

The Siege of Gaza: Spatial Violence, Humanitarian Strategies, and the Biopolitics of Punishment

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The 2014 Gaza War, in which more than 2,100 Gazans and 71 Israelis were killed, is the most recent and most destructive of a series of wars and military escalations in Gaza over the past decade. These wars — euphemistically labeled “operations” by Israel — have marked a new era of intensified killing and amplified levels of devastation in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The unprecedented increase in loss of life occurred against the backdrop of a major shift in the structure of the Israeli occupation: the Israeli withdrawal from and subsequent closure of Gaza. Since Israel’s unilateral “disengagement” from the Gaza Strip in the fall of 2005, it has become more difficult to characterize the status of Gaza in terms of an occupation. The intermittent withdrawal and redeployment of Israeli troops from Gaza has created a new strategic situation; one that is no longer exactly an occupation in the sense of a mode of rule that operates through the direct administration of a territory and its population. Israel does not administer Gaza in any conventional way. Instead, Gaza is controlled to a large extent through a blockade that prohibits, obstructs, and limits who and what can enter and leave the Strip. The blockade of Gaza has effectively cut it off from supply lines, infrastructure grids, trade routes, cultural networks, and so on. Gaza has, according to the UN, become a “sealed off, imprisoned and occupied territory.”¹

If 2005 saw the end of the Israeli colonization and settlement of Gaza, it also marked the emergence of a new matrix of rule, one that operates through comprehensive closure, punctured by periodic military escalations and the generalized use of extrajudicial assassinations. The coincidence between a series of increasingly lethal military operations and this new form of spatial control could conceivably be purely accidental. However, an analysis of the rationality and spatial logic of the disengagement-turned-blockade suggests otherwise. As Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir write, “abandonment has been an official Israeli policy in Gaza.”² Israel has abdicated governance, administration, and regulation in Gaza as well as any responsibility for the lives and welfare of the occupied population. Yet abandonment has not signified an end to Israeli dominion but rather the emergence of a novel mode of rule. Blending new and familiar technologies of violence and spatial control, the combination of disengagement with closure and periodic shelling has

generated a form of control that the existing vocabulary of political theory is poorly equipped to address.

The violence in Gaza, Ophir notes, is, strictly speaking, no longer that of a sovereign order defined in its relation to the law:

In Gaza, no sovereignty is infringed and no sovereignty is enforced; the withdrawal of state apparatuses has enabled the state to exercise bare force on lives that became bare long ago, without however being engaged in war.³

Put differently, in Gaza, state violence is no longer mediated by law, even a law as tainted as that of an occupation regime. Yet it would be wrong to conclude that the violence deployed against Gazans is unmediated. The idioms of “bare force” and “bare life” may lead us astray here, unless we understand “bare” as the historically specific effect of material conditions. The susceptibility of Gazan life to intensified lethal violence is produced not by the suspension or absence of Israeli law or by the withdrawal of state apparatuses but by the simultaneous imposition of a new kind of spatial violence encapsulated by the metaphor of the siege.

Over the past decade, the term “siege” has been employed by Palestinian and Arab media, human rights organizations, international solidarity groups, critics of the Israeli blockade,⁴ and occasionally, by the UN⁵ as well as by Israeli and international media. Yet, curiously, the term has for the most part been understood in the polemic register, as a rhetorical strategy of framing and representing the current phase of the occupation of Gaza. There seems to have been little attempt to take seriously the claims implicit in this designation. Yet if the term “siege” is to serve as more than just polemic, it is important to think through the ways in which the closure and blockade of Gaza constitute a political technology that incorporates some key mechanisms of conventional military sieges while also enhancing and refining these mechanisms for a biopolitical age.

By *political technology* I mean, following Michel Foucault, a diffuse set of military, diplomatic, and administrative techniques as well as knowledge practices that, even though they are not typically planned and articulated as a systematic and cohesive ensemble, nonetheless generate a certain rationality and coherence.⁶ Israel’s “disengagement” from Gaza and the subsequent sealing of Gaza’s borders are

customarily regarded as separate actions, motivated by distinct, perhaps even opposite rationales. The disengagement constitutes a military withdrawal, an easing of the occupation and its restrictions and controls whereas the blockade constitutes a renewed incursion. I propose to analyze these two gestures — withdrawal and investment — as two movements of a single military-political technology.

To specify the mechanisms or rationalities of a political technology is not the same as to offer a comparative or comprehensive account of Gaza or of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.⁷ I do not present a sociological or ethnographic account of life under the blockade, nor do I make claims about the plans, intentions, or justifications of political or military decision-makers. In putting forward an anatomy of a political technology, I attempt to identify the mechanisms and rationality of the siege — its coherence and logic — on the levels of spatial practice, symbolic politics, and biopolitics. To look for effects of coherence at the level of practice presupposes neither that these effects were fully anticipated nor that they are immune to challenge and contestation. Yet it brackets these questions, as well as the concerns, experiences, and responses of those directly affected by the current situation in Gaza, in the interest of a conceptual account of these conditions.⁸

To call the Gaza blockade a “siege” is to take distance from the terminology of “sanctions,” which is the category political scientists conventionally employ to discuss embargoes and blockades.⁹ Unlike sanctions or embargoes, which are legal restrictions on trade, sieges are military technologies.¹⁰ And they are military technologies, frequently associated with pre-modern warfare, that primarily target civilians. To call something a siege, then, is to emphasize its asymmetric quality, the fact that it is directed not against combatants but against civilians.

The figure of the siege indexes a particular *spatial* formation of violence. To portray a population or a territory as under siege is to suggest that it is forcibly isolated, that its supplies are cut off, and that it is the object of a strategic deprivation that operates through mechanisms such as confinement, enclosure, and obstruction. Sieges are what geographers call spatial or territorial strategies, that is, mechanisms to control people and populations through the reordering of physical space.¹¹ They bring about a circumscription, shrinkage, and transformation of space as well as new cartographies of power and territory. They are modes of warfare that rearrange and appropriate space; they measure, regulate, mark, organize, and transform it.¹²

Conceptualizing the restrictions imposed on Gaza as a siege allows us to ask a series of questions concerning the modalities of closure and confinement. How does spatial enclosure create a strategic envelope for the

development and transformation of technologies of occupation? What is the nature of the territorial entity that such a strategy of control produces? What are the modes of subjectification that a siege deploys? What are the biopolitical, humanitarian, and demographic premises on which the various instruments and mechanisms of material and symbolic deprivation rely? How does siege-fare alter the signification of territory, that is, how does it change the modes in which state power is embodied and spatialized?

In 2005 Israel removed its colonies and military bases from the Gaza Strip, announcing a withdrawal and redeployment of its troops. In the following year, Israel closed the Erez Crossing to Gazan laborers. In June 2006, following the capture of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, Israel shut down the Karni terminal, Gaza’s principal passage for goods as well as the Rafah Crossing that connects Gaza to Egypt. The closure was formalized at a meeting of the Israeli Security Cabinet in September 2007 at which Gaza was declared a “hostile territory.” While the precise legal implications of that declaration remained murky, Israel stopped the importation of electricity, fuel, and other supplies into Gaza and subsequently sealed the border completely, permitting only select imports deemed to be “humanitarian” into the Strip.

The closure has severely restricted the ability of Palestinians to enter or leave the Gaza Strip; the complete ban on exports and acute curtailments of imports led to a complete or partial shutdown of ninety-seven percent of Gaza’s factories and to a plunge in agricultural production. The demolition of infrastructure and the replacement of the formal private business sector with a growing informal sector have turned Gaza from a productive into a consumptive economy that relies almost entirely on imports, public sector employment, and aid.¹³ Between 1967 and the mid-1990s, Israel had pursued a policy of integrating Gaza’s economy into Israel’s, making Gaza entirely dependent on Israeli markets and as a result highly vulnerable to a policy of economic closure.¹⁴ Starting in the mid-2000s, Gaza saw massive increases in unemployment and poverty rates; nearly sixty percent of the population suffers from food insecurity, and in 2013 three-quarters of households received humanitarian aid.¹⁵ By 2009 Gaza’s GDP had fallen by a third compared to 2005 levels. The volume of imports into Gaza, measured by truckloads entering the Karni checkpoint, decreased by eighty to ninety percent. Thousands of Palestinian workers and traders who had previously crossed from Gaza into Israel on a daily basis were banned from entering Israel. Shortages of power and fuel have crippled critical infrastructure, including emergency medical services,

garbage collection, and sewage and water treatment. Even though import and export restrictions have been intermittently relaxed, to date Gaza's economy has not recovered from the closure, remaining fragile and heavily dependent on aid-financed consumption.¹⁶ Following mounting international pressure in the wake of the Gaza Freedom Flotilla and the deadly Israeli raid of the *Mavi Marmara* in June 2010, Israel and Egypt temporarily eased the blockade by opening the Rafah Crossing and alleviating the trade embargo for select goods. Yet, following the military coup in 2013, Egypt has tightened control over the Gaza border.

Gazans responded to Israel's closure with the construction of a network of tunnels to smuggle restricted or prohibited goods. From furtive operations going back to the 1980s, the tunnels became a major commercial industry regulated by the Hamas government and operating with the tacit acquiescence of both Israel and Egypt.¹⁷ According to 2012 estimates, there were over 1,000 tunnels connecting Gaza to Egypt, many operating in plain view of control towers. Hundreds of these underground passages have been destroyed over the past two years, since the new Egyptian regime changed its policy toward Hamas. At its height, more than ten thousand Palestinians were believed to work in the tunnel industry, which at times supplied over thirty percent of goods that reached Gaza, including thousands of tons of food, fuel, household provisions, most construction materials, medicine, livestock, and even animals for the Gaza Zoo.¹⁸

What Is a Siege?

A siege is a military concept. It refers to a type of warfare that imposes, from the perimeter of a territorial space, systematic deprivation, territorial restraint, and isolation on a population. Sieges are a form of low-intensity warfare. Unlike open battles, which aim at a climactic clash or collision of combat forces, sieges are characterized by protracted and recursive warfare based on persistent pressure. That pressure manifests itself in geographic forms, in reconfigurations of space. Sieges produce particular forms of coercive space. They weaponize space not only by populating it with military equipment but by compressing and constricting it. At a minimum, a siege encompasses two basic techniques of isolation: physical closure and economic blockade. These techniques may be supplemented by further mechanisms that generate the structure and configuration of the coercive space. Physical closure imposes restrictions on the movement of people across a specific line, while the economic blockade confines the flow of goods, services, and capital across that same line. The siege space, in other words, is defined by a variety of mechanisms that monitor, regulate, and

obstruct such flows. Consolidated around a perimeter, these mechanisms take the material form of physical and electronic borders, fences, and barriers, actual and virtual architectures of control and surveillance, and restricted military zones. And of course, they give rise to various forms and techniques of evasion, circumvention, and resistance, including the construction of tunnels for provisioning the besieged space.

Spatial compartmentalization is a well-established technology of social control, particularly in the colonial context.¹⁹ Sieges produce a particular form of compartmentalization around a fortified perimeter. The perimeter is the central spatial axis of a siege and key to its coercive formation. Power presents itself not so much in the capacity to kill, injure, arrest, and detain individuals or destroy their property (although it does so aplenty) but in the ability to interrupt the "space of flows" of people, transportation, goods, services, capital, electricity, and sewage.²⁰ A siege generates coercion by compressing and condensing the circulations and movements that constitute social life and by a general suspension of mobility around the perimeter. In a siege, power appears as the capacity to interrupt and suspend, as the ability to block and confine and to put everyday life on hold.²¹

Sieges thus deploy indirect and spatial forms of violence. Siege practices are characterized by violence that is mediated through various modes of confinement, closure, sequestration, and obstruction. Sieges mobilize centripetal forces; they congeal limits and borders into highly regulated and militarized spaces. Through their architecture of walls and fortifications, sieges create boundaries, limits, partitions, and security zones that produce coercive space by circumscription. Sieges target infrastructure: they are a kind of infrastructural war, aiming at the conditions of reproduction of biological and social life. As a result, sieges are marked by a slow and protracted temporality; the coercion does not condense in a single, temporally compacted event but is dispersed and drawn out, reaching its effect only cumulatively. Sieges, in other words, require patience, a kind of perseverance quite different from post-Napoleonic or Clausewitzian warfare.²² As a corollary (and in contrast to a battle or a sustained bombing campaign) sieges do not lead to sudden and dramatic spikes in casualty rates; the physical harm and damage inflicted by a siege increases gradually and continuously.

Sieges articulate their normative justification in terms of a discourse of punishment drawn partially from the history of how European siege warfare was regulated by the laws of war in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period. Medieval European sieges were fought under special rules. Each step of the siege process followed a more or less precise protocol: from the summons to surrender issued by a besieging commander to the declaration of siege, typically by the firing of

the besiegers' cannons, to the different ways in which a fortress was taken. Medieval law distinguished between a town that surrendered and thus was taken by treaty, and a town that was taken by storm. Whereas surrender by treaty imposed specific conditions on the besiegers, seizure by storm implied a forfeit of all lives and property to the besiegers. The inhabitants' goods and lives were not forfeited because they had lost the siege but because of the contumacious disregard of a prince's summons to surrender.²³ As a consequence, pillage was not an act of war but an act of justice. From a medieval perspective, there was hence quite a difference between a field battle on the one hand, where the two sides recognized each other as *prima facie* equal, and victory was taken to be a result of divine judgment, and a siege on the other hand, which involved the refusal of a summons by a prince (and thus an insult to his majesty). Sieges do not correspond to the Schmittian vision of rationalized and humanized, non-discriminatory war, according to which — as stipulated by the *jus publicum Europaeum* — opponents mutually recognize each other as *justi hostes*.²⁴

In the history of European legal and political theory, sieges have given rise to a series of concepts associated with emergency powers, martial law, and the suspension of legal order. For example, the concept of the *état de siège* in French constitutional doctrine denotes a state of exception that allows the temporary expansion and transfer of executive powers from civilian to military authorities as well as the establishment of military jurisdiction. The *état de siège fictif* refers to the executive power to act as if a city were under siege.²⁵ A similar fiction is at work in the notion of “siege mentality,” a metaphor that designates a (frequently collective) neurotic and sometimes paranoid sense of isolation, vulnerability, and defensiveness.²⁶

Describing Gaza as “under siege” may require some further explanation. Hermetic closure is not a new strategy, and it is not a new experience for Gazans. Nor is tunneling: historians note that during Alexander the Great's siege of Gaza in 332 BC, when Gaza was part of the Persian Empire, tunneling was a key strategy of the defiant city.²⁷ But the way that closure has been deployed and managed over the past decade has few precedents in recent history.²⁸ Rather than narrowly targeting the Hamas government or Islamic Jihad, the militant organization responsible for most of the rocket fire, the modes of isolation have targeted the life-world of the entire Palestinian society in Gaza. Because of Israel's unique ability to quarantine Gaza, the blockade is, in the words of the UN, “possibly the most rigorous form of international sanctions imposed in modern times.”²⁹

Here it may be objected that there are significant differences between conventional sieges and the matrix of control of Gaza. First, in conventional siege warfare, the principal objective is to penetrate the protective

barriers around a city or fortification and to enter its usually unprotected inner space. Put differently, the objective of a conventional siege is *territorial conquest*. That is not the case in Gaza. On the contrary, since its unilateral disengagement, Israel has been determined to avoid a territorial re-conquest of Gaza. Second, in traditional sieges, physical barriers typically function as defensive weapons, whereas in the context of the Gaza blockade, physical and virtual barriers are offensive instruments. Third, whereas conventional sieges deploy starvation as a technology of war, nutritional warfare is much more complicated in the case of Gaza. Israel places humanitarian limits on its use of nutritional warfare (more about that below). More generally, unlike traditional sieges, which in the history of warfare have typically been among the most gruesome, costly, and injurious forms of warfare³⁰, the siege of Gaza is a coercive technology that is widely seen as a less violent alternative to military intervention.

Yet these differences do not resolve the question of whether the term siege is an appropriate label for the mode of rule Israel has exercised over Gaza. Sieges are not the timeless tactics that they are sometimes imagined to be. Historically, siege practices and rationalities have changed considerably as a result of military, technological, political, and economic transformations. From the spread of gunpowder and heavy artillery to the emergence of territorial states and the formation of national armies, the weapons, equipment, and tactics of besiegers and besieged alike have been radically transformed over the course of the past five centuries.³¹

Thus, territorial conquest, once considered the hallmark of military objectives, has lost much of its relevance in 21st century conflicts. Physical barriers no longer protect but operate either as offensive instruments or as theatrical displays to perform sovereignty.³² And “humanitarian reason” has become an important factor in the strategic, tactical, and operational theaters of war.³³ Rather than starkly distinguishing the case of Gaza from historical sieges, the three factors listed above — the role of territorial conquest, of physical barriers, and of humanitarian limits — may outline the conditions under which the siege has been revived as a new kind of military-political practice: a *humanitarian siege* laid not for territorial gain but as a mode of control, deprivation, and punishment.

The differences between Gaza and conventional sieges provide an opportunity to conceptualize a siege in the contemporary political conjuncture. Along these lines, the siege of Gaza can be understood as a prototype for a new mode of managing a population deemed hostile: the *indefinite humanitarian siege*. It is indefinite, because there is no obvious end-point, and it is humanitarian, because it incorporates provisions against starvation and malnutrition. This siege is

defined not in terms of territorial objectives, but in terms of the control that is exercised through the modulation of force applied on the perimeter. I refer to Gaza as a prototype because, notwithstanding Gaza's role as a laboratory, this aspect of contemporary siege-fare is not necessarily restricted to it.³⁴ To the extent that a humanitarian siege is indirect and mediated and that its point of application is not the bodies of the besieged but rather the conditions in which these bodies are to live and reproduce themselves, it represents a quintessentially modern and biopolitical form of power and coercion.

Spatial Strategies

To conceptualize the siege of Gaza as a political technology raises the question of the productive role of the various tactics of closure, embargo, and quarantine. How are these tactics coordinated into a rationality of power? What are the patterns of transformation and the political effects that these siege tactics generate? And what is the nature of the political entity that such a technology produces?

Historical geographers and scholars of empire have noted the close interconnection between European imperial policy, the idea of abstract space, and cartographic practice.³⁵ The rationalization of territorial space as universal, divisible, and homogeneous has typically been understood as an important mechanism of the European colonial expansion. The siege of Gaza provides a counter-example to this narrative. It demonstrates that *territorial de-rationalization* may be just as effective a technique of imperial control. Rather than conquering and incorporating Gaza territorially, the siege has had the opposite effect. It has constituted Gaza as a disordered hybrid space: a non-sovereign quasi-state over which Israel maintains military control; a territory that is under recurring military assault; and yet a space that has been detached from the spatial and political imaginary of the Israeli state.³⁶

From a frontier for conquest and settlement in the 1970s and 1980s, the image of Gaza has been transformed in Israeli political discourse into a massive pen for the containment and management of a population portrayed as dangerous. Gaza remains a porous space for the Israeli military but it is no longer a space of settlement and colonization. Taking into account this shift in the representation of Gaza, the siege can be understood as one of the techniques in the new transnational geographic imaginaries that envision urban spaces as sites of danger and sources of threats.³⁷

By targeting the everyday life of Gazans, the siege aims at transforming the relations residents of Gaza have to the territory, what geographers sometimes call the mode of mediation between the concrete and the abstract territory, that is, between spatial morphology and

social organization.³⁸ By petrifying the territorial borders and turning them into rigid barriers, the siege has, from the margins of the territory, fundamentally altered Gazans' ability to provide for themselves and support themselves. The subsistence crisis has led to the high levels of household debts, unemployment and poverty, and to high and increasing rates of domestic violence.³⁹ The dearth of formal employment opportunities has introduced new social stratifications and has had a profound effect on the normative gender order. The increase of traditionally feminized reproductive labor has led to increasing burdens of care-work for women.⁴⁰ These shifts have been accompanied by pervasive renaturalizations of gender and family relations, as if consolidations of traditional conceptions of kinship and femininity and of disciplinary modes of gendered embodiment could compensate for the proliferation of precariousness and the production of unstable and hazardous conditions of social life.⁴¹

Even as this prolonged exposure to direct and indirect violence has generated new stratifications, the spatial strategy of the siege introduced the naïve geographical fiction of Gaza as a homogeneous space. Whereas prior to the Israeli "disengagement," the Gaza Strip was striated by settlements, bypass roads, control points, fences, and other military installations, the removal of the permanent military and settlement constructions has ostensibly transformed Gaza's morphology. And indeed, compared to the fractured physical and social geography of the West Bank, Gaza presents a different cartographic picture; one that is largely a product of the spatial dynamics of the siege and of the shifting of Israel's war machinery from the ground to the air and the sea. Yet this seemingly innocuous representation of Gaza as a homogeneous space distorts the fundamental precariousness. The cartographic gaze obscures the social production of space as segmented into zones of insecurity.

These zones of insecurity are obfuscated by the transformation of Gaza's boundary — the Green Line — into a seemingly permanent and impregnable border.⁴² Territorial boundaries are symbolic forms that fuse spatial direction with legal and political claims of jurisdiction, possession, and exclusion.⁴³ The symbolic effect of removing permanent military installations from Gaza was to communicate to the world that the Green Line was henceforth to be understood as a quasi-international border. If recognized as such, the transformation would symbolically validate the end of the Israeli occupation of Gaza, thereby separating the political status of Gaza from that of the West Bank. It would also change the legal framework that governs the relations between Israel and Gaza under international law: instead of an occupying power with a set of legal responsibilities, Israel could credibly claim to be an equal belligerent party in an international conflict.⁴⁴

It would be a mistake to consider the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip a stable institution, a set of fixed geographical coordinates that marks the dividing line between two political territories. The border between Israel and Gaza does not exist; or more precisely, it exists only as a fiction. This is not to say that there are no demarcation lines, but rather that the meaning and signification of the various lines traced on maps and embodied in fences and border installations are deeply contested. The Green Line is an example of what Ann Stoler has called empire's "zones of ambiguity," with their "gradated variations and degrees of sovereignty and disenfranchisement."⁴⁵ Because this ambiguity provides Israel with a legal and political cover for its military operations (self-defense against attacks from a hostile entity), it is critical for rationalizing the increasing — and unprecedented — intensity and lethality of state violence deployed against Gazans.

Israel's reorganization of its military installations, checkpoints, and security zones constitutes an attempt to graft the value of an international border onto its military architecture. These military emblems generate the appearance of an international border; they manufacture the illusion that the Green Line separates two sovereign states. Legally, the international border of a sovereign state signifies a limit on the reach of a state's legitimate activity and force. On one side of the border, a state may legitimately exercise its power and authority; on the other side, it is to cede to the sovereign authority of the neighboring state. Yet the Green Line between Gaza and Israel is nothing like an international border — it is rigid only from the Palestinian side and porous from the Israeli side. But by withdrawing its colonies and permanent military installations to the perimeter, Israel has consolidated the fiction that the Green Line marks the point where Israel's territorial claims end.

Effective resistance to this separation project has so far foiled any attempt to formalize the new status of Gaza juridically. Yet even if the siege has not succeeded in formally separating Gaza from the remainder of Israel/Palestine in legal terms, the disavowal of political responsibility has been effective on the level of political imaginaries. For international lawyers, the question of whether a particular line constitutes an international border has a binary structure (if it separates two sovereign states it is an international border; otherwise it is not), but in terms of appeals to the political imagination of international audiences, the status of a border is much more ambiguous. It is on this imaginary level that the siege has been most effective in eliciting — for Israeli and international spectators — the *fantasy of an international border*; a fantasy that does not in fact prevent Israel from maintaining

military control over Gaza. As George Bisharat noted in 2009, this new framing of the conflict in Gaza has tacitly been accepted by most international observers, including major human rights groups.⁴⁶

Humanitarian Strategies

The distinctive paradox of the siege of Gaza is that at the very same time as it makes possible the unleashing of unprecedented levels of military violence, it has carefully calibrated the privative violence deployed through nutritional warfare. From 2006 to 2010 Israel severely curbed imports of food stuff, yet claimed to restrict only goods "not vital for the survival of the civilian population." As Dov Weisglass, a senior advisor to the Israeli cabinet said in 2006, "The idea is to put the Palestinians on a diet but not to make them die of hunger."⁴⁷

The available data on truck crossings collected by international organizations and non-governmental organizations generally support the claim that starvation has not been part of the siege strategy and that the humanitarian guidelines proclaimed by Israel were indeed followed. These humanitarian limits turn the siege into a properly *biopolitical mode of warfare*. Unlike traditional sieges that placed little weight on civilian lives, in this *humanitarian siege* the lives and bodies of the besieged must be protected. The siege's zone of intervention is not the prerogative power to kill or let live; rather, it operates by impoverishing the lives and welfare of the besieged population. The siege's target is not the biological life of a population but its level of well-being, its reserves, and its prosperity. The aim, in the words of Israeli officials, is to keep Gaza's economy "on the brink of collapse."⁴⁸ While the siege does not annihilate the population, it turns welfare, nutrition, health, and security into vectors of punishment and coercion.

Ophir has called this strategy "catastrophization." According to Ophir, the situation in Gaza corresponds to a "suspended catastrophe," where the humanitarian conditions consistently approximate a downright catastrophe and where an oscillation between repressive and palliative measures keep the impending threat of disaster alive without ever quite producing irreversible conditions of famine and mass starvation.⁴⁹ The result is a flexible machinery of incentives and punishment that allows for a broad range of rewards for compliance and a similarly expansive scope of penalties for defiance. By maintaining supplies that are scarcely above a humanitarian minimum, Israel ensures that minor adjustments in the supply regime have disproportionate effects on the well-being of the Palestinian population. This penal apparatus works in the interval between a humanitarian crisis and disaster but in order to function efficiently, it must prevent catastrophic conditions such as mass starvation and disease. Put differently,

this optimization of violence incorporates a moral economy, namely a humanitarian rationality that aims to inflict suffering yet avoid its extremes.⁵⁰

Humanitarianism is therefore not a direct challenge to the siege but part of its functioning mechanism. As a consequence, the humanitarian response to the siege has to be understood as part of its internal logic. The siege has turned Gaza into the most aid-dependent region in the world and has destroyed the formal private sector economy, a process which Sara Roy has called “de-development.”⁵¹ The tunnel industry has sheltered some wealthy Gazans from the full impact, yet the high margins on smuggled food, fuel, and construction materials have made these goods unaffordable to the poor and low-income Gazans who make up the vast majority of the population. Household resources and assets were quickly depleted and traditional coping strategies rendered ineffectual by the pervasiveness of the economic crisis, making the population highly dependent on formal humanitarian assistance.⁵² Since 2007, over three-quarters of Gaza residents have received humanitarian aid. Yet humanitarian assistance, as many scholars have noted, has a number of perverse effects: first, it often contributes to a prolongation of violent conflict; second, it renders those subject to deprivation as abstract, helpless, and suffering victims; third, it tends to exploit that suffering in order to raise funds; and fourth, it de-historicizes and de-politicizes conflicts by reducing them to balance sheets of human suffering.⁵³

The emphasis on redressing human suffering bypasses questions of political responsibility by foregrounding the pragmatic and seemingly apolitical problem of how to alleviate the victims’ distress.⁵⁴ This depoliticization has both a juridical and an economic dimension. From a juridical angle, it replaces the *political* category of the refugee with the *humanitarian* category of the victim. Unlike refugees, victims have no legal status under international law and make no legal or political demands. Nor does their presence occasion any legal obligations for the Israeli state. Economically, the rise in humanitarianism has led to a significant reshuffling of foreign aid funds for Gaza, draining funds earmarked for long-term development projects as donors have shifted their assistance from development to humanitarian emergency aid. This reorganization reinforces the precariousness of Gaza’s economy by stalling development projects.⁵⁵

The anthropologist Mariella Pandolfi has described the increasing power of humanitarian apparatuses as constituting a mode of sovereignty.⁵⁶ Such sovereignty, Pandolfi writes, coexists with conventional territorial modes of sovereignty yet challenges the latter due to the non-territorial forms of power and governance that draw their legitimacy from a planetary logic of humanitarian crisis and disaster management. It is, in Peter Redfield’s

words, “a migrant mode of sovereignty, administered through Toyota Land Cruisers, satellite phones, and laptop computers.”⁵⁷ Decisions are made in accordance with the internal priorities and procedures of international organizations and non-governmental organizations, in conformity with the ostensibly innocent, disinterested, and apolitical principles of humanitarianism and moral universalism. In the interest of efficiency, local actors and institutions are systematically bypassed. Thus, whereas the ethical impetus for humanitarian intervention derives from a cosmopolitan claim to global citizenship — supported by the electronic media that establish the condition for the role of universal “moral spectator”⁵⁸ — in practice, the interventions are predicated on a suspension and deferral of local citizenship.

In the case of Gaza, the non-territorial powers of the humanitarian apparatuses coexist not only with the sovereign powers exercised by Israel but also with the limited authority of the Hamas government. As the responsibility for Palestinian lives is shifted to international humanitarian relief organizations, Palestinian administrative and representative institutions are effectively deprived of authority and disempowered. What is remarkable about this eclipse of Palestinian institutions and the dispersal of governmental functions is that it is accompanied by an Israeli discourse that conjures the phantasm of an all-powerful Hamas government with complete and effective control over and responsibility for everything that happens in the Strip.

The Humanitarian Threshold

The kinds of goods Israeli officials have considered “vital” for the survival of the Gazan population have constantly shifted, sometimes week to week and sometimes day to day. In May 2010, vinegar, chocolate, ginger, cardamom, cumin, and dried fruit were prohibited while flour, semolina, chickpeas and hummus paste were allowed. Pens and paper, notepads, toys, and razors were banned, but cleaning rags and baby wipes were permitted. For a while, Israel allowed wood for home furnishings but not wood for windows and doors, and some time later the wood for furniture was also prohibited. In 2010, the ban on toilet paper, diapers and sanitary napkins was lifted, and Israel also permitted margarine, salt, and sweetener. Around the same time, Israel discontinued the restrictions on detergents and soaps, including shampoo. But as Amira Hass reports, one merchant discovered that the shampoo he had ordered was returned because it included conditioner, an item that was not listed among the allowed goods.⁵⁹

Some investigative journalists have suggested that these seemingly erratic shifts were dictated in part by powerful interest groups, including the Israeli agricultural lobby, which saw Gaza as a convenient

surplus market for the seasonal excess production of fruits and vegetables.⁶⁰ Yet there is also an immanent rationality to the unpredictability: it continually enacts the precariousness and uncertainty to which the Palestinian population is exposed while at the same time permitting the minimum survival necessities.

Recently declassified Ministry of Defense documents reveal that in 2008, the Israeli Ministry of Health conducted surveys to calculate a “minimal subsistence basket” for Gaza, that is, a basket of consumer products just shy of producing malnutrition. In order to determine what counts as vital goods, Israeli officials devised a procedure for inventory control in Gaza.⁶¹ The purpose of the policy was to monitor and control basic food products and fuel in real time as well as to detect shortages or surpluses. Through an array of humanitarian procedures, statistical techniques, and nutritional calculations, Israel effectively established a caloric minimum as a humanitarian floor to its nutritional warfare.⁶²

The biopolitical resort to a scientific and nutritional infrastructure to define levels of minimal caloric intake is not a new development in Palestine. Since 1948 the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) has set a minimum caloric intake as a yardstick for humanitarian intervention: 1,600 calories a day per adult, which is 300 more than the UN’s Food and Agricultural Organization considers to be a minimum to avoid starvation.⁶³ Nor is the idea of reducing a population’s welfare by rationing its food supplies entirely novel. For instance, the 1944 Morgenthau plan, which was the blueprint for Allied policy in a defeated Germany, contained a program for the de-industrialization of Germany as well as severe restrictions on imports, including food, as a deliberate measure to lower German standards of living.⁶⁴

The Israeli procedure for monitoring, controlling, and allocating basic foods to Gaza was based on models that estimated daily consumption levels of each product on the basis of past data published by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. Through a close monitoring of local production, inventories, and imports, Israel ensured that supplies in Gaza remained above a humanitarian minimum but below market demand. Documents obtained under Freedom of Information Act petitions by Gisha, an Israeli human rights organization, detail the mechanisms and calculations used by Israel to determine the humanitarian minima.⁶⁵

The first model is outlined in a series of slides contained in a presentation put together by the Israeli Ministry of Defense in January 2008 titled “Food Consumption in the Gaza Strip — Red Lines.”⁶⁶ The document summarizes the efforts of the Ministry of Defense along with the Ministry of Health to devise a “minimal subsistence basket” in order to identify the threshold at which humanitarian interventions are nec-

essary so as to prevent malnutrition. The model, based on average consumption patterns in Israel, concluded that the population in the Gaza Strip needed a daily total of one hundred and six truckloads of humanitarian supplies, including ten truckloads of flour and yeast, five truckloads of rice, five truckloads of oil, three truckloads of medical equipment, and three truckloads of powdered milk and baby formula. These figures are based on a daily per capita diet of 2,279 calories, a figure that, the presentation emphasizes, is above the UNRWA standard as well as that of the UN’s World Food Programme.⁶⁷

The “Red Lines” document also indicates that at the time the Israeli Ministry of Health was working on designing a tighter minimal subsistence basket calculated on the basis of consumption patterns in Israel’s “Arab sector.” Whether such a basket was ever devised and whether it affected policy is unclear. What is known is that by April 2009, the Ministry of Defense had formulated a procedure for monitoring and assessing inventories in the Gaza strip.⁶⁸ The procedure details the inventory norms for basic foods, animal feed, and fuel, as well as the mechanisms for monitoring imports and inventories, and for calculating the shelf life of products. Among other things, the Israeli coordinators calculated that Gazans needed a daily ration of four hundred and fifty tons of flour and wheat, a hundred tons of sugar, ten tons of baby food, three hundred tons of diesel each for transportation and heating, and 2.5 tons of hypochlorite (a chemical compound used for bleach, disinfectant, and water treatment). Underlying these calculations are not only past consumption statistics but a series of assumptions about consumption patterns, norms of nutrition, transportation, and hygiene, as well as estimates of population levels, and birth and mortality rates. The models presuppose health and consumption norms of the human population and make a series of assumptions about the health and mortality of livestock. Thus, the required level of animal feed are based on the premise that seven out of ten breeding eggs will hatch, and that eighty percent of the hatched chicks will reach maturity.

These efforts to calculate nutritional minima constitute a remarkable bureaucratic undertaking to rationalize a biopolitical military-penal strategy in terms of humanitarian benchmarks.⁶⁹ They resemble high-modernist projects of social planning with their characteristic obsession with standardizing, regularizing, and normalizing abstract measures of human development.⁷⁰ Yet, unlike the biopolitical apparatuses studied by Foucault, which manage life by inserting populations into mechanisms of discipline, normalization, governance, and capital valorization, the biopolitics of the siege are governed by a repressive logic. Rather than the improvement of life, the target of the humanitarian siege is civilian suffering, which is turned into a calculated mechanism of administration.

Israel's turn to these kinds of models in order to compute thresholds of consumption can be understood as a de-marketization of Gaza; an attempt to neutralize or suspend the operation of markets as regulatory mechanisms. Unlike the import and export embargo, which cripples industrial and agricultural production, these models target not the material but the formal aspects of economic life — the market form as such. Markets remain in existence as mechanisms of distribution, but in the face of supply rigidity, they do not play the macroeconomic co-ordinating role linking demand and supply through the price mechanism. To the extent that making market decisions is considered a basic component of neoliberal citizenship and economic freedom, and that consumption patterns are increasingly represented as the aesthetic practices of the neoliberal self, this de-marketization and de-commodification of Gaza undermines the consolidation of globally dominant models of citizenship and subjectivity. In other words, what is being negated through the siege is choice — as a metonym for freedom — in the domains of consumption and production.

The supply and price distortions were accentuated by the tunnel industry, which imported a variety of goods more or less clandestinely from Egypt. While these irregular, subterranean corridors may seem to have constituted a challenge to the consolidation of Israel's siege-fare, they were themselves subsumed into the siege strategies. The tunnel industry provided employment for thousands of Gazans and imported vital consumption goods and construction materials, but the higher prices shut out a large number of Gazans from the market, and the rapid expansion of this informal sector led to significant administrative challenges.⁷¹ The Hamas government responded by developing a regulatory regime and imposed taxes on tunnel operators, which funded a sizeable portion of its budget. Yet this governmental rationalization cuts both ways: it represents the regularization of precariousness, the legal and administrative normalization of uncertain supply mechanisms, and the institutionalization of officially sanctioned profiteering. And because the operation of tunnel networks relied on the tacit assent of both Israel and Egypt, it was easily turned into a new mechanism of collective punishment. The ability to selectively shut down tunnels provides both Israel and Egypt with leverage to inflict severe damage on the Gazan economy while largely evading domestic or international criticism.

Conclusion

War is not just a clash of forces. Wars are fundamentally shaped by space and in turn transform space. These spatial effects help define the objectives and rationalities of war; they condition the military and

non-military capacities to fight and resist; and they mold the ways in which wars are understood, narrated, and signified. The analysis of the siege of Gaza offers a reconstruction of spatial violence; that is, an analysis of the mechanisms of violence and of the political form to which the siege has given rise. The siege of Gaza is a strategic envelope for an occupation without occupiers. There are two principal axes of this envelope: first, the territorial de-rationalization of Gaza — its constitution as a hybrid, quasi-sovereign state separated from Israel by an illusory international border and subject to recurrent military assault. And second, the deployment, in Gaza, of comprehensive economic sanctions on an unparalleled scale yet at the same time buffered by an equally unprecedented biopolitical humanitarian apparatus that measures, calculates, manages, and controls the provision of caloric minima to the besieged population. By transforming a blockade into a quintessentially biopolitical form of warfare, Israel has converted nutritional warfare from a universally condemned military practice into a coercive technology, a seemingly non-violent instrument of security widely – and falsely – seen as an alternative to military assault.

NOTES

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