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## Gaza and the One-State Reality

Tareq Baconi

### ABSTRACT

In contemporary conversations around Israel/Palestine, the Gaza Strip is construed as a state of exception, rendering the territory either hypervisible or entirely invisible. Through the prism of the Covid-19 pandemic and Israel's possible de jure annexation of portions of the West Bank, this piece argues that rather than being exceptional, the Gaza Strip represents the very embodiment of Israeli settler colonialism in Palestine. Its isolation and de-development constitute the endpoint of Israel's policies of land theft and Palestinian dispossession. This endpoint, referred to as Gazafication, entails the confinement of Palestinians to urban enclaves entirely surrounded by Israel or Israeli-controlled territory. The Trump plan, otherwise known as the "deal of the century," along with the Covid-19 crisis, have inadvertently exposed the reality of Gaza as an enclave of the one-state paradigm.

### KEYWORDS

Gaza; annexation; settler colonialism; Trump plan; "deal of the century"; Covid-19; one-state reality; confinement; land dispossession

DURING THE TUMULTUOUS MONTHS OF 2020, the Gaza Strip was simultaneously rendered hypervisible and entirely invisible in conversations around Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt). In the media and beyond, the coastal enclave's hypervisibility has centered on its particularly vulnerable state and the expectation that it would be overwhelmed by an outbreak of the novel coronavirus, Covid-19. This fear fueled reports warning that Gaza was on the brink of catastrophe.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, posts circulated on social media highlighting the irony that the blockade, instituted in its current form in 2007, might provide Gaza with a safety blanket, as the trickle of people and goods into and out of the territory insulated it from the unfolding pandemic. Palestinians in Gaza somberly joked that the rest of the world might now finally understand what lockdown and quarantine feel like—an innocent analogy that severely misrepresents Gaza's dire circumstances:<sup>2</sup> today, more than half of Gaza's population is below the age of eighteen, and the overwhelming majority of those in that age group have never been allowed to leave the territory's narrow confines.<sup>3</sup>

The intense focus on what might happen in Gaza has been paralleled by the near erasure of the territory in discussions of Israel's possible de jure annexation of portions of the West Bank. Following the release early in the year of the political component of U.S. president Donald Trump's "Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People," legitimizing Israel's settlement enterprise, and after the formation in July of an Israeli coalition government with an annexationist agenda, the attention of policymakers shifted to when, how, and if Israel would formalize its hold over the oPt.<sup>4</sup> Members of the international community, particularly European states, sought to deter this outcome by highlighting the countermeasures they might consider were Israel to proceed with annexation.<sup>5</sup> The Palestinian leadership in the West Bank also took preemptive steps in the vein of

deterrence by announcing the suspension of security coordination mechanisms with Israel's occupation forces.<sup>6</sup> In the rare instances when policymakers have discussed the implications for the Palestinians of Israel's de jure annexation, attention has rightly been directed at those living in the areas to be annexed, like the Jordan Valley.<sup>7</sup> Nowhere has the Gaza Strip featured in such discussions even though, to date, the Palestinians most impacted by the prospective annexation, and specifically the suspension by the Palestinian Authority (PA) of its security coordination with Israel, are those in Gaza who have lost the few channels at their disposal to secure medical permits to exit the territory.<sup>8</sup>

Whether Gaza is rendered hyper- or (in)visible in its exceptionalism, the context of its situation is misunderstood, misrepresented, or overlooked. This essay argues that rather than being unique, Gaza is but an extreme manifestation of the impact that Israel's occupation has had on the oPt in general. Gaza's lack of preparedness to manage the risks attendant to the pandemic and its exclusion from conversations around Israel's annexationist agenda provide an accurate picture of Israeli settler colonialism in Palestine and how de facto annexation manifests there. If there is any doubt as to the long-term outlook for the Indigenous population of the West Bank, one need look no further than the Gaza Strip and the ways it models Palestinians' enclosure into urban enclaves surrounded by Israel or Israeli-controlled territory. This Gazafication of the oPt must, in other words, be understood as the natural outcome of Zionism and Israeli settler colonialism in Palestine.<sup>9</sup> This paper therefore argues that rather than being marginal or exceptional, Gaza is the lynchpin for understanding the trajectory of Israel's policies in the rest of the oPt.

## The Trump Plan and Annexation

The Trump plan is the culmination of policies that the U.S. administration has been propagating since 2016 to formalize Israel's expansion throughout the oPt and to depoliticize the Palestinian national struggle. The Trump administration has endorsed Israel's acquisition of territory by force, in contravention of international law, by recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, thereby legitimating Israel's de jure annexation of West Jerusalem in 1967 and of East Jerusalem in 1980;<sup>10</sup> it has legitimized Israel's de jure annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights in 1981;<sup>11</sup> and approved Israel's illegal settlement enterprise beyond the 1967 line in the remainder of the West Bank. It has also demoted the legal and diplomatic status of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) by expelling its representatives from the United States and, using diplomatic offensives within the United Nations (UN), including the financial strangulation of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), challenged the status of Palestinian refugees.<sup>12</sup>

With these measures in place, Trump's plan paved the way for Israel to formally annex all the West Bank settlements, including an area comprising some 30 percent of the territory (this excludes East Jerusalem, which was already annexed in 1980). Any leftover land, beyond the annexed areas, would comprise the envisioned Palestinian state, a collection of 168 urban enclaves, loosely connected through state-of-the-art infrastructure and entirely subsumed by Israeli territory, with the exception of a twelve-kilometer border between Egypt and the Gaza Strip—although this would also be subject to Israeli oversight.<sup>13</sup> Trump's plan uses the language of a "realistic" two-state solution to describe this formulation while effectively demoting the role of the Palestinian state to local governance under overarching Israeli hegemony. The release of the long-awaited document failed to gain much traction, however. Members of the international community came

out against it to varying degrees, most notably for its abandonment of the principles that inform the peacemaking industry around Israel and the Palestinian territories.<sup>14</sup>

The Trump plan does indeed break with what had generally been understood to be the international consensus on this issue, but it nonetheless abides by how that consensus has manifested on the ground. In fact, the Trump plan is perhaps the most honest articulation of U.S. and Israeli policy formulation in the guise of conflict resolution and the two-state solution.<sup>15</sup> The break that the Trump plan represents is in its blunt denial of international law principles attendant to the perceived goal of a two-state solution, which were upheld, at least rhetorically, by all previous U.S. administrations. Despite the decades-long international affirmation that Israel's settlement enterprise is illegal, Israeli expansionism has progressed unfettered since 1967, with more than six hundred thousand settlers now residing on occupied Palestinian land.<sup>16</sup> In effect, if not intention, previous Israeli and U.S. governments have systematically cleared the way for this latest proposal. By his own avowal, the U.S. president's actions are merely the recognition of reality on the ground.<sup>17</sup>

Underpinning this reality are processes of land theft, Palestinian dispossession, and Jewish settlement—in other words, *de facto* annexation. Opposition to *de jure* annexation can best be understood by looking at the question of Israeli settlements, over which international opposition has limited itself to the rhetorical sphere, in statements of condemnation. Israel's response has generally been to weather the condemnation while persisting in its actions to create more “facts on the ground,” which, over time, are then accepted as the *de facto* realities that shape the contours of negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians and thereby circuitously gain a place in policy making on Israel and the Palestinian territories.<sup>18</sup> “Facts on the ground” did not begin with Israel's settlement enterprise in 1967, however, but with the colonization of Palestine. In other words, the 1947 plan of partition, and then the 1967 boundary (Green Line) as the imagined border for a two-state solution, were both rhetorical and legal devices to accommodate the fact of Zionist settlement in Palestine.

Zionist annexation of Palestinian territory has been an ongoing process in Palestine since well before the Nakba.<sup>19</sup> Zionist organizations, and later the State of Israel, systematically seized Palestinian lands for the exclusive purpose of Jewish settlement within the boundaries of what is now recognized as “Israel proper.” Following the 1967 war, this process expanded into the newly captured territories, where they continue to unfold over half a century later. The prospective *de jure* annexation that has so rattled the international community and the Palestinian leadership is thus not a turning point signaling a departure from this trajectory, but rather (hopefully) the end of the illusion that settlement in the oPt, compared to settlement within Israel, could be temporary or reversible.

That illusion is currently being sustained by the military regime that oversees the oPt, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, or COGAT, which the state ostensibly holds at arm's length. Yet this separation is a legal and bureaucratic fiction: the settlement enterprise is one of the Israeli government's largest budget items, and various decisions related to governance of those territories, from defense to construction, are made by ministerial departments, and not the military regime.<sup>20</sup> The military regime is but a facade masking the fact that annexation has already happened, *de facto*. Moreover, all Jewish settlers residing in the oPt are subject to Israeli civil law, enjoying the same privileges as their counterparts inside the Green Line. Thousands of them cross into Israel on a daily basis with no sense of having gone from territory that is universally recognized as occupied land into Israel “proper.” The process of building the infrastructure that serves six hundred thousand settlers, bringing them

into the ambit of Israeli civil law, and ensuring their safety through a vast military apparatus, is arguably a far more permanent endeavor than passing a legislative amendment in the Knesset to legalize Israel's hold over those lands.

Yet, after more than half a century of failure to effectively challenge Israel's de facto annexation and control of these same territories—in other words, the “facts on the ground”—it is the de jure annexation which has the international community riled up. This is not because de jure annexation changes anything *on the ground*, but because it removes the flimsy facade of temporariness from Israel's occupation, and lays bare the vacuous nature of the international community's support for Palestinian self-determination using the rhetoric of the two-state solution. Like earlier peace efforts, Trump's plan simply repackages the one-state reality that has existed, both inside Israel and in the oPt since the 1967 occupation. In so doing, the plan exposes the disconnect between the rhetoric around conflict resolution that has engaged much of the international community on the question of Israel and the Palestinians and the reality that has entrenched itself against the backdrop of the so-called peace process. What this means is that any further acts of de jure annexation must be understood not in the context of the end of the two-state solution, but rather as the perpetuation of the one-state reality.

## Covid-19

This one-state reality has been brought into sharp relief by the Covid-19 pandemic. The outbreak of the novel coronavirus in the oPt began in Bethlehem, in Area A that comprises 18 percent of the West Bank and is technically under Palestinian civil and security control. Shortly after the first cases were detected in early March 2020, Israel's defense minister, Naftali Bennett, placed Bethlehem under lockdown.<sup>21</sup> Whether in answer to Bennett's directive or otherwise, the Ramallah-based PA instituted curfew procedures around Bethlehem, initiating its own lockdown and movement restrictions as the virus spread throughout the West Bank.<sup>22</sup> As part of its effort to combat the virus, the PA suspended travel between West Bank Palestinian cities, as well as to and from border crossings with Jordan, urging more than 150,000 Palestinian laborers who work in Israel or on Israeli settlements to refrain from going to their places of employment.<sup>23</sup>

The PA has no ability to enforce these measures, however. The Israeli army controls all crossings between the West Bank and Jordan, as well as all movement between the Palestinian localities that constitute Area A since these are separated by Area C, which comprises 60 percent of the West Bank and is the only contiguous swath of territory there. Regardless of the PA, Israel can prevent all forms of movement between Palestinian towns and villages, including from and into Bethlehem, the original epicenter of the outbreak.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the movement of Palestinian laborers, whether they work inside Israel or in the settlements, is controlled not by the PA, but by a complex system of permits, checkpoints, and roadblocks entirely managed by Israel's occupation regime. PA control is limited to the enforcement of curfew and lockdown procedures within Palestinian enclaves scattered throughout the West Bank, all of which are entirely surrounded by Area C. As the pandemic spread in Israel and the oPt, it was the Israeli government that set the overall health policy response (movement, border crossing, medical supplies, and so on), catering first and foremost to the needs of its Israeli Jewish population. The PA was, wittingly or otherwise, demoted to the role of implementing that policy within the urban enclaves it administers.

Not only does the PA's symbolic performance of sovereignty misrepresent reality, it also has very tangible consequences, the most important of which are to absolve Israel of the cost

of the occupation, relieving it of its ultimate responsibility for the health situation of the Palestinian population in the West Bank.<sup>25</sup> Following decades of economic strangulation under military occupation, the West Bank's health sector is ill-equipped to deal with a full-scale outbreak of Covid-19. To remedy this shortfall, international nongovernmental organizations, headed by the World Health Organization (WHO), mobilized early on to donate ventilators, testing kits, and protective gear.<sup>26</sup> Israel allowed the passage of this equipment into Palestinian areas and, along with the PA, was then commended by international officials, including the UN's secretary-general and special Middle East envoy, for their excellent level of cooperation in coordinating movement, testing, and other measures to mitigate the risk of the virus.<sup>27</sup> The Covid-19 outbreak was portrayed as a challenge to which both parties could rise, setting aside their differences and highlighting their common interests.

Under international law, an occupying power has the responsibility to care for the population under its rule.<sup>28</sup> Rather than being commended for allowing the transfer of internationally sourced medical equipment into the West Bank, Israel should have been condemned for failing to account for the medical needs of the Palestinians under its control or to ensure that the necessary health equipment they needed was provided in the same manner as was done for its Jewish citizens, including settlers. In establishing its Covid-19 response, Israel simply ignored the needs of the Palestinians under its control. The Israeli government lagged behind in testing and care provisions to Palestinian citizens of Israel (PCIs) and undermined mitigation efforts among Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem. The Israeli authorities failed to provide any testing facilities—harassing, arresting, and prosecuting Palestinian health activists who mobilized to respond to the virus in the context of long-term and structural neglect of East Jerusalem's health care needs, which has rendered the population there all the more vulnerable to the novel coronavirus.<sup>29</sup>

Absolving Israel of its cost is one of the principal reasons the occupation has been so sustainable. But more importantly, depicting the relationship between Israel and the PA as one of cooperation erases the very destructive acts that constitute the occupation. In the same period that the two sides were seen as cooperating, Israel maintained its military incursions into the oPt, demolishing homes and even destroying clinics that Palestinians were setting up as Covid-19 testing centers.<sup>30</sup> Israeli authorities also failed to adhere to PA requests to manage the movement of Palestinian laborers so as to minimize the spread of the virus to Palestinian localities,<sup>31</sup> and spikes in Covid-19 cases were subsequently traced to laborers returning to the West Bank from Israeli Jewish areas that were themselves witnessing outbreaks. Cutting through the PA's symbolic performance of statehood, Covid-19 demonstrated the truth that an increasing number of Palestinians understand: the PA's obsession with a state-building agenda is not paving the way for independence, but institutionalizing the PA as Israel's policy enforcer in the oPt.<sup>32</sup>

## **Gaza Is Not Exceptional**

The Gaza Strip's brush with Covid-19 provides a prism through which to look into the relationship between Israel and the oPt; it also demonstrates how the current juncture is simply one milestone in Israel's ongoing colonization of the territories. In mid-March, before any cases of the virus had been detected, Hamas authorities instituted lockdown procedures and curfews throughout Gaza; they also established quarantine facilities for travelers entering the territory from the Rafah crossing with Egypt.<sup>33</sup> As it frequently does, Israel unilaterally shut



Erez, the main civilian crossing between Gaza and Israel, thereby preventing any exit from the Gaza Strip through Israeli territory.<sup>34</sup>

With one of the highest population densities in the world, Gaza is particularly susceptible to a Covid-19 outbreak given the conditions of extreme water scarcity, poverty, and unemployment that prevail in the territory. As with disenfranchised communities everywhere, this excessive vulnerability results from structures of racism and oppression that cast aside whole segments of the population—in the case at hand, a military occupation and blockade, which leave the inhabitants of Gaza particularly vulnerable in light of the evisceration of the territory's health care sector. The blockade, thirteen years into its current manifestation as a brutal chokehold, has accelerated the long-standing de-development of the Gaza Strip and prevented the upkeep of medical supplies and equipment.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, Israel has deliberately targeted and destroyed health care facilities, and killed medical personnel, in the course of three major assaults and frequent military incursions.<sup>36</sup> In recent years, the health sector has sagged under the weight of the need to provide acute care to the thousands of casualties (mostly young men) maimed by Israel's use of live fire to quash the Great March of Return protests.<sup>37</sup>

As with the West Bank, Israel was commended for allowing medical equipment into Gaza through the auspices of WHO, as well as UNRWA, which has long acted as the primary health care provider in the territory. Yet the supplies, which included five hundred WHO-funded testing kits and one thousand protective suits, are far from adequate to address what might have been, and could still become, a humanitarian catastrophe.<sup>38</sup> No one is under the illusion that Gaza could deal with a full-on outbreak of Covid-19, and even as they take measures within its boundaries, Hamas authorities consistently make clear that they hold Israel fully responsible.<sup>39</sup> For their part, Israeli politicians have stressed that the transfer of medical aid to Gaza should be made contingent on political concessions from Hamas.<sup>40</sup> Hamas's leaders, in turn, have threatened Israel with rocket fire—which if deployed would negate Israel's social distancing efforts, since targeted communities would have to gather in close proximity in shelters—if the Israeli government “left Gaza to die.”<sup>41</sup> Israeli commentators have also speculated about how the Israeli army might manage the public relations fallout from having to shoot at patients trying to scramble across the perimeter fence in pursuit of medical attention in Israel.<sup>42</sup>

The picture is clear. Hamas holds the Israeli authorities responsible for Gaza's catastrophic situation, and Israeli politicians exhibit no qualms about maintaining their policy of collective punishment while acquiescing to international intervention on a humanitarian basis. Without the performance of sovereignty or the facade of cooperation prevalent in the West Bank, the dynamic between occupier and occupied is distilled to its essence in the Gaza Strip. While the PA's security coordination with Israel and neoliberal economic policies may obscure the picture, it would be mistaken to think that there are structural differences between Gaza's reality and that of the West Bank.

Even the question of cooperation or coordination with Israel finds parallels in Gaza. Over the past few years, a new *modus operandi* has emerged, with Hamas controlling which forms of resistance are allowed (and at what intensity) in exchange for Israel loosening the strangulation of the blockade.<sup>43</sup> Each of the truces (*hudna* or *tahdi'a* in Arabic) that followed Israel's military incursions into Gaza since 2014 have ended with a mutual commitment whereby Hamas would restrain armed resistance and Israel would allow increased movement of people and goods into the territory. This *quid pro quo* has been especially visible recently around the Great March of Return protests: Hamas put the lid on the number of protesters at the perimeter fence and restricted the use of burning kites and incendiary devices that disrupted the lives

of Israeli communities on Gaza's periphery, sometimes causing damage;<sup>44</sup> and for its part, Israel allowed the transfer of cash from Qatar into Gaza, once again outsourcing the cost of its occupation to external players.<sup>45</sup>

In its own way, Hamas has entered into a form of indirect security coordination with Israel.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the PA, however, the authorities in Gaza do not delude themselves, fully understanding that Palestinian lives are systematically oppressed and controlled by Israel's occupation regime, and that the Palestinians' inability to address the challenges of Covid-19 or to exercise control over their health is due to nothing other than Israeli hegemony. Looking beyond the facade of state building and cooperation with Israel that prevails in the West Bank underscores the common reality shared by the two Palestinian enclaves—that Palestinians are subjects under the military rule of Israel which, alongside the international community, “manages” them as recipients of humanitarian aid and as clusters of population centers.<sup>47</sup> Israel tolerates the presence of Palestinians on the land so long as it does not have to be responsible for their needs, and only after they have been sufficiently pacified, whether through explicit security coordination and neoliberalist policies such that exist in the West Bank or through economic strangulation and military bombardment in Gaza.

### **Gaza: A Prototype for Area A**

The Gaza Strip, in other words, is anything but exceptional, and nowhere is that more apparent than in the current debate around Israel's annexation of parts of the West Bank. With the focus on which settlement blocs the Israeli government might consider formally annexing, and whether portions of the Jordan Valley might also be integrated into Israel *de jure*, the Gaza Strip has been rendered almost entirely invisible: at best, it has been regarded as geographically distinct and discursively marginal. Such a view misses the bigger picture of the prospective annexation.

Any act of *de jure* annexation in the West Bank builds on a more than century-long practice of land dispossession, territorial consolidation, and demographic isolation that forms the core of the Zionist settler-colonial enterprise in Palestine, allocating Palestinian lands to exclusive Jewish settlement.<sup>48</sup> Inside the Green Line, PCIs, who today comprise 20 percent of the population, currently own 3.5 percent of the land, having lost 40–60 percent of their property since 1948, upon the establishment of the state.<sup>49</sup> Since then, not a single Palestinian community in Israel has been able to obtain permits for growth or expansion, while more than a thousand Jewish communities have been established.<sup>50</sup> The result has been the confinement of PCIs to urban clusters that are entirely surrounded by Jewish communities.<sup>51</sup>

That is the norm, in different guises, throughout the land of historic Palestine. In East Jerusalem, processes of demographic engineering and urban landscaping have continued apace with municipal master plans to boost the Jewish presence, erode the Palestinian presence in the city, and build infrastructure, including the so-called separation wall, that redraws its landscape.<sup>52</sup> In the rest of the West Bank, more than 90 percent of the Palestinian population lives on less than 18 percent of the land, disaggregated into enclaves that the Trump administration has now graciously designated as the Palestinian state. In contrast, around two hundred thousand settlers control more than 60 percent of the territory. This kind of demographic and territorial restructuring was also manifest in Gaza where, until 2005, more than 1.8 million Palestinians lived under military rule, confined to portions of the territory, while eight thousand Jewish settlers colonized the most desirable lands in the enclave. Zionist practice



throughout Palestine has entailed policies of confinement that separate Palestinians into silos that are entirely, and maximally, surrounded by Israel or Israeli-controlled territory.

It is against this backdrop that Israel's so-called disengagement from the Gaza Strip must be seen. Ariel Sharon's 2005 plan has long been understood as a precursor to the tightening of Israel's grip over the rest of the oPt, and as a vehicle to accelerate and deepen the fragmentation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank *in order to* undermine the viability of a future Palestinian state.<sup>53</sup> While this assessment is accurate, it can be distilled further. Rather than viewing Gaza in relation to the West Bank specifically in the context of Israel's disengagement (that is, through the framing of the two-state solution), the Gaza Strip can instead be viewed through the prism of ongoing Zionist colonization that predates 1948. Today, the Gaza Strip is the outcome of processes of land consolidation and demographic isolation that began in what is now Israel and continue apace in the rest of historic Palestine.

Disengagement, in other words, was merely a way of restructuring and solidifying the one-state reality by turning Gaza into an urban enclave of two million Palestinians surrounded almost entirely by Israeli territory, with the exception of the twelve-kilometer border with Egypt. Then, as now with annexation, disengagement was perceived to be a rupture in Israel's relationship with the Palestinians when it was merely a continuation of the Zionist project in Palestine. In that sense, the Gaza Strip is nothing more than an unpacified version of any Palestinian town—whether in the Galilee or Area A of the West Bank—where in response to Covid-19, for example, each enclave was entirely sealed off and isolated from the territory around it.

At their core, the Trump plan and Israel's attendant annexation entail the Gazafication of the West Bank, whereby each Palestinian urban cluster becomes a miniature standalone Gaza. Such confinement of the Indigenous population in disparate clusters is a common feature of other settler-colonial projects. As with the Gaza Strip, the infrastructure for such isolation can be put in place and activated as needed and loosened in exchange for “good behavior.” Every time Hamas tempers its resistance, medical goods and economic aid flow into the Gaza Strip. In the West Bank, given the effectiveness of security coordination, the boundaries around each Palestinian city or locality are simply rendered invisible.

Gaza is the measure of Israel's structural engagement with Palestinians. It is not tangential to the conversation but rather the starkest manifestation of annexation—a model of demographic control that can be emulated elsewhere, in Palestine as well as globally.<sup>54</sup> Gaza's isolation was secured by seizing the surrounding territory, both during and after the 1948 war, and implanting Israeli Jewish localities, now known as Gaza's periphery communities, on its entire periphery. And Gaza's separation is also a prerequisite for the successful unfolding of a similar process in the West Bank. Thus, the prospective annexation per the Trump plan does not signal a break with the (illusory) two-state solution but the continuation of the undeniable entrenchment of the one-state reality. Said differently, the Palestinians are not fighting the end of its statehood project but the formalization of Palestinian confinement to 18 percent of the West Bank as a result of Israeli settler colonialism expanding to the final frontier.

## Reclaiming Gaza

The map of Palestinian islands floating in an Israeli territorial sea in the West Bank is now infamous, even though it presents only a partial view of the reality on the ground, one that is grounded in a two-state framing. It would be more holistic to show how Palestinians have

been entirely restricted to urban enclaves throughout historic Palestine, whether Nazareth in the Galilee, Jisr al-Zarqa on Israel's Mediterranean coast, Kafr 'Aqab in East Jerusalem, Nablus in the West Bank, or the Gaza Strip in the very south. Highlighting the similarities between these enclaves is important if one is to free oneself from a partition-based framing and see the nonpartitioned reality for what it is: from the River to the Sea, the Palestinian people's singular and holistic confrontation with Zionism.

Rendering Gaza as a standalone challenge, per the Covid-19 conversation, or marginalizing it from the West Bank, when talking about Israeli annexation, result from an impulse to highlight the particular and acute suffering of Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. Such an impulse should not be entirely dismissed. But scholarship and discourse on Gaza must stress the similarities between that coastal enclave and Palestinian enclaves elsewhere by understanding annexation in the West Bank through the lens of Gaza and by dismantling the shroud of quasistatehood under which the PA hides. To do so is not to minimize the unique challenges that Palestinians in Gaza face, but to argue their centrality to the Palestinian experience.

Understood as the starkest manifestation of settler colonialism in Palestine, where territorial annexation, demographic isolation, land dispossession, and population pacification have been taken to their natural end point, Gaza ceases to be exceptional. Rather, it can be reclaimed and provide the scaffolding for any conversation that seeks to consider prospects for decolonization using the current one-state reality as its starting point. Instead of speaking of Palestine and its decolonization, one now speaks of annexation and Area A, the blockade and Gaza, equality and the Galilee. Overcoming Gaza's exceptionalization is part and parcel of surmounting the fragmentation that has been imposed on Palestinians geographically as well as discursively. Reclaiming Gaza aptly showcases the daunting challenge that Palestinians still have to confront to undo settler colonialism in their minds as well as on their lands.

## About the Author

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