza-based members of the "My Right" Coalition for Advocating for Women's Right to Decent Work and their Economic Rights—mostly cooperatives, women's centres, unions, and community-based organizations. It founded that 96.2% of these groups suffered material damage: 60.8% had their premises destroyed, 82.4% lost furniture and equipment, 31.4% lost production material or equipment, 21.6% lost items produced by association members, 5.9% lost planted land, 3.9%

8 Palestinian News and Info Agency, "898 military checkpoints and gates besiege Palestinians in the West Bank, https://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/153818 and https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/15/israeli-checkpoints-barriers-raise-fears-in-the-west-bank

9 Interview conducted by DWRC Gaza branch office and published on facebook on 15/01/2024, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=765667758929223&set=pb.100064580176537.-2207520000&type=3

lost greenhouses, and 11.8% lost vehicles. Some 15.7% could not assess damage due to inability to reach their premises. The human cost was severe: 43.1% of organizations reported staff deaths due to the war, 9.8% lost board members, 29.4% lost general assembly members, 47.1% lost volunteers, and 43% lost activists. Additionally, 84.6% said their personnel, volunteers, or governing members lost family members. Due to the war, 60.8% had to stop operations, and 43.1% had not resumed due to lack of resources. Over half (53.8%) lost all funding sources.[10]

Although formal education structures ceased entirely until the January 2025 ceasefire, many informal education points were set up, and some small private institutions reopened.

> Before the war, J. owned a kindergarten in Tel Al-Hawa area in Gaza city. She used to employ 12 workers and provide early childhood education for more than 100 children. Her kindergarten was bombed and nothing remained of it. She could not even reach that area, because the Israeli army was stationed there. After losing her source of income, she started working at another kindergarten that used to be closed before the war but was reopened as many others were destroyed. She was employed through a share system with the owner, getting to keep one third of students' tuition, while the owner got two thirds. She says: "I had to work and conclude a partnership in the new kindergarten to provide an income for myself and my family. I aspire to reopen my own kindergarten".[11] This kindergarten operates without electricity and with no modern amenities, and there is only one bathroom for 80 children. Employees earn 300 to 400 shekels a month, but they only get paid based if parents of the pupils manage to pay the fees.

In 2024, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) described the Palestinian economy as facing "a complete collapse of the economic structure in Gaza Strip, accompanied by a sharp decline in production in the West Bank and unprecedented increase in unemployment rates."[12]

Women's security, jobs and businesses have also been severely affected in the occupied West Bank.

Collective punishment measures imposed by the Israeli occupying power—illegal under international humanitarian law—have disrupted the entire economic cycle. The overall unemployment rate in the West Bank rose sharply from 12.9% in the third quarter of 2023 to 30% in the third quarter of 2024. Men's unemployment increased from 10.2% to 31%, while women's unemployment rose from 24.9% to 29.7%. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) noted that women have experienced "less pronounced" effects than men, largely due to their employment in more stable sectors, and fewer women working in Israel.[13] The report from 2024 states that "many women, compared to men, were already in more stable positions within the workforce before the war, primarily engaged in the public sector or other industries such as education and healthcare, which have been less adversely affected by the war […]."[14] Women's unemployment, however, still increased, despite being more than double that of men before October 2023.[15]

Moreover, many of the "more stable" jobs held by women are feminized and underpaid, with irregular and incomplete wage payment. For example, Palestinian civil service employees have not received full salaries for over two years and are owed an average of six months of back pay. Women in paid care roles,

10 Democracy and Workers' Rights Center in Palestine and National Society for Rehabilitation, Rapid Assessment about the Situation and Needs of Member Organizations of the National Coalition „My Right" in the Gaza Strip, 2024, unpublished

11 Interview conducted by DWRC Gaza branch office during field visit to some kindergartens in Gaza governorate on 5/12/2024

12 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, Press Release on the Performance of the Palestinian Economy During 2024, 31/12/2024, https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/_pcbs/PressRelease/Press_En_ForecastingRep2025EPCBS.pdf

13 ILO brief „A Year of War in Gaza: Impacts on Employment and Livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza Strip: Bulletin No. 5", https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/A%20Year%20of%20War%20in%20Gaza-Bulletin%205-October%202024-FINAL%28en%29.pdf

14 Ibid, page 8

15 Ibid, page 7, table 2: Labour force participation and unemployment rates in the West Bank, by sex, Q3 2022 - Q2 2024 (%)

already poorly paid before the crisis, have been among the first to lose employment. The Palestinian Authority's inability to pay full wages has affected many day-care centres in the Ramallah/ Al-Bireh area, leading to staff reductions, while private sector layoffs have also increased.

For example, Rana has worked for a day-care centre in the Ramallah governorate for the past 18 years, earning a monthly salary of 2,200 shekels—barely above the Palestinian minimum wage. While still being owed backpay from the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, she has not been paid her full wages for over a year and a half, receiving only "advances" that have been her sole support for a family of five. Her husband, who previously worked in the construction in Israel, has been unemployed since 7 October 2023, when the Israeli government arbitrarily cancelled all the work permits. The day-care centre relies entirely on fees from parents, as early childhood care receives no public funding. Many parents can no longer afford fees and have withdrawn their children, leaving the centre unable to cover administrative costs or pay its four employees. Rana also faces difficulties commuting from her village near Ramallah due to Israeli checkpoints and the transportation costs. With irregular wages, she struggles to pay university tuition fees for her two daughters, utility bills, and medical expenses without any health insurance.[16]

Her co-workers and many other day-care workers endure similar hardships.

Since mid-January 2025, over 40,000 Palestinians from refugee camps in Jenin, Tulkarem, and Nour Shams in the West Bank—half of whom are women and girls—have been forcibly displaced by the Israeli army's latest military operation. This has severely impacted women's businesses and jobs in the area.

In the north of the Westbank, Sama operated a small garment workshop with five sewing machines in Nour Shams refugee camp in Tulkarem, employing three female workers who all became family breadwinners after their husbands lost jobs due to the war. They marketed their goods directly to clients, but repeated Israeli sieges, including in Tulkarem and its camps, disrupted financing for materials and product sales. Sama introduced weekly work rotations to keep her employees. Imperfect as it was, it was the best solution to keep going. But her small business has now come to a halt. The recent invasion and siege of Nour Shams camp involved closing all entrances, damaging infrastructure, demolishing buildings, and expelling families. Many workers and families are now homeless and without livelihoods.

The Jordan Valley has long suffered land confiscation, water denial, movement restrictions, and scarce jobs outside farming. After Palestinian men were barred from working in Israel, they replaced women in agricultural jobs.

Maysa, a farm worker from Bardala village in the northern Jordan Valley, earned 60 shekels daily before losing her job. She said: "this amount is not enough to meet my needs, especially since I have to pay rent, but it was better than now, especially since I used to make soap and currently also face difficulties in marketing it, just like other female workers in my village." About ten female workers in her village were employed by local farmers until male relatives replaced them following the ban on Palestinian women working in Israel. Women producing goods like soap or pre-prepared foods face growing marketing difficulties due to Israeli checkpoints, harassment by Israeli soldiers—including intimidation, long detentions, phone searches, and humiliation—and lengthy detours. Even locally, insecurity from repeated Israeli military incursions and economic hardships have reduced people's purchasing power, making it harder for women to sell their products.[17]

16 Interview by DWRC's Legal Aid and Human Rights Protection Unit, Ramallah office, 2025

17 Interviews and information collected by DWRC's Legal Aid and Human Rights Protection Unit, Ramallah office, 2025

Palestinian women have a right to decent work and decent life in their homeland. They are more than ready and fully qualified to be a driving force in a sovereign, democratic, and independent Palestinian State, as well as in the recovery and reconstruction of Gaza.

After the ceasefire began on January 19, 2025, many displaced women in Gaza returned with their families to where their homes were. Few found their homes, businesses, or workplaces still standing.

Suzan, from Abasan in Khan Younis governorate, had just opened her business when the war started. She recalls: “It was my dream to open my own business. Due to the economic situation, I postponed this project for many years until I decided to establish it in partnership with my colleagues. I obtained a loan and started setting up the shop, which included 600 dinars for space rental. The store opened on 6 October 2023. On the next day, the war on Gaza began. Because of the attack, work stopped before it even started. I went from Abasan to Muwassi Rafah with my family in very difficult conditions, and most of the establishments and houses in my town of Abasan were destroyed.”[18]

Despite all the hardships and months of uncertainty about her shop’s fate, Suzan was among the “lucky” ones, as she found her shop intact when she finally returned to Abasan, and is now able to resume her work.

18 Interview by DWRC Gaza branch office updated on 10/03/2025

Invitation to the opening of Suzan’s shop
“Zayi Al-Qamar Dress Rental” dated 6/10/2023.

As people clear rubble, many are trying to save and restart their businesses, or start new ones. Estimates for rebuilding Gaza are staggering—53 billion US dollars—but an Arab recovery and reconstruction plan was presented on 4 March 2024, aiming to achieve this within five years. It has been welcomed by European countries and the European Union. Palestinians in Gaza have already begun rebuilding their lives during the ceasefire. Further progress, however, depends on political developments, as does the fate of Palestinians in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The international community, particularly EU member States, must assume their responsibilities and ensure respect of international law and UN resolutions concerning the rights of the Palestinian people.

Despite uncertainties, interventions in Gaza should include measures to foster employment for all, including women and persons with disabilities. Woman, like men, require massive job creation projects to earn a living during the early recovery and reconstruction phase. There is also an urgent need to support skills development and adaptation, and to provide material and financial support to small and family-run businesses in the form of grants rather than loans. In parallel, an economic damage and losses assessment and compensation scheme should be implemented as soon as possible. Specific support to care services is also needed to enable more women to join the workforce, including care for young children, persons with disabilities, and the elderly who depend on relatives for care.

HOMELAND IN WORDS AND IMAGES

A Palestinian Cultural Journey

By Mahmoud Muna

Mahmoud Muna, writer and publisher, is known to many as the bookseller of Jerusalem. He helps run the family's renowned Educational Bookshop. He is active in cultural and literary initiatives and is a regular media contributor on culture and politics. His work explores the intersections of culture, identity, language, and behaviour. When not reading, he writes for local and international cultural magazines and newspapers. His co-edited book Daybreak in Gaza was widely praised and shortlisted for the Palestine Book Award.


Not to for get...
كي لا تنسى...

From the olive groves of rural villages to the crowded city streets, from the trembling cadence of exile-born poems to the bold strokes of paint on canvas, Palestinian art and literature carve a place for a homeland, even when that homeland has been fragmented, challenged, or denied. This article embarks on a journey through creative expression, tracing how Palestinian writers, poets, and visual artists have woven memory, loss, resistance, and hope into stories and images that speak to what it means to belong.

Through this cultural journey, I will explore how art and literature become acts of nation-telling; not simply recording what was lost but affirming what endures. Because in every poem, in every brushstroke, in every embroidered thread lies the quiet, persistent heartbeat of a people unbowed, waiting and working for self-determination and freedom.

While the Palestinian political reality is yet to see a bright day, cultural creators have advanced not only in shaping the Palestinian identity, but also in documenting its progress, and its celebration.

The arts and literature have always been the beating heart of the Palestinian struggle. Mahmoud Darwish, the renowned Palestinian poet, wrote the Palestinian Declaration of Independence in 1988—a pivotal document announcing the State of Palestine, which was read by Yasser Arafat in Algiers and envisioned a democratic state with human rights and coexistence. Therefore, by studying the cultural journey of Palestine, this essay will also identify successes and the failure of the cultural leaders, and the opportunity they have in placing their people on the world stage.

The Urgency of Telling: Voices Facing Silencing

In 1984, the late American–Palestinian writer and thinker Edward Said wrote a seminal article titled “Permission to narrate.”1 In it, he analysed how Palestinians have been systematically denied the power to tell their own story, barring them from narrating their history and their lived experiences. This practice was not only implemented in circles of political discourses, but also so obvious in Western media. This analysis highlighted the absence of the Palestinian voice, concluding that it was all done by design.
As his article was written two years after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, it also referenced the international commissions that were established to investigate the reported Israeli violations of international law during the invasion. Said was right to argue how this denial was being used as a tool of power, which allowed a dominant, often false, narrative to prevail while suppressing the lived experiences and the voice of the oppressed.

Furthermore, he demonstrated that even when their voice is present, it so often portrays Palestinians as victims who are weak or passive, rather than as agents of their own story. This portrayal, Said argued, serves to justify and cement the already established power structures, and forms of dominance.

Said’s work was an important call to action for Palestinians and their allies to confront this setup, and to encounter such dominant narratives by creating and circulating Palestinian-owned narrative, in history and politics, but also through literature, art, and other forms of expression. For Said, it was imperative to embolden every Palestinian, including marginalised groups, to tell their own tale, and to narrate their own stories, to portray their own image, and to sketch their own dreams. He emphasised the significance of such active storytelling of everyone, independently and on their own terms, without gatekeeping or filtering.

Naturally, cultural creators, including artists and writers, were among the first to heed this invitation, or perhaps call to action. Curators, writers, filmmakers and all types of artists have stepped up to the challenge and started what could be marked as the “cultural renaissance” of Palestine, producing art of all forms, and writing literature that ranges from social studies to historical fiction, creative writing, and children’s and cuisine books, and everything in between.

1 https://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/attachments/jps-articles/Permission%20to%20Narrate.pdf

The Light Before the Lantern: Early Stewards of a People's Story

This must not be seen without its historical context, Palestinian writers and artists were already producing art and literature long before Said's article. For example, Khalil Baydas (1874/5–1949) is considered to be the pioneer of the Palestinian novel; he published what many regard as the first full-fledged Palestinian novel, Al-Wareth [the heir], in 1920. He was also instrumental in introducing translated Russian, French, and Italian literature to Palestinian readers through his magazine al-Nafa'is al-'Asriyya [the modern valuables].

The poet Ibrahim Tuqan (1905–1941) was known for his nationalistic verse; he felt responsible for "awakening his countrymen to their predicament." His poetry, along with that of his contemporaries, was widely read and highly influential in fostering a sense of national pride. The same applies to Najib Nassar (1865–1947), a key figure in early Palestinian journalism, who founded the newspaper Al-Karmil in Haifa in 1908, which was a leading voice of Arab aspirations and an opponent of Zionism.

And perhaps the most well-known of all is Ghassan Kanafani (1936–1973). Although his main career flourished later, he began painting in the early period and became an influential writer and intellectual, coining the term "literature of resistance" and using his writing to express the Palestinian plight. Khalil al-Sakakini (1878–1953) was an educator and writer who had a lasting impact on younger generations; he was known for his literary work and his role in developing Arabic literature curricula to foster national consciousness. He was also one of the first Palestinian literary figures to face persecution under Ottoman rule for his anti-Ottoman activities.

In art, Palestinian artists from as early as the 1900s were inspired by several international schools, including European styles, yet they blended these with local landscapes, religious themes, and traditional crafts. Pioneers from this period included Nicola Saig (1863–1942), known for his Byzantine-style icons and secular scenes, and Khalil Halaby (d. 1947) another icon painter who focused on landscapes of his hometown. Jamal Badran (1909–1999) was a key figure in Islamic decorative arts and calligraphy, who brought the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement to Palestine and opened a significant studio in Jerusalem.

Other notable artists included Sophie Halaby (1906–1997), who studied abroad and taught art in Jerusalem, and Zulfa al-Sa'di (1910–1988) one of the few female apprentices of Nicola Saigh. Art in Palestine was in a gradual and constant transition, also influenced by the British Mandate and Western travellers of the time, moving from purely religious and non-controversial subjects to include more nuanced national and political dimensions as the mid-century approached.

Palestinian artistic expression extended beyond painting to include significant work in traditional crafts, music, cinema, and theatre. These art forms often reflected both traditional cultural practices and a growing sense of national identity. Embroidery was a significant folk art, particularly the intricate tatreez used in traditional dress, which became a powerful symbol of Palestinian identity. Mother-of-pearl inlay and glass decoration were skills practised by craftspeople in cities like Bethlehem and Hebron, but were also taught throughout the land of Palestine.

Playwriting in Palestine has also a deep history. emerged in the early 20th century, with performances of both local works and translations of European classics taking place in cultural clubs and coffee houses. Following the 1948 Nakba and the 1967 war, theatre transformed into a critical form of cultural resistance and artistic expression, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, when theatre became a vital platform for articulating Palestinian identity, critiquing social norms, and challenging the power dynamics of occupation. To this day, Palestinian playwrights continue to use theatre as a powerful tool for social and political commentary, performing people's stories on wide range of social and political issues of life under occupation, the refugee experience, and the pursuit of justice.

A cornerstone of this movement is the Palestinian National Theatre, commonly known as El-Hakawati ("the storyteller"). Founded as a troupe in 1977 by François Abou Salem (1951-2011) and others, it established its permanent home in a


devotion
force
I Illustrate-
Explain

renovated, war-damaged cinema building in East Jerusalem in 1984, becoming the first professional Palestinian cultural centre and theatre. The Hakawati Theatre has since served as a crucial cultural anchor, producing a mix of original plays, improvisations, and adaptations that focus on social and political concerns. Despite constant interference and closures by Israeli authorities, it is widely seen as a resilient hub for national arts and culture. Palestinian music and performing arts were a vibrant blend of deeply rooted oral traditions and new Western and broader Arab influences, primarily centred in urban areas like Jerusalem. Musicians like Wasif Jawhariyyeh (1897–1973), through his detailed writings and performances, captured the era's rich musical landscape, which included traditional tarab ensembles, café performances, and the novel introduction of sound recording technologies. The establishment of Palestine Broadcasting Service (PBS) in 1936 (aka as Radio Jerusalem, or hunna al-quds) provided a critical platform for local composers and performers, including Yahya Lababidi (1900–1943) and Riad al-Bandak (1924–1992), to reach a wider audience with their traditional Arab compositions. The radio was also used to its full potential as a media outlet, constantly challenging Zionism and advocating for Palestinian self-determination and freedom.

Simultaneously, Western classical music gained a foothold through figures like Augustin Lama (1901–1988), who received formal training and composed for the church, educating a new generation of musicians. It was later fused with traditional Palestinian themes. Theatre was also a success story, primarily within cultural clubs and missionary schools. Playwrights and directors such as the Saliba brothers produced a mix of translated European classics and original Arabic plays, while traditional storytelling (hakawati) and puppet theatre remained popular forms of local entertainment, reflecting the diverse and dynamic cultural and political scene of the period.

In fact, Palestinian art creators were not limited to the geography of Palestine. The Lama brothers, Ibrahim (1901–1988) and Badr or Pedro (1907–1947), were pioneering figures in early Arab cinema; their major work took place in Egypt rather than Mandate Palestine itself. Their careers and output remain significant to the history of both Palestinian and Arab filmmaking. The Lama brothers were not alone, Ibrahim Hassan Sarhan (1915–1987), along with other local filmmakers like Ahmad Hilmi Al Kilani (1925–), set up the Arab Film Company studio in Jaffa in 1945, producing several short films until the 1948 Nakba.

Palestine enjoyed a thriving cinema culture prior to the 1948 Nakba, boasting approximately 40 cinemas across major cities like Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa, Nablus, and Jenin. These venues served as key cultural and social gathering spots, offering a diverse program of regional and international films. A prime example was the Alhambra Cinema in Jaffa, opened in 1937 on Jerusalem Boulevard. Recognized as one of the largest and most luxurious cinemas in the Middle East with a seating capacity of over a thousand, it was also a significant performance venue that hosted famous Arab artists, including Umm Kulthum.

The New Harvest of Voices: Art and Culture in Full Ascent

The Palestinian literature scene post-1967 war showed some shifts; it developed into a plural and transnational field in which craft, creative styles, and political testimony are tightly interwoven. A new generation of novelists, poets, and essayists – writing from the West Bank, Gaza and across the diaspora– have broadened formal repertoires (from autofiction and speculative fiction to documentary poetics), while repeatedly returning to core thematic anchors: dispossession, memory, mobility, and the politics of representation. Being a multilingual diaspora meant that contemporary writers also write not just in Arabic, but also in English, Spanish, French, and others. Their writing is both a personal narrative and a collective tale, using storytelling to reconstruct erased geographies and to sustain cultural continuity across displacement.

There are innumerable examples of such writers. The writings of Sussan Abulhawa (1970–) are an example of historical fiction through family sagas; they illustrate the refugee experiences, documenting the long arc of dispossession and resilience, giving readers access to lived Palestinian history and its emotional, human side. Isabella Hammad (1990/91–) re-imagines Palestinian history and identity through personal and family narratives, making personal biography into a lens on colonialism, belonging, diaspora, and loss. Ibtisam Azem (1974–) writes a powerful allegory for erasure, absence, dispossession, and the fragility of existence under shifting political regimes. Huzama Habayeb (1965–) work frequently centres on Palestinian refugees, diaspora, and the gendered/social experience of displacement. Her writing shows how Palestinian identity is embodied not only in political resistance but also in everyday survival, family ties, loss, and hope. The novels of Sahar Khalifeh (1941–) explore Palestinian life under occupation, focusing on ordinary people in small towns, and how their lives are shaped by the political reality.

While Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008) wrote poetry for decades, making him the national poet of Palestine, there were many other poets making their mark. Mosab Abu Toha (1992–), a poet from Gaza, writes painfully and lyrically about life under siege, loss, destruction, memory, but also resilience and human endurance. His poetry transforms daily reality under occupation into testimony. Marwan Makhoul (1979–) writes from the standpoint of a Palestinian citizen of Israel proper, a vantage point often marginalised in wider Palestinian and Arab cultural discussion. Through his poems and plays, he articulates the tensions, identity fractures, and lived experiences of Palestinians living within Israel; a segment of society whose narratives are rarely centred. Najwan Darwish (1978–) is considered by many to be one of the leading contemporary Arab-language poets. His verse repeatedly challenges structures of power, occupation, displacement, and injustice. His style often merges lyricism with sharp, unflinching commentary. By naming, imagining, mourning (and refusing silence) his poems resist erasure; they assert Palestinian presence even under displacement, occupation, or diaspora.

Palestinian contemporary artists are also utilising their work as a form of protest against the continuous colonisation of their people. They constantly merging aesthetic expression with activism to confront occupation, displacement, and cultural erasure. Visual artists like Hazem Harb (1980–) employ collage and archival materials to reconstruct Palestinian memory and assert presence, transforming historical maps, photographs, and documents into installations that testify to collective loss and resilience. Similarly, Sliman Mansour (1947–) uses painting to highlight Palestinian identity, blending traditional imagery and local materials to convey perseverance and cultural continuity. Multimedia artists, such as Rehab Nazzal (1961–), engage video, sound, and performance to document the psychological

and social effects of occupation, giving form to experiences of trauma, resistance, and survival. Through these practices, art becomes both a medium of witness and a method of political engagement, ensuring that Palestinian narratives are preserved and communicated even under conditions of extreme adversity.

The musician Tamer Nafar (1979–), both as the frontman of DAM and as a solo artist, operates at the intersection of art and political activism, giving voice to the Palestinian experience within Israel and under occupation. Nafar directly challenges stereotypes, structural discrimination, and state violence. Performing in Arabic, Hebrew, and English, his music affirms Palestinian identity, documents collective memory, and mobilises cultural solidarity, transforming hiphop into a powerful medium of political testimony and transnational advocacy. Mohammed Assaf (1989–), who, through his music, brings Palestinian narratives to broader, often global, audiences in a different but equally political register, particularly through his rise to fame on the Arab Idol competition, has emphasised Palestinian pride, resilience, and visibility on international stages. Together with others, their work illustrates the spectrum of political music in Palestine, from direct protest to symbolic affirmation, while offering a contemporary, diverse, and engaged music form.

In addition to individual practices, grassroots movements and exhibitions amplify the political dimension of Palestinian art. Projects like the Art of the Palestinian Poster showcase graphic and digital works that address contemporary crises, human-rights violations, and collective memory, often designed for wide reproduction and global circulation. PalFest and Kalimat literature festivals are powerful vehicles for Palestinian writing, enabling it to travel far and wide. Both art and literature, with exhibitions in Ramallah, Gaza, and internationally, create accessible channels for solidarity, raising awareness and even funds for humanitarian causes. Palestinian artists intertwine personal, cultural, and political narratives, using creativity as a form of resistance. Their work challenges erasure, asserts identity, and transforms art into a public act of political testimony, cultural survival, and transnational advocacy.

Art Under Pressure: Balancing Creativity and Political Responsibility

Those who are in close contact with Palestinian artists, including writers, will often hear the creators' sense of frustration, as their work is often expected to be judged on how relevant it is to the historical and political struggle of their people. The idea that artists or writers should reflect the aspirations of their people is often perceived literally, ignoring the fact that art is always political, and it can, as it inevitably does, directly or indirectly, speak of the creators' context, hope, and dreams.

The work of the late Palestinian writer and political activist Ghassan Kanafani is particularly instructive here. In his political essays, Kanafani insisted that the artist's foremost responsibility was engagement: that artistic production should stand in service of the collective struggle. His remarks, however, must be understood within the specific historical context of the 1970s and 1980s, a period in which Palestinians were urgently asserting their peoplehood and articulating their right to a homeland and the right of return. It is equally essential to recognise the richness of Kanafani's own identity. He was simultaneously a novelist, literary critic, journalist, visual artist, schoolteacher, and revolutionary. To frame him in narrow terms is to overlook the full spectrum of his contributions, which traverse the political and the aesthetic in equal measure.

Toward a New Dawn: Palestine's Cultural Tomorrow

Palestinian artists have long produced, and will continue to produce, work deeply rooted in lived experience. Their art reflects identity, memory, and an enduring sense of peoplehood. Some choose direct political expression, while others forge more subtle or symbolic pathways through which politics enters the work implicitly. What remains constant is that, in the Palestinian context, politics and literature are inseparable, each shaping and reinforcing the other.

When surveying the current landscape of writing about Palestine, one immediately notices a striking trend: much of today's Palestinian historical fiction and family memoir is authored by Palestinian women, many of them second- or third-generation descendants of the 1948 Nakba. The names are well known (Susan Abulhawa, Hala Alyan, Isabella Hammad, Adania Shibli, Suad Amiry, Liana Badr, Ibtisam Barakat, Sahar Khalifeh, Selma Dabbagh, Ghada Karmi, Maya Abu al-Hayyat, Nayrouz Qarmout). Their prose is vivid, powerful, and deeply observant; their work is widely celebrated, translated into multiple languages, and often published by major international houses.

This phenomenon is a point of pride for Palestinians. It not only reflects the diversity and dynamism of Palestinian cultural production, but also exemplifies women's central role in the national movement, not only on the political front, but also within the social and cultural realms as well. In interpreting this trend, one must also acknowledge the crucial place of storytelling within Palestinian families, and how this narrative tradition has long travelled most naturally between mothers and daughters. This is not only true of literature; a similar observation can be seen in cinema, where most feature films are often directed by Palestinian women.

Palestinian oral history, family memory, and the wider social story have long been carried across generations by women; a powerful testament to their lasting role in shaping national consciousness. In Palestine, the ink-bottle is handed from mother to daughter, and through this quiet inheritance, the past and the present are continually written.

I remember clearly the not-so-distant days when curators, directors, and publishers steered away from using the word "Palestine" in titles, whether for exhibitions, performances, or book covers. The term was treated as if it carried bad energy, something off-putting, something that might jeopardise publicity. Then came a cautious shift: "Palestinian" began to appear, but only in the fine print of artists' bios, softened by references to the "Holy Land" or the "Middle East." Eventually, the word "Palestine" itself was permitted, in books often as a subtitle, somewhere in smaller font at the lower end of the cover; then it started to appear but only when paired with "Israel," as if the former could be acknowledged only in the shadow (or under the overshadowing weight) of the latter.

Four decades on, through hard work, real labour, and a commitment shaped by Said's vision, there is genuine progress to acknowledge. Today, artworks, books, theatre productions, and films appear every week with "Palestine" printed boldly on their covers and titles. This is no minor symbolic shift; it reflects recognition earned by artists and writers themselves, reinforced by expanding global solidarity and new cultural paradigms that have shifted, and new ground has been established.

Palestinian artists, writers, and curators (together with cultural institutions and global partners) must keep advancing along the path they have carved with persistence and vision. Their work deserves full recognition: a rightful place on the international stage, and an acknowledgement of the artistic courage with which they continue to narrate the experience of a people whose homeland has been fractured, transformed, and long unlawfully contested. Their efforts echo traditions of resilience and resistance, through storytelling and cultural transmission that have sustained Palestinian identity for generations.

And so they must continue to claiming space, asserting voice, and shaping the world's imagination, until the struggle itself becomes a place of renewal, and the story they carry can at last return home.

Bushra Khalidi & Ziad Issa
Munir Nuseibah

INTERNATIONAL & LEGAL

ADVOCACY IN THE FACE OF GENOCIDE

PALESTINE, POWER, AND RESISTANCE

By Bushra Khalidi & Ziad Issa

Bushra Khalidi and Ziad Issa are Palestinian and Syrian humanitarian policy specialists working across Palestine and the wider Middle East, focusing on humanitarian access, civilian protection, and accountability in protracted conflicts.

Bushra Khalidi works on Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, engaging governments, the United Nations, and international coalitions to shape global narratives on siege, forced displacement, and the weaponisation of aid.

Ziad Issa works on Palestine and the wider Middle East, with previous experience on Syria and Palestinian refugee contexts. His work is grounded in decolonial and anti-racist approaches, with a focus on movement-building and challenging power imbalances within humanitarian systems.

The struggle for Palestinian rights has long been a focal point of global advocacy, drawing solidarity from grassroots movements, human rights organisations, and international institutions. However, advocacy efforts have become increasingly fraught with challenges, particularly in the wake of the Gaza war, which has exposed the world to a genocide broadcast in real time. The suppression of pro-Palestinian voices, the criminalisation of activism, and the intensification of legal and political barriers have made it harder for advocates to push for justice and accountability.

This article serves as a blueprint for advocacy, drawing from direct experience and strategic insights to offer best practices for those engaged in this space. It also examines the shrinking civic and humanitarian space within Palestine and globally, analysing how restrictive measures against human rights organisations in the West mirror those imposed on Palestinian civil society.

The perspectives shared in this article are grounded in the authors lived experiences and professional engagement within the humanitarian and advocacy sectors. They reflect personal analysis and observations shaped by years of work in challenging contexts, including Palestine. These views do not represent, nor are they intended to reflect, the official positions or internal dynamics of any specific organisation. The article does not aim to critique, endorse, or generalise the practices of individual institutions, but to contribute to a broader dialogue on principled advocacy and humanitarian action.

PALESTINIANISM AND GLOBAL PALESTINE

The Palestinian struggle for liberation has long resonated beyond its geographic confines, evolving into a global symbol of anti-colonial resistance and human rights advocacy. This section delves into the historical trajectory of Palestinian advocacy, tracing its roots from the foundational efforts of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to its current manifestations amidst contemporary challenges.

Established in 1964, the PLO emerged as a unifying body for various Palestinian factions, aiming to represent the Palestinian people in their quest for self-determination. Under the leadership of Yasser Arafat from 1969, the PLO not only coordinated armed resistance but also engaged in diplomatic efforts to garner international support. Arafat's outreach extended to liberation movements across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, positioning the Palestinian cause within the broader context of global anti-colonial struggles.

Notably, the PLO's alliances with African liberation movements underscored shared experiences of colonial oppression. Arafat's relationships with leaders like Nelson Mandela highlighted mutual recognition of struggles against apartheid and occupation. Mandela once remarked, "We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians,"[1] emphasising the interconnectedness of their respective fights for justice.

Alongside Nelson Mandela, Yasser Arafat built deep ties with leaders of African liberation movements. He maintained strong alliances with Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, who hosted a PLO office in Dar es Salaam; with Algeria's Ahmed Ben Bella and Houari Boumédiène, who positioned Palestine at the heart of Algeria's revolutionary diplomacy; with Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda, who championed Palestinian rights at the Organisation of African Unity (OAU); and with Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso, who viewed Palestine as a symbol of global anti-imperialist struggle. These relationships grounded Palestinian advocacy within the broader postcolonial world, reinforcing its legitimacy as a struggle against racialised domination and settler colonialism.[2]

1 Nelson Mandela, Speech at the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, 1997.

2 Seikaly, Sherene. (2017). "Third World Solidarities: The PLO and the Global South." Journal of Palestine Studies 46, no. 2 (2017): 6–21; Khalili, Laleh. Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies. Stanford University Press, 2012.

The Palestinian diaspora played a pivotal role in internationalising the Palestinian cause. Organisations such as the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS) established chapters worldwide, particularly in European and North American universities, fostering awareness and solidarity among students and intellectuals. These groups organised conferences, cultural events, and protests, embedding the Palestinian narrative within global academic and activist circles.

In the UK, trade unions and student organisations increasingly aligned with Palestinian advocacy, especially during periods of intensified conflict. The Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC), founded in 1982, became a central platform for coordinating efforts across various sectors, including labour unions, churches, and community groups. Their activities ranged from educational initiatives to organising demonstrations, reflecting a growing commitment to Palestinian rights within British civil society.[3]
The First Intifada (1987–1993) marked a significant shift in Palestinian resistance, characterised by widespread civil disobedience and grassroots mobilisation. The images of unarmed youths confronting heavily armed Israeli forces galvanised international public opinion, leading to increased support for the Palestinian cause. Solidarity movements intensified their activities, organising protests, boycotts, and advocacy campaigns to pressure governments and institutions to reconsider their policies towards Israel and Palestine.[4]
The Second Intifada (2000–2005) further amplified global attention, albeit amidst a more complex geopolitical landscape post-9/11. While the international community's response was more divided, many grassroots organisations continued to advocate for Palestinian rights, emphasising the need for a just resolution to the conflict.

The Oslo Accords of the 1990s introduced a new phase in Palestinian advocacy, marked by international enthusiasm for state-building and development initiatives.[5] Donor countries and international organizations funneled aid into the occupied Palestinian territory, with a focus on institutional reform, economic development, and technical cooperation. However, this approach prioritized conflict management over conflict resolution, sidestepping core issues of land, sovereignty, and self-determination, and sidelining accountability for Israel's violations of Palestinian rights, enabling the expansion of settlements, and creating a donor-dependent Palestinian Authority with limited sovereignty.

The Oslo framework also sidelined one of the core pillars of the Palestinian struggle: the Right of Return for refugees. By deferring the issue to "final status negotiations," the accords effectively reframed this internationally recognised right under UN Resolution 194 as a matter of political bargaining rather than a non-negotiable principle of justice. Palestinian refugees were excluded from meaningful representation in the process, while subsequent talks reduced their rights to options of resettlement, limited return to a future Palestinian state, or compensation. In practice, Oslo fragmented and depoliticised the refugee question, leaving millions of Palestinians in exile further marginalised and their central demand for return diluted into a negotiable humanitarian file. Rather than ending the occupation, the Oslo Accords helped entrench it, weakening the tools and structures needed to hold Israel accountable for its ongoing violations. The resulting aid architecture became deeply technocratic, politically depoliticized, and in some cases, complicit in sustaining the status quo.

Rather than challenging Israel's deepening occupation, many NGOs and their donors aligned with a framework that aimed to "stabilize" the conflict rather than resolve it.[6] This shift narrowed the scope of advocacy, de-incentivized political clarity, and subordinated rights-based approaches to bureaucratic benchmarks. Despite the existence of binding international

3 Baker, M. "Narratives of Palestine: Journalism and the Politics of Advocacy." The Translator 16, no. 2 (2010): 197–222. Routledge.

4 "Roots of resistance: The First Intifada and international solidarity." Mondoweiss, 12 December 2012, https://mondoweiss.net/2012/12/roots-of-resistance-the-first-intifada-and-international-solidarity/.

5 Hammami, R. "Palestinian NGOs since Oslo: From NGO politics to social movements?" Middle East Report 214 (2000: 16–19.

6 Le More, Anne "International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo: Political Guilt, Wasted Money." Routledge, (2008).

resolutions, including repeated UN Security Council calls to halt settlement expansion, donor governments largely failed to uphold their obligations. Instead, red herrings like the Abraham Accords or backchannel ceasefire negotiations between Israel and the United States have further eroded multilateral accountability and sidelined Palestinian agency.

The influx of aid also brought challenges. The Palestinian economy became increasingly dependent on external funding,[7] while restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation limited genuine economic growth. This dynamic led to a phenomenon described as 'economic peace,'[8] where economic incentives were used to placate demands for political rights, drawing criticism from various quarters for undermining the broader liberation struggle.

In the face of ongoing occupation and systemic violations, Palestinian advocacy increasingly turned to international human rights and humanitarian law frameworks. Organisations documented abuses, engaged with UN mechanisms, and sought accountability through legal avenues.[9] While these efforts brought attention to specific violations and offered tools for advocacy, they also faced limitations.

The prolonged blockade of Gaza and the deepening entrenchment of occupation have placed humanitarian advocates in an impossible dilemma: whether to centre their work on immediate needs or on Palestinians rights that would make those needs obsolete. Too often, the success of advocacy has been measured by how much aid can be negotiated, coordinated, or delivered rather than by progress towards dismantling the structures that create the need for aid in the first place.

Under blockade, even the language of rights becomes difficult to sustain. Advocating for justice has frequently been side-lined in favour of appeals for humanitarian access. But this access is conditional, fragile, and often weaponised used to pacify rather than empower, and to manage Palestinian survival rather than enable Palestinian freedom and liberation. The result is a humanitarianism that risks normalising the very systems of control it is meant to mitigate.

At the same time, for decades Israel has invested significantly in shaping the global public narrative, making the Palestinian struggle appear inaccessible, extremist, or illegitimate to much of the world. Decades of strategic diplomacy coordinated media efforts, and securitisation of Palestinian identity have contributed to a discursive environment where basic claims for justice are reframed as threats, and where solidarity is policed as incitement. This has created further pressure on advocates, not only to soften their language, but to justify their humanity.

In this context, the distance between the rhetoric of decolonisation and the practice of humanitarian advocacy has widened. The foundational ethos of Palestinian advocacy, one that was rooted in collective liberation and anti-colonial solidarity, has had to contend with a global aid system that too often trades rights and justice for technical neutrality. This tension lies at the heart of today's advocacy crisis, torn between the imperative to speak truth to power and the institutional pressures to remain palatable, fundable, and politically 'safe.'

Shalhoub-Kevorkian explains how "international law has been deployed both as a shield and as a muzzle, used to articulate Palestinian suffering within a framework of rights while simultaneously fragmenting that suffering into technical violations, obscuring the structural violence of settler colonialism". Indeed, the reliance on legal frameworks sometimes constrained the discourse, focusing on individual rights violations rather than the overarching structures of occupation and apartheid. Moreover,

7 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. "Report on UNCTAD assistance to the Palestinian people: Developments in the economy of the Occupied Palestinian Territory." 10 September 2024, https://www.un.org/unispal/document/unctad-report-10sep24/, Khalidi, Raja and Samour, Sobhi. "Neoliberalism as Liberation: The Statehood Program and the Remaking of the Palestinian National Movement." Journal of Palestine Studies, 40(2), 6–25. (2011)

8 "Palestine's economy is a casualty of occupation." Foreign Policy, 2 June 2021,https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/02/palestine-israel-conflict-occupation-peace-economy-trade-services-manufacturing-agriculture-labor-dependency/. International Crisis Group "Squaring the Circle: Palestinian Security Reform under Occupation (2010).

9 Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. "Atrocity Alert No. 423: Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory," February 2024.

as so many have argued, the lack of enforcement mechanisms and political will within international institutions often rendered these legal victories symbolic rather than transformative.[10]

In recent years, Palestinian advocacy has encountered heightened repression, both within the occupied territory and globally. Governments have enacted laws and policies that criminalise support for Palestinian rights, conflating criticism of Israeli policies with antisemitism. Activists and organisations face surveillance, legal challenges, and restrictions on funding, leading to a shrinking civic space for advocacy.

The hypocrisy of international responses is stark. For example, in Syria, many Western governments rightly invoked international law to condemn the Assad regime's bombardment of civilians and use of chemical weapons. Yet many of those governments remain paralysed, silent, and late to respond when Israel deliberately starves Gaza's population, bombs hospitals, and kills aid workers. This selective outrage reveals that the application of international law by has been less about universal principles and more about geopolitical convenience. The message is clear: when international law serves Western interests, it is weaponised with urgency; when it threatens allies like Israel, it is quietly shelved.

The designation of prominent Palestinian Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) as "terrorist organizations" by Israeli authorities exemplifies this trend, aiming to delegitimise and dismantle civil society efforts. Internationally, solidarity movements confront increasing censorship and backlash, particularly in academic and cultural institutions, reflecting a broader pattern of suppressing dissenting voices.

The trajectory of Palestinian advocacy underscores a persistent struggle for rights and recognition amidst evolving challenges. From the foundational efforts of the PLO to contemporary grassroots movements, the Palestinian cause has maintained its resonance within global discourses on justice and decolonisation. However, the current landscape necessitates adaptive strategies that address both the structural impediments of occupation and the external pressures constraining advocacy.

As the civic space continues to shrink, and legal avenues face limitations, the resilience and innovation of Palestinian advocates and their allies remain crucial. By forging broad-based coalitions, leveraging digital platforms, and articulating a compelling narrative rooted in universal principles of justice, the movement has continued to galvanise support and assert Palestinian voices globally.

Yet today, a profound shift is underway. The Gaza war has not only exposed the brutality of occupation but also the moral crisis within the humanitarian and human rights sector itself. Two compromised systems: a human rights discourse that, as Samuel Moyn argues in 'Not Enough', emerged as an accessory to the neoliberal order post–Cold War, detached from questions of structural inequality and economic justice; and a humanitarian system whose very foundations are built on compromise in the name of neutrality and access.[11]

For decades, humanitarians have operated within frameworks that demand silence in exchange for presence, what some have called principled pragmatism, others quiet complicity. From the International Committee of the Red Cross´s (ICRC) refusal to take sides to UN agencies navigating genocides in Bosnia and Sri Lanka, the mandate to "save lives" has too often come at the cost of moral clarity and political truth-telling.[12] Gaza now lays bare the limits of this model.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Gaza. The assault on Gaza has not only revealed the scale of human devastation but also the hollowness of a sector that cannot, or will not, confront the

10 Richard Falk, Rethinking International Law After Gaza: Closing the Enforcement Gap, March 8, 2025 and Amnesty International, Chapter 3: Israeli Settlements and International Law, January 2019 and UN Experts, UN experts warn international order on a knife's edge, urge States to comply with ICJ advisory, September 2024

11 Moyn, Samuel. (2018) Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World. Harvard University Press,.

12 Slim, Hugo. Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster. Oxford University Press, (2015).

political roots of Palestinian suffering. It has forced a reckoning: with the complicity of silence, the dangers of selective neutrality, and the cost of abandoning political clarity in favour of access. This is not simply a crisis of response, it is a crisis of purpose.

In what follows, we examine how the war on Gaza has forced humanitarian actors and advocates alike to re-evaluate their strategies, rediscover their moral clarity, and confront uncomfortable questions about power, complicity, and courage.

CHALLENGES IN ADVOCACY ON GAZA AND BEYOND

The Gaza Genocide and Its Impact on Advocacy Strategies

Israel's war on Gaza has not only intensified an already catastrophic humanitarian situation, but it has laid bare the operational and ethical dilemmas confronting the humanitarian sector. The denial of aid and the killing of aid workers have, in many ways, become normalised. States like Israel can now block the delivery of food, water, medicine, and fuel with impunity in violation of international law.[13] They can bomb aid convoys and hospitals, starve a population, and yet powerful allies continue to shield these actions from accountability.[14]

For many humanitarian actors, the only remaining tool has been to speak out. Yet, even this has come to feel radical in a sector that has long been conditioned to prioritise humanitarian access over justice.[15] This poses a critical challenge: if humanitarian organisations operating in Gaza do not name the violations, who will? As analysts have argued, after decades of accommodating Israeli policies, the humanitarian sector must now confront what it truly means to act with moral clarity in the Palestinian context. This includes resisting co-optation into systems of control and violence and instead reclaiming a form of humanitarianism that contributes to dismantling the conditions that create the need for aid. In this view, principled humanitarian action must aim not only to alleviate suffering, but ultimately to render itself unnecessary by addressing the root causes of that suffering.[16] Advocacy strategies must confront this fear directly. The reluctance (and in some cases refusal) to name the power structures responsible for obstructing aid and killing aid workers leaves the sector complicit.[17]

Organisations should respond to the killing and detention of their staff in Gaza with the same level of concern and accountability as they would in other contexts such as Yemen, Syria, Ukraine, Sudan, or Myanmar. Every life, and every aid worker matters. By avoiding naming the perpetrators, organisations send a clear message: they are afraid of Israel and its allies, or they do not value Palestinian lives in the same way they value the protection of their funding streams or whatever little "access" they have to Gaza.[18]

Operating during an active genocide has further amplified these contradictions. The dilemma of whether to remain silent to preserve operational access, or to speak out and risk everything, is deeply personal for many. It is personal for us, too. As people who have lived through war, dictatorship, and occupation but who also hold the privilege of being able to leave, to speak, and to act, we find ourselves questioning whose interests are ultimately being served when we choose silence.

As advocates, our roles have shifted from addressing the world to having to look inward at organisations internal power structures and dynamics. Internal and cross-sector advocacy has become just as vital as external influencing. It has required us to spend considerable time and emotional labour educating leadership in Global North-based headquarters about the suffering of Palestinians, and why a louder, clearer stance is

13 Amnesty International. (2025). Israel's blockage of aid into Gaza is a crime against humanity and violation of international law.

14 The Guardian. (2025). The Guardian view on Israel's aid blockade: hunger as a weapon of war

15 Doctors Without Borders. (2024). Why weaponising neutrality against humanitarian organisations must not silence us.

16 The New Humanitarian. (2024). Gaza demands a new kind of humanitarian action.

17 The New Humanitarian. (2024). Aid agencies: History will judge your failure to call out Israeli war crimes in Gaza.

18 The Lancet. (2024). The humanitarian system: Politics cannot be avoided.

not just appropriate, it is vital.[19] This work is exhausting and often isolating. Despite widespread institutional commitments to anti-racism and decolonization when the conversation turns to Palestine, many have gone silent. The same organisations that proudly champion racial justice elsewhere have too often retreated into caution, equivocation, or complete inaction when confronted with Israeli apartheid and the brutalisation of Palestinians.[20] If anti-racism does not include Palestine, then it is not anti-racism, it is selective solidarity.

We are not simply radical activists. We understand that Israel is not a conventional state that will be swayed by traditional diplomacy. Repeated and public statements by Israeli officials have laid bare intent to destroy the Palestinian population in Gaza.[21] The systematic and deliberate killing of Palestinians and the prevention of aid from entering Gaza are part of the strategy.[22] Under such conditions, traditional advocacy methods are not only inadequate, but they also risk legitimising the violence they fail to challenge.

If advocacy on Gaza is to be meaningful, it cannot stop at calling for more aid trucks and protection of civilians. It must also tackle the political conditions that make humanitarian assistance necessary in the first place. It must also interrogate the colonial structures embedded within the humanitarian system itself. We often ask ourselves: if these large humanitarian agencies were led by Palestinians or others from the Global South, if they were led people with lived experience of war, apartheid, and colonisation would they still be silent? Would they not be shouting louder?[23]

The sector's much-lauded commitments to anti-colonial and locally led approaches have, in the case of Gaza, amounted to little more than documents gathering digital dust. When the moment came to act, these principles were abandoned.[24]

The devastating scale of destruction in Gaza has demanded a shift in advocacy priorities. Yet many actors continue to retreat into the comfort of so-called 'neutrality.' Neutrality was never intended to mean silence in the face of atrocity. It is a tool for ensuring access, not an excuse to avoid naming violations of international law. In Gaza, the humanitarian sector has reached a point where stating the facts, about blockades, starvation, and civilian targeting, feels like a political act. But neutrality does not mean abandoning moral clarity. On the contrary, principled humanitarianism requires us to speak out precisely when the laws and norms we claim to uphold are being eroded. Upholding the Geneva Conventions should not be seen as controversial. Yet today, defending even the most basic principles of humanitarian law are increasingly perceived as a risk. This distortion of neutrality has left many organisations paralysed, contributing to an environment where silence becomes an operational strategy and a risk mitigation to ensure "aid access".

We must confront it, not just through carefully worded statements or whispered diplomacy but through bold, public, collective campaigning. The humanitarian sector must reclaim its moral courage, or it risks losing its moral relevance altogether.

Media Engagement: Strategies for Staying on Message

Media engagement is one of the few spaces where humanitarians and advocates can break through institutional silence. But it comes with its own set of risks, including the prevalence of false equivalence and whataboutism, which can obscure the realities of asymmetric conflicts. Academic analyses highlight how such rhetorical strategies derail meaningful discourse by shifting focus away from substantive issues.[25]

The goal is not just to be heard, but to name the structures of violence and accountability. That means preparing spokespeople

19 https://www.doctorswithoutborders.ca/shut-up-and-provide-aid-why-weaponizing-neutrality-against-humanitarian-organizations-must-not-silence-us/

20 Noura Erakat & Marc Lamont Hill (2021). "We Still Charge Genocide." Boston Review.

21 A Registry of Israeli Genocidal Statements on Gaza: https://intent.alhaq.org/

22 https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/18/israel-starvation-used-weapon-war-gaza

23 https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2022/08/12/Decolonising-aid-a-reading-and-resource-list

24 https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/the-wrap/2022/08/11/Decolonising-aid-racial-justice-humanitarian-reform

25 https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:EU:73dbb208-d4de-432e-81e0-7b12a3becdff

not just to talk about humanitarian needs, but to assert rights: the right to life and the right to justice. It means rejecting the framing that this is a war between equals or that every Palestinian death must be 'balanced' by a reference to Israeli suffering. As scholar Jamil Khader writes, "the demand for balance in settler colonial contexts often serves to obscure the structural nature of violence and the legitimacy of resistance."[26]

This kind of clarity requires courage. We have seen it in Palestinian voices who say plainly: "This didn't begin on October 7," or "This is not a humanitarian crisis, it's a political one." These are not talking points. They are acts of resistance.

Ineffective media engagement, by contrast, often reflects the institutional anxiety of trying to say something without saying too much. It produces vague statements that please no one and obscure the truth. Edward Said once noted that "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is a crucial element of culture and imperialism."[27] Avoiding the naming of perpetrators doesn't just reflect caution, it reinforces the very structures we seek to challenge.

And yet, when organisations do step into the fire, taking clear, public stances even at risk to their access, they create space for others to follow. This is what solidarity should look like: not just defending your own work but standing with those who speak the truth and face retaliation for it. But too often, the first to speak out are left exposed. Some agencies privately express support or even praise those who take bold positions, only to withhold their own names from joint statements or public messaging. In effect, early leadership becomes a fig leaf for the cowardice of others, used to tick a box without taking a risk. We need fewer private nods and more public courage.

Media institutions also play a critical role in shaping public understanding of conflicts. When mainstream outlets adopt language that frames Palestinians as the obstacle to peace or obfuscates power asymmetries, referring to "clashes," "crossfire," or "escalations" without identifying the context of occupation, they contribute to a false equivalence that undermines accountability. Ethical journalism must reckon with its role in either amplifying or distorting the realities on the ground. Editorial choices around framing, sourcing, and terminology are never neutral, they either challenge power or sustain it.[28]

Digital media platforms have at times, offered an alternative space to bypass institutional silence. Palestinian-led campaigns like #SaveSheikhJarrah and #GazaUnderAttack went viral, with millions engaging globally. Research by 7amleh (The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media) documents how digital platforms have become essential tools for Palestinian human rights defenders, while also exposing the patterns of systematic censorship and takedown of Palestinian content.[29]

However, reliance on social media comes with limitations. While it can amplify suppressed voices, it is also subject to algorithmic bias, state pressure, and platform moderation policies that disproportionately affect Palestinian content. As documented by Access Now,[30] and Human Rights Watch,[31] Palestinian accounts have been shadow-banned, deplatformed, or subjected to content removal at much higher rates than others during periods of escalation.

To counter this, advocacy must be strategic. It must go beyond visibility to shift narratives. That requires not just technical training, but political grounding. Humanitarians need to be prepared to challenge dominant framings, to call a blockade a blockade, not a "logistical bottleneck"; to say starvation is not a "lack of aid," but a policy choice.

26 Khader, J. (2020). "Settler Colonialism and the De-Politicization of Resistance." Settler Colonial Studies.

27 Said, E. W. (1993). Culture and Imperialism. Knopf.

28 https://fair.org/home/six-tropes-to-look-out-for-that-distort-israel-palestine-coverage/

29 7amleh – The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media. (2023). The Reality of Digital Rights for Palestinians 2023.

30 Access Now. (2021). Facebook and Instagram's Systemic Censorship of Palestine Content.

31 Human Rights Watch. (2021). Facebook Censors Discussion of Rights Issues in Israel and Palestine.

Media engagement is not just communication; it is confrontation with the narratives that enable and excuse violence. The question is no longer whether we can afford to be clear. It is whether we can afford to be vague. And the answer, at this moment, is no. Ultimately, narrative is a form of power. For Palestinians, reclaiming that narrative, after decades of erasure, distortion, and securitisation is itself a form of resistance. Media engagement, when done boldly and ethically, is not ancillary to advocacy; it is advocacy.

The Policy and Institutional Barriers to Advocacy

The deepest barriers to advocacy are not in public discourse, they are structural. Western political institutions remain heavily aligned with Israeli policy. They shield Israel from accountability, provide the arms and funds that fuel the war, and attack or defund those who dissent. The criminalization of campaigning groups has reached unprecedented levels, with activists facing legal charges, sweeping injunctions, and disproportionate sentencing simply for protesting Israel's actions in Gaza.[32] This goes far beyond suppressing speech; it represents an assault on the right to resist complicity in war crimes. As Oxfam argued in its 2024 Davos report, these dynamics are rooted in a global order built on "modern-day colonialism" where wealth, resources, and political power are extracted from the global South and consolidated in the hands of the powerful, reinforcing "systems of exploitation and violence."

This alignment makes advocacy hard. But it also clarifies what's at stake. Advocacy can no longer be about polite policy asks or technocratic briefings. It has to be about power: who holds it, who abuses it, and who enables that abuse.

The justice vs. aid dilemma captures this tension. Would someone who lost everything choose a food basket or justice in court? Humanitarian assessments never ask that question. They ask about water and shelter, but not about freedom of movement, the right to mourn, or the right to resist occupation. These intangible rights are erased from the humanitarian script but they are central to what people in Gaza are dying for.

32 https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4g83l33wdeo

Therefore, our advocacy must challenge the depoliticization of suffering. Needs are not neutral. The destruction of Gaza is not a natural disaster. It is the result of deliberate policy, sustained, protected and sanctioned by global systems of impunity. As noted by humanitarian scholars, the framing of crises as apolitical emergencies often obscures the structural violence and historical injustices that underpin them.[33] As the Takers Not Makers report notes, "ignoring power asymmetries in humanitarian and development work risks reinforcing the very colonial systems we claim to resist."[34] Our work must reflect that.

Campaigns, like the work of what international NGOs have been doing jointly and publicly on Gaza, offer a glimpse of what's possible. They mobilise diverse actors, speak with moral clarity, and refuse the framing of false balance. But even these efforts face limitations without deeper shifts in strategy. Advocacy should not serve operations, operations should serve advocacy. The ultimate goal is to make our work obsolete, by dismantling the systems that make humanitarian aid necessary.

The challenges of practicing solidarity

• Operationalising solidarity

What does solidarity look like in practice? It means standing by those targeted; knowing it will implicate you, too. When organisations support litigation against Israeli war crimes or challenge donor censorship, they take on risk. But that risk is what makes others bolder.

Solidarity is not charity. It's not even just a partnership. It's a shared struggle. If we build a mobile clinic in Gaza, is it only to deliver services, or is it a way of standing with a destroyed Ministry of Health, or refusing to let healthcare collapse without resistance?

This contrasts with the language of resilience, which often shifts responsibility to communities: survive what you must, adapt to what you can't change. This perspective echoes the concept of "solidarity humanitarianism," which emphasises mutual aid and

33 https://odi.org/en/insights/gaza-litmus-test-humanitarian-sector-commitment-decolonisation/

34 Oxfam. (2024). Takers Not Makers: How the Rich Exploit the Global South – and How to Fight Back. Oxfam International. https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/handle/10546/621599 p.17

political commitment over neutral service delivery.[35] Solidarity says: we reject this premise. We will not normalise oppression. Critics argue that the resilience narrative can inadvertently place the burden of coping on affected populations, thereby absolving international actors of their responsibilities.

• Global south solidarity

The genocide unfolding in Gaza is not only a test of international law, it is a moral reckoning for the entire global community. As institutions in the Global North falter under the weight of double standards and political cowardice, new sources of leadership, legitimacy, and moral clarity are emerging from the Global South. From legal challenges to mass mobilisations, Global South actors are stepping forward to defend not just Palestine, but the credibility of human rights itself.

This moment has shown that solidarity is no longer the domain of a few large Western capitals. South Africa's bold move to take Israel to the International Court of Justice was not symbolic, it was a landmark act of legal and political courage. It forced the world to confront genocide not as theory, but as a lived, unfolding reality. Elsewhere, civil society in Kenya and Malaysia have called for arms embargoes and accountability. Across Latin America, countries have cut diplomatic ties with Israel in protest. These are not marginal responses, they are leadership.

What distinguishes this wave of solidarity is not just geography, but values: anti-colonialism, intersectionality, and consistency. These movements are rooted in lived histories of occupation, racial violence, and imperial hypocrisy. They do not flinch from naming the structures of oppression-settler colonialism, apartheid, militarism- and they refuse to be silenced by accusations of bias or political risk. In contrast to the moral equivocation of many Western governments and institutions, Global South advocacy speaks with urgency and honesty.

For international NGOs, this shift is not a challenge, it is an opportunity. It is an invitation to listen more deeply, align more boldly, and act more consistently. The role of International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) must evolve from gatekeepers of humanitarianism to amplifiers of justice. This means doing more than issuing statements. It means standing with partners when they are targeted, refusing donor conditionalities that silence advocacy, and ensuring that Palestinians and their allies in the Global South lead the work, not just feature in it.

To remain relevant, INGOs must actively build relationships with Global South movements and integrate their frameworks into global advocacy strategies. This requires humility, openness to critique, and a commitment to shifting power, not just in rhetoric, but in budgets, platforms, and leadership. The future of principled advocacy is being shaped in Cape Town, São Paulo, Jakarta, Gaza, and Ramallah. If INGOs want to be part of it, they must follow their lead.

Global South solidarity is not just important, it is essential. It offers the clarity, courage, and political coherence that have been missing from many traditional advocacy spaces. And in this moment of global fracture, it is these movements that are keeping the soul of internationalism alive. As the people of Gaza resist with dignity under impossible conditions, we must ask ourselves: are we ready to match their courage with action?

• Fear, courage, and the evolution of advocacy identity

Perhaps the most personal part of this journey is fear and choosing to move beyond it. Many of us came into this work as activists. Then we joined institutions. We traded purity for access, clarity for diplomacy. But the genocide in Gaza has brought many of us to a breaking point. That refusal to be silent is not just emotional, it is strategic. Not everyone can afford that risk. But those who can, must. If we don't, who will?

We do not pretend to be purists. But we are committed to refusing complicity. To reclaim a space for principled advocacy. And to build a humanitarianism rooted in justice, not just service delivery.

This is the challenge for our sector. And the opportunity. Will we meet it?

35 https://odi.org/en/events/hnpw-2025-neutrality-in-humanitarianism-what-do-we-learn-from-gaza/

Yet as the calls for principled humanitarianism grow louder, so too does the backlash. The more advocates speak out against the assault on Gaza, and the global systems of impunity that enable it, the more aggressively their voices are silenced. Around the world, solidarity with Palestine is increasingly being met not with dialogue, but with criminalisation, censorship, and coercion. What began as a challenge to the humanitarian sector's own silence now reveals a broader and more alarming trend: a concerted effort by states and institutions to shrink the civic space for Palestinian advocacy itself. The next section turns to exactly that question, how solidarity can be operationalised by international organizations in practical, principled ways.

GLOBAL BACKLASH AND THE SHRINKING SPACE FOR PALESTINIAN ADVOCACY

From Terror Designations to a Manufactured Humanitarian Vacuum

Perhaps the most dramatic example of state repression of Palestinian advocacy in recent years is Israel's 2021 designation of six leading Palestinian NGOs as "terrorist organizations" under its 2016 Anti-Terrorism Law and a subsequent military order in the West Bank. The targeted organisations, Addameer, al-Haq, Defense for Children International – Palestine (DCI-P), the Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC), Bisan Center for Research and Development, and the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees (UPWC), are internationally recognised for their legal, human rights, and development work.

The designations were made without public disclosure of credible evidence. Despite Israel's claims of links to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), multiple states, including nine EU Member States, stated that Israel had provided no substantiated evidence to justify its actions. A classified U.S. Central Intelligence Agency assessment similarly found no intelligence corroborating the allegations. As Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, affirmed: "No substantial information was received from Israel that would justify reviewing our policy toward the six Palestinian NGOs."[36]

In August 2022, Israeli forces escalated their crackdown by raiding the offices of the six groups, ransacking property, confiscating equipment, and welding shut their doors. Political theorists of securitisation argue that such acts function less as a response to verifiable threats than as 'speech-acts' that reconstrue human-rights work as a domain of emergency, thereby enabling extraordinary measures.[37] These acts were accompanied by military orders declaring their activities illegal, rendering their operations a criminal offense in both Israeli and West Bank jurisdictions. Legal appeals have been obstructed by Israel's new policy requiring lawyers for the organisations to obtain special permits, effectively violating their right to legal representation and a fair hearing.

The broader impact is far-reaching. Staff members face risks of arrest, interrogation, and even criminal prosecution. Israeli military law specifically Military Order 1651 permits up to 10 years imprisonment for involvement with so-called "unlawful associations," a designation that now applies to employees of these NGOs.[38] Furthermore, these laws allow for the seizure of assets, as was witnessed during the raids, and require banks to report any financial holdings associated with these organisations. The implications of these designations extend beyond civil society to directly affect the protection and legal representation of Palestinian children. The result is an engineered humanitarian vacuum. DCI-P and Addameer have been two of the most prominent legal providers for children detained in Israeli military prisons, where roughly five to seven hundred Palestinian children are prosecuted each year. Since 2021 alone, these organisations have provided legal services to nearly half of those children, services that are now severely at risk. In the absence of their support, children may face prolonged detention without access to legal counsel, exposing them to further abuse, coerced confessions, and rights violations.

36 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/israelpalestine-statement-high-representative-josep-borrell-israeli-raids-six-palestinian-civil_en

37 Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998

38 Gordon, Neve. "Human Rights as a Security Threat: Lawfare and the Campaign against Human Rights NGOs." Law & Society Review 48, no. 2 (June 2014): 311–344. https://doi.org/10.1111/lasr.12074

Their legal advocacy also contributes to international accountability mechanisms, including submissions to the UN and the International Criminal Court. These activities are widely seen as the reason these organisations were targeted, to disrupt their ability to document violations and seek international redress.

As UN experts have warned, such attacks aim "to entrench Israel's occupation by silencing those who advocate against it."[39] The legal frameworks used against these NGOs both the 2016 Anti-Terror Law and the military orders enable Israeli authorities to prosecute individuals, seize property, ban peaceful assembly, and criminalise services fundamental to the humanitarian response.

The domestic clampdown is designed to radiate outward. The designations have produced a significant chilling effect across the humanitarian and advocacy sectors. Donors, NGOs, and institutional partners are increasingly hesitant to associate with Palestinian civil society for fear of reputational or legal repercussions.[40] According to legal analysis from Diakonia, the designations risk "indirect consequences encompassing the loss of provision of services, resources and support,"[41] effectively isolating these organisations from funding and coalitions. This chilling effect is arguably the point. An Israeli security source admitted to Haaretz (Israeli newspaper) that the main objective of the designations was to disrupt the organisations' fundraising and international legitimacy. Despite this, more than fifty Israeli civil society organisations issued a joint statement defending the work of the six and denouncing the attempt to dismantle Palestinian civic space.[42]

Transnational Reverberations in Law, Policy, and Cyberspace

Across the Atlantic, in the United States, similar patterns of political restriction have emerged. More than thirty states have enacted legislation that conditions public contracts or funding eligibility on refraining from participation in certain boycotts, particularly those related to Israel.[43] These laws[44] have raised serious concerns among civil liberties groups, who argue they infringe on free expression and have prompted multiple legal challenges on First Amendment grounds.[45] While some provisions have been struck down or amended, many remain in effect, contributing to a broader climate of self-censorship and deterring advocacy on Palestinian rights. [46]

The criminalisation of political expression has begun to creep into immigration law as well; counterterrorism laws have been weaponised to target Palestinian advocates. The case of Mahmoud Khalil, a Palestinian activist and Columbia University graduate, exemplifies the criminalisation of pro-Palestinian advocacy. Khalil was detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in March 2025, despite being a lawful permanent resident, for his involvement in pro-Palestinian protests. He has not been charged with any crime, yet faces deportation under a rarely used provision of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, which allows for removal if an individual's presence is deemed to have "potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences" for the U.S. NPR.[47] Khalil's detention has been widely criticised as a violation of his First Amendment rights and an example of the U.S. government's suppression of dissenting voices.[48]

European public space is contracting along parallel lines. In Germany, authorities have increasingly restricted pro-Palestinian demonstrations, often citing concerns over public order and antisemitism. Notably, the use of Arabic chants and slogans at protests has been banned in several instances, raising concerns

39 Michael Lynk, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, A/HRC/34/70.

40 https://www.amnesty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Joint-NGO-letter-Suspension-and-review-of-funding-to-Palestinian-and-Israeli-CSOs.pdf

41 https://apidiakoniase.cdn.triggerfish.cloud/uploads/sites/2/2021/10/Designation-of-Palestinian-CSOs-as-terrorist-organisations.pdf

42 https://www.btselem.org/press_releases/20220821_human_rights_are_not_terrorism

43 https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/23/us-states-use-anti-boycott-laws-punish-responsible-businesses

44 https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/challenging-anti-boycott-legislation-in-the-us

45 https://www.theguardian.com/law/2023/feb/21/us-supreme-court-arkansas-anti-boycott-israel-law

46 https://www.jtl.columbia.edu/volume57-3/the-state-power-to-boycott-a-boycott-the-thorny-constitutionality-of-state-anti-bds-laws

47 https://www.npr.org/2025/04/10/nx-s1-5356481/mahmoud-khalil-dhs-evidence-detained-palestinian-protests-columbia-antisemitism

48 https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/03/12/mahmoud-khalil-columbia-deportation/

about the suppression of cultural expression and freedom of speech. These measures have been criticised by human rights organisations as disproportionate and discriminatory, contributing to the shrinking space for Palestinian advocacy in Europe.[49]

Inside Israel itself, civil society organisations critical of government policies, particularly those advocating for Palestinian rights, have faced increasing restrictions. Legislation such as the NGO Transparency Law requires organisations receiving more than [50] per cent of their funding from foreign governments to disclose this in all publications and communications, effectively stigmatising them. This has led to a chilling effect on Israeli NGOs, limiting their ability to operate freely and advocate for human rights.

Digital architecture replicates and amplifies these offline constraints. A December 2023 Human Rights Watch report documented 1,050 instances in which Meta platforms either removed or algorithmically suppressed Palestine-related content, concluding that the censorship was "systemic and global."[50] The Arab Centre for the Advancement of Social Media (7amleh) went further, recording more than 5,100 cases51 of takedowns, shadow bans, and disinformation in the twelve months following the October 2023 escalation in Gaza. At the same time, Amnesty Tech's forensic team and Human Rights Watch has confirmed that NSO Group's Pegasus spyware was deployed against at least six Palestinian human-rights defenders between 2020 and 2021, demonstrating how cyber-surveillance underwrites the broader campaign to neutralise advocacy.[52] The synergy is clear: algorithmic erasure reduces public scrutiny, which in turn lowers the cost (political and reputational) of intrusive state surveillance.

Administrative Lawfare and the Weaponisation of Humanitarian Access

Normative frameworks intended to combat antisemitism have likewise become instruments of silencing. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, conceived as a non-binding 'working definition' to help European monitors track hate crime, has gradually been transformed into a quasi-legal instrument that collapses legitimate criticism of Israeli state policy into antisemitic hate. Kenneth Stern, the definition's lead drafter, has warned that right-wing organisations and governments have "weaponised"the text: first in Title VI complaints against US universities[53], then in Donald Trump's 2019 executive order[54], which threatened federal funding for campuses that tolerate what the order rebranded as antisemitic "anti-Zionism." Jared Kushner celebrated the move in the New York Times, insisting the IHRA language "makes clear [that] anti-Zionism is antisemitism."[55] Faced with the prospect of costly investigations, university administrators increasingly police pro-Palestinian speech; faculty steer clear of teaching on Palestine; and student activists are chilled by the hint that advocacy for Palestinian rights could trigger legal action. In practice, the misuse of the IHRA definition has narrowed civic and academic space, hampered public debate, and stymied efforts to hold Israel and its allies accountable for human-rights violations, an outcome that ultimately undermines both free expression and the broader fight against genuine antisemitism.

Academic institutions have not been immune to these pressures. In the United States, student groups advocating for Palestinian rights have faced administrative sanctions, including suspensions and disbandment. Faculty members expressing solidarity have encountered professional repercussions, such as denial of tenure and research funding.

In the United Kingdom, measures ostensibly framed as safeguards for "free speech" have been repurposed to narrow the boundaries of acceptable debate on Palestine. The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, alongside the counter-terrorism Prevent programme, equips university administrators and security services with broad discretion to monitor or sanction events, a latitude critics say disproportionately targets Muslim students and academics and encourages pre-emptive

49 https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/03063968241253708

50 https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metas-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and

51 https://7amleh.org/post/hashtag-palestine-2023-palestinian-digital-rights-during-war-enn

52 https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2021/11/devices-of-palestinian-human-rights-defenders-hacked-with-nso-groups-pegasus-spyware-2/

53 https://www.help.senate.gov/download/05/08/2025/stern-testimonypdf

54 https://www.npr.org/2019/12/11/787176743/trump-to-sign-order-against-anti-semitism-at-colleges-worrying-free-speech-advoc and https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/additional-measures-to-combat-anti-semitism/

55 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/13/antisemitism-executive-order-trump-chilling-effect

self-censorship.[56] Domestic containment, however, is only one layer of a wider architecture: the same logic is projected outward through migration controls. Across Europe and North America, Palestinian advocates and their allies increasingly confront visa denials, secondary screenings, or outright deportations on the basis of their political speech, thereby extending campus-level silencing into literal restrictions on movement and assembly.

Financial gatekeeping adds a third, less visible, strut to this structure. Governmental and institutional donors now embed "anti-terror" or "anti-BDS" clauses into grant agreements[57], requiring recipients to renounce certain forms of advocacy or vet staff against opaque screening lists. For organisations that challenge Israeli policy especially those supporting boycott initiatives the price of non-compliance is the loss of core funding streams and, with it, the capacity to operate. Together, these three modalities - campus regulation, border control, and donor conditionality- create a mutually reinforcing environment in which the cost of pro-Palestinian advocacy is systematically escalated from reputational risk to legal peril, financial precarity, and physical immobility.

A coherent pattern thus emerges tactics first tested on campuses, at borders, and in donor agreements increasingly migrate toward the humanitarian field itself. Where speech codes and visa denials insulate foreign jurisdictions from Palestinian narratives, Israel's newest measures turn the same logic inward, making continued humanitarian presence contingent on ideological compliance. The trajectory therefore runs full circle, from the suppression of advocacy abroad to the direct regulation of life-saving operations on the ground, setting the stage for the next development in this architecture of control.

Israel's new registration regime for international NGOs, unveiled in March 2025 and due to take full effect within six months, crystallises the logic of "controlled humanitarianism" that has been creeping into Israeli policy since the 2021 terror designations. The regulations shift ultimate authority for licensing INGOs to an inter-ministerial committee led by the Ministry for Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism and empower that body to deny or revoke registration and the attendant work visas on grounds wholly unrelated to operational capacity. Among the disqualifiers are any call, within the previous seven years, by an organisation, board member, or even a former employee for a boycott of Israel; public support for legal proceedings against Israeli officials in international courts; or unspecified activities deemed to "delegitimise" the state.[58] Aid groups must also surrender extensive personal data for all Palestinian and foreign staff and their family members, information that, in a theatre where more than four hundred aid workers have been killed since October 2023, could expose employees to surveillance, detention, or worse.

Humanitarian law scholars note that Article 59 of the Fourth Geneva Convention obliges an occupying power that lacks the logistical capacity, or political will, to meet civilian needs to 'facilitate' relief by "all means at its disposal," not to condition it on ideological conformity. Yet Israeli officials explicitly frame the new scheme as an instrument to ensure that aid is delivered "in a manner aligned with Israel's national interests," a formulation that inverts the convention's logic by subordinating impartial relief to the occupier's security agenda. The International Court of Justice underscored this point in its 2024 provisional-measures order, instructing Israel to allow unimpeded humanitarian assistance to Gaza; the registration rules directly undermine that mandate by granting the state unfettered discretion to choke the pipeline at source.

In practice, the State of Israel extends the logic of 'securitisation' identified by Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde: by recasting neutral actors as latent security threats, the state legitimises extraordinary controls that would otherwise be impermissible.[59] Field evidence already bears this out. In a joint public statement, 55 humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding organisations operating in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory warned that the new registration regime is designed to "assert control over independent operations, silence advocacy grounded in

56 https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/action/research/entry/prevent-publication

57 https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/study-of-the-impact-of-donor-counterterrorism-measures-on-principled-humanitarian-action.pdf

58 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/03/15/israel-palestinians-aid-groups-registration/

59 Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998).

international law and further entrench Israeli control."[60] The rules effectively force INGOs to choose between remaining silent on violations, thereby eroding their protection mandate, or speaking out and risking deregistration or expulsion, a dilemma that civil society lawyers describe as a "compliance trap," and what Eitan Diamond terms "rule-by-administrative-revocation."[61]

The economic dimensions are equally severe. INGOs channel roughly US $1.2 billion a year in grants and in-kind aid into the oPt; losing registration would not only strand those resources but also paralyse the cash-transfer networks on which hundreds of local partners depend. As 55 agencies warned in their joint statement of 6 May 2025, the measures "go beyond routine policy…[and] risk setting a dangerous precedent" for humanitarian operations worldwide."[62] Donor governments now face a legal paradox: continuing to fund programmes that Israel blocks could violate fiduciary rules, yet withdrawing support would abrogate their own obligation, reaffirmed by the ICJ, to help ensure that aid reaches Palestinians. The likely outcome, if the rules stand, is a two-tier system in which only those organisations willing to self-censor and share sensitive data retain access, while principled actors are forced out, a textbook instance of what Neve Gordon (2014) calls 'lawfare' by administrative strangulation.

International precedents suggest that once such regimes become entrenched, they are rarely rolled back; India's 2020 amendments to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act and Russia's "foreign agent" law followed a similar trajectory, beginning with registration hurdles and ending with wholesale ejection of critical NGOs.[63] What makes the Israeli case distinctive is the overlay of occupation law: by conditioning lifesaving relief on political allegiance, the occupying power converts a legal duty into a bargaining chip, thereby weaponizing humanitarian need itself. Reversing this trend will require more than rhetorical rebukes. Donors must incorporate "safe-harbour" clauses that protect lawful advocacy, condition military and financial assistance on Israel's compliance with the ICJ order, and support emergency bridging funds for organisations that refuse to acquiesce. Absent such counter-measures, the registration regime is likely to become the global template for states seeking to silence inconvenient witnesses under the veneer of administrative reform.

The evidence assembled in this section shows a clear through-line: Israel's measures over the years including the terror designations inaugurated a system of securitised governance that now extends far beyond the six proscribed NGOs. By conflating human-rights work with terrorism, the state has normalised extraordinary legal tools, asset seizures, office closures, data demands, and visa bans that simultaneously disable Palestinian civil society and chill international solidarity. Once embedded, these techniques migrate outward recasting advocacy as a security threat, then impose administrative or technological filters that render dissent costly, if not impossible.

This cumulative contraction of civic space matters for two reasons. First, it hollows out the protective ecosystem on which Palestinians, particularly children, detainees, and displaced families depend in the absence of state redress. Second, it establishes a transferable template for authoritarian control: a model of "law-by-attrition" that any government can adapt to silence inconvenient witnesses while maintaining a façade of legality. The stakes, therefore, transcend the Israeli-Palestinian arena; they implicate the integrity of the entire post-Cold-War human-rights architecture.

Recognising the scope of this challenge is only the first step. The next, and final, section, distils hard-won insights from practitioners who have navigated this hostile terrain. It outlines concrete strategies for reclaiming civic space: from diversifying funding streams and forging cross-regional coalitions to leveraging strategic litigation and digital resilience. In short, if the current chapter charts the mechanics of repression, the forthcoming one maps the pathways of resistance.

60 https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/israels-new-ingo-registration-measures-are-grave-threat-humanitarian-operations-and-international-law-55-organisations-say-6-may-2025

61 https://www.justsecurity.org/109772/israel-humanitarian-ngo-guidelines/

62 https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/israels-new-ingo-registration-measures-are-grave-threat-humanitarian-operations-and-international-law-55-organisations-say-6-may-2025

63 ICNL & Human Rights Watch, World Report 2023: Russian Federation (Freedom of Association section)

LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCE – A BLUEPRINT FOR EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY

The previous sections traced the history of Palestinian advocacy and analysed the global backlash. Here, we distil practical lessons from experience. These lessons are not a checklist but interconnected strategies that can guide principled advocacy under repression.

Lesson 1: Navigating Institutional Gatekeeping and Repression

• Understanding institutional dynamics

Palestinian advocacy operates in a heavily securitised and risk-averse international system. What is often framed as neutrality or risk management is, in fact, a symptom of deeper structural politicisation. Institutional gatekeeping often manifests as restrictive funding conditions, editorial oversight on advocacy outputs, or refusal to publicly name perpetrators. even in the face of overwhelming evidence. These responses are not just bureaucratic caution; they are expressions of power shaped by a system that rewards silence and penalises dissent.

Many INGOs have, over time, been conditioned by their donors sometimes deliberately, sometimes unwittingly, to internalise the contours of acceptable speech and action. Donor governments often frame the conflict through a securitised, one-sided lens, and this framing trickles down into the policies of humanitarian and development agencies. For example, some European donors, including Germany and the EU, have reportedly asked partners to ensure that their sub-grantees refrain from publishing anything deemed politically contentious in the wake of October 7.[64] This creates an environment where even basic human rights advocacy is treated as a liability.

64 https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/european-governments-donors-discriminatory-funding-restrictions-to-palestinian-civil-society-risk-deepening-human-rights-crisis/

In this context, advocacy within institutions requires navigating complex hierarchies of accountability, balancing internal diplomacy with public positioning. Understanding how Global North institutions respond to political pressure is essential. Advocates must identify internal allies, build strategic relationships across departments, and embed human rights language and analysis within broader policy frameworks. Behind-the-scenes engagement with senior leaders, policy teams, and legal advisors can lay the groundwork for moments of greater clarity and principled public engagement, but only if we also interrogate the systems shaping those institutions from the outside in.

• Maintaining credibility under pressure

Advocates face intense scrutiny when challenging dominant narratives about Israel and Palestine. In these conditions, credibility is both a shield and a tool. Grounding messages in international humanitarian and human rights law helps shift the frame from 'politics' to 'obligations.' Documentation from reputable sources should be used strategically to support legal and moral arguments, but we must also recognise our own power to generate that evidence. As humanitarians, we have been direct witnesses to unconscionable acts. We do not only cite the facts; we carry them. Our testimonies, field data, and lived realities are themselves credible sources, especially when others remain silent or politically constrained. Avoiding vague euphemisms, and instead using precise language (e.g., apartheid, occupation, collective punishment) allows advocates to speak truthfully while remaining rooted in law.

• Leveraging international mechanisms

Although often limited in enforcement, international legal mechanisms still hold normative value, which should guide deterrence. Submitting evidence to UN Special Rapporteurs, treaty bodies (such as the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination), the International Court of Justice for the International Criminal Court can generate political pressure and media coverage. These platforms also serve as historical records of rights violations. Palestinian organisations have long led the way in this space. Groups such as Al-Haq, Al Mezan Center for

Human Rights, and Addameer have spent decades documenting violations, building legal case files, and strategically engaging with international mechanisms to advance monitoring, accountability, and justice. Their efforts have laid the groundwork for many of the cases now under review and continue to demonstrate the critical role of principled legal advocacy from the ground up. Working in partnership with such organisations, and building on their experience, increases the legitimacy and impact of broader international advocacy.

• Building cross-movement coalitions

Solidarity across causes amplifies advocacy.
The interconnectedness of struggles whether against racial injustice, settler colonialism, climate injustice, or militarism offers opportunities to build powerful coalitions. The success of coalitions like the Black-Palestinian transnational solidarity or the links forged with Indigenous movements in Turtle Island (North America) show the strength of intersectional organising.

Cross-sectoral coalitions also help share risk. When Palestinian voices are backed by environmentalists, feminists, healthcare workers, or trade unionists, the cost of silencing them rises. Solidarity must be mutual and principled, based on shared values, not opportunism. It also requires addressing anti-Palestinian racism within progressive spaces, including reluctance to speak out due to fear of reputational damage.

Lesson 2: Mobilising publics and reclaiming the narrative

• Harnessing digital platforms

Digital media is a battleground and a lifeline. Social platforms like Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become crucial spaces for visibility and organising. Palestinian-led digital campaigns have outpaced traditional media in reach and engagement. Hashtags like #GazaUnderAttack, #SaveSheikhJarrah, and #FreePalestine have galvanised global attention and generated political consequences.

Yet digital advocacy faces serious threats: algorithmic suppression, shadow banning, content removal, and even targeted cyber-attacks. Research by 7amleh and Access Now documents how Palestinian content is disproportionately targeted for takedown. Advocates must diversify platforms, use encryption, and build relationships with digital rights organisations. Storytelling formats (e.g., reels, threads, live broadcasts) should be designed to resist censorship and travel across platforms.

• Engaging influencers and public figures

Public figures can act as amplifiers. When artists, celebrities, or athletes speak up, they bring Palestine into mainstream discourse. Engaging such figures requires preparation: advocates must provide context, talking points, and rapid-response support when attacks arise.

Crucially, celebrity support should never replace grassroots leadership. Instead, it should follow Palestinian organisers' lead, echo their framing, and use their platforms to redirect audiences to advocacy campaigns and relief efforts.

• Balancing grassroots and policy engagement

Policy advocacy and public mobilisation are often siloed. But the most effective strategies integrate both. For example, when advocacy groups coordinate street protests with lobbying campaigns, they can create a sense of urgency that policymakers cannot ignore. Historical movements show the power of this dual-track approach. For example, in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaigns, led by transnational civil society and grassroots coalitions, were instrumental in isolating the apartheid regime and shifting public and political will globally. These efforts, alongside internal resistance, helped dismantle the system of racial segregation and contributed to the international consensus against apartheid. Research by scholars like Erica Chenoweth shows that sustained, nonviolent mobilisation is one of the most effective drivers of political change.

Advocacy messages should be adapted for different audiences: policy briefs for diplomats, emotional appeals for mass mobilisation, and sharp legal framing for media interviews. Every tool, petitions, social media, webinars, or briefings should be part of a coherent narrative strategy.

- **Enhancing media engagement and narrative framing**

Mainstream media coverage of Palestine is often filtered through colonial and securitised lenses. Journalists rely on passive language ("clashes erupted," "died in airstrikes") or present a false balance that erases power dynamics. Advocates must be proactive in challenging these frames.

Media engagement should include, building long-term relationships with sympathetic journalists, as well as offering alternative sources, visuals, and storylines but also calling out bias publicly when needed, and praising ethical coverage. As Edward Said famously argued, the power to narrate and to block other narratives are central to imperialism. Advocacy must reclaim that narrative power.

Lesson 3: Centring lived experience and building resilience

- **Centring lived experience**

Too often, Palestinian voices are either excluded or tokenised in advocacy conversations. Lived experience must be recognised not just for its emotive power but for its analytical value. Those most impacted by occupation, blockade, or exile are best placed to diagnose root causes and articulate solutions.

Organisations must shift from including Palestinians as speakers or case studies to centring them as strategists, spokespersons, and decision-makers. This also means confronting anti-Palestinian racism and double standards in hiring, media access, and donor relations.

- **Resilience in the face of repression**

Palestinian advocates routinely face harassment, surveillance, travel restrictions, and professional consequences. Despite this, they have sustained some of the most creative and impactful campaigns in the human rights space.

These examples show that even under siege, advocacy can thrive. But it requires support. INGOs and allies must ensure Palestinian civil society is resourced, protected, and given platforms to speak on its own terms.

- **The emotional and psychological toll**

Advocacy work in this space is deeply personal and often painful. The repeated cycles of violence, dehumanisation, and loss can lead to trauma, burnout, and moral injury. This is compounded by the emotional labour of having to 'prove' the value of Palestinian lives to hesitant institutions.

Creating space for grief, processing, and healing is not a luxury, it's a necessity. Organisations, activists, advocates should all normalise therapy, peer support, debriefs, and rest as essential parts of advocacy infrastructure. As Audre Lorde wrote, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation."

- **Moving beyond charity:**

Solidarity is not charity. It is shared struggle. Humanitarian organisations must rethink their role: not just as service providers, but as political actors standing with oppressed communities. Every clinic, food basket, or water truck should be seen as part of a broader refusal to normalise injustice.

- **Investing in local leadership:**

Localisation cannot be a buzzword. Palestinian organisations must be trusted, funded, and supported to lead. INGOs should take a backseat when needed, offer flexible funding, and advocate for the protection of local staff.

- **Redefining success:**

Success should not be measured only in access gained or aid delivered. It should be assessed by whether advocacy helps shift power, protect rights, and challenge the root causes of suffering. Sometimes, speaking the truth even when it costs access is itself the most principled and impactful act.

Lesson 4: Defending Space and Promoting Digital Rights

• Combating online suppression

As written in Chapter 3.2. Digital repression is one of the most urgent threats to Palestinian advocacy. Meta, YouTube, and TikTok have all been implicated in removing Palestinian content or amplifying misinformation. Algorithms flag Arabic terms, flag images of destroyed infrastructure, or penalise activist pages for "community guideline violations."

Advocates must partner with digital rights groups to document suppression, appeal removals, and push platforms for transparency. Initiatives like 7or (an Arabic digital security platform), and Access Now's #KeepItOn campaign, offer tools for circumvention and resistance.

• Promoting digital literacy and resilience

Workshops and resources on digital security, platform strategy, and content creation should be shared across advocacy networks. Young Palestinian activists have been particularly adept at using humour, memes, and personal storytelling to make their messages resonate.

Decentralised platforms (e.g., Mastodon, Telegram) can also serve as backups when mainstream tools are restricted. Maintaining multiple channels of communication helps ensure advocacy can continue even under coordinated censorship.

Lesson 5: Advancing Policy Change and Legal Accountability

• Strategic litigation and legal advocacy

While the ICC and UN mechanisms are slow, they remain crucial in documenting war crimes and human rights violations with the aim of providing justice and remedy to the victims. Strategic litigation, whether targeting arms companies, governments complicit in occupation, or officials accused of war crimes can generate media attention and legal precedent.

Cases such as South Africa's submission to the ICJ in 2024 have reignited legal momentum. Advocacy organisations must coordinate legal strategies, public communication, and political mobilisation around these cases.

• Donor engagement and conditionality

Donor governments have power. Advocacy should pressure them to condition aid to Israel on compliance with international law. Campaigns targeting military aid, arms sales, or trade agreements can be effective, especially when tied to broader calls for justice.

INGOs must also examine their own donor agreements. Anti-BDS or anti-advocacy clauses should be resisted or negotiated. Legal support should be provided for organisations facing restrictions due to their stance on Palestine.

• Strengthening and aligning with global south solidarity movements:

As explored earlier, Global South movements are now driving some of the most principled and courageous advocacy on Palestine. The task for INGOs is to translate this moment into strategy: to align with, learn from, and support these movements not just in principle, but in practice.The clearest, most principled leadership on Palestine today is emerging from countries and movements shaped by colonialism, racialised violence, and Western double standards. From South Africa's legal case at the ICJ, to grassroots mobilisations across Kenya, Brazil, Malaysia, and beyond, these actions are setting new global benchmarks for justice-driven advocacy.

INGOs should not treat these as peripheral actions, but as central to the future of rights-based work. That means partnering with Global South actors on equal footing, integrating their values of anti-colonialism and intersectionality into advocacy frameworks, and showing up in solidarity beyond statements. INGOs must shift from conveners to collaborators, listening more than leading, resourcing rather than directing. This is not just ethically right; it is strategically necessary if we are to build a more just and durable global advocacy movement.

CONCLUSION: GAZA IS REORDERING THE WORLD. WILL WE RISE TO MEET IT?

The genocide in Gaza has not just shattered buildings and bodies, it has shattered illusions. For months, the world has watched, in real time, on mainstream media and digital platforms, as hospitals were bombed, families erased, and children starved. This is not a hidden atrocity. It is a broadcast genocide, unfolding in front of a global audience. And in that visibility lies a profound reckoning, for our governments, our institutions, and our movements.

What we are witnessing is more than the destruction of a people. We are witnessing the collapse of a global system that has long cloaked complicity in the language of neutrality and double standards, buried truth beneath bureaucracy, and replaced justice with managed suffering. For decades, "neutrality" has served as a shield, allowing states, institutions, and even humanitarian actors to justify silence in the face of atrocity. It has too often meant accommodating power rather than confronting it, prioritising access over accountability, and erasing political context in the name of impartiality. From the ICRC's silence during genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda to today's bureaucratic contortions around Gaza, neutrality has been deployed not as a moral principle but as a political convenience. Gaza has shattered the illusion that one can remain neutral in the face of genocide, including deliberate starvation, mass killing, and collective punishment. It has forced the world to choose a side, not between two equal narratives, but between complicity and resistance, between silence and solidarity. In this moment, the true meaning of humanitarianism and human rights is being tested, not by abstract principles, but by whether we are willing to name the crime, confront the system, and stand unequivocally with the people fighting for their survival.

At this moment, the loudest and clearest voices are not coming from the traditional centres of power. They are rising from the Global South, from South Africa's courtroom to Brazil's favelas, from student uprisings in Jakarta to union halls in Nairobi. These movements are not just showing support; they are reshaping what solidarity means in the 21st century. They are calling for a world where international law applies to all, where colonial violence is named and dismantled, and where humanitarianism is inseparable from liberation.

For international NGOs and advocates everywhere, this is a crossroads. We can either continue business as usual or we can stand where justice demands we stand: with Palestine, with Gaza, with those whose survival has become an act of defiance. Solidarity is not a slogan. It is a strategy. It is how we protect life, how we shift power, and how we reclaim the moral foundations of our work. It means centring Palestinian voices, aligning with Global South leadership, and refusing to normalise the machinery of occupation and genocide. It means recognising that Gaza is not the edge of the world, it is its moral centre.

The question is no longer what is happening. We know. The question is what we will do now that the world has seen it. Because Gaza has changed everything. And history will not only remember the violence, but it will also remember who stood against it.

Now is the time to be brave. Now is the time for radical, unapologetic solidarity.

OPINION

THE UNIVERSAL ADJUDICATION OF ISRAELI CRIMES

The Rolling Snowball

By Dr. Munir Nuseibah

Dr. Munir Nusseibeh is a professor of international law and the director of the Human Rights Clinic and the Community Action Center at Al-Quds University, Jerusalem, Palestine. His research focuses on international human rights law, international humanitarian law, transitional justice, Jerusalem, forcible displacement and other themes. Through his work, he is also involved in pro-bono legal aid and international advocacy.

Introduction

Since October 2023, the State of Israel has escalated its attack on the Palestinian civilian population especially in the Gaza Strip, with a fully-fledged genocidal campaign.[1] Since the Second World War, the world has not witnessed such a scale of state violence against civilians. Israel has murdered and injured dozens of thousands, displaced around 90 per cent of the population of the Gaza Strip, demolished most of the existing structures, including hospitals, schools, universities, cultural centres and more. It has banned the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for the Palestine refugees (UNRWA) and attacked its facilities in the Gaza Strip. It starved the Palestinian population, and prevented access to fuel, electricity, and water.[2]

The reactions to the genocide have been shocking, especially to those who are involved in the human rights sector, but also to the general public in Palestine. However, many of Israel's allies, like the USA, the Europe Union, the UK, Germany, have prioritised their relationship with Israel over their legal and moral responsibilities they have signed in several agreements, for example the 4th Geneva Convention, the Rome Statue, … etc.

For example, the European Union's (EU) position after October 7th breached a major conclusion of the International Court of Justice in its advisory opinion on the wall in 2004, by considering that Israel was attacking Gaza in self-defence. The advisory opinion had, in 2004, clarified that an occupying power cannot invoke self-defence against the population under occupation. Furthermore, the EU supported the Israeli position that opposed a ceasefire. On October 15th, 2023, the EU issued a statement stressing what they called "Israel's right to defend itself,"[3] a claim made to support Israel's continued military action in Gaza.

Later in November, they issued another statement calling only for a "humanitarian pause" rather than a ceasefire.[4] Suddenly, the same institutions who had been advocating negotiations, non-violence, and peace turned to support war. European diplomats did not dare, during a certain period of time, even to talk about a ceasefire. They adopted the term "humanitarian pause" as an alternative, which served to allow the Israeli genocidal campaign. No one has a legitimate reason to claim that they did not know what Israel was doing. As early as 9 October 2023, Israel officially and publicly announced that it was cutting off water, food, electricity, and fuel from the Gaza Strip. The carpet-bombing that does not distinguish civilian targets from military ones was obvious. Nonetheless, most of Israel's allies continued unconditional support, disregarding their legal and moral obligations.

Amid this reality, the State of South Africa expressed its high moral standards and leadership, deciding to take the initiative to file a case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) attempting to stop the Israeli genocide in Gaza. Shortly after, the State of Nicaragua took a bold initiative. It filed a case against the State of Germany aiming to prevent it from continuing to support the State of Israel, especially militarily, at the time of genocide. Later on, the International Criminal Court took the overdue step of issuing arrest warrants against the Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and defence minister Yoav Galland, and simultaneously against Sinwar and Haniyye. Later on, the ICJ issued an advisory opinion that declared many important legal principles related to Palestine.

This article will review these initiatives, and assess their influence on the protection of human rights.

1 The ICJ issued a binding order on 26 January 2024, stating that genocide is plausible. Available at: https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240126-ord-01-00-en.pdf

2 https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/18/israel-starvation-used-weapon-war-gaza

3 https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/15/statement-agreed-by-the-27-members-of-the-european-council-on-the-situation-in-the-middle-east/

4 https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/11/12/statement-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-humanitarian-pauses-in-gaza/

First Judicial Initiative: South Africa vs. Israel Genocide Case

As mentioned above, the scope of the Israeli attack against the Gaza Strip was clearly not conventional, and it was evident since October 2023 that the Israeli government, and especially some outspoken leaders, were emboldened to express a genocidal intent and act upon it.[5] For example, the Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallent stated on October 9th 2023 that Israel was fighting "human animals" and it would prevent food, water, fuel and electricity from Gaza. Indeed, Israel implemented this genocidal policy.[6]

On 20 October 2023, legal experts and hundred Palestinian and international human rights organisations called upon the ICC prosecutor to prosecute those inciting genocide.[7] On 28 October 2023, Craig Gerard Mokhiber wrote a resignation letter from his senior position at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)[8], where he described the Israeli attack on Gaza as "a textbook case of genocide" and criticised the UN for its failure to prevent Israel from committing it.[9] On 2 November 2023, several UN independent experts issued calls for an immediate ceasefire,considering the Palestinian population in Gaza at "a grave risk of genocide."[10] On 12 December 2023, a panel discussion[11] was held at the United Nations, organised by the UN Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP). This panel discussed the international community's "responsibility to prevent genocide." Despite these calls, the United States used its veto power at the UN Security Council several times to prevent ceasefire or even "humanitarian pause" resolutions. By the end of December 2023, it managed to block two resolutions at the Security Council.[12]

Against this dim reality, it was necessary that concrete steps are taken to protect the Palestinian population from genocide, despite the UN's failure to act. South Africa decided to take a leading role and filed a case in late December 2023 against Israel in the ICJ,[13] arguing that Israel was committing genocide, and needed to be ordered to stop its genocidal acts. South Africa requested provisional measures (orders from the court to protect certain rights immediately even before the final judgement to protect them while the proceedings are ongoing) as a first immediate remedy, aimed at protecting the Palestinian population. The court indeed issued provisional measures on three different occasions.[14] In January 2024, it ordered Israel to refrain from any genocidal acts, including killing members of the Palestinian group in Gaza, causing serious bodily or mental harm, preventing incitement to genocide, and providing humanitarian assistance, as well as preserving evidence related to allegations of genocide.[15] In March 2024, upon South Africa's request, the court issued a new version of its provisional measures, ordering Israel to allow access to basic services and humanitarian aid including food, water, electricity, fuel, shelter, clothing, hygiene, and medical supplies.[16]

5 See a list of genocidal statements accumulated by Law For Palestine, a human rights organization, available at: https://law4palestine.org/law-for-palestine-releases-database-with-500-instances-of-israeli-incitement-to-genocide-continuously-updated/

6 https://law4palestine.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Database-of-Israeli-Incitement-to-Genocide-DECISION-MAKERS.pdf

7 https://www.alhaq.org/advocacy/21946.html

8 https://www.craigmokhiber.org/

9 Mr. Muhkeiber is not the alone in finding that Israel's actions amounted to genocide. Many human rights scholars, organizations and other experts reached a similar conclusion. See, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/top-genocide-scholars-unanimous-israel-committing-genocide-gaza-investigation-finds

10 https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/11/gaza-running-out-time-un-experts-warn-demanding-ceasefire-prevent-genocide

11 https://www.un.org/unispal/document/chair-summary-of-panel-discussion-on-2023-war-on-gaza-the-responsibility-to-prevent-genocide

12 https://www.un.org/unispal/document/us-vetoes-resolution-on-gaza-which-called-for-immediate-humanitarian-ceasefire-dec8-2023/

13 https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20231228-app-01-00-en.pdf

14 https://www.icj-cij.org/case/192

15 https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240126-ord-01-00-en.pdf

16 https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240328-ord-01-00-en.pdf

Furthermore, based on the intense Israeli attacks against humanitarian aid, the ICJ ordered Israel to refrain from military actions against humanitarian aid. The third and, thus far, last order of provisional measures was issued in May 2024.[17] In this order, the court specifically ordered Israel to halt its military offensive in Rafah and to open the Rafah crossing for unhindered humanitarian aid. In addition, the court added that Israel must allow UN-mandated investigators to enter Gaza.[18]

Despite the clarity provided by the court's orders, Israel has continued to ignore them all. A major reason for this is the unlimited support Israel has received from its allies, most importantly the United States, Germany, the UK, France, and others. This reality has led to another bold judicial initiative: Nicaragua vs. Germany. The case will continue to be reviewed by the ICJ for several years. Given the facts, however, it is most likely that the court will find Israel guilty of genocide, and decide that Israel must stop such acts, provide guarantees of non-repetition, and repair the damage.

Second Judicial Initiative: Nicaragua vs. Germany

In March 2024, Nicaragua filed an application before the ICJ against Germany, arguing that Germany violated its legal commitments based on the Genocide Convention, international humanitarian law, and other peremptory norms of international law through its political, financial, and military support to Israel. In that application, Nicaragua requested several provisional measures to guarantee that Germany would not be able to support Israel in continuing its genocidal campaign, but the court decided not to issue any provisional measures vis-à-vis Germany.[19]

Nonetheless, the court found that it had jurisdiction over the case and expressed explicitly that it "considers it particularly important to remind all States of their international obligations relating to the transfer of arms to the parties to an armed conflict, in order to avoid the risk that such arms might be used to violate" international law.[20] It further noted that "all these obligations are incumbent upon Germany as a State party to the said Conventions in its supply of arms to Israel."

Despite the fact that Nicaragua's case has received less coverage in media, it is important to note that from a legal and political point of view, this case is very significant—not only for Palestine, but also for the rest of the world. First, it does not only examine a state's obligations during a genocide or the risk thereof, but it also confirms that states have obligations when they observe the commission of international crimes by other states.

The case will be considered by the court over the next few years. However, it is highly likely that the court will find that the German-Israeli relationship has been in violation of German international legal responsibilities. Germany's support to Israel, as an occupying power that commits war crimes daily, will be scrutinised by the ICJ and potentially declared illegal.

This will, in turn, provide additional protection to all civilians suffering from crimes around the world. It will be a strong message to all states to review their international relations against human rights standards.

But for Palestine, if successful, the case will have an immediate effect. Germany—and potentially the European Union by extension—will have to review its relationships with Israel and make the continued normalised relations subject to human rights standards.

17 https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240524-ord-01-00-en.pdf

18 https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240524-ord-01-00-en.pdf

19 https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/193/193-20240430-ord-01-00-en.pdf

20 https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/193/193-20240430-ord-01-00-en.pdf

Third Case: The ICJ Advisory Opinion on the Legality of the Occupation

In October 2017, Professor Michael Lynk, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (2016–2022), published a report to the UN General Assembly, arguing that the Israeli occupation of the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) was unlawful in its entirety.[21] He further recommended that the General Assembly request an advisory opinion from the ICJ to determine this question. This request is based on the authority of the UN General Assembly to ask legal questions to the ICJ in the form of a request of an advisory opinion, including in situations when states refrain from referring their international disputes to the court. An advisory opinion reflects the view of the court on the facts and the law that applies to them, and provides a non-binding advise, which, nonetheless, reflects binding international law.

Indeed, in December 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution to request the ICJ to issue an advisory opinion answering two questions.[22] The first was regarding the legal consequences of Israel's violation of the right of the Palestinian People to self-determination, prolonged occupation, settlement expansion, and discriminatory measures. The second was about how these policies affect the occupation's legal status and consequences for the international community.

In a unique historic reaction, the largest number of countries and international organisations participated in the argumentation process before the judges in both written and oral forms. The court found that the continued Israeli occupation to the oPt was in violation of international law and must end as soon as possible. It further found that Israel was breaching the obligation to refrain from the crime of apartheid and racial segregation, aligning itself with the opinions of dozens of human rights organisations,[23] UN special rapporteurs,[24] and contributors to the analysis. It further demonstrated that all states are under an obligation not to recognise the illegal situation stemming from the occupation and colonisation of the oPt, not to render aid to Israel, and to take concrete measures to pressure Israel to end these violations.

This advisory opinion was followed up by the UN General assembly, which adopted a resolution in September 2024 demanding that Israel end its occupation within 12 months, and mandating the UN Secretary-General to recommend modalities for addressing Israel's apartheid.

Thus far, Israel has rejected the advisory opinion. The Israeli Minister of National Security used the usual accusation that is utilised to suppress Israel's critics: anti-Semitism. He called the ICJ an "anti-Semitic organisation."[25]

While the findings of the court have been clear, including with regards to the responsibility of third states, the international community has not yet shown any serious commitment to the orders of the court.

Fourth Case: The ICJ Advisory Opinion on Israel's Suspension of UNRWA and other UN Operations

In October 2024, the Israeli Knesset adopted two bills that outlawed, from the perspective of Israeli domestic law, the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for the Palestine

21 https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1317859?ln=en&v=pdf

22 https://www.icj-cij.org/case/186

23 See, for example, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2022/02/israels-system-of-apartheid/ , see also, https://www.alhaq.org/advocacy/20931.html, see also, https://www.btselem.org/topic/apartheid, see also, https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution

24 See, for example, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/israels-55-year-occupation-palestinian-territory-apartheid-un-human-rights, see also, http://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/A.77.356_210922.pdf

25 https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/netanyahu-says-icj-s-opinion-on-israeli-occupation-of-palestinian-territories-is-absurd-/3280243

Refugees (UNRWA) in occupied Jerusalem; and revoking Israel's agreement with the UNRWA. Of course, UNRWA is the major humanitarian aid provider in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip (in addition to providing services in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria). During the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the continued presence and services of UNRWA are vital for most of the Palestinian population there. In addition to that, the services UNRWA provides in Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank are essential.

As a result, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution in December 2024 requesting the court to issue an advisory opinion on the legality of Israel's ban of UNRWA as the main provider of humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people. The hearings took place in April and May 2025. It is expected that by late 2025 the court will issue its advisory opinion. It is also likely that the court will decide that this ban is unlawful and that Israel must rescind these laws. It is also expected that the court will address international obligations in light of the ongoing ban.

Fifth Court Action: The International Criminal Court Arrest Warrants Since 2009, Palestine has attempted to seek the intervention of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in ending the impunity for the crimes that are continuously committed in occupied Gaza Strip, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

Eventually, Palestine officially joined the ICC and gave it jurisdiction over the territory of the state of Palestine that begins in June 2014. But despite this jurisdiction, the ICC has been extremely slow in advancing with the investigations and issuing any arrest warrants in the situation in Palestine.

This was the reality, even though the preliminary investigation showed that war crimes and crimes against humanity were being committed in Palestine.

As the genocidal campaign progressed in Gaza, voices calling the prosecutor of the ICC to act against Israeli impunity became louder. Similarly, the silence of the ICC despite its confirmed jurisdiction over the state of Palestine was severely criticised. Eventually, the court issued arrest warrants against the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his defence minister Yoav Gallant on a number of counts, as well as against Yahya Sinwar, Muhammad Deif and Ismail Haniyye, (the three men were assassinated by Israel during the war).

The accusations against the Israeli suspects included war crimes such as starvation as a method of warfare, and intentional attacks on civilians, and crimes against humanity including murder, persecution, and other inhumane acts.

Currently, both politicians are suspects in the court, and all member states to the Rome Statute have an obligation to arrest them. Nonetheless, Netanyahu has visited Hungary, a member state to the Rome Statute, answering an invitation apparently designed to breach the arrest warrant. Hungary did not arrest him.

Despite that, many states have expressed that they will enforce the arrest warrants.

The Gap of Enforcement

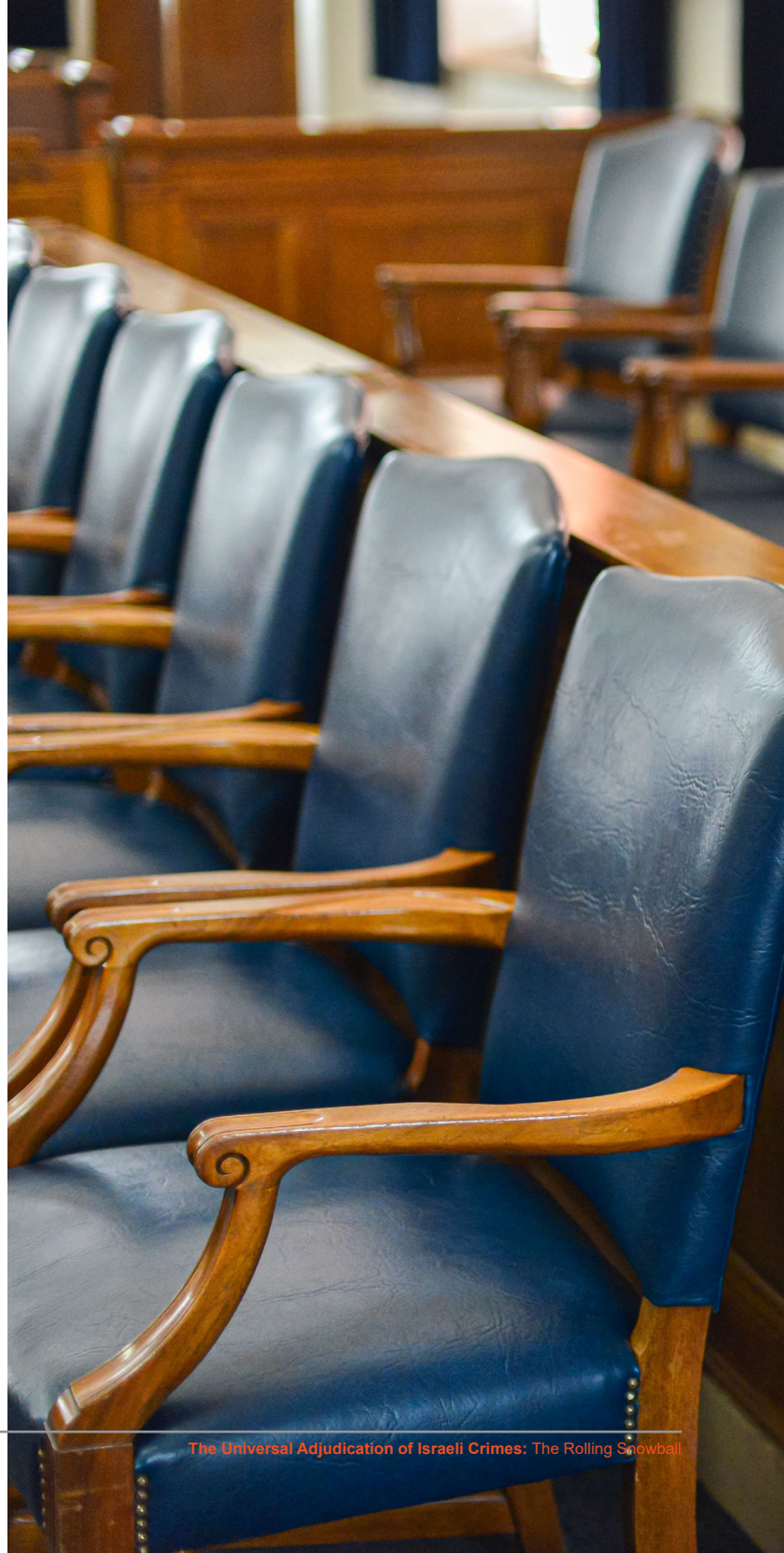
As shown by all these cases, Israel has continued to ignore international law. What is worse, is that all of these legal initiatives have not yet resulted in serious policy change within the international community. Israel still enjoys prosperous relations with many of its allies, including in arms trade.

However, there are some clear and strong voices that have attempted to change this reality. A significant one was the formation of the Hague Group (a working group of eight states from Latin America, Africa, and Asia) who decided that they would work to support the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, and to prevent the provision or transfer or arms to Israel, and to prevent the docking of vessels at their ports if they are carrying military supply to Israel.

This group is taking a leading role in enforcing certain aspects of international law, and they are certainly influenced by the judicial activity to protect the Palestinian people from genocide and other crimes. The group held an emergency meeting in July 2025, where they were joined by more states, and where they pledged to enforce an arms embargo on Israel, and to ensure accountability for serious crimes.[26]

Even the European Union, a close ally to Israel, has finally decided to review its relationship with Israel based on Israel's human rights performance.[27] The European Union has an "association agreement" with Israel, which gives Israel preferential treatment with the EU in trade, culture, and other fields. There have been calls within the EU to revise these agreements in light of Israel's terrible human rights record. Nonetheless, the EU failed to suspend the association agreement with Israel until this article was written.[28]

It is true that Israel is able to continue ignoring international law, but slowly and progressively—and with the leadership of a number of countries like South Africa, Nicaragua, Spain (in the EU), and others—international law is again beginning to regain relevance in the conversation.



26 https://thehaguegroup.org/meetings-bogota-en/

27 https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/israel-in-breach-of-eu-association-agreement-says-european-commissioner-for-mediterranean/3645325

28 https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/07/eu-israel-refusal-to-suspend-the-eu-israel-association-agreement-is-a-cruel-and-unlawful-betrayal/

Water of Hope

We sit on the edge of a massive tear,
suffocated from it.
It neither returns to where it came from,
nor does it trigger a flood…

But I…
Snatch my picture from the wall of missing people ,and rip it apart.
I mend a house in my heart ,struck by a shell of despair…
I search for a daughter not my own to raise,
for the water that moulded us is that of hope…

My mother ,under the rubble of memories,
emerged like angels of light.
My father ,martyred while watching the news,
returned from a long battle with time.
As if they were newly in love;
They birthed a new child,
whose name is' Awda [Return].

My siblings have many names,
I remember them one by one…
Eighteen thousand in total,
I memorized them by heart.
I saw them soaring above our paths,
offering shade to the shadeless…

A certain time had to pass,
for us to return alive from our own debris,
to sow the land with hope and pride.

Mai Kaloti is a Jerusalem-born writer and poet whose work explores identity, memory, and Palestinian social history. Trained in journalism, and modern media, she began her career at the Al-Quds newspaper and later worked with leading cultural institutions on projects examining language, representation, and social change. She co-authored Hamlet la Tashrab al-Summ do not drink the poison, Hamlet! in 2011, and her writings appear in This Week in Palestine, Brownbook, and Granta. In 2024, she co-created Byoot houses, a critically acclaimed theatrical work blending literature and performance.