

Defying Exception: Gaza after the “Unity Uprising”

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ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades, a series of regimes invoked by Israel have gradually constructed the Gaza Strip into a site of exception to commonly recognized rules and conventions, legitimizing and perpetuating the territory's separation and confinement. The organizing principle behind Gaza's state of exception is the separation, isolation, and confinement of a surplus Palestinian population into designated spatial zones, a fact that has been either ignored, absented, or obfuscated in Western normative discourse, which follows the Israeli narrative in exceptionalizing Gaza's difference. With the recent wave of widespread popular Palestinian mobilization, however, the dominant narrative about Gaza has started to shift. The ongoing mobilization has reaffirmed the shared struggle of Palestinians across differentiated geographies of Israeli rule against a broader policy of territorial dismemberment and fragmentation.

KEYWORDS

Gaza; siege; space;
enclavization;
state of exception;
sovereignty; uprising

IN THE EARLY STAGES of the Oslo peace process, Singapore was frequently invoked as a model for the future development of the Gaza Strip into an area of autonomy that would be administered by the Palestinian Authority (PA). Although the idea was far-fetched, the repeated referencing of Singapore and other burgeoning global urban and industrial centers was not without purpose.¹ It aimed to provide an initial measure of hope to skeptical Palestinians and to legitimate, through promises of prosperity and economic success, the process of geographic separation to come. Almost three decades later, Gaza remains under a fourteen-year blockade, cut off from other Palestinian areas and caught in an unending cycle of military assault, counterattacks, and confinement. The days of envisioning Gaza as an oasis of free enterprise are long gone, but in the endless closures and measures of violence that have ravaged the territory since, the legacy of the Singapore pipe dream lives on, reconstituted into the separation, enclavization, and state of exception that mark Gaza today.

Gaza's exceptional status is the actively planned outcome of a series of invoked regimes particular to the territory but rooted within a framework of Israeli colonial and occupation practices. Beginning with the open-ended autonomous arrangement created by the 1993 Oslo Accords, based on perceived economic imperatives, and culminating with the ongoing blockade, constructing Gaza as a site of exception can be seen as constitutive of a broader Israeli strategy of territorial dismemberment and separation. For decades, the organizing principle of Gaza's separation and containment has remained unchallenged in any meaningful way due to a tacit acceptance of the Israeli narrative casting Gaza as exceptional, unfamiliar, and hostile. With the recent wave of mass popular mobilization taking place around Jerusalem, however, the singular logic behind Israel's differentiated systems of rule over Palestinians has been brought into sharp focus. The movement, dubbed the “Unity Uprising” or “Unity Intifada,”

offered new hope that future engagement with, and contestation of, Gaza's situation will occur in the context of collective Palestinian action.

Constituting Gaza as Exceptional

The rendering of Gaza as a site of exception to recognized rules and conventions is not an aberration but an expression of contemporary international norms and bodies of knowledge. Gaza's blockade is a revealing example of proliferating exclusive or exceptional spatial forms and models, enclosed areas that operate according to special laws and that have the power to regulate the entry of different population groups. From special economic regimes offering privileged access to land and resources, to present-day refugee camps and encampments that exist outside the common juridical order and mode of governance,² the state of exception has come to represent the "dominant paradigm of government" in contemporary politics.³ Conceptualized in relation to national systems; legitimized by, as well as legitimizing, racial and class difference; and creating differential distributions of citizenship in terms of access to life, liberty, and justice,⁴ exceptional legal regimes are a function, as authors and theorists have noted, of the sovereign power and modern state. Across political contexts, they help governments maintain and reproduce relations of hierarchy, discipline, control, and exclusivity.⁵

From this angle, how are we to understand Israel's use of force over a territory in which it is neither present nor sovereign? Israel's capacity to exercise executive discretion in Gaza required constructing the territory as a spatial zone lying outside both its own juridico-political system and recognized areas of Palestinian self-rule. This process began with the Oslo Accords, which marked a shift in Israel's policies of population management from an approach that relied on integration to a strategy of separation.⁶ The framework for a two-state solution that the accords provided would separate and confine Palestinian population concentrations to designated zones in ways consonant with the international consensus. Within the proposed territorial configuration, Gaza's enclavization would cut the territory off from the West Bank, severing spatial interflows and weakening the possibility for a viable territorial-political entity to emerge.⁷

Significantly, the accords formalized Israel's jurisdiction over Gaza's territorial boundaries, empowering Israel to impose closures at will. Where movement in and out of the Gaza Strip had previously been virtually unhindered, tight restrictions were introduced on the movement of people and goods. Israel began requiring Gaza residents to obtain civil administration permits to travel between Palestinian areas, placing severe restrictions on work and entry into Israel.⁸ Under the pretext of needing a more secure border, Israel encircled the Gaza Strip with a security barrier and established a buffer zone that extends the entire perimeter of the territory adjacent to Israel, complete with high-technology observation posts and electronic sensors. The buffer zone was in breach of the Oslo Accords and was not necessary to guard the border, but it affirmed Israel's control over Gaza's territorial boundaries and subsequently ensured that any future entity in Gaza would be subject to Israeli sovereignty.

Consigned to the margins; politically and geographically alienated from the centers of Palestinian commercial, cultural, and political life; and sealed off from neighboring areas, Gaza gradually became a space where state authority was not fully articulated and where, particularly after the administrative split between Gaza and the West Bank, exceptional forms of sovereign power were needed to maintain order.⁹ Thus, Oslo merely prefigured the

reenvisioned, punitive, and hermetic closure to come. After Israel’s security cabinet declared Gaza a hostile entity in 2007, a tighter seal was enforced through a series of sanctions that culminated in the ongoing blockade. Almost all access points to the territory were closed off, population movement between Gaza and the West Bank was halted, and trade links with the outside world were severed, concretizing Gaza’s infinite dislocation.¹⁰ The depiction of Gaza in its totality as a militant space, a battlefield in which everyone is a potential fighter, rendered it an exceptional territory that needed to be dealt with using exceptional measures.¹¹ It legitimized arbitrary regulations governing access to medical care, the entry of food, availability of water/sanitation and electricity, and the movement of people and goods. It justified massive destruction of life and property in the name of Israel’s self-defense. It enabled the incarceration of two million people, keeping them in a perpetual state of crisis and allowing the bare minimum of humanitarian relief while containing them outside the bounds of regular interaction.

The Significance of Unity Protests: De-exceptionalizing Gaza’s Separation

Israel’s unchallenged dominance, the inaction of the PA leadership, and the consistent failure of multilateral regimes to deter Israeli violations have combined to create a context devoid of hope or possibility in blockaded and war-afflicted Gaza. For those living there, the absence of a clear course of action to bring the siege to an end, and a fear that they will be confined to their position absolutely and indefinitely, have compounded the suffering caused by years of violence and siege. In the shadow of fear and uncertainty, public attention in Gaza has been less concerned with the usual questions of occupation, liberation, and popular struggle in recent years, and instead has largely revolved around the more immediate and pressing concerns of food and health care, the frequency of border crossing closures and openings, and repairs from the destruction wrought by recurring assaults. Despite the shift away from collective Palestinian concerns in popular conversations, the reality evident to all who live in Gaza is that the closures that shape and condition Palestinian lives there are a subset of Israeli occupation practices—a specific method of rule within a wider array of policies designed to isolate and manage a surplus Palestinian population.¹²

From demographic isolation to militarized violence, the similarity of Israeli practices against Palestinian communities across Israel and the occupied territories is either ignored, absented, or obfuscated in Western normative discourse.¹³ The dominant geopolitical narrative about Gaza has long emphasized the territory’s separate identity and continues to discuss Gaza in different terms than the rest of Palestinian society. Such discourse, which has increasingly pervaded the regional public sphere over the years, has amplified the sense of alienation and abandonment experienced by Gaza’s population and deepened political and societal fragmentation within the Palestinian population at large.

Within this context, the collective Palestinian mobilization against Israel’s actions in Jerusalem in May 2021 has had a transformative impact. For those under blockade, the demand for collective Palestinian rights, which became a rallying cry for the mass protests, reaffirmed their shared struggle with those living in other parts of historic Palestine against a system that separates them from one another. Via mobilization across spatially differentiated geographies of Israeli rule, Palestinian grassroots organizers have erased these geographic divisions, exposing Israel’s long-standing strategy of exceptionalizing Gaza’s difference as an attempt to disconnect the territory from the wider Palestinian struggle. Crucially, situating Gaza’s enforced

separation within a wider system designed to maintain an exclusive homogenous space affirms that such separation is constitutive of—rather than outside—the project of building an exclusively Jewish state. Palestinians in Gaza and beyond are thus folded into the Israeli system of rule in the form of the exception to and/or exclusion from the dominant, privileged group.

Perhaps unexpectedly, continued mobilization among Palestinians following the large street protests indicates that an oppositional project is beginning to form against the very system that upholds these exclusions. This includes mobilizing initiatives by youth-led networks, most prominently a historic general strike that disrupted business-as-usual in essential Israeli sectors; a campaign to boycott Israeli products and boost local Palestinian economies; and online debates connecting activists in different areas. If these events reveal anything, it is that Palestinians are redefining empowerment beyond the notion of a national leadership capable of representing their interests and telling them how resistance should operate. The Palestinian people have emerged from this uprising as active agents capable of defining their own life circumstances and resistance politics.

About the Author

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Endnotes

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3. Giorgio Agamben, "The State of Exception," trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 2.
4. Sumi Madhok, "Coloniality, Political Subjectivation and the Gendered Politics of Protest in a 'State of Exception,'" *Feminist Review* 119, no. 1 (2018): pp. 56–71, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-018-0121-z>.
5. This essay instrumentalizes Agamben's framing of the state of exception to draw attention to Gaza as a spatial arrangement that remains outside the formally recognized state of law. It does so, however, while recognizing that in the late-modern colonial occupation of Palestine, as argued by Achille Mbembe in "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): pp. 11–40, <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/39984>, topography and identity are closely bound. Taking a historical perspective, Mbembe's analysis advances a corrective to Agamben's state of exception that brings to the fore the significance of race and racial hierarchies in the calculus of who becomes subject to exception. According to Mbembe, the exercise of the political right to rule is inextricably linked to the exercise of the right to exclude and kill, and is inscribed in the way that modern states function. He claims that an unprecedented form of governmentality, the state of exception, can nonetheless be traced back to the mechanisms of governing colonial territories. According to Mbembe, it stems from the notion of biologically distinct subgroups of the human species, and as a contemporary means for the "management of the multitudes," it both enables and is enabled by the translation of social conflicts in racial terms in the industrial world. Following Mbembe, this essay thus recognizes that in Palestine and beyond, power is aided by technical innovations fundamental to the project of Western modernity but also by racist rationalization, creating relations of exception and enmity that provide a normative basis for the right to kill.
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