VOLUME 27 NUMBER 3 SEPTEMBER 2025

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Genocide Research

ISSN: 1462-3528 (Print) 1469-9494 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjgr20

# Settler Colonialism and the Displacement/ Immobility Nexus: Israeli Policy in Gaza Since 1948

Anne Irfan

**To cite this article:** Anne Irfan (24 Aug 2025): Settler Colonialism and the Displacement/ Immobility Nexus: Israeli Policy in Gaza Since 1948, Journal of Genocide Research, DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2025.2547445

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2025.2547445

JOURNAL OF GENOCIDE RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2025.2547445

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

FORUM: ISRAEL-PALESTINE: ATROCITY CRIMES AND THE CRISIS OF HOLOCAUST AND GENOCIDE STUDIES



# Settler Colonialism and the Displacement/Immobility Nexus: Israeli Policy in Gaza Since 1948

Anne Irfan

Arts and Sciences, University College London, London, UK

> It is the Israelis who want the borders closed, but it is also the Israelis who say "run away."[1]
> Haidar Eid

In July 2025, Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz announced a new plan to forcibly displace, contain, immobilize, and ultimately expel Gaza's Palestinians. The plan, which followed numerous ethnic cleansing schemes for Gaza from both Israel and the US, proposed that the Israeli army would establish a so-called "humanitarian city" on the ruins of Rafah, a city largely obliterated by 21 months of genocidal warfare (ongoing at the time of writing). According to Katz, the army would then "move" 600,000 Palestinians into the encampment, with the eventual aim of enclosing the Strip's entire population therein. Once inside, the Palestinians would not be allowed to leave the camp, which would be surrounded and guarded by the military, except to emigrate from Palestine permanently.[2]

Opponents of Katz's plan have rightly pointed out that it constitutes a war crime and a crime against humanity, as well as forming part of a two-year military onslaught that is now widely recognized as genocidal.[3] Forcibly displacing and containing a civilian population

**CONTACT** Anne Irfan anne.irfan@ucl.ac.uk

[1] Haidar Eid, "Diary, 20 July 2014," in *Gaza as Metaphor*, ed. Helga Tawil Souri and Dina Matar (London: Hurst, 2016), 30.

[2] On the planned concentration camp in Gaza, see Yaniv Kubovich and Liza Rozovsky, "Defence Minister Says Israel Plans to Concentrate All Gaza's population in 'Humanitarian' Zone Built on Rafah's Ruins," *Haaretz,* 7 July 2025; Emma Graham-Harrison, "'Humanitarian City' Would be Concentration Camp for Palestinians, Says Former Israeli PM," *The Guardian,* 13 July 2025.

[3] On the criticisms of the Israeli plan, see inter alia Raja Shehadeh, "Yes, Israel's Plan for Rafah Would be a Crime – But International Law has never Protected Gaza," *The Guardian,* 12 July 2025; Rayhan Uddin, "'Concentration Camp': Israel's Planned New City in Rafah, Explained," *Middle East Eye,* 10 July 2025, https://www.middleeasteye.net/explainers/israel-planned-new-city-rafah-concentration-camp-explained; James Sweeney, "Plans to Relocate Gazans to a 'Humanitarian City' Look Like a Crime Against Humanity – International Law Expert," *The Conversation,* 10 July 2025, https://theconversation.com/plans-to-relocate-gazans-to-a-humanitarian-city-look-like-a-crime-against-humanity-international-law-expert-260727. On the genocidal nature of Israel's current war on Gaza, see Francesca Albanese, "Genocide as Colonial Erasure. A/79/384: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied Since 1967," 1 October 2024. https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/a79384-report-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights-palestinian; Amnesty International, "'You Feel Like You Are Subhuman': Israel's Genocide Against Palestinians in Gaza," 5 December 2024. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde15/8668/2024/en/; Médecins Sans Frontières, "Gaza: Life in a Death Trap," 19 December 2024. https://www.msf.org/life-death-trap-gaza-palestine; Raz Segal, "A Textbook Case of Genocide," *Jewish Currents*, 13 October 2023. https://jewishcurrents.org/a-textbook-case-of-genocide; Nimer Sultany, "A Threshold Crossed: On Genocidal Intent and the Duty to Prevent Genocide in Palestine," *Journal of Genocide Research* (17 April 2024), doi.org/10.

contravenes international humanitarian law, as does expulsion of the kind envisioned in this and other Israeli plans for Gaza.[4] Yet these measures – displacing, immobilizing, and expelling – are consistent with long-term Israeli policy in Palestine. At the end of 2023 – only two months into the Israeli assault, which was launched after the Hamas-led attacks of 7 October – the UN reported that Israel had displaced more than 85 percent of Gaza's population, meaning nearly two million people.[5] At the same time, Israel denied them the right to leave the Strip, either to enact their right of return to their ancestral homelands, now in Israel, or to claim asylum outside historic Palestine. In other words, Palestinians were simultaneously forced to move and denied the right to move.

While Israel's violation of Palestinians' mobility rights has reached a crescendo during the Gaza genocide, the actions themselves are nothing new.[6] In common with settler colonial states and movements everywhere, Israel (and the pre-state Zionist organizations) long denied Indigenous mobility rights in order to impose and enforce its demographic hierarchy. A deceptively simple set of questions can determine the nature of this hierarchy: who has the right to move around as they wish, who has the right to stay in place, who has both, and who has neither? The answers to these questions can, in turn, ultimately determine who really has their freedom. As Hannah Arendt put it:

> Freedom of movement is historically the oldest and also the most elementary [of all freedoms]. Being able to depart for where we will is the prototypical gesture of being free, as limited movement has, from time immemorial, been the precondition for enslavement.[7]

In this article, I argue that control of movement – including both forced migration and containment – has always been at the core of Israel's domination over Palestine and its people. Scholars, activists, and analysts have rightly paid much attention to long-running Zionist-Israeli practices and policies of expulsion (sometimes euphemistically termed "transfer") of the Palestinians, beginning with the original Nakba (or Catastrophe) of 1947–1949.[8] In recent years and to a much lesser extent, there has also been increased discussion of Israeli practices of *enforced immobility*, most notably in Gaza.[9] Still, there is

1080/14623528.2024.2351261; Omer Bartov, "I'm a Genocide Scholar. I Know It When I See It," *New York Times,* 15 July 2025.

[4] On the Trump plan for Gaza and Palestinian responses to it, see Mahmoud Mushtaha, "'Gaza is Not For Sale': Palestinians Dismiss Trump's Ethnic Cleansing Plan," *+972 magazine,* 5 February 2025, https://www.972mag.com/gaza-trump-ethnic-cleansing-refusal/

[5] UNRWA Situation Report #58 on the situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, 31 December 2023, https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-58-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-Jerusalem

[6] On these dynamics in twenty-first century Gaza before October 2023, see Isabela Agostinelli dos Santos and Reginaldo Mattar Nasser, "From Forced Displacement to Forced Immobility: The Israeli Mobility Regime to the Gaza Strip in the Post-Disengagement Period," *Monções: Journal of International Relations of the Federal University of Goiás* 13, no. 25 (2024): 250–76.

[7] Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), 9.

[8] See, for example, Nur Masalha, *A Land without a People: Israel, Transfer and the Palestinians, 1949–1996* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997); Rosemary Sayigh, *The Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries* (London: Zed Books, 2007); Ilan Pappe, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (London: Oneworld, 2006); *Nakba: Palestine, 1948 and the Claims of Memory,* ed. Lila Abu-Lughod, and Ahmed H. Sa'adi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Anne Irfan, *Refuge and Resistance: Palestinians and the International Regime System* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

[9] Three of the most significant recent works on Palestinian im/mobility are Julie Peteet, *Space and Mobility in Palestine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); Ilan Pappe, *The Biggest Prison on Earth: A History of the Occupied Territories* (London: Oneworld, 2017); Yael Berda, *Living Emergency: Israel's Permit Regime in the Occupied West Bank* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017). See also Hagar Kotef and Merav Amir, "Between Imaginary Lines: Violence and its Justifications at the Military Checkpoints in Occupied Palestine," in Hagar Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of*

considerable room for additional scholarship on the subject. I argue here that while forced migration and containment may appear to exist in opposition to one another – one concerns the right to move, the other the right *not* to move – they are more accurately understood as functioning in tandem. Indeed, these two categories are flip sides of the same coin, which I describe here as the *displacement/immobility nexus*.

The Gaza Strip has always held a particular position within this nexus. Since 1948, Gaza has constituted the apotheosis of Israeli attacks on Palestinian mobility rights, including both the right to move and the right to stay in place. This was primarily due to the Strip's demographics, as the only territory in the Levant in which Palestinian refugees formed the majority, making it central to any would-be Palestinian state. These very same characteristics made Gaza an obvious focal point for Israeli attempts to permanently expel Palestine's Indigenous people. The large-scale displacement, enforced containment and planned expulsion of the current genocide marks the culmination of this nexus, which has always been central to the settler colonial scheme in Palestine.

## Settler Colonialism and the Displacement/Immobility Nexus

It is perhaps an obvious point to say that control of movement is core to settler colonialism. Establishing a settler colony in the first place relies on the mass movement of a settler community into the colonized territory, with their elite position dependent on the subjugation of the Indigenous population. Their subjugation is typically engineered via a combination of military, political, and economic measures, and always involves both displacement and containment. For examples, we could look to the displacement of Black South Africans and their forced containment in "Bantustans," or the forced migration westwards of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole nations during the mid-nineteenth century Trail of Tears, followed by the US's eventual reservationization of Indigenous peoples across North America.[10] As decolonial scholars and activists have observed, in the eyes of settler colonial movements, "[Indigenous] people got in the way just by staying at home."[11]

When it comes to Palestine, the Zionist movement has consistently relied on replacing the Indigenous Palestinian population with Jewish communities, as the only way to establish a Jewish state in a region with a non-Jewish majority. The resulting strategy of land grab and usurpation has been dubbed "maximum Jews on maximum land, minimum Arabs on minimum land" by Palestinian rap group DAM, and "maximum Jews on maximum land with minimum Palestinians" by former Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid

*Freedom: On Liberal Governances of Mobility* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 27–51; Ilana Feldman, "Gaza: Isolation," in Tawil-Souri and Matar, *Gaza as Metaphor*, 92–102; Agostinelli dos Santos and Mattar Nasser, "From Forced Displacement to Forced Immobility."

[10] On South Africa, see Okechukwu Ibeanu, "Apartheid, Destabilization and Displacement: The dynamics of the refugee crisis in Southern Africa," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 3, no. 1 (1990): 47–63; Laura Evans, "Resettlement and the making of the Ciskei Bantustan, South Africa c.1960–1976," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40, no. 1 (2014): 21–40; Michael Savage, "The Imposition of Pass Laws on the African Population in South Africa," *African Affairs* 83, no. 339 (1986): 181–205. On the US, see Evan Taparata, "'Refugees as You Call Them': The Politics of Refugee Recognition in the nineteenth century US," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 38, no. 2 (2019): 9–35; Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London: Verso, 2016), ch. 5.

[11] Deborah Bird Rose, *Hidden Histories: Black Stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River and Wave Hill Stations* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1991), 46.

(in office 2022).[12] In other words, then, both Zionists and anti-Zionists concur that this is a central goal of the Israeli state. To achieve this goal, Israel has continually pursued an expansionist territorial policy entailing the displacement, containment, and expulsion of the Palestinians.

The state of Israel was founded during the events of 1948, which Israelis call *Milhemet Ha'Atzmaout* (the war of independence) and Palestinians call the *Nakba*. Starting in 1947, Zionist militias, including the Jewish Agency's Haganah, which later became the Israeli national army, carried out the large-scale planned ejection of Palestinian communities from the country, in order to create the desired Jewish state in Palestine. By the time Jewish Agency leader David Ben-Gurion declared the establishment of the state of Israel in May 1948,[13] Zionist militias had already displaced and expelled as many as 375,000 Palestinians.[14] By the end of the year, the figure would reach at least 750,000.[15] The new state quickly acted to block the refugees' return, ensuring that their movement could only happen in one direction. In so doing, Israel violated both elements of the Palestinians' mobility: their right to stay in place and their right to move freely, with the latter including the option of leaving and returning to one's country at will.[16]

As Patrick Wolfe famously wrote, settler colonialism is "a structure, not an event," and so Israel's ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians did not end with the state's establishment in 1948.[17] In fact, this only marked the beginning of the process, leading many Palestinians to speak of *ongoing Nakba* (*al-nakba al-mustamirra*).[18] In subsequent years, Israel continued to displace, immobilize, and expel Palestinian (and other non-Jewish Arab) populations, both within the armistice lines it agreed with neighbouring states in 1949, and in territories it later invaded, occupied, and sometimes annexed. These include East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Sinai, the Golan Heights, and southern Lebanon. Yet of these, it is Gaza where Israel has always enforced and enacted the displacement/immobility nexus at its most brutal, a long-term phenomenon culminating in the current genocide. As the next section details, Gaza's particular position within this

[12] For the DAM lyric, see DAM, *Born Here,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIo6lyP9tTE&list=RDzIo6lyP9tTE&start_radio=1, accessed 11 July 2025. For the Yair Lapid quote, see Gil Stern Hoffman, "Lapid: US Helped Iran Fund its Next War Against Israel," *The Jerusalem Post,* 26 January 2016.

[13] While five Arab states almost immediately declared war on Israel, the oft-repeated claim that they all "invaded" the new state is erroneous. The Lebanese army never crossed its international southern border. The Jordanian and Iraqi armies stayed within the areas designed to the would-be Palestinian Arab state under the UN Partition Plan, with the Jordanian regime having reached a secret understanding with the Jewish Agency. It was only two Arab armies – Syria and Egypt – that crossed into the territory of the Jewish state. See Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), xxxiii. On the Jordanian-Zionist secret agreements, see Avi Shlaim, *Collusion Across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

[14] Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949–1993* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 3; Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (London: Oneworld, 2007), 131; Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 262–3.

[15] The exact number of Palestinian refugees from 1948 is disputed, but the approximate figure of 750,000 is the most widely verified. See UN Economic Survey Mission for the Middle East, First Interim Report, No. 66979, 16 November 1949, https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-194924/

[16] Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country."

[17] Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 388.

[18] On the concept of ongoing Nakba and its implications, see Rabea Eghbariah, "Towards Nakba as a Legal Concept," *Columbia Law Review* 124, no. 4 (2024): 887–992.

nexus can be traced back to the original Nakba, meaning that the Strip's Palestinians endured continual displacement, containment, and expulsion long before October 2023.

## The Expulsion/Immobility Nexus in Gaza

The modern-day Gaza Strip is the direct product of the expulsion/immobility nexus. When 750,000 Palestinians were made refugees during the Nakba, more than 200,000 of them sought shelter in the country's southeastern corner, where they joined a pre-existing local population of around 80,000.[19] The newly-formed Gaza Strip, the boundaries of which were established by armistice lines agreed between Egypt and Israel in 1949 and 1950,[20] became home to more than one in four Palestinians who remained in the territory of Mandate Palestine (now comprising Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip).[21] In this way, it became something of a microcosm of Palestine itself, core to the creation of any Palestinian state, and, accordingly, a long-term target of Israeli offensives.

The Nakba's demographic impact on Gaza is central to understanding subsequent Israeli policy towards the Strip. Its oft-cited over-crowdedness can be directly traced to the expulsions of the Nakba, which caused Gaza's population density to more than quadruple from 500 people per square mile in 1944 to 2,300 four years later.[22] Moreover, this population was majority-refugee, distinguishing it from any other territory in the Levant. This latter point was especially significant, as the Nakba refugees would go on to play a critical role in the Palestinian national movement, with Gaza producing an outsized number of nationalist figures, including secular nationalists and Islamists, militants, and civil society activists.

Examples of Gaza's centrality to the Palestinian struggle are plentiful. Gaza was the site where the first *intifada* (Palestinian uprising) began in December 1987. It was also where the founders of Fatah, Yasser Arafat, Salah Khalaf and Khalil al-Wazir, first connected in the 1950s; and, three decades later, where a group of Islamists met in Shati refugee camp to form the Islamic Resistance Movement – Hamas. Both groups went on to run their respective first governments in Gaza, Fatah with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority's headquarters in Gaza City in 1994, and Hamas after its victory in the 2006 elections. Most recently, of course, Gaza was the source of the Hamas-led attacks and war crimes of 7 October 2023, in which Palestinian militants killed 1,195 people in Israel, the majority civilians, and kidnapped 251.[23]

As mentioned above, the very same features that made Gaza central to the Palestinian nationalist movement simultaneously made it an object of fierce hostility from Israel. Over

[19] Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Gaza: A History* (London: Hurst, 2015), 69–71; Ilana Feldman, "Home as a Refrain: Remembering and Living Displacement in Gaza," *History and Memory* 18, no. 2 (2006): 13.

[20] Egyptian-Israeli General Armistice Agreement, 24 February 1949, https://peacemaker.un.org/en/node/9440. On the 1950 addendum, see Salman Abu Sitta, "Gaza Strip: The Lessons of History," in Tawil-Souri and Dina Matar, *Gaza as Metaphor*, 107.

[21] Sara Roy, "The Gaza Strip: Critical Effects of the Occupation," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1988): 63–4. Around 56 per cent of refugees in the Strip came from other parts of the pre-1948 Gaza District, while 42 per cent came from Lyd District in central Palestine. See Beryl Cheal, "Refugees in the Gaza Strip, December 1948–May 1950," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 18, no. 1 (1988): 138–9.

[22] "A Gaza Chronology, 1948–2008," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 38, no. 3 (2009): 98–9.

[23] Figures taken from: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), https://www.ochaopt.org/; Human Rights Watch, "October 7 Crimes Against Humanity, War Crimes by Hamas-led Groups," 17 July 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/07/17/october-7-crimes-against-humanity-war-crimes-hamas-led-groups

the years, and long before 7 October 2023, Israeli public figures consistently used dehumanizing and brutalizing analogies to describe the Strip, in language that has become increasingly normalized in Israel during the current genocide.[24] Gaza was described as the "troublesome home of saboteurs" (Israeli military commander Moshe Bar-Kochba in 1951);[25] the site of "venomous snakes walking in the street" (Prime Minister Levi Eshkol in 1967),[26] "a swarm of bees" (Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, also in 1967),[27] and a place of "wild weeds and slithering snakes" (Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies vice-president David Weinberg in 2021).[28] "*Go to Gaza*" is Israeli slang for "*go to hell*" (a pun on the two words' similarity in Hebrew, first coined in a 1970s pop song).[29]

Crucially, Israeli thinking distinguished Gaza from the West Bank, where Nakba refugees constituted only around a third of the population. The demographic distinction was compounded by other differences. Gaza is significantly smaller than the West Bank and lacks the West Bank's wealth of religious sites and strategic depth.[30] As a result, it has always occupied a lesser place in the Zionist-Israeli imagination than the West Bank, with the latter the top priority for the settler movement after 1967.[31] This in turn can partly explain then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's willingness to evacuate Israel's illegal settlements from the Strip in 2005, a move which, as we shall see, precipitated an intensification in enclosing, containing and immobilizing its Palestinian population.

Collectively, these factors gave Gaza a particular image in Israeli eyes as simultaneously less desirable and more "troublesome" than the West Bank, characteristics that made it consistently central to the displacement/immobility nexus. Over the 75 years between the original Nakba and the beginning of the current genocide, Gaza emerged as the most concentrated site for the violent convergence of displacement, containment, and expulsion. These forces operated not as discrete events but rather as a cumulative and intensifying logic. From the mass expulsions and exclusions of the original Nakba, to the stratified mobility of the so-called "open door" policy in the 1970s and 1980s, and eventually the regime of permanent closure and blockade initiated in the early 1990s, each phase reinforced Gaza's isolation and the ultimate immobilization of its Palestinian population. Tracing these phases and the shifts between them can illuminate how Israel's long-term mechanisms of settler colonial control served to normalize its repression and dehumanization of the Palestinians, ultimately laying the structural and ideological groundwork for the genocidal violence of today.

[24] Tamir Sorek, "Mainstreaming a Genocidal Imagination in Israeli Society: Settler-Colonialism, Settler Anxiety, and Biblical Cues," *Journal of Genocide Research* (6 February 2025): 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2025.2456321

[25] Benny Morris, *Israel's Border Wars, 1949–1956: Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation, and the Countdown to the Suez War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 202.

[26] Ilan Pappe, "Israel's Message," *London Review of Books* 31, no. 1 (1 January 2009).

[27] Tom Segev, *1967: Israel, the War and the Year that Transformed the Middle East*, trans. Jessica Cohen (Boston: Little, Brown, 2007), 325.

[28] David M. Weinberg, "Israel Must Prove it has Freedom to Defend Itself," *The Jerusalem Post,* 13 May 2021.

[29] Amira Hass, *Drinking the Sea at Gaza: Days and Nights in a Land under Siege*, trans. Elana Wesley and Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), 10.

[30] Daniel Bloxham, "The 7 October Atrocities and the Annihilation of Gaza: Causes and Responsibilities" *Journal of Genocide Research* (3 April): https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2025.2483546, 6.

[31] On the Israeli settler movement in both the West Bank and Gaza, see Idith Zertal and Akiva Elder, *Lords of the Land: The War over Israel's Settlements in the Occupied Territories*, trans. Vivian Eden (London: Bold Type, 2007).

## Expulsion and Exclusion, 1948–1967

With the original Nakba, Israel established the blueprint of the displacement/immobility nexus: the expulsion of the Palestinian people followed by the denial of their right to return to their homes. As outlined above, the nexus was a structure rather than a singular event, so even after 1948, Israel continued using a combination of displacement and containment to expel the significant number of Palestinians who remained in its territory. Although the state had declared independence in May 1948, it had not declared its borders. Instead, it continued to seize additional land throughout 1949, when it agreed on armistice lines with Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria, respectively. As Israeli forces expanded their territorial hold, they often expelled the remaining Palestinians by deploying the displacement/containment nexus: first forcibly concentrating Palestinians into smaller demarcated areas that they could not leave, then expelling them altogether.

One of the most striking cases occurred in the southern town of Majdal, where more than 2,000 Palestinians were living at the beginning of 1949. After the government approved the settlement of 3,000 Jews in the town, Israeli forces enclosed the Palestinians in a small ghetto surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by the military. In a plan proposed by military commander Moshe Dayan and sanctioned by Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, the authorities then used military trucks to forcibly transfer the ghetto's population to Gaza in 1950. Those who resisted were threatened at gunpoint. By mid-October 1950, Israel had emptied out the Palestinian population of Majdal and renamed it Ashkelon.[32] The Majdal expulsion served as a microcosm of how Israel would ultimately treat the Gaza Strip itself: forcing a displaced population into a concentrated area, denying their freedom of movement, and then looking to expel them altogether.

At the time of the Majdal expulsion, the Gaza Strip was a newly-formed entity with boundaries determined by the Israeli-Egyptian armistice agreement of February 1949.[33] A year later, in a little-known addendum, Egypt ceded more land to Israeli requests for a "buffer zone," reducing the Strip by a further 20 percent to just 141 square miles, less than 1.5 percent of historic Palestine.[34] Although the boundaries were determined as part of a temporary armistice and did not constitute international borders, both Israel and Egypt policed them as such. Yet the Palestinians overwhelmingly rejected this designation; almost as soon as refugees arrived in Gaza, they sought to journey back to their homes. The returnees' trips were highly dangerous – they could be fatal if Israeli forces encountered them – and accordingly, their visits tended to be short. Still, the hope of eventual permanent return underpinned these journeys. In the meantime, returnees sought to check on their homes, retrieve belongings, tend their crops, and locate loved ones who might have been left behind.[35]

As the 1950s dawned and the Palestinians remained exiled, armistice line crossings were increasingly carried out not only by unarmed returnees but also by low-level

[32] Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited,* 528–9.
[33] Egyptian-Israeli General Armistice Agreement.
[34] Abu Sitta, "Gaza Strip," 107.
[35] On the armistice line crossings at this time, see Morris, *Israel's Border Wars, 1949–1956*, ch. 2; Filiu, *Gaza*, 79–81; Ilana Feldman, *Governing Gaza: Bureaucracy, Authority and the Work of Rule* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 22–3; Adel Yahya, *The Palestinian Refugees, 1948–1998: An Oral History* (Ramallah: PACE, 1999), 48–53; Jehad Abu Salim, "From Fence to Fence: Gaza's Story in its Own Words," in Tawil-Souri and Matar, *Gaza as Metaphor*, 90–1.

militants (*fida'iyyin*) launching raids and ambush operations inside Israel. While the fida'iyyin came from all directions, an outsized number originated from the tiny Gaza Strip on account of its especially high levels of impoverishment, signified by the high proportion of people surviving in refugee camps. In total, fida'iyyin from Gaza and Egypt killed 403 Israelis from 1951–1955, and those from the West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon killed another 564 in the same period, both soldiers and civilians.[36]

In its determination to fortify its frontiers, Israel did not distinguish between unarmed refugees and militants and shot any undocumented Palestinian on sight, killing an estimated 2,700–5,000, the majority of whom were unarmed, in the immediate years following the Nakba.[37] Others died of heat, thirst, and exhaustion during the arduous journey, especially if they had to cross the Naqab (Negev) desert to reach their former homes.[38] As Israel's shoot-on-sight policy started to deter returnees, especially those who were only seeking to reclaim their possessions or harvest their crops, the number of crossings began to fall, from as many as 15,000 in the early 1950s to 5,000 by the middle of the decade.[39]

In 1954, Israel codified its policy on crossings with the Prevention of Infiltration Law, which stated:

> [an] "infiltrator" means a person who has entered Israel knowingly and unlawfully and who at any time between 29 November 1947[40] and his entry was … a Palestinian citizen or a Palestinian resident … [and] who, during the said period, left his ordinary place of residence in an area which has become a part of Israel for a place outside Israel.[41]

By defining returnees as "infiltrators," Israel constructed Palestinian refugees as outsiders and turned their very presence into an inherent threat, thus denying their indigeneity. Again, this was part of the settler colonial state's very structures, which relied on the erasure of Palestinian history and identity.

In a display of the double standards characterizing Israeli policy towards Palestinians, Israeli forces themselves regularly crossed the Gaza armistice line in a bid to intimidate the population, deter Palestinian crossings, and pressure the Egyptian regime into suppressing the fida'iyyin. Their operations were typically brutal and indiscriminate, often targeting the camps. In 1953, for instance, Israeli forces killed at least fifty Palestinians in Bureij camp, twenty of whom were civilians;[42] two years later, they killed thirty-six Egyptian soldiers and two Palestinian civilians, including a young boy, in the Gaza Raid, condemned in a UN Security Council Resolution.[43]

The following year, Israel proved definitively that its expansionism and the accompanying displacement, containment, and expulsion of the Palestinians, had not ended with the Nakba. In November 1956, Israel invaded and occupied the Gaza Strip for the first

[36] Martin Gilbert, *The Routledge Atlas of the Arab–Israeli Conflict*, 9th ed. (London: Routledge, 2008), 58.
[37] Morris, *Israel's Border Wars*, 416.
[38] Gene Currivan, "Torture Reports Studied by Israel," *New York Times*, 8 June 1950; Gene Currivan, "Israel is Adamant over Frontier Ban," *New York Times*, 9 June 1950.
[39] "A Gaza Chronology," 99.
[40] The date of the UN Partition Plan for Palestine. See UN Resolution 181, A/RES/181 (II), 29 November 1947.
[41] Prevention of Infiltration (Offences and Jurisdiction) Law, 5714–1954, passed by the Knesset on 16 August 1954.
[42] "A Gaza Chronology," 99; Filiu, *Gaza*, 85.
[43] On the Gaza Raid, see Filiu, *Gaza*, 87; Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (London: Penguin, 2014), 131–5; Salman Abu Sitta, *Mapping My Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (Cairo: AUC Press, 2016), 117–8. For the UN Resolution: UN Security Council Resolution 106, S/3378, 29 March 1955.

time. During the four months of occupation, which ended on the orders of US President Dwight Eisenhower, Israel imposed a strict curfew on all Gaza residents while carrying out further expulsions and massacres in Khan Younis (at least 275 killed), Rafah (111 killed), and other camps (66 killed). In total, Israeli forces killed as many as 1,500 Palestinians, most of them civilians, out of a total population of around 300,000.[44] Including those injured, detained, or tortured, at least one per cent of the Strip's population suffered first-hand from Israeli violence during the first occupation.[45]

Israel used the first occupation as a testing ground for longer-term policies, including the expulsion of the Palestinians and the establishment of Jewish settlements in Gaza.[46] Finance Minister Levi Eshkol allocated US$500,000 to fund the emigration of two hundred Palestinian refugee families from the Strip, with the goal of permanently erasing their right of return.[47] Israel's forced withdrawal from Gaza in March 1957 put an end to these plans, but only temporarily, as they provided the blueprint of erasure for when Israel reoccupied Gaza a decade later.

## *Expulsion, Incarceration, and Banishment: The So-called "Open Door," 1972–1991*

When Israel occupied Gaza and the West Bank in 1967 (hereafter the Occupied Palestinian Territory or OPT), it faced a return to Zionism's original quandary: how to establish a Jewish state in a country with a non-Jewish majority. After the 1967 war, more than 600,000 Palestinians remained in the OPT, many of them Nakba refugees.[48] Having now taken control of the whole of historic Palestine, Israel again wanted the land but not its people. In the words of Eshkol, who had become Israeli Prime Minister in 1963, "the bride is beautiful, but she is followed by a dowry we do not want."[49] In a bid to separate the "bride" of the land from the "dowry" of the Palestinian people, Israel employed the same measures used by settler colonial states everywhere: displacement, containment, and expulsion.

In Israeli eyes, the demographic "problem" was especially acute in Gaza, on account of both its population density and its high proportion of Nakba refugees. Six months into the occupation, the Director of Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics articulated this explicitly when he told Eshkol, "If the [occupied Palestinian] area remains in our hands, then you'll have less trouble from those [Palestinians] in the West Bank than in the Gaza Strip. Because in the Gaza Strip, they're presented as refugees for all the world to see."[50] Eshkol concurred, having already stated that "Gaza is the problem."[51]

[44] Filiu, *Gaza*, 96–7; Morris, *Israel's Border Wars*, 408.
[45] Jean-Pierre Filiu, "The Twelve Wars on Gaza," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 44, no. 1 (2014): 53.
[46] Filiu, *Gaza*, 100–1. See also Agence France-Press, "Suez Crisis Triggered Israel's First Occupation of Gaza," *France 24*, 2 November 2021, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211102-suez-crisis-triggered-israel-s-first-occupation-of-gaza
[47] Tom Segev, "The June 1967 War and the Palestinian Refugee Problem," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 36, no. 3 (2007): 7, 15–16.
[48] Irfan, *Refuge and Resistance,* 68.
[49] Quoted in Avi Raz, *The Bride and the Dowry: Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinians in the Aftermath of the June 1967 War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 3.
[50] Quoted in Segev, "The June 1967 War and the Palestinian Refugee Problem," 12.
[51] Quoted in Pappe, "Israel's Message."

As a result, Israel deployed its post-67 expulsion measures with particular brutality in Gaza, aiming to "empty out" the Strip of Palestinians and ultimately replace them with Jewish settlers. Such plans had been bolstered by the June war, during which time around one in ten of Gaza's population, 45,000 Palestinians, had already fled, many fearing a repeat of the 1956 massacres.[52] Israel compounded the effect by precluding anyone who had been outside of Gaza during the war from returning. Around the same time, barely a week after the end of the war, the Israeli cabinet discussed "transferring" Gaza's Palestinian population to Jordan en masse.[53] To aid this goal, it opened the border crossing between the West Bank and Jordan and arranged special coaches to transport Palestinians there from Gaza.[54] After the Jordanian government denied entry to Palestinians on the grounds that they were being forcibly transferred, the Israeli government looked for alternatives, including the possible expulsion of Gaza's population to the West Bank or Iraq.[55]

In the end, Israel did not pursue these schemes for fear of international opprobrium. Instead, with clear parallels to the 2020s, it attempted to promote "voluntary emigration" from Gaza by offering financial incentives and foreign passports to camp refugees who agreed to permanently relocate abroad, primarily to Canada, Australia, and Brazil.[56] With the tacit support of US President Lyndon B. Johnson, Israel set up "emigration offices" in Gaza's refugee camps to implement the scheme, which required Palestinians to forfeit the ID cards that proved their Gaza residency and Palestinian identity. Yet, as would be the case in the 2020s, the Palestinian people recognized the "offer" as merely another phase in the ongoing Nakba, and very few cooperated with it.[57]

Nevertheless, Israel's depopulation policies in the wake of the 1967 war had a significant demographic impact on Gaza. Its population fell from 400,000 in June 1967 to 325,900 by the end of that year.[58] In the first six months of 1968, 20,000 Palestinians fled the Strip under varying degrees of coercion; around 80 per cent of them were Nakba refugees.[59] Gaza's population would not return to its pre-1967 levels until the mid-1970s, in a slow population growth compounded by immobilization. As in 1948, Israel only permitted Palestinian movement in one direction; those who tried to return were deported and could be shot dead.[60]

At the same time, the longer-term nature of Israel's second occupation of Gaza engendered a change its approach to Palestinian movement within the former Mandate territory. In 1972, the occupying authorities issued a general exit permit for the Strip that allowed Palestinians to move freely between Gaza, the West Bank and Israel itself

[52] Figure sourced from Report of the UNRWA Commissioner General, A/7213, 1 July 1967–1930 June 1968. On fears stemming from the 1956 massacres, see Abdel Bari Atwan, *A Country of Words: A Palestinian Journey from the Refugee Camp to the Front Page* (Saqi, 2008), 49; Madeeha Hafez Albatta, *A White Lie* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2020), 80; Hekmat al-Taweel, *Come My Children* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2023), 77.
[53] Pappe, *The Biggest Prison on Earth*, 84.
[54] Omri Shafer Raviv, "Israeli Emigration Policies in the Gaza Strip: Crafting Demography and Forming Control in the Aftermath of the 1967 War," *Middle Eastern Studies* 57, no. 2 (2021): 349.
[55] Ibid., 342, 347, 350. See also Segev, "The June 1967 War and the Palestinian Refugee Problem," 17–18; Tom Segev, *1967*, 627; Pappe, *The Biggest Prison on Earth*, 157–8.
[56] Shafer Raviv, "Israeli Emigration Policies in the Gaza Strip," 344, 348.
[57] Segev, "The June 1967 War and the Palestinian Refugee Problem," 7, 11, 15–16.
[58] Filiu, *Gaza*, 134; Sara Roy, *The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-development* (Institute for Palestine Studies, 2016), 139.
[59] Segev, "The June 1967 War and the Palestinian Refugee Problem," 15.
[60] Filiu, *Gaza*, 144.

during the daytime (a similar policy had already been enacted for the West Bank; Israel delayed it in Gaza on account of the latter's fierce resistance to the occupation, which the army suppressed with a brutal four-year campaign).[61] After more than two decades of forced confinement within Gaza, Palestinians could now reach their ancestral hometowns and reunite with loved ones in the West Bank and Israel.

Such reunions were not, of course, the intended purpose of the new policy, dubbed the "open door" by its chief architect, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan. In issuing the general exit permit, Dayan calculated that Israel could both exploit Palestinian labour and pacify resistance to the occupation by improving living standards in the OPT.[62] In so doing, he sought to create a new status quo that would put a definitive end to the Palestinians' dreams of return. As we shall see, his calculations on this front would prove sorely mistaken.

In view of Dayan's calculations, it follows that the "open door" policy did not mark the end of the displacement/immobility nexus in Gaza. If we return to the four questions outlined at this article's outset – who has the right to move around as they wish, who has the right to stay in place, who has both, and who has neither? – we see that the general exit permit continued to reinforce the same mobility hierarchy that positioned Jewish Israelis at the top and Gaza-based Palestinians at the bottom. Thus, while Palestinians could now cross the armistice line, their freedom of movement was restricted to daytime hours; they were not allowed to spend the night in Israel or Jerusalem. While they could now go to see the homes and neighbourhoods they had been forced to leave twenty years prior, Israel continued to deny their internationally recognized right of return.[63] As such, the general exit permit retained core elements of immobilizing measures for the Palestinians. Historian Ilan Pappe refers to it as an "open air prison" before Israel moved to the high security model later in the century.[64]

Israel's continuing imposition of its mobility hierarchy becomes clearer still if we consider what the "open door" meant for Israeli citizens (a status open to Jewish people anywhere in the world). While Palestinians' freedom of movement was restricted to the daylight hours, Israelis were free not only to stay overnight in Gaza (and the West Bank) but to reside there full-time on illegal settlements, the first of which were built in the West Bank in 1968 and in Gaza in 1970. Roads for settler vehicles connected them directly to Israel, making the Green Line increasingly irrelevant for Jewish Israelis.

By contrast, the line never lost its potency for Palestinians. In the 1970s, limited opportunities and widespread unemployment in Gaza led many to seek work in Israel, where they lacked any labour rights and were paid on average less than half of their Israeli counterparts (while this article focuses on mobility rights, the "open door" policy was unequal in almost every way).[65] Forbidden from staying overnight inside Israel, Gaza-

[61] On the Four Years' War in Gaza, see Filiu, *Gaza,* 125–46.
[62] On Israeli economic policies in Gaza at this time, see Sara Roy, "The Gaza Strip: critical effects of the occupation," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1988): 59–103; Sara Roy, "The Gaza Strip: A Case of Economic De-Development," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 17, no. 1 (1987): 56–88.
[63] At the end of 1948, the UN had passed a resolution stating that "the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date." See UN General Assembly Resolution 194, A/RES/194(III), 11 December 1948.
[64] Pappe, *The Biggest Prison on Earth,* 24–6.
[65] Filiu, *Gaza*, 162.

based workers had to get up as early as 4am to arrive at work on the other side of the line in time. Others slept illicitly in Israel or Jerusalem, risking imprisonment if caught by the authorities.[66]

For some Palestinians, the immobilizing measures went much further than this. The nature of the general exit permit was such that Israel could easily exclude anyone deemed "troublesome." From the outset, it used this to punish anyone agitating against the occupation, including by nonviolent means. To take just two of countless examples, in the 1970s, it banned civil society activists Ibrahim Abu Sitta and Yusra al-Barbari from leaving Gaza for several years.[67] In so doing, Israel both displayed its total power over the Palestinians and hindered the nationalist movement by preventing its organizers from connecting across the boundaries of their dispersal.

Crucially, these immobilizing measures continued to go hand-in-hand with further displacement, with the settlements central to both. As the settlement project expanded apace in the 1970s and 1980s – championed by military general-turned-Defense Minister Ariel Sharon – Israel seized more land from Palestinians, displacing them repeatedly to construct more settlements that left the territory increasingly fragmented. Indeed, Sharon openly talked about using the settlements to violate Gaza's territorial contiguity, with proliferating Israeli military checkpoints exacerbating the impact.[68] Palestinian attempts to resist the evictions, including by legal appeal, were unsuccessful in a system stacked definitively against them.[69] Instead, they became increasingly confined and contained within ever-smaller stretches of Gaza, as Israeli settlements and the military infrastructure around them ate up more and more territory. By the mid-1980s, Palestinians had lost a third of the Strip's land to Israeli expropriation. Adjusting for population, this meant that a settler had 400 times as much land at their disposal as a Palestinian refugee living in the same territory.[70]

At the end of 1987, long-simmering Palestinian frustration finally boiled over as the first intifada broke out in Gaza's Jabalia refugee camp and quickly spread across the whole of the Strip and into the West Bank and Israel. Moving to repress it, the Israeli authorities abolished the limited mobility rights of the "open door" policy and intensified the Palestinians' containment in Gaza. As we shall see in the next section, it subsequently evolved into what Pappe dubs the "high security" model of carcerality, which would reach its crescendo in the twenty-first century.[71]

## *Closure and Blockade: Immobilizing Gaza, 1991–2023*

In 1991, Israel cancelled the general exit permit it had issued for Palestinians in Gaza two decades earlier. Thereafter, Palestinians needed individual exit permits in order to cross the Green Line; Israel quickly denied or revoked permits for those who engaged in any

[66] Paul Cossali and Clive Robson, *Stateless in Gaza* (London: Zed Books, 1986), 36–7, 52–3, 83–7.
[67] Filiu, *Gaza,* 155. "Yusra al-Barbari," *Interactive Encyclopaedia of the Palestine Question*, https://www.palquest.org/en/biography/14291/yusra-al-barbari; Albatta, *A White Lie*, 86–92, 106.
[68] Roy, *The Gaza Strip*, 150; Filiu, *Gaza*, 161–2.
[69] Nimer Sultany, "Activism and Legitimation in Israel's Jurisprudence of Occupation," *Social & Legal Studies* 23, no. 3 (2014): 320–1; Zertal and Eldar, *Lords of the Land,* 346–8.
[70] Ibid., 196. See also Sara Roy, "The Gaza Strip: Critical Effects of the Occupation," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1988): 60, 75.
[71] Pappe, *The Biggest Prison on Earth,* 182.

kind of political activism, including non-violent campaigns.[72] It was the beginning of a new era in which Gaza was closed off from the wider world; strikingly, this period lasted more than a decade longer than either of those outlined above. Since 1991 Israel has never lifted its closure restrictions on Gaza, although at various points it has intensified or lessened them according to calculations of its interests.

Many narratives portray the 1990s as a period of hope for the Palestinians, marked by the optimism of the 1993 Oslo Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA). But on the ground and particularly in Gaza, it was also a time of increasing isolation and fragmentation – reinforced by the Oslo Accords themselves, which buttressed Israel's division of the OPT. In 1994 – the same year that the PA opened its first headquarters in Gaza City – Israel began building a wall around Gaza, intensifying its control over the Palestinians' mobility.[73] As the decade passed, fewer and fewer Palestinians received exit permits; between March 1996 and June 1997, only 500 people were permitted to move between Gaza and the West Bank.[74] At the same time, the permit regime isolated Gaza from the rest of the world by making it increasingly difficult for outsiders to enter. The exception was Israeli settlers, who continued to move freely between Gaza and Israel without requiring any special permits. What's more, their numbers were growing; from 1993 to 2000, the number of Israeli settlers living in Gaza more than doubled to 6,700.[75]

The immobilizing policies of the 1990s are especially significant in view of the standard Israeli argument that closure is a necessary security response to Hamas' governance of the Strip. In fact, Israel first closed Gaza in 1991, more than fifteen years before Hamas won the parliamentary election that led to it taking power. Even more tellingly, the closure policy began two years *before* Hamas' first suicide bombing, which took place in April 1993 in a West Bank settlement, killing a Palestinian worker alongside the bomber himself. The intensive suicide bombing campaign carried out by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), which killed hundreds of Israelis, began the following year. While it is undoubtedly true that Hamas' attacks endangered Israelis, the chronology does not bear out the claim that Israel enacted its closure policies in response. As early as 1995, more than a decade before Hamas took power, the *New York Times* reported that Palestinians in Gaza were describing it as a "prison."[76]

The more accurate analysis, then, is that Israel consistently deployed the displacement/immobility nexus as a modality of settler colonial domination ever since 1948. Over the years, it variously relaxed its approach (as with the "open door" policy) or tightened it (as with post-1991 closure), but the nexus itself was always present. During the second intifada (2000–2005), Israel invoked punitive measures that intensified its approach again; in 2001, it declared that any Palestinian found within a kilometre of the Gaza armistice line was considered a "legitimate target," further shrinking the already tiny area in which Palestinians could move freely.[77] This was compounded by the military's physical

[72] B'tselem, *Divide and Rule: Prohibition on Passage between the Gaza Strip and West Bank,* May 1998, https://www.btselem.org/publications/summaries/199805_divide_and_rule
[73] "Conquer and Divide: the Gaza Perimeter Fence," *B'Tselem*, https://conquer-and-divide.btselem.org/map-en.html
[74] Sara Roy, "De-development Revisited: Palestinian Economy and Society since Oslo," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28, no. 3 (1999): 74.
[75] Ahron Bregman, *Cursed Victory: A History of Israel and the Occupied Territories* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), 248.
[76] Serge Schmemann, "World Within a Fence, a Special Report: Palestinians in Gaza Find Freedom's Joy Has Its Limits," *New York Times,* 25 August 1995.
[77] Filiu, *Gaza,* 259.

division of Gaza into four separate areas, separated by concrete blocks.[78] Palestinians in Gaza became more and more isolated as Israel closed down the territory's Yasser Arafat International Airport in October 2001 and destroyed it with airstrikes the following year.

Israel's closure of Gaza reached new heights after Hamas achieved victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections. In response, Israel and the US imposed a total blockade across the OPT (again exempting Israeli settlers), subsequently lifting it from the West Bank and tightening it on Gaza after Hamas seized power in the Strip June 2007. Thereafter, Israel imposed a siege and blockade on Gaza: a particularly cruel form of the immobilizing policies that had characterized its approach to the territory ever since 1991.[79] With this, the Strip was virtually severed from its natural and international markets, creating a man-made situation of permanent crisis characterized by mass unemployment, food insecurity, and large-scale dependency on international humanitarian aid for survival.[80] Thereafter, very few essential items could enter Gaza, and very few Palestinians could get out; even the tiny number of people issued exit permits found that the crossings were often shut or that their permits were granted and then denied at the last minute.[81] Over the years, the chances of being able to leave Gaza steadily lessened; for example, medical permits were only issued to those with conditions deemed "life threatening," and the odds of getting such a permit almost halved between 2012 and 2017.[82]

In some ways, the closure and blockade of Gaza marked a return to Israel's pre-67 policy, when it had fortified the armistice line as an impermeable border, at least for Palestinians. Yet from 1948 to 1967, Gaza's population had been able to access the wider world via Egypt. In the twenty-first century, the Egyptian regime took a very different stance on its Gaza border, largely aligning itself with Israel after the two states had signed a peace agreement in 1979. After the Hamas takeover in 2007, Egypt shut down its Rafah border crossing with Gaza;[83] upon reopening, it agreed that goods entering Gaza via Rafah would require Israeli approval.[84] When Hamas used explosives to demolish 200 metres of the Egyptian border wall in 2008, allowing as many as 700,000 Palestinians to cross over from Gaza and buy food, medicine, and other essentials, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak acquiesced to Israeli demands to reseal it.[85] The deteriorating humanitarian

[78] Roy, "Palestinian Economy and Society," 14.
[79] Bloxham, "The 7 October Atrocities and the Annihilation of Gaza," 7; Eyal Benvenisti, "The International Law of Prolonged Sieges and Blockades: Gaza as a Case Study," University of Cambridge Faculty of Law Research Paper No. 22/2021, 5.
[80] On the post-2006 Gaza crisis, see inter alia Amnesty International, *Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians* (2022); UN Country Team in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, *Gaza: Ten Years Later* (2017), https://unsco.unmissions.org/gaza-ten-years-later-report-july-2017; Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP), *Gaza's humanitarian emergency* (2018); Pierre Krähenbühl, "Gaza as a Metaphor for Unsustainability," in Tawil-Souri and Matar, *Gaza as Metaphor,* 53–60.
[81] Filiu, *Gaza*, 304. Darryl Li, "Gaza at the Frontiers of Zionism," in Tawil-Souri and Matar, *Gaza as Metaphor,* 191; Caitlin Procter, "Coerced Migration: Mobility Under Siege in Gaza," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 50, no. 10 (2024): 2363–4.
[82] See MAP, Access to Healthcare Briefing Paper "Health under Occupation: Chapter 1;" MAP, *Gaza's Humanitarian Emergency,* Briefing Autumn 2018; World Health Organization, occupied Palestinian territory, Monthly Report: June 2018.
[83] Gisha, "Movement of People between Gaza and Egypt via Rafah Crossing," 26 December 2013, https://gisha.org/en/movement-of-people-via-rafah-crossing
[84] Ruth Michaelson, "Rafah Border Crossing: Could Egypt Open it to Fleeing Palestinians?" *The Guardian,* 15 October 2023.
[85] Amnesty International, "Egypt Blocks Gazans' Access to the Outside World," 31 January 2008, http://amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2008/01/egypt-blocks-gazans-access-outside-world-20080131. See also Sarah El Deeb, "Border Breach Temporary Boost for Gaza," *Associated Press*, 28 January 2008.

situation in Gaza meant that increasing numbers of Palestinians emigrated via Rafah whenever they could – a phenomenon termed "coerced migration" by one scholar[86] – but the possibility of doing so was restricted by constant border closures and the near-impossibility of securing the required permits and visas.

Israel's Egyptian-supported blockade went hand-in-hand with persistent drone activity and military surveillance, alongside full-scale Israeli bombardments of Gaza in 2008–2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021 (including ground invasions in 2009 and 2014). Each of these entailed further displacement as Israel destroyed housing across Gaza and warned residents to evacuate without either allowing them to leave the Strip or respecting safe zones where civilians could shelter – hence Haidar Eid's remark during the 2014 bombardment, quoted at the outset of this article, that "it is the Israelis who want the borders closed, but it is also the Israelis who say 'run away.'"[87] Instead, Gaza's Palestinians faced the deadly nexus of displacement and immobility as the number of internally displaced people spiked with each Israeli operation: more than 51,000 in 2008–2009,[88] 12,000 in 2012,[89] 485,000 in 2014,[90] and 58,000 in 2021.[91]

The blockade-and-bombardment policy had been made possible by an Israeli move at the end of the second intifada. In 2005, the then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had evacuated all 8,000 Israeli settlers from the Strip. The settler evacuation was divisive in Israel, as it undermined the core Zionist goal of "maximum Jews on maximum land." Yet, Sharon was not driven by peaceful motives or the goal of establishing a Palestinian state in Gaza; instead, he had calculated that settler departure would enable Israel to fully isolate Gaza and remove the Strip's 1.4 million Palestinians from the demographic equation while expanding its colonization of the West Bank.[92] It was, then, a tilt in favour of the full-scale containment and immobilization of Gaza's Palestinians, as Israel continued to occupy and control the Strip via increasingly remote and digital means.[93] Thereafter, Israeli military attacks on Gaza escalated and intensified, unfettered by the presence of Jewish settlers. From 2009, the Israeli government was led by Benjamin Netanyahu, who had virulently opposed Sharon's "disengagement" from Gaza – yet he chose to continue with the isolation policy. Ten years into his second premiership, he explicitly told his party, "This is part of our strategy – to isolate the Palestinians in Gaza from those in Judea and Samaria [the West Bank]."[94]

Netanyahu's uncompromising approach was compounded by the rise of Israel's far right, who joined his government in coalition after national elections in November

[86] Procter, "Coerced Migration."
[87] Eid, "Diary, 20 July 2014," 30.
[88] Al Haq, "'Operation Cast Lead:' A Statistical Analysis," August 2009.
[89] Norwegian Refugee Council/Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (NRC/IDMC), Global Overview 2012: People Internally Displaced by Conflict and Violence – Occupied Palestinian Territory, 29 April 2013, https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/idmc/2013/en/49258
[90] UN OCHA, Occupied Palestinian Territory: Gaza Emergency Situation Report, 3 August 2014.
[91] UN OCHA, Escalation in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Israel, Flash Update #7, 17 May 2021.
[92] On the machinations surrounded the settler evacuation, see Rob Geist Pinfold, *Understanding Territorial Withdrawal: Israeli Occupations and Exits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), ch. 4. Population figures sourced from: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, "Palestinians in Diaspora and in Historic Palestine Year End 2005."
[93] Helga Tawil-Souri, "Digital Occupation: Gaza's High-Tech Enclosure," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 41, no. 2 (2012): 27–43. See also Agostinelli dos Santos and Mattar Nasser, "From Forced Displacement to Forced Immobility," 262.
[94] Quoted in Gidi Weitz, "Another Concept Implodes: Israel Can't be Managed by a Criminal Defendant," *Haaretz*, 9 October 2023, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-10-09/ty-article/.premium/another-concept-implodes-israel-cant-be-managed-by-a-criminal-defendant/0000018b-1382-d2fc-a59f-d39b5dbf0000

2022. In the later twentieth century, Israeli figures had often denied the Nakba, stating that Palestinians had voluntarily left in 1948 in line with Arab military strategy.[95] By the 2020s, there had been a striking shift in Israeli public discourse; rather than denying the Nakba, some politicians now openly celebrated it. By the end of 2022, Israeli ministers were lamenting the fact that Ben-Gurion hadn't "finished the job" in 1948.[96] It was, in this sense, not only the Palestinians who understood the Nakba as an ongoing process.

## Culmination, 2023-Present

From the history outlined above, it is clear that the current Gaza genocide is not an aberration but rather the culmination of decades of Israeli policy. As we see from cases throughout history, forcing people into increasingly restricted areas and then denying them the right to move from there often serves as a precursor to genocidal acts, particularly in settler colonial contexts.[97] Indeed, this connection further reinforces settler colonialism's reliance on the displacement/immobility nexus, given that, in the words of Patrick Wolfe, "the question of genocide is never far from discussions of settler colonialism."[98]

This is not to say that the current genocide, which at the time of writing has killed more than 60,000 Palestinians in Gaza,[99] was necessarily inevitable or divorced from historical contingencies. Internal, regional, and international variables have all shaped its timing, duration, scale, and nature, as well as failing to prevent it from happening in the first place. Relevant factors include the aforementioned ascent of Israel's most far-right government in history from 2022; the machinations around Benjamin Netanyahu's corruption trial and the anti-government Israeli protests; the policies and positioning of both the Biden and the Trump administrations; the Egyptian regime's support for Israeli policy in Gaza; the long-term split between the Fatah-led PA in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza; and the ascendance of Hamas's hardline wing following the party's 2017 internal elections – which precipitated the attacks and crimes of 7 October 2023. Nevertheless, the long-term precedents outlined in this article do show that the genocide is not simply a response to 7 October, or purely a function of the current Israeli government's fascistic nature. Instead, it is the zenith of settler colonial policies that have long sought to erase Palestinians from the land by denying their rights and, accordingly, their humanity.

At the same time, the history traced here does not only exhibit the long-term structural nature of Israeli policies; it also shows the steadfast refusal of the Palestinians to

[95] See Avi Shlaim, "The Debate About 1948," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 3 (1995): 287–304; Michal Ben-Josef Hirsch, "From Taboo to the Negotiable: The Israeli New Historians and the Changing Representation of the Palestinian Refugee Problem," *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 2 (2007): 241–58.

[96] Anne Irfan, "Why Palestinians Could be Facing Another Nakba," *The Nation,* 17 August 2023, https://www.thenation.com/article/world/palestine-second-nakba/

[97] On the connection between "transfer," international human rights and genocide, see A. Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), ch. 8.

[98] Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," 387.

[99] At the time of writing, the official death toll in Gaza stands at more than 60,000 people. See UN OCHA, Reported impact snapshot: Gaza Strip, 30 July 2025. https://www.ochaopt.org/content/reported-impact-snapshot-gaza-strip-30-july-2025. However, the real number of deaths is likely to be significantly higher. See Rasha Khatib, Martin McKee, and Salim Yusef, "Counting the Dead in Gaza: Difficult but Essential," *The Lancet* 404, no. 10449 (July 2024): 237–8. https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(24)01169-3/fulltext; Smitri Mallapaty, "Gaza: Why Is It So Hard to Establish the Death Toll?" *Nature*, September 2024. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-02508-0.

capitulate. Despite 77 years of settler colonial domination and ethnic cleansing, the Palestinians in Gaza have remained on their land and successfully resisted repeated ejection attempts. They have continued to do so even amidst the intensive expulsion efforts of the post-2023 genocide. This is the other side of the displacement/immobility nexus: its confrontation with Palestinian steadfastness (*sumud*) and the resulting inability to achieve total success in the intended settler colonization of all of Palestine.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on Contributor

***Anne Irfan*** is Lecturer in Interdisciplinary Race, Gender and Postcolonial Studies at University College London (UCL), where her work focuses on Palestinian refugee history and politics. She is author of the book Refugee and Resistance: Palestinians and the international refugee system (Columbia University Press, 2023) and her research has appeared in publications including the Journal of Refugee Studies, Journal of Palestine Studies and Jerusalem Quarterly.

## ORCID

*Anne Irfan* http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0323-5353